

# Pre-Opening Resource

*Recruiting your free school principal*

Spring 2021

**New  
Schools  
Network**

## Introduction

Appointing the principal of your free school is likely to be the most important task you take during the pre-opening phase and also one of the most difficult.

Leading a new free school is a unique opportunity but it is also a huge challenge. A number of free schools have struggled in their opening years or even been forced to replace their original principal because they did not appoint the right person from the start. Individuals who are capable of getting a new school off the ground successfully are in short supply, so you should not underestimate the difficulty of recruiting them.

When recruiting a principal, new free schools face many of the same issues as other types of school but there are some which are unique to them. This guidance offers practical advice about how to approach these issues, based on the direct experience of those that have already been through the process. Specifically, it sets out the different elements of the recruitment process and also provides a range of links to other, more general sources of information on recruiting a principal for you to explore further.

## Who are you looking for?

Free schools are different to other types of school, which means that you will probably need to look for a principal with a different range of skills. Although you are looking for someone who can deliver academic excellence, you also need someone who can build the culture and infrastructure of the school from the ground up and clearly communicate their vision and ethos to others.

It is therefore important that you take time to define what skills your principal will need. In your application you will have already set out some of the qualities you are looking for in a principal, but you will need to build on this further. The [National standards of excellence for headteachers](#) are a useful basis for thinking about the role of a principal generally, but a successful principal of a free school will need to demonstrate qualities that go beyond these. For example, as the free school grows to capacity they are likely to also need to be able to:

- Recruit and develop a team from scratch, with the number of staff required growing substantially each year in line with a developed phasing plan
- Lead the marketing of your school to prospective parents/pupils and secure admissions
- Oversee the development of your school site and the transition into it
- Take significant responsibility for the school's finances and lead on its financial planning for the future

- Quickly establish evidence of your school's performance, using appropriate management information systems, and lead it through an Ofsted inspection that will take place in the seventh term
- Establish a distinct profile for the school within the local community and media
- Potentially balance these tasks with a significant teaching load or other responsibilities within the school

You should also consider how your principal fits within the wider context of your school and its future. For example, are you looking for someone who will be making the step into headship and wants to build their career at this school, or would you be more interested in appointing someone who has the experience to see the school through its first few years and then move onto a new challenge? More fundamentally, it is worth considering whether you really need a substantive principal for your school. Individuals capable of taking up this role on their own are in short supply and you might want to consider operating a different senior leadership model, such as one in which the headteacher of an existing school is appointed to the position of executive headteacher and commits time to mentoring a less experienced individual in the role of head of school.

Your responses to these issues should then form the base of both a detailed job description and person specification. The former should set out the responsibilities of the role and the latter should detail the competencies needed to succeed in it that will be tested for in applicants. These two documents will form the basis of an applicant pack, which you can send to anyone interested in the role. To help you do this, we have included below examples used by other free schools.

## How will you find them?

With a shortage of school leaders nationally, it's no surprise that many free schools have had a hard time recruiting their principal. Historically, free schools that we have spoken to in the past have often been disappointed by the number and calibre of applications that they received for the role. Even relatively high profile schools have struggled to attract more than half a dozen good candidates and a number of schools that we have worked with have had to conduct multiple rounds of recruitment.

To give yourself the best chance of attracting strong applicants, you need to think very carefully about how you advertise the principal's role. You should prepare for this process to be difficult; as one person we spoke to pointed out, the best principal for your school has probably never heard of it, will definitely not have worked in a free school before and may not even know they want a new job yet. As a result, you should very much look at your recruitment process as a chance to 'sell' the

opportunities your school offers, rather than as a process of attracting talent from a pre-existing pool.

Most teachers use fairly standard websites and newspapers when looking for a new job. The [TES](#) is most popular but we have listed others below. Bear in mind though that for the reasons stated above, simply putting up an advertisement and hoping for the best will almost certainly not be enough. Repeated advertising can also be very expensive, so you should think creatively about how you can use other channels to reach people, such as through: tapping into existing networks; your presence on social media (e.g. [LinkedIn](#) has been recommended) and face to face events, such as open days or community events. One school found that simply raising its profile locally through reports in local/regional media was just as effective in generating potential applicants, who then knew more about it, as paying for advertising in a national newspaper.

Whatever your approach, you need to ensure that it matches the profile of the person you are looking for, since different types of applicants will be influenced by different things. For example, if you are looking for a young, dynamic individual taking on their first headship then you are probably more likely to find them through the networks offered by [Teach First](#) or [Ambition Institute](#) and will attract them by making it clear you would consider this type of candidate. Conversely, if you want someone who is much more experienced, then using an agency that is already aware of individuals like this and can do some 'headhunting' may make more sense.

