

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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David Williams
Chief Executive
Portsmouth City Council
Guildhall Square
Portsmouth
PO1 2AL

Dear Mr Williams

Inspection of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement

Following my visit with Her Majesty's Inspectors Sue Frater, Jeremy Loukes and James Sage to Portsmouth local authority, 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 and that of all the staff whom we met during our visit which took place between 8 and 12 February 2016. We particularly appreciate the time and care taken to prepare the programme for us. Please pass on our thanks to your staff, elected members and contracted partners, headteachers, principals and governors, 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.

Evidence

During the inspection, discussions were held with you, elected members, senior officers and school improvement staff. Inspectors met with headteachers, principals and governors from schools, colleges, academies, teaching school alliances and the schools forum. Discussions were also held with representatives of services that deliver support for school improvement, and with contracted consultants.

Inspectors took account of discussions held with school leaders during seven recent school inspections and 15 telephone calls to headteachers and principals of schools and academies carried out between 1 and 8 February 2016.

A range of documents were scrutinised, including council plans, the strategy for school improvement, information about pupils' achievement, case studies about schools receiving support, notes of visits to schools made by education officers, and Ofsted school inspection reports.

The inspection followed a focused inspection of Portsmouth schools in February 2013 and monitoring by Her Majesty's Inspectors of educational standards achieved in the local authority since that time.

Summary findings

The achievement of pupils and learners in Portsmouth is not improving quickly enough. At ages 11 and 16, and from 16 to 19, outcomes remain well below the national figures. In 2015, the progress made by pupils across the primary and secondary phases of education, and by learners between the ages of 16 and 19, remained in the lowest performance bands nationally. The continuing picture of slow progress and low attainment means that too many pupils are not well prepared for the next stage of their education.

From the early years to age 16, the underachievement of disadvantaged pupils and boys has not been addressed successfully. The underachievement of disadvantaged learners continues after the age of 16. Pupils with special educational needs or disability do not make sufficient progress given their starting points, particularly in English and mathematics between the ages of 11 and 16.

The absence of a consistent vision for excellence in education in Portsmouth has limited the local authority's effectiveness in bringing about improvement in schools and colleges. Until recently, the need to raise educational standards in the city was not a prominent feature of council plans to develop local prosperity.

The local authority's approach to school improvement lacks urgency and precision. Officers have promoted a broad aim for standards of achievement at ages 11 and 16 to match or exceed national figures, without challenging schools and colleges effectively to accelerate pupils' progress towards these goals. A similar lack of challenge to providers is evident in the early years and at age seven, where the underachievement of boys and disadvantaged pupils continues.

Local authority school improvement services have not sustained a persistent and coherent approach to raising pupils' and learners' achievement. A succession of fresh-start approaches and restructuring of services have impeded progress. Short-term strategies, such as arrangements for cluster working between schools and an authority-wide project to promote progress for disadvantaged pupils, have been introduced and then ceased with limited effect.

The local authority has not maintained effective systems to hold schools and colleges to account for pupils' and learners' outcomes. Until recently, school and college leaders, including governors, did not have trust and confidence in the local authority.

These shortfalls have limited the local authority's capacity to challenge and support schools, and attempts to work together.

In recent months, the council has given a higher priority to improving educational outcomes for all pupils and learners in Portsmouth schools and colleges. However, this fresh approach is not yet expressed in a sharply focused and practical strategy, clarifying the exact role of local authority school improvement services and how these will raise educational standards urgently.

Recent changes in senior leadership, particularly the appointment in January 2016 of the permanent Director of Children's Services and the current interim deputy director, are improving the confidence and trust of school and college leaders. Senior officers now understand that the local authority needs to do more to ensure that Portsmouth schools deliver the substantial improvements in pupils' and learners' achievement which are required. The impact of these positive changes on outcomes for pupils and learners is untested.

Senior officers rightly acknowledge the local authority's role to broker and check the quality of support to schools, including from school to school. However, the way this will be done has not been agreed with school and college leaders, and the impact is patchy.

Local authority school improvement leaders have not held officers consistently to account for their impact on raising educational standards in the city's schools and colleges. The effective features of some school improvement services, such as the ethnic minority service and support for the education of pupils and learners looked after, are not shared across the running of other services. School improvement leaders have recently devised a better structure to remedy this and to increase accountability, but this has yet to be implemented.

In the last year some practical steps have been taken to support school improvement. A successful governor recruitment drive has been linked to the council's initiative to engage commerce and industry in developing the city's prosperity. The council has also taken action to support schools and colleges to recruit high calibre teachers. The local authority's analysis of schools' performance has improved recently. Local authority governor services now challenge and support governors more effectively to enable them to hold school and college leaders to account. Governor support services are beginning to play a more central role in the local authority's monitoring of school performance. It is too soon to see the impact of these recent developments on achievement across the city.

