

Applicant Guidance

Building your team

May 2018

**New
Schools
Network**

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Introduction

Successful free school applications come from groups with a diverse range of backgrounds, from parents and teachers to maintained schools and multi academy trusts. For your free school application to be approved by the Department for Education you must demonstrate that you have a team with the necessary skills and expertise to set up and run a good school. You'll also need to prove you have enough time to commit to the project and are clear on the role each member of your group will play in the on-going operation of the school.

The expertise you need

We would strongly recommend you conduct a skills gap analysis of your team, which you can do using our [skills gap analysis tool](#). This will help you to work out what skills you have now and what you will need to recruit to your team.

The Department for Education specifies that you must have access to high quality **educational and financial** expertise to be approved. Your application will be rated more highly if individuals have expertise in most of the additional areas - managing state school finances, leadership, project management, marketing, human resources, safeguarding and health and safety. It would be beneficial if they formed a part of your core applicant group, and they ought to have a proven track record in their areas of expertise.

Education expertise

In our experience, the DfE want educational expertise to be provided by an experienced school leader with senior leadership expertise at a Head or Deputy Head level in a school of the same type and age range as you are proposing. The DfE state that individuals should have a good track record so this school should be rated Good or Outstanding by Ofsted and should have achievement that is above LA and national averages for headline accountability measures of attainment and progress and should generally be on a consistent or upward trajectory since their last inspection.

You need educational expertise on your team to:

- Develop a realistic but ambitious vision
- Develop a curriculum that will deliver your vision
- Develop strategies to meet the needs of all pupils, and secure good behaviour and attendance

- Create a strategy for addressing the needs of disadvantaged students and how their performance will be in line with the national results for non-disadvantaged students and/or how will they be making better progress than their non-disadvantaged peers
- Understand how to monitor and evaluate pupil performance
- Develop a staffing structure that will deliver your curriculum plans within the budget available

Financial expertise

Financial expertise would ideally be provided by a school bursar or school business manager, but could also come from finance professionals, such as an accountant, or someone who has run their own business, in conjunction with an experienced senior educationalist.

You need financial expertise to:

- Develop a balanced budget which delivers your educational vision within available funding
- Explain assumptions to support your calculations
- Understand how you must adapt your plans if you do not recruit the number of pupils you need
- Demonstrate how you will regularly review key financial health and efficiency metrics (including teacher contact ratio, average class size and average teacher cost) to plan staffing and timetabling that effectively and efficiently deliver an affordable curriculum.

Other expertise

The Department for Education will also expect you to demonstrate that your team will have access to individuals with the following expertise:

- Managing school finances
- Leadership
- Project management
- Marketing
- Human resources and recruitment
- Safeguarding
- Health and safety

In addition, you should think about what other skills will be useful including:

- Academy governance

- Additional education expertise specific to your vision for the school, particularly if the school will have a specialism
- Establishing new organisations
- ICT
- Buildings and construction

Time commitments

All of these individuals must be able to give significant time to the project both before you apply and as you prepare to open the free school. You will not be able to write a high quality application if individuals with expertise in the rights areas are not contributing to it.

You will also need to make an assessment of the time that will be needed in pre-opening for each area, and the best way to do this is to speak to similar free schools who have been approved. As a general rule however, we would recommend that:

- Individuals in the pre-opening team or on the governing body with expertise in education, finance or project management are able to commit at least a day per week to the project
- The time commitments across the team managing the project in pre-opening add up to at least the equivalent of 1 FTE equivalent person across the group as a whole (35-40hours/week).

Track record

The Department for Education wants to see that the individuals on your team have a strong track record in their respective areas of expertise. You must therefore provide relevant information about the professional history of the individuals on your team to demonstrate that they have a robust and positive track record in their fields of expertise. In your application you will be expected to indicate the area of expertise of each individual member of your team, any other relevant expertise they may have, and provide CVs highlighting their expertise and track record as annexes to the application.

Specifically, the CVs of team members with senior leadership expertise in a school should include:

- Details of the last three positions they held
- Details of the academic track record of the schools they are or were employed at (the school's Key Stage 2 or 5A*-C GCSE including English and maths data and, if available, the school's best 8 value added scores for the years they were in post)

- A commentary on why their experience is relevant to the proposed
- At least one reference
- A description of they what specifically they did to raise standards in the school(s) they led
- How the schools they worked for addressed the needs of disadvantaged students

The CVs of team members who are or were Heads of Department or Faculty should include:

- Details of the last three positions they held
- Details of the academic track record of the departments or faculties they headed (the department/faculty's Key Stage 2 or 5A*-C GCSE compared to the school's averages)
- A commentary on why their experience is relevant to the proposal
- At least one reference
- A description of what specifically they did to raise standards in the department(s) they led

As mentioned above, individuals with education expertise should predominantly be from schools rated Good or Outstanding by Ofsted, particularly if they are your education lead or a proposed governor.

The CVs of individuals with financial expertise should include:

- Details of their last three roles and responsibilities, with a focus on their financial responsibilities
- A commentary on why their previous financial experience is relevant to the proposed
- Details of their professional financial qualifications
- At least one reference

What needs to be done by your team

The main tasks your team will do at the different stages of setting up the school are outlined below.

