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John Wilson
Corporate Director for Children and Young People
Wakefield Metropolitan District Council
County Hall
Wakefield
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Dear Mr Wilson

Inspection of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement under section 136(1) (b) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006

Following the recent inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectors on 18 to 22 November 2013, I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

We are grateful to you for your cooperation, and to your staff, the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, contracted partners, headteachers and governors who gave up their time to meet with us.¹

This inspection was carried out because of concerns about the achievement and progress of pupils in primary and secondary schools and the quality of education and training for young people aged 16 to 18 years. In addition, the proportion of schools in Wakefield judged to be good or better at their last Ofsted inspection is well-below national averages and not improving rapidly enough.

The local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement are ineffective.

¹ During the inspection, discussions were held with senior and operational officers, and elected members of the local authority, governors and other stakeholders. Inspectors scrutinised available documents, including strategic plans, and analysed a range of available data.

Context

The authority's schools are organised into a two-tier system of primary and secondary phases. Currently, there are 144 state-funded schools, around a third of which are academies. Of the academies, 11 (eight primary and three secondary) are sponsor-led and 36 are academy convertors, with almost two thirds being in the primary sector. All but one of the 18 secondary schools is an academy. Most of the secondary schools and just over a quarter of the primary schools have converted to academy status since February 2011.

In 2011, the Wakefield school improvement service was reorganised to deliver cross-phase support and challenge. It includes 10 advisers, including a seconded advisory headteacher, who focus on school improvement, led by a service manager. Three posts are currently unfilled, with these positions covered using interim staff and a seconded lead headteacher. This team implements the authority's policy for monitoring, challenging and supporting schools and leads the priority improvement programmes and cross-phase partnerships. A further team supports post-16 and early years provision. The Corporate Director for Children and Young People took up his post in August 2013. A complete review of the model for the future delivery of school improvement is under way, with a report and recommendations planned for publication in April 2014.

Summary findings

- The proportion of pupils attending schools which are good or better is too low.
- Despite some improvements in attainment, particularly in Key Stage 4, the performance of pupils at Key Stage 1 and 2 remains well below national averages in reading, writing and mathematics. The gap between local and national performance is not closing quickly enough.
- The gap in achievement between disadvantaged groups and advantaged pupils remains too great and, in some phases, such as the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 2, this gap is increasing.
- Despite the relatively high number of school improvement officers in Wakefield, arrangements to support improvement lack coherence: partnerships with a range of providers lack effective coordination.
- Systems are over-complicated; some partners lack the capacity to meet the demand for help. This reduces the support and challenge for primary school leadership, where it is most needed.
- There are examples of school-to-school support working effectively; however, the role of good and better schools in providing challenge as part of a

coordinated strategy is not consistently understood by headteachers and governors.

- The Schools Forum has not assessed the impact of improvement programmes systematically and cannot demonstrate how much improvement has been achieved or whether the considerable investment has provided value for money.
- Wakefield and its partners have some clear areas of strength. These include:
 - reducing the proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training
 - increasing the numbers continuing in education beyond the age of 16
 - the good quality of outcome data which schools receive
 - the improving level of support and challenge provided for governors.

Areas for improvement

In order to improve schools:

- the lack of clarity around commissioning and deploying support should be addressed
- arrangements for evaluation and quality assurance should be clarified so that the effectiveness of actions can be accurately judged
- improving and strengthening primary leadership needs to be a key priority in planning and resource allocation
- the Schools Forum should develop clearer processes for monitoring and evaluating the impact of funded programmes.

The local authority arrangements for school improvement require re-inspection within nine to 12 months.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- Elected members and senior officers are ambitious for education in Wakefield. They recognise that it must be a priority for economic regeneration. However, the partnerships and structures necessary to realise this ambition have been too slow to develop. For example, the division of adult and children's services and the appointment of the Corporate Director for Children and Young People did not take place until this summer. Most schools, but not all, support the local authority's ambition.
- The evaluation of the impact of initiatives is limited. The school improvement service has moved appropriately towards more brokerage and less direct delivery, working with a range of partners, national, local and specialist

leaders in education and teaching schools. However, this is not yet delivering strong outcomes because school leaders do not consistently understand the practical demands of this approach. Therefore, the local authority's approach to securing and promoting strong school autonomy is not effective.

