



Office for Standards
in Education

Buckinghamshire

Local Education Authority

Inspection Report

Date of Inspection: February 2004

Reporting Inspector: Jillian Munday HMI



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Basic information

Name of LEA:	Buckinghamshire Local Education Authority
LEA number:	825
Address of LEA:	County Hall Aylesbury Buckinghamshire HP20 1UZ
Reporting Inspector:	Jillian Munday HMI
Date of Inspection:	February 2004

Summary

Introduction

Buckinghamshire is a largely affluent county with pockets of relative disadvantage. Low unemployment, high house prices and close proximity to London cause difficulties in the recruitment of officers, teachers and others who work with children and young people. The primary school population is declining. Secondary schooling in Buckinghamshire is selective. Some 14,730 pupils attend 13 grammar schools and 19,487 pupils attend non-selective upper schools.

Standards of attainment are above or well above national averages and above those seen in similar authorities¹ at all key stages. This generally high performance masks some areas for improvement which the LEA is addressing. For example, in spite of improvements, the standards attained by some minority ethnic pupils are still too low.

There have been significant changes in council and service structures since the previous inspection, largely targeted at improving provision for vulnerable young people. The council has radically reorganised service structures, ways of working and members' responsibilities. Services with a common focus have been placed together in six portfolios. Of these, the schools portfolio supports universal, mainstream provision for all pupils. The children and young people portfolio is targeted at improving provision for vulnerable groups and individuals, securing statutory services, and raising professional and public awareness. Despite recent improvements in perceptions, a significant proportion of schools is unconvinced of the value of these structures and has little faith in its school funding arrangements or its consultation procedures. Members and officers recognise these weaknesses in their partnership with schools and are keen to improve using the expertise of members, officers, schools and the community. They have put in train a number of actions to improve the situation. However, recruitment and retention difficulties, particularly in the children and young people portfolio, have proved further impediments to progress.

¹ Buckinghamshire LEA's statistical neighbours are: Surrey, Bedfordshire, Hampshire, Dorset, North Somerset, North Yorkshire, West Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Windsor and Maidenhead, and Gloucestershire.

Main findings

Summary: Buckinghamshire is a satisfactory local education authority (LEA). Since the previous inspection it has sustained or extended its effective work to raise standards and improve the performance of schools. Planning, monitoring and review procedures have improved and, overall, the progress made since 2000 is satisfactory. However, the LEA has been slow to develop and put in place its strategy for special educational needs (SEN). A lack of continuity in leadership and the negative views of some schools have been barriers to further success. The council is willing to confront its weaknesses and is keen to improve its partnership with schools. It has already embarked on an ambitious programme of change. It enjoys the support of external agencies and partners, and collaborative work with them is developing well. The strategic manager for schools has made a good start in rebuilding relationships with schools, working with them to agree a vision for education in the county and to clarify roles and responsibilities. The LEA has highly satisfactory capacity for further improvement.

Areas of strength	Areas of weakness/for development
<p>Corporate leadership of education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality and clarity of corporate plans • Monitoring, review and scrutiny processes, including performance management • Schools' confidence in the strategic manager for schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of a fundamental review of school funding arrangements • Poor oversight of the delegated schools' budget • Ineffective consultation and communication, resulting in some schools' limited understanding of, and commitment to, the portfolio structure • Lack of clarity in cross-portfolio responsibilities of strategic managers
<p>Strategy for education and its implementation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear and well set-out plans • Monitoring, challenge and intervention in schools and the provision of performance data • Intervention in underperforming schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools' lack of understanding of, and unwillingness to accept, their roles and responsibilities in relation to the <i>Code of Practice for LEA-School Relations</i>
<p>Support to improve education in schools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for all national strategies in the curriculum • Support for school governors • Guidance on self-evaluation for schools and governors • Support for gifted and talented pupils 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of schools' capacity to act as informed purchasers of services • Budget-setting support for schools where management is weak
<p>Support for special educational needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity of the council to make rapid progress in further developing the SEN strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of clarity about the LEA's direction in supporting pupils with SEN • Lack of transparency in SEN funding arrangements • Ineffective strategic leadership leading to a lack of confidence by schools
<p>Support for social inclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work of pupil referral units (PRUs) in promoting and supporting the LEA's strategies for behaviour and for pupils educated other than at school • Provision for looked after children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic leadership • Securing provision of full-time education for Key Stage 3 pupils out of school

Recommendations

Key recommendations

Decision-making: improve the effectiveness of communication and consultation procedures to ensure that decisions made are understood by schools.

Targeting of resources: review the schools funding formula and the funding of SEN in consultation with the schools forum.

Strategy for school improvement: using the opportunities afforded through the development of a Single Education Plan, draw up an agreement with schools that clearly defines ways of working, expectations, roles and responsibilities for school improvement.

Strategy for SEN: work with schools, senior managers, governors and partners to develop an understanding and consensus about the SEN strategy, involving them in detailed plans to improve provision in the county.

Strategy for social inclusion: strengthen the council's leadership of social inclusion and appoint a strong strategic manager for the children and young people portfolio.

Other recommendations

Corporate leadership of education

Targeting of resources: clarify responsibility for oversight of the delegated schools budget by the LEA to ensure that services collaborate in robustly challenging, advising and supporting schools with deficits and surpluses.

Strategy for education and its implementation

Monitoring, challenge and intervention

- With schools, further refine monitoring procedures, ensuring that they are proportionate to need, especially in relation to the most effective schools.
- Agree with schools a broader range of criteria, including stronger financial management indicators as an element of the school monitoring and categorisation process.

Support to improve education in schools

- **Planning and provision of services to support school improvement:** provide focused budget-setting support for schools where financial management is weak.

Support for special educational needs

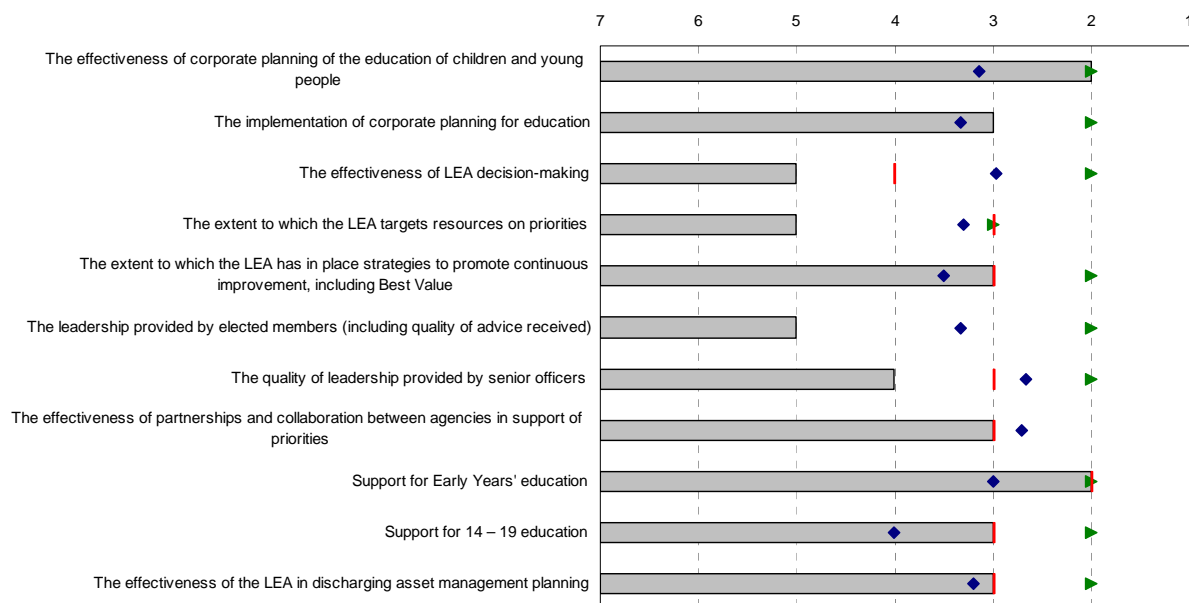
- **Strategy for SEN:** secure the management and control of the current significant overspending of the LEA's SEN budget, and better align the budget to the SEN strategy.

Support for social inclusion

- **Provision for pupils educated other than at school:** move swiftly to improve provision for Key Stage 3 pupils who are out of school.

