Are free schools using innovative approaches?

Research report

September 2014

Department for Education

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Foreword from the Secretary of State

It is now four years since the Academies Act 2010 authorised the creation of free schools - new independent state-funded schools that have a high degree of autonomy about how they are managed.

Like all state-funded schools, free schools are covered by the School Admissions Code, Ofsted inspections and performance measures but - like academies - they also have a high degree of autonomy about how they manage themselves. We know from international evidence that school autonomy (in tandem with accountability) can improve performance, and just a few years after the first free schools were established, 71 per cent of those inspected have been graded as either 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted. This is testament to the hard work and dedication of the wide variety of groups that have been responsible for establishing free schools – including charities, universities, businesses, educational groups, teachers and parents – as well as to all those who work in them.

Four years on, we wanted to understand how free schools are making use of the freedoms available to them and – crucially – to explore how they are working with other schools as part of a self-improving, school-led system. That's the purpose of this report.

The resulting research shows two key things.

Firstly, that free schools are bringing new ideas and approaches to our school system: two thirds offer an alternative to the national curriculum in some or all subjects; around half have an extended school day; and a similar proportion operate different term dates and lengths to other schools in the area. The majority of head teachers interviewed said they believe that using such opportunities to innovate is important for them in delivering the vision they have for their school.

Second, it reveals that free schools are not working in isolation but are collaborating with and supporting other local schools, helping to fulfil the government's vision of a self-improving, school-led system. Eight out of ten free schools already formally collaborate with other schools, or plan to do so. This collaboration takes many forms, from allowing use of the school's facilities by others, to allowing specialist subject teachers to teach in other local schools. Three-quarters of the head teachers who took part in our survey believe their school has contributed to a rise in the quality of local education generally because of the way they are working with other schools and competing in places, thereby challenging others to improve.

Free schools are still relatively new and this report is an early contribution to understanding how they are working. We plan further work on how specific approaches benefit pupils and to support the sharing of best practice to encourage further school-led improvements in the education system.

But it is a fact that more children in England have the opportunity to go to a good or outstanding school today than ever before, and I am absolutely clear that the free school revolution this government has unleashed has played a critical role in driving that change.

Nicky Morgan
Secretary of State for Education

1. Headline Findings

The headline findings from a representative survey of free schools open in the academic year 2013/14 are as follows:

- A large proportion of free schools are developing innovative approaches, by using the freedoms they have. Comparisons to an earlier survey of academies suggest that free schools make more use of their autonomy in some areas - for example, running an extended school day (reported by 57 per cent of free schools) and operating term times different to surrounding schools (41 per cent).
- Free schools are not operating in isolation; 84 per cent stated that they either already formally collaborate with other schools or plan to do so.
- Three quarters (73 per cent) said they had supported other schools.
- 72 per cent of free school headteachers believe they are having a wider impact on schools in the local area. Of these, a third think local standards are being raised through competition and a further third believe collaboration is making a difference.

2. Summary of main findings

Use of freedoms

- 62 per cent of respondents reported delivering an alternative to the national curriculum in some or all subjects.
- Over half (57 per cent) run an extended school day and 41 per cent of free schools said that they operate a school year which is different to other local schools.
- 84 per cent of respondents said that their free school either already formally collaborate with other schools, or plans to do so. Secondary schools are more likely than primary schools to use the majority of freedoms open to them.

Curriculum

- The subjects on which most free schools say they are likely to follow the new national curriculum to a great extent in September 2014 are mathematics (80 per cent of respondents), English (78 per cent) and Science (66 per cent). The figures for free schools are similar to those reported by academies.
- Intention by free schools to follow the national curriculum varies little between school phases, although secondary schools are less likely than primary schools to offer some subjects at all.
- 57 per cent of free schools claim that they offer subjects not available in local schools.

Operational

- 65 per cent of schools believe the opportunity to innovate with their school day and term is important for them to deliver the school's vision.

- 81 per cent of respondents feel they offer something innovative in how they deliver their curriculum.
- 82 per cent of free schools offer extra-curricular activities (more likely in primary) and 68 per cent offer an enrichment programme (more likely in secondary).

Admissions

- Around half (46 per cent) of free schools use oversubscription admission procedures different to local schools (although they all must be in line with the School Admissions Code),
- The most common criteria used are catchment area and giving priority to disadvantaged pupils. A significant minority use lotteries.

Staffing

- 32 per cent of free schools report ever having hired any unqualified teachers. Almost half of these (46 per cent) no longer have any (they may have since qualified or no longer work at the school) or have one non-QTS teacher.
- 57 per cent of respondents reported setting their own pay and conditions for staff, while half (51 per cent) felt they used the freedom of setting their own performance management system for teachers
- The most regular method used to manage performance was informal observation of lessons which three quarters used more than half-termly and 95% at least half termly.
- Parental feedback in more common in free schools 61 per cent seek this at least termly compared to only 42 per cent of academies.
- Three quarters (77 per cent) of free schools reported linking pay to teachers' performance.

School support

- Free schools access support from a number of different places. LAs are the most common source of support for SEN, Admissions and Governors; other schools for teaching, subject-specific and leadership and management; and private companies are most widely used for HR and financial management support.
- Typically more primary schools access support from their local authority than do secondary schools.
- 73 per cent of free schools support other schools; the most common types of support provided are running CPD courses and joint practice development.

General

- 47 per cent of free schools felt they offered something innovative which is different to other schools. The curriculum (mentioned by 49 per cent) and the style of teaching (37 per cent) were the most common areas.
- 72 per cent of free school headteachers believe they are having a wider impact on

other schools in the local area; of these, a third think local standards are being raised through competition and a further third believe collaboration is making a difference.

3. Introduction

The Academies Act 2010 authorised the creation of free schools. Free schools are non-profit making, independent, state-funded schools that benefit from the same degree of autonomy from local authority and central government control that academies do. Set up in response to what local people say they want and need, a free school can be set up by any suitable proposer, providing they meet the key requirements – a strong vision and education plan, evidence of demand from local parents, sound finances and the capacity and capability to deliver a new school quickly. Since 2011, 251 free schools have opened, with over 100 more aiming to open in 2015 and beyond. All free schools are expected to maintain the highest possible standards.

Free schools have more autonomy than local authority maintained schools in a number of areas, including how they use the national curriculum and being able to hire teachers who do not hold qualified teacher status. Until now, the government has not collected information on exactly how they are using their autonomy. This report presents the results of a survey which was designed to understand the innovative approaches being used by free schools including: use of freedoms unavailable to non-academies; attitudes towards the new national curriculum; how they collaborate with other schools; and changes in the performance management of staff.

4. Methodology and sample

The Department for Education commissioned BMG Research to issue a 15 minute online survey to the 174 free schools open in the 2013/14 academic year. The survey was issued to headteachers on 20th June 2014 and fieldwork closed on 18th July 2014. A total of 74 free schools replied (a response rate of 43 per cent). Analysis of the data was conducted within DfE.

Table 1 shows the survey is representative of the free school population.

Table 1 Survey respondents compared to the actual population

		Proportion of free schools open in 2013/14	Proportion of survey respondents
Phase	Primary	41%	46%
	Secondary	43%	38%
	All through	13%	12%
	16 to 19	3%	4%
Year of opening	2011	13%	15%
	2012	32%	32%
	2013	55%	53%
School type	Mainstream	85%	81%
	Alternative Provision	10%	14%
	Special	5%	5%
	Base	174	74

The base size means that there are limited opportunities to make comparisons to identify statistically significant differences between sub-groups, but where possible sub-group analysis is included in the report.

Research findings

5. Are free schools using the freedoms available to them?

Key findings
- 62 per cent of respondents reported delivering an alternative to the national curriculum in some or all subjects.
- Over half (57 per cent) run an extended school day and 41 per cent of free schools said that they operate a school year which is different to other local schools.
- 84 per cent of respondents said that their free school either already formally collaborate with other schools, or plans to do so. Secondary schools are more likely than primary schools to use the majority of freedoms open to them.

Free schools are different to academies because they are new (rather than a change from a previous school) and do not need to change existing practise. This may mean that free schools are more easily able to adopt innovative approaches to how they are run. For example, brand new free schools are able to set their own term dates, choose

their curriculum and make all decisions around procurement, without having to change any historical relationships/systems.

As shown in Figure 1, the use of these freedoms is not universal among free schools. The vast majority of free schools procure services from a range of providers (85 per cent) and just under two thirds deliver an alternative curriculum in some or all subjects (62 per cent). Over half (57 per cent) run an extended school day and about a third (32 per cent) have employed teachers without QTS. The vast majority (84 per cent) of free schools already collaborate with other schools in a formalised partnership, or plan to do so.

