



Department
for Education

Free school applications: criteria for assessment

Special

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Introduction

Routes of entry

As a reminder before you start, there are two routes to follow when applying to establish a free school:

- Route 1 – applicants who have:
 - an open free school of the same type and phase; or
 - a free school of the same type and phase currently in pre-opening
- Route 2 – all other applicants

The purpose of Route 1 is to avoid asking you to provide information that we have seen before. If you have previously been approved to open a free school, we still hold a copy of your previous application. Instead of asking you to duplicate information in all areas, you will need to provide a brief statement and commentary of significant differences between this application and your last approved application for most of the education plan section. We will also take into account the views of your DfE lead contact and your named education adviser, based on their experience of your educational model during pre-opening and, if applicable, when open. You should be aware that your application will still be assessed against other mainstream, 16-19, AP and special free school applications as appropriate. You should consider the How to Apply Guidance and assessment criteria carefully to ensure that this is the right route for you.

If you are proposing a different education plan, you are free to submit a full Route 2 application. Indeed, you will not be eligible for Route 1 if:

- You are establishing a different type of school (e.g. if you were previously approved to open a mainstream school and are now applying to open a special school)
- You are establishing a different phase of school (e.g. if you were previously approved to open a secondary school and are now applying to open a primary school)
- You operate a type of school that is not a free school (e.g. you are an academy sponsor that has not previously submitted a free school application). This is because we need more information than we currently hold to fairly assess your application

Single and multiple applications

It is possible to apply for one or more free schools in the same round, irrespective of whether you apply through Route 1 or Route 2. It is also possible to complete a single application form covering more than one school, where this avoids duplication:

- **Submit one application covering all schools if:** all your proposed free schools are of the same phase and type (e.g. all mainstream primary, all special secondary) and will follow the same educational model (e.g. all teaching the same or similar curriculum, all staffed in the same or a similar way)
- **Submit different applications for each school if:** each of your proposed free schools are of a different phase and/or type or if your proposed schools are of the same phase and type, but each school will follow a different model
- **Submit a mix of combined and single applications if:** some of your proposed free schools will be of the same phase and type, and follow a similar educational model, but others will be different

What to fill in for Route 1/Route 2 and single/multiple applications

Where the information required from you in response to a criterion is different because you are a Route 1 or Route 2 applicant or because you are applying for one or more than one free school, this is set out at the end of each section and clearly marked.

Initial assessment

All criteria are important and you should complete your entire application with care and consideration. Each criterion includes information you must provide in order for your application to be assessed. **If you do not provide this information for any of the criteria that are relevant to your application, it is likely that your application will not be considered further and you may not get feedback on the other sections.**

In addition, if we judge that the information provided in any section of your application is weak when compared to the assessment criteria then it is likely that we will not assess the whole application and provide detailed feedback on all sections.

Group capacity and capability - You will need to show that your team includes the right people to set up your school in the pre-opening phase and the right people to hold it to account as trustees once it is open. These may not necessarily be the same people.

If you are an independent school you will already have established capacity and capability. We will therefore expect your application to be substantially more developed, compared to a new free school application with your leadership, management systems

and governance ready for the rigours of the state sector. We will want to see this greater level of preparedness woven through all aspects of the criteria in each section of your application.

Need for the school - You will need to show that your school is needed in the local community and will have enough pupils to be financially viable. You should collect evidence of demand for statemented and, if applicable, non-statemented pupils. Demand for statemented pupils/pupils with an education, health and care (EHC) plan will need to show that local authorities will name your school on children's statements/EHC plans, and will pay the required top-up fees and that parents will support the school being named on their child's statement/EHC plan. Demand for non-statemented pupils/pupils without an EHC plan will need to show that parents (or students, if post-16) will choose your specific school as their first choice, and that their child is identified as having the primary SEN for which the school is designated.

You will need to build a case for your free school by providing a brief description of the current specialist SEN provision in the area, and why your free school will offer something different and of higher quality. You should show whether there is a shortage of high quality places for pupils with the specific needs you will cater for in the LA or neighbouring LAs.

If there is a surplus of good quality school places in your area for the specific needs your school will cater for, we will expect you to show even more evidence of demand from LAs and parents/students.

How applications will be assessed

As you will see in this booklet, we explain under each criterion how we will assess your application and what you need to do to be rated most highly.

Section A – Applicant details

In this section we ask you for basic information about your group and your company limited by guarantee.

As companies limited by guarantee, certain details will be publicly available on the Companies House website. However, the personal information you provide in **Section A** will be treated in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Personal data is collected on the Word and Excel templates in order to consider an application to set up a free school and will not be used for other purposes. For the purposes of the Data Protection Act, the Department for Education is the data controller for this personal information and for ensuring that it is processed in accordance with the terms of the Act. The department will hold all personal information you supply securely and will only make it available to those who need to see it as part of the free school application process. All personal information supplied in these forms will only be retained for as long as it is needed for this process.

Section B – Outline of the school

In this section we ask you for key details on the type of free school you are proposing.

There are no assessment criteria for this section.

Differences for Route 1/Route 2 and single/multiple applications

Route 1/Route 2

You must provide the same information in sections A and B regardless of whether you are a Route 1 or Route 2 applicant.

Single/multiple

If you are applying to establish more than one free school under the same multi-academy trust, you need only complete one version of section A.

If you are applying for more than one free school but with each free school managed by a different trust, you must complete separate versions of section A for each school and make clear the connection between your applications.

