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LOCAL EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

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INTRODUCTION

1. This inspection was carried out by OFSTED in conjunction with the Audit Commission under Section 38 of the Education Act 1997. The inspection used the *Framework for the Inspection of Local Education Authorities* (December 2001) which focuses on the effectiveness of local education authority (LEA) work to support school improvement. The inspection also took account of the Local Government Act 1999, insofar as it relates to work undertaken by the LEA on Best Value. The previous inspection of the LEA took place in autumn 1997; the report was published in January 1998.

2. The inspection was partly based on data, some of which was provided by the LEA, on school inspection information and audit reports, on documentation and discussions with LEA elected members, focus groups of headteachers, other staff and governors, staff in the education department and in other council departments and representatives of the LEA's partners. Use was also made of the LEA's own self-evaluation. In addition, a questionnaire seeking views on aspects of the LEA's work was circulated to all its schools. The response rate was 68 per cent.

3. The inspection also involved studies of the effectiveness of particular aspects of the LEA's work through visits to five primary schools, two secondary schools and one special school. The visits tested the views of headteachers and other staff on the key aspects of the LEA's strategy, particularly the effectiveness of support to schools causing concern. The inspection also took account of relevant evidence from Her Majesty's Inspectors' national monitoring work.

COMMENTARY

4. Birmingham is a major city, with areas of affluence, but many more of considerable poverty, and high levels of deprivation overall. It has a richly diverse population; the proportion of minority ethnic pupils was 43 per cent in 2001.

5. The LEA has done much, with its schools, to overcome the educational effects of this high degree of disadvantage. Since 1997, the attainment of pupils has risen at almost all levels at a rate faster than the national average. In 1998, OFSTED reported that Birmingham was a very well run LEA. It is now clear that it is much more than that. It is one of a very small number of LEAs which stand as an example to all others of what can be done, even in the most demanding urban environments.

6. Critical to its success has been its consistency of approach over a long period, a high level of funding, dedicated and uniformly effective work by officers, very capable political leadership, but above all the energising and inspirational example set by the chief education officer.

7. Overall, the LEA is now very effective. Performance in functions is often good or very good, and is at least satisfactory in all except two. Processes for ensuring continuous improvement are good and the LEA is not complacent. Support for children in public care has been prioritised by the council and is improving, but is not yet satisfactory.

8. The following functions are exercised particularly effectively:

- the leadership for education provided by senior officers and elected members;
- corporate planning and scrutiny of plans and performance in education;
- the effectiveness of strategies to promote continuous improvement;
- the strategy for school improvement and its implementation;
- leadership and management of services for school improvement;
- targeting resources on priorities;
- definition of monitoring, challenge and intervention;
- monitoring schools and challenging them to improve, including the use made of performance data;
- identification and intervention in under-performing schools;
- support for ethnic minority groups including Travellers;
- support to schools for gifted and talented pupils;
- support for school leadership and management;
- support for assuring the supply and quality of teachers;
- provision of school places;
- provision for pupils without a school place;
- effectiveness of combating racism;
- support for early years; and
- partnership working including partnership with schools.

9. The following functions are not performed adequately:

- support for children in public care; and

- property services.

10. The leadership provided by the chief education officer is outstanding, and has contributed significantly to the 'can do' and aspirational culture demonstrated by headteachers and others interviewed during the inspection, without which such a good rate of improvement is unlikely to have been achieved. This culture was noted during the last inspection, but is now much more securely embedded, in the education department and in schools. The chief education officer continues to be very well supported by senior officers. Elected members also provide very good leadership. They continue to prioritise and support education, and those with a leading role in education show a high level of understanding of relevant issues. The council has improved the speed and transparency of decision making, and scrutiny in education is particularly good.

11. The LEA has demonstrated that it has a very good capacity to improve, and to take action on the recommendations made in this report.

SECTION 1: THE LEA STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Context

12. Birmingham is a major city with over a million inhabitants. It has areas of affluence, but many more of considerable poverty and high levels of deprivation remain. Despite recent success in regenerating the city centre, overall indices of disadvantage are much higher than those found nationally. Birmingham is the 23rd most deprived district, out of 352, in terms of the average of ward scores, in the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions Indices of Deprivation 2000. Unemployment in 2001 at 7.9 per cent, is more than double the national average. In some parts of the city this rises to over 20 per cent. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals in 2001 was well above average at 34 per cent compared with 18 per cent nationally.

13. Birmingham continues to be a richly diverse city. The proportion of minority ethnic pupils was 43 per cent in 2001, well above the national average of 12.1 per cent (2000 figure). This is a three per cent increase compared with the situation in 1997. There has been a recent increase in the number of asylum seekers and refugees, which rose to just over 500 between June 2000 and July 2001.

14. The school-age population of the LEA has risen to just over 179,000. The proportion of pupils moving between schools within the school year remains high, at 19 per cent in 2001 for primary schools and ten per cent for secondary schools.

15. In 2000, the proportion of primary and secondary school age pupils with statements of special educational need was similar to the national average (2.8 per cent and 4.1 per cent compared with 2.7 per cent and 4.0 per cent nationally). The proportions educated in special schools were well above the national average. However the percentage of pupils with statements of special educational need educated in mainstream schools has increased from 37 per cent in 1997 to 61 per cent in 2001.

16. The LEA maintains 25 nursery schools, 323 primary schools, 78 secondary schools, 29 special schools and 31 special units. The 22 former grant maintained schools are now foundation schools. The number of primary schools has reduced by four following mergers of separate infant and junior schools. Two secondary schools have closed. Primary school rolls are larger than average. In 2001, 66 primary schools had more than 400 pupils. Roughly nine per cent of secondary age pupils attend eight selective grammar schools. There are ten non-selective girls' schools and five non-selective boys' schools. The imbalance of single sex girls' to single sex boys' school places has led to an imbalance of girls to boys in co-educational schools. Forty-two of the secondary schools have sixth forms, eight of which have fewer than 100 pupils compared with 13 in 1997.

17. Birmingham joined the Excellence in Cities initiative in 2000. There are two large Education Action Zones within the LEA which were started in 1999. The LEA has a local Public Service Agreement which came into effect in April 2001.

Performance

18. In broad terms, pupils' performance is below the national average but close to or above the average for similar authorities. Generally, the rate of improvement since 1997 is above or well above the national average. The numbers of schools subject to special measures, with serious weaknesses or meeting the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) criteria for being in challenging circumstances, have reduced significantly.

- The baseline assessment scores of pupils on entry to school have improved since 1997 and indicate that attainment on entry is just below the average of that found more generally.
- In 2001, pupils' attainment in national tests at the end of key stages 1, 2 and 3 was below the national average. Compared with similar authorities attainment was average, apart from Key Stage 2 where it was above average.
- In 2001, the proportion of pupils gaining 5+ grades A*-C at GCSE (41.4 per cent) was below the national average (48.4 per cent) but above the average for similar authorities (32.6 per cent). The proportion gaining 1+ grades A*-G (95.9 per cent) was similar to the national average (96.1 per cent) and above the average for similar authorities (94.4 per cent). At 36.4, the average points score was below the national average of 39.0, but above the average of 33.6 for similar authorities.
- In 2000, the average point score for two or more entries at A-level was close to the national average, and above the average for similar authorities.
- At Key Stage 1, the rate of improvement between 1997 and 2001 was broadly in line with the national trend.
- At Key Stage 2, the rate of improvement between 1997 and 2001 in English, mathematics and science was above or well above the national trend. In English there was an improvement of 14.1 per cent, compared with 11.7 per cent nationally. In mathematics the improvement was 12.5 per cent, compared with 8.7 per cent nationally. Birmingham remains in the top third of most improving LEAs. The proportion of schools in the lowest performance quartile nationally has reduced, but in 2000, 39 per cent of schools remained in this quartile for English and 36 per cent for mathematics.
- At Key Stage 3, the rate of improvement for pupils achieving Level 5 or above between 1997 and 2001 was above the national trend in English, mathematics and science.
- At GCSE, the rate of improvement between 1997 and 2000 was above that seen nationally, and well above when considering the proportion of pupils gaining one or more grades A*-G and five or more grades A*-G. However, a quarter of schools made less than two per cent improvement in 5 A*-C grades over this period.
- The LEA identifies pupils of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and African Caribbean heritage as underachieving, together with white boys from disadvantaged backgrounds. LEA data show the gap is narrowing for some groups at some key stages, but not consistently.
- The proportion of schools judged by OFSTED to require special measures or to have serious weaknesses is low and has reduced significantly since 1997. In

January 2002 there were four schools in special measures and three with serious weaknesses. The percentage of secondary schools falling within the DfES category of being in challenging circumstances has reduced from over 40 to 23.

- Based on their last inspection, a higher proportion of primary schools was judged by OFSTED to be good or very good than nationally in terms of quality of education and management and efficiency. A lower proportion was judged to be good or very good than is the case nationally in terms of standards and school climate.
- Based on their last inspection, secondary school inspection grades were lower than the national average for the composite grades for standards, quality of education, management and efficiency and school climate. Apart from the area of school climate, grades were above the average for similar authorities.
- Attendance in 2000 was well below the national average in primary schools, and below the national average in secondary schools. Attendance in both phases improved at faster than the average rate between 1997 and 2000.
- Permanent exclusions are higher than the national average in primary and secondary schools. The number of permanent exclusions has reduced from 318 in 1996/97 to a provisional figure of 198 in 2000/2001. While the rate of improvement at secondary level is lower than that found nationally, Birmingham achieved the national target of reducing permanent exclusions by a third a year earlier than the original target date of 2002.

Funding

19. Birmingham's Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) for education is the 5th largest per pupil outside London, in addition, in 2001/02 the city council added a further £26 million (5 per cent) to this. This has been the pattern since 1995.

20. Under Fair Funding regulations Birmingham retains £406 per pupil compared to the metropolitan and national averages of £423 and £447 respectively. By using economies of scale effectively, the LEA is able adequately to fund its functions while also being one of the highest delegating education authorities. All the government's financial targets for 'passporting' additional funds and increases to pupil funding have been met. Schools in Birmingham are also relatively well resourced. Average delegated funding per pupil in Birmingham is £2748 compared to the metropolitan borough average of £2467 and the national average of £2496.

21. Some of the more significant changes in the distribution of funds within the education service since the last inspection are: administrative costs and retained Standards Fund have reduced, resources to support various aspects of inclusion work have increased, and the significant increase in the money retained for school improvement brings this area up to the national average.

22. The LEA has been successful in attracting an extra £113 million this year from a variety of grants, and where relevant, matched funding has been achieved without direct detriment to the individual schools budget. The co-ordination of much of this extra resource towards meeting key LEA objectives is a strength, and is based on the increasing use of an effective appraisal mechanism which helps officers assess both the appropriateness and potential of different sources of grant funding.

