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31 January 2020

Mrs Helen O'Brien  
Chief Executive Officer (CEO)  
Wickersley Partnership Trust  
C/o Clifton Community School Campus  
Cranworth Road  
Rotherham  
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Dear Mrs O'Brien

### **Summary evaluation of Wickersley Partnership Trust**

Following the summary evaluation of Wickersley Partnership Trust in January 2020, 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 27 to 30 January 2020. 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**

- School leaders and staff describe the Trust as a 'family of schools'. This has not always been the case. Previously, schools tended to work in isolation. The CEO and trustees have made it a priority to ensure that the Trust's schools work more closely together. Staff appreciate the increasing opportunities to collaborate and share ideas and resources.
- The CEO has worked tirelessly since her appointment two years ago to ensure that trust-wide systems and procedures have improved. She has modelled the values of the Trust. Staff are committed to the ethos of the Trust, which is to 'send all young people into an ever-changing world able and qualified to play their part in it'.
- In the past 18 months, a number of new appointments have been made to the board of trustees. Trustees understand the Trust's strengths and

weaknesses well. They are clear about the journey that the Trust has been on in the last few years. They are not complacent about the work that still needs to be done. Trustees have a range of skills, but there is a gap in the educational knowledge and expertise on the board of trustees.

- The quality of education across the Trust is variable. While pupils in the Trust's secondary schools achieve well, the quality of education in the Trust's primary schools is not consistently strong. The progress and attainment of pupils in the Trust's primary schools are below the national average in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of key stage 2. Disadvantaged pupils do not achieve as well as they should in the primary phase. Pupils' achievement in the early years and their outcomes in phonics by the end of Year 1 are too variable across the Trust's schools.
- Trust leaders are working with school leaders to develop the curriculum. New curriculum plans have been devised in most subjects. The intention is for all curriculum plans to be in place by the end of this academic year. Further support and training are needed to ensure curriculum leaders effectively check the implementation and impact of the Trust's newly developed curriculum.
- Trustees, chairs of local governing bodies and school leaders have recently devised the Trust's strategic priorities for the next few years. However, these are not clearly understood by all staff and governors. The CEO and trustees have plans in place to ensure all stakeholders understand and share the Trust's priorities.
- The Trust's central team provides effective support for school leaders. This includes support for finance, information technology (IT), human resources (HR) and premises. This is enabling school leaders to focus on improving the quality of education in their schools. Staff are clear that the CEO and trustees consider their well-being.
- Until recently, local governing bodies have not fully understood their roles and responsibilities. Following a Trust-wide training programme, governors are clearer about their roles. However, there is still work to do to ensure that they hold school leaders effectively to account for the quality of education.
- Despite recent improvement, behaviour is not good enough in the Trust's secondary schools. The Trust's 'non-negotiables' for meeting its priorities, such as reducing fixed-term exclusions, are not clear enough in Trust policies and procedures, or in the direction given to school leaders.
- Although the CEO and Trust strategic leaders keep a check on the arrangements for safeguarding in the Trust's school, trustees do not ask questions to assure themselves that schools comply with statutory guidance. As a result, they do not know if the Trust's schools fulfil their statutory duties

regarding safeguarding. The scheme of delegation is unclear about the role of trustees in relation to safeguarding.

- The safeguarding checks made by the Trust on their schools focus on compliance rather than the impact and quality of safeguarding procedures. The Trust do not identify potential trends and patterns in safeguarding concerns across the Trust schools.

### **Range of evidence**

Inspections of five schools in the Trust were carried out between September and December 2019. The evaluation team considered these inspections. All of these inspections were carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005, as amended.

The inspection outcomes were:

- In four primary schools, the overall effectiveness was judged to require improvement in their first inspections since joining the Trust. One of these schools was judged outstanding before joining the Trust. In the other schools, the overall effectiveness was judged inadequate prior to joining the trust.
- The secondary school inspected was judged to be good. Previous to joining the Trust this school was judged inadequate.

During the on-site visit to the Trust in January 2020, we visited six schools. We met with headteachers, middle leaders, members of the local governing bodies and small groups of school staff and pupils. Face-to-face meetings were held during the on-site visit to the Trust with the headteachers of five other schools in the trust. These face-to-face meetings were requested by the CEO in place of telephone discussions.

During the on-site visit to the Trust, discussions were held with the CEO and other senior and operational staff from the Trust. The team also met with trustees and members. A range of relevant documentation was also scrutinised.

### **Context**

- Wickersley Partnership Trust currently comprises 10 schools in Rotherham and one secondary school in Lincolnshire: seven primary schools and four secondary schools.
- The Trust was founded in March 2014 by Wickersley School and Sports College. Six of the schools are academy converters and five are sponsor-led academies. Two academies were re-brokered from Ashwood Multi-Academy Trust and one school was re-brokered from The Lincoln College Academy Trust. This school was the most recent school to join the Trust in June 2018.

