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22 June 2015

Mr Michael Jameson  
Strategic Director Children's Services  
Room 202  
City Hall  
Bradford  
D1 1HY

Dear Mr Jameson

## **Inspection of Bradford local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement**

Following the visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) Margaret Farrow, Jane Austin, Bernard Campbell and Helen Lane to Bradford local authority between 15 and 19 June 2015, 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. We particularly appreciate the time and care taken to prepare the programme for us. Please pass on our thanks to your staff, the lead and elected members, partners, headteachers 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**

The findings of this inspection are based on discussions with:

- elected members, senior officers from the council's school achievement service and representatives from other council services that support school improvement
- headteacher and governing body representatives from maintained schools and academies representing all phases of educational provision
- partners involved in school improvement and school-to-school support such as the Bradford primary, secondary and Catholic partnerships, teaching school alliances and partners representing the Early Years Foundation Stage and post-16 phases of education.

The outcomes from focused inspections of eight schools and a telephone survey of a sample of 14 leaders from maintained schools and academies were also considered as part of the inspection evidence. These were undertaken in the week beginning 8 June 2015. Inspectors reviewed a wide range of documentation, including the local authority's evaluation of its own effectiveness, recent improvement strategies, reports to elected members and school performance data provided to schools.

## **Summary findings**

The local authority has been too slow in driving improvement in the attainment, progress and attendance of pupils and in narrowing the gaps between disadvantaged and other pupils across the district.

Although rising, not enough children achieve a good level of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Too few pupils make good progress from their very low starting points on entry to Key Stage 1 to the end of their primary education. This is particularly true of disadvantaged pupils, disabled pupils or those with special education needs.

The proportion of students gaining at least five good GCSEs at grades A\* to C, including English and mathematics, by the end of Key Stage 4 fell significantly in 2014 to well below that found nationally. Attendance rates are below average and unauthorised absence rates are well above average. The majority of outcomes for pupils at Key Stages 2 and 4 place Bradford in the lowest 10% of local authorities nationally.

Despite being the 24th most improved authority for level 3 qualifications in 2014, not enough students achieve academic qualifications at levels 2 or 3 by the age of 19. The achievements of boys lag well behind those of their peers nationally, particularly at the higher A\* to A grades for A-level qualifications. Success rates are, however, above average in vocational qualifications. In 2014, the proportion of disadvantaged students gaining level 3 qualifications was similar to that found nationally. The proportion of young people aged 16 to 19 not in education, training and employment has fallen to the lowest level seen in Bradford. However, the proportion remains above that found nationally.

Previous strategies and partnerships have been ineffective in improving the quality of school provision or preventing schools from deteriorating, particularly in the secondary sector. Consequently, too many pupils in Bradford attend schools that are not good; around a third of primary-aged pupils and well over half of secondary-aged pupils. Although the number of primary schools judged inadequate at the time of their Ofsted inspection is low, the proportion that requires improvement is twice the national average. Ten per cent of secondary schools are inadequate, which is well above the national average.

Around half of schools with sixth forms have a judgement of requires improvement for their sixth form provision and one is judged inadequate. Local authority roles and responsibilities for supporting and challenging academic achievement in maintained

sixth forms are unclear. The 14–19 team has had limited communication with school achievement officers about the performance, support and challenge for sixth forms. There has been a lack of coherence in the use of post-16 data and information between the two groups to identify those at risk of underperforming or in highlighting good practice to share across the partnership of schools.

The local authority's support and challenge for leadership has not been effective. There has not been enough good or outstanding leadership to build capacity across the school sector. School-to-school partnerships are well established in Bradford. Schools have traditionally worked together to support each other through the Bradford Catholic, primary and secondary partnerships. Until recently, the local authority provided little strategic leadership to, or quality assurance of, these partnerships. This meant that ineffective or complacent partnership arrangements were not sufficiently checked or challenged, and good practice was not extensively identified or shared. Quality assurance arrangements for evaluating the impact of local authority achievement officers have also been insufficiently robust to ensure timely intervention in schools at risk or to hold staff to account fully for the impact of their work. Mechanisms to identify schools at risk of declining performance have consequently been inconsistent and the school achievement services and partnerships have been reactive rather than proactive. This has contributed to the lack of sustained improvement across schools and academies in Bradford.

