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3 December 2013

Mrs Sue Harrison  
Director of Children's Services for Blackpool Borough Council  
Education and Children's Services Department  
Progress House  
Clifton Road  
Blackpool FY4 4US

Dear Mrs Harrison

**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 25 - 29 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, your staff, the elected members, contracted partners, headteachers and governors for your cooperation and for giving up your time to meet with us.<sup>1</sup>

This inspection was carried out because of concerns about low outcomes for young people in Blackpool. Attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 has been significantly lower than that found nationally for the last three years and the proportion of students securing five or more good GCSE grades, including English and mathematics, declined further in 2013. The progress made by young people in English and mathematics between the ages of 11 and 16 is well below average. Very few of the most able young people achieve their potential by the age of 16. A young person's chance of attending a good school in Blackpool decreases significantly at age 11.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

## **The local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement are ineffective.**

### **Summary of inspection findings**

Over time, the local authority has failed to provide sufficient challenge to secondary schools to raise standards. Underachievement persists in most secondary schools and students' progress, and standards overall, remain significantly below regional and national averages. There are stark inequalities in young people's access to a good or better secondary school.

This picture of poor performance is recognised in the local authority's self-evaluation and by senior officers, most of whom are relatively new to their posts. While there is the ambition to raise aspirations, the council's published improvement strategy, *Journey to Outstanding*<sup>2</sup>, lacks quantitative targets and qualitative indicators to which school leaders can subscribe and be held to account. The authority's use of data to plan improvement is weak. There is no coherent over-arching strategy to evaluate the impact of the council's school improvement arrangements. The Director of Children's services commissioned an external review of school improvement in June 2013. The recommendations from this review are being acted upon; however their impact is not yet evident.

While many school leaders are positive about the work of the Director of Children's Services, they also report that the relationship between Blackpool maintained secondary schools and the local authority has been too comfortable, and at the expense of objective challenge. Greater emphasis is being placed on school-to-school support from partners outside Blackpool but this is at an early stage. The local authority has only rarely used its statutory powers to intervene in schools that are causing concern.

### **Context**

The Director of Children's Services was appointed in May 2012. A Deputy Director took up post in November 2013. The Head of Education, Standards and Effectiveness, who oversees school improvement, has been in post for two years.

There has been considerable reduction in the number of local authority school improvement staff over recent years as a result of revisions to funding allocation and service reorganisation. The authority provides support and challenge through a small team of school improvement officers and commissions support from external consultants. School-to-school support is provided through various arrangements,

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<sup>2</sup> This was being consulted on at the time of the inspection.

including a cross-authority Teaching School Alliance incorporating a number of primary and secondary Blackpool schools and one outstanding secondary school from a neighbouring local authority. This provides support for secondary and primary school leadership and teaching through deployment of National and Local Leaders of Education. The local authority works in partnership with the teaching school to share school data and advise upon deployment. Support is provided from a Multi Academy Trust for a primary school that is subject to special measures. Blackpool has thirty primary schools, of which seven are converter academies. There is one all-through school that is a sponsored academy. Of the seven high schools, one is a converter academy and another three are in the process of becoming sponsored academies. A one-form entry primary free school has opened recently. There are only two outstanding schools in Blackpool, both of which are special schools. The pupil referral unit, sited at various satellite centres, was judged good at its last inspection but the support for special educational needs in mainstream schools varies widely and is often weak. There are two colleges in Blackpool catering for post-16 learners; both of these have been judged outstanding.

### **Areas for improvement**

The local authority should take swift and decisive action to ensure that pupils and students have equal access to a school that is good or better. In particular, it should:

- translate its ambition for schools into a rigorous action plan, supported by robust data and evidence, which has challenging targets and interim objectives for improvement in leadership, teaching, behaviour and achievement
- insist that maintained schools provide more accurate predictions of pupil and student performance and challenge more rigorously when predictions are inaccurate
- state unequivocally to schools whether their rate of improvement is sufficient and follow this up with action to address under-performance
- ensure that governors regularly attend formal meetings to review the progress of schools causing concern and that these meetings result in action to improve the leadership of schools
- accelerate the review of the quality of provision in the special education resource bases in mainstream schools
- devise a secondary school strategy for improving teaching and raising standards in English, and advance the current strategy for improving mathematics
- make full use of statutory powers of intervention in maintained schools

- ensure that any concerns about academy performance are reported to the Secretary of State

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

**Corporate leadership and strategic planning**

- The local authority has been slow to challenge secondary schools that do not offer students a good or better education. It had not used its formal powers of intervention before 2013 despite a long history of poor outcomes and low attendance in the town's secondary schools.
- Too much focus on support, and not enough challenge, has led to under-achievement, particularly in secondary schools. Attainment in the borough's primary schools has improved and is in line with the national average at the end of Key Stage 2, with particular improvement in mathematics. In stark contrast, GCSE results are very low across a range of subjects and there is little evidence of the impact of the local authority's recent work to improve standards in secondary mathematics.
- While senior officers and councillors believe that Blackpool students deserve the best education, they have been ineffective in translating their vision for change into realisable plans. Initiatives such as the provision of free breakfasts for all primary school pupils demonstrate a commitment to improving well-being. However, not enough has been done to improve teaching and leadership. Moreover, the recent commissioning of a higher education institution to assess the impact of the 'free breakfasts' is an example of the kind of evaluation that has been missing from other areas of activity
- The local authority's use of data to inform its work is weak. Secondary school predictions of students' attainment have been unreliable for several years. In response, the authority has begun to build in an 'inaccuracy-factor' into predictions instead of insisting that predictions are more accurate. The authority tracks the progress of various groups of students but does not link this to its pledge to raise aspirations and to challenge individual secondary schools. It has not identified higher-attaining pupils as a distinct group, despite their under-achievement being a priority for improvement.
- A programme to improve the accuracy of observations, and assessment, in the Early Years Foundation Stage has proved broadly effective. Outcomes have improved because teachers now have a better understanding of children's skills, knowledge and understanding. However, the outcomes of baseline

assessments have not been used to target specific work in schools where there is greatest need.

