

Aviation House  
125 Kingsway  
London  
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231  
**Textphone** 0161 618 8524  
[enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

**Direct T** 0300 0130178  
**Direct F** 020 7421 6546  
[sean.harford@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:sean.harford@ofsted.gov.uk)



6 November 2013

Ms Sue Cook  
Director of Children and Young People's Services  
Suffolk County Council  
Endeavour House  
8 Russell Road  
Ipswich  
Suffolk  
IP1 2BX

**Sean Harford HMI**  
Regional Director, East of England

Dear Sue

### **Suffolk Local Authority focused inspections – 9 to 20 September 2013**

I am writing to inform you of the outcomes of the school inspections and telephone survey carried out across Suffolk during the focused period of 9 to 20 September 2013.

On Monday 9 September 2013, Paul Brooker HMI and I met with Adrian Orr, Interim Assistant Director, and Angela Thompson, Senior Primary Adviser, to explain the purpose of the focused inspections. In addition, we discussed the Local Authority's developing strategy for school improvement, based on the 'Raising the Bar' initiative, launched in June 2012, which seeks to challenge and support schools in Suffolk to raise their attainment.

As you are aware, Ofsted is focusing some of its section 5 school inspection activity in particular local authorities 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, has enabled us to obtain a clearer picture of the education provided for children and young people in Suffolk, and your role in supporting improvement.

### **Outline of focused inspection activities**

We inspected 33 schools as part of the focused inspection activity: 23 primary schools; seven secondary schools; two pupil referral units (PRUs) and one special school. Four of the secondary schools, including the two upper schools inspected, are converter academies.

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?

We surveyed a further 25 schools by telephone during the focus period. These included 21 primary schools, three secondary schools and one middle school, selected randomly from the county's good and outstanding schools. Seven of the schools sampled were judged outstanding at their last inspection and 18 were judged to be good. 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 school's strengths to help others improve?

### **Inspection outcomes**

Of the 33 schools inspected as part of the focused inspection activity:

- 2 were judged to be 'outstanding', both of which sustained this high standard of educational provision
- 13 were judged to be 'good', 9 of which were already at this grade, 2 improved from 'satisfactory' and 2 declined from 'outstanding'
- 12 were judged to require improvement, 11 of which were already at this grade and one school declined from 'good'
- 6 were judged to be inadequate, 5 of which declined from 'satisfactory' and one from 'good'; four of these schools were placed in special measures and two were deemed to have serious weaknesses.

I am very concerned that, by the end of this focus period, there was no increase in the county's stock of good or outstanding schools and that nearly a fifth of the schools inspected were judged inadequate. This is unacceptable and now means that Suffolk has a higher proportion of pupils educated in inadequate schools than both the regional and national averages. Additionally, the proportion of its schools which require improvement or are inadequate remains well above the national figure. It is also worrying to me that, against a backdrop of considerable improvement across the rest of the country, 20 of the schools inspected did not improve their overall inspection grade and nine declined in the quality of education being provided. The lack of progress of previously 'satisfactory' schools means that pupils in these schools

still do not have access to a good quality of education. This will be of great concern to parents, carers and pupils alike.

On reviewing the inspection reports from the focus period, it is clear to me that the inspection evidence affords some examples of effective intervention and support from the Local Authority. However, it is equally clear that in some schools the Local Authority has not intervened early enough, for example where there has been a drop in standards. Support provided by the Local Authority for those schools judged to require special measures or that have serious weaknesses has not been effective. In some cases, the Local Authority has been aware of the issues for some time, but has not acted swiftly enough or with sufficient robustness to arrest a decline in standards.

### **Survey responses**

Responses to the key survey questions asked of those schools inspected during the focus period and those contacted by telephone were analysed. A summary of the findings is set out below.

### **Strengths**

- Schools are aware of the Local Authority's strategy for improvement embodied in its 'Raising the Bar' initiative. At the heart of this strategy is collaboration between schools. They agree that the Local Authority's ambition is articulated and understood, and consider that the initiative has created a degree of momentum for improvement.
- The schools feel that the strategy is most effective where existing school-to-school partnerships, brokered by the Local Authority, are driving improvement.
- Schools generally feel that the Local Authority makes effective use of performance data to identify any decline in standards in individual schools and to target its support accordingly.
- Some of the county's stronger schools and experienced headteachers, notably but not exclusively those who are National or Local Leaders of Education, recognise that the Local Authority draws on their expertise to support other schools.
- Where schools in the focused inspection have improved, senior leaders and governors acknowledge the Local Authority's role in guiding and supporting the improvement.
- Schools state that they make full use of those support services provided by the Local Authority which they perceive to be effective. Governor Services, in particular, are highly valued and the guidance provided by Human Resources and Finance are, in the majority of cases, highly commended.
- Governors are generally positive about the support provided by the Local Authority. They say, for example, that they benefit from well-tailored training

and the regular governor briefings which help them to sharpen the focus of their work in challenging and supporting their schools.

## **Areas for development**

- The 'Raising the bar' initiative is regarded with varying degrees of credibility. The majority of headteachers surveyed expressed some scepticism about the implementation of the Local Authority's strategy for school improvement. Their main concern is that the Local Authority's plans have not focused sharply or urgently enough on the need for high quality teaching and learning.
- Just over half the schools in the telephone survey said that the Local Authority had not specifically approached them to support others. While the Local Authority has retained productive links with many good and outstanding schools, there is a general feeling that it has not done enough to utilise these providers to support school improvement.
- Schools perceive that the move away from centralised Local Authority provision for continuing professional development means that there is insufficient support to drive improvements in teaching. They feel that while pyramids or families of schools are starting to address this need in some areas, some partnerships lack the capacity to provide the necessary support and service.
- The majority of good schools do not feel challenged by the Local Authority to improve their overall effectiveness. Furthermore, outstanding schools believe that not enough is being done to challenge them to maintain their strong performance.
- Some schools, including those that are not academies, feel disengaged from the Local Authority. Although termly headteacher meetings and governor briefings provide a forum for Local Authority support and challenge, some headteachers regard the censoring tone of Local Authority officers in these meetings to be counter-productive. There is also a strongly-held view in some localities that Local Authority support is too Ipswich-centric and that challenge, support and knowledge of their school is dependent on their proximity to Ipswich.
- Some schools say that the Local Authority needs to achieve a better balance between structural reform – with the associated capital works, development of new curricula and recruitment of staff - and the urgent need to improve existing schools.

## **Summary**

Suffolk schools seem to be well-informed about the Local Authority's strategy for school improvement, but opinions on the quality and impact of its support and challenge vary widely. Although there were positive comments about effective Local Authority support and guidance for schools, there was some scepticism from a majority of those surveyed about the Authority's overall strategy for school improvement and the particular focus on the urgent need to improve teaching and

learning. In addition, schools that are demonstrating good and outstanding practice feel that more should be made of their expertise for County-wide improvement.

The proportion of good or better schools has risen in Suffolk since September 2012, although this has been at a slower rate than seen both regionally and nationally, especially in primary schools. However, the lack of improvement and indeed the decline in standards in so many schools in the focused inspections highlights shortcomings in the Local Authority's ability to provide effective support and challenge.

From subsequent discussions with your team, we are aware that the outcomes of the focused inspections largely did not come as a surprise to you. It raises the question, therefore, of why the Local Authority has not done more to effect improvement.

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

Please pass on my sincere 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