

Tribal
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 0117311 5493
Direct email
roxanne.holly@tribalgroup.com



22 July 2014

Mrs Rose Collinson
Interim Director of Children's Services
Council House
Lichfield Street
Walsall
WS1 1TW

Dear Mrs Collinson

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 16 to 20 June 2014, 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, as well as 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 in your local authority due to concerns regarding the achievement of pupils in primary and nursery schools, as well as the low proportion of pupils attending schools that are good or better.

The local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement are ineffective.

¹ During the inspection, discussions were held with senior and operational officers, 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

Walsall is a small local authority with 119 schools and approximately 49,000 pupils. Seven of the schools are special schools and provide education for children and young people with a wide range of additional needs. Walsall has eight nursery schools, 72 primary schools and a further 14 primary academies. At secondary level, there are four local authority maintained schools and a further 14 secondary academies, two of which are selective grammar schools.

Walsall has a large further education college that caters for around 7,500 post-16 students and a University Technology College that serves students aged 14-19 years.

The Interim Director of Children's Services took up her post in September 2012. Following a lengthy contract with an external provider and a hand-over period, the local authority took over the school improvement service in August 2013. An Assistant Director (Access and Achievement) was appointed in April 2014 to lead the school improvement service. A substantive Director of Children's Services has been appointed to start in September 2014.

Summary findings

- Too few pupils in Walsall attend a good or better school. The local authority agrees that this is not acceptable.
- The proportion of pupils attending inadequate schools is too high and the number of schools causing concern is not reducing.
- The proportion of pupils achieving average levels of attainment at the end of Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 is too low and is not improving quickly enough.
- The proportion of pupils making expected progress across Key Stages 2 is below average. Progress across Key Stages 3 and 4 is well below average.
- Achievement for too many sixth form students is inadequate.
- Although the senior officers and elected members share an ambitious vision for all schools in Walsall, their strategy for improvement is not being realised because:
 - the delivery plans to implement the strategy are not fit for purpose
 - the local authority does not know its schools well enough. As a result, it does not act quickly enough to effect improvement.
 - The impact of the improvement work of local authority officers is inconsistent.
 - Weak leadership in too many maintained schools has not been challenged quickly enough.
 - The local authority does not have a clear plan to improve leadership and governance.
 - plans to co-ordinate high quality and effective school-to-school support have not been realised.

- Provision for children in Walsall's nursery schools is outstanding. It is good or better in all special schools.

Areas for improvement

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

- ensure that there is a clear strategy to develop future leaders and intervene quickly where leadership, including governance, is weak
- urgently improve plans to deliver the local authority's improvement strategy. This should include clear and measureable criteria that can be used to regularly and rigorously check progress
- ensure that the local authority has a clear and up-to-date picture of the performance of all schools in order to act quickly to secure improvement and stem decline
- strengthen the implementation of the local authority's categorisation of schools to ensure that the support and challenge provided are proportionate to need
- ensure that there are robust systems in place to check and improve the quality of the school improvement work of local authority officers
- implement plans to promote and facilitate effective school-to-school support and signpost high-quality services that schools can commission or broker.

The Local Authority arrangements for school improvement require re-inspection

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- The local authority fails to engage with all schools. For instance, a significant minority of schools do not share their most recent achievement data with the local authority. This severely undermines the local authority's ability to bring about improvements.
- Strategic planning to achieve the local authority's ambition is not robust. It is not clear how the progress of its work to improve schools will be measured. The journey from the current position to the eventual goal is not planned carefully enough. Plans focus on systems, procedures and initiatives but not on robust, practical measures that will deliver for children and young people.