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. Corporate planning is now good and its implementation is highly satisfactory. Political ambition and drive have been clarified. The council plan is the main reference point for actions that are detailed in other plans, and there is good coherence between all layers of corporate, portfolio and service planning. Good review systems support the planning process. The council has secured portfolio accountability firmly through lead members and strategic managers, but cross-portfolio powers and responsibilities lack some clarity. Performance management procedures are beginning to work well. Council monitoring and review processes, including scrutiny, are mostly rigorous, challenging and effective. However, procedures to follow up the monitoring of school expenditure are unsatisfactory and there is a lack of transparency in SEN funding.

2. The council has taken seriously its responsibility for ensuring that targets are met, and action is timely. It is open to external challenge and criticism and responds appropriately. It is not afraid to acknowledge its own weaknesses and has a number of strategies in place to drive improvement, change organisational culture, and develop community leadership skills. In addition, it has recently demonstrated its commitment to

education by agreeing a rise in council tax specifically to allow funding increases to be passed to schools.

3. Despite this focus on enhancing services for all children and young people, members have not convinced all schools, in particular secondary schools, that they provide strong educational leadership and this hinders the council's effectiveness. Most importantly, the rationale behind the structural changes has not been clearly enough understood by many schools. As a result, they criticise perceived divisions in the structure and do not recognise the good potential for multi-disciplinary work. Inconsistent officer leadership in the children and young people portfolio has further impeded progress and has served to embed schools' views. The leadership given by elected members in this area has been supportive but insufficiently strategic.

4. In recognition of the fragile partnership with schools, the strategic manager for schools has led some recent and effective development work that is beginning to improve matters. In addition, partnership work with external agencies and providers has progressed well. In the schools portfolio, where there is stability and an improving relationship with schools, the capacity for improvement is good. In the children and young people portfolio, sensible interim arrangements have been put in place, but the future structure and leadership remains unresolved, and the capacity for improvement is thus less secure.

Decision-making

5. Decision-making is unsatisfactory. Limitations in the effectiveness of the council's consultation processes mean that schools' commitment to significant strategic decisions and developments such as SEN has not been secured. The reasons behind these decisions are not consistently clarified or understood. Improvements in the council's communication on financial matters, recommended in the 1999 inspection report, have not been fully achieved. In addition, the lack of a partnership with schools based on mutual trust and confidence means that, even when the council does provide full information on the decisions it is making, too frequently schools remain entrenched and negative in their views.

6. However, there are good examples of the council making difficult decisions in favour of education, even in the face of adverse community responses. The recent catchment area review has shown that the council is becoming more alert to the need to reconsider its position and respond to stakeholders' concerns. Scrutiny procedures are helping to drive improvements. The engagement of schools in the Schools Forum is also bringing about more positive responses. Members receive good advice from officers, and act on this in the majority of cases. However, there have been occasions when they have initiated inappropriate action without due consideration or reference to officers. Strategic managers oversee cross-cutting work but their powers and decision-making responsibilities in these matters are unclear to schools and other stakeholders.

Recommendation

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improve the effectiveness of communication and consultation procedures to ensure that decisions made are understood by schools. |
|---|

Targeting of resources

7. Buckinghamshire's targeting of resources on priorities within education is unsatisfactory. A fundamental review of the schools funding formula has not been completed despite significant concerns raised by schools. This lack of action has contributed to the financial difficulties of such schools. Funding for SEN has not been reviewed regularly and is not transparent to schools. Recent decisions by members to increase the funding through the free school meals and low attainment elements of the formula were welcomed by headteachers, but were not part of a considered strategic approach to reviewing the funding of schools.

8. Although there are recent signs of change, the LEA's lack of clarity over who holds responsibility for overseeing schools' delegated budgets has allowed schools to build up excessive levels of deficits or surpluses without sufficient challenge or support. Schools have not received a clear enough message about their responsibility to manage their finances, and not all understand their role in these matters. Many of the deficit budgets are in secondary schools, many are long-term and some are a feature of schools causing concern. Some schools have not agreed deficit reduction plans with the LEA, and the LEA has never withdrawn delegation from a school. New headteachers are not required to receive financial training as a matter of course.

9. The council has demonstrated its commitment to funding education by earmarking a specific element of council tax to support school budgets and bring expenditure up to the level of the LEA's Formula Spending Share. It manages its limited funds well, and has been successful in maximising income from external grants. However, due to the selective school system and the rural nature of much of the county, transport costs are high.

Recommendations

- Clarify responsibility for oversight of the delegated schools budget by the LEA to ensure that services collaborate in robustly challenging, advising and supporting schools with deficits and surpluses.
- Review the schools funding formula and the funding of SEN in consultation with the Schools Forum.

Strategies to promote continuous improvement, including Best Value

10. The LEA's strategies to promote continuous improvement are highly satisfactory. It has a clear local performance plan, responds well to external review and has made improvements to its performance management system following a Best Value review. Despite accurately identifying areas for development, the LEA's overall self-evaluation presented as part of this inspection process has over-estimated its performance in a significant number of aspects when compared with the judgements made in this report.

11. The LEA's performance management framework makes clear connections between the corporate plan priorities, the responsibilities of services and of individuals through the service-planning and appraisal process. The framework is now applied far more consistently than it was at the time of the corporate assessment of the local authority. The LEA has

embarked on a cultural change programme across the organisation, which is beginning to show effects.

12. There is a thorough performance monitoring process. High level performance indicators and Best Value review action plans are reviewed regularly by management teams, the cabinet and the overview and scrutiny committees. Reviews have been targeted effectively at underperforming services and have led to clear improvements, for example in support for looked after children.

Leadership by elected members and advice given to them

13. Leadership by elected members in relation to the areas subject to this inspection is unsatisfactory, despite the high priority given to education. This corporate commitment to education is not well understood or even accepted by schools. The rationales behind the current portfolio structure, and the resultant emphasis on social inclusion and supporting vulnerable children, have not been explained to schools in a way that secures their understanding. The strategic leadership and drive behind the children and young people portfolio have not been sufficient to secure confidence in the efficacy of these decisions. In spite of thorough performance monitoring procedures being in place, members have not driven forward some agreed strategic plans, such as that for SEN, which has been late to be reviewed. In addition, the council has been over-cautious in its approach to external brokerage and procurement, which has resulted in an over-dependency by schools on in-house provision.

14. These issues are acknowledged and understood, and many elements are identified as areas for development in the LEA's self-evaluation. The council is committed to the rationale behind portfolio working, but is currently reviewing the present structure in liaison with schools. Members are focused on ensuring that all pupils in Buckinghamshire benefit from high quality provision and the work of the schools portfolio is well directed. Sensible action is underway to resolve rapidly some of the identified weaknesses.

Leadership by senior officers

15. Leadership by senior officers is satisfactory. This judgement is lower than the LEA's self-evaluation and reflects the lack of continuity in the leadership of the children and young people portfolio and within special educational services, which have impeded progress. The LEA is fully aware of the impact of these personnel difficulties and has put in place appropriate interim arrangements, while setting in motion a debate about future structures to take account of national developments as well as local issues.

16. The chief officer and his management team are well respected. They focus on securing school improvement and raising the achievement of all children and young people in the county. Cross-portfolio work is developing well. Elected members receive clear advice from heads of service and value their skills and expertise. The strategic manager for schools is well regarded and has gained the trust and confidence of schools. Her current work with them to establish an educational vision for the county is central to improving relationships, creating clarity about relative roles and responsibilities, and driving forward developments.

Strategic partnerships

17. In contrast with the weaknesses in its working relationship with many schools, the LEA has established and sustained highly satisfactory partnership arrangements with external bodies and other local authority services. The council recognises the importance of collaborating with other agencies in order to meet the needs of children and young people, especially vulnerable groups. Officers across all portfolios have a sound understanding of the value of partnership work. Joint activities are reviewed and monitored well through scrutiny, cabinet and performance management procedures.

18. Partnership initiatives arising from Buckinghamshire's local public service agreement are beginning to have an impact. Buckinghamshire's community plan has been developed alongside a wide range of interested parties and highlights important key areas where joint action is necessary. A local strategic partnership for children and young people has been set up, but it is in the early days of development and the leadership from elected members is not yet sufficiently proactive. A preventative strategy is being developed showing how children's needs are to be met and how the contribution of various partners and agencies will be brought together.

19. Links with the diocesan boards and with the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education are strong and have had a positive effect, particularly in school improvement activities. The LEA's involvement with the Excellence Cluster is in the early stages. Local school-based integrated approaches are leading to reductions in exclusions. Evidence from special projects indicates that children out of school gain access to a wider range of alternative provision.

