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IN EDUCATION

**INSPECTION OF
NORTH SOMERSET
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities*, which focuses on the effectiveness of local education authority (LEA) work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value. The previous inspection took place during autumn 1997.
2. The inspection was partly based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation, and on discussions with members, staff in the education and other council departments and representatives of the LEA's partners. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of its work was circulated to all but one of the LEA's schools. The response rate was 83 per cent. Use was also made of the LEA's self-evaluation.
3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to seven primary and two secondary schools. The visits tested the views of governors, headteachers and other key staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. Evidence from other HMI visits to schools in the LEA was also included. The inspection considered whether the support provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in schools, and provides value for money.

COMMENTARY

4. North Somerset LEA was previously inspected during autumn 1997. The main findings then were that the new LEA had 'made an impressive start' and there were good prospects for the future. In contrast, the findings of this report are disappointing. Progress since the last inspection has been poor. Although, overall, the performance of the LEA in supporting its schools is satisfactory, major strengths are few and there are some notable weaknesses. The lack of a clear and agreed vision for education and reductions in the levels of funding have frustrated schools and hampered progress. The earlier 'shared' commitment to improvement and the sense of 'partnership' have all but evaporated.
5. Although it includes some small, but significant pockets of local deprivation, notably in Pill and Weston-super-Mare, North Somerset is a prosperous area. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is below the national average and the proportion of pupils with statements for special educational needs (SEN) is broadly in line with that nationally. The percentage of pupils of minority ethnic origin is low.
6. Since the previous report, the LEA has not made the progress expected. The principal reasons for this have been weaknesses in the political leadership of education, poor strategic planning and a failure to sustain purposeful relations with schools. Where the authority has needed to act 'as a whole' to support schools, it has frequently been found wanting. Monitoring and evaluation of effectiveness and performance management have been poor. Although support for most areas of school improvement has been broadly satisfactory, this has been largely due to the efforts of individual officers. The LEA as a whole has not been sufficiently adding value in drawing this work together. This is especially apparent in the support provided for pupils with SEN, support for information and communication technology (ICT) and the maintenance of school accommodation.
7. In responding to the survey, schools were very critical of the LEA. The inspection's findings confirm that many of the criticisms were justified. The last four years have been characterised by turmoil and schools have perceived members as not giving education sufficient priority. The effects of discontinuity, resulting from frequent changes of director of education, have been compounded by year-on-year budgetary cuts in real terms. The authority has not passed on in full the increases in the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA). During the current year, the LEA's failure to take up its full Standards Fund allocation has also caused some vital curriculum support for schools to be delayed.
8. In contrast to the bleak picture above, there is some hope for the future. The council has adopted new approaches to decision making. Schools see the new leader of the council as more supportive of education. Members have made a commitment for 2002/3 to passing on the full education SSA increase and to taking up the Standards Fund in full. Also, the performance of schools remains satisfactory, and in many instances is good.
9. There are other positive signs. The current director of education has been in post for less than a year but already has a good grasp of the needs of the authority and has created a new management structure. Members of the new senior management team have a good track record of success in previous posts, are clear about what needs to be done and have started taking appropriate action.

There is now a need to build on this, in particular, by creating genuine opportunities for schools, officers and members to both plan and work together.

10. Many of the LEA functions are discharged satisfactorily, and the following are performed well:

- identification of and intervention in under-performing schools;
- support to school governors;
- financial services support to schools
- personnel services support to schools; and
- support for health and safety, welfare and child protection.

The following functions are, however, performed inadequately:

- corporate planning, including leadership by members;
- targeting resources to priorities;
- promoting continuous improvement through Best Value;
- performance management of services to support school improvement;
- support for SEN;
- asset management; and
- property services support to schools.

11. Although the performance in many day-to-day functions is satisfactory and these outnumber the areas where there are weaknesses, the latter are particularly significant because they are mainly strategic. The question now is whether or not the LEA has the capacity to implement the recommendations of this report, and to improve.
12. The LEA's track record over the last four years raises doubts about the extent to which it can be relied upon to move things forward. However, further upheaval is more likely to exacerbate the problems than improve matters. The new education senior management team has begun to re-build the confidence of schools. It has the capacity to achieve improvement, provided that the recent corporate and member support is continued. OFSTED and the Audit Commission will, however, need to return to check progress.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

13. The population of the authority has remained generally stable since the previous inspection, rising slightly to 192,000. North Somerset is a prosperous area, although there are small, but significant pockets of local deprivation, notably in Pill and Weston-super-Mare.
14. Just over 27,000 pupils attend the authority's schools. The proportion eligible for free school meals is below the national average in both primary and secondary schools. The proportion of pupils with statements of SEN is broadly in line with the national average. The percentage of pupils of minority ethnic origin is below the national average. Around 12 per cent of pupils below school age are on the roll of primary schools.
15. The authority has 78 schools of which 65 are primary, ten are secondary and three are special. There are three pupil referral units (PRUs).

Performance

16. Pupils in North Somerset schools achieve above the national average at all key stages apart from A Level, where performance is below average. Performance overall is in line with similar LEAs.
17. In 2001, at Key Stage 2, compared to both the national average and similar LEAs performance in English fell slightly, but standards in mathematics improved. At Key Stage 3, a continuous trend of improvement was broken and the results were significantly below the 2002 targets and, in English, below that of similar LEAs. At Key Stage 4, the proportion of pupils achieving five or more GCSE grades A*-C fell four per cent short of the local targets, representing a decline of approximately two per cent from 2000. The gender gap in North Somerset mirrors the position nationally, with girls out-performing boys, particularly in English. Standards in Weston-super-Mare are consistently below those in the rest of North Somerset, with the gap widest at Key Stage 4.
18. Overall, pupils make above average progress between Key Stages 1 and 2 and between Key Stages 3 and 4. Between Key Stages 2 and 3, progress is below average. The percentage of primary schools judged to be good or very good is in line with the national average, and well above that for similar LEAs. The figure for secondary schools is in line with the national average and similar LEAs.
19. Pupils' attendance and the level of permanent exclusions are broadly in line with national figures.

Council structure

20. At the time of the pilot inspection in 1997, the council was under Liberal Democrat control. In 1998, the council became hung, with Liberal Democrat group control only being maintained through working alliances with members of the Independent group. This position continued until May 1999, at which point the Conservative group took control of the council by a narrow majority. The

council has recently adopted a new executive (cabinet) structure. Select committees, with scrutiny functions, have also been introduced.

21. Education is one of four council directorates. The director of education is supported by five second tier officers: the head of inclusion; the head of school improvement; the head of support services; the head of resources and the head of policy, pupil and student services. Together, they make up the education directorate management team. This structure has only been in place since autumn 2001.

Funding

22. The LEA's SSA for primary and secondary education is among the lowest in the country. This is unchanged from the first inspection. What has changed significantly is the LEA's spending in relation to the education SSA. This has reduced steadily from 11.8 per cent above education SSA in 1996/7 to only 0.1 per cent above in the current financial year. Each year's increase in SSA has not been fully passed on to the education service. Expenditure has reduced in real terms.
23. Within the education budget, spending is significantly below primary SSA (92.5 per cent), but above for all other areas, with spending on under fives and school sixth forms furthest above (both at around 119 per cent). The LEA has been active in seeking additional sources of funding and can demonstrate some significant success in securing grant funding. Much of this, however, has been in the area of capital, rather than revenue, spending. Nonetheless, current levels of capital expenditure are inadequate to meet the needs of schools.
24. Overall revenue spending per pupil is well below the average for unitary authorities, reflecting the level of SSA, as indicated in the following table:

Local Schools Budget (LSB) per pupil	North Somerset	Unitary authorities	All English LEAs
Primary	£2,297	£2,394	£2,484
Secondary	£2,964	£3,062	£3,141

Source: 2000/2001 Section 52 returns

When account is taken of comparatively high expenditure within the total on premature retirement costs (largely inherited from the previous authority) and home to school transport, the spending likely to be seen as directly beneficial at school level is lower still. The comparative position of the LEA's schools was worsened in the current year by a failure to take up the full allocation of grants under the Standards Fund. Allied to the difficulties associated with such comparatively low funding have been those of managing a steady and significant decline in the resources available. This has affected both schools and LEA services and is referred to in a number of sections below.