If you are applying for more than one free school, you must complete section B (and the rest of the Excel spreadsheet apart from section A) for each free school for which you are applying.

Section C – Vision

Your education vision should describe why you want to set up your particular free school in the particular area you have identified, its core features and the needs of the pupils you intend to cater for. This is your opportunity to tell us in your own words about the overarching vision for your school and how it informs your education plan. Your application should be coherent and consistent throughout and work together as a cohesive whole. You will need to demonstrate in later sections that the vision is both deliverable and affordable within the funding allocated to free schools.

We will be using one criterion to assess this section of your application.

C1 – A credible proposal to deliver a high quality free school and a clear rationale for establishing it in this area

You must:

- Demonstrate that your vision is deliverable (this will be assessed across your whole application but needs to be clearly set out in this section)
- Ensure your vision is consistent with the rest of your application
- Show that your school will offer a high quality education (e.g. that you have set high ambitions for standards of teaching and pupil outcomes)
- Include a brief explanation of why you are seeking to establish your free school in this particular area, including facts and figures relating to the local context (any current or forecast shortage of places in the local area for the particular types of need you intend to cater for and the quality of local educational provision for children with these types of need)
- Include a brief explanation of the key features of your school, including the proposed age range, details about the expected pupil population, the needs of the pupils it will cater for and any particular ethos you wish your school to have (e.g. any religious or other beliefs)

We will also assess the **quality** of your vision by how far your proposed school will:

- Add to choice/diversity of provision locally
- Offer higher standards than local schools catering for pupils with the same needs
- Respond to demand from local authorities and parents
- Make use of academy freedoms to improve standards in the local area

You will be rated more highly if you can make a **compelling** case that your school will address **most** of these factors.

Differences for Route 1/Route 2 and single/multiple applications

Route 1/Route 2

You must provide the same information here regardless of whether you are a Route 1 or Route 2 applicant.

Single/multiple

If you are applying to establish more than one free school, you have a free school which is open or about to open or you have any open state funded or independent school* you must also provide:

- A brief overarching vision for your chain, including: the number and types of open schools you already manage and have in pre-opening (including free schools, academies, voluntary aided schools and independent schools); and your planned expansion strategy (including how many schools you hope to have in total, your planned geographical spread and timescales)

* You do not need to provide this information if you are applying to convert a single independent school into a free school

We would normally expect the vision section to be about 5 pages long for a single school (and longer in the case of multiple applicants).

Section D – Education plan

This is the heart of your application. Your education plan must explain how your school will achieve its education vision. You should note that section D in the application form includes two parts for you to fill out.

Part 1 asks you to fill out a table showing how your school will grow over time to full capacity. The numbers included in this table must be consistent with the pupil numbers used in the budget planning spreadsheet. **All applicants** must complete this table. **Multiple applicants** must complete a separate table for **each school they are proposing**.

We would generally expect special free schools to be at full capacity no later than the start of the fourth year of operation.

Part 2 is where you should provide the information relevant to the criteria below.

The education plan must set out your **high level strategies** for:

- D1 - the curriculum
- D2 - setting and achieving targets
- D3 - the staffing structure
- D4 - ensuring the particular needs of the children coming to your school have been carefully considered and will be met appropriately

These strategies must demonstrate how you will deliver your vision. As well as being achievable, your education plan must be affordable within the funding allocated to free schools and consistent with your financial plans.

Differences for Route 1/Route 2 and single/multiple applications

Route 1/Route 2

If you are a **Route 1 applicant** (either for a **single school** or for **more than one school**), we already hold information about your education plan from your previous application(s). If all your schools use a similar curriculum model and your approach to the curriculum, staffing and target setting will be the same or similar in each school, you need only provide a brief statement and commentary of significant differences between this application and your last approved application for criteria D1, D2 and D4. We will use our existing knowledge of your education model to assess this section. We will also take into account the views of your DfE lead contact and your named education adviser, based on their experience of your educational model during pre-opening and, if applicable, when open. You should complete D3 for each school you are applying for.

If you are a **Route 2 applicant**, please complete D1-D4.

Single/multiple

If you are a **Route 2 applicant applying for more than one school**, provide one version of this section, referring to individual schools or circumstances where relevant (e.g. setting and achieving targets).

D1 - An ambitious and deliverable curriculum plan which is consistent with the vision and pupil intake

You must:

- Demonstrate that your proposed curriculum will be deliverable
- For pupils with a statement/EHC plan, demonstrate that your curriculum is appropriate for the types of need for which you intend to cater. We will look at how you intend to develop literacy and numeracy skills and prepare pupils for later life
- For pupils without a statement/EHC plan, offer a broad and balanced curriculum which places a suitable emphasis on English, mathematics and science.
- Please complete the tables in the application form with:
 - A list of subjects to be offered with the number of hours spent per week on each. You do not need to provide sample timetables
 - The length of the school day, including any enrichment time, making a distinction between compulsory and voluntary activities
- Offer appropriate qualifications

We will also assess the **quality** of the curriculum plan by how far it demonstrates that you have:

- An understanding of the expected pupil intake and their needs
- A rationale for the type of curriculum proposed which is consistent with the vision. Please explain how it meets the needs of the expected intake, whilst having an ambitious approach to meeting those needs. If you are proposing to teach something other than the national curriculum, please reference – but don't copy and paste – evidence (where it is available) which demonstrates that it is a good and successful model (e.g. results of academic research)
- Strategies in place to support pupils to be successful when they enter and leave the school
- An appropriate enrichment programme

Differences for Route 1/Route 2 and single/multiple applications

Route 1 applicants must:

- Provide a brief statement explaining which of your existing schools your curriculum is modelled on with an explanation as to why you have chosen to use that model in this school and any evidence of its success
- Outline any differences between what you are proposing for this school and the model we approved previously, with a brief explanation for the changes (e.g. to cater for a different pupil population or for pupils with different needs)

We would normally expect section D1 to be 8-10 pages long for Route 1 applications and 20-30 pages long for Route 2.

