GREAT SCHOOLS TRUST

Recruitment Guide

Chief Financial Officer

Contract: Permanent, full-time (37-Hours), all-year round.

Location: Hybrid, with a minimum of three days per week at King's Leadership Academy Warrington and regular self-managed travel to academies across the Trust.

Salary: £103,030 - £110,892 FTE

Start: Negotiable

@GSTSchools

Welcome to the Great Schools Trust

“Excellence is not a destination –
it is who we are, every day.”

Welcome to Great Schools Trust, where belief in every child’s potential meets the daily habits that make success inevitable. In our schools, excellence is not left to chance. It is embedded through clear routines, ambitious teaching, compassionate leadership and a culture where character matters.

Our Mission:
To develop in every student the academic skills, intellectual habits, qualities of character, and leadership traits necessary to become a successful, healthy citizen in the global community.

Our Vision:
To build a family of outstanding academies where all students, irrespective of their starting points, flourish, are happy and achieve their full potential.

Our Values — ASPIRE
- Aspiration & Achievement
- Self-awareness
- Professionalism
- Integrity
- Respect
- Endeavour

Our Pillars of Excellence:

People & Leadership –
Growing exceptional leaders who inspire, empower and deliver.

Character & Leadership –
Building resilience, integrity and aspiration through values-led education.

Educational Transformation –
Relentlessly improving teaching and learning for every child.

AI & Future Learning –
Harnessing innovation and technology to personalise and future-proof learning.

System Leadership –
Driving improvement across schools with trust-wide accountability and collaboration.

Educational Partnerships –
Working with families, communities and global partners to extend opportunity.

National Recognition:
- National Behaviour Hub Lead MAT
- Edurio Top 10 for Staff Satisfaction (2024)
- Most Improved MAT in the North West for Progress 8 (2023–24)
- Home to the IPCL: The Institute of People, Character & Leadership

WELCOME FROM THE CEO

Shane Ierston

Chief Executive Officer

Thank you for your interest in joining Great Schools Trust as our Chief Financial Officer.

This is a significant executive appointment for the Trust. We are looking for someone who can help us build a finance function that is technically exceptional, strategically ambitious, trustworthy, and genuinely helpful to leaders in making the best decisions.

Financial decisions are educational decisions, it's that simple. They determine what we can sustain, where we can invest, which opportunities we can pursue and how confidently we can plan for the future. They ultimately influence the quality of education our pupils receive. We are therefore looking for someone who brings deep financial expertise, professional judgement and an absolute commitment to the stewardship of public money.

This is not a role for someone who simply reports what happened last month with impressive accuracy. It is for someone who can help us see what might happen next. You will turn financial information into intelligence, challenge assumptions before they become expensive, make complexity understandable and help leaders make better decisions about where our resources can have the greatest impact.

At Great Schools Trust, culture is strategy and finance is one of the ways strategy becomes real. We are growing a Trust where professional agency sits alongside high accountability, where people are trusted with context rather than controlled through paperwork and where leaders are expected to own the consequences of their decisions. Our CFO will be central to making that possible.

You will work closely with the executive team, trustees, academy leaders and central colleagues to strengthen financial planning, simplify systems and ensure our resources follow our priorities rather than the other way around. You will bring challenge and occasionally, you will need to say no. That is part of the job. But “computer says no” is not a strategy. We will expect you to explain the trade-off, find the alternative and help us solve challenges.

We are looking for someone who is credible around a Board table but equally comfortable sitting alongside the finance team working through what needs to improve. You will be self-secure enough to invite challenge, professionally candid enough to give it and curious enough to question systems that everyone else has quietly accepted. A nicely formatted spreadsheet explaining yesterday is helpful, but we need sophisticated thinking about tomorrow and what lies over the hill.

You will understand that strong financial leadership is not about choosing between control and innovation, or between prudence and ambition. It is about holding those tensions intelligently. Public money is a moral trust and good stewardship means protecting it rigorously while making sure it works as hard as possible for the children and communities we serve.

If you share our belief that excellent financial leadership should be values-led, evidence-informed and future-facing, we would love to receive your application and, importantly, your vision for finance at GST.

