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Rob Tarn CBE, Chief Executive Officer (CEO)
Mark Sanders OBE, Chair of the Board of Trustees
Northern Education Trust
North Shore Academy
Talbot Street
Stockton-on-Tees
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Dear Mr Sanders and Mr Tarn

Summary evaluation of Northern Education Trust

Following the summary evaluation of Northern Education Trust (or 'the trust') in March 2023, when I was accompanied by Eleanor Belfield and Tim Scargill-Knight, His Majesty's Inspectors, I am writing on behalf of His 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 7 to 10 March 2023. 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 1 of this summary evaluation, seven schools were inspected between March 2022 and January 2023. All these inspections were carried out under either section 5 or 8 of the Education Act 2005 (the Act), as amended.

The inspection outcomes were:

- Two schools had their first graded inspection as a sponsored academy. One of these schools was judged to be outstanding and the other was judged to be good. In both cases, the predecessor schools had been judged to be inadequate.

- Four further schools had a graded inspection. Two of these schools were judged to be outstanding and two were judged to be good.
- One school had an ungraded inspection and continued to be good.

Over the course of the on-site visit to the trust, discussions were held with you, the deputy CEO, senior executive principals and other senior and operational staff. We also met with curriculum leaders, subject directors and leaders of the 'staff college' that trains staff and governors. In order to evaluate governance, we met with members, trustees, including the chair of the board of trustees, and some local academy councils. We visited nine trust schools that had not been inspected during stage 1 of the summary evaluation process and spoke to the principals at four further schools not inspected during stage 1 by telephone. At your request, we briefly visited two schools that were inspected during stage 1. In each of these schools, we met with the principals and other leaders that lead on particular aspects of school improvement across the trust. We also spoke to pupils in some of the schools we visited.

Context

Northern Education Trust was established in 2012. The trust had a focused review from Ofsted in 2017. The CEO started his role shortly after this focused review in September 2017. The deputy CEO started her role in June 2018. Northern Education Trust is a multi-academy trust that serves 22 schools. Of these schools, 10 are primary schools and 12 are secondary schools. The schools are located in 11 local authorities: Stockton-on-Tees, Redcar and Cleveland, Calderdale, Hartlepool, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Sunderland, Bolton, Barnsley, Bradford, Gateshead and Northumberland. Hetton Academy joined the trust in September 2022; its predecessor school, Hetton School, was judged to require improvement in September 2021.

The trust's schools vary in size from just below 120 pupils on roll at Whitecliffe Academy to around 1,600 pupils at Walbottle Academy.

Many of the schools in the trust serve communities with high levels of deprivation. Nearly half of the pupils in the trust are eligible to receive the government's pupil premium funding, compared to about one quarter of pupils nationally. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is also above average. These proportions vary from school to school within the trust.

The trust board is made up of nine trustees. This group is responsible for the strategic oversight and performance of the trust and its schools. Two trustees are also members.

Main findings

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

- Six schools are judged to be outstanding
- 15 schools are judged to be good
- One school has yet to be inspected since joining the trust. The predecessor school required improvement.

Impact of the trust on its academies – governance and delegation

- Since the last focused review by Ofsted, trustees and other leaders have transformed how the trust operates. This has, in turn, transformed the schools in the trust and the experiences and life chances of the pupils who attend them. Trustees have a very strong moral purpose to support pupils in all schools. Schools that have recently joined the trust have undergone monumental improvements that are life changing for pupils and staff. All schools in the trust that have been inspected are now judged to be good or outstanding.
- Governance is strong. Trustees are highly skilled in their roles. The different committees challenge leaders to improve the educational offer for pupils in each school. Trustees consider the overview of the trust's performance and 'deep dive' into a particular focus such as attendance. Members, as an arms-length body, check that trustees are doing this successfully. Trustees recognise the importance of a bespoke local academy council for every individual school. Currently, the trust is moving from some schools sharing local governors to each school having its own local academy council to provide local scrutiny and quality assurance.
- Leaders' vision that 'we are the trust' is exceptionally well understood and implemented by staff across all schools. Leaders see the trust as 'one school over many sites'. There is no real distinction between trust leaders and school leaders. Leaders at all levels are ambitious for pupils. They walk the schools regularly. They talk to pupils and gather detailed information about how well pupils are learning the curriculum and how they are feeling.
- Pupils also feel the benefit of being part of Northern Education Trust. They enjoy getting together with pupils from across the trust at events such as 'NETfest', a concert that celebrates the performing arts. Leaders communicate well with the wider community that each school serves. Leaders, including

trustees, acting on their evaluation of the trust's effectiveness, are developing the way they gather the views of parents and carers.

