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22 January 2018

Mr Roger Burman  
Executive Principal  
The Aylesbury Vale Academy  
Paradise Orchard  
Aylesbury  
Buckinghamshire  
HP18 0WS

Dear Mr Burman

### **Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of The Aylesbury Vale Academy**

Following my visit to your school on 10 and 11 January 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection that took place in November 2016. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

leaders and managers are taking effective actions towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation

the school's combined statement of action and improvement plan is fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Oxford, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Buckinghamshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Gary Holden  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## **Annex**

### **The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in November 2016**

- Raise outcomes for pupils in all key stages so that they are consistently better than national averages and that the gap between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally closes rapidly.
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in all parts of the school by:
  - sharing the strong practice that exists already in isolated pockets across each phase
  - continuing the process begun in April 2016 of tackling teachers' weaker performance, especially in the secondary phase
  - implementing focused, rigorous staff performance management and effective, purposeful training.
- Strengthen the leadership and management of the whole school so that there are consistent policies, procedures and practices from the Nursery provision right the way to the top by:
  - reforming the governing body so that it is able to hold school leaders regularly and rigorously to account, as well as providing appropriate support to the new executive principal
  - clarifying leadership and management responsibilities – establishing school-wide leaders for safeguarding, assessment and staff training, and for supporting groups of pupils facing potential barriers to learning
  - creating school-wide practice in, among other things, safeguarding, assessment, teachers' professional learning and the management of practice for children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken by a professional team independent of the sponsor and the local authority.

An external review of governance should also be undertaken, commissioned by the sponsors but carried out by persons independent of current governors and the local authority.

## **Report on the second monitoring inspection on 10 and 11 January 2018**

### **Evidence**

During this inspection, meetings were held with the executive principal and the chair of the governing body, as well as with representatives of the school's sponsor, the Diocese of Oxford. An inspector spoke informally with parents of primary school pupils at the start of the day. Inspectors also met with subject leaders and teachers and spoke to groups of pupils. Inspectors visited classes in all year groups in the primary school. They also made 27 visits to parts of lessons in the secondary school. The majority of these visits were carried out jointly with members of the senior leadership team. The lead inspector checked the school's single central record and spoke to the designated safeguarding lead. He also reviewed the combined statement of action and action plan, as well as a range of other documents. These included minutes of governing body meetings and records of visits by advisers from the Diocese of Oxford.

### **Context**

Since the previous inspection, a large number of teachers have left the school. A number of new subject leaders have been appointed, including in English and mathematics. Over 20 new teachers joined the school in September. A small number of classes are currently taught by supply or agency staff.

At the time of the last monitoring visit in July 2017, the school was jointly sponsored by the Diocese of Oxford and Buckinghamshire County Council. Working with the Department for Education, both sponsors have agreed that, henceforward, the Diocese of Oxford will be the sole sponsor.

Since July, a number of governors, including the chair of the governing body, have stepped down. The Diocese of Oxford has wasted no time in recruiting several new and appropriately skilled governors, and has appointed a new chair of the governing body.

### **The quality of leadership and management at the school**

Senior leaders' relentless focus on improving the quality of teaching and pupils' progress has meant that the school continues to get better in all areas of its work. Leaders have built well on the early successes noted during the last monitoring inspection. The executive principal is determined that pupils leave the school as well-qualified, confident young men and women able to make the most of the opportunities available to them. Senior leaders share his drive and together they have raised expectations of all staff. Leaders have an accurate view of the improvements that have been made, and at the same time recognise what needs to be done to ensure that the school provides a consistently good standard of education.

Senior leaders have been successful in developing other leaders' roles. Many subject leaders, including those appointed this year, now play an important role in making improvements to teaching and pupils' progress and are eager for this to develop further. This is helping to build leadership capacity in the school. Subject leaders and those responsible for pupils' welfare confirm that senior leaders give them strong support and also hold them to account for the impact of their work on pupils' progress.

A well-organised team of appropriately trained safeguarding leaders ensures that pupils are safe. All required checks on the suitability of staff and volunteers to work with pupils are carried out diligently. Staff have received up-to-date training on child protection, and are alert to any signs that pupils may be at risk of harm. Staff know what to do if they have concerns. Leaders follow up any such concerns rigorously. They liaise well with external agencies and are tenacious in ensuring that support for pupils is provided in a timely fashion. Parents in the primary phase voiced their strong support for the work of teachers and leaders. Leaders' own surveys of parents' views in the primary and secondary phases suggest that parents are increasingly happy with the school's efforts to keep their children safe, happy and well taught. Some parents have expressed concerns about behaviour and bullying in the secondary phase. Pupils told inspectors that bullying is not prevalent in the school and that, on the rare occasions that bullying takes place, staff deal with it well. The school's own records suggest that the number of bullying incidents has fallen sharply over the last year.