Thank you again for your interest. I wish you every success in the recruitment process.

Shane Ierston

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GREAT SCHOOLS TRUST

ABOUT THE ROLE

Contract: Permanent, full-time (37-Hours), All-Year round
Location: Hybrid
Salary: £103,030 – £110,892 FTE
Reports to: Chief Executive Officer; accountable to the Trust Board and its Finance and Audit & Risk Committees
Direct Reports: Management Accountant and central finance team
Start Date: Negotiable

The Chief Financial Officer provides strategic financial leadership and leads the Trust's finance function. The postholder safeguards financial sustainability, probity and value for money so that resources are directed to improving educational outcomes for every pupil across the Trust.

The CFO is responsible for the Trust's detailed financial procedures under the Board's scheme of delegation and supports the CEO in discharging their personal responsibilities as Accounting Officer. The CFO is not the Accounting Officer but is expected to provide clear, independent and courageous professional advice to protect regularity, propriety, feasibility, value for money and the long-term interests of the Trust.

The CFO will provide expert advice to the CEO and trustees, attend Finance Committee and Audit and Risk Committee meetings, and have direct access to the Chair of Trustees and the Chair of Audit and Risk where necessary.
As a member of the executive leadership team, the CFO will be expected to contribute beyond finance, helping shape the Trust's strategy, culture, growth and organisational resilience.

The Trust is entering a period of significant, disciplined growth: income is planned to rise from around £41m toward around £56m as new academies join and existing academies expand. The Board has set a clear expectation that reserves are rebuilt to a minimum of 8% of income, with every academy delivering an in-year surplus of 3-5%. The CFO will lead the financial strategy, assurance and systems that make that growth safe and that ambition real.

The CFO leads the Trust-wide finance function and is based at King's Warrington at least three days a week. The role includes team leadership, academy travel and occasional evening governance meetings.

Our Cultural Blueprint

The Great Schools Trust uses a shared cultural blueprint to describe how we lead, make decisions and build schools where pupils and adults flourish. External candidates do not need to arrive fluent in our language, but they do need to understand what sits underneath it: belief, values, high expectations, strong routines, inclusion, safeguarding, staff agency and accountability.

Our core belief is simple: every young person can and must succeed, regardless of starting point, postcode, ethnicity or family wealth. We call this belief Credimus: we believe. Our values are expressed through our ASPIRE: aspiration and achievement, self-awareness, professionalism, integrity, respect and endeavour. These are not branding devices. They shape how our academies teach character, build relationships and set standards.

For the CFO, the cultural blueprint means financial leadership must:

- Protect the conditions in which pupils can learn safely, confidently and ambitiously
- Make resource decisions that support curriculum quality, inclusion, safeguarding, staff development and strong academy operations
- Help leaders understand the trade-offs behind difficult decisions, without hiding behind technical language
- Build systems that are transparent, disciplined and trusted
- Lead the finance team through high support, high challenge, coaching and visible presence
- Treat public money as a moral trust, not just a compliance duty

In short, this post is not only about keeping the Trust financially secure. It is about helping translate our mission into choices, habits, systems and resources that make excellent education possible.

Strategic priorities for the first 12–18 months

This is a significant moment to lead finance at Great Schools Trust. In the first 12-18 months the CFO will be expected to:

1) **Rebuild and protect reserves** - move the Trust decisively toward its minimum reserve level of 8% of income, embed an in-year surplus discipline of 3-5% at every academy, and own the recovery plans where cumulative deficits exist.

2) **Strengthen budget assurance** - ensure three-year budgets are built on evidenced pupil-number, staffing and growth assumptions, with academy-level bridges, downside scenarios and a clear written narrative that trustees can rely on.

3) **Provide the financial leadership for growth** - lead the due diligence, transfer and integration of academies joining the Trust, and ensure that planned expansion is evidenced, phased and affordable.

4) **Embed integrated curriculum and financial planning** - use staffing ratios, affordability ceilings and benchmarking so that staffing, the Trust's largest cost and greatest financial risk, is planned collaboratively with principals rather than treated as a numerical exercise.

5) **Deliver one financial platform** - a fully aligned budgeting and accounting system with clean data, consistent coding and a monthly reporting rhythm that gives leaders and the Board financial truth early enough to act.

