

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T: 03000 131 280
CorrsEastofEngland@ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr Ian Comfort
Chief Executive Officer
Academies Enterprise Trust
Kilnfield House
Station Approach
Hockley
SS5 4HS

Dear Mr Comfort

Focused inspection of AET academies

Following the focused inspections of seven of the schools in the Academies Enterprise Trust ('AET' or 'the Trust') in November 2015, and the subsequent follow-up visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors, 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 the visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) John Daniell, Stephen McMullan and Paul Tomkow on 24 and 25 November 2015. We particularly appreciate the time taken to prepare the visit programme. Please pass on my thanks to your staff and other stakeholders who kindly gave up their time to meet with our inspectors.

A focused inspection of a sample of the Trust's academies was last carried out in June 2014.

The findings from the latest sample of focused inspections and a wider consideration of the Trust's overall performance are set out below.

Summary of main findings

- After operating for nearly eight years, the Trust is failing too many pupils. Almost 40% of the pupils attend AET primary academies that do not provide a good standard of education. It is even worse in secondary, where 47% of pupils attend academies that are less than good.
- Children from poor backgrounds do particularly badly in this Trust. The attainment and progress of disadvantaged pupils, in both the primary and secondary academies, still lags behind that of other pupils, and gaps in performance are not narrowing quickly enough.

- The performance of AET's secondary academies is mediocre and has not improved enough since the previous focused inspections in June 2014. Only 41% of AET secondary academies are good or better and the Trust's impact on raising standards at Key Stage 4 has not been effective.
- Standards are rising at Key Stage 2 in reading, writing and mathematics. Of the 32 primary academies, 19 improved their Key Stage 2 attainment between 2014 and 2015. At 69%, the proportion of good or better primary academies is also increasing, although it is still well below the national average.
- Pupils' attendance across the AET academies overall is unacceptably low.
- The Trust's work to tackle weak leadership in secondary academies has had limited impact in improving academy performance.
- Changes to the Trust's organisation and working practices have not sufficiently improved the Trust's performance.
- The Trust's approach to improvement planning on a national basis means that there is insufficient focus on local issues.
- The Trust does not publish adequate information about the scheme of delegation for governance.
- The outcomes of the focused inspections failed to demonstrate that the Trust is consistently improving its academies.

Evidence

Focused inspections of seven academies were carried out between 17 and 19 November 2015. Four of these inspections were carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005 (as amended). Three inspections were carried out as monitoring visits under section 8 of the Act.

The outcomes of the section 5 focused inspections were (all academies were judged to require improvement at their previous inspection):

- one academy had improved and was judged to be good
- two academies continued to require improvement
- one academy declined and was judged to require special measures.

The outcomes of the section 8 focused monitoring inspections were:

- one academy was assessed to be taking effective action to be judged good at its next section 5 inspection

- one academy was judged to be taking effective action to remove the serious weaknesses found at its previous section 5 inspection
- one academy was judged not to be taking effective action to remove the serious weaknesses found at its previous section 5 inspection.

HMI held telephone discussions with the principals of 18 other AET academies between 18 and 20 November 2015. During the follow-up visit, HMI held discussions with senior and operational staff, principals, trustees and governors, strategic partners and other stakeholders. Inspectors also scrutinised a range of relevant documentation including information on pupils' achievement, policies and minutes of meetings.

Context

AET was set up in 2008. It is the largest multi-academy trust in the country, with 67 academies. It comprises 30 secondary academies, 32 primary academies and five special academies.

Around 73% of AET's current academies or their predecessor schools were judged to be less than good on or prior to joining the Trust. The academies are spread across England, and many are located in areas with a high level of social deprivation.

You took up the post of Chief Executive Officer of the Trust in October 2013. Four regional directors oversee academy improvement. The Board of Trustees carries out the statutory functions of governance for all academies within the Trust, while each academy has a local governing board to provide challenge and support to the principals. The Chair of the Board of Trustees stepped down recently and has been replaced by an Interim Executive Chair.

The Education Funding Agency (EFA) issued the Trust with a financial notice to improve in October 2014. This notice necessitated a review of governance and is still operative.

Following the focused inspection of a sample of the Trust's academies in June 2014, eight academies that had been part of the Trust moved to other trusts.

Main findings

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

- four are outstanding
- 35 are good
- 20 require improvement
- seven are inadequate
- one is yet to be inspected.

