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Mr Mil Vasic
Director for Children, Young People and Family Services
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The Guildhall
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Dear Mr Vasic

Inspection of the Kingston upon Hull local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement

Following the visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) Margaret Farrow, Helen Lane, Deirdre Duignan and Chris Campbell to Kingston upon Hull, I write 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 7 and 11 December 2015. 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 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, the Chief Executive, and senior officers and staff with responsibility for school improvement in the local authority
- staff and partners representing early years and post-16 education provision
- headteachers, staff and governors from maintained schools and academies
- senior staff from local authority traded services that support schools, including governor services, human resources, and finance and data analysis services
- partners delivering brokered or commissioned services on behalf of the local authority, such as leaders from the area's teaching schools, national leaders of education and national leaders of governance.

The inspection team took account of the outcomes of discussions with leaders in three school inspections and a telephone survey of a sample of 13 schools and academies carried out between 1 and 5 December 2015.

Inspectors reviewed a range of documents, including the local authority's evaluation of its own effectiveness, the recently developed ambitions strategy and school improvement strategy, data about school and academy performance across the city, and reports to members on the performance of schools. They also reviewed minutes of the Standards Board meetings and the board's recent report to members.

Summary findings

Council leaders and elected members, over a significant period of time, have been too slow to recognise their responsibility in leading and driving the ambition for school improvement. As a result, the pace of improvement has not been fast enough, particularly in secondary education, the post-16 sector and for the most-able pupils across all key stages. For too long, pupils' outcomes have languished in the bottom 10% of all local authorities nationally.

This is no longer the case in primary schools at Key Stage 2, where the proportion of pupils gaining Level 4 in reading, writing and mathematics combined has improved rapidly, moving from below average in 2014 to slightly above in 2015. However, the proportion of Year 11 pupils gaining five good GCSEs including English and mathematics remains stubbornly low. Over a third of secondary-aged pupils attend schools or academies that are not yet good.

At post-16, the proportion of young people gaining Level 2 qualifications remains below average. The proportion of young people gaining Level 3 qualifications is the second lowest of all local authorities nationally. Too few A-level learners gain higher grades.

The local authority is increasingly effective in working with several partners to ensure a broad range of provision for transitions at the age of 16. Virtually all young people (99%) moved on to post-16 education or training in 2015. This is well above average but it is not sustained over time. The proportion who remain in education, employment or training falls to below average by the age of 18.

On his appointment in spring 2014, the Director for Children, Young People and Family Services made it his quest to raise everyone's expectations and to drive improvement in pupils' outcomes across the city. He immediately developed relationships with all school leaders and made it clear that educational improvement was a pivotal part of his role and vision. Robust discussions are held between the director, senior school improvement staff and school leaders in primary and secondary schools and academies, where concerns are identified. However, the local authority does not ensure that all serious concerns about academies are brought formally to the attention of the Regional Schools Commissioner.

The vision has been translated into an ambitious strategy with two simple priorities: to ensure that all pupils attend a school judged good or better, and that pupils' attainment is at least at the national average by 2018. These ambitions have been embraced by the new Chief Executive and elected members but have yet to be represented in an overarching, council-wide strategy. There are no challenging targets for improving Key Stage 4 outcomes in the council's performance reporting procedures. Targets against which to measure the success of the strategy and the underpinning school improvement strategy have yet to be developed. Thus it is not clear how elected members and partners will hold leaders to account for the impact of the strategies or know what success should look like. The strategy for school improvement has yet to be fully endorsed by school leaders and governors.

This year, elected members received a detailed report on pupil performance across all key stages. However, the report focuses too much on small improvements. It does not identify robustly enough the significant weaknesses in school performance or the actions that are needed to improve matters.

The local authority has been successful in developing a strategy to increase the quality and take-up of free early years provision for eligible two-year-olds. Currently, 78.3% of such children access provision. This is good and close to the Department for Education's target of 80%. Children are tracked carefully, including where Hull children attend provision in other areas. Tracking shows that overall, 90% of providers have been rated good or outstanding following their Ofsted inspection. In Hull, 98% of children attend good or better provision.

Strategies developed to improve outcomes for children at the age of five are also making a positive difference. The proportion of children making expected gains in their learning at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage has improved rapidly this year and the gap between their achievements and those of other children nationally is narrowing well. However, not enough has been done to improve outcomes for children from the most disadvantaged communities, and gaps between these children and the least disadvantaged widened significantly in 2015.