- The Schools Forum has a strong representation from schools of all types in the authority. However, it does not focus effectively on the outcomes for the targeted support it agrees or hold senior leaders to account for rates of improvement.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- There is a strategy for improvement which focuses on providing appropriate levels of support to meet the needs of individual institutions. However, this has not led to an improvement in the proportion of schools which are good or better. Figures up to September 2013 show that 35%, or over 9,000 pupils, attend a primary school that is less than good. The figure for secondary schools is around 7,200 students. Overall, the proportions of good and better schools are below the national and regional averages, despite some very recent improvement. Improvement over time has been at a slower pace than across the country.
- The local authority agreed a data-sharing protocol with schools in 2004/5 and the information available is detailed and wide ranging. Annual risk assessments of all schools take place and these are monitored. However, this information has not been used incisively to improve achievement and increase the proportion of good or better schools.
- Standards in Key Stage 1 and 2 are too low in reading, writing and mathematics. This has been the trend for the last few years and the local authority has been unable to work with partners to improve this profile. Elsewhere, the picture is more positive with improvements in the Early Years, Key Stage 4 and post-16 outcomes. However, across most phases the gap in attainment between disadvantaged groups and other pupils remains greater than national averages. Local authority staff are aware of this but so far strategies have not had the necessary impact to narrow the gap significantly.
- The local authority has used its formal powers of intervention to some effect, especially in using interim executive boards, but has been less successful in the use of formal warning notices. Despite the use of these powers, the proportion of schools judged inadequate remains above the national average.
- The local authority uses school-to-school support as an integral part of its approach. However, insufficient quality assurance procedures, muddled lines of accountability and a lack of capacity mean that support lacks coherence, continuity and, most importantly, strong impact.

- A key element of the local authority's approach to improvement is the targeted support for identified schools. Considerable extra funding was provided for these programmes. However, of the schools on the 'Securing Good' programme, that were inspected last year, less than half actually improved and were judged good or better. This is a poor return for a considerable extra investment.

Support and challenge for leadership and management, including governance

- The local authority has an established programme for developing leadership delivered by schools, under contract. However, it is not clear how effective these courses are when measured by inspection outcomes. During 2012/13, the proportion of schools judged to have inadequate leadership and management was greater than the national average.
- The local authority has funded the secondment of the headteacher of an outstanding school to lead a team of advisory headteachers. The focus is on improving schools which are satisfactory or require improvement. However, this initiative has been delayed due to financial regulations; advisory staff had only just made their first visit to schools at the time of the inspection.
- The local authority has a range of governors who can be deployed at short notice to schools which require support through interim executive boards. This strategy has only been partially effective; some of the schools' inspection outcomes have declined.
- Governor support has been part of the school improvement service since 2011. This support is well deployed to schools: conferences and courses are well-coordinated. The governor services team has also begun formal reviews of governing bodies. This programme started in February and so far 15 reviews have been undertaken which have been well received by governors. The full impact of this programme has not yet been evaluated.

Use of resources

- The local authority's procedures for the allocation of resources for school improvement is considered appropriately by the Schools Forum but is less well known by all headteachers and governors.
- The average funding for school improvement per maintained school pupil across all local authorities in England in 2012/13 was £36. The figure for Wakefield was £66. There has been additional funding from the Dedicated Schools Grant, following application to the Secretary of State by the Schools

Forum. However, what is missing is a focused evaluation of the impact of this extra funding and a clear comparison with regional and national data.

- Schools are suitably challenged about surplus finances. Where appropriate, local authority officers require detailed information on individual schools' budget plans as part of published protocol.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chief Executive and the Leader of Wakefield Metropolitan District Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Robert Pyner

Her Majesty's Inspector