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15 March 2017

Mr Ian Kershaw
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Dear Mr Kershaw

Focused review of Northern Education Trust (NET)

Following the focused review of nine NET schools in November and December 2016, and the subsequent follow-up visit by 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 findings.

Thank you for your cooperation during our visit to the Trust on 5 to 8 December 2016. Please pass on our thanks to your staff and other stakeholders who kindly gave up their time to meet us.

The Trust was selected for a focused review because of Ofsted's concerns about the performance of a number of its 20 schools. The findings from the focused review and a wider consideration of the Trust's overall performance are set out below.

Summary of main findings

- Over time, the Trust's strategies for school improvement have failed to secure urgent and necessary improvements in too many of its schools. Trustees are a considerable way from fulfilling their published aim for all schools to be good or better within three years of joining the Trust.
- Weak due diligence masked the complexity of issues in a number of schools prior to becoming part of NET. Trust leaders are still tackling financial and human resources issues that were unresolved or unearthed when these schools joined NET.
- Trustees and trust leaders acknowledge that they took on too many poorly performing schools in the early stages while not having the capacity or capability to tackle the challenges these schools presented.

- Trustees' plans for improvement, enshrined in the business plan, are too far removed from what is actually happening in the schools. The key performance indicators are unrealistic and unachievable in the planned timescale, given the current academic outcomes in many of the schools
- Since joining the Trust, only half of the schools have improved at their most recent Ofsted inspection. The others have remained the same or declined. Of the 18 schools that have been inspected since they joined the NET family, one is outstanding, five are good, eight require improvement and four are inadequate. Too few pupils attend a good or better school within this Trust.
- The progress pupils make over time is too slow to remedy historic shortfalls in their learning in most of the schools. There are small signs of improvement in the primary schools. However, pupils' progress in English and mathematics is weak in the secondary schools that are part of the Trust. Too few pupils make the progress they should by the time they leave key stage 4.
- Standards remain below average at every key stage. The modest signs of improvement in the primary sector are not reflected in the secondary phase. Consequently, the majority of pupils, including the most able and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, do not receive the quality of education that they are entitled to or deserve.
- The achievement of disadvantaged pupils, including those who are most able, is especially poor. The £5.8 million of additional government funding that academies within the Trust received in the last academic year to support these pupils has had little tangible impact on their achievement.
- Pupils' attendance is below the national average in the majority of schools. The proportion of pupils who are persistently absent is much higher than seen nationally in nine of the primary and eight of the secondary schools in the Trust.
- Teacher assessment information is inaccurate in many of the schools. This has resulted in teaching that fails to meet the different needs of pupils. The marked difference between school data, predicted outcomes and actual results in the primary and secondary schools has given trustees and trust leaders an erroneous and over-optimistic view of the schools' performance.
- The systems to quality-assure the support and challenge provided to schools lack rigour. In too many instances, this has led to uneven quality and limited impact on improving pupils' outcomes.
- A lack of direction by trustees and trust leaders on leadership systems and teaching strategies has stymied progress. There is no systematic approach to tackling weaknesses that are common across a number of schools.
- Schools are supported well by the Trust's finance and human resources services. The Trust has been recognised by the Education Funding Agency as demonstrating a strong track record of good financial management.
- Relationships with academy leaders are constructive and positive. Principals and governors are fulsome in their praise for the support they receive.

- Trustees and trust leaders are honest in their evaluation of past performance and their shortcomings in moving too slowly. This has led to a planned restructure to ensure that the school improvement strategy is on a firmer footing for the future.

Evidence

Focused inspections of nine schools were carried out in November and December 2016. All of these inspections were carried out under section 5 or section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection outcomes were:

- Four schools were judged inadequate:
 - two schools were judged to require special measures: one of these schools had been judged outstanding at its previous inspection; the other had not been inspected since joining the Trust
 - two schools were judged to have serious weaknesses: one of these schools required improvement at its previous inspection; the other had not been inspected since becoming part of NET.
- Three schools required improvement: two of these schools also required improvement at their previous inspection; the other had not been previously inspected.
- One school, not previously inspected since joining the Trust, was judged to be good.
- HMI completed a monitoring visit to a school previously found to require improvement. HMI concluded that school leaders were not taking effective action to improve the school.

