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Dear Mr Greenway

Summary evaluation of The Elliot Foundation Academies Trust

Following the summary evaluation of The Elliot Foundation Academies Trust ('the trust') in June 2019, 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 24 to 28 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

- The trust's ethos, vision and values are well understood. They inform the work of all of the trust's schools, and that of the central team. Leaders share your conviction that a school's context should not be used as an excuse for poor attainment on the part of pupils.
- Leaders' high expectations have helped to promote significant and rapid improvement in the quality of education in most of the trust's schools, including many that had a previous history of being less than good.

- School leaders value the trust's commitment to ensuring that individual schools retain their distinct characteristics, a high level of autonomy, and the ability to innovate. This approach typically enables schools to meet the needs of the communities they serve effectively. It has been a factor in many schools' decision to join the trust.
- One leader, echoing others, spoke of the 'open, responsive and sometimes inspirational' nature of their engagement with the trust's senior staff. School leaders value the influence they can have on the trust's development and direction, and describe a culture of 'reflection rather than recrimination' when things go wrong.
- Since its formation in 2011, the trust has pursued a measured approach to growth. Over time, the work to establish schools' strengths and weaknesses at the time that they join the trust has become increasingly forensic. This enables both trust and school leaders to set appropriate priorities for improvement.
- The trust has helped to increase the effectiveness of leadership and management within its schools. Underperformance is typically tackled quickly and effectively. Most Ofsted reports indicate that leadership has improved since schools have joined the trust and that it is at least good.
- Regular checks on each school's performance ensure that the trust's central team know their schools well. Much information is gathered about the progress that pupils are making, and this is used to target timely improvements when these are needed. However, despite these checks and balances, on occasion the trust's response has been too slow when standards have been low.
- School leaders value the help that the trust provides to improve provision; a high proportion of Ofsted reports note the positive difference that the trust's support and challenge have made.
- Leaders and staff readily share ideas and resources with each other. The trust's systems ensure that effective practice is identified and disseminated quickly both within, and increasingly across, the three regions within which schools are grouped. This work is developing the capacity of schools to support each other's improvement on a continuous and self-sustaining basis.
- Staff benefit from high-quality and well-targeted professional development opportunities. These enable individuals to take on new leadership responsibilities with confidence, or to increase the effectiveness with which they support pupils in their learning.
- Pupils' achievement across all performance measures in many schools demonstrates an improving trend over time. This is particularly true in respect of pupils' attainment in the national tests at the end of key stage 2. Over time, disadvantaged pupils' attainment at key stage 2 has increased markedly. The difference between their attainment and that of others nationally has reduced.

In 2018, the proportion achieving the expected standard in each of reading, writing and mathematics was close to that for all pupils nationally.

- In 2018, too few key stage 2 pupils, particularly boys, made sufficient progress in writing. The trust has prioritised efforts to address this, but it is too soon to determine the impact of this work.
- The trust has concentrated much of its work on supporting schools to increase the proportion of pupils who achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics. However, many pupils who are capable of being high achievers are not realising their potential.
- The trust works hard to ensure that all pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, enjoy a wide range of life experiences. Evidence from inspections indicates that pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted well.
- To date, the trust's curriculum development work has predominantly focused on English and mathematics. Work on developing the wider curriculum and sharing expertise in the foundation subjects is less well advanced.
- Overall, pupils' attendance is in line with the national average. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils who are persistently absent, though falling, remains too high. The trust has been successful in reducing the incidence of repeated fixed-term exclusion. The trust's oversight of safeguarding is effective.
- Trust leaders are rightly reviewing the ways in which local governing bodies (LGBs) work. In some cases, LGBs have been insufficiently effective in their work to support and challenge leaders.
- Recent appointments to the trust's central team have significantly strengthened its capacity to help leaders deal with issues relating to finance, governance, premises and staffing matters. This central capacity reduces the need for school leaders to spend time on activities not directly related to pupils' progress.
- The trust board has developed the necessary knowledge, capacity and experience to shape the organisation's development and strategic direction.

