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Owen McColgan, Chief Executive (CE)
Dan McDonald, Chair of Trustees
The Howard Academy Trust
Waterfront UTC
South Side Three Road
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ME4 4FQ

Dear Mr McColgan and Mr McDonald

Summary evaluation of The Howard Academy Trust

Following the summary evaluation of The Howard Academy Trust (THAT or 'the trust') in July 2022, when I was accompanied by Catherine Old, Her Majesty's Inspector, I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the findings.

Thank you for your cooperation during our visit to the trust on 11 to 13 July 2022. 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 evidence gathering activities

For stage one of this summary evaluation, two schools were inspected in November 2021. These inspections were carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 (the Act), as amended.

The inspection outcomes were:

- The section 8 inspections of both Miers Court Primary School and The Howard School found that both schools remained good, and there were no concerns about their performance.

Over the course of the on-site visit to the trust, discussions were held with you and other senior and operational staff. We met with three representatives of the board of directors, including the chair and vice-chair of the board and met with four representatives of the local academy boards (LABs). We visited three trust schools that had not been inspected during stage one of the summary evaluation process. In each of these schools, we met with the principal, senior and subject leaders. I also conducted virtual meetings with the principal, senior and middle leaders from one further school in the trust.

Context

The trust was established in 2014 and consists of six schools. Of these, there are two secondary schools and four primary schools. The schools are located in Medway local authority. One primary school and one secondary school are sponsor-led academies. The rest are converter academies.

The trust's primary schools vary in size from around 233 pupils in Deanwood Primary School to 461 pupils in Thames View Primary School. The trust's secondary schools vary in size from around 247 pupils in Waterfront UTC to 1,519 pupils in The Howard School. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is higher than the national average. However, the proportion varies from school to school within the trust.

The board of directors is made up of seven trustees. This group is responsible for the strategic oversight and performance of the trust and its schools.

Main findings

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

- Five of the six schools in the trust are judged to be good.
- The most recent section 8 inspection of Thames View Primary School found that the school remained good, but inspectors had some concerns that standards may be declining. The next inspection will therefore be a full section 5.
- One school, Waterfront UTC, has yet to be inspected since joining the trust in 2018. The predecessor school, known as Medway UTC, was judged inadequate at its last inspection.

Impact of the trust on its academies – governance and delegation

- Pupils are currently receiving a good education in all the schools that have been inspected since joining the trust. In these cases, the trust has maintained the good quality of education or improved the quality of education, so that pupils are receiving a better experience since the school joined the trust. One school has not been inspected since it joined the trust. The predecessor school was judged to be inadequate.
- The trust has strengthened its governance arrangements following an external review. Trustees have a better understanding of schools because there is now an improved approach to sharing performance information and a stronger understanding of risk factors and emerging weaknesses.
- Trustees are committed to improving the education of all pupils within the trust. Executive leaders' reports on trust schools' standards are closely scrutinised by trustees and LAB members. However, there is some duplication between the roles of trustees and LAB members. Nonetheless, trustees hold the CE to account well through scrutinising reports and asking challenging, well-informed questions.
- School leaders are held to account strongly by the CE, who reports on the quality of each school to the board of directors. Members oversee the work of the board. The forthcoming introduction of a new scheme of delegation aims to remove current duplication between the work of the LABs and the executive functions of the trust. Significant efforts to improve the financial stability of the trust mean that schools that were in deficit are now more financially secure. Nevertheless, one school remains in deficit.
- Trustees and trust leaders have revised THAT's vision over the past two years. In April 2021, staff were consulted across the trust's schools to redefine the trust's vision and values. Subsequently, the trust's vision statement was developed around the ambition of 'working together to build a community of successful learners'. School leaders, including subject leaders, are enthusiastic about the trust's new vision and its motto of 'dignity, respect, inclusivity and ambition'. School staff feel valued by trust leaders and they appreciate how approachable the members of the executive team are.

Impact of the trust on its academies – leadership and management

- Trust leaders are passionate about school improvement. The trust has overseen the improvement of one school from inadequate to good. Purposeful work is taking place to improve another such school. As a result, pupils attending these schools are receiving a better education.

- Executive leaders gain a clear understanding of the trust's strengths and weaknesses through their improvement and quality assurance activities. Together with the director of education, the CE has led stringent improvement activities. These have enabled the executive team and trustees to gain an in-depth view of the standards within trust schools. As a result, pertinent improvement targets are set for school leaders to concentrate on. The executive team monitors these targets closely and organises rapid support for schools where weaknesses persist or emerge. When there is a need to improve leadership in schools, trust leaders act decisively.
- However, one good primary school was inspected recently, and inspectors were concerned that standards may be declining. Trust leaders have therefore refined their action plan with the intention of addressing these concerns before the school receives a section 5 inspection.
- Staff across the trust praise trust leaders for how well they consider staff development, well-being and workload. Headteachers are especially grateful for support from the central team with recruitment procedures, estates management and finance. A recent awards evening for staff made them feel valued as part of the community of the trust.
- The trust consistently focuses on sustainable leadership. Staff appreciate opportunities to gain professional qualifications and leadership experience through leading trust-wide projects. New subject leadership groups allow teachers to share ideas and, in some cases, unify their curriculums. Further plans to centralise the writing of school policies aim to further reduce leaders' workload and bring about more consistency across the trust.

