



Office for Standards
in Education

Dorset

Local Education Authority

Inspection Report

Date of Inspection: May 2004

Reporting Inspector: Heather Richardson HMI



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Basic information

Name of LEA:	Dorset Local Education Authority
LEA number:	835
Address of LEA:	County Hall Colliton Park Dorchester Dorset DT1 1XJ
Reporting Inspector:	Heather Richardson HMI
Date of Inspection:	May 2004

Summary

Introduction

Dorset's popular image as a county of outstanding natural beauty with picturesque villages belies its complexity. Predominantly rural and with one of the smallest populations of any county, 70% of the population live in towns. Unemployment is below the national average, but so are wage levels. A low percentage of pupils are eligible for free school meals, yet five wards feature among the 20% most deprived nationally in relation to child poverty. Dorset's school-age population, already below the national average, continues to fall. The decline in its young adult population is acute.

Dorset schools perform well. Standards of attainment are above the national average at most key stages and in line with those found in similar authorities.¹ There is a dip in performance in English and mathematics at Key Stage 2, but it is still in line with the national average and that of similar authorities. Pupils' attendance is better than the average found both nationally and in similar authorities. Exclusion rates are low.

There have been changes in the political structures since the previous inspection. The executive cabinet of six elected members now includes a lead member for education. The education overview and policy development committee has oversight of education. It monitors the work of the education directorate and provides advice on policy. There is a separate audit and scrutiny committee which covers all council services.

¹ Dorset LEA's statistical neighbours are: Devon, Somerset, the East Riding of Yorkshire, North Yorkshire, Cornwall, East Sussex, Gloucestershire, Cambridgeshire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

Main findings

Summary: Dorset local education authority (LEA) has made satisfactory progress since the previous inspection. It remains satisfactory overall, which is a reflection of the higher expectations now placed on local education authorities. The council has a much sharper focus on its corporate aims and the education directorate is better integrated with other council services. However, the work of the education directorate has progressed unevenly since the previous inspection. Where the agenda for improvement was unambiguous, areas of weakness have been tackled successfully. In more complex areas, notably the strategy for special educational needs (SEN), progress has been limited. The LEA explains, but does not excuse, where it has not met expectations and, as its self-evaluation for this inspection demonstrates, it knows itself well. Schools value the integrity and partnership of senior officers and also the commitment of elected members. These qualities have served schools well but, at a time when difficult decisions are being made, the LEA's vision is not sufficiently clear to schools. Beneficially, both schools and the LEA recognise that articulating the vision is a joint responsibility. There is satisfactory capacity for further improvement.

Areas of strength	Areas of weakness/for development
Corporate leadership of education	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education's contribution to the council's overall aims • Improved performance management • Council spending on education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The consistency and rigour with which inspection recommendations are followed up • The lack of clarity for schools of the LEA's priorities • The role of the education overview and policy development committee
Strategy for education and its implementation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasingly coherent support for school improvement leading to higher attainment at all key stages • Asset management planning • Support to schools causing concern 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The quality of evaluation of planned activities to promote school improvement • Criteria for school place planning • The use of pupil-level data to challenge schools
Support to improve education in schools	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The quality of support for Key Stage 3 leading to higher attainment • Support for school governors • The LEA's commitment to self-managing schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring and evaluation of the work of schools in pyramid groups
Support for special educational needs	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of statements of special educational needs • Rate of completion of statements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy and action plan for SEN not yet in place • LEA unable to demonstrate that its high spending on SEN represents value for money
Support for social inclusion	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for looked after children • Significant improvement in combating racism • The procedures for child protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action plan to bring coherence to social inclusion not yet in place • Support for behaviour

Recommendations

Key recommendations

Corporate planning for education and its implementation: challenge the performance of the LEA more rigorously through precise planning, comprehensive monitoring and critical evaluation.

Special educational needs:

- As a matter of urgency, finalise a robust action plan based on the agreed principles for provision for pupils with SEN.
- Monitor rigorously and evaluate with schools and groups of schools the use they make of delegated resources for SEN.

Support for social inclusion: finalise an action plan to ensure the strategy for social inclusion is implemented and activities are co-ordinated.

Support for behaviour: as a matter of urgency, underpin the behaviour support plan with an action plan which has clear criteria for monitoring progress and evaluating success.

Other recommendations

Corporate leadership of education

Decision-making: rationalise the remit and structures of the education overview and policy development committee to enable it to fulfil its strategic role for the education directorate and the development of children's services.

Leadership by senior officers: work with elected members, schools and other partners to ensure a common understanding of the vision and priorities for education in Dorset.

Strategy for education and its implementation

Monitoring, challenge and intervention

- Ensure that the review process draws sufficiently on link advisers' knowledge of their schools.
- Challenge schools more rigorously by systematic and detailed use of pupil-level data, including its use in target-setting.

School places: clarify the strategy for the provision of school places, including the criteria against which changes in the structure of school provision will be determined.

Support to improve education in schools

Support for school leadership and management: evaluate the impact on provision and pupils' achievement of the work of groups of schools and use the outcomes to inform the LEA's monitoring, support and assessment of value for money.

Services to support school management: improve the specification of service standards and arrangements for monitoring and reporting on service quality.

Support for special educational needs

Value for money

- Develop means of benchmarking the educational attainment of pupils to determine value for money.
- Ensure that mainstream schools understand revised LEA arrangements for delegated funds for SEN.

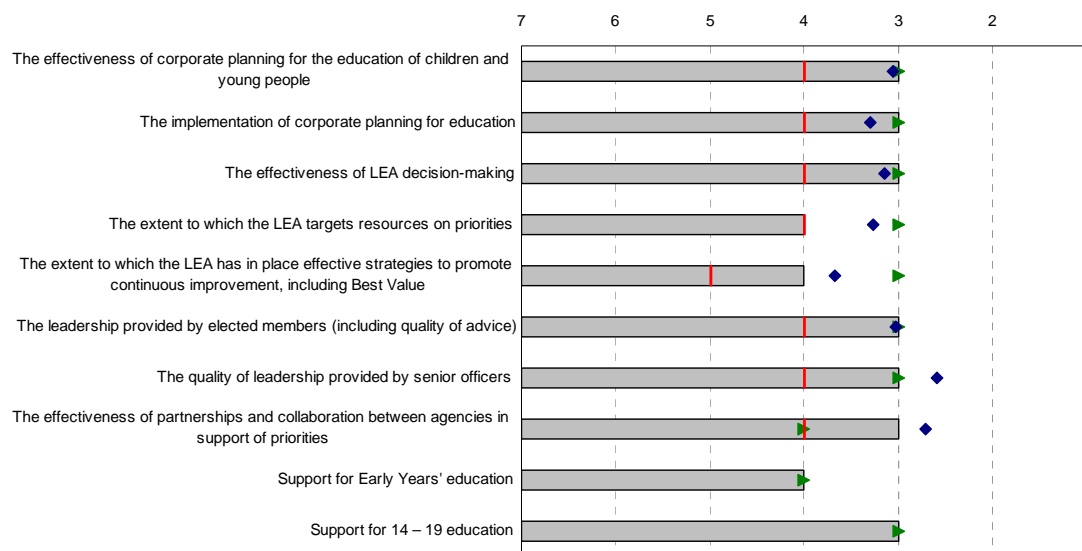
Support for social inclusion

Support for behaviour: ensure that adequate resources are available to enable the service to engage in more proactive, preventive work with schools on behaviour management.

Child protection: ensure that there is contingency support for child protection at all times.

Section 1: Corporate leadership of education

Summary table of judgements



The bar represents the grade awarded to the LEA, the triangle represents the LEA's self-evaluation grade, the vertical line represents the LEA's previous grade and the diamond represents the average grade of all LEAs inspected in the last year. 1 = Very Good, 2 = Good, 3 = Highly Satisfactory, 4 = Satisfactory, 5 = Unsatisfactory, 6 = Poor, 7 = Very Poor.

Corporate planning for education and its implementation

1. Since the previous inspection the council has improved its plans for education and the way they are implemented. Both are now highly satisfactory. Planning continues to reflect the priority afforded to education in Dorset, as does elected members' commitment to its funding.

2. Planning has improved because there is a much sharper emphasis on how education contributes to the overall aims of the council and a clear corporate drive for consistency and coherence between plans. Corporate aims are clearly reflected in the education directorate's plan and the implications of decisions made by elected members are assessed against these aims. Education is much better integrated in its planning and practice with the work of other directorates. This does not yet extend to joint planning and funding of projects, but nevertheless represents significant progress since the previous inspection. Good use has been made of a local public service agreement (LPSA) to support educational attainment in areas of social need.

3. The new community strategy and its adoption by elected members have strengthened the context for education planning and for the partnership work of the LEA. As in the corporate plan, education features both as a discrete priority and as a significant contributor to the other themes. However, the strategy is recent and has not yet had any tangible impact on the education service. Members and officers understand the need for

effective partnerships to achieve their wider goals. These partnerships, at both strategic and operational level, result increasingly in improved provision for pupils, including early years and the education of 14- to 19-year-olds. However, as yet there is no formalised structure that sets out the relationship between partnerships. The relationship between the Dorset Strategic Partnership (DSP) and the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership is, for example, at an early stage of development.

4. The council has improved its performance management and there is now both a culture and practice of monitoring performance among elected members and officers. This is strong in the use of numerical performance indicators, with well-established quarterly monitoring. As yet, it is less secure in monitoring other aspects of performance. One consequence is that the monitoring of progress on the action plan from the previous inspection has been insufficiently rigorous and some actions have not been completed. The reporting and evaluation of performance are often too imprecise to assess the effectiveness of activities and inform subsequent planning. This sometimes results from a lack of precision in the original plans, particularly service plans, but it also reflects insufficient challenge in the analysis.

