

Ofsted
4th Floor
5 St Philips Place
Colmore Row
B'ham B3 2PW

T 0300 123 1231
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Lorna.fitzjohn@ofsted.gov.uk

30 May 2014

Anna Halliday
Commissioner for Education and Wellbeing
Staffordshire County Council
First Floor Peel Building (Block C)
Tipping Street
Stafford
ST16 2DH

STAFFORDSHIRE LOCAL AUTHORITY FOCUSED INSPECTIONS 11-28 MARCH 2014

I am writing to inform you of the outcomes of the school inspections and telephone survey carried out across Staffordshire during the period 11-28 March 2014. I am grateful to the headteachers, governors and local authority officers who gave their time to speak to inspectors.

I spoke with you on Monday 10 March 2014, to explain the purpose of the focused inspections. In Staffordshire, our concern centres on the progress made by pupils as they move through their primary schools. 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 primary pupils in Staffordshire and your role in supporting improvement.

Outline of focused inspection activities

There are two hundred and ninety five primary schools in Staffordshire. We inspected eighteen primary schools as part of the focused inspection activity. 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 Staffordshire 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 Staffordshire Local Authority's support and challenge over time to bring about school improvement?

We surveyed a further 22 schools by telephone during the focused inspection period. These schools were selected randomly from the local authority's good or better 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 Staffordshire Local Authority facilitate or support this?

Inspection outcomes

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

- two were graded outstanding: both of these schools had improved from a previous good overall judgement
- seven were graded good: five of these schools had maintained the good judgement from their previous inspection; one had improved from a previous satisfactory grade and the seventh had declined from outstanding
- six were judged to require improvement: four had declined from previous good judgements and two had remained at grade 3, not improving from their previous satisfactory judgements
- three schools were judged to require special measures; it is of particular concern that each of these schools had declined from a previous good judgement.

It is encouraging that three schools have improved since their last inspection, two to outstanding and the third to good. However, it is of major concern that eight schools have declined since their previous inspections, six schools have been judged to provide an education for their pupils that is not yet good enough, and three have been made subject to special measures.

On reviewing the inspection reports, it is clear that although the local authority's intervention and support have benefited some schools, the authority has not been effective in arresting the decline of eight schools, including former good schools and

one outstanding school. Improving leadership and management is a common area for improvement in the reports.

Staffordshire local authority commissions its school improvement services from Entrust, a joint venture company of which the local authority is one of two partners. Entrust is the local authority's preferred service provider to schools. The Quality Assurance function operates within the county council and monitors and reviews school performance and evaluates risk. The local authority's School Improvement Team comprises four County Improvement Managers (CIMs) and eight District Managers for Improvement (DMIs). They engage directly with schools to challenge and support those causing concern. Entrust has been operating since April 2013. Schools may purchase support from Entrust or from any other provider, including commercial providers.

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

- Schools surveyed value the local authority's data analysis service. They report that the local authority has effective systems for collecting and analysing achievement data for its schools. The data are used by the local authority to risk assess schools. When a school that has previously been judged as good is identified as 'at risk', additional support and challenge are provided. A summary of the data analysis carried out by the local authority is provided to schools. Headteachers say that this summary, which includes a focus on the achievement of different groups, is of a high quality and they value it.
- Headteachers typically speak positively about their District Manager for Improvement and the level of support and challenge they receive from this person. Most feel that this officer knows their school reasonably well. Some headteachers value the support given with observations of teaching and learning walks. Some are able to point to improvements that have come about as a result of the local authority's support and challenge, including for the Early Years Foundation Stage, provision for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs through support services provided by Entrust and other service providers.
- The local authority core group meetings, held every six weeks for those schools requiring improvement or of concern, are considered to be

challenging and robust. Senior leaders and the Chair of the Governing Body are involved in each of the meetings.

- Governors value training provided by local authority officers through Entrust on pupil achievement, an introduction to governance, finance, performance management of the headteacher, safeguarding and safer recruitment. Governors report that training helps them to understand their roles and responsibilities as well as hold senior leaders to account and ask pertinent questions.
- In the main, headteachers and governors speak highly of Human Resources (HR) services; for example, in the management of underperformance, upper pay scale decisions, capability procedures and managing long-term absence. These services are provided through Entrust as part of school support services.
- The local authority's Behaviour Support Service provided through Entrust is cited as a strength by some respondents.

Areas for development

- Headteachers and governors have found the recent change to school improvement services confusing. The local authority's move to commissioning status and the establishment of a partnership with Entrust have led to a lack of clarity about the relationship between the local authority and Entrust and the local authority's school improvement strategy. For example, one headteacher was unclear about the criteria used by the local authority to identify schools 'at risk'. Another did not know what information the local authority held about standards and progress in academies. Most headteachers said that they have to purchase support and services, but one headteacher said that the local authority provided commissioned support for the school to 'buy in' particular support.
- Most headteachers and governing bodies surveyed are less positive about local authority leadership than in the past because they believe that the local authority does not know its schools as well as it used to. A common view is that the authority focuses its attention on schools which are not yet good. This focus has not arrested the declining performance in some good and outstanding schools that were part of the focused inspections. Headteachers recognise the need for the local authority to respond to schools in a proportionate manner; nevertheless, its approach is seen by some as reactive rather than proactive.

