

Local Members' Interest

Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee – 5th September 2014

Report on the Ofsted Focused Inspection in Staffordshire

Recommendations

1. That the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee notes the feedback from Ofsted Focused Inspection that took place in March 2014
2. That the Select Committee members review and comment upon the Local Authority response and action plan in order to support action to address the areas for development highlighted in the feedback letter

Report of Cllr Ben Adams – Cabinet Member for Learning and Skills

Summary

Between the 13th and 28th March 2014 Ofsted undertook Focused Inspection activity in Staffordshire. The outcomes of Ofsted's review were published in a feedback letter to the local authority issued Monday 2nd June. The letter can be viewed on the Ofsted website <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/letter-directors-of-childrens-services-following-focused-school-inspections-local-authority-areas>

The Local Authority has reviewed the feedback and developed an action plan in order to address the key areas for improvement, and Select Committee is asked to review the LA's response and provide comment as appropriate.

Report

Background

As part of its desk-based review and regular data monitoring function Ofsted may identify a theme or performance issue in a local authority area that they feel merits more detailed consideration. In such cases Ofsted undertake a Focused Inspection. This takes the form of an intensive period of school inspection activity, over a fixed time period, with the addition of a telephone survey of a sample of schools in order to explore a "theme" or "focus" that has emerged as a cause for concern. The findings from a Focused Inspection are shared in the form of a feedback letter to the Local Authority that reports areas of strength identified as part of the review as well as areas for development and improvement.

On Monday 11th March Ofsted provided telephone notification to the authority of their intention to undertake a focused inspection in Staffordshire, with telephone surveys beginning on that day. For Staffordshire, Ofsted's concern centred on the progress made by pupils as they move through their primary schools. The concern was prompted by schools performance data showing progress pupils make between Early Years assessment, through Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2. This focus did not come as a surprise as

the area of concern had been identified by the LA's own analysis of school performance and was reflected in our school improvement priorities that had been discussed and shared with schools, notably at the series of District events held early spring 2014.

The Focused Inspection coupled 19 school inspections of primary schools selected by Ofsted (based on their risk approach) along with a telephone survey of a 22 good or better schools. The sample size of 18 schools inspected from 295 primary schools represents 6% of Staffordshire schools, and does not represent a balanced segment of our constituency of schools. The telephone survey was anonymous and therefore the schools that inspectors spoke to are not identified. The survey asked school leaders about their perception of the support and challenge provided by the local authority

Focused Inspection Findings

The feedback presents a mixed picture with Inspectors noting a number of key strengths; they also reflect some variability in the views expressed across the sample group; as well as a number of key areas for development. Of the 18 inspections that took place under the Focused Inspection 9 schools (50%) were judged as good or outstanding, 9 schools (or 50%) were judged Requiring Improvement or in need of Special Measures.

The profile was:

- 2 schools outstanding
- 7 schools good
- 6 schools require improvement
- 3 schools special measures

The pattern of movement from previous inspection was:

- 3 schools improved/went up a grade
- 7 schools retained the same grade
- 8 schools declined/went down

It must be recognised that these inspections took place against a different and tougher inspection framework than for most of the schools' previous inspections, with different inspection criteria underpinning the judgments; therefore direct comparison is not appropriate. It is also the case that performance benchmarks have continued to ratchet up over time. Nonetheless, the pattern of movement reported in the Focused Inspection is a cause for concern, and it is not reflective of the typical pattern of outcomes for the county where 72% of primary schools in Staffordshire had been inspected as "good or outstanding" as at end February 2014, and this reached 74% by end June 2014.

Ofsted commented that "whilst the local authority's intervention and support have benefited some schools, the authority has not been effective in arresting the decline of eight schools".

Strengths

The Focused Inspection reported important areas of strength.

These included:

- a. The value schools placed on the local authority's data analysis service and the effective systems for collecting and analysing achievement data for its schools, used by the local authority to risk assess schools.

- b. Positive view of schools about their lead LA officer (District Manager for Improvement) and the level of support and challenge they receive from this person, who knows their school well.
- c. 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.
- d. 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.
- e. Schools spoke highly of Human Resources (HR) services; for example, in the management of underperformance, capability procedures and managing long-term absence.
- f. The local authority's Behaviour Support Service provided through Entrust is cited as a strength by some of the survey respondents.

