



Pre-opening

Mainstream applicants (Wave 15)

Private & Confidential

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Project management	4
2.1 Project management during pre-opening	4
2.2 Risk management during pre-opening	5
3. The transition from pre- to post-opening	9
3.1 Trustees commitments pre-opening	9
3.2 Pre- to Post-Opening	9
3.3 Recruiting a Board	9
3.4 Pre-Opening Activities	10
4. Support during pre-opening	11
4.1 The role of your project manager	11
4.2 Support we can offer	16

1. Introduction

Create: Schools work directly with free school proposer groups to help them navigate the process of applying for a new school across mainstream, special education and alternative provision routes.

Our team of highly experienced advisors provide bespoke guidance and support to ensure that applications meet the Department for Education's criteria, and that proposers have the tools they need to progress to the pre-opening phase if their application is approved.

This resource is designed to provide you with a high-level understanding of the pre-opening process, the key milestones and potential risks. This resource will provide you with guidance and support through the initial phase. It will outline the legal requirements and expectations you will need to endeavour to progress through a successful pre-opening quickly and effectively.

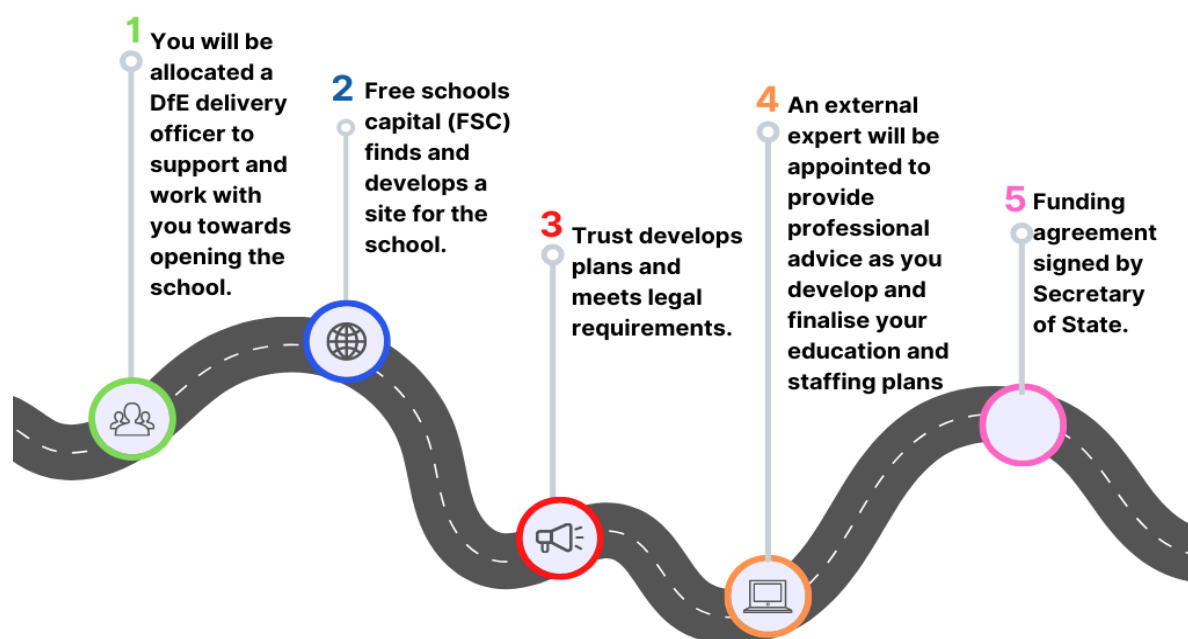
2. Project management

2.1 Project management during pre-opening

Your project manager is responsible for the successful delivery of your school, the proposed site with the appropriate staff, teachers, resources, and equipment.

Below is a free school pre-opening timeline, your project plan should be devised to align with this, which the project manager is responsible for. The project manager is responsible for co-ordinating each activity involved with the pre-opening, ensuring everything happens efficiently, in time and to budget. They will also be responsible for ensuring that any unforeseen events that may impact the project plan are mitigated and worked around. The project manager is also responsible for monitoring the budget used during pre-opening.

Free School Pre-Opening Timeline



The project manager should liaise with the various stakeholders your project requires you to engage with, your DfE External Expert, your Free Schools Capital (FSC) contact, the local authority, and any planning consultants, architects, building contractors, and others. Your project manager is responsible for ensuring all relevant parties are kept up to date as the school progresses through its pre-opening phase and whether there are any risks to the school opening successfully on schedule, and what they are doing to mitigate those risks.

You may have internal project management expertise, or you can use your project management grant to procure external support. PAG can provide project management services; please see the PAG website for more information.

2.2 Risk management during pre-opening

Risk management is an essential part of pre-opening, and all members of the pre-opening team should understand the risks presented by their workstream. We have provided some examples below.

