

Inspection report
NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE
Local Education Authority

Date of inspection: September 2002

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Basic information about the LEA

Name of LEA: Newcastle upon Tyne Local Education Authority

Address of LEA: Civic Centre
Newcastle upon Tyne

NE1 8PU

Reporting inspector: Sue Hatton HMI

Date of inspection: September 2002

Introduction

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

2. The inspection was based on a range of material, which included self-evaluation undertaken by the LEA, and data, some of which was provided by the LEA. That material also included school inspection information; HMI monitoring reports and audit reports; documentation from, and discussions with, LEA officers and members; focus groups of headteachers and governors; staff in other departments at that local authority; and diocesan representatives. Other agencies and LEA partners submitted written evidence of participation and joint working and participated in focus groups. In addition, the inspection team considered the earlier Ofsted/Audit Commission report on this LEA (published in September 1999). A questionnaire, seeking views on aspects of the work of the LEA, was circulated to 83 schools, and its results were considered by the inspection team. The response rate to the questionnaire was 78 per cent.

Commentary

3. Newcastle upon Tyne is an important regional centre for the north east of England. It continues to face the many socio-economic challenges identified at the time of the last inspection. These have been intensified by significant population decline. Forty five per cent of Newcastle's pupils live in wards identified as being in the ten per cent most deprived nationally. Appropriately, education is the first of the city council's corporate priorities and is a crucial element in its ambitious, long-term regeneration strategy 'Going for Growth'.

4. In the last inspection, in 1999, the LEA was found to be satisfactory. The LEA has made generally good progress in improving the quality of service it provides to schools and in carrying out the recommendations of the previous inspection. Strengths continue to outweigh weaknesses, but to a much greater degree. However, there has not been the progress expected or needed in the attainment of pupils despite significant improvements in the quality of education provided by schools. Standards of attainment are still lower than national averages at every key stage. Rates of improvement since 1997 have generally been in line with or above the national trend but, between 1999 and 2002, these slowed in line with the national trend. The LEA did not meet its 2002 targets at Key Stage 2 and General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE).

5. In the face of worsening socio-economic conditions the impact of the LEA's work has been to prevent any widening of the gap between the performance of the LEA and the national average. The LEA does not accept that these conditions make low standards inevitable. Its determination to work with schools to challenge under achievement and promote a culture of high expectations is clearly evident in the current Education Development Plan. However, the 2004 targets for performance at Key Stage 2 and GCSE, which have been agreed with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), are unrealistically high.

6. The sense of communal responsibility for education is strong in Newcastle. The LEA does not adhere strictly to the Code of Practice on LEA – school relations in determining the number of visits by educational advisers that schools receive annually. However, this is acceptable, given the need to raise standards across the board. The amount of support for those schools in greatest need is sufficient and the quality of that support has improved from satisfactory to good. Schools feel that they can take on extra responsibilities and challenges with the LEA's support and there is no evidence of this arrangement undermining the development of self-managing schools.

7. The results of the school survey provide a strong endorsement of basic standards and recent improvements in the LEA's services. The ratings for all but one school improvement function place the LEA in the top 25 per cent nationally. This is a hard-working LEA, which is moving towards feasible solutions to the significant challenges it faces. However, weaknesses in some aspects of support for literacy, attendance and behaviour, and in ensuring the value for money of services for special educational needs, currently detract from the LEA's overall ability to support schools in raising standards of achievement.

8. There are particular strengths in:

- the definition of monitoring, challenge, support and intervention;
- the effectiveness of monitoring and challenging schools to improve;
- the identification of and intervention in schools causing concern;
- support to schools for raising standards in information and communication technology (ICT);
- support for raising standards at Key Stage 3;
- support to schools for gifted and talented pupils;
- support for school leadership and management;
- financial services;
- human resource management;
- support for schools for the administrative use of information and communication technology;
- the effectiveness of the leadership of services to support school improvement;
- the deployment and expertise of staff in services to support school improvement;
- asset management planning;
- the quality of leadership provided by senior officers; and
- the co-ordination and effectiveness of partnership working with other agencies in order to meet priorities.

There are weaknesses in:

- support for literacy;
- the value for money of the provision for special educational needs;
- support for attendance; and
- support for behaviour.

9. The leadership provided by the key elected member and officers at senior and middle management levels is good. The self-evaluation carried out as part of this inspection, and the relatively new Education Development Plan (EDP) demonstrates that members and officers have an accurate assessment of strengths and weaknesses. There is a corporate determination to improve schools, raise standards and promote social inclusion. Disappointing results and setbacks in the past have made both members and officers more determined. They have established effective and mature relationships with schools, based on goodwill, mutual respect and a suitable balance of support and challenge.

10. The inspection team is confident that the LEA has the capacity to improve further and to respond to the recommendations in this report.

Section 1: The LEA strategy for school improvement

Context

11. Newcastle upon Tyne is a regional centre with a thriving city centre and affluent semi-rural areas to the north. However, almost half of Newcastle's 26 wards are in the ten per cent most deprived wards nationally and five of these are in the one per cent most deprived¹. Local authority data shows that 45 per cent of pupils currently live in those wards. Entitlement to free school meals is well above the national average.

12. Population decline is a significant feature of the city and its schools. At the time of the last inspection, 40,422 pupils were on roll in Newcastle's schools. This figure has reduced by more than 3,500. This decline is contributing to an increased turbulence in school rolls and, in January 2002, 60 per cent of the city's schools reported a pupil transience rate of more than 15 per cent. Approximately 1100 Newcastle pupils aged between 11 and 16 attend independent schools in the city.

13. The proportion of pupils with statements of special educational needs in secondary schools is in line with the national average and in primary schools it is below. The percentage of these pupils attending special schools has reduced since the last inspection.

14. Almost ten per cent of pupils are of minority ethnic origin, compared with 12 per cent nationally. Most are concentrated in a small number of schools, as are more than 200 children from families of asylum seekers. In some schools more than two thirds of the pupils are of minority ethnic origin, while other schools have none.

15. Newcastle currently maintains 72 primary schools (including 17 first schools), 18 secondary schools (including seven middle schools) and one hospital school. All secondary/high schools have sixth forms. Secondary schools are in the second year of the Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiative. Seven have specialist status. Following the reorganisation of provision for special educational needs, the LEA now maintains four special schools, a pupil referral unit and twenty four additionally resourced centres attached to 19 schools. Eighteen schools are currently part of a statutory education action zone (EAZ) in the north west of the city, and two small excellence action zones, established under EiC, are operating in four secondary and 12 primary schools. A range of maintained, voluntary and private early years settings provide all three and four-year-olds with access to an early education and childcare setting.

16. Since the last inspection, there have been seven school closures. Four first schools have been re-designated as primary schools as a result of the re-organisation of the three tier system and general population decline in the west of the city. In September 2002, an 11-18 'Fresh Start' Church of England controlled secondary school, sponsored by the University of Newcastle, opened to replace two under-performing secondary schools. The percentage of surplus places, in both primary and secondary schools, has been significantly reduced.

¹ Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2000

Performance

17. National Curriculum attainment tests, GCSE results and inspection evidence produce a complex and occasionally contradictory picture of the performance of pupils in Newcastle schools. Standards of attainment remain consistently below or well below those found nationally. They are in line with those of similar authorities² at Key Stages 1 and 3, but generally below at Key Stages 2 and 4.

18. Rates of improvement since 1997 have, with the exception of the higher grades at GCSE, been at least in line and often above the national trend. However, since the last inspection, that overall rate of improvement has slowed in line with the national trend. In 2001 the rate of improvement was not maintained in Key Stages 1 and 2. Provisional data for 2002 indicates that this slowing down continues and is now reflected in Key Stage 3. Ofsted inspection data, however, indicates significant improvements in the quality of education being provided by schools.

19. Attainment on entry to school is well below the national average, but children under five make better progress than nationally.

20. At Key Stage 1, standards of attainment in reading, writing and mathematics are in line with those of similar authorities, but they are below the national average in reading and writing.

21. At Key Stage 2, standards in English, mathematics and science are well below those found in similar authorities and nationally. In 2001, the percentages of pupils achieving Level 4 and above in English and mathematics dropped by over three per cent to 66 per cent and 62 per cent respectively. Provisional data for 2002 indicates a six per cent rise in mathematics and a one per cent increase in English.

22. At Key Stage 3, standards in the three core subjects are in line with similar authorities, but they are below the national average for mathematics and well below in English and science.

23. At GCSE, standards are significantly below national figures and, with the exception of the percentage of pupils attaining five or more A*-C grades, they are below those of similar authorities. In 2001, the percentages of pupils attaining five or more passes at grades A*-G and grades A*-C were 82.3 and 37.4 per cent respectively compared with 91 and 48.4 per cent nationally. Eleven per cent of pupils leave school without any qualification; this is twice the national average.

24. Since 1997 attainment has been improving at above the national rate in English at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. In mathematics, the rate of improvement is in line with the national rate at Key Stages 1 and 3 and above at Key Stage 2. At GCSE the rate of improvement in pupils' average points score and in achieving one or more A*-G grade is above the national trend, but it is slower than that found nationally for the other key GCSE indicators.

² Newcastle upon Tyne's statistical neighbours are: South Tyneside, Sunderland, Sheffield, Greenwich, Salford, Portsmouth, North Tyneside, Rochdale, Middlesbrough and Stockton on Tees.

25. The numbers of pupils in some minority ethnic groups are so small that it is not possible to comment on the attainment levels of all groups. Of the larger groups, the attainment of Bangladeshi pupils is significantly lower than that of others at all key stages, apart from in mathematics at Key Stages 2 and 3 and five or more A*-C grades at GCSE. Conversely, Pakistani pupils' attainment is close to that for all children in the earlier stages, but a significantly smaller percentage gain five or more A*-C grades at GCSE.

26. The findings of the most recent Ofsted school inspections show that the proportion of primary and secondary schools judged to be good or very good was broadly in line with that nationally and in similar LEAs. However, the quality of education, management and efficiency in Newcastle primary schools was better in a higher proportion of schools than that found in the majority of LEAs, and the momentum and pace of that improvement was greater than the trend nationally. Two secondary schools have achieved Beacon status. The proportion of schools receiving a School Achievement Award in 2002 was greater than nationally.

27. Although there was a slight reduction in 2001, attendance in primary schools is in line with that found nationally. Attendance in secondary schools, however, has remained static for two years at 89.3 per cent, below the national figure of 90.8 per cent.

28. Despite a significant reduction in the rate of permanent exclusions between 1998 and 2000, the percentage of pupils permanently excluded from secondary schools rose again in 2001 and remained above the national figure. In primary schools the rate was well above that nationally. Fixed term exclusions have risen markedly.

29. Two schools, one middle and one primary, are currently subject to special measures. One middle school has serious weaknesses.