Range of evidence

- Eleven schools were inspected between January 2019 and May 2019. The outcomes of these and previous inspections were considered.
- The inspection outcomes were:
 - In the seven section 5 inspections, one school was judged to be outstanding, three schools were judged to be good, two were judged to

require improvement and one was deemed to be inadequate and require special measures.

- In the three section 8 inspections, all the schools remained good. One was judged to be improving.
- One outstanding school received a section 8 monitoring inspection and was judged to remain outstanding.

During the on-site visit to the trust, discussions were held with you and other senior and operational staff, together with a representative of the board of trustees. In addition, HMI visited nine schools and held telephone discussions with senior leaders and teaching staff representing a further eight schools. A range of relevant documentation was also scrutinised, including strategic plans, case studies from individual schools, information about pupils' achievement, behaviour and progress, minutes of meetings and safeguarding information.

Context

- The trust consists of 24 primary schools, two infant schools and two junior schools. These schools are located within three regional 'hubs', each of which is headed by a regional director. This regional tier of leadership is central to the school improvement work of the trust. Nine schools are located in London, 10 in East Anglia and nine in the West Midlands. Twelve schools are academy converters, six of which were judged to require improvement at the point of conversion. The remaining 16 are sponsor-led academies.
- The trust was initially established in 2012. It has gradually expanded over time, with four schools joining in 2012, nine in 2013, four in 2014, four in 2015, one in 2016 and five in 2017. The most recent school to join was Westwood Primary School in October 2018.
- The trust's primary schools vary in size, from below 50 pupils to over 800. Seventeen are larger than the average-sized primary school.
- Six schools were inadequate and 11 required improvement at the point at which they joined the trust. Of the remaining schools, nine were good and one was outstanding. One school, John Locke Academy, was opened by the trust as a new school in September 2014.
- The proportion of disadvantaged pupils in the trust is above that found nationally, as is the proportion who speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) with an education, health and care (EHC) plan is broadly in line with the national average.

- The trust board is made up of 10 trustees. There is a senior central team made up of nine full-time staff. Several members of this team have joined the trust over the past year. This team is responsible for the strategic and operational work of the trust. The trust also makes use of external agencies and consultants to support its schools.

Main findings

- Currently, the inspection outcomes for the trust's academies, including the most recent focused inspections, are as follows:
 - seven schools are judged to be outstanding
 - 11 schools are judged to be good
 - four schools are judged to require improvement
 - one school is judged to be inadequate
 - five schools are yet to be inspected since joining the trust. Of these, one of the predecessor schools was judged to be outstanding and is exempt from routine inspections, two were judged to be good, and two were judged to require improvement.
- The trust's strong collaborative ethos, together with its vision and values, are well understood and permeate the work of all of its schools. The trust's work is underpinned by a commitment that all pupils will leave primary school 'life ready' and 'secondary ready'. This commitment is passionately shared by leaders at all levels, many of whom expressed pride in being part of the trust, and spoke positively about working in partnership with others across it. One principal spoke for many in commenting that, 'We are one organisation; all of us are ultimately responsible for all of the pupils in the trust.'
- The trust is wholeheartedly inclusive and deliberately non-hierarchical. Trustees have, after a thorough process of due diligence, welcomed schools into the organisation that have, in many cases, had a history of not doing well enough by their pupils. Leaders of schools, most of which are in challenging circumstances, share trust leaders' conviction that a school's context is 'a challenge and not an excuse for underachievement'. The trust is determined to improve the well-being and achievement of vulnerable pupils, including those who are disadvantaged. It is increasingly effective in supporting schools to do so.
- School leaders value the fact that the trust's schools retain their own characters and the freedom 'to do what is right for our pupils'. This promotes innovation, and the trust has supported schools that have taken distinctive approaches to the wider curriculum. Trust leaders carefully manage the risks posed by innovation, and share that which is effective both within and across the three regional hubs. The words of one governor were typical of the sentiments expressed by other leaders: 'The trust gives us a chance to be

local, and to work with others nationally for the benefit of children and teachers.'

