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Mr Clive Bush
Interim Chief Executive Officer
The Active Learning Trust
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Dear Mr Bush

Summary evaluation of The Active Learning Trust

Following the summary evaluation of The Active Learning Trust (ALT) in January 2019, 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 our visit to the trust on 21–25 January 2019. Please pass on our thanks to your staff and other stakeholders who kindly gave up their time to meet us.

The findings from the summary evaluation and a wider consideration of the trust's overall performance are set out below.

Summary of main findings

- ALT has effectively established a strong and collective ethos, vision and values across all its schools.
- You and the directors know each of the schools within the trust exceptionally well. You reflect honestly and have evaluated accurately the strengths and weaknesses in individual performance and context. You have clear and appropriate plans for continuing to improve the quality of education and pupils' achievement.
- As a trust, you encourage and celebrate the individual characteristics of each school. You provide them with a good balance of autonomy and central oversight and accountability.

- Of the 17 schools inspected since joining ALT, 12 have been judged to have good leadership and management. You have managed to overcome barriers to recruitment and have ensured that all schools have in place the right leadership foundations to improve further. School leaders have a clear understanding of the priorities for improvement and their contribution to the trust. Recent inspection reports have identified the trust's support as positive.
- In 2018, pupils' progress and outcomes across all performance measures painted a mixed picture. However, in five schools, when they joined the trust, pupils were attaining significantly below the national average. In these schools, pupils' attainment has improved steadily over three years; pupils in 2018 made progress that was more similar to that found nationally.
- You work hard to secure improvements in the schools where standards are not high enough. You have rigorous monitoring processes in place and ensure that the three schools identified as underperforming over time are suitably challenged and well supported. Leaders spoken with comment that, 'We are worked with, rather than done to.'
- Overall, disadvantaged pupils and those who should attain highly are not achieving as well as they might. You have prioritised these groups in your trust development plans and are working closely with school leaders to raise the achievement of these significant groups.
- The quality of training and development across the trust is a strength. Staff and leaders are provided with a systematic programme of courses and high-quality opportunities which develop their skills well. This has helped attract new employees to the trust as well as providing many successful opportunities to grow your own effective school leaders.
- The development of middle leadership has been identified as a priority for improvement in a few recent school inspection reports and external evaluations of ALT's performance. The capacity and skills of middle leaders continue to improve through the trust's leadership training. However, middle leaders are not having sufficient and sustained impact on monitoring and improving the quality and consistency of teaching in their area of responsibility within their schools and across the trust.
- You are currently working with senior school leaders to develop a trust-wide approach to the curriculum. This is new work for the trust. In the past you have provided leaders with the autonomy to decide their own provision. Senior leaders value the new central clarity, expertise and input. They are pleased to be involved in this process. They welcome a more common approach of working together and sharing their practice more widely. Where individual schools have been underperforming, leaders are benefiting from a more cohesive approach to designing and implementing a curriculum. Early signs demonstrate that pupils are having an improved quality of education as a result.
- The effectiveness of local governance is not consistently strong across schools in the trust. In regular external reviews of the quality of education, the role of

the governing body in holding leaders to account is not rigorously checked. Their impact on improving the standard and quality of education is not always clear. Governors' understanding of the use and impact of additional funding on raising the achievement of disadvantaged pupils is not strong enough.

- ALT ensures that pupils are safeguarded effectively. Safeguarding processes and procedures are well established and secure.

Range of evidence

Six schools were inspected between October 2018 and December 2018. These inspections took place as part of their normal cycle of inspections. The outcomes of these inspections were considered as part of this summary evaluation.

The inspection outcomes were:

- In the three section 5 inspections, one school was judged to have improved to good and two were judged to still require improvement.
- In the two section 8 short inspections, both schools remained good.
- One school received a monitoring inspection and was judged to be making effective progress towards the removal of serious weaknesses.

During the on-site visit to ALT, discussions were held with you, the trustees, and other senior and operational staff. A range of relevant documentation was also scrutinised. Inspectors also visited 12 schools and met with senior leaders, middle leaders and local governors. Inspectors met a group of executive headteachers to gather evidence about the impact of the trust on ensuring a high quality of education across all its schools.

Context

ALT currently runs 10 schools in Cambridgeshire and 11 in Suffolk. The trust consists of two special, four secondary and 15 primary schools, including an infant school. One special school, one secondary and four primaries are academy converters. The remaining 15 schools are sponsor-led academies.

The trust was initially established with one school in April 2013. ALT has gradually expanded over time, with four more schools joining in 2013, six in 2014, three in 2015, three in 2016 and three in 2017. The most recent school to join ALT was Earith Primary School in January 2018. Currently, there is one further primary school in the pipeline.