Funding

30. At the time of the last inspection, Newcastle's education budget was eight per cent above its education Standard Spending Assessment (SSA). The LEA delegated the least of all metropolitan LEAs to schools and less than the England average. School balances at the end of 1998/9 were 4.5 per cent of the funds delegated.

31. Subsequent to the last inspection, and mainly because of a falling school population, Newcastle's education SSA has increased at a slower rate than the average LEA. In addition, increased pressure on other elements of the council budget has resulted in spending against SSA being reduced annually, but still remaining above education SSA by 2.7 per cent in 2002/3.

32. Individual school budgets per pupil in 2001/2 were generally lower than average in both primary and secondary schools. Since the last inspection, the comparative level of delegation to schools has moved closer to other LEAs, but, at 83.7 per cent of the Local Schools Budget, remains below the averages for statistical neighbours, metropolitan LEAs and England as a whole. In 2002/3, Newcastle met the national delegation target of 87 per cent, but did not meet the target for passing on to schools the full increase in the education SSA.

33. Newcastle's total spending on special education, including both centrally retained elements and that designated as SEN within funds delegated to schools, was higher than the average in 2001/2, being 17.2 per cent of the authority's Local Schools Budget. This compared with 16 per cent for statistical neighbours, 14.9 per cent for metropolitan LEAs and 15.7 per cent England.

34. Newcastle has met the Secretary of State's target for central administration costs. However, Newcastle's spending on strategic management as a whole was more than double the English average in 2001/2. This is because of continuing commitments to earlier approvals for premature retirement and redundancy, where the cost per pupil in Newcastle in 2001/2 was £116 compared with £41 in its statistical neighbours.

35. Newcastle has been very successful in attracting additional external funds to enhance both revenue and capital spending. Over the last three years some £32.5 million revenue funding from a variety of sources has been used to promote Newcastle's priorities for education and social inclusion, with a further £7.5 million committed, notwithstanding any other bidding initiatives. Annual capital spending has increased from over £6 million in 1997/8 to £23.7m in 2002/3, and will be further enhanced by external funding to come, including an approved £47 million private finance initiative for six schools. Newcastle's capital expenditure per pupil in 2001/2 was £377, above the comparators of statistical neighbours (£302), metropolitan LEAs (£269) and England (£249).

Council structure

36. Since the last inspection the council has been modernised in line with the government's proposals for democratic renewal. The council has 78 members comprising 61 Labour and 17 Liberal Democrat. The cabinet consists of the leader and deputy leader with ten members who hold portfolios for key areas of work. Political responsibility for education rests with the cabinet and, in particular, the cabinet member for lifelong learning and training who is also the deputy leader of the council. Scrutiny committees are known as select committees. The lifelong learning and training select committee is chaired by a non-cabinet member from the ruling party and includes opposition members plus diocesan and parental representatives. It has two key roles: scrutiny of the executive's decisions and proposals, and advising on policy development. Plans are in place to improve the effectiveness of select committees.

37. The education and libraries directorate is one of six directorates under the line management of the chief executive. The directorate has a director and four assistant directors responsible for lifelong learning and strategic initiatives, planning and resources, access and inclusion, and libraries and information. The principal adviser also occupies a second tier post within the management structure. Clear rules support the extensive delegation of decision making powers from the city council and its cabinet to individual directors: these allow quick and transparent decisions to be taken.

The LEA strategy for school improvement

38. The last inspection judged the strategy for school improvement to be satisfactory. The priorities identified by the LEA were well known to, and supported by, schools. The

LEA's current strategy for school improvement, in particular its second Education Development Plan 'Aiming higher, achieving more' is highly satisfactory. The strategy has some significant strengths and, in general, schools are committed to both the strategy and the activities through which it will be delivered. If implemented fully, the strategy should certainly lead to improvement. However, despite its strengths, it is unlikely to bring about sufficient improvement to achieve the ambitious targets set.

39. The plan is based on a thorough analysis of strengths and weaknesses. This analysis is used well to identify the developments necessary to implement national priorities and to justify the inclusion of four local cross-cutting themes: social inclusion and special educational needs (SEN); raising standards through creativity and diversity; leadership, management and governance; and regeneration and social cohesion.

40. Schools have been closely involved in the identification and development of these priorities and themes through the annual standing conference on the planning of education and associated working groups. In the school survey, both the relevance of the LEA's priorities and the quality of the LEA's strategic planning were rated very highly, placing the LEA in the top 25 per cent of those surveyed.

41. The Education Development Plan has some significant strengths. The intended impact of each priority is clearly stated. In most activity plans, it is clear what the LEA is going to do and the target group is identified. Given the need for a rapid rise in attainment across the board, it is appropriate that some activities involve all schools. Success criteria are generally measurable, precise and well matched to intended targets and priorities. There are, however, weaknesses in the plan: given the rapid rate of improvement necessary, it is not always clear how some activities will contribute to raising attainment and some actions are too vague.

42. The LEA has agreed targets for 2004 with the DfES. Based on provisional results for 2002, increases of 17 per cent and 12 per cent are required to meet the targets for English and mathematics at Key Stage 2. Such large increases are clearly unrealistic. At GCSE, increases of seven and five and a half per cent are needed to meet the targets for five or more A*-C and five or more A*-G grades. Given recent rates of improvement these are also unrealistic. Furthermore, although schools recognise the need for challenging and aspirational targets, there are some significant differences between the LEA targets and aggregated school targets, which are based on pupil level data.

43. The LEA considers the Education Development Plan to be the key strategic document to promote school improvement. It does not, at this moment, fulfil this role. It does not bring together and articulate the connections between the full range of initiatives, which in practice make up the LEA's strategy. In particular, it does not define with sufficient clarity the place of Excellence in Cities initiatives. As a result it does not do justice to the quality and impact of EiC which, in reality, has a central role in delivering both school improvement and social inclusion objectives.

Recommendation

In order to ensure that all stakeholders have a clear sense of how individual EiC strands and activities are integrated into planned developments in improvement strategies and service activities:

- incorporate EiC more explicitly and effectively into the strategies for improvement and school improvement programmes, at the time of the next revision of the EDP in 2003.

The progress on implementing the LEA's strategy for school improvement including the EDP

44. The LEA has made steady and sufficient progress in implementing its strategy for school improvement. School inspections demonstrate improvements in the quality of education provided for pupils. Nevertheless, standards of attainment remain stubbornly low and the intended improvements in attendance and exclusions have not materialised.

45. The previous EDP set extremely challenging performance targets for 2002. Over the life of the plan, levels of achievement in all key stages improved, usually at least in line with, and sometimes faster than, the national rate. However, only the target for science at Key Stage 2 was met. Provisional data for 2002 indicate shortfalls of 13 per cent and ten per cent for English and mathematics at Key Stage 2, and five per cent and three per cent for five or more A*-C and one or more A*-G grades at GCSE. Targets for improving attendance and reducing exclusions have not been met.

46. The majority of activities in the previous EDP have been delivered in full and on time. Significant improvements have been made in support for information and communication technology. The LEA framework for self evaluation has been developed and is now used widely in schools. The LEA has improved both its identification of, and intervention in schools which are a cause for concern. The re-organisation of SEN provision has been completed and there are plans for further improvements. However, national guidance has overtaken the LEA's intended developments in performance management at school level. Insufficient progress has been made in providing Key Stage 4 pupils with access to workplaces that will accredit key skills.

47. Monitoring and evaluation arrangements have been sound and have produced perceptive and honest assessments of progress. DfES funding is being used to support relevant initiatives in schools, which did not meet their Key Stage 2 targets. Some areas of the LEA's work, such as support for attendance and behaviour are hampered by lack of shared access to data systems. Not all central systems are compatible with those of schools and services located outside of the civic centre.

Excellence in Cities

48. Good progress has been made in implementing Excellence in Cities. Although EiC does not feature clearly enough in the LEA's overall strategic plans, in practice, it is very

effectively integrated into the LEAs improvement strategies and activities. The core strands of activity are operating effectively.

49. Initial strategic planning, including Newcastle's submission to the DfES for EiC funding, was generally sound with a number of significant strengths. Clear criteria were identified for the allocation of resources across schools. Helpful guidance and draft specifications for the implementation of individual strands and appointment of staff in schools were produced. Schools were organised effectively into clusters for implementing activities. Early planning had weaknesses in the extent to which specific targets for improvement were identified. Subsequent planning has improved and built effectively on the outcomes of early monitoring and reviews. Nevertheless, sufficiently specific targets and outcomes are still not consistently identified in all action plans.

50. EiC has been well-led and well-managed by headteachers, senior officers, strand co-ordinators, and by those responsible for integrating EiC improvement strategies into the work of other services. The LEA has made positive contributions to the development and implementation of EiC and managed those contributions well. The LEA has a clear awareness of its role, developed in partnership with schools. That partnership and the mature relationship that is now developing between the LEA and its schools are real strengths. Both the LEA and headteachers on the executive committee see EiC as a model for local delivery of education and LEA-school partnership in the future.

51. The EiC Partnership, in association with the LEA, has developed sufficiently effective monitoring procedures. The outcomes of monitoring and review are beginning to drive further improvements in the implementation of core strand activities. Here again, the LEA has a clearly defined role. The collection and analysis of data on EiC activities is well integrated with, and contributes to, the LEA's overall monitoring procedures. The involvement of EiC staff in schools in the monitoring process is a strength, and is enabling them to take an increasing role in shaping developments.

52. Satisfactory, and in some respects, good progress is being made in improving the attainment of groups of pupils receiving EiC support, particularly at Key Stage 3. With the exception of the proportion of pupils achieving five or more A*-C and one or more A*-G grades at GCSE, most central Excellence in Cities targets have been achieved, and several exceeded. Nevertheless, the impact on the LEA's overall performance targets is still mixed. EiC has not yet turned out to be the solution to some seemingly intractable problems, for example, the need to reduce exclusions and improve levels of attendance.

53. The dissemination of good practice and networking across specialist and Beacon schools is developing satisfactorily. However, as the LEA acknowledges, there has not yet been a specific EiC dimension to this work. Relevant EiC activities, particularly the gifted and talented strand, have not always played their full part in directing the development of the recently opened City Learning Centre, but plans are now in hand to take full advantage of this strand of the EiC initiative.

The allocation of resources to priorities

54. The last inspection judged that, though financial planning was a strength of the authority, central costs were too high and should be scrutinised to determine their justification, with a view to increasing delegation to schools. Though no detailed fieldwork has been carried out in this inspection, analysis of the council's funding regimes has provided sufficient evidence to confirm the original judgement. However, issues concerning central costs and school balances remain.

55. The council retains its strategic medium term financial plan, but, in recent years, annual uncertainty about levels of funding available, specific budget pressures and the need to set a balanced budget have limited its impact. Council balances are at a minimum desirable level, and imaginative use has been made of funding sources from private finance initiatives (PFI) through to Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. The education budget is generally well-controlled, enhanced in 2002/3 by an additional £1million for special education. Consultation and co-operation with schools about budget issues is timely and thorough. Schools have indicated that they are content with the current level of delegation and school budgets have been used to assist matched Standards Fund monies. The school survey confirms that good advice has been given to schools on how they might secure external funding to support school development.