Recommendation

- Challenge the performance of the LEA more rigorously through precise planning, comprehensive monitoring and critical evaluation.

Targeting of resources

5. The targeting of resources remains satisfactory. Despite areas of improvement there are still weaknesses, particularly in the resourcing of special educational needs and the funding formula for schools.

6. The council's strong financial commitment to education continues, with spending in 2003-04 over 9% above the Formula Spending Share. These additional resources mean that schools are funded through the Individual Schools Budget at levels comparable to those in similar authorities. This commitment is valued by schools, with whom well-established arrangements are in place for consultation through the Schools Forum.

7. The council's medium-term financial strategy provides a sound basis for education planning. Budget making is generally accurate. However, the process lacks a sufficiently in-depth review of base budgets. As a result of slow progress in developing and implementing a clear strategy, the main problem area continues to be SEN spending. This is well above average and does not represent good value for money. Budgetary control has improved since the previous inspection following the introduction of more robust procedures. Problems are identified in good time, allowing remedial action.

8. Positive measures have been taken to support schools in tackling deficits, a notable shortcoming at the previous inspection. The LEA's officers have worked effectively with schools to draw up and implement recovery plans. Monthly progress reports have been provided to elected members on schools in particular difficulty. Both school budget deficits and surpluses were at an average level at the end of 2002-03.

9. Progress on the development of the funding formula has been slow. There is a consensus between schools and the LEA that the formula is characterised by a degree of inequity, particularly in the funding of large primary schools and junior schools, and a lack of transparency. To its credit, the LEA has developed a needs-led model, which continues to be amended to meet new circumstances and has been used as the basis for distributing some additional resources. The LEA's intentions as to when, how or if this model will be implemented further, and to what degree, have not been made sufficiently clear to schools.

Strategies to promote continuous improvement, including Best Value

10. This function has improved and is now satisfactory, primarily because the LEA now has sound performance management arrangements in place. Performance management has benefited from the introduction of a comprehensive corporate approach to planning for improvement. However, the new framework is very recent and it is too early for the outcomes to influence planning. In addition, although the systems are in place, there is some variation in the implementation. There are clear links across strategic and directorate plans, but links to service plans are not so well formulated. The approach to staff appraisal is sound, but individual targets are not consistently linked to service plans and outcomes.

11. The procedures for regular reporting on performance are now well established, as are arrangements for audit and scrutiny. These have led to effective challenge, for example to education budget-setting processes, in close liaison with the Schools Forum. The LEA is making increasingly good use of the European Foundation for Quality Management model to evaluate aspects of performance. However, targets and costs are not always considered, nor are outcomes always integrated into service planning.

12. Despite the systems that are now in place, monitoring has been insufficiently rigorous to ensure that all the elements of the action plan from the previous inspection have been completed. Some actions were tracked well and reached timely conclusions, but others foundered through a delay in actions or the complexity of the task. However, the LEA does recognise and acknowledge its strengths and weaknesses, as the broadly accurate self-evaluation produced for this inspection demonstrates.

13. The council has improved its arrangements for Best Value and these have resulted in better service outcomes. Significantly, the cross-cutting review of services to children and young people has paved the way for much development work to support children's services. The new programme rightly takes into account the need to focus on broader reviews and the involvement of elected members in the review process has been strengthened.

Decision-making, leadership by elected members and advice given to them

14. Elected members now provide highly satisfactory leadership for education, not least through continuing to fund education at a level which is consistently and substantially above the government assessment. They have a much clearer view on how education relates to corporate aims and to delivering services in an integrated way. Improvements to data and performance management mean that members are better informed of progress against targets. Since the previous inspection, the establishment of a lead member for education within the

cabinet has significantly improved communications between elected members and the education directorate. Elected members receive good advice.

15. Decision-making is highly satisfactory. Decisions are informed by consultation and by members' improved knowledge of the performance of the education directorate and schools. Procedures are better and decisions are now matched to council priorities. The extent to which decisions are informed by the evaluation of policy remains limited. The current Best Value review is designed, rightly, to tackle this weakness. The distinction between the roles of executive and scrutiny is clear, but decision-making is not always well-served by the remit and structure of the education overview and policy development committee. The multiplicity of its roles, and the proliferation of panels and paperwork limit the committee's capacity to fulfil its key strategic role of 'sounding board' for education.

Recommendation

- Rationalise the remit and structures of the education overview and policy development committee to enable it to fulfil its strategic role for the education directorate and the development of children's services.

Leadership by senior officers

16. The leadership by senior officers is now highly satisfactory. It has improved partly as a result of other council developments, in particular the increased focus on corporate aims and improved performance management. It has also improved through the efforts of senior officers to work in partnership with schools and with other agencies. There is a clear emphasis on school improvement and a commitment to self-managing schools. Senior officers, including the chief executive, have ensured good progress has been made since the previous inspection in a number of areas, such as the consistency of corporate planning and the significant improvement in combating racism. Moreover, Dorset is the first LEA in the country, other than the pilot LEAs, to agree a compact with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to take forward its priorities for school improvement and social inclusion. This is complemented by the use of the LPSA to target support to schools. However, progress in developing the LEA's strategy for SEN has been more limited. Officers have not been complacent but, in challenging circumstances, they have not always succeeded in sustaining the pace of change.

17. Senior officers are committed to working collaboratively with schools. This strength derives from the director's clear endorsement of schools' responsibilities for their own improvement and the complementary role of the LEA. This principle is understood and supported by schools who also recognise its benefits, including a much stronger relationship between the LEA and schools than was the case at the time of the previous inspection. This is illustrated, for example, in the director's participation in the secondary headteachers' group and in joint work between schools and officers over the development of the 14-19 strategy. However, the benefits of this collaborative style of leadership are currently constrained by the absence of a clearly articulated vision and priorities. Senior officers are not without vision, but beyond the broad commitment to school improvement, the LEA's current priorities are not clear to schools. This has served to cause confusion at a time of significant school reorganisation. Senior officers have now, rightly, recognised the need to open up a major

discussion with schools on the aspirations and goals of the LEA to serve as a framework for decisions and priorities. Significantly, schools recognise they also have responsibilities to help shape the vision. This commitment reflects their ultimate confidence in the senior officers and their clear acknowledgement of the integrity of the director of education.

Recommendation

- Work with elected members, schools and other partners to ensure a common understanding of the vision and priorities for education in Dorset.

Strategic partnerships

18. The LEA's support for partnership work has improved and is now highly satisfactory. At the time of the previous inspection, Dorset had no strategic partnership. Progress has been made and the community strategy produced by the DSP has now been adopted by the council. Partnership work reflects the increasing recognition by elected members, senior officers and schools that education is an aspect of provision in Dorset and not a separate strand. Partnership between the LEA and its schools is healthy, despite current tensions arising from the review of school places.

19. The LEA is well represented on a range of cross-cutting partnerships and relationships with partners are good. Partners such as the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) are content that the right LEA officers are working with them at the right levels to enable both strategic decisions to be made and working practice developed to support 14-19 education. Similarly, Primary Care Trust partners value the LEA's contribution to joint project work including Sure Start and children's centres. This is helping to promote consistent provision for very young children in need and in public care.

20. However, although sound principles of partnership working have been established, much remains to be done. The framework within which partnerships are set is embryonic. For example, although the DSP and Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership have identified the need to formalise their relationship in terms of common membership and information exchange, this is at an early stage. Within the local authority, partnership between directorates and services has yet to reach the stage of shared funding arrangements to maximise the use of resources.

Support for Early Years

21. Support for early years education is satisfactory. Plans are well linked to the primary strategy in the Education Development Plan (EDP) and are in line with corporate priorities. They reflect the LEA's commitment to develop further joint work with health and social care agencies. Increasingly well-informed elected members provide challenge and support for early years through their active promotion of Dorset in national initiatives. Work with partners is improving the quality and coherence of support for early years. Ofsted inspection evidence indicates that standards achieved in reception classes are above those in similar authorities.

22. The broad membership of the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP) helps to ensure strong links with other providers and agencies. The LEA's officers keep the EYDCP well informed. The EYDCP has achieved its targets for funded education places for three- and four-year-olds and its strategic goals are aligned to national initiatives including Sure Start, neighbourhood nurseries and extended schools, although provision is still uneven. Projects such as Sure Start in Weymouth are building on a local history of good service-level links across sectors with health and social services.

23. Recent appointments and the restructuring of the Early Years team are resulting in better support for special needs, literacy and numeracy and small schools. Officers have developed new ways of working to improve communications and enhance the LEA's knowledge of all nursery education settings, including the voluntary sector. This includes the establishment of a cross-sector early years forum. New cross-sector quality review arrangements allow the LEA to target resources closely to settings with the greatest need. Training for use of the Foundation Stage Profile is underway, but the use of profiles is not yet fully developed for children entering Key Stage 1 from non-maintained settings.

