

Inspection report
KNOWSLEY
Local Education Authority

Date of inspection: June 2003

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Basic information

Name of LEA:	Knowsley Local Education Authority
Address of LEA:	Education Offices Huyton Hey Road Huyton Knowsley Merseyside L36 5YH
Lead inspector:	Gina White HMI
Date of inspection:	June 2003

Introduction

1. This inspection of Knowsley 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 considered whether the support provided by the LEA contributes, where appropriate, to the discharge of the LEA's statutory duties, is effective in contributing to improvements in schools and provides value for money. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value. The previous inspection of the LEA took place in June 1999.

2. The inspection was based partly on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, the LEA's self-evaluation, on documentation and discussions with elected members, staff in the education and other council departments and representatives of the LEA's partners. The inspection also involved discussions with partners, governors, headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy. The inspection also took into account findings of the inspection of children's services conducted by the social services inspectorate in May 2003. In addition, a questionnaire, by the Audit Commission, was circulated to all schools. The response rate was 70 per cent.

3. For each inspected function of the LEA, the inspection team makes a judgement which is converted into a numerical grade. An inspection team may make up to 52 key inspection judgements. An inspection judgement is made against criteria for each inspected function of the LEA. These criteria (and the guidance notes on functions of an LEA that may be inspected by Ofsted) can be found on the Ofsted website. The numerical grades awarded for the judgements made in this inspection are appended to this report, along with short explanations of what each grade represents. Judgements on inspected functions of an LEA are made during the inspection of the LEA and indicate the effectiveness of the LEA's performance of individual functions at the time of the inspection. The numerical grades awarded by the inspection team complement the areas of the report which comment on the individual functions scrutinised on this inspection, and, as such, must be considered in the light of those comments.

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

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

Commentary

6. Recent developments and the implementation of a number of well thought through initiatives have resulted in Knowsley establishing itself as an LEA of some significance. It has improved over the past three years and shown how vision and leadership, together with excellent relationships with schools, can revive an education service.

7. The borough has considerably higher levels of social and economic disadvantage than the national average. Unemployment is high, and income levels are low. Pupils' achievements at school are relatively weak, and the take-up of further education and training is very poor. There is a culture of low aspiration and self-esteem. The council, determined to overcome these problems, has had some success in fostering business growth and regenerating communities through improved housing policies. It has also established easier access to services. Much remains to be done but elected members are enthusiastic and determined to tackle the continuing challenges.

8. The previous inspection found several strengths in the LEA but identified key weaknesses in its support for school improvement. This led to a lack of challenge to schools, and a reluctance on the part of the LEA to disturb the status quo. Resources for school improvement were not directed where they were needed most.

9. Changes in staff at council level and amongst key partners have made this a very different authority, operating in a new way from that inspected in 1999. The director of education and lifelong learning, most of the leadership and management team, the team of school improvement officers and many of the special educational needs (SEN) and social inclusion staff have all joined the department within the last four years.

10. The new administration has developed further the existing strengths in partnership and collaborative working and has taken them to an unusually high level. Headteachers of individual schools see themselves as part of a wider team with responsibility for the education service throughout the borough. The authority has given a strong lead to schools and has developed a challenging and imaginative school improvement strategy. Together with schools, they have embarked upon a series of carefully considered and very well-funded initiatives that are intended to transform education. The overall aim is not just to raise educational attainment, but also to ensure that all pupils take full advantage of educational opportunities and realise their potential whatever their background.

11. Many of its initiatives are still at an early stage, but the authority has successfully gained the commitment of a significant majority of teachers and schools to a new philosophy and approach to teaching and learning. The productive partnership with schools goes beyond the changes being wrought at classroom level. They characterise the authority's new approach to challenge, monitoring and intervention, underpin the framework for continuing professional development and are the foundation for a rigorous programme for school self-review.

12. There have already been successes. Primary school standards are rising faster than the national rate of improvement. A clear strategy for SEN and social inclusion is emerging, and good structures of support for pupils and schools are being established. Some pupils who

had previously rejected education have now returned to school or alternative provision. Fewer pupils are being referred for statements of special educational need. However, the LEA has yet to make significant inroads into the overall levels of attainment in secondary schools, pupils' attendance, or staying on rates for young people entering education and training.

Strengths

There are particular strengths in:

- the strategy for school improvement and its implementation;
- the quality of leadership provided by senior officers;
- the quality of leadership provided by elected members and the quality of advice given to elected members;
- targeting resources to priorities;
- defining monitoring, challenge and intervention and sharing them with schools;
- monitoring schools and challenging them to improve, including the use made of performance data;
- partnership working including partnership with schools;
- identification and intervention in under-performing schools;
- focusing support on areas of greatest need;
- the strategy for special educational needs;
- support for school attendance;
- support for literacy and numeracy;
- support for school leadership and management;
- support for early years;
- support for 14-19;
- support for assuring the supply and quality of teachers;
- leadership of services to support school improvement;
- effectiveness and deployment of staff to support school improvement;
- effectiveness of strategic planning to support school improvement;
- effectiveness of services to support school improvement;
- provision for pupils who have no school place;
- support for behaviour; and
- effectiveness of property services.

The LEA performs its other functions satisfactorily, but the following area is unsatisfactory;

- admissions to schools.

13. This is a good LEA which has made good progress since its last inspection. It has some very good functions and its capacity to improve further is also very good. Elected members provide good leadership and have a determination to secure better life chances for children and young people, despite considerable social and economic disadvantage. The leadership of LEA officers is particularly good. They have raised the profile of education, clearly identified what more needs to be done, are effective in challenging schools, but also take care to highlight and celebrate success. This approach secures very strong support from schools. They respond very positively to the powerful and visionary lead of the director of education and lifelong learning.

14. The Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), published in December 2002, gave the education service two stars for current performance and three stars (the highest grading) for its capacity to make further improvement. This inspection reinforces the latter judgement. The LEA has a very good capacity to improve further, and is well placed to address the recommendations in this report and contribute significantly to improving schools' and pupils' performance.

Section 1: The LEA's strategy for school improvement

Context

15. Knowsley is a small metropolitan authority covering 33 square miles within the conurbation of Merseyside. It includes the urban areas of Huyton, Halewood, Kirkby and Prescott. Success in attracting funding to support economic regeneration has helped to reduce unemployment levels, yet this remains well above the national average. Despite recent developments, Knowsley retains many features of considerable deprivation and economic disadvantage. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's statistics¹ place Knowsley as the sixth most deprived authority nationally and over 79 per cent of residents live in the most deprived 10 per cent of wards in England. Four out of every ten children live in homes where there is no earned income. A third of children live in one-parent households; this is high compared with national averages.

16. The proportion of young people continuing into education beyond the age of 16 has significantly increased since the last inspection and now stands at 62 per cent but this still remains low compared to the national average. The percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals has reduced since the last inspection but at 46.9 per cent in primary schools, it is higher than that of similar authorities and well above the national average. In secondary schools, at 42.2 per cent, it is over two and a half times the national average.

17. The LEA maintains 59 primary schools, 11 secondary schools, seven special schools and one pupil referral unit. Nine schools have beacon status and three have specialist status for sport, languages and performing arts. The total school population is 28,022 and children comprise approximately 19 per cent of the total population of the borough. A significant number of children transfer at the end of Key Stage 2 to secondary schools outside the borough, and despite the efforts of the LEA and schools, this situation has not changed since the last inspection.

18. Pupil-teacher ratios have improved since the last inspection. They are now in line with similar authorities and national averages in primary schools, and in secondary schools they are much better than the national average. The proportion of pupils attending special schools is well above the national average. The proportion of primary age pupils with statements of special educational needs is average, but the secondary proportion is well above average, though this is now reducing. The area is predominantly white and 99.2 per cent of the pupil population is of white UK origin.

19. Knowsley became part of the Excellence in Cities initiative in 1999. It has one small Education Action Zone, and three City Learning Centres. The LEA has a Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA) which came into effect in January 2003.

¹ 2000 DETR Index of multiple deprivation

Statistical neighbours are; Liverpool, Salford, Middlesborough, Kingston Upon Hull, Hartlepool, City of Nottingham, Sandwell, Wolverhampton, Rochdale, Walsall.

Performance

20. On entry to school, pupils' baseline assessment scores are low in most areas of learning and well below national average in language and literacy skills. By the end of Key Stage 1, attainment at Level 2 is in line with national averages for reading, writing and mathematics and is above that of similar authorities. Higher attainment at Level 3 is broadly in line with national averages and above that of similar authorities. At the end of Key Stage 2 pupils' attainment at Level 4 is in line with national averages in English, mathematics and science, above that of similar authorities in English and mathematics and well above in science. Higher attainment at Level 5 and above is in line with the national average in science, below average in mathematics and well below in English. Attainment at Level 5 and above in all core subjects is in line with similar authorities. Since 1999, attainment at Key Stages 1 and 2 at Level 2 and Level 4 has improved at a faster rate than nationally. The percentage of primary schools where the quality of teaching and management was judged good was above the national profile and above similar authorities.

21. Pupils' attainment is unsatisfactory but improving in secondary schools. Key Stage 3 attainment at Level 5 and above is well below national average in English, mathematics and science and is in-line with that of similar authorities. Since the last inspection the overall attainment in English, mathematics and science has improved at a faster rate than nationally. The gap between the performance of Knowsley schools and of schools nationally has closed significantly in English and science but only slightly in mathematics. Attainment at Level 6 and above has improved considerably since 1999, but standards remain well below national averages in all core subjects. They are below the average of similar authorities in English and mathematics and in line for science.

22. At Key Stage 4 attainment on all key indicators is well below national averages and below that of similar authorities. However, the rate of improvement between 1999 and 2002 was greater than that nationally, and well above for the proportion of pupils gaining five or more grades A*-C at GCSE.

23. The number of pupils continuing in full time education improved significantly in 2000 from 50 to 62 per cent. In 2002 participation rates fell slightly to 61 per cent and remain well below national rates. The advanced level and advanced subsidiary (AS) average points score per pupil have increased since the last inspection but remain well below the average nationally and that of similar authorities.

24. No school is in special measures. The proportion of schools judged by Ofsted to have serious weaknesses is low and has reduced since 1999. In June 2003 three schools had serious weaknesses. In 2001 over half of the secondary schools fell within the DfES category of being schools facing challenging circumstances. Over the last 12 months, a third of the schools have improved their results and are above the target of 25 per cent grades A*- C. Furthermore all of the schools have now met the target of no school having less than 20 per cent grades A*- C. This achievement is two years ahead of the government's target date.

25. In 2002, attendance in schools was unsatisfactory. In primary schools, attendance was below the national average, and in secondary schools it was well below. In 2001 the proportion of pupils permanently excluded from primary school was below, and in secondary schools well below, the national average and that found in similar authorities.

Council structure

26. The council has 66 elected members: 55 are from the Labour party and 11 are Liberal Democrats. The council structure has been modernised since the last inspection. In May 2002, a cabinet was established consisting of the leader and nine members, one of whom holds the portfolio for education and lifelong learning. Six scrutiny committees have been established, and the education, training and culture scrutiny committee takes responsibility for scrutinising executive decisions relating to education and lifelong learning. There are also six community area forums each one covering a different area of the borough. They comprise all elected members for the area, representatives of police, health and other partner agencies. The forums meet with local residents for consultation on local issues and policies to inform the wider council deliberations and decision-making.

