



OFFICE FOR STANDARDS
IN EDUCATION

**INSPECTION OF
PLYMOUTH LEA
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

September 2002

Lead Inspector: Jane Bevan HMI

**OFFICE OF HER MAJESTY'S CHIEF INSPECTOR OF SCHOOLS
in conjunction with the
AUDIT COMMISSION**

CONTENTS	PARAGRAPHS
INTRODUCTION	1-3
COMMENTARY	4-14
SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT	
Context	15-19
Performance	20-27
Funding	28-31
Council structure	32-34
The LEA strategy for school improvement	35-39
The allocation of resources to priorities	40-45
Structures to ensure continuous improvement, including Best Value	46-49
SECTION 2: SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT	
Summary of effectiveness of services to support school improvement	50-54
Monitoring, challenge and intervention	55
The effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring and challenging schools, including the use of performance data	56-60
The effectiveness of the LEA's work with under-performing schools	61-63
Support for literacy	64-67
Support for numeracy	68-71
Support for information and communication technology (ICT)	72-76
Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3	77-80
Support for early years	81-84
Support for minority ethnic groups, including Travellers	85-87
Support for gifted and talented pupils	88-89
Support for school management	90-93
Support to governors	94-96
The effectiveness of services to support school management	97-112
The LEA's work in assuring the supply and quality of teachers	113-115
SECTION 3: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS	
Summary	116
Strategy	117-120
Statutory obligations	121-123
Special educational needs functions to support school improvement	124-127
Value for money	128-129
SECTION 4: PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION	
The strategy to promote social inclusion	130-132
The supply of school places	133-134
Admissions	135

Asset management	136-139
Provision of education for pupils who have no school place	140-143
Attendance	144
Behaviour support	145-147
Health, safety, welfare and child protection	148-150
Looked after children	151-154
Measures to combat racism	155-159

SECTION 5: CORPORATE ISSUES

Summary	160
Corporate planning	161-166
Decision making	167-169
Leadership provided by elected members	170-171
Leadership provided by senior officers	172-173
Partnership	174-176

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection of Plymouth local education authority (LEA) was carried out by Ofsted in conjunction with the Audit Commission under section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities (December 2001)*. The inspection focused on the effectiveness of the LEA's work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value.

2. The inspection was based on a range of material, which included self-evaluation undertaken by the LEA, and data, some of which was provided by the LEA. That material also included school inspection information; HMI monitoring reports and Audit Commission reports; documentation from, and discussions with, LEA officers and members; focus groups of headteachers, staff and governors; staff in other departments at that local authority; and diocesan representatives. Other agencies and LEA partners submitted written evidence of participation and joint working and participated in focus groups. In addition, the inspection team considered the earlier Ofsted/Audit Commission report on this LEA published in February 2000. A questionnaire, seeking views on aspects of the work of the LEA, was circulated to 106 schools and three pupil referral units (PRU), and its results were considered by the inspection team. The response rate to the questionnaire was 64 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to five primary schools, one secondary school, one PRU and one special school. Those visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other staff on key aspects of the LEA's strategy. In addition, the inspection team considered the LEA's work in 48 other schools through focus groups, telephone conversations with headteachers and case studies with LEA officers. The visits to schools also considered whether the support that is provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, and is effective in contributing to improvements in the school and provides value for money.

COMMENTARY

4. Plymouth LEA has significant strengths that outweigh the few weaknesses. Elected members, generally, give insufficient leadership for education, and procedures for Best Value, scrutiny and performance management are unsatisfactory. These weaknesses have not materially hindered progress in the department for lifelong learning because of the effective work of senior officers. Given this corporate context, the achievements of the lifelong learning department are considerable.

5. The city has a population of close to a quarter of a million, with approximately 40,000 school-age pupils. Although seemingly in an attractive and prosperous location, Plymouth has considerable economic deprivation. It is in the bottom quartile of English districts when ranked on indicators of social deprivation. Alongside this the council receives a government allocation for education as part of the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA), that is seven per cent below the national average. The council has significant financial constraints. Since its inception, Plymouth LEA has been able to demonstrate that the skills of children when they enter school are below those of children of a similar age nationally, and that they have particular shortcomings in language and communication skills.

6. Over the short history of the authority there has been steady improvement in the attainment of pupils and the rate of improvement has been faster than the national rate; this is despite SSA budget allocations per pupil that are below national averages. In 2002, only in Key Stage 1 are standards below national averages and by Key Stage 4 they are at or above national levels. The proportion of schools in Plymouth that are good and very good overall, is the same as that found nationally. The city has two schools that are causing serious concern, both of which are in the primary sector.

7. Since the first inspection report in 2000 the LEA has made good progress in many areas of its work. Senior education officers, half of whom are now in extended acting appointments, have addressed the recommendations of that report and introduced suitable and effective change. Some of the progress has been dramatic, especially in the area of school improvement. This progress has been furthered through the leadership and support of the portfolio holder for education and children's services. The LEA has intervened effectively in underperforming schools and the quality of curriculum support for information and communication technology (ICT) has greatly improved. Financial and personnel services are good, as is the support given by the LEA for literacy and numeracy. Overall, the school improvement services and functions are now satisfactory or better and one third are good. The one unsatisfactory exception is the corporate property services support to schools.

8. There is also considerable strength in depth across the LEA's work for special educational needs (SEN) and issues of social inclusion. The LEA has a very strong commitment to inclusion that is exemplified in its strategies for support to pupils and strongly endorsed by most schools. Essential to these areas are the LEA's sound partnerships, both across and beyond the local authority, that are supporting pupils and their families. The department for lifelong learning has begun to develop a more precise approach to the evaluation of its actions and their impact in schools.

9. This represents a good story for the lifelong learning department, but it is not mirrored by similarly effective developments within the council as a whole. Three of the corporate weaknesses identified in the first inspection, relating to Best Value, performance management and service level agreements have not been fully addressed. Plymouth City Council expresses a strong commitment to education and has always spent the full education SSA on the education service. Nevertheless there are evident weaknesses in the elected members' vision and leadership of education, the rigour of their scrutiny procedures and their communication with schools. Significantly, in four years, the council has twice made decisions leading to considerable change in the structure and working of the lifelong learning department; and since May 2000 there have been three halts on appointments to the department. This might have derailed a less effective education team, but it has not been the case, although it has caused fragility in the system.

10. Elected members are fully aware of the shortcomings in corporate practices and have put in place a change management programme since May 2002. This work is led by the substantive director of lifelong learning who is seconded to the corporate role until May 2003.

11. The LEA performs the following functions particularly well:

- its effectiveness in work with under-performing schools;
- support for literacy;
- support for numeracy;
- support for school management;
- support for governors;
- the expertise of the staff for school improvement;
- financial services;
- personnel services;
- the strategy for special educational needs;
- statutory obligations for special educational needs;
- special educational needs functions to support school improvement;
- provision for pupils with no school place;
- behaviour support; and
- looked after children.

12. The support for minority ethnic groups, including Travellers, and the LEA's work to secure pupil attendance were not inspected through detailed fieldwork. They were good at the time of the first inspection and available data indicates that this is still the case. The provision for school places and admissions, together with services for cleaning, caretaking, grounds maintenance and catering were not inspected and remain satisfactory as at the last inspection. The LEA fulfils the majority of its other functions satisfactorily.

13. There are significant weaknesses in the following functions:

- corporate planning;
- corporate decision making;
- the leadership of elected members; and
- property services.

14. In many areas, Plymouth LEA has made good progress since the first inspection with regard to its services and functions to support education. The LEA's capacity for further improvement is satisfactory. The effective track record of leadership and management by senior officers in the lifelong learning department outweighs the evident shortcomings of the council's procedures that place future corporate capacity in some doubt. Elected members express their desire to change and improve procedures and need to demonstrate this, with some urgency, through effective future actions. These must include a clear understanding and articulation of their vision and strategic direction for lifelong learning together with improved procedures for planning, scrutiny, Best Value and performance management. The already established programme for change must not be allowed to fail. Maintaining and resourcing a strong service for lifelong learning is an imperative for the future.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

15. The City of Plymouth is situated on the estuary of the Tamar River between Devon and Cornwall. It is a four year-old, average-sized unitary authority with a population of approximately 260,000.

16. Socio-economically the authority has changed in small, but significant ways since the last inspection in 1999. Plymouth remains in the lower ranked authorities in relation to social deprivation lying at 84th of the 354 national districts in the year 2000. The city has 40 per cent of its wards in the 20 per cent most deprived wards in England. In the 1991 census the proportion of the population in social classes one and two and those with higher education qualifications were below the national average. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is in line with the national average. However, unemployment has fallen significantly from 1999 to 2001. Overall, the proportion of minority ethnic pupils in Plymouth schools, at 1.7 per cent, is well below the national average of 12.9 per cent, but the number of minority ethnic pupils has more than doubled since 1998.

17. The school population is approximately 40,000, of which the proportion educated in special schools is above the national average, 1.8 per cent of primary-aged pupils and 2.1 per cent of secondary-aged pupils. The number of pupils in primary schools is expected to fall up to the year 2006 and in secondary schools numbers are expected to peak in 2004. Data indicates that, in line with the LEA's early intervention policy, the percentage of pupils with statements of special educational need is falling. It is currently above the national average for primary-aged pupils, but below the national average for secondary-aged pupils.

18. The city has 106 schools. There are two nursery schools, 79 primary schools, nine of which are infant and nine junior schools, together with 61 primary schools. Of the 17 secondary schools, two are for pupils aged 11 to 16 and the remainder for pupils aged 11 to 18. Three of the secondary schools have selection on entry and are single sex, two for girls and one for boys, there are also two single sex denominational schools. Eight special schools cater for a wide range of needs and provide places for pupils from surrounding authorities. There are also three pupil referral units, two for pupils who are excluded or at risk of exclusion and one for young mothers.

19. The city has eight specialist schools that cover technology, arts, languages, sport and engineering. One more is under consideration for a business specialism and there are four Beacon schools. The Education Action Zone (EAZ), due to become an Excellence Cluster in January 2004, comprises two secondary schools, 16 primary schools, two special schools and one nursery.

Performance

20. Overall the improvement in the attainment of pupils in Plymouth schools is better than national improvement rates and there is above average progress between all key stages. Nevertheless, standards in Key Stage 1 are below national figures.

