SCHOOL ENERGY BUYING / RESEARCH REPORT

How academy trusts buy energy: what public records reveal in 2026

An investigation into the decisions behind trust energy contracts, the limits of published spending comparisons and the evidence boards need at their next renewal.

School Connection | Michael Lindsay | 23 November 2026

A trust can receive a competitive energy quotation and still have important work unfinished. Its finance team needs to understand the whole agreement, compare the available routes and establish who can approve the decision. It also needs to explain why the commitment suits the schools it serves.

The Academy Trust Handbook 2026 introduces a specific requirement at energy renewal: use Energy for Schools or a DfE approved energy deal, unless an alternative provides equivalent value for money. A trust choosing an alternative therefore needs a reasoned comparison it can retain and explain.

School Connection has examined public procurement notices, trusts' own papers and published spending returns to understand the decisions behind that responsibility. The records reveal substantial intermediary involvement, a concentrated supply calendar and wide differences in expenditure. They also show how much a public notice or annual spending figure leaves unanswered.

The practical lesson runs through each finding. Specialist advice can make the work more manageable, but the trust needs to retain control of its timetable, its comparison and the evidence supporting its decision.

Four findings that matter to trust boards

Autumn dominates the planned supply calendar. Of 48 distinct published tender procedures in our defined 2026 sample, 43 specified an earliest supply start in September or October. That is 90% after rounding. These are advertised plans, not confirmation that every supply began on the stated date.

The final interval is often short. The median interval between the stated tender deadline and earliest planned supply start was 36 days. In 39 of the 48 procedures it was no more than 90 days. Neither measure establishes when preparation began or when energy was priced.

Specialist involvement is common, but responsibility remains with the trust. Forty of the 48 notices listed a contact email domain associated with an energy intermediary. That is evidence of involvement in the advertised process, not proof of who controlled every decision or of national market share.

The financial pressure has eased without returning to its earlier level. In the full-year academy returns analysed, aggregate energy expenditure per pupil was about £146 in 2024/25, compared with £179 in 2023/24 and £87 in 2020/21. These are changing annual cohorts and nominal spending figures, not a tariff comparison or a measure of procurement skill.

The requirement that now shapes renewal

Paragraph 2.29 of the Academy Trust Handbook 2026, effective from 1 October, applies when energy contracts are renewed. It permits an alternative to Energy for Schools or a DfE approved deal where equivalent value for money has been sourced.

This sits within the handbook's broader purchasing responsibilities: appropriate procurement, decisions made within the trust's delegated authority and recorded consideration of DfE opportunities. An intermediary appointment does not replace the trust's responsibilities for the agreement it enters.

DfE's accompanying guidance explains the evidence expected for an alternative. Trusts need to compare their proposed arrangement with an approved option, evaluate price, terms, service and risk, retain their recommendation and governance decision, and support their compliance declaration. The applicable procurement rules still need to be followed.

DfE does not expect trusts to terminate existing contracts. It recommends planning and benchmarking at least 12 months before expiry. It also explains that Energy for Schools has variable pricing, so a historical benchmark cannot be treated as a guaranteed future quotation.

For a board, this changes the quality of the conversation. A recommendation needs to explain what is being compared, the assumptions behind the cost, the risks accepted and the service being purchased. A persuasive unit rate is one part of that explanation.

What the records cover

This report uses three evidence groups. They cover different organisations and periods, so their figures need to be read separately.

Evidence group	Published analysis	What it can establish
Energy supply tender procedures	48 distinct Find a Tender UK4 procedures, linked to 33 academy-trust buyers; notices published from 29 May to 16 November 2026	Advertised requirements, contacts, deadlines and planned start dates
Academy spending returns	Full-year academy returns from 2020/21 to 2024/25; 10,392 qualifying academy records in the latest year	Recorded energy expenditure and spending per pupil within each annual cohort
Published governance papers	Three dated examples checked against the original public minutes	The discussion, assumptions and authority recorded at those meetings

The procurement sample is drawn from records located and matched in School Connection's research collection. It is not a census of all trust purchasing. Repeated versions of a UK4 tender notice are counted once per procurement identifier. Separate electricity and gas procedures can count separately, so 48 procedures does not mean 48 trusts or 48 completed contracts.