- The local authority has appropriate systems to hold senior officers to account, but the lack of improvement milestones hampers its ability to check that initiatives are on track to deliver local authority targets.
- The effectiveness of plans for the implementation of Raising the Participation Age and to prepare for the future landscape are not replicated elsewhere.
- Senior officers and elected members are ambitious and committed to securing improvements in Walsall. They recognise that recent initiatives have not delivered better outcomes for young people.
- The implementation of the improvement strategy is at an early stage. Several appointments to the school improvement service are recent and some are interim. Staffing volatility is a factor in hindering better progress. School leaders know and understand the strategy. They agree that its priorities are appropriate and ambitious.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- The local authority has failed to act quickly enough to prevent schools from becoming inadequate or to improve schools that have been judged to require improvement. Consequently, the proportion of pupils who attend good or better schools is below average.
- Attainment in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 is well below average. Progress in Key Stages 2, 3 and 4 is also well below average. Achievement in just over half of sixth forms is inadequate. Achievement at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage is below average, although early indications are that this may improve.
- A key element of the local authority's improvement strategy is the categorisation of schools in order to provide support and challenge to the schools that most need it. However, the local authority does not consider a wide enough range of performance indicators to accurately band schools for targeted support.
- Currently the main criteria for the evaluation of schools is their performance at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 4, as well as the school's most recent inspection judgement. Early Years Foundation Stage achievement and sixth form outcomes are not considered well enough. Consequently, schools with poor performance are not eligible for the support they may need to improve and are not sufficiently challenged in these areas.
- The local authority does not hold comprehensive information about the progress children and young people are making on a termly basis or the targets they are expected to achieve. Its use of retrospective data delays the necessary intervention and help.
- The local authority does not forensically analyse attendance and exclusion data to identify trends that need to be addressed. For instance, a rising trend in fixed-term exclusions for primary-aged pupils has not been identified or addressed.

- The local authority does not know enough about the effectiveness of governing bodies in a significant proportion of schools. It holds no information about schools that do not use its clerking services. This hampers its ability to act decisively where governance is weak.
- The quality of the work of local authority school improvement advisers is inconsistent and is not checked well enough. Typically, written records of visits to schools are sparse; they are not evaluative and they lack focus. This means that reports to headteachers and governors do not provide clear direction about how to improve their schools.
- The local authority has not sufficiently progressed its plans to co-ordinate school-to-school support. Too much of it is ad-hoc, and depends on the good will of local leaders in the authority. Nevertheless, the local authority is compiling a directory of good practice to spread support more widely, but this is not yet complete.
- The support that the local authority has brokered to develop Early Years Foundation Stage provision with the use of staff from outstanding nursery schools is a rare but good example of a more co-ordinated approach to school improvement.
- National and local leaders of education support some schools, but this work is not always evaluated for its impact on improving leadership. Additionally, some school leaders who would benefit from such support are not receiving it.
- The local authority has applied its formal powers to some effect when using interim executive boards to replace governing bodies. However, it has not issued any formal warning notices.
- Local authority attempts to engage more fully with academy schools have not been wholly successful. Relationships are distant in most academy schools. However, the local authority reports any concerns about the performance of academy schools to the Department for Education.

Support and challenge for leadership and management, including governance

- The local authority is not doing enough to develop leadership capacity. Some schools have their own arrangements to develop future leaders; for example, working with a teaching schools alliance to provide a nationally-recognised training programme for middle leadership development.
- Training for senior and middle leaders has not been a priority for the local authority. The recent focus has been on developing leaders of literacy and numeracy. School leaders agree that the provision of training for future leaders is weak.
- The local authority allocates a mentor for headteachers who are new to their role, but does not evaluate the support they receive.
- The local authority has not acted swiftly enough to address weak school leadership. There are examples of action being taken to improve leadership, but too often this is prompted by inspection outcomes and occurs too late. Statutory powers to address weak leadership have not been utilised.

- Reviews of governance conducted by the local authority vary too much in their quality and usefulness. The effectiveness of governance in just over half of its schools is unknown to the local authority. This severely limits its ability to act on identified weaknesses.
- Headteachers and governors value some of the training for governors provided by the local authority, particularly the briefings for chairs and clerks. However, attendance at these meetings, and at other governor training sessions, is low.
- There are many vacancies for governors across the range of schools. A recent recruitment campaign has successfully halved the number of local authority governor vacancies, although too many vacancies remain.
- There is no local authority strategy for the deployment of experienced governors to support governing bodies of schools causing concern. A National Leader of Governance has been approached to provide some support but this has yet to begin.

Use of resources

- The local authority has recognised the need for the rapid development of the school improvement service and has recently appointed a senior officer to lead the service.
- In making budget decisions, the local authority and Schools Forum are committed to the principle that 'the money follows the child'.
- Through consultation and robust modelling of options, the Schools Forum has agreed a formula that gives considerable weighting to deprivation, reflecting the challenges faced by many children and young people in Walsall.
- School leaders understand how funding is allocated because they are consulted regularly as part of the budget-setting process.
- The local authority uses a range of methods, such as efficiency benchmarking, to ensure that budgetary decisions represent good value for money.
- School leaders are challenged to ensure financial control is robust and school balances are not excessive.

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

Yours sincerely

Michelle Winter

Her Majesty's Inspector