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Andrew Cook, HMI
Regional Director, East of England

Dear Sir or Madam

Concern about the quality of education and the outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in Cambridgeshire schools

I am writing to express my serious concerns about the lack of improvement in outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in Cambridgeshire and for the higher than average proportion of secondary and primary schools that require improvement or that are inadequate.

I note the improvements seen in the 2015 GCSE results in Cambridgeshire, but it would be wrong to take too much reassurance from these improved outcomes because they mask the widening gap in attainment between pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and non-FSM pupils. This gap has increased from 31.1 percentage points in 2014 to 38.9 percentage points in 2015. This is unacceptably wide and means that only 23.4% of FSM pupils achieved five or more GCSE grades A* to C, including English and mathematics. This compares with 62.3% for non-FSM pupils achieving the same measure in the country.

There appears to be a dearth of good practice in Cambridgeshire schools from which school leaders can learn. There are 16 secondary schools that in the past have been judged by Ofsted to be good or outstanding. Recent outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in these schools are unimpressive. In nine of these schools, the gap in expected progress for English between disadvantaged and other pupils in all schools widened in 2015. For mathematics, this gap widened in five schools. This worrying decline meant that in 13 out of the 15 good or outstanding schools with national data for Year 11 pupils, fewer than half of the disadvantaged pupils gained five GCSE grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, in 2015. In three schools, this figure fell below 30%.

Outcomes are no better for disadvantaged younger children in Cambridgeshire. In the early years, the gap has widened between the children known to be eligible for free school meals who achieve a good level of development and all others nationally.

At the age of six, the proportion of disadvantaged pupils achieving the expected standard in the phonics screening check has declined by five percentage points since 2014. The gap between these pupils in Cambridgeshire and all other pupils nationally widened alarmingly from 19 percentage points in 2014, to 26 percentage points in 2015. The gap in attainment between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils is also unacceptably wide at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2.

In accordance with our published inspection framework, good or outstanding schools are likely to decline to requires improvement or inadequate at their next inspection if outcomes for disadvantaged pupils are poor. The situation is already bleak. The proportion of good or outstanding secondary schools, at 53%, is the lowest in the East of England region and well below the national average of 76%.

Equally concerning is that, since September 2015, Ofsted inspections have identified a marked decline in the quality of education in Cambridgeshire's primary schools. Between September and December 2015, Ofsted completed 10 short inspections of good schools. Eight out of 10 schools declined from good to requires improvement or inadequate. At 79%, the proportion of primary schools that were good or outstanding in February 2016 was seven percentage points lower than the national figure. It means that there were over 10,000 pupils being educated in Cambridgeshire primary schools that are not good enough in February 2016.

I am aware that strategies are in place that seek to bring about improvement. For example, the two school improvement boards that have been established in the last year, one led by the local authority and the other facilitated by the regional schools commissioner, acknowledge the need for action. Both boards aim to support school leaders and governors in school improvement. The local authority has been working with primary schools specifically to try to raise standards for disadvantaged pupils. The local authority has also undertaken individual school reviews of provision for disadvantaged pupils, promoted school-to-school projects and issued warning notices to 12 schools this year. However, there is little evidence yet to point to any significant impact from these actions and initiatives.

As all except one secondary school in Cambridgeshire are now academies, I look to the regional schools commissioner to challenge the standalone academies and multiple academy chains to do more. Between 8 January 2014 and 27 March 2015, only one warning notice and three pre-warning notices were issued by the regional schools commissioner to schools in Cambridgeshire.

I do not underestimate the challenges school leaders face. Staff recruitment is a particular issue for some in Cambridgeshire. Much more needs to be done to put in place initiatives such as Teach First to tackle this issue across the country. This calls for a strong political will to drive educational improvement.

As leaders responsible for education in Cambridgeshire, you will recognise the need to halt the decline in school performance and take urgent action to improve

outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. A culture of high expectations across all phases of education must eradicate underperformance.

I will, of course, continue to monitor the impact of improvement through the inspections we carry out in the county 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 "A Cook".

Andrew Cook HMI
Regional Director, East of England

Recipients:

Local Members of Parliament
Chair of Children and Young Peoples Committee, Cambridgeshire County Council
Chief Executive, Cambridgeshire County Council
Director of Children's Services, Cambridgeshire County Council
Regional Schools Commissioner

cc. Department for Education