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Ms Eleanor Brazil
Director of Children and Young People's Services
Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council
Civic Office
Doncaster
DN1 3BU

Dear Ms Brazil

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 on 17–21 March 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 because of concerns about the low proportion of primary and secondary schools in Doncaster judged to be good or better for overall effectiveness. This is well-below national averages, putting the council in the lowest performing 20% of local authorities across England. In addition, pupils' attainment and progress, in both primary and secondary schools, are weak across a range of measures.

Context

Schools within the local authority are organised into a two-tier primary and secondary system. There are 92 maintained schools: 82 primary, two secondary,

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 a range of documents, including strategic plans, and analysed a range of available data.

three Pupil Referral Units and five special schools. In addition, 32 schools are academies. Of these, 12 secondary and six primary academies are sponsor-led. Six different organisations sponsor academy schools. The remaining 14 schools are academy converters: 11 primary and three secondary.

The Director of Children and Young People's Services was appointed in June 2013 on an interim basis. Education service provision is managed by the Assistant Director of Education, who has been in post for two years. There are four full-time equivalent senior standards and effectiveness officers managed by a head of service. Following a direction issued by the Secretary of State, an independent Trust is being established to deliver the local authority's social care services, with an anticipated implementation date of October 2014.

Summary of inspection findings

The local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement are ineffective.

Attainment in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 has been significantly below national averages for the last three years. The gap between the proportion of young people who achieve five or more good GCSEs including English and mathematics in Doncaster and the national figure has remained too wide over the same period. The progress made by pupils in English and mathematics between the ages of 11 and 16 is significantly below average. Neither primary nor secondary pupils achieve as well as they should. Outcomes for all pupils, including the more able, are significantly below average. Performance for those in receipt of the pupil premium is well below average for a number of key indicators. There is an urgent need to improve this situation.

Only 45% of children and young people in Doncaster attend a good or better school. This profile of poor performance was recognised by elected members when the administration changed in May 2013. Since that time, a number of initiatives have been implemented, including regular discussions between senior officers and the Lead Member for Education and academy sponsors. Headteachers of all types of schools report better relationships with the local authority. However, these initiatives are relatively new and have not yet resulted in improving outcomes for all pupils.

Eleven standards and effectiveness partners (StEPs) have been contracted and are working with schools, including some academies, to provide additional support and challenge. This initiative, which began in September 2013, is developing well but

current plans for quality assurance are worryingly insecure. It is not clear that the StEPs' work is sufficiently focused in order to improve the quality of education or provide an indication of any decline in performance and trigger early intervention. In addition, systems for collecting and analysing schools' performance data are not fit for purpose.

The school improvement service does not keep formal records of the quality of governance in individual schools. The local authority has used its statutory powers to place additional governors on school governing bodies. However, there is no consistent use of more formal powers to intervene in schools that are causing concern.

A greater emphasis on school-to-school support has been recognised as a priority by the local authority. There are examples of supportive links being developed between schools in order to improve the quality of provision. However, initiatives have not as yet had a discernible impact on overall outcomes.

Areas for improvement

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

- improve its systems for the collection and analysis of school performance data, including in-year data, to ensure a more focused analysis as part of the risk assessment, support and challenge for schools
- sharpen its strategies for early intervention, including the use of statutory powers, when schools show early signs of declining performance
- review and quality-assure the monitoring of schools by StEPs to ensure that robust and effective challenge is a consistent feature of the local authority's work with schools
- improve monitoring procedures to include a clear judgement on the quality of governance for maintained schools
- build on the existing range of support from good quality providers through enhanced partnerships with the Teaching School Alliance and service leaders, focusing clearly on improving the quality of teaching and raising standards
- continue to develop links with academies and sponsor organisations at senior officer and elected member levels to encourage a shared approach to improving the quality of education, especially at the secondary phase
- ensure that any concerns about the performance of academy schools are reported promptly to the Secretary of State

- enhance evaluation procedures used by the Schools' Forum so that there is a sharper focus on the outcomes of the funding for school improvement.