Support for 14-19 education

20. Support for 14-19 education remains highly satisfactory with a number of good aspects. Key Stage 4 standards are well above the national average and LEA targets have been exceeded. Good quality data are used to highlight appropriate areas for improvement, such as increasing the value added between Key Stages 3 and 4 and reducing the variations in the performance of different schools. The LEA uses well-developed tracking systems to monitor the progress made by looked after and vulnerable young people, and good support enables such groups to raise their achievement from year to year.

21. The number of pupils staying on for education and training post-16 is high and the figure is rising. Good working partnerships have been established with the Lifelong Learning Partnership, the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the further education (FE) colleges in the county. The LEA, schools and the Connexions service work together to support pupils in Key Stage 4 and prepare them for post-16 education and training. The LEA has successfully secured funding from the local LSC to help widen the range of education and training provision for young people across the county. Innovative practice, centred on the Amersham and Wycombe FE college and several secondary schools, has significantly increased the number of students taking a wider range of post-16 courses and training opportunities. This partnership is supported by the LEA, which is also promoting the development of a smaller consortium elsewhere in the county.

22. There has been consultation with schools, but Buckinghamshire's general approach to 14-19 education has been insufficiently proactive. This has been partly as an indirect outcome of the changes in lead officer over the last few years. The LEA currently does not have an agreed published view to debate with the local LSC about how to provide and widen education and training opportunities for its young people. However, led by a knowledgeable officer, it is now developing its 14-19 strategy through a discussion paper on the subject to be finalised in the summer 2004 after consultation. There is an agreed 'memorandum of understanding' between the LEA, schools, and the local LSC. Schools have yet to be convinced that these developments will lead to a coherent vision and strategy.

Asset management planning

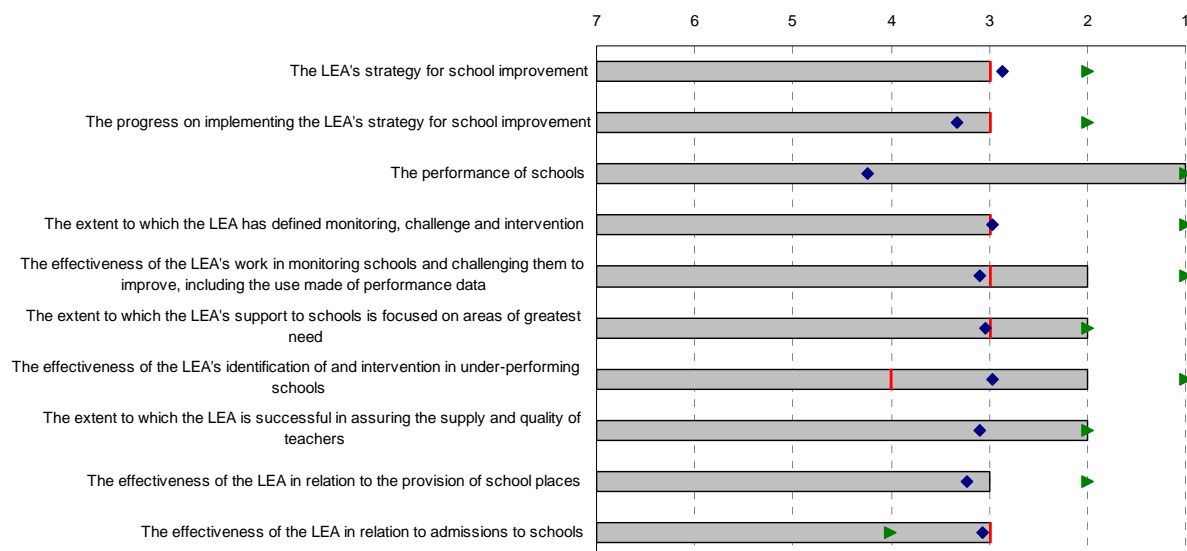
23. Asset management planning by Buckinghamshire is highly satisfactory. The asset management plan is expert and accessible, sets out clear priorities and links well to other plans. Information on the repair needs and sufficiency of school buildings is up-to-date and sources of funding are identified effectively within the limits of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) framework. There is a good system for schools to apply annually for capital funding, which provides up-to-date information on need and on the impact on school improvement. Schools jointly-fund some projects using their devolved capital.

24. The lack of specialist facilities at some upper schools means that the LEA faces a considerable amount of work to make premises more suitable. Although it is able to deal with the highest priority condition requirements, it estimates it will take 11 years to meet all of these requirements at current levels of funding. It has directed its limited funds to supporting schools causing concern where buildings issues have frequently contributed to underperformance. Despite the good communication in this area, some schools claim ignorance of the arrangements for prioritising investment.

25. Until recently, staff shortages and split responsibility for new build and maintenance projects between two different service areas have affected the quality of project management. Clarity of responsibility has been improved now that the schools team has oversight of all building investment.

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

26. The LEA's strategy for school improvement and its implementation remain highly satisfactory. The performance of schools is very good compared with the national averages, especially at the higher levels, and maintenance of this high level of performance is a priority for the LEA. It has taken particularly decisive action to tackle its underperforming schools. The LEA recognises that it is now time to refocus the school improvement service to provide the expert, differentiated support that schools need. The main weakness in this area relates to a lack of progress in securing schools' understanding of their own and of the LEA's changed roles within the *Code of Practice for LEA-School Relations*. The current work with schools to clarify relative roles and responsibilities is beginning to address this issue. Schools' resistance undermines the LEA's overly positive self-assessment in several areas of support for school improvement.

27. The Education Development Plan (EDP) is based on a thorough audit, and the eight priority areas focus appropriately on national and local priorities. Local concerns such as underachievement by particular groups of pupils are addressed. Explicit links with the priorities of the Excellence Cluster partnership are limited though there are many common

areas of focus. Action plans are clear but too many timescales are imprecise. The statutory targets in the EDP are extremely challenging. They are higher than the aggregate school targets, which themselves are appropriately challenging and were agreed with schools following rigorous debate and good use of pupil level data. Although school representatives were involved in the identification of the local priorities, most schools do not recognise the EDP as relevant to their own planning processes. This is partly a consequence of the LEA's own limited view that, while schools will be involved in the activities, the plan is primarily a service plan for the school improvement service. New opportunities to involve schools are afforded through the authority's work on a Single Education Plan.

28. There has been improvement in most EDP priority areas and notable progress in some. The reduction in schools in special measures and serious weaknesses is a particular achievement and reflects the allocation of considerable effort and resources to this area. Standards are rising steadily in most core subjects at all key stages and there is good support for behaviour, recruitment and retention of teachers, and governors. Monitoring procedures are thorough, involving elected members, headteachers and governors, and appropriate adjustments in support are made as a result. However, this monitoring does not focus sufficiently on the impact of actions on standards, nor are the outcomes adequately reported to schools.

Recommendation

- Using the opportunities afforded through the development of a Single Education Plan, draw up an agreement with schools that clearly defines ways of working, expectations, roles and responsibilities for school improvement.

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

29. The LEA's success in defining its approach to monitoring, challenge and intervention is highly satisfactory. In response to recommendations in the previous inspection report the LEA has revised and sharpened its procedures for monitoring and challenging schools. The principles and processes for this key function of the LEA are set out clearly in a framework to support school improvement. Nonetheless, some schools are critical of the procedures and a vociferous minority are inappropriately dismissive of the LEA's attempts to implement them.

30. The LEA's implementation of its strategy to monitor, challenge and intervene in all schools and the use made of performance data are good. The school improvement service (SIS) uses an annual dialogue with the headteacher and chair of governors, target-setting meetings and visits to discuss matters of teaching, learning, leadership and management. These monitoring activities have enabled link advisers to gain knowledge about schools, but are not sufficiently proportionate to need since all schools, regardless of effectiveness, are visited six times a year.

31. The SIS provides thorough, challenging records of school visits to headteachers and governors. The portfolio holder and scrutiny committee receive regular review reports on schools' performance. In discussion with schools, the LEA has identified five categories of

school, thus enabling officers to specify more accurately the areas on which to target support for improvement. As a result, additional LEA support is allocated according to need. The categories are based upon a small range of criteria that do not include tight financial indicators. A few schools rightly express concern about the limited breadth of the criteria and the consistency of their application.

