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Ms Sue Westcott
Executive Director of Children's Services
Peterborough City Council
Children's Services
Bayard Place, Broadway
Peterborough
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Dear Ms Westcott

Inspection of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement under section 136(1) (b) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006

Following the recent inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectors from 3 to 7 February 2014, I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

We are grateful to you for your cooperation, and to your staff, the elected members, contracted partners, headteachers and governors who gave up their time to meet with us.¹

This inspection was carried out for four main reasons:

- (1) The proportion of pupils in Peterborough attending a primary school rated as good or better is in the lowest 10% nationally.
- (2) By the end of Key Stage 2, pupils' attainment is below the national average and is very low for pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals.
- (3) Although there were significant improvements in 2013, outcomes at the end of Key Stage 4 remain below the national average.

¹ During the inspection, discussions were held with senior and operational officers, and elected members of the local authority, governors and other stakeholders. Inspectors scrutinised available documents, including strategic plans, and analysed a range of available data.

- (4) A high proportion of young people aged 16 to 18 are not in education, employment or training.

These issues have prompted concerns about the capacity of the local authority to bring about improvement in the city's schools.

Context

Peterborough City Council is a small unitary authority. Seven of its twelve secondary schools are academies, as are an increasing number of primary schools. One secondary provider is a free school with a special school located on the same site. A further four special schools, and one pupil referral unit, provide education for children and young people with a wide range of additional needs. Two colleges provide post-16 education and training.

Peterborough is a fast-growing city. Much of this growth emanates from new arrivals to the United Kingdom who are predominantly from Eastern Europe. The number of pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) is well above average and rising; it is currently much higher in Year 1 than in Year 11. These demographic changes have influenced the revision of the Peterborough EAL strategy. The range of languages spoken in schools is broadening. The proportion of pupils who join or leave school during the course of the year is amongst the highest nationally. This reflects the temporary nature of some employment and the movement of families within the city itself. Despite some affluent areas, there are some localities in which levels of deprivation are high and continue to rise.

Peterborough maintains a small team of officers to support school improvement. Their work is overseen by an Assistant Director for Education and Resources. Most schools access advice and support from the school improvement team and use the local authority's other services, such as support for governance, attendance and finance. The local authority also commissions services from key partners to improve teaching and learning in mathematics and phonics. Examples of these partners are Edge Hill University and the EAL Academy, a bespoke consultancy service, who work to raise the achievement of all pupils who have English as an additional language. In 2013, a review of school improvement activities led to the establishment of a 'Self-Improving Schools Network' overseen by a School Improvement Board.

Summary findings

The local authority's arrangements for supporting school improvement are effective.

Strategies to improve the education outcomes for children and young people in Peterborough are bearing positive results. Notable recent successes include the significant improvement in GCSE results. Over the past three years, the proportion

of students achieving five or more GCSEs at A*-C grades including English and mathematics has increased by 10% from 45.5% in 2010 to 56.2% in 2013.

Attendance in schools has also improved and, although still slightly below the national average, it now matches similar authorities. The pupil referral unit is now good. Its leadership, judged outstanding at its recent inspection, is having a significant impact on reducing exclusions across the city's schools. In the 2011/12 academic year, ten pupils were permanently excluded from primary schools in Peterborough. During the following year, and so far this academic year, there have been no exclusions. Overall, the number of permanent exclusions has reduced from 43 in 2011/12 to 24 in 2012/13. The reducing number of permanent exclusions, (eight so far this year), against the number of requests, (19 to date), demonstrates the robust stance taken by the local authority and schools.

Officers recognise that there is still some way to go. The proportion of pupils attending a good or better primary school, although improving steadily, is well below average. Results, although improving year on year, are also below the national average. Pupils start school with low levels of attainment. As they get older, through Key Stages 1 and 2, their progress in writing and mathematics increases at a faster rate than is seen nationally. However, progress in reading is slower. Polish and Lithuanian pupils are making good progress and their results are much improved this year. Nonetheless, the attainment gap between pupils from disadvantaged groups and other Peterborough pupils is wide. Reducing these inequalities is a key issue for the local authority and schools to address.