The Education Development Plan

25. The LEA's strategy for school improvement is satisfactory. The Education Development Plan (EDP), which is the LEA's key document for promoting school improvement, was not in place at the time of the first inspection. The current EDP, which ends in April 2002, includes the following priorities:
- raise achievement in literacy;
 - raise achievement in numeracy;
 - raise achievement in ICT;
 - improve the quality of management, governance and self-evaluation of schools;
 - improve the quality of teaching and learning in all schools;
 - sustain and extend the richness and relevance of the curriculum for all pupils;
 - raise standards of achievement of pupils with SEN and emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD); and
 - improve behaviour, reduce truancy and promote social inclusion.
26. The LEA's priorities are clearly articulated and reflect the national ones, as well as some local needs. Priorities five and six are too broad and do not focus sufficiently on particular schools or groups of pupils. There is also some overlap, for example, in the priorities for raising achievement in literacy, numeracy and ICT and 'improving teaching and learning'. This has been partially recognised in the revised EDP through better cross-referencing of activities. Links with other key plans are identified under each priority but are not always made explicit in the action plans. The improvement strategies for the Weston Education Action Zone (EAZ) are, for the most part, coherent with those of the EDP. The resources allocated to support the priorities have proved adequate, apart from ICT, where the evaluation of the EDP reveals a number of shortfalls in the quantity of support needed.
27. The LEA undertook a sound audit of needs, using a range of data and findings from OFSTED inspection reports, to draw up the original EDP and to revise it. The extent to which the results of these audits are reflected in the activities underpinning the priorities varies. For example, they are strongly reflected in the action plans for numeracy and ICT but less so in priorities seven and eight. Action plans are generally coherent and appropriately linked to success criteria. A detailed evaluation of progress of the first EDP was undertaken as part of the audit for the new EDP, which will run from 2002-2007.
28. Overall, the LEA has made satisfactory progress in implementing its current EDP. Good progress has been made in implementing the priorities for literacy, numeracy, ICT and aspects of support for management. Progress has been slower in the other priorities and there has been some slippage. The LEA will struggle to reach its 2002 target for literacy at Key Stage 2 and higher grade GCSEs, but is on track to meet its other targets.
29. The EDP for 2002-2007 was still in draft at the time of the inspection. Headteachers, elected members and other stakeholders have been actively involved in drawing up the new plan and there has been full consultation over both the priorities and the strategies supporting them. The evaluation of the first EDP correctly identifies areas of work needing to be continued into the new EDP, including a stronger emphasis on developing school autonomy. The audit for the

new EDP is sound, although there is still scope for making better use of the extensive data at the LEA's disposal to evaluate the performance of particular groups of pupils. The detailed action plans were still being developed at the time of the inspection and the resource implications of the new EDP were not available.

The allocation of resources to priorities

30. The levels of spending inherited by the LEA from its predecessor authority could only have been maintained by drawing on reserves and/or significantly raising the council tax. With reserves limited and a dominant political priority to minimise council tax increases, members have felt it necessary to significantly reduce spending on some services.
31. In relation to SSA, spending on education has been steadily reduced. This is in contrast to some other areas, such as social services, where expenditure has risen. Members have recently given an undertaking that the education SSA increase for the coming year will be passed on in full, thus ensuring that total spending does not fall below the SSA level. Although school delegated budgets overall will stay the same in real terms, this move towards achieving greater stability has been welcomed by schools. It is not, however, regarded by them as more than a limited, first step in establishing education as a corporate spending priority.
32. In recent years, the education budget has been dominated by the need to deliver the service reductions required by members and, more recently, to meet the statutory requirement to increase the age weighted pupil number values within the funding formula. The tendency, noted in the first inspection, towards protecting school budgets, has continued. However, this has been at the expense of disproportionate reductions in the funding of central education functions and services. As a result of the cuts made, some important elements have suffered. The concerns raised in the previous report, that further reductions might hamper the continued delivery of good quality services to schools, have therefore been justified.
33. Beyond the broad principle of protecting school budgets, there is little indication of spending changing in a planned way to reflect developing LEA priorities. There is a strong sense of a budgetary straightjacket, within which any significant redistribution of funds, other than to effect cuts, has not commanded members' interest. Opportunities to effect efficiency savings have been taken, but any money released has rapidly been taken to meet the next pressing demand or to deliver the next cut.
34. Budget-making has thus reflected the dominant priorities of the LEA but that is all. Its use to target specific service priorities has been largely non-existent. Particularly disappointing has been the failure to implement to any major degree the excellent work done with schools in reviewing their current spending needs and the design of the LEA's funding formula. If anything, allocations have recently been skewed away from those suggested by the review as a consequence of having to channel all the available funding to meet statutory requirements. The review of schools' needs has not informed in any way the size of the sum to be distributed by the formula and the LEA continues to allocate

funds in broadly the same way as it did at the time of the first inspection. Its rationale is better understood by schools than it was then, but no better accepted.

35. Dialogue with schools on the budget has been extremely limited. It has improved this year at officer level but very little discussion has taken place between schools and members. Members have restricted officer activity in such respects until they have concluded their own considerations. Contacts with schools have essentially been to give information about decisions already taken, rather than representing consultation in the true sense. This is unsatisfactory and the LEA has paid a major price in terms of relationships with schools.
36. Recent consultation with schools has been much better on the issues of the further delegation of funding and the design of the funding formula. The control of the education budget overall is sound, as it is at individual school level. Few schools have either significant surpluses or deficits. The LEA takes reasonable steps to inform schools of opportunities to bid for grants, but support beyond this is limited, except in the case of capital grants where it is good.

Structures to ensure continuous improvement, including Best Value

37. There is currently no satisfactory education directorate business plan. Specific strategic and service plans do not readily permit effective scrutiny, both of what is planned and, latterly, whether intended outcomes have been achieved. The description of planned activity is sometimes limited and timescales imprecise. Lead responsibilities are not always clear, resource implications are rarely assessed in a precise manner, and outcomes and targets are often not expressed in measurable ways.
38. To a large extent, these weaknesses are compensated for at individual service level by the close and effective working relationships within and between the small teams concerned and the high calibre of many individual members of staff. However, this works less well for developing broader and more complex strategies and this is where the LEA is much weaker. The LEA has lost ground in such respects since the last inspection, when a network of three-year plans was seen as providing some clear direction to service development and a reasonable framework for both monitoring and evaluation.
39. Performance management is poor. A senior officer with a proven track record of running highly effective support services for schools has recently begun to develop performance management systems in the education directorate, incorporating the principles of Best Value. This is an appropriate first step. The LEA is already well aware that models, which work well at individual service level, will need to be significantly adapted if they are also to provide a sound basis for strategic planning. Existing good practice within the directorate includes a programme of focused discussions on specific services with individual headteachers, following a Best Value framework.
40. The External Auditor has approved the 2001/2 Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP) as being in all significant respects in accordance with the Act and statutory guidance. An appropriate range of education performance indicators is included in the plan and all education functions will be covered during the five-year programme. The choice of SEN as a Year 1 review was entirely appropriate, given the weaknesses detailed elsewhere in this report. However,

the conduct of the review was unsatisfactory in a number of respects, most particularly in the failure to incorporate all aspects of provision and to look at strategy and service provision in a holistic way. A more detailed evaluation of the review is provided in Appendix 2.

41. The choice of school meals for the other Year 1 review would have been justified if the review had been designed to inform the two imminent major decisions affecting the service: namely 1) the letting of a new contract; and, 2) the delegation of funding to primary and special schools. It was not so designed, however, and both decisions were taken well before the completion of the review. The scope of the review was poorly defined and this adversely affected all aspects of the exercise. A more detailed evaluation is provided in Appendix 2.
42. Significant service improvements have not followed as a direct consequence of either review. No other wholly education service reviews are planned until Year 4 of the programme, although some support services will be covered by cross-cutting reviews. The directorate is likely to find the review workload in Year 4 particularly difficult to sustain. Corporate guidance for those conducting Best Value reviews is still incomplete, although it has improved since the beginning of the Year 1 reviews. The current guidance has strengths in the areas of challenge, comparison, and competition, but is relatively weak on consultation.
43. The support to help schools to apply Best Value principles to their work is patchy, unco-ordinated and unsatisfactory overall. Key deficiencies are in linking the school development and budget-making processes and in evaluating the cost effectiveness of resourcing decisions. The lack of involvement of the Education Development Service (EDS) in such respects so far, is a key weakness. Advice on procurement is unsatisfactory, although client support for the purchase of some services is available on a traded basis. The LEA has facilitated school access to the Audit Commission financial benchmarking website but provides no such support otherwise.

Recommendations	
In order to support strategy for school improvement:	
•	establish arrangements to ensure that schools are consulted at a formative stage of the budget-making process;
•	establish clear arrangements for effective performance management, to include:
	- clear links between corporate and service objectives and plans;
	- clear and measurable indicators, against which to evaluate service performance;
•	re-consider the programme of Best Value reviews, with particular reference to the heavy workload in Year 4; and
•	support schools to apply Best Value principles to their work.

SECTION 2: SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Summary of effectiveness and value for money of LEA's support for school improvement

44. The EDS performs the majority of the school improvement functions satisfactorily, although frequent staff changes and the absence of a performance management framework, have limited its overall effectiveness. Individual advisers and officers work hard and have embraced the principle of supporting schools in inverse proportion to success. The new Head of School Improvement has also taken important first steps towards achieving greater coherence in the way support is organised and evaluated, and is providing good leadership.
45. Total expenditure on the EDS, i.e. including expenditure covered by income from schools, is slightly higher (at £33/pupil) than the available unitary authority average figure (£29) but significantly below the national one (£45). The service has an adequate understanding of Best Value principles, but these are only just beginning to inform practice. Overall, the service is having a significant impact on raising standards. The support provided represents satisfactory value for money.
46. The lack of a clear and consistent corporate approach to school improvement has contributed to a distancing of schools from the authority as a whole. Where more than one directorate has been involved in supporting a particular aspect, support has at best been uneven and frequently unsatisfactory. For example, support for pupils with SEN, which requires effective 'joined-up' working with social services, has been a major area of weakness. The maintenance of school accommodation, dependent on the involvement of the corporate professional support service, has also been poor.
47. The quality of school accommodation, overall, is unsatisfactory. This is sending a negative message to staff about the extent to which education is valued by the authority. Headteachers have suggested that it is hampering teacher retention. There can also be little doubt that it is inhibiting the delivery of National Curriculum requirements.