23. Funding for capital projects until 1999/2000, during which year the LEA spent only £8 million, was too low to make any significant impact. However, improved government funding, increased borrowing, more contributions from revenue and a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) scheme have increased planned expenditure in the current year to £30.5 million.

Council structure

24. The city council consists of 117 elected members made up as follows: 67 Labour, 28 Conservative, 17 Liberal Democrat and five People's Justice Party. The full council meets monthly. The executive comprises the leader of the council and a cabinet of nine members each of whom holds a portfolio. Decisions are made by the cabinet or individual cabinet member. One member of the cabinet has the portfolio for education and lifelong learning. The portfolio holder is advised by a group of five councillors.

25. Seven overview and scrutiny committees are responsible for scrutinising and reviewing the policies and performance of the executive and the council as a whole. One of these, entitled 'learning city', deals with educational matters. The present structures have replaced the education committee and services sub-committee, and have an extended and modernised brief. There are also 39 ward (local) committees.

26. Each of the nine portfolio areas is served by a lead officer. These, together with the chief executive and other key officers, form the chief officers' group. At present the position of chief executive is vacant and the responsibilities are shared between four of the chief officers including the chief education officer, as an interim measure.

27. The chief education officer has a deputy, and a senior team of seven assistant directors each heading up a division. At the time of the inspection the position of deputy had been vacant for a year; the new postholder arrived mid-way through the inspection. Compared with the position in 1997, some functions have been moved to different divisions in order to achieve greater coherence.

The LEA strategy for school improvement

28. The LEA's school improvement strategy, which incorporates the Education Development Plan (EDP), is very good, and the LEA has made good progress in implementing the strategy. The previous inspection predates the requirement for LEAs to have an EDP. The report stated that primary and secondary schools were improving at a faster than national rate, although less consistently at Key Stage 2, and that the LEA had made a considerable contribution to this. However, there were recommendations including encouraging schools to focus on literacy and numeracy, and securing schools' commitment to the LEA's published targets.

29. The Education Development Plan 1999-2002 identified eight priorities for school improvement. They are:

- Raise standards of achievement, particularly in literacy and numeracy.
- Ensure continuity and progression across all phases.

- Extend professional development.
- Improve attendance and motivation and address the needs of underachieving groups.
- Establish and develop learning networks to support school improvement.
- Identify and support schools causing concern.
- Improve early years provision.
- Promote and extend the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) as a tool for school improvement.

30. Challenging performance targets were set out in the original EDP. The LEA chose, for example, to set a 2002 target of 80 per cent of pupils at Key Stage 2 reaching Level 4 or above for English, a figure which was five per cent above the upper end of the target range suggested by the DfES. Subsequently, most targets have been revised upwards twice; firstly, when the LEA joined the Excellence in Cities initiative and secondly, following Birmingham's recent local Public Service Agreement with the government. As part of this agreement, the LEA has set particularly ambitious targets for attainment at Key Stages 3 and 4, and for the educational achievements of children in public care. The latest set of targets are all very challenging.

31. The EDP and other major initiatives together present a coherent strategy for school improvement. The Excellence in Cities initiative is fully incorporated into the EDP, in a way which is most helpful for schools. The EDP includes cross references to the work of the Education Action Zones and there are specific activities which support the zones. Activities are incorporated from other statutory plans, as well as those which are funded by the Single Regeneration Budget. Thus to a considerable extent the other plans and initiatives are integrated with, and reinforce and strengthen, the overall strategy for improvement.

32. The original EDP was based on a thorough audit of strengths and weaknesses which, together with national imperatives, led to the identification of relevant priorities. The activities support the priorities and are themselves underpinned by detailed action planning. There is now an appropriate focus on literacy and numeracy. Thorough procedures for monitoring and evaluation are built into the annual planning cycle. Progress against targets is rigorously analysed and the completion of activities checked for each priority, although evaluation reports for the different priorities are somewhat variable in quality. The EDP has been regularly revised, updated and improved.

33. The LEA has consulted very effectively on the EDP, using a variety of mechanisms including well publicised 'road shows'. Headteachers accept and welcome the aspirational targets set by the LEA, and show a determination to try to meet them, and an understanding of how this might be achieved. Extensive consultation has also taken place on the new plan which comes into effect from April 2002. As a consequence of the council's Public Service Agreement, Birmingham is not required to produce a new EDP. Instead it is to produce a single overarching plan for education, called the Local Education Standards Strategy. This was being prepared at the time of the inspection. Again, headteachers showed a knowledge of, and a commitment to, the main priorities being put forward which had in turn been shaped by the consultation process, and are fewer and more focused than those in

the original plan. The LEA has the data to further increase the already good precision of targeting when the new strategy is implemented.

34. Good progress has been made in implementing the strategy for improvement. In view of the size and complexity of Birmingham, the scale of the problems faced by its schools and their previous levels of attainment, together with the very challenging targets set, good progress has been made towards reaching those targets. The rate of improvement since 1997 in Key Stages 2, 3 and 4 is above or well above the national average. Although the rate of improvement slowed in 2001, this was not by as much as nationally. At all key stages there remains a significant gap between the 2001 results and the targets set for 2002 and beyond. However the LEA is putting in place innovative and very promising strategies to help it reach those targets, and is greatly aided in this by the positive attitudes and commitment shown by schools. The strategies for closing the gap include the use of sophisticated data to target support more precisely at individual pupils and schools and an initiative led by the chief education officer to encourage a large group of year 10 pupils, currently predicted to gain three grades A*-C at GCSE, to make a sustained improvement. The LEA already has examples of schools that have made the necessary levels of improvement. This information is available to all schools and is encouraging them to believe that such a leap forward is possible. The LEA was close to achieving its interim 2001 targets for exclusions and unauthorised absence in primary schools, but further from its target for unauthorised absence in secondary schools.

The allocation of resources to priorities

35. Birmingham LEA is good at allocating its resources to its priorities and it has built on the position outlined in the previous inspection report. The council has not been deflected away from its key priority, which is 'the learning city', despite budgetary pressures from other departments. There is widespread understanding of and commitment to this priority across the council, and the process for establishing the level of funding for each department is appropriately rigorous. All departments are, rightly, challenged both to bid for resources and demonstrate the improvements which they have brought about. Education has consistently been able to show high levels of progress for its investment.

36. The LEA also resources its schools well, giving them tangible evidence of its commitment and its trust in them to deliver. However, as for the education department, headteachers and school staff are left in no doubt that this brings with it accountability and the challenge to deliver. This is accepted and provides the basis for the very strong partnerships evident throughout the education service.

37. Birmingham has good processes to ensure that appropriate grant funds are bid for and it has been very successful in the amounts secured. The recent emphasis on the inclusion agenda also illustrates how well the LEA can harness a wide range of funding streams to enable schools to make effective use of such resources. This principle is appropriately being applied to the current proposals both to more sharply focus special educational needs resources on children's actual needs, and to delegate these resources to schools so they have more flexibility over their use.

38. Stakeholders are well consulted on the regular reviews of the funding formula which continues to target resources effectively on areas of need. Schools are also provided with very good explanatory materials about their budget allocation, including a particularly clear breakdown of resources for special educational needs. Schools were rightly appreciative of these in the school survey and interviews.

39. Budget planning, monitoring and control by both the education department and schools are good. The variance from the total LEA budget over recent years has been very small (under 0.01 per cent), and apart from a small number of exceptions, school budgets are in good shape. These exceptions are closely monitored, regularly reported on and where necessary, schools are being challenged and supported to bring them in line over agreed periods.

40. The processes for allocating capital resources to needs has improved and is now highly satisfactory. Planned estimates of expenditure and potential income from identified sources enable appropriately prioritised bids to be made into the council's 'single capital pot'. However, the LEA has not carried out an estimate of the capital requirements of its inclusion plan to the same level of detail as it has for the revenue costs of this initiative.

Structure for achieving continuous improvement and Best Value

41. Birmingham has good, robust strategies in place to ensure continuous improvement in education. Scrutiny arrangements are excellent. The education overview and scrutiny committee is appropriately constructed involving opposition, diocesan and parental representatives, and is led wisely and energetically. Members of the committee have a very clear understanding of its agreed roles, and there is much evidence of its effectiveness. As well as being able to call in any significant decision, oversee Best Value reviews, and scrutinise statutory and business plans the committee has developed a very effective programme of investigative reports. Recently these have focused on the provision of statements for pupils with special educational needs, youngsters who are disconnected from education, and the provision of school places in north Birmingham. Each issue was thoroughly researched, reported on, and far-reaching recommendations made. The council has also improved its processes to ensure implementation of the reports is carefully monitored and reported.

42. Procedures for carrying out Best Value reviews are satisfactory and improving. In June 2001, the external auditor gave an unqualified opinion on the Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP), but provided the council with some suggestions for improvements. These have been accepted, most having been identified during a self-assessment process, and an action plan is being implemented. Current reviews are appropriately based on themes such as 'property' and 'people' services. There are sensible arrangements for ensuring review teams are challenged about their thinking, and officers display a clear commitment to ensuring the process delivers improvement. Schools also have been provided with very good materials and advice to enable them to understand and apply Best Value principles although the LEA does not have a mechanism for ensuring all schools report on how they are applying these.

43. At service level, annual surveys of satisfaction are carried out and the results of these can be tracked through into improvement targets within business plans and periodic reports to elected members on progress against these targets. Performance management structures ensure that individual staff can identify their personal improvement targets within the key objectives of the department. This is also true at the highest level, where the chief education officer and the assistant directors have bi-annual reviews of targets.

44. Furthermore, the culture within the LEA is one of striving for improvement. This is seen in the department's push to be 'at the leading edge' of practice, and in the attitudes consistently displayed by those interviewed during the inspection.

SECTION 2: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Summary of effectiveness of LEA's support for school improvement

45. The LEA's support for school improvement is good and gives good value for money. Most functions are carried out well or very well. The highest priority is accorded to raising standards in schools. Monitoring their performance to ensure that support can be quickly targeted to schools where it is most needed is central to the total strategy for school improvement, and this aspect of the work, backed by very good quality data, is of very high quality. There are equally good and effective arrangements to provide schools with the challenge needed to help them continue to improve, and appropriate intervention strategies to help those that need additional support to improve as quickly as possible. Apart from the advisory service, other services are also focused on school improvement, and provide support that is largely effective.

Effectiveness of services to support school improvement

46. The main LEA agency for school improvement is the Birmingham advisory and support service. The last inspection found the service to be very well managed, with high quality planning which reflected the LEA's priorities. However, certain less satisfactory features were noted. Since then, steps have been taken to deal with all these matters.

47. The leadership of the service has continued to improve and is very good. It is distinguished by vision, imagination and enterprise. Developing the way it works to meet the requirements of the Code of Practice on LEA-School Relations introduced since the last inspection has been skilfully managed. The service has been reorganised with the result that its contribution to school improvement is now of very high quality. The range of its activities has widened, partly as a result of support services for ethnic minority pupils including Travellers being incorporated within the advisory service, and partly through some redefining of the range of functions embodied in school improvement.