Therefore, 59% of those academies inspected to date are good or better. At the time of the previous focused inspection in June 2014, around 50% of AET's academies were at least good. While this represents some overall improvement, it is worrying that this is mostly from the Trust's primary academies and that eight academies have declined in their effectiveness since they joined the Trust.

Since June 2014, in nearly a quarter of the monitoring inspections of secondary academies, inspectors judged that the academy was not improving fast enough. That is why only 41% of AET secondary academies are good or better and far too many pupils continue to suffer a sub-standard education. It compares poorly with the national average of 75% good or better secondary schools.

Inspection has identified that the common weaknesses across secondary AET academies that are less than good are:

- poor monitoring of performance by academy senior leaders
- ineffective middle leadership
- inconsistencies in the quality of teaching
- underachievement of some groups, including more-able and disadvantaged pupils.

The Trust has had more success in ensuring that pupils in primary and special academies receive a good-quality education. Of the Trust's academies that have been inspected, 69% of the primary academies are now good or better. While this is still well below the national average of 85%, it represents reasonable improvement when compared with the Trust's position at the time of the previous focused inspections, when only 60% of its primary academies were at least good.

This improvement in inspection outcomes for the primary academies is reflected in Key Stage 2 outcomes, where there has been an upward trend across the Trust over the last three years. In 2015, there was a seven percentage point increase in the proportion of pupils attaining at least the expected Level 4 in reading, writing and mathematics from the previous year. Half of the primary academies achieved in line with or above the national level of 80%. The proportion of pupils making expected progress in mathematics, reading and writing was above average at 91%, 92% and 95% respectively. However, while it is encouraging to see these improvements in overall rates of progress, disadvantaged pupils still achieve less well than their peers in most of AET's primary academies. The gaps in attainment have narrowed in some academies, but widened in others.

Standards are not high enough, or rising quickly enough, at Key Stage 4. Across the secondary academies, the proportion of pupils achieving five or more A* to C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, has remained static for the last two years and, at around 43%, is well below the national level. In 2015, in only four of the academies was this proportion in line with or above the national level. Progress is

also inconsistent. Last year, twice as many secondary academies saw an improvement in the rates of pupils making expected progress in mathematics than in English. In too many academies, rates of progress remain below the national level in both subjects.

Furthermore, the attainment of disadvantaged pupils continues to give cause for concern. In those academies where the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers was relatively small, too often this reflected weaker attainment by non-disadvantaged pupils. In 2015, the proportion of disadvantaged pupils making expected progress by the end of Key Stage 4 in English fell in 19 AET academies and in mathematics it fell in 12 academies. This is a serious concern.

A few secondary academies can point to marked improvements in pupils' rates of progress and improved attainment. In others, however, attainment has dropped significantly. This calls into question the effectiveness and impact of the Trust's improvement strategies.

Teachers across the Trust's secondary academies were assessing pupils' attainment and progress inaccurately. This resulted in inflated forecasts for their achievement. More recently, the Trust has revised its system and regional directors now check assessment information regularly to secure accurate forecasts for the end of Key Stage 4. However, this new system has yet to have any proven impact.

Pupils' low attendance is due to high levels of unauthorised and persistent absence. Recent monitoring inspection reports of those academies in special measures comment favourably on the academies' plans to improve attendance, although the widespread impact is yet to be seen.

The Trust's vision and core values are reflected in its three-year corporate plan and known by all stakeholders. Academy principals are overwhelmingly positive about the role of the AET regional directors. This was not the case at the time of the previous focused inspections in June 2014.

The four regional directors are now holding the academies' senior leaders to account and encourage open, honest and evaluative discussions as to why some academies are not improving at a fast enough rate. The Trust has taken action to address weak leadership in its academies. Additional support has been provided and, in some cases, changes have been made to leadership teams. However, the impact of this work in the primary academies is much more evident than in the secondaries, where pupils' outcomes have remained static and below national rates.

The 'Quad' system of regular school-to-school reviews in groups of four enables academy leaders to identify and share good practice. AET academies are actively encouraged to engage with other schools outside the Trust. Principals also make good use of the Trust's online communities to seek advice and share best practice, aimed to encourage meaningful discourse on a range of approaches to teaching and

learning. Nevertheless, there is no recognisable impact of these initiatives on Key Stage 4 outcomes.

Improvement planning at the national level aims to identify issues that are pertinent to specific regions within the Trust. However, inspectors found some of the local priorities to be too generic in nature, for example 'improving the quality of teaching' or 'developing middle leadership'.

