



Department
for Education

Department for Education
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Email enquiry form: www.gov.uk/contact-dfe

Date: 28 April 2026

Ms Fiona Coombe
Chair of Trustees
Tenterden Schools Trust
Ashford Road
Tenterden
TN30 6LT
Company number: 07736448

By email: [REDACTED]

cc: [REDACTED]

Dear Ms Coombe,

Notice to improve: Tenterden Schools Trust

We are writing to you in your capacity as the Chair of Tenterden Schools Trust (the Trust), to inform you that the Department for Education (the department) has assessed that the Trust's breaches of the Academy Trust Handbook (ATH) relating to financial management are significant enough to warrant a Notice to Improve. On that basis, we are issuing the Trust with a Notice to Improve on financial grounds.

This letter and its annexes serve as a written Notice to Improve financial management at the Trust (Notice to Improve or "the Notice"). It reflects the weak financial position of the Trust and continued concerns on long-term viability.

The Trust is required, pursuant to the provisions of the ATH and the Funding Agreement (FA), to comply with the terms of this Notice. These terms are set out in Annex A and Annex B.

Being issued with a Notice means that certain delegated authorities, as defined in the ATH, are revoked. All transactions previously covered by these delegations, regardless of their size, must now be approved in advance by the department, specifically:

- special staff severance payments
- compensation payments
- writing off debts and losses
- entering into guarantees, indemnities or letters of comfort
- disposals of fixed assets beyond any limit in the funding agreement

- taking up a leasehold or tenancy agreement on land and buildings of a duration beyond any limit in the Trust's funding agreement
- carry forward of unspent GAG from one year to the next beyond any limit in the funding agreement
- pooling of GAG

If the Trust seeks retrospective approval from the department this will be deemed a breach of the ATH. Further details of the approval process will be forwarded to you upon acknowledgment of receipt of this letter. It is important that you share this information with the Accounting Officer. These delegated authorities shall be returned to the Trust once we are satisfied that the requirements of the Notice have been, and will continue to be, complied with to the satisfaction of the Secretary of State.

The department will monitor progress made towards meeting the requirements of this Notice and will keep us updated through regular case reviews. A decision to lift the Notice will be taken when we are satisfied the requirements set out in the Annexes have been met in full.

We will support the Trust as it implements the required changes through regular contact and clear routes of escalation to resolve any questions or queries you might have. However, if the Trust is unable to deliver the necessary improvement and fails to make sufficient progress against the original conditions, we reserve the right to issue a revised Notice and add further specific conditions. Should it become evident that the Trust is unlikely to fulfil the conditions and / or requirements set out in this Notice and / or within the agreed timescales, we will explore the contractual intervention options available.

In the event that the Trust fails to meet the requirements of this Notice to our satisfaction, it will be considered to have failed to comply with the terms of the ATH. Failure to comply will be deemed a funding agreement breach and may lead to termination.

If continued non-compliance with the ATH occurs, we may also refer the case to the Charity Commission and/or Insolvency Service for further investigation, as deemed appropriate in the circumstances.

We should be grateful if you would acknowledge receipt of this letter by email within three working days of the date of this letter to [REDACTED], who will be your main point of contact related to this Notice to Improve. In line with the requirements set out in our publishing policy, the Trust has 10 working days to offer any final comments on factual accuracy to DfE colleagues before publication. The Trust is required to publish the Notice on its website within 14 days of it being published on gov.uk and retain it there until the Notice is lifted.

We recognise that this may be an uncertain time for the Trust and its staff. We are mindful of creating additional pressures on individuals involved. Therefore, we ask

the Trust to ensure appropriate provision is in place to support all its staff, as necessary. You may find the Education staff wellbeing charter¹ helpful.

We will continue to keep clear and regular lines of communication open with you. As such, [REDACTED], will be in contact shortly to answer any questions you may have, and to discuss the next steps in more detail, including any support the Trust may require to drive the necessary improvements.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely



Dame Kate Dethridge
Regional Director for South East, Department for Education



Lindsey Henning
Director, Schools Financial Support & Oversight, Regions Group, Department for Education

CC: Accounting Officer: Jonathan Wilden
Members: Canon Quentin Roper, Mr Clive Thomas, Reverend Lindsay John Hammond

¹ Education staff wellbeing charter: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/education-staff-wellbeing-charter>

Annex A: Tenterden Schools Trust

Notice to Improve

This Notice to Improve (the 'Notice') is a consequence of Tenterden Schools Trust (the 'Trust')

Failing to maintain robust oversight of the academy trust, bringing into doubt its ability to operate as a going concern as required in the Academy Trust Handbook (ATH) paragraphs 1.10, 1.21, 1.28, 1.39, 2.2, 2.8, 2.9, 3.1, 5.3 and 6.27.