Governors who talked to inspectors speak highly of the support from governors' services. Local leaders of governance work in the same way as national leaders of governance in supporting governing bodies in difficulties and on interim executive boards. However, their expertise is stretched. The governing body support service does not contribute effectively to the risk assessments of school leadership and governance.

There is a new direction in the local authority and a cause for optimism. Headteachers, governors and partners speak convincingly about a 'step-change' in the authority's approach and a new rigour and challenge to schools and partnerships. This follows the appointment of the strategic director for children's services just over a year ago and, more recently, the appointment of the Interim Assistant Director of Education and School Improvement and the secondment of two senior officers into the Bradford primary and secondary partnerships.

On his appointment, the strategic director quickly commissioned an external review of school improvement arrangements. Based on this, with partners, he has developed a strategy for rapid improvement – the 'Bradford School Improvement Strategy 2015' – to tackle the significant weaknesses identified by the review. He has successfully harnessed the commitment of all political leaders, elected members, senior local authority staff, school, academy and free school leaders to a new school-led model of improvement. The strategy identifies a leaner strategic role for the authority in brokering and facilitating school-to-school support and a more rigorous approach to monitoring and evaluating the impact of services and partners' work to drive improvement in schools. The strategy is aligned closely to the council's overarching strategy, the New Deal for Bradford, and the council's children and young people's

plan. It has a small set of very appropriate priorities with ambitious targets for improvement. It is too early in its development to have had time to tackle the history of underachievement across the community of primary and secondary schools and the lack of sustained school improvement.

A strength identified in discussions throughout the inspection is the sense of urgency, purpose and commitment to driving improvement across all providers. Academy and free school leaders report that the local authority makes no distinction between academies and maintained schools and 'all children are in the authority's line of sight', no matter what type of school they attend. The director has written formally to 11 academies since the autumn, challenging their declining performance and work is ongoing with these academies to improve their performance. The local authority raises concerns about academies with the Regional Schools Commissioner appropriately and formally. The strategic director is keen to work closely with regional and national government to identify suitable sponsors and structural solutions to accelerate school improvement in secondary schools causing particular concern.

School leaders speak positively about the work of the Schools Forum<sup>1</sup>. The forum carries out its duties highly effectively and is well informed and supported by local authority officers. Leaders report positively on the work of human resources and finance officers in securing robust arrangements for financial management and staffing issues. They value the training for child protection procedures and they particularly value the training on child sexual exploitation and risks from extremism or radicalisation through the work of the Prevent team.

## **Areas for improvement**

- Accelerate the work begun to raise pupils' achievement and attendance at all levels, by:
  - implementing the agreed school improvement strategy as a matter of urgency
  - increasing the level of challenge to schools and commissioning more effective support to bring about more rapid and sustained improvement
  - further improving processes for assessing risks to schools so that timely actions can be taken to prevent decline and increase the number of good or outstanding schools
  - improving the strategic use of school performance and management information to ensure timely challenge to all sectors and providers where weaknesses are identified; this includes better utilisation of information from services working with schools such as governor support services in identifying schools that may be at risk of decline
  - using more successful and experienced headteachers more extensively beyond their own schools to enable other schools to accelerate their improvement

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<sup>1</sup> Bradford's Schools Forum is a representative group of headteachers, governors and non-school members established by statutory instruments issued by the Government. Forums were established nationally in 2002 primarily as bodies for local authorities to consult on school budget related issues, such as formula funding, contracts funded from the schools budget, and provision for the education of pupils with special educational needs.

- ensuring that local authority staff and leaders commissioned to work with schools are held rigorously to account for the impact of their work
- reviewing the value for money of the current pattern of post-16 provision and then acting on outcomes with partners to raise achievement and increase the proportion of young people moving successfully into education, training and employment
- continuing to work with regional and national agencies to identify expert partners to help solve deep-seated and intractable issues in schools facing the most challenging circumstances, particularly in the secondary sector.

