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27 January 2015

Tony Oakman  
Executive Director of People  
Stoke-on-Trent City Council  
Civic Centre, Glebe Street  
Stoke on Trent  
ST4 1HH

Dear Mr Oakman

### **Inspection of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement**

Following the visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) Charalambos Loizou, Linda McGill, Jean Olsson-Law and Ian McNeilly to Stoke-on-Trent City 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 19 and 23 January 2015. We particularly appreciate the time and care taken to prepare the programme for us. Please pass on our thanks to your staff, the lead and elected members, the Chief Executive Officer, Assistant Director for Learning Services, headteachers, governors and representatives of multi-academy trusts who kindly gave up their time to meet us. Our thanks also go to representatives of various partnerships of schools, academies and teaching school alliances, as well as staff and officers who manage training programmes and oversee the commissioned improvement partners' work in maintained schools.

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**

There are 71 primary and 16 secondary schools, four special schools, two pupil referral units and six nursery schools in the city of Stoke-on-Trent. Forty-five of the primary schools are local authority maintained and 26 are academies, of which 21 are academy converters and five sponsor-led academies. Of the 16 secondary schools, three are maintained by the local authority, five are academy converters and eight are sponsor-led academies. Each sponsored academy is governed by one of five multi-academy trusts. Three teaching school alliances work with some maintained schools and academies.

Since June 2013, the Executive Director for People and Assistant Director for Learning Services have implemented school improvement strategies as part of Stoke-on-Trent's 'Mandate for Change'. This is a school-led strategy that aims to develop a significant change of culture of collaborative partnerships in schools and education providers to improve the education and life chances of children and young people.

## **Evidence**

In addition to meetings with officers, elected members and the personnel described earlier, inspectors considered and reviewed a wide range of documentation, including assessments of pupil outcome data. The outcomes of the most recent inspections of schools and providers in Stoke-on-Trent were reviewed. Evidence from focused inspections of 15 schools was also taken into account, together with the results of a telephone survey of a sample of 15 primary and secondary schools. Both of these were undertaken the week before this inspection.

## Summary findings

The local authority's arrangements for sustained school improvement are not yet good enough. The Executive Director of People and Assistant Director for Learning Services provide accurate and honest self-evaluations of the local authority's work. They recognise that what was happening in the past did not work. Elected members and officers have a realistic view of the significant challenges that schools still face to improve. There are now relevant and urgent priorities for improvement that focus on raising attainment and reducing inequalities and achievement gaps between disadvantaged pupils and others. The authority's improvement strategy is underpinned by an ambitious strategic plan, 'Towards Outstanding Achievement for All'.

Improvements to schools and pupil outcomes have not been made rapidly enough. Support for schools in greatest need or in risk of decline was not previously timely or effective. Many of the recent changes to improve schools have not had enough time to have a full impact on raising standards in all phases of education and for all groups of pupils. Data for 2014 show that the authority is one of the 10 worst in England for the proportion of primary schools that are good or outstanding and in the bottom 20% of authorities for the percentage of good or outstanding secondary schools. This is not good enough.

Pupil outcomes in most phases of education and for particular groups of pupils across Stoke-on-Trent are not good enough. Not enough children are achieving a good level of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage in mainstream schools. Standards in Key Stages 1 and 4 are too low and not improving rapidly enough. The most able pupils and those with disabilities or who have special educational needs in mainstream schools are not making enough progress.

Although there is now more rigour in the authority's reports, reviews and school health checks, some school reviews and analyses of pupil performance data are still not sharp enough. This is still leaving some schools at risk of further decline.

The authority's 'Raising Achievement Strategy' rightly sets ambitious targets for raising standards and improving schools. However, the targets set for this year have not been achieved because the timescales were unrealistic. Officers are not evaluating success against improvement targets at key points during the year.

The quality of governance varies considerably across the authority. There has been a determination, with some success, to improve the effectiveness of governing bodies in maintained schools. Nonetheless, the authority is not gathering information or

intelligence systematically to have a good enough grasp of the quality and effectiveness of all governing bodies.

Although the school forum has been restructured and is more organised than previously, it still needs further refinement. Decisions about making the best use of additional funding are not transparent enough to ensure that resources are targeted at schools and pupils in greatest need of support.

Despite these shortcomings, there is cause for optimism as there have been recent improvements. The local authority now has a more rigorous approach to school improvement. School partnerships, school-to-school support and intervention programmes are evolving well. This is having a positive impact on improving leadership capacity in schools. The local authority's school improvement team are working more collaboratively with maintained schools, academies and multi-academy trusts. Teaching school alliances and effective headteachers and leaders are increasingly being deployed to build leadership capacity across all schools.

Special schools, pupil referral units and nurseries are maintaining good or outstanding inspection outcomes. Although attendance remains below the national average, it is improving in both primary and secondary schools. At Key Stage 2, pupils' attainment has improved consistently for the last three years, pupils are making better progress and the achievement gaps between disadvantaged and other pupils are closing.

Recent inspections indicate that there has been effective intervention and support in primary schools. However, there is a long way to go to narrow the gap between national and regional figures for the proportion of good or outstanding schools.