D2 – Measuring pupil performance effectively and setting challenging targets

You must:

- Describe an assessment and data tracking system that will allow pupil performance to be monitored
- Have ambitious and realistic targets for pupil performance, behaviour and attendance, explaining why they are suitable to measure the delivery of your education vision, and what your strategy will be to achieve them
- Explain how you will review success measures and targets regularly to improve the school's performance

We will also assess the **quality** of your plans to:

- Use appropriate data to inform teaching and drive progression and attainment for all pupils
- Focus on measuring and improving quality of teaching in the classroom
- Liaise with and report progress to parents

Differences for Route 1/Route 2 and single/multiple applications

Route 1 applicants must:

- Outline any differences between what you are proposing for this school and the model we approved previously, with a brief explanation for the changes. This should include targets specific to this school with a brief explanation as to why they are appropriate

We would normally expect section D2 to be about 2 pages long for Route 1 applications and 5 pages long for Route 2.

D3 - A staffing structure that will deliver the planned curriculum within the expected income levels

You must:

- Demonstrate that as the school grows to full capacity, you have an affordable staffing structure and sensible phasing plans that deliver a suitable (interim) curriculum plan. Provide diagrams or tables showing the proposed staffing structure each year until the school is at full capacity in line with planned pupil numbers
- Demonstrate that at full capacity, your staffing structure is sufficient to deliver the curriculum plan; consistent with the information provided in the budget plans; and affordable

We will also assess the **quality** of the staffing structure through the extent to which:

- It includes an appropriate balance of roles, experience and expertise e.g. senior leadership team, middle managers, subject leaders, teachers, SEN specialists, non-teachers etc.
- You have credible contingency plans to adapt your staffing structure if income were to be less than expected

In setting out the plans you have for staffing the school, we will use your budget plans to assess whether they are affordable. You **do not** need to provide a commentary or explanation on affordability in this section.

Differences for Route 1/Route 2 and single/multiple applications

Route 1 applicants must complete this section as above and:

- Explain whether you intend to use any of your existing staff in this school, and if so how this will work in practice and why the staff in question are the correct choice for this school

We would normally expect section D3 to be 5-10 pages long.

D4 – The particular needs of the children coming to the school have been carefully considered and will be met appropriately

You must:

- Explain the types of need the school will cater for and how the school will cater for these needs
- Include a strategy to assess and meet the needs of all pupils

We will also assess the **quality** of your plan to meet the needs of the children through the extent to which:

- Your strategies to cater for identified types of need represent best practice and make use of the teaching specialisms and SEN expertise of members of staff
- You will engage with other agencies and they will be involved to support pupil development
- You will ensure safeguarding, good behaviour and good attendance and that any health needs will be met

Differences for Route 1/Route 2 and single/multiple applications

Route 1 applicants must:

- Outline any differences between what you are proposing for this school and the model we approved previously, with a brief explanation for the changes

We would normally expect section D4 to be about 2 pages long for Route 1 applications and 5 pages long for Route 2.

Section E – Evidence of need

We will assess whether there is **need** for your school by weighing up local authority and parent demand (**or student demand for 16 to 19 places**), the need for additional places catering for the specific type of need you have identified and the standards of schools in the local area catering for the same needs.

We will look at the data you have provided to judge the level of need and the extent to which you have engaged with local authorities and parents (**or students for 16-19 places**) for both statemented and non-statemented pupils.

Differences for Route 1/Route 2 and single/multiple applications

Route 1/Route 2

You should complete this section in the same way regardless of whether you are a Route 1 or Route 2 applicant.

Single/multiple

If you are applying for **more than one school**, you need to complete each criterion for each school you are applying for.

E1 – Valid evidence of need for statemented pupils/pupils with an education, health and care (EHC) plan

You will need to be able to demonstrate that you have interest from local authorities and parents for places in each of the school's first two years of operation and some indication that top-up funding will be paid.

You must:

- Complete the demand table in the application form showing how many children local authorities would place at the school for the first two years of the school's operation
- Complete the demand table in the application form showing how many parents (**or students if post-16**) would request that the local authority name your free school on statements of SEN/EHC plans
- Provide commitments in writing from local authorities for a specific number of places in the first two years, including the top-up funding they will pay. A suggested wording is as follows: "[LA] would expect to purchase a minimum of [x] places at [name of free school] at a top up cost of £[x]. The exact cost may differ

depending on the specific needs of the child and this will be discussed with free school trust on a case by case basis.”

- Demonstrate that potential parents and local authorities have made an informed decision when choosing your school. Please include the text you have used in leaflets or other promotional material for prospective local authorities and parents (**or students if post-16**) about the particular characteristics of your provision. You must make sure that this adequately describes the provision you are proposing; we will not consider generic expressions of interest in a new school to be sufficient evidence that there is local authority or parental demand for what you are proposing
- Provide evidence that there is a shortage of high quality places for pupils with these needs in the LA or neighbouring LAs

You will be rated more highly if:

- Your school has commitments in writing from local authorities equal to the number of places in the first and second year of operation
- Local authorities have committed to pay the required levels of top-up funding
- You provide compelling evidence that there is a shortage of high quality places for pupils with these needs in the LA or neighbouring LAs
- You provide compelling evidence that you have engaged successfully with a high proportion of the local community and adapted your proposal in response to feedback if necessary

Independent schools must:

- Present evidence of demand from current and prospective pupils separately

E2 – Valid evidence of need for non-statemented pupils/pupils without an education, health and care (EHC) plan

You will need to be able to demonstrate that you have interest from parents (**or students if post-16**) that is close to the school’s capacity for each of the school’s first two years of operation.

