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Mr David Moran
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Dear Mr Moran

Focused inspection of E-ACT academies

Following the focused inspections of seven E-ACT (or 'the Trust') academies in December 2015, and the subsequent follow-up visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors, 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 7–9 December 2015. I and my colleagues, Mel Ford HMI and Jeremy Loukes HMI, particularly appreciate the time and care taken to prepare the programme of meetings for us. Please pass on our thanks to your staff and other stakeholders who kindly gave up their time to meet us.

Focused inspections of a sample of the Trust's academies were last carried out in January and February 2014.

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

Summary of main findings

- Since the focused inspections in 2014, the Trust has taken a more robust and direct approach to school improvement. This is evident from the outcomes of the seven focused inspections in December 2015, which were positive, and demonstrated that most leaders were taking effective action to remove the weaknesses from the underperforming academies. Nevertheless, the quality of provision for too many pupils in E-ACT academies is not good enough.

- A review of the outcomes from the inspections of all 23 of the Trust's academies shows that more than half are not providing a good standard of education. Five of the academies are currently inadequate and only 10 are good or better.
- Pupils achieve better in E-ACT primary academies than they do in the secondary academies. This disparity needs urgent attention.
- More pupils are now reaching expected levels in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of Year 6, although in four of the primary academies pupils' results remained below average.
- Standards in the secondary academies are too low. Previous interventions by the Trust to raise attainment and accelerate progress have not had enough impact and any improvements have been slow.
- Pupils from poor backgrounds do not do well enough. These pupils make less progress than other pupils nationally. This is an area of serious concern.
- Until recently, rates of absence have been too high and too much learning time has been lost by pupils.
- The Board of Trustees challenges the Trust's leaders effectively by focusing on pupils' progress, standards and improving the quality of teaching. However, the support and challenge provided for academies by the Trust's leaders have not yet had a consistent impact on improving standards, especially at Key Stage 4.
- The Trust's website outlines the roles and responsibilities of the Trust Board, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), local governing bodies, and executive and academy Principals. However, insufficient information on governance is provided on the academy websites.
- Academy leaders understand and share the Trust's vision for the future. However, much still needs to be done to improve the quality of education provided by academies across the Trust.

Evidence

Focused inspections of seven academies were carried out between 1 and 5 December 2015. All of these inspections were carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 (as amended). One of the inspections converted to a full inspection under section 5 of the Act.

The inspection outcomes were:

- one academy judged to be good at its previous inspection continued to provide a good education for its pupils
- one academy which requires improvement was assessed to be taking effective action to be judged good at its next section 5 inspection
- one academy was judged to no longer require special measures; the section 5 inspection judged that it now requires improvement, but that leadership and management are good
- leaders in three academies were taking effective action to remove the need for special measures
- leaders were not taking effective action in one academy requiring special measures.

HMI held telephone discussions with the Principals of 16 other academies in the Trust between 2 and 3 December 2015. Additional telephone discussions were held with chairs of local governing bodies, the Regional Schools Commissioner linked to E-ACT, and other representatives, including local authority officers, who work closely with the Trust. During our follow-up visit to the Trust, discussions were held with senior and operational staff, executive headteachers and Principals, system leaders, trustees and other stakeholders. HMI also scrutinised a range of relevant documentation.

Context

E-ACT was set up in September 2009. After an initial period of growth, the Trust was given a financial notice to improve by the Education Funding Agency (EFA) in March 2013. The previous CEO left in the same month. You took up the role of acting CEO in April 2013, having been appointed as Director of Operations a few weeks before. You were made permanent CEO in October 2013.

In your first year at E-ACT, you reduced the Trust's head office staffing from 76 to 25 personnel and appointed a small team of national directors. At this time, 14 Principals, 12 chairs of local governing bodies and five central directors left the Trust.

Ofsted conducted focused inspections of 16 E-ACT academies in January 2014. Five academies were judged to require special measures. After these inspections took place, 10 academies were transferred to other trusts.

The current Chair of the Board of Trustees took up post in February 2015.

The financial notice to improve was removed by the EFA in July 2015.