56. Recent changes in formula funding in mainstream schools in 2001 and in special schools in 2002, have correctly provided an increased educational rationale to delegation. However, finances have not yet been available to support these changes in full.

57. The level of delegation to schools has been increased since the last inspection, but overall, corporate charges made to the education department are too high. This has been recognised by recent Best Value reviews. In spite of continuous monitoring by the LEA, school balances are also too high, having increased from 4.5 per cent at the time of the last inspection to 7.1 per cent at the end of 2001/2 and to 7.6 per cent overall at the end of 2002/3. The increase is only partly accounted for by the 2001/2 Standards Fund spending profile being extended to August.

Recommendations

In order to improve the allocation of resources to priorities:

- reduce the overall cost of corporate charges to the education directorate; and
- work with schools to reduce the level of school balances.

Strategies to ensure continuous improvement, including Best Value

58. Arrangements to promote continuous improvement within the education department were not inspected in 1999. They are, currently, highly satisfactory. In respect of the council as a whole, the district auditor considered the 2000/1 Best Value Performance Plan to be good, containing a comprehensive review programme, and a framework for performance management. However, the current plan, published in June 2002, is not as strong and reflects the uncertainties for forward planning introduced by the need to implement the conclusions of the recent external corporate assessment, the impact of the council's 'Going for Growth'

policy and the nationally changed format for Best Value Performance Plans. The council's performance management and appraisal system is comprehensive and clear, containing the necessary links between individual and team performance and service planning. However, within the council as a whole, it has been patchily applied and there are inconsistencies in service planning.

59. Despite sharing some of the weaknesses in performance systems of the council, the education department is well positioned for further improvement, utilising the council's balanced scorecard approach. Though limited in its references to Newcastle's corporate priorities, the newly published document, 'The Strategic Role of the Education Service' provides a good framework statement. Individual service plans have a common structure and, generally, provide a sound basis for evaluation of performance. However, as yet, they vary too much in the amount of detail they include, particularly in respect of success criteria and finance. Links between plans are not always clearly established.

60. Completed Best Value reviews on school place planning and admissions, and 16-19 education have produced soundly structured improvement plans. The current Best Value review of the role of the LEA is ambitious in attempting to cover such a wide area of activity; a good start has been made. Other corporate reviews of activity, involving human and financial resources and services provided by the council, are having a direct and beneficial effect on the delivery of services to schools.

61. The LEA has made a reasonable start in its attempts to help schools ensure they implement Best Value principles in spending their delegated budget and, in doing so, is beginning to move to a more open approach to the delivery of services. Schools have found recent publications and guidance from the LEA helpful in formulating school Best Value policies.

Section 2: Support for school improvement

Summary

62. Since the last inspection, the quality of support for school improvement has been maintained or improved in all but one function. In particular, the LEA has significantly improved its ability to identify and intervene in under-performing schools and in its support to schools for raising standards in ICT. Excellence in Cities has supported the development of new ways of working with schools and other partners.

63. Standards of attainment have risen, but not sufficiently or at a fast enough rate to close the gap with national averages. Senior officers recognise that standards of attainment in Newcastle are not yet high enough either for individual pupils or to ensure the success of the council's regeneration strategies. They continue to challenge schools where there is evidence that, either as groups or individuals, they can do better.

64. Apart from the school improvement service, other services are also focused appropriately on school improvement and, with the exception of support for attendance and behaviour, their support is largely effective. The core services supporting school improvement provide satisfactory value for money.

Monitoring, challenge, support and intervention

65. The LEA's work in monitoring, challenging, supporting and intervening in schools was satisfactory with a small number of weaknesses at the last inspection. These weaknesses have been remedied, and the work is now good. Headteachers and governors have a thorough understanding of these functions, which is regularly being refined and extended through discussion and in practice.

66. The school improvement strategy sets out a clear and comprehensive framework for school improvement and provides a detailed account of the processes used. It covers the interaction between the LEA's monitoring and schools' own self evaluation practices, makes clear how the school improvement service supports schools in review and development, and outlines the circumstances in which the LEA will intervene to support schools causing concern. Further documents amplify this, notably a checklist of indicators of potential concern, known as 'triggers of fragility', produced jointly by the school improvement service and a group of headteachers.

67. The LEA has provided good support to schools in developing a self-evaluation process which culminates in a useful annual self-evaluation report by each school that is moderated by advisers and presented to the governing body and the LEA. Schools understand that these self-reviews are likely to be challenged by the LEA, using data about school performance and information from contacts with the school by advisers and other officers. Arrangements for the categorisation of schools have recently been refined to reflect more accurately the different levels of need and intervention. These are clearly set out and are well understood by schools. This is a good strategy for school improvement and the school survey indicates that headteachers believe that the LEA has a well-informed

understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of its schools. The schools' evaluation of the quality of support provided for school self evaluation is the highest recorded in the LEAs that have been surveyed to date.

The focusing of LEA support on areas of greatest need

68. This was satisfactory at the last inspection. The LEA's assessment is that it continues to be satisfactory. Although no fieldwork was undertaken in the present inspection, the evidence seen indicates that it is at least satisfactory, with few areas of weakness. Schools identified as most in need are the focus of most support. Monitoring arrangements, including thorough analyses of performance data, enable the LEA to identify these schools reliably. The categorisation system, particularly with the recent improvements that have been made, enables support to be targeted accurately.

69. Changes in the structure of the school improvement service have improved the range of its expertise and increased the proportion of its work that is purchased by schools. Service level agreements offer schools a good measure of flexibility in selecting the support they wish to purchase from the service. The service has developed better arrangements than previously existed to help schools identify independent sources of support and advice, on lines set out in the action plan following the last inspection.

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

70. The last inspection found that these aspects of the LEA's work with its schools were satisfactory, with some good features. They are now good, a view reinforced by headteachers in the school survey. Detailed monitoring, using both performance data, school self-evaluation and the outcomes of adviser and other officer visits, is done systematically and thoroughly.

71. Schools not identified as a cause of concern are allocated an equivalent of one day each per year for attached adviser visits. This is divided into three termly visits so the time used is more than one day. Advisers also attend one governing body meeting per year for each school. There is no plan to reduce the time for the more successful schools. At this stage of development, and given the need to raise standards across the board if LEA targets are to be met, this amount of support is acceptable. Additional support, differentiated to the needs of schools, is provided to schools identified as causing concern, and all schools are able to purchase further support under a service level agreement.

72. Notes of visits are sent promptly to headteachers and the sample seen indicates that they contain detailed evaluation and, where appropriate, observations that challenge the school to consider alternatives to its current practice. These notes are not usually sent to chairs of governors, however, and an opportunity to support governing bodies in the exercise of their responsibility is being missed.

Recommendation

In order to improve the effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring and challenging schools:

-
- ensure that a copy of all notes following the visit of advisers or other officers to schools is sent to the chair of governors as well as to the headteacher.

73. Through the setting of targets and through other contacts, which advisers and officers have with schools, there is a strong element of challenge that is understood and valued by headteachers. The performance monitoring service, working closely with the school improvement service, provides each school with a comprehensive set of performance data at LEA, school and pupil level. It maintains a detailed database of sequential information about the attainment of individual pupils and provides an annual report for each school containing both the data and an interpretation of its significance. This forms a good basis for target setting as well as enabling schools to undertake their own added value study. There is an effective and timely transfer of data when pupils move between phases, including from middle to high schools. Inefficiencies stemming from a failure to develop the means of electronic data transmission have been recognised and plans are in place to overcome these.

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

74. At the last inspection the LEA's work with under-performing schools was satisfactory. Since then, improvements have been made and the findings of the present inspection support the assessment of the LEA that this is now good. Moreover, as experience is acquired, there are indications that the LEA's response to schools in these circumstances has become more confident and effective.

75. Currently, two schools require special measures and two have serious weaknesses. In total, seven schools have been identified as requiring special measures since 1993. Of these, all but two, where the need was determined less than a year ago, were either closed or made sufficient improvement to be removed from the category. Six other schools have been identified as having serious weaknesses since 1997. Subsequent inspection found that four of these had improved, and the LEA believes that the remaining two have made sufficient improvement to be removed by forthcoming inspections. With the exception of one school, which has had unusually complex difficulties, the LEA's support has been instrumental in resolving these situations within a reasonable time.

76. LEA monitoring arrangements identify accurately schools that are under-performing, and those that are at an earlier stage of experiencing difficulties which, if unsupported, could lead to serious under-performance. These schools are placed in either the "amber" or the "red" category, depending on the seriousness of the problems, and this categorisation is used to determine the amount of additional support to be provided.

77. Action plans for schools causing concern are prepared with the help of advisers and are reported on regularly to governors, to senior officers in the raising achievement division and to the cabinet member with responsibility for education. In a number of schools, the attachment of an experienced headteacher, released part or full-time from another school, has proved to be of considerable value. This is building up a pool of expertise about how best to help schools in difficulties. Where it has judged it necessary, the LEA has not hesitated to use its powers to intervene. Poor performance has been a significant factor in determining

school closures, and, in other instances, the LEA has appointed additional members to governing bodies.

Support for literacy

78. The last inspection judged that support for literacy was satisfactory. In the period between inspections, progress has been insufficient. Management of the strategy, particularly last year, suffered from lack of continuity and insufficient management time because of personnel matters outside the LEA's control. Support to schools has been, and is currently, unsatisfactory. There have, however, been very recent developments, which have had too little time to have direct impact on the work of schools and standards of attainment. They provide a good basis for improvement.

79. Until recently, the implementation of the strategy suffered a loss of momentum. Support was not sufficiently well focused on identified need. Consequently, the work of consultants was not well planned and their time was not used effectively. Across the LEA, standards in English at the end of Key Stage 2 fell by three per cent in 2001. Furthermore, they improved in less than half of the schools receiving support in 2001/2.

80. In January 2002 a senior adviser took over the responsibility for managing both primary strategies and, in September, a new line manager for literacy took up post. A recent audit of schools has enabled the LEA to re-focus its support to identified schools, for particular purposes, using relevant criteria that are well known to all schools. Detailed action plans have been agreed with these schools and the intention is that these will contribute to the LEA's evaluation of the impact of support. A further ten schools have been identified to participate in a DfES project aimed at intensifying support for both literacy and numeracy. All schools have access to a named consultant for advice.

81. The quality of training is satisfactory. Arrangements for the dissemination of good practice are not well developed, and, although leading teachers have been identified, less effective use has been made of this resource than in other authorities.

Recommendation

In order to improve support for literacy:

- improve the arrangements for the dissemination of best practice and, in particular, find ways of making more effective use of the leading teachers of literacy.