21. The LEA's baseline assessment and Ofsted inspection reports on schools indicate that the overall attainment of pupils when they begin school is consistently below the national average. By the end of Key Stage 1, at age seven, pupils' attainment remains below national averages in reading, writing and mathematics. However, the recent rate of improvement in these areas has been above the national trend in both reading and mathematics and well above it in writing. The progress of pupils between Key Stages 1 and 2 has been well above the national average.

22. At the end of Key Stage 2, standards in English, mathematics and science are broadly in line with national averages. Rates of improvement at Key Stage 2 are in line with the national trend in English and above it in mathematics and science. The rate of improvement between Key Stages 2 and 3 is again above the average progress.

23. Key Stage 3 attainment continues to be in line with national averages in English, mathematics and science and the rate of recent improvement in all three subjects is also broadly in line with the national progress. When progress between Key Stages 3 and 4 is measured, it is above the national rate of increase.

24. In General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations at the end of Key Stage 4 the proportion of pupils gaining five or more A* - C grades and the average points score are broadly in line with national levels. The percentage of pupils gaining one or more A* - G grades is above the national average. These are rates of improvement that are well above the national progress for five or more A* - C grades and equal to the national improvement for the other two measures.

25. Pupils taking advanced level qualifications post-16 generally attain standards that are in line with the national average. Recent data on the attainment of pupils in public care in Plymouth indicates considerable improvement. Levels of attainment at Key Stage 4 are well above national averages.

26. Ofsted inspections of schools indicate that the percentage of primary and secondary schools that are good or very good is in line with the national average. Improvement in the quality of teaching in secondary schools has been significant between the first and second inspections; but more than half of the schools require some improvement in standards. The LEA has one school with serious weaknesses and one underachieving school, both in the primary sector. There are no schools requiring special measures.

27. Attendance in primary and secondary schools is broadly in line with the national figures, as is authorised absence. In primary schools, unauthorised absence is close to the national figure, while in secondary schools it is well below. Permanent exclusions in primary schools over the last three years have been broadly in line with the national average, in secondary schools they are below the national figure.

Funding

28. Plymouth's Standard Spending Assessment per pupil for 2002/03 is low in comparison to ¹statistical neighbours, other unitary authorities and England as a

¹ Statistical neighbours are Portsmouth, Sunderland, The Medway Towns, Torbay, Southampton, Sheffield,

whole. At £2,610 per primary pupil and £3,314 per secondary pupil the SSA is seven per cent below the national average in both cases.

29. Plymouth has consistently spent at, or slightly above, the SSA on education; in 2002/03 spending exactly matches SSA. However, reflecting the lower SSA in Plymouth, budget allocations to primary and secondary schools in 2001/02 were below the average for all comparator groups.

	Plymouth £ per pupil	Statistical neighbours £ per pupil	Unitary authorities £ per pupil	England £ per pupil
Primary individual schools budget (ISB)	1,888	1,961	1,951	2,010
Secondary ISB	2,652	2,616	2,641	2,694

Data source: CIPFA Section 52 data 2001/02

30. In 2001/02 Plymouth delegated slightly more than average funding to its schools, 87 per cent compared to 86 per cent for statistical neighbours, 85 per cent for unitary authorities and nationally. The level of Standards Fund delegation is the same as statistical neighbours and English LEAs overall, but slightly above that of other unitary authorities. In this year, there was major delegation of special educational needs funding to schools. Overall, retained expenditure by the LEA is low, although the amount spent on access, that reflects the cost of home-to-school transport, is the highest of all comparator groups.

	Plymouth £ per pupil	Statistical neighbours £ per pupil	Unitary authorities £ per pupil	England £ per pupil
Strategic Management	94	111	98	102
School Improvement	15	29	26	29
Access	143	102	123	128
SEN	103	149	147	159
TOTAL	355	392	395	417

Data source: CIPFA Section 52 2001/02

31. In spite of the LEA's low overall funding it took up almost all of its Standards Fund allowance in 2001/02. It has also taken advantage of opportunities for accessing additional external funding from a variety of sources such as Neighbourhood Renewal, Education Action Zones, Single Regeneration Budget, Sure Start and Lottery funding. Where relevant, matched funding has been secured without direct detriment to the individual schools budget. The LEA is developing a Private Finance Initiative scheme to help rationalise and enhance school and

community provision on one site at the Whitleigh campus, a location that already includes nursery, primary, secondary and youth service provision. Enhanced primary provision is also being sought through this route. Additionally, increased LEA resources have been directed to social inclusion projects in the last three years.

Council structure

32. The council comprises 37 Conservatives, nine Labour and one Liberal Democrat member. Since 1999, when the new local authority was established, the council has taken an incremental approach to the modernisation agenda by piloting the procedural changes and this process is still in development.

33. The executive committee that includes nine portfolio holders is chaired by the leader of the council and meets fortnightly in open session. This same group also meets weekly as the cabinet to prepare issues for the executive and the full council. It also gives separate briefings to the Conservative group. Two portfolio holders, one for education and children's services and the other for leisure and environment, manage the business for education and lifelong learning. A scrutiny commission deals with the annual and monthly work plan and budget issues of the council. There are nine overview and scrutiny panels that mirror the portfolios.

34. The council's procedures for developing its leadership role, the scrutiny and Best Value processes and consultation with the community are all presenting difficulties. A change management programme is rightly underway.

The LEA strategy for school improvement

35. The LEA's Education Development Plans (EDP) encapsulate the strategy for school improvement. The implementation of EDP1 had many strengths and few weaknesses. In the great majority of cases the activities have resulted in successful outcomes and progress overall has been good. The activities have been well managed, with little slippage in the actions over the period of the plan. It has had a very positive impact on school improvement. Monitoring of EDP1 has been very thorough and regular across the department and linked to the performance review process. However, the use of measurable targets through which to evaluate outcomes has been limited. Shortcomings in the implementation of EDP1 have been in the failure to meet attainment targets, notably in Key Stage 2.

36. EDP2 is a satisfactory plan and a considerable improvement on the first. It has successfully addressed the recommendations in the first inspection report in having clearly sequenced activities together with improved outcome measures. The plan was produced through effective consultation with representative groups of headteachers and other partners, and actions are reflected in school improvement plans. The priorities for EDP2 are:

- (a) raising attainment in the early years and in primary education, especially literacy and numeracy;
- (b) raising attainment in Key Stage 3;
- (c) raising attainment in Key Stage 4 and the 14-19 age group;
- (d) narrowing attainment gaps and tackling underachievement;
- (e) support for schools causing concern;
- (f) continuing professional development; and

(g) innovation and diversity.

37. The LEA's evaluation of the implementation of EDP1 was thorough and included a detailed review of action following the first inspection of the LEA. Strengths and weaknesses were clearly identified and a view was reached on the cost effectiveness of EDP1. This judgement used a helpful value for money proforma, prompting suitable questions for each service. However without stated, measurable outcomes in EDP1 the judgements were inevitably imprecise. The local audit to identify future priorities was brief, but the use of data and information on pupils' and schools' performance was good. The rationale for the two priorities of continuing professional development and innovation and diversity was not clear from the audit, but the priorities had strong local support.

38. Targets in EDP2 for Key Stage 2 English and mathematics in 2004 hold considerable challenge. They are realistic in mathematics, but the 2002 attainment in English was well below target, making the 2004 aspirations of a 10 percentage point increase very challenging. In Key Stage 3 there is similar challenge in the targets for English and mathematics, but little challenge in those for science. Key Stage 4 targets are also challenging, but schools' targets indicate that they are realistic. There are clear activities in the plan to raise the attainment of minority ethnic pupils, boys and gifted and talented pupils.

39. The many activity plans of EDP2 use a consistent format that provides clarity about purpose, timescales, actions and responsibilities. In some cases these are covered well and success criteria are quantified effectively, particularly in two of the priorities. In some other actions there is less detail and the purposes and outcomes of the actions are imprecise. Sound procedures exist for target setting, half-termly service monitoring and termly evaluation reports to senior officers and the portfolio holder for education and children's services.

Recommendation

In order to further improve EDP2 and its processes:

- incorporate more precise and measurable outcomes and targets to ensure robust evaluation of actions in the plan.

The allocation of resources to priorities

40. The allocation of resources to priorities remains satisfactory. This is in line with the LEA's self-evaluation. The allocation reflects the priorities in EDP2 and takes satisfactory account of strategic priorities.

41. The overall position on council funding is similar to that at the time of the last inspection. Council commitments are greater than SSA and there is a deficit. Overspends have been met, until now, from small and reducing reserves. The council has protected education spending at the level of SSA and increases in the SSA have been transferred, in full, to school budgets. Spending on other council areas such as social services and fire services remains high, but this has been at the

expense of services other than education. The level of delegated funding is above the national average.

42. Support for raising attainment is reflected in the protection school funding has received. Service savings have not directly impacted on school budgets. Furthermore, additional resources have been allocated to schools such as contributions for Standards Fund, to support inclusion, and, as a consequence of the formula review, increased funding for primary and special schools. Additional educational needs funding is now allocated to secondary schools and the LEA also supplements post-16 funding. Retained central expenditure on access is high, in part due to the cost of the subsidy for concessionary student transport, and the rising cost of transport for pupils with special educational needs. Plans to review current transport arrangements are timely. Behaviour support, that is also funded centrally, is highly regarded by schools and no consideration has been given to the delegation of this service.

43. Consultation on budget issues is satisfactory and the formula is transparent to schools. The balance of funding between primary, secondary and special schools is appropriate. They are fully involved in formula reviews and proposals to increase levels of delegation. Recently the bias of funding has changed to favour primary schools in order to support early intervention. School budgets are generally under control and are monitored well. Only one school has a deficit budget and the local authority has successfully intervened to assist other schools in these circumstances in previous years. There is robust monitoring of school spending plans where balances are high.

44. Education budget making is mainly secure and monitoring arrangements are rigorous. However, there have been recent increases in the costs of pupil transport and joint SEN placements. These unanticipated areas of growth are being closely investigated. The council has no medium-term financial strategy, and this impairs corporate consideration of education spending pressures. Plans are in place to address this in 2003/04. Progress on the previous recommendation for clear service agreements between departments of the council and for the disaggregation of corporate costs has been unsatisfactory. Senior officers acknowledge this, and some small recent changes in this context have been led by education staff.