Recent changes in local authority and school leadership have brought a sense of urgency and opportunity to raise educational standards for all groups of pupils and learners. Senior school improvement leaders recognise a 'step change' is required in outcomes at all ages. One school leader told inspectors, 'this is an opportunity to do something special', and another said, 'it feels lately that we are all pulling together'.

Nevertheless, this recognition and goodwill are not yet translated into practical strategies to raise standards.

Areas for improvement

The local authority should tackle with urgency the long-standing underachievement of children, pupils and learners at all stages of education by:

- robustly challenging all providers of education to improve pupils' and learners' rates of progress at every stage, particularly disadvantaged pupils and boys
- setting out clearly the role and function of local authority school improvement services in championing excellence in all Portsmouth schools and colleges, including academies
- agreeing precisely with stakeholders how officers broker and quality assure the support made available to schools and other providers from external sources and between schools
- ensuring all local authority school improvement services are held firmly to account for their contribution to raising standards and improving lives
- promoting effective collaboration between local authority school improvement services, to accelerate improvements in departments' performance and maximise the local authority's impact in raising educational standards.

The inspection team recommends that the local authority's progress in tackling areas for improvement is monitored by Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- Elected members have not ensured that local authority leaders of school improvement maintain a persistent approach to raising standards. Frequent changes in the local authority's senior leadership, including for school improvement, have resulted in a lack of consistency in the challenge and support provided for Portsmouth's schools and colleges.
- Despite continuing underachievement at all stages of education, the council's plans to regenerate the local economy have not placed enough importance on raising attainment in the city's schools and colleges.
- Published last summer, the council's 'Plan on a page' clearly states that raising educational standards is the first priority, but this has yet to be confirmed in a comprehensive strategy agreed with all stakeholders.
- The new Director of Children's Services has begun to work more closely with secondary headteachers, building on a start made by her interim predecessor. Trust and confidence between local authority, school and college leaders are growing. All parties now agree on the need for rapid improvement in the achievement of pupils and learners. The interim deputy director is due to consult with the headteachers' executive group about forming a strategic partnership between all schools and colleges and the local authority to achieve this aim.
- The local authority is open to innovative partnerships with schools and colleges, such as the current work to establish a university technical college. This is

designed to ensure that more pupils gain the mathematical and scientific knowledge and skills needed to support the council's vision for the city in the 21st century.

- After the age of 16, a significant proportion of Portsmouth's learners attend provision out of the city. The significant reduction recently in young people not in education, employment or training shows there is now sufficient provision at most levels. An exception is at level 1, where relevant work is being done to promote traineeships and an effective pre-apprenticeship programme.
- Officers place suitable importance on learners' employability skills, as well as their qualifications. They recognise that effective action has not been taken to remedy post-16 the weak achievement of many pupils at the end of Key Stage 4, particularly disadvantaged learners. Useful work is underway to develop separate programmes to promote and monitor learners' progress in wider employability skills. The new post-16 adviser is working closely with partners beyond the local authority to secure wide-ranging provision. The local authority has improved, and continues to develop, arrangements for tracking learners' progress after age 16.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- The local authority does not have a secure picture of how well pupils are progressing towards the standards expected for their age, particularly at ages 11 and 16. Education officers are too accepting of schools' predictions of future results.
- The local authority's challenge to those providing education at all stages to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils has not been incisive. The local authority lacks a focused strategy to promote rapid improvement in the achievement of this key group. An initiative launched in 2014 was allowed by the local authority to dissipate with too little success.
- In the last year, the local authority has set out more clearly how officers will review the effectiveness of individual schools and colleges annually, and the action the local authority will take if concerns are identified. Already established local authority 'school assessment meetings' have been refocused in the last year to provide better evaluation of schools' performance. Officers now consider a range of factors, including governance and pupils' attendance, to determine the specific involvement of the local authority. However, information about pupils' progress is still mainly considered by the local authority at the end of each school year, limiting opportunities for early intervention if there are concerns.
- The local authority has not made best use of the capacity of schools to support each other. Arrangements to ensure that support from school to school is of good quality and targeted where it is needed most are weak. While primary headteachers told inspectors they value instances of external support arranged by the local authority, this is not set up systematically or well tailored to needs across the city's schools.
- In the last year, the local authority has broadly doubled the number of two-year-olds receiving education provision, significantly enhancing opportunities to learn for the youngest disadvantaged children. However, the early years team implements projects without always considering beforehand the difference they

expect to make to children's progress, particularly disadvantaged children and boys, and checking this afterwards.

