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Tony Nicholson
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Dear Mr Nicholson

Summary evaluation of Fylde Coast Academy Trust (FCAT)

Following the summary evaluation of FCAT in January 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 my visit to the trust with my colleague, Stephen Bentham, Her Majesty's Inspector, on 28 to 31 January 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

- Trustees ('Directors') have a clear vision for the trust and are committed to making a positive difference to pupils' lives.
- The quality of education in most of the trust's schools is improving, particularly in the case of those that joined the trust having previously been judged inadequate by Ofsted.
- Pupils achieve well overall in the primary phase but are less successful in the secondary phase.
- Although improving the quality of teaching and learning is a priority for the trust, there is more to be done to ensure that teaching in key stages 3 and 4 enables pupils to achieve as well as they can.

- You, along with your executive team, created a trust-wide curriculum statement which outlines pupils' entitlement across all key stages. Leaders are currently developing a curriculum for Years 5 to 8 to build on pupils' knowledge and understanding as they move from key stage 2 to key stage 3.
- Pupils' overall attendance is high in the primary schools. However, it is lower in the trust's secondary schools. The rate of persistent absence in secondary schools has been higher than the national average in recent years. Senior leaders are taking an appropriate range of actions to improve attendance. The trust's own records show that attendance is improving in all its schools.
- The rates of exclusion are low in the primary schools. Until recently, the number of fixed-term exclusions has been high in secondary schools. Directors know that they need to develop a more inclusive approach. Senior leaders have improved the range of support for pupils to improve their attitudes to learning and provide training for staff on behaviour management. Evaluation evidence shows that exclusion rates are now beginning to fall in the trust's secondary schools.
- Directors and academy council members have a broad range of experience, which they bring to their roles. They provide a strong level of challenge and support to leaders.
- Leaders and teachers in the trust's schools benefit from the many opportunities that they have to collaborate and share good practice.
- The trust provides its schools with effective support for finance, human resources (HR) and data management. Directors know that the professional development for non-teaching staff needs to improve so that they can play a greater role in improving the quality of education across the trust.

Range of evidence

- A range of evidence was gathered in relation to the trust's impact on the quality of education across all schools within FCAT.
- A range of relevant documentation was scrutinised.
- The outcomes of the most recent two inspections were considered. Inspectors also took account of the inspection outcomes of four other schools that have been inspected since joining the trust.
- Inspectors visited five schools on 29 January 2019 and met with principals, executive principals, other senior leaders, academy council members and middle leaders.

The two most recent inspections were carried out in June and December 2018. They were carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005, as amended.

The inspection outcomes were:

- One school improved from requires improvement to good.
- One school was judged to be requires improvement in its first inspection.

Telephone discussions were held on 30 January 2019 with the principals and executive principals of four schools in the trust. During the on-site visit to FCAT, discussions were held with you, members of the board of directors, senior and operational staff, strategic partners and other stakeholders.

Context

FCAT was established in 2013 by its sponsors, Fylde Coast Teaching School Limited (FCTS). FCTS was established by a partnership of The Blackpool Sixth Form College and Hodgson Academy as subscribing members. FCTS was designated as a teaching school in 2011 by the National College for Teaching and Leadership to act as a hub for local initiatives to raise standards in teaching and learning across the Fylde coast and Lancashire.

FCAT has professional links through the Fylde Coast Teaching School Alliance. The trust benefits from strong links with the Fylde Coast Teaching School SCITT, which was judged outstanding at its most recent inspection, in November 2017, for its secondary partnership.

The trust currently runs eight schools in Blackpool and two schools in Lancashire. It consists of five secondary (two 'all through') and five primary schools. Seven of the schools are academy converters, two are sponsor-led academies and one is a free school.

FCAT has gradually expanded over time, with five schools joining the trust between October 2014 and September 2017. In addition, two academy converters joined during 2017.

Armfield Academy (all-through free school) opened in September 2018 for Nursery, Reception and Year 7 classes. By September 2019, the secondary phase will have Years 7 to 8 and will have Years 7 to 11 by September 2022.

