

Free Schools set the standard for school accountability to the local community

By Democratic Audit

*Free Schools, given their freedom from local authorities, have been criticised for lacking accountability, including by Chris Waterman [recently on Democratic Audit](#). Here **Natalie Evans**, Director of the New Schools Network, argues that, on the contrary, Free Schools are in fact more transparent and accountable than the majority of schools. Subject not only to the same inspections and monitoring as any school, they are also uniquely accountable to their local communities.*

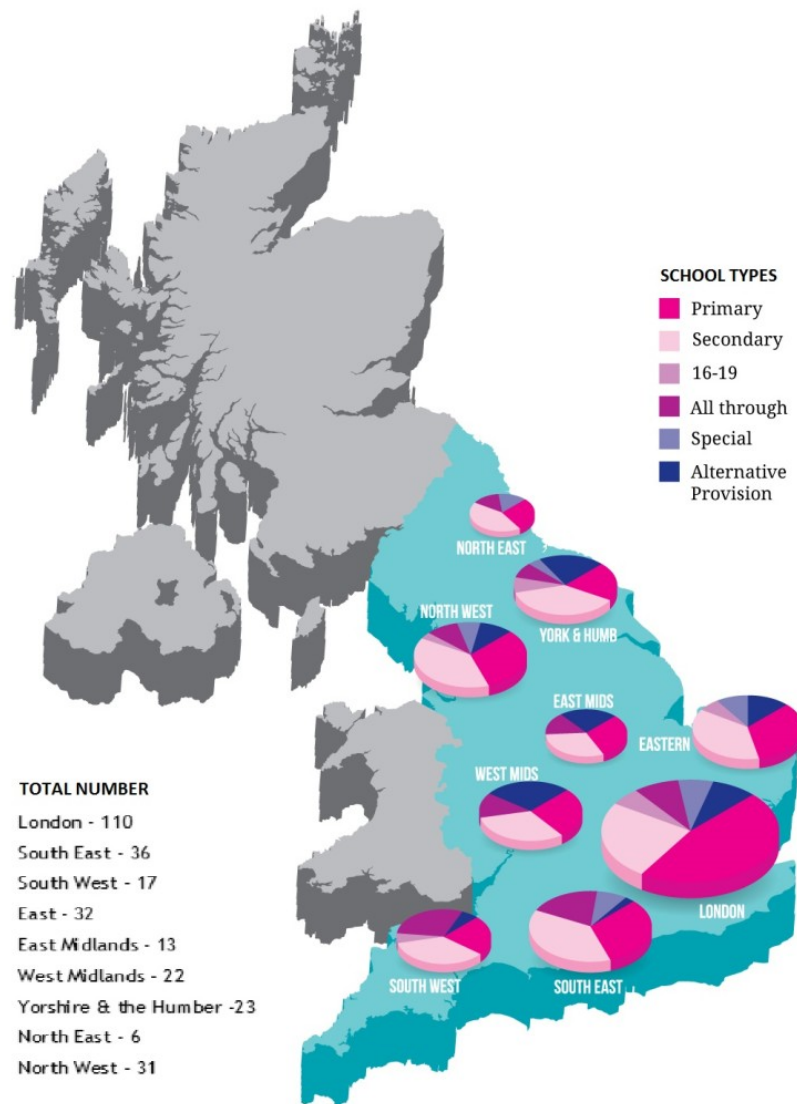
In the three years since their



Are free schools accountable to local communities? Credit: Cabinet Office (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

establishment, Free Schools have had a significant impact on England's educational landscape. 174 schools will be open from September 2013, with another 110 due to open in 2014. Free Schools are now open in every region of the country (see Figure One below), and by 2015 are set to be providing around 250,000 new school places. This rate of expansion is unprecedented. More Free Schools will have been established in a three year time period than either Charter Schools in New York or Free Schools in Sweden.

Figure One: Number and type of Free Schools in English regions



This rate of growth would not have been possible without Free Schools proving popular extremely with parents – in their admissions for September 2012 Free Schools received an average of three applications for every place. It is this parental demand that is at the heart of Free Schools and their impact. More importantly, it is this which makes them among the most transparent and accountable schools within the state sector.

In order to set up, a Free School a group has to show significant and tangible parental support for their particular school. They have to widely consult the local community where they wish to establish and be open and transparent about their vision for the school; their educational plans; the outcomes they wish to achieve for their pupils and how they are going to meet the needs of all children.

This local engagement starts from the beginning of the application process. A key part of this process is identifying and proving local need. Mainstream Free Schools have to show demand for the new school from local parents that have children of an appropriate age to attend the Free School when it opens. These parents have to show their commitment by stating that the Free School would be first choice for their child. The Free School application must include a petition ideally showing that they would be several times oversubscribed. For parents, this is a significant pledge: to agree to send their child (in principle), as their first choice, to a school which does not yet exist. Parents therefore have high expectations from day one and, in addition to all the statutory accountability structures, hold Free Schools further to account.

Once they are approved to open, groups proposing a Free School have to undertake a statutory consultation and parents have to formally commit to sending their children to the new school. The group has to show that is capable of delivering a high quality, viable school. If it is not, the project may be cancelled, or the opening delayed. Groups have to engage broadly with their local community and do so in a variety of ways. Many groups amend their plans as a result of the feedback they receive – further evidence of their accountability to the community they serve.

Once open, the schools have to live up to the expectations and commitments they have made to their local community. Especially in their first years, Free Schools do not have exam results and so do not appear in the usual league tables to ‘prove’ their success. It is therefore critical that they continually engage with local parents to demonstrate their value.

In addition to this local accountability, Free Schools are subject to the same regulatory framework as other Academies. Ofsted inspections are conducted within two years and the funding agreement that is put in place between the Department for Education and individual Free School holds them tightly to account on all financial matters. It also sets out the requirements for them to deliver education that meets high standards and is aligned to national values.

But given the need to engage with parents directly, Free Schools in effect face a further, powerful – and more direct – layer of local accountability. Free Schools offer a powerful lessons on the way that schools can be given more freedom, resulting in rising standards whilst ensuring appropriate level of accountability. This is democracy in its purest form and it is my expectation that, born out of community demand, Free Schools will retain the strong relationship with the communities they serve over the long-term.

Note: This post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the London School of Economics.

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