



Campaign for State Education

Systems Matter III: Revisiting high pay in the academy trust and local authority sectors

A REPORT FOR THE CAMPAIGN FOR STATE EDUCATION

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FOREWORD

At a time when school funding is high on the agenda because it is totally inadequate and the needs of many young people are not being met, CASE has produced a third report based on research comparing the way in which funds are used in the two sectors currently running our schools - Local Authorities and Academy Trusts.

The first report looked at the pay of CEOs of Academy Trusts compared with Directors of Children's Services in Local Authorities. The second report compared the spending on teachers in classrooms in the Academy Sector with those working in LA maintained schools.

This third report compares the top salaries being paid in Academy trusts with those paid in Local Authorities. The results tell a stark story. While the lack of funding in maintained schools is well documented the amounts being paid to key people in academy Trusts has not been widely publicised. The amounts massively outweigh any salaries in the maintained sector. And yet both sectors are funded by the DfE based on the numbers of children attending the schools, whether they are in a trust or local authority. The research shows that there is a dramatic difference in the number and levels of top salaries in the two sectors. There are 152 Local Authorities and 2,072 Academy Trusts each with a varying number of schools. Academy Trusts have fewer schools than Local Authorities but in total they oversee similar numbers of pupils. Around a third of academy trusts have just one school. The largest Local Authorities have hundreds; Lancashire has 600 schools.

The research found that CEOs of Academy Trusts are paid on average £117,000 more than Directors of Children's Services while educating the same numbers of young people. Additionally many more people are paid high salaries in Academy Trusts than in Local Authorities.

Questions have to be asked about the huge disparities between executive pay in Academy Trusts and that of directors in Local Authorities when the results for young people in Academies are in general no better than in Local Authority schools.

Our reports provide an evidence base for such questions to be raised and addressed. It is time that the unregulated salaries in academy trusts were properly scrutinised and public funding of state education is spent where it is needed, in the classroom, not the boardroom.

Melian Mansfield

Co-Chair Campaign for State Education

Introduction

This is the third in a series in which CASE has analysed spending within academy trusts and local authorities, allowing comparisons to be made between the two sectors, which between them are responsible for all pupils in English state-funded schools.

Our first report, *Systems Matter: the Cost to Classrooms of the Academies Programme (2023)* compared spending on salaries of £130,000 or higher in both sectors. The second, *Systems Matter II: The Impact of the Academy System on Staffing (2024)*, compared spending at staffroom level between academy trusts and local authorities.

This third report uses a new metric to compare the spending of England's academy trusts on their top-paid person with those of, in each case, a similarly-sized local authority. It also updates its findings on overall academy trust and local authority spending on high salaries, and the number of people awarded such salaries, to come up with comparisons both between the sectors based on their latest sets of accounts, and, for the academies sector, with the situation three years previously. Such comparisons are important, as the two sectors represent alternative ways of organising education, and higher spend on executive salaries may take money away from classrooms.

Executive summary

The leaders of England's largest multi-academy trusts are receiving six-figure pay premiums for running them, compared to what they would receive if these organisations were operating in the local authority maintained sector, overseeing non-academy schools with similar numbers of pupils.

This paper's analysis of the amounts England's academy trusts pay to senior staff, compared to that seen in the local authority sector, shows far higher spending in the former.

The 10 biggest academy trusts paid their chief executives, in 2024-25, an average of £117,000 more than they would have received if they were directors of children's services working for councils with similar numbers of pupils in non-academy schools.

Pay premiums for leaders working in the academy sector, compared to those leading council children's services departments of similar sizes, stood at £96,200 for the largest 20 academy trusts, £70,000 for the largest 50 trusts and £58,000 for the largest 100 such chains.

This paper also found that the academies sector continues to pay many more people salaries of £150,000 or higher: 777 individuals in 2024-25 compared to just 199 within local authorities. For academies, this represents a more-than-trebling of the number from just three years previously, when 233 people across the sector received £150k+ salaries.

And, while there were only 20 cases of individuals paid £200,000 or more who could work in local authority schools or as local authority education officials, the figure for the academies sector was more than six times higher, at 125.

England's local authorities spent £34.9 million on education salaries of £150,000 or more, including £4.8 million on salaries of £200,000 or more, in 2024-25. For academies, the comparable figures were, respectively, £130 million and £30.3 million.