Figure 1 – Use of different freedoms[1]
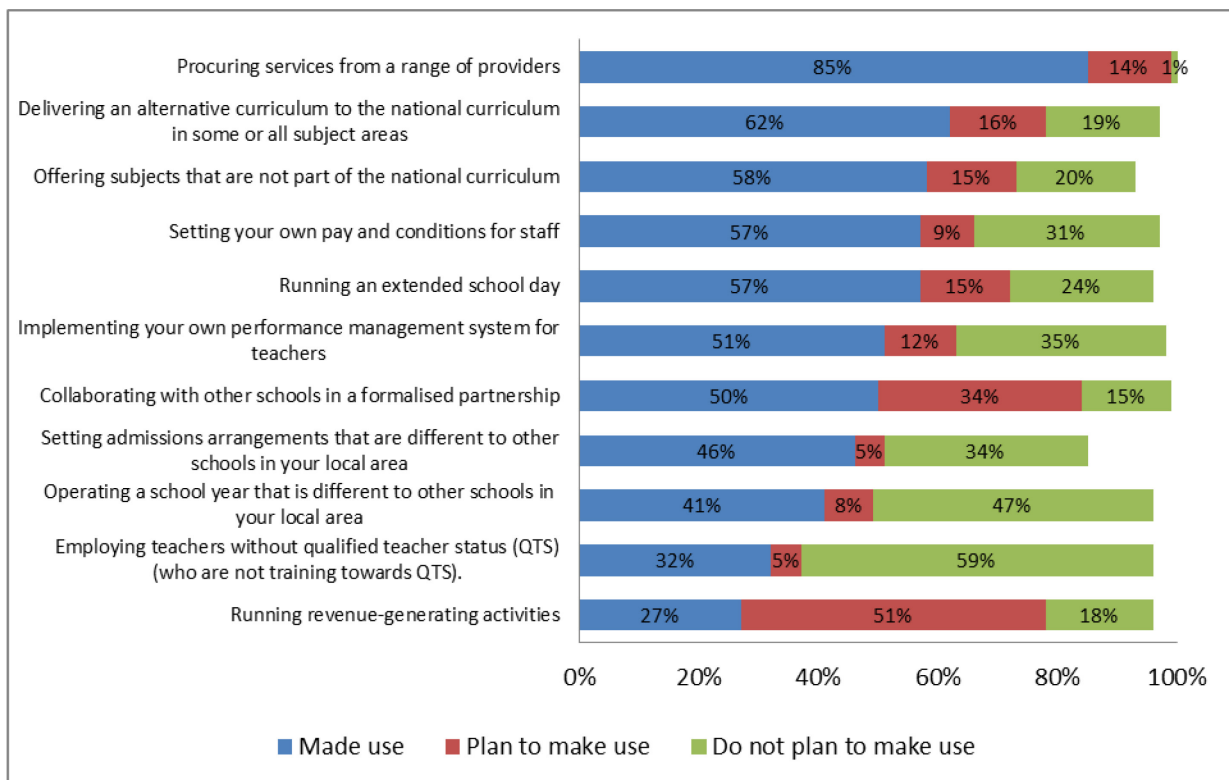
Base: Total sample 74

The DfE's report "*Do academies make use of their autonomy?*"[2] included a similar question to that analysed in Figure 1. Respondents to the academies survey were asked for changes they had made since conversion, whereas free schools were asked what freedoms they had used. Academies are therefore explaining changes made while free schools are describing approaches they adopted as they opened for the first time. While the results are not directly comparable, some of the options were similar; so they do offer some insight into differences between free schools and academies.

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[1] Where figures don't add up to 100 per cent this is due to those answering don't know
[2] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/do-academies-make-use-of-their-autonomy DfE-RR366

Academies and free schools provide comparable answers on a number of measures, for example:

- 85 per cent of free schools procure from a range of providers while 87 per cent of academies procure services that were previously provided by the LA from elsewhere.

- 62 per cent of free schools offer an alternative curriculum in some or all subjects while 55 per of academies reported changing their curriculum.

- 51 per cent of free schools have implemented their own performance management system while 56 per cent of academies have changed theirs.

There are three areas where more free schools appear to have made use of their ability to innovate than have academies.

- 57 per cent of free schools set their own pay and conditions for staff while only 24 per cent of academies have changed the pay structures.

- 57 per cent of free schools run an extended school day while only 8 per cent of academies have increased the length of their school day[3].

- 41 per cent of free schools operate a school year which is different to other local schools while only 4 per cent of academies have changed their terms.

This evidence suggests that free schools are able to use innovative approaches to running their school, while academies might find it more difficult to make such fundamental changes, although it should be noted academies might not change because the current approach works well.

Are there differences in the use of freedoms between primary and secondary free schools?

Overall, secondary free schools are more likely to use the freedoms open to them. On average, primary schools reported use of five of the freedoms listed in Figure 1, compared to seven for secondary schools. Although base sizes are low, secondary schools are significantly more likely to collaborate in more formalised partnerships, implement their own performance management system and employ teachers without QTS. Although primary free schools appear slightly more likely to operate an innovative school year than secondary free schools, the difference is not statistically significant. The pattern of more innovation in secondary schools was also identified in the academies survey.

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[3] Note that some academies may have run an extended day before conversion

Figure 2 - Use of different freedoms by primary and secondary schools

	Secondary	Primary
Procuring services from a range of providers	89%	85%
Delivering an alternative curriculum to the national curriculum in some or all subject areas	75%	59%
Implementing your own performance management system for teachers	71%	41%
Running an extended school day	71%	50%
Collaborating with other schools in a formalised partnership	68%	35%
Setting your own pay and conditions for staff	68%	44%
Offering subjects that are not part of the national curriculum	68%	56%
Setting admissions arrangements that are different to other schools in your local area	50%	41%
Employing teachers without qualified teacher status (QTS) (who are not training towards QTS).	46%	21%
Running revenue-generating activities	29%	21%
Operating a school year that is different to other schools in your local area	29%	50%

Base: Primary 34, Secondary 28

# 6. Are free schools introducing curriculum innovations?

Key findings
- The subjects on which most free schools say they are likely to follow the new national curriculum to a great extent in September 2014 are mathematics (80 per cent of respondents), English (78 per cent) and Science (66 per cent). The figures for free schools are similar to those reported by academies.
- Intention by free schools to follow the national curriculum varies little between school phases, although secondary schools are less likely than primary schools to offer some subjects at all.
- 57 per cent of free schools claim that they offer subjects not available in local schools.

Figure 1 showed that 62 per cent of free schools reported using their freedom to deliver an alternative curriculum in some or all subject areas. All the schools were asked the extent to which they would follow the new national curriculum in September 2014 for a number of different subjects - see Figure 3. Schools are most likely to follow the curriculum to a "great extent" in mathematics (80 per cent), English (78 per cent) and Science (66 per cent). These figures are almost identical to the answers provided in the

academies survey which were 77 per cent for mathematics, 76 per cent for English and 67 per cent for science. In fact the percentages were similar for all subjects[4].

Figure 3 - Extent to which schools will follow the new national curriculum
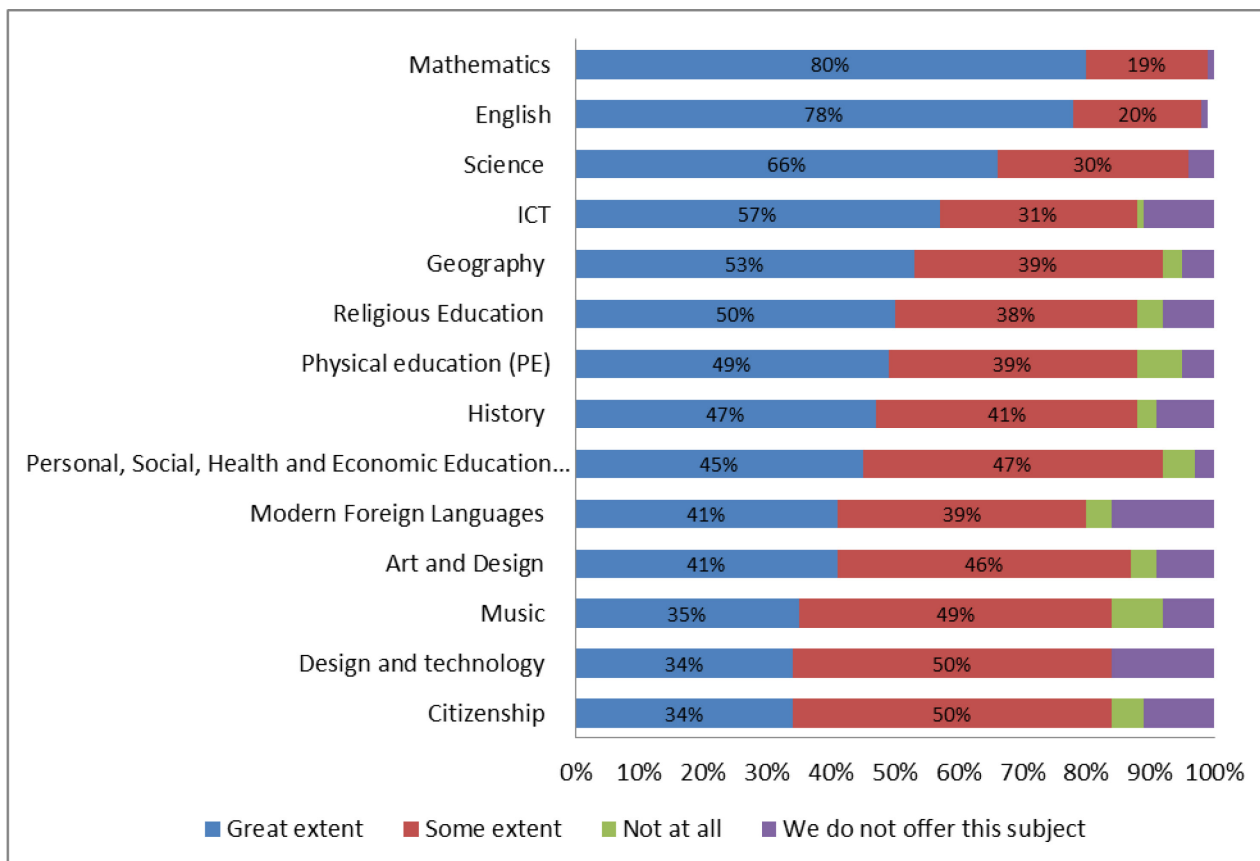
Primary schools were more likely to intend following the national curriculum to a great extent for design and technology and ICT but there are no other significant differences between phases. Some secondary free schools did not offer all subjects - for example seven secondary schools did not offer modern foreign languages, six did not offer ICT, and six did not offer design and technology.