Members of the Executive Board and academy leaders are acutely aware of the need to strengthen the quality of teaching in order to secure more good and outstanding provision. Leaders cite shortages of teachers in specific subjects and recruitment of teachers to coastal academies as two of the key challenges.

In order to address the shortages of teachers, the Trust draws on expertise from its National Teaching Schools Alliance, made up of academies and schools from within and outside the Trust. To improve their teaching, teachers with clear areas for development visit effective academies and are given sufficient time to put into practice what they have learnt.

The Trust is now focusing more on longer-term development of teachers' skills and succession planning for the future, rather than short-term intervention programmes. However, these approaches have not yet secured consistently strong improvement across all of the Trust's academies.

The Board of Trustees has seen some turbulence in recent months. Following the resignation of the Chair, a new Interim Chair has been appointed and new members are currently being sought with a view to increasing the range of expertise on the Board. Minutes of the Board's meetings are detailed and evaluative. Governance arrangements at academy level are kept under constant review. The Trust has intervened on a number of occasions and replaced an ineffective local governing board with a management board.

Insufficient detail is given on the Trust's website about the way in which the Trust is governed. There is no published scheme of delegation. The distinction between the roles and responsibilities of the board members and the trustees is not set out clearly. Levels of accountability and responsibility are not explained. The Trust does not identify which functions of governance are delegated to local governing boards. This lack of detail is replicated on academy websites which include a standardised, brief and general overview of AET governance. Academy websites provide lists of governors with attached duties, but do not give information about the delegation of responsibilities to the local governing board from the Trust. Some academy websites, but not all, link to the Trust's master funding agreement.

Safeguarding

AET academies adapt the Trust's safeguarding policy to reflect the different nature of the Local Safeguarding Children Boards across the regions. Principals report that they feel well supported by AET in responding to any safeguarding concerns.

Recommendations

The Academies Enterprise Trust must:

- ensure that all academies that are inadequate or require improvement are taking effective action to remove identified weaknesses
- as a matter of urgency, improve the achievement of disadvantaged pupils across primary and secondary academies
- ensure that pupils achieve better outcomes in English and mathematics by accelerating the progress they make over time, particularly in secondary academies
- improve attendance by reducing the proportion of unauthorised and persistent absence across all academies
- ensure that the Trust's regional priorities are more pertinent to each region's particular local challenges and needs.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew Cook".

Andrew Cook
Her Majesty's Inspector
Regional Director East of England

Annex: AET academies

Academies inspected as part of the focused inspection – section 5 inspections

Academy name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Previous inspection judgement (date)	Inspection grade in November 2015
Beacon Academy	East Midlands	Leicestershire	12/2012	requires improvement (2013)	3
Millbrook Academy	South West	Gloucestershire	01/2012	requires improvement (2013)	4
Shafton Primary Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Barnsley	12/2012	requires improvement (2013)	2
St Helen's Primary Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Barnsley	12/2012	requires improvement (2012)	3

Academies inspected as part of the focused inspection – monitoring inspections

Academy name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Most recent s5 inspection grade and date	Monitoring inspection judgement June 2015
Kingswood Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Hull	07/2013	4 (serious weaknesses) (2015)	Taking effective action
Ryde Academy	South West	Isle of Wight	09/2011	3 (2014)	Taking effective action
Swallow Hill Community College	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Leeds	07/2013	4 (serious weaknesses) (2015)	Not taking effective action

Other academies

Academy name	Region	Local authority area	Opening date as an academy	Latest inspection date	Most recent overall effectiveness grade
Anglesey Primary Academy	West Midlands	Staffordshire	01/12/2012	12/12/2013	4
Ashingdon Primary Academy	East of England	Essex	01/09/2011	28/02/2013	2
Aylward Academy	London	Enfield	01/09/2010	07/11/2012	2
Barton Hill Academy	South West	Torbay	01/09/2012	25/04/2014	2
Bexleyheath Academy	London	Bexley	01/09/2011	19/09/2013	2