Support for 14-19 education

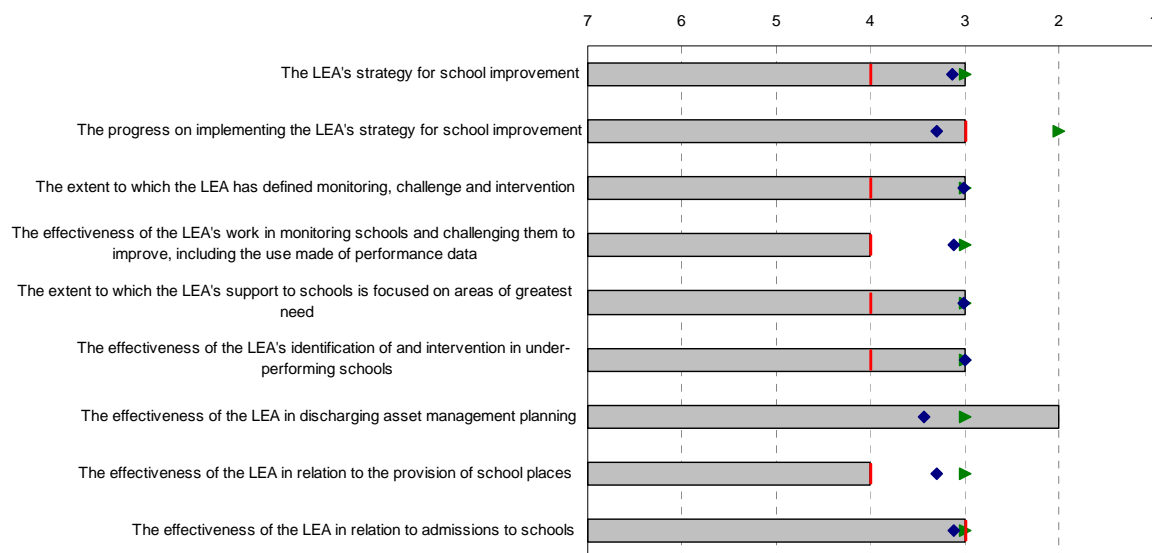
24. This is highly satisfactory. In consultation with its partners, the LEA has developed an ambitious strategy which focuses on the needs of learners. Central to this ambition is the commitment of the LEA and its partners to meet learners' entitlement to access academic, vocational and work-based learning at all levels, together with enrichment activities and guidance, all within a reasonable travelling distance.

25. The LEA has secured the confidence of its partners and working relationships are good. Together with good leadership from well-informed officers, partnership work is a strength of the LEA's support for 14-19 education. Schools value the transparency and purposefulness of the steering group. In addition to securing consensus on the overall strategy, some early benefits have been achieved. A protocol for the exchange of data has been agreed with the local LSC and schools. Data are being used to greater effect to review performance, challenge the range of provision and target funding. Partnership with colleges has improved opportunities for increased flexibility at Key Stage 4 as well as additional vocational provision for post-16 students. This has benefited from collaborative use of LSC funding with Bournemouth and Poole LEAs.

26. The 14-19 strategy is well aligned with the LEA's strategy for school improvement and the joint review of schools by the advisory service now includes 14-19 education. The LEA recognises that the provision of a more appropriate curriculum is essential to raising attainment, particularly at post-16. Although performance at AS/A level is in line with national averages, this represents a decline from General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), which is above the national average. Given the recent implementation of much of the strategy, there are few outcomes to evaluate. Procedures for monitoring the implementation of the strategy are clear.

Section 2: Strategy for education and its implementation

Summary table of judgements



The bar represents the grade awarded to the LEA, the triangle represents the LEA's self-evaluation grade, the vertical line represents the LEA's previous grade and the diamond represents the average grade of all LEAs inspected in the last year. 1 = Very Good, 2 = Good, 3 = Highly Satisfactory, 4 = Satisfactory, 5 = Unsatisfactory, 6 = Poor, 7 = Very Poor.

The strategy for school improvement and its implementation

27. The LEA's strategy for school improvement is highly satisfactory, as is the implementation of the strategy. The LEA's focus on school improvement is unambiguous. The EDP clearly reflects local and national needs and commands strong support from schools. There are many good outcomes for pupils. Attainment is above the national average and in line with that in similar authorities at all key stages, with the exception of English and mathematics at Key Stage 2, which are in line with both comparators. Attendance is high and the rate of exclusions is low. Moreover, school improvement is increasingly linked to other work of the LEA. For example, targets to improve pupils' attainment are incorporated into design and building specifications for new schools. Asset management planning is now good.

28. The LEA's performance against its targets is mixed. The 2003 targets at Key Stage 3 were met. The gap between GCSE targets and performance was narrow, but performance at Key Stage 2 was significantly adrift from the targets. The LEA's 2004 targets are better aligned with schools' aggregated targets, partly as a result of better data. The targets at Key Stage 3 and GCSE are realistic, but those at Key Stage 2 are unlikely to be met, despite well-targeted additional support from the LEA.

29. The LEA is making good use of resources to bring about improvement. It is unequivocal about targeting support at greatest need. It is, for example, making good use of

LPSA funding to raise attainment, especially through its focus on the performance of middle schools at Key Stage 2. The LEA has already improved GCSE results through targeting its support at underperforming departments. Support for early years education and the policy for 14-19 education are benefiting from resources, including expertise, through collaboration with a range of partners.

30. The LEA has improved the quality of its action plans in response to the recommendation in the previous report. However, there is room for further improvement. Success criteria are often too imprecise and there is a lack of clarity and some inconsistency in relation to monitoring and evaluation. This results in too great a variation in the quality of monitoring and more especially in the evaluation of outcomes. Insufficient use is made of quantifiable outcomes and qualitative evaluation is often too general and insufficiently focused on outcomes for pupils.

31. However, there have been improvements since the previous inspection. The review cycle is adhered to and includes clear financial tracking. Better use is made of performance indicators and elected members are well informed. A determined effort has been made to base planning on the review of activities and other performance indicators.

The LEA's monitoring, challenge and intervention in schools and the targeting of support

32. The LEA has improved these aspects of its work and this has resulted in a reduction in the number of schools with significant weaknesses. The LEA's definitions for monitoring, challenge, and intervention are clear. The principles of the Code of Practice for LEA-school relations are applied well and support is focused on areas of greatest need on the basis of clear criteria. These functions are highly satisfactory. The LEA's monitoring of schools and challenging them to improve remain satisfactory. The quality of data has improved, fulfilling recommendations from the previous report, but both the data and the use of data are not yet sufficiently robust to ensure rigorous challenge.

33. The LEA has a good knowledge of the standards of leadership and teaching in its schools. The annual review now forms the main basis for the LEA's monitoring of schools. The review process has a number of strengths, including the range of the school's work it encompasses. The reports which headteachers and governors subsequently receive are comprehensive and actions to secure further improvement are identified clearly. However, although the LEA prioritises the visits it makes, the timing of some reviews is too late in the academic year to influence schools' priorities. In addition, the review does not always make use of pupil-level data to challenge schools. The engagement of chairs of governors at the initial stage of the review process is inconsistent.

34. The LEA's clear commitment to improve its monitoring and challenge underpinned its restructuring of the school advisory and inspection service in 2002. It aimed to distinguish the monitoring and challenge functions of review inspectors from the supporting roles of link advisers. This has not been entirely successful. The distinct roles are not clear to all schools and the detailed knowledge that link advisers have of their schools is not used consistently as part of the review process undertaken by inspectors.

35. The expertise of link advisers and consultants is, rightly, highly valued by schools. They co-ordinate the support well. Advisers and schools are clear about whether support is part of an entitlement or is to be purchased. Their notes of visits identify strengths and weaknesses and the basis for action.

36. The LEA's provision of performance data for schools is now satisfactory, although officers have rightly identified scope for further improvement. The electronic transfer of information is largely successful and actions to improve systems are in hand. Schools receive guidance on target setting and officers monitor the targets set by each school. However, the guidance is of limited use because the indicative target range is too broad and advisers do not always have a timely opportunity to use the full range of pupil-level data in challenging the target-setting process, especially in successful schools.

Recommendations

- Ensure that the review process draws sufficiently on link advisers' knowledge of their schools.
- Challenge schools more rigorously by systematic and detailed use of pupil-level data, including its use in target setting.

Effectiveness of the LEA's identification of, and intervention in, underperforming schools

37. Support for underperforming schools has improved and is now highly satisfactory. The LEA's focused activities have enabled these schools to address weaknesses efficiently and sustain improvement once support is withdrawn. Consequently, the number of schools on the LEA's list of those causing concern is reducing. In the last year no school has been identified by Ofsted as requiring special measures. At the time of the inspection one special school was removed from Ofsted's category of serious weaknesses, leaving one primary school with serious weaknesses and one middle school judged to be underperforming. Senior officers monitor the progress of these schools rigorously and elected members are kept well informed. Officers take appropriate action to direct resources where they are most needed. Through joint action planning and co-ordination of support the link adviser, consultants and the school focus on what matters, such as weaknesses in leadership or in specific subject areas. School action plans specify clearly how the LEA support will be reduced and how the schools will be helped to maintain improvement. However, the evaluation of the support provided is not sufficiently sharp to inform future actions.

38. The LEA has devised good strategies to identify and tackle common weaknesses across a group of schools. It has established a programme to support several middle schools and address underperformance at Key Stage 2. Support for leadership, the sharing of good practice through Beacon schools and advanced skills teachers are improving the quality of teaching and learning, but have yet to make a difference to results at Key Stage 2. In secondary schools, the LEA's work has contributed to improved results. Targeted work in underperforming departments resulted in improved GCSE results in 10 of the 15 schools involved.

Asset management planning

39. The LEA's approach to asset management planning is good. Data on condition and suitability of buildings are comprehensive, up to date and clearly identify priorities for investment. Schools appreciate the way in which they are consulted on setting priorities. There is an awareness of the need to link planning to school improvement and, as a result, attainment targets for pupils are now cited as an outcome in design and building specifications.