### **Areas for improvement**

The local authority needs to make sure that the approaches it adopts result in rapidly improving schools so that all pupils in Stoke-on-Trent attend a good or outstanding school. To achieve this, the local authority should work with school leaders to:

- build on the work being done with schools to raise standards so that they are at least in line with national averages by:
  - sustaining an increase in the proportion of children reaching a good level of development by the end of their Reception Year
  - improving rapidly the achievement of pupils in Years 1 and 2 in reading, writing and mathematics

- increasing the percentage of Key Stage 4 pupils gaining five GCSE grades A\* to C (including English and mathematics) so that it at least matches the national average
  - narrowing, then closing, the gaps between the performance of disadvantaged pupils and others in all phases and key stages
  - accelerating the progress that pupils with disabilities or special educational needs make in mainstream schools
  - improving the achievement of the most able pupils so that the progress these pupils make in all key stages matches that of most schools regionally and nationally
- 
- gather and analyse pupil performance data submitted by all maintained schools to provide accurate and timely assessments of trends, gaps or lapses in the achievement of different groups.
  - evaluate the quality and impact of those commissioned or deployed to support and challenge schools, particularly secondary schools, ensuring that this prevents failure and secures rapid improvement in those schools that are at most risk of decline.
  - develop a more successful strategy to improve governance in all schools and adopt more systematic and robust evaluations of the quality of governing bodies.
  - refine the current restructuring of the school forum to ensure that decisions about additional or targeted funding for schools that are in greatest need are transparent and understood by schools and elected members.

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**

- Elected members support and promote the new, more ambitious strategy and vision for school improvement. Members and officers accept that what was being done before was not effective and are communicating a different way of working with schools and academies. Elected members and the Chief Executive Officer are increasingly holding officers and strategic managers to account.
- Systems leaders, headteachers and governors speak of the trust that they now have in senior officers and the school improvement team that was not there before. However, the local authority's improved arrangements are not yet sufficiently robust enough for sustained school improvement. Recent inspection outcomes and pupil performance data show that there are some schools at risk of decline.

- Although the local authority presents a clear overview of current performance based on an analysis of data and Ofsted inspection outcomes, the targets for improvement are not being realised because the timescales are unrealistic. The local authority needs to adopt a more staged process of evaluation, with clear milestones to gauge how well brokered or commissioned arrangements are sustaining improvements to pupils' achievement, particularly in the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stages 1 and 4.
- There are no maintained secondary schools with sixth forms. Officers are working constructively with academies and further and higher education providers, as well as neighbouring local authorities, to support effective post-16 provision, although standards of achievement remain below average at Key Stage 5.
- Well-devised plans are in place to comply with the Raising the Participation Age (RPA) requirements. As a result, there are an increasing number of alternative and vocational pathways for young people to follow.

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

- Senior officers are visible and often undertake visits to schools to keep a close eye on the pace of improvement. They have high expectations of schools. In the case of academies, officers are notifying the Department for Education, through the Regional Schools Commissioner, if they have any concerns about pupil performance outcomes.
- Annual checks in maintained schools provide useful information for officers and those commissioned to support and challenge school leaders and governors. However, some maintained schools require more intensive support along with more regular analysis of in-year pupil performance data to prevent a decline in their effectiveness. Detailed analyses of pupil achievement and school performance are not yet systematic or routine for all maintained schools.
- Senior officers are increasingly challenging school leaders to secure more rapid improvement. The authority is now issuing warning notices to underperforming schools; this was not previously the case.
- Some good schools feel that the authority is supportive and they trust and understand its core purpose in improving schools and pupil achievement. Many schools recognise and appreciate the changes that are being promoted by senior officers.
- There are well-established procedures and policies in place to maintain the welfare and education of looked after children and young people. These are resulting in improved outcomes over time that, although low, compare favourably with their peers nationally. The authority is not complacent and is working with maintained schools and agencies to continue improving outcomes for the most vulnerable pupils and young people.

- The systems for monitoring the attendance and whereabouts of post-16 students, particularly those identified as at risk of becoming NEET - not in education, employment or training - have improved. This has come about because senior staff and representatives of the virtual school develop relationships with individual students that extend beyond the age of 16 to aid continuity and stability. As a result, the number of young people who are NEET (16 to 18-year-olds) is declining.

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

- The local authority's professional development programme contains a range of training and professional development opportunities for leaders at different levels. This is increasingly being targeted according to need, although too many inspection outcomes reporting on the quality of leadership judge that it requires improvement or is inadequate.
- School-to-school support is increasingly being adopted to build leadership capacity in and among schools. However, there is no consistent or objective evaluation of the impact of the work being done with schools to sustain improvement to pupil achievement or a school's overall effectiveness.
- Many governors believe that the authority's governor services, including the clerking service, are accessible and supportive. They believe that there is now a more robust approach to improving governance and leadership and they have more confidence now than previously in the work of senior officers. However, there is no systematic or robust evaluation of the quality of governing bodies and no systems in place to identify risks. The quality of clerking in some governing bodies, currently, is weak, although the local authority is taking action to tackle this.
- The local authority is increasing partnerships through soft or hard federations between schools and developing relevant training and continuing professional development programmes for leaders, teachers and governors. This is leading, particularly in primary schools, to more focused interventions in schools that are at risk of decline. Recent inspection outcomes show that primary schools on their journey to good received intensive support from commissioned improvement partners.

### **Use of resources**

- While reducing the number of officers it employs, the council has shown its commitment through increased funding aimed specifically at school improvement activities. This reflects the ambition of senior officers and elected members.

- The schools' forum as it is organised now is a very new model and its structure replaces one that did not work. The restructuring is still in its early stages and officers recognise the need for the forum to be more proactive and transparent in determining how funding is targeted at schools in most need, and especially for those at risk of decline.
- There are some maintained schools that have surplus budgets that are above the expected norms or thresholds. However, the local authority and human resource personnel are working effectively with schools to ensure that delegated funding reaches pupils and that surpluses or deficits reduce.
- Headteachers speak highly of the authority's human resources department and the support that they have provided to help with critical staffing issues.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chief Executive Officer, Lead Member and Executive Director of People of Stoke on Trent City Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website at GOV.uk.

Yours sincerely

Charalambos Loizou  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**