When applying to open the school

- Creating the vision and ethos of the school
- Campaigning and establishing demand for the school
- Designing and detailing the education provision and putting together a budget which will deliver it
- Thinking of the performance of disadvantaged students within the school and how their needs will be met
- Demonstrating that you have the necessary capacity to manage the project

- Creating a robust governance structure
- You should provide a short timeline (less than one page) for your planned recruitment exercise(s) for recruiting a principal designate and executive head (if you intend to have one).

When opening the school

- Project managing the school or overseeing a company doing this
- Developing detailed curriculum plans
- Running admissions
- Running a statutory consultation
- Recruiting the principal
- Liaising with the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) to procure a site

When operating the school

- Being a significant part of the Academy Trust and/or governing body, and having long-term involvement in the school
- Overseeing the management and performance of the school

The Department for Education will want to see that there is commitment from individuals and/or organisations both in pre-opening and in the long-term. You should ensure that individuals or organisations are able to give the support you need, and if not you should seek alternatives.

Filling skills gaps

It is normal to have some skills gaps in your team at the time you submit your application to the DfE, and there is a skills gaps section in the application form that you will complete outlining these.

However, the DfE want to see that the team you have in place by the time you submit your application will enable you to drive the project through to completion. You should therefore try to secure expertise in as many of the areas identified by the DfE as possible. It is particularly important that you have sufficient expertise in the areas of education and finance, as without this your application is very unlikely to be approved.

If you do not have sufficient expertise in either the areas mentioned by the DfE, or other areas that you think are important for your project, these are skills gaps. Some of the strategies you could use to fill skills gaps include:

- Drawing on your personal and professional networks
- Identifying people from the local community
- Advertising in local media
- Targeting and approaching organisations – local schools, companies, charities or educational establishments - you think are likely to employ or work with people with relevant skills and experience

You should also bear in mind that during the pre-opening stage you will have access to a Project Development Grant (PDG) that can be used to secure access to expertise. This is more suitable for some activities, such as project management, than others and as mentioned above the DfE will expect you to have a good level of skill and experience relevant to education and finance already within your core group.

Using existing education providers

If members of your team are unable to give long-term commitment to the school, or you cannot find the necessary education and/or financial expertise, two options to consider are:

- Joining an existing academy trust
- Employing an education provider

Joining an existing academy trust

You can contact an existing academy or academy chain to apply to set up a free school. The advantage of this is that you can access the expertise of an existing school provider who will probably have expertise in all of the required areas, along with a track record of running a school successfully. For an existing academy this means an Ofsted rating of at least Good and results that are above LA and/or national averages. Additionally, the performance of disadvantaged students is emphasized in the DfE's criteria - this should be in line with national averages for non-disadvantaged students or the progress made by disadvantaged students has to be better than that made by non-disadvantaged students.

However, it is very important to be aware that if you set up a free school as part of an existing multi academy trust, the free school will be *their school*, not yours. They will be the formal applicants:

they will apply to the Department for Education to set up the school and will eventually run it and be accountable for the standards in that school.

If you are considering partnering with an existing academy trust but want to have a long-term role in the school, you should make sure that you have a formal written agreement setting out your long-term involvement, including on the governing body, before you agree to partner with them. You should also be confident that your values and ambitions for the school align with theirs.

Some key questions to consider include:

- Does this organisation have the people and the track record to deliver a great school?
- Do they understand the reasons we wish to set up a school and our values?
- What is their educational model and curriculum?
- What role will we have in the long-term? E.g. a trustee or local governor.

In this scenario your role in the application stage could be:

- Campaigning for the school
- Outlining the vision and ethos of the school

If the school is approved, your role will be determined by what you agree with the academy trust.

Employing an education provider

It is possible to hire an education provider – charitable or company – to run part or all of your school for you. You would explain how you would do this in your application, but you would not be able to hire the provider until after you were approved.

In this scenario you could still be in the members and directors of the trust that run the school, and would therefore be responsible for its ultimate success. However, you could outsource the day-to-day decisions and thereby increase the capacity of your team.

It is important to note that the DfE would still expect you to have the expertise on your team that would enable you to hold this provider to account. For example, you might have an individual with senior education expertise but they may be unable to give the time required to be the project's education lead. In this scenario you could potentially use an education provider.

The advantages of this are:

- You can utilise the expertise of an existing school provider to bolster the capacity of your team
- The ultimate responsibility for the school remains yours so you can decide how the school will be run within your contract with the provider

The most important thing to remember is that you are still ultimately responsible for the school's performance. If the school does not perform well, then the academy trust is accountable. You must be confident that you will have sufficient expertise in your team to manage the contract and to know whether or not your provider is doing a good job.

Capacity and capability in the application, pre-opening, and open phases

The Department for Education will be more interested in the contribution to your project that members of your team will be making in the pre-opening phase, and once the school has opened, rather than what they contributed to the application. In your application you will be expected to indicate how much time (in hours per week) each team member will be able to commit to the project in the pre-opening phase, and once the school is open, and what their roles will be.

You will also be expected to provide details of your proposed governance structure once the school is open and of your plans to recruit high-quality governors, along with the details of any proposed governors. Your application will be rated more highly if you have identified governors in your application with a strong track record in the areas of education and finance, so you should certainly aim to do this.

You will therefore need to think at application stage about:

- What skills and expertise you want to see represented on your governing body
- Whether the current members of your steering group have the expertise to stay on as governors
- Whether any members of your current team would be willing to join your governing body
- How much time proposed governors will be able to commit once the school has opened

Other useful resources

- NSN's ['How we can help'](#) webpage outlining our support for applicants groups
- NSN's [guidance](#) on developing a vision for your school