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Dear Dr Smith

Summary evaluation of University of Brighton Academies Trust

Following the summary evaluation of University of Brighton Academies Trust (UoBAT or 'the trust') in June 2019, when I was accompanied by Matthew Haynes, Senior Her Majesty's Inspector, and Sarah Hubbard, Her Majesty's Inspector, 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 stage two visit to the trust on 17–20 June 2019. Please pass on our thanks to your staff and other stakeholders who kindly gave up their time to meet us.

The findings from the summary evaluation and a wider consideration of the trust's overall performance are set out below.

Summary of main findings

- UoBAT trustees and the executive team are determined to improve pupils' life chances through providing high-quality education for all of the pupils in their schools. They maintain a sharp and unerring focus on school improvement, ensuring that the trust's central values of 'excellence, innovation and integrity' are at the heart of their strategic decision making.
- The chief executive officer (CEO) and his executive team are highly regarded throughout the trust. They have systematically made sure that the central services provided by the trust are highly efficient so that leaders can

focus on educating pupils. They have, therefore, been instrumental in improving the education of the pupils.

- The trust's strategic plans are rightly focused on improving the quality of pupils' educational experiences and outcomes. These include refining further the work of the central team. This work will benefit from: even stronger central checks on the quality and effectiveness of activities intended to improve schools; and ensuring a broader range of stakeholders are involved in developing and evaluating trust improvement plans.
- Ofsted reports from the schools inspected during stage one of this summary evaluation praised the trust's work in supporting schools to improve. Inspectors typically found that strong leadership led to a culture of high aspirations, in which dedicated staff used a range of effective approaches to ensure pupils' welfare and safety.
- Inspectors also highlighted some areas where the trust could do better, including improving pupils' attendance and reducing exclusions in some schools. Importantly, inspection reports emphasised the need to raise the attainment and progress of disadvantaged pupils.
- Leaders have ensured that effective systems are in place to facilitate collaboration and cooperation between the trust's schools. This supports school leaders in their day-to-day work, especially if they are new to their roles. Further collaboration, including with the trust's university sponsor, is planned to support schools in improving the quality of the key stage 3 curriculum and the curriculum for non-core subjects in key stage 2.
- School leaders feel strongly accountable. They value highly the autonomy they are given to decide how best to educate the pupils in their schools. They also appreciate that autonomy is earned and not a given. Where outcomes are lower, the executive team is more directive about next steps. All schools really value the support and challenge provided by the trust.
- The trust prioritises staff well-being and training. This helps to improve the quality of teaching, increases staff retention, supports succession planning and adds capacity to the trust as a whole.
- The trust is sharply focused on reducing levels of pupil absence and rates of exclusion in its schools. Its work is starting to make a positive difference.
- The trust has altered local governance arrangements to improve consistency across the trust. Local boards play a useful role in supporting school leaders, monitoring behaviour and safeguarding, and maintaining strong links with local communities. Further clarity about the role of local boards will help to maximise their impact.
- Pupils' outcomes are just above the national average in the early years and in phonics, as a result of the trust's focus on improving early reading and enhancing pupils' vocabularies. Pupils' attainment by the end of key stage 1

has risen over time to be above average in reading, writing and mathematics. Although rising over time, pupils' progress and attainment at key stage 2 are below average.

- At key stage 4, outcomes are above average in one of the trust's three schools, but below average in the other two. There are some signs of improvement, for example in the proportion of disadvantaged pupils achieving both English and mathematics to grade 4 and grade 5 at GCSE.
- Across the trust, disadvantaged pupils do not achieve as highly as other pupils nationally.

Range of evidence

For stage one of the summary evaluation, inspections of four academies took place between 11 September 2018 and 1 May 2019. All of these inspections were carried out under either sections 5 or 8 of the Education Act 2005 (the Act), as amended.

The inspection outcomes were as follows:

- The section 5 inspection of The Baird Primary Academy resulted in the school being judged as good. This school had previously been judged to be inadequate.
- The section 5 inspection of The Burgess Hill Academy resulted in the school being judged as good. The predecessor school had previously been judged to require improvement.
- The section 5 inspection of Blackthorns Community Primary Academy was judged to be outstanding. The predecessor school's judgement was good.
- The section 8 short inspection of Lindfield Primary Academy found that the school is at least good and may potentially be outstanding. Its next inspection will be a section 5 inspection.

