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23 March 2016

**Andrew Cook, HMI**  
Regional Director, East of England

Dear Sir or Madam

## **Concern about the quality of education and the outcomes for pupils in Central Bedfordshire schools**

I am writing to express my concern about the standard of education that children are receiving in Central Bedfordshire. I am particularly concerned about:

- the low standards attained by pupils at the end of Key Stage 2
- the poor outcomes for disadvantaged pupils
- the limited impact that you as key stakeholders have in driving rapid improvement in the quality of education and standards.

### **Low standards**

Published results for 2015 show that, despite a good start in Key Stage 1, pupils in Central Bedfordshire make weak progress in Key Stage 2 and fail to achieve well enough at the end of Year 6. In 2015, only 77% of pupils in Central Bedfordshire achieved the expected Level 4 in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Year 6 compared with 80% of pupils nationally. Taking into account their achievement at the end of Year 2, these pupils made less progress in mathematics and reading than in any other local authority area in the East of England. Not enough has been done to ensure good outcomes for Key Stage 2 pupils.

Underachievement at Key Stage 2 is particularly stark in newly established primary schools, where only 63% of pupils achieved at least Level 4 in reading, writing and mathematics, well below even the local authority average. There is also wide variation in the Key Stage 2 outcomes achieved in mainstream maintained schools and in converter academies. At 81%, the proportion of pupils who attained at least the threshold Level 4 in reading, writing and mathematics was much higher in converter academies than in maintained schools (72%). The proportion of

disadvantaged pupils attaining the same level was also higher in converter academies (64% compared with 56%). This gap in performance indicates that the local authority has not done enough to secure good outcomes for Key Stage 2 pupils attending maintained schools.

### **Outcomes for disadvantaged pupils**

The outcomes for disadvantaged pupils are poor. Only 55% of pupils eligible for free school meals achieve the minimum standards expected in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2 compared with 81% of pupils from more affluent families. This 26 percentage point gap is much wider than the national figure of 17 percentage points and means that pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds are poorly equipped to do well in secondary schools.

Nowhere in the East of England is this disparity more stark than in Central Bedfordshire. The attainment gaps between pupils eligible for free school meals and their classmates are not only wider at Key Stages 2 and 4 than those found nationally, but they widen as pupils move through their secondary education.

By the end of Key Stage 4, despite the fact that overall standards were above average in 2015, more than 70% of pupils eligible for free school meals failed to achieve at least five GCSEs grades A\* to C, including English and mathematics. The Dunstable and Houghton Regis area has particularly high levels of social disadvantage. Over the last two years, Ofsted has received a number of letters that are highly critical of the effectiveness of the local authority in this locality. Although I understand that structural changes in the three-tier provision in and around Dunstable have inevitably disrupted provision, it is nonetheless the case that outcomes for pupils here are woefully low.

### **The limited impact that key stakeholders have in driving rapid improvement in the quality of education and standards**

I am not convinced that either the local authority or the regional schools commissioner provides effective support and challenge for schools or focuses sufficiently on strengthening provision for the most disadvantaged pupils. Within the last three years, 105 formal warning notices have been issued by the 11 local authorities in the East of England. Central Bedfordshire local authority has issued none. This demonstrates an unwillingness to challenge school leaders and governors when standards, especially for disadvantaged pupils, are so poor.

The most recent inspection outcomes in Central Bedfordshire are not reassuring. In the autumn term of 2015, seven locally maintained schools in Central Bedfordshire were inspected. Two schools improved their overall effectiveness and one was judged to still be good, but three schools declined to inadequate and one was judged to require improvement for a second time.

This worrying pattern, when set alongside the track record of formal intervention by the local authority, indicates to me a lack of urgency or effectiveness. I acknowledge that 26% of primary schools and 72% of secondary schools in the Central Bedfordshire are academies and I expect the regional schools commissioner to be challenging multi-academy trusts and standalone academies to tackle underperformance.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector's Annual Report for 2014/15 acknowledged that the landscape within which schools now operate has changed significantly. The greater diversity in the structure and governance of schools presents challenges, as well as opportunities. It is essential that those responsible for education provision across Central Bedfordshire work closely together to develop a coherent strategy to transform the outcomes and life chances of pupils, particularly the most disadvantaged. Regardless of school structures, improvement is dependent on effective partnership, oversight and challenge. I am determined that there should be clear accountability that facilitates effective support and challenge in the schools and academies that need this most.

I will, of course, continue to monitor the impact of any improvement through the inspections we carry out in the local authority area and will ensure that Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is kept informed about developments.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "AR Cook".

**Andrew Cook HMI**  
**Regional Director, East of England**

**Recipients:**

Local Members of Parliament  
Cabinet Member Schools Portfolio  
Chief Executive, Central Bedfordshire Council  
Director of Children's Services, Central Bedfordshire Council  
Regional Schools Commissioner

cc. Department for Education