Monitoring, challenge and intervention

48. This function was rated satisfactory at the last inspection. Overall, it remains satisfactory. In the previous report, the LEA was recommended to renegotiate the 'partnership' with schools to establish more clearly respective responsibilities and accountabilities. Progress in this area has been unsatisfactory. Much effort has been directed at promoting effective school self-evaluation, and training to support this has been a priority. In spite of these developments, a minority of schools remains unclear about the respective school and LEA responsibilities in securing school improvement and some primary schools are still over-dependent on the LEA.
49. The LEA's approach to focusing support on areas of greatest need is satisfactory. The LEA has defined its approach to monitoring, challenging and intervening in schools and has appropriately directed most of its efforts at schools where it has concerns. The degree of challenge to schools from advisers varies, but is generally good, with the LEA's processes rigorous and providing an appropriate

balance of both challenge and support. The LEA places all schools in one of five categories, three of which imply some level of concern.

50. The monitoring programme is differentiated, with the 'Schools with Issues' (SWIG) register and forum providing an appropriate arrangement in helping to identify weaknesses in schools at an early stage. Reference to performance data helps to identify schools that are under-performing and these are prioritised for advisers' support. Clear criteria are also in place for assessing the subsequent progress made by the schools and for reviewing, in general terms, the effectiveness of the actions taken.
51. The LEA has responded well to the previous report's recommendations to improve support. Guidance to schools on use of data for target-setting has been well developed and provision now is satisfactory. The quality of data on pupils' performance was rated as good in the school survey and this view was confirmed in discussions with headteachers.
52. Schools know what data will be circulated and when they will receive it. Bespoke presentation of data is also available to schools on request. The LEA has still to persuade a minority of schools that the key task is to set targets for improvement rather than simply predict results. Electronic transfer of data has not yet been implemented.
53. Although the monitoring of schools is now differentiated so that the best-led schools receive fewer visits, it still relies heavily on actual contact with the attached adviser. The LEA has recognised that monitoring of successful schools can be achieved without advisers' visits, thereby releasing time for discussion of school development issues and/or more intensive work with schools in difficulties. However, there should be greater clarity over retained funding and that released to schools to enable them to decide the extent to which further support from advisers might be required for target-setting, planning and review. Advisers' notes of visits are now usefully copied to chairs of governors, but these do not consistently include clear action points.

The LEA's work with under-performing schools

54. This area was rated good at the last inspection. Support is still good and the LEA has improved its ability to identify weaknesses in a school at an early stage. The proportion of schools requiring some or significant improvement is low. Only one school is subject to special measures and the LEA's record in supporting such schools is good. A second school, for example, was removed from special measures in only 14 months. Schools are assisted with their action plans, which are well aligned to the LEA's statements of action.
55. The LEA's policy and procedures for identifying, monitoring and supporting schools causing concern are thorough and are well known to schools. Procedures give priority to the early identification of difficulties. Schools causing concern receive well-planned and co-ordinated support. Difficulties are tackled both promptly and incisively. Reports to both the headteacher and governing body are helpful in moving a school forward.

56. The officer/adviser SWIG forum monitors schools 'with issues' on a half-termly basis. Progress of individual schools is reviewed regularly by senior managers, who in turn brief elected members.
57. The LEA has shown itself to be prepared to use its full range of intervention powers, but has done so sparingly. Leadership and management issues are mostly dealt with both robustly and sensitively. Acting headteachers are found speedily and good support is provided in recruiting replacement substantive headteachers. Examples of under-performing teachers can still be found, but there is good support from personnel officers in helping to address competency issues. Officers also provide sustained and helpful support to governors.
58. The absence of clear exit criteria, against which schools are no longer deemed to be a cause for concern, is a weakness.

Support for literacy

59. Overall support for raising standards of literacy is satisfactory, with some good features.
60. Test results at Key Stage 1 show the LEA to be performing above the national average in reading and writing and in line with similar LEAs. In 2001, 78 per cent of pupils achieved Level 4 at the end of Key Stage 2. This is above the national average and in line with similar LEAs, but four per cent below the LEA's target for 2001 and eight per cent below its 2002 target. The latter target presents a considerable challenge and there is little expectation that it will be reached. Test results at Key Stage 3 show the LEA to be performing in line with similar LEAs in relation to pupils achieving Level 5, but to be performing less well with more able pupils.
61. The LEA's implementation of the National Literacy Strategy is satisfactory and the strategy has been well managed by the very capable lead-consultant. Development, however, has been hampered by the failure of the LEA to take up the Standards Fund grant in full and by a structure that has resulted in the literacy team too often being isolated from other aspects of school improvement. The LEA has taken steps to rectify these shortcomings through its intention to take up the grant in full in the next financial year and through a better integration of literacy with other priorities for school improvement in the second EDP.
62. The reduced take-up of the Standards Fund has directly impacted on the amount of training the LEA has been able to provide. Training programmes to support, grammar for writing, early literacy, use of phonics, word level development and boys' literacy, have only proceeded within the limits of the LEA's capacity. The failure to take up the Standards Fund for summer schools and family literacy last year meant that these initiatives were not developed. Delays in appointing a consultant for Key Stage 3, also resulting from an inability to take up full Standards Fund allocations, meant the LEA made a slow start in implementing the literacy strategy in secondary schools.
63. The training provided by consultants has been good and has been valued by schools. Support is now suitably differentiated and schools are generally aware of the level of support they can expect to receive. Primary schools are supported through cluster groups, newsletters and guidance material produced by leading

literacy teachers. Effective links have also been formed both with the EAZ and with ICT.

64. The audit undertaken by the LEA of its first EDP provides a comprehensive evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses and a clear view of priorities for the future. There is good curricular target-setting in primary schools and the LEA has provided effective support to help schools to analyse their strengths and weaknesses and develop strategies for improvement.

Support for numeracy

65. Support for numeracy is satisfactory and well received by schools.
66. Attainment at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 is well above national averages and above those of similar LEAs. The rate of improvement over the past three years has been in line with the national trend. The proportion of pupils gaining Level 4 or above at Key Stage 2 increased by one per cent to 77 per cent between 2000 and 2001, compared to a decline in the national average. The LEA is making good progress towards meeting its 2002 target.
67. There are good links with other initiatives such as literacy, the Weston EAZ and ICT. The percentage of pupils reaching Level 4 or above in schools receiving intensive support has risen at a significantly greater rate than in others. There are appropriate plans for continuing support for numeracy in the new draft EDP. However, the criteria for identifying schools to receive intensive support are not sufficiently clear or transparent and have not been effectively communicated to schools.
68. Changes in personnel resulted in a completely new numeracy team starting in September 2001. The new line manager has, however, made a sound start to managing the strategy. The consultants are well supported; appropriate training has been organised and suitable contingency arrangements are in place to cope with further changes of personnel in the future. The numeracy team is highly regarded and the training provided has been well received.
69. Cluster meetings and a newsletter produced jointly with the literacy team, provide additional support. There is a network of leading mathematics teachers. Key Stage 3 training has been well attended and well received.

Support for information and communication technology

70. This area of work was found to be unsatisfactory by the previous inspection, with weaknesses in planning and teaching not having been addressed. Considerable progress has been made and support is now satisfactory with some significant strengths. The National Grid for Learning (NGfL) has been effectively implemented and there has been some good support in helping schools to use ICT across the curriculum and raise standards. The proportion of pupils gaining accreditation at Key Stage 4 is significantly above the national level and that for similar LEAs.
71. The LEA has a clear ICT strategy and this is well understood by schools. It is underpinned by a comprehensive audit of need and clearly focused on raising standards. Targets for improvement are appropriate. There is an intention to link

the strategy to the use of ICT in management and administration, but this has yet to be fully developed. The ICT steering group is a useful vehicle for consultation and has enabled schools to be fully involved in helping to develop ICT across the LEA.

72. Levels of provision are above the national average in primary schools and similar to national levels in secondary schools. Technical support is available to schools and arrangements for this service are currently being reviewed. Curriculum ICT is to be part of a broader Best Value review of information technology across the council in 2003.
73. Schools have received appropriate guidance and support concerning New Opportunities Fund (NOF) training but although take-up is high, completion rates at the moment are low compared to other LEAs. The LEA expects the majority of schools to have signed up for NOF training by March 2003. The LEA training programme is satisfactorily integrated with the NOF arrangements and schools are generally happy with the quality provided.
74. A range of useful initiatives has been developed to share good practice including the use of leading teachers, newsletters, an ICT website, the use of primary cluster groups and secondary co-ordinators meetings. The LEA has identified schools requiring additional support and has recently reviewed ICT provision in the majority of schools.

Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3

75. This is a new area for inspection, and support is satisfactory. The LEA has adopted the national Key Stage 3 Strategy and all the secondary schools have begun to implement it. Training has been satisfactory, and consultants are beginning to make an impact. A delay was caused by the LEA's failure to take up in full its Standards Fund allocation. However, a former headteacher has now been appointed as strategy manager and an appropriate audit of need has been conducted as part of the preparation of the new EDP. Pupil performance targets have been set up until 2004 and a draft strategy has been discussed with secondary headteachers.
76. Continuity between the LEA's strategy for Key Stage 3 and its strategies for raising standards at Key Stage 2 have been assisted by the secondment of a primary headteacher in the role of both school link adviser and numeracy strategy manager. Secondary teachers have also been encouraged to visit primary schools.
77. The LEA has provided guidance and support to schools in the analysis of results. Standards at Key Stage 3 fell in 2001 and the LEA has explored the reasons for this with the schools. It has also made a sensible response in focusing attention on the need for further development of value added data.

Support for minority ethnic and Traveller children

78. This area was not inspected in 1997. About 1.7 per cent of the pupils are of minority ethnic heritage and these pupils generally perform well. Support is mainly provided through joint arrangements with two of the former Avon LEAs. The Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) is co-ordinated by Bristol LEA,

with the Travellers' service managed by South Gloucestershire LEA. Support is satisfactory overall, although there are some weaknesses.