The new chair of the governing body leads the governing body with energy and insight. She has made good use of the sensible recommendations made in the external review of governance to bring greater rigour to the work of the governing body. For example, she has clarified governors' roles and responsibilities. Meetings are well attended and run in a highly professional manner. New governors have been selected for the particular skills that they bring and have been well inducted into their roles. Governors are linked to different areas of the school's work and they make regular visits to the school to check for themselves that what leaders tell them is happening in practice. Because of the skills they bring and the strategic overview they have of the school's work, governors are now able to offer sharp challenge and constructive support to the executive principal and his team. As well as making sure that they hold school leaders stringently to account, governors have established a strong relationship with officers from the Diocese of Oxford, which has improved the quality of communication between sponsors and the governing body.

### **Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:**

- Leaders continue to take effective action to improve the quality of teaching. Leaders have displayed considerable determination in meeting the challenge of replacing the large number of teachers who left last year. Rightly taking the view that only the best is good enough for Aylesbury Vale pupils, leaders have left no avenue unexplored in their search for high-quality subject specialists. Although

they have had commendable success in this, some classes are still taught by non-specialist teachers or by long-term supply teachers.

- Leaders' insistence on a consistent approach to lesson planning and assessment has enabled the many new teachers to settle in quickly. Teachers are committed to ensuring that their pupils achieve the best possible outcomes, and they regularly go the extra mile to support their pupils. Well-established routines mean that little learning time is lost. As a result, the school is a calm, orderly and often studious environment. Leaders are swift to challenge, support and tackle any weak teaching. At the same time, leaders make good use of the most skilled practitioners to model and share the best practice in teaching. Leaders make sure that teachers receive the training they need, and teachers appreciate the support they get to improve their practice. When teaching is effective, pupils are given work to do that is well matched to their needs. For example, in science Year 11 pupils made strong progress because they completed tasks that addressed specific weaknesses in their knowledge and understanding. Pupils were keen to learn from their mistakes and made good use of the time. Across the school, most pupils try their best and relationships between teachers and pupils are warm. Pupils agree that teaching has improved in the last year.
- Working with an adviser from the Diocese of Oxford, the vice principal has transformed the school's approach to assessing and tracking pupils' progress. The primary and secondary phases now share a common system for collecting information about pupils' progress. This enables leaders and governors to check with greater precision how well different groups of pupils are doing in their learning. Leaders also hold teachers more stringently to account for the progress pupils make. Teachers are beginning to use the information they collect about pupils' performance to help them to plan work that is appropriately challenging and which better meets pupils' needs. Leaders have put in place sensible measures to ensure that teachers' assessment of pupils' progress is accurate. Leaders' and teachers' work on tracking and assessment is starting to have a positive impact. For example, provisional outcomes for 2017 show that pupils, in particular girls and disadvantaged pupils, made strong progress in English. In addition, the school's most-able pupils made strong progress in a number of subjects.
- Leaders have made good use of the findings of the recent pupil premium review. Teachers now get clear guidance on how to prioritise the progress of disadvantaged pupils in their planning. Leaders have improved the way that the pupil premium grant is used, so that it is now more squarely focused on approaches that have been demonstrated to work. In particular, funds are directed to improving the overall quality of teaching and to raising the aspirations of disadvantaged pupils through, for example, university visits. A separate pupil premium plan targets the right priorities, though it would benefit from sharper, more easily measurable success criteria. Provisional results for 2017 show that while the difference between the overall progress of disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally remains wide, it has diminished compared to the previous

year.

