

# Pre-opening Resource

*Free school Ofsted guidance*

*March 2020*

**New  
Schools  
Network**

# Agenda

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This guidance offers practical advice for free schools facing their first inspection, based on NSN's analysis of the Ofsted reports published so far and the experience of free schools that have already been through this process.

- How free schools interact with Ofsted
- Free schools' Ofsted performance
- How to prepare for your first inspection
- Lessons learnt from existing free schools
  - Quality of education
  - Behaviour and attitudes
  - Personal development
  - Leadership and management
- Links and further resources
- Support for free schools in pre-opening



# How free schools interact with Ofsted

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- Free schools are inspected in the same way as other state schools, under the same Ofsted [Education inspection framework](#)
- All free schools must be inspected after two years of opening, so could be inspected from their seventh term
- Mainstream, special and alternative provision schools receive an inspection under 'Section 5' of the Education Act (2005)
- 16-19 free schools are inspected under the '[Further education and skills inspection handbook](#)', in line with the Education and Inspections Act (2006)

# Free schools Ofsted performance

- There are currently 508 open free schools (excluding studio schools and UTCs)
- Of these, 344 have had a section 5 inspection with the results outlined below (February 2020)
- 85% are Good or Outstanding with 15% judged Requires Improvement or Inadequate
- Whilst free schools are more likely to be rated Outstanding (31% to date) than the national average, they are also more likely to be rated Inadequate (6%)

## Free school published Ofsted reports, 85% Good or better

Outstanding	60	30.7%
Good	111	54.4%
RI	27	8.7%
Inadequate	8	6.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>206</b>	

Data correct in February 2020

# How to prepare for your first inspection

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## Before the inspection

- Prepare an easily accessible self-evaluation of your school which is: concise, focused on the same areas as the inspection framework and links them together, externally validated (e.g. through undertaking a mock inspection) and positive, highlighting evidence to merit higher grades if a judgement falls between two grades.
- Ensure your school website is as up to date and informative as possible. Ensure your school website is meeting requirements outlined in the DfE's [What academies, free schools and colleges should publish online](#).

## When the inspectors call

### During the call

- Establish any important features/issues which you want the inspectors to take into account when visiting. For example, if you are in a temporary site. See p. 15 of the [School inspection handbook](#) to find out more about what the inspector will ask when first contacting the school.
- Offer to send the inspector key documents

### After the call

- Send the inspector any key documents. The list of documents they will ask to see is in the school inspection handbook. Sending an executive summary of your data/judgements in advance would be useful. For full details on the information an inspector will request at the start of a visit, see p.16 of the [School inspection handbook](#)
- Prepare a suggested timetable
- Inform staff, pupils, parents and governors and remind them of what is required of each of them. For more information about what each party may be asked to do, see the [School inspection handbook](#) (p.22-29)
- Inform the External Expert assigned to your school by the DfE, who may be able to provide advice

# How to prepare for your first inspection

## During the inspection

Inspectors will expect a degree of professional challenge from you. It may be relevant to do so in the following cases:

### Good achievement

- Judgements about achievement are not definitively fixed.
- For example, the grade descriptor for a Good quality of education states: 'The curriculum is...developed to be ambitious...' . You could challenge inspectors on their definition of 'an ambitious curriculum model'.

### Outstanding achievement

- Schools do not need to have a certain amount of historic data or track record, so this should not be a barrier to being judged Outstanding.

### Teaching style

- Judgements should not be made about a preferred teaching style. Outcomes for pupils should be the focus.

### Pupil groups

- There is no definition of a 'group' in the school inspection handbook. Groups could be two or three pupils in a small school.
- If judgements are made about 'groups', you can challenge the inspectors definition of the 'group'.

### Innovation

- You can challenge inspectors to show a willingness/ability to understand your vision if it is not obvious that they do.

# Lessons learnt from existing free schools

## Key issues

## Lessons learnt

### Governance

Governors lack a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses, do not provide effective support and challenge and simply rely on information provided.

