

Oxfordshire County Council

Local Education Authority

Inspection Report

Date of Inspection: October 2004

Reporting Inspector: Mary Ryan HMI

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Basic information

Name of LEA:	Oxfordshire County Council Local Education Authority
LEA number:	931
Address of LEA:	Macclesfield House New Road Oxford OX1 1NA
Reporting Inspector:	Mary Ryan HMI
Date of Inspection:	October 2004

Summary

Introduction

Oxfordshire is a mainly rural county, with the lowest population density of any county in the south east of England. It has a very successful economy, a rich cultural and educational heritage and the second lowest rate of long term unemployment of any county in England and Wales. There are also pockets of deprivation and poverty in several of its rural and urban communities. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals is below the national average.

Standards on entry to school are above average; standards of attainment at Key Stages 1 to 4 are in line with national averages but below those of the LEA's statistical neighbours. While rates of improvement are in line with national trends, the failure to raise standards at Key Stage 4 has been identified by the LEA as an area of concern.

There have been significant changes within the council since the last inspection. In 2001, the formation of a two-party coalition led to the establishment of an executive committee which transformed the decision-making process. The council management team was subsequently restructured and the number of directorates reduced to five. These include Learning and Culture (which includes the former education department) and Social and Health Care (which includes the former social services department). The director for learning and culture¹ took up post in 2003.

¹ Referred to within the report as ' Director'

Main findings

Summary: Oxfordshire County Council local education authority (LEA) is highly satisfactory. Progress since the previous inspection in January 2000, albeit slow initially, is satisfactory overall. However, a number of initiatives are at an early stage of development. Although the performance of its schools is in line with national averages, standards are below those in similar education authorities. The county believes that it can do better and this determination to improve standards drives the work of the council. Changes to the corporate organisation and decision-making processes, together with key appointments of senior officers have improved the effectiveness of the leadership of education. All key issues identified in the previous inspection have now been tackled, though the much needed improvements to the quality of financial systems have only just begun. Schools and the LEA are still adjusting to a new relationship which encourages greater school autonomy, responsibility for the evaluation of their own performance, and increased accountability. The LEA has identified accurately its strengths and its weaknesses, knows what needs to be done, has resourced activities and projects appropriately and has begun to implement its plans. All this indicates that Oxfordshire’s capacity to improve further is highly satisfactory.

Areas of strength	Areas of weakness/for development
Corporate leadership of education	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective leadership by senior officers and elected members • Improved decision-making • Good support for early years education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The development and implementation of a strategy for 14-19 education • The targeting of resources to schools
Strategy for education and its implementation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The quality of the recent LEA strategy for school improvement • The improvement in the LEA support for underperforming schools • The quality of the arrangements for admissions to schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards in schools, in particular at Key Stage 4 • The quality assurance of notes of advisers’ visits to schools • The quality of asset management planning
Support to improve education in schools	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The quality of support for ICT in the curriculum and the quality of support at Key Stage 3 • Support for school governors • The work of the LEA in securing the supply and quality of teachers • The high quality of human resource services to schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The planning and provision of financial services to schools • The effectiveness and value for money of services provided to support school management • The impact on standards, of services to support school improvement • Information management services to schools
Support for special educational needs	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clear, coherent vision and strategy for SEN which provides good value for money • Meeting statutory obligations for SEN 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools’ understanding of the proposed changes in the support for school improvement in SEN, including that for special schools
Support for social inclusion	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The coherence and effectiveness of the strategy for social inclusion • Good support for attendance and behaviour in schools • Good support for child protection 	

Recommendations

Key recommendations

Key Stage 4: Improve standards of attainment at Key Stage 4.

Financial services: Improve financial services by focusing on improving schools' capacity to manage their financial resources.

Management services: Develop and implement systems to ensure both the effectiveness and value for money of services to support school managers.

Other recommendations

Corporate leadership of education

14-19 education: Establish and implement, in partnership with other stakeholders, a strategy for 14-19 education for Oxfordshire.

Strategy for education and its implementation

LEA support to schools: Establish clear expectations for the purpose and content of notes of advisers' visits to schools.

Support to improve education in schools

Services to support school improvement: Continue to develop ways of working with schools that promote their self-management and challenge performance across all schools.

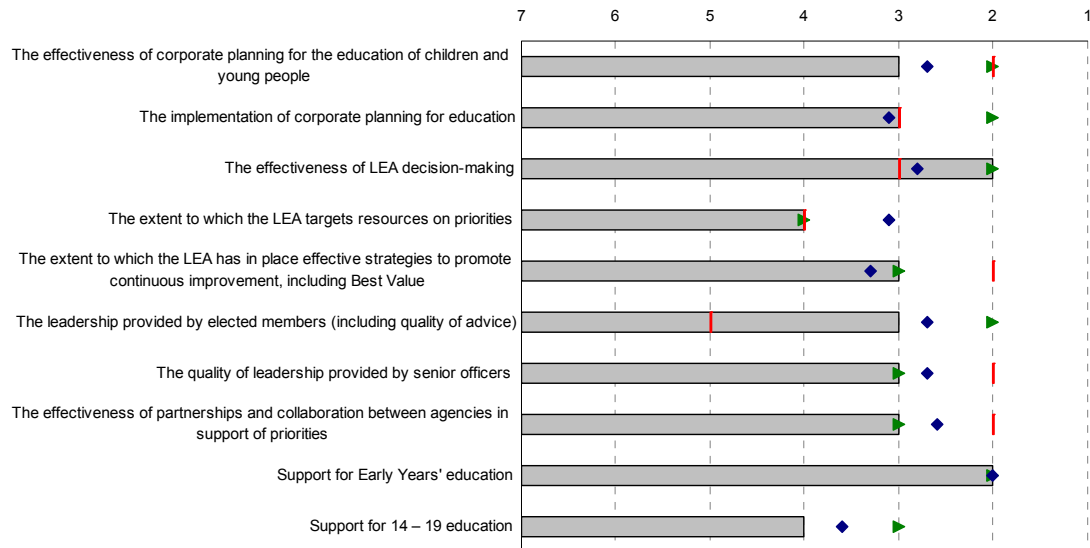
Support for special educational needs

Strategy for special schools: Ensure that schools fully understand the implications of the proposed changes in the support for school improvement in SEN.

Support for social inclusion

Section 1: Corporate leadership of education

Summary table of judgements



The bar represents the grade awarded to the LEA, the triangle represents the LEA's self-evaluation grade, the vertical line represents the LEA's previous grade and the diamond represents the average grade of all LEAs inspected in the last year. 1 = Very Good, 2 = Good, 3 = Highly Satisfactory, 4 = Satisfactory, 5 = Unsatisfactory, 6 = Poor, 7 = Very Poor.

Corporate planning for education and its implementation

1. The LEA's corporate planning is highly satisfactory as is the implementation of those plans. Highly satisfactory progress has been made since the previous inspection as a result of effective leadership by elected members and senior officers, improved cross-directorate working and increasingly effective monitoring and scrutiny. Although there are individual examples of their effectiveness, many procedures are at a relatively early stage of development, are not yet embedded and have yet to show significant impact on performance. Capacity for further improvement is highly satisfactory.

2. Significant progress has been made in establishing corporate priorities and in focussing resources to meet these priorities. The council management team was restructured in April 2003 and the number of directorates reduced to five, with each director having a countywide responsibility in addition to their core directorate responsibilities. This has strengthened corporate capacity and facilitated cross-directorate working.

3. Recent corporate plans give a clear sense of direction encompassing local and national priorities. The learning and culture directorate and service plans reflect these priorities. Improving the attainment of secondary school pupils and giving every child the best start in life head the thirteen priorities of the council, and resources to support the achievement of these priorities have been increased. The

Educational Development Plan (EDP) drives the work of Learning and Culture. All plans are well structured with clearly defined actions, timescales, responsibilities and success criteria. Decision-making procedures are good, and the council has demonstrated its ability to make difficult decisions when required. Shared planning across directorates has resulted in the improved co-ordination of projects across the council, for example the Best Value review (BVR) of children's services, which is led jointly by the learning and culture and social and health care directorates, together with the health service. The council is working increasingly effectively with its partners to achieve the outcomes identified in corporate and directorate plans.

4. The introduction of a formal programme to monitor the performance of services is bringing about much needed improvements in securing accountability at all levels of the organisation. Improved self-evaluation procedures mean that the LEA knows itself well. Weaknesses in financial support services are being tackled. The respective monitoring responsibilities of the executive, officers and scrutiny committee are now understood. Good use is made of performance indicators and evaluations of impact. Best Value reviews are used effectively to shape strategy. Monitoring is now better linked to the management of performance.

5. Partners and other stakeholders report that communication with officers has improved since the restructuring of the directorate in April 2003. Schools recognise the fresh impetus brought by the appointment of the current director, but many have yet to understand fully and accept the changing relationship with the LEA.

Decision-making

6. Decision-making procedures have improved since the last inspection and are now good. They are clearly defined and are well understood by members and officers. Decisions are informed by thorough consultation, high quality information, good planning and effective communication. These procedures have been adjusted in the light of experience and there is now full consultation with stakeholders and elected members, for example, in the most recent review of secondary provision in Banbury. The LEA has demonstrated its ability and determination to take difficult decisions as, for example, in the reorganisation of Oxford City schools. Members always seek and usually act upon the sound advice of officers.

7. Officers maintain good contact with executive and non-executive members of all three political parties through regular formal and informal briefings. The information provided by the director and heads of service to elected members through briefings and seminars is of high quality.

Targeting of resources

8. The LEA performs satisfactorily in this respect, as it did at the previous inspection. Significant progress has been made however, in responding to a key recommendation in that report to address the low funding of education. As the council sharpened its decision-making and agreed its priorities, it also increased the

resources available for education year on year such that, for the current year, the directorate is funded in excess of £8 million above the Formula Spending Share.

