



**Department
for Education**

Department for Education

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Leanne Hedden
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Dear Leanne

2nd June 2016

I would like to pass on my thanks to Carole and Jenny for receiving Glynis Bradley Peat's recent visit to Shenfield High School. We were particularly interested in talking through whether gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their peers both within school and against the national picture were reducing. It was good to hear the plans in place to address the issue.

The regional office of the Department for Education has four priorities:

- to develop the capacity of multi-academy trusts to support others
- to support and challenge underperforming academies
- to increase the number of free schools
- to encourage greater collaboration to develop a self-improving school led system

A crucial part of the Regional Schools Commissioner's role is to hold academy trusts to account for the performance of any schools in their trust. We decided that the best way to understand what is happening in schools was to visit rather than rely just on published data. Our Education Advisers made over 200 visits to academies in the past year and gained a strong understanding of the individual issues each school faces and the actions being taken to improve outcomes for pupils. Visits are generally for half a day or less and aim not to be a burden on the school.

Where progress or plans for improvements are not sufficient, taking into account Ofsted reports and contextual information, then formal intervention such as pre-warning and warning notices will be considered. Last year just 11 pre-warning and warning notices were issued.

It was useful to hear some of the recent history of the school and the challenges that it brought. As I recall too, the merger with Sawyers Hall resulted in a top heavy Key Stage 4 and an intake which changed drastically very quickly. An above average catchment changed to be broadly average. This was followed by very challenging five years. Carole told Glynis that a very positive inspection in 2014 helped to rectify this skew in intake. Over the years

the school has become ever more distinctive. Sport and performing arts are very important and as a result a number of sports trials and auditions take place for a small number of students. The school also prides itself on the great pastoral, well-being and support it provides for its students. The mental health needs of students are met through the appointment of a well-being specialist who works effectively with a plethora of outside agencies. Carole told Glynis that this is very important to the school and provides real expertise. She was clear that the school continues on its upward journey despite being affected by the IGCSE English results last year and some weaknesses in DT and geography. Predictions last year were 66% A* to C including English and mathematics but the actual outcome was 58%. This year the more able were entered for English in November and the school already has achieved 78% A* to C. Mathematics are predicted to achieve 72%. 'KS3 wasted years' has ensured greater challenge in English and the school continues to enrich the curriculum. The sixth form performed very well last year and again, this year, predictions are very healthy for Years 12 and 13. The school has had to restructure regularly to ensure viability of the budget and to ensure leadership and staffing suits the changing profile of the school. Leaders have tried to ensure that the school values remain at the heart of everything it does. The team of teaching assistants have changed the way they work. They provide individual support, small group work and intervention.

With regard to narrowing the gaps between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students, Glynis was encouraged to see the array of initiatives the school has used to this end. As a result, considering the differentiated starting points of the students, the 'in school' pupil premium gap is narrowing this year for both attainment and progress within school. Against the national non-disadvantaged cohort, the gap remains. Much is being done to combat this. Leaders have ensured that staff are much more aware of where the gaps are. Progress gaps are closing against the national norm but attainment gaps remain stubborn. Carole told Glynis that the school attracts children with barriers to learning in addition to their disadvantage which is making gaps harder to shift. Glynis suggested that the school could look more at how it is having an impact on reducing gaps over time of the same cohorts of students. Also, what the picture looks like for those students who have been in the school for all of their secondary education. Significant numbers of pupil premium students also have SEN; Glynis suggested that the school could prepare data for this group which may well go in some way to explaining why the attainment gap remains stubborn. Leaders are beginning to track the gaps in reference to Progress and Attainment 8. This shows closed progress gaps and that the attainment gap is reducing more recently. Disadvantaged students are currently making better progress than their peers.

'Achievement for all' mentoring has promoted better performance for disadvantaged students. There has been a drive to mentor Year 7 students, again an earlier approach for a better impact. Help has been given to develop particular students towards better organisation. There has been some success here through a consistent approach. The junior sports academy is planned to start in September and leaders are looking to develop students' social skills and team work for example, through sport. Much has been done through sport

already to promote better attitudes to learning and social skills. Mentoring in years 8 and 10 has raised attainment and improved attendance. Glynis was impressed by her visit to the vocational centre where a small number of students follow courses which develop their skills and tackle disaffection. Cohorts of children have studied landscaping for example and students sell what they make and grow. Students praised the practicality of the place and spoke positively about other opportunities to study animal care, engineering and gardening. Glynis said that she thought this helped students to develop a love of learning. Again, the 'Oasis centre' seems to be highly beneficial and ensures that the most vulnerable students are supported to stay in education. They are referred through the interventions team. Techniques are taught to students to help them form coping mechanisms. Fifteen students currently attend the centre, some full time, others less and some just a few sessions. Some of these students would be unlikely to attend school without the unit. A mathematics and English teacher are specifically employed in the Oasis centre. Students say that the centre helped them with their attendance, helped them to make friends and reduced stress.

During the tour of classes, Glynis commented that books were very well presented in a low Year 10 English set. They had been well marked with helpful tips and hints for students to follow up. Classrooms were attractive, clean and tidy. Students were well behaved and on task. The music studios were well appointed and resourced. Students commented that there were lots of extra-curricular possibilities in music which motivated them to take an interest. In a Year 10 science class students were working hard revising. They said that they liked biology best as they found physics and chemistry more difficult.

Glynis enjoyed her meeting with the students. They praised the mathematics department and spoke about how teachers work tirelessly in class to support them during lessons, 'that makes a real difference'. They said that teachers encouraged them towards better grades and that revision was well organised. They also praised science saying that teachers expect more of us than in other subjects and show us effective ways to revise. They said quite clearly that teaching was very thorough, 'nothing is missed'. Students told Glynis that in a few subjects there had been changes of teacher, beyond the school's control, which had hampered their achievement. This had been particularly evident in ICT, English, geography and PE. Students said that behaviour is generally good although it is not as good in the lower sets because it is not managed as well by some teachers. Students said that they would like more rewards and praise for good behaviour. Outstanding learner cards are encouraging but they are only for a few pupils. Where students say teaching is not as good they said perhaps teachers 'could change the way they teach to engage students more in their learning.' They suggested that more practical ways of working would help.

We know that the work of academy trustees, school leaders and teachers is very demanding and we know that you do it because you believe that the pupils for whom you work deserve the best possible education possible. We are pleased to be working with you on this.

Yours sincerely
Tim Coulson

Tim Coulson

Regional Schools Commissioner, East of England and North East London

cc Carole Herman Headteacher

cc Jenny Comerford Deputy Headteacher