



Workforce Strategy Insights for Academy Leaders in 2026

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Workforce planning remains one of the most significant strategic challenges facing academy trusts in 2026. With staffing costs representing the largest proportion of trust expenditure and ongoing pressures around recruitment, retention, and affordability, workforce decisions are now at the intersection of educational delivery, financial sustainability, and governance.

Department for Education (DfE) data and guidance continue to underscore the importance of aligning workforce strategy with long-term financial planning and educational priorities. For trustees and senior leaders, this means moving beyond short-term staffing decisions and adopting a structured, evidence-led approach to workforce planning.

The Strategic Importance of Workforce Planning

Staffing decisions have a profound impact on both educational outcomes and the financial resilience of an academy trust. Trustees are responsible for ensuring that staffing structures are affordable, aligned with the trust's curriculum and educational strategy, and sustainable in the medium to long term.

Staffing decisions—whether around leadership capacity, support functions, or teaching staff—are often not easily reversible. Once embedded, they create ongoing cost commitments that can significantly affect future budgets, reserves, and the overall financial position of the trust. Therefore, workforce strategy has evolved from being an operational concern to a core element of financial governance.

Affordability and Financial Sustainability

DfE financial data consistently shows that staffing costs make up the largest proportion of academy trust expenditure. Even small adjustments in staffing levels or pay structures can have a substantial impact on the trust's financial performance. Effective workforce planning requires close alignment with:

- Funding assumptions
- Pupil number projections
- Medium-term financial forecasts

Trusts that increase staffing levels without a clear understanding of long-term funding viability risk inadvertently increasing financial pressures. This makes careful planning essential for ensuring financial sustainability while maintaining educational standards.

Recruitment and Retention Pressures

Academy trusts continue to face significant recruitment challenges, particularly in specialist teaching roles and leadership positions. These pressures often lead to increased costs, including reliance on agency staff, recruitment incentives, or temporary staffing solutions.

Beyond the financial impact, sustained recruitment challenges can place undue pressure on existing staff, resulting in higher workloads and decreased morale. Workforce strategies, therefore, need to focus not only on filling vacancies but also on maintaining stability, capacity, and long-term retention. Addressing staff wellbeing, providing professional development opportunities, and improving working conditions are key components of any successful workforce strategy.

Leadership and Central Capacity

As academy trusts expand, restructure, or consolidate, decisions around leadership roles and central teams become increasingly important. Centralised capacity offers significant value through:

- Consistency in leadership
- Support for local schools
- Economies of scale

However, this must remain proportionate to the trust's size, complexity, and the scope of its operations. Over-centralisation can lead to inefficiencies, while under-centralisation may result in a lack of coordination and reduced support for schools within the trust.

Governance and Audit Perspective

From both a governance and audit perspective, effective workforce strategy is demonstrated not just by the affordability of staffing structures but by evidence of careful

planning, ongoing challenge, and robust oversight. Auditors will evaluate whether staffing assumptions are:

- Realistic
- Sustainable
- Consistent with financial forecasts

Furthermore, auditors will assess how well workforce planning has been integrated into the overall governance framework, including its alignment with long-term financial goals.

Integrating Workforce Strategy into Financial Governance

The most effective academy trusts embed workforce planning into their broader governance framework. This includes:

- Linking workforce assumptions to medium-term financial planning
- Reflecting staffing risks within the trust's risk register
- Providing trustees with clear workforce data and reports

Trustees must ensure that they are not only informed about current workforce-related decisions but also actively involved in strategic planning for the future. This proactive engagement ensures that workforce decisions support the trust's overall strategic objectives and long-term financial health.

Conclusion

In 2026, workforce strategy is inseparable from financial sustainability. Trusts that effectively integrate workforce planning into their governance, budgeting, and risk management frameworks are better positioned to manage cost pressures, support high-quality educational delivery, and demonstrate effective oversight.

By adopting a strategic, evidence-driven approach to workforce planning, academy trusts can navigate the ongoing challenges of recruitment and retention, while maintaining financial resilience and achieving long-term success.