This paper also finds that in just over half of England's largest 100 academy trusts, pay increases to their highest-paid person over three years outstripped the national pay award for a classroom teacher in England. More than a quarter of these trusts saw their top pay rise by at least 30 per cent, with two trusts seeing their top remuneration rise by at least £100,000.

Recent context

In July 2026, the government announced¹ a move to limit the ability of academy trusts to pay their executives more than £174,000 a year. From October 1st, 2026, trusts must obtain DfE approval before advertising any new post where remuneration is above £174,000, or where performance-related pay exceeds £25,000. This was set out in the Academy Trust Handbook², which also stipulates that "executive remuneration must not increase at a faster rate than that of the academy trust's teachers," without a clear justification and prior approval from the Department for Education.

It might be anticipated that this will, in time, exert downward pressure on high academy trust leadership pay, the current position on which is set out in this paper. However, with the pay cap not applying retrospectively, and leaders of large academy trusts in particular often staying in post for many years, the overall position seems unlikely to change imminently. It therefore seems important to continue to track spending patterns on high pay, in the local authority as well as the academy sector.

Methodology

For this investigation, CASE looked at the 2024-25 accounts of all 152 local authorities which oversaw maintained (non-academy) schools in their area; the accounts of the 100 largest academy trusts in England, based on pupil numbers³; and accounts from a sample of the remaining 2,072⁴ academy trusts in England.

Accounts for academy trusts and local authorities from 2024-25 were accessed, as this was the most recent year for which financial statements were available for both sectors.

Local authority accounts

Under current legislation⁵, local authorities have to disclose in their annual accounts the number of people paid at least £50,000, in bands of £5,000, while details of remuneration and job title of

¹ <https://tinyurl.com/bdznek27>

² <https://tinyurl.com/bdznek27>

³ Pupil numbers used in this investigation, on both the local authority and academy trust sides, were based on the DfE's schools census for 2024-25. This shows the number of pupils in schools overseen by each local authority, and by each academy trust, during the year to which their 2024-25 accounts relate.

⁴ The number of academy trusts is based, again, on the 2024-25 DfE schools census, showing the number of trusts which are listed against the names of state-funded schools in England.

⁵ The current rules are set out, for example, here: <https://tinyurl.com/9ywvydk7>

certain senior employees – including directors of children’s services – also have to be disclosed, with individuals having to be named in cases where they were paid £150,000 or more.

This investigation then used the accounts to collate, for each of the 152 local authorities, the salary of the director of children’s services (or equivalent post⁶), as well as looking at statistical data on high pay. Specifically, it documented the number of people paid at least £150,000 in each local authority, where that individual could have worked⁷ in education, and similarly, for £200,000-plus salaries. The highest-paid person in each local authority, among those who could be working in education, was also documented.

Local authorities are also required to disclose pay above £50,000, again in bands of £5,000, within schools for which they are the employer. This allowed this investigation to include cases of local authority headteachers who were paid more than £150,000. Therefore, these are included in our analysis in addition to highly-paid local authority education officials.

Academy accounts

On the academies side, trusts must disclose the number of their employees paid at least £60,000, in £10,000 bands. They must also disclose the salaries in bands of £5,000 of any trustee – usually the chief executive – who is also an employee, against that person’s name.

This investigation accessed the accounts of the 100 largest academy trusts, ranked on pupil numbers, to obtain data on the highest-paid person within each, the numbers paid at least £150,000, and at least £200,000.

For the sample of the remaining trusts, these were ranked in size order in terms of pupil numbers and then accounts accessed for every tenth one of them. Top pay and the numbers of £150k+ and £200k+ employees were collated, with these figures then being multiplied by 10 to arrive at a figure for these remaining trusts as a whole.

⁶ *Local authorities have many slightly differing titles for what is the same position: the DCS. For example, accounts for different local authorities list Directors of Children and Young People; Executive Directors of Children, Young People and Education; and Corporate Directors of Children and Education Services. All are considered in this analysis to be the senior post-holder for the council’s education function. In a minority of cases, where there was no post-holder whose title linked them directly to education, we looked at the list of positions in the senior officer list which seemed most likely to have responsibility for education – such as an “Executive director – people” – and counted that position as working in education.