Effective processes are in place for governors to make their own assessments of data and observe the quality of provision. Governors contribute to school improvement planning and their skills are externally audited

### Target setting and assessment

Assessment data is not used to create an effective cycle of target setting, planning, teaching, assessment and intervention

Targets are SMART and progress is consistent across different subjects and groups of learners. Assessment is followed by intervention, which has a discernible impact

### Quality of teacher

School's judgements about teaching are driven by what teachers are seen to be doing, rather than the impact this has on pupil progress

Assessment data, workbooks and marking is used to triangulate judgements about teaching quality and judgements are moderated. Pupil data and prior attainment is used to plan lessons

### Middle leadership

Middle leadership is underdeveloped and not having enough of an impact (often due to inexperience and over reliance on the SLT)

Performance management of middle leaders demonstrates their effectiveness and priorities for development. CPD opportunities are available

### Behaviour and safety of pupils

Low attendance is not addressed robustly. Pupils are unaware about how to stay safe in different situations (including PREVENT)

Patterns of attendance are analysed and interventions are used to improve them. Good citizenship is promoted and there is a zero-tolerance approach to bullying

# Lessons learnt from existing free schools

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The following slides outline some key characteristics of Outstanding free schools, categorised under the four headings used by Ofsted:

- Quality of education
- Behaviour and attitudes
- Personal development
- Leadership and management

*Ofsted reports from free schools that display best practice in particular areas are referenced as examples. Click on each to read the full report.*

# Lessons learnt: Quality of education

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- Strong teamwork among teachers and assistant teachers which supports planning and ensures the needs of all groups are met
- Pupils' work, discussions with them, parental views, tracking and analysis of assessment information, and outcomes over the last two/three years all confirm that, over time, the quality of teaching is outstanding
- Work is differentiated for all learners, using prior attainment, pupil data and assessments to inform planning. In some recent cases, the most able have not been sufficiently challenged
- Teachers ask probing questions
- The curriculum is coherently planned and sequenced. Staff understand its intent, implementation and impact.

## Case Study

The Boxing Academy AP Free School: Outstanding, February 2020

*“Teachers quickly assess pupils’ academic needs. They know that many have gaps in their learning. Some have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The needs of these pupils are met. Teachers have excellent subject knowledge. They design activities that stretch and engage each pupil. For example, they use cameras to explore photographic techniques in art and use interactive software when studying anatomy.”*

# Lessons learnt: Quality of education

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- Marking and feedback is of a consistently high standard across the school and has an evidenced impact on pupil progress. Pupils respond to the marking
- Baseline data is used to establish targets and scaffold progress
- Systems for collecting data provide all the necessary information about pupils, e.g. the performance different pupils groups
- Interventions for particular groups of pupils are shown to be making an impact, particularly regarding use of the pupil premium
- Assessment does not create unnecessary burdens for staff or learners

## Case Study

Callywith College: Outstanding, January 2020

*“Assessment is mostly frequent and carefully ordered, which ensures that students can make excellent progress towards achieving their curricular goals. Most teachers provide students with high-quality feedback. This includes the use of specific technical or professional language and strategies to help them improve their work.”*

# Lessons learnt: Quality of education

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- Assessment data is used in the performance management of teaching staff
- Evidence of interventions to improve the quality of teaching
- School judgements about the quality of teaching are moderated/quality assured
- Teachers are able to identify their strengths and areas for development.
- Good practice is shared, for example, through observations of other staff members
- CPD provision is effective and all staff members have the opportunity to develop their skills

## Case Study

### Pioneer House High School: Outstanding, May 2019

*“Staff have excellent subject knowledge so they provide clear explanations, ask probing questions and pick up quickly on misconceptions. Staff adapt activities so that every pupil can access learning. For example, teaching assistants prepare a range of resources suitable for the different needs of pupils to support learning in mathematics lessons.”*

*“There is a ‘golden thread’ that links the objectives in pupils’ education, health and care plans with medium term plans and then individual lesson plans. Teachers ensure that they plan opportunities in every lesson for pupils to work towards their personal targets. Consequently, pupils are helped to overcome their individual barriers to learning successfully.”*

# Lessons learnt: Behaviour and attitudes

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## Attendance

- For low and persistent attendance, interventions have been put in place to improve it and there is evidence of these succeeding (e.g. family liaison support)
- School works well with external agencies to improve attendance and punctuality if necessary
- Pupils are punctual

### Case Study

Oasis Academy Southbank: Outstanding, June 2015

*“Students are confident and highly motivated to learn. Their passion to achieve extremely well is demonstrated in their well-above-average attendance, punctuality, and their readiness to begin learning...despite the long day and the length of journey that some students make daily.”*