79. Appropriate policies are in place for minority ethnic and Travellers' education, and a good plan for their delivery has been drawn up with the LEA's partners. Training is provided for mainstream teaching of English as an additional language (EAL) although support for EAL pupils otherwise is spread very thinly. The annual achievement grant is well managed.
80. Significant improvement has been made since 1997 in the area of monitoring and tracking pupils' attainment. The LEA's monitoring and tracking covers all individual pupils and there is a focus now on monitoring achievement by ethnic group in both primary and secondary phases.
81. Attendance figures for Traveller children have remained steady and there was some improvement in the children's 2001 national test results. The Traveller service works well with other agencies, such as the educational welfare service (EWS) and the educational psychology service (EPS). Service targets are appropriate and are mostly met or exceeded.
82. The LEA has no policy for the children of asylum seekers and refugees and some of these children are having difficulty in obtaining school places.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

83. This is a new area for inspection. The development of this area is indicated clearly in both the current EDP and the draft of the new EDP. It also appears as a priority in the EPS development plan and the inclusive education plan. The LEA's preparation for the further development of this area is progressing well and support for gifted and talented pupils is satisfactory at this stage.
84. A policy and guidelines have been formulated jointly by the EDS and EPS. Consultation took place in the summer 2001 and the policy document was circulated to schools in December 2001. The LEA is providing good quality in-service training to teachers on the teaching of gifted and talented pupils. A training programme for senior school staff prepared by the EPS has also been well received. There is, however, little evidence at present of the LEA evaluating the effectiveness of its strategy in raising standards.
85. The gifted and talented programmes provided by the Weston EAZ were inspected by OFSTED in February 2001 and found to be satisfactory. The EAZ-funded summer schools, which targeted gifted and talented pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in 2000 and 2001, were of good quality and were well received by parents.

Support for school leadership and management

86. This area was deemed satisfactory at the last inspection. There have since been some further positive developments and, overall, support for school leadership and management remains satisfactory. However, while individual initiatives are valued and effective, there is still no coherent overall strategy for leadership and management development.

87. The LEA provides a good range of training opportunities for senior managers in schools and these effectively supplement the national programmes. There is a good induction and mentoring programme for headteachers. OFSTED school self-evaluation training has been provided by LEA advisers and this has been well received. Effective use has been made of good practice outside the LEA in providing support and guidance, particularly in secondary schools. Some use is also made of outside consultants, although this is not well developed.
88. The LEA's training course for middle managers in secondary schools is good. The approach in primary schools is more generic and is less well regarded. The LEA helps to facilitate subject networks for heads of department, subject co-ordinators, deputy headteachers and heads of sixth form. These are generally valued by the participants.

Support to governors

89. This area was judged to be satisfactory in the last inspection report. Considerable progress has been made and support for governors is now good. The authority supports governors well in their strategic role.
90. Since the last inspection, governor vacancies have fallen to a level below the national average. Governorship has assumed a higher profile and improving 'management and governance' is a key priority within the EDP. The policy and governor support service now has responsibility for both governor training and advice to governors on school improvement issues. This has resulted in a single reference-point for governing bodies and much improved support. The quality of training is good and courses are appropriately tailored to schools' needs.
91. A governors' support and development steering group has been established, comprising of governors, headteachers, LEA officers and advisers, and diocesan representatives. This group arranges an annual conference for governors, promotes cluster activities and assists in the design and delivery of governors' courses. A good partnership exists between the governors' forum and officers. Governors state that the LEA is very inclusive and invites them to be representatives on, or make inputs to, various working parties and consultative groups.
92. Very good communication links exist between governors and LEA officers and a governor development action plan has been circulated for consultation. The LEA has also established an IT database, which records serving governors, new appointments and attendance at courses. A governor website has also been established to advertise courses and provide data and updates. LEA officers are very keen to ensure that governing bodies are well informed and effective in their roles and responsibilities. In contrast, members have been very reluctant to consult governors on funding matters and this has been a major weakness. Belatedly, this matter is now being addressed.

The effectiveness of services to support school management

93. The previous inspection recognised the extensive involvement of headteachers and governors in the planning and evaluation of management support services. The LEA has continued and extended this good practice and the services are a strength overall. The services play a full part in the monitoring of school

performance and in supporting schools with particular difficulties. The personnel and finance services are outstanding. In contrast, property services support is poor.

94. The marketing information for schools is satisfactory and supplemented by detailed service specification documents that include reference, in some cases, to the centrally funded services schools can expect to receive. These documents adequately cover the range of services offered, although they do not identify with enough clarity the performance standards to be expected or the responsibilities of schools deciding not to purchase all or part of a traded service.
95. The range of choice offered within the traded services is reasonable and is regularly reviewed. Where the LEA does not provide a service, it includes details of external providers in its marketing booklet. It has also recently agreed to promote the traded services of neighbouring authorities electronically through the South West grid for learning.
96. The gathering of schools' views takes a number of forms, including an annual questionnaire and a less frequent but more detailed survey, focusing on traded services. In a number of instances, the LEA has amended provision to reflect schools' changing needs, responding to the views expressed.
97. The **education finance service** was assessed as a strength in the first inspection and is now excellent. The difficulties with financial systems noted in the previous inspection have been dealt with and schools are now well served. The absence of any involvement by LEA link advisers is a limiting factor in supporting schools in making and monitoring their budgets. The current support from education finance officers is, however, technically of high quality and well regarded. Audit and payroll services to schools are also good.
98. The **education personnel service** shares the qualities of the finance service. It was a strength at the time of the first inspection and remains so. It is also now an excellent service. Staff have high levels of technical competence and a strong customer focus. The advice provided to schools is comprehensive, well presented, and of high quality. A key strength is that it is issued very promptly, giving schools full opportunity to absorb it in advance of its being needed operationally. Support on casework is robust and trusted by schools. Useful benchmarking data is also provided.
99. **Property services** support to schools was favourably commented on in the first inspection report, although some teething problems were noted and concerns were expressed about the robustness of contract supervision. The position has deteriorated significantly. Support for schools, provided firstly by the education department and then, more recently, by the housing and social services department, has been poor. Problems have included weak customer focus and contract management and technical expertise that has been of poor quality. The LEA has recently investigated the support available from two external providers. This is a sound and overdue move.
100. Client support for **cleaning, caretaking, and grounds maintenance** was not investigated in depth in the inspection but the evidence available suggests that it is satisfactory.

101. **ICT support for school administration and the development of an information management strategy** for the LEA is satisfactory. The first inspection report mentioned teething problems with new ICT systems and some promising developments of an information and management system covering both schools and the authority's own departments. The initial problems have been solved and schools now have good online access to the central financial information system.
102. The overall development of electronic links between the LEA and schools has been limited. Weaknesses in the co-ordination of corporate and education directorate strategic planning have not been helpful. Existing links do not currently allow school access to the LEA intranet, although a facility to enable the transfer of basic pupil curriculum data is imminent.
103. Dialogue with school representatives through a number of working groups is good. The groups are helpful in identifying and dealing with day-to-day problems and in collecting schools' views on priorities for development. They also provide a forum through which the LEA can seek the views of schools on its activities and plans. Appropriately, the private company that provides the day-to-day support for schools is closely involved.
104. Less formal mechanisms are used effectively to co-ordinate the collection, collation and analysis of data. Schools are also appropriately consulted on any proposed changes to the information that the LEA wishes to collect from them.
105. **School meals** provision was the subject of a Year 1 Best Value review. The inspection's findings on the review are attached as Appendix 2. Service provision is satisfactory.

The LEA's work in assuring the supply of teachers

106. This is a new area for inspection. Although recruitment and retention are issues for the LEA, the overall position compares well with that nationally. Support is satisfactory overall.
107. Recruitment statistics for teaching posts show that the numbers of applicants have reduced steadily since the last inspection. Advertisements for permanent posts in the primary phase now attract only half the previous level of applicants, with those attracted to secondary schools down by three-quarters. Despite this downward trend, the North Somerset position is still significantly better than the national picture.
108. Teachers' vacancies are advertised throughout the former Avon authorities. The LEA also provides useful comparative data to schools on costs of advertising vacancies and vacancy patterns. The LEA makes effective use of consultants and alternative providers to deliver training it cannot itself provide. The LEA also actively encourages and promotes teachers' involvement in national training programmes.
109. A well-organised and comprehensive training and development programme for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) is well attended. The LEA's guidance material clearly sets out the roles and responsibilities for supporting NQTs. Effective quality assurance arrangements covering the support for NQTs, are also in place.

Leadership of the school improvement service

110. The new Head of School Improvement took up post in July 2001. She is already providing good leadership in appropriately prioritising key tasks. The appointment followed a period during which there had been significant changes in both leadership and staffing of the service over the previous year. This was reflected in schools' negative responses in the school survey.
111. Individual advisers have sustained the service for some time. New management structures are required and moves towards greater coherence are overdue. There is, however, now a shared vision of school improvement and the service's objectives are clear. Communication with schools is mostly good and there is an increasing understanding and sharing of priorities. Evaluation of service performance is being improved and under-performance, where it occurs, is now being challenged.

The deployment of staff to support school improvement

112. Advisory staff are mostly well deployed and support is differentiated according to schools' needs. Although there is some over-monitoring of successful schools, those with the greatest needs receive priority support and the arrangements are well understood by all involved. Workloads are monitored to avoid staff becoming overburdened, although over the last year discontinuity of staffing has meant that this has not always been achieved. Individual advisers' activity broadly reflects their individual specialisms and expertise. Imaginative ways are used to ensure a rapid response to crises, with very effective use made of both secondments and consultancy.