Do free schools offer subjects not available in other local schools?

57 per cent of schools claimed to offer subjects which are not available in other local schools. The main subjects offered were Mandarin (6 schools), Classic languages (5 schools), Science, Engineering and Manufacturing technologies (5 schools) and Environment and land based skills (4 schools). Due to low base sizes it is impossible to highlight significant differences, but it is worth noting that Spanish and French are

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[4] It is important to note that special schools and alternative provision are included in this research which explains why one school does not offer maths or English

highlighted in primary schools but not secondary and environment and land based skills are offered in secondary schools.

7. What innovative approaches are free schools using in their operations?

Key findings
- 57 per cent of free schools headteachers run what they consider to be an extended school day. Half of these schools have a compulsory school day of seven hours or more.
- 65 per cent of schools believe the opportunity to innovate with their school day and term is important for them to deliver the school's vision.
- 81 per cent of respondents feel they offer something innovative in how they deliver their curriculum.
- 82 per cent of free schools offer extra-curricular activities (more likely in primary) and 68 per cent offer an enrichment programme (more likely in secondary).

Free schools are using a wide range of the freedoms open to them regarding how they operate. The survey explored a number of these in more detail.

Have free schools innovated with the school day?

Although all schools in England are free to decide when their school day should start and end (there are no specific legal requirements about how long the school day should be), many chose to open for around six and half hours e.g. 8.45 – 15.15 or 9.00-15.30. Figure 1 showed that 57 per cent of schools responding to the survey believed they run an extended school day. These 42 schools were asked a series of follow up questions to provide understanding about how they have extended the day.

Table 2 presents the data for compulsory hours during the week. The percentages are the proportion of schools that have an extended school day (rather than all free schools because those who ran a 'normal' school day were not asked). Due to the low base sizes it is not possible to identify statistically significant (at 95%) differences between primary and secondary.

A third of schools with an extended day start at 8.30 or earlier and two thirds finish at 15.30 or later. Around half (55 per cent) have a compulsory school day of seven hours or over. The longest school day was a mainstream secondary school which had an eight and half hour day.

Table 2 - The proportion of schools with early start and late finish times

	Total	Primary	Secondary
8.30 or earlier	32%	21%	50%
15.30 or later	64%	59%	65%
7 hours plus a day	55%	41%	65%
Base	42	17	20

Schools with an extended school day were asked to provide details about whether they also had non-compulsory school hours. The total time schools are 'open' each day during the week are presented in Table 3 below. Half the schools are 'open' for more than eight hours per day, while a quarter are open for more than nine. The earliest start time provided was 7.00am and the latest finish time was 18.30.

Table 3 - The total amount of time schools with an extended school day are open

	Total	Primary	Secondary
Under seven hours	17%	18%	10%
Between seven and eight hours	29%	12%	35%
Between eight and nine hours	26%	24%	30%
Over nine hours	26%	41%	20%
Base	42	17	20

Four of the schools who completed the survey were open on Saturdays and in one case Saturday attendance was compulsory.

All schools were asked if they felt that having freedom over altering the length of their school day and terms have been important in delivering the school's vision. With 57 per cent already running an extended school day (with a further 15 per cent planning to do so) and 41 per cent using terms different to their surrounding schools (a further 8 per cent plan to do so); 65 per cent of the headteachers surveyed believe the opportunity to innovate in this way is important for them delivering the school's vision.

As explained earlier in the report, free schools are more likely to run an extended school day and different term dates to other local schools than academies.

What innovative approaches are being used for delivering the curriculum?

Schools were asked whether they have adopted practices to deliver their curriculum which they think are innovative or different to other schools; 81 per cent felt they offered something innovative. The 60 schools who felt they were innovative were asked an open question to explain their approach and the main responses are in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4 - Examples of innovative approaches used
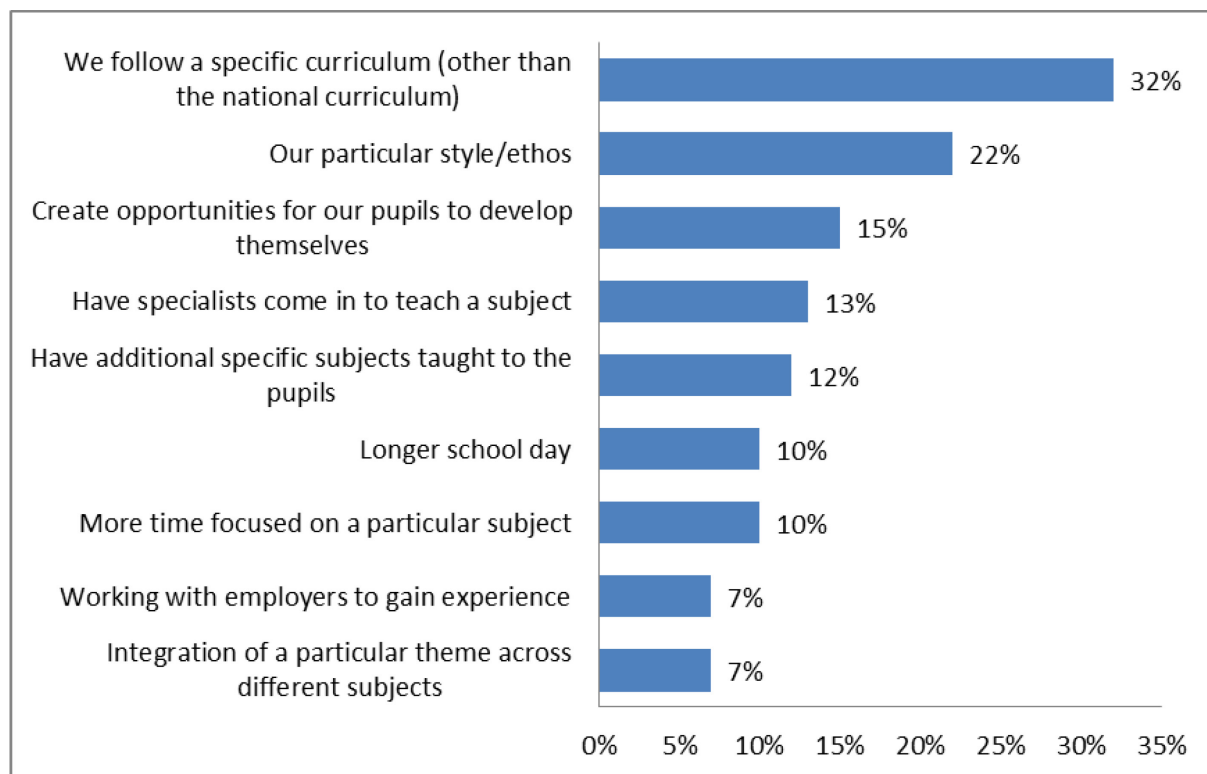
Base: Innovative approach (60)

Some good examples of how schools explained their innovative approaches include:

"longer day to make "extra-curricular" activities part of the school day (in our "electives" programme), and to make additional time for sport & PE in KS3 - students arriving with English & Maths levels below age expected standards study extra numeracy and literacy classes instead of doing MfL - we are adopting our own knowledge-driven curriculum for KS3 Ma/Eng/Sci/History/Geography"

"A number of subjects (Music, PE, MFL) are taught by subject specialists from Reception upwards. Three hours a week of sport I.5hrs a day of literacy (including phonics and grammar)"

"A broad curriculum, flexible timetable; extended day to allow freedom within the day; whole school learning focus (as well as year group termly planning) linking the school and community and making cross phase learning opportunities completely possible; non-negotiable beyond classroom / school based learning to take learning and make it real; characteristics of learning stretching across the whole school"

"Delivering education and training in full partnership with local employers who provide speakers, work based experience, 40 day placements etc. We have a Stakeholder Board that brings the businesses together to support the school."