During stage two of the summary evaluation, inspectors visited seven schools, typically meeting with the principal, representatives of the local board and a small group of middle leaders in each one. Telephone discussions or face-to-face meetings were held with the principals of a further eight academies in the trust, so that the principals of all UoBAT academies contributed their views during stage two of the evaluation. During the on-site visit to the trust, discussions were held with senior and operational staff. In addition, I met with trustees, including the chair and vice-chair. A range of relevant documentation was also scrutinised, including strategic plans, pupils' achievement information, information about partnership working, the scheme of delegation, minutes of meetings, and safeguarding information.

Context

UoBAT consists of 15 schools spread across East Sussex and West Sussex. Of these, three are secondary schools, 10 are primary schools and two are infant schools. The three secondary schools and two of the primary schools are sponsor-led academies. All the rest are academy converters.

The current trust, UoBAT, was established in 2017 following the merger of two predecessor trusts:

- Hastings Academies Trust, comprised of nine academies in Hastings and St Leonards
- University of Brighton Academies Trust, comprised of six academies in West Sussex.

The Hastings Academies Trust was established in 2010. The Hastings Academy and The St Leonards Academy were the first to join in September 2011. These two schools were formed from three previous secondary schools. A primary and an infant school joined this trust in 2013, a further four primary schools joined in 2014 and one in 2015.

The University of Brighton Academies Trust was launched in 2014, with three primary schools and one infant school joining in 2015. The Burgess Hill Academy joined this trust in 2016 as a secondary sponsored-led academy and a further primary school joined in 2017.

The merged trust, UoBAT, is now responsible for the education of the approximately 7,600 pupils. The primary/infant schools vary in size from around 180 pupils in Dudley Infant Academy to around 620 pupils in Silverdale Primary Academy. The secondary schools vary in size from around 780 pupils in The Burgess Hill Academy to around 1,420 pupils in The St Leonards Academy.

The trust is sponsored by the University of Brighton. Several trustees and members hold positions with the university, including the chair of the board of trustees, who is deputy vice chancellor of the university, and the CEO, who is head of the university's school of education and initial teacher training provision.

The trust executive team consists of the CEO, the executive director of school improvement, the executive director of finance, and the executive director of planning, policy and governance. The trust manages most of its human resources and estates functions internally, but also receives advice through external specialist providers. The trust also employs a team of advisers known as 'challenge partners' who contribute to school improvement work across the schools.

The trust members are responsible for determining the purpose of the trust and the way it is governed. The board of trustees is responsible for determining the strategic direction of the trust, along with its vision, financial performance and the educational

standards achieved by pupils in its schools. They organise their work through a series of specialist committees. These are: education and standards; finance and resources; risk and audit; and remuneration and human resources. Each committee is chaired by a trustee and made up of further trustees, external expertise and members of local boards.

The trust has reorganised its scheme of delegation as a result of the previous two trusts merging together. Local boards' delegated powers include maintaining community links and monitoring pupils' safeguarding, behaviour and attendance. The chairs of each local board form the 'chairs forum', which is also a committee of the board of trustees. This committee allows for an additional channel of communication between schools and trustees.

Principals contribute to the strategic work of the trust through regular senior management team (SMT) meetings. These are attended by all principals, heads of professional services and the trust executive team.

The trust includes two teaching schools, based at Pound Hill Infant Academy and Robsack Wood Primary Academy, which are both outstanding schools. Robsack Wood also runs school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT).

Across the trust, approximately one third of pupils are disadvantaged, which is above the national average. Several trust schools have very high levels of deprivation compared to the national average. This includes schools in Hastings and St Leonards, which was designated as an 'opportunity area' by the Department of Education in 2017.

A below-average proportion of pupils are from minority ethnic groups or speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is broadly average. Five schools in the trust have a specialist unit for pupils with SEND.

Pupils' performance information

- Trust-wide trends are not necessarily reflective of all individual schools because some schools have small numbers of pupils. The secondary school performance information includes just three schools.
- In 2017 and 2018, published results showed that approximately three quarters of children in the early years achieved a good level of development, which is just above the national average. Nearly two thirds of pupils eligible for free school meals achieved a good level of development, which is below that of others nationally.
- In 2018, the proportion of Year 1 pupils reaching the expected standard in the phonics screening check rose to be just above the national average. Over time, a similar proportion of children to the national average achieved the standard of the phonics screening check by the end of Year 2.