The primary schools vary in size from around 230 pupils to around 360 pupils. The secondary schools vary in size from around 610 pupils to around 1,240 pupils. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils in the trust is above that found nationally. The proportions of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is above average. The proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language or who are from minority ethnic groups are lower than national averages.

FCAT has developed a bespoke 'Associate Membership' model, which involves providing school improvement services to Fleetwood High School and Longridge High School.

FCAT comprises 11 directors, who form the trust board. The trust's executive team includes the chief executive officer (CEO), two deputy CEOs, chief operating officer plus four executive principals, who have trust-wide roles. Directors delegate local responsibilities, such as day-to-day operational matters, to academy council members. Each school is led by a principal and executive principal, who report to the executive team and academy councils of their respective schools.

Main findings

The performance of the trust's schools

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

- Four schools were judged to be good at their latest inspection: Unity Academy Blackpool and Blackpool Aspire Academy improved from requires improvement to good. Westcliff Primary and Garstang Community Academy have received short inspections and they remain good.
- Two schools were judged to be requires improvement at their latest inspection. Since joining the trust, Montgomery High School improved from inadequate to requires improvement. Blackpool Gateway Academy was originally part of Westcliff Primary School. Blackpool Gateway Academy was judged to be requires improvement in its first inspection.
- Four schools are yet to be inspected since joining the trust. Of these, Hambleton Primary School is outstanding, and Mereside Primary School and Westminster Primary School are good. Armfield School opened as a new school in September 2018.

Pupils' outcomes are stronger in the trust's primary schools compared to those in the secondary schools. Children get off to a good start in the early years, and on the whole, this is sustained across most of the trust's primary schools. As a result, pupils make good progress at the end of key stage 2 and are well prepared for the next phase of their education. Where leaders identify variation in performance in different year groups across the trust's primary schools, they take effective action to bring about improvement.

In the trust as a whole, the progress of pupils at the end of key stage 4 was below the national average in 2018. In addition, Year 11 pupils' progress in two out of three secondary schools and one all-through school was below the national average in 2018. Pupils made weak progress in English and mathematics. Disadvantaged pupils did not achieve as well as their peers, which is a decline on the previous year. Boys and the most able pupils did not make the progress of which they were capable in 2018.

Leadership and management of the trust

Directors have a clear vision for pupils' education across the trust's schools and have high expectations. Academy council members and leaders share this vision. Directors and academy council members have a strong understanding of the context of each school. Directors are committed to making a difference to the lives of pupils.

Structures of governance are fit for purpose. Directors have reviewed the organisation of governance in response to recent guidance from the Department for Education. Consequently, directors and academy council members now have a greater level of independence and accountability. The scheme of delegation is understood well among directors, local governors, executive principals and principals.

Directors bring a wide range of experience and skills to their roles, which are helping to steer the trust's decision-making. They have an informed view of the strengths and areas for development of each school through reports from you, your deputy CEOs and other officers. Minutes from directors' meetings show that they provide appropriate challenge and support to leaders on a range of issues, including attendance, exclusions and pupils' outcomes.

Academy councils provide strong oversight of schools. You ensure a rigorous process is in place for the appointment of governors to sit on each school's academy council. This helps to ensure that they add value to the local governance of schools. Academy council members welcome the training that they receive, such as support in interpreting and analysing performance information.

You, together with your directors, have developed good systems and procedures to improve the level of accountability across the trust's schools. Directors ensure a good balance between autonomy and direction from the trust so that individual schools' identities are not lost. Directors, academy council members and senior leaders use information gained from school visits, peer reviews and external reviews to celebrate success and to provide support for schools where aspects of work need to improve.

Following the disappointing decline in pupils' progress across two secondary schools in 2018, you and your team carefully analysed the reasons for this, and are using a range of strategies to support the two schools. For both schools, you have introduced improvement plans to address weaknesses. These plans have clear success criteria and deadlines and are reviewed regularly. It is too early to see the impact of these plans.