Improved relationships with partners, more effective deployment of school improvement staff and external support from national leaders of education and teaching schools is beginning to ensure that support to schools is targeted according to need in the maintained primary school sector. This is helping to improve the proportion of schools judged good or better following inspection. The proportion is just below that found nationally. This is not the case in the secondary sector, where only 58% are judged good or better. Arrangements to ensure that school improvement staff and leaders providing support are held to account for the impact of their work with targeted schools are insufficiently robust.

Not enough has been done to develop a city-wide recruitment and retention strategy to ensure that the best teachers and leaders go to Hull and remain there.

The Standards Board comprises a group of leaders from good and outstanding schools and academies, and has an independent Chair. Despite its title, the Standards Board does not have a role in formally challenging or reviewing school standards. Some board members, school leaders and governors are unclear about its role and impact.

Areas for improvement

- Raise standards at Key Stage 4 and in the post-16 sector and reduce the proportion of young people not in education, training or employment by the age of 18 by:
 - working with school-, academy-, college- and work-based leaders to develop a shared responsibility and robust strategy to drive improvement
 - ensuring high-quality education and training opportunities result in successful outcomes for all young people.
- Improve the impact of strategic planning by:
 - ensuring that the aspirations for young people are identified in the high-level strategies of the council
 - including challenging targets in these strategies and in the council's performance reporting procedures so that the impact can be checked by members, school leaders and other partners, and decisive action taken if actions are not driving the required improvement quickly enough
 - developing the school improvement strategy further to ensure it is fully owned and understood by all partners and takes account of emerging legislation
 - including measurable targets in the school improvement strategy to ensure that senior leaders are held to account for the impact of the strategy
 - ensuring that all school improvement staff and brokered and commissioned school leaders are held to account fully for the impact of their work with schools they are supporting.
- Ensure that the local authority uses all the powers it has available to challenge schools where weaknesses are evident, including formal representation to the Regional Schools Commissioner when there are serious concerns about the performance of academies.
- Improve the achievements of the most disadvantaged children in the early years and the achievements of the most-able pupils at all key stages.
- Work at a strategic level with partners to develop a recruitment, retention and succession planning strategy to ensure high-quality teaching and school leadership across the school community in Hull.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- Council leaders and elected members accept that in the past, the council has not been a strong enough ambassador in driving improvement across the city. This is particularly so at Key Stage 4 where outcomes remain too low. The proportion of pupils gaining five good GCSEs including English and mathematics improved in all four maintained secondary schools in 2015. However, provisional information indicates that outcomes remain well below average in two of these schools, and the progress pupils made from their starting points on entry into Year 7 in mathematics was below average in two. Standards fell in five of the seven academies in 2015. Pupils' progress in mathematics was below average in six academies and well below in four.

- The director and the interim City Manager for Education and Skills have provided a much-needed sense of urgency in the drive for improvement. They and senior officers have a clear understanding of their service's strengths and weaknesses.
- Senior officers' written self-evaluation of their effectiveness is accurate, identifying clearly what needs to improve. For example, they saw that an aspect of the special educational needs strategy was not working. After a change in legislation, pupils with statements of special educational needs should move on to integrated education, health and care plans in three years. The local authority's timescale of 18 months was too ambitious and delays due to staff illness became a cause of serious concern to school leaders. To respond to identified weaknesses, an interim officer was quickly appointed in the summer term. A coherent strategy for rectification and development has been implemented. School leaders report that they recognise and value the improvements.
- Outcomes of self-evaluation have led to the simple vision for improvement, the ambitions strategy. Headteachers and governors are beginning to understand this shared commitment, mainly through regular meetings and discussions that take place between the director and school leaders.
- The Chief Executive and elected members articulate clearly that young people in Hull will need good qualifications to secure employment in the wide range of innovative, high-skill, multinational companies that the council is successfully bringing to the city. However, there are no strategic targets to raise achievement at Key Stage 4 or 5 in the council's performance reporting procedures, to challenge all, and to make sure young people have the qualifications to take part in the wide-ranging opportunities soon coming.
- The role of the Standards Board is unclear, not least because it does not report on school standards. The board has initiated projects to support school improvement. For example, a recent project in the early years has been reported as contributing to the improved outcomes this year. This may well be the case but the report to members does not identify precisely, or quantitatively, the impact of the project on that improvement.
- There is a lack of shared accountability among post-16 partners for improving the outcomes of young people over the age of 16. This is because there is not a concerted, collective focus on ensuring that the high numbers who enter post-16 provision remain there, or achieve highly by the age of 18.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- The data team provides high-quality, timely information on the performance of all schools to senior officers and schools. This information is being used better than previously to identify schools' strengths and weaknesses and to inform the categorisation of schools causing concern. Headteachers report that the categorisation process has improved and is well understood, particularly for schools that require additional support. They value the timely data and the analysis provided by the team.

