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Academy Trust Handbook 2026

The Department for Education (DfE) published the Academy Trust Handbook 2026 on 15 July 2026. Unlike previous years, the new handbook will take effect from 1 October 2026 (rather than 1 September), as the DfE recognises that the publication comes shortly before the end of the academic year and therefore gives trusts additional time to prepare for the changes.

This edition introduces a number of important changes, particularly around inclusion, financial oversight, procurement, transparency and governance. Below is a summary of the changes.

Roles and Responsibilities

Inclusion and collaboration

The handbook includes a new dedicated section on inclusion and community responsibilities which follows the Government's new long-term policy direction for schools.
Trusts are expected to:

- Embed inclusion across all aspects of their provision.
- Develop a trust-wide approach to identifying and meeting additional needs.
- Monitor access, participation and outcomes for pupils with SEND, disadvantaged pupils and those known to social care.
- Work collaboratively with local authorities and other agencies.
- Ensure boards have adequate oversight of inclusion, with consideration given to appointing a lead trustee or committee.

Digital and technology standards

The handbook reiterates the expectation that trusts continue working towards meeting the DfE's digital and technology standards by 2030, including cyber security, filtering and monitoring requirements.

Trustee's financial knowledge and expertise

There is stronger emphasis on boards ensuring they collectively possess sufficient financial knowledge and expertise to hold the executive to account. This should include appropriate financial training covering financial management, control, monitoring and reporting.

CFO qualifications

The DfE has strengthened expectations around CFO appointments, stating that they must be appropriately qualified and/or experienced. Trusts must assess whether the CFO and finance team should have qualifications in business or accountancy (for example from CIPFA, ICAEW, ACCA or CIMA). In larger trusts (those with over 3,000 pupils), the CFO should be a qualified accountant, with mandatory qualification requirements expected from September 2027.

Financial requirements

Integrated curriculum and financial planning in schools

Clarification of the expectation that Boards should take an integrated approach to curriculum and financial planning in schools.

Going concern

There is increased emphasis on the board and accounting officer assessing and reporting on the trust's ability to continue as a going concern. The accounting officer must notify the trust board where it is identified that the trust's ability to operate as a going concern is at risk and for the trustees to take ownership and the necessary action, including notifying the DfE.

This change reflects the increasing scrutiny being placed on financial resilience across the academy sector, particularly in light of continuing cost pressures, declining pupil numbers in some areas, and growing SEND and estates-related demands. Boards should ensure that going concern assessments are evidence-based, appropriately challenged and supported by robust financial forecasting.

Going concern is a key area which will be reviewed and challenged during the external audit. The strengthened wording in the Handbook reinforces the importance of trusts being able to clearly demonstrate the basis for their assessment and the level of scrutiny applied by the board.

Procurement

Several procurement changes have moved from recommended practice to mandatory requirements in order to improve value for money, deliver greater consistency across the sector and support trusts in identifying efficiencies within increasingly challenging financial conditions. This is particularly relevant following the recently announced pay awards, where additional funding has not fully covered the increased costs for many trusts, reinforcing the DfE's expectation that trusts actively seek efficiencies and maximise value from public funds.

Under the new Handbook, Trusts must:

- Consider DfE procurement opportunities when making purchasing decisions and record their decision making.
- Use the Government Commercial Agency, Supply Teachers and Education Recruitment (Supply Teachers and Education Recruitment - Get help buying for schools) for their supply staffing requirements unless they have an alternative compliant agreement with rates which do not exceed those available through the framework.
- Use the DfE Energy for Schools service or a DfE approved Energy deal unless an alternative agreement with comparable pricing has been sourced. This applies when energy contracts are renewed.
- Ensure that all Management Information System (MIS) contracts are aligned with DfE's MIS framework by September 2027.

Executive pay and senior pay controls

The handbook introduces updated requirements relating to executive pay governance and senior pay controls, with greater scrutiny around remuneration decisions and approval processes.

Electric vehicle salary sacrifice schemes

Clarification that Trusts are permitted to offer EV salary-sacrifice scheme and do not need DfE approval provided there are comprehensive mitigations in place to ensure no cost or liability falls on the Trust. There is an Electric vehicle salary sacrifice guide that must be followed.

Alternative pension schemes

Trusts wishing to introduce alternatives to the Teachers' Pension Scheme or Local Government Pension Scheme must now engage with the DfE early and obtain approval before making any changes.

Delegated authorities

Severance payments

Further explanation has been provided on what Trusts need to consider when dealing with severance payments.

Financial transparency

A significant new requirement is the obligation for multi-academy trusts to publish a financial summary statement outlining how funds are distributed across their schools. This must be published on the Trust website alongside the annual accounts by 31 January.

The regulator and intervention

Breach of funding agreement

Clarification around the intervention powers available to the Secretary of State where a trust breaches its funding agreement obligations, providing greater transparency around potential regulatory responses and accountability measures.

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Key takeaways

In their letter announcing the release of the 2026 Academy Trust Handbook, the Director of Funding and Financial Oversight at the DfE specifically highlighted these areas:

- Trustee's financial knowledge and expertise
- CFO qualifications
- Procurement
- Executive pay and senior pay controls
- Electric vehicle salary sacrifice schemes
- Financial transparency

The key actions for Trusts will be to review inclusion governance arrangements, prepare for the new transparency statement, and ensure procurement, pay and financial management processes align with the new requirements before 1 October 2026.

Other information

A new Schedule of Musts 2026 was released with the Handbook. This provides a concise list of every mandatory requirement ("must") in the handbook.

The following good practice guides were also updated on 15 July:

- Reducing procurement risk: good practice for academy trusts - GOV.UK
- Academy trust financial operating models - GOV.UK

The full Handbook can be found here:

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