32. The LEA's provision of performance data for schools has greatly improved and is now good. Officers have grasped the issues with enthusiasm and managed the process well. Discussions with schools have been effective and advisers continue to provide good quality training and coaching. The range of analysed data is extensive and schools are improving their use and interrogation of the information. The SIS is effective in interpreting the data and using it to target actions and resources at areas of weakness.

Recommendations

- With schools, further refine monitoring procedures, ensuring that they are proportionate to need, especially in relation to the most effective schools.
- Agree with schools a broader range of criteria, including stronger financial management indicators as an element of the monitoring and categorisation process.

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

33. Intervention in underperforming schools is a top LEA priority and work in this area is good. The council monitors progress rigorously, and governing bodies are kept well informed. Since September 2002 the number of schools with serious weaknesses has reduced significantly and at the time of this inspection no schools required special measures. The challenge, support and guidance that the LEA provides for headteachers and governors are generally very good, although guidance from financial and human resource services has not been well integrated into the work of the SIS.

34. Joint action planning and monitoring between advisers, consultants and schools, and the use of supported self-evaluation procedures are strong. All these aspects, including the use of data and management information, have significantly improved since the time of the previous inspection. Underperforming schools welcome the well-planned additional resources that the LEA provides or brokers to support their improvement. Negotiated exit strategies for these schools are helpful in ensuring that improvement can be sustained.

35. Regrettably, some schools take the view that the LEA's work in underperforming schools has had too high a focus and has shifted attention from other school improvement issues. They believe it has overburdened all schools with unnecessarily pressured school visits by SIS. They are correct in criticising the number of core visits to all schools but not in their concerns about rigorous challenge to a school made by well-informed link advisers.

Providing school places

36. The planning of school places is highly satisfactory. The LEA is continuing the process of aligning the capacity of school buildings fully with need, following a change in the age of transfer from 12yrs+ to 11yrs+ in 1998 and 1999. The school places, admissions, and asset management planning teams have been brought together by the LEA, and this has been effective in improving joint working. The planning team works closely with the school improvement team to support schools causing concern.

37. The LEA has a clear strategy to increase secondary places to deal with the projected increase in numbers by 2006. Nearly a quarter of secondary schools were above capacity in 2003 and there is very little surplus capacity in this sector. The building programme focuses appropriately on improving specialist accommodation together with the use of temporary classrooms to allow for the downturn in numbers expected after 2006. In the primary sector, there is an above-average proportion of unfilled places and numbers are projected to fall further. The LEA has made good use of primary amalgamations and age-range changes to reduce places and the number of very small schools. The number of schools with 25% or more surplus places has also been reduced.

Admissions to schools

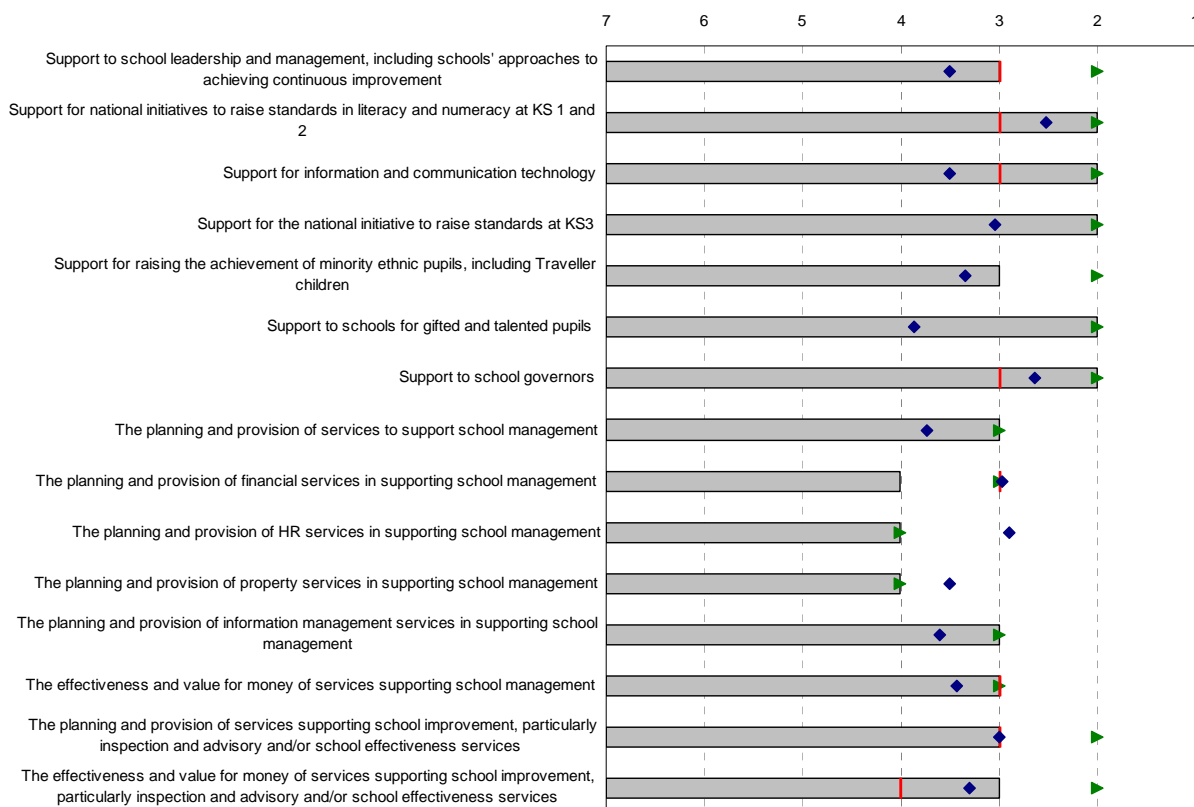
38. Buckinghamshire's arrangements for admissions to schools are highly satisfactory. They are well co-ordinated with school place planning. For example, recently agreed changes to catchment areas will reduce the number of large, shared grammar school catchments across the county and thus increase the number of pupils going to their local school. The LEA is on course to meet the deadline for the implementation of co-ordinated admission arrangements, despite the selective arrangements that require more complex processes. It has not yet implemented an electronic admissions process, but planning is in hand to introduce this by 2005.

39. Buckinghamshire LEA is committed to its system of selective education from the age of 11. This matter is for local decision-making and, as such, is not subject to inspection scrutiny, although some of the procedures surrounding it are addressed. Information for parents, particularly on the selective entry to secondary schools, is comprehensive. Over-subscription criteria for all schools are fair, with appropriate priority given to pupils with SEN and to children looked after by the LEA, followed by children living in the school's catchment area. Appeals are dealt with efficiently.

40. The admissions forum, which has been in existence for several years, is very active. It had oversight of the catchment area consultation and is currently considering proposals for a protocol to co-ordinate the reintegration of excluded pupils. Appropriately, pupils subject to exclusion or casual admission are supported by a reintegration officer.

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

41. The support that the LEA's services give to school leadership, management and school improvement has improved and is now highly satisfactory. Many schools make full use of the wide range of services. The support for developments in the national strategies for the curriculum and for the work of governors are significantly better than at the time of the previous inspection.

42. In spite of robust work with underperforming schools, the LEA's overall professional partnership with school leaders and managers, through which they identify weaknesses and provide or broker support for improvement, is not secure. The approach, style of work and communication by some LEA teams have not always been productive.

Nevertheless, the strategic manager for schools has a clear vision and strategy for improvement in which schools have trust and confidence. This, together with recently agreed executive powers, gives her the credibility to be proactive in order to accelerate improvements in relationships with, and standards in, schools.

43. Advice and training for headteachers and middle managers are highly satisfactory. The LEA has very recently established with schools the Buckinghamshire academy of school leadership, planned to be a focus for good practice and to extend the range of provision at all levels. Middle managers can already gain accreditation through a local programme with Oxford Brookes University, and national initiatives for headteachers and deputy heads are supported by the LEA. The provision for newly-qualified teachers is monitored and resources are provided for their support. Though the LEA runs a two-day residential course, some recently appointed headteachers reported having little or no induction support, indicating that the recommendation from the 1999 inspection report has not been fully addressed.

44. The SIS has taken effective action to monitor and know its schools better. More focused work in schools is now evident and there are secure systems for the LEA to identify quickly a decline in performance and intervene appropriately. As a result, the LEA has better information on the very good practice in many schools and the SIS is making reasonable progress in disseminating the information. The LEA offers very good self-evaluation procedures to schools and governing bodies that support self-management. Officers also offer a good range of traded services, but they do not provide schools with the guidance necessary to enable them to become well-informed purchasers.