45. Plymouth ensures that bids are made for appropriate grants to support education. However, schools do not consider the advice they receive to be a strength or that sufficient support is given in the area of capital projects. The support of the new capital planning team will assist schools in identifying issues of eligibility and how to maximise funding at individual school level.

Structures to ensure continuous improvement, including Best Value

46. The first inspection judged this function to be poor. However, the LEA's recent self-assessment reports Best Value to be satisfactory. The LEA now has in place appropriate strategies for improvement, which encompass the principles of Best Value. The processes in the department are now satisfactory.

47. The external auditor judged that the 2000/2001 Best Value Performance Plan adequately complied with relevant guidance, but emphasised that action planning, rather than review, was critical to achieving significant improvement. The

inspection concurs; there are shortcomings in the plan because it lacks clear links to council priorities and specific responsibilities and timescales are imprecise. In addition the financial implications of the plan are unclear.

48. Best Value reviews have had variable impact on quality and effectiveness in education. The reviews, for example, of the services for catering and transport, were too wide ranging to take account of school specific issues. Others however, such as the reviews of family education and of the service for English as an additional language, have resulted in service restructuring with a clear focus on priorities for improvement. The council has rightly agreed to cease the current Best Value Review programme in March 2003 and plans to introduce, immediately, fewer and wider ranging crosscutting reviews. Meanwhile the lifelong learning department has undertaken effective internal reviews, for example, a reorganisation of financial and personnel services so that they more directly meet schools' needs. While not using formal Best Value procedures, the department takes account of Best Value principles and is committed to continuous evaluation and review of its services.

49. The introduction of performance review across the council is under-developed and has lacked momentum; central support has been reduced and processes are in temporary abeyance as a result of the change management review. Without corporate leadership the lifelong learning department has developed its own approach to performance management and continuous improvement, including the use of a range of external evaluation processes and annual reviews. Four senior officers, including the acting director of lifelong learning, are trained assessors in the European Foundation Quality Mark. The approach has effectively informed LEA practice, so that targets and performance indicators, together with regular monitoring systems, are included in service plans. The department has developed its own satisfactory procedures for staff performance review and development. The LEA is a member of the southwest benchmarking group and has devised a useful value for money proforma to raise awareness with service users.

SECTION 2: SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Summary of the effectiveness of services to support school improvement

50. The effectiveness and value for money of the LEA's support for school improvement was unsatisfactory in the last inspection. Link advisers were new and their knowledge of schools was insufficient. Good progress has been made, and all but one of the LEA's school improvement functions are now carried out at least satisfactorily. Overall, the effectiveness of services to school improvement now has many strengths and few weaknesses and the value for money is good.

51. The LEA has a focused and targeted approach to school improvement that is built firmly and appropriately on supporting self-managing schools. Standards of pupils' attainment in national tests or examinations are at or around the national average and rates of improvement are generally above those found nationally. The LEA's support for literacy, numeracy and under-performing schools together with the standards of expertise of staff, the support for school management and for governors are strengths of the school improvement services. There is also satisfactory co-ordination of support for school improvement through the behaviour support, the education welfare, and the educational psychology services. Nevertheless, despite clear operational strengths, the LEA has not met its 2002 targets at Key Stage 2 and needs to secure substantial improvements if statutory targets for 2004 are to be met. Centrally retained costs of school improvement services are below those in other LEAs and the value for money is good.

52. Leadership and strategic planning for school improvement services are satisfactory with more strengths than weaknesses. There is a clear team ethos and much strength in deciding key priorities and managing change. Service planning is developing and there is an appropriate match between priorities, targets and activities. Consultation and partnership with schools is effective, but levels of communication are not always sufficient to ensure that schools understand fully the strategic direction of all school improvement initiatives. At the time of the inspection, there had been an acting chief adviser for over twelve months and, despite advertising the post twice, the LEA had not managed to secure a substantive post-holder. Uncertainty is constraining the development of clear leadership and strategic thinking about the future direction of school improvement.

53. Performance management is developing and is satisfactory. Procedures to monitor progress of activities and to assess slippage in implementation are well developed. The deployment of services against defined priorities is very satisfactory. Members of the advisory staff are suitably qualified and the team has a good range of phase, management and subject expertise. There have been some imaginative solutions to improving the levels of service and to widening the expertise of the small central team of advisers. These include strengthening team expertise by the secondment of a number of headteachers, making highly focused and effective use of advanced skills teachers and Beacon schools and facilitating networking arrangements between schools.

54. Workloads are monitored to ensure that members of the advisory staff are not over-burdened, but evaluation of service performance is not firmly embedded. In particular, insufficient use is made of management information systems or other

evaluative data to determine the success of activities, to make decisions about sufficiency of staffing or to realign the work of the service towards new emerging priorities such as supporting gifted and talented pupils. Performance data are collected and analysed by individual teams, but there is inadequate central co-ordination and interpretation of data. Performance review of the work of individuals is satisfactory. A locally developed quality framework helps to ensure consistency of standards within the advisory service. Links, however, between service targets and those set for individual members of staff are insufficiently clear and individual performance targets often lack precision. All advisers have access to appropriate development opportunities.

Recommendations

In order to strengthen the evaluation of the work of the advisory services:

- improve the strategic use made of the management information systems currently available;
- centralise the collection and analysis of pupil and school performance data; and
- sharpen the performance targets set for individuals within the advisory service.

Monitoring, challenge and intervention

55. Procedures for monitoring, challenge and intervention, which were unsatisfactory at the last inspection, are now very satisfactory. Good progress has been made in implementing recommendations. Support is now targeted at those schools needing it most and the work of the advisory service is aligned well to the principles of intervention in inverse proportion to success. The respective roles of the LEA and schools are set out clearly and understood thoroughly. Monitoring arrangements support strongly the commitment to self-managing schools.

The effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring and challenging schools, including the use of performance data

56. The previous inspection found that the LEA's work in monitoring schools and challenging them to improve was unsatisfactory and the use made of performance data was poor. Since then, there have been improvements, some significant. The provision is now satisfactory, but areas of relative weakness remain. In particular, the detailed analysis of performance data and the provision of value-added information is not as well advanced as in many other LEAs.

57. The LEA has a well-established and effective monitoring policy and very sound procedures for its implementation. On the basis of monitoring data and well founded other evidence, schools are allocated to one of four categories, and receive monitoring and support in line with their needs. There are clear criteria for intervening in schools, assessing the subsequent progress made by them and for reviewing, in general terms, the effectiveness of the support provided. Intervention in schools following an Ofsted inspection is required only occasionally. Increasing use is made of performance data to help identify schools with weaknesses or those that are under-performing. Successful schools are used increasingly to share good practice. Effective use is made of serving headteachers, Beacon schools, and

advanced skills teachers to support school improvement work. Elected members are informed about the performance of schools.

58. The annual monitoring and review cycle has strength because it builds purposefully and appropriately on school self-evaluation. Link adviser visits are carried out to a clear and suitably differentiated agenda that is fully understood by schools. The cycle culminates in an annual end-of-year review conducted jointly between the school and the LEA. This process confirms the school's capacity for self-evaluation and enables the LEA to target future support appropriately. Oral and written feedback following the annual review is available to governing bodies. Those governors interviewed welcome the feedback, reporting that it allows them to have a clearer shared understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. However, the quality of written reports is variable and unsatisfactory overall because they do not consistently provide sharp evaluation of strengths and weaknesses and clear action points.

Recommendation

In order to improve monitoring and challenge:

- ensure that all written reports to schools provide sharp and clear judgements and focused action points.

59. There has been a marked improvement in the way data is used by the LEA. School performance profiles are now provided and are broadly welcomed by schools for their local benchmarking information. Schools know what data will be circulated and when they will receive it. Electronic transfer of data has been implemented fully. The LEA has successfully established clear protocols to govern expectations and data sharing arrangements between schools. Recent investment in software will enhance the extent to which the LEA can provide individualised pupil performance data. The use of these systems is in its infancy, although clear targets have been set for the provision of further information. Predictive performance data for individual pupils, provided for the first time this year through an external agency, has the potential to improve the process of school target setting.

60. Schools welcome the data, but primary headteachers feel inadequately briefed on the use and potential of the information. Guidance and training on the use of the data are provided, but are insufficient to enable primary schools to make full use of the vast array of reports available within the package of information. The target-setting process has enabled advisers to provide necessary challenge to schools, especially where proposed targets were too low. However, target-setting processes are not securely established in many primary schools, especially for English. Schools are at an early stage in setting targets to reduce gender gaps, to improve performance of minority ethnic pupils and for underachieving pupils.

The effectiveness of the LEA's work with under-performing schools

61. The LEA support for schools causing concern, which was satisfactory at the previous inspection, is now good. The LEA has an effective strategy for supporting schools and for tackling underachievement. The schools make good progress and are removed from special measures or from serious weaknesses within appropriate

timescales. The strategy for supporting secondary schools facing challenging circumstances has helped raise standards in all four secondary schools involved.

62. The proportion of primary schools needing some or significant improvement is broadly in line with the national average. At secondary level the proportion is lower than the national average. Few schools have needed intervention following Ofsted inspections. The LEA currently has one primary school that continues to have serious weaknesses and a further primary school designated as underachieving. In addition the LEA has identified one primary school as causing concern.

63. Improved performance data is helping the LEA to identify those schools that are weakest and to target support appropriately. Difficulties are tackled promptly and incisively. There is a well-planned and suitably differentiated programme of co-ordinated support for individual schools causing concern. Intervention takes account of the school's capacity to plan and implement action. Progress is monitored thoroughly. Additional resources are allocated systematically and their cost effectiveness properly evaluated. Schools have clear exit strategies, agreed with the LEA, to ensure a graduated and appropriate reduction in LEA support. Officers are prepared to intervene and use statutory powers where necessary. The lead member for education is kept closely informed and receives regular reports on schools. The role of other members in monitoring progress of schools causing concern is less well developed.

Support for literacy

64. The LEA's support for literacy is good. This matches the LEA's self-evaluation and is an improvement since the previous inspection when it was satisfactory. Standards and the rate of improvement in English at Key Stage 2 are now in line with national averages. In Key Stage 1 standards remain below the national average, but improvement trends are encouragingly above the national level. Targets set in Key Stage 2 have been challenging. A significant number of schools and the LEA have not met their targets in 2001 and 2002, making the 83 per cent target in 2004 very demanding.