Support for numeracy

82. Support for numeracy is satisfactory. This was the judgement made in the last inspection. No detailed fieldwork was carried out during the current inspection, but both the LEA and schools judge that it continues to be satisfactory. Results in national tests show an improvement of almost 11 per cent in the five years since 1997 compared to around nine per cent nationally. More recently, improvement has been uneven but provisional data for 2002 indicates a significant improvement after a fall of over three per cent in 2001.

Support for information and communication technology (ICT)

83. At the last inspection, support for ICT was satisfactory. It is now good. There have been significant improvements in, for example, the ICT infrastructure in all schools. The capacity for further improvement is also good, particularly in view of the LEA's progress in meeting broadband connection targets for 2003, and its strong focus on raising standards. Schools across each sector recognise the good progress since the last inspection. All schools now have server based networks that support the curriculum as well as management and administrative functions.

84. The LEA's ICT strategy sets out a clear vision with relevant objectives and measurable targets. There are good links with the EDP, particularly in relation to the national strategies and the focus on social inclusion. Raising attainment in pupils' ICT capability and, in particular, the use of ICT across the curriculum are key components of the strategy. Pupils' progress in ICT is better than in similar LEAs and nationally at Key Stages 1 and 2, but not at Key Stages 3 and 4. There is little evidence of improvement in the proportion of students leaving school with ICT accreditation. As an integral part of the EDP, the LEA is targeting higher ICT attainments through the Key Stage 3 Strategy. As well as Key Stage 3 targets, some schools are beginning to set targets at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2.

85. The LEA's support for schools' ICT development plans has improved and schools have valued the LEA's support in accessing National Grid for Learning funds. This has resulted in some highly focused plans, the best of which draw together relevant school based priorities and future developments that take account of key components of the EDP. A comprehensive range of training opportunities in ICT is provided for teachers. A local consortium has provided much of the New Opportunities Fund training and schools have valued the face-to-face training programme. The LEA has supplemented this national training programme with good in-service courses for support staff as well as teachers.

86. The successful implementation of the National Grid for Learning has significantly boosted schools' efforts to meet National Curriculum requirements. The current computer:pupil ratios of 1:10 in primary and 1:5 in secondary exceed the LEA's 2002 target and, in secondary schools, the target for 2004 has already been reached. All schools have access to the internet. The quality and quantity of hardware have improved significantly in all schools. The LEA has strengthened its technical ICT support for schools in order to respond to increased provision and ICT use.

87. The LEA draws effectively upon the work of a good range of providers for schools to improve their work with ICT and to share good practice. The opportunity to use the Newcastle United Learning Centre has been greatly valued by schools, for example for gifted and talented pupils at their summer schools. E-classroom projects with video conferencing facilities and integrated learning systems are also underway in a number of schools. The recently built and very well equipped City Learning Centre offers an exciting opportunity to schools to extend their use of ICT. The overall strategy for the use of the City Learning Centre, however, remains unclear and at an early stage of development.

Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3

88. The Key Stage 3 strategy has been launched since the last inspection. The LEA's support for the strategy is good and what has been achieved in this first year provides a good basis for further improvement. The LEA has successfully adapted the national strategy to work within both its two tier and three tier system.

89. Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 in all core subjects is in line with that in similar LEAs. It is below the national average, but the rate of improvement in recent years has been similar to that found nationally. The LEA has agreed challenging targets for Key Stage 3 with the DfES. Aggregated schools targets indicate that these are achievable. Improvements have been made in both attainment and attendance though, at this early stage, this cannot with certainty be attributed to the strategy. Discussions are currently taking place about the most effective ways of evaluating the operation of the strategy.

90. The Key Stage 3 strategy is being implemented to the national timetable and development plans are sensible and suitably detailed. The LEA has built well on the work of its former secondary achievement strategy. It has made efforts to spread the timing of training and minimise the demands on schools. Both this and the quality of training provided are appreciated by schools. Consultants' time is allocated according to need, although, appropriately, all schools will receive some support over the life of the strategy. Their work alongside staff is recognised as useful by schools and their expertise and advice are valued. Sound measures are in place to ensure continuity from the Key Stage 2 strategies. These include the use of 'catch-up' units of work in Year 7 and a number of well-supported summer schools in 2001 and 2002.

91. Owing to the movement of a key member of staff, the overall management of the strategy has suffered some discontinuity. The authority managed the difficulties well and potential disadvantages were minimised. The central consultant team is now complete. Arrangements to manage the strategy are good and there are well identified links with the work of EiC and the EAZ. All schools have followed advice to ensure that their strategy manager is a senior member of staff. Strategy managers value the half-termly meetings that are held with the LEA. Strand leaders have now been designated in all schools. Schools have completed cross-curricular audits for most strands and the ensuing action plans are sound.

Support for minority ethnic groups, including Travellers

92. The last inspection did not report on the effectiveness of support provided by the LEA for these pupils. The findings of this inspection confirm the LEA's assessment that it is satisfactory. The weaknesses that exist are known to the LEA. Improvements have been made, particularly through the establishment of the minority ethnic, Traveller and refugee achievement service within the school improvement service in autumn 2001. There is now a clear view of the responsibilities of this combined service, and the development of working contacts between the minority ethnic, Traveller and refugee achievement service and the school improvement service provides a sound basis for further improvement.

93. The LEA has made a sound start on implementing the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. It has provided schools with model policies and guidance on meeting the statutory

requirements of the Act. It has, sensibly, asked all schools and governing bodies to review their policies and practice during 2002. It promotes the use of the Commission for Racial Equality's school standards and the associated tools for self-evaluation have been recommended to schools. The LEA has circulated to schools up-to-date policies on equal opportunities and bilingualism. The latter recognises correctly the importance of valuing a child's first language while extending competence in English as an additional language. However, some schools find this difficult to implement since they may have as many as 40 first languages represented. The minority ethnic, Traveller and refugee achievement service has developed valuable contacts with the universities in the city, and uses these to extend its pool of part-time bilingual assistants.

94. The majority of the minority ethnic grant to schools is delegated to schools using an appropriate formula. This is based on an audit that schools complete annually in October and which is moderated by a panel, that includes teachers, to secure comparability. Analysis of the outcomes of the audit in 2001 led to the identification of schools where pupils with English as an additional language have made insufficient progress. These schools were required to produce an action plan designed to improve the assessment and performance of these pupils.

95. The level and quality of support for schools is satisfactory. All schools, including those with very small numbers of minority ethnic pupils, have a consultant attached to whom they can refer for advice and support. Attendance, particularly for Asian pupils and particularly in secondary schools, continues to be a major problem that is not responding to efforts to improve it. Two bilingual education welfare officers have been employed to work with schools with the highest numbers of minority ethnic pupils. The service also employs a refugee and asylum advisory teacher.

96. A detailed database of the attainment and progress of all minority ethnic pupils is maintained by the minority ethnic, Traveller and refugee achievement service. This is not, as yet, linked to the main pupil performance database, and this limits the possibility for schools to analyse data in as much detail as they need when setting targets for the attainment of minority ethnic pupils.

97. Limited funds are available to provide training for teachers. Sensibly, the LEA has entered into regional arrangements that are more cost effective. The main emphasis is on helping teachers to meet the needs of children of refugees and asylum seekers. Staff within the service have received training about the implications of national primary strategies for their work.

98. Support for Traveller children is good, though there are only small numbers in the city. The minority ethnic, Traveller and refugee achievement service includes two part-time teachers who are specialists in working with Traveller children. At the time of the annual Town Moor fair, the LEA provides a two-week summer school attended by about 60 children, which has a good reputation nationally.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

99. The LEA's support to schools for gifted and talented pupils is good. Although this aspect of the LEA's work was not inspected previously, it is clear that substantial developments have taken place since the implementation of Excellence in Cities (EiC) and that a number of existing initiatives have been effectively consolidated.

100. The Education Development Plan includes work with gifted and talented pupils through the implementation of the EiC programme, and continuing support for national and local programmes to raise attainment in primary schools. Excellence Challenge is building effectively upon EiC and Education Action Zone developments in conjunction with Newcastle and Northumbria Universities. All targets for gifted and talented pupils were met in 2001.

101. The programme of support for gifted and talented pupils is well-led. Schools receive high levels of support and challenge. Effective monitoring and evaluation of the work of gifted and talented pupils, and the implementation of EiC programmes as a whole, are in place and a strong emphasis on self-review is developing. Overall, the LEA has a clear view of the strengths and weaknesses of schools' provision for gifted and talented pupils, which informs its comprehensive action plan. Audits by gifted and talented co-ordinators of activities in schools focus sensibly on teaching and learning, curriculum enrichment and school organisation structures. Any weaknesses in schools, such as budgeting difficulties or changes of co-ordinator, are identified quickly and appropriate action taken. Schools have benefited from the LEA's initial leadership and support of this work and are now managing their own developments well.

102. The range of partnerships is a strong feature of the LEA's gifted and talented work. Good links have been made with the University of the First Age, the independent sector and universities as well as professional organisations. Summer schools are well established and provide a good range of activities including art, music, drama, sport and ICT.

Support for school management

103. Support for school management was good at the time of the last inspection. The LEA's own evaluation indicated that it remained good. As a result, no detailed fieldwork was conducted. Evidence from the inspection of other areas indicates a number of strengths, including the identification of schools requiring support or intervention, the quality and timeliness of that support or intervention and the advice and guidance provided to develop school self-evaluation.

Support to governors

104. The support to school governors was highly satisfactory at the time of the last inspection. The findings of this inspection confirm the LEA's view that it remains highly satisfactory. Since the last inspection, a combined governor services unit has been established as a fully traded training and support service to improve the effectiveness of governing bodies. It includes a clerking service, which increasing numbers of schools have

purchased since 1999. Vacancies for governors rose from 2000 to 2001 and were higher than national averages. Local advertising and the use of a governor agency have helped to reduce vacancies for LEA governors from 21 per cent to 16 per cent during the last academic year. Efforts to recruit more governors representing ethnic minorities, however, have been largely unsuccessful.

Recommendation

In order to improve support for governors:

- further develop recruitment policies to fill vacancies on governing bodies and increase the representation of ethnic minorities by targeting groups and interested parties more directly.

105. A good range of support and advice options is available through a service level agreement. Advice to governing bodies is helpful and readily available and the programme for governor training is comprehensive and responsive to the needs of governing bodies. The LEA's communication with governing bodies is effective with information and advice provided via newsletters, the website and at meetings. The recently formed governors' association meets the director and senior officers once a term. Governors are also invited to the annual standing conference on planning education at which aspects of the EDP are considered and discussed.

106. The LEA has sound strategies in place to support weak governing bodies and, if necessary, to replace governors. In order to improve the contribution of governors to the strategic direction of schools, the LEA encourages governing bodies to undertake self-evaluation and provides relevant guidance.

