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30 July 2014

Ms Sheila Lock  
Interim Director of Children's Services  
Norfolk County Council  
County Hall  
Norwich  
NR1 2DL

Dear Ms Lock

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

Following the inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectors between 23 and 27 June 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.<sup>1</sup>

This was a re-inspection following the previous inspection in June 2013 when the local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement were judged to be ineffective.

**Context**

The local authority completed an action plan based on the recommendations from the June 2013 inspection. This was incorporated into the local authority's strategy, *A good school for every Norfolk learner* following feedback from Ofsted. The local authority also commissioned an evaluation of its improvement strategy by an external partner which reported its findings in October 2013. In the last year,

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

county council elected members have moved from cabinet member leadership to a children's services committee structure.

## **Summary findings**

### **The Local Authority arrangements for supporting school improvement are effective.**

Norfolk's arrangements for school improvement are now demonstrating more positive impact on the standards achieved by pupils and on the quality of education provided by schools. Inspection outcomes confirm that the proportion of good or better schools is improving. In autumn 2012, 60% of primary and 47% of secondary schools were judged as good or better. At the time of this inspection these figures had improved to 70% for primary and 64% for secondary schools. However, these remain well below national figures.

Outcome measures suggest improvement for all age groups too. Predicted and actual results for this year show strong improvement for the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 2 pupils. The proportion of Reception pupils achieving a good level of development is 58%, which is a significant improvement on 2013. In Key Stage 2, the proportion achieving Level 4 or above in reading, writing and mathematics is 78%. Both of these figures are above last year's national averages. Despite overall improvement, however, the outcomes for Norfolk's small schools remain below the county average.

Outcomes for pupils in the county's secondary schools also indicate improvement. School data for this year identify a six percentage point increase in the proportion of pupils expected to gain five or more GCSE passes at grades A\* to C, including English and mathematics. If realised, this would bring Norfolk up to the national figure for last year. However, although reduced, the attainment gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and those from more advantaged backgrounds is wider than the national figure. There also remains variability in the outcomes for pupils across the seven districts within Norfolk. Clearly, there is still much work to do to ensure that the improvements seen so far are more evenly spread.

The local authority's improvement strategy is based on the forensic use of accurate outcomes data to provide intensive support and challenge for schools. All schools, including academies, are risk-assessed regularly. This leads to focused support and challenge from the local authority or, for high-achieving schools, strong encouragement to take up opportunities to provide support for others.

Inspection evidence for this year shows that of the 29 schools in receipt of intensive support that have been inspected, 25 have improved to become good or better. This is a higher proportion 'getting to good' than is seen nationally. In addition, a review of the 108 school inspection reports for this academic year shows that, where there are comments about the quality of the support by the local authority, almost 90% were positive.

Intervention in schools where underperformance is identified is now swift and proportionate. The local authority has intervened much more robustly this year, through significantly increasing its use of warning notices, establishing interim executive boards and removing governors' delegated budget status.

The local authority is making increasingly effective use of system leaders. There is a strong partnership with the London Leadership Strategy and this is supporting effective developments within Norfolk. This is seen in the improved outcomes at inspection for schools subject to intensive support and challenge. However, the full impact of this improving provision is yet to be seen in high enough standards.

Council leaders and senior officers have worked with determination to improve the outcomes for Norfolk's pupils and they recognise that there is still much more to do. The council has committed considerable funds to improving schools and a strategic body has been established, the Norfolk Education Challenge Board, with an independent and highly-experienced chair. This body is now an effective driver for further improvement.

### **Areas for improvement**

To continue to improve its impact on schools, the local authority should:

- work to increase the proportion of good and better schools still further, with a sharper focus on secondary schools and the smallest primary schools
- challenge school leaders to improve the achievement of vulnerable groups, including those entitled to free school meals and looked after children
- focus support and challenge to eradicate the variability in pupils' outcomes between districts
- develop the role of system leaders further by building on external support to rapidly increase capacity in the county.

## **Corporate leadership and strategic planning**

- Norfolk's core strategy, set out in the document *A good school for every Norfolk learner* is coherent and well known by headteachers and governors.
- The establishment of the Norfolk Education Challenge Board is an effective development in strengthening the impact of school improvement services. Headteachers and governors believe that there is now a more effective system for supporting schools across the local authority, especially through much more robust data analysis which has led to greater challenge.
- The local authority's arrangements to ensure there are sufficient and suitable places for all 16- and 17- year-olds in education or training are developing well. Participation rates for 16-year-olds are improving and are above the national average. The most recent data show a higher rate of apprenticeships than seen nationally.
- The number of young people not in employment, education or training is reducing, but remains above the national figure and so warrants greater effort to improve further.

## **Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support**

- The local authority has a robust system for the collection and analysis of school data. All schools, including academies, use this service to support their own improvement strategies.
- Pupil level data is required every six weeks by the local authority from each school identified as underachieving. This regular data collection and analysis is used to make accurate decisions about the risk assessments for schools.
- For schools assessed to be at risk of declining from 'good', a specific range of support and challenge is available. These schools have an external Education Challenge Partner assigned to them whose role is to monitor progress, and they are strongly encouraged to engage with the Norfolk to Good and Great programme. This provides tailored support to meet the school's specific needs. Headteachers value this programme.
- Outcomes for the districts within Norfolk remain too variable. The proportion of Key Stage 2 pupils gaining Level 4 or better in reading, writing and mathematics in 2013 showed a 12 percentage point gap between the highest and lowest performing areas. This gap has only slightly reduced this year.
- The attainment for pupils in the smallest primary schools remains stubbornly below the average figure for Norfolk.
- Gaps between the attainment of vulnerable and more advantaged pupils remain too wide.

## **Support and challenge for leadership and management, including governance**

- The local authority now uses statutory powers and local strategies for intervention more robustly and effectively. Since September 2013, it has imposed

six interim executive boards, issued 21 formal warning letters and served four statutory warning notices. It has also removed delegated budget status from 21 schools. Additionally, concerns about the performance or leadership of academies are reported to the Department for Education swiftly.

- Thirty eight external reviews of governance have been conducted following risk assessments and in all cases these resulted in action plans for improvement submitted to the local authority.
- Four in five good and outstanding schools are now engaging in school support work across Norfolk because the local authority has developed more effective use of system leaders.
- The coordination of the work by Teaching Schools, National and Local Leaders in Education is developing well. However, external partners continue to be used extensively, so further work to build greater capacity in the county is still needed.

### **Use of resources**

- Elected county council members have authorised and provided significant additional resources to invest into the system to tackle the issues identified at the inspection in June 2013. This has been focused to target rapid improvement, engage external expertise and challenge weak practice in schools. A clear monitoring programme regularly scrutinises the impact of spending on key improvement strategies.
- The Schools' Forum effectively supports and challenges financial decision making. It is well led and decisions on budgets and funding are now effectively focused on raising achievement and improving provision.

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

Robert Pyner  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**