

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
LASI@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



7 April 2016

Mr David Haley
Executive Director of Children's Services
Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
The Civic Centre
Darwall Street
Walsall

Dear Mr Haley

Inspection of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement

Following the visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) to Walsall Metropolitan 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 during our visit on 29 February until 4 March 2016. I and my colleagues, Mel Ford HMI, Rachel Howie HMI and Deirdre Duignan HMI, 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, principals and governors, and the senior leaders and managers in the school improvement team 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.

This was a re-inspection of the local authority's arrangements for supporting school improvement, which were found to be ineffective in June 2014.

Context

Most of the authority's schools are organised into a two-tier system of primary and secondary. There are 121 schools and settings, 92 of which are maintained by the local authority. This includes 85 primary, three secondary, seven special, two pupil referral units and eight nursery schools. There are also 29 academies, comprising 15

primary academies, of which seven are sponsor-led and seven are convertors; 16 secondary academies, of which eight are sponsor-led and seven are convertors.

Since the previous inspection in June 2014, there have been significant changes to the way that arrangements for school improvement are led, managed and monitored. You started in September 2014 as the Executive Director of Children's Services, replacing the Interim Director. The Assistant Director (Access and Achievement) joined the authority in April 2014. The school improvement team has been reorganised and streamlined so that the Head of School Improvement Service has more direct oversight of school improvement advisers and partners. An education challenge board (ECB) was set up soon after the Executive Director of Children's Services joined and is independently chaired with membership external to the local authority. The ECB is a monitoring and challenge board which holds the council and its officers to account for school improvement.

Evidence

Inspections of nine maintained schools were carried out between 23 and 26 February 2016. Five of these were carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005 (as amended). Three inspections were carried out as short inspections of previously good schools under section 8 of the Act. One inspection was carried out under the same Act because it was exempt from inspection having previously been judged outstanding.

The outcomes of the section 5 inspections were:

- one secondary school improved from requires improvement to good
- three primary schools continued to require improvement
- one primary school declined from good to requires improvement.

The outcomes of the section 8 inspections were:

- one nursery and infant school improved and was judged to be outstanding
- one primary school continued to be good
- one primary school declined and was judged to require improvement
- one primary school declined significantly from outstanding to requiring special measures.

HMI held telephone discussions with headteachers and principals of 24 schools and academies between 24 and 25 February 2016; 12 were maintained schools and 12 were academies. During this follow-up inspection visit, HMI held discussions with the

Chief Executive Officer; the Lead Elected Cabinet Member for Learning, Skills and Apprenticeships; the Chair of the ECB; senior and operational leaders and staff; headteachers, principals and governors; school improvement partners; and the chairs of the local authority's school partnership clusters. Inspectors scrutinised a range of relevant documentation including assessment outcomes and information on pupils' achievement, school performance data, policies and strategic action plans.

Summary findings

There has been improvement since the previous inspection but there is still a great deal to be done. Improvements to school performance and pupils' achievement are uneven across Walsall. Only 75% of schools in Walsall are good or better, and this compares with a national average of 85%. This is not good enough.

The local authority aims to meet ambitious targets over the next four years. Nonetheless, some schools are not improving quickly enough and too many pupils, particularly the disadvantaged and those who have special educational needs or disability, are not achieving well enough.

Since the previous inspection in June 2014, you as the Executive Director of Children's Services, the Assistant Director and the Head of School Improvement Service have worked effectively to devise more coherent strategies to address the weaknesses that exist in many Walsall schools. Since joining the authority, you and the Assistant Director have successfully communicated a new mandate for change across Walsall. This is gathering momentum as schools across the authority's partnership clusters accept that everyone has a part to play to secure more sustained improvement. The reorganisation, streamlining and deployment of school improvement partners is a good development since the previous inspection. These officers are engaging with school leaders more than previously so that assessment information about pupils' progress and performance is shared with the local authority's school improvement team more systematically. This is helping to identify weaknesses and achievement gaps sooner than was previously the case. This is proving to be effective. For example, the percentage of schools that improved to good or better since the previous inspection (4%) was similar to the national trend, although there is still some way to go for the proportion of schools judged good or better in Walsall to meet and then exceed the national average.

