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David Morris
Chief Executive Officer
Diocese of Leicester Academies Trust
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Dear Mr Morris

Focused review of Diocese of Leicester Academies Trust

Following the focused review of six academies in the Diocese of Leicester Academies Trust ('DLAT' or 'the Trust') in November 2017, and the subsequent follow-up visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the findings.

Thank you for your cooperation during my visit to the Trust with my colleague, Ian McNeilly, Senior HMI, on 21 and 22 November 2017. Please pass on our thanks to your staff and other stakeholders who kindly gave up their time to meet us.

The findings from the focused review and a wider consideration of the Trust's overall performance are set out below.

Summary of main findings

- The overall effectiveness of three academies has improved since they joined the Trust, when compared with the grades of their predecessor schools. The good quality of education provided by a further six academies and the outstanding provision in one academy have been maintained. The overall effectiveness of two academies has declined since they joined the Trust.
- As chief executive officer, you have brought about a change in culture. You have established the means by which academies are able to work more collaboratively and support school improvement more effectively than has been seen in the past. There is a greater sense of collaboration and determination to improve the quality of education provided across the Trust.
- Changes in leadership in the Trust have led to an increased impetus of school improvement activity, which has led to improvements in the quality of teaching and pupils' outcomes.

- Academy leaders are very positive about the pastoral support they receive, including support when key staff are absent for extended periods. The Trust is inclusive and supportive.
- The Trust has been too slow to establish a clear vision. Therefore, the purpose, aims and direction of the Trust are not clearly articulated and are not understood by all.
- Action taken to address some areas identified as in need of improvement have been too slow. Directors and senior staff acknowledge this. They are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the Trust and are keen to bring about the necessary improvements.
- School improvement activity is more considered than in previous years but the lack of clear strategic direction is currently holding back whole-Trust improvement. The considerable amount of work undertaken by DLAT staff is not underpinned by an effective strategic plan.
- Although pupils' outcomes are improving, they are not doing so quickly enough to bring them into line with national averages.
- The effectiveness of the Trust's governance arrangements is inconsistent. Some local governing bodies have a clear understanding of their responsibilities and are highly effective in their roles. However, there is a lack of connection between local governing bodies and the groups that should hold them to account, namely the directors. Directors have not used the information with which they are provided to hold local governing bodies to account.
- Despite the Trust having 14 academies, many are very small, which has implications for DLAT funding. This has limited the Trust's capacity for school improvement, despite the determination and industry of those involved.
- An example of this limited capacity is seen in the well-intentioned but ineffective academy performance reviews at the start of each academic year. These clarify the position of the academy, but lack the detail and precision necessary to bring about sustainable school improvement.
- The Trust has commissioned support from an external consultant who conducts an in-depth and evaluative review of each academy's performance. This supports leaders in identifying strengths and weaknesses and in taking action to address areas in need of improvement.
- The recent appointment of a governance support officer has brought about increased vigour and drive to the Trust's governance functions.
- You understand the need to provide value for money and you consciously work to deliver support and improvement in a cost-effective manner. It is your intention to seek collaboration with other academies in the diocese that extend beyond the Trust but you have not yet acted upon this.

Evidence

Focused inspections of six academies were carried out from 14 to 16 November 2017. One of these inspections was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005 (as amended). Five inspections were carried out under section 8 of the same Act. Of these, one inspection converted to a full inspection under section 5 of the Act.

The outcomes of the section 5 inspections were:

- one academy was judged to be good
- one academy was judged to require improvement.

The outcomes of the section 8 inspections were:

- one academy continues to be outstanding
- three academies continue to provide a good standard of education.

On 16 November, HMI held telephone discussions with either the headteacher or executive headteacher of all other academies in the Trust. During follow-up visits, discussions were held with you and other senior and operational staff from the Trust. Inspectors also met the diocesan director of education, who was the Trust's previous chief executive officer. A range of relevant documentation was also scrutinised.

Context

The Diocese of Leicester Academies Trust comprises 14 primary academies in Leicestershire. Ten academies are academy convertors and four are sponsor-led academies. The Trust was created in March 2013, with three academies. It expanded to 11 academies during 2014. Three academies have joined the Trust since April 2017.

The role of chief executive officer was previously undertaken by the diocesan director of education, who left this position in August 2016. You were appointed as interim chief executive officer from September 2016.

There have been several changes to the membership of the board of directors in recent years.

Main findings

Currently, the inspection outcomes for the Trust's academies, including the most recent focused inspections, are as follows:

- one academy is outstanding
- five academies are good

- five academies require improvement
- three academies are yet to be inspected since joining the Trust (all of which are currently judged to be good).