The strategic planning of services to support school improvement

113. Following recent developments, strategic planning to support school improvement is now satisfactory. The previous EDS service plan was a weak document, containing only a vague mission statement and lacking clarity on funding. Appropriately, it is now being revised, with previous approaches replaced by a thorough audit of need. Monitoring of the overall service is still largely informal and therefore imprecise. This is well understood by the new Head of School Improvement, who is now taking appropriate steps to address the issue.

The effectiveness of performance management to support school improvement

114. The absence of formal performance management systems impedes the analysis of service effectiveness. Analysis of individual staff performance is ad hoc and informal, with no system for regular performance appraisal yet in place.
115. Induction of new staff is poor and new appointees to the service are expected to 'hit the ground running'. There are no explicit links between service targets and those set for individual staff, although the de facto expectations of staff are understood. The small size of the team in part compensates for a lack of formal arrangements. Staff have access to development opportunities, although there is no coherent training plan for the service as a whole.

The standard of expertise of staff to support school improvement

116. In the previous report, the LEA was recommended to 'increase the amount of authoritative and expert advice' to schools, especially on planning for particular subjects and assessment. There has been little progress in this area. Staffing cuts have been a key factor. The EDS has provided some good support, but discontinuity has meant that the expertise available has not been of consistent quality.
117. A high priority has been placed on recruiting staff able to combine good leadership and management experience with a willingness to work flexibly. Advisers comprise a number of former headteachers, who together provide both varied and cross-phase experience. The LEA has also made very effective use of secondments and consultants so that the overall expertise on offer to schools is satisfactory. The recruitment of a former chief adviser as a part-time associate adviser to support leadership and management in secondary schools has been particularly effective.

Recommendations
In order to support school improvement:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• where appropriate, clarify the responsibilities of self-managing schools in monitoring their performance;
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• develop arrangements to allow successful schools to have a greater say in negotiating the support required for target-setting and review of progress;
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• improve the consistency of advisers' notes of visits, to include clear and detailed action points and timescales;
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• further investigate the causes of pupils' under-achievement at Key Stage 3;
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• develop a single policy covering the needs and support requirements of children of asylum seekers and refugees;
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• improve the support for gifted and talented children, by establishing stronger links between primary and secondary phases and extending monitoring and evaluation strategies across the full age range; and
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ensure that there is proper co-ordination of corporate and directorate planning for ICT.

SECTION 3: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Summary of effectiveness of LEA's SEN provision

118. The work of individuals within the special educational needs (SEN) support service is highly valued by both schools and parents. However, provision generally does not effectively contribute to school improvement. The main reason for this is the lack of a clear and agreed strategy. This has hindered development and has resulted in a largely reactive service.

The LEA's strategy for SEN

119. The previous inspection did not comment in detail on the LEA's strategy for SEN and made no recommendations. However, strategic planning for SEN is poor and schools are highly critical. The inclusion policy agreed in 2000 is vague and it has failed to win the widespread support of schools and other stakeholders. The policy was not rooted in a rigorous audit of need and its action plan lacks detailed timescales. Success criteria are vague and the arrangements for monitoring and evaluation, including by members, are weak.
120. The LEA's own evaluation of its first EDP acknowledges that insufficient progress has been made in supporting SEN, reflecting the lack of a meaningful strategy and progress in implementing it. Although raising standards of achievement of pupils with SEN was identified as a priority, the aims and objectives were poorly defined and lacked coherence. This has resulted in poor understanding of what the LEA's actions were intended to achieve and limited ownership by all involved. The new Head of Inclusion, who was appointed in September 2001, is taking appropriate steps to address these shortcomings and has already begun to gain the confidence of many headteachers and SEN co-ordinators (SENCOs).
121. Although the level of overall expenditure on SEN has remained relatively constant, spending has been poorly focused. There have been particularly large increases in out-of-district placements. The LEA has delegated funding for high incidence special needs and intends to delegate the remaining funding for more severe and complex needs during the next financial year. Schools have perceived that the only way to access additional funding is to secure statements. The current criteria for allocating resources are not clearly understood by schools and have not been consistently applied. There have hence been difficulties in accessing appropriate funding for some individual needs, for example to support pupils with EBD.
122. The review of special school provision currently being undertaken by the LEA should ideally be underpinned by a much broader and more widely accepted strategy for inclusion. However, senior SEN managers understand the steps that need to be taken and are well aware of the urgency with which these need to be implemented.

Statutory obligations

123. The LEA takes satisfactory steps to meet its statutory obligations in relation to SEN. Seventy four per cent of statements are completed within the required timescale, although this falls to 49 per cent when exceptions are taken into account. The LEA is taking appropriate steps to achieve its 2003 target of 90 per

cent. A recently established panel has begun to ensure that decision-making in relation to statutory assessments is shared.

124. The quality of statements is satisfactory overall. However, statements do not always reflect individual needs of pupils precisely enough. Information for parents is not easily accessed or sufficiently comprehensive. The LEA does make effective use of the local parent partnership scheme and appropriately uses the SEN regional partnership to resolve disagreements. Annual reviews of statements are also thorough.

SEN functions to support school improvement

125. Support for schools in meeting children's SEN is unsatisfactory. Support for SENCOs has been hampered by the lack of a specialist SEN adviser. The support provided by the recently appointed part-time adviser for inclusion is highly regarded but, given her wide remit, her capacity to meet training needs in SEN is limited.
126. The criteria for statutory assessment are consistent with the old Code of Practice but will require updating to reflect the new one. Some initial training on the new code has been provided and more is planned. Although funds to support pupils with high incidence special needs have recently been delegated, there is no up-to-date manual covering SEN procedures.
127. Annual reviews are monitored and scrutinised, but the LEA does not make sufficient use of the evidence collected to assess whether the pupils' various targets are being met. Individual education plans are in place, but these vary considerably in quality.
128. The EPS has suffered badly from staffing difficulties and, until recently, has not been able to meet its commitments to schools. Some good quality support has been provided by individuals, but frequent staff changes have undermined the quality overall. Learning support for individual pupils is mostly effective, but the support is not deployed consistently. The consortium arrangement for sensory support is well regarded.

Value for money

129. The management of SEN resources is unsatisfactory. The respective roles and responsibilities of the LEA and its schools in managing support for SEN are not clearly set out.
130. Overall SEN expenditure has been constant at slightly below the average for similar LEAs as a percentage of the local schools budget. However, there have been overspends on some individual budgets. In response to concerns about escalating costs, a Best Value review of SEN was appropriately undertaken during 2000/2001. The scoping of the review, however, resulted in only a partial and fragmented consideration of SEN issues (see Appendix 2).
131. The LEA does not effectively monitor school expenditure on SEN and performance management of SEN services is weak. Although the review of statements is robust, the LEA collects little information on how its expenditure impacts on pupil progress. The LEA therefore has no way of knowing the extent

to which the SEN budget provides value for money. The head of inclusion is aware of these issues and has begun to address them.

Recommendations	
In order to support SEN:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• as a matter of urgency, develop an SEN strategy and action plan, which is supported by all stakeholders and has clear targets and monitoring arrangements;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• provide parents with accessible and comprehensive information on arrangements for pupils with SEN;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• provide schools and other stakeholders with an up-to-date and comprehensive manual of SEN procedures;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• improve the monitoring and control of SEN budgets to bring them into line with planned expenditure; and
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• monitor schools' expenditure on SEN.

SECTION 4: PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION

Summary of effectiveness in promoting social inclusion

132. The LEA has a comprehensive set of policies that support social inclusion and, support for SEN apart, is giving satisfactory support overall to both schools and pupils. Each of the services has a clearly defined and practical approach to promoting the LEA's policies and there is now more cohesion in the strategic management of services than there was a year ago. The authority has a strong commitment to increasing the participation in education of vulnerable groups of pupils.
133. Service provision is well planned and generally expert. Good use is made of links across LEA functions and with external partners. The authority's work on social inclusion has recently improved significantly. It is now well conceived and, increasingly, is based on the sound use of data and appropriate action planning.
134. The LEA is committed to protecting cultural diversity and to opposing racism. Schools are given very clear directives about racist or homophobic behaviour and are strongly encouraged to develop policy responses. The LEA guidelines cover harassment in all its forms and are firmly linked to the recommendations contained in the Macpherson Report. Multi-agency working has made a strong contribution to the authority's work in this area, including recently helping to promote racial harmony following various international events.

The provision of school places

135. In the previous report, the LEA was praised for the prompt action it had taken to improve its roll forecasting capabilities and its work on initiating local reviews. It has made further progress and performance is satisfactory overall. Surplus places have been removed in some areas and additional accommodation provided in others. One special school has been closed and post-16 provision in Weston-super-Mare has been reorganised.
136. Current performance in forecasting pupil roll changes is broadly satisfactory at the level of the whole LEA but significantly less so in some cases at local area level. In particular, there have been worryingly large fluctuations from one year to the next in the forecasts. This is of particular concern because the LEA continues to operate with comparatively very low margins in terms of unfilled places. This puts an onus on accurate forecasting and prompt responses to any problems identified if sufficient provision is always to be available. At best, getting the equation wrong when rolls are rising can seriously limit the choices available to parents. Part of the apparent problem with forecasting lies in the continued use of definitions of local areas which do not, in reality, accurately reflect patterns of parental preference and school attendance. The LEA is conscious of this and intends to redefine the areas. It could and should have done this before now.
137. The quality of the LEA's planning is better than its planning documentation and is satisfactory overall. The School Organisation Committee works smoothly and there is general confidence in the LEA's officers. Relationships with the diocesan authorities are also good. The problem with the definition of local planning areas, however, significantly undermines the value of the school organisation plan as a vehicle for providing information to schools and other stakeholders and for

consulting with them. The plan also falls short of giving a clear indication of all the developments being considered, particularly in the secondary sector, where a significant deficit of places is forecast.

