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Mr Paul White
Chair of Trustees
The Academy Trust of Melksham
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Dear Mr White

Focused review of the Academy Trust of Melksham (ATOM)

Following the inspections of seven schools in the Academy Trust of Melksham (the Trust) and the subsequent follow-up visit to the Trust by Stephen Lee, Tracy Hannon and Iain Freeland, 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 review findings.

Thank you for your cooperation during the visit on 3 and 4 May 2017. Inspectors greatly appreciated the time and care taken to prepare the programme of meetings for them. Please convey our thanks to all those who gave up their time to meet with the inspectors.

The Trust, which is responsible for eight schools, was selected for a focused review because of Ofsted's concerns about the performance of a number of its schools. The findings from the focused inspections and a wider consideration of the Trust's overall performance are set out below.

Summary of main findings

- The Trust has failed to sustain a good quality of education in its schools. In April 2015, the Academy Trust of Melksham comprised six primary schools and a secondary school. Of the seven schools inspected in April 2017, all of which had been part of the Trust since 2015 and were previously good, four were judged to require improvement, two were judged to be inadequate and only one remained good.
- The Trust currently lacks the capacity to secure the rapid improvement that the majority of its schools now need to make.
- It is not clear who holds responsibility for making key strategic decisions to bring about improvements in the schools. This is particularly the case with regard to

the Trust board and the schools' local governing bodies. The Trust has not acted quickly enough to clarify the scheme of delegation where it has been interpreted differently by local governing bodies and the Trust board.

- The Trust's capacity to promote school improvement has been overstretched by problems in two of its schools in particular. Actions to stabilise the leadership and management in these schools have absorbed the majority of time and resources available and significantly limited the effectiveness and pace of school improvement across the Trust as a whole.
- Strategic development planning by the Trust is weak. Planned actions do not address key priorities or attempt to tackle some of the existing barriers to school improvement.
- There are no clear performance management procedures in place to monitor the impact of the work of key personnel, such as the Trust's chief executive officer (CEO) and members of the school improvement team.
- Monitoring of pupils' progress on a Trust-wide basis is largely non-existent. This hampers the Trust's capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of the use of additional funding, including the pupil premium.
- The Trust puts too little emphasis on the progress that pupils make from their starting points, focusing instead largely on attainment. This contributes to a lack of precision in the Trust's judgements about the impact of teaching in its schools.
- The Trust's arrangements to review the quality of education lack the rigour, precision and challenge to drive forward rapid school improvement. External support from school improvement advisers has had limited impact on raising the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in the Trust's schools.
- Procedures for checking the accuracy of identification and quality of provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are inconsistent across the Trust. The impact of additional funding for pupils who have SEND is not monitored effectively at Trust level.
- In 2016, pupils in the Trust's primary schools made less progress at key stage 2 than other pupils nationally. This was particularly true in mathematics, with two schools being in the bottom 10% of schools nationally for progress.
- Disadvantaged pupils do not make good enough progress at key stage 2 and key stage 4.

Evidence

Focused inspections of seven of the Trust's eight schools were carried out on 25 and 26 April 2017. The one school not inspected at this time joined the Trust more recently, in December 2016. All inspections were short inspections of schools previously judged to be good and were carried out as monitoring visits under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 (as amended).

Of the seven schools that were inspected:

- one short inspection judged the school to be continuing to provide a good standard of education
- four short inspections converted to section 5 inspections and the schools were judged to require improvement
- two short inspections converted to section 5 inspections and the schools were judged to be inadequate.

During the follow-up visit to the Trust, HMI held discussions with the CEO, the head of school improvement, the finance officer, all the headteachers from the Trust's schools and a number of the special needs coordinators. In addition, HMI met with the trustees and the members of the Trust. Telephone discussions were held with external school improvement advisers. HMI also examined a range of documentation provided by the Trust, including minutes of meetings, records of school visits and financial information.

Context

The Academy Trust of Melksham was formed in April 2015 when six schools joined a single academy's existing trust, whereupon it adopted its current name. The Trust is responsible for seven primary schools and one secondary school. Six of the primary schools are Church of England schools and the Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education is a member of the Trust, acting corporately through its trustees.

