



**INSPECTION OF
GLOUCESTERSHIRE
LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

January 2003

Lead Inspector: Kevin Jane HMI

**OFFICE OF HER MAJESTY'S CHIEF INSPECTOR OF SCHOOLS
in conjunction with the
AUDIT COMMISSION**

CONTENTS

PARAGRAPHS

INTRODUCTION	1-4
COMMENTARY	5-12
SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT	
Context	13-15
Performance	16-22
Funding	23-28
Council structure	29-32
The LEA strategy for school improvement	33-38
The allocation of resources to priorities	39-44
Promoting continuous improvement, including Best Value	45-50
SECTION 2: SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT	
Summary of the effectiveness of the LEA's support for school improvement	51-54
Monitoring, challenge and intervention	55
The effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring and challenging schools	56-59
The effectiveness of the LEA's work with under-performing schools	60
Support for literacy	61
Support for numeracy	62-63
Support for information and communication technology (ICT)	64-66
Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3	67-69
Support for minority ethnic groups, including Travellers	70
Support for gifted and talented pupils	71-73
Support for school management	74-78
Support for governors	79
The effectiveness of services to support school management	80-94
The LEA's work in assuring the supply and quality of teachers	95-98
Support for 14-19	99-102
Support for small schools	103-104
Support for early years	105-106
SECTION 3: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS	
Summary of the effectiveness of the LEA's special educational needs provision	107
The LEA's strategy for special educational needs	108-111
Statutory obligations	112-113
School improvement	114-118
Value for money	119-122
SECTION 4: PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION	
Summary of effectiveness in promoting social inclusion	123-127
The supply of school places	128
Admissions	129

Asset management	130-132
Provision of education for pupils who have no school place	133
Attendance	134
Behaviour support	135
Health, safety, welfare and child protection	136
Looked after children	137
Measures to combat racism	138-141

SECTION 5: CORPORATE ISSUES

Introduction to corporate issues	142-144
Corporate planning	145-147
Decision making	148-150
The leadership provided by senior officers	151-152
The leadership provided by elected members	153-155
Partnership	156-157

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection of Gloucestershire 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 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 autumn 2001.

2. The inspection was based on a range of material, which included self-evaluation undertaken by the LEA, and data, some of which was provided by the LEA. The material also included school inspection information; HMI monitoring and audit reports and documentation from the LEA. Discussions were held with LEA officers from other local authority services; elected members; focus groups of headteachers and senior managers, teachers and partners of the LEA. In addition, the inspection took account of the earlier Ofsted/Audit Commission report published in January 2002. A questionnaire, seeking the views on aspects of the work of the LEA, was circulated to 308 schools and the inspection team considered its results. The response rate to the questionnaire was 63 per cent.

3. Inspection judgements, converted into numerical grades, are used in the comprehensive performance assessment profile for the education service. The Audit Commission published the assessments for each upper tier council on 12 December 2002. The judgements from this inspection will be incorporated into the proposed subsequent annual update of the education service scores.

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

COMMENTARY

5. Gloucestershire is a relatively prosperous and mainly rural county in the West Country with some, though relatively few, pockets of urban and rural deprivation. There has been a slight rise in the school-age population since the last inspection and the percentage of primary pupils with special educational needs (SEN) taught in special schools remains high. The LEA continues to provide education in a wide variety of schools serving urban and rural contexts. The minority ethnic population is well below the national average although there are areas, particularly in Gloucester where minority ethnic populations are concentrated.

6. Educational standards are consistently higher in all key stages than that found nationally and in similar LEAs. Pupils transferring between all key stages consistently make above average progress, though this positive overall picture masks some considerable variation between the highest and lowest performing schools across the county. Nevertheless, when set against significantly lower than average national funding, the profile of standards of attainment and quality of educational provision is good in Gloucestershire schools. This success is, in part, due to the effectiveness of the LEA school improvement services. Support is well focused and the LEA is committed to supporting self-managing schools.

7. The first inspection, conducted just over a year ago, found serious weaknesses in the council's strategic planning and leadership for education; low priority afforded to education and indecision in key areas affecting aspects of educational provision. Reform to political administration and decision-making processes were too new to allow the inspection team to have confidence in the capacity of the council to address the weaknesses.

8. The LEA has maintained its performance in the majority of its functions, but importantly, has responded satisfactorily to the previous corporate weaknesses. The emphasis elected members now place on education in promoting corporate objectives to make Gloucestershire a better place to live, learn and work, is central to the improvement made by the LEA. The council has committed additional resources to education and is now spending above Standard Spending Assessment (SSA). The clear vision for the future articulated by the new executive director for education is appreciated by schools and other partners who express cautious optimism. Elected members show a greater willingness and determination to lead and to take difficult decisions. Together with committed officers, a more effective and productive partnership with schools and other stakeholders is developing to raise standards further and narrow gaps in attainment. One particular strength of the LEA is its use of data to audit its progress, although following this analysis through into cohesive strategies in some cases is weaker, though not unsatisfactory.

9. The LEA discharges the following functions well:
- the effectiveness of services to support school improvement;
 - the strategic planning, leadership, deployment and expertise of services to support school improvement;
 - the LEA's definition of monitoring, challenge, intervention and support to schools with greatest needs;
 - the LEA's monitoring of schools and the use made of performance data;
 - the identification of and intervention in under-performing schools;
 - support for literacy, numeracy, Key Stage 3 and gifted and talented children;
 - support for raising standards of minority ethnic, Traveller children and asylum seekers;
 - support for school leadership and management;
 - support for small schools and Early Years;
 - arrangements for admissions to schools;
 - statutory requirements in relation to health, safety, welfare and child protection; and
 - the effectiveness of the LEA in combating racism.

10. The following functions are unsatisfactory.
- the effectiveness of the LEA's strategy for SEN;
 - the value for money of SEN functions;
 - the extent to which the LEA targets its resources on priorities;
 - the curriculum support for information and communication technology (ICT);
 - the overall effectiveness of services to support school management and in particular, property services; and
 - strategic support for 14-19 education.

11. One year on since the previous inspection and with a restructured and substantive education directorate, this is now a satisfactory LEA. Progress since the last inspection has been satisfactory, although some major weaknesses remain. For example, there has been a determined effort to manage the development of special educational needs provision and there has been an increase in the pace of activity. In the longer term, the strategy for special educational needs has the potential to secure improvements, but the communication and implementation so far have served to increase anxiety and it appears fragmented. In particular, schools and parents do not understand the LEA's intentions nor do they have confidence in its plans. New, clear-sighted leadership is providing impetus and direction for this work, although significant effort in improved communications is required if confidence and support are to be regained.

12. The council recognises that there is still much to be done to realise its vision and aims. A commitment to continuous improvement is now evident in its approach to Best Value processes and performance management at all levels. Structures are still new and plans are at an early stage of implementation. Consequently, there is still little evidence of significant effects of recent initiatives. However, the sound strategy for school improvement and the emerging coherence of corporate planning make the potential and capacity for improvement and to address the recommendations within this report highly satisfactory.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

13. Since the last inspection in 2001, Gloucestershire's population has increased slightly to 565,000. The county is largely rural, with two main population centres, Gloucester and Cheltenham, together with medium-sized market towns of Tewkesbury, Stroud and Cirencester. Gloucestershire is a relatively prosperous county. Unemployment overall is low at just over two per cent, although this masks some variations; in a few wards, mainly in the Forest of Dean and Gloucester City, unemployment approaches or exceeds 30 per cent.

14. The school-age population rose slightly in 2002 to 85,890. The LEA predicts that primary school numbers will decline by 6.1 per cent over the next three years, but secondary school numbers are projected to grow rapidly by an average of 1.8 per cent per year over the next four years. The percentage of the school population from minority ethnic groups (four per cent) is low, less than a third of the national average, although there are areas, particularly in Gloucester, where minority ethnic groups are highly concentrated. The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (9.8 per cent and 7.8 per cent of primary and secondary age pupils respectively) is around half that nationally. The proportion of pupils with statements of special educational needs has fallen slightly since the last inspection to three per cent, but remains in line with the national average. However, the percentage of pupils in special schools remains higher than the national average.

15. The LEA provides education in 252 primary schools, a slight reduction since the last inspection caused by the amalgamation of two sets of infant and junior schools into primary schools. There are still 42 secondary schools and 14 special schools. There are now four pupil referral units, an increase of one, resulting from the last inspection's recommendation that the reintegration service be formally registered. There are some very small primary and secondary schools in rural areas. Eight primary, five secondary and two special schools currently have Beacon school status.

Performance

16. Ofsted inspection data indicates that attainment on entry to Gloucestershire's primary schools remains above the national average, but broadly in line with similar LEAs.¹ In Key Stages 1 and 2, attainment is well above and above the national average respectively in all core subjects. When compared with similar LEAs, rates of progress over the last three years are also well above average, except in writing and mathematics at Key Stage 1, where they are below.

¹ Gloucestershire's statistical neighbours are Bedfordshire, Worcestershire, Northamptonshire, Suffolk, Dorset, Hampshire, West Sussex, Kent, Lincolnshire, Norfolk.

17. Attainment in Key Stage 3 is well above the national average in English and mathematics and above in science. When compared with statistical neighbours, standards are above average in English, but broadly in line in mathematics and science. Rates of progress over the last three years are broadly in line with the national trend. When compared with similar LEAs, the rates of progress are more variable.

18. At the end of Key Stage 4, the percentage of pupils achieving at least five A*-C General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) or GNVQ equivalent grades in 2001 remain well above the national average and above the average of similar LEAs. Rates of improvement are also above national and similar LEAs' trends. At age 18, the Advanced level average point score for students is above both the national and statistical scores for similar LEAs.

19. Pupils transferring between all key stages consistently make above average progress. This presents a very positive profile of attainment and value added by Gloucestershire schools, but it also masks considerable variation between the highest and lowest performing schools in the LEA.

