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12 September 2013

Barbara Peacock
Director, Children and Adult Services
Medway Council
Gun Wharf
Dock Road
Chatham
Kent ME4 4TR

Dear Ms Peacock,

Medway local authority focused inspections – 25 to 28 June 2013

Thank you for our telephone discussion on 24 June 2013 during which I notified you of the focused inspections for ten of Medway's schools. It was a good opportunity to build upon our previous meeting of 30 April 2013 regarding Ofsted's new regional structure and how we might work together to improve schools across Medway.

Our discussion also gave me an opportunity to explain the approach that Ofsted is taking with schools in particular local authority areas through focused and concentrated inspection activity. This approach, combined with the outcomes of a telephone survey of a sample of school leaders' perceptions of the support and challenge provided by the local authority, has given Ofsted a clearer picture of educational provision across Medway and of your part in improving it.

I am writing to inform you of the outcomes of the ten inspections and of the telephone survey.

Outline of inspection activity

Six primary schools, three secondary schools and a pupil referral unit were inspected during the focused inspection week. The schools are located across Medway. Five of these schools and the pupil referral unit were judged satisfactory at their previous inspection. Two of these schools were judged good at their previous inspection. For one of the schools, this was the first inspection since opening. For another, this was the first inspection since amalgamating with another school. During the inspections, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) 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 local authority support and challenge over time to help your school improve?

A further ten schools were surveyed by telephone during the focused inspection period. These included two infant schools, two junior schools, three all through primaries, a secondary modern school and two grammar schools. The schools were selected randomly from Medway's good and outstanding schools. Eight of the schools were judged to be good at their previous inspection and two were judged to be outstanding. Headteachers in these schools were asked the three questions above, and a fourth, which reflects 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 ten schools inspected as part of the focused inspection activity:

- Five schools and the pupil referral unit were graded satisfactory at their previous inspection. Of these, one school is now judged to be good, three to require improvement, and one to require special measures. The pupil referral unit is judged to have serious weaknesses
- Two schools were judged good at their previous inspection. Of these, one school is now judged good, and one requires improvement.
- The recently amalgamated school was judged to require improvement.
- For one sponsor academy, this was the first inspection, and it was judged to require improvement.

It is disappointing that two schools and the pupil referral unit have declined since their previous inspections. In addition, three schools are stuck at grade 3, having been judged satisfactory at their previous inspection. In two of these schools, leadership requires improvement. It is encouraging that two schools, serving some of the most disadvantaged of Medway's pupils, have maintained or achieved a good grade during this event.

The outcomes above are balanced against inspection outcomes since September 2012. Here, the picture is more slightly more positive. In total, 34 of Medway's schools have been inspected during this period. Thirty one of these had been inspected previously. Of these, nine schools maintained a judgement of good or better (three improved from good to outstanding), and seven crossed a grade boundary, improving to good or better. Additionally, two schools came out of a category of concern.

Overall, the proportion of Medway's schools which require improvement or are inadequate remains high. It is of particular concern that the pupil referral unit which provides for some of Medway's most vulnerable pupils has been judged to have serious weaknesses. It is also worrying that one of Medway's grammar schools is not delivering a high quality education for some of the area's brightest pupils.

Responses to the key survey questions asked of schools inspected during the focused period and those contacted by telephone are set out below:

Strengths

- Medway knows many of its primary schools well. Its officers conduct a range of monitoring activities to keep track of primary school performance and, as a result, schools are risk rated. Challenge, performance and review meetings held by Medway with its primary schools are generally robust and lead to support and intervention which is sensibly tailored and proportionate to the needs of each school.
- School leaders and governors of the more vulnerable primary schools indicate that support is well matched to their individual priorities. The positive impact of the local authority's work in these schools can be evidenced, for example, in improvements in leadership, teaching or pupils' achievement. These improvements have not always been sufficiently embedded to help the school cross a grade boundary during an inspection.
- Primary schools identified a range of high quality advice and guidance from the local authority, including end of key stage moderation, assessment, professional development for subject leaders and support for improving the Early Years Foundation Stage.
- There is a high degree of consistency in the nature of activities undertaken by local authority officers in primary schools to accelerate school improvement. Internal school data is investigated through discussion with senior leaders, by visiting classrooms to check aspects of school performance, by undertaking observations of teaching and learning and by looking at pupils' work.

