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I wanted to thank you and the Committee for last week’s constructive hearing about the academy system and the role of Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs). As the Committee reflected, there are many outstanding and good academies, which play an important role in improving educational standards. I highlighted to the committee that there are now over 450,000 children studying in sponsored academies rated Good or Outstanding, typically schools that were previously falling.

During the hearing, a number of commitments were made to write to the committee with further information. This letter provides this information or an update on our progress in obtaining it.

We discussed the important role played by parent representatives in the governance of academies. I would like to clarify that all multi-academy trusts (MATs) are required to have at least two elected parent representatives. This may be at trust board level or alternatively on each local governing body. It is for the trust board to decide where parental representation best sits. Where there are no local governing bodies in the trust, the parental representation will sit at the trust board level. Many trusts have parent fora in addition to the formal governance structure, which enable feedback to be provided.

Boards are required to provide certain details on those involved in governance, as volunteered by individuals, via the ‘Get information about Schools’ system. If there are concerns about compliance of the legislation on parental representation then these can be raised through the trust’s complaints procedure, which should be published on the school’s website. If an individual has followed this procedure and remains unsatisfied with the response then they can complain to the Department. The process for making a complaint to the Department is set out at https://www.gov.uk/complain-about-school. Individuals can also complain to Ofsted if they think that a school is not properly run and needs to be inspected. We will continue to engage with relevant stakeholders and boards themselves about how we can ensure the requirement is fully understood and implemented.
We want parents and carers to be involved in their child's education. Our expectations of how schools and MATs engage with parents, carers and the communities they serve are reinforced in both the Governance Handbook and our guidance on effective practice in MATs (Multi-academy trusts: good practice guidance and expectations for growth). This makes clear that boards should be able to demonstrate how the methods they have used to seek parents’ and carers' views have influenced their decision-making.

The Committee asked a number of questions about how parents' views are taken into account when selecting sponsors for new academies or when transferring academies to another trust. You personally highlighted the situation where the predecessor school has a special educational needs (SEN) specialism.

Where a maintained school is judged to be inadequate our first priority is to secure a sponsor with sufficient capacity to drive rapid improvement. RSCs, on behalf of the Secretary of State, are ultimately responsible for decisions on sponsorship. In doing this they take into account a number of factors, including that the sponsor has the capability and track-record to secure the best possible outcomes for pupils at the school and any relevant specialist expertise needed to support that specific school, for example, in relation to SEND.

We expect in-coming sponsors to work closely with the existing school community, parents and carers, and to involve them in decision making as set out in the Governance Handbook and other guidance. Where an in-coming sponsor wishes to make a ‘significant change’, including changes affecting provision reserved for pupils with SEN, they must meet the requirements of the significant change process. This includes undertaking a fair and open local consultation with all those who could be affected by the proposed change and ensuring that the proposal takes account of all responses received. Comments or objections can be made on any grounds and opportunities for feedback should be given at all public and stakeholder meetings.

Finally, we committed to provide the committee with information on the school improvement activity undertaken by the Bright Tribe Trust in the North of England. Funding from the northern fund for academy sponsors was awarded to Bright Tribe Trust (BTT) on 4 November 2015. This funding was to support BTT in building their capacity and capability to create new hubs of academies, which would take on under-performing schools from the areas of greatest need across the RSC North region. We asked the trust to take on three to five maintained schools or academies in the region, of which the majority should have been previously judged 'Inadequate' by Ofsted and in need of improvement.

Since this time, three additional academies have opened under Bright Tribe's sponsorship, with two of these previously having 'Inadequate' Ofsted judgements – Grindon Hall Christian School (inspected November 2014) and Haltwhistle Upper Academy (inspected May 2015). Grindon Hall's overall Ofsted category has since improved to 'Requires Improvement', with Haltwhistle Upper Academy's most recent Section 8 inspection stating 'leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures' (both inspected March 2017). In addition, the trust undertook further
extensive work supporting a number of other ‘Inadequate’ schools in the RSC North region, including Haydon Bridge High School. This work, however, has not led to the school joining the trust due an ongoing assessment of the school’s long-term viability.

The majority of the funding that BTT received was used to support the development of the trust’s staffing capacity. This covered a number of areas, including the recruitment of senior educational leaders, as well as financial, marketing, legal, human resources, facilities, analytical and strategic expertise. It included the appointment of an Assistant Director of Schools in August 2015, Gary Kelly, and the recruitment of Executive Principals, including Dr Judith Greene and Darren Glover. The funding was also used to enable senior trust figures, including the Chief Operating Officer, to undertake work across a number of schools in the RSC North region.

I hope this information is useful to the Committee and I look forward to working with you in the future.

THEODORE AGNEW