45. There is a growing range of successful strategies to attract and retain teachers in the county. The high cost of housing and the attraction of enhanced salaries in adjacent authorities present the LEA with familiar difficulties, but work to address these is beginning to have an effect.

Support for the implementation of national initiatives at Key Stages 1 and 2

46. The LEA's support to schools in these areas is good overall, but stronger and more consistent in numeracy than in literacy. Previous strengths have been built on and some encouraging progress is being made in improving the standards attained by minority ethnic groups. Standards in both subjects remain high in comparison with national averages, and above or in line with average standards in similar authorities. The 2002 statutory targets were not met in either subject, although Buckinghamshire's gap was less than the national average. In 2003, standards improved in line with the national increase.

47. There is a strong emphasis on driving up standards and the analysis of data has been improved to include elements such as significant information on ethnicity. This is beginning to guarantee that the challenge to schools is robust. Pupil level data are now being used well to ensure that individual targets are appropriately high. The LEA is fully aware of the areas needing improvement and particular emphasis is rightly placed on improving, for example writing at Key Stage 1 and Level 5 English at Key Stage 2.

48. Better procedures are now in place to build the capacity of schools to improve their own performance. These include well-targeted training for Year 6 teachers, good networking arrangements and action-planning support for co-ordinators. Leadership of these national initiatives is now more stable and there are well-established links between the primary strategy team and other teams.

Support for information and communication technology (ICT)

49. The support offered by the LEA in this area has improved and is now good. High-quality and comprehensive support, led by a knowledgeable adviser, is regarded well by schools. Good links have been established with the council's technical support service. Together these services ensure that teachers are well supported in developing ICT provision, and to raise standards in the subject and across the curriculum. The LEA's draft strategy outlines its coherent approach to ICT development across the county, reflects both corporate and national developments, and is being widely consulted on. Significant difficulties in ensuring all schools have access to broadband have been resolved by officers' commitment to finding a cost-effective solution. There is now a realistic plan that all schools will be connected to broadband by the summer 2006.

50. The LEA uses its good quality data well to monitor achievement in ICT at Key Stages 3 and 4. It also considers Key Stage 2 data from schools. Targets have been exceeded at Key Stage 3. These data and information, together with regular school review meetings with headteachers and co-ordinators and customer satisfaction surveys, enable the ICT team to make the best use of its resources. Consultants visit schools regularly and there is a pragmatic approach to supporting and challenging schools within a clear framework. Clear guidance, training, and information contribute to an effective level of support. The LEA has established some opportunities to share good practice between schools, but these are not yet widely used. Informative and regular reports are made to elected members who support the work of the LEA through membership of committees that also involve officers and school staff.

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

51. The support provided for minority ethnic pupils is highly satisfactory with good capacity for further improvement. The attainment of underperforming groups of minority ethnic pupils, notably those of Pakistani and Black Caribbean heritage, has shown improvement since 2000, though there are fluctuations and it is not yet possible to identify clear trends. The gap between these groups of pupils and the LEA average remains wide, although the performance of Black Caribbean pupils in 2003 was above the national average at all key stages.

52. The LEA's service for supporting ethnic minority pupils (METAS) is focused well on raising the achievement of underperforming groups, including the children of Travellers. Data are now used effectively by the LEA to identify weaknesses and priorities and targets are set based on good prior attainment data. The diversity adviser provides strong leadership for the METAS team, and its work is now much more closely linked with the school improvement team and, consequently, is more effective. Links with other services and

portfolios support the work of the team, for example mentoring for African Caribbean boys undertaken with the youth and community service. The grants for raising minority ethnic achievement and for vulnerable groups are deployed appropriately, based on a clear and transparent formula.

53. The team has correctly identified a need for better expertise in teaching English as an additional language (EAL). Ofsted inspections of schools identify significant variability between schools in the progress made by pupils with EAL. Training in the teaching of EAL, as part of developments in the national strategies, has been enhanced by the METAS team, but this is not a consistent feature in schools' planning priorities.

Support for school governors

54. The governor support service is now well led and managed and the provision made is good. The view of governors, however, is that until recently the LEA's support was limited. Officers are aware of strengths and weaknesses in school governance across the county, and the LEA has, in appropriate circumstances, successfully placed additional governors in schools facing difficulties. Consultation and active involvement with governors are wide ranging. Their representatives contribute to strategic discussions with senior officers and the recruitment of advisers. Governors are central to the annual evaluation of governor services and the subsequent action plan. The LEA's new self-evaluation procedures for governors are of good quality. They are already used in over a quarter of schools and are being actively considered by others.

55. Training and information for governors are increasingly well matched to their needs through courses and the more successful school-based training. Good efforts are made by the service to recruit governors and attract them to training courses, but the number of governors attending is often small and cancellations are high. New, more flexible strategies are planned to try to overcome this problem. Governor vacancies are in line with the national average and the service is working energetically to attract more governors, especially from minority ethnic groups. This work is hampered by some members of governing bodies who are unwilling to provide information about ethnicity.

The planning and provision of services to support school management

56. The planning and provision of services that support school management are highly satisfactory. The LEA offers a good range of services for purchase and provides clear information on the service standards that schools can expect as well as descriptions of both traded and core services. Charges are realistic. The school survey indicates dissatisfaction with payroll, property management and grounds maintenance services, yet schools continue to purchase them. All these are provided through LEA-procured external contracts.

57. The LEA is aware of schools' views through its own annual survey and takes appropriate action. The services to schools scrutiny board has had regular dialogue with poorly-performing services such as property management and the payroll service over the last year. This has led to some improvement. Project work to link the LEA's new human resources and financial systems to those of schools is well-managed.

58. There has been little progress in encouraging schools to become more independent purchasers. Despite a recommendation in the 2002 Best Value review of school support services, members decided at that time not to set up a brokerage service to help schools access alternative service providers. The service for schools brochure does not include information on alternative providers. The LEA is at the early stages of considering ways it can support schools more systematically in procuring services externally. For example, it has offered schools advice on alternative providers of grounds maintenance services.

59. The financial support service to schools is satisfactory. The day-to-day support provided to schools is good; financial systems work reliably and schools are given clearly presented and timely information about their budgets. Schools are offered support in budget-setting, but this is not directed at those where financial management is weak.

Recommendation

- Provide focused budget-setting support for schools where financial management is weak.

The planning and provision of services to support school improvement

60. The planning and provision of services that support school improvement are highly satisfactory. Service leaders and managers are aware of the main strengths and weaknesses of their services. The SIS, in particular, makes good provision for development, in the curriculum and its enrichment, for teachers and for governors. Highly satisfactory school improvement support is provided for minority ethnic pupils, vulnerable groups and pupils with SEN.

61. Planning documents in school improvement services are strong and securely referenced to one another. Priorities and actions are broadly matched with the exception of those with the Excellence Cluster. All plans have outcomes and activities that are focused on raising standards; responsibilities and resources are identified, but there is imprecision in some of the timescales for actions. Monitoring procedures are generally good and reports go regularly to the relevant scrutiny boards.

62. Performance management is effective throughout the education service, ensuring that staff reviews focus on individuals' contributions to the actions and targets of the EDP. Services have improved their recruitment and retention of suitably qualified staff to meet the needs of schools. The SIS, for example, has employed primary headteachers as link advisers. Nonetheless, frequent recent changes of staff in several services have undermined stability and contributed to schools' lack of confidence in the LEA. The LEA has limited external brokerage arrangements to call on in these cases. In some services, staff development and work shadowing are used well to ensure the growth of team expertise. Comprehensive monitoring, by the SIS, of individuals' work in schools provides valuable information on resource targeting, staff deployment and workloads.

Effectiveness and value for money of services to support school improvement

63. The effectiveness and value for money of the services that support school improvement are highly satisfactory. All services give at least satisfactory provision and

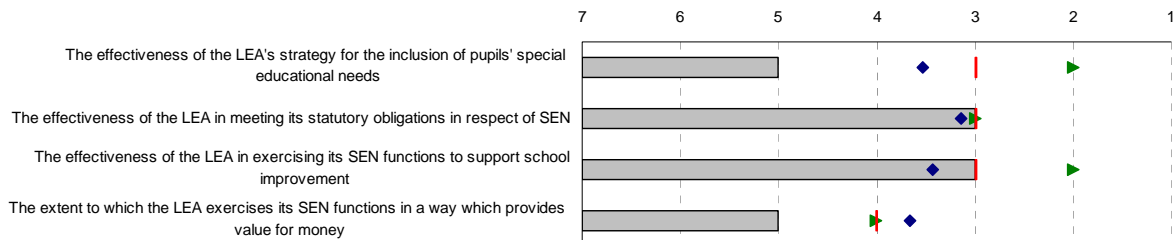
most perform better. Best Value reviews and their outcomes are used well to inform further service improvement. Though judged to be satisfactory in the school survey most of the schools' views were in the bottom quartile when compared with the same services nationally, and some schools were discontent with the level of variability in the quality of services.