You must:

- Complete the demand table in the application form showing how many parents (**or students if post-16**) would select your provision as their first choice for the first two years of operation
- Demonstrate that potential parents (**or students if post-16**) have made an informed decision when choosing your school as their first choice. Please include the text you have used in leaflets or other promotional material for prospective

parents or students about the particular characteristics of your provision. You must make sure that this adequately describes what you are proposing; we will not consider generic expressions of interest in a new school to be sufficient evidence that there is demand for what you are proposing

- Demonstrate that potential pupils (**or students if post-16**) have the same primary SEN designation for which the free school will cater
- Demonstrate that the intended admissions for pupils without a statement/EHC plan are not merely short-term, catering for those who are going through the assessment process to determine whether a statement is needed , but for a longer period¹
- Provide a map which shows that potential pupils (**or students if post-16**) live within commuting distance of your school

You will be rated more highly if:

- Expressions of interest from parents (**or students if post-16**) exceed the number of places available in the first two years; or
- You provide compelling evidence that there are a shortage of high quality places for students with these needs in the LA or neighbouring LAs.

Independent schools must:

- Present evidence of demand from current and prospective parents (**or students if post-16**) separately
- We would normally expect section E2 to be about 5 pages long.

¹ A special free school, like any other special school, may cater for pupils who are waiting for or going through an assessment. However, these children are not considered as 'children without a statement/EHC plan' and therefore the evidence that you gather here should not be for these children.

Section F – Capacity and capability

You must demonstrate that your group has the capacity and capability to set up and run a school. You must have access to appropriate educational, financial and other expertise, either within your group or externally.

All applicants must complete sections F1-F8 as set out in the table below:

Type of applicant	Which sections to complete
Route 1 applicants (both single and multiple)	F1-F6*
Route 2 applicants applying for one free school in this round	F1-F4*
Route 2 applicants applying for more than one free school in this round	F1-F6*
Route 2 applicants applying for one free school in this round who already have an open academy	F1-F6*
Independent schools wishing to 'sponsor' a new free school	F1-F6*
Independent schools wishing to become free schools	F1-F4 and F7-F8

* All existing mainstream schools and academies which have not been approved to be an academy sponsor should complete F1 to F6.

If you are an approved academy sponsor the department will already hold material that would be relevant to your free school application and will therefore not expect you to provide this information for a second time. As a result at this point do not fill in sections F5 and F6 of the application relating to your educational track record until we have assessed whether we already have enough information on these aspects of your performance. If required, we will make sure that we give you sufficient time to provide any clarification or additional material to help us take a view in regard to these factors.

In addition if you are not an approved academy sponsor but are interested in finding out more about this role and potentially apply to become a sponsor please make contact with the department's [Sponsor Approval team](#).

It is important to make clear that approval as an academy sponsor will not guarantee a free school application is approved. Each free school application is considered against the criteria set out in this guidance. Similarly, approval to deliver a free school project

does not mean that you would be automatically chosen to deliver a specific academy project. All projects are carefully considered on a case-by-case basis. It is the role of the department to consider which of our sponsors will provide the best possible solution for a particular school(s), and ministers will make a final decision as to whether the proposed sponsor should take forward a specific project, based on that advice.

Throughout sections F and G, we will ask you to provide details of educational and financial expertise. When we ask this, please include the information below using the template CV provided in the Word application form.

Educational expertise

- If an individual is or was a member of a school leadership team, please provide their CV on the template provided, including:
 - Details of their last three roles (this should cover the last four years. If not, please include additional roles) – the school(s) in which they were employed, their position(s) and how long they were in each position
 - The school's results for the years they were in post – these should include, as appropriate, Key Stage 2 results, 5A*-C GCSE including English and maths results or, for 16 to 19, average point score per entry and per student for level 3 qualifications and level 3 value added scores for academic and vocational provision. If these results are not available, they should set out the track record of the school they led in terms of developing literacy and numeracy skills, qualifications achieved, and preparing pupils for later life
 - Best 8 value added scores for the years they were in post in each school, if available
 - A brief commentary on why their previous experience is relevant for this proposed free school
 - At least one referee who is able to confirm their education credentials. We may make other enquiries as we see fit
 - Optionally: any other brief comments they wish to make on how their role(s) had an impact on raising standards
- If an individual is or was a teacher or head of department/faculty but not a member of the leadership team, please provide their CV on the template provided, including:
 - Details of their last three roles (this should cover the last four years. If not, please include additional roles) – the school(s) in which they were employed, their position(s) and how long they were in each position
 - Their subject/department's results for the years they were in post, compared to their school's averages – these should include, as appropriate,

Key Stage 2 results, 5A*-C GCSE including English and maths results or, for 16 to 19, average point score per entry and per student for level 3 qualifications and level 3 value added scores for their subject area. If these results are not available, they should set out the track record of their subject/department/school in terms of developing literacy and numeracy skills (where appropriate to their department and subject), qualifications achieved, and preparing pupils for later life

- A brief commentary on why their previous experience is relevant for this proposed free school
- At least one referee who is able to confirm their education credentials. We may make other enquiries as we see fit
- Optionally: any other brief comments they wish to make on how their role(s) had an impact on raising standards

Financial expertise

- For the group's nominated finance lead(s), please provide their CV on the template provided, including:
 - Details of their last three roles (this should cover the last four years. If not, please include additional roles) – where they were employed, what their role was, how long they were in each role and what their financial responsibilities were
 - A brief commentary on why their previous financial experience is relevant for this proposed free school
 - Details of their professional financial qualifications
 - At least one referee who is able to confirm their finance credentials. We may make other enquiries as we see fit.