6) **Lead visible finance partnering** - face-to-face support for principals and operations managers across the Trust's hubs, building financial capability across academies and surfacing risk early.

Job Description

1) Strategic Leadership & Educational Impact

- Serve as an active member of the executive leadership team, shaping Trust strategy, growth and organisational development beyond the finance function.
- Act as a visible cultural and strategic leader, ensuring financial decisions strengthen the Trust's mission, values, high expectations and commitment to pupil flourishing.
- Translate the Trust's educational priorities into a sustainable medium- and long-term financial strategy, using scenario planning and clear measures of impact.
- Lead integrated curriculum and financial planning with executive and academy leaders, linking staffing, pupil numbers, curriculum delivery, SEND and disadvantage funding, estates and technology investment to pupil outcomes.
- Provide authoritative advice to the CEO, Board and committees on affordability, feasibility, regularity, propriety and value for money, including the consequences of proposed decisions and viable alternatives.
- Lead financial due diligence, modelling and integration planning for new schools, transfers, free schools, major partnerships and other strategic opportunities.
- Help leaders understand financial trade-offs clearly so decisions are honest, evidence-informed and connected to pupils, staff and long-term sustainability.

2) Financial Planning, Performance & Sustainability

- Lead the annual budget cycle and rolling multi-year financial plan for the Trust as a single legal entity, with transparent academy-level budgets and accountability in line with the scheme of delegation.
- Ensure budgets and forecasts use realistic, evidence-based assumptions, including pupil numbers, funding, pay, pensions, inflation, staffing, capital needs and sensitivity analysis.
- Rebuild and protect reserves in line with Board policy, moving the Trust to a minimum reserve level of 8% of income and embedding an in-year surplus expectation of 3-5% at every academy.
- Ensure no academy plans a deficit budget without explicit CFO approval, that recovery plans are embedded and delivered where cumulative deficits exist, and that every academy contributes positively to Trust reserves over the medium term.

2) Financial Planning, Performance & Sustainability Cont.

- Ensure multi-year plans include credible downside scenarios (including pupil-number shortfalls and delayed growth) and that material academy-level movements are explained through clear bridges that trustees can rely on.
- Align investment decisions with core educational and cultural priorities, including safeguarding, inclusion, curriculum quality, high-quality teaching, staff development, safe estates, digital infrastructure and support for disadvantaged pupils.
- Prepare the annual budget and DfE budget forecast return for Board approval, and ensure all statutory and regulatory financial returns are complete, accurate and submitted on time.
- Produce monthly management accounts comprising income and expenditure against budget, forecast outturn, cash-flow forecast and balance sheet; provide clear variance analysis and corrective action to the CEO, Chair and Board.
- Maintain early-warning indicators for financial stress and immediately advise the CEO and Board where financial sustainability or going-concern status may be at risk.
- Lead benchmarking, productivity and benefits-realisation work so that efficiencies are sustainable and do not compromise safeguarding, inclusion, educational quality or statutory obligations.
- Build financial reporting that helps academy and executive leaders act, not merely receive data.

3) Governance, Compliance & Stewardship

- Ensure compliance with the current Academy Trust Handbook, funding agreements, Academies Accounts Direction, Charities SORP, company and charity law, Managing Public Money principles and other applicable requirements.
- Maintain and annually review the financial regulations, scheme of financial delegation and supporting policies, ensuring consistent application across all academies and central services.
- Ensure the Trust understands and complies with DfE delegated authority limits, including requirements for prior approval of novel, contentious or repercussive transactions, special payments, write-offs, guarantees, indemnities, borrowing, leases, asset disposals and related-party transactions.

Job
Description Cont.

3) Governance, Compliance & Stewardship Cont.

- Maintain effective arrangements for registers of interests, gifts and hospitality, conflicts of interest and related-party reporting, with complete records and transparent disclosures.
- Ensure the Trust's approach to distributing and pooling funds across its academies is transparent, Board-approved and published where required.
- Support trustees and academy leaders with accessible financial information and training so that they can exercise appropriate challenge and discharge their responsibilities.
- Monitor regulatory change and implement prompt, documented action, maintaining an annual compliance and reporting calendar.
- Strengthen Board reporting so trustees can see how financial choices support mission, risk management, pupil outcomes and public benefit.