- The primary schools vary in size from around 180 pupils in Thrybergh Primary School to around 440 in Monkwood Primary School. The secondary schools range from around 630 pupils in The Gainsborough Academy to 2,090 in Wickersley School and Sports College.
- Across the Trust, the proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and/or English as an additional language is lower than the national average. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils across the Trust is slightly below the national average.
- Wickersley School and Sports College is a teaching school and is a part of the Learners First Schools Partnership.
- In January 2018, a new CEO was appointed from within the Trust.

### **Inspection outcomes**

Currently, the inspection outcomes for the overall effectiveness of the Trust's schools, including the most recent inspections carried out as part of this evaluation, are as follows:

- Six of the Trust's schools are 'requires improvement'. Three of these schools have improved since joining the Trust, one has declined and two have remained 'requires improvement'.
- Three schools are 'good'.
- Two schools have not been inspected since joining the Trust. Of these, one was judged to be inadequate before joining the Trust and one was judged to be outstanding and is currently exempt from routine inspection.

### **Main findings**

- The CEO, the Trust's strategic leaders and trustees have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the Trust. The CEO and Trust's strategic leaders are very 'hands-on' in the Trust's schools. They have spent less time planning strategically to improve the Trust. The CEO and Trust strategic leaders now realise that to move the Trust to the next stage in its development they need to step back from operational aspects so that they can fulfil a more strategic role.
- The CEO, the Trust's strategic leaders and headteachers are becoming increasingly accountable to trustees for the quality of education. There has been significant change in senior leadership across the Trust's schools in the last two years. Leaders in schools understand the Trust's main priorities for improvement. They understand their accountability for achieving these priorities. However, staff who do not hold leadership responsibilities are less clear about the main priorities of the Trust. The Trust has recently reviewed

its strategic priorities. These priorities are now ready to launch to stakeholders.

- Recent training has led to governors on local boards being clearer about their roles and responsibilities. However, there is still work to do to ensure that they know how to hold leaders to account. The chair of trustees now meets every half term with the chairs of local governing bodies. These meetings have helped to shape the Trust's scheme of delegation. The scheme of delegation needs further development to ensure there is clarity about the lines of accountability for equalities, the professional development of staff and the role of trustees in relation to safeguarding.
- The CEO and trustees are keen to develop staff and to grow their own teachers and leaders. The Trust ensures there are opportunities for the professional development of staff at different stages of their careers. School leaders value the opportunities to achieve nationally accredited leadership qualifications. The Trust uses its own specialist leaders in education and also brokers support from specialist leaders of education from the Learners First School Partnership to develop staff. Staff who are new to teaching feel well supported. Staff talk positively about visiting other schools within the Trust to share practice and work collaboratively. The CEO considers the strengths and gaps in leaders' skills. She manages staff movement across schools to ensure senior leaders' skills complement each other. However, curriculum leaders need further training to develop their skills to check the implementation and impact of the curriculums in each school.
- Too few pupils in the Trust's primary schools achieve well across the curriculum. This includes in the early years. This means that some pupils are not well prepared for their next steps in education. The Trust's school improvement strategy needs to be reviewed to ensure it has the desired impact on the quality of education, particularly in the Trust's primary schools.
- Although pupils' outcomes in phonics at key stage 1 are broadly in line with the national average across the Trust overall, there is wide variance between schools. Trust leaders have taken swift action with school leaders to respond to the areas for improvement identified in their recent inspection reports. For example, the books that children learn to read now match the sounds that they know. However, the Trust's approach to the reading curriculum beyond early reading and phonics is not coherently planned.
- Leaders recently undertook a whole-scale review of the curriculum. This has involved collaboration between schools to evaluate and develop curriculum plans. However, collaboration between the Trust's secondary and primary schools has been more limited. There is a phased plan for the completion of curriculum plans. There is still work to do to ensure that the quality of education is consistently strong across all subjects. Leaders recognise the

need to ensure curriculum leaders have the skills and expertise to implement and check the impact of the new curriculum. Consequently, the CEO has begun the process to recruit subject-specific experts to support across the Trust's primary and secondary schools.

- Leaders have recently reviewed the key stage 3 curriculum to ensure that pupils experience a curriculum at least as ambitious as the national curriculum. As a result, a new curriculum will be implemented for Year 9 pupils from September 2020. The CEO has rightly identified that too few pupils in the Trust's secondary schools study the English Baccalaureate (EBacc). Although the number of pupils studying the EBacc has increased slightly, EBacc entries are still well below the national average. The CEO has been challenged by trustees to increase the number of pupils studying the EBacc. The CEO's ambition is for 60% of pupils to study the EBacc by 2022.
- Trust leaders are aware of the priorities for improving the quality of education. However, the quality of strategic planning to address these priorities is variable. There is a plan in place for the development of mathematics across the primary phase. In the secondary phase, plans are less well defined. Leaders have started to take some actions to address the areas for improvement identified by the Trust in the early years, for example to develop outdoor provision in its primary schools. However, there is no clear strategic plan in place to achieve the Trust's early years priorities.
- The Trust school leaders have a great deal of autonomy. While this means they can adapt Trust policies to their local context, some processes and procedures are applied inconsistently across the Trust's schools. The Trust's policies do not always make it clear what is expected of school leaders. For example, the procedures that must be followed when children are missing in education or when parents or carers request that their child is home educated are unclear.
- The Trust's centralised HR services, premises and finance team, and IT services team provide effective support to schools. These teams enable the Trust to provide economies of scale and school leaders to focus more on improving the quality of education in their schools.
- Inspection findings indicate that, in most of the Trust's schools, pupils' behaviour and attitudes are good. This is the case across all primary schools. In the Trust's most recent secondary school inspection, behaviour and attitudes were judged to require improvement. Reducing the behaviours that lead to fixed-term exclusions remains a main priority for the Trust.