Directors have taken steps to improve the level of consistency in monitoring pupils' outcomes across the trust's schools. They have, for example, introduced new ways of analysing performance information, which summarises pupils' progress and so improves consistency in monitoring and evaluating pupils' progress.

The trust does not have a strategic overview of the impact of additional funding for disadvantaged pupils, particularly across its secondary schools. Planned strategies by individual schools aim to minimise the barriers these pupils experience. In some schools, strategies are clear in their aims and actions, and ensure that money is used effectively to improve pupils' learning. However, some school leaders do not consistently evaluate the success of their actions to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils.

Principals of individual schools benefit from effective mentoring from executive principals. Principals say that expectations are high and there is a 'no excuses culture'. They report that the support that they receive from executive principals has helped them to manage change more effectively.

The trust has created a range of teams and individual roles to bring about change or improvement. For example, the quality improvement groups made up of executive principals from the trust's schools lead on a range of key areas, including the curriculum, teaching and inclusion. The school improvement team consists of senior and middle leaders. Each member leads on a different area of the trust's work, such as literacy, numeracy and the provision for pupils with SEND. Further support is provided by lead practitioners in English and science, who work with staff to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The trust is in the process of appointing a lead practitioner for mathematics. The focus of this role will be on improving outcomes in mathematics, particularly in key stages 3 and 4. Middle leaders are enthusiastic and committed to their roles. They are taking action to improve teaching and learning in their subject areas.

FCAT has introduced a trust-wide curriculum entitlement for all pupils. Senior leaders of individual schools are given flexibility within this framework to plan their school curriculum and schemes of work with the intention of meeting the needs and interests of pupils. The trust has a strong focus on developing the curriculum across Year 5 to Year 8. This is helping pupils to build on their knowledge and understanding, and ensure a smooth transition between key stages 2 and 3. Teachers of Year 6 and Year 7 spoke highly of the opportunities that they have to work in different phases.

Directors are aware that the quality of teaching and learning and pupils' outcomes need to improve more rapidly in the trust's secondary schools. You and your team have developed a trust-wide approach to improving teaching and learning called the 'FCAT way'. This provides a shared vision and non-negotiables for enabling greater consistency in teaching and learning. The sponsors are providing a range of support for FCAT secondary schools. For example, The Blackpool Sixth Form College provides support for English, and Hodgson Academy provides support for mathematics. While this work is positive in its intention, it has not yet had sufficient impact.

Pupils' overall attendance is high in the primary schools. However, it is below average in the trust's secondary schools. The rates of persistent absence in

secondary schools has been higher than the national average in recent years. Senior leaders are taking an appropriate range of actions to improve attendance. The trust's own records show that attendance is improving in all the schools in the trust.

The rates of exclusion are low in the primary schools. Until recently, the number of fixed-term exclusions has been high in secondary schools. Directors know that they need to develop a more inclusive approach. Senior leaders have improved the range of support for pupils to improve their attitudes to learning and provide training for staff on behaviour management. Evaluation evidence shows that fixed-term exclusion rates are now beginning to fall in the trust's secondary schools.

Directors are keen to develop staff and grow their own leaders within the trust. Leaders value the opportunities to participate in nationally recognised leadership programmes to develop their skills. Staff report that the release time they receive to visit other schools is invaluable. They say that school visits and secondments allow them to broaden their experience and share effective practice. A typical comment was, 'The trust allows a chance to better yourself.'

FCAT also benefits from a range of training opportunities provided by its sponsor FCTS, such as programmes to improve teaching and learning, and coaching. The trust organises an annual training day, which is attended by all governors and senior leaders. This sets expectations for the whole trust and helps to ensure that governors and leaders work together to steer their schools effectively.

