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Ms Avril Wilson
Director of Education, Adult and Children's Services
Reading Borough Council
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Sir Robin Boshier
Regional Director, South East

Dear Avril

Inspections of schools within Reading

Thank you for your letter dated 23 October 2014 and the information that you provided. As you know, I asked inspectors to assess the effectiveness of Reading local authority in supporting schools to improve. This was as a result of concerns about the performance of the schools in the local authority. I am writing to inform you of our findings from this work. I have considered the evidence from this focused inspection very carefully, which is why this letter is slightly later than I had first anticipated.

Outline of focused inspection activities

Ofsted inspected 10 of the 56 schools in Reading (see Annex 1) between 9 and 23 October 2014. Of these 10 schools:

- six are primary schools, one of which is an academy
- two are special schools
- two are early years providers.

In addition, inspectors held telephone conversations with the headteachers of almost all the other maintained schools, academies and free schools in the local authority. During the inspections and telephone conversations, inspectors asked headteachers and governors the following questions:

1. How well does the local authority know your school, including its strengths and weaknesses?
2. What measures are in place to support and challenge your school and how do these meet your school's needs?
3. What is the impact of the local authority support and challenge over time to help your school improve?

One additional question was posed to the good and outstanding schools:

4. How effectively has the local authority used your expertise to support other schools in your locality?

Summary of the concerns

- There has been a sharp rise in the number of schools judged to be inadequate since October 2013.
- There has been no overall improvement in the proportion of good or outstanding primary schools in Reading over the last year.
- Two primary schools were judged to be inadequate in October 2014, bringing the total number of schools judged to be inadequate in the last year to six.
- Not enough pupils are reaching the expected level in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2.
- Not enough pupils are making expected progress in reading, writing and mathematics during Key Stage 2.
- Not enough pupils are achieving the expected level in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 1.
- The number of Year 1 pupils achieving the expected standard in the phonics screening check is not increasing quickly enough and disadvantaged pupils in particular do less well than other pupils.
- Exclusion rates are high, particularly permanent exclusions, which are well above the national average.

Inspection outcomes

Of the 10 maintained schools and academies that were inspected as part of the focused inspection activity:

- two schools maintained their outstanding status
- three schools retained an overall effectiveness judgement of good
- one school improved from requires improvement to good

- one school declined from outstanding to good
- one school declined from good to special measures
- another school declined from requires improvement to special measures
- the academy was judged as requires improvement.

Over a quarter of primary-aged pupils in Reading are not receiving a good standard of education, which is reflected in the inspections conducted.

It is disappointing to note that only one school inspected has improved since its previous inspection. Three schools declined. Two of these declined so significantly that they now require special measures.

It concerns me that there has been no increase in the overall proportion of good and outstanding schools in Reading during the last year. The evidence collected during the inspections indicates that your local authority has not provided sufficient challenge or support to schools to enable them to improve quickly enough.

I am particularly worried that the local authority has failed to take action to prevent schools deteriorating to the point where they now require special measures. I am sure you will be anxious to support these schools in providing a good education for the children they serve.

Inspectors highlighted common weaknesses across the schools and academies that were judged less than good. These include:

- poor quality leadership that fails to identify weaknesses and drive improvement, particularly in teaching
- teaching that is not good enough to enable all groups of pupils to make enough progress
- insufficient challenge for pupils in lessons because of low expectations, particularly for more-able pupils, disabled pupils and those with special educational needs
- weaknesses in pupils' writing skills
- ineffective marking and feedback that do not help pupils to understand how to improve their work
- poor behaviour management
- pupils' poor attitudes to learning
- gaps in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils
- weaknesses in middle leadership
- governance that has not secured effective leadership, displays a lack of urgency to bring about improvements and does not provide sufficient challenge in holding school leaders to account.

Wider findings

The evidence collected through the headteacher telephone survey shows that some school leaders think that the local authority's systems and procedures to support school improvement are not rigorous enough.

The number of visits schools receive from a school partnership adviser is proportionate based on schools' most recent inspection judgements. However, there are mixed views about the quality of challenge and support provided through these visits. The visit agendas are negotiated and mainly driven by the headteachers themselves. The local authority does not take enough initiative in establishing a focus for the visit. As a result, there are often no obvious links between one visit and the next and no coherent approach to moving the school forward. Advisers do not routinely scrutinise or evaluate schools' self-evaluation documents and development plans.

