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Mrs Delyth Curtis
Director of Children's Services
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Dear Mrs Curtis

Inspection of Blackpool Council's arrangements for supporting school improvement

Following the recent visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors Joanne Olsson, Charalambos Loizou, James McNeillie and Julie Winyard to Blackpool 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 whom we met during our visit between 8 and 12 December 2014. We particularly appreciate the time and care taken to prepare the programme for us. Please pass on our thanks to your staff, elected members, contracted partners, headteachers, governors and other stakeholders 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.

Evidence

During the inspection, discussions were held with senior and operational officers, elected members, headteachers, principals, governors, strategic partners and other stakeholders. Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation relating to the local authority's arrangements for school improvement. Inspectors also took account of the feedback from 18 school and academy leaders who were contacted by telephone in the week prior to the inspection taking place.

Context

The local authority's arrangements for school improvement were judged ineffective in November 2013. Since this time, a new Director of Children's Services has been appointed. Six of the seven secondary schools and one third of the primary schools are academies. Five primary and four secondary schools became academies in the past year. There are five different multi-academy trust arrangements in place.

Summary findings

Significant weaknesses remain in the local authority's arrangements to support school improvement. Consequently, progress since the last inspection has been too slow. Recent changes are signalling a more rigorous and cohesive approach to school improvement work. However, much of this work is too new to have made any marked difference.

The decline in standards by the end of Key Stage 4 has not been stopped quickly enough. Too many students made insufficient progress in 2014 and left Year 11 without five good GCSE qualifications including English and mathematics. Students' chances of attending a good secondary school in Blackpool are severely limited. The achievement gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their peers that are evident by the time children start school do not close quickly enough and remain at the end of Key Stage 4.

Although systems and structures have been tightened, the current school improvement strategy is not fit for purpose. It has not enabled officers to pick up underperforming schools quickly enough or take effective and timely action to prevent failure. There is no cohesive strategy to help schools move to outstanding and good schools are not systematically encouraged to work together to improve.

The strategies for evaluating the impact of the local authority's work lack rigour at all levels. Too much evaluation is based on satisfaction levels rather than a systematic analysis of the difference support and challenge make to pupils' outcomes and the effectiveness of schools. Elected members have an honest view of weaknesses, but they do not hold senior leaders to account well enough for the impact of their work.

The use of strong partnership working, including school-to-school support, is not being promoted systematically. Key partners and school leaders have not sufficiently contributed to the current approach. As a result, roles and responsibilities within the school improvement strategy lack clarity.

Despite these major shortcomings, there is some cause for optimism. The number of children leaving Reception year with a good level of development is increasing. The proportion of pupils succeeding in the Year 1 phonics screening check is also improving at a quicker pace than seen nationally. Primary schools are successful in helping pupils to reach the levels expected for their age. The proportion of primary

age pupils attending a good school is broadly average, while special school provision and the support for those pupils who attend the pupil referral unit remain a strength.

A local authority-wide determination to tackle the number of young people not in employment, education and training is reaping rewards. The number of young adults without a purposeful destination once they leave school has been halved and is much closer to the national figures. A joined up strategy between different services within the local authority has been successful in reducing absence rates, particularly in secondary schools. The number of students who miss large proportions of their time at school has reduced considerably in the past year.

Recent action is beginning to show early signs of changed attitudes and behaviours and a renewed determination by senior officers is setting the local authority on the right track. All recognise that more of the same will not bring about future success within a changing school landscape. Senior officers are no longer reluctant to use statutory powers to tackle underperformance or to alert the Department for Education of their concerns about academies. Positive relationships are being fostered with leaders and academy sponsors to ensure the success of all pupils, regardless of the setting they attend. A new secondary strategy, commissioned by the local authority and delivered by a private company, is now being implemented in all secondary schools.