- Schools gave a very wide range of responses about the frequency and quality of contact with local authority officers. Some receive an annual visit from the local authority to discuss standards and progress. Others choose to buy further visits and/or additional support from the local authority's school improvement partner, or Entrust, or from a variety of other providers. Despite headteachers' generally positive views of the District Managers for Improvement, many raised concerns about capacity within the authority: they believe that there are too few officers for the number of schools. In addition, relationships between schools, local authority officers and Entrust personnel are inconsistent in their effectiveness as some schools have experienced changes of personnel or people transferring from the authority to Entrust.
- Governors expressed a very wide range of views about how well the local authority knows its schools. These ranged from 'not at all' to 'knows very well.' Governors of schools judged to be 'good' or better generally felt more distanced from the authority. Taken overall, governors' impressions of the quality and frequency of their contact with the local authority are an area for improvement. Governors expressed more positive views when they had had direct contact with their school's District Manager for Improvement or where they had been part of 'core group' meetings at which the school's performance is discussed and reviewed. Some governors felt that the local authority knows the data about a school's performance, but that its first-hand knowledge of the school and of the quality of teaching was not so strong.
- Although the local authority commissions support for schools, including specialist teachers, moderators and headteacher consultants, most headteachers surveyed believed that the authority is not yet fully effective in identifying strengths in good and outstanding schools and using these to help other schools to improve. Some schools are providing school-to-school support without local authority involvement; others provide informal support and mutual opportunities to share good practice through clusters and local networks.
- Governors are unclear about whether the local authority or Entrust broker support from good and outstanding schools to support others. In contrast, governors are clear about the provision of support where schools establish their own arrangements; for example, from the cluster of Catholic schools. These schools, as with other groups, provide support without going through the local authority channels. The governors of one school are concerned that the division of the local authority has fragmented the support available to schools.

- Informal school-to-school support also extends to curriculum areas because many headteachers surveyed do not consider that the local authority's arrangements for contracted training meet their school's needs. They claim that the local authority's contracted arrangements do not always secure the necessary knowledge, skills or experience to review, evaluate and feed back to headteachers. Others, however, report a higher degree of satisfaction in support given to, for example, subject leader training.
- Local authority officers are confident that they have sufficient knowledge about the schools they work with. They refer to their use of data and the production of a local authority 'data dashboard'. This information is used to categorise schools and to work out potential risk and the subsequent level of intervention. Although local authority officers believe this system is effective, in several cases dips in school performance are not noted until after the event and too late to prevent schools declining.

Summary

The inspections undertaken in the focused period indicate that the local authority could further improve effectiveness of support and challenge to schools by: supporting and challenging all schools to become good or better; ensuring that good and outstanding schools maintain this standard and making certain that all primary-aged pupils make at least good progress.

The local authority's engagement and communication with schools, particularly governing bodies, is not fully effective. There has been a perceived lack of proactive engagement with academy schools surveyed and the local authority does not have a sufficiently clear and recognised strategy for ensuring that best use is made of school-to-school support.

Headteachers' views of the impact of the local authority do not match the improvement or decline in their school's performance. There is considerable uncertainty among headteachers about how the local authority and Entrust work to improve schools, despite the development of 'The School Improvement System in Staffordshire: A Framework for Achieving Excellence 2013'. There is confusion about who is responsible for which services. Several headteachers stated they judged they have little confidence in the local authority's contracted arrangements for curriculum support which they regard as especially weak. Together, this confusion, combined with the lack of confidence in the local authority's contracted arrangements is of significant concern.

The local authority's school improvement strategy relies heavily on the quality of individual officers in its own team and its contractors. As noted previously, headteachers typically speak positively about their District Manager for Improvement and the level of support and challenge they receive from this person. Relationships between schools, local authority officers and its contractors however are inconsistent in their effectiveness, owing to changes of personnel. When a school is identified as vulnerable, the local authority officers may only commission support from Entrust. It is unclear to some schools who is responsible for evaluating the impact of this support. It is also not transparent to some headteachers and governors who pays for which service.

Some schools express the view that the overall level of support for schools has declined. Others feel that Staffordshire lacks a strategic overview of its schools, particularly in the area of school-to-school support. Several schools report that their skills have not been fully used to help improve schools that are more vulnerable. Similarly, vulnerable schools feel that they do not benefit from sharing others' good practice. However, the Core Group review process is recognised as a key mechanism used by the local authority to support schools about which it has concerns and the schools surveyed value highly the local authority's data analysis service.

Officers feel that relationships between schools and the authority are more balanced and that the local authority is offering greater challenge, particularly in moving on underperforming staff.

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

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



Lorna Fitzjohn
Regional Director, West Midlands