64. The quality of education and standards of attainment continue to rise from a high base. Progress is generally at or above the national rates of improvement. The costs of the SIS are gradually reducing and, when compared nationally, are close to the average. The cost to schools of SIS services is also at average national rates.

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



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

65. The LEA's work in this area is unsatisfactory and less effective than at the time of the previous inspection. A number of factors have combined to reduce schools' confidence in the LEA's ability to agree and implement an updated strategy for SEN provision. For example, several key staff changes in the special education services (SES) in the last few years have hindered consistent progress. These changes have contributed to a drift in implementing the Best Value review recommendations for SES and in reviewing the strategy for SEN. In turn, these delays have made it difficult to clarify expenditure on SEN to ensure that schools are fully aware of the resources that are available to them to support particular pupils.

66. The council has recognised that many schools, particularly special schools, are concerned about the current situation and it has recently taken action to resolve the situation. Interim staff appointments to the children and young people portfolio and SES have ensured that respected, experienced staff who have a clear commitment to improving the situation are in post. The strategic manager for schools is now leading on SEN policy development, thus placing it, importantly, at the heart of the agenda for schools. The recent cabinet agreement on the LEA's inclusion strategy after a period of consultation and the start of the review of the SEN strategy have given new impetus. These decisions, together with the current committed officers in SES, have increased the LEA's capacity to make progress and regain the confidence of schools. However, unless schools work in partnership with the LEA, it will be difficult for the interim officers to convince headteachers that they are improving services in this area.

67. The LEA's plans for the development of SEN provision reflect the corporate priorities in the council plan. Members are involved at a practical level in ensuring that vulnerable children are supported effectively. The 10-year SEN strategy, agreed in February 2000, sets out a clear vision, principles and objectives for the LEA. A number of actions have been completed, but strategic leadership has been unsatisfactory. Progress, therefore, is limited in important areas such as communication with schools and other partners, the focusing of resources on early intervention by schools, and the clarification of funding. Consequently officers, headteachers and school staff are unclear about these aspects of the LEA's strategy.

68. The children and families social work team and SES are within the same portfolio, which facilitates joint work to support pupils with SEN. However, staffing problems within SES and the recent history of difficulty in recruiting and retaining social workers have meant that the benefits of this co-location have not been fully realised. Although good quality advice from educational psychologists is recognised by schools, the difficulty of recruitment and retention over the last year has led to delayed support to some schools in meeting the needs of particular pupils. There are good links with other services, such as health, to provide early intervention support for children in early years settings.

Recommendation

- Work with schools, senior managers, governors and partners to develop an understanding and consensus about the SEN strategy, involving them in detailed plans to improve provision in the county.

Statutory obligations

69. The LEA is highly satisfactory in ensuring that it meets its statutory obligations for SEN. The recent disability access plan shows clearly how the LEA will make mainstream education more easily available to pupils with a physical disability. The quality of statements of educational need has improved, but they still vary in the level of detail about the support that should be provided by schools. The rate of completion of statements within statutory time limits is high and improving; good links have been established with the local health authority to ensure that delays are reduced to a minimum. Formal procedures, which involve headteachers, are in place to assess the quality of the information available when a statement of educational need is requested. The LEA acts on common areas of weakness and provides training and support where necessary.

70. A well-regarded parent partnership team provides an independent support service to parents. This service is publicised effectively and is recognised by the LEA as important in ensuring that parents are fully informed and supported. Well-attended parent conferences, training and information meetings, and good quality information leaflets all indicate a responsive and effective service. These, together with an effective mediation service, have reduced significantly the need to resolve conflicts through tribunals in the last few years.

SEN functions to support school improvement

71. This is a highly satisfactory area of the LEA's work with many good features. The adviser for SEN, based in the school improvement service, has developed good and effective ways of working with co-ordinators and headteachers. This work ensures that the special educational needs of pupils are met and that activities are integrated into wider school improvement priorities. Training for school staff and officers, based on an audit of need, is co-ordinated effectively and valued by participants. Courses and training events are fully attended and ensure that the requirements of the Code of Practice are met in schools and by the LEA.

72. Good quality data are used successfully to challenge schools, when necessary, about the progress made by individual pupils. The LEA's annual dialogue with schools focuses on the attainment of all pupils and school target-setting is appropriately based on pupil level data. The LEA places significant emphasis on the achievement of pupils with SEN. The quality and implementation of individual education plans setting out the support for these pupils are reviewed regularly by officers and advisers.

73. Recent staffing changes facilitate more successful close working between the schools portfolio and the children and young people portfolio. As the LEA recognises, this enables clearer communication with all schools about its SEN strategy. The SES has not yet been sufficiently effective in giving schools confidence that the LEA is leading the direction of service provision.

Value for money

74. The value for money of SEN work in the LEA is unsatisfactory and less effective than it was at the time of the previous inspection. This is related to the LEA's approach to its formula funding of schools, which lacks transparency on the SEN element delegated to schools. Confusion exists in schools about money for additional educational needs and that for SEN. This lack of clarity makes it difficult for the LEA to monitor the effectiveness of expenditure by schools on supporting pupils with SEN.

75. The quality of support for pupils with SEN is monitored through meetings and discussions between officers and school staff. However, there is no clear mechanism for moderating the consistency across schools when identifying pupils who need extra in-school support or when an expert is needed to work with a pupil. Neither is there any analysis of the link between expenditure on SEN and the achievement of these pupils across the LEA.

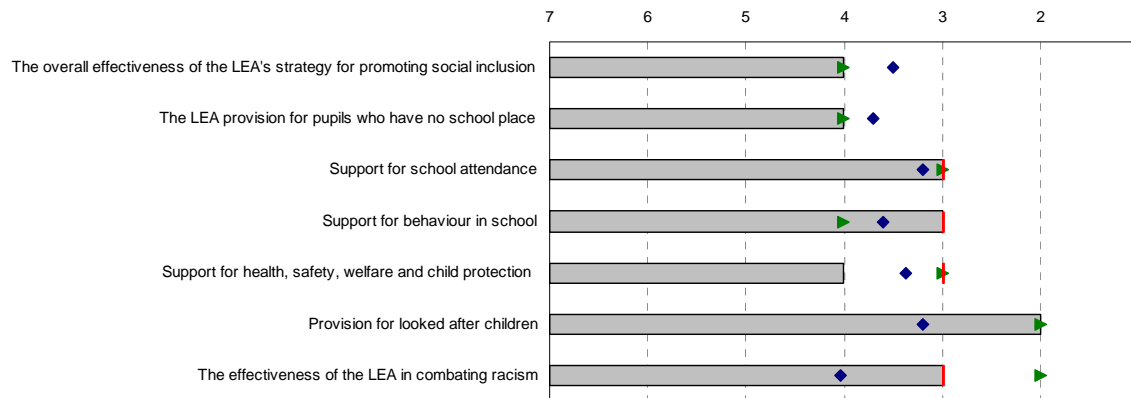
76. Buckinghamshire's overall expenditure on SEN is higher than that for similar LEAs. It has already identified the need to reduce expenditure on out-of-county placements and home-to-school SEN transport. The LEA has also increased funding in some areas of SEN expenditure in the last two years, to address historically inaccurate budgets that have been significantly overspent. Nevertheless, the SEN budget is still overspending. It is a cause for concern that there are no coherent plans for managing this expenditure within an overall strategy for SEN provision.

Recommendation

- Secure the management and control of the current significant overspending of the LEA's SEN budget, and better align the budget to the SEN strategy.

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 LEA's strategy for social inclusion

77. The council's commitment to social inclusion is clearly stated in its community plan and its strategic approach is satisfactory. The Best Value review of children's and young people's services identified priorities for further development, most significantly the need to develop better strategies for early identification and prevention. The cabinet has recently ratified its social inclusion strategy for education and is making satisfactory progress with a broader preventative strategy. In addition, the overview and scrutiny committee's focus on social inclusion has helped to drive forward improvements. Nonetheless, much remains to be done to convince schools and other partners of the council's commitment.

