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Ms Sue Cook
Director for Children and Young People
Suffolk County Council
Endeavour House
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Dear Ms Cook

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 20-24 January 2014, 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 the achievement of pupils in primary and secondary schools has been below national averages. In addition, the proportion of pupils attending schools which are good or better is too low.

The Local Authority arrangements for supporting school improvement are ineffective.

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.

Context

The Director for Children and Young People was appointed in February 2013. The Council's Cabinet Member for Education also took on their role some months later, in June 2013. An interim Assistant Director for Learning and Improvement took up post in May 2013. The Local Authority is currently reviewing the structure of the Learning and Improvement Service to refocus the role of the Service in improving pupils' achievement and to meet further reductions in spending.

There are 334 maintained and academy schools in Suffolk: 254 primary schools (of which 77 have less than 100 pupils on roll); 13 middle schools; 43 secondary schools; 14 pupil referral units; nine special schools and one nursery school.

Suffolk County Council embarked upon a process of school organisation review in 2007 to move from a three-tier to a two-tier system. The completion of this process, across almost all areas of Suffolk, is due by 2016. A final decision is soon to be made regarding the proposal of a two-tier system in the Bury St Edmunds area.

In the summer of 2012, the Council launched its 'Raising the Bar' policy as it recognised the need to raise educational achievement. As part of this, leaders commissioned an external enquiry by The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA). Headteachers, governors and other stakeholders have been involved in this work. The outcomes of this review resulted in the Council's 'Raising the Bar' plan. The Local Authority has recently concluded a further consultation with headteachers, and suggestions for future developments are being considered by senior officers and councillors.

Summary findings

- Too few pupils in Suffolk attend a good or better school and far too many attend a school that is inadequate. This is unacceptable.
- The proportion of pupils achieving average levels of attainment and making at least nationally expected progress at the end of Key Stages 2 and 4 is well below average. This is damaging the life chances of young people in the county.
- Rates of improvement in pupils' achievement at the end of these key stages are too slow. This has led to the low attainment seen in too many of the county's schools.
- The Local Authority's strategy to challenge and support schools is weak. Officers have not intervened quickly enough in those schools that are

declining. They have been equally tardy in addressing ineffective leadership in maintained schools. As a result, there has been a rise in the number of schools judged to be inadequate by Ofsted.

- The Local Authority does not have a strategic plan to show how the Learning and Improvement Service can contribute to the Council's future vision. As a result, too many school leaders remain unaware of the Local Authority's role in bringing about rapid improvement, or what their contribution should be to realising the Council's ambitions.
- Weak leadership and poor provision for pupils in too many maintained schools have not been challenged quickly enough by the Local Authority. This has left some schools to languish far too long in mediocrity.
- Local Authority officers have not consistently used available information about maintained schools' performance to intervene quickly and provide both challenge and support.
- A lack of quality assurance and evaluation of the impact of school improvement officers' work has led to inconsistent levels of challenge to the leaders of maintained schools in the Authority.
- Although officers and councillors have a shared, ambitious vision for improved educational achievement in Suffolk schools, this ambition is not being realised.
- Senior officers have started to challenge academy schools and academy trusts when standards are a cause for concern. This challenge includes informing the Department for Education of these concerns.
- Governors and headteachers of maintained and academy schools value the support received from the Local Authority for strengthening governance.

Areas for improvement

To improve achievement and ensure that all pupils in Suffolk County Council attend a good or better school, the Local Authority should:

- urgently finalise strategic plans which demonstrate how the Learning and Improvement Service can contribute to the realisation of the Council's vision for improvement. It is important that these plans show how progress and impact will be measured
- improve communication with school leaders so that they understand the Local Authority's role in school improvement
- ensure that challenge to, and intervention in, maintained schools that are underperforming, lead to rapid improvements in progress and attainment by:
 - using the wide range of available evidence to target support where the need is greatest, and speedily identify and prevent trends of decline

- ensuring that there is transparency in how the Local Authority identifies schools causing concern
- taking quick action to tackle weaknesses in school leadership, including in those maintained schools that have disengaged from the Local Authority's support or challenge in the past
- implement systematic and robust checks to evaluate the quality of work provided by the Learning Improvement Service.

