



MEDIA AND PUBLIC RELATIONS UNIT

Town Hall, Castle Circus, Torquay, Devon TQ1 3DR

Main Switchboard (01803) 201201

Direct Lines (01803) 208850 / 51

Fax (01803) 299878 • DX 59006

NEWS RELEASE

Peter Surcombe 01803 208860 9 September 2004

Inspectors praise “fast developing” LEA but make key recommendations for further progress

Torbay’s schools chiefs have said they are confident that the Bay’s education service is well placed to continue improving in line with recommendations made by a team of Ofsted inspectors.

Commenting on the publication of an inspection report by Ofsted in conjunction with the Audit Commission, Torbay’s Director of Learning and Cultural Services, Tony Smith, said: “Our new management team has only been in place for a few months and we have already made significant strides, both before the Local Education Authority was inspected in May and in the four months or so since. We are totally committed to making further progress during the coming months and years.

“It is pleasing to note that the inspectors have acknowledged that we are making rapid progress, and that the prospects for improvement are encouraging; nor are there any areas which are poor or very poor.

“However, there is certainly no room for complacency. The detailed and robust action plan we are putting in place will ensure we remain firmly focussed on the considerable amount of work that lies ahead.

“We are in the process of finalising our action plan which we will be submitting soon to the Secretary of State, Charles Clarke. We are already well on the way to addressing the Ofsted report recommendations, and I am confident we now have firm foundations on which we can build.

“Torbay is currently planning a major restructuring programme that will lead to the setting up of a Children’s Services Directorate. This will ensure close collaboration between agencies which deal with children, especially the most vulnerable.”

Endorsing Mr Smith’s comments, Executive Member Chris Lomas added: “Education is one of Torbay Council’s key priorities. Whilst it is critical of some areas of the LEA’s work, the Ofsted report also includes some very positive comments.

“We can take much encouragement from the report, although we have to accept that the service has fallen short of expectations in some respects.

“None of the issues -- positive or critical -- highlighted by the inspectors came as any real surprise to us. We had already built up a clear picture of what we feel we do well, and of what we know needs improving. In a way, it was reassuring to know that the fresh perspective provided by the inspection team endorsed the self-critical judgement, which is part of the inspection process.

“We are determined not only to continue building on our strengths but also to address the weaknesses head on, so that in close partnership with our schools and colleges we can offer the best education possible for the Bay’s students.”

In the inspection summary, reporting inspector Christine Brown said that following its previous inspection in 2001, the performance of Torbay LEA had quickly reached a plateau, and in many respects its effectiveness had declined significantly.

At the time of the recent inspection, the management team and political administration had been in place for less than a year, but there was already a common sense of purpose and a determination to succeed.

“Progress in the last 12 months,” she said, “has been rapid and most areas of weakness have been tackled with energy and vigour.

“However, there has been much to do in redressing a legacy of inadequate strategic planning.

“A climate of mutual respect between the LEA and schools is developing, but there is not yet a commonly agreed agenda, or a shared understanding with all headteachers of schools’ collective responsibilities for supporting vulnerable pupils and those most at risk of educational and social exclusion.

“The weaknesses in special educational needs and aspects of social inclusion outweigh the strengths within school improvement, leadership and corporate commitment.

“Nevertheless, Torbay is a fast developing LEA and, given a commitment by all schools that matches that of officers, the prospects for improvement are encouraging.”

Torbay Council leader Chris Harris said: “Learning remains a key priority of both the council and the community. We have made big improvements in a short space of time. However, we must not sit back. Instead, we must focus on the areas of weakness that remain and ensure that progress is maintained.”

In their 38-page report, the inspectors acknowledged the leadership given by elected members and senior officers. “Elected members,” said the report, “are committed to improving education services and are actively involved at a strategic level. The leader of the council provides clear direction.”

The inspectors said leadership by senior officers was highly satisfactory. They went on: “The new leadership team for education has been fully operational for less than six months, and it is too early for them to have demonstrated a sustained effect.

“Nevertheless, the new director (Tony Smith) provides a clear vision and purposeful leadership and management. Despite having been in post for less than a year, he has been instrumental in developing a climate of mutual respect and trust with schools and other stakeholders. Weaknesses have been tackled with vigour and resolve.”

Senior officers in the education directorate were ably supported by the council’s managing director, Richard Painter who, said the inspectors, “brings a track record in implementing change and who has already made a positive difference to performance management.”

The inspectors addressed in detail many aspects of the LEA’s work, including corporate leadership, the strategy for education and its implementation, support to improve education in schools, support for special educational needs, and support for social inclusion.

They listed several areas of strengths, and highlighted a number of areas of weakness or in need of development.

The inspectors listed a number of key recommendations, calling for strengthening of the coherence of corporate plans. They emphasised the need to ensure that schools and officers understood the council’s vision and direction, and that the respective roles and collective responsibilities which would enable the organisation to meet its objectives were discussed and agreed.

On the strategy for school improvement, the inspectors said there was a need to establish, through consultation with schools, clear and agreed implementation plans to guide school improvement. No Torbay school needs special measures or has serious weaknesses.

The report was critical of the “unsatisfactory” strategy for Special Educational Needs education, which had not developed to reflect changing pressures and national expectations.

However, the inspectors said the new senior management team had recognised the weaknesses which need addressing and had taken positive actions to secure improvement.

The inspectors recommended that in dialogue with schools, parents and partner agencies, the LEA should develop a shared concept of inclusion and detailed plans in order to achieve a substantial reduction in the unnecessary use of statements and separate provision.

The LEA should ensure that draft statements complied with requirements and that parents were supported in expressing unconstrained preferences about placement. It should also improve the system for annual reviews to ensure statements were updated appropriately in the light of pupils' progress.

On support for social inclusion, the inspectors praised the support for attendance and partnership working with a range of agencies and stakeholders. However, they highlighted as areas for improvement the lack of a coherent and integrated approach to social inclusion and combating racism and the provision for and re-integration of excluded pupils.

Addressing the criticism of the support for special educational needs, Mr Smith said: "We are well aware of weaknesses in this difficult area and we are certainly not alone in having issues to tackle. The SEN Review has started the debate and we must ensure our most vulnerable children are well served.

The inspection report can be viewed on the Ofsted website at www.ofsted.gov.uk and on Torbay Council's website at www.torbay.gov.uk or at Torbay's Grid for Learning website at www.tgfl.torbay.gov.uk