20. Ofsted inspection data continues to show that the percentage of good or very good primary schools in Gloucestershire (77 per cent) is above the national average (70 per cent) and in line with similar LEAs. The proportion of secondary schools that are good or very good is now in line with that nationally and in similar LEAs. This represents a slight deterioration on the position reported in the previous inspection.

21. Rates of attendance continue to be well above the national figure for primary schools and above for secondary schools. Both primary and secondary attendance is broadly in line with that of similar LEAs. Levels of unauthorised absence are also below and well below national figures and comparable LEAs. Permanent exclusions from primary and secondary schools remain broadly in line with the national levels and those in similar LEAs.

22. The LEA has one secondary school requiring special measures and one with serious weaknesses. A further four primary schools have serious weaknesses and one primary school is designated as underachieving. Of the five schools with serious weaknesses, three are reported to be making satisfactory or better progress. This is an improved picture since the last inspection.

Funding

23. There has been little change since the last inspection in the level of revenue funding that Gloucestershire LEA receives through the Standard Spending Assessment and it remains poor. Since 1999-2000, Gloucestershire's SSA has risen more slowly than the English average. The SSAs for 2002-2003 for both primary and secondary education were about three per cent lower than the average among the county's statistical neighbours and some 11 per cent lower than the average for all LEAs in England.

24. Until this year, the council has funded the education service at a level at, or marginally below, SSA. For 2002-2003, however, the council has increased investment in the service to almost two per cent above SSA. The total revenue budget for education, including grants and other income, amounts to some £266.4 million.

25. Though the local schools budget (LSB) for primary schools increased by nine per cent in 2002-2003, and that for secondary schools by 11 per cent, funding for schools in Gloucestershire remains well below average for England as a whole and below the average among statistical neighbours.

	Gloucestershire	Statistical Neighbours	All English LEAs
Primary LSB per pupil	£2660	£2744	£2928
Secondary LSB per pupil	£3358	£3582	£3767

26. The LEA has retained about 16 per cent of local schools budget for 2002-2003. This is well above the national average, and reflects the fact that the LEA has only devolved to schools a small proportion of the funding for pupils with statements of special educational needs. In consequence, the centrally-retained SEN budget of £192 per pupil is the highest among Gloucestershire's statistical neighbours. Total expenditure on special educational needs, including that delegated to all schools, and that retained centrally, is a little higher than the average for statistical neighbours, but slightly below the average for all English LEAs. The strategic management budget (£101 per pupil) is also the highest in the group, reflecting the high cost of the council's generous early retirement scheme. However, the total centrally-retained budget has increased only slightly since 2001-2002. Budgets for school improvement (£22 per pupil) and access (£129 per pupil) are low compared with similar authorities.

27. Despite above average increases in 2002-2003 the individual schools budgets (ISB) for both primary and secondary schools are among the lowest in the statistical neighbour group, reflecting both the low SSA funding and the high centrally-retained budget.

	Gloucestershire	Statistical Neighbours	All English LEAs
Primary ISB per pupil	£1858	£2020	£2137
Secondary ISB per pupil	£2566	£2793	£2862

28. The LEA has taken up its full allocation of Standards Fund for 2002-2003. Nevertheless, total revenue from the Standards Fund and other specific grants is the lowest among Gloucestershire's group of statistical neighbours. In contrast to its revenue funding, the LEA's capital budget of about £32 million has increased markedly since 2001-2002 and, on a *per capita* basis, is now well above the average for statistical neighbours.

Council structure

29. Since September 2001, the council has been operating both a new political management structure and a new political administration formed from a coalition between Labour and Liberal Democrat members. These structures were not assessed for their effectiveness at the time of the last inspection because they were too new.

30. The full council consists of 63 members of whom 27 are Conservative, 19 are Labour, 16 are Liberal Democrat and one is Independent. The council's cabinet consists of the leader of the council and nine other members, each of whom has a portfolio for a range of services to supervise policy development and financial resourcing. Within the cabinet, three members hold portfolio's related to education, covering education for children and young people, lifelong learning and children and families.

31. A scrutiny management board, consisting of the chairs of the council's scrutiny committees and three other members, co-ordinates the work of the scrutiny arm of the council and acts as the council's audit committee. There are four scrutiny committees, one of which deals with education issues. Scrutiny committees contribute to policy development, monitor the activities and decision making of the cabinet, and review the performance of individual services.

32. In September 2002, the council completed a reorganisation of its service delivery structure into five executive directorates of which education is one. The education directorate has also recently been restructured and is led by an executive director and two heads of service. Two thirds of this strategic management team have only been in post from September 2002. The two heads of service are responsible for the school improvement and inclusion service, and the education planning and lifelong learning service. In the new structure, ten third-tier officers are responsible for the operational functions that fall within the remit of each head of service.

The LEA strategy for school improvement

33. The Education Development Plan (EDP1) was highly satisfactory in the last inspection with particular strengths in activities that led to school improvement. The LEA's progress in implementing activities and evaluating progress was good. It was recommended that the LEA improve their EDP by relating it more closely to an audit of strengths and weaknesses in educational performance and by reflecting more closely the needs of secondary schools.

34. The LEA's overall strategy for school improvement is highly satisfactory and is underpinned by coherent strategic planning, including the EDP. Since the last inspection, the LEA has obtained approval for its second Education Development Plan 2003-2007 (EDP2). The LEA has devised a strategy for striving to achieve the target for five A*-G GCSE grades, a condition of approval. EDP2 itself is a

satisfactory plan. Nevertheless, there are some weaknesses, mainly in the clarity of some priorities, the precision of some success criteria, the allocation of financial resourcing to priorities and the lack of targeted action to schools and groups within some actions.

35. The LEA's audit of strengths and weaknesses was thorough and based on a wide range of data. This, together with an effective evaluation of EDP1 has resulted in a clear identification of activities within the national priorities and the local priority. The plan makes sound links with other improvement plans such as the Early Years Development and Childcare Plan and the Education Action Zone Plan.

36. The strategy identified in EDP2 is complex, and, in priorities five and seven, the extensive collection of activities makes the LEA's intentions unclear. Actions are often targeted appropriately at teachers and schools, although sometimes, for example in priorities two and three, targeting is insufficiently specific. Responsibilities for implementing them are clear, timescales are realistic and procedures for monitoring and evaluation sound. The success criteria are satisfactory, but not all are sufficiently measurable. The LEA has taken steps to revise those that it is finding less useful. Schools are aware of the priorities, view them as reasonable and were consulted appropriately. The plan is costed as a whole, but it is not clear to schools how funding will be allocated across the activities and therefore impossible for them to judge whether resources are appropriately allocated.

37. Progress in implementing EDP2 has been highly satisfactory. The first monitoring and evaluation report, covering the period April to August 2002, shows clearly the extent to which activities are on track with specific supporting evidence matched against intended outcomes. The implementation of priorities two, three and four has been particularly good, but progress is more variable in the others and there is no indication in the report about how the LEA intends to recover slippage. This limits the value of the evaluation.

38. The previous report expressed doubt over whether some of the LEA's EDP1 targets for attainment were realistically achievable. The challenging target of five A*-C GCSE grades was very close to being met, falling short by less than one percentage point. Average point scores at GCSE exceeded the target. However, whilst the rate of improvement in English and mathematics at Key Stage 2 were higher than nationally, the targets were not achieved, falling short of the 2002 target by seven and three percentage points respectively. Targets for 2003 and 2004 are again very high and demand a greater rate of progress than is the case currently if they are to be achieved.

The allocation of resources to priorities

39. The allocation of resources to priorities was satisfactory at the time of the last inspection, but a number of important shortcomings were identified. The report recommended that the LEA should make the basis for charges by other council

departments more transparent, and work with primary schools to ensure that they spend the budgets allocated to them. There has been substantial progress in several aspects of financial planning and management. However, there are still significant shortcomings and some budgeting problems have become worse. Firm plans in place offer a sound basis for further improvement. However, these improvements have yet to make significant impact and there remains too many primary schools with significant surplus budgets. Consequently, the allocation of resources to priorities is unsatisfactory.

40. The council has made a good start in realigning its budget to reflect its new corporate strategy, which makes it clear that schools represent one of the council's main priorities. In allocating additional resources to the education service for 2002-2003, the council has increased its spending to almost two per cent above SSA and has also committed itself to providing an additional £1 million over and above increases in SSA for each of the next two years. Though not yet fully implemented, the council's new corporate planning structure and the closely-related medium-term financial strategy have the potential to deliver further improvements in the prioritisation of resources, both at corporate level and within individual directorates.

41. Spending within the education budget for 2002-2003 reflects corporate priorities to the extent that school budgets increased by almost £15 million in comparison with the previous year. With the exception of the SEN budget, increases in centrally-retained budgets have been small. Nevertheless, the retention of funding for pupils with statements of SEN has resulted in the LEA failing to meet government delegation targets for 2002-2003. The council has responded satisfactorily to the recommendation that it should review the service charges made to education by other council directorates and work is in progress to produce standards that set out more clearly the service that is provided. Capital expenditure within the revenue budget has, in the past, been used to compensate for overspends in other areas. However, the combination of increased capital receipts and improved asset management planning provides a sound, transparent basis for the improved use of capital funding during 2003-2004.

42. The quality of budget monitoring within the education directorate has improved and is now satisfactory. However, the new planning process was introduced too late to make an impact on the quality of budget setting for 2002-2003. In consequence, the current budget continues to reflect historical trends and is not related to need with sufficient accuracy. While overall spending is broadly in line with the budget, significant variations in individual items undermine the LEA's ability to ensure consistent planning and allocation of resources to priorities with unplanned under-spends being used to balance over-spends. Budget setting within the SEN area has been particularly weak, with the provision for pupils with statements in mainstream schools already projected to exceed the budget for 2002-2003 by about £700,000.