Areas for improvement

As a matter of urgency, Blackpool Borough Council needs to ensure that more pupils attend a good or outstanding school and that pupils' achievement, particularly in the secondary sector, improves to match or exceed the national average by:

- reviewing and improving the structures and systems for supporting school improvement so that they reflect the diverse educational landscape in the local authority
- ensuring that support is directed to those schools with the greatest need
- carefully monitoring the impact of the commissioned support for secondary schools and taking swift remedial action if the secondary strategy is found to be ineffective
- utilising the expertise of key partners, including headteachers, principals and system leaders, to draw up the local authority's plans for improvement and reshape the school improvement strategy
- ensuring that the school improvement strategy supports good schools so that their performance is at least maintained and more schools are judged outstanding
- fostering greater collaborative working and school-to-school support so that leaders are able to systematically challenge and support each other

- monitoring all school improvement activity and evaluating the impact this work is having on schools' effectiveness and outcomes for children and young people
- developing the role of elected members in holding senior officers to account for the impact of their work and the value for money the school improvement arrangements provide
- using performance data effectively to commission and broker support and training that tackle common weaknesses across the authority.

Ofsted will continue to monitor the local authority's arrangements for school improvement. The arrangements are likely to be re-inspected within two years.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- The Chief Executive Officer, elected members and the newly appointed Director of Children's Services share the same vision and determination to improve the outcomes for all children and young people in Blackpool. The challenges facing schools, particularly pupil mobility, are known to all but are no longer being used to excuse weak performance. Senior leaders are outward-looking; they are seeking and acting on the advice and support from other local authorities. Nonetheless, action to bring about change has been too slow; many of the concerns identified in the last inspection have not been resolved.
- Education is at the heart of the council's plans for the future. Elected members are well informed about shortcomings. However, they have too generous a view of the effectiveness of the school improvement arrangements and the value for money these services provide.
- Although considerable time and energy are invested in a significant number of meetings with key partners, these are not fostering enough genuine and worthwhile consultation. School leaders and key partners have not had enough influence in the design of the school improvement strategy or the plans for improvement.
- The local authority's actions to tackle the shortcomings identified at the last inspection did not go far enough to ensure that the right structures and systems were put in place to bring about rapid improvement.
- The revised 'Working Together' document presents a clear strategy for working with schools and academies. Most school leaders understand the rationale for support and challenge. Brokering and commissioning support is a key feature of the strategy; some use has been made of such expertise in the past to successfully help schools facing challenging circumstances. Nonetheless, the strategy is still too reliant on the work of local authority officers.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- The local authority has not reduced inequality between different groups of pupils and they have not prevented school failure. Since the last inspection, two secondary schools (one maintained by the local authority and one academy) have been judged inadequate. Almost all of the remaining schools in the secondary sector and approximately a third of primary schools have been identified as schools causing concern by the local authority.
- Officers respond quickly when the need arises, but the impact of this work is varied. The quality of support and challenge is generally more effective in primary schools. Despite intensive work by officers in one secondary school over a significant period of time, little difference was made to students' outcomes or the school's inspection judgement.
- In the past, the local authority did not make full use of data about schools' performance. This made it difficult for officers to intervene in schools or raise concerns about academies with central government. Work is underway to tackle this weakness. Schools' targets are now more challenging and take better account of national benchmarks. The data produced for schools this year is comprehensive and, for the first time, the local authority has a clear and accurate understanding of pupils' achievement in all secondary schools. However, much of this is new. There was wide variation between secondary school predictions and actual results last year; no-one had been prepared for the further decline in Key Stage 4 achievement.
- Officers are now using a wider range of appropriate triggers, including performance data, to identify schools at risk. In moving key services, such as admissions and pupil welfare, under the umbrella of school improvement, there is greater scope to capture 'softer' information about schools, for example the number of pupil exclusions. Consequently, officers are now more alert to any warning signs that may prevent schools from succeeding.
- The local authority is using its statutory powers judiciously. Officers are using warning notices, pre-warning notices and letters to central government about academy schools to raise concerns in a far timelier manner.
- Schools causing concern are kept under regular review through focussed meetings, which are appropriately prioritised. These meetings are generally supporting improvement in primary schools. This success is not replicated in secondary schools.
- The local authority ensures that there is a wide range of support available, signposting schools to national and local programmes, central training and teacher networks. However, this extensive offer is not tailored closely to authority-wide weaknesses, such as improving the achievement of most able pupils. Furthermore, too much emphasis is based on the satisfaction levels of those who attend training, rather than the impact this work has back in school.
- Through the effectiveness of the 'Journey to Work' strategic group, the local authority has been successful in raising the participation age and ensuring