What non-curricular activities are offered?

82 per cent of free schools reported offering extra-curricular activities and 68 per cent offered an enrichment programme. Figure 5 shows some statistically significant differences between primary and secondary schools. Primary schools are more likely to offer extra-curricular activities (91 per cent vs 71 per cent) and secondary schools are more likely to offer an enrichment programme (82 per cent vs 56 per cent).

Figure 5 - Difference between non-curricular activities offered in primary and secondary schools
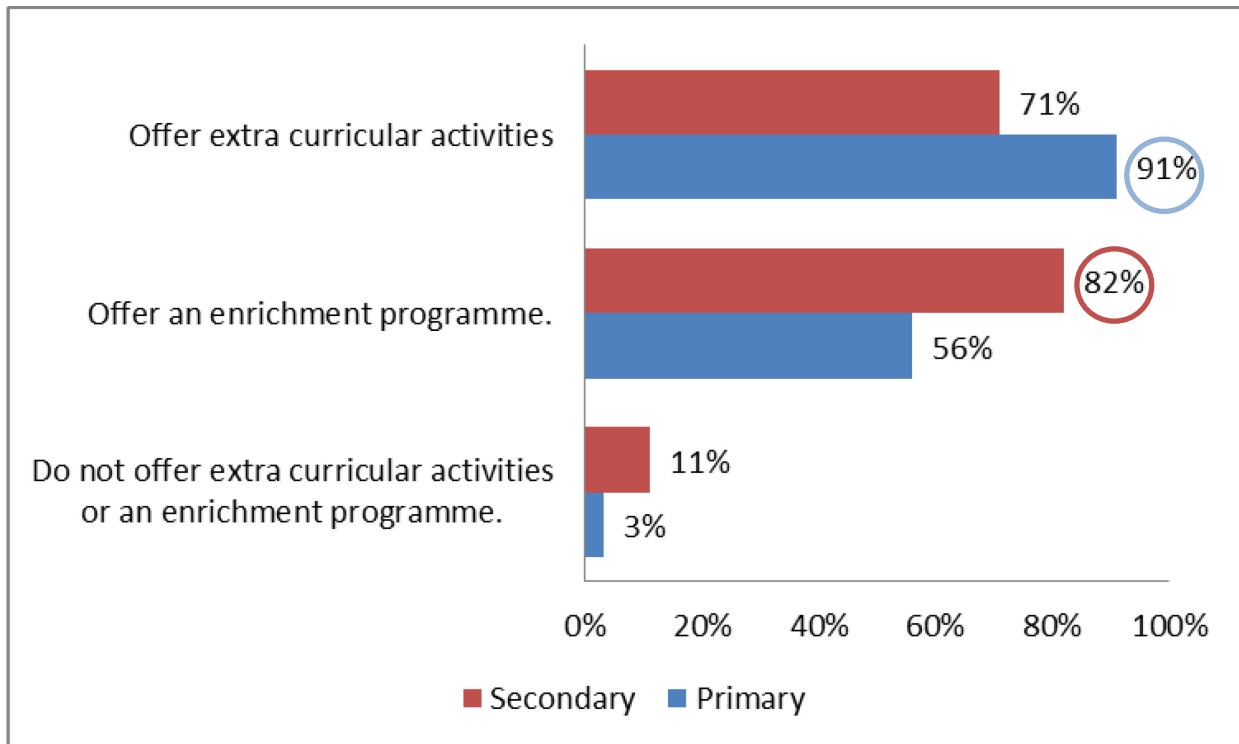
Base: Primary 34, Secondary 28

The types of activities provided are presented in Table 4, the most common being PE/sports, performing arts, music, arts and crafts and other languages.

Table 4 - Extracurricular/enrichment activities provided

	Offer activities
Physical Education and Sports	57%
Performing Arts	44%
Music (incl. instrumentation and vocal)	34%
Art & Crafts	31%
Other languages	22%
Cookery/catering	19%
IT/Technology	18%
Games (incl. board games, quizzes, puzzles, chess, etc)	18%
Horticulture/agriculture	12%
Speaking/Debate	10%
Science	9%
English Language/Literature and creative writing	9%
Employer/business related	7%
Mathematics	7%
Breakfast club	7%
Trips/expeditions/DofE	7%
Community/charity activities	7%
Martial Arts	4%
Base	68

There were some differences between the activities provided by primary and secondary free schools (which link to more enrichment than extra-curricular offers in secondary schools). Secondary school examples included speaking/debate, Community/charity, employer/business related; while primary schools appear more likely to offer breakfast clubs, arts and crafts and music.

Some schools provided extra detail on the activities they offered.

"Science Summer School - aimed at Pupil Premium students joining the school in September but also open to current PP students and other students. Two weeks - 8.30 to 3.15"

"There is a menu of enrichment activities - all …. participate in at least one session per week. Many select more. These run from 3.25 - 4.15 each day. Enrichment options include: Engineering, Formula 1 Maths Challenge, School Magazine, Technology Review, World Wise Quiz, Roma-Greco Wrestling In addition there is a Sports Leadership Programme on Saturdays. For 'Big Society' there is an annual programme of charity and volunteering activities including the running of a Food Bank for the local community on a Friday. There are also collapsed timetable days for the delivery of the Enterprise Specialism"

"Every evening has 2 - 3 clubs including Drama, science, gardening, languages, Robotic, computer science, debating, sports etc. We also have followed the private school model and do weekly service in the community"

8. Do free schools differ in their use of the School Admission Code to their surrounding schools?

Key findings
- Around half (46 per cent) of free schools use oversubscription admission procedures different to local schools (although they all must be in line with the School Admissions Code).
- The most common criteria used are catchment area and giving priority to disadvantaged pupils. A significant minority use lotteries.

Free schools can set their own admissions policies, but these must be in line with the School Admissions Code that applies to all schools[5]. Free schools can order their oversubscription criteria and seem to be doing this.

Figure 1 showed that about half (46 per cent) of respondents reported using different oversubscription criteria to other local schools, while a third (34 per cent) did not intend to do so. 26 of the 34 schools which have used different admissions were mainstream; the most common differences for mainstream schools are presented in Figure 6 and relate setting a catchment area and giving priority to disadvantaged pupils. There are also some examples of free schools using lottery-based approaches to admissions.

Figure 6 – Different admissions approaches to local schools
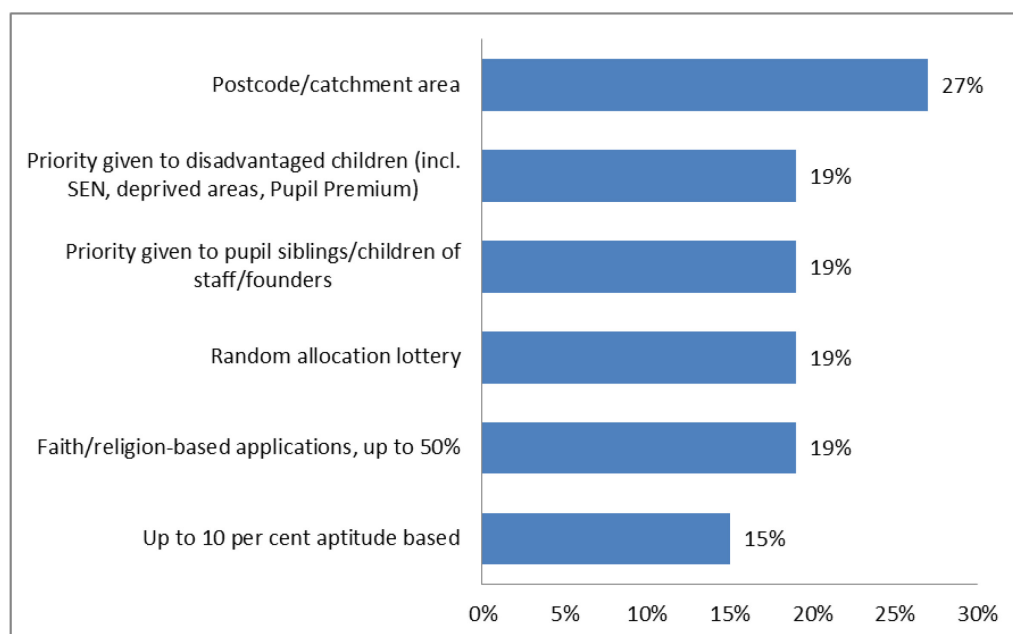
Base: Mainstream schools using a different approach to local schools (26)

Schools explained their approaches in some detail.

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[5] The school admissions code does not apply to 16-19 academies/free schools

"Only applies if over-subscribed but it identifies 3 areas around the school and a % of students are randomly selected from each of the 3 - to encourage a multi-cultural community - as far as a random system can."

"We allocate 50% of available places on distance and 50% on random allocation. This is challenging for the LA to administer and understand however as there are no other schools locally with a random part to their allocation."

"Combination of 10% musical aptitude, 45% straight line distance and 45% lottery (after places have been taken by children with statements of SEN, LAC and sibs). The lottery element is unusual."