43. The LEA has firm plans to review the school funding formula for the 2004-2005 financial year, following the introduction of new government funding arrangements for schools and LEAs. Secondary schools report improved

consultation about budgetary matters, but schools are generally critical of the educational rationale underlying the funding formula. The present distribution of the individual school budget has similar shortcomings to the centrally-retained budget in terms of its limited relation to schools' needs; for example, premises-related allocations within school budgets are unrelated to schools' size and condition. Other, non-pupil-led lump sums allocated to all schools make an effective contribution to the protection of small schools, but are insufficiently related to need for larger schools.

44. The LEA has conducted a thorough analysis of the very high levels of financial balances held by primary schools. Total balances have grown from the unacceptably high levels reported at the last inspection to about £13.8 million or 16.4 per cent of budget. With the agreement of headteachers, the LEA has set appropriately ambitious targets for the reduction of the balances and has proposed a suitable strategy for achieving these goals, including, where necessary, the imposition of sanctions on schools. It also intends to place a greater focus on financial management during monitoring visits by link advisers. While over 80 per cent of primary schools have balances in excess of five per cent of budget, over one third of secondary schools have licensed deficit budgets.

Recommendations

In order to improve financial management in primary schools:

- increase, in proportion to need, the frequency and rigour of the monitoring of school balances and the quality of financial planning; and
- challenge headteachers and governors to make full use of funding and, where necessary, use available statutory powers.

Promoting continuous improvement, including Best Value

45. This aspect of the LEA's work was unsatisfactory at the time of the last inspection. There has been steady progress in addressing the requirement to introduce systematic performance management. The LEA's own self-evaluation of its services is sound and performance is now satisfactory.

46. The council has introduced a promising performance management system across the organisation. The arrangements are beginning to ensure that planning at the level of individual officers, service teams and whole directorates is coherently linked and focuses on achieving the goals of the corporate strategy. Within the education service, performance management is beginning to draw together the principal objectives of the many existing statutory plans and action plans. At this early stage, there remain differences within and between council directorates in the interpretation of the requirements of planning levels.

47. Improvements in the consistency of planning have resulted in better monitoring by members and officers. Members of the education and skills scrutiny committee receive regular and detailed monitoring reports on the LEA's progress in

relation to key plans. At times, members receive too much detail, but officers and members are making good progress to ensure that the volume of information received by members is manageable, and that it focuses on key targets and issues.

48. The council and, in particular, the education directorate have improved the quality of their response to Best Value since the last inspection. The Best Value Performance Plan for 2002-2003 has been judged to meet requirements by the authority's external auditor. The plan provides an accessible and balanced outline of the council's priorities and of progress to date. The LEA met or exceeded a little over half of its education-related Best Value Performance Indicator targets for 2001-2002 and achieved top quartile performance in over 40 per cent.

49. The education department has made good progress since the last inspection by completing four Best Value reviews. It has also been involved in a further three cross-cutting reviews. Those conducted within the education department, though narrow in scope, have appropriately focused on aspects deemed to be areas of high risk within the SEN and inclusion services. The reviews are generally of satisfactory quality, but they are not succinct enough and are limited by the lack of sufficient comparative data. Consultation has been thorough, and challenge panels, including elected members, have provided valuable contributions at various stages of the process. The review of the reintegration service has produced significant service improvements in terms of meeting government targets for the tuition of pupils excluded permanently from schools at reduced cost.

50. There is too much variation in the quality of action planning following Best Value reviews. Some contain no reference to the resources necessary to implement the plans, and success criteria are too often defined in terms of the completion of tasks rather than in terms of improved service performance. The LEA continues to learn from the process and future planned reviews are broader in scope, including greater challenge through the introduction of external leadership.

SECTION 2: SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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

51. The effectiveness of the LEA's support for school improvement was good in the last inspection and it remains so.

52. The LEA has a well-focused approach to school improvement that is built firmly and appropriately on supporting self-managing schools. Standards of pupils' attainment in national tests and examinations are above the national average, although there continues to be wide variation in the performance of individual schools. Rates of improvement are generally above those found nationally. The LEA's support for literacy, for numeracy, for raising standards at Key Stage 3, the effectiveness of intervention in under-performing schools and the support for school leadership and management are strengths of the school improvement services. There is satisfactory support for school improvement through personnel and financial services, support for behaviour, education welfare services, and educational psychology services. Support is being strengthened through the provision of criteria for additional and differentiated support from the LEA in these areas. Weaknesses in support from property continues to distract too many schools from the business of school improvement. There has been very limited progress in improving schools' choice of management services and in building schools' autonomy as effective purchasers of services. This is at odds with the commitment to building self-evaluating schools, which is a strong feature of the work of the advisory service. However, these weaknesses are outweighed by the many strengths in the effectiveness of other services. Centrally retained costs of school improvement services, and especially for the advisory service, are not high and are below the national average. School improvement services therefore provide good value for money.

53. The leadership of school improvement services, and the strategic planning and deployment of staff to support school improvement were good at the time of the last inspection and this remains the case. Performance management of staff in the advisory service has improved and is now highly satisfactory. Evaluation of service performance is embedded in practice and satisfactory use is made of management information systems to determine the success of activities. Service objectives stem from corporate plans, and, in particular, the EDP. There are good links between the targets for the service as a whole and those set for individual members of staff, although, in the case of the latter, there is scope to strengthen the success criteria against which the performance of individuals is judged. All advisers have access to appropriate development opportunities.

54. The expertise of the advisory staff has also been strengthened by new appointments and is now good. The policy of shifting the balance of advisers from curriculum specialists to phase generalists with senior management experience is now complete. Members of the advisory staff are suitably qualified and the team has a good range of phase, management and subject expertise. There have been some

imaginative solutions to improving the levels of service for schools, including making highly focused and effective use of advanced skills teachers and Beacon schools.

Monitoring, challenge and intervention

55. The LEA's arrangements for monitoring, challenging, intervention and supporting schools were good at the time of the previous inspection. This remains the case. Schools have been consulted fully on the procedures and arrangements strongly support the commitment to building self-evaluating schools. Support is targeted effectively at areas of greatest need.

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

56. The previous inspection found that the LEA's work in monitoring schools, in challenging them to improve and in the use made of performance data was good. It remains so. Improvements have been made to the analysis and use of data and target setting in special schools, in line with the recommendation in the last report. Networks of special schools have been set up across a number of neighbouring authorities and the LEA is taking a lead in agreeing and establishing regional data collection and analysis to support special schools.

57. The LEA has a well-established and effective monitoring policy and good procedures for the implementation of school reviews. On the basis of monitoring data, and well-founded other evidence, schools are allocated to one of four categories, and receive monitoring and support in line with their needs. There are published criteria for intervening in schools, assessing their subsequent progress and for reviewing, in general terms, the effectiveness of the support provided. Intervention in schools following an Ofsted inspection has reduced considerably and is now required only occasionally, although two primary schools were identified recently as having serious weaknesses and a secondary school slipped from serious weaknesses into special measures. The LEA's performance data are used well to help identify schools with weaknesses or those that are under performing; however, in a very few isolated cases there is insufficient follow through of the issues that have been identified. The portfolio holder for education for children and young people is kept closely informed and receives regular reports on schools, but the role of other members in monitoring the progress of schools is less well developed.

58. The annual monitoring and review cycle builds purposefully and appropriately on school self-evaluation. Link adviser visits are carried out to a clear and suitably differentiated agenda that is understood fully by schools. Written reports following visits are of good quality, providing headteachers and chairs of governors with sharp evaluation of strengths and weaknesses and clear action points.

59. The LEA continues to provide for schools a comprehensive range of timely and very useful comparative local performance data, which adds to the national provision of data. Link advisers challenge schools to set high, but realistic, targets and support them effectively to determine and implement curricular and other

changes necessary to reach them. Electronic systems for the transfer of data are developing and protocols are being established for the open and transparent sharing of data between schools. There has been sound recent progress made in developing a central information and communication technology database of information from different service areas, although, inevitably with such a complex task, much further work is necessary before it can be seen to run smoothly.

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

60. The LEA's work in schools causing concern was good at the time of the last inspection and remains so. No detailed fieldwork was conducted during the inspection. There is currently one secondary school requiring special measures and one with serious weaknesses. A further four primary schools have serious weaknesses and one primary school is designated as underachieving. The LEA has an effective strategy for supporting schools and for tackling underachievement. Schools causing concern make good progress and are removed from special measures or have their serious weaknesses remedied within appropriate timescales. The strategy for supporting secondary schools facing challenging circumstances has helped raise standards in all five secondary schools involved.

Support for literacy

61. Support for literacy was good at the time of the previous inspection. The LEA's self-evaluation, supported by the views of the schools surveyed and by the continuing good standards of attainment in end-of-key-stage tests, confirms that this is still the case. No detailed fieldwork was undertaken during this inspection. The team has provided training for staff in pupil referral units, for staff in reintegration services and for residential social workers, in response to the recommendation of the last inspection.

Support for numeracy

62. Support for numeracy, was good at the time of the previous inspection. It has improved and is now very good. The LEA's strategy for raising standards in numeracy is well established and is understood fully by schools. By the end of this academic year, the team will have provided focused support in all primary schools, as part of a rolling programme of developments. Standards in mathematics at both Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 are above the national average and have been improving at a rate at least in line with the national trend. The LEA makes very good use of data and other information to select schools for intensive support and standards in these schools have risen consistently at a rate above the LEA average. The LEA did not meet its 2002 Key Stage 2 target for mathematics of 80 per cent for the proportion of pupils attaining Level 4, but achieved a rate of progress slightly above the national trend. The Key Stage 2 target of 87 per cent in 2004 requires an average rise of five percentage points per year over the next two years, which is well above the recent rate of improvement. Nevertheless, the schools and the LEA are determined to improve and the aggregate of schools' targets for 2003 is aimed at the

necessary increase. The target of 37 per cent in 2004 for the proportion of pupils attaining a Level 5 and above is realistic, requiring an increase only slightly above that achieved in recent years.