The primary schools vary in size from around 60 pupils to 650 pupils. The secondary schools vary in size from 700 pupils to around 1,300. Four schools opened as new, with pupil numbers increasing incrementally each year until they reach their capacity.

The trust's schools are divided into three designated regions. This regional tier of leadership is central to the school improvement work of the trust.

The proportion of disadvantaged pupils in the trust is above that found nationally. The proportions of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and pupils who speak English as an additional language are below the national averages. The proportion of pupils with an education, health and care plan is broadly in line with the national average.

Since December 2018, you have been appointed by the trust board to take on the role of interim chief executive officer to cover a planned period of absence of the substantive chief executive officer.

Main findings

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

- One school was judged to be outstanding prior to joining the trust and is exempt from routine inspections.
- 10 schools are judged to be good.
- Five schools are judged to require improvement.
- One school is judged to be inadequate.
- Four schools are yet to be inspected since joining the trust; of these, two of the predecessor schools were judged to be good, and the other two opened as new schools.

ALT is a large multi-academy trust that has grown steadily over time. The trust's aims and ethos are clear. They are based on a determination to provide a high-quality education for all. You have ensured that, over time, these aspects continue to drive the improvements and decisions that you make. Consequently, schools that are part of ALT have a shared understanding and acceptance of this strong ethos. School leaders at all levels are universally proud to be a part of ALT and have confidence in the expertise of the directors.

Headteachers appreciate the autonomy they have as leaders to improve and develop their own provision, but welcome the support and challenge from the trust. You value and encourage the individual nature of each school. Your current work, involving school leaders in researching and developing an ALT approach to the overall curriculum, has been welcomed by school leaders but is at an early stage.

The collaborative approach is most effective in the North Suffolk hub, where the schools offer each other effective support and challenge. Here, leaders at different levels share their best practice to ensure that each of the schools in the hub offers pupils a high quality educational experience. Due to the well-established success of this hub, this year, you have evaluated what has worked well and have changed the ways in which the other hubs work accordingly. Although in its early days, the collaboration and school-to-school support is increasing and improving.

Central to the way you check the quality of your work are the regular Academy Improvement Group (AIG) meetings with each school. You hold leaders to account for the performance of pupils through a highly standardised approach. A few schools that you have rightly identified as 'Challenge 1' schools receive more frequent visits from directors to support and challenge the quality of provision. School leaders have confidence in the clarity and consistency of the school improvement information they receive. While the pace of improvement has been slower in the past, over the last year there has been a greater sense of urgency and pupils are making better progress as a result.

You and all directors have an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses of each school within the trust. You know your schools very well. You acknowledge that some have not improved sufficiently or quickly enough. You have often taken on underperforming schools; you have then recruited new leaders or provided executive headteachers from existing ALT schools to ensure that pupils receive better provision. Recent inspections show that, while some schools still require improvement, in all inspections, the quality of leadership and management and the work of the trust has been judged to be strong. There is clear capacity to improve further.

One reason for the strength in leadership and management stems from your commitment to growing and developing your own leaders. You provide structured and effective opportunities for staff at all levels to train and develop their skills and practice, giving them a clear pathway either into teaching or into leadership. The programme of courses has recently been accredited. Continuous professional development is well established, highly valued and is often a reason provided by staff for applying and staying with ALT. There are many examples of newly qualified teachers or newly promoted leaders carrying out research and development projects that have a direct impact on improving pupils' achievement.

The need for middle leadership to have greater impact on improving the quality of teaching has been identified in recent reports and external evaluations as an area to improve. The trust is taking action this year to address this issue. Where middle leaders have had the greatest impact on improving pupils' achievements, it closely links to their training and development projects. More could still be achieved by middle leaders to raise attainment by formally sharing practice and holding staff more effectively to account, in both their home school and across the hub.

ALT uses local governing bodies to hold school leaders to account for pupils' outcomes, but it does not have a clear enough view of the effectiveness and impact of local governing bodies. This is because governing bodies are not routinely included in the external quality assurance checking processes that are in place. During this evaluation, inspectors found that governors do not know enough about the use and impact of pupil premium funding.

The overall attainment and progress of pupils paint a mixed picture. Where pupils have made too little progress and outcomes have been too low, this has been the result of deep-seated and inherited weaknesses in both leadership and the quality of teaching. It has been a lengthy process for you to overcome barriers and build the necessary foundations and conditions to bring about sustainable improvements. These foundations are in place in all schools and evidence of improvement is starting to be seen more widely.