27. There are seven chief officers and, together with the chief executive, they make up the council's chief officer group. The director of the education and lifelong learning department has a deputy and three assistant directors and together they form the leadership team. This revised management structure was put in place in March 2003.

Funding

28. Knowsley is a well-funded authority, reflecting the significant degree of social disadvantage in its schools. The council's standard spending assessment (SSA) for education is high compared with other LEAs. The allocation per pupil, in both the primary and secondary sectors, is the second highest of all metropolitan districts. Actual spending on education has been between one and three per cent above the SSA level in the last three years.

29. Knowsley spends more than other authorities on early years education and other services, such as the youth service. Funding for schools in 2002-2003 is above average, with secondary schools particularly well funded, as shown in the following table:

	Knowsley LEA £ per pupil	Statistical neighbours £ per pupil	Metropolitan authorities £ per pupil	England £ per pupil
Primary individual schools budget (ISB)	2,959	2,893	2,818	2,929
Secondary ISB	4,056	3,908	3,697	3,768

Data source: CIPFA Section 52 data 2002/2003.

30. Knowsley's level of financial delegation to schools is in line with the average for authorities.

31. The level of centrally retained spending per pupil, as shown in the table below, is comparatively high in respect of strategic management and access, although central spending on special educational needs is below average. High levels of Standards Fund money have

supplemented the otherwise average level of retention for school improvement. Funding retained for access is the highest for all metropolitan authorities and, within this, spending on pupil support and the education welfare service is particularly high.

	Knowsley LEA £ per pupil	Statistical neighbours £ per pupil	Metropolitan authorities £ per pupil	England £ per pupil
Strategic management	132	115	121	101
School improvement	30	28	28	31
Access	155	104	103	131
SEN	114	154	144	160
Total	431	401	396	423

Data source: CIPFA Section 52 data 2002/2003.

32. The contribution to Knowsley's overall funding from externally programmed resources, including the DfES Standards Fund, has increased dramatically since the last inspection. In 2002/03 it represented £33.6 million or 28 per cent of the total spend on education, compared with £8.7 million or 10 per cent in 1999/2000. Knowsley also draws in high levels of funding from programmes such as Excellence in Cities, the Single Regeneration Budget, the New Opportunities Fund, the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund. Key elements of the authority's 'transformational strategy' are funded through the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund.

33. Levels of capital expenditure have risen significantly in recent years but are at no more than average levels per pupil. Confirmed additional capital resources for 2003/04 and future years equate to £10.9 million, compared with £2.2 million in 1998/99.

The LEA's strategy for school improvement

34. At the time of the last inspection the LEA's strategy for school improvement was satisfactory. It is now very good. Planning is firmly located in a vision, principles and values that are shared by all stakeholders. The strategy is well focused on priorities and the LEA has made good progress in implementing it.

35. The strategy is very good. It is consistent with the council's aims to raise educational standards urgently and it integrates well with the need to raise self-esteem and aspirations, in an area where there is very little tradition of participation in higher education. The council's overall vision is expressed clearly in the education development plan (EDP), which sets out plans for transforming education. Actions go beyond the usual measures to improve schools. In the past such measures have demonstrably proved insufficient to address the depth of the problems in Knowsley and to tackle underachievement vigorously. The LEA's current model is based upon two strands: firstly a series of imaginative projects and

initiatives focused squarely on the development of teaching and learning; secondly, the integration of services to address the problems of disadvantage. Both approaches are carefully interwoven and underpin the priorities of the EDP.

36. The seven priorities in the EDP are relevant and suitably balanced to reflect both national and local need. They emphasise the LEA's determination to raise attainment, to challenge and support schools, to develop the capacity of headteachers and school staff through professional development and to involve the wider school community in learning. The emphasis is given to addressing the needs of vulnerable groups of pupils and the gifted and talented. Priorities are enriched by themes that reflect the important cross-cutting role that information communication technology (ICT), social inclusion and equality of opportunity play in securing improvement. Partnership working between schools is emphasised in planning and takes place within well-defined structures. These form the basis for establishing self-managing learning communities.

37. The strategy is focused on developing an approach to teaching and learning that takes full account of pupils' individual needs and learning styles. This approach, known throughout Knowsley as 'mind-based learning' dovetails well with the national strategies for literacy, numeracy and Key Stage 3. Additional intervention consists of the Plus One Challenge: a short-term intervention strategy that uses computer based revision, testing and assessment programmes to support learning at Key Stages 2, 3 and 4 and a further project to support transition between Key Stage 2 and 3 and raise pupils' self esteem and aspiration. The excellent strategy builds on good work undertaken recently in the Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiative, and the partnership known as the collegiate of 14-19 providers effectively offers a wider range of curriculum opportunities for Knowsley students. These initiatives work together in a coherent and co-ordinated way.

38. Planning is underpinned by a good quality audit and includes critical analysis of information drawn from both the LEA's thorough knowledge of its schools and information provided by other sources such as Ofsted, DfES, and external evaluations commissioned by the LEA.

39. Consultation is good and wide-ranging. The director leads a major 'visioning' conference, held annually, at which agreement is reached on the broad principles and priorities that inform the school improvement strategy. This then forms the basis for the next year's plans. The conferences include a wide range of stakeholders, including young people, and have evolved over three years to provide an effective and practical means of engaging the community in debate about future proposals for education policy and specific activities for inclusion in the EDP. This firmly anchors the planning process to local need and ensures ownership of the strategy by the community.

40. The targets in the EDP for 2004 are challenging. Included within the plan are three LPSA targets for education which provide an added dimension of challenge, link well to existing attainment and performance targets for 2003 and 2004 and align closely to priorities and activities within the EDP.

41. The gap between the targets, current performance and annual rates of improvement is significant. The LEA has put in place an additional range of local strategies to harness the resources of EiC and Education Action Zone (EAZ) and accelerate progress. Schools'

aggregated targets for 2004 indicate that headteachers and officers are confident that the LEA's targets can be met

42. Progress in implementing the strategy for school improvement is good. Each strand of the strategy has been appropriately targeted to each key stage and links well with both schools' plans and national strategies. The LEA evaluates its work comprehensively, through its own success criteria and through careful analysis of reports commissioned from external sources. Where weaknesses are identified, plans are amended and support is appropriately refocused. This approach has been used well to target work on secondary school attendance and there are indications that this is improving at a rate to meet the target. However, efforts to accelerate the improvement in attainment have yet to meet the pace that the LEA anticipated. The capacity for further improvement is good.

The allocation of resources to priorities

43. At the last inspection the LEA's allocation of resources to priorities was satisfactory. It is now good.

44. Education has been a high priority for the council for many years. In the last three years, the way resources have been mobilised by the council in support of education and, in particular, the 'transformational strategy' is impressive. The council has allocated funding very well and in line with its strategic priorities for education. Spending has exceeded the education SSA in recent years and the council has passed increases on to schools. In the current year, the council ensured that funding was protected in the context of a low financial settlement for education.

45. The targeting of resources within the education budget is good. Funding has been clearly directed each year to the priorities outlined in the education business plan and explicit links are increasingly being made between funding and performance. A specialist team of officers has been highly successful in maximising external programmed funding, both for the LEA and individual schools. The resulting multiplicity of funding streams is directed carefully and deliberately to the LEA's priorities and projects are integrated well into actions to address specific issues and problems.

46. Schools recognise the value of the authority's approach to financial matters and are well consulted through the schools forum and its sub-groups. Headteachers play a key role in the group, contributing informed and practical views.

47. Since the last inspection, the LEA has appropriately given a comparatively low priority to a fundamental review of the funding formula because schools have a high regard for the transparency of the current formula. However, the formula is reviewed annually with minor amendments as necessary.

48. Budget setting and control are sound, although the budget for special educational needs has been regularly overspent, mostly because of the high number of special school placements outside the borough. This budget is now, however, under much tighter control, as the LEA begins to implement its new SEN funding strategy. Schools have been challenged and supported appropriately on the management of their own budgets. The LEA withdrew financial delegation from a governing body in one case. Comparatively few Knowsley

schools have excessive financial balances thanks to the LEA's good monitoring and appropriate challenge.

Strategies to promote continuous improvement, including Best Value

49. These were unsatisfactory at the time of the last inspection. The authority now has highly satisfactory structures in place to promote continuous improvement. The council responded vigorously to criticisms of its performance management in the 2002 Audit Commission corporate assessment. Good systems are now in place, though they have yet to have their full effect. Planning arrangements are coherent across the council in pursuit of agreed corporate objectives. Performance information is used systematically to promote improvement. Priority performance indicators have been agreed for the education department and structures are in place for monitoring progress. This appropriately involves members and officers at all levels.

50. The impact of early Best Value reviews in education was mixed. The review of SEN did not support or steer the later improvements in this service. On the other hand, the review of strategic management was more challenging and led to significant change for the better, for example, in the governor support service. The future Best Value review programme has been appropriately revised in the light of improvement planning priorities and the education service will contribute to wide-ranging reviews of, for example, community safety and integrated children's services.

51. The council has made extensive use of outside consultants and auditors, adapts well to changes in practice and has achieved 'Investors in People' accreditation. There are robust structures in place for the continuing evaluation of performance and the European Foundation for Quality Management methodology has been used to good effect. The self-evaluation undertaken for this inspection demonstrated a clear understanding of the LEA's strengths and weaknesses.

Section 2: Support for school improvement

Summary

52. Since the last inspection, the quality of support for school improvement has improved considerably. All functions are now carried out satisfactorily, and most are good or very good. A completely new school improvement team has been appointed, and the Knowsley school improvement partnership framework sets out a comprehensive strategy for monitoring, challenging and supporting schools. Several features of the support for school improvement reflect a coherent and, in many respects, pioneering view of the role of an LEA.

53. Close partnership now exists between schools. The LEA has devised a Transformational Strategy, funded mainly from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. The strategy is based on the belief that school improvement will come about only by fundamentally transforming the quality of teaching and learning. This work is well planned, but the approach has not as yet developed sufficiently for any impact on standards of achievement to be discernible. Many teachers and officers report, however, that there are already observable changes in the organisation and pace of lessons and that these are having a positive influence on the attitude and application of pupils.

The effectiveness of services to support school improvement

54. The previous inspection judged that, while some aspects of the work of the advisory and other services in supporting school improvement were satisfactory, others were unsatisfactory. These included the deployment of staff, the strategic planning of services, the expertise of school improvement staff and the overall value for money of these services.

55. Since then new appointments have been made in all posts, and the effectiveness of these services is now at least highly satisfactory in all the aspects and good or very good in most. Leadership is very good. There is an awareness of a wide range of school improvement strategies. These are applied selectively to particular situations, based on a sound knowledge of the needs of the schools and a realistic assessment of strengths and weaknesses. Priorities are clearly established and conflicting or competing demands are resolved openly and unambiguously. Sound partnerships operate with other services within the education department that contribute to school improvement, some of which - notably the attendance service - are well co-ordinated with the school improvement service.

