

Applicant guidance

Becoming an academy sponsor

January 2021

**New
Schools
Network**

Introduction

Schools which do not have academy status (maintained schools, voluntary controlled and voluntary aided schools, foundation schools, and 16-19 sixth form colleges) are able to convert to become an academy if their performance is secure. Academies are able to set their own curriculum, school day and term lengths and set their own pay and conditions. Where a school does not have secure performance, they can be supported by an approved academy sponsor. This process involves the underperforming school becoming an academy.

An academy sponsor is an organisation or an individual that has been approved by the Department for Education (DfE) to support an underperforming academy or group of academies. Many approved academy sponsors are multi-academy trusts (MAT), but this is not always the case – approved sponsors who have successfully sponsored academies include NHS trusts, dioceses, universities, FTSE 100 businesses and individuals. Where the academy sponsor is an existing academy trust, it is expected that the sponsored school would join the academy trust. When a group or organisation gains academy-sponsor status, the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) will match them to schools in need of support.

Being an approved academy sponsor is one of the eligibility criteria for applicants responding to a Section 6A local authority presumption competition. A presumption competition is a competitive tender to deliver a free school that is launched where a local authority has identified a need for a new school. Only academy trusts which have MAT articles of association (even if the MAT only has a single school) and are approved academy sponsors may apply.

This guidance has been written for anyone who wishes to become an academy sponsor, however it is designed to be of particular interest to existing academy trusts who wish to become approved academy sponsors in order to be eligible to apply for a local authority presumption competition.

What is a sponsor?

An academy sponsor is an organisation or individual who has received approval from the DfE to support an underperforming academy or group of academies. Sponsors work with the academies they support through an academy trust. An academy trust is a charitable company that runs an academy or a group of academies. Where the academy sponsor is an existing academy trust, it is expected that the sponsored school would join the academy trust.

What do sponsors do?

- Set up the academy trust (if not already set up)
- Appoint the leadership team
- Select the governing body
- Work with the academy trust, governing body, principal and senior leadership team
- Monitor the academy's performance and take action where necessary
- Report to DfE about the academy's performance
- Involve parents and the wider community in the academy's work through events, mentoring and business links
- Ensure the academy spends its funding effectively.

The Secretary of State for Education can remove sponsor status if the sponsor does not meet their responsibilities.

Who can be a sponsor?

Any of the following can apply to become an academy sponsor:

- schools
- further education colleges
- sixth-form colleges
- universities
- businesses and entrepreneurs
- educational foundations
- charities and philanthropists
- faith communities.

Why become an academy sponsor?

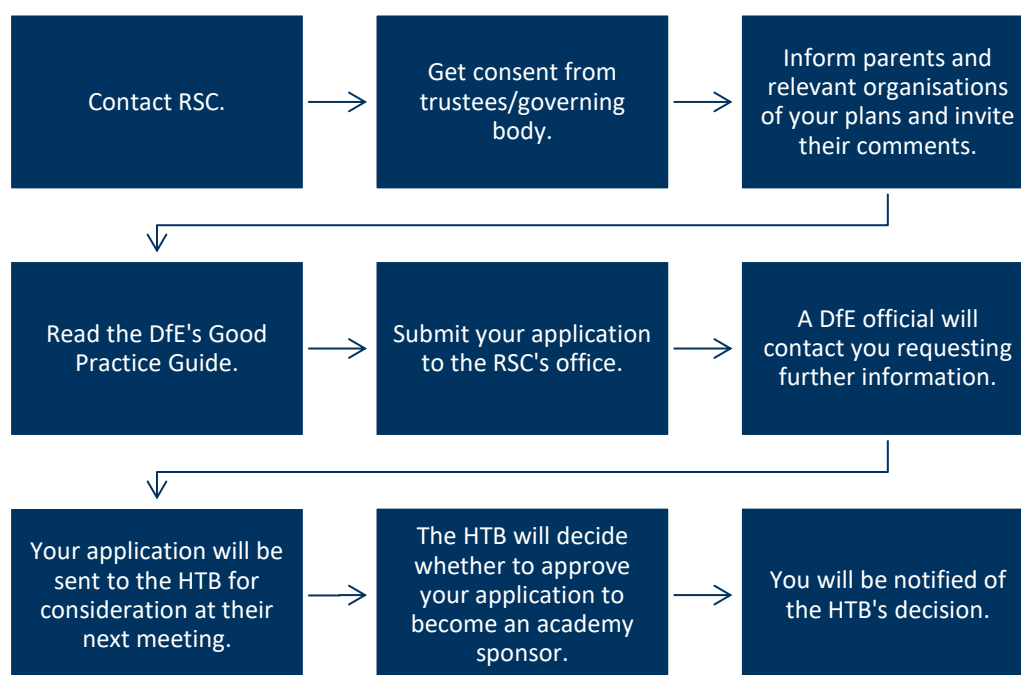
Successful schools and organisations may have a commitment or interest in school improvement and wish to offer formal support as an academy sponsor. Some sponsors have also used the sponsorship process to formalise an existing relationship where they are already working with an underperforming school to improve standards.