The Local Authority arrangements for school improvement require re-inspection within nine to 12 months.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- Senior officers and politicians are ambitious and determined to secure improvements for all pupils in Suffolk. They are rightly unequivocal that the pace of improvement has been too slow. They also recognise that recent interventions have not had time to have a substantial impact.
- The Local Authority has failed to communicate clearly with school leaders and teachers to ensure that there is a shared understanding of the Local Authority's role in school improvement.
- The overarching intention of the Council's vision for improvement is understood and welcomed by school leaders and governors. However, the importance of improving teaching and learning and the critical role of strengthening leadership are insufficiently linked to the realisation of this vision.
- Strategic planning to achieve the Council's ambition is incomplete: it is unclear how the progress and impact of the Local Authority's work will be tracked and measured.
- The plans are not informed by a detailed, forensic analysis of the weaknesses in maintained schools' performance to determine the priorities to raise standards and improve provision.
- School leaders lack confidence in the Local Authority because communications are unclear and there is insufficient strategic planning.
- The Local Authority has shown leadership in implementing a major reorganisation of schools in a changing educational landscape. There is evidence that these changes are beginning to make a difference to standards at Key Stage 2 in some areas. However, the review process has not yet been completed and so the impact of this change is not fully conclusive. In addition, not all school leaders agree with the decision that was made to reorganise schools in this way.

- The Cabinet Member for Education has increased the levels of accountability for senior officers and has introduced meetings to discuss progress and actions taken in individual maintained schools. However, this is a recent development with little tangible evidence of impact as yet.
- The Local Authority has set clear expectations with schools for the implementation of Raising the Participation Age (RPA). These are clearly articulated by senior officers in well-considered plans which particularly focus on the urgent need to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). These well articulated plans are not replicated in other parts of the Learning and Improvement Service.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- The impact of the Local Authority's challenge and support has been weak. Over time, there has been no significant reduction in the number of maintained schools causing concern and a rise in the number of schools judged to be inadequate.
- Officers have not consistently used the wide-ranging information available about schools well enough. This lack of a targeted and forensic use of the data means that trends of decline have not been identified consistently. Intervention has generally been too slow to improve standards.
- The reasons why a maintained school may be a cause for concern to the Local Authority are not routinely shared with school leaders.
- Maintained school leaders who have, in the past, chosen not to engage with the Local Authority, and whose schools have been a cause for concern, have also not been challenged or supported effectively.
- The quality of school improvement officers' work is inconsistent. Some headteachers report being held rigorously to account during officers' visits and through the Strategic Accountability Group; others judge that officers provided scant challenge in these meetings.
- Written records of visits to maintained schools are not consistently evaluative. This weakness means that records do not always provide clear direction and advice to school leaders on how to improve their schools.
- Officers can point to improvements in pupils' achievement in individual maintained schools as a result of targeted support, particularly those identified as a concern by Ofsted. However, this impact is not consistent across all maintained schools.
- The Local Authority does not yet have a coordinated approach to the evaluation of the range of school-to-school support strategies for underperforming maintained schools. National and Local Leaders of Education are used to support some schools but there is no detailed overall evaluation of

their impact. Local 'Challenge Partners' began work in October 2013 in primary schools, but it is too early to identify sustained impact.

- In recent months, senior officers have challenged academy schools and multi-academy trusts when there have been concerns about performance. The Local Authority is now quicker to raise its concerns with the Department for Education.
- Officers have productive relationships with academies and are using successful leaders in these schools to support school improvement, including through the proposed 'Learning Partnership'.

Support and challenge for leadership and management, including governance

- The most significant weakness of the Local Authority's arrangements is that officers have not been quick enough to address ineffective leadership in maintained schools. This is at the core of why pupils' achievement is low and why school performance is generally a cause for concern.
- Historically, the Local Authority has been slow to use its full range of statutory powers.
- The Local Authority's use of Interim Executive Boards to replace weak governing bodies is variable. On some occasions, the Local Authority has taken early, decisive action, but too often it has been in response to an inadequate inspection outcome.
- Additional governors are deployed to maintained schools where there are concerns about governance. It is particularly good to note that a considerable number of governors have been recently trained to become National Leaders of Governance.
- The Local Authority has promoted and brokered partnerships which provide school-to-school support. However, it is not clear whether this has contributed to wide-scale improvement throughout the Authority.
- In recent months, the Local Authority has increased its level of challenge to maintained school leaders, including in its use of statutory powers. The Director for Children and Young People, and other senior officers, are leading 'challenge meetings' with headteachers and governors of maintained schools causing concern to the Local Authority. This has clarified expectations of leaders in these schools, but the approach is too recent to demonstrate substantial impact.
- Officers know where best practice exists and have used this knowledge to broker support for maintained schools. This has contributed to improvements to the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement in some targeted schools.

- The quality of support for governance is highly valued by governors and headteachers, as is evident in the high numbers of both maintained and academy schools that purchase packages and training from this aspect of the service.

Use of resources

- There are examples of improvements in individual maintained schools and small groups of schools working collaboratively; however, officers are unable to provide substantial evidence of a cost-effective use of resources across the Local Authority as a whole.
- Significant funding is delegated directly to schools. The Local Authority monitors closely how this money is spent and has challenged and intervened when necessary.
- School leaders understand the decision-making process related to finance and the schools forum is used well in this respect as a decision-making body.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chief Executive and the Leader of Suffolk County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

James McNeillie
Her Majesty's Inspector