4) Financial Control, Systems & Data

- Maintain a proportionate, Trust-wide control framework covering delegated authorities, segregation of duties, income, purchasing, payments, payroll interfaces, debtors, creditors, bank reconciliations, journals, assets and capital projects.
- Lead the Trust's integrated budgeting, accounting and reporting architecture as a single aligned platform, ensuring clean data transfer between planning and finance systems, consistent nominal and cost-centre coding, data quality, user access, approval workflows, audit trails, master-data controls, business continuity and disaster recovery.
- Work with digital and operational leaders to manage cyber-enabled financial crime, payment diversion and fraud risks; ensure proportionate controls, incident response and compliance with the prohibition on paying cyber ransoms.
- Maintain robust arrangements for fraud prevention, detection, investigation, loss reporting and escalation, and promote a culture in which concerns and whistleblowing are handled properly and fairly.
- Drive efficient, standardised and user-focused finance processes across academies, using automation and management information appropriately while maintaining human oversight and accountability.
- Embed a culture where issues are surfaced early, owned clearly and resolved quickly, with learning used to improve systems.

5. Risk, Assurance & Audit

- Contribute to the Trust's enterprise risk management, ensuring financial and related strategic risks are identified, assessed, owned, mitigated and reported, including contingency and business-continuity planning.
- Support the Audit and Risk Committee and independent internal scrutineer in developing a risk-based programme of financial and non-financial scrutiny, while preserving the scrutineer's independence and objectivity.
- Provide information requested by internal scrutineers and ensure management responses and agreed actions are timely, evidenced and embedded across the Trust.
- Lead management's relationship with the external auditor and reporting accountant; coordinate preparation of the annual report and accounts and address audit findings promptly.
- Support the Accounting Officer's annual statement on regularity, propriety and compliance and the Board's governance and value-for-money disclosures.
- Ensure assurance is seen as a leadership tool for improvement, not simply a compliance exercise.

6) Treasury, Reserves, Tax & Pensions

- Maintain robust cash-flow, banking and treasury management, ensuring the Trust does not become overdrawn and that security and liquidity take precedence over income generation.
- Advise the Board on reserves and investment policies, including planned use of reserves, access by individual academies, treatment of school surpluses, counterparty exposure, interest-rate opportunities and regular review of investments.
- Ensure accurate accounting and compliance for VAT, PAYE, National Insurance, business rates, corporation tax where applicable, Gift Aid, payroll and off-payroll arrangements.
- Oversee financial governance of pension obligations and interfaces, including Teachers' Pension Scheme and Local Government Pension Scheme requirements, actuarial information and any proposal for alternative pension arrangements.
- Ensure the Trust has appropriate cover through the Risk Protection Arrangement and/or commercial insurance, and that uncovered or emerging risks are identified and managed.

Job Description Cont.

7) Procurement, Contracts & Commercial Management

- Lead a Trust-wide commercial and procurement strategy that delivers demonstrable value for money, social value where relevant, lawful competition, appropriate due diligence and effective contract management.
- Ensure compliance with the Procurement Act 2023 and associated regulations, including applicable thresholds, notices and use of Find a Tender, and maintain complete and transparent decision records.
- Ensure current DfE purchasing requirements and opportunities are considered and documented, including applicable arrangements for supply staffing, energy and management information systems.
- Maintain a complete contracts register, forward procurement pipeline, performance and expiry controls, and clear ownership of supplier risk, data protection, safeguarding and business continuity requirements.
- Oversee income generation and trading activity, ensuring activities further the Trust's charitable objects and that tax, subsidy-control, legal and financial risks are properly considered.
- Challenge spend that does not advance pupil outcomes, statutory duties, operational resilience or the Trust's mission.

