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8 December 2014

Mr John Gilbert  
Board Director Commissioning (DCS/DASS)  
Swindon Borough Council  
Civic Offices  
Euclid Street  
Swindon  
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Dear Mr Gilbert

## **Inspection of Swindon Borough Council's arrangements for supporting school improvement**

Following the visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) Ian Hancock, Sue Frater and Mel Ford, and Matthew Haynes Senior HMI to Swindon Borough 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 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, elected members, contracted partners, headteachers, teachers and governors 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**

The findings of this inspection are based on discussions with:

- elected members and senior officers of Swindon Borough Council and personnel responsible for the school improvement service, including commissioners, the school improvement adviser and associated consultants
- headteachers, teachers and governors from maintained schools and academies

- officers and partners representing early years and post-16 educational provision
- partners delivering brokered or commissioned services to support school improvement, including governor services, data analysis and other traded services.

The inspection team took account of the outcomes of focused inspections and responses to the telephone survey of schools and academies.

A range of documentation was scrutinised, including the local authority's strategy and policy for education improvement, data about school performance, case studies and notes of visits made by representatives of the local authority.

### **Summary findings**

Swindon Borough Council's arrangements to support school improvement in maintained schools are disjointed. Not all stakeholders understand their role in, and responsibility for, helping maintained schools to get better. The local authority's work to champion excellence and promote high standards for pupils in secondary academies is poor. Until very recently, officers have not referred concerns about standards and leadership in academies to the Department for Education. Pupils' attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 is low and only half of secondary pupils attend a school or academy that is judged to be at least good.

Officers have a secure knowledge of most maintained primary schools' performance and use annual data appropriately to identify those at risk of underperforming. Several maintained schools have improved as a result of effective challenge by officers, but this has not been the case in others. Officers do not check on the quality of support and challenge brokered by the local authority rigorously enough. A decline in a school's effectiveness is not always picked up swiftly which means that the rate at which maintained schools improve over time is uneven.

The local authority's work to improve the outcomes for disadvantaged pupils is also not well established. Focused work with 18 schools and academies has yielded improvements and pupils' attainment overall and for disadvantaged pupils in Key Stage 2 now exceeds the average. Nonetheless, gaps in attainment for disadvantaged pupils are too large or not closing in Key Stages 1 and 4. Furthermore, the most able pupils do not achieve well enough by the end of Key Stage 4, especially in mathematics.

The elected members and senior officers have an ambitious vision for 'One Swindon' that enjoys broad support from stakeholders. However, senior officers have not set out clearly the incremental improvement required across a range of measures. As a result, it is difficult for elected members to hold officers to account for the pace of improvement.

Students' completion rates post-16 are increasing and a higher proportion of students are in education, training or employment. The borough council has supported academies and drawn effectively on established links with local employers to increase the educational pathways on offer post-16. Concerted effort by the early years officers and partners has increased the proportion of early years providers judged to be good or outstanding. However, this figure is still below the national average.

Senior officers promote school autonomy appropriately and nearly all funding is passed on to maintained schools. There is a high take-up of the local authority's traded services to support school improvement. Governor services are managed well and valued highly by both maintained schools and academies. The services have had a noticeable impact on improving governance, but more needs to be done to ensure that governors are supported in challenging headteachers to raise achievement for the most vulnerable or most able pupils.

### **Areas for improvement**

The local authority should:

- set out the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholder groups involved in school improvement so that they work cohesively together
- increase accountability by implementing the proposed Education Improvement Strategy Board and setting out the incremental improvement necessary to improve educational provision in Swindon, especially for disadvantaged and the most able pupils
- check rigorously the quality and effectiveness of the support brokered to maintained schools so that improvement is more consistent and the proportion of good or outstanding maintained schools exceeds the national average
- ensure that concerns about standards and leadership in academies are referred promptly and directly to the Regional Commissioner for Schools so that standards rise at the end of Key Stage 4 and all secondary pupils have access to education that is at least good.

The inspection team recommends that the local authority's progress in tackling areas for improvement is evaluated by a further inspection.

### **Corporate leadership and strategic planning**

- The borough council has not communicated clearly how the teaching schools, improvement networks and school leadership associations should contribute to the improvement of educational provision in the area. Too many leaders of maintained schools are unsure of the local authority's priorities and how the work of the key stakeholder groups will help to achieve them.

- The borough's educational improvement strategy was developed following consultation with schools and other providers. However, while there is a suitable focus on improving weaker maintained schools, not all the leaders of good or outstanding schools recognise that the strategy for school improvement includes anything for them.
- The council's ambition for outcomes to compare positively with national averages and for all pupils to attend a good or outstanding school is not followed through thoroughly enough. Success measures set out in the corporate business plan cover a three-year timescale, but lack the interim milestones necessary to enable elected members to hold senior officers fully to account for the speed of improvements.
- The local authority's effective partnerships with providers, employers and schools have increased options for vulnerable young people post-16. Students have greater choice following the establishment of two sixth forms and a university technology college. Participation rates have improved, the numbers of unknown destinations for this age group have halved and the numbers of those not in employment, education or training are reducing. Nevertheless, the improved provision has not yet had an impact on the number of students achieving level 3 qualifications, which is below the national average.
- The council's ambitious vision, set out in 'One Swindon' capitalises on the area's industrial context to provide the 'right skills, right jobs in the right place'. The Board Director Commissioning and senior officers have promoted the vision keenly so that it enjoys support from a range of employers and partner agencies.

