

# Pre-Opening Resource

*Education brief*

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**New  
Schools  
Network**

## Introduction

Your curriculum, and the teachers you employ to deliver it, will more than anything else determine the success of your new school. As a school leader, your curriculum is also likely to be the aspect of your school which you are most passionate about, and which feels most personal to you.

The aim of this guide is not to offer any advice about the type of curriculum you might employ, but rather to highlight the main aspects of curriculum design and curriculum staffing which need to be in place before you open.

You will be working with a DfE Education Adviser (EA) in pre-opening and in your first two years of opening, as you prepare for your first Ofsted inspection. This guide will outline the key deliverables which your DfE EA will expect to be completed before your school opens.

If you need more assistance with developing your curriculum resources or carrying out your staff recruitment, you may consider [NSN's Essentials Advisory Service](#) through which you will benefit from bespoke advice from NSN Project Managers and expert Associates. For more information, please contact the NSN Delivery team at [open@newschoolsnetwork.org](mailto:open@newschoolsnetwork.org).

## NSN Spotlight visits

When you are designing your curriculum and education plan, it can be very useful to visit schools where a similar curriculum is already being used successfully.

[NSN Spotlight visits](#) allow you to visit open free schools and observe lessons, meet key leadership staff and ask questions about their experiences.

We've worked with over three quarters of all open and approved-to-open free schools, and have run spotlight visits to a diverse and fascinating range of schools, such as Reach Academy Feltham, the West Newcastle Academy, Marine Academy Primary, The Lighthouse School, School 21, Canary Wharf College, Batley Grammar School, Harris Westminster School, the West London Free School, Kings College London Maths School, Harmonize AP, Marchbank Free School and Dixons Trinity Academy.

## Key documents

The key documents you will have to produce in pre-opening for your DfE EA are:

- An education brief
- Curriculum plans
- Schemes of work
- Lesson plans
- Pupil assessment and accreditation plans
- School policies
- A three-year school improvement plan

For each of these documents, it is the content which is important, and there is no set format which must be followed. If you are part of a multi-academy trust there may be trust-wide policies which you will have to adopt, or trust-wide formats, or agreed content for schemes of work, lesson plans, etc. If you are replicating an existing school from within your trust then you may wish to replicate some schemes of work or lesson plans from your existing school(s), with agreement from your DfE EA to ensure that these are appropriate. Groups will agree with their DfE EA and DfE lead contact the timelines for the submission of key documents and policies to the DfE. However, the timelines that may have been specified are subject to change if the risk factors associated with the project change. You will need to have your DfE EA sign off on all documents before their submission.

Some organisations (including other multi-academy trusts) have curriculum materials which can be purchased. It is perfectly acceptable for your group to use such materials, provided their content fits with the central education vision of your school, your trust board has approved the expenditure as part of your pre-opening grant. Your pre-opening grant spending must be managed through a transparent procurement policy and you should be able to demonstrate the processes undertaken for procuring any services and you can find further guidance within [the Academies Financial Handbook](#). NSN is able to offer free advice and guidance for the processes of procuring services through our [Foundation Advisory Service](#).

Before your school is set to open you will need to attend a Readiness to Open Meeting (ROM). By this point you will be expected to have completed the above education documents. Additionally, you will be expected to have completed a report to submit at the meeting.

## Who is responsible for what?

Once recruited, your principal designate should take the lead in most areas related to education, as they will be accountable for the successful delivery of the curriculum once the school is open.

If the principal designate has not been recruited, then the project's education lead should be closely involved in designing or quality assuring these resources, as should the project lead, assuming they have some educational expertise.

The trust board or shadow governing body should approve the key policies (such as behaviour, safeguarding, etc.), and should approve the three-year school improvement plan.

Your DfE EA will assess the various policies and curriculum materials that you need to develop during pre-opening. Your EA will work with you on curriculum and education issues during pre-opening and in the run up to your first Ofsted inspection, which will take place no later than your seventh term of opening.

## What are the key deliverables?

### Education brief

This is a document which sets out your overarching educational vision, the key features of the curriculum, a staffing plan, an example timetable, example schedule for the school day and school terms, and how you plan to ensure the quality of teaching and learning. In terms of curriculum content, this does not need to be as detailed as the schemes of work or curriculum plans, but will outline the fundamentals that inform your school's curriculum.