The effectiveness of services to support school management

107. Services to support school management range from highly satisfactory to very good and, overall, have improved since the last inspection. Key improvements are taking place, in particular through the work of a strengthened central procurement team. An education directory of services, published in April 2002, clearly sets out all the services available to schools, both central and delegated. The school survey responses indicate a much higher level of satisfaction than for most LEAs. The planned introduction of brokerage arrangements for 2003/4, with increased benchmarking and improved co-ordination for all services, are steps in the right direction.

108. Nevertheless, there are weaknesses. Co-ordination of the effective delivery of services is made more difficult by the shared management of the services by different directorates. At present, the detail of service level agreements is sent to schools at different times, with limited common information, and with individual arrangements for quality assurance. The LEA has not developed a brokerage role and the council's procurement policy, which still tends to favour in-house suppliers, has only recently been adopted.

109. **Financial services** were assessed as good in the last inspection. No detailed inspection work has been carried out, though the available evidence suggests that it remains

good. The school survey rating was high and the delegated service is bought back by all schools. A District Audit report of 2000 considered that the LEA's financial monitoring and stewardship role in respect of schools needed to be strengthened and appropriate action has been taken. Progress has been slow on implementing the recommendation of the last inspection to develop electronic reconciliation between schools and the council's financial system though this is planned for 2003.

110. The LEA's support for **human resources** was very good in the last report and no detailed inspection work has been undertaken. The school survey rating is very high and all schools buy back the service. Good recent developments include the introduction of a regular schools' newsletter, a revised personnel handbook and a new computerised payroll and human resources system.

111. The last report was very critical of the council's management of its building stock, but acknowledged that the LEA was making efforts to meet schools' needs in respect of **property services**. The service is now highly satisfactory. Schools surveyed consider that building maintenance services and the programming and management of building projects are better than satisfactory. Technical support, available to schools from the education department as part of asset management planning, is sound and improving. Almost all schools buy back for some or all of their needs from central council services, on an ad hoc basis, for which they either use a detailed schedule of rates or, more regularly, a one-stop service. Schools, rightly, also have access to a standing list of approved contractors maintained by the council.

112. The LEA's provision for **ICT administrative support** was satisfactory at the time of the last report. The service now provided is good. All schools buy back the service and school survey responses to the ICT related questions show a high approval rating with the quality of technical support, the highest of all LEAs surveyed. The service has benefited from a planned interlinked administrative and curriculum ICT model, and all schools have the necessary infrastructure. The education ICT strategy is clear and fits well with the corporate strategy. Communication is good, both with the corporate centre and with schools, the latter assisted by termly co-ordination meetings. Though the service has increased in size since the last inspection, comparison of its costs with those of other competitors demonstrates its value for money. Electronic communication with schools is established, via the internet and an intranet. Plans are in hand to connect all schools to the broadband wide area network, and all service managers to the pupil database in 2003.

113. Services for **cleaning and caretaking** have not been inspected. They were previously highly satisfactory and they remain so, with the school survey recording the highest satisfaction rating for all LEAs surveyed for cleaning, caretaking and grounds maintenance. Most schools buy back into the service. The last report was critical of the service provided for **grounds maintenance**, and recommended improvements. The service has improved and is now highly satisfactory. Some 65 per cent of schools buy back into the service, less than other premises related services. Improvements have been made. In particular the creation of specialist teams focused only on schools, and the adoption of specific service level agreements catering for the needs of individual schools. A forthcoming Best Value review is intended to identify further areas for improvement.

114. The previous inspection made no comment on **catering** facilities. They are satisfactory with few areas of weaknesses. Almost all schools continue to use the council to deliver the school meals service and, in the school survey, rate it as above satisfactory. Since the last inspection, costs have rightly been much reduced and menu planning developed in consultation with schools. The LEA has belatedly introduced plans to transfer funding from transport to the provision of some regeneration of kitchens on school sites. Currently, the work being undertaken on benchmarking the constituent costs of the provision of a meal is not sufficiently detailed.

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

115. The extent to which the LEA is successful in assuring the supply and quality of teachers is highly satisfactory. The level of vacancies is lower than the national average and the LEA did not attract funding from the Teacher Training Agency to appoint a recruitment and retention manager. The presence of four university initial teacher training departments in the area makes a positive contribution to the recruitment process. Nevertheless, the LEA recognises that the age profile of staff, especially headteachers, is high and requires careful monitoring. There is also a shortage of adequate supply cover for teachers. Given that the number of working days lost per teacher is higher in Newcastle than nationally, the pressure on schools to secure additional supply teachers of sufficient quality is particularly high.

116. The LEA's draft recruitment and retention strategy includes short- and medium-term plans, which embrace aspects such as attracting a workforce to the north east, as well as actions to provide better information for applicants and opportunities for career progression.

117. The continuing professional development strategy provides a good range of training opportunities for teachers with a strong emphasis on school improvement and support for school self-evaluation. It is supplemented by partnerships with outside providers such as University of First Age and Newcastle University. Recent evaluations identify the need for more opportunities to dissemination and sharing of good practice. The shortage of supply cover for teachers also affects attendance at in-service training and contributed to the cancellation of a high number of courses in 2001.

118. The Education Development Plan includes, appropriately, the cross-cutting theme of leadership, management and governance with plans to provide a career pathway for teachers and governors. This links well to the LEA's support for national programmes such as the National Professional Qualification for Headship and the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers. The LEA's induction programme for new deputy and headteachers includes satisfactory mentoring arrangements as well as training events. The induction arrangements for newly qualified teachers are well established and the proportion of newly qualified teachers retained after their first year is high compared to national averages.

The effectiveness of services to support school improvement

119. The previous inspection judged that the work of the advisory and other services in supporting school improvement was satisfactory overall with some strengths. Limited fieldwork was undertaken in this area, but it is clear that services remain satisfactory with many strengths and few weaknesses.

120. The school improvement service has undergone a major structural reorganisation with several staff changes. New appointments have gone a long way to ensuring a well-balanced range of expertise and experience. Steps have been taken to cover for gaps in secondary senior management experience through the use of external consultants.

121. Leadership of the school improvement service is good with particular strengths in clarity of purpose, sound communications, and a willingness to take difficult decisions. The distribution of responsibilities within the service is good and makes effective use of expertise. In many respects, strategic planning is also good. Schools are regularly invited to contribute to the evaluation of its work.

122. Performance management follows the council pattern for individual officers. Targets for individuals and the overall priorities for the school improvement service are well linked. Induction arrangements for newly appointed members of the service are thorough and effective. However, arrangements for professional development are not as thorough and are not based on a sufficiently systematic exploration of the needs of the service and of the individual.

Section 3: Special Educational Needs

Summary

123. The LEA has successfully implemented major changes in its provision for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN). A reduction in the number of special schools and the creation of additionally resourced centres has led to a better continuum of provision, which allows more pupils with SEN to be educated in mainstream schools. There is good practice developing in work between mainstream and special schools, though this has not yet been formalised and supported with appropriate funding mechanisms. The LEA's support for SEN is highly valued by schools. However, arrangements for funding are unsatisfactory. The LEA has begun to take steps to improve funding arrangements and work is in hand to overcome weaknesses in its monitoring of both pupils' progress and resources delegated to schools.

Strategy

124. The previous inspection judged the LEA's strategy for SEN to be satisfactory. In the LEA's view it remains so, and schools and available evidence confirmed this view. As a result, no detailed fieldwork was undertaken as part of this inspection. However, it is clear that many of the strategies that were being introduced at the time of the last inspection have been implemented effectively, are working well and are producing positive results. In line with the LEA's clear policy on inclusion, an increasing number of pupils are being educated effectively in mainstream schools. Special school provision has been successfully reorganised. Children with the most complex needs are now educated in the four new special schools. Twenty three additionally resourced centres for pupils with learning or behavioural difficulties have been established in mainstream schools.

Statutory obligations

125. When last inspected, the LEA was taking reasonable steps to meet its statutory responsibilities in respect of special educational needs. Following a period of unsatisfactory performance, the LEA is once again meeting its statutory obligations.

126. The percentage of children for whom the LEA maintains a statement is well below statistical neighbours and national levels. At the time of the first inspection almost all draft statements were completed within the expected timescale of 18 weeks. Subsequently, the rates, both with and without exceptions, fell substantially to 35.6 per cent and 60.7 per cent respectively, largely due to staffing difficulties. Following the appointment of new staff, the LEA has significantly improved the administration of the statutory assessment process and, during the three months immediately prior to this inspection, all statements were completed within 18 weeks, other than where exceptions applied. Officers have taken appropriate steps to ensure that the number of assessments where medical advice has delayed completion is minimised.

127. Criteria used for making statutory assessments are consistent with the Code of Practice and schools have been provided with appropriate guidance and training on the Code. However, not all statements are sufficiently specific when defining the provision to be made.

Recommendation**In order to meet statutory responsibilities with regard to special educational needs:**

- ensure that, in line with the Code of Practice, all statements are specific in detailing the provision that is required and the funding implications.

128. Parents have access to clear advice on support available for children with SEN. They are also informed of the parent partnership scheme, independent parental support, conciliation arrangements and the right of appeal to the Tribunal. Parent partnership officers have an appropriate degree of independence from the LEA.

SEN functions to support school improvement

129. The LEA's support to schools to enable them to improve their own capacity to manage SEN was judged to be satisfactory by the previous inspection. The LEA acknowledges that some key aspects of this function, particularly the monitoring of schools' use of delegated funding for SEN, are not performed satisfactorily. Nevertheless, there are some significant strengths; these outweigh weaknesses and, overall, the LEA's support is satisfactory.

130. Schools value SEN support services. The quality of support, advice and training offered by the special educational needs teaching and support service and the educational psychology service has helped to develop schools' confidence in managing SEN and inclusion strategies and supporting improvement in attainment. This is significantly aided by effective SEN networks facilitated by the LEA. The educational psychology service has a sensible focus on whole school training and support, particularly at secondary level, in order to maximise the effectiveness of their limited resource. There is evidence that this has reduced the need for statements. Nevertheless, whilst these services are responsive, the support they provide is not always strictly allocated according to sufficiently clear and specific criteria, which are fully understood by schools.

Recommendation**In order to support school improvement in the area of special educational needs:**

- ensure that systems, which are clear to schools, are developed and implemented which allocate SEN support to schools on the basis of identified need.

131. There are good links between SEN support services and the school improvement service via the two advisers who comprise the SEN and inclusion advisory team. The LEA has recognised the need for greater emphasis on SEN and inclusion issues in the school self-review process and in its monitoring by all attached advisers.

132. Data indicate that pupils with SEN are making sound progress, but the LEA's monitoring of pupils' progress has been weak. Services do not have access to school level data to support fully their strategic planning.

Recommendation

In order to support school improvement in the area of special educational needs:

- develop a comprehensive system to monitor the progress of individuals and groups of pupils with SEN.