63. The numeracy team is very well managed by a specialist mathematician who has a very clear strategic vision of actions and activities needed to raise standards. The team has secured continual improvement through support that is focused on building school autonomy, on increasing the managerial confidence and competence of subject leaders and on improving the quality of pupils' learning and their appreciation of mathematics. Training and other support are targeted carefully at areas of identified weaknesses; hence the recent and very appropriate concentration on using ICT to support mathematical learning and on developing pupils' problem solving and reasoning skills. Good guidance has been provided for schools on the teaching of mathematics to mixed age-ranges. The team has provided training for teachers of pupils educated otherwise than at school, in response to the recommendation from the previous report.

Support for information and communication technology (ICT)

64. Support for raising standards in ICT was unsatisfactory at the time of the previous inspection. The LEA acknowledged that ICT had been underfunded for several years, leading to slow progress in developing a comprehensive strategy across the council and in its support to schools. Support for ICT in the curriculum remains unsatisfactory, despite an increase in the level of funding available, the inclusion of developments in ICT as a theme within the EDP, improved deployment of resources and enhanced staffing to support schools. Progress has been made, but developments are fragmented and are not well understood by schools. The major weakness is the lack of an all-inclusive strategy that is underpinned by a clearly targeted development plan, focused sharply on raising the achievement of pupils in ICT. Progress on implementing the recommendations is sound. An analysis of schools' needs is being undertaken, using self-evaluation materials distributed to all schools. Although this is not yet complete, the resulting analysis, together with information from school inspection reports, from school development plans for ICT and from link adviser visits, is enabling a better identification of schools needing intensive support.

Recommendation

In order to improve support for ICT:

- develop and implement a comprehensive and costed strategy and development plan for ICT that:
 - brings together developments in the various strands of the EDP and the National Grid for Learning;
 - is focused sharply on raising the achievement of pupils in ICT; and
 - is shared with, and understood by, schools.

65. Materials to support assessment in primary schools are in the final stages of development, and are due to be launched in a series of training courses later this term. The LEA has made a sound start in implementing the Key Stage 3 strategy. Consultants have been appointed, information on teacher assessment has been collated, targets have been set and schools have been identified for intensive support. The LEA acknowledges that teacher assessments in ICT vary widely between secondary schools, but it has yet to provide guidance on the levelling of work and moderating assessments. Advanced skills and expert teachers are used to deliver courses, but, in general, the LEA makes insufficient use of the expertise within its schools to further developments.

66. National Grid for Learning funding has been allocated appropriately to ensure that schools match or exceed the national targets for resources. All secondary schools have broadband connections and the LEA is on track to connect a third of primary schools via broadband by March 2003. The majority of schools will have signed up to New Opportunities Fund training by 2003, and a much higher percentage of teachers than nationally have completed the courses. The LEA has arranged for additional technical support to be available so that primary schools especially have access to a broader range of options for securing services.

Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3

67. Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3 is good. The national strategy has been well implemented and has built effectively on the pilot project launched in 2000. The roll-out of the pilot programme to all secondary and special schools has been well managed by a highly motivated team. The principles of supporting schools to develop their own programmes within the strategy framework and of disseminating good practice have built confidence and competence within schools. Links between the LEA strategy and EDP2 are strong. Challenging performance targets have been set up to 2004. Schools have high regard for the quality of training and support for the continuing implementation of the Key Stage 3 strategy.

68. Standards at Key Stage 3 in English, mathematics and science are above the national average and rates of improvement are in line with national trends, although there is a wide variation in the performance of individual schools. The targeting of lowest performing schools has been effective and there is clear evidence of a rise in standards in those schools provided with intensive support. Support focuses on the management of the strategy by subject leaders and school strategy managers, through making effective use of individual pupil data to set overall attainment targets, and, most importantly, on helping schools determine curriculum targets that underpin them.

69. Primary and secondary strategy consultants link well together to ensure good continuity between Key Stages 2 and 3. This is helped by improved data at the point of transition. Some progress has been made in ensuring that consistent and agreed standards are applied in both primary and secondary schools, although more work needs to be done in this area.

Support for minority ethnic groups, including Travellers

70. The last inspection reported the LEA's support to schools in raising standards of minority ethnic and Traveller children as good. The LEA's self-evaluation and other indicators confirm that this remains the case. No detailed work was carried out in this area. However, there continues to be some marked variation in the attainment of minority ethnic groups by the end of each key stage. Schools value the training, advice and resources provided by the intercultural and languages service and the Traveller service. These services have supported schools in further developing good practice. Attainment, attendance and exclusion levels of vulnerable groups are monitored effectively and support is appropriately targeted. The LEA and schools have responded well to the needs of asylum seekers.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

71. The provision for gifted and talented pupils is good and has the capacity to improve further. The LEA strategy is developing well in partnership with a small group of headteachers. The LEA policy is ready for publication, but has not yet been effectively communicated to all schools. Guidance to schools includes useful self-review materials and advice on different teaching and learning approaches. Challenging targets are set for higher-level attainment. The percentage of pupils achieving higher levels is increasing year on year in all key stages and is significantly above the national average.

72. The LEA has accurately identified strengths and weaknesses in schools' provision for pupils who are gifted and talented. It provides good support and advice and, where necessary, challenge to schools in their provision for these pupils. Good practice has been identified and shared across the county, for example the work of Beacon schools in the area of arts and thinking skills. There has been a good level of participation in training offered. The LEA is developing wider partnership working with higher education institutions and the Learning and Skills Council through the Excellence Challenge initiative.

73. The LEA leads or brokers a broad range of activities for gifted and talented pupils. Pupils' personal and social skills are developed as well as their academic, creative or physical abilities. Well-attended summer schools have run each year since 2000 and have provided a range of opportunities in sports and creative arts as well as literacy and numeracy. The enhanced 'city curriculum' initiative led by primary schools in the Education Action Zone is having a positive impact on attainment of able pupils. Schools are well on the way to managing their own development and there are good examples of collaborative work between schools. The LEA is now working to disseminate the wide range of activity that has developed and, in so doing, further improve its role in developing brokerage and partnership working.

Support for school management

74. The support for school leadership and management was good and it remains so. The main emphasis of the LEA's support to schools continues to be on the successful promotion of schools' self-evaluation. The annual review cycle ensures LEA intervention is proportionate to each school's needs, and it builds systematically on schools' self-evaluation. Link advisers work alongside headteachers to verify judgements. The LEA is currently consulting on a system of accredited self-review for primary and special schools.

75. Link advisers challenge the improvement strategies used by senior and middle managers. The recent restructuring of the education service into a school improvement and inclusion unit has brought together link advisers, education officers, governance, and finance officers in a single group. One of the purposes of the reorganisation is to develop further the monitoring of schools and to help facilitate the link advisers' role in brokering the support needed by school leaders and managers. This shift is already starting to improve the co-ordination of support from the whole LEA for schools causing concern or facing challenging circumstances.

76. The quality of written reports provided for headteachers and governors is good and they provide sharp evaluation of the schools' strengths and weaknesses and clear action points. For senior managers requiring additional targeted support, the LEA has made appropriate use of seconded headteachers and other senior managers. School inspections carried out since September 2001 indicate improvements in the quality of leadership and management, and especially in the leadership provided by the headteacher. Improvements have been secured in the LEA's support and training for middle managers, in line with the recommendation in the previous report. In secondary schools, the major thrust of this is through a subject leader development programme offered as part of the national Key Stage 3 strategy.

77. The LEA facilitates the dissemination of good practice in management at both senior and subject leader levels through capitalising on the management expertise within Beacon schools and through its effective use of advanced skills teachers and leading mathematics and literacy teachers. Networks and cluster arrangements are being furthered between schools for the purposes of sharing information and expertise. The LEA has made good progress in creating collaboration projects across the LEAs in the south-west to support leaders and managers in special schools.

78. There is a clear commitment to support schools in adopting Best Value principles. Training courses and good quality guidance materials have been provided, although it is clearly early days in developing understanding by some schools of how to implement Best Value principles. Schools have been provided with benchmarked financial and other data so that headteachers can make comparisons with similar schools and use the information to identify good practice. Agreements are being established to make the information open and transparent to

facilitate increased co-operation and self-help between schools in dealing with common issues related to school improvement, and thereby assisting them to develop greater autonomy. Despite the recent training, the high level of unallocated financial reserves indicates that more work is needed to improve the quality of resource management in some primary schools.

Support for governors

79. Support to governing bodies was satisfactory and documentary evidence, including the LEA's self-evaluation, indicates that it remains so. No detailed fieldwork was undertaken in this area during the inspection. Additional venues to improve access to governor training have been added to those already used and new courses have been developed, in line with the recommendations. The LEA is currently supporting the development of a newly-formed Association of Gloucestershire Governors.

The effectiveness of services to support school management

80. There were some overarching weaknesses in the LEA's support for supporting school management at the time of the last inspection which recommended that the LEA should improve schools' choice of management services and ensure the charges to schools for services offered by the LEA covered the costs of providing those services. There has been some progress in addressing those recommendations, but there remains much to be done to increase school autonomy in this respect and to support schools as effective purchasers of services. Overall, this aspect of the LEA's work is unsatisfactory.

81. The majority of individual services supporting school management were highly satisfactory at the time of the last inspection and remain so. The LEA's self-evaluation indicates that provision remains highly satisfactory in these areas. Schools' views support these conclusions, and the vast majority of schools choose to buy the services provided by the LEA. Therefore, no detailed fieldwork was undertaken of financial services, human resources, cleaning, grounds maintenance and catering. Two services, property and ICT administration, were less than satisfactory and were inspected in detail this time.

82. The booklet of LEA services provides a satisfactory level of information about services that the council makes available to schools through its resources directorate, and their cost. Most services offer a limited range of packages to suit schools' differing needs. However, the details, in some cases, also refer to additional elements at unspecified costs, so that it is unclear to schools precisely what their investment will cover. In general, the service specifications contain too little information about the standard of service that schools should expect.

83. Each section of the service booklet contains a useful synopsis of those elements of each service that are funded from centrally-retained budgets, rather than by schools. However, there remains some confusion among schools between those

services for which schools themselves are clients and those that form part of the LEA's monitoring role, and for which the council is the client.