## **Safeguarding**

All published inspection reports confirm that the arrangements for safeguarding are effective in the Trust's schools. The Trust's safeguarding leader and CEO carry out checks on the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements before new schools join the Trust. They work with the school to ensure that any areas for improvement in safeguarding identified in the predecessor school are addressed. Trust leaders have close links with the local area safeguarding teams. They have worked together to implement a Trust-wide safeguarding policy.

The Trust's safeguarding leader and CEO carry out annual checks on safeguarding procedures in each school. These inform plans that help each school to make improvements. However, the checks that leaders make tend to focus on safeguarding compliance. They do not focus closely enough on the quality and impact of safeguarding procedures. Leaders do not consistently check that recommendations have been carried out.

All schools use an electronic system to record information about safeguarding. School leaders do not have clear guidance about how this should be used and so there is some variability in its application. This means that Trust leaders cannot use the information to reliably identify potential patterns in safeguarding concerns across the Trust.

While the CEO and Trust leaders undertake checks to ensure schools comply with statutory guidance, trustees do not ask the questions they should to assure themselves that schools are carrying out their statutory responsibilities. The scheme of delegation does not outline the role of trustees in relation to safeguarding.

## **Recommendations**

- Ensure that pupils achieve well across the curriculum in the Trust's primary schools, including in the early years and in reading, so that pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education.
- Ensure that the recently developed curriculum plans are implemented consistently well across the Trust's schools. Develop the expertise of curriculum leaders so that they can check on the quality of education.
- Review and refine the roles and responsibilities of senior leaders in the Trust so that they are less operational and more focused on the Trust's strategic priorities.
- Ensure that the Trust's strategic priorities are understood by all staff and governors and that plans are in place to address each priority so that all stakeholders are clear about the part they need to play to improve the Trust's schools.

- Clarify the non-negotiables in the Trust's policies and procedures so that, where a Trust-wide approach is agreed between trust and school leaders, schools are in no doubt about what is expected of them.
- Ensure that the scheme of delegation clearly defines the role of trustees in relation to monitoring safeguarding so that they can assure themselves that the Trust's schools are carrying out their statutory duties effectively.
- Continue the programme of training for local governing bodies so that all governors can fulfil their role in holding leaders to account, particularly for improvements to the quality of education.
- Continue to develop and implement strategies to improve pupils' behaviour and attitudes in the Trust's secondary schools.

Yours sincerely

Michele Costello  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**



## Annex: Academies that are part of the Trust

### Schools inspected as part of the batched inspections during autumn term 2019 – section 5 inspections:

School	Local authority	Date of joining the MAT	Previous inspection judgement	Most recent inspection grade
Clifton Community School	Rotherham	December 2017	Predecessor school: Inadequate	December 2019: Good
Monkwood Primary School	Rotherham	October 2016	Predecessor school: Inadequate	September 2019: Requires improvement
Rawmarsh Ashwood Primary	Rotherham	September 2016	Predecessor school: Outstanding	November 2019: Requires improvement
Sandhill Primary Academy	Rotherham	October 2016	Predecessor school: Inadequate	September 2019: Requires improvement
Thrybergh Primary School	Rotherham	September 2016	May 2017: Requires improvement	October 2019: Requires improvement

### Other Trust schools:

School	Local authority	Date of joining the MAT	Previous inspection judgement	Most recent inspection grade
Aston Hall Junior and Infant School	Rotherham	August 2016	Predecessor school: Good	May 2019: confirmed as remaining good
Aston Lodge Primary School	Rotherham	August 2016	Predecessor school: Requires improvement	June 2019: Requires improvement
Brinsworth Whitehill Primary	Rotherham	August 2016	Predecessor school: Requires improvement	June 2019: Requires improvement

Rawmarsh Community School	Rotherham	August 2014	Predecessor school: Requires Improvement	May 2017: Good
The Gainsborough Academy	Lincolnshire	June 2018	Predecessor school: Inadequate	Not yet inspected as a part of the MAT
Wickersley School & Sports College	Rotherham	March 2014	Predecessor school: Outstanding	Exempt from routine inspections