40. The asset management plan (AMP) is closely linked to other plans. Plans have been judged externally to be of good quality. The LEA has ambitious, but realistic, plans for the long-term modernisation of school buildings, together with a sound knowledge of external and internal funding sources. A pragmatic, but innovative, approach is in place to develop procurement options through a joint venture partnership. The LEA has already had some success in developing Public Finance Initiative schemes.

41. The council has demonstrated a corporate commitment to improving school buildings and reducing the backlog of repairs. For example, the corporate AMP lists improvements to school buildings as top priority; specific targets have been set and additional funding has been found. This has helped to reduce the backlog of urgent repairs.

42. The LEA works well with schools through the buildings maintenance scheme, to which most schools subscribe, to secure a comprehensive knowledge of how schools use delegated resources. It also works well with schools to monitor and challenge their use of schools' capital budgets in order to obtain value for money. The LEA has responded appropriately to concerns expressed by schools over some aspects of project management.

Providing school places

43. School place planning continues to be satisfactory, despite concerns on the part of some schools about the direction of future policy. Since the previous inspection, the LEA has made significant progress in a number of areas of the county.

44. The LEA has not been afraid to take unpopular and difficult decisions in order to tackle the growing number of surplus places. Several separate infant and junior schools have been successfully amalgamated. Reorganisation has been carried out, or is close to completion, in Weymouth, Shaftesbury and Blandford. This pragmatic and incremental approach to school place planning has paid dividends: the level of surplus places is not excessive at 11% in the primary sector and 5.5% in the secondary sector and will reduce further, once agreed proposals are implemented.

45. The LEA's mixed pattern of provision, based on a three-tier system covering around 40% of the county, and a two-tier system in the rest, has not been a matter of particular concern in the authority until relatively recently. The LEA's data on pupil performance demonstrate that pupils are not disadvantaged by either system and the school organisation plan is clear that it is not currently the LEA's policy to move to a single system across the county. However, neighbouring LEAs have already moved, or are poised to move, from the three-tier to the two-tier system and the two most recent area reorganisations in Dorset have resulted in proposals to that effect. Schools, particularly middle schools, are concerned that

the three-tier system is being dismantled piecemeal. Moreover, uncertainty over the pattern of school provision is impeding planning for other critical developments, such as the renewal of the school building stock. Rightly, the LEA now proposes to clarify its vision for future provision in the widest sense, including the organisation of school places.

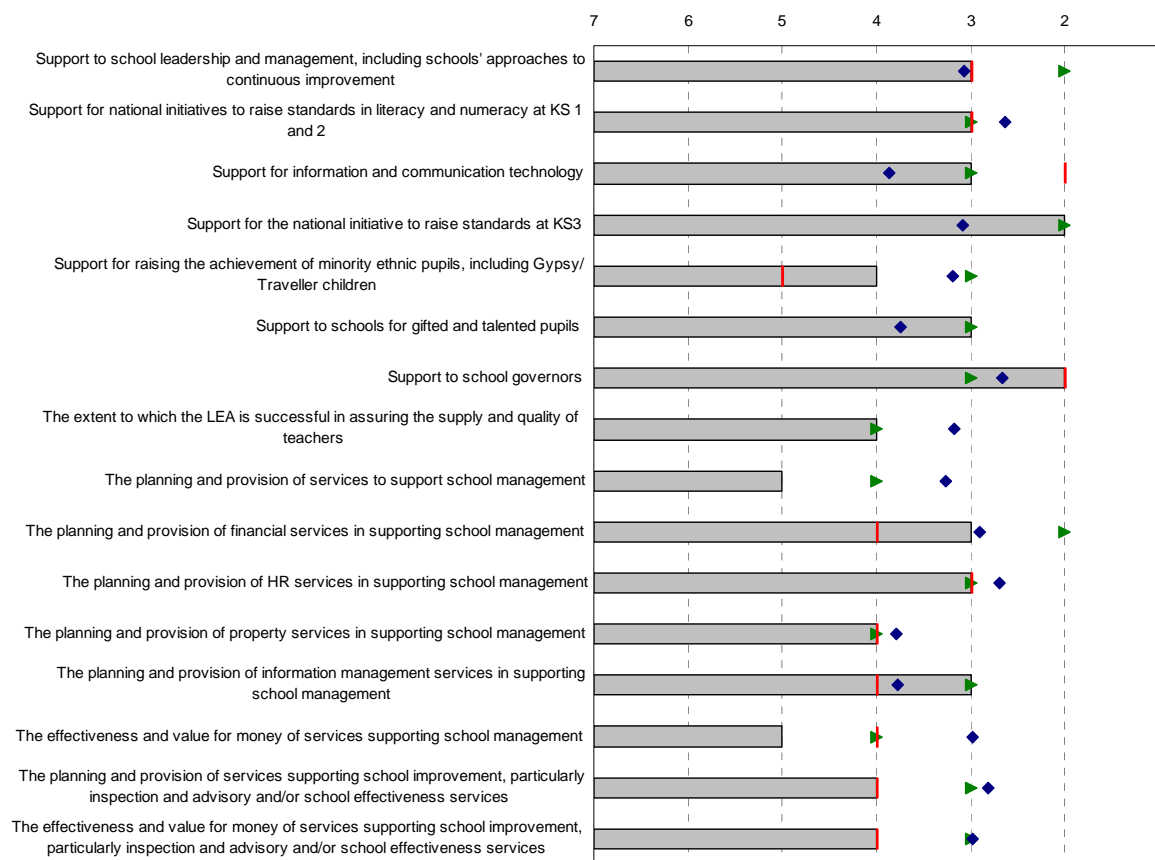
46. The School Organisation Committee functions effectively and operates with appropriate independence. A helpful protocol on school organisation explains the processes to those who might be affected. The forecasting of pupil numbers is based on a sound methodology and is generally accurate. However, the school organisation plan, despite its clear format and improved coverage, is too general in its conclusions and does not contain a sufficiently clear exposition of the LEA's priorities for school organisation.

Recommendation

- Clarify the strategy for the provision of school places, including the criteria against which changes in the structure of school provision will be determined.

Section 3: Support to improve education in schools

Summary table of judgements



The bar represents the grade awarded to the LEA, the triangle represents the LEA's self-evaluation grade, the vertical line represents the LEA's previous grade and the diamond represents the average grade of all LEAs inspected in the last year. 1 = Very Good, 2 = Good, 3 = Highly Satisfactory, 4 = Satisfactory, 5 = Unsatisfactory, 6 = Poor, 7 = Very Poor.

Support for school leadership, management and continuous improvement

47. Support for leadership, management and continuous improvement in schools is highly satisfactory as a whole. The LEA has developed a good range of provision to support school leadership which reflects its strong commitment to self-managing schools. Support for Key Stage 3 and support for governors are good and other services to support leadership are at least satisfactory. The LEA's support has improved most where officers have a clear brief, sometimes provided by a strong national directive. The individual services supporting school management, including financial services, are all at least satisfactory. However, there are weaknesses in the LEA's approach to and specification of management services, including insufficient progress in implementing the recommendations from the previous inspection.

48. Officers provide sound advice and training for self-evaluation, which are valued by primary schools in particular. The LEA's support for leadership and management reflects the

wide range of needs of Dorset schools, including support for leadership of small rural primary schools and relevant projects for middle schools. For example, the LEA is making good use of consultant headteachers to increase leadership capacity in schools facing particular challenges. The LEA has been slow to develop a coherent approach to specialist schools. Nevertheless all but two schools now have specialist status.

49. As the previous report noted, the LEA has encouraged schools to work together in pyramid groupings. This is based on the firm belief of senior officers of the benefits of collaboration rather than competition as a way of promoting school autonomy. Pyramids vary in the extent to which schools work together. Some pyramids have been more innovative than others in sharing resources and expertise, and in managing aspects of their own support. Some variation in the development of pyramids is inevitable given their different starting positions and contexts, but other anomalies are more questionable, including funding allocations. At present the LEA does not monitor the work of the pyramids or their use of delegated funding sufficiently to ensure equitable provision for pupils, to identify and disseminate good practice or to judge value for money. The recommendation from the previous inspection that the LEA should undertake these activities has not been fully met.

50. The LEA fosters good networking across the county to disseminate good practice through newsletters, case-studies and the website. This works well for the national strategies and other curriculum development, but less well in the area of SEN. Consultants and advisers know where good practice lies. They monitor subject areas well and support is rightly targeted to developing the skills of middle managers, particularly where outcomes are too low. Communication between the LEA and school leaders is productive, although some newly-appointed headteachers report insufficient support and limited induction.

Recommendation

- Evaluate the impact on provision and pupils' achievement of the work of groups of schools and use the outcomes to inform the LEA's monitoring, support and assessment of value for money.

Support for the national initiatives at Key Stages 1 and 2

51. The quality of support for literacy has been maintained and is highly satisfactory. Support for numeracy is much improved and is also highly satisfactory. Leadership is stronger than at the time of the previous inspection and there is a better match between consultants' expertise and the needs of schools. The recently-published primary strategy is coherent and activities are well co-ordinated. Schools value consultants' high level of commitment and expertise.

52. Progress in all schools is monitored closely. Better data are used more effectively to target work in schools. Primary consultants know schools well and work closely with link advisers to ensure that support is matched to needs. Improvement strategies focus rightly on teaching and learning and on raising standards in weaker skills, such as writing. The middle schools project to raise standards at Key Stage 2 is a good example of well-targeted support. This also makes good use of additional LPSA funding. Similarly, the LEA's targeted support for boys' writing at Key Stage 2 is based on its identification of continuing weaknesses. The

LEA uses expert teachers well and national materials are suitably adapted to fit the Dorset context. A range of networks has been established to share good practice with all schools. A weaker area is the tracking and analysis of the progress of some individual and groups of children, including those with special educational needs.