84. With the exception of property services, there has been no progress in improving schools' choice of management services. While some schools make their own arrangements to buy services, the LEA provides no information about alternative suppliers nor about schools' responsibilities should they choose not to use the service offered by the LEA.

Recommendations

In order to improve schools' effectiveness as purchasers of services:

- improve the specifications contained in the service booklet and extend it to include other services that schools pay for; and
- ensure that schools have access to approved and alternative providers of services.

85. There has been good progress in adjusting the charges to schools for management support services to reflect the cost of their provision. However, there is too little transparency in the way in which service charges are allocated to schools' budgets.

86. **Property services** were very poor at the time of the last inspection. The council had terminated contracts with its previous, and unsatisfactory, supplier of building services shortly before the inspection, but, at that stage, schools were unable to provide evidence of any improvement. The LEA was recommended to improve the transparency of the allocation of funding for property work and improve the service to schools and the condition of school buildings.

87. The quality of property services remains unsatisfactory. Schools are more critical of property services in Gloucestershire than in most LEAs. Only eight per cent of secondary schools and 29 per cent of primary schools responding to the school survey rated the quality of building maintenance services as satisfactory or better. Schools expressed similar views about the quality of programming and scheduling of building projects. The council has made significant changes since the survey was undertaken, and prospects for further improvement are good. The arrangements for repairs and maintenance and for building work funded from schools' budgets are satisfactory. Further work is in hand to improve the availability and quality of building project management to ensure that work is delivered on schedule and within budget.

88. Over half of schools have chosen to buy a traded service that provides regular maintenance for items such as boilers and security systems, the scheduling of routine maintenance work and advice and client support for building projects. This represents a significant improvement in transparency compared with the former

arrangements. However, the package is weak because it lacks flexibility in that schools cannot purchase the elements separately.

Recommendations

In order to improve the quality of property services:

- communicate clearly to all schools their responsibilities as tenants and those of the LEA as landlord; and
- secure, separately from other property services, a traded advice and client support service for schools planning self-funded building projects.

89. The LEA's own evaluation of the success of building projects completed under the new contract arrangements is positive. Contractors for LEA-funded and school-funded projects are selected from an approved list. The LEA accredits the most successful contractors and removes from the list those failing to meet requirements.

90. Improved asset management planning has brought greater clarity to the allocation of centrally retained capital funds. However, the allocation of funding to schools' budgets is insufficiently related to their needs. The condition of school buildings compares favourably with other LEAs and all centrally-funded repair and maintenance work in the last financial year was planned rather than reactive.

91. Support for **ICT in administration** was unsatisfactory at the time of the last inspection. There had been delays in introducing a virtual private network to improve electronic communication between schools and the LEA and between schools themselves, and plans to introduce a central management information system lacked clarity. Schools were highly critical of the LEA's management information strategy and of the effectiveness of technical support for ICT. However, the LEA has reached several important milestones very recently, forming a sound basis for future improvement. The quality of provision is now satisfactory.

92. There has been significant progress in developing electronic communication between schools and the LEA. Despite difficulties and delays, all schools are now connected to the Internet and all secondary schools have broadband connections. The virtual private network has now been introduced and schools are able to transfer data securely to the LEA.

93. Progress in implementing an information management system is in line with that set out in the post-Ofsted action plan. The LEA now has a fully-populated pupil database and its SEN module is also operational. The latter represents an important strand in improving the quality of planning and monitoring of the provision for special educational needs within the LEA. Gaps nevertheless remain. For example, schools' financial returns are re-entered manually into the council's computer system, and schools' hardware systems are incompatible with those in the council's personnel section.

Recommendation

In order to improve ICT support for school administration:

- update the directorate's ICT strategy to reflect recent progress and to include clear, costed plans to enable:
 - key LEA officers to have on-line access to an integrated and comprehensive package of up-to-date management information about schools that is consistent with the LEA's monitoring responsibilities; and
 - headteachers and senior managers to have access to the same information in relation to their own schools.

94. The LEA provides or secures, on a traded basis, an appropriate range of ICT technical support and training for schools. All primary and special schools and over half of secondary schools have subscribed to the entire package, but the LEA's own customer satisfaction survey notes a drop in schools' levels of satisfaction in terms of hardware and software support. The LEA has arranged for additional technical support to be available so that primary schools, in particular, have access to a broader range of options for securing services.

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

95. Support for schools in securing an adequate supply and quality of teachers is satisfactory. Gloucestershire does not have a serious shortage of teachers, but there are above average numbers of teachers set to retire in the next few years, suggesting that the situation may worsen. There are already problems of recruiting sufficient experienced teachers in shortage subjects in secondary schools and in some schools causing concern. The education scrutiny committee has formed a working party to review the position and activities to support the recruitment and retention are an integral part of the EDP. The LEA, along with neighbouring LEAs, was successful in a joint bid to appoint a recruitment strategy manager.

96. Data on recruitment and retention are gathered from a variety of sources. Reports prepared by the recruitment strategy manager provide useful information about levels of vacancies, age profiles of teachers and recruitment and retention of newly qualified teachers. Comparisons with other LEAs are also provided. There are, however, weaknesses in the use of data to inform a medium- to longer-term strategy for assuring the supply and quality of teachers, and in the strength of partnership working between the recruitment strategy manager, personnel and the advisory service.

97. There are appropriate strategies to support schools in the recruiting of good quality staff including attendance at recruitment fairs and courses for those teachers wishing to return to the profession after a career break. There are also several initiatives that support the retention of staff. For example, the LEA's success in encouraging teachers to consider the advanced skills teacher option is helping

schools retain good staff and providing flexible career opportunities for teachers. Useful additional pastoral support is provided for new and experienced headteachers in small primary schools, as a means of aiding retention.

98. The LEA offers a useful range of in-service courses for teachers, including an increasing number of opportunities for them to engage in award bearing and accredited training. The LEA actively and successfully promotes the national leadership programmes. The headteachers' induction programme provides a useful introduction to the county for new headteachers who are well supported. Newly qualified teachers in their first year also receive good advice and support and the LEA retains well over 90 per cent of newly qualified teachers into their second year of teaching. The LEA has yet to develop an overarching and coherent strategy for continuous professional learning and development within which the in-service programme could sit.

Support for 14-19

99. At the time of the previous inspection the LEA's strategic support for sixth forms was unsatisfactory. The provision was considered to be unplanned, uneconomic and ill fitted to the needs of many of the post-16 students in the smaller schools. Constraints of time have meant that this position has not yet changed significantly; strategic support for sixth forms remains unsatisfactory.

100. Nevertheless, sound progress has been made in the time available. Councillors have made a strong commitment to improving the quality of post-16 education. They have agreed a range of principles and policies within which to undertake a review of post-16 provision and for initiating a strategy to help schools develop sufficient curriculum provision to meet the needs of all 14-19 students. The LEA has worked in active partnership with the local Learning and Skills Council and representatives from schools and colleges to stimulate debate and discuss plans for developing post-16 education.

101. Most schools have now made good use of the self-evaluation materials provided by the LEA in collaboration with partners to examine their own sixth-form provision. As a result, groups of schools in two areas of the county have opted to move towards increased co-operation and collaboration for post-16 education in advance of any formal strategy. Early evidence indicates that this is yielding some potentially effective arrangements upon which to base models of good practice.

102. Raising standards across the 14-19 age range is a priority in the EDP. Conferences have been planned to support headteachers and senior managers in curriculum planning and in the management of a more flexible 14-19 curriculum. Additional funding from the European Union is being used to forge links between secondary schools and local colleges of education with the express aim of exploring imaginative solutions to 14-19 provision and increasing the range of learning settings to include more college- and work-based opportunities. The LEA has also made a

bid for pathfinder funding to extend further the range of vocational pathways for 14-19 year-olds.

Support for small schools

103. The last inspection reported that the LEA provided very good support for small schools, and this remains the case. Over 60 per cent of Gloucestershire's 252 primary schools have fewer than 200 pupils on roll and therefore qualify as small schools according to Department for Education and Skills (DfES) definitions. Within this group, over 60 per cent of schools have fewer than 120 pupils. About 14 per cent, or one in seven, of secondary schools are classified as being small, having fewer than 600 pupils on roll.

104. The LEA's clear, well-balanced policy in relation to small schools acknowledges that, especially in more rural areas, schools play a key role in the life of their communities. However, it also recognises the many challenges facing small schools in terms of delivering the curriculum and in contributing fully to pupils' social development, the problems associated with limited accommodation and resources and the isolation of teachers. Partly through the analysis of school inspection reports, the LEA has identified the key challenge as that of management workload. The LEA has addressed this issue effectively through the use of Standards Fund grant. Schools receive allocations to ensure that headteachers' teaching commitments need not exceed 40 per cent of each week. In addition, the grant has enabled clusters of schools to work together on innovative projects to address a range of other issues such as ensuring improved access for pupils in small schools to specialist facilities and teaching. The projects have been well documented and include appropriate attention to the sustainability of the projects once grant funding ceases. Further valuable support for small schools is available through the small schools support group, and through a mentoring scheme for new headteachers. Despite its support, the LEA reports declining numbers of applications for headteacher vacancies in small schools. It has set clear criteria to trigger the review of the viability of small schools and has, in two cases, established federations of schools.

Support for early years

105. Support for early years was good previously and continues to be so. Good partnership arrangements exist for supporting maintained and non-maintained sector settings for pupils under five. There is effective collaboration between officers and advisers with early years responsibilities, which is ensuring coherent strategic planning and partnership working. Progress in implementing the Early Years Development and Childcare Plan is good. The LEA is on track to meet its targets or has exceeded them. Progress on implementing the EDP2 priority is sound. For example, a comprehensive database to ensure better targeting of service priorities is developing. Seven early years centres are currently involved in Sure Start programmes and an early excellence centre has been established since the last inspection.

