

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0300 013 1281
Direct F 020 7421 6546
nick.hudson@ofsted.gov.uk



26 November 2013

Paul Moffat
Director of Children's services
Northumberland County Council
County Hall
Morpeth
Northumberland
NE61 2EF

Nick Hudson
Regional Director, North East,
Yorkshire & Humber

Dear Mr Moffat

Northumberland local authority – focused inspections – 14-24 October 2013

Thank you for our telephone discussion on 14 October 2013 during which I notified you of the focused inspections for Northumberland. It was a good opportunity to build on our previous meeting on 26 April 2013 regarding Ofsted's new regional structure and how we might work together to further improve schools in Northumberland.

Our discussion was also an opportunity for me to explain Ofsted's approach to the inspection of local authorities with significant numbers of underperforming schools. I emphasised that the purpose of focused inspections is to determine whether sufficient support and challenge is being offered by the local authority. In addition, inspectors will also conduct a telephone survey of good and outstanding schools to ask whether their good practice is being used by the local authority to challenge underperformance.

As I explained during our telephone discussion, I am writing to inform you of the outcomes of the seventeen inspections and the telephone survey carried out during the period 14-24 October 2013.

Outline of inspection activities

Focused inspection

We inspected seventeen schools as part of the focused inspection including:

- Five first schools
- Five middle schools
- Three high schools
- Two primary schools
- One 3-19 school; and
- One special school with pupils aged 2-11 years.

The focused inspection included a wide range of different schools reflecting the diversity of provision in the county. Two of the schools which were inspected have academy status.

The schools had received the following judgments at their previous inspections:

- 12 schools were judged to be satisfactory
- Four schools were judged to be good; and
- One school was judged to be outstanding

All of these schools were due for inspection during the academic year 2013/14. During the inspections, Her Majesty's Inspectors and Additional Inspectors gathered information on the use, quality and impact of local authority support for school improvement. This information was collected by asking three 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?

Local authority officers were asked similar questions, as is usual practice during school inspections.

Telephone survey

Her Majesty's Inspectors conducted a telephone survey of a further 21 schools. Inspectors spoke to:

- 14 first schools
- Two middle schools
- Four high schools; and
- One primary school.

Of these schools surveyed, six were judged to be outstanding at their last inspection and the remaining have all been judged to be good schools. One school which participated in the telephone survey has academy status.

Inspectors asked headteachers in these schools the same three questions as those asked of the schools in the focused inspection. In addition, they were also asked a fourth question, 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?

These schools were selected for the survey to give their perspective on how the local authority uses good or outstanding schools to support others.

Inspection and survey outcomes

Of the schools we inspected during the focused inspection week:

- One school was graded as outstanding. The school improved from its previous judgement of good.
- Three were graded as good. All of these schools had improved since their previous inspection.
- Nine were judged to require improvement to become good. Six of these schools were graded satisfactory at their previous inspection and three had been previously judged as good or better.
- Four schools were placed in special measures, three of which were previously judged as satisfactory and one school which was previously judged as good.

Following the focused inspection process, there is obviously much to reflect on. While it is encouraging that there has been improvement in almost a quarter of the schools which were inspected, it is disappointing that the remaining three-quarters had declined or not improved. In addition, it is particularly concerning that the leadership and management of all nine schools judged as requiring improvement have similarly been judged to require improvement.

These figures do not reflect well on the local authority's capacity or influence to drive improvement. The results suggest that the support provided by the local authority in those schools placed in special measures has not been effective, and it seems that actions to tackle weaknesses have not been swift enough to arrest the decline in these schools.

As you know, school inspection outcomes in Northumberland have traditionally shown higher numbers of good or better schools compared to regional and national figures. This good performance is particularly noted in the county's first schools. Therefore, it is of great concern to me that in the period since September 2012 there has been a significant and worrying decline in inspection outcomes. This downward trend shows that in the last 14 months the proportion of good and better schools has declined, most notably in the middle and high school sectors. The proportion of schools in special measures is also much higher than that previously seen in the county.

This downward trend of school performance is unacceptable against an overall national and regional improvement. Consequently, this means that children in Northumberland have less chance of going to a good school particularly in the middle and high school sectors. This result is unacceptable and will be of great concern to parents, carers and pupils alike.

Ofsted has analysed responses from the survey and focused inspections. The key findings are outlined below.