65. Over the last three years the LEA's data on schools' performance has greatly improved. The literacy team uses this data, their knowledge of schools' strategies and the schools' data on pupil groups to focus their work. Appropriate annual partnership plans are established and schools are then clear of the support they will receive. The process helps schools in identifying their strengths and weaknesses with a secure focus on curricular targets. The deployment of consultants, leading English teachers and advanced skills teachers is well directed to the most needy schools.

66. The literacy strategy is clear and well understood by staff and schools. It is appropriately integrated into the early years work of the LEA. The team is effectively managed and has had the advantage of stability of most personnel for some years. Strategies have been developed for boys' writing, including helpful documentation and, more recently, an approach to pupil conferencing that will involve male trainers for pupils where possible. Early pilots of this approach have shown dramatic increases in standards at Key Stage 2 and its dissemination to all schools began in September 2001.

67. There is very effective sharing of strategies, curriculum advice and teaching approaches through the work of the team, the termly network meetings for co-ordinators and the regular newsletter. Education Action Zone consultants work very closely with the literacy team, as does the Key Stage 3 consultant. Successful summer schools in most secondary schools have supported the transfer of pupils at year six over the past four years. The literacy team also works closely with the ethnic minority achievement service to provide training and curriculum development in schools.

Support for numeracy

68. Support for numeracy has improved since the satisfactory judgement of the first inspection and the service has effectively provided advice and materials for mixed-age teaching in response to the recommendation. The LEA's numeracy support is now good. Action plans are closely linked to EDP2 and well understood by schools. Schools that require support are effectively identified, using school and LEA data, annual attainment trends, knowledge of the schools' practices and the annual review report on the school. Information to schools on their selection for support is made in good time. The strategy ensures that consultants focus on particular issues, for example, the progress of more able pupils in Key Stage 2 using differentiated activities and materials.

69. The numeracy team is well managed by a specialist mathematician who has a clear grasp of what has to be done to raise standards. To support this, the team has good links with Education Action Zone consultants with whom roles are sensibly divided to avoid overlap. There is also co-operation with the literacy strategy to share practice and with the early years foundation training programme for teachers and learning assistants. Each term EDP activities are monitored and reported to senior staff.

70. The numeracy team provides a good range of training, currently focused on the use of ICT for mathematics and on problem solving. This is appropriately offered to staff in foundation settings, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. Most effective of the recent training has been the use of Key Stage 2 pilot unit planning materials. LEA monitoring indicates that the work has significantly improved the quality of teaching and raised pupils' attainment. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) has invited the LEA to pilot work for low attaining pupils in Key Stage 1 during this year. In addition, the numeracy team supports an effective network for mathematics co-ordinators, publishes a helpful newsletter and has provided good curriculum guidance on the teaching of mental and written mathematics.

71. Standards in mathematics have been improving at a faster rate than the national trend and are now in line with the national average at Key Stage 2, but still below the average in Key Stage 1. The LEA target for mathematics at Key Stage 2 in 2001 was met and results were just below the target in 2002. The target of 84 per cent in 2004 is realistic.

Support for information and communication technology (ICT)

72. Support for information and communication technology was previously poor. The LEA strategy was considered inadequate and there was insufficient guidance to schools on how to improve standards, quality or management in ICT. Good progress

has been made in implementing recommendations. Support for ICT in the curriculum is now very satisfactory and has good capacity to improve further.

73. The LEA has a clear E-Learning strategy for developing ICT and for enabling schools to raise standards progressively. With the expanded LEA support team, that includes an adviser, a secondary and primary consultant and advanced skills teachers, the emphasis has moved from the provision and allocation of resources to a sharper focus on curriculum developments. Increasing use is made of the LEA website to share good practice. Benefits come from being part of innovative projects to enhance curriculum opportunities such as exploring the potential use of video conferencing.

74. School ICT policy and development plans have been scrutinised thoroughly and appropriate support and guidance given where there were weaknesses. In addition, the LEA has conducted a comprehensive review of ICT in a sample of 12 schools. Such initiatives are identifying where curriculum guidance, training and intensive support should be offered. Evidence from Ofsted and LEA monitoring identified 21 primary schools for intensive support during the academic year 2001/02. All of these schools have made satisfactory progress and a third have made good progress. Ten secondary schools have been identified for intensive support at Key Stage 3 based on results of teacher assessment, school audit and an evaluation of development plans.

75. The LEA is establishing targets in ICT for Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. Teacher assessments of ICT in the secondary sector vary widely between schools and the LEA has begun to provide guidance on the levelling of work and moderating assessments. The LEA's collection and analysis of information on the performance of primary schools in ICT is not yet sufficiently developed. The council has funded an ICT assessment package for primary school pupils, which can provide a record of the skills they have mastered to help secondary schools identify pupils' ICT skills at transfer. At the time of the inspection, only a quarter of primary schools had availed themselves of the facility.

76. The National Grid for Learning grant and New Opportunities Funding are integrated appropriately within the LEA's wider strategy and are being administered satisfactorily. The ratios of computers to pupils in both primary and secondary schools have met the Government's August 2002 target. Secondary schools are developing their Key Stage 4 courses to include ICT skills accreditation, but the proportion of students offered these courses remains lower than the national mean. Challenging targets have been set for the extension of broadband connectivity across the city. The LEA's support for New Opportunities Fund training is good and a much higher percentage of teachers than nationally have completed the courses.

Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3

77. The LEA's support for raising standards at Key Stage 3 is very satisfactory. This is in line with the LEA's self-evaluation.

78. In 2001, Key Stage 3 attainment was broadly in line with national averages, and improvements during the three years to 2001 were similarly in line with the national trend. The progress made by pupils between Key Stages 2 and 3 is above the national average. In 2002, standards fell slightly in mathematics and science,

and more sharply in English. The attainment of more able pupils at Level 6 and above was close to national averages in mathematics and science, and only slightly below them in English. Sustained improvement well above the recent rate is needed to meet the very challenging targets set for 2004 in English and mathematics. Attendance rates are in line with the national average and exclusion rates are below the national average.

79. The LEA's strategy for Key Stage 3 has many strengths, with the capacity to improve further. Implementation of the strategy started promptly, with the early appointment of an ICT consultant to address the recommendation in the previous inspection. The LEA has a capable and enthusiastic team of consultants and a strategy manager, for whom induction and management are satisfactory. The successful local experience of the team has enabled them to gain the confidence and participation of all schools. Cross-phase line management provides continuity between Key Stages 2 and 3.

80. Raising attainment at Key Stage 3 is recognised as a key priority area in EDP2. Activities are generally well matched to EDP2 priorities. The LEA ensures that all schools receive support during one of the first two years of the strategy. There are effective strategies to share good practice through training and support from good practitioners, the use of leading teachers, and the publication of helpful case studies. English and mathematics training and support in schools have been very well received. Thorough evaluation of the impact on teaching and standards is not available, although some informal evidence indicates improved learning by Year 7 pupils on catch-up programmes. Two thirds of schools ran literacy and numeracy summer schools in 2002; consultants reported challenging, interactive teaching in all but two of the schools visited. Cross-curricular work is at the early stages of development following well-attended training given in conjunction with good practice schools.

Support for early years

81. Improvement in early years provision in schools is a key part of EDP2. Unusually, the local authority has only two nursery schools and 19 nursery classes, but its training and development work involves the full range of provision in the city. The Plymouth Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership is well established. There is effective joint work with the partnership, both strategically and operationally, to support progression for young children into school.

82. The partnership has been successful in gaining funding from several sources, including the European Social Fund. These resources are used effectively to support community and family projects for young children, with a focus on special educational needs, where appropriate. The partnership can also demonstrate success with two of its targets, namely the proportion of places available for three year-olds and the number of settings where Ofsted has judged the provision to better than satisfactory, both of which are above target.

83. Plymouth's baseline assessment information, since 1998, indicates that the skills of children when they enter school are below national averages. Through the partnership there are well-focused community projects that encourage parents to support the development of communication and language skills with their children.

84. The LEA team comprises an early years adviser, a jointly funded consultant and four advisory teachers who provide, with other partners, a good range of training opportunities for teachers, assistants and volunteers. Where possible these courses are designed for all providers, but the LEA also offers separate training and advice for foundation learning in schools.

Support for minority ethnic groups, including Travellers

85. This area of the LEA's work was not inspected through detailed fieldwork. The area was good in the first inspection and this matches the LEA's self-evaluation. The support for the attainment of minority ethnic pupils and travellers remains good.

86. Since the last inspection the number of minority ethnic pupils in Plymouth schools has more than doubled and the range and depth of their needs has increased. In the context of an unchanged Government grant the LEA carried out a Best Value review of the service for English as an additional language. The review consulted the users of the service; parents, pupils and schools, and applied the principles of Best Value appropriately. The new ethnic minority achievement service has changed as a result, and this has addressed the recommendation from the last inspection.

87. Teachers combine support to individuals and groups of pupils with whole school training and the provision of teaching materials. They also advise teachers and support staff on literacy and numeracy. The service has a detailed analysis of individual pupil's progress in their acquisition and use of English. The school survey judged the ethnic minority achievement service support to be mainly good and, in the view of secondary schools, in the top quartile of all LEAs.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

88. Support provided by the LEA for gifted and talented pupils is satisfactory. The LEA has made a promising start, with prominence given to raising awareness and changing attitudes and aspirations to enable progress to occur. In March 2001, a clear policy and an approach to recognising and supporting gifted, talented and more able pupils was launched. A good range of successful activities have included art workshops at a local higher education establishment, mathematics masterclasses, a samba music day and literacy sessions for able Key Stage 1 pupils. The LEA has supported successful summer schools. These offered a wide range of well-conceived activities, recruited well and received positive pupil evaluations. Strong links have been made with all secondary schools and an active group of secondary co-ordinators meets regularly.

89. There is limited evidence of the wide and appropriate range of initiatives having an impact on pupil performance or of support for gifted and talented pupils being embedded into the ongoing work of schools. Support for gifted and talented pupils was moved into the advisory service in spring 2002, but is not yet integrated into that service.

Support for school management

90. LEA support for leadership and management is good. It was previously graded unsatisfactory with support and training not always well targeted at individual schools, especially secondary schools.