The financial analysis uses school-level academy returns rather than assigning past spending to a trust's current membership. This avoids presenting today's portfolio as if it were necessarily the same group of schools in an earlier accounting year. The governance examples include two trust boards and, separately identified, one school governing body.

Purchases through wider arrangements may have limited visibility at individual trust level. The absence of a new notice does not establish that a trust has rolled over, that its current contract is unknown to its own team, or that it is paying out-of-contract rates.

The intermediary's role should be visible and defined

Forty of the 48 tender notices in the sample listed a contact email domain associated with an energy intermediary. Six used trust-domain contacts and two used an energy-supplier domain. Contact information is a useful indicator of published involvement. It does not establish exclusive responsibility, the scope of an appointment or the quality of advice.

For an individual trust, the more useful question is what its adviser has been appointed to do. Gathering offers is only one possible task. Preparing meter information, explaining contract terms, organising an appropriate competition and investigating billing problems each require a clear scope and someone responsible for completion.

An adviser who understands a trust's estate can help connect those tasks. The finance team still needs enough information to judge the recommendation and follow the work after supply begins.

The fee belongs in that discussion. Ofgem's broker fee requirements extend disclosure in the principal contract terms to all non-domestic customers for contracts signed from 1 October 2024. Suppliers must also make the information available on request. Disclosure to the customer and publication in a procurement notice are different matters.

A public notice cannot establish everything a trust was told privately. This report does not infer undisclosed remuneration or a regulatory breach from the absence of a fee in a notice.

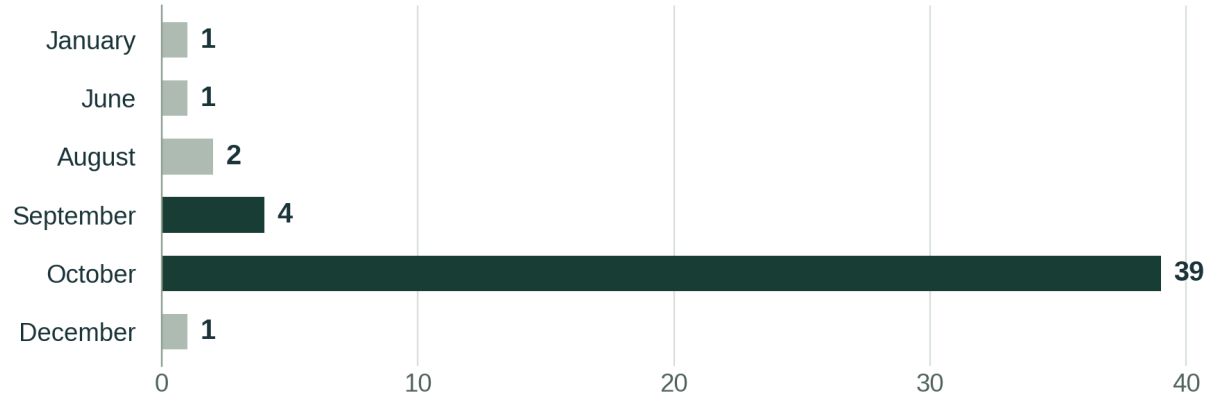
Trusts can make the relationship easier to examine by asking for the charging basis, the estimated total over the proposed term and the consumption assumptions used. Where remuneration varies between suppliers or products, the trust should understand that variation before accepting the recommendation. The agreed service should explain what happens after the contract is signed.

A short final interval puts more weight on preparation

The 48 procedures in the timing sample were advertised through UK4 tender notices. Forty-three had their earliest planned supply start in September or October, including starts scheduled beyond the evidence cut-off. October accounted for 39 procedures and September for four.

Autumn dominates planned supply starts

43 of 48 tender procedures planned a September or October start.



Six zero-count months are omitted. Earliest planned start across lots per procedure. Tender plans, not confirmed starts or signed contracts. Cached UK4 notices; 33 trust buyers.

