

# **DfE Multi- Academy Trust Growth Readiness Check Report**

## **Preface**

Oasis Community Learning were invited by the Department for Education to lead a pilot Growth Readiness Check to work with the Elliot Foundation (TEF). The growth checks are structured around five key themes:

- school improvement: standards and track record of improving schools;
- people and leadership;
- risk management;
- financial sustainability
- governance.

The process followed was set out below:

### **Day One**

A reading and preparation day

### **Day Two**

Visits to five Academies and interviews with the CEO, senior leaders and learning walks  
Telephone discussions with Trustees, Senior Directors, and Chairs of local Governing bodies

### **Day Three**

Discussions with CEO, Founder, and other directors at the Elliot Foundation National office

### **Day Four**

Writing the final report

The following colleagues from Oasis Community Learning were involved in the process:

John Murphy - CEO of Oasis Community Learning

Joy Madeiros - Group CEO of Oasis Community Learning

Chris Chamberlain – Oasis Regional Director for the South West

Ben Cowdrey – Oasis National Press Officer

At all stages Oasis colleagues were accompanied by Wendy Pritchard-Smith who acted as an observer throughout the process. The Elliot Foundation were very open, welcoming and transparent with the whole process and gave complete and open access to all information and their Academies. We would like to extend our thanks for their kind hospitality at all stages of the process.

## **Introduction**

This report will therefore focus on the main five areas:

- school improvement: standards and track record of improving schools;
- people and leadership;
- risk management;
- financial sustainability
- governance
- Potential lines of enquiry for the Trust to consider

## **Academy Improvement: Standards and Track record of Improving Academies**

The Elliot Foundation has a strong and proven track record of ensuring their Students and Academies over time make good progress from low starting points. The evidence for this is clear and well demonstrated by the following facts:

### **Improving Academies:**

- Of the 22 primary academies in the MAT 15 have been inspected by OFSTED of these:
  - 93% are now good or better
- In 2011-12 75% of Academies in the MAT were either below the floor standard or in a category

### **Standards:**

#### **2016 data:**

- In 2016 48% of all pupils reached the combined RWM national expected standard. The national average was 53%
- 45% of pupils are disadvantaged and 47% of pupils are EAL
- The RWM KS2 forecast for 2017 is 60%. This is above the 2016 national average
- In 2016, compared to other MATs – progress across KS2 in Reading (-0.9) was below average by a significant amount, progress in Writing (+2) was above the national average by a significant amount and in Maths progress (+0.7) was close to the national average

#### **2015 data:**

- In 2015 77% of pupils reached level 4b in combined RWM. This was just below the national average for all pupils was 80%

### **Academy Improvement:**

Once a school has joined the Foundation, a baseline review takes place to highlight in detail the main areas for Academy improvement. This is undertaken by the Regional Directors. They then support the academy intensively to make the necessary changes and accelerated improvements.

Annually each academy receives six visits from a Progress Partner. There is a cycle of visits beginning in the first half of the autumn term focusing on standards and the development of the Academy improvement plan. In each subsequent visit, the Progress Partner reviews progress made by the academy against the key issues for improvement

Progress Partners are sometimes the Regional Directors – this is often the case when academies require intensive support. Visits increase to more than six each year when academies require additional support. Activities undertaken by Progress Partners or Regional Directors when they visit academies include: book looks/work scrutiny, lesson observations, data analysis, working with senior or middle leaders, support for groups of teachers and training for the Local Governing Body.

During each Progress Partner visit the Single central register is reviewed. Safeguarding has not been a concern in Ofsted inspections of academies within the MAT. However, there does not appear to be whole MAT approach to ensuring that all aspects of safeguarding are in place.

The MAT has a policy explaining its challenge and support process. Leaders are now considering the merits of moving to peer reviews in the future.

Key to membership of the MAT is the willingness to share and collaborate. Academy to Academy support is strong across the MAT. Leaders facilitate opportunities for colleagues to share best practice regularly, particularly in Year 2, 6 and Early Years. Principals meet with the MAT CEO twice each year so that he can share the strategic direction. Principals also have a two-day conference once a year focusing on professional development. Principals are encouraged to attend each of these. In each region, there are Regional Hubs where Principals can meet to discuss current issues and share best practice.

MAT priorities are shared with academy leaders through the Trust Improvement Plan (TIP). Aspects of the TIP (e.g. 80% of teaching good or better) are regularly included in academy improvement plans and there is a specific requirement from MAT leaders for the TIP key issues to be included.

A detailed risk register is maintained nationally, monitored weekly and MAT leaders communicate regularly to review key risks and update support plans.

