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Jane Portman
Executive Director, Adults and Children
Bournemouth Borough Council
The Town Hall
Bourne Avenue
Bournemouth
BH2 6DY

Dear Ms Portman

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 9–13 December 2013 of Bournemouth Borough Council's school improvement arrangements, 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 throughout the inspection process. I would also like to express my gratitude to your staff and those elected members, headteachers and members of the governing bodies of schools who gave up their time to meet with us.¹

This inspection was carried out for two main reasons. First, the proportion of pupils attending a good or better primary or secondary school was smaller than in most local authorities, placing Bournemouth in the lowest performing 20% of local authorities across the country. Second, for a number of years, the progress made by pupils across Key Stage 2 has been significantly lower than that seen nationally.

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

This trend means that pupils' attainment was lower than the national average and much lower than it should have been by the end of Key Stage 2, given pupils' high attainment at the age of seven.

These issues raised concerns about the capacity of the local authority to bring about much-needed improvement; prompting Ofsted to initiate an inspection of the authority's arrangements to promote school improvement.

Context

Bournemouth is a small unitary authority. All of its secondary schools are academies, as is one of its two special schools. A growing number of primary schools also have academy status. Over the past eight years, the birth rate has increased substantially and the number of primary school places has expanded to accommodate this trend; many primary schools are considerably larger than average. There is relatively high pupil mobility which reflects the seasonal nature of some employment, families attending university and the density of language schools in the area. The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is also increasing.

Bournemouth maintains a small team of officers to support school improvement. Their work is overseen by the Service Director, Children and Young People, who was appointed in January 2013. Many academies buy advice and support from the team, and also purchase other services provided by the local authority, such as support for governance.

This year, primary schools, including some primary academies, have been formally organised into three collaborative trusts. This initiative is being overseen by a school improvement board and is part of a move towards increasing school-to-school support. These actions are intended to raise schools' awareness of the individual and collective responsibility they have for the outcomes for Bournemouth's pupils.

Summary findings

The local authority's arrangements for supporting school improvement are effective.

Action taken by the local authority's school improvement services has had a positive impact on the quality of education in its schools. Recent Ofsted inspections confirm

that the proportion of pupils who attend a good or better primary school has increased and is now broadly in line with the proportion nationally.

Pupils' attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 has risen year on year and is now in line with national averages in reading, writing and mathematics. Pupils' progress across the key stage has also improved and has done so at a faster rate than seen nationally. However, pupils' progress in mathematics has not improved as much as in reading and writing when compared with national rates of improvement.

The attainment gap between children eligible for free school meals and those from more advantaged backgrounds varies widely from school to school. Tackling this unacceptable inequality is an urgent issue for the local authority and its schools.

The local authority makes good use of system leaders; they are playing an increasing role in the drive for school improvement. The support the local authority has brokered for schools which have previously caused concern has been especially effective. Two primary schools and one secondary school which formerly required special measures have improved and have been judged good.

Good outcomes at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 have been maintained. The outcomes for students in Bournemouth's secondary academies have also improved: the proportion of students gaining five or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C including in English and mathematics is three percentage points higher than the national figure.

The council's leaders and senior officers have recognised the need for a change of culture and a greater sense of urgency; they have made explicit their ambition that all schools will be good or better by 2015. School leaders and governors say that they understand and share this ambition; however, not all are able to articulate precisely what this goal requires from their schools and what needs to happen across their collaborative trust.

Areas for improvement

To improve achievement, and ensure that all pupils in Bournemouth attend a good or better school, the local authority should:

- make sure that the collaborative trusts focus their efforts on narrowing the gap between the attainment and progress of pupils supported by pupil premium funding and others

