

Applicant & Pre-opening Resource

Marketing and communications guidance for free schools

Spring 2021

**New
Schools
Network**

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Introduction

The challenge of ensuring your school is full every year can be daunting, especially in the early years. But from our experience we inevitably discover that, in almost all cases, free schools are doing the right things to ensure parents and students understand their school and know it is a choice for them.

In many cases free schools identify which communication techniques work through the long process of evidence gathering during the application stage. Once you are approved and actively recruiting however, the stakes are higher for you, and the commitment you need from the parents and students you are trying to reach is bigger, so it is important to consider how you are going to communicate with them to ensure it is time well spent.

For every free school the challenge is clear: as a new school, you do not have a reputation on which potential students and parents can judge you. If you are part of a chain, trust or wider organisation, you can draw on that reputation but you may still be a new or changing entity that needs to persuade people to put their faith in your offer.

First steps

When you are under pressure to build awareness of your school, the temptation can be to try and do everything to avoid missing an opportunity. In most cases you will also have external interest in your project and it can be very difficult not to feel pressured by all these outside factors. It is crucial to remember therefore that you should never communicate for its own sake. You need to have a clear vision and plan for what you are trying to achieve. Ask yourself:

- **Who do I need speak to?** Is it one group or many? Is it parents, students, teachers, commissioners or the wider community? Are there other audiences that influence your key targets?
- **What do I want to say?** Remember to keep it simple – what three things would you want every target parent or commissioner to know about you and your school? What is the action you want them to take?
- **Do message and audience match?** It may seem obvious but are your messages of interest to your audience? If they are not, you need to re-think. For example: project-based learning

may be critical to your approach but do parents understand what this means? Is there another way to talk about your curriculum?

Finding the right tactics for your needs

Once you have the answers to these first questions you are ready to start making decisions about how and when to reach your audiences. Again, the first stage of this process is simple common sense:

- Where do your audience spend their time and meet?
- Where do they gather and share information? What media do they watch or read?
- Who do they trust and who influences them?

In order to identify the most effective tactics to reach your audience you need to understand them – most schools find that they test a variety of approaches and messages before getting it right. Every approach has different advantages and drawbacks.

A summary of the classic tactics you should be considering is set out below to help you assess what might work for you. More detailed advice on each of these approaches follows to help you achieve the maximum impact.

Finally, you will find a section looking at ongoing marketing and, particularly, managing the media.

Special and alternative provision (AP) schools

Many of the tactics below are more relevant for mainstream schools that need to recruit students directly. However, the same broad rules apply if your audience is a smaller group of commissioners from LAs and schools. You will still need to work out the best way to reach and influence that key audience – whether through letters, direct meetings or visits. You will also need to ensure that your wider reputation, including media reporting and the impression of potential parents and students is positive making you an ‘easy choice’ to take.

Approach	Advantages	Disadvantages
Create a school website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be created very easily and cheaply • Allows you to clearly state your vision and plans as well as provide more complex and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Websites need to be maintained and refreshed to make the most of their potential

	<p>timely information about events and activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Widely available to your audience at all times and often the first port of call for those interested (also a natural place to direct people for follow-up information) - try to follow a 'one click' rule • Although some people lack digital access, the proliferation of web access via phones and TVs have given websites a much broader reach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Websites which are difficult to navigate or lacking in information may have a negative impact on the perception of your school • Although new systems make creating a website much easier, you may still need require some technical expertise to create your platform
Arrange visits to local schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guaranteed to give you access to your most relevant audience group • The support from the local organisations will help build trust among your audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becomes very challenging if there is any opposition to your school
Visit community groups and use existing events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Captive audience - you do not have to recruit them and they do not have to actively commit to your event • Allows for face-to-face contact which can be very persuasive • Great way to get committed parents/volunteers involved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not all the audience will be relevant for you – you will not be able to select who speaks to you • Weather and other practicalities can get in the way • Very time intensive and requires lots of people to be willing to give up their evenings/ weekends