⁷ For each local authority, this investigation looked at the section of the accounts where the salary of individuals in senior roles is documented against their post. Any education position – typically the director of children’s services or equivalent, but occasionally including a slightly less senior schools position – were included in the high pay analysis. In the statistical section of local authority accounts, where the number of people paid £50,000 is listed, in bands of £5,000, it is usually not specified whether such individuals were working in the council’s education department, or in other roles. Where there was doubt, this investigation counted all such individuals as working in education: every £150,000-plus, and £200,000-plus salary which was not clear from the senior salary section of the accounts as working not in education, was counted as working in education. Because of this, the total figures quoted in this report as the maximum possible working in education and paid beyond these benchmarks almost certainly overstates the true position, in terms of high spend on senior posts in the local authority education sector.

In this way, high pay figures for both the academy and the local authority education sectors as a whole could be compared.

Previous analyses⁸ have shown that local authority directors of children's services, or equivalent, were much less well-paid, per pupil, on average than are the leaders of academy trusts. For this investigation, an approach was taken which paired each academy trust with a local authority responsible for a similar number of pupils.

Starting with the largest academy trusts, the number of pupils in their schools was listed. This number was compared to the number of pupils in non-academy schools overseen by each local authority in England. Each academy trust was then paired against the local authority with the closest number of pupils to it, to work out comparative levels of high pay, between one organisation of similar size from each sector.

For each trust, the salary of the top-paid person was listed, and the amount paid to that person per pupil was worked out. This was then compared to the top pay for education within each local authority. The amount the academy trust paid to its top-paid person – usually the chief executive – per pupil was then multiplied by the number of pupils in schools overseen by the local authority to work out what the local authority leader would have been paid, if this had been at the same per-pupil rate as the academy trust leader had received. The difference was then computed, and averages taken from all such comparisons to come up with figures showing the effective pay premium for academy trust chief executives, compared to local authority directors.

This investigation then also added up spending on salaries of £150,000 or more, and £200,000 or more, within both sectors to come up with a comparison.

And it looked back to CASE's first analysis of high pay in the academies sector, which had been based on academy accounts from 2021-22, to see to what extent the salaries of top-paid person within England's largest academy trusts have increased.

Findings

1 Pay premiums for chief executives of large multi-academy trusts

The investigation found that there is a premium of more than £100,000 for leaders of England's largest multi-academy trusts, compared to the amounts they would be earning if they were working for local authorities overseeing similar numbers of pupils.

The 10 biggest academy trusts paid their chief executives, in 2024-25, an average of £117,000 more than they would have received if they were Directors of Children's Services working for councils with similar numbers of pupils in non-academy schools.

⁸ See <https://tinyurl.com/42d8rdyu> and <https://tinyurl.com/y4x858td>

Table 1: Top pay differentials: England's 10 largest multi-academy trusts versus similarly sized local authorities.

Academy trust	Number of pupils	Top pay, £k	Nearest-sized LA	Number of pupils	Top pay, £k	Top LA pay, given MAT rate per pupil	Diff, £k
UNITED LEARNING TRUST	66,300	315	Leeds	67,518	167	321	154
HARRIS FEDERATION	43,007	535	Redbridge	40,864	228	508	281
ORMISTON ACADEMIES TRUST	34,763	195	Nottinghamshire	34,762	160	195	35
LIFT SCHOOLS	33,943	283	Gloucestershire	33,733	143	281	138
OASIS COMMUNITY LEARNING	31,569	205	Barnet	31,541	131	205	74
OUTWOOD GRANGE AT	30,890	205	Sandwell	30,824	104	205	101
ARK SCHOOLS	30,090	215	Tower Hamlets	29,849	221	213	-8
DELTA ACADEMIES TRUST	29,911	315	Tower Hamlets	29,849	221	314	93
LEIGH ACADEMIES TRUST	24,831	385	East Riding	24,444	147	379	232
E-ACT	24,108	245	Haringey	24,074	170	245	74
Averages	34,941	290		34,746	169	287	117

Sources: Academy trust accounts, local authority accounts, 2024-25. Top pay figures assume pay is in the middle of the published band, when the precise amount is not disclosed. Where a senior figure served only part of the year, their pay was multiplied according to time served, to come up with an annualised figure. LA top pay figures show top pay for anyone who could have worked either in the children's services department or leading schools for that year.