138. The LEA is appropriately revisiting its review of primary provision in the Nailsea area as the original changes agreed by members were not sufficient to address the problems of falling rolls there. One consequence has been a very long period, during which the future of the schools in the area has been uncertain. Leading elected members are, however, taking an active and supportive role in the review process.

Asset management planning

139. Asset management planning is unsatisfactory. There continues to be a significant gap between the backlog of work and the annual budget for repairs and maintenance. The previous report referred to the backlog of building work as 'a major and unenviable aspect of the LEA's inheritance' from the predecessor authority. The report also noted that there was a significant gap between the backlog of work and the annual budget for maintenance and repair; and that most of the money was being spent on urgent, 'reactive' works, rather than planned maintenance that would be more cost effective in the long term. Exact comparisons with the position then are difficult, but the overall picture is essentially the same.
140. Insufficient money is being spent each year even to maintain the current, unsatisfactory state of many school buildings. In recent years, the LEA has spent above the average for unitary authorities on capital works but still the impact on the overall condition of the building stock has been limited. A substantial proportion of the money has gone on major building replacement schemes in a handful of schools, leaving the LEA's schools overall in a significantly worse condition than found generally in other authorities. In the foreseeable future, the LEA is unlikely to be able to secure the investment needed to make the necessary improvements. The only substantial possibility lies in developing a Private Finance (PFI) scheme, which the LEA is now rightly researching.
141. The LEA has also been poorly served by its professional support service. The effects have included a failure always to use, or at least to use promptly, all the funding which has been available. Project management has also often been poor. The decision has rightly been taken recently to place no further work with the service and in future to outsource all new work.
142. In contrast, the small asset management team within the education directorate has a sound grasp of schools' needs. The team has established good arrangements for consulting with schools, has taken some worthwhile steps towards benchmarking costs and has begun to develop alternative approaches to commissioning building projects. Satisfactory progress has been made on assessing the suitability of school buildings. Steps are also currently being taken significantly to improve condition assessments.

Admissions

143. The previous inspection found that the management and co-ordination of admissions was both thorough and effective. The area was not looked at in detail

during this inspection but the indications are that it remains so. There have been some significant improvements in recent years, in particular the acceptance by all schools of common timetables for the main entry and transfer processes and by most schools of a common application form.

Provision for pupils with no school places

144. In the last inspection in 1997, this area was judged to be satisfactory. Provision is still satisfactory, although there are some weaknesses. Since the previous inspection, provision for education otherwise than at school (EOTAS) has been restructured and three pupil referral units (PRUs) have been created under the management of the Inclusion Support Service (ISS). Two PRUs have been established; one in Nailsea, in the north of the authority; and another in Weston-super-Mare, in the south. A third has been set up as a Post-14 centre, based at Weston College. This is supplemented by a facility under contract with a voluntary body, an arrangement, which the current Behaviour Support Plan (BSP) has extended into Key Stage 3. All the PRUs are registered.
145. The ISS Management Committee is chaired by an elected member and includes representatives of all the contributory agencies. The ISS has a clear and appropriate policy for the planning of EOTAS and a plan to improve the quality of its provision, including an objective to meet the national requirement that all pupils will receive 25 hours weekly tuition by September 2002. A significant planned injection of funding should assist the service to achieve this target. The previous target of 15 hours for pupils in the PRUs, set for September 2001, has not yet been achieved. There has, however, been a significant improvement in provision since the last inspection, when the average was only five hours.
146. The number of permanent exclusions has fallen by a third since 1997 and no pupil was permanently excluded from a special school in 2000/2001. Reintegration of pupils into mainstream schools was satisfactory at over 50 per cent last year and there was also a low incidence of repeat exclusions. All Year 11 pupils within the PRU provision achieved national accreditation in external examinations and 16 achieved at least one GCSE grade A*-G. However, a significant number of excluded pupils had to wait an unacceptable length of time before being placed in alternative educational provision.
147. The various parts of the EOTAS service have been brought together under the control and direction of ISS. This has been a positive move. In addition to supporting their own 56 pupils, the PRUs have management responsibility for delivering the LEA's provision for home tuition, sick children and pregnant schoolgirls; covering 160 pupils in total.
148. The EOTAS service collaborates well within a strong multi-agency approach, involving health service workers, social services, the EWS and the education family support team. Home tuition is used only under special circumstances, for example, with violent pupils who cannot be taught with others, or with schoolgirls in the later stages of pregnancy. It is provided for only five hours a week, which is insufficient.
149. Prior to November 2001, each element providing EOTAS support maintained its own records. This was inefficient and slowed down the response to meeting

pupils' and schools' needs. The Head of Inclusion has now addressed this by setting up a single comprehensive database.

School attendance

150. The LEA's support for improving attendance was graded satisfactory in the previous report. The recent school survey was critical of some aspects of the service but, overall, schools were generally satisfied with the Education Welfare Service (EWS). School visits revealed that criticism was focused more on the amount of support provided, rather than its quality, which remains satisfactory. Attendance is broadly in line with national figures in both the primary and secondary phases.
151. The LEA employs effective strategies to improve attendance and takes reasonable steps to carry out its statutory duties. Since the previous inspection, the LEA has reviewed and updated all its guidance documents and partnership working within and across the service has become both efficient and effective. Partners such as the police and the Weston EAZ team work with the LEA on attendance initiatives and a 'First Day Contact Procedures Scheme' has been set up in a number of EAZ schools. Although it is too early to evaluate the effectiveness of the scheme, further work is needed if the LEA and EAZ objectives and working procedures are to be aligned.
152. Designated teachers for truancy issues have been established in schools and attendance is a key element in both pastoral support and personal education plans for children in public care (CiPCs). The EWS also gives good support to PRUs in following up absence. Education welfare officers (EWOs) and schools are highly committed to improving attendance and are helping to promote new initiatives, for example, through reward systems for high and improved attendance. The EWS is well managed and its database is efficiently maintained.

Behaviour support

153. This area was not inspected in 1997. The LEA has a sound strategy for improving behaviour in schools and provides satisfactory support. The number of permanent exclusions is broadly in line with those nationally and targets set in the BSP have, for the most part, been met.
154. The current BSP builds on the previous plan and is satisfactory. It is precise, succinct and gives schools a clear guide to the support available. It also includes case studies to help schools' understanding. New targets are both reasonable and achievable. The plan also includes details of a variety of projects and initiatives to support disaffected and excluded pupils, some of which are run jointly with social and health services. Appropriate mechanisms are in place for monitoring and evaluating the plan's success.
155. The LEA does not have a specialist behaviour support service, but the LEA recognises that this is a priority and has plans to set up this service within the current year. The ISS is proposing to provide schools with training before the new service is set up to make best use of it once it is established.
156. The schools' survey showed that many schools believe that the LEA's support had been inadequate in the recent past. School visits revealed that the

dissatisfaction was related to the amount of support that could be given, not its quality. This had some justification because of the combined effect of the loss to the LEA of a number of educational psychologists and the heavy demands being made on the relatively small team of EWOs. Significant progress has now been made on addressing staffing levels.

Health, safety, welfare and child protection

157. This area was not inspected in 1997. The quality of provision is now good. The LEA carries out its statutory responsibilities appropriately and gives a high priority to children's safety and welfare. It has a good and clear policy on health and safety and schools are generally given good and comprehensive guidance on health and safety matters. Governors are given guidance on their statutory responsibilities. The LEA also provides schools with clear advice on dealing with both day-to-day matters and major incidents. Safety problems are promptly reported by schools and are carefully analysed.
158. Since the previous inspection, the LEA has encouraged schools to develop model safety policies and to adopt a risk assessment culture. The LEA has worked with the Health and Safety Executive and the DfES nationally as part of Best Practice initiatives related to children with life threatening conditions. Training has been given to school staff and governors on aspects of health, safety and child protection. The school survey rated these services as good and evidence collected during school visits confirmed this.
159. The LEA includes the issue of child protection in many of its service plans. High quality in-service courses in child protection, including bullying, have been provided for both school staff and governors. Ninety per cent of all educational establishments and 90 per cent of designated teachers have attended these during the last two years. Designated teachers for child protection have a clear understanding of their responsibilities.
160. On matters of child protection, the EWS has a close working relationship with a number of agencies, including social services, the health authority and the police. This ensures a speedy response when intervention is required. Inter-agency working is a strong feature of the LEA's provision in this area and there has been improvement in multi-agency training, co-ordination and joint delivery since the last inspection. The LEA also has an effective strategy for monitoring the effectiveness of the work in this area.

Children in public care

161. This area was not inspected during the previous inspection. However, CiPCs have a high profile in LEA planning and provision, and support is now satisfactory and improving.
162. Provision for CiPCs is prioritised in both the current EDP and the new draft EDP. The Children's Services Plan and the Quality Protects Management Plan also define a clear and coherent strategy to promote the educational achievement of the children and set clear and appropriately challenging targets for improvement. The children's interests are also served in a range of the LEA's other key plans, such as the BSP, education welfare development plan and the inclusive education action plan.