You should also try to remove any barriers to application. These will vary from factors which affect free schools generally, such as uncertainty over whether the school will definitely open or the fact that you may be advertising the post at a time of year when people don't usually look for this type of role, to others which are more specific to your school. Take time to think about what your school looks like from a candidate's perspective and try to address any issues through your advertising and in your application materials. For example, one school was able to widen its pool of applicants by emphasising how easily the site could be reached from central London by train.

Finally, you need to make sure that you communicate clearly with anyone interested in the position so that they fully understand your vision for the school and convert this interest into an application. A good website and applicant pack will help here, but you should also consider being more pro-active. One free school recommended nominating a member of the trust to manage all communication with applicants, whilst another allowed anyone interested in applying to have an informal chat about the school before they did so. Whatever approach you take it is crucial that you are able to recruit a principal that understands your vision for the free school and is able to espouse it.

## Headhunting

Some free schools have used a headhunting service to help them find a principal, though the ones we spoke to had very mixed views about this given how much it costs. If you do use head-hunters, you should expect them to be flexible and respond to your needs, which are likely to be different to most schools. You will also need to be able to justify to the Department for Education (DfE) how using this service represents value for money.

One route, which a trust has used successfully in several of its new free schools, is to employ a headhunting service for the parts of the recruitment process that are particularly challenging or time consuming, but retain control of the rest of the recruitment process. In this instance, the trust instructed a recruitment agency to find details of candidates in schools that met the desired profile (i.e. deputy heads working at schools within a 45-minute commute of the free school, with a similar pupil profile, achieving at least Good results etc.) and then approach them about the vacancy. The agency then passed on the details of the candidates who were interested in finding out more to the trust, who were able to contact them directly and 'sell' the school to them in a much more personal way.

We have listed the details of some headhunting services that were recommended by schools in the *Links and further information* section of this document.

## Assessing your candidates

### What to assess

Your approach to assessing candidates should be decided prior to advertising the role, in order to ensure there is a clear link between what you are looking for and how you test it in those that apply.

The free schools we spoke to consistently advised new trusts to focus on four key issues:

- Firstly, they stressed the importance of hiring a principal who would be able to prepare the school for an Ofsted inspection within two years of opening. Candidates from less conventional backgrounds, for example someone coming over from the independent sector, can offer many advantages but Ofsted's demands are something that they must be familiar with from day one. You may find it helpful to look through NSN's [resources](#) on Ofsted to observe the issues unique to free schools that inspections unearth.

- Secondly, they also underlined the need to test candidate's familiarity with school finance, since free school principals carry significant responsibilities here which they may not have dealt with before, especially if this is their first headship. You should therefore assess their ability to plan and manage a budget, as well as their understanding of the principal's financial duties in law.
- Thirdly, they argued that it was key for the principal to be able to demonstrate Outstanding teaching practice and be able to help others work towards it. In your school's early years, the principal will probably have to take a very direct role in the professional development of staff, so it is crucial that they are well placed to do this.
- And lastly, they emphasised how important it was for the principal to embody the trust's vision for the school and be able to communicate it clearly (as previously mentioned in this document). The principal will lead in establishing the school in its first few years- whether through recruiting new pupils, speaking to the community or managing relationships with stakeholders like the LA – so it is vital that they have both the skills and commitment required to implement the trust's vision.

## Who should assess your candidates

You should also agree in advance of advertising the position who will play a role in assessing your candidates. Many people are likely to want to be involved in this but a smaller assessment team - perhaps four or five people - will help you to reach faster and more consistent decisions, so aim to include only those whose views are really key and who bring different types of expertise.

Your DfE Education Adviser (EA) will also want to be involved in your assessment of candidates. In most cases this will be through sitting on your interview panel or benchmarking exercises, though sometimes they may take part in the shortlisting process as well. The free schools we spoke to had different views about how useful their EA had been, so you should consider how you might make the most of their expertise and what you should involve them in.

Remember, however, that though your EA will offer their views on candidates (and would expect this to be taken into consideration), they cannot appoint a principal for you – challenge yourself at this stage on whether the trust has the expertise necessary to make an authoritative decision. If you don't have the input of someone who has led a similar school, for example, will you really be able to know whether your preferred candidate has what it takes to do so?

Finally, it is mandatory for at least one member of your recruitment panel to have undertaken safer recruitment training. You **must** ensure that you make arrangements for this well in advance, if necessary.

