

6 July 2015

Mrs Jan Thurgood  
Strategic Director, People Theme  
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Dear Mrs Thurgood

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

Following the visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors Jim Sage, Sian Thornton, Chris Campbell and myself Catherine Anwar to Poole 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 who we met during our visit on 29 June to 3 July 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 and senior officers of Poole Borough Council and personnel responsible for the local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement, including local authority advisors and associate consultants
- partners delivering services brokered or commissioned by the local authority, such as external, independent education consultants
- headteachers and governors from maintained schools and academies.

In addition, inspectors took account of the outcomes of 24 telephone calls with schools and the inspections of four schools carried out between 23 and 26 June 2015. Of the four inspections carried out, two schools remained good, one improved and one declined and was judged to require improvement.

A wide range of documentation was examined, including the local authority's self-evaluation and its strategy for school improvement. Case studies of the work undertaken with schools were reviewed and school performance data was scrutinised.

### **Summary findings**

Poor challenge by the local authority over time has led to a slow pace of improvement in Poole's primary and secondary schools. As a result, the outcomes for pupils at Key Stage 2 remain some of the lowest in the country and, from their starting points, pupils' progress is poor. This is the case for all groups of pupils at Key Stage 2, including the disadvantaged and the most able. Too many pupils do not make good enough progress at Key Stage 4. Achievement for learners on advanced level courses in school sixth forms is average.

Leaders do not articulate clearly an ambitious vision for the strategic improvement of education in Poole. Plans lack precision and clarity and have few targets against which to measure progress. Leaders do not use data well enough to inform decision making. Consequently, the local authority does not have a precise picture of the impact of its actions on raising pupils' achievement. In addition, councillors do not challenge local authority leaders, or hold them to account robustly enough to improve standards of education in Poole. Information provided to the council scrutiny committee by local authority leaders does not highlight areas for improvement keenly or openly enough.

There is also no clear strategy for improvement to address the underachievement of disadvantaged pupils in Poole. There is no coordinated response across all age groups to ensure that these pupils make good or better progress and no targets or measurable outcomes to ensure that progress is monitored and evaluated robustly. As a result, the progress and attainment of disadvantaged pupils remain below that of disadvantaged pupils nationally, at all stages of their education except in early years. These pupils are not making rapid enough progress and gaps in achievement are not closing except in early years. The proportion of disadvantaged students moving to sustained education or training post-16 is lower than that seen nationally, at only 75%.

Similarly, the overall achievement of disabled pupils and those with special educational needs pupils in Poole is not monitored effectively by the local authority, except for those who are looked after. No reports are presented to the scrutiny committee on this issue. There is no coherent strategy in the local authority for ensuring that pupils with special educational needs make good progress.

Local authority leaders at all levels now articulate determination and commitment to improve the quality of education for all pupils in Poole and to overcome the legacy of previously weak challenge and support. Poor school leadership and governance have recently been robustly tackled and more effective school leaders and chairs of governors have been appointed in several maintained schools.

Leaders began to create the right conditions and structures for improvement in the primary education phase from January 2013. A more effective culture of collaboration between school leaders and the local authority officers is now starting to take effect at primary schools in Poole. Most, but not all, school leaders now accept the urgent need for a rapid improvement in standards. Work in individual schools by advisers is beginning to show some impact on pupils' achievement. However, decline in individual schools' effectiveness is not always picked up swiftly enough.

An understanding of the local authority's drive for a school-to-school improvement model is slowly starting to filter through to primary leaders. A key element of this is the recent establishment of the school standards board, which includes primary and secondary headteacher representatives, as well as local authority officers. However, this process is at a very early stage for secondary schools. The local authority has not focused sufficiently robustly on those secondary schools it maintains.

In the telephone calls made to schools during this inspection, school leaders reported varying satisfaction with the local authority's support and challenge. They feel that the local authority knows primary schools much better than its secondary schools. Overall, school leaders say that the school improvement work of the local authority is slowly becoming more effective.

The work of the early years' team is a relative strength in Poole. This is because the adviser analyses children's achievement data thoroughly and plans improvement work accordingly. The impact of this work is measured robustly. Children's achievement is improving, including for the disadvantaged. Headteachers are united in their praise of this aspect of the local authority early years improvement service. The vast majority of early years providers across all settings use these improvement services for early years support.