56. All the school improvement officers are well qualified and experienced, with recent headship experience in primary or special schools. Attempts to make a similar appointment with suitable secondary experience have not been successful, but the LEA is extending the management consultancy contract, originally to work with schools facing challenging circumstances, to cover all secondary schools. Officers do not provide specific subject advice at secondary level, but the LEA maintains a list of suitable consultants and brokers their services to the schools.

57. The school improvement team is well deployed to make good use of the expertise and experience of individual members, but work-loads are very high. The use of time is monitored very closely, using an electronic database that supports detailed analysis of how

time has been deployed, for example in relation to the EDP priorities. Recently a task force of advanced skills teachers (ASTs) has been established for deployment into schools facing particular difficulties. This further enhances resources for school improvement support.

58. Arrangements for the performance management of school inspection services were judged highly satisfactory in the last inspection. No fieldwork was carried out in this inspection. Evidence from the LEA's own evaluation and from documents presented indicates that this function continues to be highly satisfactory.

59. The overall effectiveness of school improvement services is now assessed as good. In primary schools, standards are improving at a faster rate than nationally and, although targets are not always achieved, they are still successful in stimulating improvement. Standards in secondary schools are rising, but more slowly. However, the work of the school improvement service is having a significantly more marked impact on the quality of educational provision and on teaching and learning than is reflected in the performance data. Evidence from school inspection reports shows improvement since the last inspection. Attendance services are contributing to this overall improvement, though again there are some intractable problems in a minority of schools which mean that the statistics under-represent the full amount of improvement.

60. The value for money of school improvement services was unsatisfactory at the time of the previous inspection. It is now highly satisfactory. Because of its socio-economic character, as well as its skilful financial management and determination, Knowsley succeeds in attracting a number of additional grants to support its work in school improvement. The operational cost of school improvement services is not especially high, and additional funding is carefully targeted to time-limited initiatives so that specific funding is not used to support measures that exceed the lifetime of the funding. Money is now much better targeted to school improvement than formerly. It is also wisely and carefully spent to ensure sufficient support is available to meet the schools' needs.

Monitoring, challenge and intervention

61. At the time of the last inspection, the LEA's work in monitoring, challenging, supporting and intervening in schools was unsatisfactory. Since then considerable developments have taken place and it is now very good. These functions are clearly defined and set out in the Knowsley school improvement partnership framework, written as a result of extensive consultation between officers, members, headteachers and governors. The recommendation of the last report, to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation role of link advisers in order to provide adequate challenge and support, has been fully implemented. A high proportion of schools rate the school improvement strategy as good or very good.

62. Discussion and clarification continue to take place regularly. Headteachers and governors have a sound and detailed knowledge of the functions and how the LEA implements them. The work of schools and early years settings is regularly and effectively monitored through an inclusive and rigorous review process that combines evidence collected through officers' visits to schools, attendance audits, performance data and the schools' self-reviews. Both the degree and the nature of intervention and support are determined during the school improvement officers' autumn term visit to their link school.

63. School improvement officers and others are effective in challenging schools to examine and refine all aspects of their practice. Headteachers value these contacts. A thorough process of self-review has been developed in partnership with schools. This forms a central part of the improvement framework, though some schools, notably secondary schools, use other review strategies of similar rigour.

The focusing of LEA support on areas of greatest need

64. Much improvement has taken place since the last inspection, when the focussing of support on areas of greatest need was satisfactory. It is now very good. As a result of the annual review, each school is placed in one of three categories, high, medium and low, depending on the nature and degree of its need. All support is prioritised to ensure that those with the greatest need get the major part of the support available. With the help of the link school improvement officer, schools in the medium and high support categories prepare action plans or raising achievement plans, identifying the amount and kind of support needed. The system is flexible so that if circumstances change during the year, the school's category can also change, and hence the support can be varied whenever necessary.

65. All school improvement support is provided by the LEA and is shared among schools according to their category of need. Where additional support is needed, particularly for secondary schools, it is appropriately contracted by the LEA and specified closely to deal with particular problems.

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

66. Since the last inspection, when the effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring and challenging schools was unsatisfactory, there has been much improvement and the LEA's work is now good. Monitoring arrangements are thorough. They are based on a detailed analysis of performance data, visits to and contacts with schools undertaken by school improvement officers and other officers of the LEA, and, increasingly, the outcomes of school self-reviews. Visits to schools are proportional to need and agendas for visits are circulated in advance.

67. At the beginning of the new school year a thorough annual review led by the director of education determines the support category of each school for the coming year. School files show that link officers have a sound knowledge of the schools. Visits to schools are carefully planned and link coherently to school self-review. They follow up appropriately on the progress made on specific issues since the last visit. The visits are challenging not only in relation to target-setting but over a wide range of school matters. Arrangements to review the progress being made by schools in difficult circumstances are equally thorough. Senior officers undertake these reviews at regular intervals. The school performance monitoring group, a panel of six elected members, also reviews progress.

68. Notes written after visits to schools are of variable quality and value. Some include sound evaluations and add substantially to the LEA's knowledge of its schools; others give no indication of the substance of the discussion or any actions stemming from it. Copies of notes of both school improvement officers' and consultants' visits are sent to headteachers. It

is not current practice to send these to chairs of governing bodies, though they are usually present for part of the key monitoring visits that are made to schools.

Recommendations

In order to enhance the value of officers' contacts with schools both to the LEA and to the schools themselves:

- improve the consistency and value of the records of officers' visits to schools and
- provide copies of notes to the chair of governors following visits of school improvement officers, consultants and other senior officers.

69. The last inspection found that the LEA's provision of performance data to schools was inadequate. This is much improved and schools are provided in a timely way with good sets of performance data, along with advice and training on how to use these to support improvement. This is now a strength of the LEA. School profiles are suitably detailed and contain the benchmark performance data, which provide helpful comparisons with national statistics and those for schools in similar LEAs. However, the authority does not provide schools with detailed LEA benchmarked data on the achievements of different groups of pupils, such as children in public care or minority ethnic pupils. In Knowsley, these groups are small and the authority, while appropriately recognising the need for care when working with data for small groups, is committed to refining its data systems further.

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

70. At the time of the last inspection, this aspect of the LEA's work was satisfactory. It is now good. Fewer schools have been identified as causing concern, support strategies are well planned and effective, and the LEA has set demanding but realistic time-scales to improve performance.

71. Currently, three schools have serious weaknesses that were identified as a result of Ofsted inspection, and none is in special measures. The three schools are all responding to support to bring about their improvement.

72. Five of the LEA's secondary schools were identified as being in the first national cohort of schools facing challenging circumstances, and a further one was added to this category a year later. The LEA has directed a suitable and imaginative range of additional effective support to these schools. As a result of this and other support, the GCSE improvement rate in these schools last year exceeded that for other secondary schools in Knowsley. The LEA has identified a further group of schools with difficulties. Some schools have initiated the referral themselves, as a consequence of the school self-review that has helped them to diagnose the depth and nature of their problems. The LEA has produced a comprehensive plan for under-performing schools, which outlines a wide range of support initiatives used with these schools, including a central task force of experienced teachers.

73. When it has judged necessary, the LEA has made effective use of its powers to withdraw financial delegation from governing bodies and to appoint additional governors. Timely action has also been taken in some instances to secure changes in schools' senior management.

Support for literacy

74. The last inspection judged that support for literacy was highly satisfactory. Improvements have been made in the quality of support and it is now good.

75. Improvement over recent years at Key Stage 2 has exceeded that nationally. In both 2000 and 2001 the LEA target was exceeded, though this was not maintained in 2002 when there was a small dip, with only 31 per cent of schools achieving their literacy targets. The LEA attributes this to a concentration on improving standards in writing, and the difference between scores in reading and writing was considerably reduced. This narrowing of the gap brought the authority closer to achieving the LPSA target for 2004.

76. The major part of the support has been sensibly targeted to the schools in most need. The nature and timing of the support are well planned and discussed well in advance with schools, to meet their changing needs. In schools that need intensive support in both literacy and numeracy, consultants provide helpful support concurrently.

77. The management of the team of consultants is effective, and is enhanced by the fact that both the literacy and numeracy teams have a single manager. This is contributing to the merging of the two strategies into a single primary strategy, in line with national developments. The overall quality of training provided is good, though some changes of staff have adversely affected continuity. Good use is made in disseminating good practice of the 18 leading literacy teachers and the head of a beacon school.

Support for numeracy

78. Support for numeracy was judged to be effective in primary schools in the last inspection, though it was weak in secondary schools. Since then there have been significant improvements and the quality of support is good in both phases.

79. Steady progress has been maintained in Key Stage 2, with the percentage of pupils attaining Level 4 and above increasing each year, in contrast with the national trend. Nevertheless, the gap between the 2002 attainment and the 2003 target is wide and unlikely to be achieved.

80. Support is proportionate to schools' needs and is well planned. Training is of good quality, and increasingly it is targeted to clusters of schools that are at a similar stage of development or that are facing similar issues. Consultants have designed innovative learning materials, including a CD-ROM which has received national recognition for its quality. Good use is made of the 15 leading numeracy teachers, whose work is managed by the consultants. The overall management of the strategy is sound.

Support for information and communication technology (ICT)

81. Support for information and communication technology is highly satisfactory. At the time of the previous inspection this function was unsatisfactory because of insufficient support for primary schools and poor technical support. The recommendations have been addressed. The provision of technical support has been successfully realigned. It is now directed by a panel of primary headteachers, and schools are satisfied with the service, which is proving more responsive and effective in meeting their needs. The LEA engaged an external company to provide training and support to primary schools in response to needs emerging from the annual school self-review process. Satisfactory procedures have been established to ensure regular feedback from the company to the LEA, and training provided through this arrangement is highly valued by schools.

82. The authority's vision for ICT continues to focus primarily on increased resources and development of technical infrastructure to improve access to learning. In this aspect it links with other plans. The role of training to support the use of new resources is also appropriately emphasised. However, outcomes in terms of pupils' attainment are not specified.

83. The LEA has an informed view of attainment and progress in secondary schools and is able to challenge these schools and target support to them. The LEA is less able to do this with all primary schools and current procedures do not give a sufficiently clear view of pupils' standards.

84. Generally funding has been used well to meet the national computer:pupil target ratios and to achieve, ahead of plan, the provision of broadband connections to every school. An ICT strategy board has been established to oversee and co-ordinate the use of resources and the range of development under way in the borough. Newsletters have been developed to ensure schools are appropriately informed about the range of ICT projects, but some schools are unclear about the LEA's procedures for securing agreements with them for the central retention of the money for ICT from the Standards Fund.

85. In a beneficial initiative ahead of national developments, interactive whiteboards have been provided in all schools along with a suitable support programme of training. Early monitoring of the effects of the programme reports higher levels of interest and motivation by pupils. The authority has invested heavily in developing learning materials to support the teaching of literacy and numeracy and in purchasing digital resources to support pupils' use of ICT across the curriculum. Use of the resources is at an early stage and well considered planning has identified a clear need for further training and dissemination of practice. The three City Learning Centres are already supporting further developments.