- You and your team model the reflective, open-minded approach you expect of others. Schools share their monitoring information with each other so that, as one leader commented, 'All can see where things are happening successfully, who to learn from, and who needs help.' Many make a significant contribution to the work of the trust, providing support that helps to promote improvement outside of their own schools. School leaders value their systematic involvement in discussing and setting trust values and priorities, planning for improvements and reviewing the effectiveness of the trust's work. They share the chief executive officer's desire for 'change with conviction and that is sustainable'. School leaders are effusive in their praise of regional directors' candour and expertise; they value, as one put it, their 'watchful, open and developmental' role. However, trust leaders are rightly reviewing the checks and balances in place so that, when necessary, they step in more swiftly when it is clear that the quality of education in a school is declining.
- You, trustees and senior trust staff have a detailed knowledge of your schools, together with their contexts, pupils and staff. With very few exceptions, school leaders consider the trust's improvement priorities to reflect local and regional imperatives. The trust, through 'progress partner' visits, regional director monitoring and annual reviews, checks schools' progress towards meeting these priorities. Expert guidance, training and support usually help schools to meet them. Where progress is too slow, the trust typically ensures that schools get access to the help that they need through the 'team around the academy' intensive support process. Trust leaders have, in response to feedback from headteachers, adjusted the format and focus of 'progress partner' visits. However, some school leaders told HMI that there remains too much inconsistency in the level of scrutiny and challenge that these visits provide.
- The trust has an impressive record in developing leadership capacity so that improvements that are made are sustainable. Only one in five schools joined the trust with leadership and management that was judged by Ofsted to be good. After subsequent inspections, 19 of the 23 schools with published reports indicate that the effectiveness of leadership and management is good or better. Fourteen have improved their 'overall effectiveness' judgement by at least one grade, and five by two grades or more. This has ensured that all schools have in place the right leadership foundations to improve further. School leaders have a clear understanding of the trust's priorities for improvement. Recent inspection reports have identified the trust's support as positive.
- Principals value the opportunities they have to determine regional priorities and direct school improvement funding in order to meet them. They also direct the work of a number of 'special interest groups', forums that are ensuring the rapid sharing of effective practice between regions, including safeguarding and

providing support for vulnerable pupils. The work of the trust's 'expert teachers' in providing training for others is particularly appreciated by school leaders and often has demonstrable and significant impact. However, this work – alongside other work to share effective practice regionally – is more embedded in the West Midlands hub than in London or East Anglia. 'Expert teachers' who are specialists in subjects other than English and mathematics have been selected, but have yet to start their work.

- Overall, the quality of training and development across the trust is a strength. Teachers, leaders and support staff are provided with a systematic programme of courses and high-quality opportunities which develop their skills well. Increasingly, this is promoting the retention of staff within the trust. Newly and recently qualified teachers spoke very positively about the long-term development of aspects of their expertise. A number of current school leaders started their teaching careers with the trust. They were able to discuss the ways in which their precisely focused professional development has helped them to seek and meet the challenges involved in senior leadership. Teaching assistants spoke equally appreciatively about the training that has helped them to support pupils' learning, personal development and mental health more effectively.
- Pupils' outcomes across most performance measures in many schools demonstrate an improving trend. The proportion of children across the trust achieving a good level of development was below the national average in 2018. However, this represented good progress given children's starting points when they join the schools. Evidence from inspection reports demonstrates that in almost all schools, provision in early years is good; in eight schools it is outstanding. Pupils' attainment in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of key stage 1 remains below that found nationally.
- The proportion of pupils who achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics in the key stage 2 national tests and assessments has improved markedly over recent years, and is now close to the national average. This reflects the trust's particular emphasis on driving forward improvements at key stage 2. Pupils' progress in writing is below average. The trust is rightly challenging and supporting schools to improve the progress pupils make in writing, for example through the boys' writing research project. While leaders report that this work is helping improve provision, it is too early to determine the extent to which it is achieving its aims.
- Overall, disadvantaged pupils are making good progress and achieving well. The difference between these pupils' key stage 2 outcomes and those of pupils nationally has reduced significantly. This reflects, in large part, your insistence that context is no excuse, and that each and every pupil will receive the help that they need to achieve highly. It is also a result of ongoing efforts to ensure that all pupils derive equal benefit from high-quality teaching. Disadvantaged pupils also profit to the same degree as other pupils from their immersion in

the rich and varied artistic, musical, cultural and sporting activities that take place within the trust's schools.

