



Free School Statistics

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The creation of free schools was one of the major education reforms introduced by the current Government. They are state-funded schools with the same legal status as academies but are normally set up where there is thought to be parental demand by groups including parents, teachers, existing schools or academy chains/sponsors. Existing independent schools can also apply to become 'new' free schools and receive state funding. Free schools have been controversial and arguments have centred on their value for money, freedoms over the curriculum, how well they meet demand for places and serve the local population.

The first 23 free schools opened in September 2011 and this had increased to 251 at the start of the 2014/15 school year. More than 100 free schools have had their applications successfully approved and are expected to open in the future.

This note looks at the growth in free schools, their characteristics, pupil numbers and characteristics, performance information and gives a guide to financial information. Readers looking for further policy background should look at the Library [free schools](#) briefing note. The Department for Education's [List of all free schools](#) includes basic details about each school and those in the pipeline. Further Government information about/for free schools can be found at: www.gov.uk/schools-colleges/schools-types. The [Academies Annual Report 2012/13](#) also includes a small section on free schools. The Library note [Converter Academies: Statistics](#) looks at the growth, pupil intake and performance of these academies.

In late 2013 the National Audit Office published a [report](#) on the value for money of the free schools Programme. The New School Network is a charity that receives funding from the Department for Education to provide support for free schools. Readers may find some of the material on their [website](#) of interest.

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1 Number of free schools

The first 23 free schools opened in September 2011 and their number reached 251 in September 2014. This includes primary, secondary, 16-19, special and alternative provision free schools. At the start of this academic year there were 251 open free schools of all types in England. This includes, primaries, secondaries, sixth forms, special schools and alternative provision schools. These schools have largely opened at the start of each academic year –four waves so far. The second wave of free schools which opened at the start of 2012/13 was more than double the first with 54 new schools. 93 opened at the start of 2013/14 and 78 at the start of 2014/15.¹

There are free schools in all the English Regions. London has by far the most with 87, the North East the fewest with seven. 16 mainstream independent and three independent special schools have become free schools and are now state-funded.² The table below summarises some basic characteristics of free schools.

Gender		Phase		Religion	
Mixed	243	Primary	93	No Religious character	199
Boys	5	Secondary	85	"Christian"	16
Girls	3	All through	24	Church of England	11
		16+	9	Muslim	8
		Alternative provision	29	Jewish	6
		Special	11	Sikh	6
				Roman Catholic	2
				Hindu	2
				Greek Orthodox	1

There are no projections of the number of free schools. Their number will depend on the projects that are put forward by potential backers and the response from the Department for Education to these proposals. There is a list of approved projects with a current estimated opening date of “2015 and beyond” this includes 111 schools of all types. No more detail is

¹ [Edubase](#), DfE
² *ibid.*

given. It is possible that not all these schools will eventually open and more new projects are expected to be approved in the near future.³

2 Pupils

In January 2014 there were 22,783 pupils in the 174 schools open at the time. This was 0.3% of the total number of pupils in state-funded schools in England. Primary free schools varied in size from 18 to 667 pupils. The average size was 101 pupils; less than half the average size of all state-funded primaries. The larger primary free schools were either in the first wave or former independents. Secondary free schools varied in size from 8 to 1,272 pupils. The average size was 198 pupils; around one-fifth of the average size of all state-funded secondaries. One third had fewer than 100 pupils. Again the larger schools were either in the first wave or former independents.⁴

It should be no surprise that many free schools start off relatively small as they have no established school population or feeder schools. Many, particularly secondary schools, have only accepted pupils into youngest year groups. We would expect these schools to grow over time. This explains why their school population is so much below their stated capacity of just over 80,000 places.⁵ ⁶ The average class size in secondary free schools in January 2014 was only marginally below the state-funded average (20.0 v 20.1 pupils). The gap was bigger in primary schools where the average of 23.4 pupils was clearly below the state-funded average of 26.9 pupils.⁷

2.1 Characteristics

Any comparisons between the pupils that attend free schools and those attending all state-funded schools should be viewed with caution because the numbers at free schools are still relatively small and they are not distributed evenly throughout the country. An ideal comparison would compare characteristics to those of the local population. In January 2014 eligibility for free school meals was below average at primary free schools (15.2% v 18.0%), but above average at secondary free schools (16.1% v 15.7%). The non-white population at primary free schools at 58%⁸ was well above the national rate of 24%. 39% of pupils at secondary free schools were non-white, again well above the national figure of 22%, but a smaller gap than at primary level.⁹

0.5% of pupils at primary free schools had statements of Special Educational Needs (SEN); around one third of the national rate of 1.4%. The total (statemented and unstatemented) SEN rate in primary free schools was 12% compared to 17% across all state-funded primaries. The statemented SEN rate at secondary free schools was closer to but still below the national average (1.4% v 1.9%) while the total SEN rate was the same as the national figure at 18%.¹⁰

³ [Free schools: successful applications and open schools – 2014](#), DfE

⁴ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2014](#), DfE

⁵ Capacity of schools open in January 2014 where stated. The figure is just over 120,000 for those open at the start of 2014/15

⁶ [Edubase](#), DfE

⁷ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2014](#), DfE

⁸ Due to the relatively high number of unclassified pupils at free schools the proportion for both primary and secondary free schools is based on the total number of pupils with a classified ethnic group.