Section F also asks you to provide information on individuals in your group who have other relevant skills and expertise that will ensure the success of your proposed free school. This may include communications, marketing, human resources and project management expertise. There are no specific requirements for these areas but please provide CVs on the template provided for these individuals including:

- A brief commentary outlining their previous experience and why this is relevant for this proposed free school
- Details of any relevant professional qualifications

Please note that CVs should be included in the appendices and do not count within the page limit.

F1 – The necessary experience and credentials to deliver the school to opening

You must:

- Demonstrate that you have access to individuals with adequate relevant education, SEN and finance expertise with specific and sufficient time commitments
- Demonstrate that you have access to individuals with specific and sufficient time commitments and relevant experience in as many of the following as possible:
 - Special school education
 - Managing school finances
 - Leadership
 - Project management
 - Marketing
 - Human resources
 - Safeguarding

We will also assess the quality of:

- Your strategy to fill the skills gaps you have identified
- The track record of the individuals you have listed as experts in the areas named above

You will be rated more highly if:

- The individuals with education, SEN and finance expertise form part of your core applicant group
- You have individuals with expertise in most of the additional five areas listed under bullet 2 under the 'you must' heading above and that they form part of your core applicant group
- The individuals listed have a strong track record in their areas of expertise

In order for us to assess your application, please complete the **two tables** (F1(a) & (b)) in the application form.

The **first table** (F1(a)) asks you to fill out the following information about each individual who is part of your group (including all members of your academy trust) or whose expertise you intend to access:

- Name

- Where they live (i.e. town/city)
- Role in pre-opening. Please include whether the individual is part of the core applicant group, or someone whose support you are accessing. If the latter, please indicate whether you would expect this support to be provided on a paid, at cost or on a voluntary basis
- Summary of all relevant expertise (e.g. educational, financial)
- Average time commitments for all the individuals named in pre-opening (in hours per week)

CVs on the template provided for all the individuals you name in table F1(a), which include the information requested in the bullets in the introduction to section F, should be included as annexes.

The **second table** (F1(b)) asks you to set out any skills gaps that you think exist within your group and how you intend to fill them.

We would normally expect section F1 to be about 5 pages long.

F2 – A governance structure, roles and responsibilities that will ensure accountability and effective decision making in this academy trust and drive improvement in the new free school

You must:

- Provide a diagram showing your proposed governance structure, including lines of accountability between the company members, the school's trustees and the principal. The governance structure must be in line with accepted academy trust models and the Academies Financial Handbook, with a clear and appropriate division of roles and responsibilities between members, trustees and the school's senior leadership team
- Include a brief explanation of the roles and responsibilities of the company members, the trustees, any proposed committees and the principal
- Include a strategy for avoiding and minimising conflicts of interest and for securing independent challenge to members and trustees
- Include a brief description of any conflicts of interest and an explanation of how you intend to manage them

We will also consider the proposed size and structure of your board of trustees and whether it will enable effective decision making.

Differences for Route 1/Route 2 and single/multiple applications

Single/multiple

If you are a Route 1 applicant or a Route 2 applicant applying for more than one school or that already runs schools under the same trust, you must also provide:

- A diagram showing the governance structure which ensures clear accountability and scrutiny arrangements between the centre and each free school or academy (or other type of school if relevant)
- A brief explanation of the strategic remit of the board together with the remit of local governing bodies and their structure
- A brief explanation as to how the trust would intervene quickly in an academy or free school should that be deemed necessary and how it would know to do so

We would normally expect section F2 to be about 5 pages long.

F3 – Skills gaps identified for once the school is open and a plan is in place to fill them. Any trustees identified already have the experience, track record and commitment to drive

improvement in a free school, and manage the trust effectively

You must have:

- Conducted a skills gap analysis of trustees already identified
- Set out a plan to recruit and train high quality trustees, particularly those with education, school governance and finance experience, and specific and sufficient time commitments

We will assess the **quality** of your skills gap analysis.

You will be rated more highly if:

- You already have individuals in your core applicant group who would make strong trustees once the school is open
- The individuals named as trustees have excellent relevant school finance and leadership experience

In order for us to assess your application, you must complete the **two tables** (F3(a) & (b)) in the application form.

The **first table** (F3(a)) asks you to fill out the following information for each individual who is part of your group or whose expertise you intend to access for the board of trustees:

- Name
- Where they live (i.e. town/city)
- Role on board of trustees
- Area of expertise (education, finance or other. If the latter, please specify)
- Other relevant expertise and experience
- Time commitment when the school is open (in hours per week)

CVs for the individuals you name, which include the information requested in the bullets in the introduction to section F, should be included as annexes.