- In the primary sector, the local authority has contributed to the rising proportion of good schools, which now reflects the national figure. Officers are acutely aware that a proportion of these schools are infant schools, where pupils' performance is stronger, and that the challenge remains to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and at Key Stage 2. Recent improvements in the primary sector show that officers are becoming more adept at identifying schools that require intensive support. The local authority has not maintained a suitable level of challenge in the secondary phase, and until recently did not have the trust and cooperation of secondary school leaders. Four of the 10 Portsmouth secondary schools are maintained by the local authority. Two of these schools are judged to be good or better and two to require improvement, one having recently declined. All of the three special schools maintained by the local authority are currently judged to be good, two having declined from outstanding. The council's new commitment to school improvement in the city is becoming clear in the recent investment to promote an improving secondary school as a centre of excellence.
- The local authority has not made use of its statutory powers to bring about significant improvement in school performance over time, especially in the secondary sector. Where it has intervened, the local authority has achieved some improvements in the senior leadership, governance and outcomes in individual schools causing concern.
- The local authority is better placed to influence pupils' achievement in the city's academies through the growing trust of academy leaders and by meeting the Regional Schools Commissioner. An agreed protocol sets out the local authority's relationship with academies, although it is not clear enough when a referral to the commissioner would be made if an academy gave cause for concern.
- Most schools and academies purchase the local authority's attendance service. Through rigorous monitoring and effective work with pupils and their families, the rate of persistent absence has been reduced in primary and secondary schools in the last year, from well above national averages, to broadly match national figures.
- The local authority's behaviour support strategy provides clear agreement between schools to retain pupils and prevent exclusion. In the past year, 50 pupils were reintegrated from specialist provision at the Harbour School back into mainstream education.
- The ethnic minority achievement service and virtual school advocate strongly for the pupils they support. As a result, pupils from ethnic minority groups and those looked after by the local authority make good progress. The precise monitoring and high levels of challenge to providers, routinely seen in the way these services work, are not mirrored well in other areas of school improvement.

Support and challenge for leadership and management (including governance)

- Until recently, the need for urgent improvement in education outcomes has not been set out by the local authority clearly and with sufficient challenge. Termly briefings to headteachers include relevant information about pupils' achievement across Portsmouth but have not set out the overall picture, or the strategy to tackle the issues, well enough.
- Direct support for leadership in primary schools is provided by local authority link officers. The local authority brokers limited direct support for leadership in secondary schools, deploying a small team of external consultants, usually for a single annual visit. Neither the work of local authority link officers or secondary consultants is quality assured sufficiently and headteachers report variable impact from their visits.
- The local authority has been unsuccessful in growing and coordinating a sufficient range of expert leadership in schools. Where national and local leaders of education are in place, a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities has led to some tensions between the local authority and leading schools. The local authority is not sufficiently well informed about joint working between schools and how strengths are being shared. The lack of insight limits the officers' ability to make links on behalf of schools requiring support.
- Elected members actively promote the recruitment of high calibre teachers into the local authority, and work with businesses to develop leadership support such as mentoring for headteachers and to enlist skilled governors. It is too soon to see the impact of the current teacher recruitment drive, but headteachers highly value this initiative and the mentoring programme. The successful governor recruitment campaign has improved the effectiveness of governing bodies and provided a reserve pool of knowledgeable people.
- Arrangements to support governing bodies are improving. A revised strategy, introduced in September 2015, has moved the service from one which reacts to problems to one seeking to bring change. By meeting, at least annually, with the Chair of Governors and clerk, the service has a better knowledge of the quality of governance in each school. Relevant and timely training is provided, including through the deployment of a national lead governor. Governors are well supported if concerns about a school's senior leadership are identified. The local authority acts swiftly if significant concerns about the quality of governance arise. For example, the service has allocated additional governors and put interim governance arrangements into place.

Use of resources

- The local authority has not deployed and monitored all school improvement resources effectively to ensure rapid improvement in educational outcomes in the city. As a result, slow rates of improvement in pupils' achievement in Key Stage 2, declines at Key Stage 4 and the continuing underachievement of boys and disadvantaged pupils at all ages have not been challenged vigorously enough by the council's school improvement services.

- Firmer scrutiny of the impact of resources allocated by the council to school improvement is developing. The council's lead member for children's services is increasingly well informed about the impact of spending on improvement in identified schools.
- Due to recent improvements in the local authority's management of school performance information, decisions about where and when to challenge and support schools are becoming increasingly reliable. Clearer links are developing between the local authority's monitoring and the funding for schools placed in a local authority category of concern. However, checks on the cost-effectiveness of the use of these resources are not well developed.
- The local authority provides a basic level of security to ensure all schools use their budget well. Finance officers contact any school with an excess surplus budget, seeking information about future spending plans. These are checked but not challenged by the local authority, leaving the school's governing body to monitor into the future.

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

Yours sincerely

Siân Thornton
Her Majesty's Inspector