

CFBT
Suite 22, West Lancs
Investment Centre
Maple View
Skelmersdale
WN8 9GT

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

Direct T 01695 566 937
Direct email jsimmons@cfbt.com



8 December 2014

Mr John Wilson
Corporate Director for Children and Young People
Wakefield Metropolitan District Council
County Hall
Wakefield
WF1 2QW

Dear Mr Wilson

Inspection of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement

Following the visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors Jane Austin, Brian Blake, Deana Holdaway and Marianick Ellender-Gele to Wakefield Metropolitan District Council, I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

Thank you for your cooperation and that of all the staff we met during our visit between 1 and 5 December 2014. We particularly appreciate the time and care taken to prepare the programme for us. Please pass on our thanks to your staff, the Lead Member, headteachers, governors, and representatives of multi-academy trusts who kindly gave up their time to meet us.

The inspection of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement in England is conducted under section 136 (1) (b) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Context

In November 2013, the local authority's arrangements for supporting school improvement were judged to be ineffective.

Following this inspection, I am not recommending any further inspection activity. The regional Senior HMI will continue to monitor the local authority's performance regularly.

Summary findings

Since the previous inspection, the Corporate Director for Children and Young People has led a significant change in the culture and ethos of school improvement work in Wakefield. The authority organised a fully independent consultation with stakeholders on how best to support school improvement. This has led to a move away from a hierarchical approach, in which the local authority held the senior position, to one of much improved partnership work with schools. The agreed model for the future is an umbrella organisation, The Wakefield Strategic Alliance, encompassing the local authority, multi-academy trusts and other school partnerships. This will have responsibility for school improvement, delivered by schools, for schools.

While this is in development, a gradual process that is taking some time, the authority has strengthened its arrangements for school improvement so that these provide a helpful transition to, and increase in capacity for, these new ways of working. The impact of these strengthened arrangements for supporting school improvement is evident in rises in the quality of education provided by schools and in some increases in pupils' achievement. Since the previous inspection the proportion of schools judged good or outstanding has increased at a much faster rate than seen nationally or regionally. Nonetheless, the proportion of primary schools that are at least good remains below the national average, indicating that the local authority needs to drive further improvement promptly and vigorously.

Attainment at Key Stages 1 and 2, although below national averages, continues to rise. Pupils' progress during Key Stage 2 rose at a faster rate than seen nationally last year and is now in line with national averages in reading and writing; it is above national averages in mathematics. The gaps in performance between disadvantaged pupils and others are narrowing overall, generally at a faster rate than seen nationally, although some remain wider than national averages. The proportion of students gaining at least five GCSE passes at grades A* to C including English and mathematics is in line with the national average. The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training is low, as is the percentage whose occupation is unknown.

The local authority is now better placed to identify strengths and weaknesses in schools' provision since all now receive a minimum of three visits each year. The 'Monitoring, Challenge, Support and Intervention' policy sets out clearly a revised approach to school improvement that is proportionate to need. Schools take responsibility for evaluating their own performance and commissioning support, with judgements moderated carefully by the local authority. The authority has produced a prospectus of school-to-school support, accompanied by procedures for identifying agreed starting points, targets and quality assurance arrangements. In addition, moves to improve collaboration between school improvement and inclusion services are beginning to provide a more complete picture of schools' performance. However, these changes are recent so the identification of declining performance in schools is sometimes too slow.

The local authority's support for strengthening school leadership has increased in rigour. School leaders take responsibility for improvements, working together on a number of programmes with varying aims. Training and support from school improvement advisers ensure that processes are robust and developmental. The quality of governance has improved considerably as a consequence of thorough and timely reviews.

Areas for improvement

- Further establish and refine the new approach to school improvement and ensure that this leads to:
 - a rise in attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 so that it is at least in line with the national average
 - a narrowing of the gaps between the performance of disadvantaged pupils and others so that these are, as a minimum, similar to those found nationally
 - an increase in the proportion of schools judged good or better to at least in line with national average
 - more rapid identification of schools at risk of decline.
- Ensure that education and inclusion services work together to promote school improvement as effectively as possible.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- The Corporate Director has a clear vision for schools to lead improvement through working together. He has successfully built better relationships between the local authority and headteachers, in part through placing trust in school leaders to develop a new approach to school improvement. However, understanding of how the new structure will work varies considerably amongst stakeholders, depending on how directly involved they are in developing the new structure.
- There is a political will to place more responsibility for improvement with schools. The Lead Member, who is highly committed, recognises that collective ambition is accompanied by increased energy and enthusiasm for school improvement amongst officers and stakeholders.
- The leadership and expertise of the school improvement team are highly valued by school leaders, a significant change since the previous inspection.
- The authority has provided a clear lead on ensuring that there are sufficient and suitable places for all 16- and 17-year-olds in education and training. This year there has been a marked rise in the number of school leavers entering apprenticeships. The proportion of young people not in