9. Furthermore, resources available to schools have also been increased, both in real terms and comparatively. Delegated amounts per pupil at both primary and secondary level now compare favourably with similar authorities. The council has passed on to schools the full increases in funding and an officer post has been created to ensure that all the available Standards Fund grant is taken up and then targeted at priorities.

10. The directorate's retained budget has not been subject to sufficiently rigorous scrutiny, an acknowledged shortcoming across the council. However, in a concerted drive, led by the leader of the council, all budget lines are now being carefully examined against the principles promoted within the council's helpful medium-term financial plan. Together with the increasingly focused work of the Schools Forum, this process is well placed to confirm legitimate growth in line with priorities, and to challenge budget lines of lower significance.

11. The formula for distributing resources to schools has been the subject of piecemeal review. This means that while some aspects, such as the special educational needs (SEN) index, and the Key Stage 3 age weighting are carefully targeted, other items have simply been increased by the rate of inflation. The Schools Forum is again exerting helpful influence in raising the profile of these matters as well as the long-standing need for a thorough examination of the formula for funding special schools.

12. Budget setting is generally accurate, and monitoring is systematic, enabling potential overspends to be identified quickly. Remedial action is timely and effective. Although financial planning tools and data are provided to schools, inherent inaccuracies have resulted in schools understandably lacking faith in them. This has been accepted, somewhat late in the day, and an improved model is being tested with some pilot schools. The directorate has properly increased its capacity in order to take a much needed, more rigorous approach to challenging schools about their balances and deficits.

Leadership by elected members and advice given to them

13. At the time of the previous inspection, leadership by elected members was unsatisfactory. Since then, very good progress has been made. It is now highly satisfactory with the capacity to improve further. The leader of the council provides strong leadership and the combined perspectives of the three members of the executive, who share responsibility for the work of the directorate, bring to the executive committee an enhanced understanding of education and related issues. The function of the scrutiny panel has recently been clarified. This has enabled it to develop more effective ways of working. However, it has yet to establish itself fully as an effective body in shaping policy.

14. Partnership and communication between officers and elected members are good. Members understand their strategic role and delegate appropriately to senior officers. The quality of advice provided to members by officers is good. The director meets regularly with the three members of the executive, the chair of scrutiny and the opposition member for education. Both the executive and the scrutiny panel use the increasingly high quality data provided by officers to challenge the work of the directorate. Best Value reviews are used well to evaluate quality and performance and to inform strategy. Elected members are involved in the annual performance review of the director and monitor the performance of the directorate. They also undertake information-gathering visits to partnership groups of schools.

15. The overarching vision for education is understood and shared across the political spectrum. However, it is not yet fully articulated to the wider community of schools. Despite the involvement of many elected members with local school communities, schools report limited contact with the political leadership of Oxfordshire.

Leadership by senior officers

16. This function is highly satisfactory with good capacity for further improvement. Since his appointment the director for learning and culture, with the support of the chief executive, has introduced a high level of challenge to officers and schools and set a clear focus and firm direction for the education service. Elected members, officers and other stakeholders share his vision and priorities. Under his leadership, heads of service are developing a strategic view of the education service, and are beginning to take significant and enhanced responsibility for shaping policy and practice. Examples include the BVR of behaviour, which has led to the strengthening of the support for behaviour in schools, and the BVR of children's services, a wide-reaching exercise involving many partners. Information provided by officers to elected members is analytical and evaluative.

17. The newly-revised strategy for school improvement is understood by schools and is beginning to provide an appropriate level of challenge. The comprehensive data on performance and management provided by the LEA are used well by officers and increasingly by schools. There are many examples of effective consultation and good communication with schools by individual officers. However, all schools are not fully committed to the changing agenda of autonomy and responsibility. This may be explained, in part, by the many recent changes to the delivery of services which have meant reduced contact for many schools with their link adviser and other officers.

Strategic partnerships

18. Partnership work is highly satisfactory. This is particularly evident when looking at the quality of individual partnerships. These are embedded in the EDP and their impact is monitored and evaluated. The strategic management of partnership work has yet to be fully developed. The LEA does not collate

information systematically on the impact of its partnerships on the achievements of children and young people.

19. Oxfordshire has many well-established partnerships and has been proactive in developing new ones. This reflects the corporate commitment of the local authority to partnership work, both internally and externally. Joint initiatives between the learning and culture directorate, the social and health care directorate and the health service reflect the shared corporate priorities and are central to the future provision of integrated children's services. In the last eighteen months, external partners report a renewed energy and commitment to these partnerships from the LEA.

20. Partnership work has led to improvement in specific areas, for example: the maintenance of a low rate of exclusions, improved attainment in the former Education Action Zone (EAZ); improved access to college for older pupils from special schools; improved access to early years education; and better provision for pupils excluded from school. A number of other initiatives are still at an early stage of development and have had insufficient time to demonstrate impact. These include the 14-19 strategy and the pilot arrangements for integrated support services. The LEA is also proactive in exploring how new partnerships will support the achievement of its stated priorities, for example, in the move to develop extended schools.

Support for Early Years

21. Support for early years is good and is a key priority for the LEA. This is reflected at a strategic level in the EDP and has resulted in a comprehensive and coherent plan to raise quality at the Foundation Stage.

22. A BVR completed in 2001 led to services to support early years and childcare being combined in 2002. There are clear strategies to improve attainment and to support increasingly integrated childcare provision. Targets for increasing childcare places have been met and targets for the provision of out-of-school places have been exceeded. Although more childminder places have closed than opened, there is now a recruitment and retention strategy to tackle this instability. In addition, plans are in place to support high quality childminding through training and mentoring.

23. Early years education is now available to 93% of three-year-olds in a wide range of settings including six neighbourhood nurseries and two children's centres. This increase in places represents good choice for parents. Settings are well supported through training and local networks. Arrangements for completing the Foundation Stage profile are well understood in units and schools, but are less well used in the pre-school sector. Increased training on provision for children with special needs has led to greater understanding and improved expertise in this area across settings.

Support for 14-19 education

24. This function is satisfactory, although there has been slow progress since the 14-19 area review conducted in June 2003. However, the recent establishment of a cross-sector 14-19 strategy group reflects the new and energetic commitment from the LEA to joint working with other agencies. The strategy will be finalised in spring 2005 following extensive consultation. The current vision for Oxfordshire, articulated through the EDP and the LEA 16-19 strategy, provides a transitional basis on which to secure raised achievement and appropriate entitlement for all. The strengthening of the advisory team with responsibility for education post-14 has created much needed additional capacity.

25. Improving standards at Key Stage 4 is a recognised priority in Oxfordshire's plans. Following the BVR of secondary education, a number of strategies for improvement were introduced, contributing to some comparative improvement against the national average at five or more A*-G passes at GCSE. Percentages achieving five or more A*- C passes remain static.

26. Post-16 staying on rates for students in schools are good and standards achieved are secure. Provisional data on Advanced Level performance for 2004 indicate increases in the percentage of students with passes, including at higher grades, and a significant increase in average point scores. There are some successful examples of local collaboration between schools and with other providers and, in the 2004-5 EDP, an emphasis on the development of alternative programmes both pre and post-16.

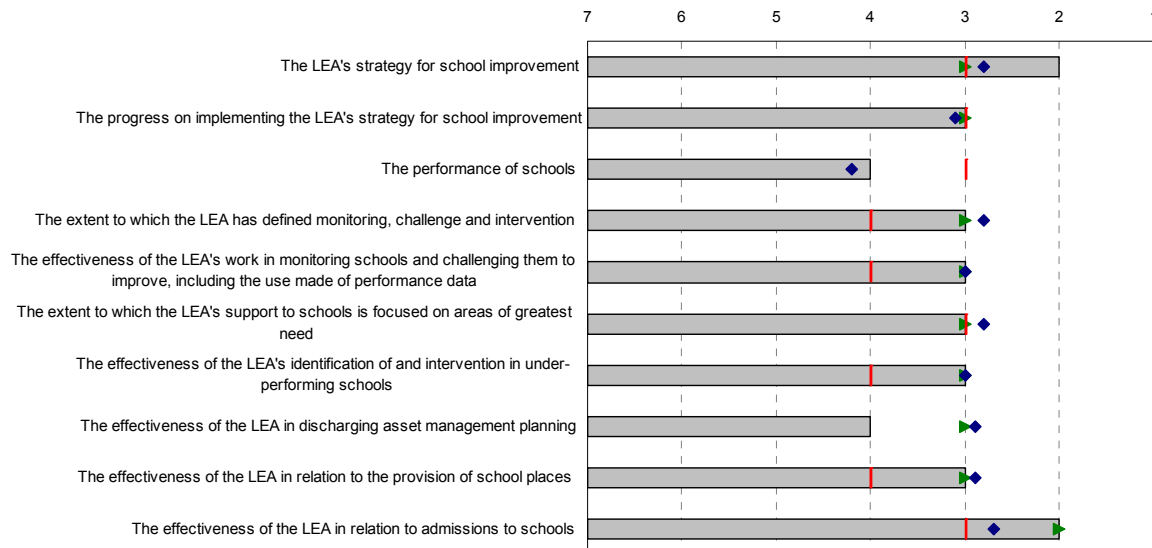
27. Despite the efforts of LEA officers there remains much work to be done across the partnership. The LEA has not moved forward significantly to improve the quality of objective advice and guidance to all students. The work of the data group, which has been supported by the LEA and will bring together a much-needed information base across the county, has yet to be completed. Quality assurance, currently undertaken by individual institutions, is not yet co-ordinated across the LEA and its partners and so does not inform the LEA about its effectiveness in this area.