## **Corporate leadership and strategic planning**

- The leader of the council, portfolio holder for children's services and elected members across the political spectrum share the strategic director's vision, sense of urgency and determination to ensure that every pupil attends a good school and reaches national expectations in their tests and assessments by 2018.
- Members expressed frustration about the lack of impact of previous strategies in driving improvement and are determined the same cannot happen again. They quickly embraced recommendations from the external review of school improvement arrangements across the district. Members fully endorse the development of the recent school improvement strategy with its clear, measurable and challenging targets for improvement.
- The New Deal for Bradford places good schools and a great start for all children at the heart of the vision for success in Bradford. This informs Bradford's school improvement plan's priorities of:
  - children starting school ready to learn
  - accelerating the rate of achievement and attainment of students
  - young people leaving school ready for the world of work and life.
- School leaders were consulted with effectively during the strategy's development and agree fully with it. They report positively about the early steps of its implementation. For example, they applaud the additional council funding to strengthen recruitment and retention of school staff. They also value the deployment of two local authority senior officers to the Bradford primary and secondary partnerships, to provide challenge, expertise and to hold the partnerships to account more effectively for the impact of their work.
- School leaders and governors express confidence in the changes in leadership in children's services and the recent senior appointments. They welcome as a 'breath of fresh air' the 'game-changing' approach and the added pace, vigour and promptness of early actions. Members, senior local authority staff and school leaders know it is too early to see the impact of these changes.
- The local authority and its partners also have a clear vision for improving the quality of vocational provision and for young people to access suitable education, employment and training opportunities. The local authority and post-16 partners have successfully ensured an above-average level of participation rates for 16- and

17-year-olds. They have reduced the proportion not in education, employment or training to the best level yet. However, they know more needs to be done to ensure all provision is at least good and to drive improvement in outcomes for post-16 students, particularly in academic qualifications.

### **Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support**

- In the past, the local authority has not used the wide range of data and information it holds about schools' performance effectively enough at a strategic level. It has failed to identify schools at risk and intervene quickly enough to halt decline and drive improvement. School leaders report that recently there has been a much more tenacious and regular review of the accuracy of school's assessment information. It is too soon to see the impact of the changes initiated.
- The local authority provides very detailed performance data for schools to access online. School leaders report positively about its usefulness and value the openness in relationships that allows schools to compare each other's data. The authority has recognised that the analysis and use of data to challenge schools about their performance has not always been timely or effective enough. It has taken recent action to improve this, for example by moving to analysis of performance in national assessments, tests and examinations before the start of the new academic year.
- System leaders (senior school staff and teaching schools alliance staff who are commissioned to work with schools) and local authority achievement officers accept that, until recently, school-to-school support has not been effective enough. Interventions in schools causing concern and work with schools at risk of underachieving have not been prompt enough to halt or anticipate decline. This has been evident in the lack of sustained improvement in standards, progress and attendance rates in the district. It is also evident in the increasing number of secondary schools judged inadequate.
- Plans for school-to-school support have lacked rigorous success criteria to hold staff fully to account for the impact of their work. This includes quality assurance arrangements for evaluating the impact of achievement officers and system leaders. For example, achievement officers' notes of visits to targeted schools are of variable quality. Some are very detailed and identify the level of challenge brought to bear and next steps needed to drive improvement. Others merely provide a commentary on what has been done.
- Elected members receive half-termly tracking information on numbers of schools causing concern to the local authority. There is little commentary or explanation of what the information means, or what difference actions have made to the reducing numbers of schools identified as high priority. Such weaknesses are being tackled through the development of a commissioning strategy with precise measures for improvement.
- School leaders and partners report that the process of working with schools causing concern to the local authority has become more rigorous. This is due not least to the recent strengthening of procedures employed by achievement officers in reviewing a school's effectiveness. There is now a much more evidence-based

approach in checking what is actually happening in schools. Monitoring letters from HMI of schools that require improvement, in the main, recognise the positive impact of interventions undertaken by school improvement staff. Nonetheless, this work has not yet resulted in an increase in the number of good schools.