133. The previous inspection report recommended that special schools be funded to enable pupils to gain experience of mainstream schools. This has not yet been done. Some significant, but informal, links have developed between mainstream and special schools, and mainstream schools value the expertise of special school staff. A small one-off allocation of funding has been given to special schools this year to finance out-reach work, but no formal strategy has been developed for taking this initiative forward.

Recommendation

In order to support school improvement in the area of special educational needs:

- ensure that special schools are funded appropriately to develop their outreach work and to allow pupils to gain experience of mainstream schools.

Value for money

134. This function was unsatisfactory at the time of the last inspection. It continues to be, as acknowledged by the LEA's self-assessment.

135. In 2001/2 Newcastle's total budget for SEN, including central and delegated funds, was higher than the average for statistical neighbours, metropolitan and English LEAs. It was enhanced by a further £1million in 2002/3. The reorganisation of special schools in 1999 was well administered, though insufficient account was taken of the resulting increased demands on the transport budget. Following reorganisation, and after thorough consultation, a well framed funding formula for special schools was introduced in 2002.

136. Consultation is, belatedly, taking place on the proper allocation of funding to mainstream schools' SEN budgets. Newcastle's delegation scheme for mainstream schools is well funded, but inappropriately configured. Funds delegated for additional educational needs are far in excess of those of other LEAs. Specific funding delegated to schools for statements is insufficient and not tailored to individual needs. Furthermore, it has to be supplemented from a central fund, which is over-committed. Only very recently, and too late, is a potentially robust procedure for the monitoring of schools' delegated SEN budgets being introduced.

Recommendation**In order to improve value for money in special educational needs:**

define clearly each element for SEN within schools' budgets.

137. The quality of services provided to raise attainment for children with special educational needs is generally good. Weaknesses in the monitoring of pupils' progress and schools' use of their delegated budgets, and in financial procedures, mean that the LEA is not able to demonstrate the impact of these services. Overall, therefore, the LEA cannot effectively assess whether its support for SEN provides satisfactory value for money.

Recommendation**In order to improve value for money in special educational needs:**

- introduce effective arrangements for monitoring and evaluating the impact of expenditure on SEN.

Section 4: Promoting social inclusion

Summary of effectiveness in promoting social inclusion

138. The LEA is strongly committed to the promotion of social inclusion for all pupils. The overall effectiveness of its strategy is satisfactory. The previous inspection report did not comment in detail on how the LEA fulfilled its statutory duties with regard to health and safety, welfare and child protection and looked after children. Nor did it comment on the effectiveness of measures to combat racism. The work of the LEA in all these areas is highly satisfactory. Furthermore, significant improvements have taken place in relation to the provision of school places, asset management planning and provision for pupils who have no school place. However, too many pupils leave school without any qualification and the performance and progress of groups of at-risk pupils is variable. In the previous inspection, support for behaviour was satisfactory. It is now unsatisfactory. Levels of both permanent and fixed term exclusion are too high and rising. Support for attendance remains unsatisfactory. The LEA has not made sufficient progress, and targets for improvement have not been met. In both these areas, detailed analysis of the reasons for lack of progress, in order to inform future support strategies, is hampered by inadequate data systems and the inability to transfer information between the education directorate, other relevant services and schools.

Recommendation

In order to inform future support strategies for the promotion of social inclusion:

- establish, urgently, electronic systems that allow services within the education directorate, other relevant services and schools to share, efficiently and effectively, accurate information regarding the performance, attendance and exclusion of pupils.

The strategy to promote social inclusion

139. The education directorate's strategy to promote social inclusion is highly satisfactory. Social inclusion is one of the prime objectives of the council's regeneration strategy along with reversing the current decline in population, securing stable communities and reducing poverty and deprivation. It recognises the major role of education in the regeneration and re-population of communities by developing and improving schools, thus making them places which serve the wider needs of the community. The local government association has designated Newcastle LEA as one of seven pathfinders in the development of 'full service' schools, bringing together professionals from a range of services relevant to the needs of communities, schools and pupils.

140. The education directorate works effectively with corporate partners such as social services and community and housing directorates, and with external partners. It has a prominent role in the development of major regeneration projects, such as New Deal for Communities and single regeneration budget initiatives. Additional external and internal funding has been secured and is well targeted. The directorate works productively with

partners such as the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership and Sure Start projects to promote social inclusion.

141. The directorate has consulted upon and recently published a social inclusion policy and implementation plan. This is a sensible attempt to set out the commitment and expectations of the directorate, include schools in the development of policy, and provide greater coherence to the initiatives and activities included in a number of priorities and themes in the Education Development Plan and in Excellence in Cities programmes. The current Education Development Plan gives a much higher profile to social inclusion than the previous one. Excellence in Cities has helped to increase the coherence of various strands of work focusing on providing more effective support for social inclusion and for disaffected young people.

142. The recently agreed local public service agreement gives further emphasis to the council's social inclusion agenda and includes enhanced targets for pupils' attainment at Key Stage 3 and attendance in both primary and secondary phases.

The supply of school places

143. The previous inspection considered the effectiveness of the LEA in relation to the provision of school places to be unsatisfactory and recommended that the high percentage of surplus school places be tackled. Considerable progress has been made and current performance is highly satisfactory. The Best Value review of school place planning contributed to that improvement process by, for example, promoting the involvement of area committees in the planning process and establishing educational criteria to underpin any further structural change. Forecasting of future school populations is reasonably accurate and is now being reviewed to improve further.

144. At the time of the last inspection, surplus places were 16.5 per cent in primary and 11 per cent in secondary schools. Since then, seven schools have closed, with four schools extending from first schools to the full primary age range and one new secondary school being established. In all, around 4000 places have been removed and, by September 2002, surplus places had been reduced to six per cent in primary and one per cent in secondary education. This has been achieved via good planning and open consultation with schools. The School Organisation Committee has had much to do and has functioned effectively. The infant class size plan has been successfully introduced.

145. The School Organisation Plan has been published late and has a number of deficiencies. While individual consultation with schools and area committees about future planning issues is good, the plan does not always provide sufficient indication of the LEA's proposals for the next five years. The school population is set to decline again by some 18 per cent between 2001 and 2011, unless this can be halted by the council's 'Going for Growth' strategy. This is acknowledged in the plan, but not covered in sufficient depth, either in policy or statistical terms. The LEA already has over 15 per cent surplus places in nursery classes, even allowing for over half the places being filled on a full-time basis, but no action is proposed in the plan. The detail given in the plan, in response to the area wide inspection of post-16 arrangements, confirms the need to take immediate action to co-ordinate provision within the city, action to which the LEA should have contributed before now.

Recommendation**In order to improve school place planning:**

- clarify the presentation of statistical information and proposed policy development within the School Organisation Plan, ensuring it is published on time.

Asset management

146. At the time of the last inspection, asset management planning, as presently structured, was in its early days. Arrangements for property management were unsatisfactory, leaving the LEA with many buildings in poor condition at a time when responsibility for maintenance was being delegated to schools. Since then, considerable progress has been made, both as a result of the rigour provided by the asset management planning process and additional funding, either directly through the DfES or via local council initiatives. While the neglect of earlier years will take time to eradicate, current provision for asset management planning is good.

147. The creation of a dedicated asset management planning team has improved the LEA's performance. The DfES assessment of the last Newcastle asset management planning in late 2001 was satisfactory with room for specific improvement. The current, revised plan local policy statement and statement of priorities are both good, clear documents setting out, after due consultation, how the LEA will manage capital resources. The asset management plan consultative group is well established and consultation with individual schools is assisted by visits from premises officers. Good advice has been issued to schools on managing and controlling capital expenditure and on preventative maintenance. Capital budgets are well controlled.

148. There is particularly effective use of capital funds to effect school improvement, as well as schools' delegated resources. The government's New Deal funding has played a pivotal role in improving school premises, but Newcastle has been successful in adding to this from a variety of sources, ranging from Lottery monies to funding attracted through major housing developments. Between 1997 and 2003 the council has contributed £9.3million to the capital programme, both revenue and capital. The council's private finance initiative scheme, due to complete in 2004, is rebuilding six schools at a total cost of £47million. Headteachers and governors involved praise the LEA's willingness to work in partnership with schools to improve facilities. Preliminary consultation with schools to produce a second private finance initiative bid further exemplifies the co-operative approach.

149. Long term strategies for continuous improvement in school building stock have been prepared and potential funding sources identified. Even against a background of annually increasing capital investment, peaking in 2002/3 at £23.7 million, there remains much to do to provide good quality accommodation for all Newcastle pupils.

Admissions

150. The last inspection found the LEA management of admissions to be satisfactory, but made recommendations to speed up the appeals process and to provide translations of the key parts of the admissions booklets. Admissions procedures are now highly satisfactory.

151. The admissions process in Newcastle is less complex than in many LEAs. There is little inter-authority movement from home to school and there are well-established arrangements for admission to, and transfer between, schools. Over 96 per cent of parental first choices of school are met. The number of appeals heard for secondary schools is high and has increased, reflecting the limited number of places in some parts of the city. Almost half the appeals relate to in-year transfers.

152. The admissions booklet is sound, but does not contain sufficient specific information on over-subscribed schools. The LEA achieves well above the minimum Audit Commission targets for administration of the admission and appeals process. In 2002, all normal transfer appeals received by the prescribed date were heard before the summer half term. Though the admissions forum was established in 1999, it has not met for over a year because, in the LEA's and partner's views, there have been no key issues to address. Links between the admissions process and the provision of school transport are satisfactory.

153. The Best Value review of admissions included a target to introduce a more standardised approach to school admissions across Newcastle, between the relevant admissions' authorities. This has not been met. The implementation of the Education Act 2002 will require the LEA, along with all LEAs, to reassess aspects of its approach to the administration of the admissions process.

Provision of education for pupils who have no school place

154. At the time of the previous inspection, the LEA's provision for pupils educated otherwise than at school was satisfactory. Since the last inspection the LEA has made the substantial improvements necessary to meet the requirement for full-time education for pupils who have no school place from September 2002. That provision continues to be satisfactory overall, with some strengths. The main weakness is that few pupils of any age are reintegrated into school (only 14 in 2001/02).

Recommendation

In order to improve provision for pupils who have no school place:

- increase the number of pupils who are successfully reintegrated into school following permanent exclusion, making particular efforts to reintegrate those excluded early in Year 10 and to ensure continuity in their GCSE studies.

155. In September 2000, the LEA sensibly amalgamated its pupil referral units (PRU) into one unit, and intends to complete the relocation of the PRU into improved accommodation during the autumn term of 2002. The unit provides full-time education for permanently excluded pupils at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 and all pupils excluded for a fixed period of more than 15 days. Key Stage 4 pupils who are permanently excluded receive full time education via individual packages of provision including placements at the PRU and Newcastle College. Pupils are gaining an increasing number of vocational and other qualifications at Key Stage 4. However, only a small number of GCSE subjects are offered. This is of particular concern as, in the past, pupils who were permanently excluded at Key

Stage 4 have not returned to school and, at present, neither schools nor the LEA expect them to do so.