E-ACT now has 23 academies: 11 secondary; 11 primary; and one all-through academy. The academies are dispersed across 10 local authority areas in seven different Ofsted regions.

Since joining the Trust, six of the 23 academies have declined from their previous inspection grade, six have improved and 10 have remained the same. These data also reflect predecessor schools' inspection grades. There is no previous inspection grade for one academy.

Main findings

The current inspection outcomes for E-ACT academies, including the most recent focused inspections, are as follows:

- one is outstanding
- nine are good
- eight require improvement
- five are inadequate.

These outcomes demonstrate that too few pupils attend an E-ACT academy that is providing a good quality of education. Only four out of the 11 secondary academies are judged to be good. In comparison, six of the 11 primary academies are judged to be good. The one all-through academy is inadequate.

Inspections identified that the common weaknesses across the primary E-ACT academies that are less than good were:

- teachers did not have high enough expectations of what pupils can achieve
- pupils did not have the opportunities to develop literacy and numeracy skills in a range of subjects
- leaders did not rigorously review and evaluate the quality of teaching or pupils' progress to inform future priorities.

The inspections of the secondary E-ACT academies that were judged to be less than good identified the following common weaknesses:

- leaders, including governors, had not been quick enough to ensure that pupils, including the most disadvantaged, were achieving well
- subject leaders lacked the knowledge and skills to improve the quality of teaching and raise achievement in their subject areas
- the quality of teaching and the progress learners made in the sixth form was not good enough.

The outcomes of the focused inspections from December 2015 indicate that there are some signs of improvement. For example, leaders in all but one of the academies were making a positive difference. The inspection reports highlight the Trust's effective strategy to partner academies in order to share good practice and strengthen academy leadership. The Trust has recruited academy leaders with good experience and knowledge. In addition, the Trust has provided the necessary

expertise to tackle safeguarding weaknesses and improve the provision for disabled pupils and for those who have special educational needs in specific academies.

Raising standards for disadvantaged pupils, who make up the majority of pupils in E-ACT academies, is a key aspect of the Trust's vision. However, in many of the Trust's academies, the gap in achievement between these pupils and others nationally remains too wide. For example, in seven of the 11 secondary academies the proportions of disadvantaged pupils making expected progress in mathematics by the end of Key Stage 4 lags well behind their more affluent peers.

Standards, particularly at the end of Key Stage 4, are too low, and actions taken previously have not had enough impact. The Trust recognises this weakness. Historically, the Trust's leaders have reacted to decline in performance rather than developing systems to stem further weaknesses.

A summary of pupils' achievement across the Trust in 2015 reveals that:

- standards at the end of Key Stage 1 were below average in five academies for each of reading, writing and mathematics and have shown negligible improvement over time. In only two academies were standards in each subject above national levels. In the remaining academies, pupils reached below average standards in writing and the majority also underachieved in reading and mathematics
- more pupils than in previous years attained expected levels in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of Year 6, but in five academies the pupils' results remained below national figures
- the pupils' progress by the end of Year 6 was broadly average across reading, writing and mathematics in seven academies. In three academies, the proportions of pupils making expected progress in writing were below average and in one academy the progress pupils made in each subject was too slow
- standards at the end of Key Stage 4 were well below national figures. The proportion of pupils achieving at least five GCSE A* to C grades, including English and mathematics, declined in eight of the 11 secondary academies and in the one all-through academy, while there were improvements in only three
- pupils' progress in Years 7 to 11, particularly in mathematics, was well below the national average in seven of the 11 secondary academies and the one all-through academy
- three of the eight secondary academies with sixth forms were below the government's minimum standards for academic qualifications, although all eight met with minimum standards for vocational qualifications.

Following the very disappointing results in some secondary academies in the summer of 2015, the Trust quickly set about an analysis of what had gone wrong. The review considered where deployment of expertise had failed and why information provided by individual academy leaders had not given an accurate indication of outcomes. A

clear and urgent strategy was established to accelerate rates of progress and raise standards. Spot checks have been carried out by Trust leaders to ensure the accuracy of information provided, and some external moderation of assessment has taken place. As a result, evidence of improved rates of pupils' progress was validated in six of the seven recent focused inspections. However, it is too early to see any sustained improvements and too late for the many pupils who failed to achieve their potential.