48. The service is now organised in three 'partnerships' for monitoring and advice, support and development respectively. The balance of expertise within the team is now good. It has been improved as a result of new appointments including those with senior management experience in secondary schools to match the already strong representation of primary management experience. The nature of the link advisers' role has been redefined in consultation with schools to emphasise their responsibilities for monitoring and challenge.

49. The work is well planned and guided by carefully defined targets both for individual members and for the service as a whole. The service takes appropriate steps to evaluate its work. An advisory body meets termly to help plan and evaluate its provision, and heads are invited to complete an evaluation *proforma* for every visit. A recently introduced series of publications, called 'The Difference We're Making', evaluates its impact on various aspects of the work of schools.

50. Performance management within the service is thorough and effective. It is a large service, though not unduly so given the number of schools in the LEA, and the per-pupil expenditure on school improvement is close to the national average. It represents good value for money.

Monitoring, challenge, and intervention

51. These functions are now clearly defined and well understood by headteachers. The last inspection report recommended that the LEA should make clearer to schools its approach to school improvement and in particular that it should take steps to ensure that key concepts such as monitoring and target setting were more fully understood in schools. Appropriate action has been taken to meet this recommendation. There has been extensive consultation, and discussions with headteachers during the inspection showed a very good understanding of both the LEA's responsibilities and how it carries them out. They also understand the necessity for intervention and the forms this intervention can take. In particular, there is an informed understanding of different kinds of challenge, and a recognition that it is not confined to setting targets. Several headteachers described discussions with their link adviser as extending their thinking and practice, and as causing them to question features of practice in their schools and to re-examine the assumptions underlying them.

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

52. This function is carried out very well, and has been developed since the last inspection. Arrangements for regular monitoring of schools are systematic and thorough and differentiated according to need. They are well understood and supported by the schools, and include a good level of challenge which stimulates review and development. All schools have a link adviser visit for a half-day each term. but no plans have been formulated to reduce this further for the most successful schools. At regular intervals, the LEA analyses data and other information about the school, together with the link adviser's reports. For schools where this analysis suggests that further monitoring would be profitable, a comprehensive evaluation takes place. If as a result of this a decision is reached that the school needs additional support and attention, it is placed in one of three categories according to the degree of support needed.

53. Support for under performing schools is well targeted. The principle of determining the amount of support provided with reference to the needs of and problems faced by each school clearly determines the deployment of most school improvement resources. For the majority of schools, any additional support resources are purchased either from the advisory service or from independent sources. Schools that are identified as a cause of concern, either by OFSTED inspection or by the LEA's own monitoring function, have additional allocations of funding with which to purchase additional support. These funds have to be spent on implementing the school improvement plan that has been agreed with the LEA. Most schools in such circumstances purchase additional support from the advisory service.

54. Data about each pupil's performance are carefully analysed by the statistics and research team to show both current attainment and progress since an earlier test, for individual pupils and the school as a whole. From this the LEA can identify schools that are making significant improvements albeit with below average overall attainment, and conversely those with high overall attainment but low improvement rates that may well be 'coasting', and react appropriately to both situations.

55. The termly link adviser visit to each school is central to the LEA's strategy for school improvement. The nature of the visit has changed and become more rigorous since the time of the last inspection. The circulation of an agenda for each round of visits has given added purpose and direction. Both the agendas and the advisers' notes seen during the inspection indicate that the discussions contain a suitable level of challenge to schools, prompting them to consider new structures and developments and to re-examine issues of long established practice.

56. Arrangements to monitor the overall quality of educational provision in Birmingham are similarly thorough. Part of this is done by analysis of OFSTED inspection reports, which are used to review the overall generic strengths and weaknesses of schools throughout the LEA. This is supplemented by an analysis of advisers' monitoring reports following their visits to schools, and a recent and valuable development is the periodic publication of reports setting out the key outcomes of each round of visits.

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

57. Identification of and support for under-performing schools are good. The development of a structured support arrangement is a significant improvement since the last inspection. Currently one secondary school and three primary schools are in special measures, and the LEA has already decided that the secondary school will close in the summer. Three further schools have been removed from special measures since autumn 2001. In addition, three primary schools continue to have serious weaknesses and a further three, two primary and one secondary, have been identified as under-achieving. This is a significant improvement in relation to the position two years ago, when 13 schools were in special measures and 8 had serious weaknesses. Twenty three per cent of secondary schools, including the under-achieving secondary, are currently designated as facing challenging circumstances on the DfES criteria, a reduction from over forty.

58. For each school that is identified as a cause of concern through OFSTED inspection, a monitoring and intervention group is established. The group works with the school, initially to prepare an action plan and a plan for the external support needed. A scrutiny of some of these plans during the inspection showed that every effort is made to customise the support programme to the current situation and needs of the school. Partnership reviews, in which advisers and members of the school staff undertake a joint evaluation of some aspect of the school's work, may also form a part of the programme, and links are usually formed with Beacon schools or, in the case of secondary schools, leading teachers.

59. Schools that are identified as needing additional support are placed in one of three categories depending on the degree of concern. The criteria for the

categorisation process are clearly set out and are well understood by schools. For most schools, a support leader is allocated, usually an adviser who is responsible with the headteacher for preparing the support programme.

60. Visits to schools that are or have been in receipt of support for these reasons indicate clearly that the strategies used are beneficial in nearly all cases, and that the LEA's arrangements for monitoring the impact of support are thorough and capable of determining when a change of intervention is likely to be profitable. Instances of schools being allowed to slip from serious weaknesses into special measures predate the improvements made to the advisory service.

61. In more extreme cases, the LEA has been prepared to adopt a firmer approach, including appropriate use of its statutory powers to issue formal warning. Equally, it has made use of competency procedures when necessary as a first step in bringing about the improvement of a school.

Support for literacy

62. Support to schools in raising standards in literacy is highly satisfactory. This was the judgement made in the last inspection. No detailed fieldwork was carried in the current inspection, but both the LEA's own view and the schools' view indicate that it continues to be highly satisfactory. In Spring 2001 the advisory and support service monitored work in literacy in primary schools across the city, using pupil performance data, lesson observation and interviews with headteachers and literacy coordinators. This produced evidence that the literacy strategy has had a positive impact on standards and on the quality of teaching and learning. This is supported by results in national tests which indicate that while at both key stages 1 and 2 overall performance continues to be below the national average, the rate of improvement in English at Key Stage 2 is greater than both the national average and that of similar authorities.

Support for numeracy

63. Support for numeracy is highly satisfactory. For the same reasons as literacy, no detailed fieldwork was carried out in the current inspection. The assessment of both the schools and the LEA is that this continues to be highly satisfactory. Results in national tests show an improvement of almost four per cent per year at Key Stage 1 until 2000, and that over the five years since 1997, the overall rate of improvement has been close to that of both similar authorities and nationally. The trend at Key Stage 2 is more uneven, and but over the five year period the total improvement has exceeded that of both similar authorities and the national average. A recent development has been the opening of a resources centre to support the work of both literacy and numeracy strategies across the city.

Support for information and communication technology (ICT)

64. In the previous inspection support to schools for ICT was judged to be good. The service covered the use of ICT for learning, communication and management, the breadth of its task being reflected in an ambitious and comprehensive strategy. The LEA's self-assessment prior to this inspection reported that while they have

been 'at the leading edge', in this area, they are now carrying out a review and considering a reconfiguration of support. Their current assessment of the service is in the range satisfactory to highly satisfactory. Schools in the school survey rate support for ICT in the curriculum as between satisfactory and good, and in the top 25 per cent of LEAs previously surveyed. No fieldwork was carried out in this inspection. Taking the available evidence into account, support is judged to be highly satisfactory.

Support for raising standards at Key Stage 3

65. Support for raising standards in Key Stage 3 is satisfactory with some good features. Between 1997 and 1998 there was a sizeable improvement in pupils' attainment in English, and since then little gain, while in mathematics the rate of improvement has been more even, with Birmingham having a higher rate of improvement than both similar authorities and nationally. Standards currently are in line with those of similar authorities, but are below the national average.

66. The LEA has been concerned about low standards in Key Stage 3 for some years and began work to remedy this as early as 1998, though it was not part of the official national pilot for the Key Stage 3 strategy. The strategy is now the main focus of its work with schools to improve standards in Key Stage 3. Under the overall management of an adviser, teams of consultants each with a manager provide training and support for the targeted schools. The targeted group of schools includes all those in the challenging circumstances category.

67. The LEA has strongly advised schools that the strategy should be managed by a senior member of staff, since from the outset the importance of affecting approaches to teaching and learning throughout the curriculum has been recognised as central to the success of the strategy. Well-regarded training has been organised in both English and mathematics. The strategy teams are also working with supplementary schools and with other projects in the city, such as those concerned with raising the achievement of African Caribbean pupils.

68. Although the strategy is at an early stage of development, some of the schools visited reported the use of a wider range of teaching methods across the Key Stage 3 curriculum, with teachers having a greater awareness of the language content of their lessons. Arrangements for evaluation are satisfactory. All schools now set targets for achievement in English and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 3. The strategy has made a satisfactory beginning and has the capacity to improve.

Support for minority ethnic groups including Travellers

69. The LEA carries out this function well. Birmingham's proportion of minority ethnic pupils (43 per cent) is four times the national average. Pupils are from many and diverse ethnic groups, with almost 50 first languages spoken in their homes. Given this context, there is a corporate lead to see such pupils not as a minority but as part of a single equal opportunities society in the city. This inclusive view underpins the LEA's policy that these children like all others are the responsibility of the whole school, and that schools should ensure that all teachers recognise their responsibility to all children and should be trained and supported as needed to work

with them. The incorporation of the support services for minority ethnic pupils into the advisory service is both a step towards improving the quality of support available to schools and a practical demonstration of the LEA's commitment to inclusion. The LEA's policies and practice on equal opportunities and combating racism are very good; this aspect is reported in more detail in paragraphs 148 and 149.

70. Link advisers have been given training to enable them to support this approach in schools, and many have undertaken the OFSTED inclusion training. They are involved in monitoring the use of the Ethnic Minority and Travellers' Achievement Grant (EMTAG) funding that has now been delegated to schools. Additional support is quickly deployed to any school needing help. An example of this is where schools have been faced with the arrival of large numbers of children from asylum seeking families as has happened recently. When needed, specialist help is provided through the English as an additional language support teaching service, members of which work alongside teachers in classrooms. Supporting the implementation of this inclusive policy has been given priority in the professional development programme. While there is still variation in understanding and attitude, a growing number of teachers are responding positively to this.