The median interval from the stated tender deadline to the earliest planned supply start was 36 days. Thirty-nine procedures, or 81%, had an interval of no more than 90 days.

Where a notice described more than one lot, the earliest planned start was used once for the procedure. The analysis excludes notices establishing or modifying a dynamic market: their dates describe a different event.

Those dates leave the earlier work largely invisible. A trust may already have completed its route assessment, consumption review and governance preparations before the tender closes. The advertised start is not evidence of the actual commencement of supply, and the deadline is not necessarily the date on which the energy price was fixed.

The finding therefore supports a practical question: what will remain unresolved when offers arrive?

Where the strategy, authority and comparison method have already been agreed, a short quotation window can be managed within an established process. Where those matters remain open, the same window can compress several different decisions into one urgent request for approval.

Trusts should identify the deadlines for each available route, the notice obligations in their current agreements and the time needed to assemble usable information. Planning early preserves choices. It does not require the trust to commit to a particular purchasing date before it understands its options.

Competition needs to be assessed at contract level

Some published records concern dynamic markets. These arrangements need to be distinguished from individual supply contracts and from the method used to price energy. The timing analysis above uses supply tender procedures, including competitions under a dynamic market, rather than market establishment or modification notices.

A dynamic market is a list of qualifying suppliers eligible to compete for future contracts. It remains open to new members. Cabinet Office guidance explains that contracts awarded under an appropriate dynamic market use the competitive flexible procedure. Joining the market is not itself an award of a supply contract.

Consequently, a market's membership count is not its bid count. An initial membership notice may also be an incomplete picture of later participation. The trust needs to understand the competition conducted for the particular requirement it is buying.

The procurement route and the energy product answer different questions. A framework or dynamic market concerns how a purchase is organised. Fixed or flexible purchasing concerns how the energy price is established. A trust therefore needs to assess both the procurement route and the way its energy will be priced.

For governors and trustees, a useful evaluation explains which suppliers could participate, which submitted usable offers and how the offers were assessed. Where suppliers declined, the reasons may help the trust understand the market response.

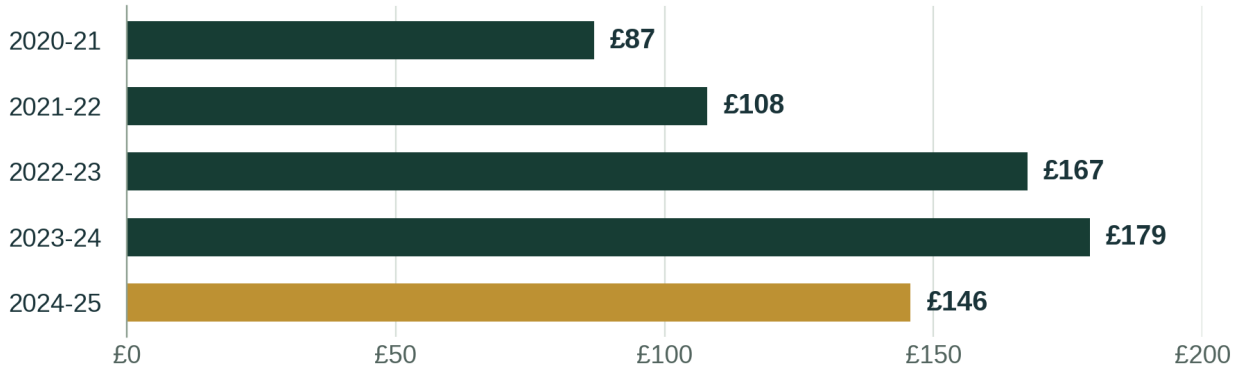
Spending benchmarks should start an investigation

Published expenditure is valuable because it gives finance teams a place to begin. It becomes misleading when treated as a league table of buying skill.

We analysed the academy returns available through DfE's Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool data sources. For each year, the comparison retains academy records covering 12 reported months, with positive energy expenditure and pupil counts. The chart divides the cohort's total energy expenditure by its total reported pupils.

Spending eased, but remained above 2020/21

Reported academy energy spending per pupil. Nominal pounds; rounded.



