

Warrington Borough Council

Testimonial to support Judith Johnson

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Background

I commissioned Judith in my capacity as Operational Director, Deputy DCS for approximately 20 days from September to December 2014 to undertake a wholesale review of Warrington's strategy for school improvement. The scope of the review included:

- The strategy for school improvement
- Readiness for LASSI
- The systems and processes to support the strategy
- The deployment of LA staff
- The impact of the strategy
- The relationship between the LA and schools
- The role of members
- The support to Governors
- Chief Exec and Executive Director support and challenge
- The sustainability of the current strategy for school improvement
- Leadership
- Traded offer
- System leadership
- Role of the teaching school
- Brokerage and deployment of LLES and SLES
- Quality Assurance
- Value for money
- Use of data and needs analysis

Approach

During the timeframe of the commission, Judith was given full access to staff from Chief Executive, Executive Director and internal staff to head teachers and enabling services, including the Data Manager and Finance Officer. Judith observed key meetings, interviewed individual staff members, reviewed key documents and was given a mandate to allocate tasks so that an evidence file was created to support inspection.

Rationale for the commission

I took up post within Warrington BC in December 2013 and assumed direct responsibility for the services to support school improvement. In May 2013, HMCI introduced a framework for inspection of School Improvement for Local Authorities. Warrington has historically performed well in terms of attainment across all key stages but under the areas of focus for the LASSI, there were some areas of concern, particularly with regard to the quality of provision in Secondary schools where only 50% of schools are good and outstanding and performance for the most vulnerable children, where

vulnerable includes children with a statement of additional needs (EHC plan) , those fitting the criteria for free school meal and children in care. The model for school improvement was a traditional model not reflective of the changing dynamic between schools and the LA brought about by the changing status of schools. The relationships with schools were for the most part positive but the level of dependence on the LA was high and unsustainable, this coupled with the declining results in the Secondary sector, the increasing gap in attainment between all children and the most vulnerable and the quality of Secondary School Provision prompted the need for a wholesale review of the service.

Outcomes

The support from Judith facilitated a complete review of the internal processes, systems and policies to support the development of a system led model of school improvement that shifted the role of the LA from one of deliverer to one of quality assurance. The revised strategy sets out clearly the vision for the service and the role of the LA within that revised approach. The resources within the LA are articulated as the 'core offer' with an increased expectation on schools to assume accountability for their own improvement. The value of Judith's report has been the rigour applied to the application of resource with a clear focus on impact.

Having an independent 'eye' on service delivery and impact has enabled the LA to challenge embedded practice that has supported a culture of dependence. The rigorous review of processes and behaviour has exposed some of the cultural practice that has inhibited innovation. There has been a tangible shift in how the team approach their work with a much more structured approach. To redesign a service that has not been acknowledged as underperforming can be an uphill struggle and it is fair to say most of the resistance has been internal rather than external, with many schools chomping at the bit to create innovative solutions through peer to peer collaboration. Judith's contribution to creating a service that is fit for purpose has been huge, her passion, rigour and relentless focus has enabled me to introduce wholesale change whilst keeping key staff not only on board but with a renewed passion, enthusiasm and pride. The commission from Judith was worth every penny and gives me confidence that the service is now in a strong place to move forward.

Sarah Callaghan