Areas for development

The Focused Inspection reported a number of areas for development and these included:

- a. Some confusion and lack of clarity caused through recent change to school improvement services, linked with the local authority's move to commissioning status and the establishment of a partnership with Entrust.
- b. Schools feeling 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 and it focuses its attention on schools which are not yet good.
- c. Variation in responses about the frequency and quality of contact with local authority officers. Some concern was raised about capacity within the authority: they believe that there are too few officers for the number of schools.
- d. Governors expressed a very wide range of views about how well the local authority knows its schools. 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.
- e. There was scope to be more effective in identifying strengths in good and outstanding schools and using these to help other schools to improve.
- f. Governors are unclear about whether the local authority or Entrust broker support from good and outstanding schools to support others.
- g. There were mixed views about how well the local authority's arrangements for contracted training meet school need.

h. Although local authority officers are confident that they have sufficient knowledge about the schools they work with, in several cases dips in school performance are not noted until after the event and too late to prevent schools declining.

Action to Address the Focused Inspection Feedback

Following the receipt of the feedback, and under the governance of the Children's Improvement Board and the Ofsted Programme Board, a detailed action plan was drawn up. This identified both the action in train to address areas for improvement as well as further action to address the key findings of the Focused Inspection. The Action Plan is attached as appendix A.

The Local Authority's annual review and improvement cycle provides further opportunity to embed improvement action into our school improvement approach for the 2014/2015 academic year. The key actions from the Focused Inspection have been embedded into this wider plan and are monitored as part of our School Improvement approach.

There have been a number of key developments in the delivery of the action plan, including the identification of commissioning priorities and district improvement plans that support the refocusing of activity to address more proactive themes in school performance that have emerged through more effective analysis and insight. The LA has shared with schools our commissioning themes and we are working in partnership with schools and with Entrust to develop the detail of the commissioning projects listed in appendix B.

There has been significant progress in developing and strengthening the LA's school improvement approach, building on the establishment of a commissioned approach, using Entrust as our school improvement provider.

There is a strong upward trend in inspection outcomes that is not reflected in the feedback from the Focused Inspection. From a baseline of 65% of schools graded as good or outstanding in August 2012, we are now at 78%, and improving faster than national trend and statistical neighbours which means we are now beginning to close the gap. We are also in line with our trajectory to have 90% of schools good or outstanding by 2016, so that we are in sight of our ambition that all schools become good or outstanding by 2020.

Furthermore, there has been concerted partnership action to improve and enhance communication and support better information sharing, to secure the consistency of understanding and the embedding of new approaches across the diverse network of 400 Staffordshire schools. Most recently, Staffordshire County Council ran an extremely well attended and positively received summer conference for school leaders in Staffordshire, focused on showcasing effective practice across a range of school improvement themes, ranging from local innovation and excellence through to national best practice and perspectives. The line up of national speakers included Frank Green, the Schools Commissioner for England, Reach2 founder Steve Lancashire, Martin Illingworth on Independent Thinking and HMI presented on Pupil Premium. Local innovation workshops included local leaders showcasing work with the Royal Shakespeare Company, Teaching School Alliances, effective practice in Early Years, the impact of partnership working in a Co-operative Trust, and local developments on Transforming Governance.

In line with our school improvement approach, there has been support action targeted to those schools who did not achieve at least a “good” judgment as a result of their inspection, with bespoke and tailored commissioned work agreed with the school to support rapid and sustained improvement. Each school in Staffordshire not yet good or outstanding is supported to improve, with core groups established in many of these to secure effective leadership and management of the improvement action. Appendix C lists these Staffordshire schools.

Summary and Conclusion

The Focused Inspection reflected the range of views that a small sample of schools shared with Ofsted as part of the survey. Many of the themes of the feedback were recognised by the local authority. Some of the variability reported as a consequence of major transition and change provides very important learning for the local authority and its partners in change-management, and colleagues are sensitive and alert to this learning.

However, taking the Focused Inspection in context, the overall improvement in Staffordshire school performance, tracked over time and sustained across the last 12-18 months should provide a level of assurance and confidence that we have in practice a school improvement partnership that works, that is developing rapidly and delivering improved outcomes for our children and young people. Recent strengthening to the LA team and the cadre of Entrust Associates has further reinforced the capacity to both identify and address the salient issues to drive and deliver further improvement across Staffordshire schools. Whilst the Focused Inspection feedback supports the consideration of important issues for our county it is also not fully representative nor typical of the county’s trends in inspection outcomes and should therefore be considered within this context.

Link to Strategic Plan

The Learning and Skills Strategy: Achieving Excellence in Learning and Skills underpins the delivery of all three priority outcomes. It forms part of the SCC Business Plan delivery, as part of the “Ready for Life” sub-outcome.

Link to Other Overview and Scrutiny Activity

Select Committee receive regular reports on education matters and have also operated a working group to review School Improvement arrangements in regard to Ofsted.

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Appendices/Background papers

Appendix A – Focused Inspection Action Plan
Appendix B - Commissioning Priorities and Projects 2014/15
Appendix C – List of Schools working towards Ofsted “good or outstanding”