⁹ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2014](#), DfE

¹⁰ [Special educational needs in England: January 2014](#), DfE

3 School location and demand for new places

One of the major areas of controversy around free schools surrounds the claim that they are not always set up in areas where they are most needed. This is particularly important at a time of tight public finances and growing demand for new places.

The Department for Education has said that 75% of places in mainstream free schools that are either open or have been approved are in areas where there was a need for extra school places or there is a projected need for new places in the future.¹¹ The area is defined as the planning area¹² which the free school located in and those adjacent to it. The underlying data used to inform this assessment compares the expected number of places available in the relevant future year with projected number of pupils.¹³ The National Audit Office looked at schools opening up to 2013 and found that almost 90% of the places in primary free schools were in local authority districts forecasting some need for new places, as were 19% of secondary places.¹⁴ They also found that 42 free schools (out of 174 open at the time) were in districts with no forecast need.¹⁵ Their analysis looked at the local authority district the free school was in. The Department for Education's figures now look at groups of planning areas that can cross local authority boundaries.

The Department for Education has said that 44% of the free schools that had opened up to September 2013 were in the most deprived 30% of local areas.¹⁶ This may reflect, to some extent, the fact that these areas tend to have a greater need for new school places and are disproportionately in London.

4 Performance

There is little reliable performance data on free schools at present. They have only been around for a few years at most, their pupil numbers are still small and secondary free schools tend to recruit to earlier year groups at first. For instance the 2013/14 performance data, which includes schools open at the start of the school year, only includes 340 pupils at the end of Key Stage 2 at 14 primary schools and 550 pupils at 9 secondary schools. The secondary pupil numbers here are dominated by former independents.

An alternative is to look at Ofsted inspection findings. The Department for Education has said that 18 of the 76 free schools inspected to the end of 2013/14 (24%) had been rated as outstanding. It compared this to a figure of 10% for all schools inspected under the same framework.¹⁷ This comparison is limited because inspections under the current (September 2012) framework on existing schools will tend to focus on those that were rated in one of the bottom two categories on their last inspection. Therefore this is not a like-for-like comparison. An alternative is to widen the coverage to include inspection findings from the previous framework. This gives a rate of 20% outstanding across all schools. Again this is not a perfectly like-for-like comparison. At the other end of the spectrum four free schools have been rated as inadequate (5%) compared to just under 3% of all schools.^{18 19} Readers should

¹¹ So-called 'basic need' areas.

¹² An area below local authority level which is based on sets of schools that local authorities have grouped together for the purpose of planning pupil places in their authority.

¹³ [Free schools: Location in areas with need for additional places. September 2014](#), DfE

¹⁴ The increase in the school age population is not expected to reach secondary schools in most areas for some years.

¹⁵ [Establishing Free Schools](#), NAO (2013)

¹⁶ [Academies annual report. Academic year: 2012 to 2013](#), DfE

¹⁷ [Free schools: Ofsted inspection grades. Statistical release September 2014](#), DfE

¹⁸ Inspections under all frameworks

note that the number of free schools inspected so far is still quite small and so provide little firm evidence on performance so far.

5 Finance

This section gives a guide to the information that has been published so far on the cost of free schools. It is not an attempt to compare these to the costs of any other state funded schools. The [NAO report](#) on free schools is the best guide to their value for money.

5.1 Capital

The Department for Education has so far published [details of the total capital costs](#) of 45 free schools. These are projects where contracts for the purchase of land and construction costs have been signed. This is updated as new contracts are signed

The [NAO report on free schools](#) gives aggregate data for the costs of schools that were part of the first three waves.

5.2 Revenue

As new schools free schools received specific funding to cover pre- and post- opening costs. The main pre-opening costs are recruitment, project manager and employing staff before opening. Post-opening costs are the extra costs incurred as a result of the diseconomies of scale linked to a new school which tends to recruit well below capacity (ie. youngest cohort only in year one) until there are pupils recruited to all the planned year groups. Both types would be incurred by any new state funded school. The [NAO report](#) includes a table with average, maximum, minimum levels for each type of cost at. The Department for Education also publishes detail on [pre-](#) and [post-](#) opening revenue funding.

[Income and expenditure in academies in England: 2012 to 2013](#) includes detailed expenditure in aggregate and per pupil at an individual school level, including free schools.

[Schools block funding allocations 2014 to 2015](#) gives detail of funding at a school level, again including free schools.

¹⁹ [Maintained schools and academies inspections and outcomes](#), Ofsted