

Inspection report
NORTHUMBERLAND
Local Education Authority

Date of inspection: June 2003

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Reference:

Contents

Section	Page
Basic information about the LEA	
Introduction	1
Commentary	2
Section 1: The LEA's strategy for school improvement	5
Context	5
Performance	5
Funding	6
Council structure	7
The LEA's strategy for school improvement	8
The allocation of resources to priorities	9
Strategies to promote continuous improvement, including Best Value	10
Section 2: Support for school improvement	12
Summary of the effectiveness of the LEA's support for school improvement	12
The effectiveness of services to support school improvement	12
Monitoring, challenge and intervention	14
The focusing of the LEA's support on areas of greatest need	14
The effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring and challenging schools	14
The effectiveness of the LEA's work with under-performing schools	15
Support for literacy	15
Support for numeracy	16
Support for information and communication technology	17
Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3	18
Support for minority ethnic groups, including Travellers	18
Support for gifted and talented pupils	20
Support for school management	20
Support for governors	21
The effectiveness of services to support school management	22
The LEA's work in assuring the supply and quality of teachers	24
Section 3: Special educational needs	25
Summary of the effectiveness of the LEA's special educational needs provision	25
The LEA's strategy for special educational needs	25
Statutory obligations	26
School improvement	27

Value for money	28
Section 4: Promoting social inclusion	29
Summary of effectiveness in promoting social inclusion	29
The strategy to promote social inclusion	29
The supply of school places	30
Asset management	31
Admissions	32
Provision of education for pupils who have no school place	32
Attendance	33
Behaviour support	34
Health, safety, welfare and child protection	35
Looked after children	36
Measures to combat racism	37
Section 5: Corporate issues	38
Introduction to corporate issues	38
Corporate planning	38
Decision making	39
The leadership provided by elected members and officers	40
Partnership	41
Appendix 1: Recommendations	42
Appendix 2: Record of Judgement Recording Statements for the inspection	46

Basic information about the LEA

Name of LEA:	Northumberland Local Education Authority
Address of LEA:	Northumberland County Council County Hall Morpeth, Northumberland NE61 2EF
Lead inspector:	Susan Hatton HMI
Date of inspection:	June 2003

Introduction

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

2. The inspection was based on a range of evidence, which included self-evaluation undertaken by the LEA, and data, some of which was provided by the LEA. The evidence also included school inspection information; HMI monitoring reports; audit reports; documentation from, and discussions with, the LEA's officers and councillors; groups of headteachers; and staff of other departments of the local authority. In addition, views were sought from diocesan representatives, and other agencies and bodies with which the LEA collaborates. The inspection team also considered the first Ofsted/Audit Commission report on this LEA (published in July 1999). A questionnaire, seeking views on aspects of the work of the LEA, was available to all schools, and the inspection team considered its results. The response rate to the questionnaire was 69 per cent.

3. For each inspected function of the LEA, an inspection team makes a judgment, which is converted into a numerical grade. The inspection team may make up to 52 key inspection judgements. An inspection judgement is made using criteria for each function. These criteria, together with the guidance that the inspection team follows, can be found on the Ofsted website. The numerical grades summarising the judgements made in this inspection are appended to this report, along with short explanations of what each grade represents. The grades relate to the sections of the report which deal with the individual functions. They must be viewed in the light of the written report.

4. Some of the grades are used in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) profile for the education service. It is intended that the CPA for education will be updated annually and the grades from this inspection will contribute to the next annual assessment.

5. The CPA for the education service takes account of the performance of several aspects of the local service, including pre-school and adult education. The CPA for education uses inspection judgements, as well as other performance indicators, such as improvement trends at Key Stage 3. The overall assessment, published in December 2002, gave star ratings for each local authority for a range of its services, for example social services, benefits, environment etc. This report is about the local authority's work to support school improvement.

Commentary

6. Northumberland is the sixth largest English county, but it has one of the lowest populations. The council recognises that the remoteness and isolation of some rural settlements in the north and west, together with the high levels of deprivation concentrated in a relatively small area in the south east of the county, present it with significant challenges in ensuring equality of access to education services. The council maintains a three-tier system of schools. Thirty five of its first schools have less than 50 pupils and the smallest school has just four pupils. In 2003/2004, Northumberland's Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) for primary and secondary education was broadly in line with the average for its statistical neighbours¹ and other counties, though it was more than eight per cent below the national average.

7. When inspected for the first time in 1999, the overall effectiveness of the LEA was satisfactory. Not all functions of the LEA were covered at that time. Since then, the rate of progress and improvement in the education directorate has been too slow and is unsatisfactory. Performance has deteriorated in some important areas, and a number of key strategic functions are unsatisfactory, as are several functions not inspected previously. The LEA has not only been slow in responding to some of the recommendations in the previous report, but also to identify and tackle the implications of new national policies and expectations. It still does not direct resources effectively at identified priorities and strategies to secure continuous improvement remain unsatisfactory. Strategic capability is limited and the overall effectiveness of the LEA is now unsatisfactory.

8. Standards in the county's schools are currently in line with national averages. However, the LEA has limited capacity to support schools in improving further because it has only recently established its own role in monitoring and challenging the performance of schools and because there are weaknesses in the leadership and strategic planning of services to support school improvement. Furthermore, the support provided by the LEA in order to raise the attainment of several groups of pupils at risk of underachievement is inadequate. It has insufficient data about the progress of such pupils to inform the planning, monitoring and evaluation of this support. The LEA did not meet its statutory obligations in respect of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in 2002/2003. In addition, it does not meet its statutory obligations for those pupils who have no school place.

9. The LEA has taken too long to define how it intends to work in partnership with schools as they become increasingly self-managing. Support for developing the quality and effectiveness of leadership and management in schools is unsatisfactory. Despite criticisms in the last report, the authority lacks a clear focus on schools as customers. As a result, schools receive insufficient advice from the LEA upon which to make well-informed purchasing decisions.

10. Furthermore, there are significant weaknesses in promoting social inclusion. The county council has stated its commitment to inclusion, but it is only now consulting on a draft strategy. The LEA has identified social inclusion as one of five priorities in the Education

¹ Northumberland's statistical neighbours are: Cumbria, York, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Warwickshire, East Riding of Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Shropshire, Durham and North Lincolnshire.

Development Plan (EDP), but, despite this, it has deferred developing a strategy until the corporate policy has been produced and a review of children's services has been undertaken. In the absence of coherence in this area, several key aspects of the LEA's work, some of which were criticised at the time of the last inspection, are unsatisfactory or poor. High levels of surplus places continue to be maintained and asset management is poor. In addition, the LEA lacks a clear strategy on how to combat racism.

11. Some improvements have been made. The last inspection was critical of the LEA's support for information and communication technology (ICT) for both curriculum and administrative purposes. Both are now highly satisfactory. National strategies that are supported by specific additional funding and clear requirements continue to be implemented effectively. Furthermore, there have been significant improvements in the quality of corporate planning and there is now a strong and explicit corporate drive to secure continuous improvement. However, these developments have not, as yet, had sufficient impact on the overall work of the education directorate.

There are particular strengths in:

- support to schools for raising standards of literacy;
- support to schools for raising standards of numeracy;
- support for raising standards at Key Stage 3;
- support for governors; and
- human resources services to support school management.

There are weaknesses in:

- the targeting of resources to priorities;
- the promotion of continuous improvement;
- the leadership and strategic planning of services to support school improvement;
- support for minority ethnic groups;
- support for school leadership and management;
- the effectiveness of services to support school management;
- financial services;
- property services;
- steps to meet statutory obligations in respect of children with special educational needs;
- the effectiveness of the LEA in promoting social inclusion;
- provision for pupils who have no school place;
- measures to combat racism; and
- the leadership of senior officers.

The effectiveness of the following functions is poor:

- support for gifted and talented pupils;
- school place planning; and
- asset management.

12. The LEA's capacity and capability to address the recommendations of this report, and to secure further improvement, are unsatisfactory. This is not an LEA which evaluates its own performance rigorously. Self-evaluation, carried out as part of this inspection, did not provide an accurate or robust analysis of this LEA's performance. It gave insufficient emphasis to existing weaknesses and did not demonstrate that the LEA understands clearly what it needs to do to improve. The Comprehensive Performance Assessment for education,

published in December 2002, gave the education service two stars for current performance which reflects the good performance of schools and early years settings. The assessment also gave the education service three stars (the highest category) for its capacity to make further improvement. The findings of the inspection team based on up-to-date evidence in the field do not support this assessment of the LEA's capacity to improve.

13. Despite the recently extended senior management team and the use of external consultants to tackle some key issues, senior officers in the education directorate are too ready to conclude that lack of strategic and management capacity and limited financial resources restrict the LEA's ability to respond to local and national policy imperatives. The LEA does not engage sufficiently with its schools or with other local authorities to find innovative or imaginative solutions to the challenges it faces.

14. Senior officers have not succeeded in maintaining the effective relationship with schools that was evident at the time of the last inspection. Together with the unsatisfactory nature of much of its consultation with schools, the authority's slow and reactive response on a number of important issues has left schools frustrated by, and lacking trust and confidence in, the LEA. The LEA argues that the number of small schools and the distances between them increases the resource needed to achieve a similar level of contact to that in other more compact authorities, but it has not demonstrated its determination to look for creative solutions. This relationship with schools is not irretrievable. It is now incumbent upon both the LEA and schools to work constructively and co-operatively to re-establish a productive partnership.

Section 1: The LEA's strategy for school improvement

Context

15. The context of the LEA has not changed significantly since the previous inspection in 1999. Northumberland is the sixth largest English county, covering almost two thousand square miles, but, with only 310,000 people, it has one of the lowest populations. The remoteness of much of the rural north and west contrasts starkly with the urban south east where over 50 per cent of the county's population live in less than five per cent of its area. This presents the council with the significant challenge of ensuring equality of access to high quality services. Fourteen of the county's 120 wards, 12 of which are clustered in the south east, are among the most deprived ten per cent in the country². These wards have high levels of deprivation, low educational attainment, and an unemployment rate that is over twice the national average. The county was badly affected by foot and mouth disease in 2001, which exacerbated the decline in agricultural employment in rural areas.

16. There are almost 49,000 pupils in Northumberland's schools and this number is falling. Entitlement to free school meals remains marginally lower than the national average. The proportion of pupils with statements of special educational need continues to be above the national average in primary schools and below in secondary schools.

17. In 2001/2002, pupils from minority ethnic communities made up less than two per cent of the school population. Of these 660 pupils, about 120 receive support for English as an additional language. In addition, there were approximately 200 children from Traveller families.

18. Northumberland maintains a three-tier system of schools, with one fewer high school than at the time of the previous inspection. Pupils transfer between schools at the ages of nine and thirteen. Currently there are 143 first schools, 45 middle (deemed secondary) schools and 15 high schools, nine of which have specialist status. Thirty five of the first schools have fewer than 50 pupils, with the lowest number on roll being four. There is one pupil referral unit and five high schools have learning support units. In addition, there are nine special schools and 11 units attached to mainstream schools across all phases: three for pupils with hearing impairment, two for pupils with language and communication difficulties, three for those with moderate learning difficulties and three for those with severe learning difficulties. In the south east of the county an Education Action Zone serves the schools in the Ashington area.

19. The county has one nursery school and 72 nursery units attached to first schools. Nursery provision for both three and four year-olds has increased since the last inspection. Early years education is now available for all four year-olds and 80 per cent of three year-olds.

Performance

20. The performance of pupils in Northumberland remains at least in line with national averages.

² Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2000

21. The attainment of pupils on entry to full-time education is slightly above the national average. In 2002, at the end of Key Stage 1, the proportion of pupils attaining Level 2 and above in writing and mathematics was above the national averages and those of similar authorities. In reading this was well above the national average. At the end of Key Stage 2, the proportion of pupils achieving Level 4 and above in English, mathematics and science was in line with national averages. However, in both English and mathematics attainment was below that of similar authorities. A smaller proportion of 11 year-olds achieve Level 5 and above in English and mathematics than is the case nationally.

22. At Key Stage 3, standards are in line with national averages and those of similar authorities in mathematics and science and above both in English. At the end of Key Stage 4, in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), the proportion of pupils attaining five or more A*- G grades is above the national average and that of similar authorities. For all other measures at GCSE attainment is in line with national averages and those of similar authorities.