## How to assess them

Trusts that we engage with in both the pre-opening and opening phases of their free schools, often contend that it is extremely valuable to see candidates interacting with students and staff. Where candidates are existing headteachers, it may be possible for you to see them in their current school. Seeing candidates teach and make judgements about how the teaching practice of others can be improved is important, especially if they will have a teaching load or if they will be leading the school's CPD programme in its early years. If it isn't possible to view them in this setting, you should try to think creatively about how you can reproduce something like a 'real-life' classroom environment – for example, by working with a local school.

Setting very practical tests for candidates, rather than relying just on presentations and interviews, also seemed to be popular. Those recommendations included asking candidates to:

- Observe a lesson from another teacher and give them feedback on it (using video if a 'live' lesson wasn't available)
- Analyse a set of student achievement data and write a report for governors based on it
- Scrutinise a sample budget and spot the issues within it
- Create a plan for how the school would manage if it had to spend a year in temporary accommodation
- Handwrite a letter to a parent (so that standards of presentation and spelling could be checked in addition to tone and flow)

Following on from this advice, we have created some detailed tools and gathered sample application materials from schools that can be accessed through our Essentials Advisory Service, which is part of [NSN's Pre-Opening Delivery Programme](#).

Where interviews or presentation based tasks were set – for example, asking candidates to explain what they understood the vision of the trust to be and how it could be delivered in practice within the school's first year – clear criteria were used to help the assessment panel make consistent judgements.

References are another element of the process that free schools have historically concentrated on. Some have recommended that you ask to see these in advance of deciding who to invite for interview; others have advised that it was best to ask for references to be given over the phone initially, and then recorded on paper, since you were more likely to get an honest assessment of the candidate this way. Please note that all referencing procedures must be in compliance with [workers' rights](#).

Finally, when thinking about how to conduct your assessments, it is worth remembering that to some extent you are being interviewed by the candidates too. Make sure that in all your dealings with the candidates you come across as a group of governors that they would want to work for. Incorporated within the packages that make up the [NSN Pre-Opening Delivery Programme](#) are targeted visits to open free schools. During these visits, there may be the potential to organise a meeting with the trust's chair of governors to discuss the principal recruitment process and lessons learnt in this area.

## Selecting the right person

Selecting someone to be your principal is a momentous decision that you will make as a trust, so you should plan the process in advance and anticipate difficulties - it is fairly common for assessment panels to disagree about the best candidate or to feel uneasy about appointing any of them.

To minimise disruption, you should plan in advance what you will do if you cannot agree on the best candidate – perhaps taking a majority vote or asking candidates back for another round of interviews – and resist telling candidates when precisely they will hear back from you, in case you have to change plans.

Most importantly, you **must not** appoint someone if you don't feel confident in their ability to lead your school. Historically, all of the free schools that we've spoken to were unanimous in saying that it was better to advertise for the post again than appoint the wrong person, and most of them had done so – in one case up to four times. It is worth remembering that a number of free schools have lost their principal within their first year of opening, in most cases because the person they appointed originally wasn't the right fit.

To avoid being rushed into a decision, you should agree in advance a set of contingency plans for what you will do if you can't find the right candidate by a certain point in the year (or if your chosen candidate turns your offer down). This will help to reassure the other members of the trust and the



DfE. By planning how you will manage the expectations of prospective parents and the community this will allow you to avoid problems here too.

Where free schools have struggled to appoint a candidate quickly, they have taken a range of approaches, including:

- Appointing an interim headteacher who can help get the school up and running and give you more time to find the right candidate
- Appointing someone from within the trust and procuring consultancy support from an experienced headteacher, who will work in the school to support them
- Splitting up the operational and education roles of the principal into two positions and appointing people to both
- Asking a nearby school leader to act as an executive headteacher

### Principal designate salary

Free schools have significant freedoms in appointing staff and school leaders that other schools do not. Notably, they are not bound by the [national pay and conditions document](#) and, as such, are able to determine their own pay and conditions. Notwithstanding this, it is not uncommon for free schools to adopt these conditions, and those that do not, typically use them as a starting point for establishing competitive pay and conditions.

### DfE underwriting PD's salary

All appointments made prior to the signing of the funding agreement should be conditional upon your school entering into a funding agreement with the Secretary of State. All the while, the DfE recognise that pre-open free school groups may be asked for additional security from applicants where a funding agreement has yet to be signed but they are being asked to tender their resignation at their present school/trust.

In such circumstances, the Department will underwrite the salary costs of the principal designate for two consecutive terms should the free school be deferred by a year or cancelled. This offer will only be made available to groups once the provisional opening date has been confirmed, and the DfE have started to release the PDG beyond the initial allocation. A cap for this underwriting will be agreed on a case-by-case basis. Further information about the conditions of this offer can be found [here](#).