Likewise, the work of the 14 to 19 team is relatively effective. Leaders in this sector understand the nature and quality of the provision, know clearly what needs to improve and have developed effective partnerships to address concerns at all levels. However, there is no evidence that local authority leaders monitor the quality of provision for 14 to 19 providers in a strategic way to secure improvement in achievement. This is slowing improvement in 14 to 19 work in Poole.

## Areas for improvement

The local authority should:

- tackle the underachievement of disadvantaged pupils without delay; monitor the attainment of disabled pupils and those with special educational needs effectively to ensure that leaders know how well those pupils are doing and take swift action to address poor performance
- urgently address the underachievement of all other groups of pupils in Poole
- develop a strategic approach to raising standards that is securely underpinned by precise targets derived from incisive analysis of accurate data; these targets must focus sharply on the key areas for improvement
- through sharp and systematic monitoring, ensure that all schools, including those with sixth form provision, fully understand and engage with the priorities for improvement and their part in securing them
- ensure that the council scrutiny committee delivers value for money by holding leaders to account, frequently and with rigour, for raising pupils' achievement in Poole.

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

- Prior to 2013, the local authority did not know its schools well. Council members had little knowledge of standards in schools and the local authority did not have mechanisms in place to identify weaknesses and address them. Although arrangements to find out about the performance and impact of arrangements for supporting school improvement are now in place, members do not yet frequently receive enough detailed, accurate information about achievement in schools. Inaccurate and misleading public documentation still hinders appropriately robust challenge from council members. This has allowed pupils' underachievement in Poole to continue largely unchecked; there has been little improvement in standards at Key Stage 2 or in closing the significant achievement gap between disadvantaged and other pupils.
- Local authority leaders do not demonstrate a clear vision for improvement of education in the borough. The strategic improvement plan for education lacks precision and does not include clear, measurable outcomes. It is out of date, does not reference the most recent achievement data and shows limited ambition for improvement. This is in the context of a weak and inaccurate children and young people's plan.
- All members and officers now express commitment to and ambition for raising educational standards in Poole. They have identified key areas for improvement, which has allowed a sharper focus on challenge to schools. There are evident strengths in the local work undertaken by advisers and there are signs of early

impact on pupils' achievement. Moreover, local authority leaders recently commissioned an external review of arrangements to support school improvement from a well-respected external organisation. The clear messages about what is not yet good enough have been embraced by leaders and findings have been presented openly to school leaders. This bodes well for a much needed, more rapid pace of improvement.

- However, there is no coherent strategy for raising the achievement of disadvantaged pupils in Poole and no consistent drive to close the gap in achievement between disadvantaged and other pupils. As a result, gaps are not closing and in some areas, such as Key Stage 2 and English and mathematics in Key Stage 4, they are widening. This is a concern. Likewise, the achievement of disabled pupils or those with special educational needs is not monitored by the local authority. The local authority therefore does not know how well these pupils are doing and so cannot judge the effectiveness of the support provided.
- The local authority has instigated several primary 'summit' conferences and set up the schools standards board. These provide a good mechanism to bring together the local authority, teaching schools alliance and the Poole Schools' Association (PSA – a partnership group of all Poole schools) and to provide a useful framework to manage the school improvement process. As a result, school leaders are increasingly supporting each other and sharing good practice, as well as looking out of Poole to ensure up-to-date good practice. Nevertheless, not all school leaders have a clear view of the local authority's arrangements for supporting school improvement. Some perceive that arrangements for supporting school improvement have a low standing within the local authority.
- There are some strengths in the leadership of early years, 14 to 19 provision and the virtual school. Clear, ambitious vision, tenacious pursuit of higher standards and robust monitoring and evaluation result in improving outcomes for pupils in these areas.
- There is sufficient 16 to 19 provision at all levels following work to increase provision for the full range of learners. A suitable 'map of the territory' is in place to ensure that all 16-year-olds know the full range of 16 to 19 study programmes available to them. Because of better tracking, the proportion of learners whose destination is unknown has decreased dramatically. Learners' progress from their starting points is improving. Attainment at A level remains in line with national averages.

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

- Since 2013, the local authority's knowledge of its schools has improved, particularly at primary level, due to more effective work on the ground by advisers. Relevant performance data is now used more effectively to identify schools in need of support and challenge. However, strategies for improvement are not updated in line with the latest data capture and common key areas are not identified astutely enough. Local authority leaders have an incomplete understanding of where good practice lies in its schools and this limits the

effectiveness and speed with which it can broker and commission school-to-school support. Moreover, continuing underperformance and decline in some schools have not been identified sufficiently promptly.

