

Feedback from the Eastern Region Peer Review Team for Cambridgeshire County Council

Introduction

The Learning Directorate of Cambridgeshire County Council commissioned the first Eastern Region peer review of school improvement from colleagues in neighbouring shire LAs (Essex, Norfolk, Hertfordshire). The focus of the peer review was on the effectiveness of support to schools requiring improvement.

This feedback document aims to outline

1. The current context for Cambridgeshire
2. The strengths identified
3. The areas for development
4. The follow up offers of support from peer LAs

Context

Results at the end of KS2 show a significant decline of 7 percentage points from 79% to 72% in 2013 and performance is below national (76%), below statistical neighbour average (76%) and in line with the Eastern region (72%). KS4 attainment (60.8% is slightly above national (58.6%) but below statistical neighbours (61.5%).

The proportion of primary schools judged to be outstanding or good is rising but against the national picture (summer 2013) was below national and bottom of statistical neighbours at 70%. The recent Eastern region Ofsted report cited Cambridgeshire as 135/152 LAs on this measure.

The proportion of secondary schools judged 'good' or outstanding has risen for each of the last three years (2010-13). Cambridgeshire secondary schools are performing better than the national average and in the middle of its statistical neighbours. The recent Eastern region Ofsted report cited Cambridgeshire as 63/152 LAs on this measure

The gap in performance at KS2 of FSM pupils compared to non-FSM is a concern as on this measure Cambridgeshire are in the bottom 10% of LAs.

The LA is acutely aware of the challenges it faces particularly in the primary phase. The LA has set clear priorities for improvement. The concerns regarding the urgent need for improved performance at KS2 underpinned the request for the peer review.

The strengths identified

- The LA has good relationships with its schools who welcome LA leadership and involvement which provides an effective platform for the LA working with schools.
- The LA has recognised the scale of the performance challenges, identifying clear priorities and strategies for improvement.
- The LA has given a clear strategic lead on the priority to improve the attainment of FSM pupils and this was reported by all levels of the system in Cambridgeshire- from schools through to county council members.

- The LA is regularly reviewing its internal systems to review progress of schools and has listened to schools in shaping the offer to schools.
- Some CPD provided by the LA is highly regarded by schools – of particular note is the David Hargreaves CPD which was seen as innovative and ambitious and the LAs programme for school leaders 'Getting to Good'.
- Schools report some excellent examples of individual adviser support which is both challenging and supportive.

Areas for development

The Areas for development have been identified under three specific themes:

- Communication and Clarification
- Refining processes
- Quality Assurance

Clarification and Communication

- There is a need to define and clarify the role of the LA and schools in school improvement.
- There is an opportunity, building on the good relationships with schools, to co-construct a Cambridgeshire school improvement strategy enabling, headteachers, governors, system leaders, Teaching School Alliances, Diocesan colleagues to take an active role in the creation of the strategy. The LA and its stake holders need to define collaboratively the ambition for Cambridgeshire.
- The LA needs to give a stronger message to schools that they are the leaders of their own school's improvement.
- Although almost all secondary schools are now Academies the LA has a continuing role in monitoring standards which needs to be clarified and re-established with Academies.

Refining processes

- The RAG rating is used to categorise schools but is not driving improvement. A more objective process of categorization is required which is non negotiable and based on data analysis and clear criteria.
- There is a need to clarify milestones for schools of how long they are expected to remain in a specific banding with a 'road map' provided for 'getting to good'.
- A Requires Improvement strategy is needed to detail exactly the expectations of schools in this category, the support they will receive, the progress expected and the intervention actions the LA will take if progress is a concern.
- The current system of KIT meetings is being revised following an evaluation of the primary offer consultations with schools. Revisions might want to include a change of name to clarify the focus of monitoring and challenge expected.
- The LA needs to develop a succinct overview of the monthly performance of its schools to ensure rapid improvement.

Quality Assurance

- Schools report variability in the quality of support and particularly the level of challenge from advisers. Consistency of approach needs to be improved through quality assurance and rigorous performance management.
- Governor challenge needs to be further developed, although recent initiatives such as the sessions for governors as part of the Primary Offer and the

refocusing of the Termly Briefings was noted. Governors need to be supported to be an effective part of the challenge to school performance through training and guidance that is focused on their accountability for school improvement.

- There is a need to regularly monitor and review the categorization of schools to reduce slippage from good to requires improvement.
- In the longer term the LA needs to embrace the role of quality assuring the Teaching School Alliances, System Leaders, School to school support offers that they have commissioned for school improvement.

The follow up offers of support from peer LAs

The context of a Peer Review is that colleagues from other LAs are able to offer additional support through sharing their own developing and effective practice. The following offers have been made:

Norfolk: Offer for DCS and Director of Learning to have a one-day visit to Norfolk LA to review new systems for rigorous monitoring and evaluation of performance particularly in schools requiring improvement and to assess Cambridgeshire's readiness for an inspection of its school improvement work. The review team identified this as the most important of its offers.

Herts: New school improvement strategy, which has been co created with stakeholders was shared and follow up discussions planned with Director of Learning in April.

Essex: Essex has 15 Teaching Schools Alliances and are developing an aligned offer to schools which ensures Teaching Schools are accountable for rapid improvement of underperforming schools. Essex have offered to share their developing models of working with TSAs and their work on warning notices to schools of concern.

The Assistant Directors of all Local Authorities in the East of England have been invited to attend a regional meeting in June to review the process of the peer review and lessons learned. The DCS regional group will be meeting to consider funding the continued process of peer reviews and it is anticipated that the following activities will be held in the region:

- Network meetings focused on LAs lessons learned from Ofsted inspections
- Workshops focused on supporting RI schools in partnership with headteachers and involving regional HMI colleagues (this is currently a model working in the East Midlands)
- Further peer reviews to be conducted on common themes

Finally the review team would like to thank colleagues in Cambridgeshire for offering to pilot the first peer review of school improvement in the East region.

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