Recommendation

In order to improve provision for pupils who have no school place:

- enable excluded Key Stage 4 pupils to undertake a wider range of accredited courses, including GCSE.

156. Levels of attendance at the PRU are improving and the LEA has good arrangements in place for tracking and placing pupils who are out of school. There is evidence of very effective multi-disciplinary team working across services to support pupils who are educated otherwise than at school, for example through the pupil tracking panel, which meets weekly.

157. The LEA has in place effective procedures to monitor the education of pupils whose parents choose to educate them at home. Provision for school phobics, young women of school age who are pregnant and young mothers, were effectively brought together with the hospital teaching service in September 2002 as a newly established Hospital Special School. The LEA makes good provision for young mothers to continue their education and has established effective links with a mainstream secondary school.

Attendance

158. The LEA's support for school attendance was unsatisfactory at the time of the previous inspection, despite the efforts of an effective and well managed education welfare service. It remains unsatisfactory, despite strengths in some aspects of its work. The education welfare service continues to provide a wide range of highly regarded services to schools, not least in the support it provides for the welfare of particularly vulnerable pupils and those who are most at risk. However, the support provided to improve attendance has not had sufficient impact on rates of attendance; in particular, levels of authorised absence in secondary schools remain well above national figures and above those of similar authorities. The service has continued to develop and promote some innovative practices, but there are gaps in strategy that need to be addressed. The LEA has not made the progress it anticipated and which it acknowledges needs to be made in improving attendance. It has not met its own reasonable targets.

159. Inspection reports on schools have noted improvements in their practice on attendance. Schools can, and often do, buy in additional officer time, reflecting high levels of satisfaction with the service. In many instances where targeted support has been allocated, there have been noticeable improvements in attendance at whole school and individual pupil level.

160. Nevertheless, rates of attendance in secondary schools have improved only marginally from 1999 to 2001 and are lower than those found both in similar authorities and nationally. Since 1999, there has been a drop in overall attendance at primary level and this is now just below the national figure. Targets for reducing the rates of unauthorised absence

have not been reached at primary level. They were achieved at secondary level between 1999 and 2001, but not in 2001/02. The EDP states that specific attendance targets will be agreed with individual schools. However, not all schools are currently setting attendance targets. Furthermore, the education welfare service is not directly involved in setting these targets or, therefore, in ensuring that the strategies agreed are the ones with the most potential to ensure that targets are met.

Recommendation

In order to improve support for attendance:

- introduce effective mechanisms for setting attendance targets with all schools and strategies to ensure that the targets are met.

161. The LEA makes appropriate use of statutory orders concerning attendance and there are relatively high levels of prosecution for irregular attendance. However, although the police and education welfare officers undertake joint truancy sweeps, the powers available to the police under the Crime and Disorder Act, 1998, have not been used.

Recommendation

In order to improve support for attendance:

- in association with the police, make every effort to improve the success of truancy sweeps by using powers under section 16 of the Crime and Disorder Act, 1998.

162. There is a good policy on attendance with clear, comprehensive guidelines available to schools. Resources are allocated to schools based on an analysis of need and against criteria that have been shared with schools. However, the education welfare service acknowledges that it has not made sufficient progress in developing suitable electronic data systems to analyse attendance data and to guide the allocation of its resources and support to schools. The use of the pupil retention grant which is allocated to all secondary schools and which can be used, for example, to purchase additional education welfare officer support, is not monitored. It is not possible, therefore, for the LEA to ensure that it is being allocated effectively or to monitor the effectiveness of differing strategies and uses of this grant in improving attendance rates.

Recommendation

In order to improve support for attendance:

- monitor the use of the pupil retention grant in secondary schools and then promote the use of the most effective strategies.

Behaviour support

163. The last inspection judged that the LEA provided satisfactory support to schools for behaviour. The LEA has not made sufficient progress in supporting schools in managing behaviour and, at present, its support is unsatisfactory. Both fixed period and permanent exclusions are rising. Fixed period exclusions rose from 909 in 1999/00 to 1464 in 2001/2 and permanent exclusions from 72 in 1999/00 to 84 in 2001/2. The 2001/2 target of 70 permanent exclusions was exceeded by 14. At secondary level permanent exclusions are above those of statistical neighbours and national figures; at primary, they are well above.

164. Since the last inspection a new special school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties has been set up and a further 48 places established in primary schools with additionally resourced centres. In the summer term of 2002, the LEA carried out a review of these centres and found that, despite some strengths, overall provision was unsatisfactory and not well co-ordinated. There was a lack of a clear rationale and purpose to the work of the centres, and the routes for pupils to progress from the centres back to mainstream schools or on to more specialist provision were not clear.

165. The LEA has responded quickly and decisively to the outcomes of this review. A draft behaviour strategy has been developed by an external consultant and was the subject of consultation at the time of this inspection. The strategy is comprehensive, coherent and co-ordinated effectively with the SEN strategy. It rightly aims to keep more pupils with behavioural difficulties in mainstream schools, support reintegration, review the funding of specialist provision and develop rigorous placement criteria. If implemented fully it has the potential to improve support to schools. The LEA plans to create a new multi-disciplinary team to support its behaviour strategy, initially financed from central funds, but becoming a service that schools can purchase within a year of its introduction. However, the proposed stages to funding and implementing the strategy are not explained clearly enough in the consultation paper currently with schools.

Recommendation

In order to improve support for behaviour:

- ensure that consultation on the proposed behaviour strategy makes clear the LEA's proposals for funding and implementation, and then implement the agreed strategy.

166. The LEA has introduced a number of changes to its support to schools, including projects such as the Millennium Challenge Project, financed through the Standards Fund. Schools, particularly primaries, value the LEA's support for behaviour, rating it between satisfactory and good in the schools survey. The educational psychology service and specialist teachers for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties provide good training, advice and support on behavioural issues.

167. There is effective liaison between learning support units, learning mentor programmes and other forms of behaviour support. Examples of good practice have featured in national projects. Learning support units have been established in all secondary schools,

funded primarily through the pupil retention grant. However, as is the case with attendance, the use of this grant is not monitored. An exclusions mediation group, which includes headteachers, has been meeting since June 2002. There is evidence that, together with the effective co-ordination of behaviour support strategies in schools, this has helped to avert a number of permanent exclusions.

168. The LEA collects data on exclusions, but limitations in the system used restrict the ability of officers to undertake a more detailed analysis of patterns of exclusions at school or individual pupil level. The special school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties has provided effective support to the establishment of learning support units, Key Stage 3 outreach programmes, and a support network for additionally resourced centres for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. It is also contributing to the development of criteria for evaluating the effectiveness and impact of support to pupils in learning support units. However, this work is not formalised, nor recognised in the funding formula for the school.

Recommendation

In order to improve support for behaviour:

- clarify the outreach role of the special school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties and identify the associated costs.

Health, safety, welfare and child protection

169. The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in these aspects was not inspected at the last inspection. It is now highly satisfactory. The LEA gives a high priority to these areas of its work, carries out its statutory responsibilities appropriately, and provides satisfactory value for money. Its policies and guidance are clear, comprehensive and up-to-date.

170. The health, safety and risk assessment package for schools is thorough and includes improvements from the time of the last inspection, such as the inclusion of core and supplementary risk assessments. The arrangements are compliant with the requirements of the health and safety executive. Headteachers, deputy headteachers and governors attend health, safety and risk assessment training and records of schools' represented on the most recent courses are thorough and up-to-date.

171. The LEA meets its statutory responsibilities for child protection and schools show a high level of confidence in the service provided. Supportive and practical information about child protection is circulated to schools. The LEA is actively represented on the area child protection committee through which procedures and training programmes are updated. Training for designated teachers is very well received and includes aspects such as exclusions and attendance. The LEA monitors the take up of training. Records show that some schools have not been represented at child protection training sessions in recent years; this is not acceptable.

Recommendation**In order to improve child protection procedures:**

- ensure that all designated teachers regularly attend child protection courses and update records accordingly.

172. Schools value the quick response to child protection issues that arise. Designated teachers comment that the process of dealing with child protection matters has improved in recent years with a much faster response to problems, greater liaison with families and support after, as well as during, incidents. Work by the education welfare service, in connection with social services, the health service and the police, demonstrates the LEA's multi-agency approach to child protection.

Looked after children

173. The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to looked after children was not inspected at the last inspection. It is currently highly satisfactory. Strengths include a multi-agency approach and a clear focus, in all relevant plans, on pupils' achievement.

174. The council has taken corporate responsibility to promote the educational achievement of children in their care. The lead directorate is social services. Satisfactory joint protocols enable education and social services to work closely with health services to maximise the benefits of education, health and social care for looked after children. These protocols provide good, clear details of the responsibilities of each partner, including the role of the school and designated teachers.

175. The action plan to raise the achievements of looked after children also targets resources towards improving attendance and reducing exclusions. In September 2001, 230 children of school age had been looked after by the authority for more than a year. There has been a reduction in the number of looked after children absent from school for more than 25 days per year, but an increase in permanent exclusions.

176. The performance of looked after children is closely monitored and relevant pupils' records are maintained. For example, details are kept of the special educational needs and rates of attendance of individual looked after children, including those educated out of the area. While small cohorts of pupils are involved, the achievement of looked after children has improved in Key Stages 1 and 2, while staying broadly the same in Key Stage 3 and GCSE results for looked after children in 2001 were slightly worse than in the previous year. Both social services and education gather data, but these electronic systems are not yet compatible with each other.

177. The LEA makes significant efforts to raise awareness of the achievements of looked after children. The introduction of a personal education plan for every child, reviewed concurrently with the social service care plan, helps to keep a good focus on the child's achievements and progress. Each school has a designated officer whose role is to share

relevant information with other staff and to work with carers and support teachers to provide individual support for children's work and behaviour. Designated officers welcomed the training on personal education plans and the joint protocols. Training and information have also been shared by way of a joint education, health and social services conference.

Measures to combat racism

178. Measures to combat racism are satisfactory with few weaknesses. This was not a focus in the previous inspection, but it has been a matter to which high priority has been given for some time, both in the education directorate and at corporate level. There is evidence of a determination to implement a sound anti-racism policy.

179. Co-operation between directorates and between the local authority and other agencies and services is well developed. The council has formally accepted the recommendations of the report into the death of Stephen Lawrence, and in May 2002 published its Race Equality Scheme. The lead directorate is community and housing. Two education policy officers provide a direct link between education and other directorates and agencies through the "Agencies Against Racist Crime and Harassment" group. A number of inter-directorate and agency projects operate to combat racism, some of them promoted by the education directorate. The council has set equality targets including employment targets, and is actively pursuing these.