Recommendation

- Establish and implement, in partnership with other stakeholders, a strategy for 14-19 education for Oxfordshire.

Section 2: Strategy for education and its implementation

Summary table of judgements



The bar represents the grade awarded to the LEA, the triangle represents the LEA's self-evaluation grade, the vertical line represents the LEA's previous grade and the diamond represents the average grade of all LEAs inspected in the last year. 1 = Very Good, 2 = Good, 3 = Highly Satisfactory, 4 = Satisfactory, 5 = Unsatisfactory, 6 = Poor, 7 = Very Poor.

The strategy for school improvement and its implementation

28. Slow progress has been made since the previous inspection. However, the strategy for school improvement is now good and its recent pace of implementation is highly satisfactory. The new strategy has clear links with the strategies for SEN and social inclusion, with a shared focus on raising attainment and increasing participation. Recommendations from the previous inspection are fully integrated into plans with specific emphasis on an increased level of challenge to schools. However, to date, the LEA has not met many of its targets. Strategies to achieve these targets are now in place but they are still at an early stage of implementation and have yet to demonstrate impact.

29. The strategy reflects directorate and corporate priorities. The LEA has belatedly put in place structures and systems to monitor closely the progress of its schools. This has allowed it to challenge schools, where necessary, and to target support and resources accurately. Schools have a good understanding of the priority to raise performance and of the actions being undertaken by the LEA in order to achieve this. However, they do not yet fully understand the implications of the changes being made, for example in respect of the differentiated levels of support to schools by the advisory service.

30. Although pupils enter schools with above average levels of attainment, standards at subsequent key stages are generally in line with those nationally. At

Key Stage 4, they are below those of similar authorities. Targets set by the schools and the LEA are ambitious. They are informed by comprehensive performance data. Officers are confident that the reliability of the data and the improved quality of the target-setting process with schools mean that these targets are achievable. They recognise the importance of high aspirations in raising standards and are focusing their work with schools on the achievement of these targets. The EDP and individual service plans make explicit the links between school improvement targets, service activities and the resource to support these.

31. The recently introduced performance management procedures, which are linked to the appraisal of individual officers, are rigorous and will enable heads of service to monitor progress against objectives. There are regular reports to elected members. Best value reviews have led to well-planned actions, some of which have resulted in improvements. The monitoring of the impact of actions to support schools has improved.

The LEA's monitoring, challenge and intervention in schools and the targeting of support

32. These aspects of the LEA's work are highly satisfactory. The quality, range, timeliness and use of data to analyse schools' strengths and weaknesses have improved significantly since the previous inspection. Clear criteria for the categorisation of schools and the deployment of school improvement and other support services have been established. Together, these developments enable the LEA to monitor the performance of schools, identify strengths and weaknesses and target support more accurately on areas of greatest need, including underperforming schools and subject departments.

33. In the majority of schools, the focus of the LEA's work has moved from target setting to improving and supporting self-evaluation. Schools recognise this and report that they value the challenge provided by link advisers. Advisory service review reports are well-focussed and shared with governing bodies. However, notes of adviser visits to schools vary in their usefulness and are not always shared with governors. Following the BVR of secondary achievement, both the LEA and its schools recognised the need for improvement. The LEA strengthened its ability to challenge and support these schools by forming a team of secondary phase advisers. It also established secondary improvement networks, groups of secondary schools with similar attainment on entry but varying levels of attainment at Key Stages 3 and 4. Schools value these opportunities to share effective practice.

34. The LEA is making increasingly effective use of partnerships and initiatives to target further support. Through the Leadership Incentive Grant, it is working collaboratively with three secondary schools in challenging circumstances to strengthen leadership and management, raise expectations, and improve the quality of teaching. It has worked with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to develop the capacity for sustained improvement in a school facing particular difficulties by establishing a school improvement partnership with one of the authority's more successful schools. The LEA supported the development of

integrated support services for schools and pupils within the former EAZ, and evaluation demonstrated positive outcomes for both. As a result the LEA, working with partners such as the social and health care directorate and the Children's Fund, is extending this initiative, amended to take account of local needs, to three other areas of the county.

Recommendation

- Establish clear expectations for the purpose and content of notes of advisers' visits to schools.

Effectiveness of the LEA's identification of, and intervention in, underperforming schools

35. Support for underperforming schools has improved and is now highly satisfactory. There has been a very significant fall in the numbers of schools requiring special measures or with serious weaknesses. In the majority of schools, the LEA identifies and tackles weaknesses promptly. A task group, involving officers, advisers, the headteacher and chair of the governing body is established for each school. This ensures that support is well planned and co-ordinated, matches the needs of individual schools and secures improvement. Additional school reviews, carried out by advisers not involved in supporting the school, are used to assess the school's improvement against its targets and evaluate the effectiveness of LEA support. Progress is well monitored and reported regularly to elected members and senior officers. If progress falters, action plans are swiftly amended.

36. Effective support for underperforming schools is provided by the targeted deployment of experienced headteachers and teachers from the Oxfordshire school improvement team into schools with identified weaknesses. They support leadership and management to improve the quality of teaching.

37. Two primary schools and a special school for secondary age pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties have recently been identified as requiring special measures. The LEA had identified all three schools as being of concern. Work was underway to bring about improvement and although progress was being made, it was not sufficiently secure or advanced to prevent such identification.

Asset management planning and the planning and provision of property services

38. Performance in both these functions is satisfactory.

39. Asset management was not assessed in the previous inspection. The council holds current data on school property, and has carried out the statutory surveys for condition, sufficiency and suitability, with no areas of weakness identified in the latest assessment by the DfES. Priorities for investment are clear, and shared with schools, and the LEA's asset plan links well with corporate developments. Links between schools' asset plans and that of the LEA are less secure, although there is

an emerging plan of each school's position over the coming three to five years. Agreements with schools about pooling budgets to achieve outcomes are developing, and plans are emerging to extend the regularity and coverage of training sessions for governors and school premises managers.

40. Investment has increased significantly over the last four years, from £36.4 million in 2001-02 up to £55.3 million this year, by using the range of conventional sources of capital funding. All high priority repairs have been addressed. However, the identified backlog of work stands at around £60 million, and although work is on-going, there is still a substantial funding gap. The council is embarking on an overall property review and is at the early stages of reconsidering its corporate procurement strategy. It is also appraising its options for using prudential borrowing and the Private Finance Initiative as potential sources of capital resources. The council has applied lessons learned from the current arrangements with a private property contractor. The new contract, to be let imminently, is rightly more focused on outputs.

41. Recent improvements in property repairs, maintenance and buildings projects mean that performance is now satisfactory. Schools are critical of the service, although less so as improvements work their way through. For example, the major building programme to enable reorganisation of city schools to be implemented was completed on time and within budget. More secure arrangements have now been put in place to separate client and contractor functions with qualified staff in post with a specific brief to offer better client support to schools. By also carrying out an annual survey update for each school and a systematic programme of focused visits, more secure links between schools' aspirations and the LEA's asset management plan are being developed.

Providing school places

42. Performance is highly satisfactory. This was the case at the time of the previous inspection, which recommended that the LEA act to reduce the high levels of surplus places in secondary schools. Oxfordshire has made significant progress in this respect and the overall secondary surplus is now at their target of around 10 %. There are still some areas with secondary surplus in excess of this, although only two secondary schools have more than 25% surplus places. The council is in the process of resolving this issue and public consultations are in progress.

43. Part of the reduction in surplus places resulted from the successful, major reorganisation of provision in Oxford city. A three-tier system of 41 schools was replaced by two tiers comprising only 29 schools in a relatively short period of time, displaying considerable expertise in planning and implementing such a complex project. Political agreement and determination to back a potentially difficult decision were also key factors in its success. The council is tracking the performance of pupils to ensure that corrective action can be taken, where necessary, to maximise the gains from the reorganisation.

44. This major project and the focus on secondary schools have proved to be something of a distraction for property officers, and the implications of the new methodology for calculating primary surplus were not fully anticipated. Initial figures suggested an apparently significant increase in primary surplus. Action to both check the situation and assess the implications has been rapid if somewhat reactive. Currently, a range of sensible tactics is planned, including mergers, changes to admissions numbers and the removal of temporary classrooms. These, together with the full impact of the single point of entry, are on track to bring primary surplus places within acceptable limits by September 2006.