For example, England's largest academy trust, United Learning, oversaw schools with 66,300 pupils in 2024-25. It paid its chief executive, Sir Jon Coles, £310-£320,000 that year.

For comparison, Leeds council, which had schools educating 67,518 pupils that year, paid its director of children and families, Julie Longworth, only just over half of Sir Jon's salary, at £166,799.

Increasing her pay to the same per-pupil amount as Sir Jon received would have seen it rise to £321,000 – some £154,000 more than Ms Longworth actually received.

Similarly, the second-largest academy chain, the Harris Federation, paid its chief executive, Sir Daniel Moynihan, £530-£540,000 in 2024-25. The lead education official at the council with the closest number of pupils in non-academy schools to Harris – Redbridge in East London – paid its corporate director of people £227,592⁹. Redbridge’s official thus received some £280,000 less than they would have done, had he been paid at Sir Daniel’s per-pupil rate, rather than that seen in his local authority.

Calculated on the same basis, academy chief executives running the 20 largest trusts were paid an average of £96,200 each more than they would have been, had they been overseeing council children’s services departments responsible for schools with the same number of pupils.

Even when considering a bigger group of trusts, the top 50 largest, there was still a premium of £70,000 for their leaders, on average, compared to the salaries of directors of children’s services at councils with similar numbers of pupils.

Among the 100 largest trusts, there was a £58,000 pay premium compared to the salaries paid by the local authorities. Only among the smaller trusts, on average, did the gap diminish, with a £16,400 pay premium for the academy sector emerging across all academy trusts in our analysis.

2 Numbers of highly-paid people in both sectors

Table 2: Numbers paid £150k+, and £200k+, in local authority and academy sectors.

Number paid	£150k+	£200k+
All local authorities	199	20
Largest 100 academy trusts	247	65
Sample of smaller trusts	53	6
Total in smaller trusts	530	60
Total in academy sector	777	125

Sources: Academy trust accounts, local authority accounts, 2024-25. Where a senior figure served only part of the year, their pay was multiplied according to time served, to come up with an annualised figure. LA top pay figures show top pay for anyone who could have worked either in the children’s services department or leading schools for that year.

The analysis totalled up the number of people paid at least £150,000 in the entire local authority sector in England – as evidenced in the accounts of all of the authorities – who could possibly work either in each council’s education department or in their non-academy schools. This added up to 199 people.

In comparison, the 100 largest academy trusts in England alone employed 247 people paid at least £150,000 in 2024-25. In our sample of 207 of the other 2072 trusts, their accounts disclosed another 53 people paid at least this amount. Multiplying that number by 10 suggested that academy trusts

⁹ Redbridge’s 2024-25 figure almost certainly overstates its true spending on the director of children’s services function, for two reasons. First, this post was split into two during 2025-26, to be replaced by both an executive director of children’s services, and an executive director of adult services and public health. Second, on top of these responsibilities, the executive director of people during 2024-25 had also served as interim chief executive. Redbridge’s salary figure comes from adding up the salaries of two people who served in the executive director of people role during 2024-25.

outside the top 100 largest had 530 employees paid at least £150,000. Therefore, assuming our sample is representative of the sector as a whole, the academies sector had 777 people paid at least £150,000 in 2024-25.

This means that academy trusts employed 3.9 times as many people on £150,000 or more than did local authorities, even though, in 2024-25, the trust sector ran schools with only 67 per cent more pupils than was the case for local authorities.

At the level of £200,000 salaries or more, the disparity was even more stark. There were 125 cases of people paid £200,000 or more within trusts: 65 within the largest 100 chains; and six within our sample of the other trusts, which would equate to 60 cases across the sector outside the largest trusts if our sample is representative. The total trust figure of 125 was more than six times the number of £200,000+ salaries in local authorities who could possibly work in education, which stood at only 20.

The latter figure meant that a £200,000-plus salary was almost unheard-of in 2024-25 within the non-academy local authority sector¹⁰.

Yet within the 100 largest multi-academy trusts, it was virtually ubiquitous. In fact, the *average* top salary for these 100 biggest chains was £211,530, with 57 of the 100 having leaders paid at least £200,000, and only one of the 10 largest not in that category.