The Trust has not ensured that there is a clear vision for its purpose and aims. Although there is a strapline, 'Transforming the lives of children and young people', reflecting the values of the diocese, there is still not any clarity as to how this translates into purpose and action in the Trust. There is no effective overarching strategic plan to implement the strapline. As a result, academy leaders and those in the Trust do not have a clear sense of direction or the means by which to achieve the Trust's aims. Consecutive leaders have not ensured that action has been taken to rectify this situation by undertaking this fundamental and straightforward task.

The Trust has been too slow to take decisive and effective action to improve the quality of education, and thus outcomes for pupils, in recent years. Prior to your appointment in September 2016, the majority of the Trust's activity was focused on organisational functions. It took too long to establish basic processes and structures. This resulted in a lack of focus on school improvement or support for academy leaders. You have clearly shared your expectation that the Trust's first priority is to improve outcomes for pupils. This has resulted in more focused work in academies. However, there remains a lack of strategic direction.

Action plans for improvement have not been effective in the past. The lack of a clear vision has resulted in vague, long-term plans which have not routinely been evaluated or updated. You have written an improvement plan which is simple and accessible. However, the key objectives are broad and lack clarity, both in terms of actions and monitoring processes. You have not yet ensured that an effective model for school improvement has been established.

In September 2016, you identified a lack of cohesion across the Trust. Academies viewed themselves as separate entities, working in isolation. Your first priority was to create a unified partnership of academies working together, and with, the Trust. You have created a positive culture for improvement and a spirit of collaboration. For example, you strengthened half-termly, trust-wide leadership meetings, attended by DLAT staff and academy leaders. These meetings provide a platform for discussion, to raise awareness and to share best practice, and to ensure that headteachers continue to focus on improving the quality of education in order to improve pupils' outcomes. Headteachers are extremely positive about the increased opportunities to work together and to learn from each other. They feel much more supported than in the past and appreciate their ability to seek support from Trust representatives.

The Trust has also encouraged and facilitated academies to support each other. There is great emphasis on working collaboratively. Working groups have been established to improve provision across the Trust. For example, the inclusion working group is led by academy leaders and includes representatives from all academies. As

a result of this working group, there is now a more consistent approach to supporting pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities and those who are disadvantaged. Academies are able to share best practice through these working groups. Headteachers value the support that such activities provide.

The school improvement officers have established positive working relationships with academy leaders. They are very knowledgeable and have a good understanding of each academy's strengths and weaknesses. You have introduced a 'guarantee of support', which has brought about greater understanding of the Trust's role in school improvement. School improvement officers work incredibly hard to provide bespoke support, responding to each academy's needs. This is valued by academy leaders. However, this team's work is hindered by the lack of a Trust vision and a coherent model for school improvement.

You have taken decisive action to challenge underperforming staff, both in academies and in the central team. This has resulted in much-needed changes to senior leadership in some academies.

You, and directors, recognise that the Trust has been too slow to take action to challenge and support academies where weaknesses have been identified. For example, the need to establish an effective model for assessment across the Trust was identified some time ago. The existing system for recording assessment is not valued or used by all academies. You have not yet established a consistent and effective assessment strategy. You are aware of this, and the assessment and accountability working group is continuing to develop this aspect of the Trust's work.

Similarly, the need to improve aspects of mathematics provision was identified a considerable time ago, both through Ofsted inspections and Trust reviews. School improvement officers have worked effectively with individual academies to support their practice and the quality of their provision, which has had a positive impact on pupils' outcomes. However, there remains a lack of a trust-wide approach. The research group to improve mathematics provision has only recently been set up, despite this having been an area in need of improvement for some time.

There are clear structures of accountability, but these are not always sufficiently and robustly followed. Directors recognise that they have not held leaders to account with sufficient rigour. They acknowledge, for example, that the lack of a clear vision should have been challenged effectively, both in the past and more recently, and that, similarly, a clear strategy for improvement should have been established. Directors do not routinely use the information with which they are provided to hold others to account, such as local governing bodies' reports to directors. In other areas, however, directors have taken action to tackle weaknesses. For example, they have implemented an academy transformation board to replace an ineffective local governing body at one academy.

Governance arrangements are inconsistent across the Trust. Many members of local governing bodies have an accurate recognition of their roles and responsibilities. A recently appointed Trust governance officer has a detailed understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the governance arrangements across the Trust. She has a clear vision, and plans are in place to bring about improvements to strengthen all aspects of governance.

Outcomes for pupils across the Trust have not improved quickly enough. In 2016, the proportion of key stage 1 pupils meeting expected standards across subjects was below the national average, as it was for pupils working at 'greater depth' in reading and mathematics. In 2017, the proportion of pupils meeting the expected standards in reading did not improve and is thus now further below the national average. However, the proportions of pupils achieving the expected standard in mathematics and the higher standards in all subjects improved and was in line with national averages. In phonics, pupils' achievement is also improving and was above the national average in 2017.