163. Approximately 100 children are in public care at any one time and currently all CiPCs have a school place. The LEA has set targets to reduce the number of CiPCs who have three or more placements in one year to no more than 16 per cent. Wherever possible, school placements are supported and movement minimised.
164. The LEA has set a target to improve liaison, protocols and joint working across the various social, health and education services. The action plan, drawn up as a result of an inspection of children's services during June 2001, identifies this as a key priority. The assistant director of social services and the head of inclusion are named as being responsible for this development and the executive member for health and wellbeing is closely involved in developing the joint protocols.
165. The LEA maintains a CiPC database. This includes both the information received from other agencies such as social services and the pupils' achievement at the end of each key stage. Various projects have been developed to prevent the educational failure of CiPCs, but these are at an early stage. In 2001, although the LEA achieved its CiPC target for Key Stage 2 in English, it did not do so in mathematics or science. However, pupil performance at five or more and one or more GCSE grades A*-G was in line with LEA targets. During the current academic year, no CiPCs have been permanently excluded. This compares to a figure of six for the same period in 2000/2001.

Combating racism

166. This area was not inspected in 1997 and so there is no baseline against which to judge the LEA's progress. However, the LEA's policy and practice in this area is well developed and of a satisfactory standard. The LEA has a sound anti-racism and anti-homophobia policy. This was updated in 2000 after wide consultation, including both minority ethnic groups and elected members. It forms part of the LEA's overarching equal opportunities policy, which is also sound. Education and other directorates have clear guidance on reporting and dealing with incidents of a racist or homophobic nature. The LEA's strategies focus on prevention of such incidents and schools have a very clear understanding of the detailed procedures to be followed should an incident occur.
167. Following the death of Stephen Lawrence, the LEA responded quickly to the recommendations of the Macpherson Report and all schools were circulated with amended guidance on dealing with racist incidents. Similarly, clear guidance on avoiding or reducing racial tension was issued quickly to schools following the events of September 11th in America. Schools appreciated this quick response.
168. Very few incidents of a racist or homophobic nature have occurred in North Somerset. Only two schools have reported racist incidents in the past three or four years and both of these involved verbal abuse. They were effectively dealt with and there has been no reoccurrence by the pupils concerned.
169. The LEA has a very small minority ethnic population. It continues to work hard with partners to ensure that racism does not become a community issue. The LEA's anti-racism and anti-homophobia review group is effective in promoting racial harmony within the community and draws on the skills and experience of the partners involved with the LEA, to achieve this. This group shares best

practice amongst the partners and raises awareness of issues that are likely to arise. The relationship between the LEA and SACRE is also satisfactory.

Recommendations
In order to promote social inclusion:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• revise the definition of planning areas used for roll forecasting purposes and for presenting the school organisation plan;
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• significantly enhance the budgetary provision for the maintenance and improvement of school buildings;
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• align the LEA and Weston EAZ policies and strategies used to support attendance; and
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• raise the achievement of CiPCs.

SECTION 5: CORPORATE ISSUES

Introduction to corporate issues

170. The LEA has no clear strategic vision for education. Although the LEA carries out the majority of its functions adequately, few were judged to be good or better and the LEA's impact overall has been uneven. In contrast to the good progress identified in the previous inspection report, the LEA has lost the trust of its schools and is succeeding, where it does, largely because of the work of individuals, rather than providing added value as a whole. This has been only due in part to a lack of continuity of leadership within the education directorate. Overall, the authority has lacked a unity of purpose. Cuts in budgets have clearly left their mark and, increasingly, schools have perceived the council as not valuing and not celebrating their achievements.
171. There has been insufficient debate within the council on educational needs and priorities. The procedures for monitoring progress and assessing value for money have also been weak. Members have not sufficiently engaged in the work of officers and staff discontinuity has hampered the development of collaborative working across the council. Schools, in the meantime, have got on with their tasks, sought to become self-standing wherever possible and gained an ever-increasing sense of frustration and bitterness with the council. Councillors have achieved their main aim of reducing expenditure, but have failed to develop clear aims and priorities to guide service development.

Corporate planning

172. The council's overall priorities are reflected in four themes, expressed in its vision 'Community Pride':
- protecting and improving the environment;
 - increasing prosperity;
 - enhancing health and wellbeing; and
 - maximising educational achievement and opportunity for all.
173. At the time of the previous inspection, there was a clear sense of partnership involving elected members, officers, headteachers and governors and a shared commitment to improvement. Following the inspection, however, tensions soon arose, with the needs of the education service sitting uneasily with members' desire to reduce expenditure.
174. The absence of a clearly articulated strategic plan for education has been an impediment to progress. Though well intentioned, the priorities expressed in 'Community Pride' have been too imprecise to give clear direction to the development of education services. Planning has been poor, reflecting the absence of a clear and consistent commitment to development of the services. Corporate and education directorate activities have also, too often, not dovetailed well.
175. The unsatisfactory nature of corporate planning is reflected in the structure of plans within the education directorate. The lack of a satisfactory education business plan has meant that, although the directorate's strategic and service

plans describe intended activities, they do not indicate clearly how these will contribute to meeting overall council objectives.

176. Within the budget planning process, there is a mechanism designed to bring together the projected funding needs of each service for three years ahead. There is, however, no evidence that this has helped members in fundamentally and collectively reviewing their spending priorities. The dominant priority of restricting council tax increases and reducing the reliance upon the use of reserves, allied to the low SSA, has had the effect of severely curtailing such discussions.

Effectiveness of decision making

177. Although poor strategic planning and the quality of some documents have hampered consultation on strategic issues, the speed of the LEA's decision making has been satisfactory. Until very recently, however, consultation with schools on the LEA's budget has been very limited. In contrast, consultation on day-to-day issues at individual service level has generally been much stronger.
178. The new council decision-making structure has not yet had time to bed down. Besides the director of education, the executive member for children and young people, the leader of the council and the chief executive are all new to their roles. However, with its new framework defining more clearly officer and member responsibilities for decision making, the council has made an appropriate and positive first step in acknowledging previous difficulties.

Leadership of elected members

179. Over the last four years, schools have perceived members as not viewing education as a priority. The council has also been seen as lacking the necessary experience and vision to manage education strategically. Early attempts to develop a shared vision for education came to nothing and the resulting vacuum still exists. Although some individual councillors do provide very good support to local schools, this is conducted in isolation rather than as part of an overall strategy.
180. For their part, members have, to a degree, acknowledged their own limitations. Some members, at least, have accepted that they have lacked knowledge and experience in dealing with education matters and, in particular, in interrogating and analysing data. There is a feeling that the member workload is shared among too few individuals. Members also reported that the new select committees have required 'a lot of learning' for those involved.
181. However, the new council leader has recently begun to be seen by schools as bringing a fresh approach to dialogue in helping to move things forward. A year ago, he made a commitment to bring greater stability to the authority, particularly with regard to funding. Schools are now beginning to believe that their concerns are being listened to, giving some hope for better relations in the future.
182. The new executive committee system has started to further speed up decision making. Cross-cutting portfolios within the executive have begun to exploit the potential for more joined-up working. New approaches to scrutinising decisions are also in place, although as yet these are under-developed.

Leadership of senior officers

183. Since the previous inspection, there have been six directors of education. These include one substantive post-holder who left after only one year, and three others who filled the role in an acting capacity. Although relatively new in the post, the current director has already shown strong leadership in some key areas. He has restructured the directorate's senior management and assembled a new team with the capacity to act robustly to help schools to move forward.
184. The new director has rightly made it a priority to establish a corporate 'vision for learning' and to rebuild partnerships with schools. A 'vision' conference for members, officers, schools and other partner organisations was held during autumn 2001. The LEA's school improvement strategy is now appropriately aimed at developing schools' own management and self-review systems.
185. Genuine attempts are being made to develop common understandings and, where possible, to secure consensus. The University of Surrey has carried out a survey of stakeholder opinions on the work of the LEA. The director is also currently seeking to strengthen collaborative working by establishing an Education Partnership Board. The new council executive has commissioned the drawing up of terms of reference for the board. A group of three headteachers are currently drafting the proposals.
186. The above and other recent developments give cause for optimism that the LEA can re-build its relations with schools and harness sufficient capacity for improvement in the future. The new chief executive has encouraged improved cross-service working, although these ideas have yet to impact on schools. There is also still a need to create genuine opportunities for schools, officers and members to plan and work together on how best to meet the needs of pupils, albeit within the constraints of the resources available.

Quality of advice provided to elected members

187. The quality of advice to elected members is satisfactory. Under the new council arrangements, clear advice is being provided on policy options in sufficient time to take decisions. The lead member for learning and youth is briefed weekly by the director. Senior education officers also provide briefings to members involved in scrutiny. Other members have access to lunchtime briefings on key policy areas and these are quite well attended. Reports by officers to the executive and select committees are both succinct and functional. To broaden their awareness of educational issues, senior members are now being encouraged to accompany senior officers on school visits.

Partnership with agencies

188. This area was satisfactory at the last inspection. Some positive developments have taken place and working partnerships continue to be satisfactory. At officer level, the LEA seeks to be inclusive in its partnership working and actively seeks inputs to, or representation on working groups from both governors and headteachers.