*“Staff assess the risks associated with low attendance. Persistent absence is very low and, when it occurs, staff work very well with external agencies to keep students safe.”*

# Lessons learnt: Behaviour and attitudes

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## Behaviour and welfare

- Expectations about pupils' behaviour are applied consistently across the school
- Evidence of the impact of sanctions and reviews of behaviour are present
- Good citizenship is promoted amongst pupils (SMSC development permeates throughout the school)
- Good relationships are cultivated between pupils, parents and the school
- There is a zero-tolerance approach to bullying, low level disruptions, and poor presentation of work and dress
- Pupils are tolerant of others' differences

## Case Study

Harmonize Academy AP: Outstanding, January 2020

*"Pupils settle in well, at whatever point they join the school. When pupils first start, staff give them the time to observe what goes on in school. This helps pupils see what is expected of them, such as standards of behaviour. Moreover, when they have not studied a subject before, such as drama, this helps them find out about it before they have their first lesson in that subject."*

*"From the moment that they walk through the door, pupils conform to the school's high expectations. Behaviour around school and in classrooms is excellent. Pupils value their learning and respect their teachers and classmates. This means that they do not disrupt learning. Staff can focus on teaching and pupils focus on learning without any distractions."*

# Lessons learnt: Behaviour and attitudes

## Safeguarding

- Pupils know how to stay safe in different situations (inspectors will speak to pupils about this) including; cyber bullying, misuse of phones and awareness of PREVENT
- Pupils have a strong understanding of bullying and discrimination
- Pupils whose circumstances make them vulnerable, including those with disabilities, SEN or LAC, feel safe and are well cared for by staff and pupils
- Robust systems are in place to check suitability of all staff members, including training they have undertaken

## Case Study

Callywith College: Outstanding, January 2020

*“Students understand how to stay safe online and have a good understanding of local safeguarding issues, such as county lines and right-wing extremism. Leaders work effectively with a wide network of local organisations to support students with safeguarding and well-being issues. Managers provide staff with training in how to deal accurately with student concerns.*

*Each year, staff develop resources using information from local agencies, such as the police, for a ‘stay safe over summer’ tutorial session. This focuses on students attending local festivals. Staff use the feedback received from a ‘I wish my teacher knew’ survey to inform tutorial sessions and work with local agencies.”*

# Lessons learnt: Personal development

## Outcomes for all pupils

- Leaders ensure that all pupils, regardless of their starting points, have the opportunity to reach their full potential
- Pupils' progress in all subjects is built upon excellent teaching and checked vigorously
- Standards overall, including for disadvantaged pupils, are high, particularly in reading, writing and mathematics
- Development of literacy and numeracy skills has a high profile across all subjects
- Emphasis on literacy and reading contributes to pupils learning English as an additional language

## Case Study

Harris Invictus Academy Croydon:  
Outstanding, September 2016

*"Pupils make outstanding progress from their individual starting points. This is the result of carefully planned teaching, high expectations and an unwavering focus on excellence and academic achievement. As a result, achievement in English and mathematics is high and is similarly strong across the other subjects of the curriculum."*

*"The school's assessment information indicates that pupils will achieve very strong outcomes at GCSE. Although it is too early to say whether the school will achieve this in the future, the progress of current pupils suggests that they are being prepared very effectively for their examinations at the end of Year 11. Careers guidance is strong and provides pupils with practical opportunities to experience the world of work."*

# Lessons learnt: Personal development

## Gifted and talented

- The most able pupils demonstrate outstanding progress
- Scrutiny of work demonstrates the most able are surpassing expectations
- Challenging, probing questions are asked to extend pupils' critical thinking skills

## Case Study

William Perkin Church of England High School:  
Outstanding, June 2015

*"In many instances, scrutiny of work completed by the most-able students indicates that they are surpassing expectations. For example, in English, Year 8 students' work on Gothic genre typifies their sophisticated use of language when commenting on the Shelley's use of symbolism in Frankenstein."*

*"The most-able students are knowledgeable about planning, editing, structuring and using evidence to defend their view point. Editing is also a common feature of their work. These writing skills are replicated across subject areas. In mathematics, work on algebra and equations shows work pitched at GCSE level."*