71. The LEA's comprehensive database on the attainment of minority ethnic pupils enables both the authority and individual schools to target additional support effectively. The data show that the aggregate attainment of the different ethnic groups closely mirrors the national picture. There is similarly thorough monitoring of attendance, exclusions and pupil movement. Most schools with significant numbers of pupils from minority ethnic groups have begun to set targets for the achievements of these pupils. The LEA has a large number of projects specifically aimed at raising attainment in different minority ethnic groups. The impact of these was recently examined in a scrutiny report. There is some early evidence of positive impact on attainment, attendance and exclusions.

72. The LEA is a member of the West Midlands consortium education service for Traveller children. A recent HMI report indicates that this is a high quality service, directing its efforts equally to supporting individual children and their families, and to helping teachers better meet their needs. It also provides peripatetic teaching support and operates a transfer system for pupils' records. The LEA monitors the attendance, attainment and exclusion rates of Traveller children thoroughly. Welfare officers are involved in efforts to improve attendance and in securing schooling for older pupils, especially boys. The council's environmental services department notifies the education department of Traveller arrivals and movement in the city on a regular weekly basis.

Support for gifted and talented pupils

73. The LEA is providing very good support for gifted and talented pupils, both in its work with schools and in a wider range of provision across the city. It fully recognises its responsibility to help schools improve the quality of education provided for their most able pupils and to enhance their performance. Evidence from national tests shows that although at Key Stage 1 the percentage of pupils attaining level 3 or better is close to the national average, the proportion attaining at

one or more levels higher than the average for their age group diminishes as pupils get older and falls behind the national average.

74. The LEA has developed a good range of well-conceived strategies designed to improve this situation. It has a good track record of identifying such pupils and enhancing the provision made for them by such means as the children's university, for primary age groups, and the university of the first age for those in secondary schools. This latter institution also arranges a young peoples' parliament. Successful summer schools are held for pupils in years 6, 7 and 8.

75. Work in most secondary schools started with extra-curricular enrichment activities, though more recently some schools have begun to make curriculum modifications for their gifted and talented pupils. For example, in one school an accelerated language course in Spanish enables pupils to take GCSE Spanish at the end of a year's teaching in Year 8. The advisory service is proactive in the identification and dissemination of good practice. The Birmingham Grid for Learning includes a section where teachers contribute materials and share experience. A conference to disseminate good practice between schools is planned for the summer term. The LEA is also taking part in the national primary school pilot for gifted and talented pupils.

76. Overall, there is an impressive range of initiatives which is chiefly though not exclusively concerned with enhancing provision for gifted and talented young people. The LEA's vision for the work is that while its prime aim is to support the gifted and talented, the relevance of this work should be disseminated for the benefit of all pupils.

Support for school management

77. Support for leadership and management in schools is good. Until recently it has been better for primary than for secondary schools, but there are clear indications that a better balance of support has now been achieved. Recent appointments have increased the number of advisers with senior management experience in secondary schools, and increasing use is made of accredited associate advisers with relevant experience.

78. The last inspection reported that while the management and efficiency of primary schools was generally sound, about one fifth of the primary schools and one third of the secondary schools that had had OFSTED inspections prior to the LEA inspection had significant weaknesses of leadership and management. Subsequent evidence from school inspections indicates that there has been an improvement in the quality of leadership and management in primary schools, but there has been little change in secondary schools. Birmingham has a higher proportion of primary schools in which management and efficiency is good or very good than its similar authorities and nationally. At the time of their second inspection, there was a higher proportion of secondary schools with good or very good management and efficiency in Birmingham than in similar authorities, but a smaller proportion than in the country as a whole.

79. Senior management in both primary and secondary schools is now well supported. Link adviser visits are recognised as an important support for headteachers, and the reports that are written following the visits contain a sound evaluation and a record of points where action is needed. A copy of the note is sent to the headteacher, but not always to the chair of governors.

Recommendation

In order to support the strategic role of the governing body:

- a copy of the note of visit prepared by the link adviser for each school following each round of visits should be sent to the chair of governors of the school.

80. Headteachers meet regularly in cluster groups, and for both primary and secondary phases conferences, often residential, are arranged. In addition, well supported 'roadshows', often before the school day, provide opportunities for headteachers to update themselves on a series of matters. The LEA has an acute awareness of the importance of the quality of leadership and management in determining the effectiveness of the school, and its monitoring arrangements, including school self review, place an appropriate emphasis on regular assessment of this aspect. Where this is identified as a weakness, provision is included in the intervention and targeted support plan for the school.

81. Support for professional development for school leadership is of good quality. For senior leaders, there are close links with the National College for School Leadership and teachers are supported in using the various national schemes for senior management development. High quality internal training is provided for specific management activities, such as the analysis and interpretation of performance data. A recent focus has been on developing school self review and evaluation, and the LEA has provided extensive training for senior managers using both the OFSTED and other models. There is also good support for middle managers.

82. Support for senior management was rated very highly in the schools' survey and support for middle management was rated as good. The survey also provided substantial endorsement for the LEA's activities in developing school self-evaluation.

Support for governors

83. Support for governors is currently satisfactory. In the previous inspection support for governors was judged satisfactory overall, with five recommendations. These covered reducing the number of vacancies for LEA-nominated and co-opted governors, seeking ways of improving attendance by governors at training courses, and three concerning improving consultation. The LEA considers its present support to be in the range satisfactory to highly satisfactory. Schools in the school survey rate support for governing bodies as between satisfactory and good. No fieldwork was carried out in this inspection, other than to check on progress made with the recommendations from the previous report. This is satisfactory, although more remains to be done.

Support for early years

84. Support for early years is good. This function was not covered in the previous inspection. The LEA has prioritised early years for some time, which is reflected in the high spending in this area. Current work builds on a strong base of good earlier work. The EDP includes a priority for improving early years provision, which sets out a clear strategy and suitable activities. Activities include the production of guidelines and support for the new early years curriculum, and establishing baseline assessment in all nursery settings. The targets in the EDP are being met and good progress has been made with all the activities.

85. The Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership is well established, and has a clear strategic plan. The 2001 targets for new childcare places were met and exceeded, and the partnership is on schedule to meet the overall target for places in 2002. 'Success for everyone under five' a project to promote inclusive early education and childcare, has been launched. The partnership works closely with the LEA, and is well supported by it. There is a good degree of cohesion between the Early Years Development and Childcare Plan and the EDP, with joint planning, delivery and review. The partnership also co-ordinates well with the work in connection with the Children's Fund and with the local Sure Start schemes. Most early years settings have received positive OFSTED reports. Those which do less well have access to further targeted support.

The effectiveness of services to support school management

86. Performance in securing a suitable range of management support services for schools is satisfactory with few weaknesses. The previous inspection was complimentary about the range of services on offer and both the chief education officer's assessment and the school survey for the current inspection indicate that Birmingham has maintained and built on its strong position. With one exception, services are at least satisfactory, often better, and there are high levels of buy back in an increasingly sophisticated and competitive market. The school survey shows satisfaction about all areas of procurement and ratings in the top 25 per cent of LEAs for advice on value for money and involvement in service reviews.

87. More generally, the LEA has embraced a trading philosophy. In addition to being offered a wider range of in-house services than previously, schools are also provided in some cases with detailed advice about alternative providers. Marketing materials are well produced and clear, but they are not brought together for ease of use by schools. Similarly, each service has its own client arrangements.

88. Although no specific inspection fieldwork was carried out on personnel and financial services, the school survey and headteacher comments indicate they continue to provide highly satisfactory and good services respectively to schools. Schools have a similarly high regard for ICT support for administrative purposes which continues to be highly satisfactory. However, evidence from other inspection activity shows that electronic transfer of pupil data at transfer to secondary schools is underdeveloped; routine transfer of data is currently still manual.

89. Property services are reported on in paragraph 125 and the inspection of Best Value reviews on cleaning and catering are reported as appendices to the main report.

Recommendation

In order to reduce the administrative burden on schools:

- steps should be put in place to ensure the efficient, electronic transfer of pupil data between primary and secondary schools.

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

90. Support to schools in obtaining teachers to fill vacant posts is good. The proportion of teacher vacancies in Birmingham schools at the time of the inspection was approximately 0.4 per cent of the total teaching force. This suggests that in comparison with the country overall the staffing situation is not acute. Inspection evidence about teaching quality indicates that the percentage of lessons that are satisfactory or better in both primary and secondary schools is very similar to the national picture. However, there are some parts of the staffing spectrum where recruitment is more difficult than elsewhere. Headships and deputy headships in the smaller inner city primary schools are particularly difficult to fill. In secondary schools the subjects that are difficult to recruit are common with those found nationally, and one secondary school visited in the inspection had no qualified mathematician on the staff.

91. The LEA was among the first to appoint a recruitment strategy manager funded by the Teacher Training Agency, now in her third year in the post. A good range of imaginative recruitment strategies is employed to attract newly qualified teachers to work in the authority, and they are largely successful. Schools report their satisfaction with the 'pool' appointment arrangements for new appointments in both the primary and secondary phase. The LEA has also made efforts to encourage schools to support and help each other in filling vacancies and discussions with headteachers indicate a high level of such help and cooperation. This extends to schools loaning teachers to other schools that are particularly hard hit by absence.

92. The LEA offers its employees, both teaching and non-teaching staff, a career enrichment and development guarantee setting out its commitment to provide training, promotion opportunities, and support for career development at various sequential stages. For non-teaching assistants, these include opportunities and support to train as teachers.

93. About one eighth of the current teaching force consists of teachers from minority ethnic groups. This is considerably less than the proportion of minority ethnic pupils in schools, despite considerable effort over several years to recruit more. The LEA is a partner in the MERITT (multi-ethnic recruitment and training for teaching) scheme, and has links with colleges in different parts of the country that want to provide a multi-ethnic placement for their students. This helps recruitment to Birmingham subsequently. The LEA also supports the training of bilingual and multi-

lingual teachers in two local institutes. It is accredited for school-based initial teacher training.

94. The LEA operates successfully a self-financing staffing agency on a non-profit making basis. This employs about 30 full-time teachers on a regular basis, and supplements these with a much larger group of part-time teachers who are registered with the agency. The teachers are available to cover both short-term vacancies and teacher absences, at full cost to the schools. Teachers employed by this agency are trained so that they are aware of developments in the practice in Birmingham schools and to enable them, for example, to slot into the work approaches of the literacy and numeracy strategies in primary schools. Similar training is also offered to private staffing agencies used by schools in the city for the same purpose. The agency also supports schools through the provision of classroom support staff, nursery nurses and clerical and administrative staff.

95. The advisory service maintains a directory of headteachers and deputies, who, with the support of their governors, have agreed to be available for secondment into schools in difficulties. This means that link advisers working with governing bodies that do not get a strong enough shortlist to justify appointment can offer a short-term alternative, and thus reduce the risk of weak appointments.

SECTION 3: SPECIAL EDUCATION PROVISION

Summary of effectiveness of LEA's special educational needs (SEN) provision

96. All of the LEA's provision for special educational needs is satisfactory, and much is highly satisfactory. There is a clear strategy for inclusion, to which members, officers and schools are committed. A start has been made on the implementation of the plan. Systems have recently been put in place to monitor schools' use of resources and the progress made by pupils.

