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25 March 2013

Mr Julian Wooster  
Strategic Director for Children's Services  
Portsmouth City Council  
Civic Offices  
Guildhall Square  
Portsmouth  
PO1 2BG

Dear Julian

### **Portsmouth LA – focused inspections – 26 to 28 February 2013**

Thank you for our meeting on 28 February 2013. It was a good opportunity to introduce myself as the Regional Director for the South East, to meet you and your senior team, and to discuss Ofsted's new regional structure and how we might work together to improve Portsmouth's schools.

Our meeting was also helpful for me to be able to explain the current approach Ofsted is taking with schools in particular local authority areas in focusing our inspection activity into a concentrated period. This approach, coupled with the outcomes of a telephone survey of a sample of school leaders about their perception of the support and challenge provided by the local authority, enables us to obtain a clearer picture of the education provided for children and young people in those areas.

As I explained at our meeting, I am writing to inform you of the outcomes of the school inspections and the survey carried out during the focused week for Portsmouth in the period 26 to 28 February 2013.

### **Outline of inspection activities**

Six schools were inspected during the focused inspection week, including: one nursery school; one primary school; two junior schools; and two secondary schools. Five of these were judged to be satisfactory at their last inspection and one required a notice to improve. These were selected randomly for this exercise as a sample of schools from all those due for inspection by the end of this academic year.

During the inspections Her Majesty's Inspectors gathered information on the use, quality and impact of local authority support for school improvement by asking three additional key questions of headteachers and governors:

- 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 12 schools were surveyed by telephone during the focused inspection week. These included six primary schools, two nursery schools, three secondary schools and one special school. The schools were selected randomly from the city's good and outstanding schools; five were outstanding and seven 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 school's strengths to help others improve?

### **Inspection and survey outcomes**

Of the schools inspected during the focused inspection week:

- Two were graded as good for overall effectiveness. Both of these schools had improved since their previous inspection.
- Two were judged to require improvement. One had improved since its previous inspection when it was placed in a category of concern. The other was judged satisfactory at its previous inspection so has not improved significantly.
- Two were placed in special measures. Both schools have declined from a satisfactory judgement at their previous inspection.

The improvement of half the schools previously judged inadequate or satisfactory gives some cause for optimism. However, it is of serious concern that two of the previously satisfactory schools have declined and one has not improved their inspection grade. The local authority had issued warning notices but these had not made an impact and, as a result, pupils continue to be denied a good quality educational provision.

The substance of the discussions at our meeting, and an analysis of school responses to the key questions asked during the week, are outlined below.



## **Strengths**

- The local authority is aware of the need to improve outcomes in its schools and has begun to take some actions to help this happen. These include monitoring school effectiveness more closely and encouraging schools to work together to share and develop best practice.
- There are examples of effective support for schools leading to improvement, as seen in the schools judged good at this inspection, and evident in the increasing proportions of schools as a whole which are good or better. However, too many schools remain vulnerable and require improvement.
- Support and training for governors provided by the local authority is generally well received and feedback is positive, although there is little evidence that the effectiveness of governing bodies is subsequently checked or challenged by the local authority.
- The quality of support from Human Resources is generally valued by schools and has been effective in managing issues relating to staff underperformance.

## **Areas for improvement**

- Schools, particularly those that are more vulnerable, and local authority officers, do not have a consistently clear understanding of the vision for school improvement across the local authority. This is despite the improving education strategy 'Effective learning for every pupil' which we discussed, and which focuses clearly on raising achievement.
- The degree of challenge for schools is variable, in large part due to reductions in the local authority's resources. There is not a cohesive approach to support schools which are not yet good or are vulnerable, and a lack of rigour in action planning and monitoring their progress. School leaders generally value the challenge and support from the education officer working with them and feel they have an accurate view of the school's performance. However, inspection evidence shows local authority officers sometimes have an over-generous view of school performance.
- Lines of communication between school leaders, education officers and local authority senior officers are not always clear. School leaders are not confident that senior officers have sufficient depth of knowledge of their schools. Evaluating the impact of local authority challenge and support is underdeveloped.
- The use of performance data and other information to challenge school leaders is under review. The local authority now compares schools with national data rather than against local or similar schools. Its 'data dashboard' offers a common way of reviewing the performance of

different groups of pupils, although this is not consistently used by all schools. There is limited evidence of a coordinated approach across the local authority to tackling the performance of different groups, beyond disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs or persistent absentees. Pupils in receipt of free school meals are of particular concern.


- There are common themes emerging in the recommendations from inspection: the need to improve teaching, achievement and the quality of leadership and management, including governance. With regard to teaching, there is a need to improve the deployment of teaching assistants; the use of differentiation; clearer marking and feedback on students' work and increasing pupils' engagement in learning.
- Senior officers have not responded quickly enough to a rapidly changing educational landscape. While some projects to support school improvement are beginning to make an impact, including through links with external partners, too many schools do not see the benefit. The local authority does not have the capacity to provide significant support or training and there is no coherent strategy for brokering support from good or outstanding schools to help others improve. The more effective schools think they are not used well.

In summary, while there are examples of effective support and challenge, there is still much work to do in establishing and embedding the strategy for improving education so that it leads to sustained and demonstrable impact across the city's schools.

I hope these observations are useful as you seek to improve further the quality of education for the children and young people of Portsmouth.

Please pass on my thanks to the headteachers, governors and local authority officers who gave their time to talk to our inspectors during the focused inspection week. Please also do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to discuss anything in this letter further.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Matthew Coffey', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

**Matthew Coffey HMI  
Regional Director, South East**

**CC Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Education**