53. The LEA has a good record of improvement where it targets support, with a significant proportion of schools having improved at a faster rate than expected. At Key Stage 2 half of the middle schools targeted through the LPSA project improved in English and over half in mathematics, including improvement at the higher rates of attainment at Level 5 and above. The impact of activities is apparent at Key Stage 1 with a steady rise in overall results and an increase of seven percentage points in writing at Level 2 between 2001 and 2003. At Key Stage 2 standards in mathematics have risen from below average in 2002 to being in line with the national figure in 2003.

Support for information and communication technology (ICT)

54. Support for information and communication technology (ICT) is highly satisfactory. Previously good, the LEA has maintained its strengths but has not yet achieved the higher expectations now required for support to be judged good. A recent review of its strategy produced a good audit of strengths and weaknesses of the LEA's provision and it has resulted in a clear action plan and some restructuring to improve the focus of support. Schools continue to benefit from the ICT team's good links with subject networks at local, regional and national levels, including the South West Grid for Learning.

55. Planning for ICT support is good and rightly focuses on raising standards in schools. Good deployment ensures that the ICT team works closely with advisers and consultants in the primary and Key Stage 3 teams to raise standards in ICT and improve its use across the curriculum. This includes joint training and consistent support for schools causing concern. Detailed records of progress are maintained and school inspection reports are monitored. The work of the team is well informed by its analysis of the strengths and weaknesses in schools. It has resulted, for example, in the current foci on increasing the proportion of pupils who attain a nationally accredited award at GCSE and addressing the wide variation in the performance of schools. Similarly, the team has identified variations in the use of ICT in primary schools and has planned accordingly. This includes increasing the capacity of the team to provide more training for teachers and manage targeted projects based on local pyramids to support rural schools. Advisers and consultants actively encourage schools to share good practice, including use of the LEA's website.

56. The LEA is not yet making sufficient use of data to challenge schools. For example, although data are analysed at both Key Stage 3 and GCSE, there is no comparison of performance at individual pupil level to assess progress.

Support for the national initiative at Key Stage 3

57. The LEA provides good support at Key Stage 3. The strategy is very well led. Schools value the way in which national guidance is matched to the needs of individual schools. Activities are set out clearly in the EDP, with actions targeted well to improve weaker aspects, such as standards in writing. Progress against the action plans is monitored

rigorously and evaluation is increasingly analytical. Consultants and leading teachers are highly valued by schools. They provide sensitive, challenging and flexible support and produce notes of visits which identify clearly strengths, weaknesses and key points for action. Intervention in schools with particular weaknesses is effective. For example, English results show significant improvement in eight out of the ten schools supported. Although recent, the high quality of the work of the behaviour and attendance consultants is already recognised by schools. Links with the LEA behaviour service are at an early stage of development.

58. Transfer of data and other information from primary schools is improving, but electronic transfer is not yet fully reliable. Pupils' performance is tracked and optional tests are used to monitor progress of individual pupils as well as groups, such as progress of boys and achievement of minority ethnic pupils. The rate of improvement from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 is above average. While results in science were static in 2003, pupils' performance in English and mathematics improved and targets for 2004 and 2005 are on course to be met.

59. The sharing of good practice is very good. Regular network meetings and good quality training courses are highly valued by Key Stage 3 managers in schools. Advisers and consultants have developed good links with the primary strategy team.

Support for raising the achievement of minority ethnic pupils, including Gypsy and Traveller children

60. Support for raising the achievement of minority ethnic pupils, including Gypsy and Traveller children, has improved and is now satisfactory. Wisely, both the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant and the Vulnerable Children Grant are retained centrally given the very small numbers of pupils and their wide distribution over the county.

61. The focus of support for minority ethnic and Traveller children is clearly set out within the EDP. Both services have good links with the national strategies for literacy and numeracy and are contributing increasingly to education for diversity.

62. Currently 150 pupils, mainly of Bangladeshi heritage, require support in English as an additional language. The recommendation from the previous report has been addressed and the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) now collects data and monitors the progress of pupils on a termly basis. This information is used to inform the work of the service. The EMAS plan records worthwhile activities to be undertaken but lacks precise success criteria and rigorous targets to measure its effectiveness.

63. The attendance of Traveller children in primary schools is in line with that of statistical neighbours and exclusions are very low. Transfer of Traveller children to Key Stage 3 is encouragingly high but difficulty in sustaining good attendance persists. The Traveller Education Service Strategy Plan is sound.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

64. Support for gifted and talented pupils is highly satisfactory. It has benefited from the focus provided by a new co-ordinator and a steering group. The majority of schools now

have a policy, and the EDP includes a good range of strategies to support pupils and schools. Advisers monitor provision as part of the annual review process for schools. Pupils' performance at higher levels in National Curriculum assessments and at GCSE has improved since 2001, but remains broadly in line with the national averages and those in similar authorities.

65. Good practice is disseminated effectively through a range of meetings and the use of the website. The co-ordinator has developed useful networks with national organisations to provide guidance on the identification of gifted pupils in early years. There is a good range of projects to meet the needs of gifted pupils including activities funded through the Leadership Incentive Grant, projects managed by advanced skills teachers, and work with Bournemouth University to widen participation in higher education. Although still satisfactory and encompassing sport and creative arts, opportunities for talented pupils are more limited. A research project with Brunel University and the Department for Education and Skills is in place to explore provision for gifted pupils in isolated rural communities.

66. Summer schools are successful and the progress of pupils attending these is monitored. Parents receive good advice on the particular needs and welfare of gifted children with prompt guidance on provision in or outside school. In 2003, few pupils attended the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth, but numbers for 2004 have increased. Relevant training courses for staff are organised with neighbouring LEAs. Advanced skills teachers, funded by the LEA, are deployed to support schools where provision needs improvement. Governors receive regular and helpful information in their journal.

Support for school governors

67. Despite changes in staffing, support for governors remains good because of the high levels of expertise and dedication of officers. The LEA responded positively to the recommendation of the previous report and measures to recruit governor representatives from minority ethnic groups and the local community are in place.

68. The inspection of support for governors focused on the effectiveness of the service following its restructuring. The service is working well. Officers provide good information to governors. Briefings and training are highly valued and governors receive prompt advice when particular help is needed. The service considers the needs of small rural schools carefully.

Services to support school management

69. The LEA has made very little progress in implementing recommendations made at the previous inspection to provide schools with information on core services which it provides, service standards and alternative providers. As a result, the LEA's overall planning, provision, effectiveness and value for money of management services are unsatisfactory, despite a generally positive verdict from schools on the performance of the individual services.

70. There continues to be a lack of clarity about what schools can expect from the LEA as core support, whether or not they purchase LEA services. The specification of service

standards often lacks sufficient detail and, although there are brief descriptions in the service brochure, these are unsupported by more specific service level agreements. Monitoring of service quality is inconsistent, often relying on anecdotal and *ad hoc* evidence. There is no systematic reporting of performance information on service standards to either purchasers or elected members.

71. Despite all this, services on the ground are generally effective. Schools, for the most part, report that services are customer-oriented and demonstrate a positive attitude to improvement. Of the seven management services evaluated by schools in the school survey, the LEA stands in the top quartile in respect of three of them. All are rated above the average for all LEAs and all are satisfactory or better. Most have been subject to a Best Value review in the last four years. These reviews have involved comparisons of cost and performance and there have been improvements in service delivery as a result.

72. Action to develop the brokerage role of the LEA has had, as yet, limited effect. A corporate procurement unit, established for around eighteen months, provides sound support on the procurement of some contracts in areas such as catering and cleaning. To encourage schools to become discerning purchasers, a useful procurement guide for schools is being developed but this is still in draft form.

73. Financial services have improved and are highly satisfactory. This is reflected in an improved verdict from schools compared with that at the previous inspection. The quality of advice from finance officers is appreciated by schools. Helpful benchmarking information is available, individually tailored to a school's particular circumstances, although not all schools are aware of this potential assistance. Financial information for budget making is timely and well supported by 'budget calculator' software to enable schools to plan more effectively. Routine financial information for budget monitoring is less satisfactory, particularly in the secondary sector, and there is no automatic reconciliation of accounts.

Recommendation

- Improve the specification of service standards and arrangements for monitoring and reporting on service quality.

Services to support school improvement

74. The overall planning and provision of these services are satisfactory, as is the value for money they provide. The comparative costs of services are less than those of similar LEAs.

75. For the most part, the advisory service is well structured to meet the needs of schools and the LEA has made good use of Best Value reviews to improve the quality of delivery and inform service planning, as in the case of the recent review of ICT support. The work of the primary, Key Stage 3 and secondary teams is complementary and coherent. Schools have confidence in the quality of inspectors, advisers and consultants. The LEA has appointed staff with relevant expertise and experience. Training and induction is given high priority. The LEA draws on additional expertise to strengthen the advisory service as required, including the use of headteachers to act as mentors for colleagues or to support schools in

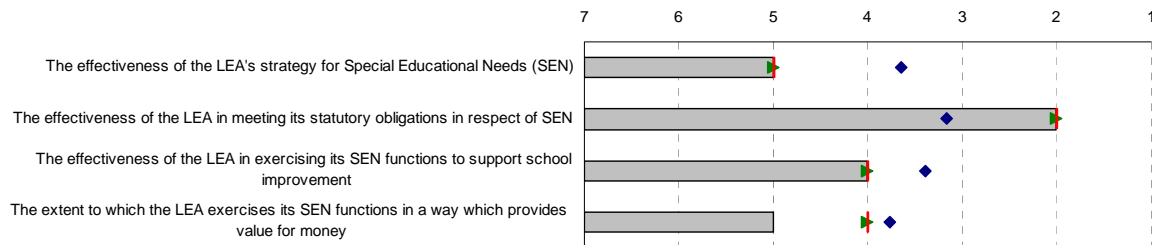
challenging circumstances. The expertise of staff in the educational psychology service and the education welfare service meets the needs of schools.