The LEA's strategy for special educational needs

97. The LEA's support for strategic planning for special educational needs and inclusion is highly satisfactory. Its capacity to improve has been strengthened by the restructuring of the special educational needs division. The last report did not comment on the strategic planning for inclusion but the translation of divisional priorities into development work was seen to be variable. A medium term divisional plan is being developed, which is improving the consistency of individual service plans.

98. The LEA has a clear policy for inclusion and meeting special educational needs that has been achieved following extensive consultation with schools, other agencies, parents, carers and the wider community. Members and officers are firmly committed to the strategy for inclusion, which is well represented within the council's priority to tackle social exclusion, the education department's strategic plan and the EDP.

99. The strategy for inclusion is comprehensive and well thought through. It is based on four key principles that put children first, recognise the value of existing staff and resources, value planning with the wider community and other agencies and emphasises the need to use resources flexibly to meet individual needs. The strategy has been translated into an efficient plan that sets out clear steps to take forward the priorities.

100. The evaluation of the first strategic plan for inclusion and the conference for inclusion in the spring of 2001 with key stakeholders shaped the four priorities and actions described in the inclusion plan 2001-04. Following a robust consultation process, the LEA responded positively to schools' concerns and a working group of headteachers and officers has been meeting to develop and discuss models of effective inclusive practice. The openness and transparency of the debate has secured the commitment of schools, but it has also slowed the pace of implementation. Planning for the future role of special schools is underway. Practical steps have been taken to develop co-location projects, where special and mainstream schools share school sites, and to extend networks of schools to support the inclusion of pupils with special education needs.

101. A satisfactory start has been made on the implementation of the overall plan. Following a survey of all schools to see how accessible they are to pupils with special educational needs, the LEA has prioritised resources to supplement the

government's access grant to carry out adaptations to school sites. Members have agreed to use resources from the sale of land following school closures to fund new co-location projects. A weakness is the lack of an overall capital resource plan to identify the sources of funding and the projected costs of the development. The LEA has begun the process of developing such a plan and it has the capital planning capacity and the necessary planning information about school places to do this.

Recommendation

In order to improve planning for the implementation of the inclusion strategy:

- develop the capital resource plan so it brings together the sources of capital funding, the projected costs and the time-scales required to implement the changes to school provision, following the consultation with special and mainstream schools.

Statutory obligations

102. The LEA's performance is satisfactory overall; it is taking reasonable steps to meet its statutory obligations. In the last inspection, although the LEA was judged to have made reasonable steps overall, its performance in completing statutory statements was criticised, as was the inconsistency of interpretation of the Code of Practice.

103. The LEA's assessment and administration of statements have substantially improved as a result of a restructuring of the service, better leadership, more effective business planning and the adoption of a chasing system to ensure late advice from its own staff and other agencies is followed up. The effectiveness of the process is still hampered by a heavy reliance on manual systems for generating letters and other documentation. There has been a satisfactory rate of improvement from the poor performance in 1997, when only 32 per cent of statements, excluding those delayed by other agencies, were completed in the eighteen week period, to 81.1 per cent completion in March 2001. In instances when medical advice arrives late, the rate of improvement is unsatisfactory with a completion rate below 50 per cent. The LEA has sound plans to improve the speed of response from the health authorities. Schools have confidence in the capacity of the LEA to improve but lost documentation and delays in the allocation of resources still cause frustration to a few schools.

Recommendation

In order to improve further the rate of completing statements, with and without exceptions, within the recommended eighteen week period:

- put in place more effective information management and technology systems.

104. The quality of statements is satisfactory with good supporting advice from educational psychologists. The LEA recognises the need to review the format and precision of statements and is working effectively with other agencies to do so. The

support and training for school-based staff on preparing individual education plans for pupils with special educational needs has improved. LEA staff attend annual reviews for pupils where significant changes or additional resources are proposed.

105. The LEA attempts to meet parental wishes wherever possible and the number of children with new statements of special educational need placed in mainstream schools continues to increase at a satisfactory rate. The LEA is effective in resolving potential tribunal cases.

106. Effective parent partnership arrangements are in place. There are well developed networks to support parents and the recruitment of independent supporters for parents of pupils with special educational needs has been well managed.

School improvement

107. The LEA is effective in carrying out its special educational needs work to support school improvement. This aspect is satisfactory with good features. In the previous inspection the increasing use of performance data and school inspection reports for monitoring and analysis of need was judged sound, but it was not consistent across support services.

108. Target setting for pupils with special educational needs in mainstream and special schools is well integrated within the LEA's school improvement strategy. There are examples of school support services, in partnership with schools, tracking the progress of the individual pupils they support. Special educational needs co-ordinators in schools value the support they receive in target setting and the quality of data for tracking the progress of individual pupils with special educational needs. Thirteen special schools and four mainstream schools with resource bases are participating in a national project led by Durham University to assess the progress of their pupils against pupils with similar needs in the rest of the country.

109. Support services for pupils with special educational needs are satisfactory with significant strengths. There is a clear focus on raising standards. The education psychology service is making satisfactory progress towards redirecting its time to support early intervention and prevention and the impact is being monitored. The rationale for this is yet to be shared with schools, who are concerned about the access they have to the service and delays to the process for completing statements of special educational need.

110. The LEA has made good progress in developing and refining the criteria for special provision. They describe pupils' needs in ways that relate to teaching and learning. This is in line with the revised Code of Practice for special educational needs. Schools are better able to identify the specific needs of pupils, and to meet these using their delegated funding for special education needs. The criteria also make clear where the level of special educational needs will attract additional LEA support. The development of the special educational needs criteria has been well supported by the LEA and there is confidence in schools that it will result in resources being better matched to the learning needs of individual children.

Value for money

111. The LEA's expenditure on special educational needs is in line with other similar authorities. The previous inspection report found special educational needs services generally effective. Despite an overall concern in schools about the level of the resources available, there were very few instances where the quality of support was not highly regarded. This remains the position.

112. The monitoring and control of centrally retained special educational needs resources are good. The division's business planning is effective and targets resources to priorities. The division has an annual review of service costs and where the data are reliable, compares these with similar LEAs and core cities. Spending is carefully monitored during the year and under or over-spends are reported efficiently and action taken to re-allocate resources. The LEA's monitoring of special educational needs resources at school level is less well developed. Recent initiatives have been put in place to improve this and to extend it to include monitoring of children with special needs in mainstream schools. This is at an early stage, but the planning is sound and visits by the school link adviser are being used to evaluate the use of resources and pupils' progress, so that an assessment of value for money can be made.

113. There is an effective information base from which to monitor trends and predict special school place needs up to 2005. The audit of special educational needs and the use of criteria are improving the match between the identified special educational needs of pupils, the allocation of resources and the cost of the provision. This development work will put the LEA in a good position to review the current expenditure on statements, which is relatively high when compared with similar local authorities. Schools are being consulted on the devolution of resources as an alternative to referral for a statutory statement. This is a positive step by the LEA, supported by schools, to enable the resources to be used flexibly by schools.

SECTION 4: PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION

Summary of effectiveness in promoting social inclusion

114. The LEA is strongly committed to promoting social inclusion for all pupils. The overall effectiveness of its strategy is highly satisfactory with some good features. There has been significant improvement from the position at the time of the previous inspection. The LEA's support for the provision of school places is good, for example, in planning, relationships with partners and council departments and in its use of statistical data. Provision for pupils who have no school place is good. The LEA's work in admissions to schools, attendance, behaviour and child protection all make highly satisfactory contributions. The work of the LEA in combating racism is very good. The LEA has undertaken a range of work including developing school policy, tracking and monitoring the recording of racist incidents, curriculum projects and raising attainment projects for some minority ethnic groups. Support for pupils in public care is improving, but is not yet satisfactory.

The strategy to promote social inclusion

115. The council's social inclusion strategy encompasses education, health, employment and the local environment. The education department takes a lead role in creating energy for partnership work. It achieves considerable success, improving the rates of progress in attainment and attendance and in reducing exclusion. A successful learning mentors' network, for example, as part of the Excellence in Cities initiative, has played a key role in achieving success in this area. The health authorities have a constructive and active partnership with education. For example, a re-examination of midwife advice to teenage mothers has led to an overhaul of the support given to this vulnerable group. Working together, education and health are seeking to improve the response to referrals for statutory assessment by improving administration and processes. The LEA is working productively with other agencies and departments including the voluntary sector in connection with the family support strategy, Sure Start, Children's Fund and the Early Years Partnership.

116. The education and social services departments are working closely to establish better joint working. There is evidence, for example, of improvement in relation to the authority's support for children in public care. However, this is not yet secure and remains an unsatisfactory element of the LEA's work to promote social inclusion at school level.

The supply of school places

117. The LEA's management of the provision of school places is good. A report on the Best Value review of this service is at Appendix 2.

118. The first inspection found that the LEA's work on securing sufficient school places was satisfactory, and a subsequent report by the external auditor confirmed that good progress was being made. This has continued, resulting in the LEA being in a strong position. The LEA's methodology produces very accurate forecasts, surplus capacity in all sectors is below national and metropolitan averages and the

LEA has significantly reduced the number of small sixth forms, in response to the recommendation from the last inspection. Consultation processes are good, diocesan representatives, schools and the school organisation committee all report confidence in and good support from officers.

119. However, demographic data show there is a lot still to do particularly in removing primary places as pupil numbers drop. The task is set out clearly and succinctly in the well written school organisation plan, which helpfully offers a summary in nine languages. Five thousand primary places are planned for removal over the next five years by a coherent range of activities involving reductions in standard numbers, closures, and a structured infant/junior amalgamation programme. The latest report to scrutiny committee shows the programme to be on track. There are secure links with the housing department, which are helpful in planning where places will be needed. This will be particularly important if the proposed voluntary housing stock transfer takes effect with its potential for large-scale movements of residents. Some secondary schools, particularly in the north of the city, have been under pressure as a bulge went through, exacerbated by a significant drift of pupils away from inner city schools. The LEA was able to resist pressure to start an *ad hoc* building programme by sensible use of its data and a rigorous analysis of the situation by its scrutiny committee. Furthermore, a coherent range of measures, centred on school improvement, is in place, which is beginning to reverse the drift of pupils towards outer suburban schools. The school organisation plan properly considers the effects of the inclusion policies in the city, but, as explained in paragraph 101, these are not explored in sufficient depth. The infant class size plan has been securely implemented.