"Priority given to Pupil Premium children, if oversubscribed we use a lottery by random allocation."

## 9. Do free schools use innovative approaches to staffing?

Key finding
- 32 per cent of free schools report ever having hired any unqualified teachers. Almost half of these (46 per cent) no longer have any (they may have since qualified or no longer work at the school) or have one non-QTS teacher.
- 57 per cent of respondents reported setting their own pay and conditions for staff, while half (51 per cent) felt they used the freedom of setting their own performance management system for teachers
- The most regular method used to manage performance was informal observation of lessons which three quarters used more than half-termly and 95% at least half termly.
- Parental feedback in more common in free schools 61 per cent seek this at least termly compared to only 42 per cent of academies.
- Three quarters (77 per cent) of free schools reported linking pay to teachers' performance.

How common is hiring non-Qualified Teacher Status teachers?

Only 24 out of the 74 (32 per cent) survey respondents had used the freedom to appoint teachers who do not hold Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) at some point (even if they had subsequently gained QTS or left). This figure is slightly higher than the 16 per cent of all academies but comparable to the 24 per cent of sponsored academies.

The 24 schools with non-QTS teachers were asked how many they had; 2 (8 per cent) currently had none (the staff member had either qualified since being hired or was no longer employed); 9 (38 per cent) currently had one; and 5 (21 per cent) had two. Figure 7 shows the subjects taught by non-QTS teachers. The percentage endorsing other is high because many subjects had a single endorsement.

Figure 7 - Subjects taught by non-QTS teachers
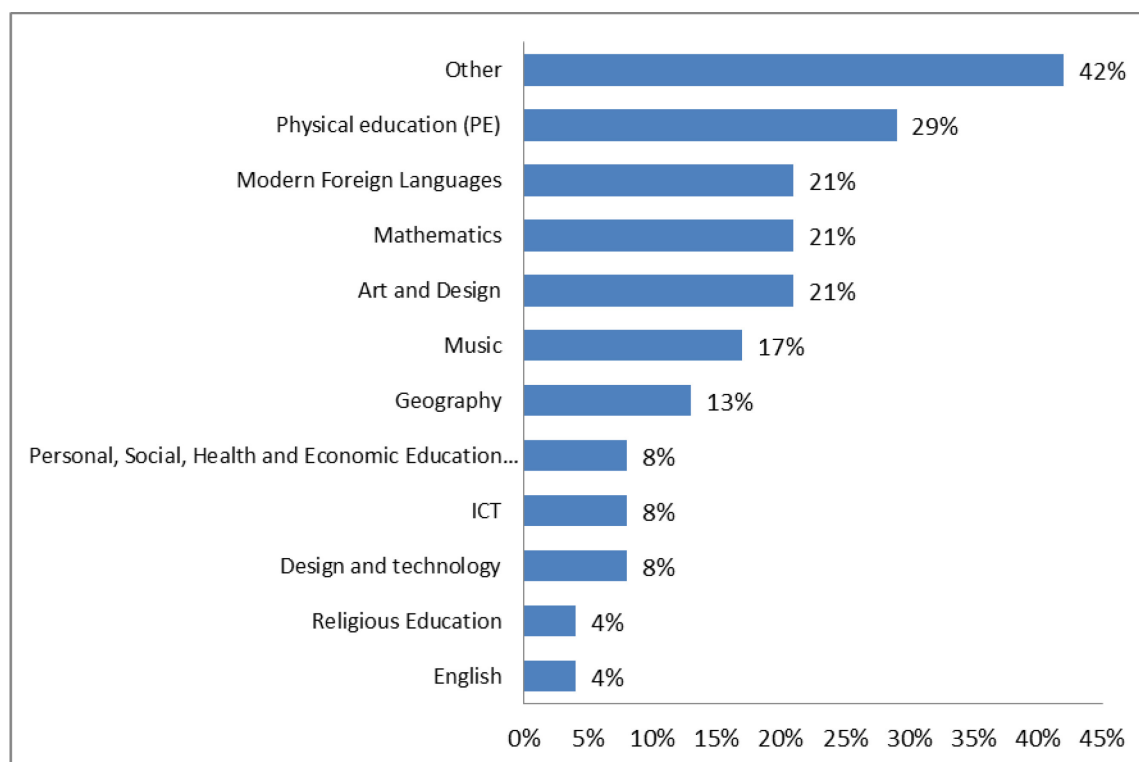
Base: Have hired non-QTS teachers (24)

The comments below provide an explanation of why non-QTS teachers were hired. The responses demonstrate that the individuals recruited were viewed as the best person for the job or filled a staff shortage in the area.

"They came with the required level of skills in a particular subject and were then trained to teach. We will offer all staff the opportunity to work towards QTS via the QTLS route."

"To plug shortage of staff with QTS - to provide an alternative route into teaching for highly qualified people in subject areas"

"All of our specialist teachers have qualifications in their specialism and were chosen because in many circumstances they could teach their subject to a higher level than teachers with QTS."

"Our Head of boys PE and Games is a well-qualified and experienced teacher with 3 years' experience in the independent sector. He was interviewed alongside 3 PE teachers with QTS and was significantly better."

"The teacher is an award winning composer and a Fellow of the college of music."

## What methods are used for monitoring teacher performance?

Figure 1 showed that half (51 per cent) of the schools in the sample felt they used their freedom to set their own performance management system for teachers. This is a similar

to the proportion of academies that had changed their performance management system since converting (56 per cent).

The most regular method used was informal lesson observations which three quarters of all free schools used more than half-termly and 95% used at least half-termly. Around 80 per cent monitor pupil progress/achievement at least half-termly. The same question was asked in the academies survey and generally similar results were observed but there were some notable differences:

- Informal classroom observations which were more frequent than half-termly were more common in free schools (76 per cent) compared to 58 per cent of academies. It is likely that this is because free schools are newer and more regular observations are considered important.

- Seeking parental feedback was more common in free schools (61 per cent of free schools reported using it at least termly, compared to only 42 per cent of academies).

Figure 8 - Methods used to monitor teachers' performance
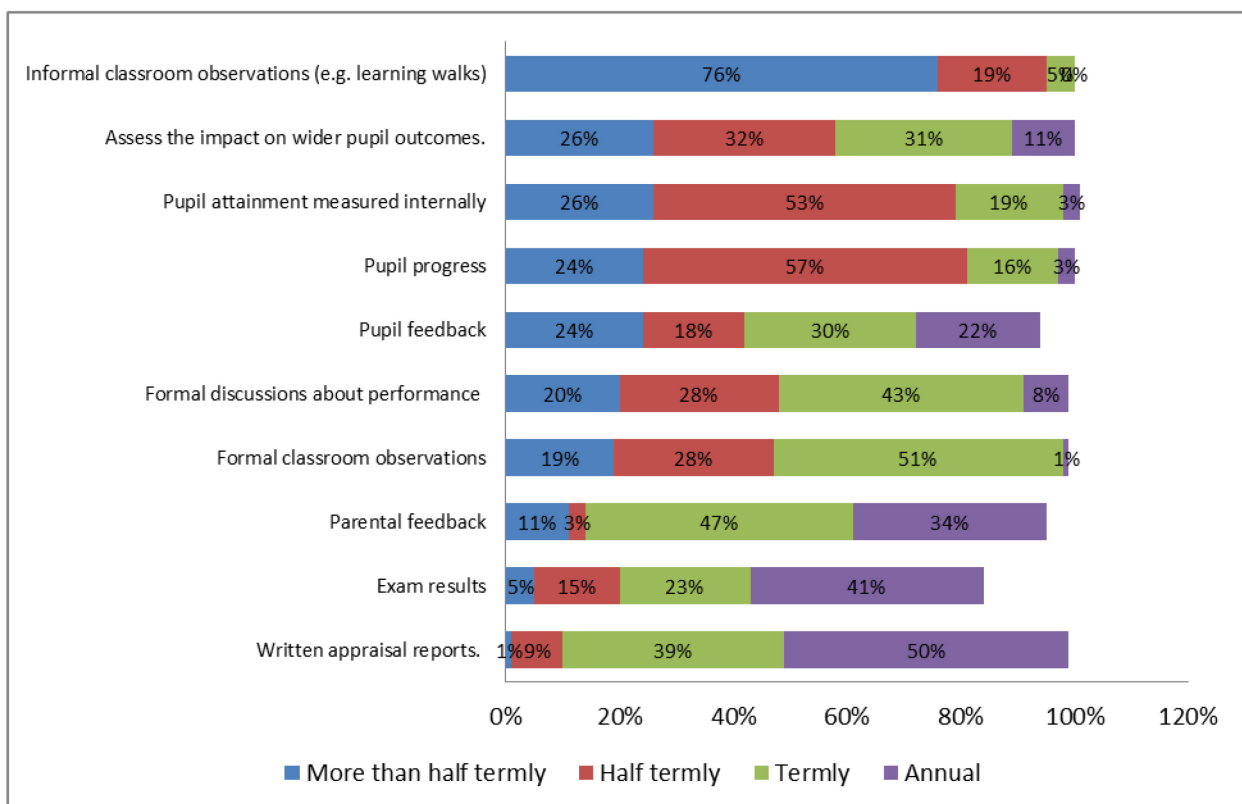
Base: Total sample (74)

Three quarters (77 per cent) of free schools reported linking pay to teachers' performance. This figure is not significantly different to 84 per cent of academies who link teachers' pay to performance.