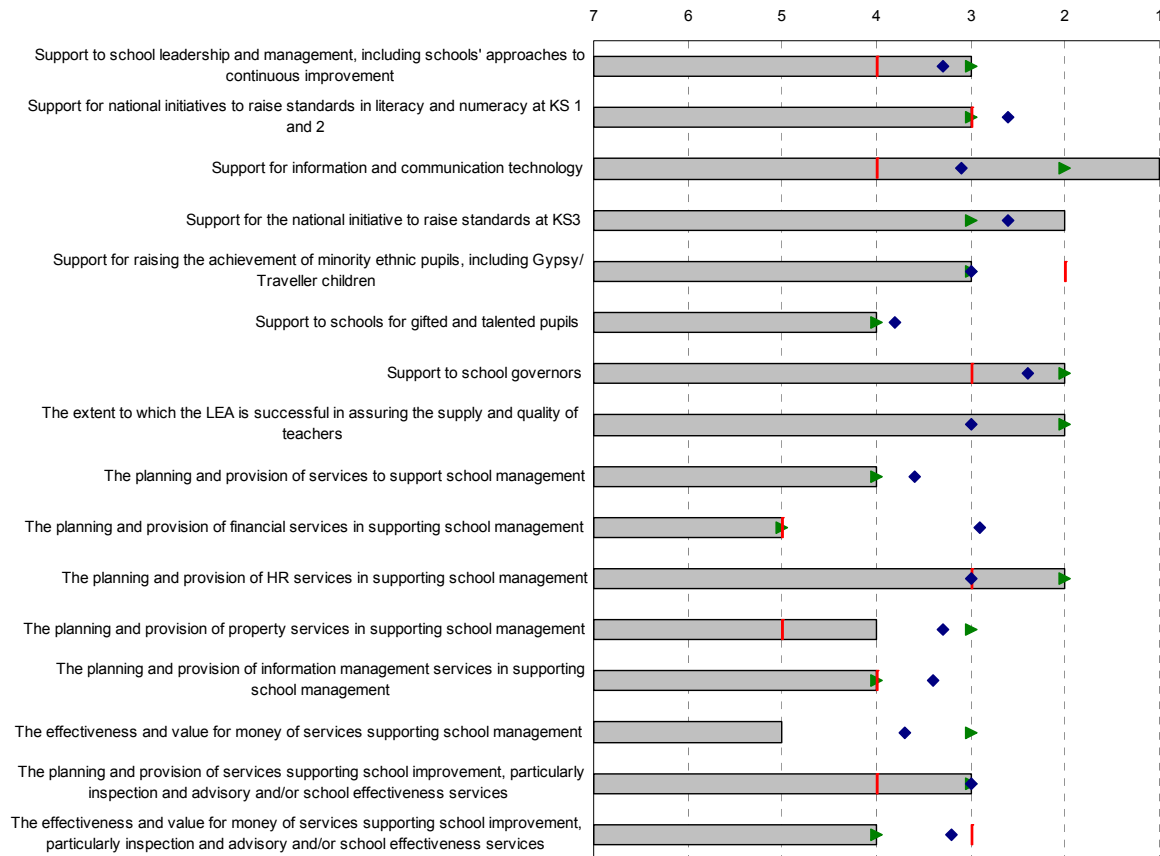
45. The school organisation committee is properly constituted, well supported, and acts appropriately. The school organisation plan is fit for purpose, although the LEA has sensibly opted to produce an annual version instead of the required three-year plan. This is particularly appropriate in Oxfordshire, given the emerging situation regarding primary surplus, fluctuations in rolls of schools serving forces communities, and the rapid housing developments around the county. Pupil forecasting follows sound principles and is accurate to within 1%.

Admissions to schools

46. The LEA was highly satisfactory in this aspect of its work at the last inspection; it is now good. Oxfordshire meets all its statutory requirements, and its arrangements for co-ordinated admissions are being implemented one year ahead of the required date. Materials for parents are comprehensive, accessible and timely, with feedback from parents showing very high levels of satisfaction. Admissions criteria are clear and fair and give appropriate support and priority to vulnerable groups, including unaccompanied asylum seekers and refugees in the category of looked after children. Performance measures are high. In September 2004, 96% of eleven-year-olds and 87% of five-year-olds received a place of first preference. The number and outcomes of appeals are consistent with similar LEAs. They are dealt with in a fair and timely way, with none being referred to the ombudsman this year.

Section 3: Support to improve education in schools

Summary table of judgements



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Support for school leadership, management and continuous improvement

47. This area of the LEA's work has improved and is now highly satisfactory, although some features are significantly stronger than others. Capacity to improve further is satisfactory. Some important measures to support the development of self-managing and autonomous schools have been recently introduced and are still in the early stages of development, in contrast to many other LEAs where they are now established practice. Good quality training in school self-evaluation has improved school self-review, which now contributes to the monitoring quality reviews led annually by the school development service (SDS). Schools and governing bodies are supplied with a comprehensive range of benchmarked performance data. Training in analysis and use of data is highly satisfactory. However, the provision of financial data is less secure and inaccurate information has caused additional work and budgeting uncertainty for many schools.

48. Recently introduced arrangements for a more flexible range of traded services managed by the Oxfordshire Quality Schools Association give more autonomy to schools for the purchasing of support, but this has come late in the day. Although advice is provided about alternative sources of support many schools, especially primary, continue to regard the LEA as the main or even the sole provider.

49. Good practice in teaching and learning is shared between schools through the primary partnerships and the secondary improvement networks which are well-supported by members of the advisory service. Good use is also made of practitioners as consultants and seconded advisory teachers. SDS advisers know their schools well and are able to identify those where leadership and management require additional support. Where weaknesses are identified, they are usually dealt with quickly and effectively. A range of training programmes and workshops supports the improved management practice and extensive use is made of national programmes. Induction and support for newly appointed and acting headteachers are good. Inspection evidence shows an increase in the proportion of schools where leadership and management are good and a reduction of those where these aspects are less than satisfactory. However, recent inspections have not identified any schools where leadership and management are very good. Reports are presented to senior officers and elected members as part of the regular and systematic review of schools' strengths and weaknesses. These include an evaluation of the quality of leadership and management in schools.

50. Although the planning and provision of services to support school management are satisfactory, their effectiveness overall is unsatisfactory. Human resources support is good while financial support, identified as weak at the last inspection, remains unsatisfactory.

Support for information and communication technology (ICT)

51. Support for ICT is very good. Good progress has been made since the last inspection, when support was satisfactory, and effective action has been taken to implement the recommendations. Attainment in schools has improved each year, and although the ambitious achievement targets which the LEA set itself for Key Stage 3 in 2003 and 2004 have not been reached, the LEA average is nevertheless in the highest quartile nationally. The proportion of pupils gaining an ICT accreditation at the end of Key Stage 4 is considerably higher than the national average. A common profile of ICT competence is used to evaluate pupils' attainments, and this, combined with the support team's knowledge of schools and a thorough analysis of inspection reports, enables effective targeting of support according to need. Very good systems have been developed to monitor the impact of the strategy on standards in schools.

52. Almost all schools rate the quality of LEA support as satisfactory or better and three-quarters consider it to be good or very good. The recently revised LEA ICT strategy is closely aligned to the corporate ICT strategy, to the current EDP and to the school improvement strategy, and is focused on raising standards in schools. It is based on a thorough audit that is regularly updated, and its preparation has

involved extensive consultation with schools, both directly and through the effective ICT forum. A dedicated website supports an extensive training programme and contributes to the spread of good practice. High quality support is also provided for pupils with SEN.

53. The LEA has achieved the 2004 targets for the ratio of pupils to computers in schools and for broadband connectivity. It has effectively extended the use of interactive white boards in schools, producing a number of work programmes that have contributed to national developments. Advisers, consultants and teachers, working together, have also produced an impressive range of high quality study materials supporting the use of ICT across a wide range of the curriculum, much of this again receiving national recognition.

Support for the national initiative at Key Stage 3

54. Support for schools in implementing the Key Stage 3 initiative is good. The LEA's strategy is set out clearly in the EDP and is closely integrated with the overall school improvement strategy and the primary strategy. It fully reflects the priorities of the national initiative and provides clear guidance for future developments. Although the implementation of the strategy across schools was variable initially, considerable progress has been made following changes in the central team and the appointment of a new strategy coordinator just over a year ago.

55. Close links with primary strategy are leading to improvements in the quality of primary-secondary transition. Increasingly, the Key Stage 3 initiative is being presented and seen by schools as a whole secondary strategy. Although the LEA's ambitious targets have not been reached, attainment in the core subjects exceeds both national averages and those in similar LEAs. With the sole exception of 2002, steady improvement has been made from year to year. Schools are well provided with benchmark data to enable them to evaluate pupils' attainment. Added value across the key stage is higher than the national rate: it is above expectation for those attaining level 5 in the core subjects, and for maths and science it exceeds expectation for level 6.

56. Monitoring the strengths and weaknesses of work in schools is done thoroughly and results in the targeting of support to need. Advice, guidance and training are good, and arrangements to disseminate good practice are well developed. Good use is made of seconded teachers as consultants, a measure which schools value highly. A promising start has been made in implementing the behaviour and attendance strand of the strategy: all secondary schools now have a behaviour and attendance coordinator, have conducted an internal audit, and have action plans at different stages of preparation.

Support for school governors

57. Support for school governors is good. It is linked closely with the EDP and has a high profile in the LEA. The governor support service, which is an integral part of the SDS, has recently been awarded a Charter Mark. The support provided is

highly valued by governors and the school survey responses compare closely with the national picture. Evidence from recent school inspections indicates that governance is good or better in a higher percentage of secondary schools and in a similar proportion of primary schools, to that found nationally.

58. A clear service level agreement (SLA), purchased by almost all schools, provides governing bodies with a wide range of support services. Support officers have a good knowledge of the effectiveness of individual governing bodies and where governing bodies are identified as having significant weaknesses, a range of support and intervention measures, such as the attachment of 'mentor' or consultant governors, is employed. Governing bodies are helped to conduct skills audits (a self-evaluation package for governors) and induction, training, publications and guidance for governors are good. These measures are carefully evaluated, both for immediate satisfaction and at a later stage, to determine their impact. The service is taking part in a national initiative to develop benchmarks for measuring the performance of governor support services. A central clerking service is offered through a SLA. Although this service is used by only one-fifth of schools currently, because small schools in particular consider the cost to be too high, they can negotiate clerking services for specific purposes.

59. The LEA has an effective strategy for governor recruitment. The current vacancy rate for LEA nominated governors is just below the national average. Ethnic minority representation is lower than proportionate, but continuous and imaginative efforts are made to improve this.

The supply and quality of teachers

60. This aspect of the LEA's work is good. In September 2004 less than 1% of teaching posts were vacant, a reduction from almost 2% in the previous year. The strategy for the recruitment and retention of teachers is effective. Vacancy patterns are carefully analysed, as is both inspection and internal evidence of the quality of teaching and learning, according to school type, area and specialism. This information is used to conduct regular reviews of the impact of, and the need for, adjustment to the overall strategy. Inspection findings indicate that the proportions of good and poor teaching in primary schools compare closely with the national picture. In secondary schools, there are lower proportions of lessons in which teaching is either good or poor than in schools in similar authorities. The LEA recognises this and has placed additional focus on improving teaching and learning in the CPD programme.