Telephone discussions were held on 30 November and 1 December 2016 with either the principal or executive principal of eight other schools in the Trust. During the follow-up visit, discussions were held with trustees and trust leaders. Inspectors also spoke to external partners commissioned by the Trust to support improvement. Inspectors held further discussions with school principals and representatives from local governing bodies. A range of relevant documentation was also scrutinised.

Context

- NET is a large multi-academy trust, which was established by Northern Education Associates in 2012 as a non-profit charity to sponsor academies. It includes 10 primary and 10 secondary schools, which are located in the north of England. The schools are in 10 local authorities: two in Bolton, Calderdale, Gateshead and Hartlepool; five in Stockton-on-Tees; three in Bradford; and one in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Barnsley, Sunderland and Northumberland.
- There are 18 sponsor-led and two converter academies within the Trust. No new schools were opened in the last academic year. Almost all of these schools serve areas that have much higher levels of social deprivation than found nationally.

- Upon joining the Trust, 11 schools were inadequate and five required improvement.
- Three schools within the Trust received pre-warning notices from the Department for Education in 2016.
- NET comprises nine trustees who form the Trust board. A school principal and a chair of a local governing body are also members of the Trust board. The chief executive officer (CEO) is a trustee and a member of the Trust's leadership team. The Trust's leadership team includes five directors, plus a chief operating officer, who hold responsibility for primary and secondary education, standards, governance, safeguarding, human resources and finance, plus legal, property and information and communication technology services across the 20 schools.
- At the time of the review, a restructure of the school improvement group and the approach to supporting school improvement had begun.

Main findings

- Trustees and trust leaders have failed to secure sustained improvements in too many of NET's schools. Academic standards remain low at every key stage and too few pupils have the opportunity to attend a good or better school. For example, the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics was below the national average in eight out of the 10 primary schools in 2016. In the secondary phase, attainment at the end of key stage 4 compared poorly with the national average in nine out of the 10 schools.
- Pupils' achievement is not improving quickly enough, especially in the secondary phase, to make up for a considerable legacy of underachievement.
- While trustees understand the barriers to improvement, they fail to act with sufficient urgency to bring about necessary change. They have been too slow to recognise that their school improvement strategy is not bringing about swift and convincing gains in many of the schools. Despite weaknesses in pupils' outcomes over time, a much-needed overhaul of structures, systems and procedures is only in its infancy.
- The trustees' business plan is divorced from what is happening on the ground. It is not driving improvement. Strategic plans pay scant attention to the key weaknesses across different schools. Key performance indicators are unrealistic given the extent of improvement required in many of the schools.
- There are signs of a positive move forward in the primary sector. More children are gaining a good level of development by the time they leave Reception. The proportion of children who are successful in developing their phonics knowledge and skills is increasing each year, and outcomes at the end of key stage 1 are improving over time.
- Nonetheless, outcomes in most primary schools remain below average. Children are behind from the beginning and do not catch up, because they fail to make sufficient progress.

- The small signs of improvement in the primary phase are not replicated in the secondary phase. Over time, the proportion of pupils gaining five good GCSEs, including English and mathematics, has been too low due to pupils' weak progress from their key stage 2 starting points. In 2016, pupils' performance against the new accountability measures was weak overall; almost all of the secondary schools were below average for every progress and attainment indicator.
- The 2016 key stage 2 and 4 results were a stark contrast to the information held by trust leaders. Despite gathering a broad range of data from each school through a half-termly 'score-card', the internal assessment information proved overly optimistic because teacher assessments were inaccurate. Consequently, there was a marked difference between the actual pupil outcomes compared to the predictions provided by schools. Flawed information hampers trust leaders from intervening more quickly and prevents trustees from seeing the true picture across the Trust's schools.
- Disadvantaged pupils, almost half of the pupil population, fare even worse than their peers in school. They are behind other pupils nationally as soon as they leave Reception. They do not gain enough ground as they progress through the education system. Despite gathering evidence on the progress these pupils make, little is done to promote their achievement in a systematic and strategic manner across the Trust. Trustees fail to hold local governing bodies to account for the additional money they receive to tackle differences in achievement. Not all schools publish information about how the pupil premium is spent and the impact this has on disadvantaged pupils on their websites.
- Most-able pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make weak progress overall. They fail to reach the standards they should for their age or capabilities. These groups receive scant attention. They are not included on the school-wide score-card, nor is there a process for gathering information about their achievement from the reports produced by the achievement partners, who are commissioned by the Trust to provide support and challenge to each school.
- Low attendance rates in some schools, especially in the primary phase, have been allowed to continue over time. Pupils' attendance is below the national average in nine primary and eight secondary schools. In over half of the schools, the absence rate for disadvantaged pupils is above the national average. Data clearly shows that attendance is a common weakness across most schools. Nevertheless, there is no trust-wide strategy to improve pupils' attendance.
- Deep-rooted shortcomings and systematic failure in the past mean that many schools are facing a whole host of challenging circumstances. Weaknesses in due diligence at the point of sponsorship or conversion and the rapidity of the Trust's expansion has left trustees and trust leaders with a mountain to climb. This unacceptable situation has been compounded by difficulties in leadership recruitment and a constant churn in school staff, especially at senior leadership level, in some of the schools.