189. The EAZ in Weston-super-Mare was established in September 1998, covering 23 schools and the Post-14 unit. It was inspected in 2001 and found to be highly effective in working with schools. Collaborative work between the LEA and the EAZ has also been identified as a strength by the DfES. This is contributing effectively, for example, to work in schools related to gifted and talented pupils and on improving attendance.
190. Good relations have been established with the learning skills council and there are also good links with Weston College. These have already resulted in some useful development work in pre-vocational and vocational training, resulting in plans for a range of new courses from September 2002. Links with the Connexions service are also developing well.
191. Relationships and lines of communication between the LEA and its partners, such as the health service, social services and the police, have been strengthened recently. Much of this is attributable to the new director, supported by the new head of inclusion. Since the last inspection, various management and consultative groups, such as the joint concerns panel, have been established. Although they have so far had little impact on schools, these groups have included appropriate representative membership from a range of services and agencies.
192. Currently, schools feel that liaison with some services, particularly the health authority, social services and the police is less than satisfactory. On the other hand, schools are appreciative of planned new initiatives that will involve partnership working, such as the proposed behaviour support service.

Recommendations

In order to support corporate issues:

- draw upon the new EDP and the BVPP, to develop and implement a new corporate strategic plan or 'contract' for education, addressing clearly:
 - the place of education in the future economic development and prosperity of North Somerset;
 - an agreed vision of the attributes expected of young people graduating from education in the authority;
 - specific measurable targets for improvement, and timescales;
 - roles and responsibilities within and across the authority's directorates;
 - the role of members and schools in monitoring progress of the plan;
- improve the capacity of members to carry out their strategic responsibilities in planning and evaluating the council's support for education, by: 1) helping them to more effectively interrogate and analyse educational data; and 2) enabling them to undertake a comprehensive programme of visits to schools to observe/discuss practice and issues;
- develop and improve the processes by which members conduct scrutiny of the council's education decision making; and
- create genuine opportunities for schools, officers and members to work together on planning to meet the future needs of pupils.

APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This report contains a number of recommendations. Of these, the following are fundamental and should be implemented urgently, if the LEA is to improve quickly:

Recommendations

- Draw upon the new EDP and the BVPP, to develop and implement a new corporate strategic plan or 'contract' for education, addressing clearly:
 - the place of education in the future economic development and prosperity of North Somerset;
 - an agreed vision of the attributes expected of young people graduating from education in the authority;
 - specific measurable targets for improvement, and timescales;
 - roles and responsibilities within and across the authority's directorates;
 - the role of members and schools in monitoring progress of the plan.
- Improve the capacity of members to carry out their strategic responsibilities in planning and evaluating the council's support for education, by: 1) helping them to more effectively interrogate and analyse educational data; and 2) enabling them to undertake a comprehensive programme of visits to schools to observe/discuss practice and issues.
- Develop and improve the processes by which members conduct scrutiny of the council's education decision making.
- Create genuine opportunities for schools, officers and members to work together on planning to meet the future needs of pupils.
- Establish arrangements to ensure that schools are consulted at a formative stage of the budget-making process.
- Establish clear arrangements for effective performance management, to include:
 - clear links between corporate and service objectives and plans;
 - clear and measurable indicators, against which to evaluate service performance.
- Develop an SEN strategy and action plan, which is supported by all stakeholders and has clear targets and monitoring arrangements.
- Where appropriate, clarify the responsibilities of self-managing schools in monitoring their performance.
- Develop arrangements to allow successful schools to have a greater say in negotiating the support required for target-setting and review of progress.
- Revise the definition of planning areas used for roll forecasting purposes and for presenting the school organisation plan.
- Significantly enhance the budgetary provision for the maintenance and improvement of school buildings.
- Raise the achievement of CiPCs.
- Ensure that there is proper co-ordination of corporate and directorate planning for ICT.

The following recommendations are important, but less urgent:

Recommendations

- Re-consider the programme of Best Value reviews, with particular reference to the heavy workload in Year 4.
- Support schools to apply Best Value principles to their work.
- Improve the consistency of advisers' notes of visits, to include clear and detailed action points and timescales.
- Further investigate the causes of pupils' under-achievement at Key Stage 3.
- Develop a single policy covering the needs and support requirements of children of asylum seekers and refugees.
- Improve the support for gifted and talented children, by establishing stronger links between primary and secondary phases and extending monitoring and evaluation strategies across the full age range.
- Provide parents with accessible and comprehensive information on arrangements for pupils with SEN.
- Provide schools and other stakeholders with an up-to-date and comprehensive manual of SEN procedures.
- Improve the monitoring and control of SEN budgets to bring them into line with planned expenditure.
- Monitor schools' expenditure on SEN.
- Align the LEA and Weston EAZ policies and strategies used to support attendance.
- During Year 4 of the Best Value review programme and jointly with schools, undertake a further review of school meals to inform the decision-making process at the end of the current contract.

APPENDIX 2: BEST VALUE REVIEW OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

1. The Best Value review (BVR) of SEN was included as a Year 1 review and carried out during 2000/2001. The review identified a budget commitment of £4m.
2. The scoping of the review was unsatisfactory. It resulted in a review that was fragmented and omitted key areas of support for SEN. A review of SEN had already been scheduled by the then education committee and this ran concurrently with the BVR. The LEA is also undertaking a review of special schools. The argument advanced for keeping the reviews separate was based on a flawed understanding of the Best Value process. The review considered five areas of SEN separately and missed the opportunity to undertake a more fundamental and cross-cutting review of SEN provision.
3. The improvement plan resulting from the review lacks detailed actions and does not provide a coherent strategy for SEN. It is unlikely to result in a substantial improvement in the quality of provision. It focuses on: the matrix funding arrangements; out-of-district placements for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties; possible outsourcing of the EPS; the management of statementing procedures and ways of providing the inclusion support service. The emphasis in each case is primarily on constraining costs, rather than improving the effectiveness of support to pupils with SEN. However, it is likely that the proposed changes to the funding arrangements for pupils with SEN will lead to a more efficient use of resources in the longer term by reducing the demand for statements as the prime way of securing funding.
4. The review team consulted a wide range of stakeholders through questionnaire surveys and other methods but did not talk to pupils with SEN. It is not always clear from the evidence presented how the results of the surveys informed the outcomes of the review.
5. The review undertook some comparisons of the services with those of other LEAs, using existing data and information from two specific LEAs. The review also considered trends in a limited range of performance indicators, including cost information, over time. These comparisons are potentially useful but it was not always clear from the evidence presented how the resulting conclusions were used to inform the review.
6. The review team considered a range of options for the provision of services. There was no professional external challenge. Members provided the main challenge and strongly influenced the outcomes of the review. It is not always obvious why a particular option was selected for further consideration. For example, members supported an option for a 'farm school' for pupils with emotional difficulties. Considerable effort was expended on investigating this option, at the expense of other considerations, before it was eventually rejected. The decision to outsource the EPS does not appear to be based on any hard evidence that this would lead to improvement.
7. Overall, the quality of the review is unsatisfactory and the evidence supporting it is poorly presented. The inspection found that support for SEN was **poor** and the capacity for improvement was **uncertain**.

BEST VALUE REVIEW OF SCHOOL MEALS

8. The scope of the review was poorly defined and this, inevitably, was problematic throughout. At the outset a decision had yet to be taken on the delegation of funding to primary and special schools and the review encompassed the full budget involved (£1.6m). By the end that decision had been taken and the scope had been reduced to 'the strategic management function of the school meals service', for which the annual budget was £7,000. For a decision as important as delegation to take place midway through the review speaks volumes about its status in terms of being a fundamental look at all the key policy issues involved. Similarly telling was the fact that the central contract, serving the great majority of schools, ended midway through the review and that a new tendering exercise was undertaken before it was completed. The exact relationship between the review and the processes leading to these two key decisions was never clear. What is clear is that the review should have informed, and preceded, both.
9. The problems with defining the scope of the review went further than this. It was assumed that where delegation had taken place, this 'ruled out' consideration of a range of policy options, on the grounds that they became the province of the schools concerned. The focus hence narrowed, in the LEA's eyes, to the statutory responsibility to ensure the provision of free school meals and the relationship of this to the continuation of a central contract. This represented a fundamental misunderstanding. The review should have looked at the full range of policy and delivery issues involved. These include, inter alia, the nature of the meals to be provided (nutritional value, meal types, choice etc.), the assumptions underlying the delegation of funding (e.g. whether to subsidise paid meals), and the promotion of healthy eating. The fact that the LEA and schools both had, or imminently might have, key decisions within their gift (and hence Best Value responsibilities associated with them), could have been recognised and the review process shaped accordingly.
10. Due to this fundamental problem, the four key processes within the review: consultation, comparison, challenge and competition, were all flawed to some degree, principally because their focus was too narrow. Comparison was the strongest feature, with consultation (particularly with parents) the weakest. The action plan emanating from the review was also narrow in scope and poorly defined in terms of how the outcomes intended would be delivered. Much of this action related to completing the delegation and contract tendering exercises, both of which had already progressed beyond the key decision stages, and pursuing the development of performance management processes. These did not in themselves represent ambitious targets for improving service delivery and/or reducing costs.
11. As far as the existing school meals service is concerned, the take-up of free school meals is comparable with other unitary authorities, although the take-up of paid meals is lower. There has been a modest increase in paid meal take-up since the new contract was let. The specification for the new contract put greater emphasis on meal quality, as opposed to price, than hitherto. A private sector contractor is the main supplier, as has been the case for many years. Many schools purchase the LEA's client support service to assist in the management of the contract. This is a **fair** service with **uncertain** prospects for improvement.

Recommendations

In order to improve support for school meals:

- during Year 4 of the Best Value review programme and jointly with schools, undertake a further review of school meals to inform the decision-making process at the end of the current contract.

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