- All leaders, abiding by the trust's mantra, are 'outcomes-focused, child-centred.' They ensure that staff across the trust focus on the pupils and that they are successful in what they do. Trustees have an accurate view of how well pupils achieve. Overall, published outcomes across the trust are exceptionally strong. Trustees challenge leaders to improve all the other aspects of education and personal development that are important for pupils. This includes pupils' confidence to move from primary to secondary school or into further education, training or employment.

Impact of the trust on its academies – leadership and management

- Leaders, including trustees, use their 'NORTHERN' model for school improvement. This model starts with 'no excuses' and 'outstanding leadership'. In 2017, trust leaders needed to secure improvements quickly. Many ways of working across the trust were prescribed. Through exceptional leadership from the CEO and other leaders, staff are now much more able to contribute to trust policies and do so throughout the trust.
- Leaders use an '80:20' model across the schools. Leaders use the '80' for consistent trust strategies such as expectations for learning, curriculum and attendance policies. All staff contribute to the trust's strategies. Leaders in schools ensure these methods work for their school community by devising local '20' variations. When these local variations are successful, leaders find out why and, sometimes, incorporate them into the '80' that all schools use. This is part of the 'prescribed innovation' that trust leaders encourage and quality assure.
- The work of the corporate teams across the trust, including finance, human resources, data and estates, is exceptional. They too use the NORTHERN model in their work. They help to ensure that leaders spend money well on improving facilities and educational resources in each school. Because of their expertise, other staff across the trust can focus on improving pupils' life chances.
- Staff at all levels are effusive about working in the trust. Many of them have had multiple opportunities to develop in their roles and achieve promotions. Leaders provide high-quality training for staff and governors through Northern Education Trust's staff college.

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

- There is an ambitious and trust-wide curriculum in place. Individual schools add a flavour of their local context and community to this curriculum using the 80:20 model. Leaders used research from cognitive science to design the curriculum to build up pupils' schema of knowledge. Leaders, based on rigorous quality assurance processes and never resting on their laurels, refine and develop this highly effective curriculum continuously. They are currently working with staff across primary schools to refine some of the curriculums, and how they are implemented, in the foundation subjects.
- Reading runs through the curriculum in each school like letters through a stick of rock. Leaders have prioritised reading in every subject and at every point in the curriculum. There is a relentless focus for pupils of all ages, and at all stages, to read fluently and enjoy the experience. All primary schools use the same phonics programme. Staff share their expertise easily. Pupils in secondary schools, who need support, get sharp and focused reading interventions that are assessed regularly. Trustees have invested in significant resources to ensure all schools have a plentiful supply of books that pupils relish reading in the trust's 'reading routes' strategy.
- Leaders ensure that the curriculum is implemented in a way that supports pupils with specific barriers to learning. Teachers use consistent pedagogical techniques that help pupils to remember important knowledge that they will need for future learning. Pupils with SEND benefit from the clear and precise actions and targets in their individual learning plans that have been developed across the trust. Pupils with SEND and disadvantaged pupils achieve remarkably well. For example, 70% of disadvantaged pupils in Year 6 achieved the combined standard in reading, writing and mathematics in 2022. This was well above the national average of 43%. Pupils with SEND in secondary schools made, on average, the same progress as all pupils nationally from Year 7 to Year 11.
- Leaders have constructed assessment systems that are carefully aligned to the curriculum. They use assessment data judiciously across the trust. Leaders know how well pupils are keeping up at any time. Leaders regularly check the progress that pupils are making and identify any gaps that they have. Timely support is provided. Trustees also have access to assessment information and question leaders about it in their meetings. Everyone remains focused on the holistic success of pupils.

Impact of the trust on its academies – Behaviour and Attitudes

- Leaders have ensured that all staff across the trust understand the 'expectations for learning' policy. This policy is built on a praise culture that pupils and staff fully subscribe to and enjoy using. Corridors and classrooms in every school echo with the sound of regular applause. Pupils cannot wait to show off their work in their 'PROUD' moments across the week.
- While the trust's use of behaviour strategies is remarkably consistent across all schools, leaders in schools still create new and innovative ways of carrying them out in their own particular context. New ideas such as 'interventions by interactions' (where staff place themselves through school to talk to pupils about particular topics) catch on quickly and become part of the trust model.
- Leaders recognise the importance of high attendance. Effective strategies to address attendance issues are used consistently across the trust. Attendance is improving overall for all pupils and particularly for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND. Leaders check the attendance of pupils in their weekly inclusion meetings. Every school keeps a vulnerable pupils' register to keep a close eye on pupils' attendance and well-being.
- Leaders have designed an 'iAspire' strategy to help pupils develop important life skills and resilience. Pupils across the trust benefit from the experiences provided that enable them to organise themselves, their resources and their time. One such experience is presenting to a class or group. Leaders show attention to detail when planning these experiences. For example, the pupils use official ballot boxes when conducting the democratic pupil elections that take place regularly at polling stations across the trust.
- Leaders and staff are committed to providing the best possible quality of education for every pupil. Each secondary school has a 'Bridge' that supports pupils who are struggling to attend school. The Bridge builds pupils' confidence and quickly gets them back in the swing of classroom life. Pupils who are suspended from school get support to try to prevent another suspension. The number of suspensions across the trust is reducing rapidly and has nearly halved this year compared to the last academic year.