sufficient suitable provision for all 16–19-year-olds. Good links between colleges and vocational providers, in addition to its own drive to promote apprenticeships, have helped to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment and training.

Support and challenge for leadership and management (including governance)

- Officers know the expertise local schools and schools beyond the local authority's borders have. This expertise is harnessed to support central training, to lead on subject networks and to aid schools where leadership and management are causing concern.
- The support available through teaching schools is signposted through the termly professional development brochures. However, the brokering and commissioning of this support does not have a high enough profile in the 'Working Together' strategy. Furthermore, the local authority does not monitor and evaluate the impact of this support closely enough to ensure that it is making a positive difference to teaching and pupils' outcomes.
- The secondary strategy, commissioned by the local authority, has been accepted readily by school leaders. Although it is early days, senior officers have been successful in forging better relationships with the leaders and sponsors of academy schools.
- Closer analysis of data and a review of the strengths and weaknesses in each school are helping some school leaders to strengthen the accuracy and quality of their own self-evaluation. Nonetheless, because this project is in its infancy, it is not possible to assess the difference it is making to the quality of leadership across all schools.
- The local authority encourages subject and middle leaders to develop their skills through access to local networks, training and national programmes. However, it does not monitor the success or otherwise of this work closely. Not enough is in place to enhance the leadership skills of successful headteachers so they are able to become system leaders with the capacity to support and challenge other schools in the authority.
- The local authority's work to improve school governance is a success story. This is because leaders in this area responded quickly following the last inspection to bring about necessary change. Governors speak highly of the support they receive and this is reflected in the increasing numbers, particularly in the secondary sector, who attend central training and buy clerking services. A wide-ranging training programme is in place to ensure that governors know their roles and responsibilities and understand national and local priorities. The local authority makes good use of the expertise of National Leaders of Governance to develop the effectiveness of governing bodies.
- A successful strategy for the recruitment of high quality governors is helping to plug gaps. A pool of volunteers with the right skills and expertise are on hand and

ready to be deployed when the need arises. This serves the local authority well when it needs to tackle weaknesses in school governance, either through informal support or when exercising its statutory powers to appoint additional governors or form Interim Executive Boards.

Use of resources

- The funding allocated to the school improvement service reflects the council's commitment to raising standards and improving the quality of education across the authority. This is giving officers the freedom to commission external services in the secondary sector and provide support to primary schools through centrally employed school improvement partners. Up to now, this funding has not brought about enough success, which means that value for money has been weak.
- The Schools Forum complies with its statutory powers to delegate public funds to schools. Delegated budgets are monitored appropriately so there are no schools causing concern with regard to finance, either through deficit budgets or by holding too much in reserve.
- Spending decisions are based on an accurate analysis of priorities within the local authority. Targeting deprivation, improving provision within the secondary sector and tackling challenging behaviour are at the heart of the funding allocation. Nevertheless, the local authority does not monitor the difference resources are making in schools across the authority rigorously enough.
- The council has reviewed the provision for pupils with special educational needs, particularly around behaviour. Decisive actions mean that some services have been decommissioned and an improved system for monitoring the quality of provision is now in place. This is paying dividends in reintegrating students back into mainstream schools.

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

Joanne Olsson
Her Majesty's Inspector