Main findings

During this review, seven of the Trust's eight schools were inspected. Six of the Trust's schools are not currently providing a good quality of education for their pupils. Common weaknesses identified by these inspections include:

- lack of leadership capacity at both senior and middle levels
- lack of rigour in monitoring and evaluation, which leads to an overgenerous view of the quality of education provided by the Trust's schools
- ineffective monitoring and use of pupil premium funding, which contributes to the underachievement of disadvantaged pupils
- lack of precision in assessment and tracking of pupils' progress
- poor use of assessment to match teaching to pupils' needs
- low expectations of what pupils can achieve, especially the most able
- weak governance
- higher than national pupil absence rates, including levels of persistent absence
- variable provision and support for pupils who have SEND.

Membership of the Trust has not led to higher standards of education in its schools. Indeed, six of the Trust's schools' overall effectiveness grades have declined since their predecessor schools were previously inspected. As currently constituted, the Trust lacks the capacity to secure improvement or to halt the rapid decline in effectiveness that the majority of its schools have experienced.

Roles and responsibilities in the Trust are unclear. In particular, there are differing interpretations of the level of autonomy exercised by local governing bodies. This lack of clarity has created tensions between the Trust and these local governing bodies. In turn, this has slowed the pace of actions to address weaknesses and maintain standards.

There is a growing recognition among trustees that the Trust has been too deferential to the local governing bodies and has not held them to account rigorously enough from the outset. Trustees realise that their approach to implementing 'earned autonomy', whereby schools that are deemed to be performing effectively are given greater freedom, has confused lines of responsibility and hampered the Trust's efforts to drive forward improvement. All six of those schools judged not to be providing a good standard of education in the most recent inspections were recommended to undergo an external review of governance.

The Trust's capacity to maintain the quality of education provided by its schools has been weakened by the necessity to bolster the leadership and management in two of its schools. Trust leaders have been so involved with crisis management that they have been unable to focus on school improvement across the Trust as a whole. The Trust has attempted to build leadership capacity by appointing an assistant headteacher from one of the Trust's schools to work on improving teaching and learning across the Trust. Nevertheless, the focus has remained largely on tackling problems in two of the Trust's schools rather than encompassing a wider school improvement remit as initially envisaged. In addition, the Trust's budget for school improvement is being used, in the main, to support these two schools. Overall, the Trust does not have sufficient leadership capacity to deal with the challenges presented by underperforming schools.

The Trust's current strategic development plan is not fit for purpose. It does not address significant issues common across the Trust, such as pupils' low attendance rates, slow progress at key stage 2, particularly in mathematics, or the underachievement of disadvantaged pupils. Actions intended to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment are described perfunctorily. Planned actions and success criteria are too vague. In addition to these problems, it is unclear who will have direct responsibility for development planning and its evaluation for 2017/18.

The capacity of the Trust to bring about the urgent changes needed is compromised by its leadership structure. The CEO and the head of school improvement are also headteachers of schools within the Trust. In the context of the issues facing a number of schools in the Trust, they simply have too little time to tackle the scale and complexity of the task demanded of them. The trustees recognise that the

current structure is not sustainable, but they have not acted swiftly enough to address this. The plans for securing the role of the CEO on a permanent basis are still not fully formed. At the time of our visit, some funding had been identified for the appointment of a CEO but the precise remit of this post and its associated remuneration had not been agreed.

Crucially, those headteachers who have Trust-wide responsibilities (such as the CEO and the head of school improvement) are not performance-managed in these roles. The Trust, therefore, is not holding those with wider Trust leadership responsibilities effectively to account. Performance management for individual headteachers, including those who have wider Trust responsibilities, is not consistent across the Trust. This leads to a wide variation in the quality and impact of this performance management. Records of this process too often lack detail about what actions will be taken or what success will look like.

The monitoring and reporting systems in the Trust do not place sufficient emphasis on the progress that pupils make, including that made by disadvantaged pupils. The reports made by schools to the Trust, be it the termly school evaluation reports or the annual school review, focus primarily on pupils' attainment rather than their progress. In a number of inspections, headteachers and other senior leaders of those schools whose overall effectiveness declined had an overgenerous view of the quality of teaching because they had not taken full account of its impact on pupils' progress.

