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Mr John Coughlan
Director of Children's Services / Deputy Chief Executive
Children's Services Department
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Dear Mr Coughlan

Inspection of The Isle of Wight local authority's 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 23 to 27 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, and to your staff, the elected member, contracted partners, headteachers and governors who gave up their time to meet with us.¹

This was a re-inspection of the local authority's arrangements for supporting school improvement, which were found to be ineffective in June 2013.

Context

The authority's schools are organised into a two-tier, primary and secondary system. There are 51 maintained schools: 41 primary, six secondary, two pupil

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.

referral units and two special schools. Three of the primary schools are academies, two of them sponsor-led and the other a converter. The two secondary academies are both sponsor-led.

In June 2013, the authority's arrangements for supporting school improvement were judged to be inadequate. Following that inspection, the Department for Education directed the Isle of Wight Council to enter into a strategic partnership with Hampshire County Council, with the latter's Children's Services taking over the statutory responsibilities of the island's Director of Children's Services. This formal partnership was established for a five-year period, with a review after three years. Since July 2013, a Leadership and Learning Partner has been assigned to each school. Leadership and Learning Partners are school improvement professionals, or serving headteachers who have received additional training for this work.

Summary findings

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

Since the previous inspection and the establishment of the partnership with Hampshire County Council, the authority has worked hard and successfully to tackle the areas for improvement identified in the 2013 report.

Working in close collaboration, senior officers and elected members have provided strong leadership and established a clear, coherent strategy for improvement which is understood and supported by all schools, including academies. The strategy ensures that the schools in greatest need are the main priority. Successful schools are encouraged to become autonomous and to support those that are weaker.

By ensuring a greater reliability of pupil performance data and gaining the agreement of schools and academies to share this, the authority is able to focus its attention on the schools most in need of support. At the same time, all schools are now better equipped to compare their performance with that of schools in similar areas and across the country, thus gaining a more accurate and realistic view of themselves.

The plans for school improvement include clear targets for the next three years. There are well-defined milestones for checking progress towards those goals on an annual basis. However, there is no system for collecting and analysing data on the performance of pupils, or groups of pupils, at key points during the year.

The authority has made a significant contribution to improving the quality of school leadership on the island. This has included supporting schools in recruiting, appointing and inducting a considerable number of new headteachers. Officers have also provided an extensive programme of professional development for school

leaders and staff at all levels. Governors have access to a broad and relevant training programme which has enabled them to gain a better understanding of their role. The authority has not hesitated to establish Interim Executive Boards where necessary, although it has decided not to use its other statutory powers, such as removing delegated powers from governing bodies, as a first resort. There is no formal system at present for identifying strong governors who can provide additional help to those schools where governance is weak.

The council's determination to raise standards is clearly reflected in the substantial amounts of additional funding for school improvement that it has already provided and plans to provide next year. The use of this funding is closely monitored, as are the finances of individual schools. The authority's officers have also provided valuable practical advice and support to schools in commissioning and brokering support from a range of sources, including other schools, and in ensuring that the services they receive give good value for money.

The impact of the strengthened arrangements for supporting school improvement is evident in the dramatic rise in attendance, the increase in the proportion of primary schools that are now good, the progress being made by schools that require improvement, and the solution to the financial problems that have been a barrier to improvement in a number of cases. The decline in secondary schools has been arrested and all those that are in an Ofsted category of concern are making reasonable progress in tackling the weaknesses identified in their most recent inspection reports. In the case of one academy, progress has increased considerably as a result of the close working relationships between officers, the sponsor and the newly appointed headteacher. The predicted results for 11- and 16-year-olds in 2014 are moving closer to the national averages for 2013 and show a clear improvement since the previous inspection. The exclusion rates are higher than average but reducing.

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 work with school leaders to:

- build on the recent improvements in the performance of secondary schools, so that they are all providing a good or better standard of education
- refine the processes for gathering and analysing data, so that the local authority has an up-to date and accurate view of pupils' achievement at key points during the year and can identify any gaps in performance between groups of pupils
- build on the successful strategies to improve attendance, in order to reduce the rates of exclusion

- formalise and implement the plans to identify strong governors who can provide additional support to schools where governance is weak.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- The lead member has the passion, commitment and ambition to spearhead the raising of educational standards on the island. He spends considerable time visiting schools and gathering the views of headteachers, teachers, parents and carers, pupils and governors, in order to gauge the impact of the actions taken by officers. As a result, he has an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of schools across the authority. He provides sensitive and clear leadership and works effectively with officers. Through the scrutiny panels and the regular examination of Ofsted reports and school performance data, elected members are able to gain a clear picture of the performance of schools and they are beginning to offer appropriate challenge to officers and school leaders.
- The authority's officers provide rigorous challenge to schools that require intensive support. This is helping schools to improve quickly and to develop the capacity to ensure that progress is sustained.
- A significant contributor to recent improvements is the focus that the authority has placed on establishing positive and close working relationships with schools. The headteachers who spoke to inspectors were of the unanimous view that local authority officers are skilful, credible, have the appropriate expertise and are successful in striking the right balance between challenge and support.
- The strategy for school improvement ensures that the schools in greatest need are the main priority. Successful schools are encouraged to become autonomous and to support weaker schools. The strategy is clearly understood by headteachers and governors and is applied consistently. As a result, schools at risk of failure are improving and the proportion of good primary schools in the authority is now closer to the average nationally. The proportion of good or better secondary schools is low. However, evidence from monitoring visits by Her Majesty's Inspectors shows that these schools are making the progress needed to secure future success.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- The authority has established a coherent and well-understood system for identifying and intervening in schools that are causing concern or require improvement. The support that officers provide is well planned and matched to the identified needs of specific schools.
- The plans for school improvement are clear, ambitious and firmly based on a detailed analysis of local circumstances and national priorities. They include clear targets for improvement over the next three years. There are well-defined milestones for checking progress towards those goals on an annual basis. However, the authority has not yet established systems for collecting and

analysing data on pupils' achievement across all schools at key points during the year.

