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Ms Stephanie Butterworth
Director Children's Services
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Jo Morgan HMI
Regional Director, North West

Dear Stephanie

Tameside local authority area focused inspection programme – 28 February to 30 April 2014.

I am writing to inform you of the outcomes of the inspections and telephone survey carried out across Tameside during the focused period of 28 February to 30 April 2014.

As you are aware, Ofsted is focusing some of its inspection activity in local authorities where we have concerns about the relatively low proportion of good and outstanding schools. This approach, coupled with the outcomes of a telephone survey of a sample of school leaders about their perception of the support and challenge from the local authority, has enabled us to obtain a clearer picture of the education provided for children and young people in Tameside, and your role in supporting improvement.

Outline of focused inspection activities

We inspected nine primary schools, two secondary schools and one special school. Two of the schools are sponsored academies. Monitoring visits were made to two schools requiring improvement.

During the inspections, lead inspectors gathered information on the use, quality and impact of local authority support by asking the following additional questions of headteachers and governors:

1. How well does the local authority know your school, your performance and the standards your pupils achieve?

2. What measures are in place to support and challenge your school and how do these meet the needs of your school?
3. What is the impact of the local authority support and challenge over time to help your school improve?
4. What more could the local authority do to make your school even better?

In addition, telephone discussions took place with the headteachers of five secondary schools and eight primary schools. These leaders were asked the same four questions.

Inspection outcomes

Of the 12 schools inspected as part of the focused inspection activity:

- none were judged to be outstanding
- seven were judged to be good: four of these improved a grade; one was already at this grade; one declined a grade and one was a first inspection
- four were judged to require improvement: two of the schools were already at this grade and two declined a grade
- one was judged to have serious weaknesses, having previously been judged to be satisfactory.

Four schools improved their overall effectiveness and are now providing a good standard of education; two of these were re-inspections following a 'requires improvement' judgement. Although none of the schools inspected were judged to be outstanding overall, the leadership and management of one primary school were judged to be outstanding. The overall effectiveness grade of four of the schools inspected, one of which is an academy, declined from their previous inspection judgements.

Although the inspections provided some examples of effective intervention and support from the local authority, it is clear that the local authority has not intervened consistently or early enough to prevent a drop in standards in some schools. This is more marked in primary schools.

Survey responses

Responses to the additional questions asked of those schools inspected during the focussed period and those contacted by telephone were analysed. A summary of the findings is set out below.

Strengths

- The majority of headteachers have confidence in the leadership of the local authority's arrangements to promote school improvement. They consider that the authority is building the capacity to support and challenge schools effectively. Several schools commented on a clear vision for Tameside, which includes high expectations of its school leaders.
- Some schools have welcomed the challenge from the local authority, even though this may have been uncomfortable. One headteacher observed that the challenge 'had really moved us on and accelerated our progress.' Some headteachers noted that the local authority officer linked to their school had a real understanding of the individual context, enabling effective support and challenge.
- Schools have welcomed the training sessions provided by the local authority for senior and middle leaders.
- Support for governance is recognised as a strength. Governors spoke highly of the support they receive from governor services, particularly with clerking. Training is highly regarded: headteachers commented on how this has helped governors to hold them and their schools to account more effectively. The local authority has successfully set up interim strategic groups, which have led to improved governance in those schools which require improvement.
- The recently appointed Performance and Standards Strategic Lead for English has been proactive in visiting all secondary schools. Where she has worked closely with schools, her support has had impact.
- The local authority's human resources and finance services are generally valued.
- Headteachers note the high quality of the support and training they receive when they request this on specific issues, such as behaviour and safeguarding.
- The local authority has brokered effective senior leadership support when this has been required for specific schools.
- Some headteachers, whose schools have been judged to require improvement, welcomed the support they had received including work on quality assurance, leadership development and lesson observation training.

Areas for development

- Many headteachers spoke of the issues caused by the lack of local authority personnel and capacity in the transition period of the last eighteen months. During the interregnum between directors of education, headteachers judge that school improvement services effectively 'disappeared,' leading to them forming their own clusters for peer support and challenge or turning to external consultants. Despite the renewed confidence noted in the local authority's leadership of school improvement, many headteachers feel that there remains a need to rebuild trust and relationships.

- Several headteachers commented that, in the past, the local authority did not know their school and they had received little, if any, support and challenge to improve. Even in schools where standards had been declining, the local authority had not intervened swiftly enough to tackle weaknesses.
- Headteachers raised concerns that the local authority had struggled to find the right balance between challenge and support with a number of its schools. One headteacher felt there had been a lack of tough conversations; others spoke of extreme challenge but a lack of support. There is, however, recognition that these concerns are being addressed and that relationships are becoming stronger.
- Changing personnel has meant that some schools have had little consistency in their assigned local authority officer; this has been detrimental to the quality of support they have received.
- Some headteachers noted that the quality of the performance data they received from the local authority had not always been good enough to promote improvement.
- Headteachers would welcome more access to good practice from both within and beyond Tameside.

Summary

These responses present a mixed picture of the quality and impact of the support and challenge provided by the local authority: judgements ranged from 'minimal' to 'very effective.' The views of secondary headteachers and governors were generally more positive than those of their primary counterparts.

While there was some recognition of effective local authority support and challenge, some responses indicated that a lack of decisive intervention by the authority had been a contributory factor in declining standards. This is the outcome of a period of significant turbulence over the last few years. The local authority has lacked the capacity and focus to know its schools and provide appropriate challenge and support. It has been unable to arrest the decline of some schools. There is general agreement that the local authority has, 'turned the corner,' and is building an effective team to deliver an agreed strategy for improvement. However, as the recent variable inspection outcomes demonstrate, it is too early to see the impact of this and much remains to be done.

I hope these observations are useful as you seek to further improve the quality of education for the children and young people of Tameside. My regional Senior Her Majesty's Inspector and Her Majesty's Inspector colleagues welcomed the positive way you, your senior colleagues and schools are engaging with Ofsted on the improvement agenda. I note, for example, that a number of Tameside schools are to take part in Ofsted's 'Better Mathematics' conference to be held locally in June.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "Jo Morgan", written in a cursive style.

Jo Morgan HMI
Regional Director, North West