While Trust leaders analyse assessment information on a school-by-school basis, there is little analysis of outcomes across the Trust as a whole, including for key groups such as disadvantaged pupils, the most able or those who have SEND. In total, the schools in the Trust receive over £500,000 in additional funding to improve the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, but trustees do not ensure that this additional funding is used effectively.

The Trust operates a school improvement group (SIG), which is made up of all eight of the headteachers of the Trust's schools. This group analyses school performance and liaises with the Trustees Standards Committee. Recently, a new process has been implemented whereby the SIG will visit each school in turn to monitor and evaluate the quality of education. At the time of our visit, two SIG visits had taken place, but the evaluations lacked rigour and precision, even when they focused on known weaknesses in the school.

Intervention in schools that are causing concern has led to improvements in some areas. The Trust has acted appropriately to tackle safeguarding concerns where they have been identified. Each of the inspections in April 2017 deemed safeguarding to be effective. Senior leaders have started to carry out further Trust-wide audits of safeguarding to go beyond checking the extent of compliance with statutory requirements.

The provision and support for pupils who have SEND was identified as an area for improvement in both of the schools that were judged inadequate in the most recent

inspections. The identification of and support for pupils who have SEND in the Trust are inconsistent in schools across the Trust. Reporting procedures to the local governing body are also inconsistent and therefore the level of challenge that governors provide varies. There is little analysis of the outcomes of pupils who have SEND at Trust level, and therefore school leaders are not held to account for the progress of these pupils. The use of the additional SEND funding is not checked at Trust level.

Key stage 2 attainment and progress were weak in 2016. The results of the national curriculum assessments for schools in the Trust at the time show an overall picture of poor progress and attainment. In attainment measures at key stage 2, the Trust's results were below the national level in reading and mathematics. In the Trust as a whole, pupils at key stage 2 made less progress than other pupils nationally, with particularly low levels in mathematics. Five of the seven primary schools recorded negative progress scores for their pupils in mathematics. Two were in the bottom 10% of all schools in the country.

Disadvantaged pupils in the Trust made poor progress at key stage 2. In the Trust's only secondary school, the progress of disadvantaged pupils at key stage 4 was similarly poor. At key stage 2 in 2016, all seven primary schools in the Trust at the time recorded a negative progress score for disadvantaged pupils in mathematics, with two primary schools in the bottom 10% of schools nationally.

Recommendations

- Urgently increase the leadership capacity of the Trust so that it can promote the rapid improvements that many of its schools need.
- Improve the effectiveness of governance by ensuring that the scheme of delegation is understood clearly by all local governing bodies and is used consistently across the Trust to drive improvement.
- Ensure that strategic development planning addresses the key priorities for improving pupils' progress across the Trust.
- Make the monitoring and analysis of schools' performance more rigorous by ensuring that they focus precisely on the impact of teaching, learning and assessment on pupils' progress.
- Increase the attention paid by the Trust to improving the progress made by all pupils, but specifically those in key groups, where significant, such as disadvantaged pupils, the most able and those who have SEND.

Yours sincerely

Bradley Simmons HMI
Regional Director, South West

Annex: Academies that are part of the Academy Trust of Melksham

Schools inspected as part of the focused inspection – section 8 inspections

School name	Local authority	Opening date as an academy	Inspection grade in April 2017
Seend Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School	Wiltshire	April 2015	Good

Schools inspected as part of the focused inspection – section 8 inspections that were also deemed to be section 5 inspections

School name	Local authority	Opening date as an academy	Inspection grade in April 2017
The Manor Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School	Wiltshire	September 2012	Inadequate
Bowerhill Primary School	Wiltshire	April 2015	Requires improvement
Shaw Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School	Wiltshire	April 2015	Requires improvement
St George's Church of England Primary School, Semington	Wiltshire	April 2015	Inadequate
St Mary's Broughton Gifford Voluntary Controlled Church of England Primary School	Wiltshire	April 2015	Requires improvement
Melksham Oak Community School	Wiltshire	April 2015	Requires improvement

Other Academy Trust of Melksham school

School name	Local authority	Opening date as an academy	Most recent inspection grade
Forest and Sandridge Church of England Primary School	Wiltshire	December 2016	Not yet inspected as an academy