23. Rates of improvement vary. At Key Stage 1, the rate of improvement in reading and mathematics is in line with that found nationally, but it is below this in writing. At Key Stage 2, the rate of improvement is in line for English, but below for mathematics and science. The rate of improvement in English at Key Stage 3 is well above the national trend and it is broadly in line with this for mathematics and science. At GCSE, the rate of improvement for five or more A*-C grades is above the national trend, and in line with this for the average point score and one or more A*-G grades.

24. The findings of the most recent school inspections show that the proportion of primary and secondary schools that are good or very good overall is above that found nationally or in similar authorities. Ten schools have achieved Beacon status.

25. Although rates of attendance declined slightly in 2001, they remain in line with the national average for primary-age pupils and above that for those of secondary age. Levels of unauthorised absence are low. The rate of permanent exclusions is below the national figure for both primary and secondary pupils.

26. Four schools have recently been found to have serious weaknesses. There are no schools in special measures.

Funding

27. Northumberland's Standard Spending Assessment for primary and secondary education in 2002/2003 was broadly in line with the average for its statistical neighbours and other counties, though it was more than eight per cent below the national average. Over the previous five years, spending has increased each year from just below SSA in 1998/1999 to three per cent above in 2002/2003.

28. At the time of the last inspection, the level of delegation to schools was the lowest of all counties. In 2002/2003, at 88 per cent, it was above average figures for both counties and England as a whole.

29. Northumberland's expenditure on centrally provided functions is shown in the following table:

	Northumberland £ per pupil	Statistical neighbours £ per pupil	County authorities £ per pupil	England £ per pupil
Strategic management	115	88	89	101
School improvement	20	24	26	31
Access	174	171	163	131
SEN	137	131	143	160
Total	447	413	421	423

Data source: CIPFA Section 52 data [2002/03].

30. Central spending on strategic management is significantly higher than the average for similar LEAs and nationally. This is largely the result of very high spending on early retirement, which is nearly twice the national average, and costs for information technology in terms of infrastructures and connections. Spending on statutory and regulatory duties (£57 per pupil) is also above average for statistical neighbours (£43), counties (£45) and nationally (£51). Expenditure on centrally provided services for school improvement (£20 per pupil) is below these averages, which stand at £24, £26 and £31 respectively.

31. In recent years the LEA has not accepted its full allocation from the Standards Fund. Over the period 1998/1999 to 2002/2003, £2.7 million from school budgets was used to provide matched funding for devolved grants and £3.9 million of the total central grant available was not taken up.

32. The LEA has had limited access to other external funding. Nevertheless, there is a significant education element within a Single Regeneration Budget partnership in Berwick, which is to be extended, and Neighbourhood Renewal funding exists for the Wansbeck district.

33. Levels of capital expenditure, in common with most authorities, have risen dramatically in the past few years. From a budget of £4.5 million in 1999/2000, the capital budget in 2002/2003 was £19.6 million. Over the past two years, the LEA has applied for Private Finance Initiative credits for major school renewal in Ashington and Berwick, but has been unsuccessful on both occasions.

Council structure

34. Since the last inspection, the county council has implemented a new constitution. The council has 67 elected members comprising 38 Labour, 19 Conservatives and ten Liberal Democrats. The executive comprises ten members from the leading political group, including the leader and deputy leader of the council. Each executive member holds a portfolio for a key area of work. Political responsibility for education, along with children's services in social services, lies with one executive member. There are three scrutiny committees chaired by members of the opposition groups. One of these is concerned solely with education and has representatives from the dioceses, teacher trade unions and parent governors. There is

also a policy board made up of members from all political parties, which has a working group on educational standards and a committee for schools causing concern.

35. The education directorate, one of seven directorates, was restructured after the last inspection in order to increase its strategic capacity. There are five divisions: school improvement; school organisation and finance; lifelong learning and social inclusion; special educational needs; and amenities. In September 2002, an additional second-tier post of education business manager was created in the directorate in order to support the council's agenda for change, and to further develop performance management. There is a clear scheme of delegation of powers to chief and senior officers.

The LEA's strategy for school improvement

36. The LEA's general strategy for school improvement is satisfactory, but it has deteriorated since the previous inspection when it was good.

37. The LEA's second Education Development Plan is the main component of the strategy. It articulates a vision of what the LEA will achieve by 2007, together with clear principles for implementation. However, the LEA has not secured the enthusiasm, engagement or commitment of all schools and recognises that some were not sufficiently involved in the consultation process. Even where schools agree that the priorities identified in the plan are relevant to them, they report that they have not had sufficient influence on the LEA's policies and plans.

38. The EDP successfully reflects national priorities and retains an appropriate local emphasis. The plan is based on a satisfactory analysis of strengths and weaknesses, which draws on an acceptable range of data to identify relevant priorities and activities. Nevertheless, analysis and evaluation are not always sufficiently rigorous. Issues raised in the audit are not followed through consistently or in sufficient detail in the programme of activities. For example, in the priority on social inclusion there are no specific activities to improve the attainment of looked after children or minority ethnic children. Unusually, the programme includes activities intended to establish a new partnership with schools and develop school autonomy, which most authorities manage to develop within their day-to-day working arrangements with schools. Strategies for monitoring and evaluation are not sufficiently focused on assessing the effect of activities on raising attainment, success criteria are too imprecise to enable progress to be determined and the intended target group of schools or pupils is not always clear enough.

39. Targets for 2004 vary in the level of challenge they present. At Key Stage 2, increases of over 15 per cent are needed to meet the targets for English and mathematics. Given that schools' aggregated targets fall short of the LEA's targets by over seven per cent and that attainment in English fell last year, these targets are unlikely to be reached. Targets for Key Stage 3 are achievable and have been raised as part of the council's local public service agreement. For GCSE, the target of 58 per cent of pupils to gain five or more A*-C grades is challenging, but achievable. However, an increase of less than one per cent is needed to meet the target of 94 per cent five or more A*- G grades. This is one per cent below schools' predictions.

40. The LEA has made satisfactory progress in implementing its strategy for school improvement. School inspections show improvements in the quality of education provided

for pupils, particularly in first schools. Since the last inspection, levels of attainment at all key stages have improved at least in line with, and sometimes faster than, the national rate. Despite this, targets for attainment in English and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2 and for the percentage of pupils attaining higher grades at GCSE were not met in 2002. Demanding targets for reducing permanent exclusions and unauthorised absence have not been met.

41. Implementation has been particularly successful where national initiatives have provided additional resources, clear strategies and rigorous timetables. The LEA has also made significant improvements in the support provided for information and communication technology and in its policy for SEN. In the first year of the second EDP, most actions are on track, except in the area of social inclusion where a strategy to support vulnerable pupils is still not in place. Furthermore, the LEA is only now developing the comprehensive and secure statistical data base it needs in order to identify and analyse the achievements and progress of vulnerable pupils and pupils with SEN.

42. Links with other relevant plans and partners are acknowledged in the EDP. The council recognises that more could be done to maximise the benefits of corporate and partnership working, but officers express their concern that the time this takes could reduce their capacity to work directly with schools. Officers are sensibly engaged in revising the EDP to include the contribution of other major initiatives, such as the area accommodation reviews and the proposed changes in the funding of provision for SEN.

The allocation of resources to priorities

43. The LEA's allocation of resources to priorities is unsatisfactory, indicating a lack of satisfactory progress. At the time of the previous inspection resource allocation was satisfactory, but there were a number of recommendations for improvement. These included developing a budget strategy that reflected corporate priorities; the provision of advice to schools about external grants; improving the processes for budget making and control; and work to support schools with budget deficits. Sufficient progress has been made on some of these recommendations.

44. Corporate and education priorities are now clearly defined. Within the financial constraints facing the council, spending on education in recent years shows the importance attached to education. Budget and policy-making processes are well aligned and key education priorities, for example the revision of SEN resourcing, have recently received additional funding. However, there is a legacy of higher than average redundancy and early retirement costs arising from reductions in budgets throughout the 1990s. Furthermore, the generous redundancy and early retirement policy which resulted in this expenditure is still in place across the council. In addition, the authority continues to maintain high levels of surplus places. As a result, the targeting of resources to more pressing educational imperatives is not yet fully effective.

45. Budget making and control have improved and are now satisfactory, particularly in areas of concern at the time of the previous inspection, such as home-to-school transport and SEN. These budgets have been the subject of close scrutiny and they are now well controlled. The LEA appropriately undertook a fundamental review of the funding formula for schools, but made a reasonable decision, with the support of schools, to defer full implementation of the subsequent recommendations. A significant minority of schools still

rates the educational rationale behind the formula as poor or very poor and there is a danger that the momentum from the exercise will be lost.

46. The LEA has made little progress on the recommendation from the last inspection to provide advice to schools on how they might maximise resources through external grants and funding. A substantial proportion of high schools have budget deficits, as at the time of the last inspection, and they have not been provided with sufficient advice and guidance. On the other hand, overall budget surpluses increased by 65 per cent between 2000/2001 and 2001/2002 with most of this growth taking place in first, middle and special schools. From April 2003, the LEA has, rightly, put in place new measures to challenge excessive balances.

47. Budget consultation with schools is unsatisfactory and has contributed to a lack of trust and confidence in the authority. Although a schools forum is in place as required, consultation about the budget this year began too late and did not succeed in engaging schools. In previous years, Northumberland consistently passed on to schools, and the education service, increases in government grants. This was not so for the 2003-2004 financial year. Budget pressures resulted in the council deciding that it could not pass on approximately £0.9 million intended for education. This was offset by £0.5 million initially identified for a bid under the Private Finance Initiative, which proved unsuccessful, and further reasonable proposals have been put forward by the council to ease budget pressures in the short term.

Recommendations

In order to target resources more effectively to priorities:

- Review the impact of and reconsider the policy on redundancy and early retirement;
- Improve consultation arrangements with headteachers and governors;
- Provide advice and support to schools on applications for external funding; and
- Provide appropriate advice and guidance to schools with deficit budgets.

Strategies to promote continuous improvement, including Best Value

48. The LEA's approach to ensuring continuous improvement remains unsatisfactory. Despite a strong corporate drive to improve the rigour of review and evaluation, procedures within the education directorate have not led quickly enough to an accurate recognition of strengths and weaknesses on which to base an effective strategy for improvement.

49. The most recent Best Value Performance Plan received a positive response from the external auditor. The Best Value review programme has been refined and improved since the earlier reviews, which were lacking in challenge and too focused on the review process. In particular, the first reviews in education, covering standards and effectiveness and SEN, were not major drivers for improvement and did not accelerate the pace of change. The review programme now concentrates appropriately on a cross-council agenda and the education service is currently a major contributor to a review of children's services, although this has been delayed. Helpful corporate advice and concise written guidance exist on conducting reviews along with appropriate support from a small team of officers.

50. The council has a good record of subjecting itself to external challenge. In autumn 2001 a peer review under the Local Government Improvement Programme made helpful recommendations and, in August 2002, the council achieved 'Investors in People' status. Internally, there is a strong corporate commitment to organisational development and the use

of the European Foundation for Quality Management to analyse performance. In 2001, officers from the corporate centre worked together with senior managers in education to provide rigorous challenge in the application of this model. Eighteen months later, monitoring identified insufficient progress on two thirds of the 62 issues originally identified for improvement. The education directorate service plan refers to these areas, which include partnership working, the lack of formal monitoring and review processes and limited development of a performance management framework. Nevertheless, the plan does not provide a coherent strategy to tackle these issues, either within divisions or across the directorate as a whole.

51. Sound arrangements for performance management are in place across the council, although they have yet to become fully established as routine ways of working. As a result, the LEA does not evaluate its own performance accurately and rigorously. Furthermore, there is only very limited evidence that performance management is leading to significant improvement. As part of the corporate performance management scheme, all senior officers are assessed annually against management competences and the achievement of objectives. This scheme is linked to salary progression. In 2000, the assessment process for 'Investors in People' identified some delays in the appraisal process. The LEA has now improved the monitoring and management of the annual performance review.

Recommendation

In order to secure continuous improvement:

- Urgently devise, implement and monitor rigorously a comprehensive improvement strategy for education, based on the recommendations of this report and incorporating the outcomes of existing internal monitoring and evaluation.