Being a MAT with approved sponsor status is a pre-requisite for applicants making a free school application in response to a Section 6A local authority presumption competition. This is a competitive tender launched by the local authority to identify a trust to deliver a free school where the local authority has identified a need.

Unlike the central free school process, applicants responding to a presumption competition must have established a trust with MAT articles of association and must be an approved academy sponsor.

What is the process of becoming a sponsor?

The diagram below sets out the stages of applying to become an academy sponsor. The length of time between submission and approval can be as little as four weeks, however this varies on a case by case basis and could take considerably longer in some cases.



Before you apply

1. Contact your RSC

If your RSC agrees that you should apply, the DfE will nominate a 'sponsor lead' to work with you. Your sponsor lead will ask what sort of academy you wish to sponsor so they can advise on the most suitable sponsor opportunities in your region. They'll also ask if you are already working with a particular school that may need a sponsor.

2. Get consent

The steps required at this stage depend on who you are:

- If you're an **academy** the board of trustees will need to pass a resolution supporting the decision to become a sponsor.
- If you're a **state-funded school** that isn't an academy you will need to get approval from your governing body to become a sponsor. If the school has a religious character you will also need approval from the relevant religious body (for example, the local diocese for a church school) before you can apply. In order to sponsor a school, your existing school will need to convert to academy status, guidance on how to do this is available [here](#). You may be able to convert to academy status alongside applying to be a sponsor.
- **Other organisations** are not required to show they have obtained consent.

3. Read the DfE's guidance

We recommend that all sponsor applicants read the [DfE's guidance for multi academy trusts](#) before beginning the application process. This guidance provides information about good practice and expectations for growth which will inform how RSCs assess your application.

4. Inform stakeholders of your plans

If you are a school or academy, we recommend that you inform parents and the local community that you intend to become an academy sponsor and consider their views. In practice this could be a letter to parents and relevant organisations informing them of your plans and inviting comments.

Apply to become an academy sponsor

To apply to become an academy sponsor you will need to complete [the academy sponsor application form](#). You should work with your sponsor lead to complete the application. Your RSC will

assess the application and send you a letter to inform you whether your application to become a sponsor has been successful.

The application form comprises the following sections:

Part A: Applicant details

Part B: Applicant overview

This section is about the strategic vision of your organisation and your plans for growth. (Recommended maximum 500 words).

Part C: Approach to school improvement

In this section you should explain how school improvement will be undertaken and provide practical examples where relevant. (Recommended maximum 500 words).

Part D: Governance structure and key people

In this section you should demonstrate that there will be a clear governance structure for the academy trust and that the individuals within it will have the knowledge, skills and experience, as well as the capacity to deliver effective governance in line with the [Governance Handbook](#). This section must also demonstrate compliance with the [Academies Financial Handbook](#).

Part E: (a) Finance

This part of the application is about the financial performance of your existing organisation(s). Here you are required to provide your most recent annual accounts and audit management letter and show the projected financial performance for the latest and next three financial years. You are also required to provide a short commentary to explain the reason for any deficits and the action you will take to avoid a continual deterioration in your reserves (if applicable).

Part E: (b) Finance

This section is about the proposed or existing trust's approach to financial planning. You will be required to provide information about your proposed or existing internal and external financial scrutiny/audit mechanisms and how your governance structure will/does ensure accountability throughout the trust and of your finance director. You will also need to explain what steps you will take to ensure your financial model is sustainable and consistent with your growth plans.

Part F: Capacity and Capability

This section is about your ability to deliver high performing academies. If you already run a school, Higher Education Institute, general FE or sixth form college the DfE will draw on information it holds

in relation to academic performance data and Ofsted reports and use this information to help determine the overall suitability of a college to become a sponsor.

