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Ms Sheila Smith
Director of People and Communities
North Somerset Council
Town Hall
Walliscote
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Bradley Simmons HMI
Regional Director, South West

Dear Sheila

**North Somerset local authority focused inspection: 10 to 21
March and 22 to 25 April 2014**

I am writing to inform you of the outcomes of the school inspections and telephone survey carried out in North Somerset during the period 10 March to 25 April 2014.

Ofsted focuses some of its section 5 school inspection activity in particular local authorities into concentrated periods. We do this where we have concerns about the relatively low proportions of good and outstanding schools. In North Somerset, our concern centred on the comparatively low proportion of good or outstanding primary schools. Our inspections, coupled with a telephone survey of a sample of leaders from good and outstanding schools about their perception of the support and challenge from the local authority, have enabled us to obtain a clearer picture of the education provided for pupils in North Somerset and your role in supporting and promoting improvement.

Outline of inspection activities

Seventeen schools were inspected during the focused inspection activity. These included 14 primary schools, two junior schools and one infant school.

During the inspections, inspectors gathered information on the use, quality and impact of local authority support for school improvement by asking the following three key questions of headteachers, governors and, where possible, local authority representatives:

- ☐ 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?

A further 13 primary schools, including two infant schools and a special school, were surveyed by telephone during the focused inspection period. These schools were selected randomly from the authority's good and outstanding schools: four were outstanding and nine were judged to be good at their last inspection. Headteachers in these schools were asked the above 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 and survey outcomes

Of the 17 schools inspected, 11 schools were judged to be 'good' at their last inspection and six were graded as 'satisfactory'/'requires improvement'.

Following the focused inspection activity:

- ☐ fourteen schools were graded 'good' or 'outstanding'
- ☐ two schools improved from being judged 'good' at their previous inspection to be judged 'outstanding'
- ☐ twelve schools were judged to be 'good'; seven schools sustained this outcome from their previous inspections and five improved from being graded as 'satisfactory'/'requires improvement'
- ☐ three schools were judged to 'require improvement', one of which had previously been graded as 'requiring improvement' and two declined from being judged previously as 'good'.

It is particularly pleasing that seven of the schools improved their overall effectiveness grade. This positive outcome recognises that these schools have demonstrated their capacity to improve.

Responses to the key questions asked of those schools inspected during the focused period and those contacted by telephone were analysed. The key findings are outlined below.

Strengths

- North Somerset has developed a strong partnership with its primary schools. The development and implementation of the authority's 'learning exchange' is understood by all schools as the key tool to enable schools to improve the quality of their provision and their effectiveness.
- Almost all of North Somerset's primary schools have elected to exercise their preference for purchasing local authority services. School leaders and governors are positive about the benefits, which they regard as providing best value for money.
- The authority's 'Big Meetings' are very well received by headteachers and governors. The invitation to the Chairs of Governing Bodies to attend these meetings is a successful strategy for engaging with governing bodies. These events are seen as providing schools with high quality professional development and building strong working relationships with leaders in the area.
- Schools are confident that North Somerset's advisers understand the performance of schools in their area. A range of monitoring activities track performance and identify where further support is required. Consequently, North Somerset is well informed about its schools and knows where improvement and intervention are required.
- The level of consistency in the work carried out by the authority's advisers is appreciated by schools. All report that advisers are focused primarily on helping schools to increase their rate of improvement.
- Schools are fully aware that the information gathered by the authority's advisers is used to risk assess each school's performance. Schools welcome the transparency which leads to these assessments. Headteachers appreciate that performance information is discussed and shared openly with them and, on occasion, the governors. The discussions are generally robust and lead to appropriately tailored support and intervention activities that are matched carefully to each school's improvement priorities.

- The local authority is responsive to changes in a school's situation and uses its intervention powers accordingly. The impact of the local authority's intervention is clearly demonstrated in that seven of the schools inspected improved their overall effectiveness grade.
- Schools report that they value the high quality advice and guidance on offer for other aspects of school improvement, including data analysis, self-evaluation, safeguarding and improving the Early Years Foundation Stage.
- New headteachers value the authority's induction programme. Partnerships brokered by the local authority between experienced headteachers and those appointed recently to a leadership role are regarded as working well.
- Governors in the schools inspected and surveyed by telephone are positive about the support they receive for improving the quality of school governance. The authority's training sessions for school governors on analysing data, safeguarding, self-evaluation and financial management are considered valuable by most users. Many governors reported that, as a result of participating in governor support programmes, they were better informed about their school's performance and felt confident to challenge school leaders and hold them to account for pupils' performance.
- Those schools requiring advice and support from the authority's human resources department praised the quality of support and guidance they have received.

Areas for development

- North Somerset draws upon the expertise of local leaders of education to support improvement in the area, yet a number of headteachers of good and outstanding schools report that their own strengths have not been fully utilised.
- The authority's advisers meet regularly with headteachers but do not routinely ensure that the Chair of the Governing Body, or their representative, attends.
- While many governors are confident that they know and understand the authority's strategy for school improvement, others are less clear.
- A few schools indicated that the local authority's level of challenge was not rigorous enough.

- Although the authority's advisers know their schools well, some advisers comment that not enough account is taken of the performance of specific groups when making assessments about a school's effectiveness.
- The inspections revealed some common areas for improvement. These included improving the quality of teaching and thereby raising pupils' achievement. The key teaching aspects identified as needing strengthening included: a stronger focus on the performance of specific groups of pupils, particularly the most able, and ensuring that marking helps pupils improve the quality of their work.

In summary, the growing proportion of good and outstanding primary schools in North Somerset largely allays our initial concern and presents an encouraging picture. Almost all of the schools inspected or contacted praised the effectiveness and impact of the authority's school improvement service. The 'learning exchange' initiative is almost universally acknowledged by headteachers and governors as being a successful strategy that is leading to improvement. The positive inspection outcomes and the evidence from the telephone survey demonstrate capacity and challenge in the system to tackle remaining weaknesses and accelerate the rate of improvement.

I hope these observations are useful as you seek to improve the quality of education a life chances for the children and young people of North Somerset.

Please pass on my thanks to all those who gave their time to talk to our inspectors.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Bradley Simmons'.

Bradley Simmons
Regional Director South West