8) Estates, Capital & Organisational Growth

- Lead the financial planning, appraisal, funding and control of capital programmes, ensuring costs, contingencies, whole-life value, benefits and risks are transparent.
- Work with estates leaders to align the financial plan, reserves and capital strategy with condition information, statutory safety priorities, sustainability commitments and the Trust's educational strategy.
- Maintain sound accounting and control of fixed assets, capital grants, leases, disposals and commitments, including an accurate fixed-asset register.
- Provide financial leadership for academy conversions, transfers and post-merger integration, including harmonisation of systems, controls, staffing structures, contracts and opening balances.
- Ensure financial advice supports safe, dignified and purposeful learning environments.

9) People Leadership & Partnerships

- Build, lead and develop a high-performing, appropriately qualified finance team with clear accountabilities, succession planning and continuing professional development.
- Provide visible leadership to the Management Accountant and finance team based at King's Warrington, with a minimum of three days each week on site to support the team, strengthen service standards and build professional confidence.
- Set and monitor service standards for the central finance function and lead a visible, face-to-face finance partnering model with principals and operations managers across the Trust's hubs, supporting budget setting, in-year monitoring, staffing affordability, financial controls and early recovery action.
- Develop financial capability across the Trust through clear guidance, training, coaching and proportionate challenge.
- Maintain effective professional relationships with DfE, auditors, banks, pension authorities, local authorities, professional advisers, suppliers and sector networks.
- Model the Seven Principles of Public Life, professional ethics, candour, inclusion and respectful leadership.
- Lead through high trust and high accountability: clear expectations, coaching, building collective responsibility and practical support.

10) General Responsibilities

- Safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people, follow Trust safeguarding policies and complete all required safer-recruitment checks and training.
- Comply with Trust policies on equality, diversity and inclusion; health and safety; data protection and information governance; confidentiality and professional conduct.
- Attend Board and committee meetings, including occasional evening meetings, and travel between Trust sites as required.
- Act as an ambassador for the Trust's values-led culture, maintaining professional standards in all interactions with staff, pupils, families, trustees, governors, suppliers and external partners.
- Undertake other duties reasonably commensurate with the seniority and scope of the role. This description may be reviewed as the Trust and regulatory framework develop, following consultation with the postholder.

Person Specification

Category	Essential	Desirable
Qualifications & professional standing	• Fully qualified accountant (ACA, ACCA, CIMA, CIPFA or equivalent) with current membership of the relevant professional body, or a member of a relevant professional accountancy body and/or holder of the CIPFA Level 7 qualification developed with ISBL. • Evidence of relevant and current continuing professional development.	• Relevant postgraduate, leadership, school business or public-finance qualification. • Membership of ISBL or an active academy finance professional network.
Experience	• Substantial senior financial leadership in a complex, regulated, multi-site organisation of comparable scale. • Leading multi-year financial strategy, annual budgets, monthly management reporting, cash-flow and scenario planning for significant budgets. • Advising a Board and senior committees, presenting complex matters clearly and providing constructive professional challenge. • Designing and embedding robust financial controls, governance, risk management and audit action plans. • Leading external audit and statutory accounts, with a strong record of accurate and timely regulatory reporting. • Leading and developing finance teams through growth, service improvement and organisational change. • Delivering procurement, contract or value-for-money improvements and managing significant commercial or capital decisions. • Working as a strategic partner to leaders outside finance, helping them connect resources, risk and operational choices to organisational impact.	• Financial leadership within a multi-academy trust, school trust, charity or wider education/public-service environment. • Academy conversion, transfer, merger, free-school or other organisational due diligence and integration. • Finance-system implementation, automation or data/reporting transformation.
Knowledge & Skills	• Expert financial judgement, analytical ability and command of management and statutory reporting. • Strong understanding of governance, internal control, risk, audit, procurement and the stewardship of public money. • Ability to understand and apply the academy trust regulatory framework, including the Academy Trust Handbook, funding agreements, Accounts Direction and Charities SORP. • Advanced financial modelling and scenario-planning skills, including the ability to connect resource decisions to educational delivery and impact. • Clear and persuasive written, verbal and presentation skills, with the confidence to influence and challenge at Board, executive and academy level. • High digital literacy and strong understanding of finance systems, data governance and cyber-related financial controls. • Ability to translate technical financial information into clear choices, risks and consequences for non-specialist leaders.	• Knowledge of academy funding, SEND and high-needs funding, capital funding, Teachers' Pensions, LGPS, VAT and the Risk Protection Arrangement. • Working knowledge of integrated curriculum and financial planning (ICFP), including staffing ratios and affordability metrics such as pupil-teacher ratio, average class size and teacher contact ratio. • Working knowledge of the Procurement Act 2023 and public-sector commercial practice.
Values & personal qualities	• Unquestionable integrity, sound professional ethics and courage to raise concerns. • Believes that public money is a moral trust and that financial leadership should enable children, staff and communities to flourish. • Committed to values-led education, inclusive practice, safeguarding and improving outcomes for all pupils. • Visible, present and team-oriented, with the willingness to spend regular time alongside the finance team at King's Warrington. • Strategic, curious and solutions-focused, with disciplined attention to detail and delivery. • Collaborative and service-minded, able to build trust while holding others to account. • Able to offer professional challenge with clarity, warmth and respect. • Resilient, calm and well organised when managing competing deadlines and sensitive issues. • Able to operate with discretion and maintain appropriate confidentiality.	-