If you have supported any schools you will need to provide information about them as the DfE will also draw on the information it holds in relation to the academic performance of those schools. You should also provide a brief explanation of the impact you have had in closing the gap between disadvantaged and other pupils at the schools you have supported.

Part G: risk management

This section asks you to articulate your approach to risk management according to required standards as defined in the [Competency Framework for Governance](#). (Recommended maximum 500 words).

Part H Declarations

In this section your organisation will need to confirm that they understand and agree to the DfE's policies and principles.

Submit your application

You will need to submit your application to the office of the relevant RSC.

An official from the RSC's office will usually contact you to ask further questions. You might be asked to expand upon information given in the application form or you might be asked about something else. If these questions can be answered quickly this process can be as little as two weeks. Where the DfE has more questions or there are more complex issues, this process can be considerably longer.

Only when the official is satisfied they have received the necessary information will they submit it to the [Headteacher Board](#) (HTB). Officials usually pass applications to the HTB two weeks before they are due to meet, with HTB meetings usually taking place once a month. Applicants will be informed of the HTB's decision shortly after the meeting takes place.

Becoming an approved academy sponsor

If the application is successful, the RSC will identify schools requiring sponsorship and ask you to outline the support you could offer them. If the school to be sponsored is not an academy, it will have to convert to academy status before you can become its sponsor. The RSC will also discuss the

plans for the school with the local HTB. If the RSC agrees, they will recommend you formally to the school as their sponsor.

The school's governing body will still have to pass a resolution to approve you as their sponsor, unless it has been judged a 'school causing concern' and an academy order has been made by the Secretary of State without the governing body having made an application. If this is the case your RSC will name you as the school's sponsor as soon as they've approved the match.

Schools causing concern are schools that are 'coasting', have been judged Inadequate by Ofsted, or have failed to comply with a warning notice from their RSC. Read more about schools causing concern [here](#). You'll officially become the school's sponsor once the school has signed the funding agreement and has become an academy.

Things for potential sponsors to consider:

Maintained schools becoming an academy sponsor and converting to academy status:

Maintained schools can become approved academy sponsors, but will be required to convert to academy status in order to sponsor a school or apply to set up a free school through a local authority presumption competition. Single academy trusts with sponsor status will need to take on MAT articles of association in order to sponsor a school or apply for a presumption. The following guidance is for maintained schools or single academy trusts with, or applying for academy sponsor status.

Governance

If you are a group of amalgamating schools or smaller trusts, then you should carefully consider your new governance arrangements and how you will need to adapt your governance structure to accommodate a new school. You should also consider engaging a National Leader of Governance to help you update your governance arrangements.

Accountability

Some maintained schools or single-academy trusts become multi-academy trusts at the same time as applying to become an approved sponsor. In some cases, schools wish to form the trust together as a partnership of equals. In this instance, you should ensure that someone is clearly designated as the ultimately accountable person in a CEO or executive principal role. This person should also be designated as the Accounting Officer for the trust.

Central services

You should decide how central services provided by the trust to the school will be funded – will this be via a central charge which is a set percentage of the sponsored school's income, or will the school be charged the actual cost of providing the services?

You may decide that you will pursue different approaches depending on whether you are sponsoring a new presumption free school or an existing school. A new school will have a smaller income as it builds to capacity, and the cost of providing some fixed overhead costs may exceed the amount that a 5% central charge can deliver.

Multi academy trusts becoming approved sponsors:

Proactive vs reactive planning

It is important that your trust development strategy is proactive rather than reactive. Many school sponsorships occur because someone outside of the trust presents a trust with a sponsorship opportunity such as the RSC's office requesting a trust sponsor a particular school or a local authority setting up a presumption competition.

It is important to consider seriously how these opportunities align with the growth strategy you have already decided upon, in terms of geography, which phase(s) and type(s) of education you wish to be involved in, whether you are primarily (or exclusively) interested in schools of a particular faith ethos, and whether your current school(s) is secure enough in its performance to allow leadership attention to be spent on another school.

Leadership capacity and succession planning

You should ensure that you have considered the leadership structure that will be in place once you either open a new presumption free school as part of your trust, or sponsor an existing school following your approval as a sponsor.

If you have a growth strategy that envisages further school sponsorships or growth, then you should also ensure that you have thought about how your leadership structure will evolve over time, including succession planning where you anticipate individuals being promoted into new posts.

