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

Inspection of Suffolk County Council's arrangements for supporting school improvement

Following the visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors Sue Frater, Lesley Farmer, Jeremy Loukes and Paul Tomkow to Suffolk County Council, I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

Thank you for your cooperation and that of all the staff whom we met during our visit between 26 and 30 January 2015. We particularly appreciate the time and care taken to prepare the programme for us. Please pass on our thanks to your staff, elected members, contracted partners, headteachers and governors who kindly gave up their time to meet us.

The inspection of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement in England is conducted under section 136(1) (b) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Context

There are 331 schools, including special schools and pupil referral units, in Suffolk. This figure includes 55 academies and six free schools, but does not include independent schools. The schools currently provide for just under 92,000 pupils.

In 2007, the local authority started a review of school organisation, to move from a three-tier to a two-tier system, which is due for completion by 2016.

The local authority's school improvement service is currently being restructured. The Director for Children and Young People was appointed in February 2013. The Assistant Director for Education and Learning was appointed in July 2014.

Evidence

During the inspection, inspectors held discussions with senior and operational officers, elected members, headteachers, principals, governors, strategic partners and other stakeholders. They scrutinised a range of documents relating to the local authority's arrangements for school improvement, including notes of visits to schools by local authority staff and a selection of Ofsted inspection reports. Inspectors also took account of nine school inspections and the feedback from 16 school and academy leaders who were contacted by telephone in the week before the inspection.

Summary findings

The local authority has been too slow in acting on the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection. Too few pupils in Suffolk attend a good or outstanding school, particularly in Lowestoft and Ipswich which have the highest levels of deprivation in the county. Elected members and local authority senior leaders are committed to their vision of raising aspiration and improving outcomes for all children and young people. The senior leaders have rightly focused their attention on inadequate schools, but have only recently established systems for identifying other schools at risk of deteriorating. As a result, poorly performing schools that have been supported and challenged have improved while others have declined.

The number of pupils achieving average levels of attainment and making at least nationally expected progress by the end of their primary and secondary school education remains below average and is especially low for disadvantaged pupils. The local authority has set suitable targets for school improvement. However, as the targets set by schools themselves are not yet linked to these, it is difficult to see how they will be met.

The 'Raising the Bar' school improvement strategy document clearly defines the local authority's role in monitoring and challenging all schools to improve and in intervening in schools causing concern. It rightly promotes schools' autonomy. However, the authority's arrangements for identifying priorities for school

improvement, such as the progress of disadvantaged pupils, and for signposting schools to appropriate support are poor. There is not enough school-to-school support in the county, especially in the areas that need it most.

Much of the school improvement strategy, as defined in the document, has been implemented since September 2014 and is too recent to have made any substantial improvement in pupils' outcomes. Since September, the local authority has also made decisive improvements in the areas that were identified in the previous inspection. It now tackles weaknesses in school leadership, including governance, by deploying its formal powers of intervention promptly. Local authority officers visit all schools, not just those identified as causing concern, although the purpose of this has yet to be clarified. The local authority is also developing systems for quality assuring the work of school improvement staff in line with their changing role.

In order to challenge all schools to improve, including academies and free schools, the local authority now carries out a risk assessment of the schools according to the progress their pupils are making. This places the local authority in a stronger position to identify schools at risk of deteriorating early enough to prevent their decline.

The local authority did not manage the consultation with headteachers and governors about the process of the schools' risk assessment well. This has resulted in strained relationships with many school leaders. Some headteachers expressed concern that they were challenged to improve without access to appropriate school-to-school support. The strategy for accessing support, including brokered and commissioned support, is not clear.

The local authority has not worked effectively in partnership with all school leaders to agree a strategy by which they can improve the quality of teaching and learning to raise achievement. The local authority is, however, promoting collaborative work between some schools, with varying success. It has also recently started taking appropriate action to increase the number of teaching schools, headteachers and governors who can support other headteachers and governors. However, this school-to-school support is as yet disparate, with no cohesive overarching strategy to define its purpose and expected outcomes.

There are examples of successful partnership work between other local authority services and schools, colleges and early years settings. These include the work on raising the participation age post-16, the involvement of key practitioners in improving early years settings and the 'Schools' Choice' traded services such as finance and human resources. All of these partnerships involve strong consultation

and communication between the local authority and the education providers, which has led to agreed, clear strategies.

Areas for improvement

- Rapidly improve achievement, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, and ensure that all pupils in Suffolk County Council attend a good or outstanding school by:
 - ensuring that the targets set by schools, especially for disadvantaged pupils, are aspirational and result in the council's targets for school improvement being met
 - using the recently introduced system for monitoring achievement in all schools to identify schools at risk of declining and intervening more quickly when necessary
 - improving the effectiveness of communications and consultation with schools
 - working in partnership with all school leaders to identify priorities for improvement and agreeing a cohesive strategy to support leadership, teaching and learning
 - urgently increasing the availability to all schools of high quality support, including school-to-school support
 - clarifying the purpose of local authority officer visits to all schools in relation to monitoring, challenge and the signposting of appropriate support.