Different eligible academy records each year. Not a matched-school panel or a price index. Total energy spending divided by total pupils. DfE source returns; School Connection analysis.

In 2024/25, the 10,392 qualifying academy records contained approximately £717.1 million of energy expenditure. That is the sum within this defined cohort, not a claim about all schools or historical trust-level expenditure.

The aggregate was £145.68 per pupil: about 19% below the previous annual cohort and 68% above the 2020/21 cohort. Figures are not adjusted for inflation, and the schools included change between years.

The distribution within the latest year also matters. The median academy recorded £128.12 per pupil; the middle half lay between £96.39 and £175.73. These are different measures: the median is the midpoint of individual academy ratios, while the aggregate divides total expenditure by total pupils.

Those differences do not establish why one school spent more than another. Heating demand, occupancy, specialist provision, kitchens, pools, buildings and opening hours can all affect consumption. Changes in pupil numbers can also alter expenditure per pupil.

A finance team investigating a high figure can work progressively towards a useful explanation. Check the reporting period and included schools, examine consumption, separate electricity and gas, and identify the effect of standing, capacity and other charges. Then inspect the relevant contract and invoices.

Similarly, a fall in expenditure does not establish that procurement improved. It may reflect lower usage, a different estate or movements in prices. An increase does not establish poor buying. The benchmark identifies where a closer examination may be worthwhile; the underlying records explain the result.

What the board papers add

Annual returns show recorded expenditure; board minutes add how particular decisions were considered. They record the discussion and authority at a meeting, without necessarily revealing all the earlier preparation or what happened afterwards.

A decision window measured in hours

In trust board minutes of 15 July 2025, section 7.3, pages 4 and 5, the finance and operations officer explained that energy offers could carry a 24-hour acceptance deadline. Trustees endorsed a proposed urgent approval process, with officers still required to demonstrate best value.

The case shows why approval arrangements need to be ready before an offer arrives. It does not establish that procurement had started late or that the resulting agreement was poor.

Different advice can imply different risks

Trust board minutes of 20 May 2024, section 8, page 6 record competing recommendations ahead of a September renewal: a three-year fixed arrangement, and an alternative combining fixed electricity with flexible gas. Trustees delegated the decision to the executive team.

The discussion concerned purchasing strategy as well as price. The minute does not disclose the final award, its complete evaluated cost or achieved savings.

A forecast saving needs a clear status

A school governing body's minutes of 8 July 2025, item 5.3, page 7 record a projected £150,000 utilities saving in the 2025/26 budget. The current supplier's forecast and a comparative quote indicated similar figures. Governors questioned the evidence and were told both were forecasts rather than fixed quotations.

This was a school-level budget discussion, not a trust-wide saving. Governors made the uncertainty explicit; the minutes do not establish that the saving was later achieved.

These cases show why the decision record matters. A later finance director or trustee should be able to distinguish the original assumption, the approved commitment and the result observed after supply began. The dated source links let readers examine the original public records.

An existing contract still needs active management

For trusts whose renewal is several years away, the work now is to understand and manage the commitment already made.

The agreement should be accessible alongside its meter schedule, fee information, price components and service responsibilities. Check that invoices reflect the agreed supplies and charges, that queries have an owner and that promised reporting is being delivered.

Estate plans belong in that review. Solar generation, a new building, changed opening hours or heating improvements can alter the quantity and timing of electricity or gas purchased. The trust needs to understand any relevant volume conditions and how to notify or accommodate material changes.

This is also where the value of continuing specialist support can be assessed. A useful service leaves a visible record: an explained charge, a resolved query, a corrected invoice or a better understanding of future demand. An identified opportunity should be distinguished from a change implemented and an outcome measured.

Ten questions for the next board discussion

These questions help turn the findings into a focused discussion. Record what is known, the evidence supporting it and who will resolve the remaining work.

1. **What are we committed to now?** Identify each supply, its expiry date, notice requirements and any separate adviser appointment.
2. **When must we act to preserve our options?** Work backwards from route deadlines and current obligations, allowing time to prepare the comparison.
3. **What energy will our schools need?** Use recent consumption and known estate changes to describe the requirement.
4. **Which route meets the handbook requirement?** Record the approved option used or the case for an alternative with equivalent value for money.