Elected members, senior officers, the ECB and school leaders are not complacent. They recognise that the pace of improvement is patchy across Walsall. This is partly because resources are not always prioritised and deployed to school partnership clusters in greatest need. For example, there is still a lot of work to be done to see enough improvement in underperforming schools.

Senior officers, backed by elected members across the political spectrum, have adopted more systematic, collaborative and effective ways of supporting schools. They accept, and rightly, that standards are too low in many schools. This is confirmed by Walsall being ranked in the lowest quartile for most achievement measures when compared with other local authorities. The attainment of pupils at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage and by the end of Key Stages 2 and 4 is below average. Similarly, the progress pupils make by the end of Key Stages 2 and 4 is also below average. In too many primary and secondary schools, the gaps between the achievement of disadvantaged and other pupils are not closing quickly enough. For example, the percentage of secondary pupils gaining five A* to C grades, including English and mathematics, at GCSE improved slightly in 2015 compared with 2014, but fewer disadvantaged pupils achieved as well as other pupils compared with the previous year. Overall school attendance rates are below average. Fixed-term and permanent exclusion rates are too high compared with national figures.

Schools at most risk of decline are not being issued with formal warning notices because the authority is not exercising its formal powers of intervention under the Education and Inspection Act 2006. The use of internal warnings and interventions have stepped up since the previous inspection but too many schools are not improving quickly enough.

Despite these weaknesses, there are some improvements. The three local authority-maintained secondary schools are now good. There are positive outcomes to report in post-16 education, where the academic and vocational achievement of learners compares favourably with national rankings. This is an improvement since the authority's last inspection. The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) is lower than the national average and the authority exercises fully its duty in raising the participation age in education for all 16–19-year-olds. Although the proportion of children reaching a good level of development is below the national average in the early years in mainstream schools, standards are improving faster than those nationally. This reflects the positive impact of the authority's 0–5 strategy and some effective school-to-school support for early years. Governance in many schools is improving because the authority's governor service supports, challenges, trains and monitors governing bodies effectively. Most of the schools visited in the sample of inspections showed improvement to governance or that governors had responded well to external reviews. The authority has increased its challenge and support in schools focusing on education safeguarding. There is some good development work for special educational needs provision involving headteacher and deputy headteacher secondees who support schools to improve provision for pupils with disabilities or additional needs.

More effective collaboration with school leaders is clearly reflected in the authority's improvement strategy, 'Better together for children – aspire, achieve, believe'. Most schools trust school improvement partners whereas, in the past, this was not the case. Increased collaborative working is galvanising school leaders and their staff teams. Partnership clusters of schools are now more focused on improvement compared with their function at the time of the previous inspection. The strategic plan sets out the most relevant priorities for sustained improvement. Senior officers and managers have put in place secure foundations and building blocks to continue improving schools and pupils' outcomes. There are clear milestones and timescales in the strategic plans to trigger reviews that enable senior officers to gauge the impact of their actions. There is now a well-established agenda for improvement which brings increased challenge and support to school leaders. This is gaining consensus among schools, including academies. School leaders respect and trust senior officers but also understand that you and your senior team mean business and are prepared to work in partnership to challenge schools in order to secure more rapid improvement. The objectives and timescales set out in the authority's plans over the next four years are ambitious, but also realistic and achievable. This is reflected in the increased pace of improvement in some maintained schools that are now good or better. However, in some partnership clusters, there remain too many schools that are at risk of decline.

The strategy of sector-led improvement through the clusters and increasing use of strong leaders, teaching schools, national leaders of education and specialist leaders of education, are influencing the work of school leaders as they increasingly see and share best practice. This is bringing together more effective improvement strategies, such as the recent leadership strategy which identifies strong leaders, as well as more coordinated and effective professional development and training. Senior leaders and lead teachers say that things are getting better. They are right, but there is still a lot to do.

