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Mr Stuart Gallimore
Director of Children's Services
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Dear Mr Gallimore

Inspection of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement

Following the visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors Paul Tomkow, Sian Thornton, Deirdre Duignan and myself, Alison Bradley, to East Sussex local authority, 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 who we met during our visit on 9 November 2015 to 13 November 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.

Evidence

The findings of this inspection are based on discussions with: senior and operational officers; elected members; headteachers, principals and governors from primary and secondary maintained schools and academies; officers and partners representing the early years and post-16 phases of education; members of the Education Improvement Partnerships; national and local leaders of education; and partners delivering services brokered or commissioned by the local authority.

Inspectors examined a wide range of documentation, including the local authority's self-evaluation and improvement strategy. They also reviewed examples of the local authority's work with individual schools and other providers and school performance data.

In addition, inspectors took account of feedback from eight inspections and from telephone calls to 18 maintained school and academy leaders in the week prior to the inspection. Of the seven maintained schools inspected, one remained good, five improved to good and one declined and was judged to require special measures.

Context

There are 152 primary, 27 secondary, two all-through and 10 special schools, just over five hundred early years providers and 15 nursery classes in primary schools in East Sussex. Post-16 provision comprises two further education colleges, one land-based college, one sixth form college and eight school sixth forms. The number of academies has almost doubled since the previous inspection. There are now 22 primary and 15 secondary academies. Both all-through schools are academies, as are six special schools and the pupil referral unit.

The local authority's arrangements for supporting school improvement were previously inspected in June 2014 and judged to be ineffective.

Summary findings

Members, officers and school leaders are committed to improving the quality of education provision and outcomes. There is a consensus of shared responsibility for all East Sussex children and young people to ensure that none is left behind. Headteachers and governing bodies have greater confidence in local authority senior leaders than in recent years.

The impact of the local authority's strategy for improvement, 'Excellence for All', and work to ensure the quality of its own advisers and brokered services since the last inspection, is clear. The youngest children and pupils in East Sussex are now getting a much better start to their education. The proportion of early years providers judged good or better is similar to the national picture. There has been a significant reduction in the number of inadequate primary schools and a marked improvement in the proportion judged good or better.

Standards at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 have improved year-on-year since 2013. The proportion of children reaching a good level

of development at age five has risen significantly, placing East Sussex in the top 10% of local authorities in 2015. Overall, achievement at age seven is now significantly above national figures, although not always at the higher levels.

The proportion of pupils reaching the expected level for their age in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2 has also improved each year and is now close to average. Performance at the higher levels is not as strong.

There are signs that the gap between children eligible for free school meals and those who are not is beginning to narrow at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage and at Key Stages 1 and 2. As yet, however, the rate of change is not fast enough or sufficiently consistent for the gap to be any better than that seen nationally. The gap widened at the end of Key Stage 4 in 2015.

The local authority has successfully increased the participation of the youngest children and older learners. The proportion of two-year-olds in early education is above the national average, as is the proportion of 16-, 17- and, more recently, 18-year-olds in education, training or employment. Attainment at Level 3, however, remains low.

The local authority has taken a strategic approach to developing school-to-school support as the way forward for improving schools. Education Improvement Partnerships (EIPs) have been established in each geographical area, for post-16 and for special education. Most schools are involved, but not all headteachers are convinced about future benefits once action plans are not supported from centrally held funds. Governors do not universally understand the role of EIPs. Discussions about how to build on what has been achieved so far have begun, but are at a very early stage.

Officers' self-assessment of work to date and their action planning sometimes lack precision. The performance indicators selected do not necessarily give the full picture. There are inconsistencies in the measures used between phases. In some cases, the analysis of the data obscures the outcomes and does not help to identify exactly what still needs to improve. Plans do not give sufficient consideration to all groups of pupils in East Sussex. They are not always specific enough about what needs to improve or how impact will be measured.

The local authority has had limited success in tackling a culture of high exclusion rates in schools. Work to extend the collective responsibility of schools for all pupils to those at risk of exclusion is at an early stage. While there has been a reduction in

fixed-term exclusions, permanent exclusions have increased. Both remain above average. Attendance is below average.

Areas for improvement

To achieve its aim that every pupil attends a good or better provider and makes good progress, the local authority should:

- facilitate further development of school-to-school support, ensuring that schools increasingly take responsibility as system leaders and that all stakeholders understand the benefits and costs of collaborative work
- improve officers' analysis of data and precision of self-evaluation and action planning so as to identify exactly what still needs to improve and how success will be measured
- use a wider range of performance indicators to monitor the attainment and progress of all key groups of pupils at all ability levels, keeping a particular focus on those known to be eligible for free school meals
- work with schools and other partners to improve Level 3 attainment
- increase the challenge to schools to take greater responsibility for pupils at risk of exclusion and to reduce rates of absence to ensure pupils at all key stages attend school regularly.

Regional Senior Her Majesty's Inspectors will continue to monitor the effectiveness of the local authority's arrangements for supporting school improvement.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

The importance of a better education for all runs through all plans, from the overarching council plan, where it is seen as vital to driving economic growth, to improving outcomes at a local level through the EIPs. The council has invested significant additional funding in the short term to improve the quality of advisers' support and build capacity in schools and settings in order to sustain improvement in the longer term. There is a clear commitment to raising participation rates post-16 so as to match learners to the right courses to meet the needs of individuals and the local area.

All stakeholders, from lead members and the chief executive to senior officers and their teams, are absolutely clear about what the council is trying to achieve. Sometimes, however, officers do not express this clearly in their day-to-day work.