<p>Hold an open day</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organising an event yourself allows you to ensure the audience is very targeted • Especially once you have your site, nothing is more persuasive than seeing where the school will be first hand • Depending how long you have been open, getting existing parents and students involved is powerful • It is also worth remembering that for many students and parents, the open evening format is how they are used to assessing schools – they will be attending several during application season 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is a much bigger commitment for your audience to sign-up and attend • Small turnout can have a negative impression on those who do attend • Identifying and managing the invitation process to attract the most relevant people and putting on the event itself can be very time consuming
<p>Send a direct mailing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaches people in their homes • Having something on paper (rather than digitally) can mean that information stays in people’s houses until they are ready to act • Personalised (and/or hand addressed) letters are increasingly rare so can grab attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mailings of any sort are very dependent on the quality of the data you are using to send them • People have negative views of ‘nuisance’ mailings and in some areas the level of junk mail makes it virtually impossible to stand out
<p>Use your local (or national) media</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In contrast to advertising or marketing materials, information received via the media is perceived as independent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information released is not in your control • Journalists will likely pick up on any controversy or

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local and regional media are more highly trusted than their national counterparts • Low cost especially for the potential reach 	<p>debate about your school</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It can be hard to get inaccuracies corrected
Advertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information released is completely under your control • Good targeting can ensure you get good reach across your audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very hard to be distinctive enough to cut through the large amounts of advertising that people are exposed to everyday • Outreach on the high street and areas such as supermarkets/ shopping centres will require permission which may cause delays
Build a social media network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For many people almost as good as face-to-face engagement – offers the chance to enter into a direct conversation • More sophisticated search options (especially if coupled with an advertising budget) means that you can target groups very accurately • Very wide reach – with the majority of people using at least one social network • Offers lots of opportunities to encourage peer-to-peer recommendations and growth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Starting a conversation means you have to be prepared to reply and engage. Can be time consuming • Offers an easy channel for any detractors to publicly criticise and raise concerns about your school • To get the most out of these channels (and to effectively monitor them)

		requires some technical expertise
Use supporters to build your base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer-to-peer recommendations are still the most important influence on most people’s decisions • This can also be an effective way to involve parents and young people in your school – simply keeping them informed about your progress • It is a very effective way to target the right audience, both in terms of location and interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some parents will not want to get involved and may be negative about being asked • Using personal networks may carry an expectation that friends and family members can definitely be accommodated by your school
Get public support from respected public figures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be a very effective way to raise awareness and build trust in your school • Most MPs, VIPs and public figures will also have their own channels of communication with their supporters – asking for a mention in newsletters or engagement on social media can be a great way to raise your profile 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public figures can also be quite polarising – remembering that public support goes both ways and you may (even in a small way) be tied to their reputation

Making your activity work

Once you have decided which tactics you want to focus on, it is well worth taking a look at how other schools have made these approaches work for them. The following briefing summarises some of our experiences of what works:

Define your message

Whether you plan to use leaflets, websites, presentations or sky-writing, your first step in marketing your school will be deciding what you are trying to say and making sure this message runs across everything you do.

Ask yourself what you want parents, students, local authorities and your community to know about your school and make sure every bit of communication has this message. Invest time in this stage and try to test your language with some of your audience in advance.

- Keep it simple: most people will not remember more than three messages
- Avoid jargon and 'sales' focused language

Design consistency

Even without a big budget to spend on branding or design, you can make your materials and website look more professional by agreeing some basic design principles and applying them across everything you do. This could include deciding on your 'brand colours'; agreeing a standard font you are going to use in every document and on every webpage or designing a simple logo. In many cases this might be a development from what you used during the application phase, but if your school name or other aspects of your school have changed since then it will be important to redefine your 'look and feel'.

