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10 April 2013

Mr Colin Green
Director of Children, Learning & Young People
Coventry City Council
Room 238
Civic Centre 1
Earl Street
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Dear Colin

Coventry LA – focused inspections – 11 to 15 March 2013

Thank you for our meeting 14 March 2013. It was a good opportunity to introduce myself as the interim Regional Director for the West Midlands, to meet you, your senior team and your Lead Member for Education and to discuss Ofsted's new regional structure and how we might work together to improve Coventry's schools.

Our meeting was also helpful for me to be able to explain the current approach Ofsted is taking with schools in particular local authority areas in focusing our inspection activity into a concentrated period. This approach, coupled with the outcomes of a telephone survey of a sample of school leaders about their perception of the support and challenge provided by the local authority, enables us to obtain a clearer picture of the education provided for children and young people in those areas.

As I explained at our meeting I am writing to inform you of the outcomes of the school inspections and the survey carried out during the focused week for Coventry in the period 11 to 15 March 2013.

Outline of inspection activities

Eleven schools were inspected during the focused inspection week, including: one nursery school; nine primary schools; and one secondary school. Seven of these were judged to be satisfactory at their last inspection, two were found to be good and the early years centre was outstanding. One school had not been inspected before. These were selected randomly for this exercise as a sample of schools from all those due for inspection by the end of this academic year.

During the inspections Her Majesty's Inspectors gathered information on the use, quality and impact of local authority support for school improvement by asking 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?

A further eleven schools were surveyed by telephone during the focused inspection week. These included seven primary schools, three secondary schools and one special school. The schools were selected randomly from the city's good and outstanding schools: five were outstanding and six were judged to be good at their last inspection. 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 schools' strengths to help others improve?

Inspection and survey outcomes

Of the schools inspected during the focused inspection week:

- two were graded as outstanding for overall effectiveness. One had not been inspected before and the early years centre remained outstanding
- two schools maintained a good grade for overall effectiveness
- five schools were judged to require improvement. All were judged to be satisfactory at their previous inspection, so none had improved significantly
- two schools were placed in special measures. Both schools have declined from a satisfactory judgement at their previous inspection.

It is positive that the early years centre continues to offer outstanding provision and that the school which had not been inspected before was also judged to be outstanding. However, it is of considerable concern that, of the seven schools previously judged to be satisfactory, two have declined and that none have improved their inspection grades so that their pupils do not have access to a good quality of education.

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

Strengths

- Recent developments in the way the local authority exercises its duty to promote high standards of education for its children and young people are improving the rigour of challenge provided to schools. Schools recognise that the local authority is now taking appropriate steps to gain a thorough understanding of schools' strengths and weaknesses; they are aware of rising expectations and the local authority's growing capacity to provide effective leadership.
- The local authority has categorised schools following discussions with them about their performance; it has established set procedures for school review and support. External reviews have been commissioned where a school's performance gives cause for concern.
- Some examples were provided, both through inspection and the telephone survey, about how the local authority has supported schools effectively, particularly at times of specific need.
- Governors welcome the local authority's training on the use of performance data; recognising that it is helping them to hold schools to account more effectively to ensure that pupils are making sufficient progress. However, not all governing bodies have been able to access this training, including some from schools that are not yet good. The clerking of governing body meetings is almost universally praised.
- The quality of support from Human Resources in managing redundancies and underperformance is generally valued by schools.

Areas for improvement

- Despite the recognition of some recent improvements in the local authority's support for schools, these developments are too recent to have had a demonstrable impact on school improvement. This is evident in the outcomes of these inspections.
- Headteachers and governors do not yet have a clear grasp of the local authority's strategy for commissioning or brokering support; the authority's approach to sharing good practice and promoting school-to-school support is

also not consistently understood. This lack of clarity can undermine the impact of the local authority's activities.

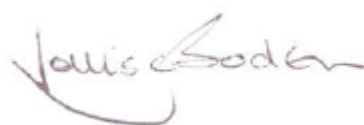
- The local authority's recent attempt to establish clusters of schools has met with a mixed response from the schools themselves. The success of this initiative is limited because it has not been systematically embedded; too many pre-existing or ad hoc arrangements run alongside the clusters, compromising the potential strengths of the arrangement.
- Although some schools welcome the replacement of School Improvement Partners with Education Improvement Advisers and consultants, others refer to the variability in the quality of the support and challenge provided; too many changes in personnel have weakened the continuity and impact of the support provided for some schools.
- Although schools and governors report that data are used more systematically in conversations with local authority officers, there was limited evidence of a strategic approach to the monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes for specific groups of pupils. There is not always a sharp enough focus on the performance of these pupils.

In summary, there is general recognition of recent improvements in the local authority's support for schools and an awareness of a greater degree of challenge. There is understanding of a strong and united corporate will to bring about rapid progress. However, there is still some way to go in establishing a widely understood and methodically delivered strategy for improvement. There is an urgent need to ensure that the revised arrangements for school improvement are systematically embedded so that they lead to lasting and demonstrable progress across the city's schools.

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

Please pass on my thanks to the headteachers, governors, local authority officers and your Lead Member for Education who gave their time to talk with our inspectors during the focused inspection week. I look forward to meeting with you to discuss the outcomes of the inspections.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Louise Soden". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Louise Soden HMI
Interim Regional Director, West Midlands
Cc Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Education