- Please note, if this application is for a free school that will form part of a multi-academy trust you must provide information for the individuals on the MAT board and the individuals on any local governing body, and ensure that you have shown clearly on which board each individual will sit.
- The **second table** (F3(b)) asks you to set out any skills gaps on your board of trustees and how you intend to fill them. If this application is for a free school that will form part of a multi-academy trust please also provide this information for any

local governing body that has a role in the running of the school as outlined in section F2.

We would normally expect section F3 to be about 5 pages long.

F4 – A credible plan for recruiting a high quality principal during pre-opening

You must:

- Provide a brief explanation of the role of the principal and the skills required

And either:

- Have identified a principal with a relevant and credible educational track record as a senior school leader in SEN schools or settings and who shows clear potential to be a competent principal of this school. Please provide a CV for your proposed principal in the annex. See the bullets in the introduction to section F for what to include

Or

- Have suggested a sensible timeline for hiring a principal and defined a role and salary that will attract principal candidates with relevant experience and credible track records of school or academy leadership. Please provide a brief explanation of why you think you can attract high calibre candidates to the role

In addition to either of the above, you must:

- Ensure the principal's salary will be affordable within the financial plan

You will be rated more highly if you have identified a principal with an **exemplary** educational track record as a senior leader and who shows clear potential to be an **excellent** principal of this school.

We will use the information you provide in section G to determine whether the principal's salary will be affordable. You do not need to provide any additional financial information in this section.

If you are an existing provider or a new applicant seeking to open more than one free school and intend to implement a leadership model that includes an executive principal and head of school, you must provide the above information for both roles in relation to your free school application.

We would normally expect section F4 to be about 5 pages long.

F5 – Educational track record (existing providers *and* any new applicants seeking to open more than one free school)

If you need to complete this section (see the Section F introductory text), you must provide the following:

Existing providers *and* any new applicants seeking to open more than one free school:

- A list of the key people you will use to provide school improvement support. Please provide CVs in the annex for each individual in line with the bullets in the introduction to section F relating to education. Please also provide details of when they have supported other schools, if applicable, and references to Ofsted judgements where they have been directly responsible for a positive transformation
- A list of the people (or organisation) that will provide any central service/support to the trust/academies. Please provide CVs in the annex for each individual in line with the bullets in the introduction to section F relating to education, finance and other relevant areas of expertise. Indicate how you will be sure these services will provide value for money

Existing providers *only*:

- The date and overall judgement of your latest Ofsted inspection with the link to the full report for each of your schools. We may not assess your application if the existing provision has not been judged at least good overall in its last Ofsted inspection
- Links to the most recent performance data for each of your schools. If there are any anomalies of which you think we should be aware, please provide a brief explanation

In order to be rated highly, you must have:

Existing providers *and* any new applicants seeking to open more than one free school:

- A strong educational track record
 - Group members' individual track records in previous schools is strong as shown by KS2/KS4/KS5 results, value added scores above LA and national averages and Ofsted outstanding ratings

Existing providers *only*:

- **Compelling** evidence of high, sustained educational impact, including:

- Ofsted S5 judgements of quality of teaching, leadership and management are ‘outstanding’ in each of your schools
- Group members’ individual track record in previous schools is strong as shown by Ofsted outstanding ratings and in ensuring that pupils with SEN achieve a good quality education that prepares them for later life

We would normally expect section F5 to be about 5 pages long.

F6 – Capacity to expand (existing providers *and* any new applicants seeking to open more than one free school)

If you need to complete this section (see the Section F introductory text), you must:

Existing providers *and* any new applicants seeking to open more than one free school:

- Provide evidence of relevant financial expertise at sponsor/trust level where not already covered in F1. Please include CVs in the annex for each individual in line with the bullets in the introduction to section F
- Include the name of your finance director and include their CV in the annex (which should include the information in the bullets in the introduction to section F relating to finance)
- Indicate how your model will allow the trust to grow and provide on-going challenge and support to any existing academies/schools and any new free schools. Where relevant, please state how you will source additional capacity if required
- Explain how you plan to make efficiencies and economies of scale by sharing services across your schools

Existing providers *only*:

- Provide a brief outline of the financial performance of your school/academy/trust/institution during the last 4 years, including details of any adverse audit opinions from any sources

Existing providers *and* any new applicants seeking to open more than one free school:

If your group is proposing to make use of a shared service function (either through a multi-academy trust, sponsor or other related organisation), you must also:

- Complete the **tables** (F6 (a) & (b)) in the application form with the projected make-up of the ‘central team’ and their approximate cost, if applicable. Please include CVs in the annex that detail the information as set out in the bullets in the

introduction to section F in terms of education and finance to demonstrate how they can support the new free school(s) through pre-opening and beyond for anyone not already covered in F1

- Explain any additional skills and expertise within the shared service function that you have not already explained in other parts of section F. Please include CVs in the annex that detail the information as set out in the bullets in the introduction to section F in terms of education and finance
- Set out a brief description of how your shared service function will be financed. This should include which services are provided by the shared service function, what the costs are likely to be to each academy or school (e.g. top-slice/per-head contribution) and what this funding will provide. Please complete the table in the application form
- Include a list of any additional services which can be purchased by each academy or school if the local governing body decides and the approximate costs of these additional services
- Explain who will monitor the performance of the shared service function and how
- A brief outline of how your current capacity will grow to match your ambition for the trust and how you intend to finance the growth of the trust

This information should be sufficiently detailed to allow us to make an assessment of both the capacity and capability and the value for money of the shared service provision.

