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31 March 2015

Ms Barbara Peacock  
Director of Children and Adults Services  
Medway Council  
Gun Wharf  
Chatham  
ME4 4TR

Dear Ms Peacock

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

Following the visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors Margaret Farrow, Deana Holdaway, Chris Campbell and Sian Thornton to Medway local authority, 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 from 23 to 27 March 2015. We particularly appreciated 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:

- the Chief Executive, elected members, senior officers and staff responsible for the school improvement services, including the Early Years Foundation Stage and the post-16 phase of education
- headteacher, teacher, principal and governing body representatives from schools, academies, colleges, the Teaching Alliance and the Schools Forum
- partners that deliver commissioned or brokered services to support school improvement, including governing body support, data and financial services.

The inspection team took account of the outcomes of discussion with leaders in seven focused school inspections and 17 telephone surveys in schools and academies carried out between the 13 and the 17 March 2015. Inspectors held telephone

discussions with two school leaders who requested to speak to them during the inspection.

A range of documentation was scrutinised, including the council's strategic plan, the strategy for school improvement, school performance data, case studies and notes of visits made by local authority school challenge and improvement leads (SCILs).

### **Summary findings**

The pace of school improvement in Medway's primary schools has been too slow. Pupils' achievement by the end of Year 6 is too low and too many attend schools that are not yet good. The proportion of good or outstanding primary schools remains well below that found nationally. Early indications of improvement are emerging due to recent actions taken.

Not enough has been done to narrow the achievement gaps between disadvantaged and other pupils across all phases of education, including level 3 qualifications in the post-16 sector. Fixed-term exclusion rates are high in some secondary schools. The achievements of students at the age of 16 are too varied. As yet, the Medway partnership's 16–19 strategy has had little impact on older groups, 18-year-olds, and too few of these young people move successfully into education, employment or training.

The interim assistant director for school effectiveness and inclusion was appointed in May 2014. She took immediate action to raise school leaders' expectations of provision and outcomes for children and young people. Her actions are starting to have an impact. The capacity for change is limited by the available expertise within Medway primary schools. She has tackled historical weaknesses and has developed more effective collaboration between successful school leaders, teaching alliances and National and Local Leaders of Education. Expertise from outside Medway is increasingly being introduced to drive improvement in weaker schools.

College principals, school leaders and governors who spoke to inspectors in meetings report a step change in the local authority's approach. They believe recent work is improving school leaders' skills and building the capacity for improvement in the primary sector. Leaders and elected members are well aware that there is still a long way to go to ensure that all children and young people achieve well and attend schools that are at least good.

Elected members and the Chief Executive have rightly placed learning at the heart of the strategy for improvement across Medway. They articulate their vision in the Council Plan. The new school improvement strategy links to the Council Plan, but does not identify clearly enough what needs to change to drive improvement quickly. The strategy does not identify how significant gaps will be closed for underachieving groups across all phases in education. Targets for improvement are not sufficiently detailed to show what success will look like as a result of actions taken. Plans do not

identify clearly enough how school improvement staff working with schools will be held to account for the impact of their work.

Staff from services working with schools do not analyse the data and information they hold about schools well enough. As a consequence, they are unable to identify needs and direct resources sharply enough to secure rapid improvement.

Reports to members on school and pupil performance typically focus on small successes rather than what is not good enough. Members and senior officers do not receive regular information on the proportion of schools causing concern to the local authority, so they cannot evaluate whether the collective work of services is making enough difference. The quality and impact of intervention by local authority school challenge and improvement leads (SCILs) are variable and procedures for holding them to account for their work are insufficiently robust.

The local authority has not made enough use of its statutory powers to challenge weaker leadership in primary schools, nor has it made effective representations to the Regional Schools Commissioner where it has concerns regarding academies; 16 out of the 17 secondary schools in Medway are academies. Leaders write to the Regional Commissioner expressing specific concerns, but not in the formal and unequivocal way that is their legal prerogative.

The work of the early years team stands out as a strength in Medway. Targeted work has increased the number of children in the early years phase achieving a good level of development, from well below average to above average. Additional resources agreed by the Schools Forum to improve children's phonics skills (building letter sounds to make words) are paying dividends. The proportion of Year 1 pupils reaching expected levels in their assessments has increased rapidly over the past two years and is now broadly average. Focused support has led to improvements in Year 2 pupils' mathematics results.

The proportion of secondary and special schools judged good or outstanding following their section 5 Ofsted inspection is above that found nationally. The Medway 16–19 partnership has stimulated a range of suitable and sufficient opportunities for young people leaving Year 11. As a result, a high proportion of 16-year-olds move on to education, employment or training. Some effective transition work between the Mid Kent College and specialist provision for young people with special educational needs is helping these young people move to their college placements successfully.