You should also consider which organisations external to your trust you have a relationship with, and which may be able to help you support the school. For example, you may be part of a Teaching School alliance, or a more informal school improvement partnership.

Due diligence and risk management

If you are applying to become a sponsor in order to be eligible to compete in local authority presumption competitions, then the due diligence required will be different to that required if you're planning to sponsor an existing school. However, you intend to grow your trust, you should ensure there is a sound strategic reason behind adopting any particular school that is consistent with your trust's capacity and planned strategy for growth.

Expertise

It is important that each area of the due diligence (whether these are educational or operational) is carried out by someone with the requisite skills. External support should be sought where there is a skills gap.

Operational capacity

You should ensure that due diligence is performed from both an educational and an operational perspective. Often the senior decision makers in a school or trust will come from an educational background, and you may have a good track record supporting struggling schools either as a school leader or through a Teaching School as a National Leader of Education and therefore decide that your school or trust will be able to support the improvement of your sponsored school.

However, you should also consider whether you have the capacity to support the school from an operational perspective. In doing so you should consider the financial health of the school including the assets and liabilities the school has and the robustness of your staffing and governance structures to allow for robust and effective running and oversight of all of the schools in the trust as the MAT grows.

Audits

If you are looking to sponsor an existing school you may wish to set up a series of specific operational audits, and decide who within your trust will conduct these, what their remit will be, and which external support you might need to commission. These audits might include, but need not be limited to, a leadership audit, an HR audit, premises and capital assets audit, a health and safety audit and an IT audit.

If you're applying to open a new school, you should ask whether your trust could support a new school with these functions as it opens and grows to capacity, and how you might need to grow your central team as the new school grows in order to provide adequate support.

Self-evaluation

If you are preparing to sponsor an existing school as part of your due diligence you should view their School Improvement Plan and self-evaluation. A key task will be ascertaining whether you agree the self-evaluation of the school is accurate, and the strategy they have outlined to drive school improvement, or whether you think a change of strategy (which may require a change of leadership) is required.

What support does NSN offer?

New Schools Network (NSN) is an independent charity that supports free schools. Although we do not offer discrete support for groups applying to become academy sponsors, the Free Schools Programme Directorate team works with groups applying to set up new free schools, including those applying in response to a section 6A local authority presumption competition.

As being a multi academy trust with approved sponsor status is a pre-requisite to applying for a free school through the presumption route, the following is available to groups applying for sponsor status with a view to applying for a presumption free school.

Universal services

Resources

This document provides an introduction to academy sponsorship, and links to further resources relating to academy sponsorship can be found at the end of this document. Guidance on how to complete the free school application form can also be found on our [website](#) and are available free of charge.

Registration

You can register with NSN [here](#) to receive the latest news and alerts including when presumption competitions are announced.

One to one meetings

You can register to [attend a one to one meeting](#) with one of our advisers. This meeting is an opportunity for you to meet with an adviser to discuss your free school application. You can also book a [specialist meeting](#) with one of NSN's specialists to advise you on your plans and provide further support.

Development Programme

The Development Programme includes an extensive range of support services for groups applying to set up free schools, which we tailor according to your needs. It is free to access, like all our

support, but we ask applicants to enrol onto the programme so that we can find out more about your proposal, and how we can best support you.

If you are successful in enrolling onto the Development Programme and you are applying to become an academy sponsor while applying for a presumption free school, your adviser will work with you to determine the support you need. Your adviser might suggest you attend a ‘Sponsor Workshop’ with an Adviser and one of NSN’s governance specialists. This workshop would take place once you have completed the sponsor application form and would use this document as the basis for a discussion around your trust’s plans and capacity for growth.

Resources

- [Convert to an academy: guide for schools](#), DfE June 2020
- [Multi-academy trusts: good practice guide and expectations for growth](#), DfE February 2020
- [Academy sponsor application form](#), DfE June 2019
- [Governance Handbook](#), DfE October 2020
- [Academies Financial Handbook](#), DfE June 2020
- Expanding your academy trust: [resources for multi-academy trusts](#), DfE February 2020
- [Competency Framework for Governance](#), DfE January 2017
- Information about [Head teacher Boards](#)
- Information about [schools causing concern](#), DfE October 2020
- [Wolds Teaching School Alliance](#) is a list of resources for growing MATs.

[Click here to provide feedback about this resource](#)