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Richenda Broad
Executive Director of Wellbeing, Care and Learning
Middlesbrough Borough Council
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Middlesbrough
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Dear Ms Broad

Inspection of Middlesbrough local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement

Following the visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors Robert Pyner, Mel Ford, Helen Lane and John Daniell to Middlesbrough 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 on 2–6 February 2015. We particularly appreciate the time and care taken to prepare the programme for us. Please pass on our thanks to your staff, the Lead Member for Learning and Skills, elected members, the Chief Executive, headteachers, academy principals, teachers, governors and organisations working in partnership with the council 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.

Context

In January 2014, the local authority's arrangements for supporting school improvement were judged to be ineffective.

There have been changes at senior officer level since the last inspection including your appointment to the Executive Director post. Currently, the school improvement service is led by an experienced interim postholder. A senior school improvement partner has been appointed to lead a team of consultants with a focus on raising achievement in all secondary schools within the local authority.

Evidence

The findings of this inspection are based on discussions with:

- senior officers and elected members of the council and officers of the school improvement service
- headteachers and teachers from a wide range of maintained schools and academies representing all phases of education
- partners involved in school improvement commissioned or brokered by the school improvement service, including leaders providing school-to-school support
- school governors
- officers and partners representing the Early Years Foundation Stage and post-16 phases of education.

A range of documentation was scrutinised, including the council's strategy for school effectiveness, school performance data, monitoring and evaluation documents, case studies and notes of visits. The outcomes of the focused inspections and telephone survey of schools undertaken prior to the visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) were also evaluated as part of the inspection evidence. In total, evidence was gathered from headteacher or governor representatives from 33 schools located in the local authority area. This amounts to 60% of all the maintained schools and academies in Middlesbrough.

Summary findings

The local authority has made some significant improvements relating to the recommendations from the inspection in January 2014. Following this inspection, I am recommending that the regional Senior HMI should continue to monitor the local authority's performance on a regular basis and, using this information, decide on any future inspection activity.

The local authority has strengthened its arrangements for school improvement. Following an extensive consultation with school leaders, the School Effectiveness Strategy (SES) was implemented in the autumn. This uses a wide range of data and

information to place every school in one of seven categories. The strategy outlines the support and expectations of improvement for schools in each category. Headteachers appreciated the opportunity to engage in a real consultation on the direction of the strategy, but they did not have a full understanding of the relative definitions of the categories and the levels of support and challenge relating to them.

Senior officers and elected members provide strong leadership and have used the support and challenge from Ofsted's HMI in the region effectively since the last inspection. Elected members are now better informed by more detailed briefings on the assessment outcomes for all schools. School leaders from both maintained schools and academies are invited to share evaluations of pupils' outcomes with senior officers and elected members through the Schools' Standards Monitoring Group. Headteachers appreciate the opportunity to discuss issues within this new forum.

Improving the quality of education is a central part of the regeneration programme led by the council. Elected members recognise the importance of strong outcomes for schools and the council's aspiration is for all schools to be 'outstanding' within five years. A key mechanism behind this for the last two years has been the Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership (MAP), which is an alliance of all schools and the local authority to support developments and monitor their outcomes. However, although there is a strong understanding of the role of the partnership from organisations supporting specific groups, especially vulnerable children and their families, there is less understanding by school leaders of the central role of MAP in supporting and challenging schools to raise achievement.

The local authority has correctly prioritised improvement work on the weaker outcomes at Key Stage 4. A senior school improvement partner now leads a team of consultants to improve outcomes in a range of subjects and aspects in secondary schools. Headteachers from both maintained schools and academies appreciate the work of this team and this has enabled a strong improvement focus for secondary schools. However, the full impact of this work has not yet been seen in the proportion of secondary schools judged to be good or outstanding. Currently, although improved, the proportion remains well below the national average.

Attainment at Key Stages 1 and 2 continues to improve, although it remains below national averages. Pupils' progress outcomes in Key Stage 2 improved at a faster rate than nationally in 2014 in reading, writing and mathematics. The gap in performance between disadvantaged pupils and others remains greater than that seen nationally, but it is reducing. The proportion of students achieving five GCSE passes at grades A* to C including English and mathematics is well below the

national average. However, the rate of improvement is greater than the national figures, for both disadvantaged and other pupils. The progress that students make at secondary school in English is a strength and better than the national and regional averages; progress in mathematics is much weaker.

The development of the Youth Employment Group has led to a more cohesive approach to post-16 provision linking employers, Middlesbrough College, secondary schools and other partners in a number of pilot projects focusing on employment skills. The latest data show that the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training has reduced significantly and is now in line with the regional average.

The local authority has strengthened the quality and quantity of school-to-school support through the Middlesbrough Schools' Teaching Alliance and a further alliance has been created, based on the Catholic schools' partnership. Local authority advisers work closely with the alliances.

Areas for improvement

- Raise achievement across all key stages, with a continuing focus on the secondary phase, and reduce the attainment gap between disadvantaged and other pupils by:
 - refocusing the Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership so that it has a more central role in raising the achievement of all children and young people
 - ensuring that the current support and challenge for secondary schools and academies are maintained for the period of the planned programme of support and that this delivers outcomes for Key Stage 4 pupils that are at least in line with national averages
 - developing the School Effectiveness Strategy so that by September 2015 the school categorisation procedures are clearer to school leaders, supporting rapid identification of decline and leading to a greater proportion of schools judged good or outstanding, particularly in the secondary phase.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- Elected members reinforce the vision that the improvement of outcomes for pupils of all ages is a central pillar of the council's ambitious plans for regeneration and greater employment. This ambition revolves around three elements: housing, skills and employment, and schools. Members receive

regular briefings on educational issues and on their role in improvement to reinforce strategies.