Some of the schools in the trust have experienced significant challenges in recruiting teachers, particularly in subjects such as mathematics and science. As a result, the trust has developed a clear strategy for attracting, retaining and developing staff. To help retain staff, the trust offers career progression through leadership opportunities and secondments within the trust. This has stabilised staffing in some of its secondary schools which have previously experienced considerable staff turnover. FCAT works closely with the teaching school to provide high-quality placements for trainee teachers. Many student teachers go on to work at the trust's schools as newly qualified teachers. Principals who have recently joined the trust feel that recruitment is easier under the FCAT umbrella as opposed to being an individual school.

The trust's centralised data, finance and HR services provide effective support to schools. Principals say that the central services team provides economies of scale and removes burdens from leaders so that they can focus on improving the quality of education in their schools. Directors and senior leaders spoke highly of the advice that they receive in relation to HR issues.

The trust has recently taken part in a Department for Education sponsored MAT development programme and is partnered with Ebor Trust, which is a more established multi-academy trust in North Yorkshire. Peer reviews have provided you and the CEO of the Ebor Trust with the opportunity to support and challenge each other.

Safeguarding

Directors place a high priority on keeping children safe across the trust. All published Ofsted reports confirm that arrangements for safeguarding are effective in each of the trust's schools. All safeguarding policies and procedures are clear and up to date. The safeguarding lead for the trust, together with an experienced safeguarding consultant, carry out thorough safeguarding reviews across all schools, including ensuring that staff are managed well in terms of suitability to work with children. The safeguarding lead also ensures that all staff and governors have received appropriate training in child protection. FCAT has its own safeguarding board, which also considers pupils' views. This enables directors and senior leaders to respond appropriately to any pupils' concerns. Directors and senior leaders have a clear understanding of local risks to pupils. The trust has established strong and effective links with external agencies, including the local authority, to keep children safe.

Recommendations

- Enhance trust-wide leadership to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the trust's secondary schools.
- Raise pupils' achievement by the end of key stage 4.
- Ensure that the directors have a strategic overview of the impact of pupil premium funding so that disadvantaged pupils achieve their full potential.
- Build on the existing curriculum from Year 5 to Year 8 to ensure that the vision for an all-through curriculum improves the quality of education further.
- Ensure that leaders provide high-quality ongoing professional development for non-teaching staff.

Yours sincerely

Ahmed Marikar
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex: Schools that are part of the trust

Trust schools inspected during summer and autumn 2018 as part of stage 1: section 5 inspections

School	Local authority	Context/previous inspection judgement	Most recent inspection	Inspection grade
Blackpool Aspire Academy	Blackpool	Predecessor school: Inadequate. Joined trust in September 2014 Inspection judgement: December 2016; Requires improvement	Section 5 December 2018	Good
Blackpool Gateway Academy	Blackpool	Joined trust in November 2016. Was part of Westcliff Primary School	Section 5 June 2018	Requires Improvement

Other trust schools that have been inspected since joining the trust

School	Local authority	Context	Most recent inspection	Inspection grade
Unity Academy Blackpool	Blackpool	Predecessor school: Requires improvement Joined trust in September 2013 Inspection judgement: November 2015; Requires improvement	Section 5 October 2017	Good
Montgomery High School	Blackpool	Predecessor school: Inadequate Joined trust in October 2014	Section 5 March 2018	Requires improvement

School	Local authority	Context	Most recent inspection	Inspection grade
		Previous inspection judgement: April 2016; Requires improvement		
Westcliff Primary Academy	Blackpool	Joined trust in September 2016 Previous inspection judgement: May 2013; Good	Section 8 October 2017	Remained good
Garstang Community Academy	Lancashire	Joined trust in September 2017 Previous inspection judgement: November 2014; Good	S8 January 2018	Remained good

Schools that have not yet been inspected since joining the trust

School	Local Authority	Context/Most recent inspection grade
Hambleton Primary Academy	Lancashire	Joined trust in November 2015 Predecessor school judged outstanding in June 2013
Mereside Primary School	Blackpool	Joined trust in January 2017 Predecessor school judged good in March 2013
Westminster Primary Academy	Blackpool	Joined trust in September 2017 Predecessor school judged good in February 2015
Armfield Academy	Blackpool	Joined trust in September 2018 New school. Not inspected yet