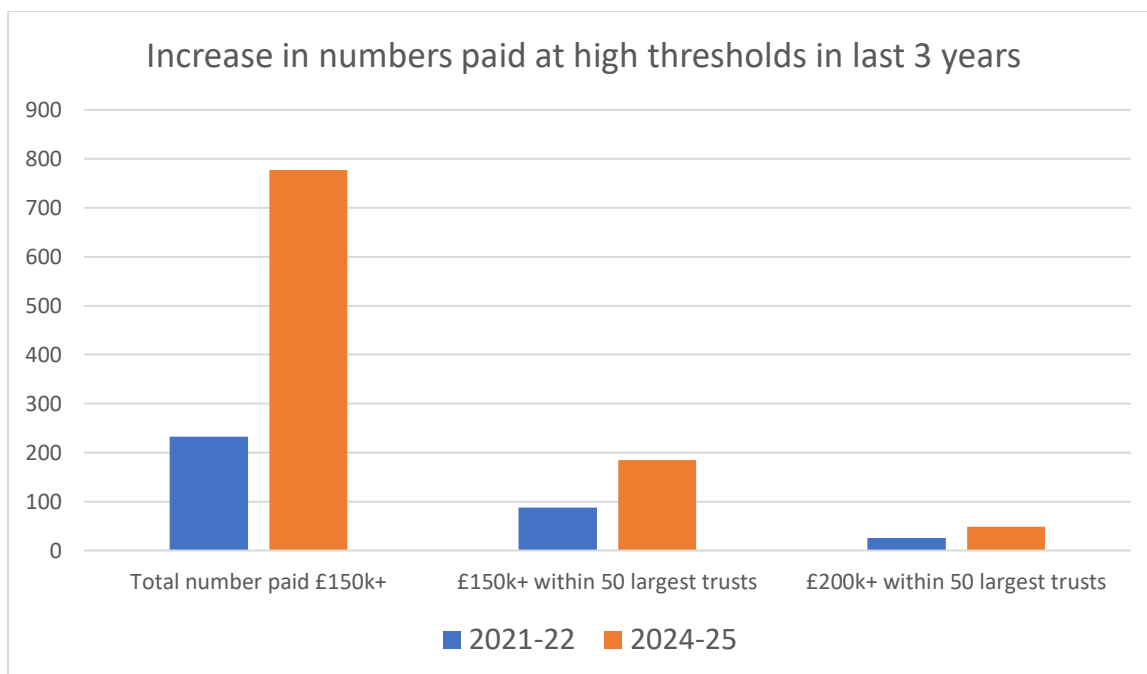
Looking back, CASE's 2023 investigation¹¹ into high pay in the academies and local authority sectors, which analysed accounts from 2021-22, shows a stark increase in £150k+, and £200k+, salaries since then.

Table 3: Totals paid at high thresholds within academy trusts, 2021-2022 versus 2024-25

Accounts year	Total number paid £150k+	£150k+ within 50 largest trusts	£200k+ within 50 largest trusts
2021-22	233	88	26
2024-25	777	185	48

¹⁰ Very few local authorities appear to have been routinely paying for directors of children's services or equivalent on salaries of more than £200,000 in 2024-25. There were only nine senior posts possibly covering education in the local authority accounts which carried payments for 2024-25 of at least that amount. The remaining 11 represented cases of unnamed people listed in statistics as paid more than £200,000 but where it was impossible to tell what position they held – it may or may not have related to education – or, in a handful of cases where salaries were going to local authority headteachers. Among the nine, one was a director of people, another combined the role of DCS with one of executive director of people, while another combined it with a post of deputy chief executive. One other post was filled for only part of the year; in this case a figure of £200,000+ was arrived at, and contributed to that figure of 20 positions across this sector at this level, by multiplying up the salary paid during the months worked to cover the whole of the year.

¹¹ <https://tinyurl.com/42d8rdyu>



Sources: Academy trust accounts, 2021-22 and 2024-25.

In 2021-22, our database shows there were 88 people paid at least £150,000 in the 50 largest trusts. We also found 29 people paid at least this figure in our sample of the 2021-22 accounts of small trusts, which looked at the financial statements of one in five trusts outside the 50 largest. That figure of 29 would suggest there had been 145 people (29x5) paid at least £150k in these smaller trusts. This meant there were 233 people paid at least £150,000 in 2021-22.