- There is a strong commitment from all types of schools to work with the local authority and collaborate together; there is a strong identity of the Middlesbrough 'family' of schools, regardless of type. Strong leadership by senior leaders and elected members has seen resources allocated to supporting and challenging secondary schools, which is the phase where outcomes need to improve most urgently. This initiative has been well received by secondary headteachers, who have been involved in the appointment of a team of consultants. This project must complete its two-year planned programme to ensure that it builds on its effective start and delivers improved achievement outcomes.
- The council has improved its communications with headteachers. A good example of this is the development of the School Effectiveness Strategy. However, the main driver for improvement, the Middlesbrough Achievement Partnership, is less well understood by school leaders.
- The local authority is leading a partnership with the local further education college, employers, schools and other partners to improve employment and training focused through the Youth Employment Group. The group has produced a strategy for 14–25-year-olds that has a strong focus on the development of employment skills. The latest data show that the proportion of young people aged 16–18 in education, employment or training is increasing at a faster rate than seen nationally.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- Following consultation with schools the local authority has implemented the School Effectiveness Strategy with a categorisation for each school. The decision about a particular category is based on a range of factors, including the most recent inspection judgement, pupils' achievement outcomes and the quality of teaching. Through letters to each school, the local authority makes clear the basis of the categorisation and the support it can provide. However, some school leaders find the range of seven categories confusing and are unsure of the support relating to each.
- The local authority has introduced a protocol for sharing pupil achievement data, which has been agreed by all schools. New data collection and analysis systems are in place, with monitoring procedures undertaken each term for

primary schools and every six weeks for secondary schools. Secondary headteachers in particular appreciate the closer scrutiny by the local authority and close monitoring of data is an integral part of the package of support and challenge developed for schools. Transition and data sharing arrangements have been agreed between primary and secondary schools, with a common 'transition week' for 2015.

- Better data collection and analysis have enabled elected members to be more effectively briefed on pupils' outcomes across the authority and the relative performance of individual schools.
- During the current academic year, the local authority has deployed its formal powers of intervention promptly and decisively. One school has received a Formal Warning Notice following a breakdown of leadership and governance. Senior leaders from the only school subject to special measures are required to attend the Progress Review Group (PRG) with school improvement staff every seven weeks to discuss progress made. Where concerns relate to a school with academy status, the council has reported this to the Department for Education.
- The brokering and commissioning of support for primary schools has developed well. This is coordinated by the Middlesbrough Schools' Teaching Alliance, which has strong links with council school improvement service personnel. This enables swift analysis of areas of concern and the development of appropriate packages of support. For secondary schools, the senior school improvement partner and consultant team have developed strong relationships with individual schools, offering well-regarded bespoke packages of support. Through the development of regular subject network groups for English, mathematics and science, stronger subject support across primary and secondary schools is being developed.
- The effectiveness of the improved systems for monitoring, intervention, challenge and support over the last year can be seen in the better inspection outcomes for Early Years Foundation Stage settings and secondary schools. However, secondary schools remain well below the national average for the proportion of good and outstanding schools. Primary schools have slipped back slightly, but are still in line with the regional and national averages.

Support and challenge for leadership and management (including governance)

- Programmes for leadership and management in primary schools are developed through the Middlesbrough Schools' Teaching Alliance and these include support for new headteachers, middle leaders and training for senior leaders to conduct peer reviews. School improvement staff work closely with the alliance, providing input on courses and quality assurance activities. There is one National Leader in Education and two Local Leaders in Education. School improvement leaders accept that there is a need to develop these roles within the local authority. There is a suitable range of Specialist Leaders in Education working with schools. The council takes the lead for primary headteacher training for the Tees Valley consortium of local authorities.
- The local authority governor support service categorises the effectiveness of school governing bodies and offers support and challenge when appropriate, including external and peer reviews. One governing body is currently receiving intensive support, including from a National Leader of Governance. Experienced governors have been placed in schools where weaknesses in governance are identified.
- The Governor Support Service is well regarded, particularly the work of the clerks and the Governors' Forum, which provides a strong means of communication and platform for learning. Governor recruitment has improved exceeding targets for this year.
- There is a broad range of training and courses available, although not all take place due to lack of participants.

Use of resources

- The Schools' Management Forum plays an important role in resourcing the priorities identified to improve achievement across the local authority. Members are knowledgeable and have a good understanding of its strategic purpose. The group meets regularly and decisions are transparent.
- There has been considerable funding allocated to the programme of support for secondary schools. This is a recognition that this phase needs to improve most urgently in terms of achievement for pupils and the number of schools judged as good or outstanding. Appropriate measures to evaluate the success of this initiative are in place.

- There are robust measures in place to monitor schools' budgets and seek further detailed information on any budget carry forward. Headteachers and governors are asked specifically to note how any carry forward will support individual school development plans. The total carry forward for the 2013/14 financial year was relatively modest.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Mayor, the Lead Member for Learning and Skills and Chief Executive Officer of Middlesbrough Council. This letter will be published on GOV.UK.

Yours sincerely

Robert Pyner
Her Majesty's Inspector