In addition, there are no specific measures in place to help good schools to become outstanding. Records of visits are variable and, in some cases, schools report that they have not received any notes following their school partnership adviser's visit. Where notes of visits do exist, they are not routinely sent to the chair of governors. Consequently, there is often a lack of challenge for school leaders from governors at subsequent governors' meetings. The local authority does not rigorously check whether advice and guidance from these visits have been acted on. Many school leaders report that there is no tangible evidence that the routine visits have had any significant impact over time in helping schools to improve.

Schools are more positive about the support they receive from advisory teams within the local authority, such as the literacy adviser's help to improve the teaching of phonics and writing. However, due to the lack of rigour in the local authority's monitoring of improvements, there is no systematic approach to evaluating the impact and effectiveness of this support. I will be interested to see if this support has a positive impact on the published outcomes for young people.

Strengths identified during this focused inspection

- Reading local authority knows the majority of its schools well. The level of support is often proportionate to need; schools that require improvement, have serious weaknesses or are subject to special measures receive more support.
- Through regular collection of pupil achievement data, the local authority is clear about the academic achievement of schools and academies.
- The data pack for schools is valued highly by school leaders as it is a useful tool to support self-evaluation.
- The wider support given to schools through a range of services is well-regarded by most schools.

- The 'team around the school' approach is generally welcomed by schools, providing some effective support for school leaders.
- Schools are very positive about the support provided by the English adviser, particularly in supporting improvements in phonics and writing.
- The newly qualified teacher programme is well regarded by those who use it.

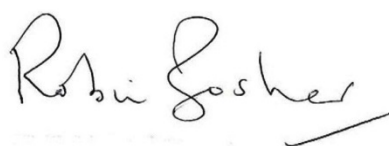
Summary of concerns arising from this focused inspection

- Too many schools are inadequate and this number is growing.
- There is too much variability in the quality of support that schools receive from local authority officers.
- Schools are not improving at a sufficiently rapid rate.
- Not enough schools are good or outstanding and too many pupils attend schools that do not provide at least a good standard of education.
- The local authority is not able to demonstrate enough of an impact on improving the effectiveness of schools and academies.

In summary, the outcomes of the inspections and discussions with headteachers indicate that Reading local authority has not been successful enough in improving its schools and academies. Although the inspection judgements of some schools have improved, there are too many that have remained the same or have declined. There is an urgent need to tackle underperformance where it exists and to support and challenge schools to improve at a faster rate. Equally, there is a need to ensure that the support and challenge that the local authority offers schools is of a consistently high quality.

I am mindful of the challenges this represents, especially in light of the reducing resources you cite in your letter of 23 October. To this end, I propose to increase the amount of time Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) have to support and challenge you in making the necessary improvements. I have asked Ann Henderson, HMI, and Jackie Krafft, Senior HMI, to contact you soon to discuss this in more detail.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Robin Boshier'.

Sir Robin Boshier
Regional Director, South East

Annex 1

Schools inspected between 9 and 23 October 2014

School	Type	Date of previous inspection and previous inspection judgement	Date of Inspection and inspection judgement in October 2014	Status
Blagdon Nursery School and Children's Centre	LA nursery school	6 October 2011 Outstanding	15–16 October Outstanding	Remained the same
Norcot Early Years Centre	LA nursery school	25 January 2012 Outstanding	21–22 October Outstanding	Remained the same
Coley Primary School	Community primary	10 October 2012 Requires improvement	9–10 October Good	Improved
Wilson Primary School	Community primary	9 January 2011 Outstanding	9–10 October Good	Declined
New Town Primary School	Community primary	17 January 2013 Requires improvement	15–16 October Special measures	Declined
Oxford Road Community School	Community primary	5 March 2010 Good	15–16 October Good	Remained the same
St Mary and All Saints Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School	Voluntary-aided primary	24 September 2009 Good	21–22 October Special measures	Declined
Phoenix College	Community SEN	23 September 2011 Good	15–16 October Good	Remained the same

The Holy Brook School	Community SEN	30 May 2012 Good	22–23 October Good	Remained the same
Battle Primary Academy	Sponsor-led academy	Not previously inspected	22–23 October Requires improvement	First inspection as an academy