Think about images – they are often the most powerful component of websites and materials. What images can you use at this stage? Real images of pupils, your site or your staff are almost always better than 'stock' pictures. Aim to produce some pull-up banners for use at public meetings with school branding.

Printed materials

There are some great free design programmes available if you want to produce your own materials but design is becoming more and more affordable. If you can use a designer to create your first materials, make sure you use their time effectively by agreeing in advance exactly what copy and pictures you want to use; it is usually much more expensive to make changes after the design has been created. Often designers have relationships with printers and can manage the print process for you but this will likely incur a mark-up.

Printing has fallen in price dramatically in recent years so it is well worth shopping around and considering using online services rather than high street shops.

The intellectual property of any design work will legally belong to the designer but if you know you will want to do multiple versions or update your materials as your project develops, consider negotiating for access to all the design files so that you are not tied to one designer and you can then get anyone with the relevant software to make updates for you.

- Shop around for printing and design services
- Where possible get access to original files to allow for easy updates and change
- If cost is a factor think about using standard formats. An A4 sheet can be folded in half for an A5 booklet or three times for a trifold leaflet, but costs will be very similar because it is standard paper stock

Website

Much of your website will be the same standard information that appears in your leaflets and elsewhere but it has the added advantage that you can provide more interaction and a wider range of content.

- Consider creating videos that can be posted online
- You also need to consider how you are going to let people contact you. Will you be asking them to email or offering a chance to make comments or interact through social media?
- The best websites have content which is constantly changing – how will you keep your site current? Even something as simple as integrating social media with your website means that any Facebook or Twitter updates will appear on your site with the latest news

There are lots of free and open source systems available to build your own website and, although it can seem daunting at the beginning if you have never used one before, it is well worth considering so you can maintain as much control as possible over your site. [Wordpress](#), [Weebly](#), [WiX](#), [Jimdo](#) and [Drupal](#) are among the most popular systems.

Your website could well be the first port of call for people interested in you so make sure you are easy to find and that your website has a simple name. It is worth thinking about 'Search Engine Optimisation' as most people will find your site by searching for you. This [Google guide](#) gives some good hints and tips.

Local school/pre-school visits

This is the most direct way to access your target audience. Your opportunities to visit likely feeder schools and pre-schools will depend on your local context and obviously if there has been opposition to your school this must be carefully managed. However, once you are approved and a reality as a school, it is a very reasonable request.

In many areas, primary schools and pre-schools host a series of visits from surrounding schools during the relevant application window. Similarly, it is common practice for secondary schools, especially when they do not have their own 16-19 provision to offer sixth forms the opportunity to present to their Y11 students.

Even if this is not common in your area, spending time building relationships with local heads/nursery leaders is well worth the investment. Hosting an event for these local leaders can address any questions they have and avoid misunderstanding or misconceptions.

Even if it is not possible to organise a visit or presentation to parents or students, heads have sometimes agreed to share information with parents or include the new school in any future initiatives.

Open door policy

Even if you discover that schools are not willing to share information about your school; it is strongly recommended that you do everything you can to keep local headteachers informed about your work.

You will be working together in future and you should do everything in your power to keep the relationship open and be accessible to anyone.

The same goes for the local authority and local MPs: even if they choose to oppose your school, it will affect them and you should try to neutrally share information whenever appropriate.

Events

Nothing beats face-to-face contact in getting your message across but events can be very time-consuming and resource-intensive so you will need to consider several factors as you define your events programme.

Deciding whether to host your own event or participate in something that is already running will be your first consideration:

- Hosting your own event means you are in control and can focus only on your issues; as well as inviting only the most relevant people.
- Once you have a building (even temporary accommodation), hosting events there can be a powerful way to really show parents and students what your school will be all about
- However, especially at the early stages when you are trying to build your audience, it may not be feasible to fill an event you host
- If you are still trying to identify and build your audience, participating in existing events or holding an information session in a public setting may well be your best bet
- Really think about the best place to reach your audience. For example, if you are recruiting pupils for a primary school then this could include Sure Start Centres or soft play areas. For older children, you may be more likely to reach their parents through other venues such as swimming pools or sports centres that hold youth sessions.