10. From where do free schools access support?

> **Key finding**
> - Free schools access support from a number of different places. LAs are the most common source of support for SEN, Admissions and Governors; other schools for teaching, subject-specific and leadership and management; and private companies are most widely used for HR and financial management support.
> - Typically more primary schools access support from their local authority than do secondary schools.

All 74 schools were asked where they accessed different types of support and the findings are illustrated in Figure 9. The bars total more than 74 because schools are able to access support from more than one source. The blue bar below represents the support schools receive from their local authority (LA) and it can be seen that LAs are the most common support for SEN, Admissions and Governors. The green bar is support received from other schools, most common for teaching, subject-specific support and leadership and management. Private companies are most widely used for HR and financial management support.

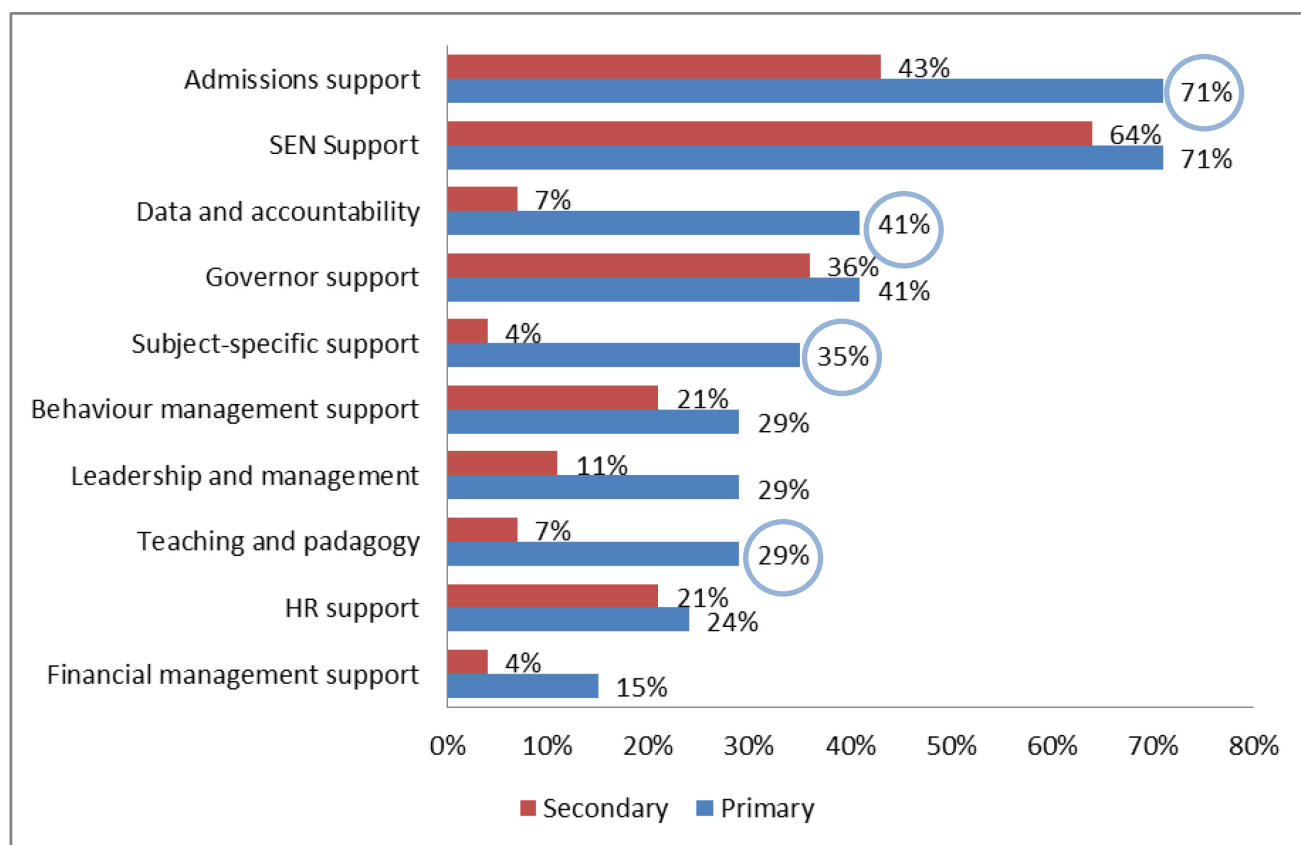### Figure 9 - Sources of support for schools
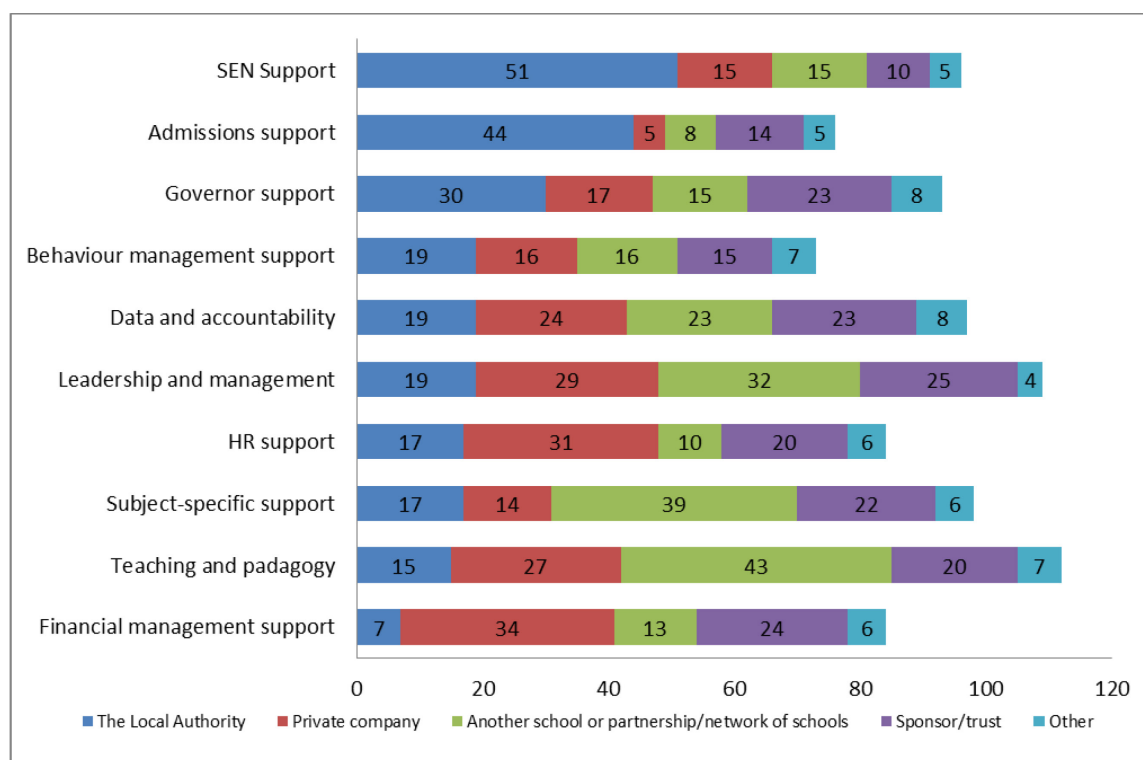
Base: Total sample (74)

It is interesting to note that the proportion of primary schools and secondary schools accessing support from their LA differs. Figure 10 shows that typically more primary

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schools access support from their local authority than secondary schools. This is not to say that secondary schools receive a lower level of support, rather that primary schools are more likely to access some LA support.

There are significant differences between primary and secondary free schools in how they source a number of types of support. Although 43 per cent of secondary schools access support for admissions from LAs, this figure is 71 per cent of primary schools. There were some areas of support which few secondary free schools sought from LAs: for data and accountability (41 per cent primary vs. 7 per cent secondary), subject-specific support (35 per cent vs. 4 per cent) and teaching and pedagogy (29 per cent vs. 7 per cent).

Figure 10 - Proportion of primary and secondary free schools accessing support from local authorities

Base: Primary 34 and Secondary 28

Respondents were asked whether they had received specific types of support from other schools and their local authority. Figure 11 shows that, apart from support for externally-run CPD courses, free schools are more likely to have accessed support from other schools than from their local authority.

