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The Rt Hon Damian Hinds MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London,
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20th August 2018

Dear Secretary of State

Converting Schools to Academies

West Sussex County Council recognises the improvements which have been made as a result of the Government's programme of school academisation. There are a number of successful academies in West Sussex, and we seek to work with them to ensure that our children have the best start in life.

There are, however, a number of areas where, in light of our practical experience of academisation over the last few years, we believe the system could be reformed to ensure that it provides value for money, and is transparent and focused on delivering the best outcomes for children. At our Full County Council meeting on 20 July a Notice of Motion on academisation was debated and agreed with cross-party support. The Motion called for an enhanced role for Local Authorities in improving the performance of failing academies.

West Sussex County Council welcomes the Public Accounts Committee's recent report on "Converting Schools to Academies", and the recommendations that the Committee makes for reform. We recognise the challenges the PAC highlights with regard to small, rural primary schools, that your Department should consider if it should provide a contribution to Local Authorities to cover the cost of conversion, and that all Academy Trusts, as part of their funding agreements, should be required to work with Local Authorities on school place planning and school admissions, including for vulnerable groups of children.

Poorly-performing Academies

In its report, the PAC also makes recommendations with regard to high profile Academy Trust failures that have been costly to the taxpayer and damaging to children's education. In particular the PAC calls on your Department to *"review academy trust failures to identify lessons for its scrutiny arrangements. It should write to us by October 2018 setting out the main reasons for the failures and how it proposes to strengthen its scrutiny of prospective academies and sponsors to ensure that risks are being well managed before and after conversion."*

The recently published Local Government Association report "Improving Schools" highlighted the impact Local Authority intervention can have when a school is

failing, with 91 per cent of council maintained schools now Good or Outstanding. Maintained schools outperform academies in every Regional Schools Commissioner region. By contrast, the most recent Department for Education (DfE) figures showed that in terms of GCSE results, over half of Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) had Progress 8 scores that were below the national average for state-funded mainstream schools and 45 percent of MATs were performing at significantly below national averages¹.

As well as improving standards in all schools, councils have an excellent track record in turning around failing schools. Before recent legislation to require all inadequate maintained schools to convert to academy status, some stayed with their council until their next Ofsted inspection. Comparison with previously maintained schools that became sponsored academies shows that since 2013 a larger proportion of council maintained schools (75.7 per cent) are now Good or Outstanding, compared to sponsor-led academies (59.4 per cent).²

Given the compelling evidence, it is hard to understand why Local Authorities do not have a more formal role in the improvement journey when academies are not performing as expected. We would ask that, in your response to the PAC's recommendation, you consider the role that Local Authorities can play when academy schools are failing. This could be by allowing Local Authorities to create MATs to take on failing academies, or by providing greater powers of intervention, challenge and support to Local Authorities, including the introduction of a mechanism to enable academies to be returned to Local Authority maintained status, where the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Local Authority agree this to be in the best interests of the individual school in question.

We are proud of the work that we are doing in West Sussex to improve the outcomes for our children, and of the improvement that has been delivered nationally as a result of our Government's reforms. We would welcome the chance to explore these issues with you, and would be happy to meet to discuss how minor reform of the school system could bring further benefits to our children.

We are copying this letter to all West Sussex MPs.

Yours sincerely



Louise Goldsmith
Leader
West Sussex County Council



Richard Burrett
Cabinet Member for Education
and Skills (and Deputy Leader)
West Sussex County Council

¹ 'Official Statistics: Multi-academy trust performance measures: England, 2016 to 2017, Department for Education, SFR 02/2018, 1 March 2018'

² www.local.gov.uk/academy-maintained-schools