Conditions

The Trust is required to comply with all the conditions set out in Annex B.

Financial management and governance requirements

The Trust is responsible for its own financial management, control and governance and is expected to take appropriate action to strengthen the weaknesses identified and return to compliance with the ATH.

The Trust should take all appropriate actions to ensure the action plan agreed with the department is fully implemented.

The department must be satisfied that the Trust is doing everything it can to rectify the weaknesses identified.

Monitoring and progress

The Trust is required to submit the evidence for the specific conditions to the timescales outlined in Annex B to enable the department to monitor compliance and progress.

Should it become evident that the Trust is unlikely to fulfil the conditions and / or requirements set out in this Notice and / or within the given timescales, the department will begin to consider and explore the contractual intervention options available.

Compliance and the end of the notice period

As outlined in Annex B, the Trust is required to submit evidence to demonstrate compliance with the conditions of this notice, which the department will use to monitor the Trust's progress. Annex B sets out the detail of the evidence required to fulfil the condition and the timescales to submit this evidence to the department.

When the Trust meets all the conditions outlined in this Notice, is fully compliant with the most recent edition of the ATH and no other breaches have been identified, we will write to the Trust to confirm that the Notice has been lifted.

Annex B: Tenterden Schools Trust

Table of Conditions

The table below summarises the conditions that have been placed on Tenterden Schools Trust (“the trust”). It outlines the evidence the trust is required to provide, along with the timescales for doing so, to demonstrate compliance with the Notice to Improve (“the Notice”). All conditions listed must be fully met before the Notice can be lifted.

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| Condition 1 | The trust is required to develop an action plan against the conditions set out in this Notice to Improve (Ntl) DfE reserves the right to add or make amendments to these conditions. |
| Evidence required to show compliance with condition 1 | Compliance will be demonstrated when the trust produce an action plan demonstrating how it intends to implement these conditions. |
| Timescale for condition 1 | By end May 2026 |

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| Condition 2 | <p>The trust is required to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Comply with the funding agreement requirement to submit all audited reports, accounts and statements to the department on time and without qualification. b) Submit an Academies budget forecast return outturn (BFR) by the deadline required by the department. |
| Evidence required to show compliance with condition 2a | <p>The department receives the trust's audited financial statements by 31 December, each year until the Ntl is lifted and thereafter as an ongoing requirement of the trust's Funding Agreement.</p> |
| Timescale for condition 2a | <p>Submit audited reports, accounts, and statements by 31 December 2026, and each year thereafter.</p> |
| Evidence required to show compliance with condition 2b | <p>The department receives the trust's BFR by the date required, each year until Ntl is lifted and thereafter as an ongoing requirement of the trust's Funding Agreement.</p> |
| Timescale for condition 2b | <p>Submit BFR by date required, each year until Ntl is lifted, including minutes confirming board approval.</p> |

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| Condition 3 | The trust must request approval from the department, in advance, for any actions under the revoked freedoms in 6.19 of the Academy Trust Handbook. These requests should be sent using the Customer Help Portal. Retrospective approval will be deemed as a breach of the Academy Trust Handbook. |
| Evidence required to show compliance with condition 3 | The trust must submit a request for approval for any actions relating to the delegated freedom revoked under the terms of the Notice. |
| Timescale for condition 3 | Until the Ntl is lifted. |

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| <p>Condition 4</p> | <p>In accordance with paragraphs 1.28-1.29 of the Academy Trust Handbook, the trust must have someone fulfilling the role of accounting officer (AO). The role must be held by a named individual who is an employee of the trust, or alternatively, an off-payroll appointment must be requested.</p> <p>The trust must ensure that the roles of the AO and the chief financial officer (CFO) are not held by the same individual. The trust must take immediate steps to regularise its governance structure to ensure full compliance with these requirements.</p> |
| <p>Evidence required to show compliance with condition 4</p> | <p>The trust must provide written confirmation to the DfE setting out the details of the current holder of the AO role including whether the AO and CFO roles are currently separately as required by paragraph 1.29 of the ATH. If roles are combined the trust must immediately implement interim arrangements that separate the duties pending formal appointment.</p> |
| <p>Timescale for condition 4</p> | <p>Within five days of the issuing of the NTI.</p> |