- Pupils who are capable of being high achievers are not realising their potential in many schools. To date, you have focused on supporting schools to improve the proportion of pupils who achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics in the key stage 2 national tests. You are rightly turning your attention to improving the progress of pupils who are capable of working at greater depth. However, this work is at an early stage and lacks the cohesion evident in other aspects of the trust's school improvement work.
- In keeping with the trust's emphasis on improving life chances for the most vulnerable pupils, schools typically provide well for pupils with SEND. The trust's monitoring information, together with Ofsted's findings, indicates that most pupils with SEND make good progress from their individual starting points. In some schools, specialist provision, including for pupils with autism spectrum disorder, is particularly effective. Regional SEND leads are being appointed, and the trust has plans to carry out detailed audits of SEND provision on a school-by-school basis from the beginning of the forthcoming academic year. Plans are also in place to appoint regional specialist support workers, such as educational psychologists, to supplement the work of external agencies.
- Evidence gathered during a number of inspections indicates weaknesses in curriculum planning within the foundation subjects. In schools where this is the case, this limits the extent to which pupils develop their knowledge and understanding within subjects other than English and mathematics. The trust's work to support schools' development of the wider curriculum, beyond that of English and mathematics, is not as well established as it should be. There is a lack of clarity on the part of leaders about the yardsticks that the trust uses to establish the quality of curriculum.
- Reflective of many schools' pressing priorities, much of the trust's improvement work, including the sharing of good practice, has centred on the core subjects of English and mathematics. The trust has not sufficiently utilised the teaching school and expert teacher programme to develop the wider curriculum. Recently, you and your team have set about correcting this imbalance and you have credible plans to do so. However, this work is not as advanced as it needs to be and remains a priority for the trust and many of its schools.
- Trust leaders have a detailed and up-to-date knowledge of pupils' attendance. Increasing attendance has been a key priority; in 2017, the proportion of pupils who were persistently absent was above the national average in over half of the trust's schools. The attendance of pupils across the trust is now in line with the national average. The proportion of pupils who are persistently absent is also in line with that found nationally. This reflects the successful

sharing of strategies to reduce absence. However, the proportion of disadvantaged pupils who are persistently absent remains too high. Work to share schools' effective techniques to rectify this is too recent to have the impact that leaders intend. During the current academic year, schools have worked well to reduce the incidence of fixed-term exclusion, with the support of the trust.

- The effectiveness of local governance is too uneven across schools in the trust. In some schools, this has limited the pace and extent of school improvement. Trust leaders have recently changed their scheme of delegation, which has clarified those responsibilities delegated to LGBs by the trustees. The recently appointed trust lead for governance is working well to support LGBs where it has been identified that the focus or extent of challenge to school leaders is not as it should be. Plans are in place to change the trust's governance model.
- As the trust has grown, there have been some 'bumps in the road' in ensuring that the central team delivers a high-quality service for its schools. However, there have been some strong improvements over time. Schools commented on a noticeable improvement and their 'new confidence in the finance team'. This is because you have increased the capacity of the central team so that aspects such as estates, finance, HR and governance are now provided for well. Comments from leaders include 'their [the trust's staff] belief in every child is paramount; when we talk to the central team, their focus is always on the children.'
- School leaders explained that the trust is mindful of its duty to manage leaders' and teachers' workload. Trust-led developments of its preferred marking and feedback policy, and the development of online sharing of teaching resources, is being well received. Many leaders explained how this is helping to reduce the unnecessary duplication of work on the part of teachers and subject leaders.