91. The LEA provides effective advice and training to help schools improve their capacity for self-evaluation. All but six schools have participated in training, and courses have been well received. The annual review cycle ensures LEA intervention is proportionate to each school's needs and it builds systematically on school self-evaluation. Visits to schools by education advisers are designed to challenge improvement strategies used by senior and middle managers, although a few secondary schools question if the experience of advisers is sufficient to challenge secondary phase management decisions. The quality of written feedback to schools following monitoring visits is variable in the extent to which it provides sharply focused evaluative comments about strengths and weaknesses. Where necessary intervention and appropriate support are given to improve leadership skills. Ofsted inspections indicate that the levels of management and efficiency in Plymouth schools are in line with national averages and the proportion of schools with good and very good leadership has increased sharply. The LEA's increasing proportion of category one schools demonstrates the growing ability for schools to operate autonomously.

92. Extensive local networks, a very useful toolkit for self-evaluation and LEA support, are available to schools to help them manage change and secure continuing improvement. Schools are provided with relevant benchmarked financial and performance data. For senior managers requiring additional targeted support, the LEA has made appropriate use of seconded headteachers and consultants. The LEA provides expert and well-tailored advice to schools about quality schemes, such as Investors in People that support leadership and management. The LEA facilitates the dissemination of good practice in management at both senior and middle management levels through its effective use of advanced skills teachers, leading mathematics and literacy teachers and through the management expertise within Beacon schools.

93. There is a rationale that makes a clear and appropriate distinction between schools' entitlement and the further support that they purchase. Advisory services are offered to schools under an annual service level agreement. The options for schools are flexible and include a 'pay-as-you-go' alternative. Costs are largely realistic and transparent, although the optional package offers considerably more than the capacity of the small team can realistically deliver. The LEA is developing these systems further to improve access to impartial advice about procuring services either from the council or from alternative providers. Schools have been provided with some guidance, albeit limited, on how to implement Best Value, but insufficient work is done to help schools ensure that they implement the principles.

Support to governors

94. This area, previously satisfactory, has improved. Support provided for governors is now good. The governor support team works closely with the advisory service to provide effective support for the governors in their strategic role. Evidence from recent Ofsted inspections indicates that governing bodies in Plymouth schools are more effective in fulfilling responsibilities than governing bodies nationally. The governor support team was awarded Charter Mark status in December 2001.

95. Governor relations with the LEA are very good. They feel valued and those interviewed welcome their increased involvement in areas of policy making and action planning. Governors have access to high quality information. A telephone

help line provides a prompt response. There is a wide range of good quality and highly relevant training courses for governors that are well received and subject to thorough evaluation. In particular, LEA induction procedures for new governors and those taking on the responsibility for chairing governing bodies are good. In line with its clearly stated aim of supporting governor confidence and autonomy, the LEA is rightly reducing routine officer attendance at governing body meetings.

96. A rigorous strategy to minimise vacancies in all governor categories continues to be at the forefront of the LEA's work. Despite numerous appropriate, but time consuming, recruitment initiatives, including those designed to increase the proportion of governors from minority ethnic groups, the level of governor vacancies remains high. Recruitment of LEA governors has also presented a number of challenges council systems are somewhat outmoded. Discussions are underway to address these issues and monthly meetings have been initiated to monitor vacancies.

The effectiveness of services to support school management

97. Services to support school management are now satisfactory and have improved since the previous inspection. There are significant strengths in some services and, with the exception of property services, all are at least satisfactory.

98. The LEA has made a clear commitment to change the way it supports schools in the procurement of services and to develop a brokerage service. Developments are good. The council's Trading Fair brochure, produced following consultation with headteacher and governor representatives, presents information on traded services in a clear and easily accessible format. Agreement has also been reached recently to promote traded services of neighbouring authorities across LEA borders and make this information available electronically through the South West Grid for Learning. The procurement group, that includes headteachers and governors, is beginning to take on a monitoring and quality assurance role to ensure that services match schools' requirements and to hold them to account. There is a system for monitoring complaints.

99. The LEA acknowledges that service procurement remains an area for considerable development. Staffing difficulties meant that for 2002/03 information was provided to schools very late; this year the brochure will be available in mid-December. At present, there are concise service descriptions, rather than formal service level agreements, and contracts are at least one year in length. Much work has taken place recently on benchmarking service costs, but this has yet to be shared with schools in an accessible and comprehensive format.

100. **Financial services** to schools are good and have improved since the previous inspection. This judgement is in line with the LEA's self-assessment and the views of schools. There is 100 per cent buy back of financial services for 2002/03.

101. Schools have access to good guidance on budget setting and training, using appropriate software and with individual support, where requested. Training and visits for headteachers and governors schools are well structured to give practical advice on each school's budget in relation to the development plan. When needed, guidance is also given on budget modelling. A good partnership with schools is exemplified by the secondment into the team of two school staff; ways to improve the

service are continually sought. The payroll service is reliable and accurate; schools now rate this as good.

102. The previous inspection reported problems with long-term sickness of staff. This has continued to some extent and there have also been recruitment problems. Despite this, service delivery has only been marginally affected, but there were delays in final budget information for a minority of schools this year.

103. **Personnel services** have also improved since the previous inspection and are good. The LEA's self-assessment concurs with this and the service is highly valued by schools. All schools currently buy back this service.

104. A particular strength of the service is the management of casework. Personnel officers liaise effectively with link advisers and finance staff in responding to schools' needs, especially where there are schools causing concern, with falling rolls or in school reorganisations. There is a high degree of trust among headteachers and school governors for the quality of advice and training received. All schools have a named personnel officer who, in most cases, visits at least once a term. Individual advice and support are readily available at all times, either by telephone or additional visits. A comprehensive manual, including model procedures, is in place; a revision to the format of this, including increasing electronic access, is planned.

105. **Property services** support to schools, provided by the direct services department, was unsatisfactory at the time of the previous inspection and continues to be so. There is significant dissatisfaction among many schools using the service, based around a poor customer focus and contract management, failure to deliver projects on time and technical expertise of variable quality. These shortcomings are recognised by the LEA. The district auditor has recommended exploration of options for creating partnerships with external property services providers. The LEA plan to make information about services in neighbouring LEAs available electronically is a positive move in this direction.

106. In 2001/02, there were considerable personnel and recruitment difficulties in this area and the LEA rightly transferred some delayed projects to external contractors. Changes to architectural services, which offer building maintenance, major architectural schemes and annual maintenance contracts, have been in place since January 2002 and it is too early to judge their impact. Exact details and costs of the service for 2002/03 were not available to schools during the spring term 2002 and, consequently, the confidence of schools has been lost and there is much ground to recover. Many schools remain unclear in their understanding of the traded service provided. The service now has a full complement of staff and is attempting to develop a customer focus through attendance at governing body meetings and a brochure to explain the service provided.

Recommendations

In order to improve property services support to schools:

- develop appropriate guidelines for schools so that they are clear where their responsibilities lie; and assist schools in obtaining value for money in property services by brokering services with a range of providers.

107. Support for **ICT in school administration** has improved since the last inspection when it was unsatisfactory. It is now satisfactory.

108. All schools are able to make electronic communication and data returns; the LEA has invested in Securenet as part of the South West Grid for Learning and school administrators are supported in making effective use of information transfer facilities. The pupil data return to the DfES this year was carried out effectively and benefited from trialling in the preceding months.

109. The LEA website provides a satisfactory range of information for the public both on services for education, online proforma and general advice on how to deal with queries. The education intranet for schools is a sound development and its curricular use, though not yet extensive, is a clear objective for the future.

110. Services for ICT administration continue to be available through a joint arrangement with Devon County Council that provides a core service, including a helpline, training, on-site visits with additional services on a 'pay-as-you-go' consultancy basis. Although they acknowledge that the quality of technical support for ICT has improved, schools still rate this service between poor to satisfactory. Some question the value for money provided and a number of primary schools remain unclear about how to use their systems and resources. Guidance from the local authority is lacking. Secondary schools generally view the service as outdated and some are considering alternative providers.

111. The LEA has in place elements of a satisfactory ICT and information management strategy, including various effective data systems, but, at present, is lacking a coherent means of bringing these elements together. Strategic direction is lacking and schools have not been sufficiently engaged in discussions about their overall needs.

Recommendation

In order to improve access to management information and improve planning and monitoring:

- build upon the existing E-learning strategy to develop and implement, across the local authority, a strategic plan for ICT and information management in consultation with schools.

112. Client support for **cleaning, caretaking, grounds maintenance and catering** remains satisfactory. This matches the LEA's own assessment. No detailed inspection work was carried out in these areas. The majority of schools surveyed expressed no concerns with these services, but their general view is that, apart from

catering, they are not as satisfactory as at the time of the previous inspection. The catering service was the subject of a Best Value review in 2000/01, which helped inform the delegation of provision for school meals to secondary schools; primary schools have requested a delay in delegation.

The LEA's work in assuring the supply and quality of teachers

113. Support for assuring the supply and quality of teachers is satisfactory. Initiatives to support schools in retaining staff are highly satisfactory and form part of an EDP2 priority. Appropriate induction arrangements are in place for newly qualified teachers. There is a well-planned induction and mentoring programme for new headteachers. In addition, the LEA promotes the national leadership programmes and a range of award bearing and accredited courses. The LEA has good links with local higher education establishments. It also provides opportunities, through programmes such as 'Stepping Stones', to support teachers and teaching assistants as they move through their careers. As a means of helping schools retain good staff and of providing flexible career opportunities, officers are especially active and successful in encouraging teachers to consider the advanced skills teacher option. Teachers entering their second year of teaching are invited to be part of a mentoring and support programme designed to ensure that emerging needs are given appropriate attention.

114. Plymouth does not have significant teacher shortages, but schools are experiencing increasing difficulties in attracting well-qualified teachers with the appropriate expertise. They are not aware of any LEA strategy to address this. A number of strands are in place to form the basis of further work in this area, but, at present, these lack overall coherence and communication with schools is insufficient.

115. At present the authority does not make productive use of data to anticipate medium to longer-term needs, or assist retention. The LEA is a member of the South West recruitment strategy partnership, which facilitates access to data on recruitment and patterns of employment, and assists in promoting teaching in Plymouth. Consequently, the LEA knows, for example, that it retains over 80 per cent of newly qualified teachers for a second year, but it has not explored sufficiently the reasons why those leaving do so.