- take urgent steps to promote the sharing of best practice in the teaching of mathematics across the collaborative trusts
- ensure all maintained schools understand clearly what is required from them, collectively and individually, to realise the ambition for every school to be good or better, including the agreement of key milestones
- consult with non-maintained state-funded schools to agree actions to take should the performance of an academy, or other state-funded school not maintained by the local authority, give cause for concern.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- Bournemouth's vision for its schools is ambitious. Elected members, senior officers, headteachers and governors all understand the drive for all pupils to attend a good or better school by the end of 2015. They know there needs to be a 'step change' to achieve this goal. School leaders understand their personal responsibility for school improvement and that the local authority's role is to champion excellence through support and challenge.
- The establishment of the primary school collaborative trusts is one strand of this improvement strategy; these trusts have rightly been organised to include outstanding schools, as well as those that require improvement, and to span relatively advantaged as well as more deprived areas of the town.
- Key priorities for the local authority and its schools are well known. However, there is a lack of detailed understanding of why performance at Key Stage 2 is weaker than in other key stages. Factors such as mobility, and an increase in the numbers of pupils who are in the early stages of learning English joining schools part way through Key Stage 2, may explain lower attainment but do not account for slower progress. Schools must examine their data forensically to understand what is happening at this stage.
- Headteachers and governors typically have high regard for the work of school improvement officers, citing the challenge provided by the annual 'September letter' (a personalised letter that sets out strengths and weaknesses in each year's outcomes for pupils) and the rigorous follow-up monitoring visits.
- The local authority's arrangements to ensure there are sufficient and suitable places for all 16- and 17-year-olds in education or training are good. The strategy is strongly led; there are good plans for further development. The number of young people not in employment, education or training is low.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- The local authority collects and analyses ample data about the attainment and progress of pupils at individual schools. Many academies utilise the local authority's data package because of the level and quality of detail provided.
- School leaders understand and accept how this information, alongside a consideration of other factors such as staffing issues, is used to determine the level of support and intervention a school will receive. The performance of good schools is monitored consistently; there is prompt action should any indicators start to slip. However, there is no clear and agreed protocol to inform the action the local authority should take if the performance of an academy gives rise for concern.
- Performance information is used well to determine the priorities for teachers' professional development and training. Bournemouth offers a wide range of opportunities in conjunction with partners in neighbouring local authorities. Recent training on the effective use of pupil premium funding was timely and well received by schools.
- The local authority's decision to encourage schools to form collaborative trusts is causing a shift from central intervention and direction towards school-to-school challenge and support. Schools are increasingly willing to be open and to share strengths and weaknesses with one another. Many schools now have a clear understanding of their collective responsibility for every Bournemouth child; a few still need to grasp this responsibility.
- The local authority places a strong emphasis on the promotion of the well-being of children and young people. It understands this focus as essential to its work in promoting educational success. 'Early Help' for families is a key element of this commitment. This year, Bournemouth appeared in the top 10 of the local authorities in the Stonewall Equality Index (a measure of how well homophobia and homophobic bullying are being tackled in schools).

Support and challenge for leadership and management, including governance

- Although statutory powers of intervention have not been used, the local authority's system of in-house warnings (called 'notice to governors') and subsequent action have proved effective. The process is taken seriously by school leaders and governing bodies. All schools issued with such a notice have improved their performance.
- National and Local Leaders of Education, both from academies and maintained schools, are deployed well to support leaders in other schools. The two special schools play a prominent role in improving the provision for those who are disabled or who have special educational needs across the borough, leading to a reduction in the the number of exclusions.

- The local authority has been instrumental in bringing about improvements in governance. In particular, the provision of additional governors has strengthened and enhanced governing bodies. The support, advice and challenge provided by the local authority's governor services are highly regarded. Local authority officers also provide good support to governing bodies in the management of headteachers' performance. However, while there is some sharing of good practice between governing bodies, this aspect of school-to-school support is underdeveloped.

Use of resources

- Following consultation with members of the schools' forum, the decision by Bournemouth's elected members to maintain a central school improvement service was endorsed by schools. Members point to improvements in the quality of education as an indication that this decision has resulted in value for money.
- In the context of financial restraint and the move towards greater autonomy and accountability for schools, the establishment of the collaborative trusts is timely and appropriate. Over the coming year, senior officers and the school improvement board are to evaluate the impact of the trusts on improving outcomes for pupils, and to review the necessity of maintaining a central team.
- The schools' forum plays a key role in monitoring delegated budgets and in considering and making decisions on formula changes. The forum's chair is clear that all members of the forum understand the need for decisions to be based on key priorities and needs; for example, the forum has supported the establishment of a 60-place unit for pupils with autism in one of Bournemouth's schools.

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

Yours sincerely

Linda McGill
Her Majesty's Inspector