Safeguarding

Leaders have developed a culture in which they want safeguarding to be 'even better'. Their work to keep pupils safe goes far beyond compliance with basic requirements and into many innovative ways of ensuring pupils are safe in school and in the community. For example, information communication monitoring systems

provide leaders with detailed information about possible risks from internet searches. This is tracked in school and at home on school devices. Leaders quickly respond to incidents. They use their knowledge to inform their online safety curriculum.

Each school has their own annual safeguarding planner. The planner maps out staff training, and what pupils will be taught throughout the year. The trust's community of learners, both pupils and adults, is highly informed about local contextual risks. These risks include staying safe in railway stations in cities or near water in rural areas. Pupils are taught about these risks through the carefully designed and comprehensive 'Life' curriculum.

Schools inspected at stage 1 cited effective staff training and strong governance to ensure safeguarding being at the forefront of everyone's minds. Leaders' vision to work closely with external agencies for the benefit of children and families is carried out well by staff.

The trustees' precise and detailed risk register is externally audited to give another level of reassurance about the safeguarding procedures throughout the trust. This goes beyond basic compliance and looks at a wide range of features to ensure schools are doing everything that they can. For example, each school has to clearly show what they are doing to improve the attendance for pupils who are persistently absent. This is included in the risk register. The impact is evaluated by leaders. Risk assessments are checked regularly.

Recommendations

- Refine the systems for collecting the views of parents and carers throughout the trust so that trustees and leaders respond to feedback quickly.
- Fully implement leaders' plans to review the structure of local academy councils so that each one provides the local scrutiny desired by trustees.

Yours sincerely

Matthew Knox
His Majesty's Inspector

Annex: Academies that are part of the trust

School Information				Most recent inspection		
URN	School name	Local Authority	Date joined trust	Does the inspection relate to the school in its current form?	Inspection date	OE grade
148135	Walbottle Academy	Newcastle upon Tyne	01/09/2020	Yes	25/01/2023	Good
147541	Freebrough Academy	Redcar and Cleveland	01/09/2019	Yes	10/01/2023	Outstanding
139673	The Grangefield Academy	Stockton-on-Tees	01/01/2014	Yes	01/12/2022	Outstanding
143618	Badger Hill Academy	Redcar and Cleveland	01/09/2019	Yes	18/11/2022	Good
140172	Abbey Park Academy	Calderdale	01/12/2013	Yes	21/09/2022	Good
136135	Kearsley Academy	Bolton	01/09/2010	Yes	17/03/2022	Good
139405	Dyke House Sports and Technology College	Hartlepool	01/04/2013	Yes	16/03/2022	Outstanding
141686	Manor Community Academy	Hartlepool	01/03/2015	Yes	23/09/2021	Good
136146	North Shore Academy	Stockton-on-Tees	01/09/2012	Yes	08/07/2021	Outstanding
140002	The Blyth Academy	Northumberland	01/10/2013	Yes	07/07/2021	Good
140979	Kirk Balk Academy	Barnsley	01/03/2015	Yes	22/01/2020	Good
135878	Red House Academy	Sunderland	01/10/2014	Yes	15/01/2020	Good
139959	The Oak Tree Academy	Stockton-on-Tees	01/09/2013	Yes	26/09/2019	Good
143619	Whitecliffe Academy	Redcar and Cleveland	01/09/2019	No	11/07/2019	Good

140519	Norton Primary Academy	Stockton-on-Tees	01/01/2014	Yes	05/04/2019	Good
141185	Thorp Academy	Gateshead	01/09/2014	Yes	04/03/2019	Good
139229	Merlin Top Primary Academy	Bradford	01/04/2013	Yes	28/03/2019	Outstanding
139270	Mount Pellon Primary Academy	Calderdale	01/04/2013	Yes	23/01/2019	Good
138995	Hilton Primary Academy	Newcastle upon Tyne	01/12/2012	Yes	08/06/2018	Outstanding
138399	The Ferns Primary Academy	Bolton	01/09/2012	Yes	09/06/2016	Good
140072	Frederick Nattrass Primary Academy	Stockton-on-Tees	01/09/2013	Yes	18/05/2016	Good
149235	Hetton Academy	Sunderland	01/09/2022	No	-	Not yet inspected

*Schools highlighted received either a graded, ungraded or monitoring inspection in stage 1 of the MAT SE