We will also assess the **quality** of the evidence you can provide in relation to:

- Your improvement plans and how you provide the appropriate scrutiny to every academy or school
- Contingency planning and risk management
- Capacity and capability to intervene quickly across all areas of the school(s)
- High calibre financial leadership
- Robust financial track record and good value for money
- Whether the free school(s) will benefit from support and challenge from a highly skilled, focused local governing body, with the necessary delegated authority to carry out its functions

You will be rated more highly if you have **compelling** evidence demonstrating that you have good plans in place to meet **most** of the points above.

We would normally expect section F6 to be 5-10 pages long.

F7 – Independent schools, including special institutions that are privately run, have a good educational track record

Pages 12-14 of the [How to apply guidance](#) explains the minimum criteria you need to meet as an independent school or non-maintained special school wanting to become a free school and how we assess these applications. Please read this section carefully before deciding to apply.

If you meet the minimum criteria and decide to apply, you must:

- Provide the date and overall judgement of your latest inspection with the link to the full report
- Complete a self-assessment against the Ofsted section 5 framework. A template is included in the application form

In order to be rated highly, your school needs to be outstanding (or equivalent) in all areas of your latest inspection.

We would normally expect section F7 to be about 5 pages long.

F8 – Independent schools, including special institutions that are privately run, have a good financial track record

If you meet the minimum criteria and decide to apply, you must:

- Provide a brief outline of the financial performance of your school during the last 4 years. Submit the school's audited financial statements for the last two years with your completed application form. Supply alternative evidence of the school's current financial health if the school has not been open long enough to have two years' worth of audited accounts
- Tell us about any relevant financial issues relating to the potential conversion to free school status and explain how you will seek to address them. You should expect to discuss these in greater detail in later stages of the application process. Examples of financial issues which may impact on becoming a free school include running at an operating deficit or having outstanding loans and overdrafts, including mortgages
- Confirm in writing that you have disclosed all financial liabilities
- Provide an explanation of your existing and planned internal and external financial management and governance arrangements, including for scrutiny and challenge

In order to be rated highly, your school's existing governance arrangements must be **strong** and your existing school must have an **outstanding** track record of financial management.

We would normally expect section F8 to be about 5 pages long.

Section G – Budget planning and affordability

Before you begin to develop and complete your plans, you should read:

- the overview of free school funding in [Annex A of the How to apply guidance](#) which explains how your school will be funded once open
- **Annex A** in this document for detailed guidance on how to complete the financial template

We first ask you to provide a financial plan showing your income and expenditure as your school grows to full capacity. We want to check that your financial plans will support delivery of your education vision and plan and that your school is viable with the funding provided. For the financial plan (the G1 and G2 criteria) you need to **provide a narrative in the Word application form** and complete the relevant sections of the special Excel financial template.

The special Excel financial template will calculate the baseline funding you will receive for statemented pupils/pupils with a EHC plan and for any post-16 non-statemented pupils/pupils without a EHC plan based on the pupil numbers you input. You must enter the top-up funding rate.

You will need to use the mainstream financial template to work out the per-pupil rate for pre-16 non-statemented pupils/pupils without an EHC plan and add this additional income in the marked row in the 'other income' section on the budget tab of the special Excel template. Please provide a note explaining this in column P.

We then ask you to explain what changes you would make if you had to operate with only 70% of your expected intake. We want to make sure that your school is resilient to changes in income both as a result of having fewer pupils than expected and receiving a lower top-up rate than expected.

Row 93 on the 'budget' tab on the Excel template will provide you with the 70% figure so you can calculate the required 30% saving. You must show how you made 30% savings for each year up to and including the year your school reaches steady state. You **do not** need to submit a 70% plan in the Excel financial template but you will need to think about areas where you can make savings and explain these in the Word application form. It is critical that you include the savings that each change will generate, the rationale for each change you propose and the reason you have prioritised the changes as you have

You will need to think about areas where you can make savings and explain these in the Word application form. It is critical that you include the savings that each change will generate, the rationale for each change you propose and the reason you have prioritised the changes as you have.

We will also ask you to explain the rationale behind the top-up rate you have chosen. If your top-up rate is higher than your local authority per-pupil rate, you should explain the savings you would make if the rate were to be reduced.

Differences for Route 1/Route 2 and single/multiple applications

Route 1/Route 2

You should complete this section in the same way regardless of whether you are a Route 1 or Route 2 applicant.

Single/multiple

If you are applying for **more than one school**, you need to complete each criterion for each school you are applying for.

G1 – Accurate financial plans that are consistent with the rest of the application and based on realistic assumptions about income and expenditure

You must:

- Include an overview explanation in section G of the Word application form of how you developed your plans and the strategic decisions underpinning them. As part of this, you should explain how you would deliver value for money, and describe how your financial plan would support delivery of your education vision and plan
- Complete a financial plan showing income and planned expenditure in the Excel template and include the assumptions made about income and expenditure in the space provided. You should explain clearly what you have based your assumptions on and the evidence you have to show these are realistic and appropriate.
- Make sure that the information in your plan is consistent with the other parts of your application e.g. the staffing structure and pupil numbers in the education plan should agree with the financial plan
- Demonstrate that no material errors have been made in completing the financial plan
- Show that you have allowed for unforeseen problems and have contingencies

We will also assess the **quality** of your financial plan by the extent to which it is reasonable, represents good value for money and is prudent. In making this assessment we will consider:

- Core operating income/expenditure assumptions
- Benchmarking information for income and expenditure, including rates of top-up funding
- Contingencies
- Any centrally-provided services and their costs
- Proportion of spend allocated to each budget area – and particularly to staffing
- Staff to pupil ratios
- The school's particular education offer (e.g. types of SEN)

For independent schools:

- You should set out clearly your assumptions as to how you will remain financially viable, with sufficient reserves, to operate as a successful state sector school. You will want to consider the appropriateness of existing staffing structures and how they might change to live within the levels of per pupil income you anticipate.
- You should also set out your assumptions on the development costs of maintaining a good or outstanding school.

