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Interim Strategic Director for Children, Young People and Skills
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Lorna Fitzjohn HMI
Regional Director, South West

Dear Isobel Cattermole

Bristol local authority focused inspection: 3 to 14 June 2013

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your recent appointment to lead the improvement work with Bristol schools.

As you will know, Ofsted has been focusing section 5 school inspection activity in targeted local authorities into concentrated periods. We are doing this in areas where we have concerns about the low proportions of good and outstanding schools, and in consequence too few pupils benefit from an acceptable standard of education. 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, enables us to obtain a clearer picture of the quality of education provided for children and young people in those areas.

You will be aware that Ofsted recently carried out a focused inspection of Bristol schools. Since announcing the focused inspection of Bristol schools on 3 June 2013, I have spoken, or met, with Bristol colleagues on three separate occasions. During the phone call on 3 June 2013, I explained that the focused inspection had been organised because Ofsted's official data, released in December 2012, showed that 32% of schools in Bristol were less than good, which is higher than average for England (26%).

I am now in a position to be able to inform you of the outcomes of the school inspections and the survey carried out in Bristol during the focused period of 3 to 14 June 2013.

Outline of inspection activities

Fifteen schools were inspected as part of the focused inspection activity, including: one infant school; two junior schools; seven primary schools; one special school; one pupil referral unit; and three secondary schools. Four of the schools visited, one primary and three secondary, were academies.

Thirteen schools were judged to be satisfactory at their last inspection and two were found to be good. Schools were selected on the basis that they were due for inspection by the end of the academic year 2012-13.

During the inspections, lead inspectors gathered information on the quality and impact of local authority support for school improvement by asking the following three additional key questions of headteachers, governors and, where possible, local authority representatives:

- How well does the local authority know your school, your performance and the standards your pupils achieve?
- What measures are in place to support and challenge your school and how do these meet the needs of your school?
- What is the impact of the local authority support and challenge over time to help your school improve?

A further 16 schools were surveyed by telephone during the focused inspection period. These included two nursery schools, one infant school, nine primary schools and four secondary schools. Four of the schools contacted, one primary and three secondary, were academies. All of these schools were selected randomly from the city's good and outstanding schools: six were outstanding and 10 were judged to be good at their last inspection. Headteachers in these schools were asked the same three questions and a fourth, which reflected their status as good or outstanding schools:

- How well is the local authority making use of your schools' strengths to help others improve?

Inspection and survey outcomes

Of the 15 schools inspected as part of the focused inspection activity:

- one school improved from being judged good at its previous inspection to outstanding
- ten schools were judged to be good; one school sustained this outcome from its previous inspection and nine improved from being satisfactory
- three schools were judged to require improvement; previously these were all judged to be satisfactory

- one school declined from a satisfactory overall effectiveness grade and was placed in special measures.

Importantly, two thirds of the schools inspected during the focused inspection improved their overall effectiveness grade. This is a cause for optimism and reflects well upon the hard work of the senior leaders, teachers and pupils since the schools were last inspected. Of the five schools that did not improve their inspection grade, one was judged to be maintaining a good quality of education; three others were identified as requiring improvement to be good and one school declined and was placed in special measures. The three schools requiring improvement, along with the inadequate school, represent just over a quarter of the schools visited that were judged not to be providing the quality of education expected.

This is a matter of concern to Ofsted and will be worrying to parents and carers. It means that the pupils in these schools continue not to have access to a good quality of education with the subsequent impact on their chances of further education, training and employability.

Responses to the key questions asked of those schools inspected during the focused period and those contacted by telephone were analysed. The key findings are outlined below.

Strengths

- Schools value the engagement with the school improvement officers, many of whom have worked with the same schools for a number of years. As a result, schools comment that these officers know their schools well and offer a high level of support and challenge in order to promote improvement.
- There is widespread praise for the high quality of the authority's governor support services. Many of the schools comment positively about the quality of training their governing body has received. In particular, school leaders value the input on data analysis, which has helped governing bodies develop the capability to hold their schools accountable for students' progress.
- The authority has established a strong support network for clerks of governing bodies. School leaders praise this arrangement, which along with the authority's regular briefings, ensures that the clerks are knowledgeable about educational issues and are well supported in their work.
- The collaboration and partnership work that has developed through strong headteacher networks and the increasing levels of inter-school support that is facilitating school improvement initiatives.

Areas for improvement

- School leaders' understanding of the local authority's strategic plan for school improvement is too variable. Many are unclear about the authority's vision and long term priorities and actions to support schools. There is also a negative perception among school leaders that Bristol focusses unduly on underperformance rather than on strategically commissioning the best practice found in some schools to benefit those in need of improvement.
- The local authority's relationship with its schools is too inconsistent. There is a widespread culture of mistrust and uncertainty across schools that has hindered open and transparent communications with the authority and inhibited the development of a dynamic and strategic approach to school improvement.
- Although schools comment positively about the role of the school improvement officers, many school leaders are less confident that the authority's senior officers have a good knowledge of the wider achievements taking place in their schools.
- The relationship between the authority and academies located within Bristol is not strong enough. Leaders of the academies state that, despite sharing their data with the local authority, the authority's senior leaders do not have an up-to-date knowledge of current strengths and weaknesses. Currently, the nature of the relationship between academies and the local authority has not been defined precisely enough and this is diminishing the capacity of the local authority to commission school improvement activity from these resources.
- Evidence gathered from schools that have previously been inadequate or have not improved their inspection grade indicates that the authority has been slow to recognise the issues and instigate early intervention.
- There is general agreement across schools that the authority's human resource team do not deliver an efficient or effective service. Despite recent restructuring many schools have chosen to use external providers to deliver this service to their schools.
- As a result of lack of availability and some dissatisfaction with quality, many schools opt to purchase support services from neighbouring local authorities and other providers.

In summary, the improving quality of education provided by Bristol schools is encouraging. While recognising this improvement, it is important to emphasise that much more remains to be done to ensure that all pupils in Bristol receive the high quality of education expected. There is still some way to go in establishing a widely understood and methodically delivered strategy for improvement. It is clear that schools' views about the quality and impact of the local authority and its ability to initiate and sustain improvement strategies are too variable. This finding alone highlights the urgent need for the authority to promote strong and positive relationships with all its schools in order to make best use of the expertise that resides within the city.

I hope these observations are useful as you seek to improve the quality of education for the children and young people in Bristol. We note the change in leadership for children's services in the authority. The new Regional Director for the South West, Lesley Ann Jones, will be in touch to arrange to meet with you to discuss your plan of action. She will decide on any further inspection activity needed in relation to the local authority.

Please pass on my thanks to the young people, parents, headteachers and their staff, governors and local authority officers who gave their time to talk to our inspectors. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to discuss anything in this letter further. I am looking forward to meeting officers in September to discuss the findings of Ofsted's focused inspection.

Yours sincerely

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

Lorna Fitzjohn, HMI
Regional Director, South West

cc Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Education