86. All schools registered for the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) ICT training and a majority of teachers have completed it. The authority has provided all schools with appropriate training in the use of assessment, levelling and moderation. The quality of this training is highly regarded by schools and has contributed to raising teachers' confidence in making secure judgements, especially about Key Stage 3 standards.

Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3

87. The national Key Stage 3 strategy has been launched since the last inspection. The LEA's support is highly satisfactory and what has been achieved to date provides a sound basis for further improvement. The proportion of pupils attaining Level 5 or better in all three of the core subjects is lower than in similar authorities, and considerably below the national average. However, suitably challenging targets have been set and, provided that the recent improvement rates are sustained, these should be achievable.

88. The strategy is being implemented to the national timetable, and development plans are clear and workable. The consultants' time is well targeted, and support is differentiated according to the needs of individual schools. The two special schools that have Key Stage 3 pupils are fully integrated into the strategy. Overall, the management of the work is good and, although there have been two changes of management in the short life of the strategy, these transitions have been well handled. Consultants are well equipped for the work and their contributions are valued by schools. Although there is some variation in quantity of training between the strands of the strategy, the overall quality is reported as satisfactory or better by the school strategy managers interviewed. A register of leading departments is being developed to assist the spread of good practice.

89. Continuity between primary and secondary schools has become stronger than formerly, as a consequence of the work done in the Key Stage 3 strategy and the support given to this by a linked Year 5 to 8 initiative mounted in the authority. Work in the first four strands to be implemented is well under way, and is becoming embedded in practice. That in the foundation studies strand has made a brisk start. Agreement has been reached to focus on one of the humanities subjects in each school; overall this is a sound approach.

Support for minority ethnic groups, including Travellers

90. The support given to minority ethnic groups was not covered in the last inspection. This inspection shows it to be satisfactory.

91. The total number of minority ethnic pupils is small and they are widely dispersed across the borough, representing a wide range of ethnic groups and language backgrounds. There is a small number of children from asylum-seeking or refugee families; very few come from Traveller backgrounds.

92. Based on their prior attainment, the minority ethnic pupils generally make academic progress that is broadly in line with or above national expectations. A small support service aimed at supporting pupils' English language development and meeting their pastoral needs has been valuably augmented. The school survey indicates that the service is appreciated by schools but the LEA does not undertake detailed analysis of schools' or other users' levels of satisfaction. The service puts a good emphasis on the assessment of pupils, and divides its time sensibly between giving direct support to pupils at the early stages of English language acquisition and providing advice to schools. It has met its recent objectives of achieving early assessment of pupils' needs and improving the resourcing available to support pupils. A member of the team also liaises with families and arranges for translation services.

*Recommendation***In order to be able to improve support for minority ethnic pupils:**

- introduce a system for monitoring schools' and users' levels of satisfaction with the LEA's services.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

93. The support for gifted and talented pupils was not previously inspected. It is highly satisfactory. LEA policy developed in collaboration with schools appropriately defines and provides guidance on identifying pupils. Cohorts of pupils are identified through the Excellence in Cities programme and through a project with a cluster of schools in the Education Action Zone (EAZ).

94. All secondary schools and about half of primary schools are currently involved in the gifted and talented programmes provided through the EiC and EAZ initiatives. Plans to extend support to all schools from September 2003 are in place. Each school has a co-ordinator or nominated person, appropriately trained, inducted into the role and supported by the authority's gifted and talented and excellence challenge officers.

95. A range of activity has been developed which is designed to promote higher expectations and to widen participation. The programme involves City Learning Centres, specialist schools, higher education and local football clubs. Support is more firmly established for gifted pupils and is developing well for talented pupils through sport coaching sessions at the Liverpool Football Academy, the use of a local textile designer to support work with fashion and textiles students, and a programme of financial support provided by the authority for talented musicians. Summer schools to support transition and develop ICT, literacy and self-esteem were held successfully in 2001 and 2002 and specialist schools are building on this work in 2003 to extend provision. Opportunities for involvement in masterclasses in art and mathematics and with the "national academy for the gifted and talented" have been promoted well, and take-up is high.

96. The LEA has identified the strengths and weaknesses in its provision and is working in an integrated way through the EiC to tackle low achievement. Recent improvements to data systems have been developed in order to track pupils' progress better, particularly between key stages and post-16 provision. An appropriate range of targets has been set for gifted pupils for 2003 and there is an expectation that their attainment will contribute to wider LEA targets. Targets have been set in the EDP for increasing attainment at Level 6 at Key Stage 3 and this reflects a realistic view of the challenges faced in Knowsley in raising achievement from Level 5. However, this is not consistent with the LEA's high expectation for its pupils and does not focus sufficiently on individual gifted and talented pupils' achievements.

97. Targeted work and the tracking of improvement of individual pupils has generally been slow to develop in secondary schools. The setting of appropriate individual targets for talented pupils has been identified as an area for development. However, in the EAZ high achievement project identified, pupils follow a differentiated, clearly focussed course to accelerate learning. The performance of pupils is monitored and schools are able to measure

significant gains in attainment and attendance. Primary schools have also taken a strong lead in developing collaborative approaches, target setting with individual pupils and their families and tracking and monitoring progress. They are well supported with resources and in-service training developed by the beacon school and use cluster groups well to share practice.

98. Regular meetings between LEA and school co-ordinators have been established to exchange ideas and support developments and there is strong and willing support to move forward with this work.

Support for school management

99. Support for school leadership and management was satisfactory at the time of the last inspection. Since then there have been several improvements, and it is now good.

100. The quality of support for professional development of school leadership and management is good. The LEA has close links with the National College for School Leadership, and effective use is made of national development schemes, where the take-up has increased four-fold in the last two years. The development programme for middle management has several strong features. Training for a range of aspects of school management is provided, largely by external providers selected by the LEA with the participation of experienced headteachers. Senior officers attend all interviews for headteacher appointments. Effective support is also provided for both newly appointed and acting headteachers. One of the beacon schools takes a lead in induction and support for primary headteachers, and the LEA arranges for all newly appointed heads who so wish to have a mentor.

101. As well as providing schools with performance data profiles, the LEA has started to make available to schools a range of benchmarked and annotated data to assist financial management. This information and performance data are discussed during school improvement officer visits, and are recognised by headteachers as a key element of the LEA's support for leadership and management. Management consultants are contracted by the LEA to work with the secondary schools in challenging circumstances, and the LEA plans to extend this approach further to provide similar support for all secondary schools.

102. The importance attached to school self-review and the work done to develop a thorough and comprehensive process for self-evaluation is part of the published 'Knowsley school improvement framework'. This forms a central part of the LEA's support for leadership and management. An overriding sense of partnership, carefully nurtured during the preparation of this framework, has been further encouraged through a wide range of opportunities for senior managers in schools, governors and LEA officers to meet regularly to discuss matters central to educational policies and practice. Examples of such occasions are the annual School Improvement Conference, termly seminars for headteachers that focus on sharing good practice, and cluster network groups for deputy headteachers and heads of department.

Support for governors

103. Support for governors was satisfactory at the time of the previous inspection. It is now highly satisfactory. Between the inspections the service was comprehensively revised as a result of a Best Value review that identified unsatisfactory aspects in support. The service has undergone significant change over the last twelve months and much has been accomplished in the last three months. Service level agreements have been established with schools for clerking services, bespoke training and access to additional advice. Leadership of the service is strong and effective. The recent development has brought the support up to a highly satisfactory standard.

104. A new training programme was swiftly introduced and has proved effective in increasing participation rates. The programme is based on general needs identified from a comprehensive analysis of all school Ofsted reports. Link training governors were introduced in September in just over half of schools. Few meetings have taken place between the governor support service and link governors but those that have proved effective in developing ideas for an area based governor-training programme. This is due to be introduced across the borough from September 2003 to further encourage participation in governor training.

105. The school self-review process has sensibly been extended to involve all governing bodies more freely in the analysis of their own and the school's performance. Support to governing bodies for schools in difficulties continues to be effective, as it was at the last inspection, and the governor service works well with school improvement officers to co-ordinate support to meet each school's specific needs.

106. Work to develop consultation structures has progressed and a regular newsletter, website and a governor conference were set up this year. Regular meetings between the LEA and chairs and vice chairs of governing bodies have been introduced and these also serve as a consultation forum to provide feedback on a range of school improvement services, including governor support. Area governor forums have been refocused and meet termly to discuss changes and receive briefings on policies and new initiatives. Consultation to promote continuous improvement in the delivery of the service is at a very early stage but is developing. All of these changes have met with strong approval from schools, which now regard this as a highly effective service that is more attuned to their needs.

107. Strategies introduced to reduce governor vacancy rates further have succeeded in the short term and will be further tested in September when vacancy rates are expected to peak. Many of the developments are very recent and have yet to become embed securely in practice, although there is strong capacity for further improvement.

The effectiveness of services to support school management

108. The LEA's general approach to enabling schools to secure management services is highly satisfactory. There is a high rate of buy-back of LEA services from schools, which generally hold a very favourable opinion of their quality.

109. Whether delivered from within the education and lifelong learning department or the department of environment and operational services, the services are characterised by the

close involvement of headteachers in drawing up specifications and refining service standards, as well as by a strong customer focus. The facilities management group is a good vehicle for consultation, meeting every three months with headteacher representatives, and it is appropriately widening its remit to a broader range of services.

110. Service level agreements are in the process of further review, but on the whole they offer suitably differentiated levels of service, do not tie schools unreasonably into lengthy contracts and provide a clear specification. The presentation to schools is unsatisfactory. It is insufficiently co-ordinated, either through a clear and informative 'brochure' or a single point of contact for schools.

Recommendation

In order to improve management services to schools:

- present details of the management services to schools in a consistent and co-ordinated format.

111. The LEA has been slow to develop its role as a broker as well as a provider of services, although there have been some examples of effective brokerage in the areas of continuing professional development and risk management. The LEA is beginning to explore how it can do more to support schools to become effective purchasers of services. The issue was highlighted in the Best Value review of strategic management and has featured prominently in recent workshops with headteachers and school managers.

112. No fieldwork was carried out in respect of financial services, human resources services or support for ICT in administration. These services were judged satisfactory or highly satisfactory at the last inspection and the evidence is that they remain so.

113. Property services are good, as they were at the time of the last inspection. A small team of buildings officers operates at arm's length from the authority and is highly responsive to the needs of schools. Headteachers are involved in the appointment of buildings officers, whose work is to serve the needs of individual schools. Each school has its own asset management plan, with priorities linked to resources available and advice provided both on maintenance and broader development issues. Approximately 90 per cent of schools regard the service as satisfactory or better. The management of larger building projects has been generally satisfactory, with the exception of a few, mainly in secondary schools. The authority has a good record of responding to emergencies in schools: two schools severely damaged by fire were up and running again within a week.