Section 2: Support for school improvement

Summary of the effectiveness of the LEA's support for school improvement

52. The quality of the LEA's support for school improvement is satisfactory overall, but progress in a number of areas has not been good enough. In several respects the LEA's work has not kept pace with changing national requirements and expectations. Some improvements have been made, but many of these are recent and have not yet brought about intended changes. The LEA's support for school leadership and its strategy for ensuring that schools have access to a range of services to support school management remain unsatisfactory. Although the LEA has rectified weaknesses from the previous inspection with regard to information and communication technology, it has yet to develop effective strategies to support gifted and talented pupils and pupils from minority ethnic groups. The LEA has successfully implemented the Key Stage 3 national strategy and improved its support for literacy and numeracy in primary schools. Its work in these areas is good. Other services, such as those for looked after children, are increasingly focused on raising attainment and improving schools.

53. The LEA has been slow in implementing the Code of Practice on LEA-school relations, nor has it made clear enough how it intends to work in partnership with schools as they become increasingly self-managing. The LEA does not have sufficient capacity to make the improvements required. The effectiveness of services to support school improvement, although satisfactory overall, has deteriorated and there are weaknesses in the leadership and strategic planning of services. Furthermore, the credibility of link advisers is not secure with all schools.

54. In most aspects of support for school improvement, the LEA's self-evaluation was not sufficiently rigorous to provide officers with an accurate evaluation of current performance. It gave insufficient emphasis to the weaknesses which exist and did not provide the LEA with a secure understanding of what needed to be improved.

The effectiveness of services to support school improvement

55. The effectiveness of services to support school improvement is satisfactory. At the time of the previous inspection it was highly satisfactory. Services are of variable quality, but overall they have a generally positive effect in supporting schools to raise standards of achievement. The LEA has made inconsistent and slow progress in tackling the weaknesses identified in the previous report. It has effectively clarified the relationship between service level agreements and the activities available to schools as part of the EDP. The capacity of some support services to meet the demands placed upon them, which was in doubt in 1999, has been increased, but these improvements are very recent and it is too soon to evaluate their impact. The school improvement division has recently redefined the roles and responsibilities of advisers so that these are in line with the requirements of the Code of Practice. It has recruited advisers with experience of primary management, but it still does not have, and has not secured sufficient access for schools to, significant expertise in the leadership and management of middle and high schools.

56. The leadership of services to support school improvement is unsatisfactory. There are weaknesses in service planning, monitoring and evaluation and communication with schools. Leadership of services was highly satisfactory at the time of the last inspection. Priorities have been identified, although not always shared with schools, and staff are deployed satisfactorily in line with these. Services share a common commitment to improving standards. Nevertheless, insufficient attention has been given to developing with schools the vision and strategic direction for the divisions supporting school improvement and lifelong learning and social inclusion.

Recommendation

In order to improve the leadership of services to support school improvement:

- Establish with schools a shared understanding of, and commitment to, the strategic direction for the divisions supporting school improvement and lifelong learning and social inclusion.

57. Strategic planning of services to support school improvement is unsatisfactory. This has deteriorated from highly satisfactory. The previous inspection reported that the advisory service did not have a business or service development plan, and that procedures for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the service were not sufficiently rigorous in identifying weaknesses and promoting improvement. Service planning and the use of a common format for plans are recent developments. The quality of individual service plans is satisfactory, but together they do not provide the LEA with a secure strategic framework against which to evaluate progress in terms of its effect on standards and quality in schools, or on the value for money provided. Plans emphasise actions to complete rather than the outcomes of those actions. This has contributed to the lack of rigour apparent in the LEA's self-evaluation before this inspection. Some plans, for example for literacy, numeracy, Key Stage 3 and SEN, are useful documents with sufficient detail and focus and clear timescales. However, other plans do not make clear enough the distinction between proposed action and intended outcomes, and lack precise timescales. A common and key weakness is the absence of identified resources to support the implementation of these plans. This makes it difficult for the LEA to substantiate its claims of insufficient resources, or to argue with members its case for increased funding.

58. Performance management remains satisfactory. The appraisal of the performance of members of staff is regular, systematic and supportive. Most staff have adequate experience and expertise. The professional needs of individuals are identified through the appraisal process and there is good access to training and development. For example, advisers were well briefed, before their first monitoring visits, about the performance of schools and the use and interpretation of data. However, the school improvement division does not take sufficient account of the lack of credibility of its link advisers in supporting and challenging leadership and management in schools across all phases, and particularly middle and high schools.

59. In view of the small scale of the central service, the comparatively low expenditure and the generally satisfactory impact that services have, they provide satisfactory value for money. This is a significant deterioration since the previous inspection when they provided good value for money.

*Recommendations***In order to improve the strategic planning of services to support school improvement:**

- Evaluate the quality and precision of success criteria and their effectiveness as measures for monitoring the outcomes and effectiveness of service plans; and
- ensure that service plans identify the necessary resources and timescales for implementation.

Monitoring, challenge, and intervention

60. The LEA's work in monitoring, challenging and intervening in schools was satisfactory at the time of the last inspection and overall it remains so. However, the LEA has been slow to communicate, with sufficient clarity, how these functions are defined in the light of the Code of Practice, and the effects of recent developments are only now beginning to be seen.

61. The recent reorganisation of the advisory service has resulted in a clear separation of the functions of monitoring, challenge, and intervention from support and advice. School improvement advisers have taken on this new role with enthusiasm and determination. Schools are very clear about the monitoring role of advisers and how this relates to levels of intervention. However, the current definition of challenge is too restricted to the analysis and evaluation of standards and does not place sufficient emphasis on leadership and management. Headteachers acknowledge the usefulness of the monitoring visit and regard it as time well spent. A real strength is the way governors are increasingly involved in this process.

The focusing of the LEA's support on areas of greatest need

62. Support for schools with the greatest need was good at the time of the last inspection. However, the LEA has been slow to adapt its procedures to meet changing national expectations and its performance in this area is now satisfactory.

63. The school improvement division has recently developed, and shared with schools, clear criteria for evaluating the level and nature of support to its schools. These criteria are usefully linked to the satisfactory model for schools' self-evaluation promoted by the authority. Aspects of schools' performance are assessed and, as a result, schools are placed in one of five categories. Action is then taken in proportion to need. This works satisfactorily for schools generally, but not enough has been done to make the criteria relevant for special schools or to provide data which recognise the progress of pupils with SEN.

64. The use of the criteria during advisers' first monitoring visits to schools has brought about greater consistency and an increased clarity in schools' understanding of how support will be allocated. The LEA has provided a succinct guide for monitoring visits, but its usefulness is limited as it lacks an explanation of how further support can be obtained or purchased, and schools remain unclear about this.

The effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring and challenging schools

65. Monitoring and challenge were unsatisfactory at the time of the previous inspection and target setting was not secure. Systems for monitoring and challenging schools, including

the use of performance data, are now satisfactory but progress has been slow. As a result of changes introduced in September 2002, monitoring is suitably differentiated and encourages schools to evaluate their own practice. Most, but not all, weaknesses are identified at an early stage. Data are used increasingly well and target setting is effective.

66. Headteachers and governors receive useful reports following the visit of an adviser. These indicate where there is a need for further action, but do not consistently outline alternative courses of action to inform future developments. The LEA intends to review the consistency of these reports.

67. The LEA has sought schools' views on the first round of monitoring visits, but did not seek specifically to determine their effect in challenging schools to improve. Schools' views vary on the level of challenge offered. Link advisers do not yet have consistent credibility in this respect, particularly among headteachers of middle and high schools. Nevertheless, there are advisers who are well respected for their expertise and the quality of the challenge they offer schools.

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

68. This aspect of the LEA's work was highly satisfactory at the time of the last inspection and it remains so. Northumberland has no schools that require special measures and a lower proportion of schools with serious weaknesses than is the case nationally or in similar authorities. After identification, schools in these categories receive relevant and well-planned support. Their progress is regularly monitored by the divisional management team and regularly reported to members.

69. Four schools were identified recently as having serious weaknesses. One was already on the LEA's register of schools causing concern and another was identified immediately before its inspection. In the two remaining schools, weaknesses in teaching and in leadership and management were not identified by the LEA because standards had not been identified as a major issue. The LEA recognises that it does not use monitoring criteria sufficiently critically to challenge schools' leaders and managers about their effect on improving schools and raising standards.

Recommendations

In order to improve the effectiveness of procedures for monitoring, challenge, support and intervention:

- communicate the LEA's roles of monitoring and challenge more precisely to schools;
- improve guidance to schools about monitoring visits by including information about how further support can be obtained;
- improve the data available for special schools;
- include criteria on the effectiveness of the leadership and management of schools in the monitoring system; and
- evaluate the effectiveness of advisers' monitoring visits on school improvement.

Support for literacy

70. The LEA's support for raising standards in literacy is good. There have been improvements in practice since the last inspection when support was highly satisfactory.

Given the current level of resources and approach, the capacity for further improvement is also good.

71. Results at Key Stage 1 have consistently been well above the national average. However, in 2002, Key Stage 2 results were much lower than predicted. At 73 per cent these were well below the target of 83 per cent. Until 2002, the rise in results at Key Stage 2 had been greater than the national average. The LEA's target of 88 per cent for 2004 will be difficult to achieve.

72. Support for literacy is well managed. Actions in the EDP are appropriate and well implemented, support is well targeted, and consultants are efficiently deployed through good use of available data and other evidence. The LEA is also working with 12 school partnerships. This is an extremely useful and creative deployment of consultants, intended to help schools improve the transition of pupils from first to middle schools.

73. There is a good range of support for those schools that do not receive any direct help from consultants. Lead literacy teachers are very well trained and deployed. Literacy co-ordinators from schools were particularly enthusiastic about support from the LEA and credited their training with bringing about changes in practice, for example in teaching poetry. However, not all schools were entirely clear about their entitlement to support or how to gain access to the lead teachers.

74. The literacy team collaborates well with other services such as the SEN team and works closely with advisers and the 'Thinking for Learning' project team. There are positive and effective links with the adult education service in the provision of family literacy programmes.

Support for numeracy

75. The LEA's support for numeracy is good and has improved since the last inspection when it was highly satisfactory. Given the appointment of a dedicated line manager and proposed increases in staffing for next year, the capacity of the service to improve further is good.

76. Standards in mathematics at the end of Key Stage 1 have been consistently above the national average. The rate of improvement over four years has been broadly in line with the national trend, but below that of similar authorities. In 2002, Key Stage 2 results were in line with the national average for the proportion of pupils achieving Level 4 and above, but, at 71 per cent, below similar authorities and well below the LEA's target of 80 per cent. The numeracy team has taken sensible actions, including collaboration with other authorities, which maintain middle schools, to investigate reasons for this dip in performance. The LEA's target for 2004, of 87 per cent, is unlikely to be met.

77. The strategy is well managed and resourced, with three primary consultants and a fourth to be appointed from September. Support is well targeted on schools with the greatest need, including two thirds of middle schools. As with support for literacy, some work is undertaken through school partnerships. For example, consultants have worked with partnerships on the use of interactive teaching programmes. The team has prepared materials and provided training to support the transition of pupils from first to middle schools. Intensive support is well planned and success criteria are clearly identified.

78. There is a good range of support for those schools not receiving any direct input from consultants. Centrally organised training is relevant, practical and much appreciated by teachers. Programmes have been tailored specifically to the needs of teachers in special schools and to SEN co-ordinators. Leading mathematics teachers have been recruited from a wide cross-section of schools. They have received excellent training and are a valuable resource.

79. The team has worked well with other services of the LEA and there has also been some productive joint work with the Education Action Zone. A consultant has recently established links with the Northumberland Travellers education service.

Support for information and communication technology

80. At the time of the previous inspection the LEA's support for raising standards in information and communication technology and for promoting its use across the curriculum was unsatisfactory. Significant progress has been made and support is now highly satisfactory. There are particular strengths in the quality of support provided by the advisory team, the knowledge and enthusiasm of the consultants, the balance between strategic and short-term planning and the imaginative materials developed for schools through a creative and innovative website. The current ICT team is under strength because the LEA has not yet been able to appoint a full complement of consultants for Key Stage 3. Initially this was because matched funding was insufficient but, most recently, there have been insufficient candidates with appropriate expertise. Nevertheless, the LEA is well placed to continue the good support that it already provides.

81. The ICT strategy identifies and ensures coherence between national and school-based support and training. The development plan clearly sets out issues, actions required, timescales, processes and responsibilities. However, it does not include details of resources, quantifiable targets or success criteria, nor does it give precise details about how monitoring, evaluation, and review are to be conducted. The development plan is reviewed annually and successive evaluations show clearly the progress that has been made.

