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Mrs Lisa Christensen
Director of Children's Services
Norfolk County Council
Children's Services
County Hall
Norwich
NR1 2DL

Dear Mrs Christensen

Inspection of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement under section 136(1) (b) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006

Following the recent inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectors on 10 to 14 June 2013, I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

We are grateful to you for your cooperation, and to your staff, the elected members, contracted partners, headteachers and governors who gave up their time to meet with us.[1]

This inspection was carried out because outcomes for young people in Norfolk have been too low for a number of years. Pupil progress throughout Key Stage 2 is too slow. As a result, attainment is well below the national averages in English and mathematics. While attainment is better at Key Stage 4, being in line with the

[1] During the inspection, discussions were held with senior and operational officers, and elected members of the local authority, governors and other stakeholders. Inspectors scrutinised available documents, including strategic plans, and analysed a range of available data.

INVESTORS IN PEOPLE | Silver

national averages in English and mathematics, the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils is too wide.

The focused inspection activity in March 2013 did not signal quick enough improvement and raised considerable concerns about the quality of education being provided by schools across the county and how the local authority's efforts to support and challenge schools to improve were perceived by school leaders.

Context

The county's first, middle and high schools were reorganised over a period of time to the current system of primary, infant, junior and secondary schools. There has been a reduction in the number of local authority school improvement staff although some schools 'buy back' advice and support for a range of subjects and training. A group of intervention advisers are funded by the local authority. All education services and activities are overseen by the Assistant Director for Children's Services who was appointed in September 2012. The local authority commissions senior leaders from high performing schools to help provide school-to-school support. Their work is overseen by senior local authority school improvement staff and a small number of county headteachers who are employed specifically to work with schools causing concern.

Summary findings

The local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement are ineffective.

The local authority has been too slow to challenge some weaker schools. As a result, the proportion of children in Norfolk attending good or better schools is lower than that seen nationally. There is a legacy of underachievement in many schools and, although rising gradually, standards remain lower than regional and national averages.

The challenge provided to schools by local authority staff, intervention advisers, partners and other advisers is not of consistently high quality. While many school leaders and governors have positive views on the quality of the local authority school improvement arrangements, particularly in schools that have received intensive support from intervention advisers, the impact of the personnel working to improve schools varies too much and is not measured or evaluated either systematically or frequently enough.

The local authority's new strategy for school improvement, 'A Good School for Every Norfolk Learner', is a clear statement of intent to challenge and support schools to improve. However, it does not set out the authority's ambitions with clear targets at regular intervals for the county's schools during the next two years.

The local authority has only used its formal powers of intervention in a small number of schools. Only recently have more underperforming schools been subject to formal and strong challenge from the local authority.

More positively, the local authority has begun to take a more concerted approach to improving educational outcomes for children and young people in Norfolk. Political leaders have recently made a public commitment to improve education and have allocated funding accordingly.

Areas for improvement

To improve achievement, and ensure that all pupils in Norfolk attend a good or better school, the local authority should:

- commission an external, forward-looking review of the strategies 'A Good School for Every Learner in Norfolk' and 'Norfolk to Good and Great' to identify how these could rapidly lead to better outcomes
- ensure that schools, including governors, are held to account for their own improvement and for raising the achievement of their pupils
- use available performance information systematically to check that schools are improving against frequent and ambitious milestones
- intervene more promptly and robustly, applying formal procedures where appropriate, in those schools which consistently underperform
- accelerate the implementation of new arrangements for commissioning system leaders, and partnerships, to improve educational provision
- sharpen evaluation of its strategy for, and practice in, challenging and supporting schools.

The local authority arrangements for school improvement require re-inspection within nine to 12 months.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- The local authority has taken too long to challenge schools that do not offer pupils a good or better education. While recent emphasis on improving school performance has led to a rise in achievement, especially for boys at Key Stage 2

and GCSE results, more needs to be done to demonstrate the effectiveness of the local authority's approach to improving schools.

