Department for Education

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

Date: 11 May 2026

Tracey Knight
Chair of Trustees
Sacred Heart of Mary Girls' School
St Mary's Lane
Upminster
RM14 2QR

Company number: 07693743
By email: [redacted]

Dear Mrs Knight,

Notice to improve: Sacred Heart of Mary Girls' School

We are writing to you in your capacity as the Chair of Sacred Heart of Mary Girls' School (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.

We understand that this decision may be disappointing and want to assure you that we recognise the positive action the trust has taken to date to address the concerns. We also recognise the cooperation and extensive discussions that have taken place between the trust and officials and the changes you have already made to strengthen accounting and internal financial controls. However, our concerns remain in relation to the weak financial position and financial management, governance and oversight at the trust. Our assessment is that the trust has breached the following sections of the ATH:

> ***1.10.*** *The academy trust is the legal entity with the board having collective accountability and responsibility for the academy trust and assuring itself that there is compliance with regulatory, contractual, and statutory requirements.*
>
> *The academy trust board provides:* ***accountability and assurance****: the board has robust effective oversight of the operations and performance of the academy trust, including the provision of education, pupil welfare, overseeing and ensuring appropriate use of funding and effective financial performance and keeping their estate safe and well-maintained.*

1.21. *Ensuring regularity, propriety, value for money, and taking ownership of financial sustainability.*

2.8. *Preparing and monitoring financial plans that ensure the trust remains a going concern.*

2.11. *Ensuring accurate, realistic budgeting and reflecting lessons learned from prior years.*

2.20. *Taking timely action to maintain financial viability and address budget variances*

5.32. *Securing prior approval from the DfE for borrowing, including overdraft facilities*

This letter and its annexes serve as a written Notice to Improve financial management at the trust (Notice to Improve or "the Notice").

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 the trust's Accounting Officer upon acknowledgment of receipt of this letter. These delegated authorities shall be returned to the trust once we are satisfied that the conditions and / or 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 conditions and / or 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 conditions and / or 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 FA breach and may lead to its 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 charter[1] 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

Dr Vanessa Ogden CBE

Regional Director London Region, Department for Education

[1] Education staff wellbeing charter: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/education-staff-wellbeing-charter

Gavin Davies
Interim Director, Schools Financial Support & Oversight, Regions Group,
Department for Education

CC. Accounting Officer – Vivienne Teresa Querry

Annex A: Sacred Heart of Mary Girls' School

Notice to Improve

This Notice to Improve (the 'Notice') is a consequence of Sacred Heart of Mary Girls' School (the 'trust') lack of appropriate financial oversight and governance evidenced by the trust's failure to inform the department of entering into an overdraft position and lacking sufficient funds to pay outstanding creditors and payroll, resulting in multiple breaches of the ATH.

Conditions

1. The trust is required to comply with all of the conditions set out in Annex B.

Financial management and governance requirements

2. 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.
3. The trust should take all appropriate actions to ensure the action plan agreed with the department is fully implemented.
4. The department must be satisfied that the trust is doing everything it can to rectify the weaknesses identified.

Monitoring and progress

5. 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.
6. 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

7. 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.
8. 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: Sacred Heart of Mary Girls' School

Table of conditions

The table below summarises the conditions that have been placed upon Sacred Heart of Mary Girls' School ("the trust"). It sets out the evidence the trust must provide, and the timescales the trust must meet, to show that they have complied with the Notice to Improve ("the Notice"). All conditions set out in the table must be met before the Notice can be lifted.

Condition 1	The Trust is required to: Produce a comprehensive financial recovery and improvement action plan. This plan must be formally approved by the board before submission to the department. The plan must include: i. Detailed schedule of planned savings, how SRMA recommendations have been used, cost reduction measures, including delivery timelines. ii. Evidence of how Integrated Curriculum Financial Planning has been used to develop the trust financial plan. iii. Actions to strengthen financial oversight, internal controls and financial governance. iv. Arrangements for reporting progress to the trust board and the Department on a regular basis.
Evidence required to show compliance with condition 1	i. The department receives monthly updates on the financial recovery and improvement action plan. ii. Trust will need to provide evidence of meeting each action by the specific target dates and provide any supporting documentation along with this. The trust must inform the department if actions are likely to be missed or delayed.
Timescale for condition 1	i. Submit the financial recovery and improvement action plan to the department by 01 June 2026, with monthly updates through the trust Management Accounts ii. Submit evidence to the department demonstrating that each required action has been completed by its specific target date in the trust action plan.