SECTION 3: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Summary

116. The LEA's SEN provision is effective and has developed well since the last inspection. An inclusive SEN strategy, based on a thorough audit of need and good consultation with schools, is now in place and well understood across the LEA and its partners. It includes the development of the role of special schools and a reduction in the number of funded special school places. Funding mechanisms for mainstream schools have been reviewed with the result that much of the SEN funding is now delegated, giving schools greater flexibility in meeting needs in accordance with the Code of Practice. Support and training for special educational needs co-ordinators is effective. The LEA has improved the extent to which it meets statutory requirements. SEN provision contributes well to school improvement. The LEA takes reasonable steps to secure value for money.

Strategy

117. The LEA's policy for SEN is good. It is underpinned by a clear strategy running to 2004 that emphasises access and opportunity for all pupils, not just those with SEN. Plans are costed, responsibilities are clear and the principles of inclusion are well understood. The work of support services is targeted at early intervention. Implementation of the strategy is monitored by strong management arrangements in the lifelong learning department. Progress is reported regularly to the portfolio holder for education and children's services whose knowledge and commitment is a strength of the LEA. There is close collaboration between special and mainstream schools, both for the reintegration of special school pupils and to effectively use special school expertise in support of staff in mainstream schools.

118. In 2000, a review of the funding formula for additional educational needs and SEN was undertaken with thorough consultation in schools and the wider community that gained substantial support for the outcome. From April 2001, a phased three-year implementation programme began, taking account of historical data. A clear statement of delegated SEN resources is sent to the headteacher, chair of governors and special educational needs co-ordinators when the school receives its overall budget allocation. Schools are beginning to use the flexibility this provides to meet pupils' needs instead of, or in advance of, seeking formal assessment with a view to a statement of SEN.

119. The LEA retains a proportion of the original budget for statements to meet the needs identified in new statements and through annual reviews. The statement resources panel, with headteacher representatives, considers these needs on a monthly basis. The LEA reviews all statements of SEN on an annual basis via academic councils and there is moderation by a senior officer who attends them all. This enables the LEA to achieve a high degree of consistency in the allocation and use of resources. The LEA, in conjunction with the Education Action Zone, has also developed a system of provision mapping, with enthusiastic involvement of special educational needs co-ordinators, that enables schools to evaluate their use of SEN funds across year groups and the whole school, and the LEA to challenge schools about the effective use of resources.

120. The LEA maintains eight special schools and receives pupils from three neighbouring LEAs. The strategy envisages an important role for special schools in the future, with reductions in numbers on roll, but working as specialised multi-agency resource centres. The process has begun, with reductions in funded places at moderate learning difficulty schools and reintegration of pupils. The Plymouth inclusive education team successfully supports schools, pupils and families through the process. Special schools have annual targets for reintegration and are on track to meet them. Special schools support the strategy, but the LEA will need to continue to give guidance and support to some special schools as they cater for pupils with more complex needs than in the past.

Statutory obligations

121. The LEA has made good progress in meeting its statutory obligations since the last inspection. The proportion of pupils with statements (3.8 per cent) is relatively high, but the number of new statements is slowly reducing and there has been a marked increase in the percentage of statements being drafted within the prescribed timescales. Although this is still below the national average at 67 per cent, schools are increasingly able to meet pupils' needs in advance of a statement. The statementing team concentrates on identifying and providing appropriate provision for the pupil rather than always producing the statement in a timely fashion.

122. The quality of statements is consistently good, specifying the required teaching arrangements and targets for pupils. Annual reviews are well prepared, involving parents and pupils appropriately. Headteachers and special educational needs co-ordinators appreciate the opportunity to have their work moderated annually. The LEA has provided training for schools in writing individual education plans and these are particularly well done in primary schools, where the national literacy and numeracy strategies have had an effect on the quality of target setting for individual pupils.

123. The LEA carries out its responsibilities for a parent partnership service through the workers' education association, to guarantee independence and impartiality. The service has some 20 independent parent supporters, many of whom are parents of pupils with special educational needs. The co-ordinator is knowledgeable and resourceful and works closely with LEA decision-makers. Last year there were 500 enquiries into the service and no SEN tribunals.

Special educational needs functions to support school improvement

124. The LEA's SEN provision makes a good contribution to school improvement. Resources and specialist support services are focused on inclusion and improving the attainment of pupils. The inclusion strategy is clearly reflected in EDP2, especially priority four. The adviser for SEN and inclusion is a member of the learner support branch management team and this facilitates co-ordinated monitoring and prompt response to issues emerging from the LEA's annual review. Appropriately, the LEA has undertaken an inclusion review of 44 schools to evaluate the effective use of resources and identify good practice. A useful guide to good practice in SEN and inclusion was published, consisting mainly of case studies illustrating innovations and pilot studies. A Plymouth kitemark for inclusion policy and practice has been developed with schools, to celebrate good practice.

125. School inspection evidence shows that SEN provision in Plymouth schools is good. School evaluations of LEA services and training for special educational needs co-ordinators, teaching assistants and other staff are very positive. The LEA has undertaken several projects and research activities targeted at raising the achievement of pupils performing below age-related expectations. SEN support services play a significant role in the continuing professional development opportunities led by advisers. Two special educational needs co-ordinators and an advisory teacher have been appointed to work in a wide range of early years settings.

126. The educational psychology service has been expanded since the last inspection. It provides expert advice on a wide range of specialisms and strikes an appropriate balance between statutory assessment work and preventive advice and support. Following consultation with primary schools, a revised formula for allocating time to schools has been introduced to reflect more accurately the needs of pupils. A change in the allocation of time to secondary schools is subject to further consultation. Schools purchase additional support, over and above their core entitlement.

127. Overall, support services are well managed and have good expert knowledge. The teams for sensory impairment and speech and language difficulties provide a good service and have been strengthened, enabling them to expand specialist provision in mainstream schools.

Value for money

128. The delegation of SEN funding to mainstream schools and the development of the role of special schools has been accompanied by monitoring of the use of SEN resources. This is done by a combination of good budgetary control, information from annual reviews of statements, mapping and costing of provision in individual schools and questions in the advisers' annual review. Provision mapping is now being extended to all schools and is seen by the LEA and special educational needs co-ordinators as a powerful mechanism for debate in the school. It raises issues of the relative cost in cash and time of meeting categories of SEN and spreads a wider understanding among teachers of what is happening to meet individual education plan targets. With further development, these tools can provide very effective evaluation of provision, if linked to data on pupils' performance.

129. The LEA has energetically tackled the need to reduce out-of-LEA placements, both for financial and educational reasons. These have reduced from 15 to seven in the last year. Others, that are jointly funded with social services and health, are agreed by a joint panel using transparent criteria. The costs of SEN transport and out-of-LEA placements are high and have not yet had a value for money review. In the LEA's pupil referral units, where costs are well below the national average, value for money is good. Overall, the LEA's SEN provision provides sound value for money, with some strong features, capable of further development.

SECTION 4: PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION

The strategy to promote social inclusion

130. The strategy to promote social inclusion is very satisfactory. The LEA and schools have a strong commitment to the principles of social inclusion, which is evident in policies, strategies and operational plans. There is no overall council strategy for the function and this is a weakness. The measures taken by the LEA are sound with many good features. There is strong leadership from senior officers and the portfolio holder for education and children's services. Since the last inspection, a very clear inclusion strategy has been developed. It has a programme through to 2004 that has been embedded into EDP2 and other statutory plans with targets and costed activities. Schools feel ownership of this strategy and respond well to the LEA's leadership in implementing it.

131. The LEA's strategy includes clear, achievable plans and is being implemented effectively, with regular monitoring. It includes joint planning by specialist teams in the education and other departments. Constant attention to inclusion is given in the work of the advisory, school improvement, psychology, behaviour support, SEN, education other than at school and looked after children teams. Progress has been made in integrating children's services, overseen by the local strategic partnership and Plymouth integrated planning for children and young people. There are two school pilot schemes where multi-disciplinary teams support learning disabilities, behaviour and mental health difficulties.

132. Since the last inspection, the LEA has devoted increased resources to inclusion. Good use has been made of available external funding for example, Standards Fund, Pupil Retention Grant, Education Action Zone, four Sure Start projects, early years and asylum seekers grants, Health Action Zone and a good range of Social Regeneration projects. The council has provided £270,000 additional revenue over the last three years and prioritised inclusion projects in its capital programme. Over 20 new posts have been created in the range of support teams working directly in schools and with pupils. There are examples of good liaison, at a strategic level, with the police, health and social services, but in some situations scarce personnel resources in the department result in some discontinuity.

The supply of school places

133. The previous inspection found the performance of the LEA in relation to the provision of school places was satisfactory and it remains so. No detailed fieldwork was carried out in the current inspection. Schools' views and the LEA's own assessment indicate that performance is still satisfactory overall.

134. A successful basic need capital bid has been made for secondary provision in the east of the city and a city-wide area by area review of school place planning and organisation is currently underway. A reduction in surplus places has been achieved through the amalgamation of two infant and junior schools and the closure of a secondary school.

Admissions

135. The previous inspection found the performance in this area to be highly satisfactory. No detailed inspection work was carried out this time. Schools' views, the LEA's self-evaluation and available data indicate that performance remains satisfactory.

Asset management

136. The asset management planning process is now satisfactory. This confirms the LEA's own self-evaluation. Appropriate strategies are now in place to address the major building and conditions work.

137. The service is improving since the recent appointment of a new capital planning team. Significant progress has already been made in regaining the confidence of schools by ensuring a sound grasp of individual schools' needs, working with them to determine priorities and exploring ways to optimise the use of capital funds from different sources. This ensures that schools' priorities are linked with the LEA's asset management plan. Each school now has an assigned capital-planning officer; every school has been visited within the last six months.

138. Plymouth's asset management plan and statement of local priorities, supported by condition and suitability data has been assessed as satisfactory by the DfES. A suitable programme of condition surveys is underway, designed to ensure that all schools are surveyed once every three years. A complete list of allocations and criteria used to determine the capital programme is circulated to all schools and consultation takes place through a group that includes headteachers and governors. There has been good and rapid progress since January 2002.

139. Education is represented on the corporate asset management planning group and the education capital planning team is working closely with colleagues responsible for New Deal for Communities and Neighbourhood Renewal funding. Private Finance Initiatives are actively being explored to develop the Whiteleigh campus into an all-inclusive school and community provision, but also to address a backlog of issues in primary provision elsewhere in the city.