- Inspection evidence indicates that Medway provides strong support for raising the quality of governance in primary schools. Individual governors reported that Medway's governor services provided 'value for money, delivered 'constant' training opportunities and 'helped the governing body to challenge the school'. The local authority had brokered links for less experienced governors with more experienced governor colleagues in other schools.
- Before the start of the focused inspection event, Ofsted had inspected 34 schools during 2012/2013. In 30 of these inspection reports, inspectors made an evaluative comment on local authority support and challenge. These comments were occasionally neutral, but a large majority reported positively on Medway's challenge and support functions for schools.
- The local authority's support for schools causing concern is effective. Five of Medway's schools were in categories of concern before this focused inspection event. In each case, inspectors noted the positive impact of local authority support and challenge. Medway tailored its support effectively, slowly reducing support when appropriate to enable the school to grow its own capacity to improve.
- Good or outstanding local authority schools and academies have tended to move away from the local authority when seeking challenge or support, looking to school to school collaborations, including two significant Medway teaching school alliances. The recently appointed Director of Children's Services has recognised this shift and taken concerted steps to re-assess and redefine, through consultation, Medway's relationship with good and outstanding schools. The local authority has sought to improve the consistency of its own input and to assume a more active brokering role locally.

Areas for development

- Secondary headteachers and governors, regardless of whether their schools are local authority or academy schools, do not generally feel that their schools are well known to local authority officers and advisers. They express doubts about the capacity of the local authority to support schools adequately.
- Medway has a less detailed view of schools in all phases where the available data do not immediately present a picture of concern. Occasionally, schools suggested that school improvement officers were too reliant on data and do not know what is happening 'on the ground'.

- Although the local authority draws upon the expertise of local leaders of education to support weaker schools, headteachers of good and outstanding schools indicate that, over time, their strengths have not been fully explored or utilised.
- Medway's drive to raise achievement is acknowledged by schools, but many headteachers and governors cannot readily articulate the local authority's vision or strategy for improvement.
- Despite Medway's role as co-sponsor of two secondary academies, neither considers that the local authority knows them sufficiently well. However, in one of these academies, Medway has previously played a key role in stabilising leadership.
- In the case of a further academy, the local authority was unaware that the school had not commissioned support and challenge.
- One headteacher noted that the local authority had not challenged the school's performance sufficiently strongly. Another was clear that support had reduced over time and only improved when matters reached crisis point.
- Views expressed by primary and secondary headteachers about the quality of Medway's human resources function were very inconsistent.
- The ten inspections revealed some common areas for improvement. These included: the need to match tasks in the classroom more accurately to pupils' abilities and learning needs; the use of marking to improve progress; raising expectations of pupils' achievement and behaviour: the urgency of closing the gap between pupils eligible for the pupil premium and others and; the need to practise reading, writing and spoken English across the curriculum.

In summary, Medway's ambition to improve standards for its young people is almost universally acknowledged by its schools. Its concentration on its more vulnerable primary schools has been understandable: some of these schools are improving but the performance of too many has not shifted or has declined. A reduction in resources within Medway's school improvement function, leading to the diminished capacity noted particularly by secondary schools, has meant that its priority to improve vulnerable schools has had some negative effects on its relationships with stronger schools and academies.

In recognition of this, the newly appointed Director of Children's Services and her staff have rightly begun to consult schools about the future shape of the relationship between Medway and the schools which serve its young people. Despite this

consultation, the local authority's strategy for brokering support for and providing challenge to local authority and academy schools is not understood by all. There is an urgent need to communicate this strategy clearly so that all players within the education system in Medway have absolute clarity as to the role they must play if provision and standards are to improve.

I hope these observations are useful to you as you continue your work to improve the life chances of Medway's children and young people.

Please pass my thanks to all who made time to talk to HMI during the inspection week.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "M Coffey", written over a horizontal line.

Matthew Coffey HMI
Regional Director, South East