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| Condition 5 | Ensure that proper arrangements, in line with departmental preference and best practice, are put in place whereby there is sufficient independence to offer robust challenge and hold senior leaders and AO to account for the management of the budget/finances and general operation of the trust. |
| Evidence required to show compliance with condition 5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The DfE receives evidence that there is a schedule of regular board, members and sub-committee meetings in place for 26/27 b) The DfE receives details of changes of board meetings and an action plan to implement those changes c) The trust implements strong sub-committees d) The DfE receives meeting minutes that evidence challenge from trustees and members. |
| Timescale for condition 5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) By end May 2026 b) By end May 2026 c) By end May 2026 d) By end August 2026 |

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| Condition 6 | Ensure that arrangements are in place for the provision of internal scrutiny, and an audit committee or a committee fulfilling the duties of an audit committee. The trust should have a process in place, overseen by the audit committee, to implement findings, recommendations, and/or actions from external audit findings report. |
| Evidence required to show compliance with condition 6 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The trust establishes an audit committee and provides a schedule of meetings for 2026/27 b) The trust provides minutes of all meetings once they have taken place to the DfE |
| Timescale for condition 6 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) By end May 2026 b) By end August 2026 |

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| Condition 7 | Trust to consider strengthening governance by appointing further independent trustees to the board, which are to be agreed in advance with the DfE. |
| Evidence required to show compliance with condition 7 | Provide DfE with evidence of board minutes at which this condition was discussed and considered. Minutes should record the outcomes of the discussion and the rationale for the decisions. |
| Timescale for condition 7 | By end August 2026 |

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| Condition 8 | The trust must provide DfE with monthly management accounts, including a cashflow forecast, by the 15 th of each subsequent month. |
| Evidence required to show compliance with condition | DfE receives appropriate management accounts on time. |
| Timescale for condition 8 | Fifteen calendar days after the end of each month until the Ntl is lifted. |

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| Condition 9 | Ensure all necessary trustee and member contact details are up to date and amended on Get Information about Schools (GIAS) |
| Evidence required to show compliance with condition 9 | All relevant fields in GIAS must be completed accurately. |
| Timescale for condition | Initial deadline Initial deadline of fourteen calendar days in line with the ATH followed by an ongoing requirement to ensure the information is current. |

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| Condition 10 | Trust must comply with the recommendations identified in their SRMA report following the visit in September 2025. |
| Evidence required to show compliance with condition 10 | The trust must produce an action plan on how they intend to implement the SRMA recommendations. |
| Timescale for condition 10 | By end May 2026 |

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| Condition 11 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The trust must prepare and submit a viable financial plan informed by the recommendations of the SRMA 2025 report, that is explicitly linked to timely cost reductions and strengthened financial governance. b) The plan must demonstrate how it will achieve a cumulative surplus position, supported by robust and realistic budget forecasts including credible pupil number assumptions. c) Early milestones must evidence immediate action to secure expenditure reductions and short-term financial control alongside longer-term recovery planning. |
| Evidence required to show compliance with condition 11 | Submit a viable financial plan to the department by end May 2026 , including the minutes confirming board approval. |
| Timescale for condition 11 | By end May 2026 and reviewed on a quarterly basis thereafter until the Ntl is lifted. |

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| Condition 12 | Trust to undertake a bespoke SRMA deployment to provide DfE assurance with the current financial position. |
| Evidence required to show compliance with condition 112 | The trust must comply with the requirements of the SRMA, providing all documentation required for them to carry out the deployment. |
| Timescale for condition 12 | Commence by June 2026 |

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| Condition 13 | Understand and articulate the operational and cultural changes necessary to ensure that TST schools operate as a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) and work for the benefit of the young people and staff within it. |
| Evidence required to show compliance with condition 13 | Provide DfE with a clear plan showing the changes that will be made to the way in which the MAT operates so that schools, staff and young people within the MAT reap the benefits of being part of a family of schools. |
| Timescale for condition 13 | By end May 2026 |

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| Condition 14 | The trust must consider joining a multi-academy trust (MAT) including maintaining a clear options appraisal and demonstrating timely decision-making. |
| Evidence required to show compliance with condition 14 | Provide the DfE with a detailed breakdown of the trust's considerations and decision making, supported by the relevant board minutes. |
| Timescale for condition 14 | by end July 2026 |

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| Condition 15 | To meet with the DfE officials on a monthly basis |
| Evidence required to show compliance with condition 15 | Monthly meetings with DfE officials |
| Timescale for condition 15 | Until the Ntl is lifted. |