If you are invited to interview, we will assess how well you answer financial scrutiny questions.

We would normally expect the Word part of section G1 to be about 5 pages long.

G2 – The school will be viable within the expected levels of funding available both while it builds up and when it is at full capacity

You must:

- Demonstrate that the school is projected to at least break even at steady state (the year after you reach full capacity)
- Not show a cumulative deficit in any year. Any in-year deficits must be planned for by accumulating a surplus in (a) previous year(s)
- Not be dependent on borrowing or third-party income to break even in any year

We will also assess the **quality** of the decisions you have taken regarding the levels of in year deficit and overall surplus, looking at the factors set out under G1.

G3 – The school will be financially resilient to reductions in income

You must:

- Include an overview explanation in Section G of the Word application form of how you approached making 30% savings. You must show how you made 30% savings for each year up to and including the year your school reaches steady state. As part of this, you should explain how your amended plans would continue to support delivery of your education vision and plan
- Complete the table in the Word application form to explain how your vision and plan would be delivered if you had to operate with only 70% of your expected intake
- If the top-up rate you think you will require is higher than your local authority per-pupil rate, please explain the actions you would take to reduce costs, if you were only able to attract a top up equivalent to this rate. You should set out the reasons for the actions you propose to make savings, the reason you have prioritised the actions as you have and the savings that would result. These savings should allow you to balance your budget assuming the local authority per-pupil rate as your top-up rate.

We will also assess the **quality** of the plan by the extent to which:

- The changes proposed will result in an education plan which is affordable, will minimise compromising quality and will meet the vision for the school
- The changes outlined in the 70% table (G3(a)) have taken into account the particular characteristics of your school

We would normally expect the Word part of section G3 to be about 5 pages long.

Section H – Premises

Finding a suitable site is an essential part of opening a free school. As part of preparing your application you should investigate potential sites for your school and tell us about them in your application.

There are no criteria for this section of your application, although we make a value for money judgement on each free school application that includes likely site costs.

Differences for Route 1/Route 2 and single/multiple applications

Single/multiple

If you are applying for **more than one school**, you need to complete this section for each school you are applying for.

You must:

- Complete the Excel application form with details of your preferred sites. For each site, you are asked for:
 - the details of your preferred location;
 - the full address and postcode;
 - details of how you found the site;
 - the tenure and ownership plus purchase/lease cost if known;
 - confirmation of LA support for use of a site, if applicable;
 - confirmation of availability;
 - an outline of its current use;
 - your reasons for choosing it and its suitability;
 - size of site and building, if known; and
 - comments on the condition of the building.

Additionally, please provide any site plans, agent's particulars, photos, catchment/location maps or other associated technical information as annexes by sending to: premises.freeschools@education.gsi.gov.uk clearly marking the name and location of your free school in the subject line. All supporting text information on sites must be included in the Excel application form. Please note that any additional Word documents submitted will not be reviewed.

The form also asks you to calculate the required floor area for your school.

Please use the following formula to calculate this (we call this the gross internal area). As well as helping us, this will also help you search for suitably sized buildings.

For special schools:

Age range and size	Size (m2)
Primary pupils only; ambulant	700m2 + 15m2 per pupil
Primary pupils only; non-ambulant	700m2 + 21m2 per pupil
Schools with any secondary age pupils; ambulant	700m2 + 15m2 per pupil
Schools with any secondary age pupils; non-ambulant	700m2 + 21m2 per pupil

You should make enquiries as to whether your preferred sites are available for acquisition or leasehold but you must not enter into any negotiations at this or any other stage. If your application is approved, the Education Funding Agency (EFA) will undertake negotiations to acquire a site for your school.

We will make an overall cost and value for money assessment of your preferred site. You should therefore aim for the lowest possible capital costs and be as flexible as possible in your site requirements. We may also ask you to share sites with other approved free schools and when open, you may be required to share surplus space in your permanent building with newly approved free schools requiring a temporary home.

It is our very strong preference that local authority sites are used and this is because often we are able to secure them on what is known as a Peppercorn basis. This is a long lease, usually 125 years, with a token payment of a very minimal sum per annum and as such they usually offer exceptional value for money. As part of your application, you will need to demonstrate that you have spoken with the relevant contacts at the local authority to ascertain if there are any site options, in the education and wider local authority estate, that they would be prepared to offer to your free school.

The best person to start with at the local authority is the Director of Children’s Services or the school places commissioning team as although they will not be the property experts, they will be able to access the best information and put you in touch with the property teams. In any event, it is useful to seek support for your project from these officers. It would be useful if you could provide the LA with some or all of the the following information:

- Preferred geographical area for your school
- Size of school in terms of forms of entry and required area in m² terms

We do not expect to provide capital funding to independent schools that do not plan to create additional places. If you wish to expand provision as an independent school, we will consider whether capital funding may be made available. Decisions will be made on a case by case basis with strong supporting evidence required.

If, after approval of your application it proves impossible to identify a feasible site, we may have to delay the opening of your school or, in some cases, we may not be able to open your school at all.

You will be in the strongest possible position if you have identified a number of feasible sites at the application stage.



Department
for Education

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