- The exceedingly high caseload of personnel issues that continue to tax human resources officers indicates the extent of underperformance. While these issues are being tackled more vigorously, and in earnest, they are both costly and timely, and result in a constant turnaround in school leadership.
- Trustees have been too slow in taking decisive action to secure effective school leadership from the start. They have allowed weak performance to go on for too long. This has impeded development at school level. School leaders have introduced new procedures for teaching and learning only for them to change again when a different leader picks up the reins. This stuttering approach explains why some schools are still struggling to secure the basic building blocks for pupils' learning.
- Local intelligence and feedback from achievement partners are used well to categorise each school according to need. Input from finance and human resources officers strengthens the process further. This information gives an additional insight into the challenges facing each school. Consequently, the risk register shared with inspectors is realistic and honest. It reflects recent Ofsted judgements and unveils the scale of support required by many of the schools.
- The school improvement strategy fails to deliver because it does not have enough impact on the ground. Ultimately, there is no trust-wide systematic approach to tackling common weaknesses in leadership, teaching and achievement underpinning the work of trust officers. Consequently, actions to bring about improvement are reactive and focused on short-term solutions. Too much time is taken up 'fire-fighting' in individual schools.
- Trust leaders do not use the information they have about schools well enough to implement over-arching strategies for improvement. They fail to provide clear direction to principals and governors about teaching and learning.
- The effectiveness of the work of achievement partners, who act as the main link between schools and trust leaders, has been too patchy over time. A lack of insight and precision has led to over-generous views of the strengths and weaknesses in different schools. A review of achievement partners' work, completed last year, has led to some positive improvements in the quality of information provided to principals, governors and trust leaders. Nonetheless, the systems to quality-assure the impact of achievement partners continue to lack rigour. In some schools, too much weight is placed on achievement partners improving the quality of teaching and learning, due to the absence of a trust-wide approach.
- Recent actions to gain a better understanding of each school are beginning to bear fruit. In response to the poor outcomes in mathematics at the end of key stage 4, trustees have commissioned comprehensive reviews of mathematics departments in each secondary school. This has provided trustees, trust leaders and principals with a forensic and diagnostic picture of the quality of provision. The hard-hitting findings have given leaders a better understanding of how entrenched and common the weaknesses are across the board. This has already led to some immediate changes in individual schools.