Figure 11 - Support received from schools and the local authority
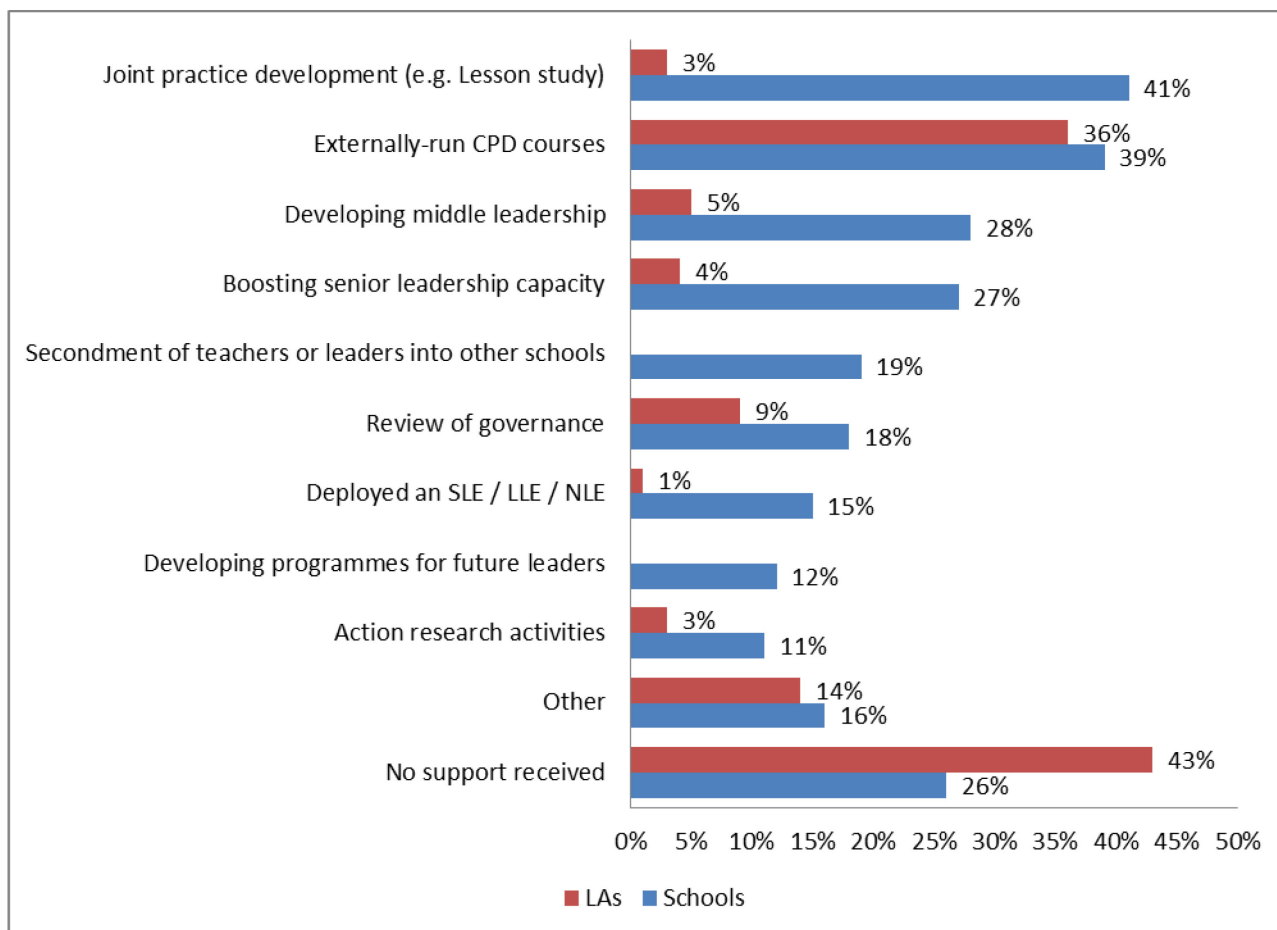
Base: Total sample (74)

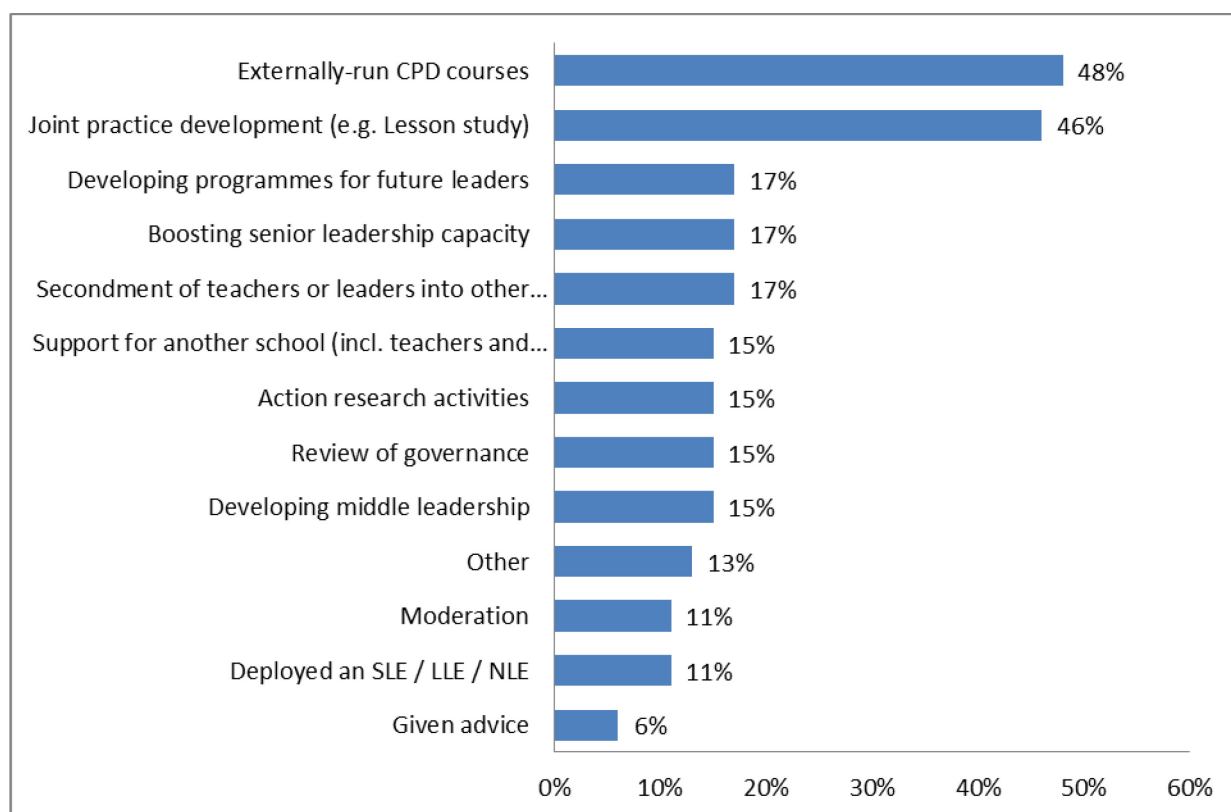# 11. Do free schools support other schools?

Key finding
- 73 per cent of free schools support other schools.
- The most common types of support provided are running CPD courses and joint practice development.

54 (73 per cent) of the 74 respondent free schools said they had supported other schools. This figure compares to 87 per cent for academies. When coupled with the fact that 84 per cent of free schools either already formally collaborate with other schools or plan to do so, this shows that working with other schools is a very common feature of free schools.

The schools were asked what type of support they have provided and Figure 12 shows that externally run CPD courses and joint practice development are by far the most common types of support.

Figure 12 - What support have free schools provided to other schools?

Support	%
Externally-run CPD courses	48%
Joint practice development (e.g. Lesson study)	46%
Developing programmes for future leaders	17%
Boosting senior leadership capacity	17%
Secondment of teachers or leaders into other...	17%
Support for another school (incl. teachers and...	15%
Action research activities	15%
Review of governance	15%
Developing middle leadership	15%
Other	13%
Moderation	11%
Deployed an SLE / LLE / NLE	11%
Given advice	6%

Base: Supported other schools (54)

Some schools articulated the sort of support they provide:

"Staff and pupils have been to local primary schools on a weekly basis to deliver Spanish and PE sessions."

"Supported other heads starting up free schools or in existing ones. Run CPD for others to access. Our MFL teacher is running sample lessons and workshop at primaries to support compulsory MFL in primaries."

"5 other schools have visited to observe our pedagogy and to learn from our delivery. We have allowed several visits to our outstanding provision in EYFS."

12. Specific examples of innovative approaches used by free schools

Key finding
- 47 per cent of free schools felt they offered something innovative which is different to other schools. The curriculum (mentioned by 49 per cent) and the style of teaching (37 per cent) were the most common areas.

Schools were asked if they thought there were any other practices they had adopted which were innovative or different to other schools; 35 out of the 74 (47 per cent) felt they had. When asked to explain their innovative approaches, the curriculum (49 per cent) and the style of teaching (37 per cent) were the most common responses.