76. The advisory service was restructured in 2002 to enable it to fulfil its work in supporting and challenging schools more effectively. Respective roles for inspectors and advisers have been identified, although inspection evidence indicates that the restructuring has not been as helpful for schools as was anticipated and it does not always make best use of expertise.

77. Review cycles and procedures for performance management are adhered to. Performance management is satisfactory. The LEA is making increasing use of the National Standards for School Improvement Professionals, but there are some inconsistencies in the quality of individuals' contributions to the targets in the EDP and to corporate aims.

Section 4: Support for special educational needs (SEN)

Summary table of judgements



The bar represents the grade awarded to the LEA, the triangle represents the LEA's self-evaluation grade, the vertical line represents the LEA's previous grade and the diamond represents the average grade of all LEAs inspected in the last year. 1 = Very Good, 2 = Good, 3 = Highly Satisfactory, 4 = Satisfactory, 5 = Unsatisfactory, 6 = Poor, 7 = Very Poor.

The strategy for SEN

78. The LEA's strategy for SEN remains unsatisfactory. The LEA has not been inactive and has sought external advice, but staffing difficulties in key posts have contributed to insufficient progress. Major recommendations from the previous inspection concerning strategy and funding are still outstanding. As a result, the LEA has not been able to rationalise its high level of spending on SEN and ensure value for money. However, elected members are giving close attention to monitoring progress and the LEA is now close to resolving its staffing arrangements.

79. The vision and principles for the inclusion of pupils with SEN are established. The LEA has undertaken extensive consultation with schools, parents and central services to reach a clear consensus over the direction of the strategy. The critical weakness now is the lack of a convincing action plan for the reorganisation of special needs provision which aligns spending with the LEA's principles of inclusion and sets precise deadlines for actions. The future role of special schools has yet to be defined, including how they will support outreach into mainstream schools and reduce the LEA's dependency on a high number of expensive out-of-county placements.

80. There are strengths in some aspects of the LEA's support for SEN, not least its continued high performance in meeting statutory obligations. The quality of the special needs support service and of aspects of the education psychology service is valued by schools. The disability action plan clearly sets out measures being taken to improve access for pupils with a variety of needs. Support is strong where systems and services are well established and adequately staffed. In addition, activities to promote the inclusion and progress of pupils with SEN are an integral part of the EDP.

81. Strategic weaknesses are, however, compounded by some fundamental shortcomings in monitoring the use of resources and evaluating the effectiveness of provision. The LEA does not have adequate systems to ensure that the resources it controls centrally and those delegated to schools provide value for money.

Recommendation

- As a matter of urgency, finalise a robust action plan based on the agreed principles for provision for pupils with SEN.

Statutory obligations

82. The LEA's fulfilment of its statutory obligations in the provision for pupils with SEN remains good. The inspection focused on the quality of the statements and their rate of production. The quality of statements and case files continues to be good, as is the rate of production of new and reviewed statements. Good relationships with parents, schools and other agencies contribute to the effectiveness of procedures. As a result, there are few appeals.

SEN functions to support school improvement

83. This remains satisfactory. Most of the LEA's services provide satisfactory support to schools and some, including the SEN support service, do this well. However, there are weaknesses in behaviour support and the LEA does not yet provide adequate challenge to schools over their provision for SEN.

84. Good training is available to meet the needs of schools, including courses for special educational needs co-ordinators, support assistants and governors provided by the SEN support service. Specialist support for behaviour, communication difficulties and early years within the education psychology service is deployed well. In contrast, the behaviour support service has been too small to be fully effective and is poorly regarded by schools.

85. Monitoring by the LEA of the provision which schools make for SEN is recent and it lacks sufficient rigour. An audit of SEN provision made by mainstream schools is now part of the school's annual review process, but this does not extend to challenging schools over the cost, nature and effectiveness of school provision for SEN at individual pupil level. It does not consider whether the school's actions are consistent with the LEA's emphasis on early intervention and prevention. Similarly, the LEA is not monitoring the different ways in which support for SEN is developing in pyramids of schools, either with a view to evaluating innovative practice or ensuring pupils' entitlement across the county.

Value for money

86. Value for money for SEN has deteriorated and is now unsatisfactory. Delays in finalising the SEN strategy have reduced the LEA's capacity to control spending and there are weaknesses in the monitoring of funding.

87. Expenditure on SEN is above that in similar authorities. The cost of statutory provision is relatively high, with maintained special schools and out-of-county provision together accounting for a large share of the budget. Despite recommendations made in the previous inspection, the LEA has been slow to develop a rigorous action plan to align spending with its priorities for inclusion. Its out-of-county spending, already high, has increased. Moreover, the LEA cannot measure the value for money of its high spending on

SEN. This is because it has not yet fully benchmarked the educational attainment of SEN pupils attending mainstream and special schools against the performance of statistical neighbours. Without this information, it is not possible to determine whether the relatively high spending is matched by additional educational value.

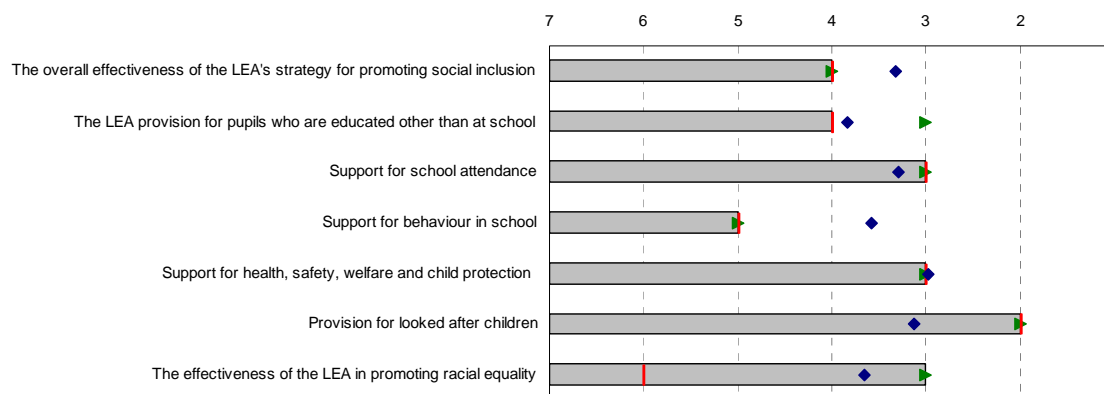
88. SEN funding is delegated to schools on the basis of a sound analysis of needs. Plans to improve the targeting of funds through the use of proxy indicators are being developed, but are not sufficiently clear to convince schools of the benefits. Further weaknesses lie in the lack of systematic monitoring by the LEA of schools' use of this funding and the evaluation of its impact on pupils' attainment and the quality of provision. These weaknesses also undermine the LEA's capacity to demonstrate value for money.

Recommendations

- Monitor rigorously and evaluate with schools and groups of schools the use they make of delegated resources for SEN.
- Develop means of benchmarking the educational attainment of pupils to determine value for money.
- Ensure that mainstream schools understand revised LEA arrangements for delegated funds for SEN.

Section 5: Support for social inclusion

Summary table of judgements



The bar represents the grade awarded to the LEA, the triangle represents the LEA's self-evaluation grade, the vertical line represents the LEA's previous grade and the diamond represents the average grade of all LEAs inspected in the last year. 1 = Very Good, 2 = Good, 3 = Highly Satisfactory, 4 = Satisfactory, 5 = Unsatisfactory, 6 = Poor, 7 = Very Poor.

The strategy for social inclusion

89. The LEA's strategy for social inclusion is satisfactory. Dorset performs well by many measures. Ofsted inspections reveal that the ethos and climate in schools are good and rates of exclusion and attendance are better than those found nationally. Progress has been made in shaping the principles for inclusion, the quality of some services and the extent of joint working. At a strategic level, planning to integrate support for social inclusion is at an early stage. At service level, the picture is mixed. Some services are strong, with the needs of children met increasingly by joint action between services. In contrast, the LEA's support for behaviour remains unsatisfactory.

90. The vision for social inclusion has been established through the EDP, the recently approved community strategy and through the LEA's consultation document on social inclusion. The priorities for social inclusion have been identified. They properly reflect the significant issue of access in a rural county as well as pockets of deprivation and the needs of vulnerable children. However, the LEA's strategy for social inclusion is still in draft and there is no action plan to develop and co-ordinate school and service activities and thus draw together the LEA's work in this area. Activities to promote social inclusion are integrated into other key plans. It is given a high profile as a priority in the EDP, with appropriate, if unco-ordinated, activities. The children's services plan sets out education's contribution to joint agency work with vulnerable groups and the Sure Start programme is targeting some of Dorset's most needy children at an early age. The strategy for 14-19 education rightly emphasises entitlement for all pupils and students.

91. Developing the strategy and practice for social inclusion has challenged some traditional ways of working. Officers at all levels talk about 'breaking out of silos', increasing the understanding of different services of each other's work and how best to make

provision for children more coherent. The LEA's inclusion strategy group has made some progress in this regard although much still remains to be done, including the development of an action plan.