education, employment or training is low and the destinations are unknown for only a very small number. There is a rapid response when a young person is at risk of dropping out of education, employment or training.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- The authority has established a clear, coherent and proportionate system for allocating support to schools based on risk assessments. These are conducted by schools themselves, but moderated rigorously by the school improvement team. All schools now receive a minimum of three visits per year, a change that means that the local authority is increasingly well placed to know where strengths and weaknesses lie and to identify any decline in performance at an early stage.
- The work of school improvement officers and school leaders is supported well by the timely production of wide-ranging data about pupils' performance at the start of the academic year and at regular intervals thereafter. Analyses of areas where performance is of concern, such as the gap in performance between disadvantaged and other pupils, are produced for the authority and for individual schools. The capacity of schools to evaluate their own performance is enhanced by bespoke analyses of data that are produced swiftly on request. In addition, developments to the data management system mean that schools can conduct their own fine-grained analyses of the performance of groups of pupils on their roll.
- The authority's role in brokering and commissioning support for schools has developed considerably in the last year and is better coordinated. The recent publication of a directory of expertise available across the authority, accompanied by processes designed to assure quality, enables schools to access a wider range of support. This contributes to the development of a school-to-school approach to improvement. Officers challenge schools that are not working in partnership with others to drive improvement.
- Systems for monitoring and challenging the progress of schools in categories of concern, as well as those requiring improvement, have strengthened. In the last year, the proportion of schools judged good or outstanding has increased at faster than the national rate.
- A unified structure that links school improvement and inclusion services has been introduced recently to ensure that identification of and support for schools' needs take account of a full range of factors including, for example, behaviour.

Support and challenge for leadership and management (including governance)

- The authority is building capacity for support for leadership and management through better commissioning and brokerage arrangements as well as stronger links with teaching school alliances. More expertise is available and being deployed within the authority from, for instance, an increased number of Local Leaders of Education.
- The authority's programmes aimed at increasing the effectiveness of school leadership are more rigorous and are well received by headteachers. These are contributing to a rise in capacity as schools take responsibility for improvement. In the main, headteachers set the agenda for development and work with fellow professionals: school improvement officers have a training and moderation role.
- Strengths in support for governance, identified previously, have developed further. Governor services, an integral part of school improvement, provide a wide range of training through a variety of media and at different times and locations to accommodate governors' circumstances. Officers also provide some innovative support for governors through coaching and modelling methods of gathering first-hand evidence in schools.
- Evaluations show that reviews of governance, of which there have been a substantial number, are leading to improvements. As a result, most governing bodies are now operating effectively. Gaps in governors' skills, knowledge and processes are identified and governing bodies draw up action plans very promptly to address these.
- The authority is keen to develop governor-to-governor support as part of its new way of working and have devised a robust system for appointing local champions of governance to extend the work of two National Leaders of Governance in disseminating best practice.

Use of resources

- The operation of the Schools Forum is more robust than was previously the case, in part because members now have a keen sense of the Forum's strategic purpose. They are clear about the need to evaluate the impact of spending, for instance on leadership programmes, by checking what difference has been made to the performance of schools.
- The establishment of a sub-committee enables a smaller group to interrogate the papers in some depth, prior to full forum meetings. This ensures that members have clear and sufficient information on which to base their decisions. Helpfully, the cycle of forum meetings is being aligned to the availability of up-to-date data on schools' performance.
- The Schools Forum has agreed considerable start-up funding for the Wakefield Strategic Alliance and expects to be able to track its

development from clear baselines to final targets through monitoring progress against the action plan.

- The Schools Forum recognises the need to engage schools more fully when consulting on specific decisions.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State and to the Chief Executive Officer and the Leader of Wakefield Metropolitan District Council. This letter will be published on GOV.uk.

Yours sincerely

Jane Austin

Her Majesty's Inspector