# Surge in executive pay at academy trusts raises eyebrows



According to a recent report from the Department for Education (DfE), a substantial increase in executive pay at academy trusts in England has sparked controversy, with 775 heads of school academies receiving pay packages exceeding £150,000 during the 2022-23 financial year. This figure represents a significant rise from just 12% of trusts reporting such salaries in 2018-19, illustrating a marked shift in remuneration practices within the sector. The data indicates that approximately 30.8% of academy trusts compensated at least one employee with more than £150,000, inclusive of pension benefits.

The recent findings have placed additional scrutiny on the government's ongoing efforts to encourage academy trusts to adopt more accountable and reasonable pay structures for senior leaders. In 2023, the DfE addressed its concerns in writing to 37 trusts, cautioning them about excessively high salaries; however, several trusts reportedly increased their pay packages shortly thereafter.

Academy schools are funded through grant allocations from the central government, operating as not-for-profit entities and typically do not charge tuition fees. As a result, their funding strategies are a focal point of the discussion surrounding these rising salaries. Notably, Martin Haworth, the head of the Flagship Learning Trust and executive headteacher at Wright Robinson college in Manchester, was among the highest earners with a salary package of at least £345,000. This amount reflects an increase of over 30% within two years, attributed by the Trust to his enhanced responsibilities as head.

Similarly, chief executive Justin James of the Lion Academy Trust, which manages schools across Northamptonshire, Essex, and east London, experienced a pay package growth from £226,420 in the 2021-22 period to £267,533 in 2023-24. Furthermore, Carl Ward, chief executive of the City Learning Trust, noted an increase from up to £265,000 in 2021-22 to over £300,000 for the current financial year, indicating a shift of at least 13% in his earnings.

Alasdair Smith, representing the Anti Academies Alliance, expressed concern regarding the implications of these pay packages, alleging a lack of accountability within the academy system. He remarked, “This is a gravy train for a small number of academy chief executives who cannot be brought to account over excessive pay. It’s a self-serving elite.” Smith further emphasised that the true value of education lies primarily in the quality of teaching, as opposed to leadership salaries, questioning how academy heads could rationalise their pay increases in light of many teachers receiving below-inflation wage adjustments for years.

While supporting high salaries may be intended to attract capable leaders in the highly competitive education landscape, there remains a growing dialogue questioning whether these pay structures adhere to the expectations set forth by the DfE. An analysis commissioned by the Local Government Association in 2023 revealed that 93% of maintained schools achieved ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ ratings in Ofsted inspections compared to 87% of academies. Proponents of the academy model argue that such comparisons may be misleading, citing the ability of academies to effectively regenerate failing institutions and improve educational outcomes.

The report highlighted that over 60 academy trusts disbursed salaries of at least £200,000 to their leaders in the previous year, with 95% of those trusts observing increases in pay packages. The highest paid academy chief executive in England is Sir Dan Moynihan of the Harris Federation, who reportedly earned between £515,000 and £520,000, plus employer pension contributions of up to £85,000 for the year ending 31 August 2024.

The current legislative framework is also evolving, as the children's wellbeing and schools bill under consideration includes provisions aimed at aligning the pay and conditions of academy teachers with those of maintained schools. Academy leaders have cautioned that poorly structured legislation could jeopardise their ability to attract top teaching talent. In January, government amendments were introduced to the bill, allowing the education secretary to enforce minimum salary standards for teachers in academy settings.

A spokesperson for the DfE reiterated the significance of high educational standards, affirming, “The overwhelming majority of academy trusts deliver a high standard of financial management and governance, but we are clear that strong accountability is non-negotiable.” The spokesperson further stated that the department would continue to scrutinise cases where executive compensation is not proportionate or clearly linked to improved pupil outcomes.

In reflection of the concerns raised, the Flagship Learning Trust defended Haworth’s remuneration by citing an ‘outstanding’ rating in the latest Ofsted report. Joe Larrigan, chair of trustees for Wright Robinson college, remarked that recent structural changes following the retirement of a long-serving chief executive have resulted in cost efficiencies and an operational framework aimed at balancing financial considerations with educational leadership. The Lion Academy Trust and City Learning Trust have been approached for their input regarding the rising pay packages of their respective leaders.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/engagement-with-academy-trusts-about-executive-pay> - This URL supports the claim about the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) contacting academy trusts regarding executive pay, highlighting efforts to ensure transparency and accountability in pay structures.
* <https://www.taxpayersalliance.com/multi_academy_trust_rich_list> - This URL corroborates the information about high executive pay in multi-academy trusts, including the total remuneration figures for heads of these trusts and the scrutiny they face.
* <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/academy-trust-handbook> - This URL provides context on the regulatory framework governing academy trusts, including requirements for transparency and accountability in financial management and governance.
* <https://www.ofsted.gov.uk/> - This URL supports the discussion about Ofsted ratings and their relevance to the performance of academy schools, which is often cited in justifying executive pay levels.
* <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/bills-and-acts/bills/childrens-wellbeing-and-schools-bill/> - This URL relates to the legislative efforts aimed at aligning pay and conditions for academy teachers with those in maintained schools, reflecting ongoing policy discussions.