Areas for improvement

The approaches adopted by the local authority should result in more consistent and sustained improvement so that all pupils in Walsall attend a good or better school. To achieve this, the local authority should work with school leaders to:

- raise standards in all primary and secondary schools, and accelerate the progress pupils make so that their achievement at least matches national figures

- close the achievement gaps between disadvantaged pupils and others, and improve the achievement of pupils who have special educational needs or disability so they make at least as much progress as other pupils nationally
- make sure that the interventions and support provided for primary and secondary schools enable all schools to provide and then maintain a good or better standard of education
- use assessment information and other key performance indicators to identify those schools at greatest risk of decline, including those that had previously been subject to 'light touch' support
- where necessary, intervene sooner and more effectively in order to prevent a decline in school performance, making sure that the local authority fully exercises its formal powers of intervention, as set out in the Education and Inspection Act 2006, in those schools where leadership, governance, or both, are weak
- improve attendance and reduce the rate of fixed-term and permanent exclusions to at least match national averages
- make sure that the allocation of resources and personnel deployed to support and challenge schools are targeted to school partnership clusters where there is greatest need.

Ofsted will continue to monitor the local authority's arrangements for school improvement.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- The Lead Elected Cabinet Member is committed and ambitious for Walsall schools. He spends a great deal of time visiting schools to gather views from headteachers, teachers, governors, parents, carers and pupils. In this way he has an accurate understanding of the weaknesses, strengths and improvements evident in schools across Walsall. Many headteachers and principals have said that the increased visibility of the Elected Cabinet Member and the authority's senior officers has earned the trust and cooperation of more Walsall schools than was previously the case.
- The Chief Executive Officer is realistic and ambitious for Walsall to succeed as an authority. There is now a cross-party political consensus to improve the education and life chances of children and young people across Walsall. This is winning back the consensus and trust of school leaders.
- All the headteachers of maintained schools and academy principals spoken to during the pre-inspection telephone survey agreed that there is a greater sense of permanence and trust in senior officers. However, during some of the inspections, some school leaders were still anxious that school improvement personnel will change, as has been the case for too long previously.

- The Executive Director of Children’s Services and the Assistant Director of Children’s Services, together with senior leaders and the Head of School Improvement have worked hard to ensure that they are visible and communicate a clear vision for improvement that is welcomed across the local authority’s schools. This was not previously the case.
- The introduction of the ECB has sharpened the way the authority monitors the impact of the actions taken to secure school improvement. The ECB brings additional scrutiny, accountability and rigour to the work of officers, elected members and the school improvement team. This is a credible initiative.
- The ECB, together with the authority’s scrutiny panel provide additional objectivity and evaluations of progress towards the authority’s core aims; the objective to make sure that all pupils across Walsall attend a good or better school is central.
- Relationships among school leaders and with senior officers and school improvement partners are improving. Partnerships, networks and localised initiatives, such as ‘early help’ for families whose circumstances have made them vulnerable, are having a positive impact on children and families in some areas of Walsall. This, for example, is helping more young children in the early years to reach a good level of development, and families are engaging more with the early years in schools, nurseries and other settings. However, these new approaches have not yet had sufficient time to demonstrate enough impact on raising standards in all phases of education and for all groups of pupils.
- Senior officers undertake more robust monitoring than at the time of the last inspection, resulting in realistic and accurate self-evaluations of what is working well and where there is need for improvement. However, the proportion of good or better primary schools is lower than the national average and schools at risk of failure are not all improving rapidly enough.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- The scrutiny and oversight of the authority’s schools are now more robust than previously. Officers and school improvement partners undertake systematic analyses of assessment information and school performance data to inform how they will support and challenge schools. There remains work to be done to ensure that those at greatest risk of decline are always identified quickly, including those previously receiving only low levels of support.
- The Executive Director of Children’s Services and senior team have put in place secure foundations to support more effective school improvement. Officers and elected members have an accurate overview of school improvement across the local authority. Having gained the agreement, trust and cooperation of schools and most academies to share their pupil

performance data, officers and school improvement leaders are now providing the right level of support and challenge to schools, and also recognise that too many pupils across Walsall are attending schools that are not yet good or better.