Admissions

120. Birmingham undertakes its admissions function satisfactorily and cost effectively with few weaknesses.

121. The admissions position in Birmingham is complex with 33 admissions authorities within the city. The current information provided to parents is helpful, very comprehensive, complies with the admissions code of practice, and has an introduction in ten languages. It is particularly good at indicating for parents their likelihood of securing a place at a given school. However, insufficient co-ordination between admissions authorities to date means that multiple offers to parents delay the allocation of places. Despite good information to parents, large numbers of preferences are expressed for schools particularly at the periphery of the city, resulting in large numbers of unsuccessful applications. As a result, only 83 per cent of parents get their first preference school, and Birmingham has the fifth highest number of appeals in metropolitan LEAs. However, only 20 per cent of these are upheld. The previous inspection was critical of the time taken to resolve appeals, especially in the primary sector, but this has now improved and all are resolved before the end of the summer term. The admissions processes are rated in the top 25 per cent of LEAs by schools in the schools' survey, and the LEA's handling of admissions was reported as satisfactory by those stakeholders interviewed.

122. Excellent preparatory work has been done to meet the recent government proposals for admissions, and potentially to radically improve the position in

Birmingham. The LEA has produced a proposed admissions framework which, for the first time, has the potential for co-ordinating all admissions authorities in the city. It is based, rightly, on explicit, agreed principles including equity and inclusion by, for example, giving priority to children in public care in the admissions criteria for over-subscribed schools. The new system properly aims to increase transparency for parents and efficiency for admissions authorities. These proposals are currently out for consultation, with a proposed date for implementation of September 2003. The consultation process has been well orchestrated, and the materials describing the proposal, and the proposal itself, are regarded by stakeholders as comprehensible and appropriate.

Asset management

123. The LEA continues to perform this function satisfactorily, as it did during the last inspection, but there has been a lack of sufficient pace in developments. The LEA got off to an early start and was praised by the external auditor for gathering data on the condition of its school buildings ahead of regulations. However, this proved to be a false start, as these data were judged to be unacceptable by the DfES, and although this has now been rectified, valuable time was lost. Data on the suitability of buildings have been collected efficiently and the use of a trained group of retired headteachers to help schools carry this out was a sensible move. However, having established a useful database on school property, the protocols for ensuring this is kept updated are poorly developed and unlikely to be effective. A representative working group, including headteachers, continues to give a useful steer to development work. The LEA now has full condition and suitability data stored electronically to which all schools have partial access. Priorities for work, medium term time-scales and funding streams have been agreed but schools have not been given sufficient details of this for them to make the most efficient use of their own resources. Although plans to rectify this were being discussed during the inspection, these are late in the day.

124. Investment levels have improved considerably as have the processes for allocating funds to priorities. The education asset management plan is fully integrated into the well presented, comprehensive capital plan for the whole council. Schools also have access to useful and improving advice on property management on Birmingham's Grid for Learning. The city has a higher than average backlog of the highest priority condition work in schools, but there are secure plans for it to be completed by the end of the year. The backlog in other areas is less than the average found nationally and a useful scheme has been introduced whereby schools and the LEA can agree a dual funding mechanism to complete projects. There have been some important capital projects completed recently. One PFI project is almost completed, and on time, with a further two projects being planned. Six city learning centres have been established as well as several special educational needs co-location projects which have required property modifications to mainstream schools

Property services

125. The LEA's performance here is unsatisfactory. Although individual officers' efforts are often appreciated by schools, there is insufficient cohesion between the education property services and central council operations and schools are unclear

about their respective roles and how best to access help. School satisfaction ratings on corporate property services are low. Within education property services there is a further lack of clarity about the roles of the area team members with no shared understanding about which functions are strategic and which should be traded. Overall, this results in inefficient use of personnel and too much variability in schools' satisfaction ratings as evidenced from both the school survey and visits.

Recommendations

In order to improve the efficiency and co-ordination of property support to schools, the council should:

- establish a more effective mechanism by which schools can access appropriate property advice and support; and
- clarify the role of the area team and agree an appropriate balance between strategic and potentially traded activities.

Provision of education for pupils who have no school place

126. At the last inspection the weaknesses in provision of education otherwise than at schools were judged to exceed its strengths and inspectors recommended that the LEA should review its system for monitoring this function. Since then the LEA's management of this provision has improved and is now good.

127. The LEA provides a comprehensive range of provision for pupils excluded from schools. The nine pupil referral units managed by the behaviour support service meet the needs of pupils at all key stages. A range of alternative provision is also available to meet the specific needs of pupils at key stages 3 and 4. The LEA is on track to meet the statutory requirement for full time provision by September 2002 for all pupils excluded for more than 15 days, and currently provides a minimum of 20 hours. The LEA has improved re-integration rates. Over two thirds of pupils in the pupil referral units are successfully re-integrated into mainstream school. The average placement in alternative provision is currently 20 weeks, compared with 36 weeks for the previous year.

128. A 1998 OFSTED inspection of the pupil referral units judged the quality of education provided to be good, but management of this provision by the LEA was criticised. Subsequent improvements in management arrangements have included an overhaul of council policies, establishing more systematic and robust arrangements for monitoring and evaluating the quality of provision, better co-ordination of the work of officers from the education welfare service, behaviour support service and the advisory service, and strengthening service planning. The recently implemented 'pupil connect' strategy has further improved the co-ordination and coherence of the LEA's monitoring and supervision of all alternative provision.

129. Referral systems for exclusions are very effectively and efficiently administered by the LEA's exclusion team. Action is taken to secure provision for all new referrals within a week. The advice and guidance given to schools are clear, detailed and very highly regarded by primary and secondary schools. Interviews with headteachers during the course of this inspection provided many examples of good

practice and imaginative approaches to avoiding exclusion or supporting re-integration. Since autumn 2001, the 'pupil connect' strategy has enabled the LEA to reduce the number of pupils at risk of disconnection from education.

130. There are suitable procedures for monitoring the education of children educated at home by the advisory service and education welfare officers, which are well described in up to date and informative guidance for parents. The provision of education for children who are out of school because of medical reasons, and for schoolgirl mothers, is similarly well monitored. The service aims to work towards inclusion of these pupils into mainstream, particularly school girl mothers, and links with mainstream schools are good.

Attendance

131. The LEA's support for improving attendance is at least satisfactory, with many good features. It was judged at the last inspection to be poor. Inspectors recommended that the LEA should place a higher priority on reducing pupil absence and improve service planning, procedures and practice and mechanisms for monitoring effectiveness. Officers and members responded to these recommendations with determination and there have been improvements in all areas of weakness. Overall levels of attendance have improved faster than the national average and are in line with those for statistical neighbours for both primary and secondary schools.

132. Service improvement has been driven by a series of reviews of the education welfare service (EWS), including a Best Value review, an external audit and, most importantly, by an education scrutiny committee review. These provided a very detailed, objective and balanced examination of all aspects of service management and performance that established the foundation for a well-balanced and coherent overhaul of the way the LEA delivered this function. The LEA's strategy is well set out in a comprehensive policy and practice manual, developed in consultation with schools. The relationship of attendance to the council's approach to combating bullying and racism are particularly well described. Key policy priorities for pupil attendance are identified in the EDP, the education strategic plan, and the behaviour support plan. Challenging targets have been set which, if achieved, will align Birmingham's performance with the best in the country. Performance is subject to rigorous quarterly monitoring at cabinet level.

133. Changes in the work patterns and procedures of the EWS have been effective in better focusing the work of education welfare officers on supporting schools. However, while support is generally well targeted there is scope for further differentiation as the minimum support for schools with high attendance is more than they need. Plans for individual schools have been introduced to provide the basis for joint working and review of progress. Well-organised additional support is provided for schools which are facing serious problems with regard to pupil attendance. This is to be enhanced by the planned extension of the use of the LEA's framework for attendance analytical tool. This assists school and EWS staff in critically appraising a school's management of attendance. Good practice is disseminated effectively through training and an annual good practice guide. Headteachers interviewed during this inspection recognised the improvement in the service, nevertheless the

responses to the school survey indicate that a quarter of secondary schools remain dissatisfied. Particular concerns relate to inconsistencies in the quality of service provided by individual education welfare officers and frequent changes in the school's assigned education welfare officer in some schools.

134. The LEA has rightly identified the tackling of authorised absence as a growing priority. Effective liaison and co-ordination between the EWS and other relevant services is underpinning their strategy to change family and community attitudes to attendance. The pupil watch initiative, undertaken jointly with the police, is making progress in raising the public profile of this issue.

Recommendations

In order to improve the LEA's support for schools in managing attendance:

- further improve the targeting of support by reducing the support from the EWS to schools with high pupil attendance and good management practices; and
- put in place measures to improve the consistency of quality of service provided by individual education welfare officers.

Behaviour support

135. The support provided to schools for managing behaviour was judged to be satisfactory at the last inspection. There has been improvement subsequently and many aspects of the service are good but there are a few weaknesses. The LEA has achieved the EDP target of a one third fall in the level of permanent exclusions a year early and an even faster reduction in the numbers of African Caribbean pupils excluded. The level of permanent exclusions in Birmingham is in line with that for similar authorities for secondary schools but a little higher for primary schools.

136. The 2001-2004 behaviour support plan (BSP) has recently been approved by the DfES. It describes a clear and thoughtful strategic approach to supporting schools in managing behaviour, carefully matching the proposed school and LEA support to differing levels of behavioural problems within schools. The linkages between each element of LEA support are well described, as is the contribution of Excellence in Cities programmes such as learning mentors and learning support centres. Interviews with headteachers confirmed the effectiveness of consultation and their commitment to the aims in the BSP. However, there are weaknesses. While there are many references to inclusion, the relationship between the BSP and the strategy for inclusion is insufficiently explicit. In particular, it is not clear how the planned improvements in support for schools and pupils will meet the concerns of secondary school headteachers regarding the inclusion of pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. The behaviour support service business plan includes the direct service and financial implications of the BSP but it does not address medium term implications, and success criteria do not focus sufficiently on the outcomes of the LEA's support.

137. Direct support to schools is provided by behaviour support service staff located within the pupil referral units. Guidance provided to schools on managing behaviour is clear and informative, as are the procedures for accessing support. The work of the behaviour support service is valued by primary and secondary headteachers and

few complain about the responsiveness of the service. Support to schools is reasonably well targeted and a range of information is analysed in order to direct support staff to where they are needed. However, schools are not aware of the criteria used.

138. The LEA has made very good use of the Standards Fund to develop the 'framework for intervention', an LEA facilitated whole-school approach to managing behaviour. Detailed evaluation of the pilot, and an inspection by HMI, have shown that it is effective in improving the capacity of schools to manage the consequences of pupils with behavioural difficulties. Providing the framework free to primary schools is ensuring a high level of take up. The level of uptake by secondary schools is much lower, as they have to pay for it. There is a concern that schools with moderate problems with pupil behaviour are not choosing to buy in this support. The introduction of learning mentors and learning support centres has greatly enhanced the support provided by behaviour support service and provided a good range of options for avoiding exclusions and supporting re-integration.

