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Ms Eleanor Brazil
Director of Learning and Opportunities
Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council
Civic Office
Doncaster
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Dear Ms Brazil

Inspection of Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council's arrangements for supporting school improvement

Following the visit by me and my team of Her Majesty's Inspectors Marianick Ellender-Gele, Michael Pennington and Amraz Ali to Doncaster Metropolitan Borough 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 23 and 27 March 2015. We particularly appreciated 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

During the inspection, discussions were held with senior and operational officers, elected members, headteachers, principals, governors, strategic partners and other stakeholders. Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation relating to the local authority's arrangements for school improvement and a number of Ofsted inspection reports for schools in the area. Inspectors also took account of the feedback from eight inspections and from 12 school and academy leaders who were contacted by telephone in the week prior to the inspection.

Context

Doncaster schools are organised into a two-tier primary and secondary system. There are 86 maintained schools: 79 primary, two pupil referral units and five special schools. In addition, 37 schools are academies, including all of the secondary schools in the local authority. Of these, 12 secondary and nine primary academies are sponsor-led. Seven different organisations sponsor academy schools. The remaining 16 schools are academy converters: 11 primaries and five secondaries. There are also two free schools in the area.

You were appointed as Director of Learning and Opportunities in June 2013 on an interim basis, an arrangement that is due to end in June 2015. The Assistant Director of Learning and Achievement, who has been in post for three years, manages the education service provision. There are 6.2 full-time equivalent senior standards and effectiveness officers, including a principal officer who leads the team, managed by one of five heads of service. Following a direction issued by the Secretary of State, an independent trust was established in October 2014 to deliver the local authority's social care services for children.

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

Summary findings

Local authority leaders have redoubled their efforts since the inspection in March 2014. They have addressed the areas of improvement that were recommended by the previous inspection with vigour and urgency. Elected members and local authority senior leaders passionately promote their vision of improving outcomes for young people in Doncaster.

Improvements to the local authority's systems and procedures are recent and some require further refinement and development; therefore they have not yet secured the necessary rise in standards. Too many pupils attend schools that are not good or outstanding. In the 2014 assessments, achievement was too low, particularly in the early years and in Key Stages 2 and 4. Academic results for post-16 students were also below average. The outcomes for pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals and looked after children were even lower than for other pupils. Performance across a range of indicators placed Doncaster among the lowest 20% of local authorities nationally.

The work of senior improvement officers and the group of officers, known as standards and effectiveness partners (StEPs), is now much more focused and enhanced by the more detailed information the local authority gathers about school performance. Headteachers appreciate the support and rigorous challenge of StEPs during their regular visits to schools. The local authority's risk assessment of schools is now usually more accurate. However, occasionally, its categorisation of some schools is too generous because it does not consider all of the available information, including low outcomes in early years provision. This weakens the local authority's ability to identify and stem decline.

The local authority's strategy for school improvement is open and transparent. Officers and elected members have taken action to improve relationships with academy schools, including by the funding of a secondary headteacher to develop positive and productive partnerships. The local authority has also been much more proactive in reporting its concerns regarding the performance of some academy schools to the Department for Education through the Regional Schools Commissioner.

The local authority now has an accurate view of the effectiveness of governance in maintained schools. It has acted quickly to improve governance where there are grave concerns, including by deploying additional governors and using its statutory powers to replace governing bodies with interim executive boards.

High quality school-to-school support and relevant training opportunities are now more widespread. The teaching schools' alliance tailors its courses to meet emerging needs. However, the coordinated directory of support does not provide enough opportunities to share good practice in governance between schools. Headteachers report that training is effective, but the local authority does not yet fully evaluate the impact of training and support on improving pupils' outcomes. Some of the Local Leaders of Education (LLEs) are new to their roles in supporting schools and they do not receive sufficient developmental feedback from the local authority about the quality of their work.

The role of the virtual school in monitoring and improving outcomes for looked after children is not well developed. Schools are not held to account robustly for the use and impact of pupil premium funding to improve achievement for children in the care of the local authority.

Elected members of the council now ask challenging questions about the use of funding for school improvement but do not always measure the impact of this funding on outcomes for young people. The council's Schools' Forum does not challenge schools that carry high budget surpluses effectively. Consequently, funding is not always directed to the pupils currently attending Doncaster schools.

Areas for improvement

To improve achievement at all key stages, academic outcomes for post-16 students and ensure that all pupils in Doncaster attend a good or better school, the local authority should:

- use all available information, such as the low early years outcomes, to inform the local authority's categorisation of schools and identify schools at risk of decline
- ensure that the local authority fully evaluates the impact of its work on improving pupils' achievement, including whether the professional development opportunities it brokers are improving outcomes for young people
- improve the effectiveness of the virtual school for looked after children so that all schools are challenged to improve significantly the education outcomes of pupils who are in the care of the local authority
- develop the expertise of all LLEs in supporting and challenging schools and provide evaluative feedback on the effectiveness of their work
- develop school-to-school support further to include opportunities to share good practice between governing bodies
- strengthen the challenge to schools that carry large surplus budgets to ensure that resources are used to improve outcomes for pupils currently in schools.