- By the end of key stage 1, an above-average proportion of pupils reached the expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics in 2018. This was an improvement on the previous year. The proportion of pupils attaining the greater depth standards was broadly average, with reading the strongest subject in both 2017 and 2018, and improvements evident in writing and mathematics in 2018. A smaller proportion of disadvantaged pupils achieved these standards than other pupils nationally.
- At key stage 2, below average proportions of pupils attained the expected and higher standard in reading, writing and mathematics, including disadvantaged pupils. Pupils' progress in these subjects remains below average. However, pupils' progress and attainment have risen overall since 2016, especially in reading.
- By the end of key stage 4 in 2018, pupils at The Burgess Hill Academy achieved above-average outcomes. This demonstrates an improvement over time for this school. However, pupils at The St Leonards Academy and The Hastings Academy achieved below the government's national headline figures. Over time, disadvantaged pupils in all three schools achieved outcomes well below the national average.
- Across the trust, an above-average proportion of pupils are persistently absent, particularly pupils eligible for free school meals.
- The proportion of pupils who are permanently excluded is broadly in line with the national average. However, the proportion who receive one or more fixed-term exclusion is well above average. Exclusion rates for disadvantaged pupils are similarly high.

Inspection outcomes

Currently, the inspection outcomes for the trust's academies, including the most recent focused inspections, are as follows:

- 14 of the 15 schools in the trust were judged as good or outstanding at their most recent inspections and one was judged as requires improvement.
- The trust has five sponsored schools, of which one was good and three required improvement before joining the trust. The fifth school joined the trust having amalgamated from two schools that were previously judged as satisfactory. All of these schools were judged to be good at their most recent inspection.
- Of the other seven schools inspected since joining the trust, two have improved from requires improvement to good, and one has improved from good to outstanding. One school has declined from good to requires improvement. Two schools have remained good, and a further good school was judged to be potentially improving and will receive a full section 5 inspection as its next inspection.

- Three schools have not been inspected since joining the trust. Of these, two are exempt from inspection because they were judged to be outstanding at their last inspection. The remaining school awaiting its first inspection since joining the trust was judged to be good at its most recent inspection.

Main findings

- Since the predecessor trusts merged in 2017, the trust's central values of 'excellence, innovation and integrity' have formed the backbone of its work in establishing itself as one entity. Importantly, each school articulates these values in a way that allows it to retain its individual identity, while ensuring a collegiate culture across the trust.
- Several schools taken on by the trust have histories of low standards and limited aspirations for their pupils. Trustees, the CEO and the executive team are dedicated to increasing pupils' capability to contribute fully to society through providing high-quality education and by raising pupils' aspirations. They set out to do this through a sharp focus on improving trust schools, including through utilising the resources of the trust's sponsor. Leaders articulate a strong moral vision that the university's expertise in education should be used to benefit pupils in the locality.
- The trust board is very effective at a strategic level. It has rightly streamlined the work of the central team, prioritising financial efficiency so that as much resource as possible is devoted to improving the schools. Well-organised committees, led by qualified and capable trustees, inform the work of the main trust board. Additionally, trustees and committee members visit schools regularly to see for themselves the impact of their actions. As a result, trustees have a full and accurate understanding of the strengths and relative weaknesses of the trust's work and of its schools.
- Trustees are constantly seeking to improve their strategic work so that it best meets the needs of the pupils in trust schools. Currently, trustees are considering ways to include a wider variety of stakeholders more fully in refining the trust's values and in developing and evaluating the strategic plan for school improvement.
- Trustees have employed a highly credible executive team to do the operational work of the trust. The executive team is universally valued by leaders and teachers across all levels of the trust. They cite the team's knowledge, extensive support and visibility as being particularly helpful.
- Members of the executive team have been effective in improving the efficiency of the trust's systems. Their expertise in education ensures that they focus on the right issues to help schools to improve; for example, they have ensured that schools embed effective assessment approaches. This team has been crucial in providing trustees with accurate evaluations of school performance and in creating the community ethos that encompasses the trust. One principal expressed the views of many by saying: 'They've made us all feel part of one family.'