180. Clear guidance, developed by a working party of officers and headteachers, has been given to schools on reporting and dealing with racist incidents. Just over a hundred such incidents were reported last year. All have been followed up, but both officers and members of community groups believe that this does not reflect accurately the scale of the problem and that there is unwillingness on the part of several schools to report incidents that may be of a racist nature. Renewed efforts are planned to impress on schools the importance of this matter.

181. Through the agreed syllabus for Religious Education and through personal and social education programmes, schools actively promote a wider understanding of the traditions and beliefs of a range of culture and faith communities. Training for teachers has been provided, and the directorate has promoted events and initiatives such as Show Racism the Red Card and the Holocaust Memorial day to support schools in teaching about the dangers of racism and racist attitudes and behaviour.

182. Communication between the LEA and the various minority ethnic communities is sound, although it is conducted more through informal contacts than through formal structures. Discussion with members of minority ethnic groups during the inspection showed that while they value these informal contacts, they recognise that this is not an open channel for all.

Recommendation

In order to improve measures to combat racism:

- review the current formal and informal arrangements for consultation between the LEA and minority ethnic groups to ensure that they are as effective as possible.

Section 5: Corporate issues

Summary

183. The last inspection identified as strengths the corporate approach of the LEA, effective working between elected members and officers, and collaboration with stakeholders and other agencies. The council saw improved educational standards as central to the success of its urban regeneration programme and the priorities identified for education were appropriate, well known and fully supported by schools.

184. Corporate planning, decision making and the leadership of elected members and senior officers continue to have some significant strengths and no major weaknesses. Partnership working, in particular, remains a strength. Education remains the first of the council's six priorities. The council's key plans continue to share common values and priorities and to ascribe a major role to education in the regeneration of the city. However, the council rightly recognises that recent developments, such as the publication of the community plan and the negotiation of a local public service agreement have resulted in the need to pull together its plans for education.

185. Since 1999, the structure of the council has been modernised. Further refinements are planned to improve the effectiveness of decision making and the scrutiny process. Education continues to benefit from the good leadership of senior officers and the determination on the part of key elected members to improve schools and raise standards of achievement. There is a history of cross-party agreement on the main issues for education.

Corporate planning

186. The quality of corporate planning with respect to education is highly satisfactory. The procedures for implementing corporate plans in the education context are satisfactory and the corporate planning cycle has sound links with financial planning. The 'Going for Growth' strategy recognises that education and, more specifically, improvements in the performance of schools and the achievements of pupils, are essential elements in the regeneration process. Detailed plans are being developed for each area of the city.

187. The education directorate's strategic plan outlines its contribution to the 'Going for Growth' strategy. It identifies social inclusion, educational achievement and partnership working as priorities for the directorate in 2002-3 to underpin the implementation of the Education Development Plan. However, it does not give sufficient emphasis to the important contribution made by the directorate to the council's other priorities, which include tackling youth and long term unemployment and supporting children and their families. Nor does it refer explicitly to the key strategic links that exist with other directorates.

188. There is an appropriate system for keeping the implementation of plans under review. Lines of communication and accountability are clear and monitoring takes place through the Best Value process. The education directorate monitors and reports to cabinet on progress with the Education Development Plan every term. Service plans are monitored monthly by heads of service, who, in turn, report quarterly to the senior management team.

Decision making

189. The speed, transparency and effectiveness of decision making are highly satisfactory. Decisions are informed by good quality, open and timely consultation with schools, partners and other stakeholders. In the period since the last inspection the council has a good record of taking difficult educational decisions based on effective review of all the necessary evidence and the advice of senior officers. For example, both the percentage of surplus places and the standard of education provided have been taken into account when considering school closures.

190. Evaluation of the decision making process has contributed to the development of plans for further improvement. A new council constitution, established in May 2002, sets out how the council operates, how decisions will be made and the procedures to be followed to ensure that these decisions are efficient, transparent and accountable to local people.

The leadership provided by officers and elected members

191. Within education the quality of leadership given by key elected members is highly satisfactory. Members see educational achievement as a key element in combating social exclusion. This is recognised and valued by schools and other stakeholders.

192. The cabinet member for education maintains a good level of contact with schools and is regularly involved in monitoring both the work of the directorate and the progress of schools, particularly those about which there is concern. He works closely with the director and the senior management team, and respects the powers, which are appropriately delegated to officers. His hard work, commitment to education and determination to improve schools and raise standards make significant contributions to the LEA's positive relationships with schools.

193. The wider involvement of members in monitoring education policy and decision making, and the work of the directorate is, however, underdeveloped. Procedures for democratic scrutiny do not ensure a rigorous and systematic examination of policy decisions. The vast majority of reports are simply received by the select committee without comment. Suitable plans are in place to enhance the committee's role in policy development and identify a clearer rationale for its monitoring work.

194. The quality of advice given to elected members is highly satisfactory. Officers provide the cabinet member with well considered advice relating to discussing policy options. The director and senior officers regularly attend meetings of the select committee.

195. The quality of leadership given by senior officers of the LEA is good. The director for education provides strong strategic leadership. His commitment to school improvement is shared by senior officers and pervades every service within the directorate. Relationships with schools are very good. Senior officers are respected and trusted. Schools recognise and welcome the element of challenge within the relationship. Communication is effective and there is genuine consultation. Schools are well informed about the directorate's intentions and consider that their views and opinions are valued.

Partnership

196. Effective partnership working remains a strength of the council and the education directorate. The vision and priorities of the council are shared, understood and subscribed to by its many partners. The Newcastle Partnership brings together key decision-makers and stakeholders and actively promotes the involvement of communities in the regeneration of the city. Within education, partnership working is structurally secure, mature and sustainable. It is characterised by a real sense of co-operation. Consultation is purposeful and valued by all partners. The role of the LEA in supporting and facilitating this level of partnership working is crucial.

197. Partnerships with schools are strong and based on mutual respect and shared objectives. There are clear, formal structures designed to maximise debate and discussion about key issues with headteachers and governors. These structures are supported by a number of working groups, such as those established to work on various elements of the second EDP. There are regular, structured and well understood opportunities for consultation with unions and teacher associations.

198. In co-operation with the University of Newcastle upon Tyne and the Church of England, the LEA opened a new 11 to 18 secondary school in September 2002 in order to secure a viable school in an area of social and economic fragility. As such, it makes a significant contribution to the coherence of regeneration activities in the area. There is effective collaboration at the corporate level between education, social services, housing and health on a wide range of initiatives including, for example, the Educational Achievement and Health Support team, which supports looked after children, the multi-agency approach to child protection and the Regeneration Action Team. Joint working across directorates, and between the local authority and other agencies and services, on measures to combat racism is well developed.

199. Liaison between the Excellence in Cities partnership, the school improvement service and other support services, such as the education welfare service, is well planned and managed at both the strategic and operational levels. Support services are actively involved in developing Excellence in Cities programmes and associated training, some of which, such as that for learning mentors, have received national recognition. The strengths of this partnership are reflected in collaborative arrangements regionally and with key agencies including, for example, higher education institutions through Excellence Challenge, and with the new Connexions service. The Learning Partnership provides an effective network to support and co-ordinate Newcastle initiatives and links with regional bodies.

200. Newcastle has well-established links with the Newcastle Education Business Partnership. This partnership manages an extensive business mentoring programme, which is well coordinated with the Excellence in Cities learning mentor initiative. Schools report that the work of volunteer mentors from the business community has contributed substantially to the LEA's efforts to broaden the curriculum offered to all young people and to extend their experience and expectations of the world of work.

201. There are good links with the standing advisory council for religious education, which operates effectively and proactively. The LEA fulfils its statutory obligations to the advisory council and provides good professional and administrative support.

Appendix: Recommendations

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

In order to improve value for money in special educational needs:

- define clearly each element for SEN within the schools' budgets; and
- introduce effective arrangements for monitoring and evaluating the impact of expenditure on SEN.

In order to inform future support strategies for the promotion of social inclusion:

- establish, urgently, electronic systems that allow services within the education directorate, other relevant services and schools to share, efficiently and effectively, accurate information regarding the performance, attendance and exclusion of pupils.

In order to improve support for attendance:

- introduce effective mechanisms for setting attendance targets with all schools and strategies to ensure that the targets are met;
- monitor the use of the pupil retention grant in secondary schools and then promote the use of the most effective strategies; and
- in association with the police, make every effort to improve the success of truancy sweeps by using powers under Section 16 of the Crime and Disorder Act, 1998.

- **In order to improve support for behaviour:**

- ensure that consultation on the proposed behaviour strategy makes clear the LEA's proposals for funding and implementation, and then implement the agreed strategy ; and
- clarify the outreach role of the special school for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties and identify the associated costs.

The report also makes the following recommendations. They are:

In order to ensure that all stakeholders have a clear sense of how individual EiC strands and activities are integrated into planned developments in improvement strategies and service activities:

- incorporate EiC more explicitly into the strategies for improvement and school improvement programmes, at the time of next revision of the EDP in 2003.

In order to improve the allocation of resources to priorities:

- reduce the overall cost of corporate charges to the education department; and
- work with schools to reduce the level of school balances.

In order to improve the effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring and challenging schools:

- ensure that a copy of any significant note following the visit of advisers or other officers to schools is sent to the chair of governors as well as to the headteacher.

In order to improve support for literacy:

- improve the arrangements for the dissemination of best practice and in particular find ways of making more effective use of the leading teachers of literacy.

In order to improve support for governors:

- develop further recruitment policies to fill vacancies on governing bodies and increase the representation of ethnic minorities by targeting groups and interested parties more directly.

In order to meet statutory obligations with regard to special educational needs:

- ensure that, in line with the Code of Practice, all statements are specific in detailing the provision that is required and the funding implications.

In order to support school improvement in the area of special educational needs:

- ensure that systems which are clear to schools are developed and implemented, which allocate SEN support to schools on the basis of identified need;
- develop a comprehensive system to monitor the progress of individuals and groups of pupils with SEN; and
- ensure that special schools are funded appropriately to develop their outreach work and to allow pupils to gain experience of mainstream schools.

In order to improve school place planning:

- clarify the presentation of statistical information and proposed policy development within the School Organisation Plan, ensuring it is published on time.

In order to improve the provision for pupils who have no school place:

- increase the number of pupils who are successfully reintegrated into school following
-

permanent exclusion, making particular efforts to reintegrate those excluded early in Year 10 and to ensure continuity with their GCSE studies; and

- enable excluded Key Stage 4 pupils to undertake a wider range of accredited courses, including GCSE.

In order to improve child protection procedures:

- ensure that all designated teachers regularly attend child protection courses and update records accordingly.

In order to improve measures to combat racism:

- review the current formal and informal arrangements for consultation between the LEA and minority ethnic groups to ensure that they are as effective as possible.