### **Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support**

- The quality and effectiveness of external support brokered by the local authority are not checked thoroughly enough by officers. For example, the records of visits to one school that was monitored by the local authority did not indicate to officers that the school's effectiveness was declining until it was judged inadequate at an inspection. Over time, the impact of the support and challenge provided has been uneven. As a result, not enough maintained primary schools are good or outstanding in the local authority.
- The primary school improvement adviser works closely with maintained schools. Effective practice is identified and shared routinely through structured programmes of support such as the 'Journey to Outstanding'. Participants show a strong commitment to the programme, which has improved inspection outcomes in four out of the six schools that have been re-inspected. These schools have been judged to be good, but one school declined and another continues to require improvement.
- Rightly, the local authority is establishing an Education Improvement Strategy Board to increase accountability and improve the coordination of school-to-school support. Some leaders of good schools have chosen to participate in the programmes available, but several others believe that there is nothing in the local authority's offer to help them become outstanding. Not all schools that have

converted to academies have improved and there are no outstanding secondary schools or academies to share the most effective practice.

- The local authority has been too slow in referring concerns about leadership and standards in academies to the Department for Education, so underachievement has continued unchecked. In 2013, pupils' attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 was in the bottom 20% of all local authorities and there is a marked fall in pupils' chances of accessing a good education when they leave their primary school.
- Officers now risk assess the performance of academies earlier than was previously the case and use the outcomes as a starting point to initiate discussions with academy principals. The local authority has begun sharing information about academies in the borough with the Regional Schools Commissioner.
- On several occasions, senior officers have challenged robustly when a school's leadership has been a serious cause for concern, but formal powers of intervention have only been used twice. Nevertheless, assertive action taken by the local authority has resulted in governing bodies instigating procedures to manage staff performance and seeking a stronger partner school with which to federate. On these occasions, the schools improve strongly.
- The local authority provides comprehensive school performance data to help identify schools at risk of underperformance and in need of support. This information is valued by schools and is used well to prioritise school-to-school support. Vulnerable children in the Early Years are doing better and pupils' attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 has risen steadily to exceed the national averages. The information has not been acted on swiftly enough to tackle low attainment in Key Stage 4 where the vulnerable and most able pupils are not achieving as well as they should, especially in mathematics.
- Governor services are managed well. Governors praise the responsiveness of the service and the manager's detailed knowledge of individual schools. Comprehensive universal training for governors is complemented by bespoke training in individual schools. Schools judged to require improvement appreciate the effective support for governance that they have received, including the supplementary support of other services such as school improvement and human resources. However, the variable performance of schools and academies in the borough shows that the impact of the service is uneven.
- There is a clear approach to monitoring, challenging and supporting early years providers. Resolute work by officers has ensured that more providers are meeting safeguarding requirements. Children's outcomes have improved and there has been a marked increase in the proportion of good and outstanding settings. Nonetheless, this figure remains below the national average.

### **Support and challenge for leadership and management (including governance)**

- The local authority has suitable systems in place to identify good practice. For instance, headteachers are asked to nominate members of staff who have

specific expertise on an annual basis. These teachers are suitably deployed to support other schools or to work within clusters. However, too many of the teachers are unsure how their work contributes to the local authority priorities for school improvement nor are they sufficiently held to account for the difference they make.

- Network groups established by the local authority are underused. Although officers often know what is being done by these groups, they are not always aware of the intended outcomes. As a result, good practice remains within a cluster rather than shared more widely across the local authority.
- The local authority ensures that experienced and well-trained governors are available to schools and supports schools with the recruitment of governors. Officers draw well on their detailed knowledge of middle leaders in schools to broker interim leadership arrangements. These arrangements have been successful in supporting the recruitment of headteachers during a period of substantial turbulence in the leadership of schools and academies in the borough. Suitable links with external providers ensure that new headteachers receive appropriate support.
- System leaders, brokered through one of the teaching schools are used appropriately to challenge and support school leaders. These support systems are more established in the primary phase and among the special schools. Recently, effective support brokered by the local authority from outside the borough has helped improve the leadership of the maintained secondary school so that it has been judged to be good.
- The support and challenge provided for school leadership link with the priorities for school improvement. For example, a structured programme is underway in several schools and academies to ensure that school leaders improve the achievement of disadvantaged pupils. It is too early to gauge the impact over time, although initial evidence is encouraging.
- The school improvement adviser is proactive in brokering training from other agencies to improve the leadership and teaching in English and mathematics. Events held in Swindon and in neighbouring authorities have been well attended and have contributed to improvements in pupils' attainment in these subjects at the end of Key Stage 2.

### **Use of resources**

- Financial resources are managed appropriately. Funding decisions made through the Schools' Forum are transparent and democratic. The minutes of these meetings over the last four years show that this process works effectively.
- School autonomy is promoted strongly so that nearly all discretionary funding is delegated to school budgets. Spending on school improvement personnel is minimal and service charges are kept the same for maintained schools and academies.

- The local authority monitors the finances of individual schools closely. There are no large surpluses in school budgets and any deficits are managed closely. Governor services check the minutes of governing body meetings thoroughly. Financial issues are picked up very quickly and addressed through training, advice and, where necessary, auditing.
- The local authority's traded services enjoy a high take-up from the borough's schools, including academies. Officers keep a tight grip on demand-led services by anticipating and planning for schools' future needs. Schools are offered a wide range of traded services, including health and well-being services, the music service, governor services and human resources. Suitable signposting to other services also takes place, although there is no system for quality assuring external services.

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

Yours sincerely

**Ian Hancock**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**