The local authority's senior leaders and the team of school improvement advisers are held in high regard by schools. They work well with local leaders of education and headteachers to support schools that are causing concern. The partnerships with a range of providers, including some from outside Peterborough, increase the capacity to support schools and intervene where improvement is most urgently needed. Headteachers show strong commitment to the newly established school-to-school partnership, although some primary schools still rely heavily on local authority support.

Headteachers and governors are emphatically committed to realising the council leaders' and senior officers' vision to increase the proportion of good or better schools and for end of key stage results to match the national average by 2015. However, the extent to which each school must contribute to this high ambition is not spelled out clearly and specifically in the council's strategic plans.

The work to improve students' participation in education, employment or training post-16 is showing signs of success. The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training has reduced from 7.4% in 2011 (above the national average), to 5.9% in January 2014, which is much closer to the national average and matches the proportion in similar areas. The local authority's officers and post-16 partners closely track young people's destinations when they leave school.

Consequently, the proportion of young people whose destinations are unknown is much smaller than the national average. The secondary schools rebuilding programme and the joint work with post-16 providers have ensured sufficiency of sixth form places and Level 3 provision across the city. Local authority data show that a significant proportion of 17- and 18-year-old students, particularly those with additional needs and those from minority ethnic backgrounds, drop out of their chosen courses before accreditation. This data is supported by officers' local knowledge. The local authority must challenge schools to ensure that students receive genuinely high-quality and impartial advice and guidance about where, and what, to study.

The improved provision for young people with special educational needs is reducing the number of those educated or trained out of the city. However, work-based learning opportunities are still limited. Several initiatives are in place to increase the number and range of placements, such as the opening of a skills' centre and making apprenticeships part of lease arrangements for start-up businesses in the town centre.

Areas for improvement

To improve achievement and ensure that all pupils in Peterborough attend a good or better school, the local authority should:

- clarify milestones and targets in strategic plans and specify how each school will contribute to raising standards for all children and young people;
- focus relentlessly on supporting and challenging schools to improve outcomes for pupils who speak English as an additional language and those supported through pupil premium funding;
- embed high quality school-to-school partnership in order to promote the sharing of good practice and increase the autonomy of primary schools; and
- improve information, advice and guidance in schools and broaden the provision of work-based learning opportunities so that young people succeed along their education and training pathways.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- Councillors and senior officers are ambitious for Peterborough. The right structures, personnel and investment are in place to realise the council's ambition. A period of stable leadership began in 2011 with the appointment of the Assistant Director for Education and Resources who formed an effective partnership with the Head of School Improvement. This was further strengthened in 2012 by the appointment of a substantive Executive Director of Children's Services who has supported them in galvanising the full support of headteachers across the city.
- Key priorities and overall targets are shared and understood by all schools. Headteachers fully understand their collective responsibility for closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and all pupils in Peterborough.

Primary schools, however, must significantly accelerate the progress of pupils in receipt of pupil premium funding if overall targets are to be met. Currently, each school's contribution to these is not specified with sufficient clarity in the strategic plans.