Overall, schools have improved since joining ALT. In primary schools, the year-on-year improvements in pupils' achievement in reading, writing and mathematics reflect improvements in the quality of provision. In 2018, overall, the progress pupils made by the end of key stage 2 was not significantly different from that of pupils nationally. In four schools, the progress pupils made in reading was better than that found nationally. However, even in these four schools, the disadvantaged pupils and those who should attain highly did not make similarly strong progress. This disparity was reflected in the most recent inspections. In four of the six schools inspected in the autumn term 2018, the progress of disadvantaged pupils and those who should attain highly was judged to not be as strong as that of other pupils.

Absence and persistent absenteeism remain too high in eight schools. In others, school leaders have tackled the issues, taken appropriate measures and improved pupils' attendance effectively. ALT's small central team has identified the schools where improvements in attendance are still required. It is beginning to support schools well with policies and procedures for reducing absenteeism.

Safeguarding

Arrangements to promote pupils' welfare and safety are secure. ALT has a rigorous process to audit the quality and effectiveness of safeguarding in its schools. This includes testing how well leaders promote and develop a culture of safeguarding. They use a trust-wide approach to recording concerns and actions taken by individual schools. Inspection reports confirm that safeguarding is effective in each of its schools.

Close work with external agencies, including local authorities, helps to raise and develop leaders' awareness of safeguarding needs within the diverse communities where ALT's schools are located.

At every level of leadership, including trust and board meetings, safeguarding is a focus and priority. The trust has invested heavily in ensuring its schools are safe and secure places for its children.

Recommendations

- Develop and implement the trust's approach to providing a consistently high-quality curriculum so that all pupils, particularly those who are disadvantaged and potentially highest achieving, can excel.

- Ensure that middle leaders work effectively within schools and across the trust to improve the consistency and quality of teaching and learning within their respective areas of responsibility.
- Improve the effectiveness of the local governing bodies, so that they hold school leaders more rigorously to account for pupils' achievement and the quality of teaching and learning.

Yours sincerely

Kim Hall
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex: Academies that are part of the trust

Trust schools inspected during autumn 2018 as part of stage 1 – section 5 inspections

School	Local authority	Date opened as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Inspection grade October/November 2018
Gusford Primary	Suffolk	August 2013	March 2015; Requires improvement	Requires improvement
Burrowmoor Primary	Cambridgeshire	July 2013	December 2016; Requires improvement	Requires improvement
Chantry Academy	Suffolk	September 2015	June 2016; Requires improvement	Good

Trust schools inspected during autumn 2018 as part of stage 1 – section 8 short or monitoring inspections

School	Local authority	Date opened as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Inspection grade October/November 2018
Albert Pye Primary	Suffolk	October 2016	Predecessor school; Good	Maintained good
Highfield Ely – special	Cambridgeshire	September 2016	Predecessor school; Good	Maintained good
Grove Primary	Suffolk	May 2014	March 2017; Inadequate	Monitoring inspection Effective progress towards the removal of serious weaknesses

Other trust schools

School	Local authority	Date opened as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Most recent Inspection grade
Ravensmere Infant School	Suffolk	October 2016	Predecessor school; Outstanding	Exempt from routine inspections
Chesterton Primary	Cambridgeshire	September 2013	New school	July 2015; Good
Westwood Primary	Suffolk	August 2013	March 2015; Requires improvement	February 2017; Good
Isle of Ely Primary	Cambridgeshire	September 2014	New school	June 2017; Good
Red Oak Primary	Suffolk	March 2014	Predecessor school; Inadequate	February 2017; Good
Sidegate Primary	Suffolk	May 2014	Predecessor school; Requires improvement	March 2017; Good
Reydon Primary	Suffolk	March 2015	Predecessor school; Inadequate	February 2018; Good
Earith Primary	Cambridgeshire	January 2018	Predecessor school; Good	No inspection as an academy
Hillside Primary	Suffolk	July 2014	Predecessor school; Requires improvement	June 2017; Requires improvement
Kingsfield Primary	Cambridgeshire	July 2014	Predecessor school; Inadequate	July 2017; Requires improvement
Pakefield Primary	Suffolk	January 2015	Predecessor school; Requires improvement	November 2017; Requires improvement
Cromwell Community	Cambridgeshire	September 2017	Predecessor school; Good	No inspection as an academy
Neale-Wade Secondary	Cambridgeshire	April 2013	February 2015; Requires	October 2016; Good

School	Local authority	Date opened as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Most recent Inspection grade
			improvement	
Littleport and East Cambridge	Cambridgeshire	September 2017	New school	No inspection as an academy
Highfield Littleport Special School	Cambridgeshire	September 2017	New school	No inspection as an academy