The appointment of experienced Maths and English specialists as Principals, who were previously in Local Authority subject advisory roles, has enabled the delivery of specific maths and English training sessions for colleagues in academies across the MAT.

Data is now held centrally and all academies use the ScholarPack for pupil tracking data. Leaders are keen to develop a dashboard from the data. A comprehensive MAT wide pupil data tracking system is still under development.

Progress in reading was slower than in the maths and writing in 2016. Leaders say that reasons for this varied from academy to academy. Because of these variances there was no specific action plan for Reading however individual academies developed actions as part of their Academy Improvement Plan. Reading has also been focus of the regular moderation meetings for Y2, 6 and EY.

In summary the Foundation has a strong and proven track record of success and is well placed to grow and has the capacity within its embedded educational processes to support new schools to the Foundation.

## **2. People and Leadership**

The Elliot Foundation presents as a passionate and engaged Multi Academy Trust who have the students and staff at the heart of their core values, vision and mission. From the CEO to Academy Leaders there is a sense of shared ownership and pride in being part of the TEF, so people and leadership are at the heart of the organisation.

It is very clear they believe their academies should create a safe space, set rules, raise the expectations of every student regardless of their starting point. TEF treats Academies in the same way teachers treat pupils; TEF believes in people and wants to raise expectations. They have a firm held belief there are no failing schools, every school has strengths and can improve.

It is clear from all the interviews and meetings that TEF supports primary leaders to feel good, are cherished and take ownership in being part of the Federation. The feedback from leaders was inspiring, and 93% positive Ofsted's was evidence that the approach is working. Executive Principals, Principals and Deputies spoken to all believe in the work of their academy and Trust and the positive impact that they are having.

The Trust has a number of clear principles that come through their working practices:

**Leadership** – the CEO is developing a model that prioritises the needs of principals, teachers and ultimately pupils.

**School to school support** – TEF Academies work closely with other local schools, making a larger positive impact by TEF.

**Innovation** – Academies are given the support and space to develop innovative techniques to the benefit of pupils, which they then share with others.

**Federation** – At a local level, federated Academies under an Executive Principal encourage sharing of best practice and development of new leaders

During the academy visits, the attitudes and views of the Principals and team we met are recorded below:

**Strengths:**

- Principals chose this MAT because it is primary focused, child centred, supportive and flexible; Academies are allowed to be individual based on the needs of the children and community,
- The MAT is, “So much more positive than in our last few months with the LA”. You are “not on your own”
- The MAT provides effective challenge and support. Principals welcome the support given by Regional Directors during inspections. They also value the input from Progress Partners – whether they are also the academy’s Regional Director or an additional colleague. Regional Directors have provided support with HR issues. They hold the Principals successfully to account, but do this in a supportive manner.
- Principals welcome the MAT non-negotiables but also the freedom to use their own professionalism in leading and improving their academies
- HR support is excellent
- Estates support is strong
- Principals value the Special Interest Groups and like the fact that these are chaired by the person with the strongest knowledge, experience or specific skills in the group
- The moderation groups, which meet each half term for Years 2 and 6 as well as for Early Years, are said to be valuable in enabling the sharing of best practice and accuracy in levelling work
- The Principals see local Governing Bodies as useful structures as they provide additional challenge and support. There are annual national conferences for LGBs that Principals say the Chairs of LGB find useful.
- The 5% top slice is justified in the Principal’s view
- Ofsted readiness sessions are proving to be very useful
- Regional Directors are readily available to the Principals
- The CEO is very approachable

**Potential areas for development:**

- Consistency in financial leadership following a succession of changes in finance directors
- As the MAT grows colleagues are concerned that Regional Directors will not know the individual Academies well enough and therefore they would like to be reassured that additional capacity will be in place

A strong feature of the development of the Elliot Foundation is the strategic development its leaders and people through the Continuing Professional Development. A wide ranging and comprehensive programme of CPD is available to staff across the trust. Academies, principals, senior leaders all consider CPD and the leadership of CPD to be an organisational strength.

The formal CPD develops NQTs, RQTS, Middle leaders, senior leaders, and aspiring heads. For example, CPD for NQTs is a mix of trust wide and contextual. TEF subsidises the CPD programme. It is clear from speaking to all colleagues that the Trust is encouraging collaboration at every level, not reinventing the wheel, and encouraging new academies to continue to use their previous links.

Another aspect of CPD is the development of 'Expert Teachers'; both CPD and a way to share effective practice. Leaders and experts on specific subjects as identified by the Directors and Principals and the colleagues go into a directory for others to use depending on their need. It is therefore strategically intentional to try to make it demand led, not supply led system, with any gaps filled in by external providers.

