



BRIEFING PAPER

Number 7033, 2 December 2016

Free School Statistics

By Paul Bolton

Inside:

1. Number of free schools
2. Pupils
3. School location and demand for new places
4. Performance
5. Finance



Contents

Summary	3
1. Number of free schools	4
2. Pupils	4
2.1 Characteristics	5
3. School location and demand for new places	5
4. Performance	6
5. Finance	7
5.1 Capital	7
5.2 Revenue	8

Summary

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 24 free schools opened in September 2011 and this had increased to 425 by early the start of the 2016/17 school year. More than 200 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 briefing notes: [Free schools and academies - frequently asked questions](#) and [Free schools](#). 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 2014/15](#) 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.

1. Number of free schools

The first 24 free schools opened in September 2011 and their number reached 425 in September 2016. This includes primary, secondary, 16-19, special and alternative provision free schools. It also covers University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools, both of which are included by the Department for Education under the broader free schools category. These schools have largely opened at the start of each academic year – six waves so far. The second wave of free schools which opened at the start of 2012/13 was more than double the first with 57 new schools. 110 opened (and are still open) at the start of 2013/14, 102 at the start of 2014/15, 67 at the start of 2015/16 and 52 at the start of 2016/17.¹ So far 16 free schools have closed.

There are free schools in all the English Regions. London has by far the most with 130, the North East the fewest with 12. Up to summer 2015 a total of 16 mainstream independent and three independent special schools have become free schools and are now state-funded.² The table opposite gives some basic characteristics of free schools.

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 projects in the pre-opening phase this includes 237 schools of all types. No more detail is 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

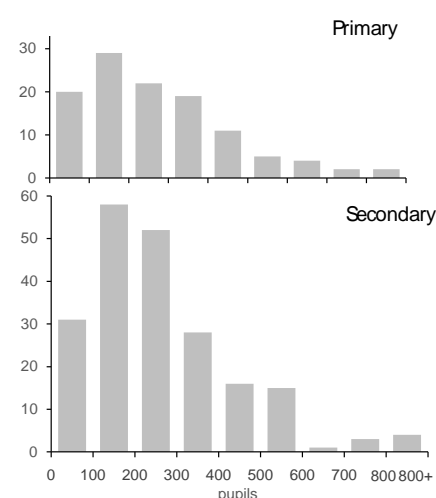
Gender	
Mixed	414
Boys	7
Girls	4

Phase	
Primary	136
Secondary	180
All through	34
16+	17
Alternative provision	35
Special	23

Religion	
No Religious character	363
Church of England	14
Muslim	14
" Christian"	13
Sikh	9
Jewish	7
Hindu	3
Roman Catholic	1
Greek Orthodox	1

2. Pupils

In January 2016 there were 74,714 pupils in the 379 schools open at the time. This was almost 50% more than the number taught in free schools a year earlier, but still only 1 % of the total number in state-funded schools in England. Primary free schools varied in size from 13 to 729 pupils. The average size was 146 pupils; just over 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 25 to 1,259 pupils. The average size was 265 pupils; around one-quarter of the average size of all state-funded secondaries. One in seven secondary free schools had fewer than 100 pupils. Again the larger schools were either in the first wave or former independents.⁴ The distribution of free school sizes are shown opposite.



¹ [Edubase](#), DfE

² *ibid.*

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

⁴ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2016](#), DfE

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 215,000 places.⁵ ⁶ The average class size in secondary free schools in January 2015 was slightly above the state-funded average (20.6 v 20.1 pupils). Free schools had a smaller average class size at primary level; 24.9 pupils compared to 26.9 pupils across all state-funded primaries.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 2016 eligibility for free school meals was below average at primary free schools (13.6% v 15.2%), but above average at secondary free schools (15.0% v 14.1%). The non-white population at primary free schools at 55%⁸ was well above the national rate of 25%. 46% of pupils at secondary free schools were non-white, again well above the national figure of 24%, but a smaller gap than at primary level.⁹

In January 2014 0.9% of pupils at primary free schools had statements of Special Educational Needs (SEN) or an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan; below the national rate of 1.3%. The total (statemented and unstatemented) SEN rate in primary free schools was 11.7% compared to 13.4% across all state-funded primaries. The statemented/EHC SEN rate at secondary free schools was close to the national average (1.6% v 1.6%) while the total SEN rate was slightly higher than the national rate (13.0% v 12.7%).¹⁰

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

⁵ Capacity of schools open in September 2016 where stated.

⁶ [Edubase](#), DfE

⁷ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2016](#), DfE

⁸ Includes unclassified pupils in the denominator. The proportion of pupils without a classified ethnic group was slightly above average in free schools

⁹ [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2016](#), DfE

¹⁰ [Special educational needs in England: January 2016](#), DfE

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 83% of the 213 mainstream free schools approved in waves 5-11 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 2014/15 performance data, which includes schools open at the start of the school year, only includes 626 pupils at the end of Key Stage 2 at 21 primary schools and 1,100 pupils at 20 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 42 of the 158 free schools inspected to the end of 2014/15 (27%) had been rated as outstanding. It compared this to a figure of 17% for all maintained schools inspected under the same

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 school applications: assessing the need for more schools](#), 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

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 21% outstanding across all schools. Again this is not a perfectly like-for-like comparison. At the other end of the spectrum nine free schools have been rated as inadequate (5%) compared to 1% of all schools.^{18 19} Readers should 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 55 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.

¹⁷ [Academies annual report: academic year 2014 to 2015](#), DfE

¹⁸ Inspections under all frameworks

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

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.

Links to school level data

[Income and expenditure in academies in England: 2014 to 2015](#) includes detailed expenditure in aggregate and per pupil at an individual school level, including free schools.

[Schools block funding allocations 2016 to 2017](#) gives detail of funding at a school level, again including free schools.

The House of Commons Library research service provides MPs and their staff with the impartial briefing and evidence base they need to do their work in scrutinising Government, proposing legislation, and supporting constituents.

As well as providing MPs with a confidential service we publish open briefing papers, which are available on the Parliament website.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publically available research briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing only with Members and their staff.

If you have any general questions about the work of the House of Commons you can email hcinfo@parliament.uk.

Disclaimer - This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties. It is a general briefing only and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific advice. The House of Commons or the author(s) shall not be liable for any errors or omissions, or for any loss or damage of any kind arising from its use, and may remove, vary or amend any information at any time without prior notice.

The House of Commons accepts no responsibility for any references or links to, or the content of, information maintained by third parties. This information is provided subject to the [conditions of the Open Parliament Licence](#).