- Senior officers meet regularly with a range of leaders of services that work with schools to share information. This gives them a broader picture of the factors influencing school performance. Information is increasingly used well to inform decisions about structural changes, deployment of school improvement staff or changes or support required in school governance.
- Local authority leaders recognise the autonomy of schools but have not yet secured a common strategy from all partners to city-wide issues of achievement, particularly at secondary level. Nevertheless, senior leaders are increasingly successful in securing timely support from within the authority's own small school improvement team, and in brokering school-to-school support from teaching schools and leaders of successful schools.
- HMI monitoring letters of maintained schools that were not judged good at the time of their inspection show the generally positive impact of local authority support and challenge. Although the deployment of school improvement staff and external support is now better targeted according to need, arrangements to ensure these staff are held to account for the impact of their work are insufficiently robust. Actions focus too much on securing support and not on the difference the support will make.
- Secondary headteachers recognise the now diverse nature of school provision (schools, academies and free schools), and share the ambition to have improved outcomes. However, they report that there is not enough clarity of purpose in strategic planning for this phase of education.

Support and challenge for leadership and management (including governance)

- The local authority knows its schools well. Recent improvements are recognised by school leaders but they report that there is still more to do to ensure a coherent and consistent approach in support and challenge to school leadership and management.
- Since his appointment, the director has taken some robust action to tackle poor or mediocre school leadership. This has led to structural change in a number of schools, including to governance.
- The school improvement service is being increasingly effective in targeting its own resources and commissioning and brokering support from the teaching schools and national leaders of education to develop a more coherent approach to school-to-school support. This work is contributing to the improvements in early years and Key Stage 2 outcomes. It is also making a difference in maintained secondary schools that have received targeted support. For example, sensitive, rapid and brokered support from an outstanding secondary school from outside the city ensured stability and improvement in a local school suddenly facing challenging circumstances.

- The local authority is now using its formal powers more effectively. Headteachers and governors in two schools considered the use of these powers to be timely in hastening improvement, for example, in putting into place interim executive boards (IEBs) in cases where governance did not improve quickly enough. However, the director recognises that there is a need to make more rapid, formal representations to the Regional Schools Commissioner where there are serious concerns about the performance of academies.
- Support to school leaders for human resources, governance and financial matters is strong. Headteachers who buy these local authority services spoke highly of their support and impact. Finance officers work closely with maintained schools to ensure budgets do not go into deficit. The safeguarding officer's advice and support are also highly valued, as is training for designated safeguarding teachers.
- Newly appointed headteachers speak positively about the timely support from school improvement officers and the mentor headteachers who have been brokered successfully. However, there is no overarching strategy to recruit and retain high-quality teachers and leaders in the city. This is recognised in the ambitions strategy but has yet to be translated into action. Leaders within the local authority and in schools recognise that improvements in teaching and leadership will be key to driving improvement in the secondary sector.
- The local authority has a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of governing bodies of maintained schools. Despite the decline in numbers buying into the governing body service, local intelligence is ensuring that the service maintains up-to-date knowledge. Further intelligence is gathered from the external reviews of governance, and key trends that emerge from these are used to target support.
- Experienced and skilled additional governors from a small pool are carefully allocated to support schools in need. This includes national leaders for governance. Officers have also successfully supported four governors to become national leaders. As yet, there is no well-defined strategy for their deployment. Exit strategies for IEBs, however, are well planned, so there is a smooth transition to the governing body in-waiting.
- Officers recognise that there is more to do to ensure that governors understand the recent school improvement strategy and fully embrace the development of a school-led improvement process where the role of the local authority is more strategic.

Use of resources

- The local authority has a clear strategy for the use of the diminishing school improvement budget and has developed a more effective and strategic role for the small team of school improvement officers. Work to broker leaders from outstanding and good schools to support school-to-school improvement is becoming part of the strategy but there is some way to go before it is fully coherent, coordinated and checked for impact.

- The school forum comprises a balance of leaders and governors from schools and academies. Past and present Chairs of the forum speak convincingly about the shared accountability for the use of resources and how they work together to do the best for all schools. Where additional resources are requested, the forum makes a careful assessment of the need for the resources and monitors the impact of the spending.
- The school forum holds the local authority to account robustly for spending decisions. Chairs of the forum confirm that the budget-setting process is transparent. They value highly the work of the finance officer for the forum who provides pertinent information and documentation to inform decision making. For example, the officer provided clear information from the data team about gaps between disadvantaged and advantaged groups across the city, which helped forum members in their discussions about the deployment of pupil premium funding.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education and the Director for Children, Young People and Family Services. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow
Her Majesty's Inspector