Condition 2	The trust must appoint a suitably qualified and/or experienced Chief Financial Officer (CFO), who must demonstrate the following:

	i. Suitable skills and experience to take responsibility for the risk, scale and complexity of the trust's detailed financial operations. ii. Sufficient leadership expertise to provide strategic advice and ensure full compliance with the ATH.
Evidence required to show compliance with condition 2	i. The trust to provide the department with regular updates on the recruitment process. ii. Once appointed, the trust must submit a summary of the selected candidate, including qualifications, relevant experience and the rationale for their appointment.
Timescale for condition 2	i. Provide updates as and when made available throughout the recruitment process and due diligence. ii. Provide new CFO summary within 10 working days of their appointment being confirmed.

Condition 3	New appointed CFO must take part in the department for Education (DfE) School Business Manager (SBM) mentoring programme.
Evidence required to show compliance with condition 3	CFO must liaise with appointed mentor to confirm and agree a start date. Once agreed, this date must be shared with the department.
Timescale for condition 3	CFO mentoring to be agreed to by 29th June 2026.

Condition 4	The trust must produce an action plan, with dated actions, agreed by the trust board, to address any risks identified in the trust Management Letter and Internal Scrutiny Report.
Evidence required to show compliance with condition 4	Submit to the department: i. An agreed plan, with board minutes evidencing its agreement. ii. Monthly updates to the plan showing progress
Timescale for condition 4	Until the trust submits a Management Letter and Internal Scrutiny Report that does not include any high or repeated risks.

Condition 5	The trust must take part in an External Governance Review (ERG), with the scope and Terms of Reference agreed with the department. The trust will be required to engage fully

	throughout the process and provide all relevant information when requested.
Evidence required to show compliance with condition 5	The trust must submit an action plan to the department following the ERG outlining all risks and appropriate actions and target dates to address them.
Timescale for condition 5	ERG to be commissioned by 15th June with an action plan to be submitted to the department 2 weeks after the ERG full report has been shared.

Condition 6	The trust must consider joining a strong Church Multi-Academy Trust (CMAT) in line with the expectations of the Diocese. This includes: i. Engaging constructively without delay with the Diocese of Brentwood, Regions Group delivery team and any other relevant stakeholders to identify any appropriate CMAT to consider joining. ii. Provide the department with updates outlining progress of discussions, stakeholder engagement and a proposed timeline to join a CMAT if a suitable MAT is identified and the decision to join the CMAT is made.
Evidence required to show compliance with condition 6	Trust to provide evidence demonstrating active engagement in the process of considering joining a CMAT.
Timescale for condition 6	The trust must provide termly evidence of how it has considered joining a CMAT until the NtI is lifted, with the first update no later than 17 July 2026.

Condition 7	Trust must continue to submit monthly management accounts, cashflow report, aged debtors and creditors reports.
Evidence required to show compliance with condition 7	Trust to submit appropriate managements accounts, cashflow report, aged debtors and creditors reports by the 15th of each month.
Timescale for condition 7	Until the NtI is lifted.

Condition 8	The trust must continue to submit minutes of trust board meetings and its finance committee meetings to the department.

Evidence required to show compliance with condition 8	All meeting minutes to be submitted by the 15th of each month.
Timescale for condition 8	Until the NtI is lifted.

Condition 9	The trust is required to: Comply with the funding agreement requirement to submit all audited reports, accounts and statements to the department on time and without qualification. Submit an Academies Budget Forecast Return outturn (BFR) by the deadline required by the department.
Evidence required to show compliance with condition 9a	i. The department receives the trust's audited financial statements by 31 December 2026, each year until the NtI is lifted. ii. The department receives the trust's BFR by the date required, each year until NtI is lifted.
Timescale for condition 9a	i. Submit audited reports, accounts, and statements by 31 December 2026, and each year thereafter until the NtI is lifted. ii. Submit BFR by date required, each year until NtI is lifted.

Condition 10	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 10	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 10	Until the NtI is lifted.