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Mrs Lisa Christensen
Director of Children's Services
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Dear Lisa

Norfolk local authority focused inspections – 12 to 22 March 2013

Thank you for our meeting on 14 March 2013. It was a good opportunity to meet you and your senior team, to discuss Ofsted's new regional structure and to explain how we might provide support and challenge to help improve Norfolk's schools. You described to me Norfolk's developing strategy for school improvement 'A Good School for Every Norfolk Learner' that arises from your work with headteachers, governors and others. Thank you for letting me know that your Cabinet has since approved the strategy.

As you are aware from our discussion, Ofsted is focusing some of its section 5 school inspection activity in particular local authorities into concentrated periods. We are doing this in areas where we have concerns about the relatively low proportions of good and outstanding schools, and as such where too few pupils enjoy an acceptable standard of education. This approach, coupled with the outcomes of a telephone survey of a sample of school leaders about their perception of the support and challenge from the local authority, enables us to obtain a clearer picture of the education provided for children and young people in those areas.

I am writing to inform you of the outcomes of the school inspections and the survey carried out in Norfolk during the focused period of 12 to 22 March 2013.

Outline of inspection activities

Twenty eight schools were inspected as part of the focused inspection activity: two infant schools; two junior schools; 16 primary schools; seven secondary schools; and

one pupil referral unit (PRU). Twenty four of these schools were judged to be satisfactory at their last inspection, three were found to be good and one school had not been inspected before. The schools were located in three areas surrounding Norwich (17 schools), Great Yarmouth (6 schools) and King's Lynn (5 schools). These schools were selected for this exercise from all those due for inspection by the end of this academic year.

During the inspections, lead inspectors gathered information on the use, quality and impact of local authority support for school improvement by asking the following three additional key questions of headteachers and governors:

- How well does the local authority know your school, your performance and the standards your pupils achieve?
- What measures are in place to support and challenge your school and how do these meet the needs of your school?
- What is the impact of the local authority support and challenge over time to help your school improve?

A further 21 schools were surveyed by telephone during the focused inspection period. These included one nursery school, ten primary schools, eight secondary schools and two special schools. These schools were selected randomly from the county's good and outstanding schools: nine were outstanding and 12 were judged to be good at their last inspection. Headteachers in these schools were asked the same three questions and a fourth, which reflected their status as good or outstanding schools:

- How well is the local authority making use of your schools' strengths to help others improve?

Inspection and survey outcomes

Of the 28 schools inspected as part of the focused inspection activity:

- one improved from being judged good at its previous inspection to be judged outstanding this time
- ten schools were judged to be good, including the PRU which had not been inspected previously; two schools sustained this outcome from the previous inspection, seven improved from satisfactory
- 11 schools were judged to require improvement; previously these were all judged to be satisfactory
- six schools declined in their overall effectiveness; all were placed into special measures.

It is of considerable concern that, while seven of the 24 schools previously judged satisfactory have improved and are now good, of the remaining 17 schools, six have declined and become inadequate, and 11 have not improved their inspection grades. This will be worrying to parents and carers, and means that the pupils in these schools continue not to have access to a good quality of education.

Responses to the key survey questions asked of those schools inspected during the focused period and those contacted by telephone were analysed.

A summary of the findings is set out below.

Strengths

- Inspection evidence has provided individual examples where the local authority has intervened successfully in schools that were previously declining and so vulnerable to becoming inadequate. The support provided to strengthen and stabilise senior leadership and governance appears to have been particularly effective.
- The impact of the local authority's work is most evident where constructive and well-established relationships exist between schools and their Intervention Advisers and Improvement Advisers, and where the headteacher has actively sought support that is targeted well at key priorities.
- Governors are generally positive about the support provided by the local authority, particularly in relation to their statutory duties. Some have benefited from a range of training provided to enable them to fulfil their roles more effectively.
- Most schools are positive about the impact of support from the county's Human Resources service in managing staff redundancies and underperformance.

Areas for development

- The survey responses suggest that the local authority has not established a well understood, strategic approach to building a sustainable model for school improvement. Not all schools are aware of the long-term strategic direction for education in the local authority, although they do have a clear understanding of the protocols that determine the level of local authority support. Furthermore, it is unclear how the local authority evaluates the impact of its challenge and support on promoting improvement.

- Although a number of examples of programmes to improve teaching were given by different schools, the local authority does not appear to have communicated to schools a clear, coordinated strategy to improve the quality of teaching.
- The local authority makes decisions about the type and extent of support a school receives on the basis of a risk assessment that includes an analysis of available performance data and discussions with the school about pupil performance. Through these assessments, many of the schools inspected were identified as requiring 'light touch support'. A frequent response from headteachers and governors was that the local authority officers accept too readily the data and school's self-evaluation, and do not provide sufficient challenge. In a small number of schools, this lack of challenge has meant that the local authority has not intervened early enough, for example, where there has been a decline in standards.
- Support provided by the local authority for those schools found to require special measures has not been effective. Known weaknesses and barriers to progress were not tackled soon enough. Local authority officers have been too accepting of the school's self-evaluation and reached an over-generous view of performance. Some inspection evidence suggests that the local authority withdraws its support too quickly before improvement has become embedded.
- Partnership working is not well established between schools, although federations and cluster arrangements are developing. A number of good or outstanding schools referred to the local authority instigating and commissioning support from them for other schools. Schools would welcome the local authority playing a more strategic role in this, especially in terms of ensuring consistency in the quality of such support. Although there is some strong evidence of improvement in some schools, not all appear to be committed to a collaborative approach of working together. It is perceived that an opportunity has been missed by the local authority to develop a strong learning community where best practice can be shared routinely. However, the local authority is hopeful that it's recently adopted strategy, 'A Good School for Every Norfolk Learner', will help to address this.
- Where headteachers have not been proactive in seeking well-focused support, and this has gone unchallenged by the local authority, the schools have not improved.
- In a small number of schools, significant weaknesses in governance over time have not been tackled with sufficient urgency or rigour by the local authority.

- Responses to the telephone survey from good and outstanding schools indicate that too many schools think that structural change, for example amalgamation or federation, is the only local authority solution to improving weak schools.

In summary, Norfolk schools do not articulate a clear enough understanding of the local authority's strategy for school improvement. There is a wide divergence of opinion amongst schools about the quality and impact of support and challenge provided by the local authority. Some value its role in helping them to bring about improvement, but others are clear that improvements in teaching and achievement have not been as a result of support or challenge from the local authority, or indeed a coordinated, strategic approach to promoting school to school support.

The proportion of good or better schools has risen in Norfolk this year, albeit at a slower rate than seen nationally. However, the weak outcomes of the focused inspection activity and the key areas for development identified by the survey, demonstrate that there is an urgent need for the local authority to provide greater challenge and support to the county's schools in order to bring about sustained improvement.

I hope these observations are useful as you seek to improve further the quality of education for the children and young people of Norfolk.

Please pass on my thanks to the headteachers, governors and local authority officers who gave their time to talk with our inspectors during the focused inspection period. I look forward to meeting with you to discuss the outcomes of this work.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sean Harford".

Sean Harford HMI
Regional Director, East of England

Cc Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Education