The decision to move the governing body support service into the school effectiveness and inclusion service and appoint a dynamic leader is starting to support much needed improvement in the quality of governance.

## **Areas for improvement**

- Further accelerate pupils' progress in all phases, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, and increase the proportion of good and outstanding schools.
- Use data more effectively to identify weaknesses and to target direct support and challenge to areas of greatest need.
- Ensure that staff providing support and challenge to school leaders are held to account robustly so that school improvement work is more sharply focused on the impact on pupils' outcomes and the impact of their work to secure improvement.
- Ensure that the school improvement strategy and final underpinning plans contain precise timescales and targets against which the impact of actions can be checked regularly.
- Build leadership capacity across Medway schools, particularly in the primary sector. This includes identifying and sharing examples of good or outstanding leadership to leaders in schools at risk of decline, so that they can understand and learn from the best practice and drive improvement in their schools more effectively.
- Ensure that concerns about standards and leadership in academies are referred formally to the Regional Schools Commissioner to tackle the significant variation in achievement and attendance, particularly in the secondary sector.
- Develop further the Medway 16–19 strategy to ensure that it meets the needs of 18-year-olds more effectively, to help them achieve well academically and to move successfully on to education, training and employment.

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

## **Corporate leadership and strategic planning**

- The local authority's work with weaker primary schools has not driven improvement quickly enough in Key Stage 1 or Key Stage 2. Although improving, pupils' achievements, rates of progress and the proportion of schools judged good or outstanding remain in the lowest 10% of all local authorities nationally.
- The Chief Executive, elected members, senior officers and school leaders share a well-articulated purpose to improve outcomes for all Medway pupils. They also share a renewed sense of urgency to increase the proportion of good or outstanding schools. Although learning is at the heart of the council's plans for the future, until recently this vision has not been embraced by all schools. The vision has not translated into actions that have tackled the legacy of underachievement across Medway primary schools.
- School leaders and governors have contributed to the school improvement strategy following lengthy consultation. Priorities link well to the council's plan. However, leaders have been too slow to produce action plans detailing precisely

what needs to be done by when. The strategy fails to explain sufficiently how success will be measured, monitored and evaluated. Priorities such as narrowing the gaps of achievement between underachieving groups and increasing the proportion of good or outstanding schools do not have sufficient precision. This lack of detail is slowing the pace of change.

- Members share the headteachers' trust and respect for the interim assistant director and report clearly the early impact of her work. She has developed stronger partnerships with teaching schools and their work is beginning to be coordinated with that of the school effectiveness team. She has ensured that intelligence gathered by different teams is coordinated to target more effectively the support needed. It is too soon to see the full impact of this work.
- The School Effectiveness Strategic Board, comprising school and teaching school leaders, was set up by the local authority with an independent chair in 2014. Its aim is to 'provide direction, develop coordination and galvanise commitment for a first class education for all children'. In the board's quest to ensure consensus, it is too cautious in harnessing the ambition and drive of some well-equipped headteachers on the board who are restless for action.
- Partnerships with colleges, employers and schools have increased options for students when they leave Year 11. Consequently, a high proportion is moving on to education, employment or training successfully. However, the Medway partnership's 16–19 strategy has not focused well enough on reducing the higher-than-average proportion of 18-year-olds not moving on successfully into education, employment or training. Nor has it secured good enough outcomes in level 3 qualifications, particularly for disadvantaged students and males.

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

- The local authority's school challenge and improvement leaders (SCILs) work closely with schools requiring improvement. However, their work is insufficiently informed by the full range of performance data and other information available, to identify risks sharply or speedily enough. This limits their ability to tackle any decline in school performance, leadership, or emerging weaknesses quickly. As a result, significant groups of Medway pupils, including the more able, the disadvantaged and those looked after, do not do as well as they should.
- Examples of good practice are not identified quickly enough to share more widely across schools. Examples of these include the improvement of pupils' phonic skills, mathematics in Key Stage 1 and work to improve the outcomes of children leaving the Early Years Foundation Stage.
- Recent work has started to show early benefits in the number of schools judged good or outstanding in Ofsted inspections. However, given the low starting points, the rate of improvement is not rapid enough, either as reported in the outcomes of Ofsted inspections or in SCILs' own assessments of the proportion of schools SCILs judge to be good or outstanding.