78. Officers provide effective support for the development of policies. There is, however, a vacancy in permanent officer leadership for the children and young people portfolio. Furthermore, member leadership is supportive but insufficiently strategic. These factors mean that the capacity of this function to develop and to co-ordinate the provision of all services to vulnerable children and young people is insecure. Nevertheless, individual education services are providing some highly satisfactory support to schools and vulnerable children. Support for looked after children is good and some other services have significant strengths, for example behaviour support and the PRUs. The performance and attendance of most targeted groups have improved and exclusions have reduced. All services show evidence of improvement in the guidance and support provided for schools.

79. Data are used well across services to identify need, to target improvement and to monitor progress. Underlying trends are identified, for example in racist incidents and patterns of exclusion. Data sharing between different agencies has improved, though the LEA knows that further improvements are required.

80. Links between agencies are mostly satisfactory, though the current shortage of social workers affects the support for some vulnerable or at-risk children. Links with different portfolios and teams are productive, for example with the school improvement service in supporting and monitoring the PRUs. Good links with the youth and community service increasingly result in joint projects such as summer universities. Formal links exist to represent minority ethnic communities but these do not yet constitute partnerships where there are mutual trust and shared priorities. Regeneration projects, for example the 'fresh start project' in Wycombe, promote high educational achievement.

Recommendation

- Strengthen the council's leadership of social inclusion and appoint a strong strategic manager for the children and young people portfolio.

Provision for pupils educated other than at school

81. This aspect of the LEA's work is satisfactory. The LEA's strategy, described in the behaviour support plan, sets out initiatives designed to meet five key issues. It does not, however, make clear the full range, quality, or cost of provision for pupils with no school place. A comprehensive database has been established to track the location of individual pupils. Sound procedures are in place to ensure that pupils off the roll of a school are followed up and identified. Some schools take their own responsibilities in this regard too lightly.

82. Revised guidance on exclusions has been issued to schools and there are clear procedures for the process of referral and identifying alternative provision. Four of the five PRUs have been inspected and the reports show highly effective and good teaching, and strong to excellent leadership. Schools value the work of the units. The regular monitoring of PRU pupils shows satisfactory progress, attainment and attendance. The units benefit from school improvement support and challenge similar to mainstream schools. A secondary PRU designated with serious weaknesses in 2003 was subject to a carefully planned closure. The current gap in provision for excluded secondary-aged special school pupils, particularly those with emotional and behavioural difficulties, is being addressed by the LEA.

83. The LEA has worked with partners to establish a good and developing range of alternative provision. At Key Stages 1, 2 and 4, statutory requirements for full-time and appropriate education are met. The LEA is rightly prioritising a reduction in Key Stage 3 exclusions, but too many of these pupils do not receive full-time teaching. The review of reintegration procedures, with an objective of gaining the support of the admissions forum for more timely and suitable outcomes, is not yet concluded. Local PRUs give good support to hospital school provision in Stoke Mandeville and High Wycombe.

Recommendation

- Move swiftly to improve provision for Key Stage 3 pupils who are out of school.

Support for attendance

84. The LEA's support for attendance remains highly satisfactory. Schools and the LEA have worked hard together to maintain high rates of attendance. In 2002, these were in line with statistical neighbours and well above the national average. Attendance is audited regularly and action is targeted at specific schools and vulnerable groups. The procedures for tracking the attendance of looked after children are now more rigorous than at the previous inspection. Feedback to schools on attendance is both oral and written. More formal arrangements involving governors are planned. Education welfare officers contribute useful information to the meetings of area school improvement teams.

85. Schools are provided with clear guidance and instructions for referrals. However, the appropriate targeted focus on vulnerable schools and groups is not fully appreciated by all schools. The LEA has not clearly communicated the rationale behind its differentiated support and some schools continue to report less than effective support. Training is well developed and, while it is offered to all schools, it is also targeted towards priority groups, for example newly-qualified teachers.

86. The LEA makes full use of its legal powers and co-operates well with other agencies. The number of prosecutions increased from four in 2001/02 to 29 in 2002/03 and these were supported by a rigorous cross-border protocol. Prosecution has proved considerably more effective in Buckinghamshire than nationally. Increased incidence of child employment in the county, due partly to opportunities in the entertainment industry, has increased the demands on the half-time post devoted to this work.

Support for behaviour

87. Support for behaviour in schools remains highly satisfactory and there are examples of very good practice in some parts of the county. The LEA has responded well to the recommendation in the previous inspection report that a more analytical approach should be taken to exclusions, including matching support more closely to area needs. This has been achieved largely by managing support for behaviour through local PRUs. Good quality guidance is now available to, and recognised by, schools. The PRUs are funded to support outreach work, which is well regarded by most schools. Short-term placements in the units are available and schools pay a proportion of their pupil-related budget for this service. Staff from the PRUs work well with other agencies to provide a coherent service and appropriate referrals, and share information with these agencies as far as is possible.

88. The LEA has made good management use of data, which provide discrete information about key groups and reasons for exclusion. The level of exclusions continues to be below national and statistical neighbour averages, although the number of pupils permanently excluded from special schools or with statements was previously a cause for concern. Concerted action in partnership with schools has been successful in reducing this from 15% of the total in 2001/02 to 10% in 2002/03. Similar targeting on physical

aggression, and for drugs-related incidents in Chiltern and South Bucks, has significantly reduced permanent exclusions for these reasons. There has, however, been some rise in related fixed-term exclusions. Behaviour support staff make a good contribution to discussion about school improvement.

89. A range of training provision is supported by a number of innovative projects and initiatives, many of them focussing on early intervention. The six learning support centres, located in upper schools, have had a positive effect on reducing exclusions at Key Stage 3. The LEA has provided bridging funding to ensure the continuation of these centres following the withdrawal of DfES grant.

Support for health, safety, welfare and child protection

90. Only the child protection aspects of this function were subject to fieldwork during this inspection. The LEA's documentary evidence on health and safety was scrutinised. Support for this function as a whole remains satisfactory, as it was at the time of the previous inspection. The LEA takes reasonable precautions to meet its responsibilities for health, safety and child protection. It is developing, in conjunction with partners, a wider range of guidance and better analysis of data for monitoring.

91. Arrangements for informing schools of their responsibilities in protecting children are sound. Guidance is updated regularly. Well-rated training on child protection is provided for schools and governors. Although the register of designated teachers is monitored, the LEA is not sufficiently proactive in ensuring that all attend training regularly.

92. The LEA is an active member of the Area Child Protection Committee and of a local consortium of LEAs working to improve child protection practices. Officers have taken a lead in developing a range of new guidance and policies for use locally. Independent reviews of serious cases have led to changes of practice in individual schools. Officers in the LEA and social services have begun to collate data on referrals from schools to identify unmet training needs and good practice in child protection.

93. The LEA has a clear line of referral for child protection concerns through the education welfare service, which is represented at all child protection case conferences. While strategic relationships with other agencies involved in child protection have generally improved, a shortage of social workers adversely affects the quality of advice and support available to schools.

Provision for looked after children

94. Support for looked after children is good. It is a high priority of the council and very good progress has been made in providing educational and pastoral support. This high-quality provision has led to a significant improvement in pupils' performance and attendance and to a low level of permanent exclusion. The council has made good progress towards meeting its targets.

95. The team that supports the education of children in public care (ECPC) provides dynamic leadership, monitoring and support for schools and children. It collects and shares

data with other agencies. The team includes staff from different agencies, such as health, and links between services to support vulnerable children are generally very effective. The ECPC team is able partially to offset the local shortage of social workers by good links with the team leaders in social services. Nonetheless, this shortage leaves a gap in the social care support available to children. The ECPC team provides well-rated training and support for teachers, including designated teachers and newly-qualified teachers. The team is rigorous in its monitoring of children, to ensure that they make progress and to avoid any being lost from the system, and of schools, to ensure that they are carrying out their responsibilities.

96. Personal education plans are in place for 83% of pupils currently in the care of the local authority, who are all encouraged to take part in drawing them up. A particular strength is the additional educational support provided for looked after children, targeted to individual need. This support is also provided for children in care who live outside the county. In co-operation with the Connexions service, educational monitoring and support are to be extended to young people leaving care post-16.