- Similarly, the new whole-school reviews, also commissioned from external consultants, are enabling everyone to gain a clear sense of common weaknesses, which is beginning to shape a more holistic response from the centre.
- Trust leaders, especially the directors of primary and secondary schools, are visible in each setting, and their support and challenge are rated highly by school principals. However, their work is typically completed on a case-by-case basis to fix short-term problems. A long-term strategy, based on clear evidence of impact, is the missing link in this approach.
- Leaders have given too little time to evaluating the quality of the additional support they broker and commission across all of the Trust's schools. This makes it hard for them to decide what is worth using again and for trustees to hold directors to account for their work.
- Trust leaders have been successful in making sure all vacancies at leadership level are filled. Trust leaders are making the most of those leaders in good or better schools, deploying them as executive headteachers to support, coach and mentor new senior leaders to secure stability.
- Greater use is being made of the newly designated teaching schools to ensure a framework for growing leaders for the future. This is indicative of the Trust's commitment to developing staff who work within NET schools to build internal capacity. Specialist leaders of education are beginning to be deployed more frequently to support teaching and learning in different age phases.
- Positive relationships are being forged with local initial teacher education providers to help meet the demand for teachers in the region, especially in shortage subject areas. For example, there are no mathematics departments that are understaffed across the whole trust.
- Opportunities for collaborative learning for teachers are in place and are developing over time. Training events and conferences are valued by school leaders at all levels. The support for newly qualified teachers is helping them to settle quickly and begin to make a difference in their schools.
- Good communication, high levels of pastoral care and frequent opportunities for school leaders to meet as a unit explain the overwhelmingly positive views of principals and chairs of governors. Despite the wide geographical nature of the Trust, principals talk of the NET family as a close-knit partnership where all are prepared to ask for and accept support.
- There are instances of rapid improvement in a few schools. One secondary school made the move to good at their recent inspection. This success was, in part, due to the close, sustained and directive support from another school within the Trust. This long-term relationship bore fruit, but at present trust leaders are unable to replicate this model more widely because of limited capacity in other schools.
- The scheme of delegation is uncomplicated and understood well among principals and governors. The role of local governing bodies is clear within this document.

Local governance is an area where NET leaders' work is showing early signs of success. Nonetheless, not all governing bodies are ensuring that they fulfil their statutory duty to publish information, as outlined in the funding agreement, on the schools' websites.

- Minutes from local governing body meetings indicate improved rigour. They are sharper, more specific and honest, demonstrating that governors are becoming better equipped to hold school leaders to account. The structures and procedures for stronger local governance are now in place. However, in most schools these improvements in governance are still relatively new and have not made enough difference in raising pupils' achievement.

Safeguarding

- The Trust provides effective support and training to ensure that the recent developments in safeguarding are communicated to leaders across the Trust. This takes the form of regular briefings and updates. However, the Trust does not routinely check that school leaders act on the briefings they receive. For example, a number of schools' websites were not up to date with regards to their safeguarding policies.
- Trustees have ensured that there is a designated senior lead within each of the schools. Where there is a shortage of training places locally, the Trust has acted expediently and sourced professional support from organisations that are recognised as credible trainers.
- The Trust has secured the services of a serious incident coordinator who provides swift and appropriate support to complement that already provided by the Trust and local agencies.
- Trustees and trust leaders have commissioned annual reviews of safeguarding practices which are thorough and consider the effectiveness of policies being put into practice. While these reviews are broad in their scope and cover most aspects of safeguarding, insufficient focus is placed on how poor attendance and high persistent absenteeism relate to safeguarding.
- Trust leaders recognise that while safeguarding is carried out within each of the schools and within the local context, insufficient records are kept centrally to ensure that the information trust leaders require is at their fingertips. For example, trust leaders were confident that all staff had received training across the schools, but were unable to provide an overview of the training logs, including the dates training was delivered, who attended and who delivered the sessions.

Recommendations

- As a matter of urgency, the Trust should establish an effective strategy to bring about sustainable school improvement so that:

- endemic weaknesses are tackled swiftly to enable a greater proportion of pupils to flourish in good or better schools
- pupils make better progress and reach the standards they should for their age and capabilities by the end of each key stage.
- Ensure trustees relentlessly champion the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, including those who are the most able, by insisting, and then checking, that additional funding is making a positive difference to pupils' academic outcomes and attendance.
- Ensure that the achievement of the most able pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities receives close attention at trust level to enable these pupils to achieve as well as they should.
- Vigorously tackle poor pupil attendance, especially in the primary phase, and reduce the high levels of persistent absence.
- Introduce systematic and rigorous procedures for quality-assuring all aspects of support and challenge provided to schools, whether internally sourced or externally commissioned.
- Review the trustees' business plan to ensure that it is based on an accurate and realistic understanding of the challenges currently facing schools.
- Ensure that schools respond quickly to directives regarding website compliance and safeguarding.