The local authority arrangements for school improvement require re-inspection within nine to 12 months.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- Following the change in administration in May 2013, elected members have endeavoured to promote a more positive dialogue with all schools and with headteachers, including academies.
- Initiatives have been introduced to support and challenge schools, which build on existing collaborative work with academies and maintained schools. An example has been the effective work over the last two years to reduce exclusions. The impact of this work can be seen clearly in the reduction in permanent exclusions from secondary schools. No permanent exclusion has been registered since September 2013 and fixed-term exclusions have fallen steadily although they remain considerably above the national average for secondary schools.
- Headteachers of all types of schools, as well as governors, note the improvement in relationships with the local authority and appreciate the drive to improve outcomes. The determination of the lead member and senior officers to improve the life chances of young people in Doncaster is clear. However, most of these initiatives are at an early stage and have yet to deliver sustained improvements in the quality of education and pupils' achievement.
- The local authority arrangements to ensure there are sufficient suitable places for all 16 and 17 year olds in education or training are developing appropriately through a 14 –19 strategy board. A clear plan has been established to develop collaborative work and to fill the gaps in current provision. Participation rates, at 88%, are broadly average. The proportion of young people not in education employment or training (NEET) is similar to the regional average and represents a reduction on previous years. Ambitious targets, however, have not been achieved.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- The performance data available to monitor and challenge schools is not fit for purpose. In the past, there have been some difficulties in collecting performance data from academy schools. This has not helped the local

authority to establish an accurate picture of how well provision is meeting the needs of the borough's children and young people. It has also led to difficulties in responding quickly when standards in academy schools have declined.

- The school improvement service ratings of individual schools are not consistently reliable. For example, of the primary schools inspected since September 2013, one third had been assessed too generously when compared with their inspection outcome. Support for schools from StEPs is hampered by the lack of up-to-date, consistent and reliable data. The overall process for checking that underperformance is identified and tackled is understood by schools but has not resulted in measureable impact.
- The school improvement service points to successful work with some schools causing concern. However, the local authority still has significantly more schools which are judged inadequate compared with regional and national performance. Over a third of maintained schools were judged as requiring improvement at their most recent inspection; this is almost double the regional and national figures.
- Formal powers of intervention are not used effectively. There are examples of successful intervention through the placement of experienced additional governors in schools causing concern. However, the use of Interim Executive Boards and Formal Warning Notices is much less frequent and very recent. Considerable scope exists for a more balanced use of statutory powers.
- The local authority has worked with the Teaching School Alliance since April 2013. Headteachers and school improvement staff note that this has led to some examples of targeted support for individual schools. However, this form of working is still relatively new.

Support and challenge for leadership and management, including governance

- Headteachers are clear that, within the last year, there has been an improvement in the use of school-to-school support from good and outstanding schools to build capacity in weaker schools. Nevertheless, although there are some examples of effective collaboration, a general lack of capacity for the support of leadership in weaker schools is recognised by senior leaders in the school improvement service.
- Recently, support for school leadership has been strengthened by the more coherent use of the Teaching School Alliance and national and local leaders in education. This is yet to lead to a sustained impact on the quality of education in maintained schools.

- The local authority's governor services has recently gained a national award for the quality of provision. Experienced governors have been used well to support some individual schools. However, governance was judged by inspectors to be weak and require an external review in over 20% of schools at their last inspection.

Use of resources

- There are insufficient formal arrangements to challenge the school improvement service on the impact of its work in improving outcomes for pupils or increasing the number of schools judged good or better. This makes it difficult to judge whether the service provides value for money.
- The Schools' Forum is working to ensure that budgets are set which take into account the needs of children and young people. The chair and vice-chair, who were appointed within the last year, welcome the active support they receive from the Director of Children and Young People's Services. She attends all meetings of the Schools' Forum.
- The importance of school improvement funding to the quality of education within the borough has been recognised within budget planning, although the proportion of funds for the service is below the national average.
- There is a clear education standards and effectiveness service action plan with termly evaluations of performance, although resources are not linked effectively to each of the actions.

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

Yours sincerely

Robert Pyner

Her Majesty's Inspector