106. Support for early years practitioners is good. There is an extensive range of well-targeted training provided, which is flexible to meet the needs of staff from different settings. The recruitment of teachers and special educational needs coordinators has enhanced the LEA's early years team, who, together with advanced skills teachers, are well placed to focus support on improving teaching and learning and the dissemination of classroom practice. Currently a Gloucestershire quality assurance scheme is being implemented and increasingly the options for accreditation are being taken up across the full range of early years providers.

SECTION 3: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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

107. Provision for children with special educational needs was unsatisfactory at the time of the last inspection. The LEA has acted to improve its support to schools and changed its senior management structure to reflect more coherent working between school improvement and inclusion teams. These are positive developments. However, the LEA has made limited progress in implementing the recommendations in the last report relating to strategy. The rate of progress has been constrained by the major restructuring of the education directorate. While the principles for more inclusive schools have broad support, there remains considerable anxiety about the coherence of the strategy and its potential to raise standards for children with SEN. With new, clear-sighted leadership this area of work is being addressed with energy and commitment. While capacity for improvement is now good, provision for children with SEN remains unsatisfactory.

The LEA's strategy for special educational needs

108. The LEA strategy, set out in the special educational needs development plan and approved in 1999, was poor at the time of the last inspection. The LEA was recommended to produce a strategy for SEN with a swifter timetable for implementation, to demonstrate how it would raise standards for pupils and incorporate the different reviews undertaken into a coherent plan. The LEA has acted to speed up the consultation process and has set the SEN development plan within the context of a policy for inclusion. However, the actions taken to implement the strategy continue to appear fragmented and a cause of concern and uncertainty to parents and headteachers of both mainstream and special schools. The strategy for SEN remains poor.

109. Officers have recently emphasised, more sensibly, the LEA's strategic commitment to retain a range of provision and work to ensure pupils will be placed in the most inclusive setting with the resources and staff expertise necessary to support them. This is intended to lead to adjustment in planning for places in special schools and mainstream schools over time. However, the delivery of this aspiration has been made complex by action taken to date. A key strand of the strategy has been the promotion of inclusive education through mainstream school provision for children with moderate learning difficulties and the consequent closure of four area special schools across the county. The issue of closing special schools and the focus on pupils with moderate learning difficulties has distorted the strategy. Officers recognise some confusion over the term 'moderate learning difficulties' which has been used to describe pupils with a wide range of needs in both special and mainstream schools. They now refer to pupils with 'complex needs', as those needing special school provision, but have not defined this term clearly enough for schools and parents.

110. To reduce uncertainty, the LEA has speeded up the consultation timetable in the two remaining geographical areas to be tackled. Officers are now consulting on a range of options drawn up with headteachers from special schools and external consultants and this has been well received. However, the range of options represents significant change to those offered previously in the Stroud and Forest of Dean areas. Justifiably, parents in different parts of the county do not feel they have been offered the same range of opportunities. The model the LEA is currently consulting on is weak in that it lacks details of viability or costs.

Recommendations

In order to improve the strategy for SEN:

- urgently clarify the SEN strategy and ensure that it closely reflects the LEA's stated policy on inclusion;
- re-communicate the strategy to schools and parents; and
- ensure there is a common understanding of the term 'complex needs'.

111. The percentage of pupils with statements is in line with similar LEAs and the national rate. However, in the last year the requests for statements in mainstream schools have risen by 9 per cent, with a 39 per cent increase in requests from parents. The profile of statements across year groups shows a higher number of pupils with statements in primary than in secondary schools. There are potentially serious implications of this in budgetary terms because of the high overspends currently in the statementing budget. Analysis of data on pupil numbers and the range of provision required has been insufficient to inform proper planning and seriously undermines the strategy for SEN. A review of provision for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties has been undertaken. The LEA has not acted on the recommendation to incorporate the different reviews into a coherent plan. The strategy in 1999 set out to redistribute funding arising from the closure of special schools to mainstream schools. Headteachers are not confident that the inclusion dividend is sufficient to ensure they can meet the needs of pupils with a wider range of special educational needs. LEA monitoring of the attainment and overall progress of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools is inadequate to evaluate the effectiveness of the provision. However, recent changes at strategic management level have increased the LEA's capacity to improve.

Recommendations

In order to inform future forecasting, planning and evaluation for SEN:

- develop a comprehensive database for pupils with SEN;
- improve data analysis and pupil tracking; and
- ensure that the LEA can demonstrate the success of its strategy in raising pupils' attainment.

Statutory obligations

112. The LEA was satisfactory at the time of the last inspection in taking reasonable steps in order to meet its statutory obligations in respect of SEN. The LEA's self-evaluation and other documentary evidence confirm that its work in this area is highly satisfactory and no detailed fieldwork was carried out.

113. The LEA has acted on the recommendation in the previous inspection report to encourage schools to be more active in promoting the work of the partnership with parents. A consequence of this has seen a significant rise in the number of requests for support from the parent partnership service. It was further recommended that the LEA should work with health authorities and the county's social services department to reduce the number of cases where exceptional needs prevent the completion of special educational needs statements within 18 weeks. The number of statements completed, with permitted exceptions, is 99 per cent, which is very good. Without exceptions this figure falls to 58 per cent. Delays in reports from health and social services are followed up, but improvement rates are slightly below the national average.

School improvement

114. Support for school improvement in relation to special educational needs was unsatisfactory at the time of the last inspection. The education directorate has recently been restructured with the areas of school improvement and inclusion (comprising of SEN, behaviour support and attendance) brought together under one head of service. Schools are in broad agreement with this alignment, though it is too early to determine the impact. Support for school improvement is now satisfactory.

115. The LEA has provided effective support to special schools and now none is in special measures or deemed to have serious weaknesses. Two schools for children with severe learning difficulties have been awarded Beacon status and three advanced skills teachers are providing good support for mainstream schools and training for learning support workers. Target setting is weak in some special schools because the development of comparative data has been slow. However, Gloucestershire, with its special schools, are taking the lead with neighbouring LEAs in the south-west in developing target setting for pupils with SEN and monitoring their progress.

116. The LEA provides a wide range of training, including case studies of good practice, that is welcomed by schools. Additional educational psychologists' time has been allocated to work with teachers in mainstream schools to increase their expertise and confidence in meeting a wider range of pupils' needs. Educational psychologists have also undertaken some tracking of the progress of pupils transferring from special to mainstream schools. This has been limited and produced little quantitative data on the rate of progress, levels of attainment or improved strategies for curriculum differentiation in mainstream schools. Lack of

measurable performance outcomes in terms of pupils' progress is a recurrent weakness in both service plans and in Best Value reviews undertaken.

117. The LEA has recently developed a section on inclusion within the schools' self-evaluation process. It is intended to enable link advisers and head teachers to scrutinise more effectively the provision for children with SEN. A proposed format for collecting annual data on SEN has been drawn up and the new electronic data management system has the capacity to ensure better monitoring of all children with special educational needs, not just those with statements.

118. A synopsis and guidelines to headteachers and governors on the practical implications of the extensions to the Disability Discrimination Act are useful and timely. There are some good examples of joint agency working.

Value for money

119. The LEA's SEN service was providing unsatisfactory value for money in the last inspection. It is now poor. While the total SEN budget is currently reasonable, forecasts of costs for children and young people with statements of special education needs have consistently been flawed. As a result, the true costs have escalated in excess of the budget, a result of poor management, poor budgeting and poor control over a number of years. The LEA has recently implemented more regular monitoring of budget spend. However, there has been too little cost-benefit analysis of the LEA's existing provision and of its proposed changes. In particular, the LEA has given insufficient attention to criteria for ceasing statements, other than at the end of statutory school age. It has not produced a trend analysis of volume changes in primary need, destination analysis by year group for the various settings or changes in inclusion levels in mainstream schools, as part of the budget-setting process. Information now available does not adequately explain the reasons for the overspend.

Recommendations

In order to improve the budget-setting process for SEN:

- monitor decisions made by the statutory assessment team through regular sampling; and
- provide a detailed termly trend analysis to inform future forecasting and planning.

120. Resources are tied up in vacant places within special schools and mainstream units. The LEA has been slow in moving towards greater financial delegation and plans to delegate both the resources and line management for learning support workers will be implemented in April 2003. Draft guidance that sets out what schools are expected to pay for and what the LEA should fund has been drawn up, but not yet completed or distributed. Monitoring of the 'inclusion dividend' recycled from reductions in special school places is more secure, but there are weaknesses in

evaluation. Recent changes made to improve the budget-planning process indicate that the LEA has the capacity to improve.

121. The LEA has no secure monitoring system in place to ensure that funding for children with special educational needs in mainstream schools is properly targeted and cannot demonstrate that it is providing value for money.

Recommendations

In order to improve value for money in SEN spending:

- urgently instigate a regular system of monitoring of budgets devolved to schools; and
- report to members on:
 - the outcomes of increased funding;
 - progress on the implementation of the SEN strategy; and
 - quality of teaching, learning and rate of attainment for pupils with SEN in the full range of settings.

122. The LEA is working with the local authority's social services directorate to address the previous inspection recommendation, to reduce out-of-county places for children with severe learning difficulties. It aims to develop comprehensive care for young people with severe learning difficulties, but it is too early to assess whether this has led to a sustained reduction in out-of-county special school places.

SECTION 4: PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION

Summary of effectiveness in promoting social inclusion

123. The LEA's effectiveness in promoting social inclusion was satisfactory. Limited fieldwork was undertaken in most of the functions that make up this section of the report. The LEA's own self-evaluation and evidence presented for this inspection suggest that many of the strengths identified in the last inspection have been maintained. There are notable strengths in admissions to schools, in combating racism and in health, safety, welfare and child protection. Combating social exclusion remains a priority within the LEA's strategy for school improvement. There are no major weaknesses and effectiveness is satisfactory overall.

124. The recent publication of the corporate strategy 2002-2005 has strengthened the council's commitment to social inclusion and aims to improve the quality of life of children and families at risk and raise standards for all children and young people. Social inclusion underpins major plans within the education directorate and features prominently in two priorities of the LEA's school improvement strategy. Sensibly, the restructured education directorate has aligned school improvement and inclusion services to meet these aspirations. The corporate drive to improve inclusion is further strengthened by the executive director holding a cross-cutting responsibility.