Most schools will need to do a mixture of both types of events. Certainly during the traditional school-visits season you will need to host your own event. But getting out into your community is also likely to be critical for a new school if demand is not immediately high. Whichever type of event you are running, there are some general tips for success:

- Especially if it is not an invited event, you will need to be engaging and eye-catching – how will you stand out from the commercial stalls in a shopping centre for example?
- Think about offering activities for children so that you can speak to their parents without distraction – something as simple as having pens and paper for them to draw on or face-painting can be very effective
- Activities are especially useful if they bring your proposition to life, but should avoid being gimmicky or wasteful. For example, if you are a STEM specialist school you could put on a science demonstration. If you are focused on art or languages, you could give a sample lesson

- Think about who is speaking for you at any event (both formally during any presentation and informally throughout the event). These need to be authentic voices who will understand the questions and concerns of your audience. It is especially worth considering inviting parents who have already chosen your school so they can share their perspectives.

Direct mailing

Whether via email or through the letterbox, direct mailing can help to build and develop your supporters. However, you should be prepared for response rates to these kinds of tactics to be relatively low. Recent benchmark data for 'cold' charity fundraising mailings showed a one to two percent response rate was average (with variations among electronic and paper mailings depending on the audience).

This emphasises that the key to successful direct mailing is the quality of your contacts and the database you are using to reach them. Spending time on the data is crucial. If you can identify your target audience accurately then you can get response rates up quickly. You will also need to consider data protection law – the [Information Commissioners Office](#) produce guidance on this.

For electronic mailings: you may want to consider affordable services like [MailChimp](#) or [Campaign Monitor](#). These will enable you to make your mailing look professional and also help you to measure the impact you are having (how many people looked at the email/clicked on a link, etc.) as these services track this.

For postal mailings: These can be organised by volunteers and, where there is strong knowledge of the locations and streets likely to have the highest numbers of your target audience, can be effective. You may also want to explore the services offered by the [Royal Mail](#) or your local newspaper. They both run mailing/insert services which can be an affordable way to reach a very wide audience.

Social media

Whether you are a social media fan or not, you have to factor these channels into your thinking. Even if you do not want to actively use them, others may be using them to talk about you. At the very least you need to be aware of conversations going on about your school.

Embarking on social media activity can seem daunting; from Instagram to Pinterest, Tumblr to Google+, new platforms are constantly emerging. As with any other communications channel, the key is to ensure you are spending your time in the same place as your target audience. Nothing

replaces doing some research into your target audience. As a starting point however, the following basic information on a couple of the most important sites may help you to decide where to focus your attention.

Platform	Description	Activity to consider
<u>Facebook</u>	<p>Over 36.5 million people – more than half of the UK population – have a Facebook page. There are approximately 2.5 million 13-17 year olds using the site. The largest user group remains 25-34s.</p> <p>Facebook is predominantly a social tool and its photo-sharing function is one of the most important for many users. Its' wider community functions mean that many users join campaigns or networks and it is also the home of many regional and special interest networks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting up a page early in your development • Expect growth of 'Likes' to be slower than on other platforms but look for high levels of engagement on your content • <u>'Pay-per-click' adverts</u> on Facebook can be very effectively targeted (by location and interest) and could be worth considering as you work to build your audience or promote a particular event/activity • Aim to post regularly and interact as much as possible with your community – look for local parent groups especially • Wherever possible use images and video posts rather than just text
<u>Twitter</u>	<p>After Facebook, Twitter is the most widely used social media network, with over 14.5 million users in the UK. Twitter users are more likely than the average population to be smartphone users and there is also a bias to those that live in the city.</p> <p>It is also worth noting that nearly half of users simply use Twitter as a news feed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depending on your audience, it can be relatively easy to build a good number of 'followers' on Twitter who are interested (either positively or negatively) in your work • Treat Twitter as a news feed – sending out all the latest updates as they happen and directing your audience to more detailed content