92. All except one of the services to support social inclusion are at least satisfactory. Provision for looked after children is good and the LEA's support for combating racism has improved significantly since the previous inspection. Preventive work, such as that provided by the education psychology service, is growing. Services perform well in those areas where officers are focused on clear targets for improvement. In the more complex area of support for behaviour, the LEA has made insufficient progress and support is poorly regarded by schools. In addition, the monitoring of the progress and attainment of vulnerable pupils and the evaluation of the effectiveness of provision are underdeveloped.

Recommendation

- Finalise an action plan to ensure that the strategy for social inclusion is implemented and activities are co-ordinated

Provision for pupils educated other than at school

93. Provision for pupils educated other than at school remains satisfactory. Belatedly, the LEA has now secured 25 hours of tuition for all pupils requiring education out of school through its pupil referral units (PRUs). A recent reorganisation has the potential to improve provision. It is not yet fully tested but, significantly, it has the support of schools. Separate services have been brought together to form the children out of school service (COOSS) and representatives of schools, services and elected members serve on its advisory panel. The COOSS is a good example of the partnerships that the LEA is building in order to improve the coherence of its services to support children and promote inclusion. In addition, the creation of learning zones as part of the restructuring is a sensible approach to providing local solutions to the individual learning requirements of pupils in a rural LEA.

94. Dorset has exclusion rates which are lower than the national average in both its primary and secondary schools. It is also among the top 10% of LEAs which reintegrate pupils who have been receiving alternative provision. Pupils have a personal education plan, although the setting of targets and evaluation of progress are not yet consistent. Moreover, the LEA does not have a service database capable of tracking the personal and educational progress of pupils. Provision for the low number of pregnant schoolgirls and teenage mothers is managed sensibly, including the use of one-to-one programmes of educational support. Similarly, efforts are being made to introduce interactive distance learning for pupils with medical difficulties.

95. For pupils at risk of exclusion, a good range of educational opportunities exists for pupils at Key Stages 2, 3 and 4 involving alternative providers, colleges of further education and work experience. Dual registration to secure further joint commitment by schools and the service has yet to be introduced. Monitoring of the quality of external providers is good. This includes the use of carefully written specifications together with regular unannounced checks on working relationships and programmes of work with pupils.

Support for attendance

96. Support for school attendance continues to be highly satisfactory. Levels of attendance in both primary and secondary schools in Dorset are above the national average. The quality and use of data, although improved, are not yet good.

97. The LEA makes good use of both guidance and its statutory powers in supporting attendance. Guidance for parents and schools sets out clearly expectations, service roles and access to services and this is supplemented by training for schools. The LEA makes constructive use of supervision orders to meet statutory obligations, thereby limiting recourse to prosecution.

98. The LEA has improved its data collection, although the provision of data is not yet timely and systematic. Better data have enabled the work of the education welfare service to be targeted more accurately and speedily at schools with particular needs. The consequent changes in the workload of officers are monitored by senior staff. The result is a good balance between the competing demands of schools and casework with individual pupils and families. The LEA's support for attendance is improving as a result of targeted use of LPSA funding.

99. There are some strong operational partnerships with other education services and agencies such as the police, social services, the Connexions service and the Youth Offending Team which address the needs of vulnerable pupils and thus contribute to social inclusion.

Support for behaviour

100. Support for behaviour continues to be unsatisfactory for the reasons identified in the report of the previous inspection. Weaknesses remain in strategic planning and in the provision of support for mainstream schools. However, despite these weaknesses, rates of exclusion are below the national averages for primary and secondary schools.

101. Belatedly, the LEA has begun a comprehensive review of the behaviour support plan, involving officers, school representatives and other stakeholders. However, it is not yet complete. The absence of a clear strategic action plan for managing provision for pupils who show challenging behaviour limits the effectiveness of the support service.

102. The LEA's decision in 2001 to delegate to schools most of the modest financial resources for behaviour support significantly reduced the capacity of the service. It resulted in a service which was only able to operate reactively, shaped mainly by the pattern of school purchasing. Only recently has the situation improved, but the service has not yet resolved conflicting demands. The appointment of two additional teachers in September 2003 has now enabled the service to be proactive and undertake preventive work on whole-school behaviour management, working closely with education psychologists. There is also the potential for further improvement by establishing close working relationships with the newly-formed COOSS and links with the national behaviour improvement programme at Key Stage 3. This has not yet happened.

Recommendations

- As a matter of urgency, underpin the behaviour support plan with an action plan which has clear criteria for monitoring progress and evaluating success.
- Ensure that adequate resources are available to enable the service to engage in more proactive, preventive work with schools on behaviour management.

Support for health, safety, welfare and child protection

103. The LEA's support for health, safety, welfare and child protection has improved and is highly satisfactory. The recommendation from the previous inspection has been acted upon and the LEA now monitors training records to ensure that all schools have fully-trained staff.

104. Inspection fieldwork focused on child protection only. The LEA meets its statutory obligations in child protection. It contributes fully to the work of the Area Child Protection Committee and good literature describing the multi-agency policy and procedures has been circulated to all schools, nursery settings and PRUs.

105. The creation of a new post of child protection officer has improved the LEA's support for child protection. Support is now more coherent and consistent. Every school, education setting and service has a named designated child protection co-ordinator and a directory of their contact and training details is maintained and monitored. Staff from the LEA and school staff receive good multi-agency training with take-up close to 100%. Every school has a named governor. Good guidance on self-evaluation against defined standards has been issued to schools and education settings. This forms the basis of monitoring carried out by the child protection officer. Much of the LEA's support is now good, but there is a key weakness in contingency arrangements. The LEA has no system or named officer to act in reserve should the child protection officer be unavailable.

Recommendation

- Ensure that there is contingency support for child protection at all times.

Provision for looked after children

106. At the time of the previous inspection support for looked after children was good. It remains good and continues to provide good value for money. Good systems are in place, partnership work is strong and a dedicated officer post ensures that support is well managed.

107. A steering group consisting of senior officers and elected members provides good challenge and support for the lead officer. As a result, joint service planning, training and operational procedures at pupil level are good. Each school has a designated teacher. There is a clear focus on improving the attainment and attendance of looked after children and on reducing exclusions. Pupils' personal education plans are closely monitored. Mentoring is available, access to services is good and events are held to celebrate the achievements of individuals. Although the number of pupils is too small for data to be reliable, there is an

upward trend in the attainment of looked after children, which is in line with the national trend.

108. Protocols on the sharing of information between the education and social services directorates are in place. Steady progress is being made in achieving an operational database holding information from education, social services and health.

109. Elected members are properly briefed through an annual report to the education and social services joint committee. However, the strategic leadership of corporate parenthood by the council does not yet champion the rights of looked after children.

Promoting racial equality

110. There has been substantial improvement in this area. Previously poor, it is now highly satisfactory. Progress has been made because there was a clear focus for improvement, which officers tackled with determination. The successes already achieved and officers' ambitions and plans mean that there is good capacity for further improvement.

111. The council introduced a race equality policy in January 2002 to ensure that tackling discrimination and promoting race equality received due attention. A model race equality policy and action plan were made available to schools in time to meet the target date required by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act, along with procedures for collecting and analysing data on racist incidents. The LEA achieved an excellent level of return of reports by schools in 2002/03. The data were used well to follow up weak practice and ensure that action plans were in place. The council adopted the Commission for Racial Equality's standards with vigour. It has progressed rapidly from a rating of 0 in 2001 and is now working towards achieving Level 2.

112. A sound LEA strategy for race equality is now embedded in the EDP. Good training opportunities in education for diversity have been made available to schools, and officers have been vigilant in increasing the take-up of this training. Schools, Dorset Racial Equality Council, other public agencies and the voluntary sector are all involved in a review of the council's strategy and training programme. The council's commitment to further improvement has been demonstrated by its commissioning of a recent review of LEA and school practice by an independent consultant. This has resulted in good recommendations for further improvement. Religious pluralism is recognised and supported through the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education.

113. The council aims to reflect minority ethnic representation in the community in the number and seniority of posts in its workforce both corporately and in schools. Monitoring of the percentage of posts is in place.