Section E (for mainstream applicants) of your free school application, the vision narrative from section C, and the staffing projections from sections E3 and G can be used as a starting point to write the education brief, although the DfE EA may require a more granular description of your educational priorities than was provided in E1.

If you have not yet identified a principal designate, then the education brief can be used as part of the recruitment process to find the right principal. The brief should be clear and unambiguous, as it is vital that the principal you recruit shares your educational vision and priorities.

## Curriculum plans

Curriculum plans are high level documents which outline which topics will be covered on a half-termly or termly basis for each year group and subject. They do not go into the level of detail that a scheme of work for a particular topic would.

The curriculum plans are sometimes asked for early on during the pre-opening process, and therefore your DfE EA may want to see these before you have recruited a principal designate. In this instance, your education lead might be involved in developing the plans, or you may wish to engage an external adviser.

## Schemes of Work

The schemes of work should be provided for the first two years.

The expectation is that the principal designate will have overall responsibility for these, although the schemes of work may need some input from experts in each particular curriculum area. If subject leads are appointed prior to opening, you may wish to ask them to help develop or review schemes of work for their subjects if they have capacity. If you are a multi-academy trust, subject leads from other schools in the trust may be engaged in reviewing or developing these documents.

The DfE EA will review these schemes of work as they are developed, and provide input and feedback.

## Lesson plans

Lesson plans are required for the first term. The format you use is up to you: remember that you are not obliged to use a three-part lesson plan, set learning objectives, etc., although of course you may if you wish.

The aim of these lesson plans is to ensure that a new teacher at your school would be aware of what they should be teaching in their subject, or with their year group, for each lesson of the first term.

You may develop lesson plans which go beyond the first term, or simply leave lesson planning to individual teachers following your schemes of work beyond the first term. The choice will be down to your principal designate, education lead, and the staff in your school responsible for curriculum management.

## Pupil assessment and accreditation plans

You will have begun to develop your approach to pupil assessment, including the format and regularity of these assessments, in section E2 of your free school application form. In pre-opening, you will develop your approach to pupil assessment further, which may include developing some pupil assessments which fit with your initial curriculum plans and schemes of work.

You should decide on the systems you will use to collate, record and distribute the results of pupil assessments, and who will be responsible for the management of pupil data and reporting to parents. You may decide to purchase an external management information system to aid with this, which would be paid for as part of the school's ICT capital budget.

## School policies

You should draw up a set of core school policies, which should be approved by the governing body, shadow governing body, or trust board, as appropriate. You will also need your policies signed off by the DfE EA. It would be useful to have written policies for topics including behaviour, safeguarding, homework, marking, teacher performance management, CPD and training, school trips and acceptable ICT and social media use.

There will be some statutory legal obligations your school must meet that should be included in your written policies such as your safeguarding policy. However, there are many areas which are not statutory obligations (such as homework, marking, behaviour, CPD) where you have a significant degree of scope to write policies which align with the vision and ethos of your school. In all of these areas, there is not a 'DfE way' or 'Ofsted way' which you must follow. Rather, your DfE EA will sign off on these before your Readiness to Open Meeting, and eventually Ofsted will look to see whether the policies you have designed are understood and followed by staff and pupils.

The suite of policies will be reviewed in the Ofsted pre-opening inspection.

## Three-year school improvement plan

The school improvement plan is a strategy document to help you lead and develop the school as it grows. It is a tool for use by your principal, senior leadership team and governors.

The school improvement plan should align closely with the vision for your school. When your school is coming to the conclusion of its third year of opening, what will it look like? How will you know if your school has had a successful start?

You are responsible for the format that your school improvement plan will follow, and if applicable you may wish to use templates which are already used in other schools in your trust. In general, school improvement plans outline targets for improvement which the school will pursue in its opening years, alongside who is responsible for achieving these, a strategy to achieve them, and a metric to judge whether actions against the targets have been successful. Along with the school's self-evaluation form (a document you will develop once the school is open), the school improvement plan is one of the key documents you will discuss with the Ofsted team who visit your school during your first inspection.