Yours sincerely

Joanne Olsson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex: Schools that are part of the Northern Education Trust

Schools inspected as part of the focused review – section 5 full inspection

| School name | Region | Local authority area | Opening date as an academy | Previous inspection judgement | Inspection grade in December 2016 |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| Merlin Top Primary Academy | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Bradford | 1 April 2013 | March 2015 Requires improvement | Requires improvement |
| Mount Pellon Primary Academy | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Calderdale | 1 April 2013 | March 2015 Requires improvement | Inadequate: serious weaknesses |
| Norton Primary Academy | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Stockton-on-Tees | 1 January 2014 | Not previously inspected (predecessor school: requires improvement) | Requires improvement |
| Southmere Primary Academy | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Bradford | 1 September 2014 | Not previously inspected (predecessor school: good) | Inadequate: special measures |
| The Grangefield Academy | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Stockton-on-Tees | 1 January 2014 | Not previously inspected (predecessor school: inadequate, special measures) | Good |
| Thomas Hepburn Community Academy | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Gateshead | 1 October 2013 | Not previously inspected (predecessor school: inadequate, special measures) | Inadequate: serious weaknesses |
| Thorp Academy | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Gateshead | 1 September 2014 | Not previously inspected (predecessor school: inadequate, special measures) | Requires improvement |

Schools inspected as part of the focused review – section 8 no formal designation inspection

| School name | Region | Local authority area | Opening date as an academy | Previous inspection judgement | Inspection grade in December 2016 |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Ryecroft Primary Academy | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Bradford | 1 September 2012 | April 2014 Outstanding | Inadequate: special measures |

Schools inspected as part of the focused review – section 8 requires improvement monitoring visit

| School name | Region | Local authority area | Opening date as an academy | Previous inspection judgement | Inspection grade in December 2016 |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| North Shore Academy | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Stockton-on-Tees | 1 September 2012 | March 2016 Requires improvement | Requires improvement monitoring visit Ineffective action |

Schools that were part of the focused telephone calls on 30 November and 1 December 2016

| School name | Region | Local authority area | Opening date as an academy | Previous inspection judgement | Most recent inspection grade and date |
|--|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| Abbey Park | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Calderdale | 1 December 2013 | Not previously inspected (predecessor school: inadequate) | June 2015 Requires improvement |
| Dyke House Sports and Technology College | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Hartlepool | 1 April 2013 | Not previously inspected (predecessor school: outstanding) | October 2015 Good |
| Hilton Primary Academy | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Newcastle-upon-Tyne | 1 September 2012 | Not previously inspected | June 2014 Outstanding |

| School name | Region | Local authority area | Opening date as an academy | Previous inspection judgement | Most recent inspection grade and date |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| | | | | (predecessor school: requires improvement) | |
| Manor Community Academy | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Hartlepool | 1 March 2015 | Not previously inspected (predecessor school: inadequate) | Not inspected |
| Red House Academy | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Sunderland | 1 September 2009 | January 2014 Requires improvement | April 2016 Requires improvement |
| The Blyth Academy | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Northumberland | 1 October 2013 | Not previously inspected (predecessor school: inadequate) | June 2015 Requires improvement |
| The Ferns Primary Academy | North West | Bolton | 1 September 2012 | May 2014 Requires improvement | June 2016 Good |
| The Oak Tree | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Stockton-on-Tees | 1 September 2013 | Not previously inspected (predecessor school: inadequate) | June 2015 Requires improvement |

Schools that are part of the trust and were not involved in the focused inspections and or the telephone calls

| School name | Region | Local authority area | Opening date as an academy | Previous inspection judgement | Most recent inspection grade and date |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Frederick Natrass Primary Academy | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Stockton-on-Tees | 1 September 2013 | Not previously inspected (predecessor school: good) | May 2016 Good |
| Kearsley Academy | North West | Bolton | 1 September 2012 | May 2013 Requires improvement | May 2015 Good |

| School name | Region | Local authority area | Opening date as an academy | Previous inspection judgement | Most recent inspection grade and date |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Kirk Balk Academy | North East, Yorkshire and Humber | Barnsley | 1 March 2015 | Not previously inspected (predecessor school: requires improvement) | Not inspected |