- The local authority strategy for improving schools has not engaged all headteachers and governors. Better communication and consultation over the last two years, and new partnerships since September 2012, have led to more schools becoming receptive to support and challenge. Some clusters of schools are working well, and directories of good practice are being compiled, but resistance or ambivalence of a significant minority of schools to developing federations, or widening collaborative working, is slowing the pace of improvement.
- The strategy is supported by new political leadership and identifies priorities for improving school performance which are aligned to the council's strategic plans. However, the strategy lacks clarity about timescales for implementation and how impact will be measured. In the West District, strong post-16 partnerships are helping to raise standards and provide young people with better opportunities for training and employment. Consequently, the successful use of apprenticeships and wider range of courses has led to improving rates of progression into education and training.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- Standards at the end of Key Stages 2 and 4 are too low. Despite some improvement over the last three years and some narrowing of the gap between the achievement of advantaged and disadvantaged pupils, the rates of progress made by pupils are not improving rapidly in enough schools.
- Since September 2012, there has been an increase in the proportion of schools judged to be 'good' or better but so has there been nationally; consequently, the gap between Norfolk and most other local authorities remains too wide.
- The local authority uses individual school performance data, including information about finance, human resources and governance, to form a view of the level of challenge required for schools. Despite this, the local authority view of the performance of schools is generous.
- The local authority has not used its formal powers of intervention effectively in schools that are slow to improve. However, these powers are now being applied more frequently, especially in schools where there has been resistance to challenge.
- The work of the intervention advisers in schools causing concern, and in building capacity in local clusters, is improving achievement in a growing number of

partnerships but there is inconsistency in their work across the different districts of Norfolk.

- Although the local authority has increased its engagement with system leaders, and there are now over 100 in the county, too many weak schools have been slow to engage with system leaders when support has been offered.
- The progress of schools causing concern is kept under review by district and senior leaders. However, early preventative work has not always been effective. For example, all six schools judged to be inadequate at the time of the focused inspection activity in March 2013 had been identified for support by the local authority, but the action taken did not halt those schools' decline into special measures.
- A key element of the local authority's approach to school improvement is the 'Norfolk to Good and Great' programme. This targets satisfactory or requires improvement schools. Schools are positive about this initiative, especially in terms of the quality of training.
- The impact of local authority intervention in schools that are not yet good is improving. Reports from Her Majesty's Inspectors to schools that have been judged to require improvement comment favourably on the local authority's support for schools in taking effective action to tackle the areas for improvement.

Support and challenge for leadership and management, including governance

- The local authority's latest strategy includes a sharp focus on using partnerships to challenge and support school leaders. This includes working with teaching schools and other system leaders to provide school-to-school support for headteachers who are new, or who lead schools with low standards, or that have been satisfactory for the past five years. However, it is not always clear what difference the challenge and support are expected to make in terms of raising standards or improving inspection outcomes.
- While individual schools often improve rapidly as a result of the support provided by intervention advisers or system leaders, this is inconsistent across the county. Some schools requiring special measures take too long to improve.
- The governor support service liaises with the intervention team to focus its support on schools requiring improvement. Evaluation of the impact of this work is inconsistent.

- For every inadequate school, the local authority deploys an additional governor who, in some cases, is an advanced skills governor. However, the deployment is not always organised strategically or for the long term, which hinders the development of sustained improvement in governance.
- There is an expectation that all governing bodies take part in annual self-evaluation, which includes an analysis of the school's performance data, finance and quality of teaching. This is supported by the local authority's training programme, which now includes evaluation of performance data. This is making some difference to the quality and impact of governance but attendance at some key training events is low.

Use of resources

- Norfolk's decision-making about resources and spending is understood by schools. The school's forum, which represents schools and governors, plays a key role in scrutinising how funding is allocated. While there are well-advanced plans to establish a group of officers from different parts of the council to evaluate the effectiveness of spending decisions, the link between funding given to schools and the difference this is making to pupil outcomes is not always used to fully measure the impact of all interventions.
- The finance team works with schools to avoid unplanned surplus balances. Finance officers provide significant challenge to schools that have deficit budgets and align their work with intervention advisers. If governors do not take steps to improve weak financial performance, the local authority intervenes.
- Substantial additional resources have been provided to support the 'Norfolk to Great and Good' programme but, it is too early to measure the impact of these spending decisions.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Managing Director, and the Leader of Norfolk County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

John Seal
Her Majesty's Inspector