114. Services for cleaning/caretaking and grounds maintenance are both satisfactory. Service level agreements are flexible and the detail is negotiated with individual schools. Costs of both services are benchmarked against other authorities and currently compare favourably. There are sound quality control procedures in place. The grounds maintenance service has had a variable record, but has responded well to criticisms in one area of the borough by introducing new payment procedures directly linked to schools' satisfaction with the quality of the work.

115. Catering services are highly satisfactory. All secondary and over 90 per cent of primary schools rate the service as satisfactory or better. Steps are taken to gauge the opinion of customers, including pupils. Arrangements are in place to ensure that nutritional standards are met, but, although there is a clear commitment to healthy eating, there is little evidence of the dynamic and imaginative schemes that are the hallmark of the best authorities.

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

116. This function was not previously inspected. Support to schools in obtaining teachers to fill vacant posts is good. Knowsley does not currently collect vacancy statistics regularly from its schools, but the 2003 school census return suggests that it has rather more vacancies than nationally. There are plans to improve its database of vacancies in the near future.

117. Since the last inspection, the LEA has appointed a recruitment strategy manager, within the school improvement section. A number of effective strategies have been developed to improve recruitment. These services are provided at no cost to schools, as is free advertising of vacancies on an internet site. The council provides a limited housing help scheme, principally targeted on attracting young teachers to work in Knowsley. Strategies aimed at stimulating recruitment to the teaching profession, include negotiations with higher education institutions to recognise the experience of recommended classroom assistants as part of an entry qualification for teacher training. A high quality programme of support and induction is provided for newly qualified teachers (NQTs), and this, in conjunction with other measures, has had a beneficial effect on their retention beyond the end of the first year. A particular strength of this is the careful monitoring that takes place, which enables officers to respond quickly when an NQT is experiencing difficulty. 95 percent of NQTs last year continued in the LEA into their second year, considerably higher than the national continuation rate and that of similar authorities.

118. The framework for continuing professional development is an important element of the Knowsley school improvement framework. This sets out clearly the commitments and obligations of all partners involved in professional development, including teachers, schools and the LEA. Together with headteachers, LEA officers have identified a small number of local higher education institutions as "preferred" training providers, and the knowledge that these providers have built up about the LEA's schools makes an important contribution to the quality and relevance of their provision. Together with contracted teaching and learning consultants, the training and development work undertaken is central to the LEA's transformational learning strategy. Officers and teachers report that since the induction of this framework it has made a positive contribution to the recruitment of teachers to schools in the LEA.

Section 3: Special educational needs

Summary

119. When inspected in 1999, the LEA's provision for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) was generally unsatisfactory. Its strategy for increasing the inclusion of pupils with SEN was poor, and its service provision had weaknesses. It has made very considerable progress in the last two years, and has now addressed almost all of the recommendations of that inspection satisfactorily. Its support for schools and for pupils with SEN is generally satisfactory with good features.

120. The LEA currently spends a great deal on its SEN provision, educates too many pupils in special schools, and has provided many more secondary-age pupils in mainstream schools with SEN statements than is the case nationally. However, the quality of provision has not been at fault: the special schools are of good quality, and pupils with SEN generally make progress in the mainstream primary schools. Nevertheless, the LEA is resolved to tackle the structural issues in the interests of greater inclusion, and in this it is strongly supported by schools from all phases. It has worked rapidly on implementing its action plan, with strong support from external consultants, and is generally meeting its deadlines for progress. Its capacity to carry through the remainder of the plan is good.

121. There are already indications that the change in strategy is beginning to bear fruit. The number of pupils educated in special schools is falling slightly, and the function of some of those schools is being modified so that they provide more support to mainstream schools. The LEA has discontinued a number of statements of secondary-aged pupils in mainstream schools, and fewer pupils are being assessed for new statements. A number of measures have been introduced to ensure consistency in assessment and provision for pupils with SEN. Although the re-distribution of resources is still not significant, greater attention is being given to assessing and supporting pupils in the early years in order to reduce the need for costly statements later. Mainstream special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCO) are now given good support.

122. The main weaknesses that remain concern the need to speed up the provision of medical advice when new statements are prepared and the need to clarify the function and operation of certain centrally provided services, particularly the child guidance service.

Strategy

123. The LEA's strategy for special educational needs was poor at the last inspection. The authority failed to give a strategic lead, particularly on increasing the inclusion of pupils with SEN, and it did not ensure that services were targeted to pupils' and schools' needs. The authority has made very considerable progress, mainly within the last two years, and the strategy is now good.

124. Knowsley has long had more special schools than most authorities, and the proportion of pupils educated in the special sector remains very high. The proportion of pupils with SEN statements is also above the national average in the secondary phase. The

LEA is now strongly committed to including more pupils in mainstream schools and to reducing the number of costly and unnecessary statements, and it has made significant early steps forward.

125. After the previous inspection, the LEA rightly launched a large-scale review of its approach to provision for pupils with SEN. However, too little progress was being made until a new senior management team came into post. The review was then re-invigorated, with an external consultant adding valuable capacity. Rapid improvement began with the review. This involved very good consultation with schools. There is now a very strong sense of collaboration between the LEA, the mainstream schools, and the special schools. The social services department and the primary care trust have also appropriately been fully involved in the development of the new strategy

126. The LEA has set out its new vision and aims in a major strategic document. This is very clear and accessible to all stakeholders. It establishes the principles which will govern decision-making, and sets out a clear path for the future. The strategy is based on a very full audit of needs, and takes account of the good quality of the LEA's special schools. A good supporting implementation plan has also been produced. This, too, is lucid and broadly comprehensive. It sets out the actions to be undertaken for including more pupils into mainstream education, with target dates for each activity. The authority reviews its implementation frequently, and work is currently on course with all activities except where a few have wisely been modified in the light of circumstances.

127. The authority intends to retain most special schools which, depending on funding, will change their role to one of outreach and involve fewer full-time pupils. This has the full support of all schools.

128. Progress on the strategy to reduce the number of pupils with SEN statements is further advanced, although the proportion with statements has declined only slightly so far. An improved funding system for mainstream schools has been introduced through which funds are provided to support earlier intervention for pupils with SEN. Now, only pupils with higher-level needs gain statements. The LEA has also made a major step forward by agreeing with schools a system of criteria for statements, and also for pupils with lower levels of need, to ensure consistency in practice across the authority.

129. The LEA has made progress in other, equally important, aspects. A child development centre is currently being established. This is a very sound development, intended to enable better assessment of young children's special needs and to support provision where feasible in mainstream schools rather than, as sometimes happened in the past, in special school nurseries. Improvements are also being made in service provision to increase inclusion. Most significantly, the delivery of SEN support to schools and pupils will soon be managed by area partnerships. The intention of this is to enable local decision-making and to provide flexibility to meet identified needs more precisely. The general principle of this has gained schools' strong support. Work is also in hand to increase capacity in speech and language support by training non-professional staff to take on aspects of this work. If successful, this will lead to speedier provision for pupils in mainstream schools. Finally, the authority has prudently embarked on a skills audit that will inform future professional development for school staff in order to equip them better for their

responsibilities in inclusion. The LEA is co-operating actively with other agencies in most of these initiatives.

Statutory obligations

130. When last inspected, the LEA met its statutory duties regarding SEN satisfactorily. It continues to do so.

131. The LEA's management of the formal assessment of pupils with SEN is now very sound. The SEN team has improved the quality of its contribution to pupils' statements, and those written recently are more precise and helpful to schools than those produced some time ago. SEN officers have a sensible system of prioritisation for attending pupils' annual reviews and currently attend 75 per cent of those preparing for secondary transfer. Officers are alert to the possibility of stopping individual statements, and interim reviews are sometimes held when cessation seems appropriate. Where there are no statutory exceptions to be considered, the LEA's timeliness in completing statements was in line with the national average last year but has since improved and all are completed on time. The primary care trust, however, has not been able to keep to national deadlines for the provision of medical advice. The LEA has rightly raised its concerns, within a review of the community paediatrician service that is being made by the primary care trust.

132. The LEA has a well-established parent partnership service. This was found to be good when inspected by Ofsted in 2002. It provides information and advice to parents and, with Barnardo's, runs a team of parent supporters. It facilitates the LEA's consultation with parents on its strategic developments. The authority has recently strengthened the capacity of this service, and also provides parents with access to a disagreement resolution service, although none have yet used it.

133. Action has been taken by the LEA in response to new legislation on disability discrimination. The authority has a draft accessibility strategy built into its asset management planning, and has given guidance to schools on their responsibilities. It sensibly plans to ensure that at least one primary and secondary school in each area is fully accessible as soon as possible.

SEN functions to support school improvement

134. At the time of the last inspection the LEA gave unsatisfactory support to schools in improving their provision for SEN. Funding and service provision were not sufficiently well targeted. The LEA has since made considerable progress, and its support is now highly satisfactory.

135. The recent revision of funding arrangements for mainstream schools has given them a clear basis on which they can plan their SEN work. The new system is fair and easily understood, and supports the LEA's encouragement of schools to meet pupils' needs without recourse to SEN statements. This has been reinforced by the recent introduction of criteria for determining pupils' needs, thus providing schools with a secure framework for planning their provision.

136. The LEA has greatly improved its support for schools' SEN co-ordinators (SENCOs). Regular meetings are held, at which policy is discussed and new procedures introduced. Guidance material is very clear and usable. The involvement of SENCOs in applying the new criteria to statemented children in their schools contributed to developing SENCOs' skills. SENCOs feel well supported by the LEA's programme of continuing professional development.

137. The LEA's provision of SEN services is generally satisfactory. Some aspects have improved since the last inspection, but the authority recognises certain continuing weaknesses and has plans to remedy them. It has increased the capacity of services supporting children in their early years, and has ensured that the educational psychology team focuses more than previously on statutory assessment and that some of its administrative procedures have improved. The child guidance service, which includes the educational psychology team, now plans its work better than previously, and there is evidence of the quality of some of its work. Nevertheless, secondary schools tend to be critical of the service. The LEA wisely intends to review its role further within the context of the new area partnerships. This review will, appropriately, include scrutiny of preventative provision for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, an aspect on which a minority of mainstream schools currently have some concern. Improvements have already been made in the sensory impairment service, but the necessary development of a specification of how it will support schools is also dependent on the outcome of current work on area partnerships.

Recommendation

In order to improve the schools' and parents' understanding of SEN service provision:

- specify in the new area partnerships arrangements precisely how schools' needs for support from educational psychologists, child guidance social workers, behaviour support staff and support staff for sensory impaired children, will be identified and met.

138. Ofsted inspections indicate that primary school pupils with SEN generally make progress in line with their counterparts nationally. The LEA is currently developing data profiles that will provide each mainstream school with a detailed analysis of the success it achieves with this group of pupils. The authority is also working to introduce improved systems of measurement of the progress of pupils with higher-level needs. Mainstream schools do not yet set targets for pupils with SEN but special schools have already set targets for their pupils.

Value for money

139. At the time of the last inspection the authority gave unsatisfactory value for money in its support for pupils with SEN. Resources were not targeted where needs were greatest and provision was not monitored or evaluated sufficiently well. Considerable improvement has been made and the LEA now gives satisfactory value for money.