What We Offer

As Chief Financial Officer, you will join a Trust where staff wellbeing, professional trust and ethical leadership are central to decision-making. You will work within a collaborative, family-like culture across all academies, supported by leaders who listen, act and value the contribution of every colleague.

We offer:

- A highly competitive salary reflecting the strategic importance of the CFO role
- 30 days' annual leave plus bank holidays
- Membership of the Local Government Pension Scheme
- Access to CredimusAI to reduce workload, improve reporting and support smarter decision-making
- A personal device to support effective Trust-wide leadership
- Weekly leadership link meetings to support professional growth
- Career development within a growing, values-led Trust
- Strategic influence over finance, operations, estates, procurement, risk and long-term planning
- Direct input into our brand-new building, helping shape facilities for future generations
- Trust-wide collaboration with executive leaders, trustees, governors and academy teams

Health, Wellbeing and Personal Support

Optional Benenden Health membership is available at £15.50 per month, including day-one access to 24/7 GP and Mental Health Helplines, specialist advice, diagnostics, physiotherapy, mental health support and cancer advice. Family members can be added at additional cost. The Trust-funded BUPA Employee Assistance Programme provides counselling, emotional wellbeing support, legal, financial and family care advice and 24/7 confidential assistance. We also offer good occupational sick pay, maternity, paternity and family-friendly policies to support life's key moments.

Financial, Lifestyle and Community Benefits

You will also benefit from the Cycle to Work salary sacrifice scheme, opportunities to support local fundraising and charity projects and the chance to shape Trust-wide culture, innovation and school improvement.

This is a CFO role with real strategic influence, public purpose and the opportunity to steward resources in service of children, staff and communities.

How To Apply

Submit your application via MyNewTerm

For an informal conversation about the role or to arrange a tour of one of our academies, please contact: h.fenlon@greatschoolstrust.com

Appointment, Compliance & Safeguarding

Appointment, Terms & Compliance
The Job Description forms part of the contract of employment and may be reviewed as the role or organisational needs change, following consultation.
The Trust will make reasonable adjustments to support applicants and employees with disabilities.
The Trust is a licensed Skilled Worker Visa sponsor and may offer sponsorship subject to eligibility and the requirements of the role.

Safeguarding & Pre-employment Checks
Great Schools Trust is committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people. All staff must share this commitment. As part of safer recruitment, interviews will explore motivation to work with children, ability to maintain professional boundaries, emotional resilience and attitudes to authority and behaviour management.

Pre-Employment Checks
Any offer of employment is conditional upon the successful completion of the following:

- Proof of identity, address and right to work in the UK
- Two satisfactory references, including the most recent employer
- Verification of relevant qualifications
- Enhanced DBS check with barred list check
- Prohibition from teaching check (where applicable)
- Section 128 check (for management roles)
- Overseas police checks (where applicable)
- Occupational health clearance

Ongoing Compliance
The postholder must comply with Trust policies, including the Staff Code of Conduct, Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy, and Staff Communication and Social Media Policy. Responsibilities may be reviewed periodically in line with Trust and academy priorities.

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