125. The LEA has recently consulted widely on its draft policy and strategy for inclusion. Schools and other partners approve of the principles and direction that aims to build a community of schools authority-wide, where inclusion is presented as the responsibility of all. The policy sets out the LEA's intentions to provide a more coherent approach to the development of support for vulnerable groups. At an operational level, individual services provide effective support, they are well managed, and there is a commitment to engage in a number of developing initiatives to support inclusion. For example, the LEA is a major partner in community development, in the new Local Strategic Partnerships and the crime and disorder reduction partnerships.

126. There are clear policies and guidelines published to schools for supporting vulnerable groups including, for example, Travellers, refugees, asylum seekers, children of prisoners, those in public care and in hospital units. The LEA effectively monitors the achievement by geographical area, at individual school level and by phase of education to ensure that support is effectively targeted. In addition, there are a wide range of well-established partnerships sharing a focus on disadvantaged and vulnerable children and families, which is leading to joint planning across agencies for complementary action. An example where this is effective is found within the plans and provision for early years education.

127. The LEA concedes that, until very recently, there has been no cohesive strategy. The integrated service and performance plans for the current year provide a framework for development and set out timescales for completion of this work. However, a further weak element remains in the need to align clearly the strategy for

SEN to the policy for inclusion where confusion is still prominent, mainly caused by weak communication.

The supply of school places

128. The LEA's effectiveness in relation to the provision of school places was satisfactory at the time of the last inspection. The LEA's self-evaluation indicates that performance in this area remains satisfactory and schools support this view. No detailed fieldwork was undertaken in this aspect. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the LEA has responded to criticisms of its last school organisation plan, and evaluations of the draft plan for 2002-2007 are positive. The plan contains helpful details of current projects for each area of the county, together with outline proposals for future developments. However, planning for post-16 provision and for SEN remains at very early stages of principle. The absence of maps is a serious omission in the plan.

Admissions

129. The LEA's admission arrangements were reported to be good at the time of the last inspection and they remain so. No detailed fieldwork was undertaken in this aspect. Schools rate the LEA's effectiveness as better than satisfactory. The service continues to meet a very high proportion of parental preferences for admissions to secondary schools and to reception classes in primary schools.

Asset management

130. Asset management planning was weak at the time of the last inspection. The report recommended that the LEA should improve its planning and link it to the allocation of capital resources more effectively. The latest school survey suggests some improvement, but schools were generally highly critical of the asset management process. However, there have been significant improvements since the survey was undertaken. The quality of asset management planning is now highly satisfactory.

131. The asset management plan is good. Initial difficulties in obtaining valid suitability data have been resolved, and the plan has been rated highly by the DfES. The local policy statement links well with other statutory plans such as the school organisation plan and the EDP, and the LEA has established appropriate criteria on which to base decisions about the prioritisation of building projects. These have been well used to produce a clear, costed statement of priorities, which is consistent with the LEA's capital budget.

132. The LEA has taken effective measures to improve schools' understanding of asset management. Recent training has increased their awareness of the LEA's responsibilities in relation to the maintenance of council assets, and improved consultation has improved the transparency of the asset management process. Schools have, in the past, been sceptical about the LEA's ability to deliver its asset

management priorities as planned. Capital funds within the revenue budget have too often been used to offset over-spends in other areas of the education budget. It is too early to tell whether these shortcomings have been remedied.

Provision of education for pupils who have no school place

133. In the last inspection support for the provision of education otherwise than at school was satisfactory. The recommendation to comply with statutory requirements to register as pupil referral units all maintained centres providing education otherwise than at school has been met in full. The LEA's provision remains satisfactory and no detailed fieldwork was conducted in this area. Evidence presented in the LEA's self-evaluation confirms that provision remains satisfactory. The number of pupils in Gloucestershire educated otherwise than at school is well above the averages for similar LEAs. The reintegration rate for permanently excluded pupils has accelerated. There is a good range of provision for pupils at Key Stage 4. Despite a 40 per cent increase in the number of permanently excluded pupils in 2001-2002 (to 137 from a previously low base) the LEA has met the requirement to make full-time provision for them from September 2002.

Attendance

134. LEA support for attendance was satisfactory in the last inspection report. Indicators confirm the LEA's self-evaluation that support to improve attendance remains satisfactory. No detailed fieldwork was undertaken in this area. The recommendations of the previous inspection report are being addressed and the service was subject to a Best Value review earlier in the year. All education welfare officers now have appropriate information communication technology equipment and facilities and work is continuing on developing an integrated system to enable access to school and education directorate records. Consultation is underway on a revised manual, which sets out the roles of schools and the LEA in promoting good attendance and the range of support and time allocations schools can expect from the service. Levels of attendance continue to improve.

Behaviour support

135. The last inspection report identified support for behaviour of pupils as highly satisfactory with a number of strengths. The LEA's evidence of self-evaluation and other indicators is that support for behaviour remains satisfactory. No detailed fieldwork was undertaken in this area. The behavioural support plan 2001-2004 is a useful document, signposting schools to a range of support available. The school survey indicated that schools value the behaviour support service. The LEA maintains strong links with the youth offending team, social services and has contributed to the Connexions and Children's Fund developments. The performance of both the primary and secondary behaviour teams is monitored effectively and linked to service improvement.

Health, safety, welfare and child protection

136. The LEA's provision for health, safety, welfare and child protection was good. The LEA's own self-evaluation and documentation presented for this inspection indicate that provision remains good and no detailed fieldwork was conducted in this inspection. The last inspection report stated that the LEA was taking all reasonable steps to meet statutory obligations. Risk assessments in schools were completed and appropriate follow up to accidents carried out. Provision for health education was effective and procedures for monitoring child welfare were very good. Links between education, social services and the police at strategic levels were good in relation to child protection and a register of designated teachers is maintained. A good range of training opportunities is offered for school-based staff and other professionals. A concern was expressed in the last report about schools having difficulty contacting and gaining access to support from social services, and with information exchange regarding children on the child protection register. Since then, the joint action group has been reformed around the planning of children's services and the head of children and young people's support in the restructured education directorate has a remit to improve the interface between schools and social services.

Looked after children

137. In the last inspection, support for looked after children was satisfactory and there was good liaison and planning with social services and health. The LEA's self-evaluation confirms that this remains the case. No detailed fieldwork was undertaken in this area, but there is evidence of sufficient progress and the LEA's support is now highly satisfactory. The looked after children service provides guidance and advice on the education of this vulnerable group to carers, schools and other agencies. Corporate responsibilities are overseen by an advisory forum and a children's champion. Data on attainment, exclusion and attendance are properly monitored and evaluated, with targets for improvement year on year clearly set out. Sharing of information between social services and education officers remains good and schools are informed about any changes in placement. However, evidence presented for this inspection revealed that personal education plans are in place for only 27 per cent of looked after children.

Recommendation

In order to improve the planning and provision for looked after children:

- secure personal education plans for all looked after children.

Measures to combat racism

138. The previous inspection reported that measures taken by the LEA to combat racism were satisfactory. The council has adopted the Commission for Racial Equality standards and is making good progress in meeting the criteria. The LEA

has provided good leadership to schools by providing clear guidance on policies and procedures for tackling all forms of racism. Support for schools has improved and it is now good.

139. There is coherent strategic development across the local authority. The fairness and diversity strategy is a fundamental part of the corporate plan, requiring the commitment and accountability of all departments. Equal opportunities training is available to all council staff. All senior managers have undertaken training on the implications of the report arising from the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence.

140. The LEA has taken positive action to ensure a more representative workforce, although minority ethnic teachers and governors are still under represented. LEA officers provide a range of training for schools and, with headteachers, are rigorous in scrutinising pupil performance data to identify and target underachievement of groups of pupils. Schools are extremely positive about the advice and support they get from the ethnic minority achievement service and the Travellers Service. Support for asylum seekers is good.

141. The LEA has sponsored a number of projects for schools to broaden the curriculum and to take account of the traditions of cultural and faith groups. The recent 'fishpool' project focuses on supporting African Caribbean pupils in reaching their potential and to take up places in higher education. Procedures to monitor racial incidents are in place in all schools and the LEA regularly reports to elected members on the incidence and type of incident. There is close partnership working with the police and other agencies through area groups working together to implement the crime reduction strategy. Work continues to ensure that, as well as teachers, lunchtime supervisors, clerical and support staff in schools have access to appropriate training and are alert and sensitive to the importance of challenging and reporting all forms of racism.

SECTION 5: CORPORATE ISSUES

Introduction to corporate issues

142. At the time of the previous inspection, Gloucestershire County Council's strategic leadership, management and planning in its role as the local education authority was poor. Decision making was weak and suffered from a lack of strategy and emphasis on education. The report concluded with doubts about the capacity of the LEA to respond effectively to the weaknesses. New arrangements in political administration and reform in decision-making processes were too new to be evaluated for their effectiveness. Strategic planning for the education service was weak, resulting in schools having little or no understanding of the strategic role or priorities of the LEA. In areas in which urgent action was required, notably SEN and sixth form provision, the LEA had failed to carry its schools with it. At that time, education was not the council's highest priority in its budget and the status of education among the council's strategic priorities was unclear.

143. One year on, the LEA has made satisfactory progress in addressing both the recommendation from the last inspection and in its willingness to improve its strategic leadership role. Elected members, the interim executive director and the newly established strategic management team of the education directorate have worked hard to develop a strategy for education, which is informed by the corporate vision of the county council. The new vision puts education firmly at the heart of its work and there are clear signs of investment in education.

144. Elected members have experienced a period of rapid change in their leadership and management of education functions and are demonstrating a continuing willingness to improve. Schools and other partners are right to be cautiously optimistic in their assessment of these new arrangements and are generally supportive and welcome the promising prospects for improvement. Nevertheless, it is too early to detect evidence of sustainability in improving the quality of the LEA's educational services overall. Weaknesses remain in some functions.

