

4th October 2024

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing on behalf of **Schools North East**, a registered charity and the representative network for **1,150 schools** in the North East of England, as well as the facilitator of the **National Network of Special Schools**, which includes **400 special and alternative provision schools** across the country. I am compelled to raise an urgent concern regarding the severe lack of representation from educational professionals in the North East—and those working in specialist and alternative provisions—on key advisory bodies within your department and Ofsted.

The absence of strong representation from one of the country's most disadvantaged regions threatens the effectiveness of education policy-making and undermines the transparency of the selection process for these advisory groups. **Educational leaders from the North East** have a unique understanding of the challenges our schools face—challenges which differ significantly from those in more advantaged regions. This absence of diverse regional representation on policy-shaping bodies perpetuates a harmful cycle of "one-size-fits-all" solutions, which fail to address the pressing needs of schools serving the most vulnerable students.

The numbers speak for themselves:

- The **Department for Education's Curriculum and Assessment Review Panel**—a body with enormous influence over our schools—has no representation from North East schools whatsoever.
- Of the **94 members** on the **seven external reference groups established by Ofsted**, **only two** are from North East schools, and only one more than the States of Guernsey.

This gross underrepresentation is particularly concerning given the scale of the challenges in the North East:

- The region has **the highest rates of long-term disadvantage** and **the highest Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility rates**, which rose from 21% in 2018/19 to **31.2% in 2023/24**.
- We lead the country in **persistent absence** and **exclusion rates**, and have the highest proportion of students with **Special Educational Needs (SEN)**.
- Our **school estate is deteriorating**, and we receive **considerably less capital funding** than other regions. For example, in 2023/24, the North East had **the lowest success rate** for **Condition Improvement Fund (CIF) bids**—**only 26.8%** of our bids were approved, compared to the national average of **41.4%**.

Yet despite these challenges, the North East's school leaders continue to excel. **92% of our schools are rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted**, the second-highest in the country, and our schools consistently achieve **the best results nationally for long-term disadvantaged students**, outpacing even London.

The expertise and resilience of North East educators in overcoming these significant barriers cannot be overstated. Their voices must be included in the national conversation to ensure that policies are shaped by those who truly understand the real-world impacts of policy decisions. Without this, we risk the continuation of ineffective, blanket policies—such as the **National Tutoring Programme**, which has had limited success in the North East precisely because of its lack of responsiveness to local contexts.

It is equally troubling that the process for selecting members of these reference groups remains opaque. It gives the appearance that the same usual contributors are shaping policy, with little room for the input of those who have frontline experience in regions that face distinct challenges. Ensuring **greater transparency** in these processes will not only promote equity but will also guarantee that the **voices from the North East**—and other disadvantaged regions—are heard and that policies are more reflective of the diversity of our educational landscape.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you at your earliest convenience to discuss how improving **representation from the North East** could enrich national education policy, and how **Schools North East** can contribute to your external reference groups. With almost **2,000 schools** represented under our umbrella, our input is essential in shaping a fair and effective future for education policy in England.

I look forward to your response and to working together to ensure that every region, especially those facing the greatest challenges, has a meaningful voice in shaping the future of education in this country.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Zarraga". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Chris Zarraga
Director
Schools North East