Appendix A

Record of Judgement Recording Statements

Name of LEA :	Dorset Local Education Authority
LEA number:	835
Reporting Inspector:	Heather Richardson HMI
Date of Inspection:	May 2004

No	Required Inspection Judgement	Grade	Fieldwork*
Context of the LEA			
1	The socio-economic context of the LEA	3	
Overall judgements			
0.1	The progress made by the LEA overall	4	
0.2	Overall effectiveness of the LEA	4	
0.3	The LEA's capacity for further improvement and to address the recommendations of the inspection	4	
Section 1: Corporate strategy and LEA leadership			
1.1	The effectiveness of corporate planning for the education of children and young people	3	
1.2	The implementation of corporate planning for education	3	
1.3	The effectiveness of LEA decision-making	3	
1.4	The extent to which the LEA targets resources on priorities	4	
1.5	The extent to which the LEA has in place effective strategies to promote continuous improvement, including Best Value	4	
1.6	The leadership provided by elected members (including quality of advice)	3	
1.7	The quality of leadership provided by senior officers	3	

1.8	The effectiveness of partnerships and collaboration between agencies in support of priorities	3	
1.9	Support for Early Years education	4	
1.10	Support for 14 – 19 education	3	
Section 2: Strategy for education and its implementation			
2.1	The LEA's strategy for school improvement	3	
2.2	The progress on implementing the LEA's strategy for school improvement	3	
2.3	The performance of schools	3	
2.4	The extent to which the LEA has defined monitoring, challenge and intervention	3	
2.5	The effectiveness of the LEA's work in monitoring schools and challenging them to improve, including the use made of performance data	4	
2.6	The extent to which the LEA's support to schools is focused on areas of greatest need	3	
2.7	The effectiveness of the LEA's identification of and intervention in underperforming schools	3	
2.8	The effectiveness of the LEA in discharging asset management planning	2	
2.9	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to the provision of school places	4	
2.10	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to admissions to schools	3	NF
Section 3: Support to school leadership and management, including schools' efforts to support continuous improvement			
3.1	Support to school leadership and management, including support for schools' approaches to continuous improvement	3	
3.2	Support for national initiatives to raise standards in literacy and numeracy at KS 1 and 2	3	

3.3	Support for information and communication technology	3	
3.4	Support for the national initiative to raise standards at KS3	2	
3.5	Support for raising the achievement of minority ethnic pupils, including Gypsy/ Traveller children	4	
3.6	Support to schools for gifted and talented pupils	3	
3.7	Support for school governors	2	
3.8	The extent to which the LEA is successful in assuring the supply and quality of teachers	4	NF
3.9	The planning and provision of services to support school management	5	
3.9a	The planning and provision of financial services in supporting school management	3	
3.9b	The planning and provision of HR services in supporting school management	3	NF
3.9c	The planning and provision of property services in supporting school management	4	NF
3.9d	The planning and provision of information management services in supporting school management	3	NF
3.10	The effectiveness and value for money of services supporting school management	5	
3.11	The planning and provision of services supporting school improvement, particularly inspection and advisory and/or school effectiveness services	4	
3.12	The effectiveness and value for money of services supporting school improvement, particularly inspection and advisory and/or school effectiveness services	4	
Section 4: Support for special educational needs			
4.1	The effectiveness of the LEA's strategy for special educational needs	5	
4.2	The effectiveness of the LEA in meeting its statutory obligations in respect of SEN	2	

4.3	The effectiveness of the LEA in exercising its SEN functions to support school improvement	4	
4.4	The extent to which the LEA exercises its SEN functions in a way which provides value for money	5	
Section 5: Support for social inclusion			
5.1	The overall effectiveness of the LEA's strategy for promoting social inclusion	4	
5.2	The LEA provision for pupils who have no school place	4	
5.3	Support for school attendance	3	
5.4	Support for behaviour in schools	5	
5.5	Support for health, safety, welfare and child protection	3	
5.6	Provision for looked after children	2	
5.7	The effectiveness of the LEA in promoting racial equality	3	

**NF' under fieldwork means that no fieldwork was conducted on this function during this inspection.*

JRS numerical judgements are allocated on a 7-point scale:

Grade 1: Very good; Grade 2: Good; Grade 3: Highly satisfactory; Grade 4: Satisfactory;
Grade 5: Unsatisfactory; Grade 6: Poor; Grade 7: Very poor

[**Note:** in the case of JRS 1: socio-economic context of the LEA and JRS 2.3: performance of schools, grades relate to comparisons against national averages: Grades 1-2: Well above; Grade 3: Above; Grade 4: In line; Grade 5: Below; Grades 6-7: Well below]

Appendix B

Context of the inspection

This inspection of Dorset LEA was carried out by Ofsted in conjunction with the Audit Commission under section 38 of the Education Act 1997.

This report provides a commentary on the inspection findings, including:

- the progress the LEA has made since the time of its previous inspection in 2001;
- the overall effectiveness of the LEA and its capacity to improve further;
- the LEA's performance in major aspects of its work;
- recommendations on areas for improvement.

The summary is followed by more detailed judgements on the LEA's performance of its individual functions, which sets the recommendations for improvement into context.

All functions of the LEA have been inspected and judgements reached on how effectively they are performed. Not all functions were subject to detailed fieldwork, but in all cases inspectors reached their judgements through an evaluation of a range of material. This included self-evaluation undertaken by the LEA, data (some of which were provided by the LEA), school inspection information, HMI monitoring reports, and audit reports. In addition, the inspection team considered the earlier Ofsted/Audit Commission report on this LEA and a questionnaire seeking the views of all schools on aspects of the work of the LEA. In those areas subject to fieldwork, discussions were held with LEA officers and members, headteachers and governors, staff in other departments of the local authority, diocesan representatives, and other agencies and LEA partners.

The functions that were not subject to detailed fieldwork in this inspection were:

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the effectiveness of the LEA in relation to admissions to schools;• the extent to which the LEA is assuring the supply and quality of teachers;• the planning and provision of human resource services in supporting school management;• the planning and provision of property services in supporting school management; and• the planning and provision of information management services in supporting school management. |
|---|

Inspection judgements are made against criteria that can be found on the Ofsted website. For each inspected function of the LEA an inspection team agrees a numerical grade. The

numerical grades awarded for the judgements made in this inspection are to be found in Appendix A. These numerical grades must be considered in the light of the full report. Some of the grades are used in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment profile for the education service.

Context of the LEA

Dorset has not changed significantly since the inspection of 2001. It remains a predominantly rural county, but with 70% of the population living in towns. Its social and economic context is mixed. Unemployment is below the national average, but so are wage levels. House prices have risen significantly and are now 16% above the national average, which affects the recruitment of key workers. There are some pockets of deprivation in the County; significantly five of the County's wards are rated nationally as being among the 20% most deprived wards for child poverty.

Dorset's population of about 390,000 is one of the smallest for a county. The proportion of Dorset's population which is of school age remains lower than the national average and continues to fall. It is predicted that by 2011 Dorset's population of children under 15 will have fallen to 13.6% in comparison with 16.9% nationally. Currently there are 55,024 pupils in mainstream schools. Some restructuring of schools has taken place since the previous inspection, but the LEA continues to have both two- and three-tier patterns of schools with variable points of transfer for pupils. There are 10 infant schools, 59 first schools, 9 junior schools, 60 primary schools, 17 middle schools, 20 secondary schools, 6 special schools and 3 pupil referral units. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic communities is well below the national average.

The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals in primary and secondary schools is significantly below the national average. The percentage of pupils in primary and secondary schools with a statement of special educational needs is in line with national averages.

Since the previous inspection, a new council structure has been implemented. An executive cabinet of six members includes a portfolio member for education. The Education Overview and Policy Development Committee has oversight of education and there is a separate audit and scrutiny committee.

The performance of schools

Since the previous inspection the performance of pupils in Dorset's schools has been at least in line with that of similar LEAs and often above the national average. Rates of improvement have been variable.

Pupils' attainment on entry to school is broadly in line with the national average. In 2003, attainment at all key stages was above the national averages with the exception of English and mathematics at Key Stage 2, where it was in line. Attainment is generally in line with the average of similar authorities at all key stages. However, attainment in writing at Key Stage 1 and in most GCSE indicators is above that of similar authorities.

At Key Stage 1 the rate of improvement in writing is well above that found nationally and in

similar LEAs, despite a dip in performance in 2003, whereas that for reading is in line. The rate of improvement in mathematics is well above that of statistical neighbours but below the national rate. Although the rate of improvement at Key Stage 2 is in line with the national rate, it is below that of similar authorities in all subjects. At Key Stage 3 rates of improvement are in line with national and similar authorities' rates, apart from English which is above that of similar authorities. At GCSE, the rate of improvement in 1+ A*-G grades is in line, whereas that for 5+ A*-C grades is above that found nationally and in similar authorities.

The LEA met its 2003 targets for attainment at Level 5 at Key Stage 2 and met all its Key Stage 3 targets. Targets at GCSE were narrowly missed, but performance at Level 4 at Key Stage 2 was significantly adrift from the LEA's challenging targets. Performance fell 11.5% short in English and 11.7% short in mathematics, thus making the 2004 targets for Key Stage 2 unrealistic. Performance is broadly in line with schools' aggregated targets.

The findings of recent school inspections show that more primary and secondary schools were found to be good or very good overall than nationally.

Attendance is above and unauthorised absence is below the national average in both primary and secondary schools. Exclusions are below the national average in secondary schools and well below in primary schools.

Funding data for the LEA

SCHOOLS BUDGET	Dorset	Statistical neighbours average	County Average	ENGLAND AVERAGE
	£ per pupil	£ per pupil	£ per pupil	£ per pupil
Individual schools budget	2,511	2,500	2,540	2,708
Standards fund delegated	63	59	56	61
Education for under fives	109	94	91	96
Strategic management	15	23	22	29
Special educational needs	196	98	110	120
Grants	19	14	14	53
Access	42	43	43	55
Capital expenditure from revenue	1	23	28	24
TOTAL SCHOOLS BUDGET	2,957	2,854	2,905	3,145
Schools formula spending share	2,520	2,642	2,654	2,904

Source: DfES Comparative Tables 2003-04

LEA BUDGET	Dorset	Statistical neighbours average	County Average	ENGLAND AVERAGE
	£ per pupil	£ per pupil	£ per pupil	£ per pupil
Strategic management	72	78	82	95
Specific Grants	7	13	12	16
Special educational needs	22	28	27	32
School improvement	25	35	34	36
Access	197	184	173	133
Capital expenditure from revenue	0	4	2	2
Youth and Community	56	50	50	74
TOTAL LEA BUDGET	378	393	379	388

Source: DfES Comparative Tables 2003-04

Note:

All figures are net

Averages quoted are mean averages; the original DfES Comparative Tables quote median average figures, not the mean average.

Notes