Figure 13 - Innovative approaches used by schools
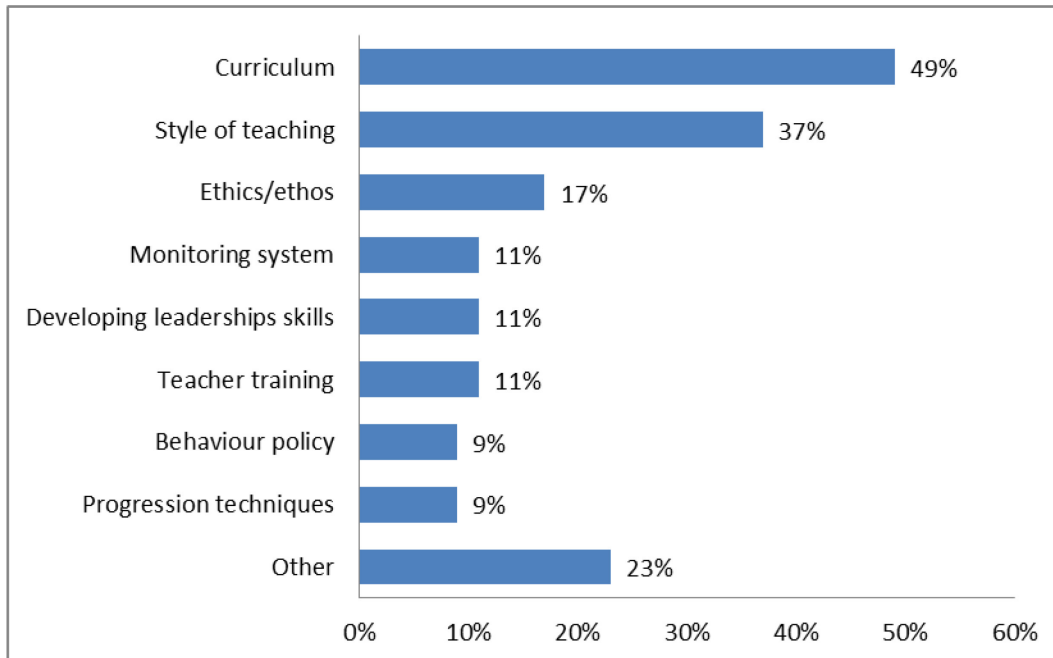
Base: Use innovative approach (35)

Schools explained in some detail their own innovative approach.

"Staff work normal working weeks 9-5 with 31 days annual leave - Our behaviour management and progress techniques"

"Achievement-oriented and aspirational school culture focussed on higher education High expectations, no excuses approach e.g. same day detentions Stretch projects and options Compulsory co-curriculum Data Days (used for appraisal and data driven planning) Tailored practice for staff Morning meetings every day used to reset expectations and for literacy and numeracy development Large group teaching Learning Commons"

"Exceptionally clear ethos with focus on etiquette and manners, 4 cycles which encompass cpd, performance data and appraisal, student leadership including service to local community"

13. Do free schools think they have a wider impact on their local area?

> **Key finding**
> - 72 per cent of free school headteachers believe they are having a wider impact on other schools in the local area.
> - Of these, a third think local standards are being raised through competition and a further third believe collaboration is making a difference.
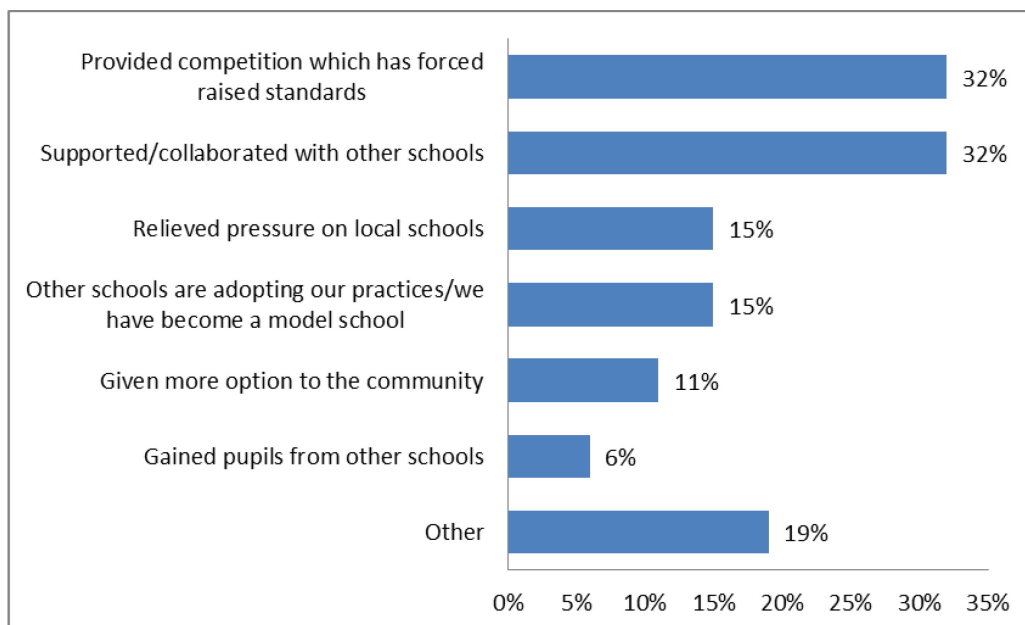
Free schools can meet demand for more places in an area and can add to choice and increase competition and thus improve standards in the local education system. The free schools were asked if they felt that their school was having a wider impact on their local area. As shown in Table 5, 72 per cent of schools felt that they were (the difference between responses from primary and secondary free schools is not statistically significant).

Table 5 - Are free schools having a wider impact?

	Total	Primary	Secondary
Yes	72%	65%	82%
No	28%	35%	18%
Base	74	34	28

The 53 schools who felt they were having a wider impact were asked to explain their view in more detail. Figure 14 shows that around a third of headteachers in these free schools believe that local standards are being raised through competition and collaboration.

Figure 14 - What contributes to the wider impact of free schools?

Category	Percentage
Provided competition which has forced raised standards	32%
Supported/collaborated with other schools	32%
Relieved pressure on local schools	15%
Other schools are adopting our practices/we have become a model school	15%
Given more option to the community	11%
Gained pupils from other schools	6%
Other	19%

Base: Felt the school had a wider impact on local area (53)

Respondents were asked to provide detail about the impact of their school. Below are a number of examples provided which explain the positive affect of free schools:

"Since opening our school, the enhanced competition has resulted in standards in the local area rising. One head of a local school has openly stated at a headteachers' meeting that the opening of our school made him re-evaluate his provision and raise attainment at GCSE by 25%"

"A number of local schools have visited and, as a result, adopted elements of our approach. We have supported other schools through the local Partnership"

"I believe that this is improving the local schools who work with us. The city has mostly special measure schools and providing a good level of education for the disaffected within these schools allows them to focus on their own improvement."

"There is a shortage of school places in the area so an additional school was welcomed. We are collaborating well with our sister school and have strong links for moderating staff and pupil performance."

"We are outward facing - for example, on opening we joined the local, school led collaborative (EIP) and play an active role. There are only 2 outstanding secondary schools in the borough - our own and our sponsor. Our school is playing a lead strategic and operational role in the recently designated Teaching School Alliance (led by our sister school). Through this we are providing S2S support. On their request, we are working with the LA and other system leaders to devise a new school improvement model for all schools in the borough. As Principal I have contributed to the delivery of our Trusts NPQH programme which draws candidates from across the NW and to their Free

Schools NPQH programme which drew 50+ delegates nationally in Year 1 and 30+ in Year 2."

"There is a desperate shortage of school places in our area and our school has gone someway to alleviating the problem of local school provision. We have a waiting list of more than 500 children."

"We are part of a MAT and our school facilities are used by pupils from our other schools and this will extend to other schools when we move to our new build."

14. Conclusion

This research has provided the Department for Education with a useful understanding of free schools in the first years after opening. The results demonstrate that innovative approaches are being used by many free schools in their aim of raising educational standards. The results also suggest that, as completely new entities, free schools may be less bound to past practices as academies, so are able to offer parents and pupils different opportunities.

A common criticism of free schools is that they operate in isolation to other schools[6]. This research goes some way to showing that this criticism is unjust. The majority of free schools are collaborating with other schools to not only improve themselves, but also to help others. Free school headteachers are clear in their belief that their school is having a positive effect on their surrounding schools through both competition and collaboration. Free schools are also criticised for hiring unqualified teachers[7], and this survey shows that a third of free schools have recruited unqualified teachers but that these teachers were recruited for positive reasons such as specific skills.

The findings highlight that free schools are more likely than sponsor and converter academies to use their ability to run a longer school day and use different terms to their surrounding schools. Headteachers feel that the ability to innovate in such fundamental areas of their school's operation has enabled them to raise standards.

Although the sample size is small, some differences can be seen between primary and secondary free schools, most notably that secondary schools are more likely to adopt various innovative approaches and primary schools have a stronger relationship with their local authority. This seems likely to be a factor of size and internal capacity, but the research cannot prove this.

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[6] An example was reported by politics.co.uk http://www.politics.co.uk/opinion-formers/nasuwt-the-teachers-union/free-schools

[7] An example was reported by the BBC http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-13266290

The department will use the research findings to understand where innovative approaches and the use of freedoms have led to improved standards and in what circumstances particular approaches might work best. We will develop case studies which will be shared with all free schools and with groups that want to open a free school. Where relevant the survey's findings will also be used to inform future free schools policy and delivery.