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Ms Helen Jenner
Director of Children's Services
London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
Town Hall, 1 Town Square
Barking
IG11 7LU

Dear Ms Jenner

Inspection of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham's arrangements for supporting school improvement

Following my visit to the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham between 24 and 28 November 2014, along with three Her Majesty's Inspectors, I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

Thank you for your cooperation and that of all the staff we met during our visit. We particularly appreciate the time and care taken to prepare the programme for us. Please pass on our thanks to your staff, elected members, contracted partners, headteachers and governors who kindly gave up their time to meet us.

The inspection of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement in England is conducted under section 136(1) (b) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Evidence

The findings of this inspection are based on discussions with:

- senior officers and elected members of the council and senior officers of the school improvement service, including advisers and advisory teachers operating within the Education Division of the Children's Services department
- headteachers from a range of maintained schools, academies and free schools representing all phases of educational provision
- partners involved in school improvement commissioned or brokered by the school improvement service, including external consultants and leaders providing school-to-school support
- school governors
- officers and partners representing the Early Years Foundation Stage and post-16 phases of education.

A range of documentation was scrutinised, including the borough council's strategy and policy for education, school performance data, monitoring and evaluation documents, case studies and notes of visits.

The outcomes of the focused inspection and telephone survey of schools were also considered as part of the inspection evidence.

Summary findings

- A good quality education for all and improving academic standards are at the heart of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham's ambitious vision. The local authority is facing significant demographic changes and challenges, such as an increasing population, increasing population mobility, greater ethnic diversity and increasing poverty. None of these is accepted by officers and elected members as a barrier to educational achievement.
- Senior officers and elected members provide strong leadership. The impact of the local strategy is fewer schools causing concern and rising standards across all phases of education that now match or exceed national averages.
- There is some way to go before the aspiration for all children and young people to attend at least a good or outstanding school is met. The proportion of good and outstanding schools, whilst accelerating, remains just short of the national average and the local authority's target for more outstanding schools is too modest.
- Robust support and challenge for all schools at risk of not providing a good education need to be further accelerated by a more forensic and consistent scrutiny of performance data.
- Additionally, more precise categorisation of schools and more prompt deployment of formal powers of intervention, such as formal warning notices where appropriate, are required.
- Strategic financial decision making is based on sound consultation with schools. Too many schools, however, carry forward surplus budgets that exceed acceptable levels.

Areas for improvement

In order for the local authority to improve the quality of education, standards and effectiveness in maintained schools and meet its stated aspirations, it needs to:

- accelerate the challenge to the remaining schools judged less than good by Ofsted inspection, challenge more good schools to become outstanding and stem any potential decline in good or outstanding schools by:
 - ensuring that all school improvement advisers use performance data more consistently for all schools to identify any risk of decline in year groups and then intervening promptly where appropriate
- refine the process for categorising school effectiveness by:
 - using sharper performance indicators and more precise thresholds for the different categories

- incorporating a wider range of aspects that is aligned to national priorities included in the school inspection framework
- deploy formal powers of intervention promptly where appropriate
- exert greater challenge to the schools that are carrying forward excessive balances to ensure that delegated resources reach current pupils.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- The 'One Borough, One Community; London's Growth Opportunity' vision statement is ambitious and education is at its heart. The vision is based on wide consultation and commands strong support from schools and other stakeholders. Senior officers and councillors provide clear direction through their leadership and schools appreciate their visibility and involvement in school communities.
- There is determination to encourage schools to act autonomously while maintaining their loyalty to the 'family of schools' in the local authority. Trust and respect are evident in the rigorous and professional relationship between schools, officers and councillors.
- Strategic education plans are reviewed and evaluated thoroughly to ensure that they help to drive up standards in the local authority and to inform subsequent targets and priorities. The policy for supporting and challenging school improvement is proportionate and flexible. The Members' Ofsted Panel, a scrutiny forum for elected members to hold schools to account following their inspection and the Director's challenge meetings are rigorous and regarded well as a means of local accountability by school leaders and governors.
- There is acknowledgement from all in the local authority that there is some way to go if the aspiration of 'all schools good or outstanding by December 2015' is to be realised. Currently, the proportion of schools requiring improvement, although reducing incrementally, renders the aspiration fragile and the target figure for outstanding schools is too modest.
- The strategy for post-16 education is coherent and based on effective partnership arrangements between schools, the college and other providers. Central to the effectiveness of the strategy is the good quality and analysis of performance data. The partnership has been successful in improving the volumes of students in employment, education and training. The proportion of students not in employment, education or training is reducing, but greater efforts are required to improve the outcomes for White British students particularly.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- Based on current unvalidated data for 2014, academic performance in the local authority area is improving and now compares favourably with national averages. There is strong improvement in the Early Years Foundation Stage, so that the proportions of children making good levels of development now match national averages. Standards and rates of progress in Key Stages 1 and 2 are at or above national averages for all subjects. Standards at GCSE have also risen to above the national average for the proportion of students achieving five A* to C grades including English and mathematics. The local authority recognises the further

challenge that is required if it is to close the gaps in performance between Barking and Dagenham and other London local authorities.