Health, safety, welfare and child protection

139. The LEA provides satisfactory health and safety advice to schools. The previous inspection found the LEA's strategy and support for school security and risk assessment to be satisfactory. Health and safety, welfare and child protection were not inspected.

140. The health and safety policy document is thorough and there is good additional advice on mental well-being and guidance about work related stress. Schools value the services provided through the accident reporting procedure, the range of training for staff and the health and safety check for schools prior to inspection.

141. The authority meets its statutory responsibilities for child protection and the procedures are well established. The LEA's designated senior officer plays a significant role in the Area Child Protection Committee. The LEA's child protection procedures complement those of the Area Child Protection Committee and plans are in place to review these in the light of recent changes. A register of designated teachers and their training is maintained. Training by the LEA has been provided in those cases where social services, because of staffing shortages, has found it difficult to support joint training. Planning is in place to improve to 71 percent the number of designated teachers receiving recent training in the last four years. Schools rate highly the support from the LEA on child protection procedures but the relationship with social services is a significant concern. Despite the priority given to the management of child protection cases and the guidance on referral criteria and procedures, there are instances where schools report difficulties in obtaining access to support from social services.

Children in public care

142. Support for children in public care was not reported on in the last inspection. It is not satisfactory, although considerable improvements have been made compared with the poor situation two years ago.

143. There are 1,500 children of school age in the care of the local authority, of which 40 per cent are educated in other local authorities. The council committed to a corporate parenting pledge for every looked after child in December 2000 and the chief education officer's leadership in raising the awareness of headteachers has been key to securing improvement. Despite this, there have been significant weaknesses in the local authority's support for children in public care because of unreliable data, a lack of clarity about the lead responsibility for personal education plans and delays in their completion. Serious staff shortages in social services have left a very high number of children in public care without the active support of a named social worker to take responsibility for the planning of their educational experience.

Recommendation

In order to improve support for children in public care:

- ensure the council carries out its corporate parenting responsibility for the care and education of children in public care.

144. The joint working between the education and social services departments has improved over the last year and two posts to support the corporate parenting role and the joint action plan have improved the co-ordination and pace of development. This is reflected in the good progress made recently on the database and on information sharing. The education service's children in public care database is operational and a good feature is the access to attainment data on individual pupils. There is evidence that the reliability of the information is improving, although not yet satisfactory, and work is ongoing to integrate the social services' data base.

145. Schools report that overall they are satisfied with the level of support from the education department for children in public care. There are, however, reported instances where information is not made available by social services. All schools have a designated teacher and training programmes are ongoing. Despite the efforts by designated teachers, the progress on personal education plans has been slow. Realistic targets are in place to complete these over the next year.

146. The LEA's provisional data for 2001 show significant improvement in the attainment of children in public care across the key stages. GCSE performance has improved, although it remains just below the national target for the proportion of children attaining one grade A*-G. The current proportion of pupils attaining five or more grades A*-C at GCSE is well below the LEA's ambitious targets set for 2002 and beyond in the Public Service Agreement. However, the targets are an indicator of the determination to improve the attainment of this group of children. The significant reduction in the number of permanent exclusions of children in public care achieved in the last two years supports this aspiration. The LEA's commitment is demonstrated by the current consultation on admissions criteria that places children in public care as the first priority for admission to community schools.

147. The education department is leading a review of the management of this area and it is well aware of what needs to be done. Recent progress made indicates that the education department's capacity to drive improvement in this area is good.

Measures to combat racism

148. The LEA's work on combating racism was not examined as an individual function in the first inspection. It is very good, and involves a lot of effective initiatives. The local authority convened its own commission after the publication of the report of the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence. While the commission's report was critical of aspects of the local authority's work, the local authority has taken on board the commission's recommendations, and individual departments are taking forward relevant recommendations. The racist incident form which schools have to complete is clear and straightforward, and is buttressed by lucid, comprehensible and practicable guidelines on bullying. Link advisers check that forms are completed, and the LEA's response to incidents is, appropriately, on a case by case basis, enabling any support to be determined by individual circumstances and the possible needs of the school.

149. The council has provided a framework for determining individual departmental equality policies, and the LEA has generated clear equality targets through the handbook 'success for everyone'. All schools now have a race equality policy and action plan, tailored to an individual school's needs. The LEA has also undertaken a range of work – including developing curriculum material, organising conferences, and maintaining linkages with ethnic minority groups – which represent effective action to embed equality issues within the mainstream, and to tackle racism. Examples include mentoring, the raising African Caribbean achievement project, black history month, and a science club for African Caribbean pupils. The range and depth of the activity on tackling racism has been welcomed by all those who, with the LEA, monitor and take action to ensure that the high quality of this work is maintained.

SECTION 5: CORPORATE ISSUES

Introduction to corporate issues

150. The 1997 inspection reported that considerable improvements had been made in the approach and the running of the LEA. The leadership given by elected members was judged to be good and that given by senior officers very good. However, scrutiny was not judged to be sufficiently systematic, and although many schools were improving, there was an implicit question mark over why there was not more rapid improvement.

151. Since 1997, important improvements have been made in corporate matters and all functions in this area in relation to education are at least good, and several are excellent. Plans are now well co-ordinated, and the LEA is currently further rationalising its education plans through its local Public Service Agreement. The structure of the council has been modernised, with benefits to the effectiveness of decision-making and potential benefits to the effectiveness of corporate working. Scrutiny in education is excellent. Education continues to be prioritised by the council, and to benefit from excellent leadership from senior officers and elected members. The education department's former aim of 'improving against previous best' has given way recently to a desire to be 'at the leading edge' of practice, which is one way in which the LEA is stimulating the drive for greater improvement.

Corporate planning

152. The quality of corporate planning with respect to education is good. The council's priorities are clearly presented in the yearly cabinet statement, which serves as a corporate plan. This groups the cabinet's priorities and key actions under six strategic themes, the first of which, entitled 'a learning city', has the greatest impact on the education service. Council uses the cabinet statement to help ensure resources are aligned to priorities. Council's corporate plans, and the education department's strategic plan reflect the themes, priorities and targets outlined in the cabinet statement. While the department's strategic plan emphasises and develops the department's key themes of social inclusion, achievement and partnership, it is over complex and repetitive. It is about to be revised and would benefit from streamlining.

153. Progress is being made with the development of the authority's community strategy. A local strategic partnership, which includes key public, private and voluntary organisations, was established in summer 2001 and is taking this forward.

154. There is a good system for keeping the implementation of plans under review. The cabinet statement is supported by an action plan with clear targets. A quarterly monitoring report on progress towards the targets is produced for consideration by chief officers and cabinet members and provides a good overview. Monitoring the implementation of plans is of variable quality across the council's departments. However, scrutiny is carried out particularly effectively in education, where there is also rigorous analysis of performance indicators. Consequently, the education department is able to demonstrate that it is using the money allocated to it well.

Scrutiny reports on particular issues have focused on areas where there were known or suspected weaknesses, have been thorough and evaluative and have resulted in improvements. The scrutiny committee also monitors progress in implementing recommendations stemming from its reports, holding officers and the portfolio holder to account for this.

Decision making

155. The modernised council structure has improved the speed and transparency with which decisions are made. It has the potential to strengthen the corporate dimensions of the cabinet's work although more needs to be achieved in this area. Every month the cabinet publishes a forward plan that outlines every key decision it expects to be decided over the next four months. Once a decision has been taken it is published, together with the options considered and the reasons for the decision. Any decision can be challenged before it is implemented by being called-in by the relevant overview and scrutiny committee, in which case it must be reconsidered by cabinet. With weekly cabinet meetings, decisions are made much more quickly than previously. This system is working well in education. Portfolio holders are also now in close contact with each other and have a good understanding of issues which affect other departments. The same is true for chief officers. For example, although there is still much to do on children in public care there is now more evident corporate ownership which is starting to bring about improvements and has certainly raised the profile of this group of children.

Leadership of elected members and officers

156. Elected members provide very good leadership for education. Council has continued to prioritise education. Members with a leading role in education are well-informed, and prepared to take difficult decisions. They are rigorous in holding the education service to account, as demonstrated by the quality and rigour of scrutiny. The portfolio holder for education maintains a good level of contact with schools. He works closely with the chief education officer in the development of policy, but appropriate levels of delegation are maintained.

157. The chief education officer, praised in the previous report, continues to provide outstanding leadership. He articulates a vision that is widely shared and has created a very positive 'can do' culture throughout the LEA. In responding to the recommendations of the previous report he has secured substantial improvement across the service, consolidating earlier successes and raising aspirations. He has the gift of making headteachers and others feel special and valued and consequently well motivated. Headteachers see this as a model of leadership that they wish to emulate in their own schools.

158. While the former aim of 'improvement against previous best' had certainly helped to bring about improvements in Birmingham's schools and education services, an important change since the last inspection is the recognition that for Birmingham, improvement *per se* is not sufficient. There is now a stated desire to be 'at the leading edge' of practice, in order to create the energy necessary to bring about sufficient improvements in a city which, to quote from the chief education officer's statement prepared for this inspection, still has 'a legacy of

underachievement and low expectations arising from its economic background'. In view of this desire, the chief education officer benchmarked the LEA's performance against the criterion of being 'at the leading edge' of practice in the self-assessment exercise undertaken before this inspection. As a result, the inspection team's assessment of the performance of functions which is benchmarked against OFSTED's criteria, is often higher than the LEA's self-assessment. Headteachers and teachers interviewed supported the 'leading edge' approach, and showed, with remarkable consistency, a commitment to improvement and a belief that they could bring this about.

159. Other senior officers continue to provide good support for the chief education officer. The leadership of the advisory service, in particular, has improved and is now excellent. The changes to the divisional structure of the education department have brought greater coherence, although the senior team remains large. Other officers have covered well during the year long vacancy at deputy director level.

160. Performance management is embedded throughout the education department, although there are some variations in how well it is carried out. The objectives in the chief education officer's performance contract can all be found in the education department's strategic plan. Similarly, the activities and targets in the divisions' business plans relate directly to those in the assistant directors' and chief education officer's contracts, as well as to individual officers' targets. Performance management is working particularly well in the advisory service.

161. The LEA's consultation and communication with schools are very good. Schools receive an informative and well produced half-termly bulletin, and a termly letter from the chief education officer. Consultation via the forums and cluster groups works well, and is backed up by other mechanisms, including the use of the intranet and termly 'roadshows'.

Partnership

162. The LEA has developed good structures for strategic liaison; partnership is good. The corporate theme, the 'learning city', is clearly understood by many partners. As a consequence there is a sense of common purpose in supporting the education department's priorities for development.

163. The LEA has played an active role in securing better and co-ordinated structures to ensure that opportunities for 14-19 year olds are maximised. For example, a strategic decision was taken to bring together the careers service and education business partnership and to locate networks within the six Excellence in Cities areas which has resulted in fewer, but more productive, meetings and has reduced bureaucracy and potential duplication. A joint LEA/Learning and Skills Council 16-19 review group has been established to evaluate and rationalise current provision. Good links are also secured between Connexions and LEA staff via the 'partnerships for change' group.