140. The LEA spends more on SEN than comparable authorities. This is partly because it retains more special schools than similar LEAs. However, Ofsted inspection shows that almost all of the seven schools are of good quality or better, and give good or very good value for money. Nevertheless, the authority is wisely reviewing this expenditure in the light of future changes in these schools' roles. The authority's use of out-of-borough placements for pupils with SEN, a hitherto significant expense, is decreasing, and the LEA is seeking to reduce it further by enhancing the function of its own special schools.

141. The number of secondary-aged pupils with SEN statements is currently high, but the LEA is acting decisively to reduce the number of new statements, and instead to divert funding to supporting younger pupils with SEN, and thereby to obviate the need for some statements, and with that some bureaucratic costs. This strategy itself entails some additional spending in the first years of the strategy, but the support of partners has been forthcoming in the establishment of the child development centre, and external funding is being used to establish other new provision. The LEA's spending on centrally-provided services is low at present, but there are some inefficiencies, noted elsewhere in this report. The LEA is aware of these, has introduced better service planning systems, and is seeking to target the use of these services more carefully with the new area structure.

142. The delegation of SEN funds to schools, as indicated above, has been managed well: the new system has been very clearly explained and schools understand it fully. Funding is closely related to schools' needs.

143. The funding strategy is planned and managed well. Previously SEN spending has been over budget, mainly because of unexpected costs of individual pupils with very expensive needs. In the short term, and with the agreement of all schools, funding will be recovered from the overall budget which the LEA allocates for individual schools. In the long term the LEA intends that its own special schools will be able to absorb more of these pupils.

144. The authority does not yet monitor the effectiveness of its SEN spending thoroughly but is moving rapidly to do so. School improvement officers currently evaluate each mainstream school's overall success in inclusion. However, this is not yet supported by statistical data on the progress made by pupils with SEN. That will soon be available, which should make the evaluation more rigorous. Progress on detailed evaluation of the special schools has been slower to achieve because of the complexities of measurement of progress; nevertheless, the LEA has improved its monitoring of these schools by the school improvement team, and some work is in hand to develop better measures of accountability.

Section 4: Promoting social inclusion

Summary

145. The LEA's work in promoting social inclusion was broadly satisfactory at the time of the last inspection but there were weaknesses in provision for some of the most vulnerable pupils: those who were poor attenders at school, and those who had no school place. The authority has made significant progress in improving both of those aspects of its work, and they are now good. However, equally significantly, it has developed a strong culture of promoting social inclusion by identifying groups and individuals who are at risk and, where necessary, developing new forms of provision that meet their needs.

146. So far, success in improving vulnerable pupils' achievements has been slight but, nevertheless, discernible. The proportion of pupils who achieve at least one GCSE grade is rising much more rapidly than nationally, although from a very low baseline. The attendance service is beginning to make inroads on the poor attendance figures. Some potentially disaffected young people are more engaged in education than previously. Permanent exclusions from school are relatively few. Nevertheless, there is a long way to go before the LEA can be sure that its measures are effective across the board. For instance, older pupils enrolled at the new pupil referral unit still tend to attend poorly, and too few teenage mothers are re-integrated to school.

147. The strongest feature of the LEA's work on social inclusion, and one that augurs well, is the high level of discussion and collaboration with schools. Monitoring by HMI has indicated the good quality of professional development provided by the LEA. There is a climate of openness in which complex and sometimes controversial matters can be resolved. This spirit of partnership between LEA and schools is exemplified by the fact that schools agreed to part-fund with the authority a new post of race equality officer, to fill what all concerned acknowledge to be a long-standing gap in provision.

148. That the LEA has made as much progress as it has in a short time is the result of the establishment of an effective new management structure, through which tasks are defined and prioritised clearly, and the expert work of a large number of officers, many of whom are new to the authority. It has also made good, and sometimes imaginative, use of the great quantity of external funding that has become available in recent years. Benefit, too, has been derived from the good level of work with external partners; this has strengthened the LEA's ability to make an impact on sometimes almost intractable problems.

The strategy to promote social inclusion

149. The LEA's strategy to promoting social inclusion was satisfactory at the time of the last inspection but there was a need to focus on raising the attainment of disadvantaged groups and integrate this into the EDP. The authority has acted on this recommendation, and has made many significant improvements. Its work in this area is now highly satisfactory.

150. The education and lifelong learning department collaborates well with the social services department which, unusually, is jointly managed with the primary care trust.

Education is a major contributor to the integrated children's services partnership, which is seeking to provide a clear strategic overview for council services for children, something currently lacking. Joint action between education and social services is effective, for instance, in planning child protection procedures and in resourcing action to combat racism. The education department is now developing area partnerships through which it will deploy its inclusion services, and it is envisaged that these will also become vehicles for delivery of some social services and health provision, such as the child and adolescent mental health service.

151. The LEA set out its commitment to meet the needs of potentially disadvantaged groups in a clear and forthright policy statement, and schools are very well aware and supportive of this. Social inclusion is a strong feature of the EDP, and of the local public service agreement with the government. Early years provision is rightly targeted at the more disadvantaged parts of the borough. The behaviour support plan has a good rationale and is underpinned by a coherent philosophy. Increasing amounts of funding, often from external sources, are being directed into inclusion work, in line with the LEA's stated priorities. School improvement officers collaborate with specialist officers who are directly concerned with inclusion, and the authority's annual review of each school includes judgements about the extent to which it actively promotes the inclusion of all pupils.

152. The authority has identified accurately a broad range of groups of young people who need additional support and is directing its resources and energy towards meeting those needs. This has led to a series of ambitious activities such as the identification of children at risk of non-attendance at school; the development of a database recording provision for vulnerable children; the restructuring of the attendance service; and the development of alternative forms of provision for disaffected young people and improved provision for teenage mothers. This work is far-sighted and well managed.

153. Analysis of data is at the heart of the LEA's strategy for social inclusion. Data collection is used to support service planning. Individual schools are not provided with analysis of the progress made by particular groups within their populations, because of the small sizes of some groups, but this will be supplied to area partnerships from next term to enable targeting of support to schools. Furthermore, the council will then begin to introduce a large-scale government-funded project that will allow detailed and comparative tracking of all pupils and groups in the LEA.

The supply of school places

154. The authority's planning of school places was rated satisfactory at the last inspection. No fieldwork was carried out during the current inspection and evidence from the LEA's self evaluation and other indicators confirm that this area remains satisfactory. Although the number of secondary surplus places is above average and primary surplus places about average, the LEA has begun to tackle this issue with some vigour through the work of the Schools Commission.

Asset management

155. Asset management is highly satisfactory. This area of work was not covered in the previous inspection.

156. The authority has a good knowledge of its building stock. It has met all the government's deadlines for the development of the asset management plan, which is regarded by the DfES as satisfactory. Data on building condition and suitability have been efficiently collected and stored on the LEA's database and procedures are implemented to ensure that the information is up-to-date. The data provides the basis for determining building work both at individual school and LEA level and processes for prioritisation are fair and transparent. Officers, headteachers and diocesan representatives work together in a well-established asset management group and there is a high degree of mutual trust. The LEA and schools have worked together particularly effectively to implement a risk management strategy. All schools except two have extensive security fencing and all that want it have closed circuit television installed. As a consequence, major savings have been realised on vandalism repairs and insurance premiums.

157. As with many authorities, there is a legacy of under-investment in school buildings, with the result that there is a slightly above average backlog of repairs, totalling over £30 million. The authority is not yet clear how this will be tackled. It is rightly approaching the issue in a comprehensive way, involving the whole council and linking it with plans to remove surplus places and extend the role of schools within the community. A Schools Commission of four independent consultants undertook an extensive review of school provision and produced a thorough report, with detailed recommendations, which is currently the subject of consultation across the authority

Admissions

158. The authority's arrangements for admissions are unsatisfactory, as they were at the time of the last inspection. Having delegated responsibility for admissions to individual governing bodies many years ago, the LEA has played only a minimal role in managing this function. However, with the change in legal requirements for the LEA to co-ordinate admissions arrangements, it is now taking back responsibility for admissions to community and voluntary controlled schools with effect from 2005/06. Prospects for improvement are good, particularly with the team of officers strengthened and an admission forum constituted for the first time.

159. In the meantime, parents and children have not suffered unduly. The great majority receive a place at the school of their first preference and there are few appeals. Those that are lodged are heard in good time for children to be inducted into their new schools. Procedures on casual admissions during the school year are good, with a pupil mobility co-ordinator taking active steps to ensure that children are well settled and attending their new school.

160. Other aspects are unsatisfactory. The multiplicity of admission policies and over-subscription criteria are confusing for parents. The quality of consultation between admission authorities is inconsistent. Admissions information, though attractively presented and easy to read, is unclear on how over-subscription criteria will be implemented and does

not give the number of applicants who were successful in previous years, so that parents can gauge their chances of a successful application.

Provision of education for pupils who have no school place

161. At the time of the last inspection the authority's provision for pupils who had no school place was unsatisfactory. The LEA has made considerable improvements in this aspect of its work and the provision is now good, with some very good features.

162. The LEA realised two years ago that there was a large number of pupils who were not attending school, and in some cases may not even have been on a school roll. It made a major and successful effort to locate these young people and attract them back to school, or, where this was more appropriate, provide alternative forms of education for the older ones. It has identified particular groups whose circumstances warrant particular attention, such as teenage mothers, or disaffected pupils, and has developed provision that aims to meet their needs. Not all of these groups are yet achieving in line with LEA averages, but a good start has been made. This is, in many ways, a major success story.

163. The authority has established an inclusion panel which takes referrals of pupils thought to be vulnerable, and oversees the placement of those who have no school place. A pupil mobility team along with the school attendance service manages the placements, and monitors these pupils. This is supported by an impressive and comprehensive database which holds updated information on every vulnerable pupil. As a result of this, the LEA rightly feels confident that it has almost total knowledge of the educational circumstances of a large group of young people who have been or are potentially at risk. The pupil mobility team has very good procedures for locating children whose current circumstances are unknown. Overall, these developments represent a very important step forward.

164. The LEA has opened a new pupil referral unit (PRU), providing full-time education either on- or off-site, to about 80 pupils who have been excluded from school or were at risk of exclusion. The attendance of these pupils is still very variable, but there are some individual success stories. The authority also manages the provision for 120 potentially disaffected pupils from Year 9 to Year 11 on part-time vocational courses at the 14-19 collegiate. Schools are involved in managing their programme, whose quality is monitored by the collegiate. Pupils' attendance is monitored by the attendance service. 60 per cent of those pupils have improved their attendance while at the collegiate. A teenage pregnancy co-ordinator runs a programme for pregnant schoolgirls and school-age mothers, concentrating on re-integrating them to school and, meanwhile, on supporting their personal development and improving their skills. It has not experienced dramatic success yet in re-integration, but its objectives are very relevant to these young women's needs. An extensive range of specific provision has been made for particular groups, such as those with emotional or behavioural difficulties, or those who are long-term hospital patients or are convalescing. In every case scrutinised in this inspection, the provision is firmly based on the basic aims of providing a full-time education suited to the individual's needs and on re-integrating pupils to school where feasible. Sensible use is made of ICT-based learning, the community learning centre, and the facilities of other agencies, such as the public libraries.