Provision of education for pupils who have no school place

140. The provision for pupils who have no school place is good; it has improved and developed since the last inspection and provides good value for money. The service meets the statutory requirement from September 2002 to provide 25 hours of education per week. Ofsted inspections of the two pupil referral units indicate that the curriculum is sound and well taught; attendance has improved. The multi-disciplinary staff are committed to raising the attainment of excluded pupils and to working innovatively with schools and other agencies to avoid exclusion. Vigorous multi-agency efforts, including support from the youth offending team, are made to re-engage pupils who are unwilling to attend the provision offered.

141. There are three pupil referral units, for pupils in years six to eight, years nine to 11 and for young mothers. Each has an advisory committee, chaired by a mainstream headteacher, and a clear line of accountability to a senior education officer. In both the main pupil referral units there is a determination to enable pupils, wherever possible, to return to mainstream education, with a range of short-term

packages of support to achieve this. In years six to eight pupils remain on the roll of their mainstream school with a clear expectation that they will return within six months. This is achieved in 80 per cent of cases. Individual learning plans concentrate on raising attainment in national curriculum subjects and results at the end of year 11 are above national averages for one A* - G grade in GCSE. The units receive well-planned and effective support from the psychology, welfare, child protection and youth offending teams.

142. The LEA has a range of strategies to minimise permanent exclusions, including managed transfer, monitoring of the use of the Pupil Retention Grant and a good practice guide on exclusion. Extra strategies are used if a pupil, in danger of exclusion, is in public care or on the child protection register. The referral system is clear, and prompt action is taken to make alternative provision. Where necessary, parents are offered independent advice and support through the parent partnership service. Links with health and social services are given high priority and generally work well. There is a joint protocol with neighbouring LEAs to ensure that excluded pupils moving into the area are identified and considered promptly.

143. The hospital school makes good provision for pupils who are out of school through illness, not only in the hospital, but through outreach work. Pupils whose parents choose to educate them at home are visited by consultant headteachers to monitor the curriculum and by education welfare officers if there is a cause for concern. The LEA provides sound advice to their parents. The unit for young mothers received a very good inspection report earlier this year, which praised the LEA's vision, support, monitoring and evaluation.

Attendance

144. This area of the LEA's work was not inspected through detailed fieldwork. The service was good in the last inspection. The provision for attendance remains good and gives good value for money. In the past three years the attendance of pupils in Plymouth primary and secondary schools has been in line with national averages. The level of unauthorised absence has been in line with national averages in primary schools and well below the national figure in secondary schools. The school survey indicates that the service is satisfactory or good and discussions with schools demonstrate that targeted support is effective. The LEA continues to work with the police on individual pupil truancy and a programme of truancy patrols across the city.

Behaviour support

145. LEA support for behaviour at school is good and provides good value for money. It has improved since the last inspection. Support for behaviour is a key feature of the inclusion strategy and the continuation of the last behavioural support plan has been embedded in EDP2. Schools find the work of the behaviour support team very effective. Permanent exclusions have reduced; further improvement is sought by targeting individual schools and pupils. Other services, particularly that for pupils who have no school place, collaborate well to minimise the risk of exclusion. Primary schools regard the support as satisfactory, but secondary schools view it as less than satisfactory.

146. The behaviour support team, of teachers, social workers, psychologists and teaching assistants has been significantly expanded since the last inspection. Its

focus is prevention and last year it worked in 95 per cent of the LEA's primary schools. The referral system is clear and schools rate the quality of support provided as very good. Schools can get immediate advice on a help-line. There are plans to add an early morning help-line soon. Last year there were no permanent exclusions from primary schools. The provision has other strong and innovative features. These include parent survival clubs, work with parents and young children through the portage scheme, guidance on handling strategies and a video for parents explaining how the team works.

147. In secondary schools, effective use is made of the Pupil Retention Grant. Schools receive funding of up to £70,000 according to an agreed formula, and the LEA retains roughly 15 per cent of the total grant to support schools and pupils through strategies designed to achieve continuity of education. Schools can agree trial placements in another school that are recorded and monitored by the LEA. Alternatively, a panel of headteachers and officers can agree a managed transfer ahead of a possible exclusion, either to another school or to the pupil referral unit for a period before returning to their school. Effective termly monitoring of the use of the grant is carried out by schools with officers. This achieves a degree of peer challenge, in addition to the LEA's central monitoring. Permanent exclusions from secondary schools are below the national average.

Health, safety, welfare and child protection

148. The LEA continues to make sound provision for child protection and health and safety, meets its statutory responsibilities and provides satisfactory value for money. Plymouth has a relatively low number of children on the child protection register. Their progress is monitored by visits to schools and extra effort is made to avoid the exclusion of any pupil on the register.

149. There are clear corporate policies and procedures to protect children and for referring concerns to schools' education welfare officers. A helpful multi-agency handbook of guidance was produced and circulated to schools in 2001 and the senior education welfare officer is the central point of contact for social services and other agencies. All education welfare officers have received the full 11 days of training organised by social services and a senior officer is on the area child protection committee and its training subcommittee. All schools have at least one designated teacher. The register is updated regularly and 95 per cent of designated staff have received training in the last two years. Training is also provided for designated school governors with regular updating available.

150. Since the last inspection, corporate management and training for the health and safety function have been reviewed and strengthened. The education department's health and safety officer monitors school policies. Governors are well supported and advised. Nevertheless, some headteachers feel that the management of the function is not sufficiently pro-active. In addition to a comprehensive handbook, guidance has been issued to schools on risk assessment and educational visits.

Looked after children

151. Provision for looked after children is very good, with excellent joint working between the team of expert education officers and the Quality Protects team in social

services. The service provides very good value for money. It has built on the clear strategy observed in the last inspection and achieved a more consistent provision than was then in place. The lifelong learning department maintains a comprehensive database, which is shared effectively with other agencies. The city council has a policy and three-year plan on corporate parenting with appropriate emphasis on children leaving care and concern for their educational attainment.

152. At any one time, there are approximately 500 looked after children in Plymouth, a proportion of the school population that is higher than the national average. Some are living with their families, but the great majority are in foster homes. The council has closed most of its children's homes and now retains only a few beds for emergency and complex cases. The LEA keeps in regular contact, at least termly, with a wide range of settings outside Plymouth to monitor and ensure that individual education plans are in place and being reviewed.

153. Looked after children are closely considered in all the LEA's statutory plans, with targets for their attainment. They achieve well above the national average at Key Stage 4. The LEA's admissions policy seeks to ensure that they are admitted to an appropriate school by treating them as siblings in the admissions priorities. If a looked after child is in danger of exclusion, extra support is offered to the school. At elected member level, several councillors are regularly involved in monitoring and celebrating pupils' progress. Last year the Lord Mayor held a presentation evening to celebrate achievement and there are plans to extend this next year.

154. The care leavers' action group, co-ordinated by a leaving care project officer, meets monthly, with multi-agency and elected member involvement. The executive is currently considering options for future delivery. The young people and their carers are fully involved in developments.

Measures to combat racism

155. The LEA's measures to combat racism have only recently become satisfactory. In 2002, the LEA introduced a range of new and effective strategies to accelerate progress that had previously been too slow. In the last inspection, this topic was inspected, together with support for children for whom English is an additional language. Since then the LEA has made strenuous efforts to improve its approach and does not underestimate the challenge of combating racism in an area where there are relatively few minority ethnic pupils. With more consistent representation from the LEA there is scope for strengthening the partnership with the local race equality council.

156. The council's corporate anti-racist task force is well-established, with representation from minority communities and relevant organisations and chaired by an elected councillor. The council has accepted the recommendations of the Macpherson report of the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence and has adopted a race equality scheme. The lifelong learning department has conducted a self-evaluation of all its policies, established a working group of officers and partners to oversee the implementation of department action plans and trained all senior officers. Data have been collected to assist ethnic monitoring of employment across the council.

157. There are useful projects, using Home Office and Health Action Zone funding, to connect communities, support families and raise awareness. One of these, N'Deagainsia, has lifelong learning department representation on its steering group and has carried out research into the experiences of black families in Plymouth. The outcomes are being used to assist the LEA in implementing its policies.

158. The LEA's inclusion strategy has action to implement in 2001/2002 the recommendations of the Macpherson Report into the death of Stephen Lawrence. Though late in coming, this has now been implemented. The LEA has also met its new statutory duties under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the related code of practice. Good use was made of the expertise of an external consultant to develop the LEA's policy and training. Governors and schools report that the training was challenging and well received. Schools are developing action plans and now have an LEA form for recording and reporting racist incidents. The forms place a clear responsibility on schools to deal with incidents. The LEA will start to collect data each year to add to evidence from questions raised at the annual review. This is too infrequent for effective monitoring and subsequent action where necessary. The race equality council is in a position, through a service level agreement, to assist the LEA in providing support and advice to schools and families.

159. The LEA has established the Plymouth religious and cultural resource centre as an independent trust to provide resources for schools and communities. It is intended that the centre will generate income to become self-funding. In the meantime, the LEA is continuing to support the centre by seconding a manager.

Recommendations

In order to improve support for combating racism:

- collect and monitor data each term on racist incidents in schools and take any necessary action; and
- strengthen the partnership with the Race Equality Council through a service level agreement for support and advice to schools and families.

SECTION 5: CORPORATE ISSUES

Summary

160. The quality of the city council's corporate leadership for education is very variable. Elected members have not given clear leadership to address the corporate shortcomings identified at the time of the last inspection. Performance management, Best Value and scrutiny processes remain unsatisfactory. This is to the detriment of the workings of the council as a whole, but much less so in relation to the effectiveness of the department for lifelong learning. Senior officers have a clear vision for the future, use their leadership and management skills effectively and keep abreast of developments and initiatives with confidence and enthusiasm. The department for lifelong learning has, as a result, introduced initiatives from which corporate developments can take place.

Corporate planning

161. Corporate planning is unsatisfactory overall. Elected members state a clear commitment to education and they have, from the outset, transferred the full SSA budget for education to the service. However, Plymouth's Strategic Plan 2001-2006, which includes education, has too many objectives and no indication of the relative priority given to each over time. The plan pre-dates EDP2 and the links between them are imprecise. The council's one year financial planning strategy is inappropriate and constrains the lifelong learning department's reasonable desire to establish medium-term planning regimes. Joint strategic and operational planning is well developed between the lifelong learning and social services departments. Work is in hand on the council's community strategy that will be under consultation by November 2002 and, in this regard, elected members and officers are actively involved with Plymouth 2020 through the local strategic partnership.