Until very recently, Trust leaders did not track or challenge poor attendance in a systematic way. An attendance strategy was introduced across the Trust in September 2015. Since then, attendance figures have shown a marked improvement, such that in two thirds of the secondary and almost all of the primary academies they are in line with national figures. Increased scrutiny across the Trust and heightened accountability of how academy leaders tackle poor behaviour have led to some improvements and a reduction in the number of pupils excluded.

Principals were clear about the Trust's priorities: improving pupils' outcomes and ensuring the success of disadvantaged pupils. The Trust's further priority is to be unified, or seen as 'one E-ACT', where staff in all academies have a shared set of values and principles, and work to consistent protocols to achieve excellence. The recent change to focus on these common priorities, rather than continuing with the original promise of autonomy for the academies, has given the Trust a more distinct direction. In telephone calls and meetings with HMI, Principals explained that the drive has changed from 'fire-fighting' to improving the quality of teaching and learning. The academy leaders were overwhelmingly positive about the new direction. From these discussions, it was clear that the leaders accepted your culture of 'no excuses'.

In 2014, the Trust set up 'Raising Achievement Boards' (RABs) to replace local governing bodies for all inadequate E-ACT academies, or those where governance was judged to be weak. RABs have tried to focus clearly on academy leaders' accountability for the standards achieved by pupils in all phases, identify barriers to success and seek solutions. Nevertheless, improvement has been slow in too many academies, particularly in the secondary phase. More recently, you have been chairing all RAB meetings and this has ensured a clearer line of sight between the trustees' expectations and each academy's accountability. The recent focused inspections provided evidence of this more effective leadership of the RABs.

Following the focused inspections of E-ACT academies in 2014, you introduced a team of 'system leaders' to try to drive improvement. System leaders have helped to secure and strengthen leadership, support newly appointed Principals and challenge weaknesses in the primary academies. They have modelled good leadership for the primary academies and demonstrated coherent approaches to improving the quality of teaching. The primary academy system leaders have demonstrated good understanding of the Trust's vision and priorities. The Trust has reduced its reliance

on external consultants and achieved greater growth of primary expertise within the Trust.

System leaders have been less successful across the secondary academies. Improvement in the secondary phase has been too slow, as demonstrated in the Key Stage 4 results in 2015. System leaders and RABs have not consistently established the necessary urgency to bring about the much-needed improvements. Since September 2015, you have insisted on specific, non-negotiable practice, set targets to establish clear expectations of pupils' rates of progress and introduced systems to regularly check and track achievement over time. The majority of Principals who spoke with inspectors are positive about these changes.

The Trust's quality assurance processes have had some positive impact. Academy reviews result in clear and thorough reports that ensure that leaders at all levels understand the strengths and weaknesses of each academy. These reviews include academy leaders who have been trained by the Trust. The information from reviews has been used to steer well-targeted support from system leaders and has led to the improvement or removal of weak leadership. Trust and academy leaders identified the review process to be a pivotal activity to academy improvement. However, Trust leaders accepted that too much faith was placed last year in what turned out to be inaccurate assessments of pupils' progress in a number of academies.

The focus on improved teaching is now a constant feature of each academy's review and the support provided. The Trust has recently developed a 10-week programme to improve teaching in those academies judged to have serious weaknesses or to require improvement. Another programme to promote outstanding teaching is provided for current practitioners who are judged to be good teachers. System leaders have reported improved teaching from lesson observations. Higher-quality teaching was also evident in the majority of the most recent inspections, but it is too early to see any consistent impact on pupils' outcomes.

The Board of Trustees has undergone a significant turnover of members in the last year; all but one of the seven members have changed. Trustees have conducted regular audits of their areas of expertise in order to inform future recruitment decisions. They are well qualified and bring a wealth of expertise to the Trust. The Board's strategic plans are underpinned by a clear rationale for development and change. For example, it has established a clear line of responsibility and communication for leadership and governance in the proposed regional structure. Trustees have challenged you and the national directors effectively by focusing adeptly on pupils' progress, standards and improving the quality of teaching. They have commissioned a professional programme to recruit and develop staff from the point of qualifying as teachers to becoming future leaders. Trustees seek their own information and evidence, and provide substantial support for local governance.