165. Monitoring of pupils educated at home, although conducted according to good procedures, is not yet as frequent as it should be. Provision for the tiny number of primary

pupils excluded from school will, until next term, rely on extensive provision of home tuition, which inevitably carries the risk of under-emphasising their social development. The LEA's own evaluation suggests that provision for sick children, even though it is flexibly managed to take account of pupils' health from week to week, should be augmented. These are all relatively minor weaknesses. The authority is well aware of areas for improvement and has plans to deal with them. Most significantly, it is preparing to establish a body which will maintain accountability for all pupils who are unlikely to return to school-based education. This body will have the responsibility of planning and monitoring provision, and therefore ensuring its coherence and effectiveness. This will make the current arrangements, good as they already are, more secure and more accessible to external inspection.

Attendance

166. The LEA gave poor support to schools in improving pupils' attendance at the time of the last inspection. The main weaknesses were in the management of the LEA's support and, particularly, the failure to deploy support to areas of greatest need. Those weaknesses have been overcome and very many other improvements made. This aspect of the LEA's work is now good.

167. The poor standard of attendance of many pupils forms one of the greatest challenges facing the LEA. There was no significant improvement in attendance during the period 1999-2002. Primary attendance was below the national average last year, and secondary attendance was well below. Unauthorised absence from primary schools was above average, and from secondary schools was well above average. The LEA has recognised this as a fundamental problem, and last year changed its approach significantly. The attendance service has been remodelled. It now mainly comprises school attendance improvement officers who give strategic support to schools. This involves close monitoring of each school's attendance data, and the identification of pupils or year-groups that are at risk. These officers also evaluate each school's attendance strategy and suggest improvements where appropriate. This is presented to the school in an annual audit document, which headteachers interviewed in this inspection generally find to be rigorous. The audits selected by inspectors for scrutiny were of very good quality. They provided schools with relevant and well-substantiated advice. The school attendance improvement officers work closely with their counterparts, the school improvement officers. On occasion, joint work has been undertaken in a concerted attempt to bring about major change in a school.

168. The more detailed casework with pupils and parents is undertaken by school attendance support assistants, who are deployed by their attendance improvement officers according to schools' needs. The assistants have a well-designed, staged and benchmarked model for intervention. When they provide intensive support for a pupil or family, this is for a short period only, after which legal action may be initiated to enforce attendance. The records of assistants generally show evidence of the effectiveness of this support and in some cases improvement by individual pupils has been impressive. The assistants have been robust in cautioning parents about possible legal action. The LEA took legal action against 49 parents last year; however, this in itself did not always lead to improved attendance.

169. Many schools also have other forms of attendance support, such as Excellence in Cities learning mentors or their own attendance units. The efficiency of management by

headteachers of the various strands of support is monitored by the school improvement team in its annual reviews.

170. The authority has also done much more to improve its provision. When the overall strategy was in its early stages, the LEA sent a leaflet to every home in the borough encouraging parents to ensure that their child went to school and seeking to establish the whereabouts of any non-attenders. This was the beginning of the major initiative whereby the authority found a large number of children who had not been at school; nearly all of these young people now attend school or alternative provision. The service is well aware of the risks of disaffected pupils slipping through the network when there is, as here, a complex range of alternatives to full-time mainstream education. Accordingly, it monitors pupils' part-time attendance at training provision. The service has produced clear and helpful guidance to schools about improving attendance, and has established very clear referral procedures.

171. As a result of all these actions, a corner appears to have been turned: most schools targeted for particular support have achieved improved attendance over the last two terms when compared with a similar period last year. Most schools involved in the Behaviour Improvement Programme exceeded their targets for attendance in the autumn term. Most significantly, current indications suggest that the LEA's overall secondary school targets for this year may well be met. Furthermore, the majority of pupils attending alternative educational provision in Key Stage 4 have improved their attendance, and in certain cases attend there better than they do at their base school. There are indications that the service's advice has led to increased stringency by schools overall when considering authorisation of absence. As yet, the improvements are small overall, but schools, especially primaries, are generally seeing at least some benefit in the changes made by the LEA. The authority's plans for further development indicate a satisfactory capacity for further improvement.

Behaviour support

172. The LEA's support to schools in improving behaviour was good at the time of the last inspection. The school survey undertaken for this inspection shows that schools regard the LEA's support as satisfactory, and secondary schools' and special schools' evaluations place the LEA in the top quarter of authorities nationally. The number of primary pupils permanently excluded from school is in line with the national figure, and is very small. The number of secondary pupils permanently excluded is much smaller than is the case nationally. In both phases, the number of fixed term exclusions is below the national figure. In view of all these positive indicators, no fieldwork was undertaken during this inspection. This aspect of the LEA's work continues to be good.

Health, safety, welfare and child protection

173. These aspects of the LEA's work were highly satisfactory at the time of the last inspection. The LEA's self-evaluation and school survey data demonstrate that provision for health and safety continues to be highly satisfactory. Detailed inspection was made of child protection during the current inspection, and this is also highly satisfactory.

174. The LEA has made very significant progress in protecting potentially vulnerable children by its success, detailed elsewhere in this report, in locating those who had been habitual non-attenders at school and ensuring that they returned to education. Its arrangements for identifying vulnerable children, and sometimes in providing alternative forms of education for them, are sound and continually improving. This, too, is of fundamental significance to child protection.

175. The education and lifelong learning department already works closely with the social service department within a good framework of inter-service collaboration, but plans are in hand for introducing new, more rigorous, procedures that will build child protection into all aspects of the LEA's work. The education department is well represented on the local area child protection committee, and has given clear guidance to schools about the recently introduced procedures for referral of children in need. Commendably, learning mentors, who may come from non-educational backgrounds, have been trained in these procedures. It has yet to extend this training to workplace providers who have service agreements with the 14-19 collegiate.

176. Ofsted inspections show that Knowsley schools' provision for child protection is slightly better than seen nationally. The LEA has ensured that every school has a designated teacher in charge of this work. All schools have a child protection policy, updated to meet new requirements. The authority offers child protection training, beginning with awareness-raising but with supplementary courses for experienced staff. The LEA's records have not been totally accurate. However, investigations show that all schools have attended training within the last two years, or are about to undertake refresher training that has now been specially arranged for them.

Looked after children

177. The support given by the LEA to looked after children was highly satisfactory at the time of the last inspection. The LEA's self-evaluation indicates that it has made further improvements, and the school survey shows that schools in all phases regard the LEA's provision as better than satisfactory; this places the authority in the top quarter of LEAs nationally. In the light of these indicators, no fieldwork was undertaken during this inspection. This aspect of the LEA's work continues to be highly satisfactory.

Measures to combat racism

178. This aspect of the LEA's work was not evaluated in the last inspection. After a period of some inactivity, the council has now begun to take positive action against racism, and the education and lifelong learning department has been at the front of progress made. On balance, the current position is satisfactory, but there is considerable scope for improving the speed of developments.

179. The council has accepted the findings of the Macpherson enquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence and has taken steps to respond to its recommendations. However, the council's race equality scheme was only in draft at the time of the statutory deadline for publication a year ago. It was approved by council members during this inspection, one year late. This slowness to respond to legislative requirements indicates that the council has

previously given insufficient priority to race equality. However, there has been a quickening of pace in the last two years: a chief officer now leads on diversity and equalities across council services, some corporate activity is underway, and departmental self-evaluation has begun.

180. The education and lifelong learning department judges that it is currently at level 1, the lowest level, of the Commission for Racial Equality's standards. That it may have reached this level, however, is the result of important actions taken recently. The department has appointed a race equality officer, in collaboration with the social services department and schools. This officer will have a broad remit, but crucially will provide support to schools. The LEA has also introduced a system for recording racist incidents in schools. The LEA has monitored the ethnic composition of its staff and the school workforce, and has sensibly taken positive action, albeit small-scale, to recruit staff from minority groups. Training in recognising and reporting incidents was provided to teachers and lunchtime organisers, and was positively evaluated by most. The results of this monitoring are reported to councillors. The level of racist incidents reported so far is very low, but the authority does not require a nil response and therefore cannot be certain that each school has adopted procedures.

181. The authority, rightly, believes that it should help schools to meet their responsibilities regarding race equality, particularly significant given the unusually limited ethnic diversity in the local population. It has used a consultant to produce very helpful guidelines to schools, and training in implementing anti-racist strategies was well supported by schools. Clear and forthright guidance has been given to governing bodies on meeting their statutory responsibility to combat racism. The school self-review system includes an element on equalities. All of these are helpful actions. In addition, the EDP contains activities designed to promote citizenship, but it is not clear how these will be pursued to enhance pupils' knowledge and understanding of multi-cultural society.

Recommendation

In order to monitor racist incidents more thoroughly the LEA should:

- require every school to send a termly report to the authority on racist incidents, even where a nil return is appropriate.

Section 5: Corporate issues

Summary

182. At the last inspection most aspects of corporate management and leadership were highly satisfactory. Since then a new council cabinet structure has introduced new working practices and a new chief executive and director of education and lifelong learning have been appointed. These changes, combined with the commitment of members, the vision of officers in defining a model for education and the enhanced communication and collaboration with schools, have brought a new dynamic to the council. Corporate planning and implementation and decision-making were judged highly satisfactory at the last inspection and they remain so. Partnership working continues to be very good and has been developed further through the 14-19 collegiate and in constructive, collaborative working with the Learning and Skills Council. The leadership of members has strengthened and it is now good. Leadership by officers is vigorous and challenging and it is now very good.

The clarity, consistency, coherence and feasibility of corporate plans

183. At the time of the last inspection this function was highly satisfactory. No fieldwork was carried out in the current inspection, but evidence from the LEA's own evaluation and the review of corporate planning documents, undertaken as part of the inspection of the school improvement strategy, confirms that effectiveness has been maintained.

The effectiveness of the procedures for implementing and evaluating corporate plans

184. The effectiveness of procedures for implementing and evaluating corporate plans was rated as highly satisfactory at the time of the last inspection and continues to be so. No fieldwork was carried out in this inspection. The LEA's own self-evaluation confirms that procedures continue to be effective.

The speed, transparency and effectiveness of decision-making

185. This function was assessed as highly satisfactory at the time of the previous inspection. LEA self evaluation confirms that it continues to be so. No fieldwork was carried out in the current inspection.

The leadership provided by officers and elected members

186. The quality of leadership provided by elected members is good. There is firm cross-party commitment to education as an essential means of improving people's lives. Elected members' vision for education is fully reflected in the priorities within the council strategic plans, community plans and in the EDP. Financial decisions are consistent with policies and priorities. Members have a good understanding of the challenges facing the education service and schools. They are prepared to take the advice of officers in making hard, but necessary, decisions to secure improvements.