164. Relationships are productive at strategic and operational levels. For example, a concerted effort to bring about community regeneration on an estate involving large scale housing refurbishment fully involved the education department. Close

liaison, through a period of considerable turbulence, ensured that schools continued to focus on improving attainment and attendance and reducing exclusions. Whilst levels of disadvantage remain high in this estate, partnership work has led to considerable improvements in standards.

165. In a similar vein, the partnerships developed with diocesan representatives, the standing advisory council for religious education and faith communities have had a positive impact on the LEA's work in combating racism. For example, the LEA acted quickly and decisively in issuing guidance to schools following the September 11 incidents in the USA. Partners praised the action for the sensitive way in which it was managed. A programme of school and community activity resulted in very few negative responses to these tragic events.

166. Partnership work with the health authorities, the police and parent groups is increasingly effective in combating social exclusion. There are clear strategic plans for putting children at the heart of their communities, not only in the context of improving attainment but in widening opportunity and experience and raising expectations.

167. The LEA's support for the standing advisory council for religious education is good. Advisory support and regular liaison has led to a well co-ordinated range of professional development opportunities and additional guidance to complement the use of the agreed syllabus for teaching religious education.

168. Partnership with social services at a strategic level is satisfactory and improving. However, at school and service level, liaison has been more problematic due to difficulties encountered by this department in recruiting and retaining staff.

169. The Excellence in Cities initiative, synchronised with other school improvement plans, has led to good local partnership work which is successfully developing an achievement culture through interdependent working on common initiatives. For example, learning mentors and gifted and talented co-ordinators meet regularly to share examples of effective practice and to develop these strands further. Another example is the way in which schools have been empowered to make decisions about the location of learning support units and city learning centres. This is helping to ensure provision is targeted to where it is needed most and contributes to the improvements in attainment. Evaluation of the impact of the work is not yet as good as in some other areas.

APPENDIX 1: RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to support the strategic role of the governing body:

- a copy of the note of visit prepared by the link adviser for each school following each round of visits should be sent to the chair of governors of the school.

In order to reduce the administrative burden on schools:

- steps should be put in place to ensure the efficient, electronic transfer of pupil data between primary and secondary schools.

In order to improve planning for the implementation of the inclusion strategy:

- develop the capital resource plan so it brings together the sources of capital funding, the projected costs and the time-scales required to implement the changes to school provision, following the consultation with special and mainstream schools.

In order to improve further the rate of completing statements, with and without exceptions, within the recommended eighteen week period:

- put in place more effective information management and technology systems.

In order to improve the efficiency and co-ordination of property support to schools, the council should:

- establish a more effective mechanism by which schools can access appropriate property advice and support; and
- clarify the role of the area team and agree an appropriate balance between strategic and potentially traded activities.

In order to improve the LEA's support for schools in managing attendance:

- further improve the targeting of support by reducing the support from the EWS to schools with high pupil attendance and good management practices; and
- put in place measures to improve the consistency of quality of service provided by individual education welfare officers.

In order to improve support for children in public care:

- ensure the council carries out its corporate parenting responsibility for the care and education of children in public care.

APPENDIX 2:

BEST VALUE REVIEW OF SCHOOL CATERING

The review focused on the school catering service which is part of the direct services organisation of the council. The selection of this service for a pilot review was inappropriate in that it placed an additional burden on the service which was already faced with considerable extra work resulting from the council's decision to delegate the service to all schools. Furthermore, the council has subsequently commissioned a review of catering across the council thereby incurring duplication of effort. Catering services were not reported in the previous inspection, although evidence from the LEA's own satisfaction surveys showed reasonably high levels of satisfaction.

Officers accept the shortcomings in the BV review of the service. External challenge was absent and fundamental questions relating to the need for the service were given cursory treatment. However the challenges from schools and external competitors were keenly felt as a result of delegation, and officers understandably saw the main imperative as the need to respond to these. Comparative and competitive data in this area are very thin and unconvincing although the service has appropriately used the 'hospitality assured' quality mark against which to test itself.

Consultative processes were satisfactory, reaching most stakeholders, who gave high satisfaction ratings along with a helpful list of suggestions for improvement. The list of options for delivery were generally argued from the provider perspective and with no rigorous challenge, the unsurprising final conclusion was to continue to provide the service.

Despite this however, the improvement plan for the existing service is satisfactory, although some of the targets are too imprecise. However the plan has been superseded by improvements arising from delegation. Significant improvements include: schools now have a service specification which is detailed enough for them to seek external tenders; consultation processes are comprehensive; key staff have undergone management and customer care training; there is better liaison with school managers; investment in kitchen equipment is beginning to have an effect on meal take-up; and significant contracts are being secured in open competition with external providers.

The school catering service in Birmingham is a **good service** and **prospects for continued significant improvement are promising**, as the service continues its vigorous response to delegation.

BEST VALUE REVIEW OF CLEANING SERVICES

The scope of the review was the school cleaning service section of the council's direct services organisation. School cleaning has been delegated for many years now, and the service was not reported on in the last inspection. Currently, sixty per cent of Birmingham's schools buy the service, and about fifteen per cent of these chose the service in open competition with private providers, the rest have arranged a service level agreement.

Although the service has a turnover in excess of £6 million, its choice as a pilot review was not based on the associated risk, nor on its strategic importance to the education service, but rather as a relatively straightforward trial run of the process. Officers accept that the process of reviewing at that time had limitations, and consequently this review reflected those limitations. Shortcomings in the review process are similar to those already reported for school catering.

However, the improvement plan resulting from the review was comprehensive in its approach to the shortcomings revealed from the consultation exercise, and the implementation of these improvements is being monitored appropriately. Those schools which buy the service continue to report satisfaction ratings of around eighty five percent.

School cleaning is a **good service, prospects for improvement are promising** although these are likely to be incremental given the lack of rigour in the review.

BEST VALUE REVIEW OF SCHOOL PLACE PLANNING SERVICE

This Best Value review was completed in December 2000, and the review's report was endorsed by the city council on 6 January 2001. The scope of the review covered the main areas of work of the service.

This was a poor candidate for an early BVR because indicators from internal self assessment, the previous inspection report and from the external auditor all point to an already good service. The likely gains from the review were therefore modest, especially given the shortcomings in the review process outlined in the introduction to this appendix.

External perspectives were secured by having the Roman Catholic diocesan representative as chair of the review team, and another LEA on the team. Useful performance data were presented against some of the service aims, but others, such as 'minimising the need for travel' had no targets or performance data. Comparative performance against local LEAs was also reported as being good, but apart from costs, no figures were presented. Consultation was effective, and garnered intelligence from a wide range of stakeholders. Fundamental challenge was limited. Although four options for delivery were generated, only cursory consideration was given to the possibility of outsourcing administrative functions, and no corroborative evidence supporting the negative assertions about its possible effects was presented.

The improvement plan is well written although its ambitions are limited by the generally good performance of the service at the outset. However, most of the improvements have been implemented, and these are being monitored by the new scrutiny arrangements.

This is a **good service** which **has promising prospects for improvement** as a consequence of the adoption of the improvement plan.

BEST VALUE REVIEW OF EDUCATION WELFARE SERVICE

During the previous inspection the service was judged to be poor. The choice of this service for a BVR was thus very appropriate. The BVR sought to build on these foundations and its scope encompassed all aspects of the service with the aim of improving the performance the service.

The structured analysis of the scope and purpose of the service during the BVR process led to a clearer understanding of the relationship between attendance with other services working to promote social inclusion. Furthermore it highlighted the importance of the service in supporting vulnerable groups. While the service was achieving success in improving attendance, it was in these latter areas where key stakeholders had complained of some inconsistency and of an insufficiently proactive service.

A thorough and comprehensive approach to comparison of service performance showed that it was an average cost service that had, or was soon to, implement processes that were consistent with best practice elsewhere. The review benefited from having access to the results of the extensive consultation undertaken as part of the concurrent scrutiny review. This confirmed that satisfaction with the service was improving albeit too slowly for some headteachers. The results of consultation with a wider set of stakeholders showed that joint working and liaison arrangements with other services and agencies were frequently weak, particularly with the social services department. Despite the attention given to inclusion, there was too little examination of the consequences of the implementation of the council's strategy for the inclusion of pupils with special needs, particularly those with behavioural problems, on the work of the EWS.

The conclusions of the BVR were translated into a series of options for the future of the service. These options were, however, limited in their scope and focused on the potential for outsourcing or delegation of the funding of the service but choice of the option that meant the least change for the service was well argued. The admittedly more difficult options around the nature of the services provided and how they might work with other parts of the council and agencies to better focus on vulnerable communities were not set out. Despite these shortcomings, the resultant service improvement plan is well structured and detailed and includes actions which will lead to a better community focus and support for children at risk. The actions are well set out and provide a sound basis for service improvement. Since approval of the plan by members, progress has been monitored assiduously and is being made in all areas.

This is now a highly satisfactory service and the prospects for continuing the already significant improvements are promising.

BEST VALUE REVIEW OF THE BEHAVIOUR SUPPORT SERVICE

The behaviour support service provides a comprehensive service for the education of all pupils who have been excluded, supporting their return to mainstream and working directly with school staff and pupils on the management of pupils with behavioural difficulties. The scope of the BVR was pertinent to all aspects of the service in considering whether the service is delivered in the manner which most effectively meets the needs of its clients and contributed to both social inclusion and school improvement.

Considerable effort was put into comparing the behaviour support service with an appropriate set of other LEAs. Comparison showed that the cost and quality of service were broadly in line with those of similar LEAs and some aspects of the service, for example the capacity to use service data to support planning and evaluation, compared well. A broad and appropriate range of service users and other stakeholders were consulted; schools have a high regard for the service and wanted more of it, and pupils and parents particularly valued the ethos. However, consultation revealed dissatisfaction with the quality and extent of interagency working and service staff considered that the absence of an established head of service meant it was lacking in strategic direction.

The analysis of challenges facing the service is well informed and focused on the impact of legislation and the council's inclusion strategies. A series of options for the future of the service, each of which is well supported by an analysis of strengths and weaknesses, provided a choice for the future deployment of the service. However, these largely addressed the different options for providing the existing services and the potential for delegation of the funding to schools. The option chosen represented that which involved the least change with the service evolving to meet future demands. The improvement plan does not set out how the service will rise to the challenge of inclusion and focuses on reducing exclusions, extending educational provision for excluded pupils and improving the re-integration of pupils from pupil referral units. However, the deficiencies of the improvement plan were soon recognised, partly as a consequence of the concerns raised by secondary head teachers during consultation on the council's inclusion strategy. The recent appointment of a head of service gives the LEA the capacity to improve the strategic planning of the service.

This service is **highly satisfactory**, and **the prospects for improvement are promising**.

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