## Readiness to Open Meeting

The Readiness to Open takes place before shortly before the school is set to open, and will be where a number of key documents are signed off. The purpose of the meeting is to consider any risks that might affect the schools opening, discuss how to mitigate those risks, assess the school's readiness to open and deliver a high standard of education, and what post-opening support will be required.

The meeting will be attended by a DfE EA, DfE lead contact, a senior DfE official, your Free Schools Capital (FSC) link, and other appropriate individuals. Your Chair of Governors and principal designate must attend this meeting or the meeting will not take place.

### Readiness to open report

This is a report which should be prepared by the principal designate, with feedback and input from the DfE EA. The report will follow a DfE template which will ask you for key information on areas such as curriculum, admissions, building, risks identified, and staffing. The report should be submitted two weeks prior to the ROM and a pre-meeting briefing should be arranged to help the principal designate collate the report.

You will need to have submitted all of your education documents to the DfE in advance of this meeting. The meeting may produce a list of actions the school must undertake before it is deemed ready to open.

## Ofsted pre-opening inspection

At this meeting with an Ofsted inspector, you will be asked to provide your suite of whole school policies and some additional Ofsted documentation such as building plans and safeguarding plans. Your DfE education adviser will provide feedback on your whole school policies before they are sent on to the Ofsted inspector.

The meeting may produce some actions. In this instance, an action plan will be developed and submitted to your DfE EA. This is separate to the action plan which may result from the readiness to open meeting.

## Links and further information

The [DfE's pre-opening guidance](#) sets out your key tasks when recruiting staff and developing your curriculum, when these need to be completed, and what support you can expect to receive from them.

The NSN Foundation Advisory Service is available to all groups in pre-opening. Through it you can access a question and answer service and a selection of key resources entirely free of charge. If you have further questions about staffing, you may benefit from the support offered by the NSN Essentials Advisory Service; to find out more about either service, please contact the NSN Delivery Team through [open@newschoolsnetwork.org](mailto:open@newschoolsnetwork.org)



## Support for schools in pre-opening

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 meticulously designed to address the challenges of the rigorous pre-opening process. Whilst proposer groups may have a wealth of skills and expertise, the NSN Delivery Programme will fill gaps in capacity and/or capability, providing a range of support options to prepare schools for a successful opening.

Our exclusive packages of advice, support and project management have been developed to comply with Department for Education (DfE), and Free Schools Capital (FSC) guidance and focuses on the areas that our experience shows will provide free schools with the most value in pre-opening.

### NSN Delivery Programme

#### Foundation Advisory Service

All approved projects have access to our core advisory service, which is free of charge. This foundational offer includes:

- An invitation to our annual launch event, delivered in partnership with the DfE
- A telephone and email service
- Key pre-opening resources
- Invitations to our Spotlight events at open free schools
- An invitation to our events focusing on the final stages of pre-opening

#### Site Advisory Service

Relevant to both sequential and concurrent groups, the NSN Site Advisory Service helps groups to navigate the complex process of securing a site and suitable free school building. Developed to complement the support provided by LocatED and FSC, the service includes:

- A named NSN Project Manager
- Access to NSN Site Associates
- Comprehensive and exclusive guidance resources about free school capital projects
- In-depth support meetings with NSN Project Managers and Site Associates
- Detailed feedback from support meetings

### Essentials Advisory Service

Developed to support the project management and delivery of the non-site related challenges you will tackle in pre-opening, the NSN Essentials Advisory Service focuses on areas such as pupil recruitment and admissions, the section 10 consultation, finance, governance, education planning and staffing. The NSN Essentials Advisory Service provides:

- A named NSN Project Manager
- Access to a range of NSN Associates
- Bespoke and exclusive networking opportunities with existing free schools
- In-depth meetings with NSN Project Managers and Associates
- Detailed feedback from support meetings
- Comprehensive and exclusive suite of guidance resources about all aspects of pre-opening
- Spokesperson training for principal designates

### Project Management Partnership Service

Based on our vast experience, and developed with the DfE's Pre-Opening Guidance in mind, the NSN Project Management Partnership is for groups planning to outsource some or all of the project management of their free school in pre-opening.

Split into two phases, the NSN Project Management Partnership takes into account the volume, complexity and timing of tasks in different phases of pre-opening. With additional bolt-on services available to buy, the NSN Project Management Partnership is the most bespoke service offered as part of the NSN Delivery Programme.