- In the past, SCILs' work has been reactive rather than proactive, responding when schools have been judged by inspectors to be in a category of concern or as requires improvement.
- Recent work between SCILs, teaching schools and National and Local Leaders of Education is being better coordinated and targeted at those schools in greatest need. It is too soon to see the full impact of this work. Headteachers and governors who spoke to inspectors were clear that targeted support is leading to better achievement and improved leadership. Evidence from telephone discussions with headteachers and focused inspections was much more mixed.
- Current interventions of the school challenge and improvement team are determined following an annual review meeting with schools. These meetings are generally welcomed by school leaders where their schools' performance is considered and support and intervention levels agreed.
- Planned support for schools is not informed by sharp, measurable targets for pupils' outcomes or by the speed of a school's improved overall effectiveness. As a result, the impact of SCILs work in these areas is not fully maximised.

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

- The support and challenge to schools have increased in effectiveness in recent months. The proportion of schools judged to be good or outstanding has improved slightly since September. Leaders and elected members know that there is a considerable way to go to meet their ambition that all schools are at least good.
- The local authority has not used its statutory powers of intervention rigorously enough, given the much higher-than-average proportion of primary schools that are judged as requires improvement or inadequate. In the secondary sector, there are unacceptable variations in students' achievement, attendance and fixed-term exclusion rates. For its academies, the local authority has not made effective use of formal notices to the Regional Schools Commissioner to communicate such concerns.
- Since September 2012, the local authority has used its informal powers to place additional governors onto weaker governing bodies to build the capacity of school governance; 23 schools have benefited from this additional support. This academic year, the local authority has written to 17 schools, including six academies, to raise concerns about standards. Governing bodies from three schools causing significant concern have been replaced with interim executive boards. The local authority recently issued a pre-warning notice to a school causing significant concern. These practices fall short of formal notices and, as a result, do not ensure that school leaders and governors are crystal clear when there are serious concerns about their effectiveness.
- Governor effectiveness is beginning to be improved following the decision to place governing body services within the school effectiveness and inclusion service. A recently appointed dynamic leader has developed systems to categorise the effectiveness of governing bodies and target support with greater

precision. Governors report positively about improvements to the service and to the quality of training.

- The governing body service is rightly supporting governors in making wider external links to improve their effectiveness, including the use of the National Leaders of Governance. It is also supporting the development of local area fora for chairs of governing bodies to develop skills and share good practice more widely. Leaders of the service are aware there is much to do and report that fewer than 10% of governing bodies are currently outstanding or highly effective.
- The assistant director has been instrumental in utilising the broad range of intelligence gathered about schools more effectively. Information held by brokered services, such as human resources, finance and governing body services, contributes robustly to the categorisation of schools causing concern. Senior staff report that meetings to discuss schools causing concern are much sharper in identifying issues and planning timely actions. However, not enough has been done to track this information over time to hold SCILs to account for the impact of their work on reducing the number of schools causing concern to the local authority.
- The local authority and school leaders have recognised the need to recruit and retain high quality leaders from within and outside Medway. This is one of the four key priorities of the school improvement strategy and an additional £90,000 funding has been secured from the Schools Forum to support this priority. There has been some success in using executive headteachers and secondments from outside Medway to build the capacity of leadership in the primary sector. There is still much to do and more flexible models of delivery are being considered.

### **Use of resources**

- The budget-setting process is clear and transparent. There is cross-sector representation on the Schools Forum and a stated improved willingness of all to listen, to challenge and to act for the good of all children and young people in Medway.
- A high level of resource is directed straight to schools and the Schools Forum report that the local authority retains a lower proportion than their comparators.
- The Schools Forum is consulted effectively on, and shares, priorities for the local authority, including the recognised need to hasten improvement in Key Stage 2 outcomes. The forum has agreed additional school improvement resources to recruit and retain high quality leaders and teachers into the primary sector, particularly, and for other priorities within the recently developed school improvement strategy. The forum holds the local authority to account appropriately for the use of these additional resources.
- Arrangements to challenge the impact of services working with schools to improve outcomes for pupils and increase the number of schools judged good or outstanding are unsatisfactory. Arrangements to hold schools to account for their

use of the pupil premium are not securing good enough outcomes for disadvantaged pupils or those looked after.

- Financial services to schools are highly regarded and school leaders report timely advice and guidance. Robust procedures are in place to monitor schools' use of budgets. Urgent action is taken if surpluses are beyond the recommendations set by the local authority (in line with good practice). Any school that is predicting a deficit is required to produce and respond to a two-year recovery plan. Consequently, the number of schools significantly over or under budget is low.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State and the Director of Children and Adult Services. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**