- School leaders appreciate being able to access centralised services for back-office functions such as finance, health and safety, estates management and human resources. This work is valued for being professional, well organised and provided in a timely manner. Leaders can also access and adapt a central bank of school policies, such as for safeguarding, which provides them with reassurance that they are fulfilling their statutory requirements. As a result, school leaders report that they are able to devote more time and money to school improvement than if they had sole responsibility for dealing with these aspects of school management.
- The trust has identified accurately the barriers preventing some pupils from being successful in their learning. Trustees have made key appointments to the central team to address these issues. For example, the trust's attendance manager provides excellent advice and training to school-based attendance officers in how to reduce pupils' persistent absence. Her hands-on approach has already started to make a significant difference in improving pupils' attendance in some schools. Further central appointments are planned to tackle other trust-wide issues, such as a behaviour manager to support schools in reducing rates of exclusion.
- Through a trust-wide strategy, staff recruitment, well-being and training are strongly prioritised. All school leaders have access to professional recruitment and retention advice through human resources advisers, and work to streamline appraisal, performance management and salary progression is underway. Staff in schools recognise that the trust considers their well-being, for example in exploring how to reduce teacher workload and by providing staff with access to counselling services.
- A strong approach to succession planning has been established. The trust provides nationally accredited training in educational leadership for middle and senior leaders, and staff are able to access masters-level study through the University of Brighton. Leadership secondments between schools and involvement in cross-school projects are also available to allow staff to develop their careers. As a result of these combined initiatives, the trust is able to recruit and retain well-qualified staff to leadership positions within the trust.
- Chairs of local boards feel that they are part of an interconnected team, in particular through being able to raise and discuss issues of interest through regular 'chairs forum' committee meetings. Their role in ensuring strong community links and in monitoring pupils' behaviour, welfare and safeguarding is well regarded by trustees and school leaders. However, some local board chairs are not clear enough about how the work they do at a local level feeds into the central and strategic work of the trust. Some expressed the opinion that they are more closely involved in the oversight of improvements than the scheme of delegation sets out. They feel that this enables them to support the work of school leaders more meaningfully. Further refinements to quality assurance processes and to the scheme of delegation will be helpful in order to clarify local board roles to maximise their impact. Trustees recognise this.

- School improvement is at the heart of the work of the trust. The school improvement team maintains very close contact with schools and knows its schools extremely well. The team coordinates effectively the many layers of activities to improve schools and has consequently been instrumental in the improvements schools have made in recent years. Consequently, virtually all schools have been judged as at least good at their most recent inspection. Rightly, trust leaders view raising pupils' attainment and progress further, particularly for pupils in key stages 2 and 4 and for disadvantaged pupils, as a priority.
- The trust has been instrumental in supporting schools to utilise the resources of the Hastings Opportunity Area, a Department for Education initiative that is focused on improving the education of pupils in the Hastings area. This includes work to improve pupils' attendance, behaviour and academic achievement. Impact of the trust's work can already be seen in the raised outcomes for reading in the early years and at key stage 1. Leaders have rightly identified that sustaining and developing improvements in early reading are key to improving the life chances of pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils.
- Schools receive six annual visits from well-qualified education advisers known as 'challenge partners'. These visits play an integral part in helping the trust to identify areas for improvement, set school-specific targets and source necessary additional support. Although there is some checking of the impact of previous initiatives, each visit tends to focus on a different aspect of school improvement. The process would be further strengthened with more quality assurance and moderation to ensure that improvement points are followed up thoroughly throughout the year. School leaders value the challenge partner process, which they feel is helping them to improve their schools.
- Principals feel very responsible for their schools. They maintain a sharp focus on the quality of teaching and on school improvement, and feel both firmly held to account and supported effectively by the CEO and executive team. Principals value the trust-wide policy of 'earned autonomy', whereby school leaders are able to make decisions about the school's curriculum and the actions they take to improve their school, so long as they can demonstrate a positive impact. Principals appreciate strongly that the trust will step in quickly and intervene should standards appear to be in danger of decline or in need of significant improvement. Leaders and teachers from schools that have recently improved their inspection outcomes spoke enthusiastically about the range of support they were able to access through the trust, which led directly to the improvements seen in their schools.
- School leaders value the networks that they have established between trust schools. Regular senior management team meetings, breakfast meetings and visits to each other's schools allow principals to contribute to trust-wide strategy, keep up-to-date with initiatives and to access both formal and informal support from each other. New principals feel especially well supported by their colleagues and the trust as a whole. In particular, they

appreciate the calendar of activities, which gives them reassurance that 'nothing will be missed' as they embark on their new roles.