Safeguarding

- The trust provides effectively for pupils' safeguarding. Stringent audits, regular scrutiny, and timely, well-coordinated training by 'safeguarding ambassadors' and others ensure that processes and procedures are secure. Designated safeguarding leads meet periodically and share resources and strategies at the safeguarding special interest group, which is coordinated by them and attended by the trust's safeguarding lead. This leads to the rapid adoption of the best that is done across the trust to keep pupils safe. All schools follow the safer recruitment processes that are set out by the trust. Safeguarding has been found to be effective during every one of the Ofsted inspections of the trust's schools.

- All schools now record and report safeguarding concerns in a common way. The trust is using this information to support schools in their work to promote and sustain pupils' well-being. Designated safeguarding leads and other colleagues benefit from training that is designed to help them respond to the most common concerns that staff record. Very many staff have been trained in how to spot the signs that a pupil's mental health may be at risk, and how to get them the help that they need, for example. Schools are also using their monitoring information to plan so that the curriculum helps pupils understand risks and how to manage these before they are likely to encounter them.

Recommendations

- Improve the trust's work in supporting schools to develop the curriculum in subjects other than English and mathematics.
- Ensure that pupils who are capable of achieving highly realise their potential.
- Reduce further the proportion of disadvantaged pupils who are persistently absent from school.
- Continue to improve the effectiveness of local governing bodies, so that each holds leaders more rigorously to account for the quality of the school's curriculum.

Yours sincerely

Jason Howard
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex: Academies that are part of the trust

Trust schools inspected during Spring 2019 as part of stage 1 – section 5 inspections

School	Local Authority	Date opened as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Inspection grade 2019
Billesley Primary	Birmingham	November 2012	Good	Outstanding
Chandos Primary	Birmingham	February 2017	Predecessor school: requires improvement	Good
Claremont Primary	Barnet	March 2016	Predecessor school: requires improvement	Good
George Betts	Sandwell	July 2013	Good	Good
Nene Infant School	Cambridgeshire	October 2013	Good	Requires improvement
Pinkwell Primary	Hillingdon	April 2014	February 2017: requires improvement	Requires improvement
Ramnoth Junior School	Cambridgeshire	October 2013	Good	Inadequate

Trust schools inspected during Spring 2019 as part of stage 1 – section 8 short or monitoring inspections

School	Local Authority	Date opened as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Inspection grade 2019
Cavalry Primary	Cambridgeshire	March 2017	Predecessor school: good	Good
George Betts Primary	Sandwell	July 2013	January 2015: Good	Good
Parkfield Primary	Barnet	August 2013	July 2015	Good
Tiverton Academy	Birmingham	May 2013	April 2015: outstanding	Outstanding

Other Trust schools

School	Local Authority	Date opened as an academy	Previous inspection judgement	Most recent Inspection grade
Croft Academy	Walsall	September 2012	Requires improvement	Requires improvement
Elm Road Primary	Cambridgeshire	November 2015	Requires improvement	Good
Eyrescroft Primary	Peterborough	December 2015	Inadequate	Requires improvement
Greenside Primary	Hammersmith and Fulham	April 2015	Good	Good
Griffin Primary	Wandsworth	September 2017	Requires improvement	N/A
Highlees Primary	Peterborough	September 2013	Good	Good
Hillingdon Primary	Hillingdon	July 2014	Outstanding	Exempt from routine inspection
The Hyde Academy	Barnet	September 2013	Inadequate	Outstanding
John Locke Academy	Hillingdon	September 2014	Not applicable	Outstanding
King's Rise Academy	Birmingham	November 2012	Inadequate	Outstanding
Lena Gardens Primary	Hammersmith and Fulham	March 2014	Good	Good
Millfield Primary	Cambridgeshire	December 2015	Requires improvement	Good
Ramsey Junior School	Cambridgeshire	April 2017	Predecessor school: good	N/A
Ramsey Spinning Infant School	Cambridgeshire	April 2017	Predecessor school: good	N/A
Shirestone Academy	Birmingham	November 2012	Good	Outstanding
Shireland Hall Primary	Sandwell	July 2013	Good	Outstanding
Westwood Primary	Cambridgeshire	October 2018	Predecessor school: requires improvement	N/A
Woods Bank Academy	Walsall	February 2013	Requires improvement	Good