- A suitably robust data-sharing agreement is not yet in place between all schools and the local authority. As a result, advisers do not always receive the information they need from all schools to enable precise monitoring of standards throughout the year.
- Annual school reviews that lead to local authority categorisation drive direct improvement work in primary schools that need urgent support. This is beginning to make a positive difference to raising some pupils' achievement in individual primary schools and is valued by school leaders. This work has yet to show significant impact on improved outcomes for children and young people in Poole overall.
- The local authority engages high quality external consultants and they are able to talk about the impact of their individual work with schools. However, there is no strategic approach to this deployment and the work of consultants is not quality assured or evaluated in terms of the difference it makes to pupils.
- The limited capacity of the school monitoring and intervention team has led to little work being undertaken with maintained secondary schools in the borough. As a result, advisers do not know their secondary schools well enough and are not clear that achievement at secondary level is not good overall. However, secondary leaders, including those of academies, recognise recent improvements in the local authority's work and most of them value the annual review system.
- The local authority is increasingly promoting school-to-school support as a core element of school improvement and some school leaders are working productively with each other and looking outside the borough for support. However, this is not yet the case for all schools and some leaders remain unclear about the organisation of the local authority's arrangements for supporting school improvement.
- Since 2013, local authority leaders have exercised their statutory duties more effectively and have sent warning letters appropriately. Moreover, the local authority has referred concerns about standards in academies to the Department for Education in a timely and tenacious manner.
- Early years provision is monitored, supported and challenged well because of leaders' incisive use of achievement data. All providers use this highly valued service. As a result, children's achievement is rising and gaps between disadvantaged children's achievement and others are closing. Similarly, the virtual school is well led and managed. The achievement of vulnerable pupils is effectively monitored and intervention strategically planned. Schools are required to demonstrate high standards of planning for vulnerable pupils before funds are released to them. As a result, pupils' achievement is improving steadily.

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

- Local authority leaders have taken challenging decisions and have acted robustly to tackle weak leadership over the last year. As a result, several schools are benefiting from new leadership and improving governance that is closely directed to challenging underachievement.
- The local authority has taken positive steps to improve the quality of relationships with its maintained schools and academies. This has been most successful at the primary level, where most leaders now understand clearly the urgent need to raise standards and are making better use of school-to-school support.
- The recent establishment of the school standards board provides a positive opportunity for enhanced collaboration between school leaders, governors and the local authority. In addition, the work of the PSA is encouraged by the local authority. The PSA has been instrumental in bringing about a significant piece of work that ensures high quality moderation of standards at Key Stages 1 and 2. However, it is too early to see any impact of this work.
- Governor services are well managed. High-calibre external training and expertise, including the input of national leaders of governance, are brokered effectively by service leaders. Governors value and recognise the strong contribution of governor services to the development of a more collaborative, accountable culture across education in Poole. Governors are increasingly focused sharply on challenging school leaders to raise standards of achievement for pupils. However, this has yet to have an impact on pupils' achievement.
- The local authority has taken steps to use the expertise of recognised leaders in education to challenge and support schools. Although there is only one national leader of education (NLE) in Poole, the authority has brokered additional support from NLEs further afield. In addition, school advisers have very recently brokered a range of courses to support the development of senior and middle leaders in schools. However, there is no strategic approach to this provision in that it is not focused on identified key issues, nor is the impact of the training evaluated.

## **Use of resources**

- The underachievement of pupils in Poole, which is particularly significant for disadvantaged pupils means that the local authority is not using its resources efficiently and effectively overall. Weaknesses in strategic planning make it difficult for the local authority to monitor the progress of groups of pupils, such as disabled pupils or those with special educational needs.
- The scrutiny committee is not provided with the sharp and accurate evaluation of standards it needs. The committee is not holding the school improvement team to account sufficiently robustly in terms of value for money. Around one third of school leaders do not know how resources are deployed to support school improvement.

- The impact of spending on early years is evaluated well. The substantial engagement from the vast majority of providers confirms the high value schools and settings place on this service. A higher than average proportion of two-year-olds are in funded education places. Similarly, governor services provide good value for money and schools outside the borough buy into this provision. Funding for looked after children is managed well.

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

Yours sincerely

Catherine Anwar  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**