61. The LEA's close partnerships with local training institutions help with initial recruitment. These are well supplemented by schemes such as the graduate and registered teacher programme, by arrangements for teaching assistants to train as teachers, and by training and support for those returning to teaching. Support for newly-qualified teachers is good, and the LEA retains more than 70% of these for a second or further year. Take up of national training programmes is high. Professional enrichment opportunities for teachers and headteachers to work as consultants, and the Advanced Skills Teacher programme contribute to their

retention in the service. A carefully structured support programme is provided for newly-appointed headteachers and acting headteachers. The 50 teachers recruited from overseas who are employed by the LEA are also offered additional support, chiefly through an adviser with special responsibility for this work.

The planning and provision of services to support school management

62. Oxfordshire's arrangements in this respect are satisfactory. Until recently, neither schools nor the LEA have challenged each other over the provision of services. Expectations from both parties are too modest and although choice is available, most schools decide not to exercise it. The vast majority, over 95%, regularly opt for an LEA 'buy-back' package. The school survey shows that schools are generally satisfied with the council's clarity of service specification, and approach to trading.

63. The situation is changing and recent failures to provide satisfactory outcomes in some service areas have encouraged schools to become more challenging of the LEA's approach. The director has also been anxious to promote increased autonomy since his arrival and a focus group of headteachers has been established to offer advice on the development of service provision. Improved-interim arrangements are in place for the coming financial year, with a view to a fully revised programme for April 2006.

64. Financial support was judged to be unsatisfactory at the last inspection. Progress has been insufficient. Performance remains unsatisfactory and is acknowledged as such by the LEA.

65. The service has been blighted by inefficient systems, both within the council and between the council and schools. In addition, insufficient scrutiny of data and lack of capacity, have led to poor performance and low morale. Schools have understandably become increasingly critical of, and frustrated by, the poor service. However, financial support officers are highly regarded for their day-to-day support for schools, although this has meant that too much of their time is spent 'fire-fighting', rather than supporting financial management in schools.

66. The situation has finally been recognised by the directorate and the current director has initiated remedial action. Capacity has been added, the service has been restructured better to deliver its objectives, and a more positive, customer focused attitude is developing. Schools report that data are more accurate, and they are also beginning to notice and appreciate the improvements, although there is still a long way to go. The service has a new improvement plan which is already having an impact; a new budget planning package is being trialled, and school budgets are more rigorously analysed. The plan is an improvement on previous practice but it still lacks sufficient measures by which progress can be evaluated.

67. Human Resource services were judged to be highly satisfactory in 2000; they are now good. The service has built on the firm foundations reported during the last inspection, and continues to provide the statutory materials and advice to

schools. However, it has gone beyond this in a variety of ways, both planned and in response to circumstances including, where relevant, close partnership with the school development service.

68. During the major reorganisation of schools within Oxford city, the potential for severe personnel problems was high. Schools involved in this and the relevant unions are very appreciative of the support given to them and individual teachers by the LEA human resources and school development services, which they felt typified some of the best practice in Oxfordshire. Unions also reported that joint work on job evaluations, health and safety advice, and workforce remodelling is exemplary. From most schools' perspectives, the major success of the service is to have recently turned round the poor performance of the outsourced payroll service, which was causing the LEA high reputational damage.

69. The philosophy of the service is properly geared towards enabling schools to make the most of their staff, while providing a 'safety net' in times of crisis. Schools clearly appreciate this approach, and this is reflected in high customer satisfaction, with over 80% of schools rating the service as satisfactory or better.

70. The planning and provision of information management services continue to be satisfactory, though a late start to developments in this area has resulted in the LEA not being as advanced as some others. Responses to the school survey indicate that a significant proportion of schools are dissatisfied with the strategy, have misgivings about the effectiveness of electronic communications and are not satisfied with the technical support for school management packages.

71. Plans are now in hand to implement a coherent information management strategy, and recently significant progress towards this has been made in partnership with the ICT forum. There is now a comprehensive and usable database of pupil information, which is linked electronically with school systems and gives access to school-entered data. Both curriculum and information management needs are served by a common ICT infrastructure, and the recent appointment of an officer from the resources directorate to work with the Learning and Culture information and management team has strengthened this integration. Work is underway to link the education service data with those of other relevant services. However, plans to use a common system for financial information have had to be modified pending a fuller examination of the capabilities of the proposed system, and arrangements for the electronic interchange of all data between schools and the authority are not yet complete.

Recommendation

- Improve financial services by focusing on improving schools' capacity to manage their financial resources.

Effectiveness and value for money of services to support school management

72. The effectiveness and value for money of services to support school management are unsatisfactory.

73. The LEA has missed the opportunity of using innovative approaches to trading with schools to improve service delivery. The most recent survey showed that school satisfaction with the services inspected was less than that at the time of the previous inspection, with the exception of the human resources service. Furthermore, schools' confidence in the capacity of the LEA to facilitate access to high quality support services is low.

74. Performance is monitored in some service areas. However, for those services within the inspection framework, there is no systematic approach and no regular reporting to senior officers, members and schools. Service standards are not comprehensive, benchmarking is underdeveloped, and a complaints procedure is only now being developed. Prices are reasonable, and generally reflect costs, although there is no systematic mechanism for assessing value for money. However, significant change is on the way. The council has recognised these shortcomings and the new arrangements being worked on, in partnership with schools, are designed to bring this aspect of the LEA's work rapidly into line with others.

Recommendation

- Develop and implement systems to ensure both the effectiveness and value for money of services to support school managers.

The planning, provision, effectiveness and value for money of services supporting school improvement

75. The planning and provision of services supporting school improvement have made satisfactory progress since the last inspection and are now highly satisfactory. The effectiveness and value for money of these services are satisfactory. The costs of the service are slightly higher than the national average and are more than 40% higher than those in similar authorities. Oxfordshire has retained a wider range of specialist cover than many LEAs and the SDS has management and budgetary responsibility for functions that are located differently in most other authorities. In the past, the priorities for the work of the SDS were not always matched with areas of poorer attainment, for example, until recently, there was no effective strategy for raising attainment at Key Stage 4. However, developments made in the last year, including new appointments and a rearrangement of networking arrangements for secondary schools, have improved the support provided for secondary schools. There are now clearer links between SDS planning, the wider corporate objectives and priorities of the LEA and an analysis of the needs of schools. This is reflected at all levels including the planning of work targets with individual advisers.

76. Advisers are deployed in ways that, for the most part, make effective use of their experience and expertise. Work in district teams ensures sufficient flexibility to respond to unforeseen situations. In addition to maintaining almost complete coverage of subject and other specialisms, the service has a large number of advisers who have senior management experience in primary, secondary or special schools. Good use is made of secondments of effective practitioners from schools to enhance the range of expertise available. The service knows its schools well, and arrangements for monitoring, challenge and support are highly satisfactory. There has been a sizeable reduction in the number of schools in special measures, the average time taken for schools to be released from special measures has been short, and no schools are now considered to have serious weaknesses. The proportion of schools having confidence in the service is close to the national average.

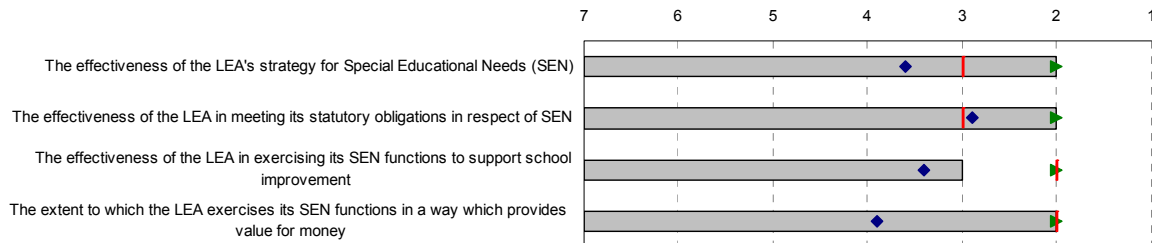
77. The traded service arrangements are of recent origin and have not yet had enough time to achieve full impact or to be widely embraced by all the members of the service or by the schools. As yet, there is little evidence that the SDS is asking searching questions about alternative methods and sources of procuring school improvement support. Short and medium term strategies have not been developed in detail, and priorities for the development of the service have not been fully set out. Despite high staffing levels, the service has had more impact on standards in some schools than in others.

Recommendation

- Continue to develop ways of working with schools that promote their self management and challenge performance across all schools.

Section 4: Support for special educational needs (SEN)

Summary table of judgements



The bar represents the grade awarded to the LEA, the triangle represents the LEA's self-evaluation grade, the vertical line represents the LEA's previous grade and the diamond represents the average grade of all LEAs inspected in the last year. 1 = Very Good, 2 = Good, 3 = Highly Satisfactory, 4 = Satisfactory, 5 = Unsatisfactory, 6 = Poor, 7 = Very Poor.

The strategy for SEN

78. At the time of the previous inspection the LEA's strategy for SEN was highly satisfactory; it is now good. Satisfactory progress has been made in relation to recommendations in the previous report. The capacity for further improvement is good: the commitment to inclusion of both the LEA and its schools has been maintained. The LEA and its partners have demonstrated an ability to evaluate performance and a determination to improve. The strategy has a high level of support from schools with four-fifths rating it as satisfactory or better and almost half rating it as good or very good. The LEA is highly effective in meeting its statutory obligation in respect of SEN.

