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Lorna Fitzjohn HMI
Regional Director, West Midlands

Dear Sir or Madam

Concerns about secondary school performance in the Black Country

I am writing to express my concerns about the continuing low standards and weaknesses in the quality of provision for secondary-aged pupils across Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton.

In the Black Country, there are 76 secondary schools, of which 23 (30%) are local authority maintained schools and 53 (70%) are academies. The concerns highlighted below are prevalent in both types of schools.

In the Black Country:

- pupils' achievement by the age of 16 is poor in comparison with pupils elsewhere in the West Midlands and nationally
- secondary schools are too often failing to build on the success of pupils in primary schools, with much of their progress going to waste
- the gap between the GCSE attainment of disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers is wide; it is unacceptable that the attainment of pupils eligible for free school meals did not improve from an already low level in all four authorities in 2015
- local authorities, trusts, the regional schools commissioner and local politicians have not done enough to hold secondary schools to account for these low standards.

Low attainment

Standards at the end of secondary school are unacceptably low. Of 151 local authorities, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton are among the worst 25 in England for GCSE attainment. Dudley fares little better and is among the worst 35 local authorities in the country for secondary school attainment. In Walsall, barely half the pupils (51%) in 2015 attained five or more good GCSEs including English and mathematics, which is well below the national figure (57%). In Sandwell, that proportion was less than half (47%) and had dropped since the previous year. This performance is damaging to both the prospects of the young people themselves and

the economic prosperity of the area.

Some credit must be given to Walsall and Wolverhampton for improving their GCSE performance in 2015. Wolverhampton was the fourth most improved authority in the country, albeit from a low base.

Poor progress

Too many of the Black Country's secondary schools do not build on the achievements made by primary schools and their pupils. This is shown by the low proportion of pupils making expected progress in English and mathematics from their key stage 2 assessments to their GCSE results. Only 64% of pupils in Walsall and 66% in Wolverhampton made the expected rate of progress in English; this is well below the national figure of 71%. In mathematics, the situation was even worse. In Dudley, and Walsall, only around 60% of pupils made the expected rate of progress in mathematics, with Wolverhampton pupils doing little better. In Sandwell, only 57% of pupils made the expected rate of progress in mathematics. All the Black Country local authority areas were well below the national figure of 67% of pupils making expected progress in mathematics last year.

Poor outcomes for pupil eligible for free school meals

GCSE attainment is particularly poor for disadvantaged pupils. In Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton last year, fewer than 30% of pupils eligible for free school meals gained five or more good GCSEs including English and mathematics. Despite the low standards attained by all pupils in these authorities, the gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and others was wider than the national gap of 27.9 percentage points. Too little is being done to improve the life chances of these pupils and help them overcome the barriers to their success.

Furthermore, the most able disadvantaged pupils¹ are losing even more ground between the end of key stages 2 and 4. While 20% of disadvantaged pupils achieved at least level 5 in English and mathematics at age 11, just 64% of these high-attaining pupils achieved GCSE grades at B or above in English and mathematics. This compares poorly with their better-off most able peers, 26% of whom achieved level 5 and above in English and mathematics at age 11, of whom 72% achieved at least grade B at GCSE in these subjects.

Too few good schools

In Sandwell, just over half of pupils attend a good or better secondary school. This compares poorly with the national figure of 79% of pupils who attend a secondary schools that is at least good. This poor quality of provision contributed in large part

¹These pupils have been eligible for free school meals in the past six years (from year 6 to year 11), have been recorded as having been looked after for at least one day or have been recorded as having been adopted from care.

to a sharp decline in pupils' GCSE attainment in 2015. Around a fifth of secondary schools in Sandwell have been designated as outstanding, which should provide a sound base for sharing good practice across the area. However, there has been too little cooperation between schools to support each other to improve. The proportion of good or better secondary schools is improving elsewhere; it is close to the national level in Dudley and Walsall and now exceeds the national level in Wolverhampton. Nonetheless, the pace of improvement has not been quick enough to ensure that the young people of the Black Country have qualifications to match their peers in other regions.

Weaknesses in accountability

Too often, weak performance of secondary schools is not challenged. Since 2014, only one formal warning notice has been issued by local authorities to a secondary school in the Black Country. This was in Sandwell and referred to a serious breakdown of leadership and governance rather than low standards. During the same period, just two secondary academies have received pre-warning notices from the regional schools commissioner: one in Walsall and one in Dudley. The regional schools commissioner has yet to issue a warning notice to a maintained secondary school in the area. Local authorities and the regional schools commissioner appear to have been unwilling to formally challenge secondary schools to improve low standards.

Urgent action is needed to raise the standard of secondary education in the urban heart of the West Midlands so that it can support a thriving local community and economy. Leaders from across the education system and politicians who represent their local communities need to come together to spearhead the much needed support and improvements for the children and young people of the region.

I will continue to monitor the progress made across the Black Country in raising education standards and will ensure that Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is kept informed about any developments.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Lorna Fitzjohn". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Lorna" on the top line and "Fitzjohn" on the bottom line.

Lorna Fitzjohn HMI
Regional Director, West Midlands

Recipients:

Local Members of Parliament
Cabinet Member Schools Portfolio – all four councils
Chief Executive, Sandwell Council
Chief Executive, Dudley Council

Chief Executive, Wolverhampton Council
Chief Executive, Walsall Council
Director of Children's Services, Sandwell Council
Director of Children's Services, Dudley Council
Director of Children's Services, Wolverhampton Council
Director of Children's Services, Walsall Council
Regional Schools Commissioner, West Midlands
Chief executives of multi-academy trusts

cc. Department for Education