In 2024-25, as shown above, there were 777¹² people paid at least that amount. This figure is more than three times that seen in 2021-22, which had already provoked concerns, as set out in our 2023 report, about high pay within multi-academy trusts, compared to the local authority sector. A total of 185 people were paid at least £150,000 within the 50 largest trusts in 2024-25 – more than double the amount three years ago.

A comparison between the 2021-22 accounts of the 50 largest trusts and those of the 50 largest in 2024-25 also shows a significant upward trend in the number paying £200,000 salaries. In 2021-22, there were 26 cases of this, among those 50 largest academy trusts. In 2024-25, there were 48 salaries of £200,000 or higher¹³.

¹² This figure is lower than the 1,081 academy trusts who were reported, in the DfE's annual academies sector report for 2023-24, as paying at least one person more than £150,000 in that year. These annual documents have themselves been generating headlines about the number of rising number of individuals above this benchmark. The DfE statistics are higher because they include employer pensions' payments, which our figures do not: they are based on salary alone.

¹³ We did not analyse the accounts of smaller trusts in 2023 by the number of £200,000-plus salaries in their 2021-22 financial statements. Therefore, a comparison here is only offered for those of the 50 largest trusts, which were analysed against this metric three years previously.

It is true that, over time, natural pay inflation will sweep more people into the list of those paid a certain amount at any salary level, in any sector. We can see this, for example, in the documentation in accounts of the numbers paid at lower rates - £50,000-plus, and £60,000-plus, in the local authority and academy sectors respectively. However, the rate of increases in these numbers are nonetheless striking.

3 Total spend

This investigation also looked at the total spend on salaries of £150,000 or more, and on salaries of £200,000 or more, in both sectors. Again, the differences were stark.

Table 4: Spending on high salaries in academy trusts vs LA sector, 2024-25

Total spending	£150k+	Per pupil	£200k+	Per pupil
All local authorities	£34.9m	£11.03	£4.8m	£1.51
Largest 100 academy trusts	£46.7m	£32.27	£15.7m	£10.88
Sample of smaller trusts	£8.4m	£21.87	£1.45m	£3.79
Total in smaller trusts	£83.7m	£21.87	£14.5m	£3.79
Total in academy sector	£130.4m	£24.73	£30.3m	£5.74

Sources: Academy trust accounts, local authority accounts.

All of England's local authorities spent £34.9m on salaries of £150,000, on people who could be working in their children's services departments or in local authority schools.

For comparison, England's largest 100 academy trusts spent £46.7m alone on such salaries. In addition, our sample of smaller trusts spent £8.4 million on £150k-plus salaries, suggesting the sector as a whole, outside the top 100 largest, paid £83.7m on such pay. In total, then, the academy trust sector spent £130.4 million on £150k-plus salaries in 2024-25.

That was spending of £95.4 million higher in the academies sector than was paid by local authorities, with the total amount paid by academy trusts being 3.7 times higher than that seen across local authorities.

Given that the academies sector had only 1.7 times the number of pupils seen in local authorities, the disparity is remarkable.

At the level of £200,000 salaries and higher, again the contrast was even more notable. Local authorities spent £4.8 million in total on remuneration at that level or higher in 2024-25. By contrast, the largest 100 academy trusts alone spent more than three times that amount on such salaries: £15.7 million. The smaller academy trusts spent £1.45m, suggesting that the sector as a whole outside the largest 100 trusts spent £14.5 million on such salaries.

So the total outlay of the academies sector on £200k-plus salaries in 2024-25 was £30.3 million. This was more than six times that seen in local authorities, with academy trusts spending £25.5 million more on them than was seen in local authorities.

As mentioned above, the academy sector as a whole had only 67 per cent, or a factor of 1.67 times, more pupils than did the local non-academy local authority sector in 2024-25. Thus, spending per pupil in academy trusts on £150k+, and £200k+, salaries was much higher than was the case in the local authority sector.

The spend on £150k+ salaries worked out at £32.27 per pupil among the largest 100 academy trusts, and at £21.87 among the smaller academy trusts. Within the non-academy local authority sector, it was only £11.03 per pupil.

For £200k+ salaries, the cost to the largest 100 academy trusts was £10.89 per pupil. For the smaller academy trusts, it was £3.79 per pupil. In the local authority sector, it was only £1.51 per pupil.