The Trust's website includes the scheme of delegation and this outlines the roles and responsibilities of the Board of Trustees, the CEO, local governing bodies, and

executive and academy Principals. However, there is no distinction made between the roles and responsibilities of the members and the trustees. A review of a sample of academy websites indicates that very little information is provided on governance other than the names of governors and an overview of their roles. Few academy websites link to the Trust's master funding agreement.

Safeguarding

The Trust has updated, and further developed, a safeguarding policy to be adopted by all E-ACT academies to ensure consistent approaches and procedures. Individual academies provide an additional annex to ensure that they meet the requirements of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board in their areas. The system leader responsible for this area of work has visited each academy at least once since her appointment in September 2015 and improvements are evident.

Recommendations

E-ACT must:

- as a matter of urgency, target appropriate support to improve pupils' standards and rates of progress by the end of Key Stage 4, particularly for disadvantaged pupils
- ensure that all forms of support, development and challenge focus on improved achievement for all pupils across the Trust, including the disadvantaged
- monitor closely attendance and exclusions, identify trends and challenge robustly where pupils are too often absent.

Yours sincerely

Deana Holdaway

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex: Academies that are part of E-ACT

Academies inspected as part of the focused inspection – section 8 short inspection

Academy name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection judgement and date	Inspection grade in December 2015
Greenfield E-ACT Primary Academy	South West	City of Bristol	September 2012	Good September 2012	Good

Academies inspected as part of the focused inspection – monitoring inspections

Academy name	Region	Local authority	Opening date as an academy	Most recent section 5 inspection grade and date	Monitoring inspection judgement December 2015
West Walsall E-ACT Academy	West Midlands	Walsall	September 2012	Inadequate (special measures) January 2014	Visit 5 – Not taking effective action
The Crest Academies	London	Brent	September 2009	Inadequate (special measures) January 2015	Visit 2 – Taking effective action
The Parker E-ACT Academy	East Midlands	Northampton	September 2012	Inadequate (special measures) January 2014	Visit 5 – removed from special measures and judged to require improvement
Nechells Primary E-ACT Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	September 2012	Inadequate (special measures) January 2014	Visit 5 – Taking effective action
Mansfield Green E-ACT Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	January 2013	Inadequate (special measures) December 2014	Visit 3 – Taking effective action
Pathways	North East	Sheffield	September 2013	Requires Improvement June 2015	Visit 1 – Taking effective action

Other academies

Academy name	Region	Local authority	Opening date as an academy	Most recent inspection grade and date
Heartlands Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	September 2009	Outstanding February 2014
Shenley Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	September 2009	Good February 2014
Parkwood E-ACT Academy	Yorkshire and the Humber	Sheffield	September 2009	Good January 2014
North Birmingham Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	January 2010	Requires Improvement February 2014
The Oldham Academy North	North West	Oldham	September 2010	Requires Improvement May 2014
St Ursula's E-ACT Academy	South West	City of Bristol	September 2011	Good January 2015
E-ACT Blackley Academy	North West	Manchester	January 2012	Good January 2014
Ilminster Avenue E-ACT Academy	South West	City of Bristol	January 2012	Good January 2014
Willenhall E-ACT Academy	West Midlands	Walsall	January 2012	Requires Improvement March 2015
The E-ACT Burnham Park Academy	South East	Buckinghamshire	April 2012	Requires Improvement January 2014
City Heights E-ACT Academy	London	Lambeth	September 2013	Good May 2015
DSL V E-ACT Academy	East Midlands	Northampton	July 2012	Inadequate (serious weaknesses) June 2015
Reedswood E-ACT Primary Academy	West Midlands	Walsall	September 2012	Requires Improvement January 2014
Chalfont Valley E-ACT Primary	South East	Buckinghamshire	September 2012	Requires Improvement January 2014
Merritts Brook Primary E-ACT Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	January 2013	Good March 2015
Denham Green E-ACT Academy	South East	Buckinghamshire	September 2013	Good May 2015