Leaders are not complacent. They are not satisfied with falling short of the milestone of reaching national averages in outcomes at all stages by July 2015. In order to understand the reasons for shortfalls and what is being done to address them, members have rightly asked to examine performance, in particular at Key Stages 4 and 5, in more depth at their forthcoming meeting.

Targets to exceed national averages by July 2016 have not changed and officers at all levels will be held to account for them through performance management. There is a risk that the overarching targets will not be achieved because the more detailed targets in the improvement plan are not sufficiently challenging. They do not take account of the achievement of all groups of pupils in East Sussex, the proportions reaching levels above those typical for their age, or rates of pupil progress.

The Education Performance Panel is now an established mechanism through which members hold officers to account by examining quantitative data about school and pupil performance, alongside qualitative input from headteacher witnesses. Scrutiny Committee continues to take a more detailed look at each key stage on a rolling basis.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

Schools report, and indeed welcome, greater challenge and rigour in the local authority's work. Headteachers from all phases, types and categories of school understand the categorisation process and know exactly what to expect in terms of support, challenge and intervention.

The local authority uses performance information promptly to decide on an indicative 'category' for each school's effectiveness, and communicates it clearly to the school concerned. This is confirmed early in the autumn term, as is the level of support required. Schools that can offer support to others are also informed in good time, so they are able to start work with others. Governors have benefited from more timely receipt of data and the expectation that they are involved in categorisation discussions. Leadership and management reviews have been used successfully in underperforming schools to identify exactly what the issues are and the support and challenge needed.

The impact of the local authority's work is evident in the improving profile of inspection outcomes in primary schools. Only one is inadequate, compared with 12 at the last inspection. Over half of those schools came out of special measures with leadership and management judged good and a third were good overall. An

increasing and significant proportion of schools previously found to require improvement are judged good when reinspected.

The secondary school model of working through consultant headteachers to monitor and provide challenge, support and intervention has not been in place as long as in the primary sector. There has not as yet been the desired impact on raising pupils' outcomes year-on-year. Better use of data and local intelligence has identified more swiftly than before a handful of secondaries where concerns need to be tackled. Support and challenge are in place.

Support for pupils in local authority care and vulnerable 16- and 17-year-olds continues to be a strength. The improved post-16 participation figures are in part due to the impact of contracted services ensuring that vulnerable learners are supported to make the right decisions. The local authority recognises that there is still work to be done to make sure that all young people are supported in that process.

Support and challenge for leadership and management (including governance)

All nine EIPs are now operational to a greater or lesser extent. The respective responsibilities of the local authority and EIPs in supporting individual schools according to the category they are in are generally understood. It is still, however, relatively early days. Officers and headteachers make valid links between specific projects or activities in individual EIPs and improvements in outcomes at the end of Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stages 1 and 2. However, limited quantitative evaluation of the work of EIPs means that it is not yet clear what has been successful and provided value for money, and what has not.

The local authority has worked with schools to develop the role of teaching schools and increase the number of system leaders, including governors, since the last inspection. Officers can demonstrate the impact that this support has had in individual schools, bringing about improvement at a faster rate than across East Sussex. The local authority recognises that there are too few outstanding schools; attention has turned to building capacity for school-to-school support further.

Governors feel that the quality of training and support is much improved. The take-up of support and training has increased, as has attendance at area meetings. The local authority has been proactive in working with individual governing bodies to look at different leadership arrangements, for example in small schools, and in tackling

underperformance. Where appropriate, it has used its statutory powers of intervention to put in place interim executive boards to improve governance rapidly.

The local authority uses informal and formal warning notices in a timely manner to communicate unequivocally its concerns to individual schools. In the case of academies, the local authority is equally prompt in relaying concerns to the Regional Schools Commissioner. Although it does not have the same statutory powers in relation to post-16 providers, the local authority has adopted a similar approach to communicating its concerns with them about outcomes. A post-16 EIP has been set up to bring together previously separate networks of colleges and sixth forms. Its work is still at an early stage so there is, as yet, no discernible improvement.

Headteachers are clear now about the rationale for school-to-school support and working in EIPs. They understand that central funding cannot continue indefinitely. Some headteachers are fully committed to partnership working in or beyond their group of schools. Others, however, are less sure about their future involvement. They tend to focus on cost and benefits for their school, rather than what they themselves might be able to offer.

Use of resources

The council's financial investment in improving schools' effectiveness and outcomes, particularly in the primary phase, is having a positive impact. The local authority has a well-informed understanding of each school's performance and needs, and targets its resources well, for example differentiating the level of adviser or consultant support. All stakeholders are clear, however, that this level of funding cannot continue. Decisions have yet to be made as to how additional monies will be withdrawn and improvement activity funded in future.

Budget-setting and decisions about the allocation and targeting of resources are open, transparent and subject to scrutiny and challenge by the School Forum. Representatives of the forum feel that decisions to use contingency reserves to fund the work of the EIPs were debated thoroughly. They are clear that funding for EIPs is released only on condition that plans address the local authority's key priorities and set out clearly how impact will be measured. Ultimately, the forum will consider the value for money of the EIPs' work to inform future funding decisions.

The local authority is diligent in holding schools to account for any surplus budgets, thus ensuring it is not funding improvement activity while schools sit on large underspends. Any savings have to be planned and used appropriately, for example protecting essential staffing in the face of a fall in numbers on roll.

Procedures for commissioning or brokering additional support are rigorous. The tendering process tests the track record of prospective providers. If successful, they are subject to regular monitoring and held accountable for impact.

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

Yours sincerely

Alison Bradley
Senior Her Majesty's Inspector