4 Pay increases for highest-paid people in the largest academy trusts

This investigation also used data, collected from CASE's first analysis of high pay in the academies sector which had been based on the 2021-22 academy year, to track the increase¹⁴ in the amounts England's largest academy trusts have been spending on the salaries of their top-paid people.

This compared top pay in each of the trusts which were among England's 100 largest in 2024-25, with what it had been three years previously, in 2021-22.

This analysis reveals that, in just over half of the 100 largest trusts, the rise in the amount paid to their most well-remunerated person – usually the chief executive – was above the national pay award for teachers on the main scale in England.

Table 5: Biggest % pay increases, among top 100 largest academy trusts, 2021-22 to 2024-25

Academy trust	Pupil numbers	Top pay, 2021-22, £k	Top pay, 2024-25, £k	Difference, £k	% Difference
NICHOLAS POSTGATE CATHOLIC ACADEMY TRUST	12,695	165	325	160	97
ADVANCE LEARNING PARTNERSHIP	8,831	175	272	97	55
BOHUNT EDUCATION TRUST	11,591	165	245	80	48
ACADEMY TRANSFORMATION TRUST	11,445	155	225	70	45
THE SIGMA TRUST	11,461	135	195	60	44

Source, academy trust accounts. Pay increase data was based on assuming that the actual salary of an individual in each case was at the mid-point of the salary band published in academy trust accounts, where precise figures were not provided in the accounts.

¹⁴ Pay increase data was based on assuming that the actual salary of an individual in each case was at the mid-point of the salary band published in academy trust accounts, where precise figures were not provided in the accounts.

Some 52 trusts saw their top pay increase by at least 20 per cent. For 26 of them – so more than a quarter – the rise was at least 30 per cent. Two trusts – the Nicholas Postgate Catholic Academy Trust and Advance Learning Partnership – saw their top pay increase by at least 50 per cent, rising by 97 per cent and 55 per cent respectively.

For comparison, the salary set out in England’s School Teachers’ Pay and Conditions Document for a teacher outside London mid-way up the main scale (M4) rose by 19.7 per cent, from £31,778 to £38,034. Inflation over the period, according to the Bank of England’s inflation calculator, stood at 20 per cent.

In terms of the largest rises in cash terms, there were nine trusts in which the salaries of their top-paid people rose by at least £70,000 over the three years, including those of England’s two most well-remunerated academy chief executives, at the Harris Federation and Leigh Academies Trust. Two trusts - Nicholas Postgate and Leigh – saw the remuneration of their top-paid person rise by at least £100,000.

The median pay rise for the top-paid person at these 100 academy trusts was £30,000 over the three years.

With eight of these 100 trusts actually seeing their top pay decline over the three years, on average the pay increases for leaders of these trusts was in line with that for classroom teachers, at 19.6 per cent. However, with pay for those leading large academy trusts already having been at high levels back in 2021-22, questions are likely to be asked about why remuneration rates are continuing to plough ahead, in many of these organisations.

The findings may underscore why the government moved to bring an end to such practice, with its announcement¹⁵ in July 2026 that academy trust executives “will not be able to receive pay rises higher than those set for classroom teachers”.

5 Other striking findings

The analysis also uncovered some remarkable other disparities between the two sectors. For example, more than a third – 56 – of the local authorities employed not a single person paid £150,000 or more. Included in that position were some large authorities. Gloucestershire, the largest on this list, had 33,733 pupils as of 2024-25, which, if it were a multi-academy trust, would make it the fourth-largest multi-academy trust in England. But whereas Gloucestershire paid its Executive Director of Children’s Services £143,125 plus an employer’s pension contribution of £29,341, the closest-sized MAT to it, Lift Schools, paid eight people at least £150,000, with its chief executive, Rebecca Boomer-Clark, paid £280-£285,000 plus £70-£75,000 in pension. This means that Ms Boomer-Clark’s total package was more than double that of the Gloucestershire official, with a spending gap between the organisations on their leadership functions approaching £200,000.