82. These recent improvements have not been in place long enough to have a clear impact on pupils' attainment. The percentage of Key Stage 4 pupils attaining a nationally accredited award for ICT is below the national average. Training on the assessment of pupils' work is provided and the ICT team and the data unit have sensibly begun to implement procedures for tracking pupils' progress. This is increasing the accuracy of school target setting.

83. National Grid for Learning funding has been allocated very effectively. The LEA has experienced considerable difficulties achieving national targets for broadband connection because schools judged the approach adopted by the regional consortium to be too expensive. Subsequently, the LEA has investigated an acceptable alternative strategy.

84. An extensive New Opportunities Fund training programme for teachers is on target for completion by December 2003. A particular strength is the practical nature of the training, which links with the national strategies and the teaching and learning priority in the EDP.

85. A key strength is the comprehensive and widely-used ICT website, which demonstrates good practice and encourages the application and use of ICT across the curriculum. This is used effectively by the ICT team for communications with schools,

enabling a swift response to ICT development plans and audits so that support can be deployed according to need.

Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3

86. The LEA's support for raising standards in Key Stage 3 is good. Initially developed from the introduction of the national strategy, it has also been woven successfully into the authority's own 'Thinking for Learning' priority in the EDP to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the foundation subjects. The LEA's approach is effective in building well on successful work in literacy and numeracy in Key Stages 1 and 2. The capacity for further improvement is good.

87. The strategy presents a positive challenge for the LEA as the percentage of pupils attaining Level 5 and above by the age of 14 is already in line with national averages for mathematics and science, and above average for English. Setting a target for improvement by the end of Year 9 therefore gives high schools an opportunity to demonstrate additional progress by the end of Year 11. The team's approach has been purposeful. Middle and high school co-ordinators are very positive about the support offered. The consultants have relevant skills and credibility and have provided innovative ways of teaching and using the materials. The quality of training is good.

88. The authority is making positive use of existing school partnerships, for example to organise training and to encourage collaboration. It is looking closely at the transition of pupils between schools and is developing a strategy for teaching thinking skills from Year 7 to Year 9 through bridging projects and the sharing of good practice. The LEA recognises that there is still some way to go to improve assessment data at the point of transfer. Consequently, it is developing data for Year 8 in order to assess value-added improvement by the end of the middle school phase. Data are used appropriately with schools to determine the level of support needed. There are plans to devolve future funding directly to school partnerships so they have the autonomy to decide how the funding should be allocated across school clusters.

89. Support for Key Stage 3 is well led by the senior adviser and well managed by the advisers with specific responsibilities. As they have oversight of all the national strategies, work in Key Stage 3 has progressed logically through from Key Stages 1 and 2. The county has now appointed its full quota of consultants for English and mathematics. The behaviour and attendance strand of the strategy is due to start in September 2003 but, as yet, consultants have not been appointed.

Support for minority ethnic groups, including Travellers

90. The LEA's support to schools in raising standards of minority ethnic groups and Traveller pupils was not reported at the time of the last inspection. Provision for minority ethnic groups is currently unsatisfactory. This confirms the LEA's self-evaluation before this inspection. Furthermore, given the current level of resources, there is insufficient capacity to improve. Support for those for whom English is an additional language has not been a high enough priority. Support for Travellers is well organised and likely to improve, particularly given the expected increase in staffing.

91. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is, at 1.4 per cent, well below the national average of 12.9 per cent. The pupils are dispersed across much of the county,

although there are higher proportions in areas such as Ponteland, Ashington and Lynemouth. Travellers account for the largest minority group. In the past two years, the LEA has begun to collect data on the performance of minority ethnic groups more systematically. It does not yet have sufficient data to justify its claims that the attainment of pupils from minority ethnic groups is not a concern.

92. The ethnic minority achievement grant, small as it is at £6000, is delegated to schools according to a formula, which is equitable and understood by schools. The LEA supplements the grant with a further £42,000. Most eligible schools receive funding for at least two hours of support from a classroom assistant per week. Schools send six-monthly reports on the progress of pupils with English as an additional language to the LEA. These reports, although brief and not supported by evidence, help the LEA's monitoring, but are not used to target support more effectively.

93. The LEA offers minimal provision and does not have a policy or plan to support its work with minority ethnic pupils, although some useful guidance for schools has been produced and informative conferences have been held for classroom assistants. Although a school improvement adviser co-ordinates the general support for pupils for whom English is an additional language, schools have little access to specialist advice and expertise.

94. Support for Travellers is satisfactory. There is a clear policy of support and given the small number of pupils in individual schools, the grant has sensibly been retained in the LEA. The small Northumberland Travellers education service is over-stretched and cannot offer much support to secondary-aged Travellers, although two Travellers gained GCSEs after they had attended revision classes. The team monitors attainment, provides training for school staff and supports primary-aged children in the classroom and through outreach work on unauthorised sites. There is no systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of the service in schools.

95. Good links are being forged between the Travellers education service and the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership. An early years worker takes a 'Toy Sack' project to families on sites. The service has also been involved with the North East Research project on work to support secondary-aged Traveller children.

96. Many schools consider that the LEA's support for minority ethnic pupils, including Travellers, is unsatisfactory, although they are more positive about support for pupils learning English as an additional language. Their main concern is the inadequacy of their budget allocation and lack of a central resource. At the same time, schools do not regard provision as a high priority for themselves or the LEA.

Recommendations

In order to improve the attainment of minority ethnic groups, including Travellers:

- establish and implement a policy and strategic plan for the support of pupils from minority ethnic groups;
- set up systems for monitoring the progress of individual pupils from minority ethnic groups as they move between key stages; and
- systematically monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of support for Travellers.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

97. The LEA's support for gifted and talented pupils was not reported on at the time of the last inspection. Although there are pockets of good practice, the approach is poor and unlikely to improve, particularly as there is no additional funding. The LEA has limited resources and has decided not to make this a priority. It has concluded wrongly that it can respond to national policy through its 'Thinking for Learning' project, which is intended to improve teaching and learning for all pupils. Furthermore, it has failed to communicate this intention clearly enough to schools who are critical of the LEA's vision, direction, and support in this area.

98. The LEA recognised in its audit for the current EDP, that 'the progress of the most able is overall not as good as it could be'. However, the LEA has no systematic procedures for gathering evidence about the progress of gifted and talented pupils. It does not monitor what schools are doing or how many have identified co-ordinators. The LEA intends to gather this information in the future during the advisers' monitoring visits.

99. There is no strategy for supporting schools. The LEA has not made a clear distinction between pupils who are gifted and those who are talented. In the main, schools seek out good practice and ideas themselves, as there are no networks of support for co-ordinators. The LEA's own guidance is out of date, although schools are referred to national guidance.

100. The LEA has undertaken a number of separate activities intended to be of benefit to gifted and talented pupils. Summer schools have been organised in middle and high schools. These have been well attended and regarded by schools as successful. More are planned for this year. The LEA has not yet carried out a formal evaluation of summer schools, although provision and attendance were monitored at the time. The Education Action Zone has identified 'gifted and talented' as a priority and devised a number of appropriate activities to support schools. Schools are putting on special events and clubs for talented pupils, sometimes with advice from the LEA, for example in the area of sports and music.

Recommendations

In order to improve support for gifted and talented pupils:

- establish and implement a policy and guidance that set out the LEA's vision and help schools to identify gifted and talented pupils;
- introduce ways of identifying and sharing good practice among schools; and
- monitor systematically the effectiveness of summer schools.

Support for school management

101. Support for school leadership and management, including support for schools' efforts to achieve Best Value, is unsatisfactory. This was unsatisfactory at the time of the previous inspection and remains so despite some recent positive developments. Progress has been poor. The LEA's programme of monitoring has not consistently identified schools that require support for leadership and management, and weaknesses are most often identified as a result of inspections of schools. Although a number of different activities, provided centrally and from outside the LEA, promote the development of leaders and managers in schools,

these are not consistently well matched to identified needs and do not constitute a systematic programme of support.

102. Some developments are satisfactory. Governors are increasingly directly involved in monitoring visits carried out by school improvement advisers and routinely receive copies of notes of visits. The work of advisers places increasing emphasis on the need for schools' self-evaluation and the LEA has suggested a model to schools firmly based on the LEA's criteria for monitoring schools.

103. The identification of the needs of senior managers is not yet secure or systematic. A newly appointed adviser is currently auditing provision for, and take-up of, leadership and management training. The number of headteachers and deputy headteachers who take up management training is low in first schools and very low in middle and high schools. This is also the case for primary co-ordinators and secondary heads of departments. Middle management training opportunities are now offered through the national strategies, but have yet to be woven into a strategic approach to support leadership and management.

104. A satisfactory induction programme for new headteachers has been developed since the previous inspection. This includes an early meeting with the school's designated adviser to identify immediate training and support needs. The LEA provides a service level agreement for mentoring and consultancy for schools. It also maintains a list of experienced headteachers who are available as mentors. Not all newly appointed headteachers are fully aware of how to access these opportunities.

105. The LEA is right not to seek to provide all the development training from its limited resources. Satisfactory use is made of Beacon schools. Advice on procuring services from other providers is limited, and quality assurance arrangements for brokering and procuring services have yet to be developed. Advice to schools on achieving Best Value is unsatisfactory.

Recommendations

In order to improve the support for school leadership and management::

- develop a coherent strategy of support for school leadership and management;
- make more rigorous the criteria for monitoring and evaluating leadership and management in schools; and
- provide advice on the procurement and purchase of school improvement services.

Support for governors

106. Support to school governors was good at the time of the previous inspection. No detailed fieldwork was conducted, but the evidence from the inspection indicates that the increasing involvement of governors in monitoring and evaluating the work of their schools is a developing strength. Support for governors remains good, in line with the LEA's own evaluation.

The effectiveness of services to support school management

107. The performance of a number of individual services is satisfactory or better. Notwithstanding this, the strategy for ensuring schools have access to a range of services to support school managers is unsatisfactory. The previous report highlighted weaknesses in treating schools as customers. Since then, the LEA's response to the Code of Practice on LEA-school relations has been unsatisfactory.

108. Service level agreements have been thoroughly revised for implementation in 2003/2004. The portfolio of services sets out clear information for schools in a consistent format, describing services provided by both the education directorate and other directorates. Schools are generally able to choose the level of service to suit their needs. The distinction between statutory and traded services is usually clear.

109. Despite these very recent improvements, a clear focus on schools as customers is still not firmly established. Schools report a strong presumption by many services that schools will buy back provision and an undue emphasis by some officers on the problems and risks if they do not. The concept of the LEA as a broker, as well as a provider of services, is underdeveloped. A schools' procurement service has been set up, but it has had contact with only a very small number of schools. Schools have insufficient opportunity to test the performance of the LEA's services against competitors, and hence make well-informed purchasing decisions.

110. **Financial services** for schools continue to be unsatisfactory, with insufficient progress. Central financial systems are poor. They continue to be based on an outmoded mainframe computer. Schools are required to make paper-based returns and reconciliation is dependent on monthly print outs, which are often out of date when received by schools. The council intends to install a new system, to be fully in place by 2005 that will allow schools online access to the financial information system. However, there has been insufficient consultation with headteachers to ensure that schools gain maximum benefit from the new system.

Recommendation**In order to improve the quality of financial services to schools:**

- consult schools about their specific requirements before replacing the council's mainframe computer system.

111. Other aspects of financial services are satisfactory. Schools value highly the advice received from school support officers, provided in conjunction with governor and personnel support, but schools' balances and surpluses are still not being tackled successfully. Comprehensive guidance is available on budget setting. Payroll systems are efficient.

112. School support officers and specialist officers from the county's central personnel team work effectively to provide a good service to schools in respect of **human resources**. This service has shown good improvement since the last inspection, when it was satisfactory. The service is highly regarded by schools, particularly middle and high schools. The LEA provides a comprehensive manual of advice and procedures, which is updated regularly. Sound, practical advice on policy issues is presented to governors, and schools generally have confidence in the LEA's handling of difficult casework. The LEA maintains positive relations with the trade unions and professional associations.

113. **Property services** for schools remain unsatisfactory, with too little progress since the previous inspection. The service level agreement is not working effectively. It is based on each participating school pooling funding for delegated repairs and maintenance, with the intention that at least 70 per cent will be spent on individual schools. The prioritisation of spending lacks clear criteria, monitoring the quality of work is variable, and schools are unconvinced that they receive value for money. Maintenance work is carried out through a system of 'framework contracts', let across the county as a whole. While arrangements are generally cost-effective, schools' access to a prompt and reliable service has deteriorated. Although the LEA's response to emergencies is good, nearly half of first schools and two-thirds of middle and high schools rate the general quality of building maintenance services as poor or very poor.