The inspection team recommends that the local authority's progress in tackling the areas for improvement is evaluated by a further inspection within the next two years.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- Elected members and senior officers have articulated a clear vision of raising the attainment and skills of all children and young people in Suffolk. The council has committed significant funding to the strategy for 'Raising the Bar'. The strategy document sets out clearly the local authority's changing role in school improvement, but does not set out an agreed strategy with schools for raising achievement.
- The school's accountability board rightly holds senior officers to account for the implementation of the 'Raising the Bar' strategy. However, the board is not evaluating the impact of the strategy on school improvement overall. The self-evaluation document lists the actions taken, but not the outcomes. The council has set performance targets but it is difficult to see how they will be

met as there is no clear link between these targets and those set by the schools.

- The local authority has not communicated or consulted about the school improvement strategy effectively enough. Many schools complained that they were informed of their risk assessment outcome by letter, without the opportunity to discuss ways in which they could improve performance. The changing roles of local authority staff have not been communicated clearly to school leaders and this has resulted in considerable confusion. There is also a lack of clarity about which model of school-to-school support the local authority is promoting. All of this is due to the fact that these aspects of the strategy are still evolving and have not been defined in the 'Raising the Bar' document.
- Local authority officers work well in partnership with employers, colleges and other post-16 providers to secure sufficient suitable provision for all 16–19-year-olds. Consequently, the proportion of young people participating in education, training or an apprenticeship is increasing at a faster rate than nationally. However, the proportion who are not in employment, education or training remains above average.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- The local authority has been too slow in developing the capacity for school-to-school support in the county, especially in the areas where it is needed most. It is not consulting widely enough with all school leaders to agree an approach that would be the most effective in improving leadership, teaching and learning.
- Some school leaders expressed concern that they did not know where to access good quality support or opportunities to work in collaboration with others. It is not clear whether the recently introduced half-termly visits from a local authority officer will include signposting suitable support for schools.
- Through more rigorous monitoring of pupils' progress data for all schools, the local authority is in a better position to challenge schools to improve and to identify those at risk of not improving. However, this is too recent to have prevented some schools from deteriorating. Consequently, the proportion of good and outstanding schools remains below local and national benchmarks. Almost a third of the pupils do not attend a good school.
- The local authority's intervention for the schools it identifies as causing concern is clearly understood by the schools and is effective in enabling them to improve. This is an improvement since the last inspection. Where appropriate, the local authority now takes robust action to deploy its formal powers of intervention. These include issuing formal warning notices, deploying additional governors and using school improvement boards before establishing an interim executive board.

- The local authority has positive working relationships with academies. Where the standards or leadership of an academy are a cause for concern, the local authority reports such concerns to the Department for Education through the Regional Schools Commissioner. The local authority has taken a strong stand against poor quality sponsors and this has led to a change of sponsor for some academies.
- The local authority early years staff work well in partnership with providers to ascertain their specific improvement needs. They analyse inspection reports to identify themes for training, such as improving boys' writing. They train and deploy key practitioners to support settings that are causing concern. As a result, the number of settings that are good or outstanding is high and a good proportion of families take up government funding for places for two year olds.

Support and challenge for leadership and management (including governance)

- In the last inspection, inspectors identified ineffective leadership in the local authority's maintained schools as the most significant weakness in school improvement. Since July 2014, the local authority has been working on a well-planned, coordinated approach to developing school leadership. Aligned to the programme is a clear strategy for recruiting good quality teachers and leaders. Until recently, the local authority was the main provider of support for leadership in weaker schools. It now appropriately brokers or commissions a large proportion of this support.
- There are only four national leaders of education in the local authority. However, the local authority is beginning to use an increasing number of local leaders of education more systematically to challenge and support other leaders. Professional development for aspiring headteachers and deputies, including highly regarded national programmes, is planned to be provided through the teaching schools. Training for middle leaders is not yet in place.
- Training programmes for governors are of good quality, well attended and valued. They include tailored packages of support. In addition, national leaders of governance and an increasing number of additional governors support governing bodies of schools causing concern to good effect. Current governor vacancies are high, including for chairs of governors. To address this situation, the local authority has required all governing bodies to be reconstituted to ensure they are quorate by September 2015. The local authority and governor forum are aware that more needs to be done to develop a successful strategy for the recruitment and retention of high quality governors.

Use of resources

- While a high proportion of the budget is delegated to the frontline so that as much as possible reaches pupils, achievement remains low. This does not reflect good value for money. The local authority is beginning to undertake more regular and thorough reviews of the cost effectiveness of its resource allocation. For example, the finance team makes effective use of a risk assessment to identify schools causing concern and issues notices of financial concern where necessary. It challenges schools with large reserves to submit spending plans.
- Services such as human resources, finance and governor support are traded externally under the title of 'Schools' Choice'. As the name implies, schools make the choice of buying from these traded services or from elsewhere. Strong communication and consultation with maintained and academy school leaders ensure the services are tailored to the schools' needs. As a result, a high number of schools and academies buy into them.
- Schools understand the local authority's deployment of resources well because of the authority's effective consultation with schools on its budget-setting processes. The finance team makes effective use of a resource allocation working group to examine budget proposals. The schools forum not only agrees the funding formula but also decides which proposal to implement. It has voted for the local authority to retain funding to provide support for behaviour and attendance and intervention in schools causing concern. Both of these areas are showing improved outcomes.

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

Yours sincerely

Sue Frater

Her Majesty's Inspector