



Knowsley Council

**Mr Christopher Russell HMI
Regional Director, North West
OFSTED
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD**

Tuesday, 23 February 2016

Dear Mr Russell

In response to your published open letter yesterday, I am writing to you to set out what Knowsley Council is already doing to provide the local leadership which you claim is lacking here. You didn't actually address your letter to me, and I suggest that you include me in future in any concerns you have about leadership.

I very much welcome and share your desire for Knowsley children to achieve better educational outcomes, and that has been one of my top priorities since becoming Leader of the Council last May. As you are aware, I have recently established an Education Commission for Knowsley (even though you declined to join it), and, as part of the Council's forthcoming budget for 2016/17, I will be proposing a £1 million investment to support the work of the Commission. I am also working with business leaders across the Liverpool City Region to support them in their desire to establish a University Technical College to specialise in advanced manufacturing and engineering.

As you are fully aware, the Government has a very clear policy agenda which is designed to reduce still further the role of local government in education. Alongside other political leaders in the City Region, I do not agree with this policy and indeed we made 11 specific proposals for powers to be devolved to the City Region from the Department for Education as part of the devolution negotiations at the latter end of 2015. All of those requests were rejected outright by the Department for Education without negotiation. It would be fair to say that the Department for Education was by far the least engaged of all Government Departments in the devolution negotiations. OFSTED's calls for greater local leadership would be more effective if they were addressed to those who simply aren't listening at the Department for Education.

Councillor Andy Moorhead
Leader of the Council

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In terms of the Government's support for us in tackling the challenges we face, I wrote to the Minister of State for Schools in the autumn of last year asking him to visit the Borough following his own ill-informed criticism of Knowsley schools. I am yet to receive even an acknowledgement of my letter, let alone a substantive response. Certainly, he has not taken me up on the offer and actually visited any of our schools!

I am extremely disappointed that you have decided to raise these concerns in this way, instead of through direct dialogue with myself and my colleagues, despite having had ample opportunities to speak to us directly. Indeed, officers from the Council including our Chief Executive came to Manchester to meet with you and your team on 7 January 2016 to discuss a range of issues which impact on education outcomes. Your team agreed to produce a note of the meeting, but we are still waiting for it despite asking for it to be produced on three separate occasions since. From that meeting our recollection is that you were content with the approach we are taking to improving educational outcomes notwithstanding the ongoing concerns about the Key Stage 4 results. In fact, our Chief Executive explicitly asked you if there was anything we should be doing that we are not already doing and you responded that you felt we were doing the right things. Furthermore, you complimented Knowsley on our approach to working with Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and on the quality of the MATs we had attracted to the Borough.

We are proud of our MATs and fully support their work in providing a traditional education for our children and we expect to see a continuation in the improvement of Key Stage 4 results in the coming years. It is worth noting that in 2015 the number of students in Knowsley gaining at least five good GCSE results (at grades A* - C) including English and Maths actually rose by 3.7%. This is the biggest rate of improvement in the North West and the 18th biggest in the country.

In that context, I am unclear as to the motives behind publishing a letter with such emotive language and which does not include a single positive suggestion as to any action we could take which we are not already taking.

I am particularly disappointed by the comments you make about a "lost generation" of children. This statement shows that you do not understand Knowsley or the countless examples of good and best practice which have a positive impact on children here every day. Over 90% of our Primary Schools have been judged to be "Good" or better by your Inspectorate. All of our Special Schools have been judged to be "Good" or better by your Inspectorate - as has our Family and Community Education service. In fact, that hugely emotive statement is based entirely on your view of our six Secondary Schools, one of which has never been inspected by OFSTED and one of which has been judged to be "Good" for leadership. As for the outcomes achieved by Knowsley, just under 50% of children at Key Stage 4 achieve five or more A* - C including English and Maths, which is just 3% less than the national average and nothing like the two thirds you claim are "lost". You should also note that we do not give up or write off our children simply because they do not achieve five or more A* - C.

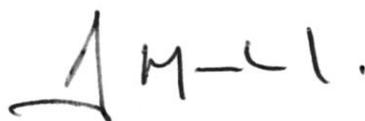
It is also factually incorrect to make the statement that pupils choose to leave the Borough because of the quality of secondary provision. Whilst it is true that some pupils leave the Borough because of the perceived quality of education, many more leave for religious reasons or because of a preference for single sex education which is not available in Knowsley. Some also leave because a school outside of the Borough is nearer to where they live. In reality however, the number of children leaving the Borough has almost halved over the last three years and two of our schools are reporting that they are oversubscribed this year, precisely because the quality of their provision has improved.

Similarly, your statement about children missing from school is misleading. In the last term alone, there has been a 19% increase – that is 1,200 more pupils - achieving 100% attendance. This achievement was celebrated with our children in early February 2016 by a local pupil who has gone on to become a well-respected Hollywood actor. No doubt one of our “lost generations” of pupils! Our work to improve attendance was highlighted with you at the meeting in January 2016, but appears now to have been forgotten about.

Both of these improvements are a direct result of the initiative shown by the Council and it is simply wrong to state that these efforts have had little or no impact. You know full well from your contact with officers of the Council that we work tirelessly to improve our education provision. In fact, your own HMIs have spent considerable time in the Borough over recent years working constructively and collaboratively with the Council to address our challenges.

I know you are new to the region and it is very unfortunate that your first contact with me has been so negative. In Knowsley, we work in a very open and transparent way with all our partners and with OFSTED – indeed, you personally complemented my officers on their open approach when they met with you in January. I would urge you to take a lead from the Council and seek to forge a positive and constructive working relationship with us in the interest of Knowsley children. Whilst your letter may be an effective way to grab a few media headlines, it will do nothing to improve education in the Borough. I know you have yet to visit the Borough or any of our schools so would like to formally invite you to pay us a visit so that I can show you what is actually happening here.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A M - 41'.

COUNCILLOR ANDY MOORHEAD
Leader of the Council