114. A similarly poor rating is given by schools to the LEA's management of building projects. In fact, the majority of projects valued at over £100,000 are completed within five per cent of the agreed time and budget, which suggests that schools are being over critical in this respect. The LEA's most recent project, a new community college, has been completed successfully and incorporates innovative thinking in design and methods of procurement.

115. Despite an overall unsatisfactory performance, there are good prospects for improvement in property services. Managers have accepted many of these shortcomings and the council has recently entered into a strategic partnership with the private sector to strengthen its capacity and to promote an improved customer focus.

Recommendation

In order to improve the quality of property services to schools:

- radically improve the service level agreement with schools as well as the methodology for the prioritisation of maintenance projects.

116. Support for **ICT in administration** is highly satisfactory, a dramatic improvement since the previous inspection, when it was poor. The service at that time was characterised by out-of-date hardware and software, a lack of any clear strategy for improvement and consequent confusion in schools. Significant progress has been made on all fronts. There is an integrated ICT strategy for the council, which clearly identifies timescales, responsibilities and resource requirements. Schools have modern equipment, provided through a leasing arrangement, and access to new software applications to support administration. However, these cannot be fully effective until the council's mainframe computer is replaced. Secure links have been established for data transfer and e-mail communication and schools have access to a secure intranet site. These are promising developments, but have yet to be established as routine. A flexible support service for information technology is available through a service level agreement. Schools find the helpdesk and support prompt and reliable.

117. Services for **cleaning, caretaking and grounds maintenance** are satisfactory. The levels of service are negotiated with individual schools and the majority rates these as satisfactory or better. Quality assurance methods have improved and there has been significant investment in the training of caretakers. Plans are well advanced to provide an integrated caretaking and grounds maintenance service for each school that is efficient and cost-effective.

118. The **catering** service is satisfactory and is rated as such by the majority of schools. Considerable progress has been made with the introduction of cashless systems for school meals in middle and high schools. The system is now being piloted in some first schools. Effective procedures are in place to monitor the nutritional content of school menus. There is a longstanding and successful commitment to a healthy eating programme in schools.

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

119. This area was not previously inspected. The LEA's support for assuring the supply and quality of teachers is satisfactory. Northumberland does not currently experience significant problems in recruiting and retaining teachers. The level of vacancies is lower than the national average and most are filled without having to re-advertise. Nevertheless, both the LEA's own analysis and reports from headteachers indicate that it is becoming increasingly difficult to fill vacancies, particularly in shortage subjects in high schools and Key Stage 3 posts in middle schools. Furthermore, and particularly relevant given the large number of primary headteachers with full-time teaching commitments, there are increasing difficulties in securing supply cover for teachers.

120. The recruitment and retention of teachers are included as activities within the EDP. The main tasks identified relate to the collection and monitoring of data. A database is now in place and an initial analysis has identified that almost one third of teachers and a half of all headteachers in the authority are over fifty and that, for some posts, the number of applicants is declining. However, the LEA is not using the database effectively to predict long-term trends and to develop suitable strategies to meet projected shortages. This is a significant weakness and the capacity for improvement is unsatisfactory.

121. The LEA's strategy for continuing professional development is satisfactory. There is an increasing emphasis on school-based and school-focused professional development. This is provided through the national strategies, through service level agreements such as those for ICT and the Foundation Stage, and through free-standing courses, sometimes leading to accreditation. Support for schools in sharing good practice is not well developed.

122. The LEA's support for newly qualified teachers is satisfactory. There is a central programme of induction for these teachers and their mentors. The quality of provision made in schools is monitored through sample visits. The LEA employs a smaller proportion of newly qualified teachers than is the case nationally and fewer of these continue to work for the LEA for a second year, although this figure is increasing. Schools rate the LEA's support for the professional development of teachers and newly qualified teachers as satisfactory.

Recommendation

In order to improve the supply and quality of teachers:

- develop and implement strategies to meet the projected shortages of teachers.

Section 3: Special educational needs

Summary of the effectiveness of the LEA's special educational needs provision

123. Most aspects of the LEA's work in relation to SEN are sound but its performance in meeting its statutory obligations remains unsatisfactory. Progress since the previous inspection has been too slow. However, a satisfactory policy and strategic plan for development are now in place. Since the time of the previous inspection, there has been a significant increase in the number of pupils with statements of special educational need educated in mainstream schools. Despite a reduction in the number of pupils educated in special schools, the reliance on places at independent special schools, in particular for pupils with emotional and behavioural needs, has continued. There are now satisfactory plans in place to reverse this trend.

124. The SEN policy rightly restates the commitment to earlier intervention and to reducing the reliance on statutory statements. However, both the number and the cost of statements have continued to rise since the last inspection. A review of funding arrangements has been an appropriate response to this, and schools broadly support the changes recommended. More recently, this has prompted elected members to reassess and increase the level of resources needed to meet stated objectives for special educational needs. Although the LEA has been aware of these pressures for some time, the implementation of these changes has only just begun and officers have yet to clarify the future role for special schools. The LEA now has sufficient capacity to make further progress and, providing that the partnership with schools is nurtured, to improve their confidence in the leadership of SEN.

125. The LEA's own evaluation of its work in the area of SEN was generally accurate. However, it did not recognise that the current rate for completion of statements is unsatisfactory.

The LEA's strategy for special educational needs

126. The LEA has a satisfactory policy and strategy for SEN in place. The first EDP reaffirmed the commitment to inclusion, but there were no locally agreed targets for inclusion or reintegration. Since then, the LEA has made slow but sufficient progress by reviewing the policy and the funding for SEN.

127. The five-year strategic plan for the inclusive education of pupils with SEN builds appropriately on policy priorities and on the outcomes of an external review of the funding and delivery of special needs services. This review, by the council's external auditors, confirmed many of the findings of the earlier Best Value review of special education and disabled children's services, and provided the impetus to reassess and improve the level of SEN resources for schools and support services.

128. Comprehensive consultation, undertaken with schools, parents and other stakeholders in developing the SEN strategy and as part of the funding review, reached a broad consensus about priorities. These are now reflected in the SEN development plan and team service plans. Schools understand and broadly support the objectives of the strategy. The LEA has begun to meet schools to address their concerns about funding, and lengthy

transitional arrangements are being put in place to reduce the financial turbulence for schools. Nevertheless, uncertainty remains over the effects of funding changes.

Recommendations

In order to improve the strategy for special educational needs:

- regularly review and evaluate with schools the effects of the funding changes during the transition period: and
- clarify the role of special schools and other specialist provision.

129. The future of one special school is currently the subject of consultation, but the future role for special schools is ill defined in the strategy. Although a review is planned, special schools are, understandably, unclear about the LEA's vision and therefore about their own future, despite exploratory consultation work completed over a year ago.

130. The LEA's strategy for SEN is supported by an analysis of pupils' identified needs, in accordance with the Code of Practice. This allows the LEA to determine the support required and specify the resource costs. However, the LEA currently lacks the comprehensive data needed to set targets for improvement for individual pupils with SEN. It therefore does not plan precisely the level or type of provision needed to secure improvement.

Statutory obligations

131. The LEA's performance in meeting its statutory obligations is unsatisfactory. At the time of the previous inspection, the LEA's performance in completing statements in the recommended timescale was unsatisfactory. Although sufficient initial progress was made to address the recommendation in the previous report, the position deteriorated significantly during last year. In 2002, the rate of completion of statements within the recommended 18 weeks declined to 80 per cent, excluding those involving other agencies. In cases where medical and other advice is sought, the completion rate is low at 55 per cent. Although the LEA analysed the reasons for the delays, action to remedy the situation was insufficient to meet the target set. The relevant teams are now being strengthened in order to improve performance and action is being taken with the health authority to speed up the provision of medical advice.

Recommendation

In order to improve the provision for pupils with special educational needs:

- put in place effective procedures to reduce significantly delays in producing statements of special educational need.

132. The number of statements maintained by the LEA is broadly in line with that of similar local authorities, despite a steady upward trend in those agreed during the last three years. Supporting advice from education psychologists and other specialist services is detailed and the specificity of statements is improving. There is an effective monitoring and moderation procedure for annual reviews, including that for pupils placed in independent special schools. All pupils with statements have individual education plans, although there is some variability in the quality.

133. The parent partnership service is well managed by an officer appointed by the LEA. Relationships with the special needs services are good; care is taken to maintain the

independence of the service, and casework resolution is carefully monitored. Good use is made of independent parental supporters, who receive effective training and support for their role. The low number of appeals reaching special needs tribunals is a reflection of the effectiveness of the support offered to parents by this service and other officers from the LEA.

School improvement

134. The LEA's support for school improvement remains satisfactory. The criteria for statutory assessment, now revised in line with the new Code of Practice, have been included in the new special needs handbook. This provides clear information about procedures and responsibilities to ensure consistency of practice across schools and support services. Special educational needs co-ordinators broadly welcome the new handbook. However, the complexity of the procedures and the time taken to reach decisions remain serious concerns for schools.

135. Two years ago, following consultation with schools, the LEA decided to delegate resources for individual statements to schools. Schools also received a very modest level of resource through the scheme of financial delegation for pupils with mild learning difficulties. This disparity in the level of funding has, not surprisingly, encouraged schools and parents to press for a statutory assessment in the absence of a realistic level of resources. Recent changes in the funding formula for schools take account of levels of free school meals and pupils' prior attainment. They are the first steps towards resourcing early intervention and reducing the dependence on statutory statements to attract funding for individual pupils.

136. Target setting for low attaining pupils and those with SEN in mainstream and special schools has been undertaken for the first time this year through school improvement advisers' visits to schools. The LEA has also established a consistent system to monitor the quality of pupils' annual reviews and progress made towards targets in their individual education plans. The LEA is beginning to focus on data about different groups of pupils, but specific support and training for the development of performance data for pupils in special schools has been limited. The LEA lacks the range of data required to set targets for the broad range of pupils with SEN.

Recommendation

In order to improve the standards achieved by pupils with special educational needs:

- establish systems for collecting and analysing the data required to set targets for, and monitor the progress of, all pupils.

137. Schools value the expertise of individual SEN services, including those supporting pupils with language and communication difficulties, and visual or hearing impairment. The quality of advice offered by the educational psychology service is good, but there has been serious disruption to this service brought about by long-term absence. Appropriate action is being taken to remedy this. There are early signs of greater confidence among schools about the planned improvement in the capacity of the support services from September 2003, but, in the interim, support for special educational needs co-ordinators is too variable.

*Recommendation***In order to improve the provision for pupils with special educational needs:**

- establish a comprehensive support network for SEN co-ordinators.

Value for money

138. The LEA's systems for ensuring value for money are satisfactory. This was the case at the time of the previous inspection, but the management and accuracy of the SEN budget were unsatisfactory. The LEA has made highly satisfactory progress in this area. The budget is now well controlled and expenditure is broadly in line with similar local authorities.

139. The basis of the current funding allocations to schools and individual pupils is complex, but is generally understood by schools, as are the planned changes from September 2003. The introduction of a new budget monitoring system is intended to enable the LEA to know how schools plan to spend the increasingly flexible resources they will have under the new arrangements.

140. The analysis of expenditure and the effectiveness of the work of support services are variable. The hearing impaired service has good quality comparative data alongside measures of pupil outcomes. Prompted by the Best Value review, the LEA intends to develop a monitoring system to ascertain whether pupils with statements of SEN are making at least satisfactory progress and targets are being met. The LEA does not yet have plans to take the next step, that of judging the progress made by individual pupils against the resources allocated.

Section 4: Promoting social inclusion

Summary of effectiveness in promoting social inclusion

141. Working towards an inclusive society is one of the council's five priorities. However, the council is only now planning to consult on a draft social inclusion strategy. The consultation report identifies a number of key barriers to effective provision, in particular the overall absence of strategic direction and the need for joined-up working between directorates.