- There are positive working relationships established with sponsored academies and most multi-academy trusts. The local authority has successfully engaged academy leaders to work in partnership with maintained schools. The Executive Director of Children’s Services and senior officers regularly monitor the performance of academies and pupils’ outcomes. Regular contact is made with the Regional Schools Commissioner to make sure that any concerns about pupils’ achievement or performance in academies are communicated to him. The Executive Director provides regular challenge to the Regional Schools Commissioner and communicates to him local authority concerns about pupils’ achievement and the quality of provision in academies.
- Gaps between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and others are not closing quickly enough in many schools. Although achievement is improving in some school partnership clusters where gaps are narrowing between disadvantaged and other pupils, too many pupils in primary and secondary schools underachieve and do not make good progress in relation to their starting points.
- Although there is more rigour in the authority’s reports, reviews and school health checks, some are still not sharp enough to have a sustained impact on teaching, learning and school leadership. This has contributed to patchy or uneven improvements across some school partnership clusters.
- The authority undertakes more systematic checks on pupil performance data which are now more robust than at the time of the previous inspection.
- The authority has been successful in raising the participation in education for 16–19-year-old learners. This is also reflected in the figures for young people in education, employment or training which are better than the national average.

Support and challenge for leadership and management (including governance)

- Effective support is now spreading across Walsall as the chairs of school partnership clusters increasingly network and cooperate to improve pupils’ outcomes, school leadership and governance within and across cluster areas.
- Schools where performance is declining or is at risk of decline are not being issued with formal warning notices under powers of intervention set out in the Education and Inspection Act 2006. As an alternative, the authority uses its own localised Walsall school improvement warning notices. The authority uses

these warning notices to put in place an improvement review process for all schools at risk of failure. This includes six weekly monitoring meetings to challenge headteachers and chairs of governing bodies on the rate and pace of school improvement. The protocols for this higher level of intervention are understood by school leaders and governors. For example, during the pre-inspection telephone survey, the vast majority of school leaders stated that they had more confidence in the authority's officers because school intervention and challenge are more transparent than previously. However, more should now be done to implement fully the local authority's formal powers of intervention in those schools that are at most risk of significant decline, or where leadership and governance are weak.

- Some actions, impact statements, reviews or analyses, such as score cards, notes of visit and summary evaluations which are presented to elected members, the corporate scrutiny panel or the ECB focus too much on processes rather than the impact of actions on school effectiveness and leadership.
- Increasingly, many of the changes to school categorisations or bandings and the increased vigilance of senior leaders and officers in checking school and pupil performance are helping to coordinate the right level of support and intervention. Schools that have improved from requires improvement to good, for example, have received effective support from the authority's officers and school improvement partners.
- There is an increasing use of effective school-to-school support. The clusters, partnerships and networks across the authority are evolving and adapting to improve pupils' outcomes and leadership more evenly across Walsall but this has yet to have sufficient impact in all clusters.
- The quality of governance is improving because there is a coordinated strategy to improve the effectiveness of governing bodies in maintained schools. External reviews of governance have taken place in many schools following their inspections and these have identified the right priorities for governing bodies to focus on. Many school inspection reports refer to the way governors have acted on the recommendations of external reviews.

Use of resources

- The strategy of devolving responsibilities and resources to the school partnership clusters of schools and settings across the local authority brings together senior and aspiring leaders and teachers, most of whom say that things are getting better. They are right, but recognise that the pace of improvement varies considerably across and within clusters.
- The school forum links very well with school improvement officers to check that funds are being spent effectively and forum members receive regular

reviews of the impact of spending on school performance and pupils' outcomes.

- The additional resources allocated to the school partnership clusters reflect the ambitions of elected members in supporting sustained improvement. For instance, the allocation of additional funding focused on raising standards in literacy and there are indications that this is making a difference, particularly in pupils' achievement in writing in primary schools.
- Nonetheless, resources and personnel are not always prioritised to schools where there is greatest need. This also reflects the patchy rates of school improvement, decline in performance and uneven pupil outcomes across and within the school partnership clusters.

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

Yours sincerely

Charalambos Loizou
Her Majesty's Inspector