- Officers make good use of accurate, rigorously moderated annual performance data to categorise schools and to direct support where it is needed most. This process is greatly assisted by their success in securing the agreement of all schools, including academies, to the sharing of pupil performance data. This is done in a timely way, so that schools can compare their own performance with that found in similar areas and across the country.
- Schools identified as having the greatest need are monitored frequently through a cycle of review meetings. However, not all these meetings are recorded formally. Therefore, relevant information is not necessarily available to key personnel.
- The impact of this support and challenge has reversed the decline in the performance of schools and is making a difference to children and young people. This is reflected in a number of positive outcomes:
 - The predicted results for 11- and 16-year-olds in 2014 are moving closer to the national averages for 2013 and show a clear improvement since the last inspection.
 - The proportion of primary schools judged good by Ofsted is now in line with the national average, as is the proportion requiring improvement. Only one secondary school on the island is yet good but monitoring reports by Her Majesty's Inspectors indicate that the others are making the progress needed to improve. Among these is an academy where little progress was being made until the authority started to work closely with the sponsor and the newly appointed headteacher.
 - Of the primary schools inspected since 2013, three have remained good and three have improved to good. Two schools that the authority judged to be in danger of becoming inadequate were prevented from doing so, as a result of its focused support. One pupil referral unit has been found to require special measures but the authority had anticipated this and is already taking decisive action to tackle the situation.
 - All monitoring visits to primary and secondary schools, conducted by Her Majesty's Inspectors since last September, show that those in a category or requiring improvement are making reasonable progress or taking effective actions.
 - Eight of the nine primary and secondary schools identified for support because of financial deficits have recovered and robust action is being taken to tackle the problems in the remaining school. As a result, funding issues are no longer a significant barrier to improvement in those schools.
 - In all the schools that have received intensive support, the quality of teaching and pupils' outcomes have improved.
 - There have been significant improvements in attendance for both primary and secondary and, in both phases, figures are now just above the national average.
 - Exclusions rate are still higher than average but are reducing.
- The authority has been successful in raising participation in education by 16- and 17-year-old students. The figures for young people not in education,

employment or training continue to be better than the national averages. The young people following vocational pathways do far better than those pursuing academic routes. The authority has a clear strategy to tackle this, as well as to rationalise the over-abundance of sixth-form provision.

Support and challenge for leadership and management, including governance

- Primary schools have access to an extensive programme of continuing professional development. This is based on the areas for improvement identified through data analysis, Ofsted letters and reports and feedback from Leadership and Learning Partners. This provision is aimed at senior leaders, governors, subject leaders and class teachers. Schools are very positive about what they receive and headteachers and the teaching schools, both on the island and in Hampshire, are increasingly involved in determining the focus and content of training. However, the evaluation of the programme centres on satisfaction with particular sessions, rather than on the impact on improving teaching and learning. Secondary schools receive bespoke training programmes which meet the specific needs of each institution.
- Almost a fifth of headteachers have been appointed since the previous inspection. The local authority has provided robust challenge, as well as support, to governing bodies, to ensure that the right people are appointed to the role. New appointments are supporting the drive to increase expertise and capacity in the leadership of the island's schools. A well-devised programme of induction for these new headteachers is enabling them to take on the responsibilities of the role quickly and to tackle key issues with urgency.
- The local authority has acted quickly to identify schools causing concern. Regular strategy meetings are arranged with each school to hold senior leaders to account. Chaired by the local authority, these meetings include governor and Governor Services representatives.
- Governors are increasingly involved in the cycle of self-evaluation and review led by the Leadership and Learning Partners. As a minimum, notes of these visits are shared with governors as well as headteachers. Although, in some schools, the Chair of the Governing Body attends the meeting between the Leadership and Learning Partner and the headteacher, this is not a consistent practice across the authority.
- External reviews of governance have taken place in two schools and published reports are detailed, with clear action points that focus appropriately on school improvement and statutory responsibilities.
- The local authority has a broad and relevant training programme for governors. Since the inception of this programme, the number of governors attending different events has increased significantly from that seen in previous years.
- Governor Services are developing their knowledge of the quality of governance across the authority. This is informing forward planning of training and support. There is no system at present for identifying strong governors who can provide additional help to those schools where governance is weak.

Use of resources

- The council has shown its commitment to raising standards through the significant increase in funding directed to school improvement. This budget will be the same next year.
- In commissioning the services of Hampshire school improvement officers and serving headteachers, the local authority has ensured that schools are provided with support from tried and tested sources which are known and trusted. This has meant the local authority has been able to tackle weaknesses with alacrity and to ensure value for money.
- The detailed knowledge that officers have of schools enables them to broker effective partnerships. Headteachers of successful schools, both on the island and in Hampshire, provide support for those that are weaker. Schools are subject to greater financial accountability than at the time of the previous inspection and they are being helped to develop a judicious approach to procurement and to solve the major financial problems that several of them encountered.
- Through the strategy to 'create space for improvement', the authority is providing support and advice to schools on procurement and commissioning. This is reducing the administrative burden on schools, so that they can focus on the core business of raising the quality of teaching and learning.
- Additional funding to support improvements in pupils' attendance has been well received and used effectively to bring about significant improvements in this area.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Managing Director and the Leader of The Isle of Wight council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Aelwyn Pugh

Her Majesty's Inspector