79. A scrutiny review of SEN took place in 2002. This led to the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the development of a new strategy which was approved by the Executive in January 2004. This strategy reflects corporate priorities, is in line with government policy and the revised Code of Practice and is consistent with the LEA's strategies for social inclusion and raising attainment. It is supported by a detailed development plan that officers intend to revise annually in the light of monitoring and feedback. An SEN partnership with wide representation was established in November 2003 to monitor the implementation and impact of the strategy, with sub-groups focusing on developing further specific elements, such as early intervention or support for mainstream schools.

80. The strategy recognises the need for inclusion to be successful for children, parents and schools. It highlights early identification and intervention, joint working with other agencies and strengthening support for SEN in mainstream schools as priorities to secure such success. The LEA demonstrates its commitment by allocating resources to these priorities. Funding for SEN has increased since the previous inspection and is now in line with similar authorities. Further increases are unlikely and the LEA is clear that future developments must be funded through the redirection of resources within the overall budget. This is already happening.

Reducing the number of residential places in the county has resulted in savings which elected members have agreed can be re-allocated to develop out-reach work, from a number of special schools.

81. Partnership work is central to the LEA's strategy. The Children's Programme Board is a joint agency, strategic planning group for services for children aged from birth to 19 years. It is overseeing the current BVR of children's services. This is an ambitious, wide-ranging and cross-cutting review led jointly by the learning and culture and social and health care directorates, and the health service, and involving schools and other stakeholders. It is intended to determine Oxfordshire's response to the Children Bill. The LEA is working increasingly effectively with statutory and voluntary agencies to meet pupils' needs and avoid out-of-county placements. This work has also contributed to a decline in the number of SEN tribunals. For example, it works with health services to provide school-based speech therapy services and clinical nurse specialists in schools for pupils with profound and complex needs. Working with the social and health care directorate, it secures consistency of support at school and in the home for a small number of pupils with complex behavioural difficulties. It also works effectively with voluntary organisations, for example, it jointly funds an advisory teacher post with the Down's Syndrome Association. Participation in the SEN regional partnership has resulted in benchmarking data being shared across authorities and in improved support arrangements for children and parents.

SEN function to support school improvement

82. At the time of the previous inspection, the LEA provided good support for school improvement. It is now highly satisfactory. Effective strategic links have been established between children's services and those focused on school development. Good procedures for monitoring, challenge and intervention in schools in relation to SEN provision have been established. However, the implications of the changes have not yet been fully understood in all schools. School inspections show that the progress of pupils with SEN is never less than satisfactory and in 85% of schools is good or better. However, schools' views on the effectiveness of the LEA in developing their capacity to meet the needs of children with SEN vary widely with a fifth rating it as poor and a fifth as good.

83. The LEA has worked with schools to agree a good framework for, and guidance on, the evaluation of provision for pupils with special and additional educational needs. This feeds into, and is supported by, the LEA's annual review process with schools which includes a clear focus on outcomes for pupils with SEN. Furthermore, in 2003, the LEA put in place a three-year SEN development programme. This is effective in providing schools with an external analysis and evaluation of their effectiveness. At the same time, it helps the LEA to identify and disseminate best practice and to direct support to those schools most in need. Feedback from the 60 schools involved so far is positive. The LEA now knows these schools well.

84. Plans for support services are clearly linked to the strategic aims of increased inclusion and improved achievement for pupils with SEN. Service evaluation focuses on progress towards these aims. Between 1998 and 2002 expenditure on central services, such as educational psychology and behaviour support, increased by more than a fifth. Schools rate these services as better than satisfactory. Feedback on the range of training opportunities, including accredited training for teaching assistants, support for governors and training for non-maintained early years settings is also positive. A schools' handbook provides useful and comprehensive guidance on SEN procedures. The LEA has developed an accessible website, covering strategy, provision and procedures, which is helpful to both professionals and parents.

85. Within the LEA's strategy for the inclusion of pupils with SEN, a continuing county-wide role for special schools for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) has been identified. Work is underway with schools to develop detailed proposals for the role of community special schools within their local area. As it intends that each school will be different, the LEA has a definition but not a specification for them. Despite their involvement in the development of the strategy, not all special schools understand fully the implications of these changes.

Recommendation

- Ensure that schools fully understand the implications of the proposed changes in the support for school improvement for SEN.

Value for money

86. The LEA continues to provide good value for money. Expenditure on SEN is broadly in line with that of similar authorities. Oxfordshire has a smaller proportion of pupils placed in special schools than nationally though this is in line with similar authorities. Of these pupils, a smaller proportion is placed in out-county special schools. This is in line with its commitment to successful inclusion.

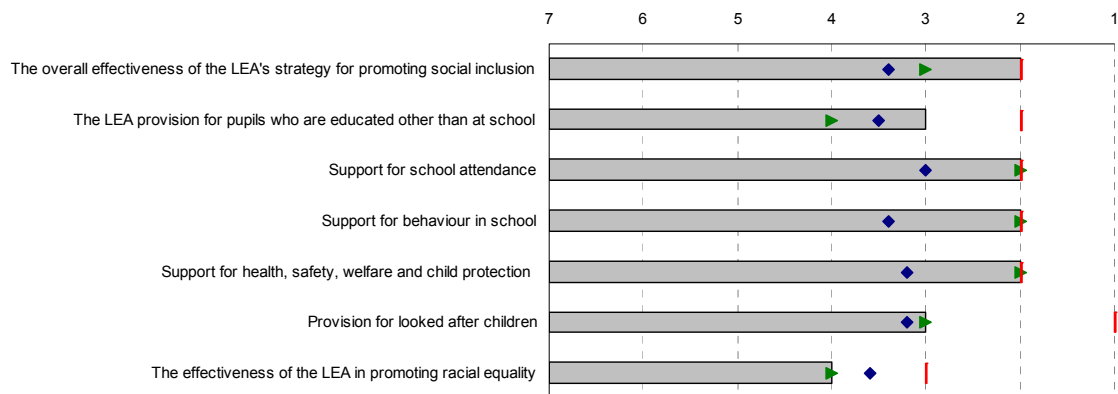
87. Funding to schools for SEN is allocated according to clear criteria that are well understood by schools and which are also used as the basis for allocating differentiated levels of support from services such as educational psychology and behaviour support. The LEA has secure mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effect of SEN funding devolved to schools. This is based on its analyses of school inspection reports; of data on the progress of the lowest achieving 20% of pupils and of the outcomes of the SEN school development programme. Work is underway with schools to explore the delegation of the statementing budget.

88. Until recently, the budget for statementing was regularly overspent. The situation has been rectified by an increase in the base budget and more secure systems for monitoring the SEN budget. As a result, predictions are that the budget will be in balance by the end of this financial year. The number of pupils in out-of-

county placements is relatively low but a slight increase in the number, coupled with an increase in the cost of each place, resulted in the budget being overspent last year. The LEA is working closely with relevant agencies to prevent the need for pupils to go out-of-county and it has recently increased the number of places for pupils with EBD within the county. Work is also in hand to strengthen support for pupils with SEN in mainstream schools by further developing outreach work from special schools.

Section 5: Support for social inclusion

Summary table of judgements



The bar represents the grade awarded to the LEA, the triangle represents the LEA's self-evaluation grade, the vertical line represents the LEA's previous grade and the diamond represents the average grade of all LEAs inspected in the last year. 1 = Very Good, 2 = Good, 3 = Highly Satisfactory, 4 = Satisfactory, 5 = Unsatisfactory, 6 = Poor, 7 = Very Poor.

The strategy for social inclusion

89. At the time of the previous inspection, the LEA's strategy for social inclusion was good and it remains so. All functions relating to this key judgement are at least satisfactory with several being good. The capacity for further improvement is also good. At both corporate and directorate level, there is a clear and explicit commitment to inclusion. Five of the authority's 12 PSA targets relate to educational achievement and social inclusion. They require significant improvements in the educational achievement of children from minority ethnic communities and those in public care and reductions in the already low number of permanent exclusions. For the first time, the effect of the concerted efforts of the LEA and schools is beginning to be seen on pupils' attainment. Unconfirmed data indicate a small improvement in the proportion of pupils gaining five or more GCSEs, at grades A*-G, including English and mathematics. Furthermore, some aspects of the achievement of children in public care have also improved.

90. Elected members and senior officers evaluate the effectiveness of the strategy and take action to bring about improvement. The BVR of behaviour and attendance resulted in the establishment of a county-wide pupil referral and integration service (PRUIS) and the phased development of in-school support for learning and behaviour in all secondary schools and high-need primary schools. Currently, the BVR of children's services is looking at services provided by the council, the NHS and voluntary organisations to determine Oxfordshire's response to the Children Bill. The council has a strong track record of consulting young people and established procedures for doing so.

91. Joint agency work is a significant and effective feature of the strategy for social inclusion. The Children's Strategic Partnership has produced a preventive strategy and a children's services plan that identify shared priorities for children and young people and joint action to be taken. The LEA's key plans focus consistently on promoting inclusion; they are based on thorough and accurate assessments of need and the strengths and weaknesses of existing services. The plans require significant contributions from all services within the education directorate and emphasise the need for joint work and effective co-operation with other statutory agencies, voluntary organisations, regeneration projects and nationally funded initiatives. Examples include a multi-agency team providing intensive support for children in care and multi-disciplinary Connexions teams in all secondary schools helping to co-ordinate support for behaviour and contributing to improvements in staying on rates. Building on the effective integration of support services for vulnerable children developed in the EAZ, the authority has identified three neighbourhoods in which to extend this initiative.

