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Christopher Russell HMI
Regional Director, North West

Dear Sir or Madam

Outcomes for secondary pupils in Greater Manchester

I am writing to outline my concerns about the decline in outcomes for pupils across many parts of the Greater Manchester area. The recently published GCSE examination results highlight the extent of this decline.

In 2015, less than half of all pupils in Manchester, Salford and Rochdale attained the threshold level of five GCSEs grade A* to C, including English and mathematics. Pupils in Oldham fared little better than this. It is worrying that some of the Greater Manchester areas now figure among the worst performing local authorities in England for this measure.

Manchester itself is ranked in the bottom eight local authorities in England and Rochdale saw the second largest decline nationally for the proportion of pupils who attained this key measure. The overall rates of progress that pupils make in English and mathematics across Greater Manchester are below national averages.

There are some pockets of excellence. The Chief Inspector's Annual Report for 2014/15, for example, celebrates the fact that Mossley Hollins High School in Tameside was judged outstanding. However, too few pupils benefit from the strong leadership, excellent teaching and high expectations seen in schools like Mossley Hollins. Too many pupils in Greater Manchester's secondary schools are left ill-prepared for the next phase of their education, training or employment. In the most recent figures, for example, only 58% of 19-year-olds in Manchester held a level 2 qualification, including English and mathematics, compared to 66% nationally. Outcomes in Rochdale, Salford and Tameside were only marginally better.

This level of performance presents not only a worrying picture for the employment prospects of young people in one of the United Kingdom's major cities, it also presents a real risk to the economic and social stability of the area as a whole. This brings into question the foundation on which Greater Manchester intends to deliver the government's vision of a 'northern powerhouse'.

The extent of underachievement in many of Greater Manchester's secondary schools leads me to question the effectiveness of school improvement work across the area and to ask how well this is being led by those who have the power and influence to make a real difference. The decline in the attainment of secondary school pupils is particularly disappointing given the significant level of investment through the Greater Manchester Challenge. This was established to improve outcomes for children and young people, but the legacy of the £50 million campaign appears to be one of decline rather than improvement.

I acknowledge that local authority officers have a number of strategies to seek to resolve weaknesses in secondary provision within their localities. These include a focus on raising standards in reading and mathematics, and improving quality-assurance processes in schools. Similarly, multi-academy trusts are producing action plans to tackle underperformance in weaker schools. Teaching schools located in the area and other external improvement agencies are equally engaged in the improvement agenda for Greater Manchester. What I cannot yet see, however, is sufficient evidence of the impact that these strategies are having on the life chances of young people in Greater Manchester.

I recognise and applaud the achievement of children in Greater Manchester's primary schools. In 2015 progress measures in reading, writing and mathematics were above national figures, with no local area below the national rate for any of these subjects.

Secondary leaders must do more to capitalise on this strong performance in the primary phase. Effective arrangements, therefore, need to be in place to support the successful transition of pupils to secondary schools. Inspectors will be looking closely at how effectively secondary and primary schools work together to support pupils when they move to secondary education. Importantly, they will be looking to see how well information is used by secondary schools to enable pupils to sustain their progress, especially in the core subjects of English and mathematics.

Now is a time of significant challenge, especially because of the rapidly changing educational landscape and the greater diversity in the structure and governance of schools. It is essential that those responsible for education provision across Greater Manchester work closely together to develop a coherent and sustainable strategy to transform the fortunes of secondary schools in this important part of England.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, has repeatedly called for strong political will to drive educational improvement and has recognised the contribution that this made to the success of the London Challenge.

It is, therefore, vitally important that local politicians and Members of Parliament across Greater Manchester play their part in galvanising change and supporting these much-needed improvements.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Russell".

Christopher Russell HMI

Regional Director, North West

The recipients in relation to each of the Greater Manchester local areas (Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan) are:

Local Members of Parliament
Cabinet Members Schools Portfolio
Chief Executives, Local Authorities
Directors of Children's Services
Regional Schools Commissioner
Directors of Education, Anglican Diocese
Directors of Education, Roman Catholic Diocese
Chief Executive Officers, multi-academy trusts
Principals of further education colleges and sixth form colleges
Initial teacher training partnerships serving the area
Teaching school alliances
By Schools for Schools

cc. Department for Education