- Leadership and teaching in the primary phase have been effective in securing outcomes that are at least at the national average in the early years, in phonics and at key stage 1. This is because leaders have ensured that pupils benefit from a broad and balanced curriculum that is well taught. Current pupils are also making strong progress, because teaching is well matched to pupils' needs and work is appropriately challenging. Pupils enjoy their lessons and feel well supported by their teachers. The school's assessment information, supported by work in pupils' books, suggests that pupils in Year 6 are on track to achieve outcomes that are at least in line with national averages by the end of the year. The fruits of leaders' focus on writing are particularly evident in Years 3 and 4, where pupils write accurately and at length for a range of audiences.
- Attendance in the primary phase is in line with the national average for primary schools. Although rates of absence in the secondary phase remain above national levels, there is an improving trend in attendance. Attendance has a high profile in the school. Leaders and teachers give frequent reminders to parents and pupils about the negative impact of absence from school on pupils' outcomes. In addition, there are rewards for those pupils who rarely miss a day. Leaders are tenacious in their efforts to remove any barriers that prevent pupils, in particular disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, from attending school regularly. Consequently, overall attendance is now close to the national average for secondary schools.
- Leaders' actions to improve behaviour have been particularly successful. The executive principal has brought clarity to the school's approach to managing pupils' behaviour. Teachers apply the policy on rewards and sanctions consistently. Pupils understand that their actions have consequences and say that behaviour has improved. The majority of pupils behave well in corridors and classrooms and they are punctual to their lessons. They wear their uniforms smartly and are polite to visitors. Although the number of days lost as a result of exclusions, both permanent and fixed-term, remains above the national average, there has been a marked improvement since the previous inspection. Similarly, the number of behaviour incidents that leaders deal with during the day has fallen sharply since last year. Just as importantly, pupils' attitudes to learning are improving rapidly. Pupils are increasingly ambitious for their own futures and are keen to do well. In an art lesson, one pupil said, 'I love the work on the wall and I want mine to be up there too, so I have to work hard.'

### **Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:**

- Leaders are aware that teaching, while improving rapidly, is not yet consistently strong across the secondary phase. Where teaching over time is less effective, work is not closely matched to pupils' needs. Questioning is superficial and does not require pupils to think hard or explain their answers. In these cases, pupils are occupied but not stretched, and so do not make the progress of which they

are capable, particularly in the quality of their writing.

- Outcomes across the curriculum in the secondary phase remain too variable. Provisional results for 2017 show that pupils made particularly weak progress in humanities. Pupils' attainment in English and mathematics is below national averages. Leaders have taken rapid action to address this variability, and early indications are that current pupils are on track to make better progress in a range of subjects in 2018. In the primary phase, while outcomes at the expected standard in key stage 1 mirrored those achieved nationally in 2017, too few pupils reached scores at greater depth.
- There is a clear need to diminish further differences between the progress of key groups of pupils across the full range of subjects in key stages 3 and 4, notably disadvantaged pupils and those who have SEN and/or disabilities. While improving, teachers' use of assessment information to plan work that meets these pupils' needs is not yet a consistent feature of practice across the school. Leaders need to ensure that additional funding has a more marked effect on the progress of disadvantaged pupils, those who need to catch up in literacy and numeracy in Year 7, and those pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities. Provisional outcomes for 2017 show that disadvantaged pupils made progress in a range of subjects that was below the national average for all other pupils.
- Leaders acknowledge that, in the face of a challenging teacher recruitment climate, they have had to make difficult decisions about the breadth and balance of the curriculum in the secondary phase. For example, pupils in key stage 3 and key stage 4 told inspectors that they do not feel they have received enough advice on future careers or on their next steps in education. Similarly, although pupils get clear information on how to keep themselves safe, including when online, there is not yet a planned approach to helping pupils understand the dangers of extremist ideas. Leaders and governors are currently reviewing the structure and content of the secondary phase of the curriculum to ensure that it provides the full range of experiences and opportunities that characterise a good school.

## **External support**

The Diocese of Oxford is fully committed to the school and continues to provide effective support to the school. The director of education for the Diocese has a good knowledge and understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses, which she uses to deploy resources to areas of the school's work where they are most needed. For example, advisers have worked closely with subject leaders to support them in monitoring the quality of teaching and pupils' progress. In addition, the Diocese-appointed school improvement adviser has worked productively with senior leaders in the primary and secondary phases to put in place an increasingly effective approach to assessment. Advisers' reports are an invaluable resource for governors in helping them to challenge leaders and to assess the school's progress. At the previous monitoring visit, the combined post-Ofsted statement of action and

action plan was judged to be not fit for purpose. Since then, leaders have refined and sharpened the plan. It now contains more ambitious targets and clearer milestones. As a result, leaders are able to collect reliable information about, and check the impact of, their increasingly effective actions to address the areas for improvement noted in the previous inspection. The action plan is now fit for purpose.