Strengths

- There is widespread praise for the local authority services supporting schools in Human Resources (HR), financial management, clerking for governing bodies and governor training. The role of the School Support Officers (SSO) in managing this support is also valued by schools.
- There are some emerging groups and clusters of schools which are providing good school-to-school support. Some of this collaboration is supported effectively by the local authority. There is also emerging evidence of the local authority improving how it supports schools in a downsized service. For example, skills audits are taking place in some localities and the local authority is seeking to partner more and more schools.
- The local authority has successfully supported some schools to demonstrate enough improvement to cross an inspection grade boundary. A number of schools view the support and challenge provided by school improvement partners as effective, and some schools are working with National or Local Leaders of Education (NLE and LLE). These schools speak positively about the relationships with local authority officers and the help they receive to bring about school improvement.
- Several schools praised the support they received from external agencies in the local authority, such as those to help improve pupils' attendance, educational psychologists and services to support pupils with special educational needs. The outstanding grade given to the special school inspected during the focused inspection provides a specific example of the positive impact of these services.
- A number of headteachers and governors told us that they value the annual data analysis of pupils' attainment and progress produced by Northumberland. This analysis provides the local authority with an overview of pupils' outcomes at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage, Key Stage 1, 2, 4 and 5.
- Several headteachers praised the support received from the local authority for new headteachers and in times of headteacher absence.
- Headteachers and governors of schools which received training in certain areas, such as the Early Years Foundation Stage and Special Educational Needs, said that the training was effective and useful.

Areas for improvement

- The local authority's strategy for improving schools' performance is inadequately communicated to schools. There is considerable uncertainty amongst many schools about how the local authority identifies concerns.
- In addition, some senior leaders in schools are unsure about the level of support and challenge available to those schools which the local authority has designated as of concern.

- The level of challenge offered to schools by the local authority is at best patchy and, in some cases, inadequate. Headteachers and governors expressed their concerns about the over-reliance on data, insufficient first-hand knowledge of the quality of teaching, over generous evaluations about schools' performance and a lack of objectivity from some school improvement partners.
- Responses from a number of schools raised significant concerns about the local authority's paucity of knowledge about pupils' attainment and progress across year groups in the three tier system of schools. The local authority has failed to ensure the accuracy of assessment information when pupils transfer to middle or high schools at ages nine and 13 years.
- The local authority is not well placed to provide an accurate and up-to-date view of each school's performance and the progress made by pupils. Some schools have little confidence in the accuracy of other schools' tracking data at the point of transfer.
- The capacity and overall level of resource in the local authority school improvement service has significantly reduced in recent years. Many schools expressed concerns about the local authority being 'stretched' and unable to provide the skills, expertise and experience required to assist schools in making improvements. The lack of local authority support in literacy and numeracy is especially concerning to school leaders.
- The local authority does not make effective use of best practice in supporting those schools which need to improve. The local authority lacks a comprehensive strategic overview of which schools can demonstrate best practice in teaching, leadership and curriculum development. Whilst there are some groups of schools who work collaboratively to provide school-to-school support, which the local authority has assisted in some cases, this type of support is not widely in place and does not ensure that all schools can access the support they need.
- There is a lack of confidence in the local authority's approach to supporting school-to-school access to best practice. In several schools, senior leaders do not believe that they benefit from sharing others good practice. Similarly, in several good schools, leaders state that the local authority is unaware of their strengths so they are not used or encouraged to help to bring about improvement in other schools.
- There are some strong concerns about inadequate support for schools when dealing with the underperformance of staff, including teaching staff. Also, several schools expressed concerns about the lack of local authority help to bring about improvements to where teaching requires improvement or is inadequate.
- Both of the two academies inspected consider the local authority to be a distant body, although each school shows a desire to improve their relationships. In each case, academy leaders consider that the local authority has not engaged enough and therefore is poorly positioned to support or challenge performance.
- The local authority strategy for improving underperforming schools lacks clarity. At present, its impact is uneven and mostly inadequate. There are too

many schools in the middle and secondary sector which require improvement or are inadequate.

In summary, there is a clear and pressing need for significant action to establish and embed a clear strategic vision for sustained improvement across schools in Northumberland. These efforts are urgently required to tackle underperformance in a relatively large number of schools and ensure that pupils' achievement rises to a good standard.

Ofsted is committed to monitoring the local authority's response to our focused inspection and survey in the weeks and months ahead. Tom Grieveson, Senior HMI, and I will meet with the local authority officers and school leaders to discuss your response to the inadequacies identified in this letter on 2 and 13 December 2013.

I know this information will cause you considerable concern. Nevertheless, I hope these observations are useful as you seek to improve the quality of education for the children and young people of Northumberland.

Please pass on my thanks to the local authority officers who gave their time to talk to our inspectors. Do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to discuss anything in this letter further.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Nick Hudson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Nick Hudson

Regional Director, North East, Yorkshire & Humber