Impact of the trust on its academies – curriculum and quality of education

- Trust leaders monitor the quality of education in trust schools through a rigorous review and risk assessment process. Decisions about the content of the curriculum are taken by individual schools. Each school is responsible for making any necessary improvements. The trust provides support and advice when needed. The trust intervenes more strongly if there are any areas of significant concern. For example, executive leaders have introduced recent changes to the curriculum in one secondary school to broaden pupils' access to vocational subjects.
- In the last year, staff across schools have begun to work together on curriculum development. Trust leaders aim to ensure that trust schools develop the curriculum based on the needs of their pupils. There is a common curriculum in some subjects, such as science and personal, social and health education (PSHE), in primary schools. However, school leaders customise the curriculum in most subjects, particularly in the trust's secondary schools. Executive leaders recognise that their school improvement plans need to

support school leaders in ensuring that subject curriculums are consistently strong across all trust schools so that pupils achieve highly in all subjects. School leaders and staff say that they feel well supported by the trust's approach to curriculum development.

- The trust provides targeted professional development based on areas of weakness within schools. It also takes action where cross-trust areas for improvement are identified. Recent whole-trust professional development days have focused on strategies to improve early reading and reading in secondary schools. However, individual schools are still using their own approaches to the teaching of reading, with the agreement of trust leaders.
- Work to improve the flow and coherence of curriculum knowledge between primary and secondary phases is underway, as is a project to streamline assessment processes across the trust. The impact of this work is yet to be seen because it is in its early stages. As a result, the potential benefits for pupils transferring from primary to secondary schools within the trust are yet to be realised.

Impact of the trust on its academies – Behaviour and Attitudes

- Trust leaders have high expectations. A single behaviour policy has been reviewed and renewed in trust secondary schools. Where needed, this is beginning to have a significant impact on improving the behaviour and attitudes of pupils in these schools. Primary schools develop their own behaviour policies. Trust leaders interrogate performance information presented in the academic review workbooks and are aware of any use of internal isolation and exclusion.
- Executive leaders monitor behaviour and attitudes closely in trust schools. They employ carefully focused quality assurance measures to determine what works well and what needs to change. For example, recent monitoring has helped trust leaders to understand more about the attitudes of sixth formers towards their PSHE curriculum. Executive leaders use these insights to put improvement measures in place.
- The trust has supported schools effectively in improving pupils' attendance so that it is improving in most of the trust's schools. For example, recent attendance in one of the trust's secondary schools is now stronger than the latest published national averages. Trust leaders help schools to work with the local authority to provide extra services for pupils who struggle to attend school and for their families.
- Trust leaders have supported school leaders to reduce exclusions and suspensions. In trust schools, alternative provision is employed sparingly.

Safeguarding

The trust prioritises safeguarding. Trustees ensure that staff in all of the trust's schools are trained appropriately. The CE and director of education view their roles in safeguarding as 'not just about compliance but also about quality'. Trust leaders' work with local partners, including Medway local authority, helps them to keep up to date on national and local safeguarding issues. This enhances trust leaders' monitoring of safeguarding practices.

Published Ofsted inspection reports show that, at the time of inspection, safeguarding arrangements were effective in trust schools. Executive leaders carry out rigorous checks on how well governors discharge their statutory safeguarding responsibilities. The trust also works with external consultants to enhance their monitoring.

Leaders and staff in the trust's schools feel well supported in understanding safeguarding training, and there is a common training package used in schools. Trust leaders have put a PSHE curriculum in place that is bespoke to each secondary school. In trust primary schools, leaders employ the same curriculum. Trust leaders are assured that these curriculums support teachers in ensuring that pupils learn about the risks they may face in the local community.

Recommendations

- Further sharpen the trust's school improvement strategies so that trust schools' curriculums are consistently strong, and pupils achieve highly across the curriculum.
- Build on the collaborative work between trust schools in order to further strengthen your work to improve pupils' reading in primary and secondary schools so that the weakest readers are supported effectively to become accurate and fluent readers in all trust schools.
- Improve the strategic organisation of the trust's governance arrangements, to reduce duplication of governance functions and maximise the impact of different levels of governance and leadership.

Yours sincerely

Harry Ingham
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex: Academies that are part of the trust

School Information				Most recent inspection		
URN	School name	Local Authority	Date joined trust	Was latest inspection after school joined trust?	Inspection date	OE grade
142394	Temple Mill Primary School	Medway	2015-12-01	YES	17-10-2018	2
144639	Miers Court Primary School	Medway	2017-08-01	YES	03-11-2021	2
146648	Waterfront UTC	Medway	2019-04-01	NO	07-03-2018	4
141466	The Howard School	Medway	2014-10-01	YES	24-11-2021	2
144132	Thames View Primary School	Medway	2017-04-01	YES	15-01-2020	2
143458	Deanwood Primary School	Medway	2016-10-01	YES	02-11-2018	2

*Schools highlighted received either a section 5 or section 8 inspection in stage 1 of the MAT SE