# Lessons learnt: Leadership and management

## Senior Leadership

- High expectations for pupils
- Clear vision is communicated to pupils, staff and parents
- Culture created where staff are committed to achieving the vision and values of the school
- Unrelenting focus on reviewing outcomes and planning for improvement
- Rigorous monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning and evidence of support to staff members in need, including their workload
- Use effective systems to monitor quality of T&L and the curriculum.
- Engage with parents and demonstrate understanding of the local context
- Effective engagement with outside agencies

## Case Study

City of London Primary Academy, Islington: Outstanding,  
November 2019

*“Senior leaders include all staff in discussions about what pupils should be taught and when. Everyone shares high expectations for all pupils.”*

*“Leaders have made sure that staff are experts in teaching their subjects. Our checks on pupils’ books showed that this leads to high-quality work.”*

*“Leaders in the early years organise training for staff and checks on teaching to make sure that children learn to read quickly. They work with other leaders to influence the way pupils learn subjects across the whole school.”*

*“Leaders inspire teachers and staff members to learn. We found a positive team spirit in the school. Staff told us that leaders are considerate and supportive of their wellbeing and workload. Governors and trustees support the school and are involved in all aspects of school life.”*

# Lessons learnt: Leadership and management

## Middle Leadership

- Senior leaders and governors have clear strategies for developing leadership responsibilities as the school grows
- Leaders receive the training and support to carry out their roles effectively
- Leaders at all levels routinely and systematically check the quality of teaching and learning
- Deep understanding of the performance of groups of pupils in each subject

## Case Study

### The Olive School Blackburn: Outstanding, June 2015

*“Middle leaders, many of whom are new to their role, are highly effective. They have strong subject knowledge because they have been provided with the opportunities to train and develop their skills. These include attending external training courses and by working alongside senior leaders in the school. Middle leaders use this knowledge well to empower other colleagues through the provision of regular in-school training and by working alongside them. Middle leaders play an important role in monitoring the quality of their subjects and in planning and implementing new initiatives. For example, the leader of computing has recently been involved in developing the online safety curriculum and holding a workshop for parents to help pupils stay safe while using the internet.”*

# Lessons learnt: Leadership and management

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## Governance

- Ensure there is a clear vision and strategy
- Are able to hold leaders to account
- Forward thinking and critically evaluating the school's work without complacency
- Thorough knowledge of interpreting data to analyse progress of different groups
- Clear awareness of the quality of teaching and learning and the impact of initiatives to improve it
- Firm grasp on finances. Use data to assess impact of targeted school funding, particularly pupil premium funding
- Plan priorities and set targets for the school as it expands each year
- Regularly review own training needs with the support of senior leaders
- Regularly visit the school to check work for themselves and maintain a presence at school events

## Case Study

### Bedford Free School: Outstanding, January 2020

*“Governors and trustees are highly skilled in their roles. They provide excellent challenge and support for leaders. This ensures that leaders address areas that need improvement quickly and effectively. Governors and trustees focus on the best interests of pupils. Governors ensure that leaders work in partnership with parents and carers so that pupils get the best support possible. Governors keep a watchful eye on the number of pupils leaving the school and their reasons for doing so.”*

*“Governors and trustees check to make sure that leaders and staff carry out their [safeguarding] duties effectively.”*

# Links and further resources

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[Ofsted Website](#) Includes link to all inspection reports, latest announcements, statistics and publications.

[Ofsted: Education inspection framework](#) The single key resource for schools, setting out what schools can expect from inspection, what inspectors must do and how they should make judgements. It also includes grade descriptors.

[Ofsted: Further education and skills inspection handbook](#) Guidance for inspecting 16-19 free schools under the common inspection framework.

[Ofsted: School inspection framework](#) Summarises the main features of school inspections and their statutory basis.

[Ofsted: Myths about inspections](#) Summarises key misconceptions about Ofsted inspections.

[Guidance: what academies, free schools and colleges should publish online](#) The information that all types of academies, free schools and 16 to 19 colleges should publish on their websites.

[NSN free school news](#) Includes details of notable Ofsted inspections.

[20 key questions for the governing board to ask itself](#) Developed by the NGA (National Governor's Association) and The Key to help governing boards evaluate their performance.

# Support for free schools in pre-opening

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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

# Support for free schools in pre-opening

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## 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

# Support for free schools in pre-opening

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## 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.

Contact [preopen@newschoolsnetwork.org](mailto:preopen@newschoolsnetwork.org) to find out more or visit our website at [www.newschoolsnetwork.org/](http://www.newschoolsnetwork.org/)

# Questions?

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