Promoting racial equality

97. The promotion of race equality is highly satisfactory. The council has now put in place a race equality policy which incorporates education policies. The education service has increasingly targeted its work on raising the achievement of underperforming minority ethnic groups, with some success. The leadership by officers in this area is good.

98. Clear guidance is provided for schools on handling and reporting racist incidents and, this year, all schools have returned reports. These are analysed and underlying patterns are beginning to be identified. Officers recognise that there is still more to do to develop the quality of returns. Some valuable initiatives are underway to improve the recruitment and promotion of minority ethnic staff and governors. A range of activities has successfully supported targeted groups of pupils.

99. There are appropriate structures in place for monitoring policies for race equality and outcomes, both within the council and by representative groups from the community. The diversity steering group, which is chaired by a strategic manager and the deputy leader of the council, monitors development across the council. Officers also report to three independent Race Equality Councils. Regrettably, although appropriate systems and structures exist for consultation and communication, at present many community representatives are mistrustful of the council's commitment to promote racial equality. Officers are aware that more needs to be done to develop a mature partnership where all those involved work together effectively to common goals.

Appendix A: Record of Judgement Recording Statements

Name of LEA :	Buckinghamshire Local Education Authority
LEA number:	825
Reporting Inspector:	Jillian Munday HMI
Date of Inspection:	February 2004

No	Required Inspection Judgement	Grade	Fieldwork*
	Context of the LEA		
1	The socio-economic context of the LEA	1	
	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	3	
	Section 1: Corporate strategy and LEA leadership		
1.1	The effectiveness of corporate planning for the education of children and young people	2	
1.2	The implementation of corporate planning for education	3	
1.3	The effectiveness of LEA decision-making	5	
1.4	The extent to which the LEA targets resources on priorities	5	
1.5	The extent to which the LEA has in place effective strategies to promote continuous improvement, including Best Value	3	
1.6	The leadership provided by elected members (including quality of advice)	5	
1.7	The quality of leadership provided by senior officers	4	
1.8	The effectiveness of partnerships and collaboration between agencies in support of priorities	3	

1.9	Support for early years' education	2	NF
1.10	Support for 14 – 19 education	3	
1.11	The effectiveness of the LEA in discharging asset management planning	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	1	
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	2	
2.6	The extent to which the LEA's support to schools is focused on areas of greatest need	2	NF
2.7	The effectiveness of the LEA's identification of and intervention in underperforming schools	2	
2.8	The extent to which the LEA is successful in assuring the supply and quality of teachers	2	NF
2.9	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to the provision of school places	3	
2.10	The effectiveness of the LEA in relation to admissions to schools	3	
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	2	
3.3	Support for information and communication technology	2	

3.4	Support for the national initiative to raise standards at KS3	2	NF
3.5	Support for raising the achievement of minority ethnic pupils, including Gypsy/ Traveller children	3	
3.6	Support to schools for gifted and talented pupils	2	NF
3.7	Support to school governors	2	
3.8	The planning and provision of services to support school management	3	
3.8a	The planning and provision of financial services in supporting school management	4	
3.8b	The planning and provision of HR services in supporting school management	4	NF
3.8c	The planning and provision of property services in supporting school management	4	NF
3.8d	The planning and provision of information management services in supporting school management	3	NF
3.9	The effectiveness and value for money of services supporting school management	3	NF
3.10	The planning and provision of services supporting school improvement, particularly inspection and advisory and/or school effectiveness services	3	
3.11	The effectiveness and value for money of services supporting school improvement, particularly inspection and advisory and/or school effectiveness services	3	
Section 4: Support for special educational needs (SEN)			
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	3	
4.3	The effectiveness of the LEA in exercising its SEN functions to support school improvement	3	
4.4	The extent to which the LEA exercises its SEN functions in a	5	

	way which provides value for money		
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 school	3	
5.5	Support for health, safety, welfare and child protection	4	
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

Appendix B

Context of the inspection

This inspection of Buckinghamshire 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 2000
- 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 reports 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">• support for early years;• supply and quality of teachers;• support for the national initiative at Key Stage 3;• support for gifted and talented pupils;• human resources, property and information management services;• health and safety;• effectiveness and value for money of services 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

Buckinghamshire is a largely affluent county with some pockets of comparative disadvantage. While 64 of its 124 wards are among the 10% most advantaged nationally, five wards are among the 20% most deprived. Unemployment is low. Buckinghamshire has 40% of its population living in rural wards. House prices are high and this, coupled with its close proximity to London, affects recruitment of officers, teachers and others who work with children and young people.

The population of the county, currently 482,577, is expected to show a slight growth by 2011, mainly in elderly residents. There are proposals for a number of housing developments in the area. Without these developments, the number of primary-aged pupils is expected to decline by 6,500 and of secondary pupils by 800, from a peak in 2005. This demographic change has significant implications for school place planning. Currently there are 40,489 pupils in primary schools and 34,217 pupils attending secondary schools. A further 157 are in nursery schools, 159 are placed in pupil referral units and 1,094 are in special schools. A total of 9,900 three- and four-year-olds benefit from early years education and care, 5,200 of whom are in nursery and primary schools. Approximately 6% of the school population is of Pakistani origin and a further 1% is of Black Caribbean heritage. In 2002/03, 358 Gypsy and Traveller children were educated by the LEA.

The percentage of pupils in maintained primary and secondary schools eligible for free school meals is well below national averages. In special schools, this percentage is high at over 30%. The percentage of pupils with a statement of SEN is below the national average.

Since the previous inspection, a new council structure has been implemented. A portfolio model is now in place. The children and young people portfolio is responsible for children and families social care and special educational services. The schools portfolio includes school improvement; policy, planning and performance; and early years and childcare. These portfolios have been designed to facilitate joint and flexible approaches to the provision of services to the community.

The performance of schools

As at the time of the previous inspection, the overall attainment of pupils in Buckinghamshire remains above or well above national averages at all key stages. In particular:

- attainment at higher levels within each key stage is consistently well above national averages;
- pupils make good progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3;
- Key Stage 3 results improved in 2003 and are well above national figures;
- results in Key Stage 4 show steady improvement and are well above the national average. Targets for 2002 were exceeded and it is likely that those for 2004 will also be achieved.

These overall figures, however, mask some significant issues for the LEA. For example:

- standards attained by pupils from some minority ethnic groups, although improved, are still too low;
- the aspirational Key Stage 2 statutory targets for 2002 were not met in English or mathematics, albeit by an amount below the national average. It is unlikely that the LEA will meet its high targets for 2004, but it should achieve its school aggregate targets. The latter are within approximately 5% of the LEA targets and are the result of an appropriately challenging and demanding target-setting process;
- despite remaining well above national averages and above the performance of all statistical neighbours, Key Stage 2 Level 5 English results between 2000 and 2003 show an overall downward trend;
- Key Stage 4 results continue to show some unacceptable variations between similar schools, and from year to year within the same schools.

Attendance figures are above or well above average. Although absence is lower than the national average, unauthorised absence is increasing. Permanent exclusions are decreasing, but fixed-term exclusions of more than five days are increasing in both primary and secondary schools.

Funding data for the LEA

SCHOOLS BUDGET	Buckinghamshire	Statistical neighbours average	County Average	ENGLAND AVERAGE
	£ per pupil	£ per pupil	£ per pupil	£ per pupil
Individual schools budget	2,514	2,562	2,540	2,708
Standards fund delegated	69	54	56	61
Education for under fives	96	107	91	96
Strategic management	31	21	22	29
Special educational needs	160	109	110	120
Grants	30	14	14	53
Access	27	44	43	55
Capital expenditure from revenue	57	29	28	24
TOTAL SCHOOLS BUDGET	2,984	2,940	2,905	3,145
Schools Formula Spending Share	2,671	2,672	2,654	2,904

Source: DfES Comparative Tables 2003-04

LEA BUDGET	Buckinghamshire	Statistical neighbours average	County Average	ENGLAND AVERAGE
	£ per pupil	£ per pupil	£ per pupil	£ per pupil
Strategic management	82	79	82	95
Specific Grants	0	12	12	16
Special educational needs	28	26	27	32
School improvement	39	31	34	36
Access	235	166	173	133
Capital expenditure from revenue	1	4	2	2
Youth and Community	57	50	50	74
TOTAL LEA BUDGET	441	368	379	388

Source: DfES Comparative Tables 2003-04

Note: All figures are net

Notes