TEF is aware of its potential strengths and weaknesses thanks to progress reports, and principals sharing information with each other at regional hubs. At a more strategic layer, directors use feedback from PPs, RDs, general attainment data and the Trust's main priorities to inform how CPD is directed.

National strategy is evaluated through Principal's feedback. Directors ensure their strategy responds to the feedback, which goes to the Board. By using the annual questionnaires, the MAT secures 'sign up' and ownership by the principals.

The CEO and senior leaders constantly spoke about having shared power to ensure that there is not one point of weakness in the organisation. Responsibility at academy level is shared by leaders to encourage new leadership development. Executive Leadership structures are being explored by the MAT to accelerate the improvement of academies where leadership has been ineffective.

### **3. Risk Management:**

This is a key strength of the Trust that holds highly detailed and comprehensive risk registers of all its Academies, National services and mitigating risks. The risks are discussed on a weekly basis and therefore any risks or issues are dealt with swiftly and are kept at the front of leader's attention.

Leaders share the accountability and responsibility for risk at a number of levels. For example, the CEO shares authority, for instance giving numerous people a veto on expansion and growth plans.

Detailed plans are in place that set how growth will be approached to mitigate risk and these plans have been in place over the last year. The plans detail costs and staffing structures that will be required to maximise the capacity of the organisation to meet the new demand of new Academies.

The sponsor capacity assessment conveys clear evidence that the Elliot foundation know itself well, is constantly evaluating its performance and has clear plans in place to tackle the main risks.

The Director for Estates and Health and safety has outsourced support and therefore the Trust has effective technical advice in dealing with all associated risks such as Business continuity planning, incident management, and Health and safety audits.

Equally a strategy capital programme is place to ensure the property and assets are well maintained going forward.

### **4. Financial Management:**

The CEO has taken robust action to secure the appointment of a new Finance Director (FD) and was open that to date there had been a succession of finance directors over the last few years.

The new FD has a clear strategic view of how she is approaching her new role and understands the need to ensure there is tighter financial accounting and management within the regions. She is wisely auditing staff skills and competencies as she has just started the role. She has identified there are sound one year financial academy budgets in place and plans in place to introduce 3-5 year academy budgets.

## **5. Governance**

From Trustees to leaders to Local Governing bodies there is a clear commitment and passion to the Trust and to ensure Governance of the Trust works well.

Whilst there is a clear scheme of delegation, the Trust is wisely reconsidering where statutory and accountability and responsibility lies as the Trust grows. The Trust wants to ensure there is a strong sense of localism, the challenge is how to maintain a golden thread through the organisation that ensures consistency. There is a wide diversion of opinion, but this creates a healthy tension in the debate.

The Trustees are committed to making a decision on this as they recognise tensions in systems leadership could occur as the size of the organisation grow. An overall view was that the direction of travel would be to:

- Bring in more Regional Directors
- Reduce the role of the LGB for Principal's performance
- Ensure there is ownership of this decision with the Principals
- Potentially regionalise some LGBs

All colleagues were clear that these structures and systems were dependent on getting exactly the right capacity at a national and local level.

## **6. Potential Lines of Enquiry for the Trust to Consider:**

**Ethos** - There are concerns from the CEO that expansion will mean the loss of TEF's ethos and values. The lack of formal, stated aims and values increases the likelihood of this and as such the website could be a more powerful tool to share these key messages. The CEO and Founder champion and embody the ethos, but a key challenge remains if this is will be maintained as the organisation grows.

**Governance** – As MAT expands, role and authority of the LGBs is being reviewed and therefore how and where professional governance sits with the regional directors or with the LGBs.

**Finances** – TEF does not currently provide enough robust financial management of its Academies and does not provide information to principals about the immediate 3-5 years ahead. A new financial Director has clear plans to address these issues systematically.

**Standards Committee** – This is a new committee that appears to have very large remit, but does not yet meet regularly. So it's role is yet to be embedded. Does the Standards Committee have the time and resources it needs to adequately hold leaders to account?

**Capacity** – Principals are concerned about capacity of senior leaders as the organisation grows. The CEO is rightly concerned about this, and has clear growth models in place depending on the scale of growth going forward.

**Trust Priorities and Growth** – There appears to be a lack of knowledge at Academy level on the priorities of the Trust. As the group grows there are questions as to how the priorities will be best communicated consistently.

### **In Summary**

The Elliot Foundation is well-led and there is a relentless commitment to evaluate its systems and structures to ensure it achieves its vision for its young people. The Elliot Foundation is in a secure position to grow. The Trust is very clear that Governance structures need to be reviewed and revised and financial capacity need to be prioritised.

J Murphy

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