142. Promoting social inclusion is one of four priorities in the EDP. This places particular emphasis on the development of a strategy for social inclusion in order to narrow the attainment gap for specific groups of pupils and to tackle underachievement. However, the education directorate has delayed this development in the light of a decision to develop a corporate strategy and to undertake a Best Value review of children's services. The continued absence of a strategy limits the effectiveness of the LEA's support for vulnerable pupils and that of other agencies working with pupils at risk of social exclusion. Furthermore, the services and initiatives intended to contribute to social inclusion lack co-ordination, and their effectiveness ranges from highly satisfactory to poor.

143. Planning of school places and asset management plans are poor. As a result, resources are not sufficiently well targeted to the council's stated commitment to social inclusion. Similarly, despite the determination of members to raise the profile and importance of race issues within the wider equalities agenda, the education directorate has been slow to respond and has no clear strategy to carry this forward. There has been some improvement in the provision for pupils who have no school place, but statutory requirements are not yet fully met.

144. The LEA makes an effective contribution to work with the Health Trust, the Northumberland strategic partnership and other partners such as the Learning and Skills Council. The relationship with the social services directorate is improving; for example, work with looked after children and the management of child protection procedures are highly satisfactory. A range of projects to promote inclusive education, such as healthy schools, drugs education and raising achievement, confidence and self-esteem, are making a difference in areas of the county.

The strategy to promote social inclusion

145. The strategy to promote social inclusion, not inspected previously, is unsatisfactory. There is a stated commitment in corporate and directorate plans to promote social inclusion and a number of different and effective initiatives are in place, but there is no clear corporate direction. Furthermore, strategic planning and management within the education directorate have not secured a coherent or co-ordinated programme of action.

146. The EDP identifies the need to improve the data held for groups of pupils and individuals, to inform a social inclusion strategy and to target scarce resources. The LEA monitors the progress and performance of some vulnerable groups effectively, for example looked after children, Traveller pupils and some pupils educated other than at school. However, the LEA has begun to monitor the performance of different ethnic groups only in

the last two years and the data are less secure. Data on the progress of pupils with SEN are also at a very early stage of development.

147. The council makes effective use of funding available for social inclusion initiatives, which is well directed at areas of deprivation. A Neighbourhood Renewal Fund project is leading to significant improvement in the Key Stage 2 results of pupils in the targeted schools. Similarly, the extension to a further four areas of the county of a project funded from the Single Regeneration Budget for young people who are vulnerable and at risk of disaffection is a good indicator of the success of the initial work. In partnership with schools, external grant funding has been used to develop five learning support units to provide for pupils at risk of exclusion and promote preventive work. This initiative has reduced the number of exclusions and improved the quality of provision for pupils excluded from these schools. However, the sustainability of this work is at risk with the removal of grant funding and, following consultation with all high schools, the decision not to fund these units from the education budget.

148. The LEA is an active contributor to the Northumberland strategic partnership and the Children and Young People Strategic Partnership. The latter has a working group on disabled children, and the action plan is clearly linked to the SEN strategy. The social services directorate has developed seven Sure Start schemes in liaison with education and health. Two mini Sure Start schemes are managed by the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership within the education directorate.

Recommendation

In order to improve the strategy to promote social inclusion:

- urgently devise and implement a social inclusion strategy that co-ordinates current initiatives and provides direction for planning and resourcing, within the education directorate and with other partners and agencies.

The supply of school places

149. The planning of school places is poor. Some progress has been made since the last inspection, when this function was very poor, but the pace of change has been too slow.

150. A sparse rural county is likely to have a higher than average level of surplus capacity. Nevertheless, the planning of school places in Northumberland has for too long been characterised by a reluctance to take effective action. As a consequence, the authority has one of the highest levels of surplus places in the country. The three-tier system of schooling makes exact comparisons difficult, but surplus places in first schools stand at 19 per cent, compared with a primary national average of 10.6 per cent. Nearly half of first schools have 25 per cent or more surplus capacity, a position made more difficult to resolve by the large number of small schools, many serving isolated rural areas. Projections of pupil numbers, particularly of those in first schools, have been of variable quality in the past. This was criticised in the last inspection report and did not improve until very recently. The LEA has now sensibly reviewed its procedures and introduced a new system. Current data suggest that surplus capacity in many areas is likely to increase.

151. The LEA's response to criticisms at the time of the last inspection was weak. Proposals to close three small schools with hardly thirty pupils between them were hastily

conceived, not part of a strategic plan and subject to inadequate consultation. As a consequence, only the LEA's representatives on the school organisation committee voted in favour and the adjudicator turned them down. This exercise, far from heralding sustained action, only served to set the process back.

152. Since then, progress on the recommendation in the last report, namely that the LEA should devise a long-term strategy for school place planning, has been protracted. The LEA sought to consider the future of the three-tier system and base any decision on an analysis of school standards. However, that review, conducted by an independent consultant, was not undertaken until late 2001 and the decision to maintain the status quo was not confirmed until May 2002.

153. The LEA has started to implement a programme of area reviews across the county. However, the LEA, in leading the process, has not agreed a set of general principles to underpin the review programme. This is unsatisfactory. Moreover, the timescale for the programme is too long. This started in the autumn of 2002, in one area, and will take five years to complete, thus compounding the medium-term uncertainty among schools and communities. Momentum will be difficult to maintain. Nevertheless, the first review has been completed on time with proposals published for the closure of three schools. Furthermore, there is a planned improvement in resources to tackle this issue from September 2003 with the appointment of an additional education officer.

154. The school organisation plan is not a helpful planning document. Having omitted to publish one in 2001, the LEA produced a plan in 2002, which gives little indication of the strategy to be pursued. Policies and principles are weak and, although other plans are mentioned, the links between them and school organisation are unclear. For example, the plan gives no indication of future trends in provision for pupils with special educational need.

Recommendations

In order to tackle the issue of surplus places across the county:

- agree with stakeholders the principles to underpin the review programme; and
- revise the proposed timetable with a view to more rapid completion of area reviews.

Asset management

155. Asset management planning is poor. This aspect was not inspected previously. Although the LEA has been rated by the Department for Education and Skills as performing at the minimum acceptable standard, the translation of asset management procedures into effective practice has been limited. Most of the shortcomings result from a lack of officer capacity. Prospects for improvement are, however, good. Within the last six months, a full team has been established.

156. The collection of data on the condition, suitability and sufficiency of the schools' building stock is now complete, and the LEA has made a sound investment in a sophisticated database. The initial collection of suitability data was, however, unsatisfactory, owing to inadequate methodology and the absence of any moderation. The exercise had to be repeated, thereby wasting time and resources. The intention is to maintain all the data through a rolling programme of new surveys, but the timetable for implementation is unclear.

157. The wealth of data now available is not used effectively to plan and co-ordinate building work. Although procedures for prioritisation have been developed, they have not been used to determine capital building and revenue maintenance programmes. Moreover, the engagement of schools in asset management planning has been weak. The LEA was late in forming a consultation group and has not succeeded in establishing any clear understanding of how it intends to prioritise building needs or work with schools.

158. The LEA faces a substantial backlog of condition work, totalling £52 million, but has no clear strategy for tackling it. There has been limited success in attracting significant additional investment into school buildings. A major replacement project for Blyth Community College was successfully funded in large part through the New Deal for Schools programme, but a large-scale Private Finance Initiative bid for the renewal of accommodation in Ashington and Berwick has twice been unsuccessful.

Recommendations

In order to improve asset management planning:

- gain the agreement and understanding of schools and other partners on how building needs will be prioritised;
- use data systematically as a basis for determining priorities and consequent building programmes; and
- establish and implement a strategy for tackling the backlog of condition work.

Admissions

159. The handling of admissions to schools is highly satisfactory. At the time of the last inspection the service was good, but a recent dip in performance is the result of specific short-term problems.

160. In most respects the administration of admissions is good, although a high level of surplus places makes the process easier. Ninety seven per cent of applicants gain a place at the school of their first preference and the comparatively small numbers of appeals are well conducted. Good arrangements are made for training members of the appeal panel. The admissions information for parents is sound and, except in a few minor respects, complies with the Admissions Code of Practice. Plans are well in hand for the co-ordination of admissions in accordance with new regulations and officers are taking the lead in inter-authority preparation for co-ordination across the LEA's boundaries.

161. This year, however, slow implementation of a new IT system has meant that offers of places were made five weeks after the published date, although the timetable will still allow appeals to be heard in time for pupils to be inducted into their new schools before the end of the summer term. Consultation on admission numbers has not been handled satisfactorily. Discussion with schools on proposed reductions to admission numbers was inadequate and delays in the completion of capacity assessments meant that consultation took place too late.

Provision of education for pupils who have no school place

162. Provision for the education of pupils who have no school place does not meet the statutory requirement for all to receive full-time education and is therefore unsatisfactory. Progress is unsatisfactory despite some improvement since 1999 when provision was poor.

At that time, there was insufficient provision for pupils excluded from school. The LEA has responded by increasing the amount of home tuition and, for Year 10 and 11 pupils, the range of college and work experience placements. There is a satisfactory plan to strengthen the management and co-ordination of this service and to extend further the work of the home tuition service.

163. The establishment of the pupil referral unit located in the south east of the county, alongside the development of five learning support units attached to high schools across the county, increased the capacity of the LEA to provide for excluded pupils of secondary school age and reduced a reliance on home tuition. However, there is uncertainty regarding the future funding of the units and there are weaknesses in the quality of education provided by the pupil referral unit. Furthermore, schools report concerns about the effectiveness of the Key Stage 3 curriculum and inconsistent procedures for the reintegration of individual pupils.

164. The LEA has maintained and improved the arrangements for a local college to provide for Year 10 and 11 pupils excluded from school. This gives pupils access to a wide range of accredited academic and vocational courses. Monitoring of the quality and continuity of this provision is satisfactory. Over half of these pupils move on to further education, training or employment.

165. The LEA ensures that all teenage mothers can continue to receive full-time education. Personal action and support plans are in place for individual students to ensure the majority continue in mainstream schools and make sufficient progress. Home tuition is provided in exceptional circumstances. There is continuing support for students over 16, including full-time further education, training programmes and part-time courses.

166. The LEA's home tuition service provides, in many cases, good quality education, but the LEA recognises that a lack of capacity means that the amount of provision and its quality control are not always sufficient. The LEA has an appropriate plan to expand this service. For example, it recognises that provision for pupils with medical needs, on average about five hours a week, needs to be increased where the medical condition allows. For parents who choose to educate their children at home, the LEA has developed an efficient procedure to monitor the quality of the education provided. There are secure procedures to ensure that no pupils become lost to the system.

Recommendations

In order to provide suitable education for pupils with no school place:

- ensure that full-time education is provided for all; and
- put in place procedures to monitor the range and quality of provision.

Attendance

167. The LEA's support for attendance is satisfactory. Progress has not been sufficient as at the time of the previous inspection support for attendance was good. Rates of attendance in primary schools are in line with the national average and those of similar authorities. In secondary schools, rates of attendance are above the national average and in line with similar authorities. However, since the time of the previous inspection, attendance in primary schools has declined at a greater rate than the national average. In the same period secondary attendance has shown an improvement above the national average.

168. The EDP sets out targets for improving attendance, but these lack sufficient challenge. Targets are agreed with schools where attendance is identified as a weakness. However, there is no strategy for agreeing attendance targets with all schools and the LEA has only recently begun to collect relevant data. The analysis of this information remains at a very early stage, although area teams of education welfare officers have a good knowledge of their local schools.

169. A very recent school attendance policy, published by the education welfare service, draws together the attendance strands from other directorate plans. It emphasises the importance of all agencies being alert to the welfare needs of pupils and gives suitable advice to improve attendance. Area-based teams are allocated to schools on the basis of indicators of social deprivation, including free school meals. This is not always well understood by schools and, although all schools have a nominated officer, the long-term absence of officers in the south of the county has left some secondary schools with a minimal emergency service.

170. Long-term planning for the service is improving, but too many decisions remain reactive. For example, the under-nines team is a very effective joint activity between the education and social services directorates. First schools report the benefits of this multi-disciplinary working, but changes in the funding arrangements are threatening longer-term resourcing.

171. Links are in place with neighbouring LEAs to exchange information, in particular about the outcomes of recent truancy sweeps. There are early indications that this strategy is having some success and further use of truancy sweeps is a key priority of the LEA.

172. The costs of the service are monitored carefully and action has been taken to use the salary savings from long-term absences during the year to recruit additional staff. This is a small team, in a low-cost service, offering satisfactory value for money.

Recommendation

In order to improve the support for attendance:

- ensure that monitoring data are collected, analysed and used transparently to focus the work of the education welfare service.