Pupils' outcomes at key stage 2 have also not improved quickly enough and have declined in some areas. In 2016, the proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics combined was below the national average. This improved slightly in 2017.

Pupils' achievement in writing at key stage 1 has improved and is now in line with the national average. However, the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard by the end of key stage 2 declined in 2017 and is below the national average.

In the early years foundation stage, the proportion of children reaching a good level of development is slightly below the national average.

Disadvantaged pupils underachieve across the Trust. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils achieving both the expected and higher standards by the end of key stage 2 is considerably below national averages for all pupils in all subjects.

School improvement officers have begun to scrutinise attendance as part of their monitoring activities. They have supported academies to improve pupils' attendance, for example by involving external partners. As a result of this work, pupils' attendance has improved and is now above the national average for all pupils across the Trust. Nevertheless, a minority of academies still have attendance rates below the national average. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils is a cause for concern, particularly as their progress and attainment are lower than those of other pupils. In 2017, disadvantaged pupils' attendance declined further, and the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent from school increased and was considerably above the national average.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding arrangements across the Trust are monitored and checked regularly. At the time of this review, every academy had been judged by Ofsted to have effective safeguarding arrangements at their most recent inspection. School improvement officers check different aspects of safeguarding during their regular visits to academies. For example, one of the school improvement officers carries out a scrutiny of each academy's single central record to ensure its compliance.

Safeguarding is also a key aspect of each academy's annual review, which is conducted by a consultant commissioned by the Trust. Local governing bodies are expected to carry out an audit of their respective academy and report their findings to the Trust. However, at the time of this review, not all academies had complied with this expectation, illustrating that governance is not consistently effective across the Trust. The recently appointed governance support officer is keen to ensure that such fundamental, basic actions are undertaken in a timely manner in future.

Recommendations

- Establish and communicate effectively a clear vision for the Trust's purpose and aims.
- Ensure that the Trust's strategic plans are sufficiently precise and detailed, so that all those involved are clear about their role and responsibilities in bringing about improvement.
- Establish effective lines of communication and accountability between local governing bodies and directors.
- Improve the progress and attainment of pupils by the end of key stage 2, particularly those who are disadvantaged.
- Improve disadvantaged pupils' rates of attendance and reduce the proportion of those who are persistently absent from school.
- Ensure that the Trust acts more swiftly to support and challenge academies when weaknesses are identified.

Yours sincerely

Deborah Mosley
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex: academies that are part of the Trust

Academies inspected as part of the focused inspections: section 8 inspections

Academy name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection grade	Most recent inspection grade (date)
Higham-on-the-Hill Church of England Primary School	East Midlands	Leicestershire	October 2014	2 (2013)	2 (2017)
Waltham on the Wolds Church of England Primary School	East Midlands	Leicestershire	October 2014	2 (2010)	2 (2017)
Redmile Church of England Primary School	East Midlands	Leicestershire	December 2014	1 (2013)	1 (2017)
St Peter and St Paul Church of England Academy	East Midlands	Leicestershire	March 2013	2 (2014)	2 (2017)

Academies inspected as part of the focused inspections: section 5 inspections that converted from section 8

Academy name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection grade	Most recent inspection grade (date)
Christ Church & Saint Peter's Church of England Primary School	East Midlands	Leicestershire	December 2014	Not previously inspected as an academy. Predecessor school grade: 4 (2013)	2 (2017)
Tugby Church of England Primary School	East Midlands	Leicestershire	October 2014	2 (2012)	3 (2017)

Academies that were part of the focused telephone calls

Academy name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection grade	Most recent inspection grade (date)
St Mary's Church of England Primary School	East Midlands	Leicestershire	March 2013	3 (2014)	3 (2017)
Weavers Close Church of England Primary School	East Midlands	Leicestershire	March 2013	3 (2015)	3 (2017)
Croxton Kerrial Church of England Primary School	East Midlands	Leicestershire	November 2013	2 (2010)	2 (2015)
Barlestone Church of England Primary School	East Midlands	Leicestershire	June 2014	Not previously inspected as an academy. Predecessor school grade: 4 (2013)	3 (2017)
St Peter's Church of England Primary School	East Midlands	Leicestershire	June 2014	2 (2012)	3 (2017)
Thurnby, St Luke's Church of England Primary School	East Midlands	Leicestershire	June 2017	2 (2009)	2 (2014)
South Kilworth Church of England Primary School	East Midlands	Leicestershire	April 2017	2 (2010)	2 (2014)
Swinford Church of England Primary School	East Midlands	Leicestershire	April 2017	3 (2010)	2 (2012)