187. Elected members understand and support school autonomy. They have a thorough and well-grounded understanding of schools and their communities, and have established good relationships with headteachers and school governors. The portfolio holder for education has a secure understanding of the broader role of education and its link with other council services. He is kept up to date about key local and national issues and is actively, but appropriately, involved in the day to day working of the education department, for example chairing attendance panels and working groups. Relationships between elected members and senior officers are good. There is considerable development of responsibility to the director of education in the context of a well-defined scheme of delegation, which sets out clearly the roles of members and officers. Expectations of senior officers are clearly defined and are focused on outcomes. The portfolio holder is responsible for monitoring the work of the department and holding officers to account.

188. Coherent and proper structures have been established for the scrutiny of key policies and decisions. The scrutiny committee for education and lifelong learning is well organised around an effective annual plan and has adopted a business-like approach to setting up structures for meetings and agendas. The committee is beginning to examine its performance and seek ways to improve it. An area for development, already identified by the committee, is to ensure greater consistency, incisiveness and rigour to its enquiries.

189. Senior officers provide very good leadership that is highly valued by schools. They are fully committed to achieving the council's priorities, driving forward change and securing improvement in schools. The director of education and lifelong learning provides a powerful and visionary lead. He has taken the lead in developing and presenting a coherent view to schools, firmly founded on carefully thought-out educational values and principles. This has secured a strong and shared commitment by officers and schools to achieving it.

190. Officers have introduced a very challenging culture to the work of the education service, characterised by high expectations of all staff, whether in schools or at the centre. Yet they have managed this without losing the goodwill and highly supportive ethos, noted at the last inspection. Capable officers take a strong lead on initiatives and projects. Systems for consultation and communication with schools are a model of clarity and are effective. Partnership and relationships with schools are outstanding. Headteachers are drawn into debate with officers about improving schools, are encouraged to re-examine practice, and to question assumptions. This in turn informs policy development and leads to clear understanding of expectations and responsibilities.

The quality of advice given to elected members

191. The quality of advice given to elected members is good. Members are well supported through reports and associated briefings, enabling them to get to the heart of issues and to perform their role effectively. Reports are incisive, informative and well presented. There are explicit links to departmental priorities and performance indicators. Alternative options are offered where appropriate and recommendations are clearly made. They enable members to debate issues and make timely decisions. The Schools Commission report is a good example of this and the implications arising from recommendations have been debated openly with the community to inform decision making. However, opposition party members are generally excluded from many of the detailed briefings provided for majority party members. This limits the contribution they can make to the oversight of education services.

The effectiveness of the co-ordination of actions in support of priorities involving collaboration between several agencies

192. This function was assessed as very good at the time of the last inspection. No fieldwork was undertaken in the current inspection. LEA self-evaluation and evidence from the school survey confirms that partnership working continues to be very good. It is a strength that is harnessed well to underpin developments in school improvement.

Support for early years

193. Early years work in Knowsley is securely based on counteracting the effects of disadvantage through improving the quality and diversity of provision for young children and their families. Work is strongly focused on improving children's speaking, listening, literacy, numeracy and social and emotional skills, which baseline data indicate are generally below average and, in some areas of the borough they are poor.

194. The LEA plays a leading role in the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP). A senior officer from the education department chairs the partnership and staff from education and the social services departments are involved in sub-committees and are represented on the executive. Clear organisational and administrative structures have been established through which initiatives and funding are drawn together to establish co-ordinated programmes across a range of services. The EYDCP strategic and implementation plans prioritise and target resources to communities with intense disadvantage and greater need, in addition to addressing the general disadvantage that is spread throughout the borough. Plans show a clear commitment to achieving national targets and meeting council priorities.

195. The integrated, multi-agency approach to early years provision reflects the local need to reduce social exclusion and change attitudes to learning. This is reflected in the provision of family learning programmes in most primary school to engage hard-to-reach groups. A wealth of provision is available across the borough and well targeted, and comprehensive information is provided for parents on how to gain access to it. In addition, cluster groups have been established to support the sharing of good practice amongst early years providers.

196. The quantity of nursery places and childcare provision has increased and is expected to slightly exceed targets. The quality of provision in maintained settings is of a high standard with 95 per cent of early education settings graded good or very good in Ofsted reports. In addition, maintained provision is regularly monitored by school improvement officers, and in other settings by the early years manager and consultants. This, together with providers' own self reviews, identifies where specific support and training are needed and where services need developing. Regular reports on the quality and quantity of provision are monitored by the EYDCP.

197. SEN co-ordinators in early years settings are well supported with three-day training packages and additional advice and support. The LEA has identified a gap in provision for three and four year-olds with severe and complex needs and has developed a plan to address this.

198. Close working links have been established with literacy and numeracy consultants. Joint planning between them and the early years' consultants has been a strong feature in the recent, extensive programme of LEA training to support the introduction of the foundation curriculum.

Support for 14-19 education

199. Since the last inspection the LEA has taken a strong lead to tackle the issues of raising standards, improving attendance and increasing staying on rates. The LEA, in partnership with key stakeholders, has been active in developing a 14-19 collegiate to provide access to a wider range of vocational and academic study in any education and training institution in the borough. In so doing, the recommendations of the autumn 2000 Ofsted 16 – 19 area wide inspection report, to re-evaluate provision throughout the 14-19 age range, have been addressed. The 14-19 collegiate is an integral and coherent part of the LEA's strategy to transform secondary education in the borough. Through this the LEA intends to build capacity to achieve by 2004, the challenging local and national targets of increasing Key Stage 4 attainment and the numbers of pupils staying on in further education and training. The collegiate is actively supported by the local Learning and Skills Council and a partnership group that includes secondary headteachers and representation from all stakeholders has been established to guide its development.

200. Post-16 participation rates in education and training are low. They have remained stable over the last two years after a significant and substantial rise of 12 per cent between 1999 and 2000. The partnership is realistic in recognising it will take time to shift perceptions and is working to lift aspirations by early preparatory work with Year 9 pupils. This expands earlier cross-phase work that is taking place throughout the service.

201. The developments build well upon a general background of steadily improving attainment. The number of pupils gaining five or more GCSE grades has improved each year since 1999 and the overall rate of progress has been twice the national average. The improvement rate for one or more A*-G GCSE grades is also above national rates. Sixth form achievement has similarly improved. The LEA has provided support to co-ordinate 14-19 developments and to work with all providers to put in place effective and rigorous systems to track students' progress, and to ensure the quality of provision meets high standards and students' needs. The collegiate is developing rapidly and the next cohort of students already has a wider choice of study from which to build their individual learning programme.

202. A positive and ambitious start has been made in the last ten months. Approximately half of the Year 10 cohort in Knowsley are currently engaged in an extended range of education and training opportunities at their host school or through attendance for part of the week at Knowsley Community College. Many vulnerable pupils are successfully re-engaged in learning through individually negotiated programmes of vocational training and basic skills support to meet their interests and development needs. The attendance of approximately 60 per cent of these pupils has improved. Plans are well advanced for the extension of provision to all students in Knowsley. A new Vocational Skills Centre offering ICT training linked to engineering studies and apprenticeships for 14 – 16 year olds is due to open shortly. Plans are advanced for all collegiate sites to offer access to specialist tutoring through video conferencing and digital learning resources.

Appendix 1: Recommendations

The report makes a number of recommendations.

In order to enhance the value of officers' contacts with schools both to the LEA and to the schools themselves:

- improve the consistency and value of the records of officers' visits to schools and
- provide copies of notes to the chair of governors following visits of school improvement officers, consultants and other senior officers.

In order to be able to improve support for minority ethnic pupils:

- introduce a system for monitoring schools' and users' levels of satisfaction with the LEA's services.

In order to improve management services to schools:

- present details of management services to schools in a consistent and co-ordinated format.

In order to improve the schools' and parents' understanding of SEN service provision:

- specify in the new area partnerships arrangements precisely how schools' needs for support from educational psychologists, child guidance social workers, behaviour support staff and support staff for sensory impaired children, will be identified and met.

In order to monitor racist incidents more thoroughly the LEA should:

- require every school to send a termly report to the authority on racist incidents, even where a nil return is appropriate.

Appendix 2: Record of Judgement Recording Statements for the inspection

Name of LEA :	Knowsley
LEA number:	372
Name of Inspector:	Gina White
Date of Inspection:	June 2003

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

14	Support to schools for raising standards in and the curriculum use of information and communications technology	3	
No.	Required Inspection Judgement	Grade	NI
15	Support to schools for raising standards at Key Stage 3	3	
16	Support to schools in raising standards of ethnic minority and Traveller children including the effective deployment of the ethnic minority and Traveller achievement grants	4	
17	Support to schools for gifted and talented pupils	3	
18	Support for school leadership and management including support for schools effort to achieve Best Value	2	
19	Support to school governors	3	
20	The effectiveness of its services to support school management	3	
20a	Financial services		3
20b	Human resources		4
20c	Property services	2	
20d	Services for ICT in school administration		4
20e	Cleaning and caretaking	4	
20f	Grounds maintenance	4	
20g	Catering	3	
21	The extent to which the LEA is successful in assuring the supply and quality of teachers	2	
22	The effectiveness of the leadership of services to support school improvement	1	
23	The effectiveness of the deployment of staff to support school improvement	2	
24	The effectiveness of strategic planning of services to support school improvement	1	
25	The effectiveness of the performance management of services to support school improvement		3
26	The standard of expertise of staff to support school improvement	2	
27	The effectiveness of services to school improvement	2	

28	Value for money of services to support school improvement	3	
SECTION 3 SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS			
29	The effectiveness of the LEA's strategy for SEN	2	
30	The effectiveness of the LEA in taking steps to meet its statutory obligations in respect of SEN	4	
31	The effectiveness of the LEA in exercising its SEN functions to support school improvement	3	
32	The extent to which the LEA has exercised its SEN functions to meet the requirements of value for money	4	
SECTION 4 PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION			
33	The overall effectiveness of the LEA in promoting social inclusion	3	
34	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to the provision of school places		4
No.	Required Inspection Judgement	Grade	NI
35	The effectiveness of the LEA in discharging asset management planning	3	
36	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to admissions to schools	5	
37	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to provision for pupils who have no school place	2	
38	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to school attendance	2	
39	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to behaviour at school		2
40	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to health and safety, welfare and child protection	3	
41	The extent to which the LEA meets its statutory requirements and achieves value for money in relation to children in public care		3
42	The effectiveness of the LEA in combating racism	4	
SECTION 5 CORPORATE ISSUES			
43	The clarity, consistency, coherence and feasibility of corporate plans		3
44	The effectiveness of the procedures for implementing and evaluating corporate plans		3

45	The speed, transparency and effectiveness of decision-making (particularly financial decision-making)		3
46	The quality of leadership provided by elected members	2	
47	The quality of the leadership provided by senior officers	1	
48	The quality of advice given to elected members	2	
49	The effectiveness of the co-ordination of actions in support of priorities involving collaboration between several agencies		1
OVERALL JUDGEMENTS			
50	The progress made by the LEA overall	2	
51	The LEA's capacity for further improvement and to address the recommendations of the inspection	1	
52	The overall effectiveness of the LEA	2	

Please e-mail your completed JRS to both:

RAI at: qzakir@Ofsted.gov.uk

LEAI at: mhoban@Ofsted.gov.uk