162. Councillors and the chief executive officer acknowledge that their procedures for planning, scrutiny, performance management and securing Best Value are unsatisfactory. A report on council processes, by an external consultant in 2002, was highly critical. The council has made two significant structural changes in education in its first four years and has frozen central recruitment over three periods since 2000. These factors, together with senior officer recruitment difficulties, have not hindered development in the department. However, they have created a fragile situation for the future that justifiably concerns schools.

163. Planning in the lifelong learning department has a good level of coherence and consistency and the plans are well understood by staff. Priorities in EDP 2 are strongly represented in individual service plans, the school organisation plan and the plans of the Early Years and Childcare Development Plan and the Education Action Zone. These links are translated into effective cross-team work that provides well-planned services to schools.

164. The implementation and evaluation of education and council plans, when taken together, are satisfactory overall. In the lifelong learning department, monitoring and the audit of need are very good and the implementation of EDP2 and current service plans is effective. Officers have a strong intuitive sense of the strategies that are successful for improvement in schools. Service leaders are given sound advice on a planning format and this is widely used. Plans and performance

indicators are reviewed termly in a report to the senior management team and the portfolio holder for education and children's services. However, some of the plans, for example, the departmental plan 2002-04, are too descriptive of the processes and actions to be taken, without a clear focus on outcomes and how they will be measured.

165. The council's initial implementation of Best Value reviews was unsatisfactory. The original challenge panel, and the current overview and scrutiny panel for education and children's services have been unclear of their role and responsibilities. Elected members had little training for the task and remain unsure of the necessary procedures and the right level of questioning to use when challenging senior officers. In addition, good call-in processes were over employed by elected members making the system ineffective. The first report to the education and children's service scrutiny panel in June 2002 was, appropriately, on school standards. The council is beginning to provide advice to schools to help them become more informed purchasers of external services. The lifelong learning department has yet to secure clear service level agreements throughout and ensure value for money.

166. Performance management procedures are not in place across the council and a performance review for the acting director of lifelong learning has not taken place. However, through its use of the European framework for quality management and internal review mechanisms, the lifelong learning department has a secure procedure for performance review. School improvement services use six-monthly line manager reviews to consider progress with the actions of the EDP, achievement of LEA targets and general professional development. Targets for individuals are set for the subsequent half-year, but few of these are outcome related to enable progress to be securely demonstrated. Other services, for example, educational psychologists, have similar, but more regular, supervision.

Recommendations

In order to ensure that corporate planning and the leadership of elected members supports the work of the lifelong learning department:

- specify in the strategic plan, and other corporate plans, the priorities given to lifelong learning and how the council will address them; provide clear vision and leadership to lifelong learning so that schools understand the council's intentions; clarify, sharpen and make more effective the councils' scrutiny and decision-making functions; and establish a corporate performance review programme that ensures a regular review for the director of lifelong learning.

Decision making

167. Corporate decision making for education and lifelong learning is unsatisfactory. In broad terms, the council has made sound decisions on education spending that reflect the EDP and strategic priorities. The LEA has also taken difficult decisions relating to school places, personnel issues and education policies, most of which have been appropriate and timely. Weaknesses, however, are significant and outweigh these strengths.

168. Council procedures are followed appropriately, but they are over complex and have constrained the smooth operation of the new constitutional processes. Corporate decisions on the annual education budget share have been tardy and, until recently, have lacked full consideration because the lifelong learning department has not been part of the council's annual budget-setting procedure. Additionally, the absence of a secure scrutiny and Best Value regime has meant that decisions are rarely evaluated for their effect on improving quality or value for money.

169. The terms of reference and guidance for decisions delegated to the portfolio holder for education and children's services and the director for lifelong learning are outdated, revisions are in draft form, but were not available for inspection. Nonetheless, procedures for delegated decisions are well managed, fully recorded and regularly called in by the overview and scrutiny committee. The portfolio holder understands the education and social inclusion objectives of the department well and presents a persuasive and very strong case for investment and development in Plymouth's schools. Following executive committee confirmation of delegated decisions three advisory groups, with appropriate representation from elected members and headteachers, consider the scope, priorities and resources needed for implementation. Headteachers generally feel well consulted and informed about decisions, but they report that the involvement of councillors in formal consultation procedures has been limited.

Recommendation

In order to clarify decision-making procedures:

- agree and publish the revision of delegated powers to the portfolio holder for education and children's services and the director of lifelong learning.

Leadership provided by elected members

170. The leadership provided by council members is unsatisfactory. Elected members recognise and declare the importance of education, but also acknowledge their limited knowledge and understanding of educational issues. This is substantiated by the views of headteachers who judged the effectiveness of the leadership of elected members and their communication with schools to be unsatisfactory. Those councillors on the scrutiny panel for education and lifelong learning are only gradually gaining the skills and knowledge needed, and procedures are well behind those of other councils. Nonetheless, members are clear about their strategic role. By contrast, reports of the weekly meetings between the portfolio holder for education and children's services and senior officers indicate robust discussion and sound decision making that ensures progress and development in the department. At this level, the council business for education is secure and effective. The portfolio holder makes regular reports to the cabinet.

171. Members receive clear and informative reports from officers. This area of work has few weaknesses. Papers are presented to an agreed format, provide a clear picture of the issues and a range of options for decisions, where appropriate. Improved data recently has raised the quality of these reports and made implications for the future clearer, although a detailed analysis of anticipated management and

contextual changes is not always evident. Executive members are well informed and up to date with events and officers are always willing to provide briefings for all members in advance of significant decisions.

Leadership provided by senior officers

172. The leadership provided by senior officers in the education and lifelong learning department has many strengths and few weaknesses. They have ensured good progress since the last inspection through clear direction and secure management. At present, half of the senior officers are in acting posts because of the secondment of the director of lifelong learning to a corporate role. The acting director for lifelong learning has a very clear vision for the future, provides good leadership and ensures purposeful management of the service. Schools speak very highly of her work and its impact. The senior officer group provides sound and committed leadership through a strong team approach where there are few weaknesses and the imperative for improvement in schools is tangible. Senior officers are a 'self-starting' group who take up initiatives with enthusiasm and have an intuitive ability to introduce strategies that are, in the main, effective.

173. The department is successfully reducing the need for intervention in schools. Many heads of service demonstrate effective leadership and management skills and the provision by these services is well respected in schools. Relationships with almost all schools are good and headteachers are involved in a wide range of consultative and reference groups that influence development in the LEA.

Partnership

174. The LEA's work involving collaboration between a range of agencies has significant strengths and few weaknesses. The department is committed to working in partnership with a wide range of organisations and agencies to maximise opportunities for the young people of Plymouth. Many of these have been described in earlier sections of this report. These partnerships are, on the whole, effective, although some of the partners report that LEA officers are overstretched with the result that continuity of relationships and involvement is sometimes difficult to achieve.

175. The work of the local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) is assisted by productive relationships with LEA officers. The SACRE development plan appropriately includes promotion and support for the religious education curriculum and sharing of good practice across the three LEAs it covers. LEA links and consultation with the dioceses over policy and school issues are effective.

176. The learning and work partnership, chaired by the council's head of economic development and urban regeneration, is the learning arm of the local strategic partnership. It effectively brings the LEA together with key players including the Learning and Skills Council, the College of St Mark and St John, Plymouth College of Further Education and the Connexions service. These partners co-operate well in the numerous regeneration and inclusion projects aimed at the training, employment and skills development of disadvantaged and disaffected teenagers. The recent inspection of the Education Action Zone praised the effectiveness of its LEA partnership. Good work between the LEA and the Connexions service, youth offending team and local training providers enhances the

education of pupils with no school place. Chaired by chief executive of Plymouth hospitals trust the Plymouth integrated planning for children and young people is piloting ways of integrated work and planning with education, health and youth offending team. The police service is actively and effectively engaged in a range of inclusion and diversity projects with the LEA and schools.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

The report makes a number of recommendations.

The following recommendations should be acted upon as a matter of priority:

In order to ensure that corporate planning and the leadership of elected members supports the work of the lifelong learning department:

- specify in the strategic plan, and other corporate plans, the priorities given to lifelong learning and how the council will address them;
- provide clear vision and leadership to lifelong learning so that schools understand the council's intentions;
- clarify, sharpen and make more effective the council's scrutiny and decision-making functions; and
- establish a corporate performance review programme that ensures a regular review for the director of lifelong learning.

In order to improve property services support to schools:

- develop appropriate guidelines for schools so that they are clear where their responsibilities lie; and
- assist schools in obtaining value for money in property services by brokering services with a range of providers.

In order to improve support for combating racism:

- collect and monitor data each term on racist incidents in schools and take any necessary action; and
- strengthen the partnership with the Race Equality Council through a service level agreement for support and advice to schools and families.

In order to improve access to management information and improve planning and monitoring:

- build upon the existing E-learning strategy to develop and implement, across the local authority, a strategic plan for ICT and information management in consultation with schools.

However, the following recommendations are also fundamental in that they affect the LEA's overall capacity for improvement:

In order to strengthen the evaluation of the work of the advisory services:

- improve the strategic use made of the management information systems currently available;

- centralise the collection and analysis of pupil and school performance data; and
- sharpen the performance targets set for individuals within the advisory service.

In order to further improve EDP2 and its processes:

- incorporate more precise and measurable outcomes and targets to ensure robust evaluation of actions in the plan.

In order to improve monitoring and challenge:

- ensure that all written reports to schools provide sharp and clear judgements and focused action points.

In order to clarify decision-making procedures:

- agree and publish the revision of delegated powers to the portfolio holder for education and children's services and the director of lifelong learning.

© Crown copyright 2002. This report may be produced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that all extracts quoted are produced verbatim and without adaptation and on condition that the source and date thereof are stated.

Office for Standards in Education
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

Tel: 020 7421 6800

A further copy of this report can be obtained from the Local Education Authority concerned:

Plymouth Local Education Authority
Directorate of Education and Lifelong Learning
Windsor House
Tavistock Road
Derriford
Plymouth PL6 5UF

A copy can also be obtained from the OFSTED website: www.ofsted.gov.uk