Corporate planning

145. Since the last inspection, corporate planning for education has improved considerably and it is now satisfactory. Within the education directorate there are four levels of planning. Integrated service and performance plans for each of the two heads of service reflect the ambitions of the corporate strategy and set out the priorities and responsibilities of the two service areas. This tier of planning contains a clear programme of action and development and identifies how each service area relates to statutory and other plans. This is bringing much improved cohesion to top-level planning. Nevertheless, having an integrated service and performance plan for each head of service in the education directorate acts against an overarching strategy.

Recommendation

In order to strengthen strategic planning in the education directorate:

- combine the priorities within the integrated service and performance plans into one overarching strategy for education and communicate it to schools and partners.

146. Planning at levels two and three contains more operational detail and level four focuses on the contribution of individual officers to the aims of the corporate strategy. These four levels of planning are therefore sensibly aligned to the much improved performance management structure. The key strategic document of the school improvement and inclusion service is the Education Development Plan. In the education planning and lifelong learning service, strategic plans such as the school organisation plan, asset management plan and Early Years Development and Childcare Plan are soundly linked. The key strategic document for this service is Gloucestershire's community plan, currently being developed, which provides an overarching strategy for other plans such as the adult learning plan, youth service development plan and Gloucestershire's Learning and Skills Council strategic plan.

147. Procedures for implementing and monitoring plans are satisfactory. The three portfolio holders are well placed to monitor the education directorate's development. The scrutiny committee for education and skills is taking an active role in scrutinising progress, for example, in the action plan resulting from the last inspection. However, plans are inconsistent in the extent to which they specify clear outcomes in terms of improved performance. As a result, evaluation of their impact, at this stage, is underdeveloped. A further weakness is the lack of specific detail regarding financial resourcing. Individual plans are affordable and achievable, but they are not yet aligned with the medium-term financial strategy.

Decision making

148. The speed, transparency and effectiveness of decision making were poor at the last inspection. The council has responded vigorously to the report's first and most crucial recommendation concerning the need to strengthen strategic management and to establish a performance management system. Though further work is necessary to embed throughout the organisation the many changes that have been implemented at member and officer levels, the speed, transparency and effectiveness of decision making is now satisfactory.

149. The introduction of political leadership following the coalition of two political groupings has been the key factor in improving decision making. This change, allied to the adoption by the council of the cabinet and scrutiny system of local government, has provided the necessary climate for reform. The council has, for the first time, produced a clear corporate strategy setting out its priorities and has set a budget that, at a strategic level, reflects those priorities. The major restructuring of directorates and the introduction across the council of a consistent planning format linked to a medium-term financial strategy provide further evidence of the improved

speed and effectiveness of decision making. Records of all key decisions are kept, though their brevity limits, in some cases, the transparency of the debate leading to the decision.

150. Schools have, in the past, felt poorly consulted about decisions affecting them, particularly those relating to the setting and allocation of budgets. Secondary headteachers now report far more optimism; their representatives have been fully involved in decision making at both member and officer level. They support, for example, the decision to delay a fundamental review of the school funding formula until 2004-2005. Arrangements for the consultation with primary schools are less effective, partly because of the large number of schools involved. Until recently, there have been no formal arrangements for consultation with school governors.

Recommendation

In order to improve the effectiveness of decision making:

- formalise consultation structures to ensure that the views of headteachers and governors in all phases of education are adequately represented.

The leadership provided by senior officers

151. Leadership provided by senior officers, including an acting head of education services was previously satisfactory. Since then, a substantive executive director for education has been appointed. She took up her new post in September 2002 together with two heads of service, one of who was also new to the authority. Together, they form the new strategic management team of the education directorate and are supported by ten third-tier officers responsible for leading operational functions. This constitutes a significant reorganisation of the leadership and management of the directorate. At this stage, the leadership provided by these new senior officers is satisfactory. The capacity for sustainable improvement is highly satisfactory.

152. In a very short space of time, the new strategic management team has demonstrated its commitment to the new corporate vision, to improvement and to inclusion. Schools and other partners broadly welcome the changes, especially appreciating the clearly articulated vision for the future. They are cautiously optimistic about the future direction of the directorate and its willingness to work in partnership with schools. Consultation and involvement in decision making is much improved and, as a consequence, relationships with schools are productive on the whole. Although it is too soon to see the significant effects of the new strategic management team, there are now clear benefits at the end of a two-year period of uncertainty in the composition and stability of the leadership team. Senior officers recognise that there is still much to do, particularly in the areas of improving effective communication, in evaluating the effect of strategies and services and in securing an overarching strategy for education.

The leadership provided by elected members

153. The leadership provided by elected members was poor at the time of the last inspection. Since then, changes to the composition and commitment of elected members have resulted in their improved contribution to the strategic role for education such that they now provide satisfactory leadership. There is broad agreement to the council's vision from all political parties and schools welcome the prominence, importance and investment that members are placing on education.

154. Relationships between officers and members are good and are helped by informal and formal liaison arrangements. Procedures for delegation to officers are generally appropriate, but, partly because the relationship is a new one, open to interpretation and in need of clarification. Elected members take their role seriously in monitoring the education directorate, but are not yet evaluating the effectiveness of their decision making on standards and school improvement. There are clear procedures for fulfilling the scrutiny functions, but councillors on the education and skills scrutiny committee have yet to utilise this instrument with precision and are only gradually gaining the skills and knowledge needed for the role.

Recommendation

In order to strengthen the leadership role of elected members:

- establish means of evaluating how the decisions of elected members influence school standards and effectiveness; and
- clarify the procedures for delegation to senior officers.

155. The quality of advice given to elected members is satisfactory. Officers provide informed advice on policy and implications are reasonably well thought through. However, the volume of reports sometimes presents too much information for members to assimilate quickly and they would benefit from reports being focussed, sharper and better costed. Informal and formal liaison arrangements for portfolio holders and the opposition spokesperson for education allow members to be kept up to date with their responsibilities.

Partnership

156. The management of partnership working was satisfactory at the time of the last inspection and remains so. This function was not subject to extensive fieldwork during this inspection. The publication of the council's corporate strategy has strengthened the approach to partnership working at operational levels. For example, it is evident in the policy and strategy relating to 16-19 education, in early years education and in building capacity for partnership with the social services directorate. Local and school level partnerships also work well. For example, collaborative work with the Education Action Zone continues to develop, and the LEA has made effective use of the advanced skills teachers and Beacon schools to support and develop school improvement.

157. The Gloucestershire Local Strategic Partnership is in a very early stage of development. It has brought together the main service providers and wealth creators in the county to improve Gloucestershire as a place to live and work. It is intended that this partnership will be responsible for the implementation of the community strategy. It is too early to judge the effectiveness of the strategic partnership at this stage, although the education directorate has a prominent role in the key theme of lifelong learning and therefore prospects are promising for strengthening links at corporate and community levels.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS

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

In order to improve the strategy for SEN:

- urgently clarify the SEN strategy and ensure that it closely reflects the LEA's stated policy on inclusion;
- re-communicate the strategy to schools and parents; and
- ensure there is a common understanding of the term 'complex needs'.

In order to inform future forecasting, planning and evaluation for SEN:

- develop a comprehensive database for pupils with SEN;
- improve data analysis and pupil tracking; and
- ensure that the LEA can demonstrate the success of its strategy in raising pupils' attainment.

In order to improve the budget-setting process for SEN:

- monitor decisions made by the statutory assessment team through regular sampling; and
- provide a detailed termly trend analysis to inform future forecasting and planning.

In order to improve value for money in SEN spending:

- urgently instigate a regular system of monitoring of budgets devolved to schools; and
- report to members on:
 - outcomes of increased funding;
 - progress on the implementation of the SEN strategy; and
 - quality of teaching, learning and rate of attainment for pupils with SEN in the full range of settings.

In order to improve financial management in primary schools:

- increase, in proportion to need, the frequency and rigour of the monitoring of school balances and the quality of financial planning; and
- challenge headteachers and governors to make full use of funding and, where necessary, use available statutory powers.

In order to improve support for ICT:

- develop and implement a comprehensive and costed strategy and development plan for ICT that:
 - brings together developments in the various strands of the EDP and the National Grid for Learning;
 - is focused sharply on raising the achievement of pupils in ICT; and
 - is shared with, and understood by, schools.

The report also makes the following recommendations:

In order to strengthen and improve strategy planning, leadership and decision making:

- combine the priorities within the integrated service and performance plans into one overarching strategy for education and communicate it to schools and partners;
- formalise consultation structures to ensure that the views of headteachers and governors in all phases of education are adequately represented;
- establish means of evaluating how the decisions of elected members influence school standards and effectiveness; and
- clarify the procedures for delegation to senior officers.

In order to improve schools' effectiveness as purchasers of services:

- improve the specifications contained in the service booklet and extend it to include other services that schools pay for; and
- ensure that schools have access to approved and alternative providers of services.

In order to improve the quality of property services:

- communicate clearly to all schools their responsibilities as tenants and those of the LEA as landlord; and
- secure, separately from other property services, a traded advice and client support service for schools planning self-funded building projects.

In order to improve ICT support for school administration:

- update the directorate's ICT strategy to reflect recent progress and to include clear, costed plans to enable:
 - key LEA officers to have on-line access to an integrated and comprehensive package of up-to-date management information about schools that is consistent with the LEA's monitoring responsibilities; and
 - headteachers and senior managers to have access to the same information in relation to their own schools.

In order to improve the planning and provision for looked after children:

- secure personal education plans for all looked after children.

© Crown copyright 2003

**Office for Standards in Education
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE**

Tel: 020 7421 6800

This report may be produced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that all extracts quoted are produced verbatim and without adaptation and on condition that the source and date thereof are stated.

A further copy of this report can be obtained from the Local Education Authority concerned:

**Gloucestershire LEA
Gloucestershire County Council
Shire Hall
Gloucester
GL1 2TP**

A copy can also be obtained from the OFSTED website: www.Ofsted.gov.uk