- The local authority is proactive and effectively plans to anticipate future challenges. For example, it has ensured that sufficient school places are available to match the significant rise of the school-age population. Officers check that schools have the capacity and expertise to meet the specific needs of newly-arrived pupils.
- Headteachers and governors hold school improvement advisers in high regard. Governors praise the quality of the training that they receive which is reflected in the high attendance and positive evaluation of courses. School leaders note a step change in the level of challenge to their schools. This is reflected in the comprehensive visit notes that show how the issues raised are rigorously followed up by officers.
- The local authority has effective arrangements to ensure there are sufficient and suitable places for all 16- and 17-year-olds in education or training. A particular strength is the improved provision, at a local college, for students who have special educational needs or a disability. There is more to do, however, to increase work-based learning opportunities and to challenge schools about the quality and impartiality of the information, advice and guidance they provide to students.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- Improvement advisers know schools well. A wide range of data and other local intelligence are used to identify strengths as well as underachievement and to eliminate potential barriers to raising standards. Most academies purchase local authority services, including data management and adviser support, because they trust the quality of what is offered.
- Educational outcomes and other criteria, such as difficulty in recruiting staff or inexperienced leadership, are used to determine the level of support and intervention a school will receive. Good or better schools are also monitored, with a lighter touch, to check whether performance is being sustained.
- The positive impact of the local authority's support and challenge is shown in several areas. This particularly includes the improved results at GCSE, the reduction of exclusions and absence from school, the now good overall effectiveness of the pupil referral unit, the sustained good quality of all the special schools, and the increase in the number of young people continuing education or training post 16, with better provision for those who have additional needs. Ofsted inspections of the few inadequate schools, and those requiring improvement, report effective support from the local authority.
- The school improvement service signposts school staff to partners whose educational work has a good track record. Officers and local leaders in education work well together to support schools, share good practice and increase the schools' capacity to improve by themselves. Not all primary schools are adapting to the new culture and some are over-reliant on the support provided by the

local authority. The success of the newly-established Self-Improving Schools Network is unproven.

- The number of newly qualified teachers is high in Peterborough. The attention given to their induction and professional development is paramount. Officers challenge schools where support is not strong enough, work with schools to identify struggling new teachers early and agree effective support plans. The induction manager is an integral part of the school improvement team.

Support and challenge for leadership and management, including governance

- The action taken to challenge poor leadership and governance in maintained schools has significantly strengthened over the past two years. It is beginning to have an impact, as demonstrated by the now outstanding leadership of the pupil referral unit. Formal statutory powers, as well as the local authority's own 'letters of concern', are used to intervene when maintained schools are not improving. The Department for Education is notified promptly when an academy gives cause for concern.
- Local leaders in education and headteachers of successful schools are deployed to help weaker maintained schools across the city. Training opportunities are closely matched to known weaknesses. Through the EAL Academy, some schools are targeted for intervention as the quality of teaching and the progress of pupils who are beginning to learn English requires urgent improvement. This includes training teaching assistants to use appropriate pedagogy for these pupils. Training to improve outcomes for pupils eligible for free school meals is also provided. Case studies demonstrate clearly how quickly some schools have improved as a result.
- Almost all schools purchase the local authority's governor services. Tailored support is well-deployed and governors welcome the flexibility in the timings of workshops, with day and evening courses on offer to promote good participation. Governors report that they are 'chased-up' if officers feel the quality of governance warrants their attendance. They also comment positively on the support and the increasing level of challenge they obtain for the management of headteachers' performance. The local authority deploys a number of experienced governors to support some governing bodies and interim executive boards.

Use of resources

- Elected members are highly committed to maintaining a small school improvement team, despite financial constraints. This is due to the fact that advisers ensure resources are targeted where they are most needed, either as part of a city-wide programme, specific improvement initiatives such as '*Every Child a Reader*', or tailored to an individual school's project. The impact of funding on pupils' outcomes and school balances are reviewed as part of the termly *Round Table Reviews*.

- The procedures for the allocation of resources are transparent and decisions made at the Schools' Forum are shared with headteachers and governors. The frequent headteacher meetings provide opportunities to challenge the council's resourcing strategy. This year, significant funds are being allocated to the first 'Triads', a specific group of schools matched to work together, and 'Collaboratives', composed of several triads, leading the way for the development of school-to-school support and school autonomy.
- The Lead Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and the University and officers are clear that the lack of funding should not stand in the way of pupils' progress. This commitment is shown through the high-quality refurbishment of schools and the development of the Peterborough school-based initial teacher training (SCITT-Teach East) partnership, to ensure the good supply of high-quality teachers and meet the increasing demand for school places.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chief Executive and the Leader of Peterborough City Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Marianick Ellender-Gelé
Her Majesty's Inspector