- The local authority's relationship with schools is generally positive. It willingly considers different models of school organisation. However, school-to-school support has had more impact on achievement in primary schools than in secondary schools, and links with a secondary support school in a neighbouring local authority are very recent.
- The authority encourages wider partnership working. It is beginning to draw on a range of external partners to secure school improvement. For example, a recent partnership with an outstanding post-16 provider has improved access and employment opportunities for a small number of students with multiple and complex needs. Similarly, the local authority works closely with other post-16 providers judged to be outstanding, and students' engagement and outcomes improve noticeably post-16.

### **Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support**

- A lack of robust and consistent challenge has led to marked differences in the performance of schools. Rates of progress made by secondary school students are among the lowest in the country. Officers acknowledge that responding to crises has on occasions taken precedence over planned programmes of work.
- Too few secondary schools are good or improving. The gap between secondary performance in Blackpool and similar areas is widening. Outcomes for young people, even in secondary schools judged to be good at previous inspections, have declined in several instances. The proportions of pupils and students who attend a good or better secondary school remains among the lowest in the country.
- The local authority has identified under-performance in mathematics as a key issue across the authority in both primary and secondary phases, and initiated a borough-wide programme by commissioning external partners to work intensively with schools to establish a mathematics strategy across the town. This initiative has proved successful in the primary phase, where the pace of improvement in mathematics is more rapid than that found nationally. In the secondary phase, the impact has been limited and monitoring of the implementation of the strategy is neither rigorous nor consistent.
- Students make much slower progress in English at secondary school than is the case nationally. The local authority has identified the need to provide support for teachers and subject leaders, and is in the process of commissioning consultants to secure improvement. This is unlikely to lead to rapid improvement in the short-term.
- There are no outstanding mainstream schools and no specific challenge or support is provided to schools who wish to become outstanding. The local

authority's intervention has not secured rapid enough improvement for schools in categories of concern.

- While the local authority's knowledge of the performance of schools has improved recently, and headteachers report that more challenging conversations are held, these are neither well-documented, nor do they routinely include judgements or identify precise actions that can be tracked and checked. This makes it difficult for the council to hold schools to account and to demonstrate the impact of its services.
- The local authority has not been rigorous enough in checking the quality of the support it has brokered for pupils with additional needs. Consequently, poor practice in a special educational resource facility in one school was neither identified nor tackled swiftly enough. This resulted in the provision being decommissioned.

### **Support and challenge for leadership and management, including governance**

- Blackpool's headteachers support each other and share improvement strategies but this has had limited impact on students' achievement in the secondary phase, where formalised sharing of practice is new. Integrated working with the teaching school alliance does illustrate that the council, and local schools, are looking outwards to find new and creative solutions to school improvement.
- Partnerships at primary level are having more impact on raising standards. A new multi-academy trust, which includes two primary schools and a special school, has been created as part of a local solution to developing leadership capacity.
- Recently, support for school leadership has been strengthened through the use of National Leaders in Education and National Leaders of Governance in schools causing concern.
- An independent review of the authority's school improvement functions indicated concerns over the quality of courses provided for teachers' continuing professional development, a criticism that is now being addressed through a refocusing on schools' precise needs.
- Support networks for subject leaders commissioned by headteacher groups are well-attended but their impact on raising achievement is not evaluated. Training has not covered 'moving good schools to outstanding'.
- The local authority provides schools with comprehensive sets of data that enable early comparison with other schools in the area. However, the local authority does not collect data that provide an accurate indication of future results. This affects officers' ability to make timely decisions on the allocation of resources in response to emerging need. While the data packs provide a

detailed view of how well different groups of pupils are doing, higher-attaining pupils are not tracked closely enough.

- Many councillors demonstrate their commitment to education by serving as governors. Interim Executive Boards in two schools requiring special measures are proving effective in challenging the quality of leadership. The local authority has provided additional experienced governors to schools requiring additional support. The local authority's support for governor development is less effective for secondary schools than it is for primary schools.

### **Use of resources**

- There is no coherent strategy for evaluating the effectiveness of the council's school improvement arrangements or for demonstrating that they provide value for money.
- Following an independent review, the Local Authority has made funding available to increase school improvement capacity through the recruitment of two additional officer posts. Schools' use of the substantial amounts of pupil premium funding that is provided to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and students is not fully evaluated and nor is good practice identified so that it can be spread more widely.
- Headteachers and other stakeholders are often positive about the work of local authority officers, and can provide some evidence about the support provided. However, the value placed on high quality relationships with the local authority is coloured by the fact that there has been too little challenge over time

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

Yours sincerely

Shirley Gornall

**Her Majesty's Inspector**