- There are some useful opportunities for teachers and middle leaders to collaborate with each other across schools. For example, cross-moderation of pupils' work has helped schools to have confidence in the accuracy of their assessments of pupils' work in key stages 1 and 2. Some initial work has been undertaken to develop the curriculum, specifically in core subjects at primary level and in key stage 3 at secondary level.
- Leaders have plans for further collaborative work between middle leaders, particularly at key stage 2. In particular, the trust plans to better utilise expertise from the university by accessing useful training for middle leaders in research skills. The trust also plans to use the subject-specific expertise of staff within the school of education to help its work in identifying a set of collective indicators of what makes for an effective curriculum. The aim of this work is to provide teachers with the tools to be able to make insightful choices when choosing the curriculum to best meet the different needs of pupils.

Safeguarding

The trust places a high priority on safeguarding. There is a nominated trustee linked to safeguarding who keeps trustees well informed of safeguarding throughout the trust. Published Ofsted inspection reports show that safeguarding and child protection arrangements are effective in trust schools. Particular reference is made to schools having a strong understanding of the community that they serve and making sure that staff are well trained and vigilant.

The trust has a multi-layered approach to ensuring that pupils are safe. Thorough monitoring of safeguarding procedures and practice is provided by visits from local boards, challenge partners, and executive team members, including in checking the single central record and in ensuring safer-recruitment procedures are followed. School leaders access common policies and protocols, which they are required to adapt to the specific context of their school. These are checked centrally for compliance. Principals also carry out an annual self-audit and visit each other's schools to peer-review their safeguarding work.

Principals feel very well supported by the trust in their responsibility to keep children safe. The executive team scrutinises all monitoring activities, acting promptly to support leaders in making any necessary improvements to their practice. The trust organises appropriate training for designated safeguarding leads, as well as support for whole-staff training in safeguarding. The central trust team act quickly to support safeguarding leads in dealing with any specific complex safeguarding or child protection cases. A recent appointment of a trust-wide safeguarding manager will further support the work of the trust in keeping children safe.

Recommendations

- Continue to improve pupils' progress at key stages 2 and 4, including disadvantaged pupils.
- Further utilise stakeholder expertise within the trust, including by:
 - ensuring that a wider range of stakeholders are involved in developing and evaluating the trust strategic school improvement plan
 - refining the scheme of delegation to further clarify the role of local boards to maximise their impact.
- Strengthen practices intended to improve schools so that they are even more effective by:
 - refining the challenge partner process through stronger central moderation, ensuring improvement points are followed up thoroughly and routinely
 - further utilising subject-specific expertise within the trust and through its university sponsor when developing the quality of each school's individual curriculum and the trust's overall curricular thinking.

Yours sincerely

Catherine Old
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex: Academies that are part of the trust

URN	School name	Date joined Trust	Ofsted Phase	Latest inspection date	Overall effectiveness
141263	Robsack Wood Primary Academy	01/09/2014	Primary	04/03/2010	Outstanding
142290	Pound Hill Infant Academy	01/09/2015	Primary	16/07/2014	Outstanding
141892	Blackthorns Community Primary Academy	01/04/2015	Primary	19/09/2018	Outstanding
143973	Desmond Anderson Primary Academy	01/02/2017	Primary	30/11/2012	Good
140179	West St Leonards Primary Academy	01/11/2013	Primary	19/10/2016	Good
141262	Hollington Primary Academy	01/09/2014	Primary	27/04/2017 (s8 short)	Good
141261	Churchwood Primary Academy	01/09/2014	Primary	28/06/2017	Good
141906	Holmbush Primary Academy	01/04/2014	Primary	17/01/2018	Good
141713	Silverdale Primary Academy	01/02/2015	Primary	21/03/2018	Good
142291	Lindfield Primary Academy	01/09/2015	Primary	11/09/2018 (s8 short)	Good
140493	The Baird Primary Academy	01/01/2014	Primary	17/01/2019	Good
140311	Dudley Infant Academy	01/11/2013	Primary	15/03/2017	Requires Improvement
136400	The St Leonards Academy	01/09/2011	Secondary	25/01/2017 (s8 short)	Good
136401	The Hastings Academy	01/09/2011	Secondary	31/01/2018	Good
142089	The Burgess Hill Academy	01/09/2016	Secondary	02/05/2019	Good