- Through a service level agreement, the schools subscribe to the school improvement service. Monitoring, support and intervention are provided on a proportionate scale according to schools' effectiveness. The comprehensive provision of performance data supports school self-evaluation well. School improvement advisers are proficient in their overall knowledge of the data and their application. This enables them to challenge most schools effectively. However, there is inconsistency in the interrogation of data by some advisers for all schools, and especially for the performance of all year groups beyond Years 2, 6 and 11. The local authority cannot be sure, therefore, that it identifies underperformance in all schools accurately in order to intervene and stem any risk of decline promptly.
- Schools are categorised according to their effectiveness, based on a range of key indicators. Categorisation is generally accurate and reliable because link advisers and other officers use the available evidence and intelligence when reaching their assessment. The range of indicators for categorisation includes key aspects and outcomes of schools' latest Ofsted inspection. Additional aspects, such as the effectiveness of governance, the Early Years Foundation Stage, sixth form provision and outcomes and inclusion attainment for pupils with additional needs, are appropriately included. However, the thresholds for each category are not precisely defined and not all current national priorities are sufficiently aligned to the categorisation process.
- Senior leaders and governors understand the process of categorisation well. Schools are provided with detailed notes of visits by link advisers which confirm progress against identified priorities and set challenges for the intervening periods.
- School-to-school support is commissioned or brokered effectively by advisers. School networks are working well where they are mature, and they are developing well in other areas of the local authority.
- The impact of this is that the proportions of schools now providing a good or better education are improving over time and close to the national average. Since September 2013 the numbers of primary and secondary schools in the borough being judged good or better by Ofsted has outpaced the national rate. Schools causing concern are kept under tighter scrutiny. Numbers have reduced incrementally over the last three years. All such schools monitored by Ofsted report the external support they receive as good.

Support and challenge for leadership and management (including governance)

- A key strength is the working relationship between elected members, officers and school leaders. There are numerous examples of where this is having a direct impact on improving schools. The school review network groups are mutually benefiting the host school and its governors and those leaders who undertake the reviews. Active federations are also benefiting school effectiveness in the partner schools and the work of PACE, a mature network group of seven headteachers, is

providing a good model for other networks of schools in the borough. These examples illustrate the greater autonomy being exercised by school leaders in driving improvements.

- In addition, there is secure evidence of positive impact where the local authority is actively brokering and commissioning support for schools through, for example, the Tollgate Teaching Alliance, the National Educational Trust and other external partners to develop further the landscape of school-to-school support.
- Training for senior leaders in primary schools is secured mainly through the networks and link advisers. The teaching schools are improving the capacity, especially in primary schools, to secure improvements in standards and effectiveness. The central professional development programme also tends to be primary focused. There is very strong subscription to this service level agreement and, consequently, high take up of courses offered based on an analysis of needs and priorities. Very few courses are cancelled. Secondary schools draw mainly on external national sources of training and support.
- The local authority knows the strengths and weaknesses of governing bodies well. The effectiveness of governance is assessed as a separate aspect that contributes to the overall categorisation of schools for targeting support, such as additional governors. Governors welcome being held to account via the Members' Ofsted panel, which is a robust scrutiny panel attended by schools in the term following their Ofsted inspection, and through the annual Director's challenge meetings. The governor support service is regarded well for the prompt and efficient service it provides, particularly for administrative matters. The central training programme is mainly confined to face-to-face events and lacks creative approaches in delivery to involve more governors. Home-grown and nationally accredited governor expertise is very limited within the local authority. There is scope for more concerted efforts to recruit and deploy high quality governors to schools in need of additional support and challenge.
- The local authority has deployed its formal powers of intervention modestly in the recent past, issuing formal warning notices, for example, to only three schools in 2012–13, and none since that time. It has not made sufficient use of these powers. Where alternative local approaches have been taken, these have not always led to the rapid improvement expected.

Use of resources

- Financial decision making is transparent, understood and agreed by schools. The School's Forum is an effective mechanism for consulting on, and informing, decisions. The views of schools are considered carefully and result in negotiating some challenging issues, such as a better balance in primary and secondary school funding and where high additional pupil needs are evident. The cost effectiveness of retaining centrally funded resources, such as the school improvement service, music tuition and outdoor education facilities, is sensibly kept under annual review and decisions are made collaboratively.
- Budgets are monitored carefully by the local authority. Focused reviews, result in funding specific projects from underspends to support priorities such as the reading comprehension programme. Where schools face financial difficulties, such

as significant changes in pupil numbers, loans proportionate to need – rather than grants – are allocated.

- The local authority is acutely aware of the volume of schools carrying forward significant balances. School plans accounting for surplus balances are required and scrutinised. Nevertheless, currently, approximately half of the schools are exceeding acceptable boundaries and a third of these are carrying significant underspends of between 16% and 30%. The local authority should exert greater challenge to these schools to ensure that delegated resources reach pupils and efforts to support school improvement are maximised.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chief Executive Officer and the Leader of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Council. This letter will be published on GOV.uk.

Yours sincerely

Kevin Jane

Senior Her Majesty's Inspector