	of updates that reflect their interests rather than ‘tweeting’ themselves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Images and videos offer a good alternative to just 140 characters
<u>Mumsnet</u> and <u>Netmums</u>	<p>These two sites are the biggest examples of obvious special-interest social media sites that are likely to overlap with your audience. Both have in the region of two million members and many more millions of visitors to their website.</p> <p>It is very common to see discussions on these sites about both school issues and specific schools. Like Facebook, they also have a very good regional spread with many sub-groups and networks around the country.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These sites have strict policies on the way that organisations can interact with their users • Work out if there is a local group in your area and how active it is • Where there are local groups, the events and bulletin boards can be worth contributing to (or advertising on) • Active groups often also use Twitter or Facebook to broadcast their activities – giving you another way to interact • Keep an eye on local discussion boards – if you are being talked about, you may want to contribute or ask your supports to speak up if they are members

Making the most of social media

- **Contribute:** Effective use of social media depends on contributing often and with information that your audience will find useful (use images and video wherever possible)
- **Be patient:** It takes time to build up followers – you will need to invest the time
- **Advertise:** Think about targeted advertising to build up initial support – most social media sites offer a ‘pay-per-click’ system which can make it very cost effective
- **Converse:** It is a conversation; this means that people will talk to you. Although you should not feel you have to respond to persistently negative or abusive individuals (‘trolls’) you should expect and be willing to have public conversations on any reasonable questions

- **Listen:** Remember people may be talking about you rather than with you. Use [Google Alerts](#) and systems like [Twilert](#) or [HootSuite](#) to keep track of these conversations and contribute when appropriate

The power of social media is in the way it amplifies your message through connected personal networks. People who support or are interested in you share your messages with their friends and networks – allowing you to reach people who are likely to share the same interests. Just as importantly, you are benefiting from an ‘endorsement’ – people are more likely to trust information that comes to them from a friend or relative. This impact is not restricted to online communication.

Keeping track

Across social networks and mainstream media, the more communication activity you do the more likely you are to be talked about. Make sure you have set up systems so that you are up-to-date with any news about you. This will probably include [Google Alerts](#) as well as social media monitoring (see above).

You may also want to set-up ‘thematic’ alerts so that you are aware of any general news about education in your area of free schools nationally.

As well as making sure you are able to respond, monitoring will also enable you to figure out what activities work for you. Other free tools include [Google Analytics](#) which will allow you to track traffic to your website after events and other activities.

Peer-to-peer

When you are focused on signing-up the next new student it can be easy to forget the ones you have already recruited. This is a mistake – your supporters are your greatest potential advocates. Think about how you can keep them informed and ask for their help at each stage.

If you are recruiting – ask them to invite their friends to an event or put up posters for you. How you involve them will depend on your audience but it could be something as simple as forwarding an email or posting something on their Facebook page through to speaking at their church or community centre.

Some schools have found text messaging works better than email – it will depend how your audience communicates. Using community advocates can be extremely effective, particularly if you

want to target traditionally hard-to-reach audiences. For example, a bilingual parent may be able to ensure you reach groups with English as an additional language.

Much of this is just good practice. Staying active and communicating your successes to your parents and networks throughout the year will ensure a higher awareness of your work making recruitment easier each year.

Local and regional media

Local and regional media are typically very interested in their local schools. Education is of interest to everyone and, as community hubs, schools often provide good (and photogenic) stories. Add to that the national media interest surrounding free schools and you will find that local media are likely to be very interested in your school.

However, getting coverage – particularly coverage that includes the messages you care about – will not be easy. You will need to spend some time sharing your news with local media in a way that will be easy for them to adapt and use.