## What next?

Immediately after appointing your principal you need to look forward, to the opening of the school. At this stage there are three issues you need to clarify:

Firstly, you should think about how your principal fits into the remaining time you have in pre-opening and what expectations you have of them here. For example, how much of the education plan would you expect them to produce and how will they work with other members of your team on this?

Secondly, you should think about the profile of the candidate you have appointed and where they might need support. Some free schools, especially those that have appointed someone taking up their first headship, have delegated or removed some of the day-to-day tasks associated with the role e.g. nominating a separate individual within the team as the premises lead to oversee the site process. Others have moved swiftly to put in place a mentor for their principal or arranged for them to undertake extensive training.

And thirdly, you need to reflect on your own role. Making the transition between being an applicant group and being a group of governors can be difficult when you have been 'hands-on' for so long but it is vital that you manage this well. Some free schools have got into serious problems here, either because they struggled to 'let go' of the project and allow the principal to run the school day-to-day or because they stepped back too much and left their new principal without enough support. The [Academies Financial Handbook](#) should be your basis for working out areas of responsibility, but you will also need to think about how you can put in place good working practices between governors and the principal, such as when and how different parties can be contacted. We would recommend that you work through these issues as soon as possible after your new principal is appointed, in order to avoid any problems later down the line.

## Links and further information

### General

The DfE's [Guide to recruiting and selecting a principal](#) is an excellent reference point and sets out in detail your legal responsibilities.

Though they are now archived, [the NCTL web pages on recruiting a principal](#) are also a useful source of advice and contain a number of useful resources.

## Designing the role

**National standards of excellence for headteachers** – these standards are a useful reference point when designing the job description for your principal.

**The Academies Financial Handbook** – provides details of the financial responsibilities of principals within free schools, that you will need to include in your job description.

## Finding the right person

**Executive search or Headhunting services** – may be able to help you find suitable candidates, either by overseeing the entire recruitment process up to selection or by working to complete elements of it (as suggested in the text above) for you. Firms recommended by some of those we have spoken to include [Veredus](#) and [Hays](#).

**Ambition School Leadership** - is an independent charity with a mission to raise the achievement of children, regardless of background, and to provide them with equal choices and opportunities in life. By developing a network of exceptional school leaders, the charity is transforming challenging schools and will work to eradicate educational disadvantage. We can share within our network details of free school senior leadership and headship positions. Please contact [headship@future-leaders.org.uk](mailto:headship@future-leaders.org.uk) for principal vacancies and [schools@future-leaders.org.uk](mailto:schools@future-leaders.org.uk) for SLT vacancies.

**Teach First** - is an education charity which recruits high calibre, passionate individuals to teach in schools serving pupils from low income communities. A number of its ambassadors (alumni of the scheme) are currently leading free schools. It can support new schools with principal recruitment by offering free advertising to its community of over 3000 ambassadors and through its close relationships with those looking to move into headship. If you would like to work with Teach First to recruit your principal please email details of the vacancy to [recruitment@teachfirst.org.uk](mailto:recruitment@teachfirst.org.uk).

*Please note that to advertise through Teach First or Ambition School Leadership your school must fit within their eligibility criteria. If you are unsure if your school will be eligible, please get in touch with them directly.*

## Safer recruitment

**Safer recruitment** – [this DfE document](#) sets out your responsibilities as a school to conduct safe recruitment.

**Safer recruitment training** – is no longer regulated by the DfE. It is currently available through [online resources](#) produced by the NSPCC.

[Click here to provide feedback about this resource](#)

## New Schools Network Delivery Programme

New Schools Network (NSN) has supported free school groups in pre-opening since 2014. NSN’s unrivalled knowledge and experience has been informed by our work with over 70% of open and approved free school groups throughout the application and pre-opening phases.

The NSN Delivery Programme has been designed to address the challenges of the rigorous pre-opening process. The NSN Delivery Programme fills gaps in capacity and/or capability, providing a range of support options to prepare schools for a successful opening. We provide tailored support whether you are newly approved to open a free school or if you are already deep into the pre-opening phase, and to all phases and types of free school.

Delivery Programme services offer support for each key milestone across pre-opening:

### Services following your approval into pre-opening

- Project Set-Up
- Project Development Grant
- Governance (Advisory or Plan Delivery)
- Site and Buildings
- Pupil Recruitment and Marketing
- Section 10 Consultation

### Services for your final year of pre-opening

- Site and Buildings
- Funding and Finance
- Education Brief
- Media Training
- Readiness to Open Meeting

You can [download our brochure](#) for more information on each service. If you are interested in one or more of NSN’s pre-opening services, please contact us at [helpdesk@newschoolsnetwork.org](mailto:helpdesk@newschoolsnetwork.org) or call 020 7537 9208. We would be happy to discuss how we can support your free school project and send you a price list of our services.