- Within Bradford, the comparatively low numbers of good or outstanding school leaders has restricted the capacity for school-to-school support to help drive improvement. There are examples of successful deployment of executive heads leading to rapid improvement. However, the authority recognises that limited use has been made of this pool of talent to bring about improvement in less successful schools. There are plans to increase the number of executive headteachers deployed from September this year.
- The local authority has improved identification of good practice through the partnerships and teaching school alliances and, while recognising that more needs to be done, is beginning to share this more widely.
- The local authority has used its powers of intervention modestly. Where it has used its powers to replace governing bodies with interim executive boards, these have largely been effective. For example, the very timely replacement of the governing body at Carlton Bolling School has contributed to improvements in leadership there. Concern was expressed during the inspection that the scope of an interim executive board is not always a broad enough solution to the deep-seated problems identified in some of the most challenging secondary schools.
- Until recently, the local authority has made limited use of its right to issue formal warning notices to schools causing great concern. It has depended too much on informal, pre-warning notices. Senior officers are aware that this needs to change and have recently issued a warning notice without recourse to informal pre-warning procedures.

### **Support and challenge for leadership and management (including governance)**

- School leaders speak convincingly about the local authority's improved and more tenacious relationships with Bradford Catholic, primary and secondary partnerships, teaching school alliances and other system leaders. They report the start of a more strategic approach in the brokering and deployment of school-to-school support for schools in need of improvement and an increased ability to identify and then intervene more quickly to tackle risks of decline.
- Headteachers and governors of schools at most risk report positively on the impact of recent interventions. They consider that the support and challenge has been coordinated and timely and can cite examples of where improvement has occurred. However, in the past, early identification of need has not been timely or sharp enough to increase the proportion of good or outstanding schools in the primary or secondary sectors.
- Until very recently, the local authority's risk assessments of schools were not accurate enough. For example, the September risk register identified some schools as low risk, despite a decline in performance over time. Some notes of visits by achievement officers reported positively on outcomes at the end of Key

Stage 2 but did not express concerns to leaders about a year-on-year decline or lack of improvement at Key Stage 1.

- The recently appointed interim assistant director for education has quickly developed a more robust risk assessment system. This is now used to inform the deployment and coordination of support from the partnerships, teaching school alliances and achievement officers. Not enough use has been made of the information held by other services who work with schools, such as finance, human resources, attendance and inclusion teams and governor support services, in contributing to early warning signs of potential decline or concern or in identifying and disseminating good practice.
- Governors speak highly of the governing body support service's clerking arrangements and training. There have been some profitable drives with businesses and the local community to recruit new governors. As a result, the percentage of vacancies has fallen well in the last year and is below that found nationally. However, systems developed by the service to evaluate the quality of governance are weak, including the analysis of the impact of training or identification of needs. Risk assessments are not robust and there is little evidence of the impact of the service's work to improve governance over time.

## **Use of resources**

- The local authority and the Schools Forum recognise that the use of resources does not represent good value for money currently, given pupils' below average achievements and the lower-than-average proportions of good or outstanding schools. Nevertheless, school leaders report that the Schools Forum carries out its duties rigorously.
- The forum is well informed and supported by local authority officers. Financial modelling for the forum and schools is strong: local authority finance officers know their schools well. School leaders speak of a collegiate responsibility for every child in Bradford: members of the forum are not parochial when making spending decisions. The forum has a thorough, thoughtful understanding of the needs of vulnerable students and has given detailed consideration to the allocation of resources to support them.
- The local authority judiciously adjusts funding to meet changing school needs and school leaders report an openness and transparency within the Schools Forum. They are aware that, in line with the commitment to streamline school improvement services in the council, the amount of per-pupil funding delegated to schools is increasing and is now above average.
- Local authority officers are working closely with school leaders and the forum to tackle the history of underachievement in schools as a matter of urgency. The forum, with the approval of the Secretary of State, has agreed £1.26 million joint investment funding from designated schools' grant reserves to improve systems for commissioning school-to-school support. The forum is currently developing an accountability framework to ensure that robust mechanisms are in place to measure the impact of the use of these significant additional resources.

- As an expression of the council's commitment to drive improvement in the quality of leadership and teaching in schools, it has provided an additional £660,000 over three years for improving recruitment and retention of teachers and leaders in schools; this is in the context of reducing budgets across the public sector. This initiative has got off to a prompt start, with innovative approaches to sharing information about prospective teachers and to promoting the district to teachers new to the profession.
- The local authority has taken effective action to increase the number of places in existing schools to provide for the rapidly rising numbers of pupils in Bradford. It continues to monitor the expanding numbers and the pressure on places carefully. The council has recently provided £770,000 to match-fund the Department for Education's contribution to meet the increased demand for school places.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**