

Tribal Education
1-4 Portland Square
Bristol
BS2 8RR

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0117 3115247
Direct email
Katie.white@tribalgrop.com



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Mr Ian Anderson
Director for Community Wellbeing and Social Care
Isle of Wight Council
County Hall
Newport
PO30 1UD

Dear Mr Anderson

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 10-14 June 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 elected members, contracted partners, headteachers and governors who gave up their time to meet with us.¹

This inspection was carried out because outcomes for children and young people on the Isle of Wight are too low. Pupil's progress between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 is the lowest in the country. As a result, attainment is significantly below the national averages in English and mathematics. At Key Stage 4 attainment and progress are also well below national and regional averages, and the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils is too wide. The poor outcomes of the focused inspection activity in March and April did not signal quick enough improvement. These inspections raised considerable concerns about the quality of education being provided by schools on the island and how the local authority's efforts to support and challenge schools to improve were perceived by school leaders.

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

Context

In 2011, Isle of Wight schools changed from a three-tier (primary, middle and high school) to a two-tier system (primary and secondary schools). The number of local authority education personnel has reduced considerably in recent years. From 1 July 2013, the Isle of Wight Council will enter into a strategic partnership with Hampshire local authority to deliver Children's Services as directed by the Secretary of State for Education.

Summary findings

The local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement are ineffective.

Poor corporate and strategic leadership has left the current administration with considerable and significant challenges. The approach to school improvement has lacked coordination and it does not have the confidence of schools. Key decisions about resource deployment, school organisation and place planning have been characterised by poor analysis, limited consultation and weak implementation. This has resulted in a large proportion of requires improvement or inadequate schools.

A lack of rigour in monitoring and challenge, mostly due to poor use of performance data, means that the local authority neither knows the schools well nor intervenes early enough. Senior leaders in the best schools are not commissioned to help weaker schools improve as part of a coordinated strategy. Where specialist teachers and consultants are used, evaluation of their impact is weak.

School leaders, governors and local authority officers describe significant improvement in the short period of time since the appointment of the interim Head of Schools and Learning. This includes better communication, clearer direction and more consultation with stakeholders. However, this has not resulted in authoritative challenge to weaker schools. As a result, too many children and young people on the Isle of Wight still lack access to a good quality of education.

Areas for improvement

To improve achievement, and ensure that all pupils on the Isle of Wight attend a good or better school, the local authority should:

- agree and publish a strategic approach to school improvement that prioritises high aspirations and achievement for all groups of pupils, and ensure it is understood by all
- introduce detailed urgent arrangements for reducing the number of inadequate schools and increasing the number of schools that are good or better

- make effective use of performance data when evaluating school performance so that rigorous challenge and coherent support can be given to all school leaders and governors, and in secondary schools in particular
- establish a new framework for monitoring and evaluating the impact of all school improvement work that is undertaken or commissioned by the local authority, including the work of system leaders
- ensure greater efficiency, value for money and better transfer between key stages for all pupils by enabling and encouraging more collaborative relationships between schools
- ensure decision-making about the allocation of resources to schools is understood by all, evaluated to ensure impact and provides value for money.

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

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- Weaknesses in strategic and operational arrangements for supporting school improvement have resulted in ineffective support and challenge for schools. The leadership of the new political administration recognises the need to improve schools but turbulence in local authority staffing has been a significant barrier to implementing a strategic approach to school improvement.
- There has been no co-ordinated strategy for school improvement in recent years. Many headteachers, particularly in the secondary phase, have lost confidence in the local authority's capacity to support and challenge.
- The local authority's approach to school improvement has been reactive and not proactive and there is little evaluation of its impact; for example, the 2010-13 strategic plan does not indicate how officers monitor the success of any actions taken.
- School leaders, including governors, have been insufficiently involved in local authority consultation about strategic and operational education policy. Headteachers, governors and teachers were inadequately prepared for school reorganisation and for teaching year groups with which they were unfamiliar.
- The delegation of funding to schools and the simultaneous reduction of local authority support were poorly managed. This resulted in school leaders lacking expertise in areas in which they had no previous experience. The Schools Forum has not been consulted effectively about policy decisions.
- Participation in post-16 education and training is good and, as a result, the proportion of students who are not in education or employment (NEET) is well below the national average. The one further education college on the island is outstanding.
- There is a strong commitment on the part of Elected Members across the political spectrum to work with local authority officers and the Hampshire partnership to improve

schools on the Isle of Wight. School leaders and officers welcome this new strategic partnership.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- The local authority does not know the Isle of Wight schools well, particularly at secondary school level. A lack of high quality detailed data about school performance results in inability to challenge schools or commission support effectively. The local authority does not have an accurate view of the likely trajectory of school performance.
- Schools at risk of decline are not identified quickly enough. Four out of six secondary schools are inadequate. The local authority has not used its formal powers of intervention in schools causing concern effectively.
- Beyond summary discussion with the schools, based on limited data, there is little knowledge or analysis of variation in school performance across the island. Where it does exist it is too broad in nature and is not focused enough on specific cohorts of pupils. Although this is partly a consequence of the poor quality of data, it is also because of the inconsistent nature of school level conversations.
- There is no formal system for commissioning, or evaluating the quality and impact of, the external support provided to schools. While some attempt is made to evaluate what schools think about the quality of external advice and support, this relies heavily on perception rather than on pupil outcomes.
- The system for brokering additional support for schools is largely led by the individual school needing help, especially at the secondary level, with little or no leadership or quality assurance from the local authority. As an example, the local authority knows that recruitment to leadership posts is difficult on the island but there is no strategic view of how to develop future leaders from within.
- Communication between the local authority and schools is ad hoc. This is especially true for higher performing schools. Many such schools report that they do not know how the local authority views their performance.

Support and challenge for leadership and management, including governance

- The local authority has failed to identify where support and challenge to headteachers and governors are required. The strategic management of school reorganisation on the island was poor and deflected attention away from improving schools. The reduction of centrally-based services happened without sufficient support for school leaders to take on these responsibilities.
- Poor quality assurance of services that are brokered or recommended by the local authority has resulted in schools wasting money on external consultancy that does not give an accurate view of strengths and weaknesses.

- The local authority's Challenge and Review meetings offer only superficial challenge to school leaders and governors. Discussions are not informed by detailed achievement and attendance data that are benchmarked against national averages.
- The local authority does not have a strategic overview of the strengths and weaknesses of governance in schools. Universal support for governance focuses solely on statutory duties. However, a reasonable range of governor training courses exist as part of traded services and completed course evaluations show they are broadly well regarded.

Use of resources

- Decision-making about the allocation of resources has lacked transparency. Schools are unclear about how, or why, funding decisions are made. The most significant example of this is the lack of a coherent strategy for managing surplus pupil places. Links between the allocation of additional resources and any subsequent evaluation of impact are weak.
- There was no coherent analysis or management of training needs of school staff in the run up to, and during, school reorganisation. Since reorganisation, a fragmented process for identification of training needs has meant that this has declined further.
- The local authority has begun the process of producing business plans for each central team, which has the potential for improving coherence. However this is very new and has not been implemented yet.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Isle of Wight Council. I am also copying it to the Director of Children's Services (or their equivalent) of Hampshire Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Pauline Robins
Her Majesty's Inspector