SHARD
Business Services

ACADEMY TRUST HANDBOOK

A Practical Guide for Academy Trusts

The Academy Trust Handbook sets the financial governance and accountability framework for academy trusts. It explains mandatory requirements, delegated authorities and expectations for oversight, control, reporting and assurance.

Compliance is not a year-end exercise. Trusts should review requirements regularly, evidence decisions and act early where controls need strengthening.

SIX HANDBOOK FOCUS AREAS

1 GOVERNANCE OVERSIGHT

The board understands its duties, delegates clearly and receives assurance that key requirements are being met.

Key Message: Know who owns what.

2 FINANCIAL CONTROL

Budgets, approvals and internal controls protect public funds and support value for money.

Key Message: Control before spend.

3 RISK & ASSURANCE

Audit, risk management and internal scrutiny provide independent challenge and follow-up.

Key Message: Evidence assurance.

4 DELEGATED AUTHORITY

Transactions follow approval limits, consent rules and documented decision-making.

Key Message: Check before committing.

5 REPORTING & TRANSPARENCY

Returns, accounts, records and published information are accurate, timely and complete.

Key Message: Report clearly.

6 CONTINUOUS REVIEW

Policies, musts and evidence are reviewed throughout the year, not only at audit time.

Key Message: Review regularly.

FIVE KEY ACTIONS

REVIEW
Check latest handbook.

MAP
Assign musts to owners.

EVIDENCE
Keep records of decisions.

REPORT
Update trustees on gaps.

IMPROVE
Follow up audit actions.

TRUSTEE QUESTIONS

01 Have we reviewed the latest handbook?

02 Are all musts owned and evidenced?

03 Do reports highlight compliance risks?

04 Are delegated authorities understood?

05 Are actions tracked to completion?

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE

Use this page to turn handbook requirements into practical governance, assurance and compliance activity.

1 PRACTICAL GUIDANCE

- Keep a live schedule of musts.
- Link requirements to owners.
- Monitor progress at meetings.

Keep it practical and evidenced.

2 COMMON MISTAKES

- Treating it as an annual task.
- Weak evidence for decisions.
- Out-of-date records or returns.

Avoid these to reduce risk.

3 GOOD PRACTICE

- Termly compliance review.
- Clear owner for every must.
- Actions tracked to completion.

Embed what good looks like.

THE 5 KEY ACTIONS

1 REVIEW
Read the latest handbook and musts.

2 PLAN
Assign owners, deadlines and evidence.

3 MONITOR
Track compliance and emerging risks.

4 REPORT
Report gaps and actions to trustees.

5 IMPROVE
Update controls after assurance work.

SELF-ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

	Yes	No	N/A
We have reviewed the latest handbook.	☐	☐	☐
Every must has an owner.	☐	☐	☐
Delegated authorities are understood.	☐	☐	☐
Evidence is retained and accessible.	☐	☐	☐
Trustees receive compliance updates.	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐

USEFUL CONTACTS & RESOURCES

DfE Academy Trust Handbook
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/academy-trust-handbook

Schedule of Musts
Available from handbook page

Academies Accounts Direction
DfE annual accounts guidance

Academy Trust Governance Guide
www.gov.uk guidance

SBS Resources
Templates and support available on request