92. Support for attendance and the LEA's promotion of race equality were not subject to detailed fieldwork in this inspection. The LEA's support for attendance is good; rates of attendance are better than those found nationally, in line with similar authorities and improving. The LEA's support for schools to develop policies to promote racial equality is satisfactory and emphasises the link with improving attainment. Guidance and systems for recording and reporting racist incidents are well understood and used by schools.

Provision for pupils educated other than at school

93. This aspect of the LEA's work was good but is currently highly satisfactory. Progress has been satisfactory: the LEA has continued to improve its provision in the context of increased national expectations. Capacity for further improvement is good. The LEA's strategy sets out clearly how the needs of all groups of pupils educated other than at school will be met.

94. Since the last inspection, the council has made extra funds available to meet the requirements for full-time provision for excluded pupils. PRUIS works effectively with schools and pupils to prevent exclusion and provide support for reintegration. It also co-ordinates a range of alternative and flexible provision for excluded pupils at Key Stage 4. The LEA's intention is to provide support for schools so that the number of pupils requiring alternative provision is low. In this it is successful. The number of pupils permanently excluded from Oxfordshire schools is low and rates of reintegration following exclusion are higher than those found nationally. However, the percentage of pupils receiving alternative education who achieve at least one GCSE is well below the national average.

95. An up-to-date database enables officers to monitor effectively the progress of individual pupils. Sound inter-agency procedures are in place to identify, track and exchange information about pupils not on a school roll or not able to attend for medical reasons. There are currently no children awaiting placement. Joint agency panels monitor provision for excluded pupils from particularly vulnerable groups such

as young offenders and children in care. Provision for individual pupils is monitored weekly often leading to changes in programmes to maintain pupils' interest and prevent disaffection.

96. Satisfactory procedures have been agreed between schools and the LEA to secure the reintegration of excluded pupils. However, changes are currently being implemented in order to ensure greater consistency of approach between schools; to achieve a fairer distribution of pupils with challenging behaviour; to provide prompt access for vulnerable pupils to appropriate education and support; and to reduce further time lost for learning. Following consultation with secondary headteachers, the LEA has increased its support for the reintegration of pupils following a period of absence, such as teenage mothers and pupils on fixed-term exclusions and, from September 2004, it is co-ordinating all in year admissions to schools including pupils at risk of permanent exclusion.

97. Rates of teenage pregnancy in Oxfordshire are lower than those found nationally but are increasing, while national rates are falling. The LEA is working with the teenage pregnancy partnership board to improve support and provision and to support schools in preventive work.

Support for behaviour

98. Support for behaviour continues to be good. The LEA has made good progress in strengthening its support, including the way in which it is implementing the behaviour and attendance strand of the Key Stage 3 strategy. Capacity for further improvement is also good. The high priority accorded to this aspect of the LEA's work is reflected in the adoption of a PSA target, set in consultation with schools, to reduce exclusions to 45 by 2005. A comprehensive range of strategies has been put in place to achieve the target including an increase in the number of places in secondary EBD special schools and improvements in the level of provision available from PRUIS. Schools are very aware of the importance of reaching the target; officers and members are convinced that it will be met.

99. Permanent exclusions remain low in comparison to similar authorities and national figures, despite a rise from 61 to 72 in 2003/4. Secondary schools in the city, going through a period of re-organisation, accounted for most of this rise. In response, the LEA allocated additional funds for all five city schools to provide in-school support for learning and behaviour. However, it also challenged schools' use of exclusions by presenting a detailed analysis of the pattern of exclusions across the county as a whole, showing wide variations even within the city. The LEA has taken prompt action to tackle an increase in the number of pupils with statements being excluded and the number of permanent exclusions of children in public care has fallen from 10 in 2001 to three in 2003. However, pupils from minority ethnic communities continue to be over-represented in exclusion figures.

100. The behaviour support plan is comprehensive, based on a thorough audit of need and developed with the involvement of schools and other agencies, including the social and health care directorate, the youth offending team and child and adult

mental health services. There are clear links to the EDP and the strategy for SEN. Schools know what they can expect from the LEA and what the LEA expects of them. The LEA challenges schools that do not meet these expectations or exclude children without following procedures. It has established an effective continuum of support that includes a behaviour support service for primary and secondary schools; in-school provision and multi-disciplinary Connexions teams to co-ordinate support in secondary schools; PRUIS; and special schools.

101. The European Social Fund was used to establish a rapid response to the exclusions team in the EAZ. Subsequent evaluations were positive and the LEA has extended the model to all primary pupils across the LEA, to children in public care and to children and schools in the three areas currently developing integrated support services.

Support for health, safety, welfare and child protection

101. Support for health, safety, welfare and child protection is good.

102. The LEA meets its statutory responsibilities with regard to child protection, and actively participates in the main area child protection committee and on appropriate task groups. The updated child protection policy fully reflects current requirements and gives clear guidance to schools. Training is routinely delivered to staff in schools and it is planned to extend this training to governors. The take-up of required training and the record of attendance of designated teachers in schools are monitored appropriately. There are effective links between the learning and culture and social and health care directorates, and schools value the referral telephone line provided by the social and health care directorate.

103. Support for health, safety and welfare was not subject to detailed fieldwork. The recently updated LEA policies on health and safety are clear and now contain comprehensive information and guidance on responsibilities, training and how to assess risk. These policies are supplemented by appropriate training in all major areas of risk. Schools are generally positive about the services for health and safety that they receive from the LEA.

Provision for looked after children

104. Provision for looked after children, which was very good at the time of the previous inspection, is now highly satisfactory. Although the LEA has continued to improve, national expectations in this area have increased significantly. There have been steady improvements in the attainment of looked after children at Key Stages 1 and 3 but attainment at Key Stage 2 and at GCSE remains a concern to the LEA. However, there are signs of improvement in some measures at GCSE. Unvalidated data for 2003/4 indicate that half of the cohort achieved at least one grade A*-G and over a third achieved five or more grades A*-G. Nevertheless the targets of 80% and 65% respectively for 2004/5 remain challenging. Exclusions of children in public care have reduced from 10 to 3 in the last three years.

105. A panel of elected members, well supported by a joint agency steering group, monitors provision for, and the progress of, children in care. They take action to secure improvement. When the attendance of these children fell in 2002/3, additional resources were allocated to increase support. Unvalidated data for 2003/4 show a slight improvement. The transport policy was changed to ensure continuity of school placement. Members regularly seek feedback from young people in care about the support that they receive. A small number of young people with first hand experience of the care system are employed as Source Workers. They are trained in consultation and participation techniques in order to be a voice for children in care and be involved in the recruitment, induction and training of officers, workers and foster carers.

106. The attainment, behaviour and attendance of children in care, including those who are placed outside the LEA, are monitored regularly and thoroughly, despite only three-quarters having personal education plans. All schools have a designated teacher. Schools rate support for children in public care as satisfactory.

107. The LEA, in partnership with the social and health care directorate and the health service, has developed a range of initiatives to meet the needs and improve the attainment of children in care. These include the development of a compact for children in care that describes the commitment, responsibilities and expectations of all partners and the establishment of the multi-disciplinary Reach Up team to provide intensive support. Looked after children have priority access to Connexions advisers and they receive full-time education from the first day of a permanent exclusion. The LEA's admission policy gives priority to children in care; schools have agreed to exceed their planned admission numbers to ensure the prompt admission of children from vulnerable groups.

Appendix A

Record of Judgement Recording Statements

Name of LEA :	Oxfordshire Local Education Authority
LEA number:	931
Reporting Inspector:	Mary Ryan HMI
Date of Inspection:	October 2004

No	Required Inspection Judgement	Grade	Fieldwork *
Context of the LEA			
1	The socio-economic context of the LEA	2	
Overall judgements			
0.1	The progress made by the LEA overall	4	
0.2	Overall effectiveness of the LEA	3	
0.3	The LEA's capacity for further improvement and to address the recommendations of the inspection	3	
Section 1: Corporate strategy and LEA leadership			
1.1	The effectiveness of corporate planning for the education of children and young people	3	
1.2	The implementation of corporate planning for education	3	
1.3	The effectiveness of LEA decision-making	2	
1.4	The extent to which the LEA targets resources on priorities	4	
1.5	The extent to which the LEA has in place effective strategies to promote continuous improvement, including Best Value	3	NF

1.6	The leadership provided by elected members (including quality of advice)	3	
1.7	The quality of leadership provided by senior officers	3	
1.8	The effectiveness of partnerships and collaboration between agencies in support of priorities	3	
1.9	Support for Early Years education	2	
1.10	Support for 14 – 19 education	4	
Section 2: Strategy for education and its implementation			
2.1	The LEA's strategy for school improvement	2	
2.2	The progress on implementing the LEA's strategy for school improvement	3	
2.3	The performance of schools	4	
2.4	The extent to which the LEA has defined monitoring, challenge and intervention	3	NF
2.5	The effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring schools and challenging them to improve, including the use made of performance data	3	
2.6	The extent to which the LEA's support to schools is focused on areas of greatest need	3	
2.7	The effectiveness of the LEA's identification of and intervention in underperforming schools	3	
2.8	The effectiveness of the LEA in discharging asset management planning	4	
2.9	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to the provision of school places	3	
2.10	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to admissions to schools	2	
Section 3: Support to school leadership and management, including schools' efforts to support continuous improvement			
3.1	Support to school leadership and management, including support for schools' approaches to continuous improvement	3	