Behaviour support

173. Support for behaviour is satisfactory. At the time of the previous inspection it was unsatisfactory. Key weaknesses were insufficient co-ordination and communication between the services provided for pupils with behavioural difficulties and the absence of a clear framework of support for schools. There has been improvement in these areas, in particular where services support pupils up to the age of 11 years. Primary schools are very satisfied with this work. Conversely, high schools rightly remain very critical of the quality and level of support for older pupils with behavioural difficulties.

174. The behaviour support plan is satisfactory; it provides a clear statement of key principles and describes the services and the support available. There are sound links with the SEN strategy and the emphasis given to reducing the reliance on places in independent special schools for children whose statements identify emotional and behavioural difficulties. Steps have been taken to increase the county's capacity to support pupils within the special school sector and plans are in place to secure further places within the county. However, the

increased need for specialist provision has been apparent for some considerable time and the LEA has been slow to respond, in part because of financial constraints.

175. The number of permanent exclusions has reduced significantly since the last inspection. Primary and secondary school permanent exclusion rates are below the national average. A database now enables careful monitoring of the rise in fixed-term exclusions, in particular from middle schools. This analysis is at an early stage, but, in response to this rise, the behaviour support team is now working with middle schools to develop and implement preventive strategies with pupils in Years 7 and 8. Plans to expand the service further, to work with high school pupils, are at a preliminary stage.

176. The number of pupils reintegrated into mainstream schools is rising. However, middle and high schools are unclear about the criteria for obtaining access to centrally managed resources for preventive work. Five learning support units, based in high schools, have been effective in reducing the number of permanent exclusions. External grant funding for the units has ceased and their future is now uncertain.

177. The LEA has an established policy for schools to respond to incidents of bullying. The accompanying guidance is useful but needs to be updated. There is an appropriate plan, supported by resources from the Children's Fund, to do this.

Health, safety, welfare and child protection

178. The LEA now meets its responsibilities for protecting children in a highly satisfactory way. At the time of the previous inspection support for this area was satisfactory. Fieldwork was carried out on procedures for child protection, but not for health and safety.

179. The LEA contributes fully to the work of the area child protection committee, and is represented at a senior level. Two years ago, a joint review action plan led to the appointment of an independent chair and the development of a well-structured annual business plan.

180. All schools have designated teachers for child protection. Guidance and procedures have been circulated to schools. Staff have been provided with a very useful quick reference guide to child protection procedures. A good range of training is offered to teachers, classroom assistants and governors, some of which has been very well attended. The training is differentiated to meet the needs of the range of professionals, including newly qualified teachers. However, the LEA's data indicate that only 45 per cent of designated teachers are known to have undertaken recent updating and training. A new database is being introduced, in order that the LEA can improve the monitoring of training.

181. There are good links between officers in education and social services. Procedures for child protection have been reviewed jointly and good practice is shared effectively. The Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership's child protection procedure was developed in close collaboration with social services. This is very comprehensive and accessible, and plans are well advanced to adapt it for use with the Sure Start schemes.

182. All children on the child protection register have a designated social worker. Schools report no major difficulties in making contact with individual social workers. There is, however, some concern about the emergency procedure for contacting social services out of hours. In response, the LEA intends to reissue the advice and guidance to schools.

Looked after children

183. The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in respect of looked after children is highly satisfactory. The last inspection found significant weaknesses in this area. The LEA has made good progress in addressing these weaknesses and the capacity for further improvement is good. Strengths include the clear commitment of elected members and the establishment of a discrete team which is focused on raising pupils' achievement.

184. In September 2000, the county council acknowledged its corporate responsibility to promote the educational achievements of children in its care by establishing the education support for looked after children team. This relatively small team is an example of effective multi-agency co-operation. Education and social services are represented on a joint steering group that is supported by an officer whose post is jointly funded by education, social services and health. Furthermore, the educational psychology service allocates a hundred hours a year to supporting and advising looked after children, their carers and schools. A service level agreement with the schools library service has ensured the provision of a small library in each residential unit. The education and social services directorates maintain separate databases, but protocols for sharing information are in place and there are plans for further improvements as new software becomes available.

185. In 2002/2003, there were 244 children and young people of school age who were being looked after by the local authority. About a quarter of these had statements of special educational need. Although small cohorts of pupils are involved, the achievement of looked after children at GCSE improved slightly from 2001 to 2002. Results at Key Stage 2 declined slightly in 2002, but they remained above the national average. The percentage of looked after children who were permanently excluded fell by almost half from 2001 to 2002. There were no exclusions from first schools, and the number of days lost because of exclusion fell in both middle and high schools.

186. The performance of looked after children is monitored well and relevant records, showing details of SEN and rates of attendance and exclusion, are maintained. The team has been collecting data for two years. As a result, the LEA is increasingly secure in planning future service provision and setting targets for the attainment of looked after children. Since the team was established, reports on its work and on the achievements of looked after children have been discussed by elected members at the corporate parenting and scrutiny committees and at the policy board.

187. The LEA has ensured that all schools have a designated teacher. The education support for looked after children team co-ordinates a multi-agency training programme for teachers, which includes contributions from young people. Further guidance is available in the form of a useful handbook for designated teachers and regular newsletters and updates. The responsibilities of all concerned are clearly spelt out. However, the introduction of personal education plans for every child has been delayed as a result of the workload of social workers. There is a target of 90 per cent of these plans to be in place by June 2003. This delay is a significant weakness.

Measures to combat racism

188. The effectiveness of measures to combat racism was not assessed at the time of the previous inspection. It is now unsatisfactory, despite a growing determination at the corporate level and among elected members to raise the profile and importance of race issues. In the education directorate, progress has been too slow. There is no clear strategy on how to proceed, despite recognition that, with a relatively small minority ethnic population, individual pupils are more likely to feel isolated and vulnerable. The development of a strategy is not recognised as a priority within the directorate plan. Resources are limited and no education staff are deployed to oversee this function. Schools rate the LEA's support for combating racism as less than satisfactory.

189. The council has formally accepted the recommendations of the report of the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence. Corporate responsibility for race issues lies within the chief executive's directorate. In response to the requirement to publish a race equality scheme and action plan by May 2002, a working group of officers was established representing every directorate. The scheme was launched in November 2002 and is intended to form the basis of a generic framework for equality. Sensibly, in the first year of implementation, activities are focused on establishing baseline information against which to set targets and evaluate progress in future years. The profile of the workforce is monitored and appropriate equality targets have been set.

190. All schools have either adopted a race equality policy or expressed their determination to do so before September 2003. The LEA has provided suitable training to support schools, but only just over ten per cent of schools attended. Schools are unclear about procedures for reporting racist incidents. The personnel service has been collecting reports as part of its monitoring of violent incidents. The LEA has realised that this is not sufficient and has recently, but belatedly, provided schools with concise and useful guidance on supporting race equality, including the reporting of racist incidents. Advice on developing the curriculum to take account of other cultures and faiths has been available through the Northumberland healthy school programme, which includes the requirement for each school to have an equality statement, and also in guidance to support the agreed syllabus for religious education.

191. Both the Northumberland strategic partnership and the council have experienced difficulties in establishing a coherent and co-ordinated approach to consultation with minority ethnic communities, given the small numbers. They are attempting to establish links with a regional organisation.

Recommendation**In order to improve measures to combat racism:**

- establish and implement a clear policy and plan of action to combat racism and promote equality of opportunity and good relations between different minority ethnic groups.

Section 5: Corporate issues

Introduction to corporate issues

192. At the time of the previous inspection elected members acknowledged that the local authority had not taken a corporate approach to planning although there was a growing awareness of the need to do so. Significant progress has been made and corporate plans now clearly demonstrate a shared vision and agreed priorities that reflect the needs of Northumberland and give high priority to education. Within the context of education, decision making and the quality of leadership provided by elected members remain satisfactory. However, the quality of leadership provided by senior officers is now unsatisfactory. The education directorate has been too slow in making the changes necessary in its relationship with schools and, too often, has lacked confidence or strategic leadership. The quality of consultation with schools is too variable and has contributed to a continuing deterioration in relationships.

193. The recent Corporate Assessment resulted in an overall grade of three (out of four) for the council and recognised improvements in corporate planning. However, the assessment also identified the need to consolidate arrangements for performance management and establish stronger corporate monitoring of both service and strategic issues to drive improvements in priority areas. There is clear evidence of this need within the education directorate. Current procedures for monitoring and evaluation did not lead to an accurate self-evaluation before this inspection. Improvements in corporate planning were recognised, but performance in other areas was consistently over-rated.

Corporate planning

194. At the time of the previous inspection corporate planning was very poor. The council had only recently published a strategic statement, which identified the need to raise educational standards as one of its five priorities. Since then, very good progress has been made. Corporate planning is now highly satisfactory and the capacity for further improvement is good. However, one important weakness is the slow development of a corporate strategy for social inclusion. The implementation of corporate plans in the education context has improved and is now satisfactory. The capacity for further improvement in this area is uncertain, in part because there has, until very recently, been a recognised lack of strategic capacity within the directorate. It is too early to judge the effect of the recent strengthening of the senior management team. There are satisfactory links between strategic plans and the financial planning cycle.

195. Corporate plans are increasingly clear and well sequenced as a result of the introduction, in 2002, of a strategic planning framework. This brings together all the county council's plans from the ten-year community strategy through to annual personal development plans. It enables the council to have a shared vision, common goals and a set of priorities focused on service delivery. This vision is based on five key strategic themes and identifies education and front-line social services as continuing high priorities.

196. The council implemented a suitable and consistent outline for planning at the directorate level for 2003/2004. The four priorities outlined in the plan for the education directorate are in line with those included in the council's improvement plan following its

recent Comprehensive Performance Assessment. The directorate plan is beginning to provide a clearer focus for the work of divisions. The accompanying outline action plans identify relevant objectives, actions and key targets alongside responsibilities and timescales. However, plans do not indicate intentions for monitoring and evaluating progress against targets. A further weakness is that they do not identify the resources needed for the implementation. Although it is too early to assess the effect of improvements in the corporate planning process in education, the developments offer the directorate a clear framework for improvement.

197. The council has made improvements in the way it evaluates and manages its own performance. It has also welcomed and commissioned external evaluations. Within education, elected members regularly monitor progress against key targets, but there is limited evidence that this has led to corrective action. The current unsatisfactory performance of the LEA in meeting its statutory obligations with regard to SEN was not acted upon soon enough. In education, self-evaluation tools, such as the European Foundation for Quality Management model, have been used to identify strengths and areas for development and then to monitor improvement. The most recent of these assessments, which was supported by officers from the corporate centre, correctly identified the continuing lack of formal monitoring and review processes and the need to improve substantially the performance management framework. However, to date, the monitoring of progress and evaluation of impact is not sufficiently systematic, consistent or rigorous to provide an accurate analysis of strengths and weaknesses, as evidenced by the LEA's self-evaluation submitted as part of the inspection process.

198. The council has recognised that the education directorate had limited strategic capacity to respond, or contribute to, the corporate agenda. The recent establishment of the post of education business manager is intended to address this issue in focusing on the implementation of corporate priorities, such as the development of performance management, in education. Again, it is too soon to assess the effect of this appointment. Currently, appraisal procedures are in place, but they do not consistently secure regular reviews of progress against the directorate's targets. Improving performance management is one of the directorate's key priorities, but this is not reflected consistently in the priorities identified for each division.

Decision making

199. The speed, transparency and effectiveness of decision making were satisfactory at the time of the last inspection and they remain so. Sufficient progress has been made, and the previous recommendation to ensure that the council's budget more closely reflects corporate priorities has been implemented. The elected members have shown that they can take strategic and difficult decisions such as introducing changes to the funding for SEN, but on occasion, for example in relation to reducing surplus places, decisions have not been taken soon enough. The council's recently introduced strategic planning framework is designed to align key political and management decisions.

200. The decision-making process regularly includes consultation with schools and other partners. However, the quality and effectiveness of that consultation has been too variable and this has led schools to question the transparency of decision making. Documentary evidence from previous consultations shows that schools have been sent very detailed information, although this has not always been very accessible or timely. Schools are

regularly presented with a limited range of manageable alternatives, but the education directorate demonstrates a reluctance to explore more creative solutions even when such ideas come from, and have the support of, schools.