Broadlands Academy	South West	Bath and North East Somerset	01/12/2012	18/06/2014	3
Brockworth Primary Academy	South West	Gloucestershire	01/09/2012	25/04/2014	2
Caldicotes Primary Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Middlesbrough	01/04/2013	19/06/2012	2
Charles Warren Academy	South East	Milton Keynes	01/09/2012	18/06/2014	2
Clacton Coastal Academy	East of England	Essex	01/09/2009	19/11/2014	2
Columbus School and College	East of England	Essex	01/05/2012	03/07/2014	1
Cordeaux Academy	East Midlands	Lincolnshire	01/01/2013	10/12/2014	3
Cottingley Primary Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Leeds	01/12/2012	28/11/2014	3
Everest Community Academy	South East	Hampshire	01/09/2011	18/06/2015	3
Felixstowe Academy	East of England	Suffolk	01/09/2011	03/06/2015	3
Feversham Primary Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Bradford	01/11/2012	26/09/2014	2
Firth Park Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Sheffield	01/08/2013	17/06/2015	2
Four Dwellings Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	01/03/2013	30/01/2015	3
Four Dwellings Primary Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	01/01/2013	20/11/2014	3
Greensward Academy	East of England	Essex	01/09/2008	11/06/2014	2
Greenwood Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	01/01/2013	13/11/2014	2
Hall Road Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Kingston upon Hull City of	01/09/2012	19/06/2014	2
Hamford Primary Academy	East of England	Essex	01/04/2012	26/03/2014	2
Hazelwood Academy	South West	Swindon	01/06/2013	26/02/2015	2
Hillsview Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Redcar and Cleveland	01/09/2014	NULL	NULL
Kingsley Academy	London	Hounslow	01/04/2013	08/05/2015	3
Langer Primary Academy	East of England	Suffolk	01/05/2012	30/01/2014	3
Lea Forest Primary Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	01/12/2012	12/11/2014	3
Maltings Academy	East of England	Essex	01/09/2008	05/03/2015	1
Meadstead Primary Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Barnsley	01/06/2013	26/02/2015	2
Montgomery	West Midlands	Birmingham	01/10/2012	25/09/2014	2

Primary Academy					
New Rickstones Academy	East of England	Essex	01/09/2008	14/01/2015	2
Newington Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Kingston upon Hull City of	01/09/2012	12/06/2014	2
Newlands Academy	London	Southwark	01/09/2013	29/11/2012	2
Nightingale Academy	London	Enfield	01/09/2010	12/06/2014	3
Noel Park Primary School	London	Haringey	01/09/2012	27/06/2014	2
North Ormesby Primary Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Middlesbrough	01/10/2012	20/05/2015	1
North Thoresby Primary Academy	East Midlands	Lincolnshire	01/07/2013	29/11/2012	2
Offa's Mead Academy	South West	Gloucestershire	01/09/2012	27/06/2014	2
Percy Shurmer Academy	West Midlands	Birmingham	01/09/2012	19/06/2014	3
Plumberow Primary School	East of England	Essex	01/09/2011	06/03/2014	2
Richmond Park Academy	London	Richmond upon Thames	01/09/2010	25/10/2012	2
Sandown Bay Academy	South East	Isle of Wight	01/09/2011	16/10/2014	3
Severn View Academy	South West	Gloucestershire	01/09/2012	18/06/2014	2
Sir Herbert Leon Academy	South East	Milton Keynes	01/09/2012	03/07/2014	3
St James the Great Academy	South East	Kent	01/04/2012	21/03/2014	2
Tamworth Enterprise College and AET Academy	West Midlands	Staffordshire	01/09/2012	18/06/2014	3
Tendring Enterprise Studio School	East of England	Essex	31/08/2012	19/03/2014	3
Tendring Technology College	East of England	Essex	01/08/2011	27/09/2013	1
The Green Way Academy	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Kingston upon Hull City of	01/09/2012	16/07/2014	4
The New Forest Academy	South East	Hampshire	01/09/2012	12/12/2013	4
The Pioneer School	East of England	Essex	01/06/2012	20/06/2014	2
The Rawlett School (An AET Academy)	West Midlands	Staffordshire	01/09/2012	27/02/2013	2
The Ridge Academy	South West	Gloucestershire	01/09/2012	03/07/2013	2
The Utterby Primary School	East Midlands	Lincolnshire	01/07/2013	29/11/2012	2
Trinity Primary Academy	London	Haringey	01/09/2012	05/06/2014	3
Westerings Primary Academy	East of England	Essex	01/09/2011	27/04/2012	2

Winton Community Academy	South East	Hampshire	01/11/2012	04/12/2013	4
Unity City Academy ¹	North East, Yorkshire and Humber	Middlesbrough	01/09/2002	15/03/2013	2
Wishmore Cross Academy	South East	Surrey	01/09/2012	16/07/2014	2

¹ Unity City Academy became an AET-sponsored academy in January 2012.