Engaging with media, especially if they are oppositional or sceptical about your work can be daunting, but is worth doing. Local media in particular tends to be a trusted source of information so can be very influential.

- **Know why you are doing it:** You will only have a limited number of opportunities to be featured in your local media so make sure you are using it for the right opportunities. Decide when you most need the attention and do it on your terms. Of course you must understand what media you need, but do not feel you have to seek media coverage for its own sake
- **Build relationships:** Take the time to get to know your local journalists, especially any which specialise in education. Ask them what they are interested in and what they would find useful from you. Once you have built this relationship make sure you stay useful – journalists need stories so plan ahead and come up with new ideas for them
- **Seeing is believing:** If possible, ask journalists to visit your school or temporary site; give them a chance to meet parents and understand why what you are doing matters
- **Different types of media:** Local newspapers are often the most approachable and visible form of local media but do consider TV and radio as well. Local radio stations can be very

powerful and participating in call-ins or acting as an expert can be a very effective way to build awareness of your school

- **Make your news ‘media friendly’:** Media look for very specific elements in a story. Spend some time reading your local paper and listening to the local radio stations and reflect their style back to them when sending them information. Think about how you can tell your story:
 - Are you a ‘first’ or the ‘biggest’ or distinctive in some other way?
 - Why should people in this area care about what you are doing?
 - What is the personal story?
 - How does it link to what is going on in the world at a national or local level?
- You will have to pick and choose but remember that media looks for debate and controversy; consider where you can use this to your advantage and look for national debates on which you can give a local perspective
- **Be helpful:** Remember media often work to very tight deadlines (even weekly local newspapers often post stories every day) so do everything you can to respond quickly and be accessible
- **Think practically:** Media, especially at local and regional levels, is very stretched. It is therefore worth doing as much as you can to make the story as easy for them to use as possible e.g. including a quote that they can use directly (rather than insisting on an interview) or providing an image that they can use
- **Remember, media like to find the ‘truth’:** something that is **T**opical; news that is **R**elevant; stories which are **U**nusual; anyone in **T**rouble; something which has a **H**uman interest

Writing a press release

If you have never written a press release, the best advice is to read your local newspaper and mirror their style as much as possible. You may find this short guide helpful however:

- Match the style of media you are targeting
- Be factual and informative, without writer’s bias or ‘sell’, you can give your views and say how wonderful what you are doing is in a quote – but do not confuse the two
- Focus on one issue and keep it short
- Avoid jargon

- Use quotes
- Use active words and future tense

Dealing with negative media

Local issues around planning and education as well as the national political and media interest in free schools mean that you may face opposition and negative coverage about your school.

In this case, many of the same principles regarding the media hold true: you will be better able to ensure your voice is heard if you have formed good relationships and taken the time to help media understand your story.

However, to avoid misunderstandings, ensure you designate a media spokesperson for your school and have an established system for handling calls and sharing information with the public if there are any difficult issues.

Driving activity and news

As your marketing campaign gets going, you will need to ensure that you have a steady stream of activity to keep interest in your work high. Deciding what activity is worth your time will depend on your priorities and how quickly you are achieving what you need. However, ideas other schools have used effectively include the following.

Endorsements

Who influences your community? Are there any well-known locals you could ask to support your school? These could be local businesspeople, artists or even your local MP. Asking high profile supporters to publicly support you gives you another story for local media and also offers the chance to use their networks and channels – e.g. electronic newsletters to tell their supporters about you.

Momentum and milestones

Remember to celebrate milestones. When you reach your first 100 students; appoint your headteacher; find out where your site will be, make sure you are telling your supporters and the wider community across all your channels.

Other networks and supporters

Who else will be affected by or interested in your new school? This will depend on your community but for example:

Local business can be a great source of support and often want to understand what a new school will bring.

- Estate agents are also often very interested in changes in local schools and will be regularly speaking to parents considering their school choices.

[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 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.