3.2	Support for national initiatives to raise standards in literacy and numeracy at KS 1 and 2	3	NF
3.3	Support for information and communication technology	1	
3.4	Support for the national initiative to raise standards at KS3	2	
3.5	Support for raising the achievement of minority ethnic pupils, including Gypsy/ Traveller children	3	NF
3.6	Support to schools for gifted and talented pupils	4	NF
3.7	Support for school governors	2	
3.8	The extent to which the LEA is successful in assuring the supply and quality of teachers	2	
3.9	The planning and provision of services to support school management	4	
3.9a	The planning and provision of financial services in supporting school management	5	
3.9b	The planning and provision of HR services in supporting school management	2	
3.9c	The planning and provision of property services in supporting school management	4	
3.9d	The planning and provision of information management services in supporting school management	4	
3.10	The effectiveness and value for money of services supporting school management	5	
3.11	The planning and provision of services supporting school improvement, particularly inspection and advisory and/or school effectiveness services	3	
3.12	The effectiveness and value for money of services supporting school improvement, particularly inspection and advisory and/or school effectiveness services	4	
Section 4: Support for special educational needs			
4.1	The effectiveness of the LEA's strategy for special educational needs	2	

4.2	The effectiveness of the LEA in meeting its statutory obligations in respect of SEN	2	NF
4.3	The effectiveness of the LEA in exercising its SEN functions to support school improvement	3	
4.4	The extent to which the LEA exercises its SEN functions in a way which provides value for money	2	
Section 5: Support for social inclusion			
5.1	The overall effectiveness of the LEA's strategy for promoting social inclusion	2	
5.2	The LEA provision for pupils who have no school place	3	
5.3	Support for school attendance	2	NF
5.4	Support for behaviour in schools	2	
5.5	Support for health, safety, welfare and child protection	2	
5.6	Provision for looked after children	3	
5.7	The effectiveness of the LEA in promoting racial equality	4	NF

**NF' under fieldwork means that no fieldwork was conducted on this function during this inspection.*

JRS numerical judgements are allocated on a 7-point scale:

Grade 1: Very good; Grade 2: Good; Grade 3: Highly satisfactory; Grade 4: Satisfactory; Grade 5: Unsatisfactory; Grade 6: Poor; Grade 7: Very poor

Note: in the case of JRS 1: socio-economic context of the LEA and JRS 2.3: performance of schools, grades relate to comparisons against national averages:

- Grades 1-2: Well above
- Grade 3: Above
- Grade 4: In line
- Grade 5: Below
- Grades 6-7: Well below.

Appendix B

Context of the inspection

This inspection of Oxfordshire LEA was carried out by Ofsted in conjunction with the Audit Commission under section 38 of the Education Act 1997.

This report provides a commentary on the inspection findings, including:

- the progress the LEA has made since the time of its previous inspection in January 2000;
- the overall effectiveness of the LEA and its capacity to improve further;
- the LEA's performance in major aspects of its work;
- recommendations on areas for improvement.

The summary is followed by more detailed judgements on the LEA's performance of its individual functions, which sets the recommendations for improvement into context.

All functions of the LEA have been inspected and judgements reached on how effectively they are performed. Not all functions were subject to detailed fieldwork, but in all cases inspectors reached their judgements through an evaluation of a range of material. This included self-evaluation undertaken by the LEA, data (some of which were provided by the LEA), school inspection information, HMI monitoring reports, and audit reports. In addition, the inspection team considered the earlier Ofsted/Audit Commission report on this LEA and a questionnaire seeking the views of all schools on aspects of the work of the LEA. In those areas subject to fieldwork, discussions were held with LEA officers and members, headteachers and governors, staff in other departments of the local authority, diocesan representatives, and other agencies and LEA partners.

The functions that were not subject to detailed fieldwork in this inspection were:

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the extent to which the LEA has in place effective strategies to promote continuous improvement, including Best Value;• the extent to which the LEA has defined monitoring, challenge and intervention;• support for national initiatives to raise standards in literacy and numeracy at KS1 and KS2;• support for the raising of achievement of minority ethnic pupils, including gypsy and traveller children; |
|---|

- support to schools for gifted and talented pupils;
- the effectiveness of the LEA in meeting its statutory obligations in respect of SEN;
- support for school attendance;
- the effectiveness of the LEA in promoting racial equality.

Inspection judgements are made against criteria that can be found on the Ofsted website. For each inspected function of the LEA, an inspection team agrees a numerical grade. The numerical grades awarded for the judgements made in this inspection are to be found in Appendix A. These numerical grades must be considered in the light of the full report. Some of the grades are used in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment profile for the education service.

Context of the LEA

Oxfordshire is a mainly rural county, with the lowest population density of any county in the south east of England. Children aged 0 -19 account for a quarter of Oxfordshire's total population of 615,200². The 2001 Census showed a growth in Oxfordshire's population of 10.6% from 1991 to 2001, well above the 6.7% growth in population of the South East region.

A fifth of the population live in Oxford city. About three-quarters of Oxfordshire is designated as Green Belt, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty or Areas of High Landscape Value, and more than three-quarters of its area is devoted to agriculture.

Oxfordshire is recognised as one of Europe's leading centres of enterprise and innovation, as a centre for culture and for the quality of its education, natural, historical and built environment. The Oxfordshire economy is one of the most successful in the country. According to the 2001 Census, Oxfordshire had the second lowest rate of long term unemployment of any county in England and Wales and from 1991 to 2001 experienced a 22% increase in jobs.

There are also pockets of deprivation and poverty in several communities. According to the new Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004³ : 13 areas in Oxfordshire are in the top 20% of multiple deprivation nationally with one area in the top 10%. Whilst Oxfordshire has a higher than average qualification profile compared with both regional and national averages, 37% of Oxfordshire's population have low or no qualifications.

The county has 500 early years and childcare settings, 345 venues for adult learning, 234 primary schools, 34 secondary schools, 14 special schools and one pupil referral and integration service (PRUIS). Formal learning is supported by 55

² 2003 mid-year estimate (ONS)

³ IMD2004 April 2004 (ODPM)

youth work bases, 50 libraries, and 20 children's and family centres. In September 2003, a major reorganisation of schools from a three-tier to a two-tier system in Oxford City culminated in the closure of twelve middle schools and one upper school. Four Ministry of Defence establishments in the county cause significant fluctuations in the student roll in their local areas.

The percentage of pupils receiving free school meals is below the national average. The percentage of pupils with a statement of special educational needs is in line with the national average in primary schools and above the national average in secondary schools. The percentages of minority ethnic pupils and pupils with English as an additional language are in line with national averages. The majority of non-UK heritage groups in the county reside in Oxford City and Banbury.

The performance of schools

The performance of schools is in line with national averages. On entry to school children's attainment is above average. At all key stages, attainment is broadly in line with national averages and at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 with those of the LEA's statistical neighbours. Since the previous inspection, standards at Key Stage 1 have remained broadly static, while at Key Stage 2 standards in mathematics and science at Level 5+ have shown improvement. At Key Stage 3, the slow rate of improvement was boosted by a significant rise in performance at Levels 5 and 6 in all three subjects in 2003. At GCSE, although there has been a slow rise in the percentage of students achieving five plus A*-C and these are in line with national standards, they remain below those of statistical neighbours. Rates of improvement are in line with those found nationally as are value-added measures. Standards post-16 are in line with national standards.

In 2004, provisional data indicate that standards at Key Stages 1 and 2 have been sustained with a rise in English at L4+ and in mathematics at Level 5+. At Key Stage 3 the progress made in 2003 has been maintained with a rise in mathematics at Level 6+ but a drop in science at Levels 5 and 6. Despite this, standards in science remain above those of statistical neighbours. At GCSE, there has been a slight increase in the percentage of pupils gaining five or more A*-G, a rise in those gaining one or more A*-G and a slight drop in those achieving five or more A*-C. The LEA failed to meet its ambitious targets in almost all areas in 2003 and 2004.

Data from Section 10 inspections indicate that three-quarters of primary and secondary schools were judged to be good or very good at their last inspection. This is slightly above national figures but below those of statistical neighbours.

Since the previous inspection, there has been a very significant reduction in the number of schools in serious weaknesses and special measures. Currently, there are three schools designated as requiring special measures. There are no schools in serious weaknesses. Whilst the proportion of primary and secondary schools requiring some improvement is below that nationally, it is above that in similar authorities.

Attendance in both primary and secondary schools is above the national average and

in line with similar authorities. Unauthorised absences are in line with national rates in primary and secondary schools, in line with statistical neighbours in primary schools but above those of similar authorities in secondary schools. Rates of exclusions are below those nationally and in line with those of statistical neighbours.

Funding data for the LEA

Schools budget	Oxfordshire	Statistical neighbours average	Unitary Average	England Average
	£ per pupil	£ per pupil	£ per pupil	£ per pupil
Individual schools budget	2,688	2,676	2,693	2,900
Standards fund delegated	49	49	58	63
Excellence in Cities	6	0	5	35
Schools in financial difficulty	0	3	3	4
Education for under fives (non- ISB)	147	106	93	85
Strategic management	12	20	25	30
Special educational needs	102	110	116	126
Grants	32	14	15	26
Access	32	51	46	60
Capital expenditure from revenue	83	22	31	24
Total schools budget	3,153	3,051	3,085	3,354
Schools formula spending share	3,031	2,883	2,919	3,197

Source: *DfES Comparative Tables 2004-05*

LEA budget	Oxfordshire	Statistical neighbours average	Unitary average	England average
	£ per pupil	£ per pupil	£ per pupil	£ per pupil
Strategic management	92	80	87	99
Specific Grants	1	14	11	14
Special educational needs	44	30	30	36
School improvement	42	30	34	38
Access	204	189	183	142
Capital expenditure from revenue	46	2	3	2
Youth and Community	54	49	52	75
Total LEA budget	484	394	400	406

Source: *DfES Comparative Tables 2004-05*

Note: All figures are net

Funding for schools in financial difficulties excludes transitional funding.

Averages quoted are mean averages; the original DfES Comparative Tables quote median average figures, not the mean average.

Notes