The leadership provided by elected members and officers

201. The quality of leadership given by elected members and senior officers was satisfactory at the time of the last inspection. The leadership of elected members remains so, but that of senior officers is now unsatisfactory. Despite giving a high priority to education and documenting their vision in relevant plans, senior officers have been unsuccessful in communicating to schools this vision, and their commitment to raise standards and secure improvement.

202. Relationships with schools have deteriorated since the last inspection. Schools consistently criticise the leadership of both members and officers, and express their frustration at the lack of effective communication and consultation. This situation is not irretrievable. Schools recognise the challenges faced by the LEA. They want to regain a constructive relationship with officers based on a shared commitment to, and enthusiasm for, overcoming these challenges.

203. Elected members from all parties have a shared sense of the importance of education and have, until very recently, repeatedly demonstrated their commitment by protecting the funding available to schools. Through the work of the policy board, the scrutiny committee and the schools causing concern committee, members are developing a sound understanding of a range of important issues such as the 14-19 agenda and special educational needs.

204. Senior officers share the elected members' commitment to school improvement. Sensible procedures and mechanisms for communication and consultation are in place, but the vast majority of schools report that they have little direct influence on the LEA's policies and plans. The work of individual officers is appreciated and they are trusted by schools, but the LEA as a whole does not have the confidence of its schools. Effective communication is difficult, given the geography of the county and the number of headteachers who have a full-time teaching commitment. The resources available to the LEA and to schools to engage in consultation are limited. However, these two factors are too frequently used by officers as a pretext for being slow to take action and as an explanation for the negative views of schools. Schools perceive the LEA as reactive to issues, rather than offering leadership and a clear sense of purpose. This affects the way they relate to and work with the LEA.

205. The quality of advice provided to members by senior officers is satisfactory. Members received sound advice in relation to the review of SEN, including information on a suitable range of options and their implications. Increasingly, through the Best Value review process, members are presented with, and consider, alternative courses of action. Improvements can also be seen in the work of the policy board where members are involved in the early stages of developing policy. However, the recent information provided to members concerning surplus places has not provided them with a clear picture of the potential benefits of the options available to them. Nor has it provided them with any innovative solutions in relation to small rural schools.

Partnership

206. The LEA's collaboration with other partners to co-ordinate action and deliver priorities continues to be satisfactory. Partnership work is strongly promoted through corporate, strategic plans. For example, the Northumberland strategic partnership has led the development of the community plan and has established effective links with the council at a corporate level. This overarching strategic partnership is sensibly aligning itself to operate more strategically and to co-ordinate, support and challenge partnership work within the county.

207. Corporate priorities are beginning to be reflected clearly in, and across, directorate plans. The education directorate is beginning to integrate its plans and priorities effectively within this corporate framework. As a result, there is evidence of improvement in aspects of partnership work, in particular between education and social services, to ensure more effective provision for the early years, looked after children and support to first schools from the under-nines multi-disciplinary team. At operational level there are some examples of very effective relationships between the LEA and partner organisations. The LEA has worked collaboratively and strategically with the local Learning and Skills Council, the Connexions service, schools, and colleges in developing the 14-19 strategy within the lifelong learning partnership. Literacy and numeracy advisers have developed very effective links with other teams, for example with the special needs literacy team and school improvement advisers, in addition to developing their partnership work with schools. The LEA has also increased its level of support for the work of the youth offending team and the police in tackling anti-social behaviour and youth disorder. The partnership with the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education is highly satisfactory. The LEA has funded a specialist religious education adviser to support the current review of the agreed syllabus.

208. The success of other key partnerships owes more to the initiative of schools or other agencies. For example, the LEA has been slower to participate actively in the development of the local Education Action Zone and the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership. However, the latter partnership has improved, in particular with the focus on the foundation years. There are also effective links being developed between the partnership and key services of the LEA that provide support for very young children with special educational needs. However, the importance of childcare provision is insufficiently developed as part of a wider strategy for social inclusion.

209. Support for 14-19 education in Northumberland is developing well. Most of the work has concentrated on developing strong partnerships on which to base an agreed strategy, an important strand in the EDP. The co-ordinator is a former headteacher whose post is jointly funded by the high schools and the Learning and Skills Council. He has successfully built up positive relationships between the different stakeholders and brought together their diverse perspectives and needs.

Appendix 1: Recommendations

This report has made a number of fundamental recommendations which are key to the further progress of the LEA. Work should begin upon them immediately. They are:

In order to secure continuous improvement:

- urgently devise, implement and monitor rigorously a comprehensive improvement strategy for education, based on the recommendations of this report and incorporating the outcomes of existing internal monitoring and evaluation.

In order to target resources more effectively to priorities:

- review the impact of and reconsider the policy on redundancy and early retirement;
- improve consultation arrangements with headteachers and governors;
- provide advice and support to schools on applications for external funding; and
- provide appropriate advice and guidance to schools with deficit budgets.

In order to improve the leadership of services to support school improvement:

- establish with schools a shared understanding of, and commitment to, the strategic direction for the divisions supporting school improvement and lifelong learning and social inclusion.

In order to improve the strategic planning of services to support school improvement:

- evaluate the quality and precision of success criteria and their effectiveness as measures for monitoring the outcomes and effectiveness of service plans; and
- ensure that service plans identify the necessary resources and timescales for implementation.

In order to improve the effectiveness of procedures for monitoring, challenge, support and intervention:

- communicate the LEA's roles of monitoring and challenge more precisely to schools;
- improve guidance to schools about monitoring visits by including information about

how further support can be obtained;

- improve the data available for special schools;
- include criteria on the effectiveness of the leadership and management of schools into the monitoring system; and
- evaluate the effectiveness of advisers' monitoring visits on school improvement.

In order to improve the support for school leadership and management:

- develop a coherent strategy of support for school leadership and management;
- make more rigorous the criteria for monitoring and evaluating leadership and management in schools; and
- provide advice on the procurement and purchase of school improvement services.

In order to improve the provision for pupils with special educational needs:

- put in place effective procedures to reduce significantly delays in producing statements of special educational need.

In order to improve the strategy to promote social inclusion:

- urgently, devise and implement a social inclusion strategy that co-ordinates current initiatives and provides direction for planning and resourcing, within the education directorate and with other partners and agencies.

In order to tackle the issue of surplus places across the county:

- agree with stakeholders the principles to underpin the review programme; and
- revise the proposed timetable with a view to more rapid completion of area reviews.

In order to improve measures to combat racism:

- establish and implement a clear policy and plan of action to combat racism and promote equality of opportunity and good relations between different minority ethnic groups.

The report also makes the following recommendations. They are:

In order to improve the attainment of minority ethnic groups, including Travellers:

- establish and implement a policy and strategic plan for the support of pupils from minority ethnic groups;
- set up systems for monitoring the progress of individual pupils from minority ethnic groups as they move between key stages; and
- systematically monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of support for Travellers.

In order to improve support for gifted and talented pupils:

- establish and implement a policy and guidance that set out the LEA's vision and help schools to identify gifted and talented pupils;
- introduce ways of identifying and sharing good practice among schools; and
- monitor systematically the effectiveness of summer schools.

In order to improve the quality of financial services to schools:

- consult schools about their specific requirements before replacing the council's mainframe computer system.

In order to improve the quality of property services to schools:

- radically improve the service level agreement with schools as well as the methodology for the prioritisation of maintenance projects.

In order to improve the supply and quality of teachers:

- develop and implement strategies to meet the projected shortages of teachers.

In order to improve the strategy for special educational needs:

- regularly review and evaluate with schools the effects of the funding changes during the transition period; and
- clarify the role of special schools and other specialist provision.

In order to improve the standards achieved by pupils with special educational needs:

- establish systems for collecting and analysing the data required to set targets for, and monitor the progress of, all pupils.

In order to improve the provision for pupils with special educational needs:

- establish a comprehensive support network for SEN co-ordinators.

In order to improve asset management planning:

- gain the agreement and understanding of schools and other partners on how building needs will be prioritised;
- use data systematically as a basis for determining priorities and consequent building programmes; and
- establish and implement a strategy for tackling the backlog of condition work.

In order to provide suitable education for pupils with no school place:

- ensure that full-time education is provided for all; and
- put in place procedures to monitor the range and quality of provision.

In order to improve the support for attendance:

- ensure that monitoring data are collected, analysed and used transparently to focus the work of the education welfare service.

Appendix 2: Record of Judgement Recording Statements for the inspection

Name of LEA :	Northumberland
LEA number:	929
Name of Inspector:	Sue Hatton HMI
Date of Inspection:	May 2003

No.	Required Inspection Judgement	Grade	NI
SECTION 1 SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY			
1	The socio-economic context of the LEA	4	
2	The performance of schools	3	
3	Funding, including the co-ordination of external funding	6	
4	The LEA's strategy for school improvement including the EDP	4	
5	The progress on implementing the LEA's strategy for school improvement including the EDP	4	
6	The extent to which the LEA targets its resources on priorities	5	
7	The extent to which the LEA has in place effective strategies to promote continuous improvement including Best Value	5	
SECTION 2 SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT			
8	The extent to which the LEA has defined monitoring, challenge, and intervention and shared those understandings with schools	4	
9	The extent to which the LEA's support to schools is focused on areas of greatest need	4	
10	the effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring schools and challenging them to improve, including the use made of performance data	4	
11	The effectiveness of LEA identification of and intervention in under-performing schools	3	
12	Support to schools for raising standards in Literacy	2	
13	Support to schools for raising standards in Numeracy	2	
14	Support to schools for raising standards in and the curriculum use of information and communications technology	3	

15	Support to schools for raising standards at Key Stage 3	2	
16	Support to schools in raising standards of ethnic minority and Traveller children including the effective deployment of the ethnic minority and Traveller achievement grants	5	
17	Support to schools for gifted and talented pupils	6	
18	Support for school leadership and management including support for schools effort to achieve Best Value	5	
19	Support to school governors	2	NI
20	The effectiveness of its services to support school management	5	
20a	Financial services	5	
20b	Human resources	2	
20c	Property services	5	
20d	Services for ICT in school administration	3	
20e	Cleaning and caretaking	4	
20f	Grounds maintenance	4	
20g	Catering	4	
21	The extent to which the LEA is successful in assuring the supply and quality of teachers	4	
22	The effectiveness of the leadership of services to support school improvement	5	
23	The effectiveness of the deployment of staff to support school improvement	4	
24	The effectiveness of strategic planning of services to support school improvement	5	
25	The effectiveness of the performance management of services to support school improvement	4	
26	The standard of expertise of staff to support school improvement	4	
27	The effectiveness of services to school improvement	4	
28	Value for money of services to support school improvement	4	
SECTION 3 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS			
29	The effectiveness of the LEA's strategy for SEN	4	

30	The effectiveness of the LEA in taking steps to meet its statutory obligations in respect of SEN	5	
31	The effectiveness of the LEA in exercising its SEN functions to support school improvement	4	
32	The extent to which the LEA has exercised its SEN functions to meet the requirements of value for money	4	
SECTION 4 PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION			
33	The overall effectiveness of the LEA in promoting social inclusion	5	
34	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to the provision of school places	6	
35	The effectiveness of the LEA in discharging asset management planning	6	
36	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to admissions to schools	3	
37	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to provision for pupils who have no school place	5	
38	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to school attendance	4	
39	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to behaviour at school	4	
40	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to health and safety, welfare and child protection	3	
41	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to children in public care	3	
42	The effectiveness of the LEA in combating racism	5	
SECTION 5 CORPORATE ISSUES			
43	The clarity, consistency, coherence and feasibility of corporate plans	3	
44	The effectiveness of the procedures for implementing and evaluating corporate plans	4	
45	The speed, transparency and effectiveness of decision-making (particularly financial decision-making)	4	
46	The quality of leadership provided by elected members	4	
47	The quality of the leadership provided by senior officers	5	
48	The quality of advice given to elected members	4	

49	The effectiveness of the co-ordination of actions in support of priorities involving collaboration between several agencies	4	
OVERALL JUDGEMENTS			
50	The progress made by the LEA overall	5	
51	The LEA's capacity for further improvement and to address the recommendations of the inspection	5	
52	The overall effectiveness of the LEA	5	

JRS numerical judgements are allocated on a 1 to 7 point scale:

- Grade 1 – Very good
- Grade 2 – Good
- Grade 3 – Highly satisfactory
- Grade 4 – Satisfactory
- Grade 5 – Unsatisfactory
- Grade 6 – Poor, significant weaknesses
- Grade 7 – Very poor, fails to provide effective support to schools