5. **What does the complete comparison show?** Explain assumptions, annual costs, contractual exposure and the services included.
6. **What are we paying for advice?** Record the fee basis, estimated total, payment arrangements and any variation between products or suppliers.
7. **What competition took place?** Distinguish eligible suppliers, suppliers approached and usable bids received.
8. **Who can approve and commit?** Ensure the trust's delegations and required scrutiny can operate within the relevant timetable.
9. **Who manages delivery?** Allocate responsibility for invoices, meter information, adviser performance and unresolved queries.
10. **What will someone reviewing this decision be able to see?** Retain the recommendation, supporting evidence, approval and the assumptions that need checking later.

Build a decision the trust can explain

The records examined do not identify a single best buying route for every trust. They show why the quality of the decision deserves attention alongside the price.

A well-prepared trust can explain its requirement, assess appropriate routes and make a clear appointment for any specialist support it needs. It can distinguish a spending benchmark from a price comparison, a supplier list from a completed competition, and an expected saving from an observed result.

School Connection's School Energy Buying programme connects these findings with route guidance, worked buying files and an editable decision paper. Trusts approaching renewal can use those resources to organise the evidence and identify the questions still requiring an answer. Those needing help with a particular requirement can request energy support.

The next useful step is to put the current agreements, renewal dates and known information gaps in front of the people responsible. From there, the trust can agree the work needed to reach a decision that remains understandable after the quotation has expired and the first bill has arrived.

Evidence and interpretation

The evidence cut-off is 23 November 2026. The quantitative findings were recalculated for this publication using the defined groups below. Official guidance and board papers are linked beside the discussion they support.

Procurement. The sample contains 48 distinct physical energy supply procedures linked to 33 academy-trust buyer records in School Connection's collection. It retains the latest available UK4 tender notice for each Open Contracting ID, with published dates from 29 May to 16 November 2026.

UK13, UK14 and UK15 dynamic market notices, award notices and termination notices are excluded. Separate gas and electricity procedures remain separate; amendments to the same procedure do not count again.

Dates and timing. The analysis uses the local calendar dates stated in the original notice data, avoiding a midnight time-zone conversion that could move a start into the previous month. Where a procedure has different lot start dates, it uses the earliest once.

The interval is the number of calendar days from the stated tender deadline to that planned start. These measures do not establish actual supply commencement, purchasing dates, preparation time or late planning.

Contact classification. The 48 retained notices were grouped by the organisation associated with the listed contact email domain: intermediary, trust or energy supplier. This identifies the published contact route, not the full appointment, the ultimate decision-maker or exclusive responsibility. No national market-share estimate is made.

Spending. The financial analysis uses DfE academy-return records by academy and financial year. It retains 12 reported months, positive energy expenditure and positive reported pupil counts, excluding wholly missing returns. Partial-year records, maintained-school returns and central-services records are excluded.

Reported periods within the same academy-year are aggregated before selection: expenditure is summed and the maximum reported pupil count is retained, rather than adding pupil counts across periods. Historical spending is not regrouped under current trust membership.

Comparisons. Each year is a separate qualifying cohort, not a matched panel of the same schools. Aggregate spending per pupil is total energy expenditure divided by total reported pupils. The median and quartiles describe individual academy ratios.

Figures are nominal and do not adjust for inflation, weather, estate condition, phase, provision or purchasing dates. They measure expenditure, not tariff quality or efficiency.

Board papers. The three examples were checked against dated public minutes and are paraphrased. Two relate to trust boards and one to a school governing body. No interview, realised saving or subsequent implementation is inferred from those records.

Download the chart data and definitions. The data file contains aggregate figures used in this report, with denominators and calculation notes. The procurement source is Find a Tender, and the financial source is DfE's published financial benchmarking data.

This is a dated research edition. The applicable guidance, available routes and individual contract terms should be checked when a trust makes its decision. School Connection's editorial conclusions are independent of any commercial partnership; commercial support does not purchase a favourable finding.