Similarly, England’s second-largest local authority by pupil numbers, Lancashire, had only one person paid £150,000 or more: its executive director of education and children’s services, Jacqui Old. She received £177,628 in salary and £28,089 in employer’s pension contributions in 2024-25. Lancashire had 124,120 pupils in non-academy schools in its area that year, which is more than England’s two largest multi-academy trusts between them. However, the latter two organisations, the United Learning Trust and the Harris Federation, had 31 people paid at least £150,000 that year, including

¹⁵ <https://tinyurl.com/mr8n3mdb>

eight paid at least £200,000. The total pay and pensions packages for their two chief executives added up to at least¹⁶ £930,000 – at least £620,000 to Harris’s leader Sir Dan Moyninan, and at least £310,000 to his counterpart at United, Sir Jon Coles - or in total more than four times that of Ms Old.

Only one of England’s 50 largest multi-academy trusts – King Edward VI Academy Trust Birmingham – had none of its employees on £150,000 or more, with its top-paid person receiving £140-£150,000 in 2024-25, to be among the leaders of an organisation of 12,000 pupils. This, perhaps, demonstrated that it is possible, within the multi-academy trust sector, for a relatively lean leadership structure to operate.

Discussion and conclusion

The government’s move to make it more difficult for academy trusts to pay salaries of more than £174,000 is welcome, given that this is not just in line with the salary of the Prime Minister, but also above that of many Directors of Children’s Services.

This paper has added to the weight of evidence showing that top pay is on average significantly higher within the academies sector than it is within local authorities, despite the latter operating the system which multi-academy trusts are expected eventually to replace¹⁷, and alongside which they currently operate.

Given that there has been little independent evidence¹⁸ that schools run by multi-academy trusts perform better, on average, than those in the non-academy local authority sector, questions should continue to be asked as to whether the trusts’ higher spending on senior pay represents the most efficient use of resources, at a time when finances across the public sector are tight.

There is a strong moral case that the government could go further, in regulating senior pay within the academies sector, by introducing a national pay scale for current academy executives, rather than only a ceiling operating in relation to advertising for future posts when they become vacant.

In the absence of such a pay scale, academy trusts should at least be featuring local authority spending on senior staff in their own benchmarking exercises, carried out when deciding the salary of their chief executives. It seems likely that¹⁹, when trusts carry out such exercises, they do not reference the local authority sector, but only spending within other academy trusts. However, if all academy trusts are spending at a relatively high level on executive pay, such comparison exercises will not lead to any change in the high pay position we see in the sector overall.

Yet, with evidence from local authorities clearly showing a sector which is still responsible for a large number of schools, but without paying as much on its senior leadership as is the case for many academy chains, individual academy trusts should be looking at local authority accounts to get a sense of how their senior spend could be made more efficient.

¹⁶ Sir Jon Coles’s pensions payments are not disclosed in the accounts of either the United Learning Trust or its sister organisation, the United Church Schools Trust. So only his salary features in the calculations above.

¹⁷ The DfE said in its February 2026 white paper, Every Child Achieving and Thriving, that in time its vision was for all schools to be operating in “school trusts”.

¹⁸ See, for example, this House of Lords paper from 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/y2myejed>

¹⁹ The author has evidenced such benchmarking not featuring any comparisons with local authority high-pay decision-making in one recent case: <https://tinyurl.com/mpts64yr>

Some readers might question whether it is right to compare senior spending in local authorities with what we see in academy trusts. Some people, working in or sympathetic to academy trust leadership, argue that it is not, since the jobs of, for example, academy trust chief executive and director of children's services are different.

It is true that academy trusts run schools in a more direct way than is the case for local authorities. Trust chief executives, then, could be seen as more directly responsible and accountable for what goes on in schools, while local authority officials, including directors of children's services, are more at arms-length, with maintained headteachers and their governing bodies the ones responsible for running these institutions, under the local management of school set-up which has been in operation in the non-academy sector since the late 1980s.

That said, local authorities do fund and monitor the performance of maintained schools, with the DCS role in significant ways going beyond that of the trust chief executive, to include responsibility for children's social care, special educational needs and looked-after children across an area, and co-ordinating school admissions.

More broadly, the system whereby local authorities paid a tier of administrators to oversee schools both operated before multi-academy trusts existed, and still operates now alongside it. If such a structure operates more efficiently, in terms of senior spend, than is the case within academy trusts, then that is a valid comparison to make, because the two structures represent alternative possibilities.

If multi-academy trusts are not operating as efficiently, in terms of senior spend, as local authorities do, it remains valid to ask the questions why, and whether this is appropriate.