Regional Senior HMI will continue to monitor the local authority's arrangements for school improvement.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- Elected members monitor the work of the school improvement service closely and challenge it to improve the effectiveness of schools. They have a good understanding of the schools that are causing concern and track their progress carefully. The lead member for education actively promotes the engagement of all schools including by visiting all the secondary academies.
- Headteachers understand the local authority's strategy for school improvement. School leaders now have more opportunities to contribute to the local

authority's strategic direction. They have confidence in local authority officers and value their support and challenge.

- Additional funding has facilitated the expansion of the school improvement team. The number of StEPs employed or commissioned has increased so that all schools now receive visits. Recently, an officer responsible for early years provision has been appointed. She has begun to identify the underlying reasons for low Early Years Foundation Stage outcomes in the local authority and developed a plan of action to address this.
- Senior local authority leaders meet regularly with the Regional Schools Commissioner and rightly report any concerns about academy schools.
- Members, business partners and the local colleges have begun to develop a coherent strategy for the provision for 16- to 19-year-olds, informed by current growth and employment opportunities.
- Young people in Doncaster are able to choose from a selection of academic and vocational pathways. The number of 16- to 19-year-olds whose destination is unknown has reduced significantly. Over 90% are in some form of education, employment or training and the proportion of those who are not (known as NEET) is significantly lower than that seen nationally.
- The achievement of 16- to 19-year-olds in Doncaster is varied. While young people on vocational courses in 2014 typically achieved well, the outcomes for A-level students were below the national level. The vast majority of the secondary academy schools in the authority offer academic provision to 16- to 19-year-olds and too few students achieve well.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- The local authority has recruited and trained a well-regarded team of StEPs. It has put into place robust quality assurance of their work. Reports for schools following StEP visits are consistently useful documents that record strengths, weaknesses and appropriate areas for school improvement.
- StEPs review school performance and risk-assess schools. This assessment of schools is usually, but not always, accurate. It is used to categorise schools for proportionate support relative to need. This ensures that finite resources are used to best effect where there is most concern.
- The coordination of support for schools has improved, but has yet to have significant impact on the proportion of successful schools. The work of LLEs is not yet consistently effective.
- Schools value the training that is available through the teaching schools' alliance, which offers a broad range of courses including to develop future leaders and improve teaching. StEPs and LLEs help to shape the programme of

courses on offer by identifying the common needs of schools. They also prompt specific training linked to a school's individual needs. However, the local authority does not fully evaluate the impact of this training.

- The virtual school does not monitor and improve outcomes for looked after children well enough. Not all pupils have a personal education plan and looked after children are disproportionately identified as NEET.

Support and challenge for leadership and management (including governance)

- The local authority has instigated a thorough review of the effectiveness of governance. All maintained schools have conducted a self-evaluation process supported by StEPs, who ensure the process is rigorous. It has supported the weakest governing bodies well. It does not yet broker enough support to improve governance, which is categorised as secure but requires some further development.
- Headteachers make good use of the long-established local networks of schools for training and support. StEPs now work well within these networks to coordinate and signpost development opportunities. Most schools now collaborate more effectively. Headteachers are clear about how they can contribute to Doncaster's wider vision for improvement.
- Headteachers value the challenge their StEP visits provide. They make good use of opportunities to conduct joint reviews of teaching and learning so that they can better identify what needs to improve. Headteachers of good or outstanding schools welcome the opportunity to work with StEPs to evaluate their continued effectiveness and are now more willing to offer support to other schools. Headteachers commented typically that 'we are no longer left alone'.
- A high proportion of headteachers are new to their posts, appointed over the last 20 months. The local authority provides a well-regarded induction programme. When this is completed, headteachers have the opportunity to join an experienced headteachers' group for further professional development.
- The local authority brokers appropriate training for middle leaders and aspiring headteachers as part of its plans for succession.

Use of resources

- Following the previous inspection in March 2014, elected members demonstrated their commitment to the school improvement strategy by allocating additional funding.

- Members of the council's Schools' Forum ask challenging questions about the use of additional funding for school improvement and receive regular reports from local authority officers. For example, they instigated a review of provision for primary pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. This resulted in changes that have secured better value for money from this service.
- Too many schools have unacceptably large budget surpluses. The relatively high threshold set for challenging surpluses and the absence of a claw-back mechanism hamper the local authority's ability to ensure that funding is used to improve outcomes for pupils currently at school.

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

Yours sincerely

Michelle Winter
Her Majesty's Inspector