

11 September 2014

Sarah Norman  
Strategic Director Community  
Civic Centre  
St Peter's Square  
Wolverhampton  
WV1 1RR

Dear Ms Norman,

## **WOLVERHAMPTON LOCAL AUTHORITY FOCUSED INSPECTIONS 16-20 JUNE 2014**

I am writing to inform you of the outcomes of the school inspections and telephone survey carried out in Wolverhampton during the focused period of 16-20 June 2014.

I spoke with you on Monday 16 June 2014, to explain the reasons for commissioning the focused inspections. In Wolverhampton, too few pupils attend schools that are good or outstanding. Currently only 71 schools out of 103 (69%) are good or outstanding. This compares to 80% of good or outstanding schools nationally.

The national figure for the achievement of pupils in reading at the end of Key Stage 1 is 89%. Across Wolverhampton the figure is only 83% and is too low.

Our inspections, coupled with a telephone survey of a sample of school leaders about their perception of the support and challenge from the local authority, have enabled us to obtain a clearer picture of the education provided for children and young people in Wolverhampton and your role in supporting improvement.

### **Outline of focused inspection activities**

We inspected thirteen schools (eleven primary and two secondary) as part of the focused inspection activity. During the inspections, lead inspectors gathered information on the use, quality and impact of local authority support for school improvement by asking the following additional key questions of headteachers and governors:

- How well does the local authority understand the school's strengths and weaknesses, its performance and the standards the pupils achieve?

- What measures are in place to support and challenge the school, and how do these meet the needs of your school?
- What is the impact of the local authority's support and challenge over time to bring about school improvement?

We surveyed a further fourteen schools by telephone during the focused inspection period. These schools were selected randomly from good or better schools within Wolverhampton and included a converter academy as well as local authority maintained schools. The schools' headteachers were asked the same three questions in addition to a fourth, which reflected their status as good schools:

- To what extent does the school support others to improve? To what extent does Wolverhampton Local Authority facilitate or support this?

### **Inspection outcomes**

Of the thirteen schools inspected as part of the focused inspection activity:

- seven were graded good: two of these schools had maintained the good judgement from their previous inspection; four had improved from a previous requires improvement grade and one from a previous satisfactory grade
- five were judged to require improvement: one had declined from previous good judgement, one previously had a satisfactory judgement and three schools continued to require improvement
- one school was judged to require special measures; it is of particular concern that this school had declined from a previous good judgement.

This is unacceptable and means that Wolverhampton continues to have a higher proportion of pupils educated in schools that are not yet good than both the regional and national averages. Additionally, the proportion of its schools which require improvement or are inadequate remains well above the national figure. It is also worrying to me that, against a backdrop of considerable improvement across the rest of the country, 46% of the schools inspected did not improve their overall inspection grade. The lack of progress of the schools that were previously satisfactory or requires improvement means that pupils in these schools still do not have access to a good quality of education. This will be of great concern to parents, carers and pupils alike.

On reviewing the reports from the focused inspections, it is clear to me that the inspection evidence provides some examples of effective intervention and support from the local authority. However, it is equally clear that in some schools the local authority has not intervened early enough, or with sufficient robustness to deliver improvements in standards. There are also a number of issues that occur frequently in the suggested areas for improvement. These include improving achievement in mathematics, making better use of assessment information and improving the quality of marking.

## Survey responses

Responses to the key survey questions asked during the focus period were analysed. A summary of the findings is set out below:

### Strengths

- The effectiveness of the local authority support is most evident where schools have a well-established relationship with their School Improvement Advisor (SIA) and respect the advice and challenge provided.
- Most schools could describe examples of where the local authority had provided effective support for improvement; these included phonics training and support for newly qualified teachers.
- Governors valued the support from the local authority for headteacher performance management and headteacher recruitment.
- There were several examples of the local authority responding decisively to broker additional leadership or governance support to schools 'in crisis'.
- Headteachers welcomed the development of learning communities which have helped them to reach local agreement over issues such as school places.
- The Human Resources (HR) service and support for schools undergoing the 'Building Schools for the Future' projects are generally valued by headteachers and governors.
- Headteachers are appreciative of the recent support that the local authority has brokered to improve children's progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

### Areas for development

- There was very little understanding of the local authority's long term strategic model for sustainable school improvement. It was of particular concern that the local authority's own advisors could not articulate a clear vision or strategy for school improvement
- Many headteachers and governors were unclear about how well the local authority knows their school. Apart from the collation of publically available data, there was no evidence of the systematic gathering of wider intelligence,

and, as a result, they did not have confidence that the local authority would be able to sharply focus additional support or challenge.

- Local authority systems to track school performance data have not been effective in anticipating declining standards.
- Schools were concerned about the frequency and quality of meetings with SIAs. There was considerable variation in the perceived quality of SIAs and their effectiveness in identifying weaknesses. Some heads commented that SIAs merely tell them what they already know. Reductions in local authority staffing leave schools concerned that although SIAs are able to gather intelligence about schools they do not have the time or capacity to follow through by brokering support for identified weaknesses.
- Headteachers and governors do not understand the recent changes to the local authority's school improvement services. Schools perceive there has been a recent and dramatic reduction in the services provided by the local authority, particularly for schools that are not causing concern. They are unsure what support they should expect from the local authority and what they now need to buy in through a model of traded services. There is evidence that schools, particularly secondary schools, are beginning to dis-engage from the local authority.
- Governors held a range of views about local authority support. The majority of governors interviewed felt that local authority support for governance is weak. In particular, training is not seen as effective. Some governors find it difficult to access training and say that communication is poor. Governors receive very little feedback from the local authority about their effectiveness as a governing body.
- Headteachers believe there is no co-ordinated strategy that makes use of schools' strengths to support others. Examples of effective school to school support exist but some of these are organised by schools themselves. Headteachers at some of the good schools were disappointed that their skills have not been used to help improve schools that are more vulnerable.

## **Summary**

The responses from headteachers and governors will give the local authority much to consider. The inspections undertaken in the focused period indicate that there have been some improvements in Wolverhampton schools but there is still considerable work to be done before all pupils have the opportunity to attend a good or better school.

The local authority's engagement and communication with schools has not been effective in ensuring that schools understand the strategic vision of the local

authority. As a result schools are confused about what support and challenge they should expect from the local authority. The local authority's strategy for ensuring that best use is made of school-to-school support is not widely understood or consistently implemented. There is considerable uncertainty among headteachers and governors about the how changes taking place within the school improvement service will impact on them and their schools.

I hope these observations are useful as you seek to improve further the quality of education for the children and young people of Wolverhampton.

Please pass on my sincere thanks to the headteachers, governors and local authority officers who gave their time to speak to our inspectors during the focused inspection period.

I look forward to meeting with you to discuss the outcomes of this work.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Lorna Fitzjohn".

**Lorna Fitzjohn**

Regional Director, West Midlands