Risk	Mitigation
<p><u>Leadership</u></p> <p>A proficient principal designate is not recruited in the first or subsequent rounds of recruitment and as a result, is not appointed early enough to support and influence the development of school policies and education brief.</p>	<p>Develop a successful and robust leadership team to ensure support is adequately received in case recruitment is not swift enough.</p> <p>Start recruitment process early to ensure proficient principal designate is hired, with sufficient time to run a second round if initially unsuccessful</p> <p>Strengthen partnerships with existing Outstanding school or schools to act in partnership</p> <p>Leverage existing networks, explore possibility of short-term secondments if required, remodel salaries/contracts to attract wider candidate field</p> <p>Consider the use of recruitment agencies</p>
<p><u>Staffing</u></p> <p>Sufficient and suitable staff have not been recruited 6 months before opening.</p>	<p>Recruit staff before DfE has agreed to enter into a funding agreement.</p>

	<p>Use connections within trust, other schools and the local area to ensure suitable staff are recruited.</p>
<p><u>Governance</u></p> <p>A suitably skilled chair of trustees is not appointed 10 months before opening.</p> <p>If you run an existing school or have another project in pre-opening and:</p> <p>You are issued with a financial notice to improve (FNtI)</p> <p>A DfE official or external expert raises any concerns about it, for example, financial concerns that fall short of an FNtI but are still a concern, such as a forecast deficit</p> <p>Ofsted judge one or more of your existing schools as either requires improvement or inadequate</p> <p>There is a significant decline in the performance of one or more of your existing schools (for example, if your Progress 8 or Attainment 8 scores fall below agreed thresholds)</p> <p>You are not able to submit a complete governance plan 10 months before opening</p>	<p>Using proven educational models combined, recruit outstanding staff including the principal designate, establish effective governance and monitoring processes so that areas of concern are addressed quickly</p>
<p><u>Pupil recruitment</u></p>	<p>Consider the local need using market research and demand on place uptake in the area, plus</p>

<p>Marketing and recruitment plan targets have not been met, indicating that the school may be unviable upon opening.</p> <p>Application numbers, at the application deadline date, indicate the school will not be viable.</p> <p>Accepted offer numbers indicate that the school will not be viable. In the case of AP or special schools, the number of referrals received from commissioners is low, making the school financially unviable (below DfE’s minimum viable number).</p>	<p>the time required to establish a reputation for the new school</p> <p>Have clear and robust financial modelling that provides different occupancy levels to ensure financial sustainability regardless of the uptake. Implement an efficient monitoring system to ensure the minimum uptake requirements are met</p> <p>Provide a strong promotional campaign to show prospective students of the offers available. Work closely with schools in the area for the promotion of the offer.</p>
<p><u>Local factors</u></p> <p>The local authority is or becomes unsupportive of the project</p> <p>Local residents or schools raise significant opposition to your project during or following consultation</p> <p>Opposition to the project attracts media attention</p> <p>Your project is linked to a new housing development and issues have arisen with that development that may result in delays</p>	<p>Conduct an open and exhaustive consultation to ensure all concerns are considered. Work alongside local providers to ensure it’s in the best interest of the young people.</p> <p>Continue to invest in local consultation and relationship building, based on work done to date</p>
<p><u>Finance</u></p>	<p>Careful budget planning, including a robust procurement framework</p>

<p>You are likely to run out of project development grant (PDG)</p> <p>A potential conflict of interest is identified when spending PDG</p> <p>You are unable to submit a viable financial plan of the readiness to open meeting or at other important points as requested</p>	<p>A strong marketing and communication plan to ensure sufficient pupil numbers</p> <p>Seek underwriting arrangements from local authority</p> <p>Ensuring that all schools are in areas of basic need, ensuring a robust plan for growth is in place</p> <p>Diversify income to decrease reliance</p>
<p><u>Education</u></p> <p>Risks could include that you fail to agree an education plan with your external expert.</p>	<p>Ensure the appropriate expertise is in place from early stages Resources and support are consistent beyond application stage into the preopening</p>
<p><u>Admissions</u></p> <p>You wish to adopt unconventional admission arrangements</p> <p>You wish be part of your local authority coordinated admissions</p>	<p>Liaise with Local Authority, establishing and maintaining a robust relationship.</p> <p>Establish relationships with free schools with similar admission policies</p>

The risks which have been presented in this section are not exhaustive. These are the most common risks, but each individual project will have its own risks and you should discuss any concerns with your delivery officer.

3. The transition from pre- to post-opening

3.1 Trustees commitments pre-opening

You will need to ensure you have trustees with sufficient capacity, particularly in pre-opening and the early years of the trust, to undertake their commitment to the role, which can be significant.

The burden on individual trustees can be reduced through effective use of committees and working groups. They can work on behalf of the trustees to explore specific areas of interest, make recommendations to the board of trustees, or take decisions on the board of trustees' behalf.

3.2 Pre- to Post-Opening

During Pre-Opening the Trustees will have overall responsibility and accountability for the new school, but their involvement at this stage should be high-level and strategic, unless there are particular workstreams where the expertise of individual trustees may benefit the project

The board must appoint an audit and risk committee – either a dedicated committee or combined with another committee, to advise the board on the adequacy of the trust's internal control framework, including financial and non-financial controls and risk management arrangements, to direct a programme of internal scrutiny and to consider the results and quality of external audit.

Taking a strategic role is not as simple as handing over plans to the principal designate and senior leaders. An important task for your trustees during pre-opening will be to evaluate how they will monitor and assess the school's strengths, weaknesses, and progress, and how they will support and challenge the principal designate and senior leadership team.

3.3 Recruiting a Board

Great boards build, grow and sustain great academy trusts. The support they provide and the accountability they demand from trusts are central to ensuring good governance and public trust.

If you are a new trust, you may not have established a trust board yet to lead on the initial recruitment. However, you may have a project steering group that is driving the new trust development and your recruitment panel could be selected from this group. Depending on the skills available within your steering group you may wish to complete a skills gap analysis.

The trust's articles of association should set out conditions determining the minimum number of trustees the trust will have. All trusts should have reserved places for parents, carers or other

individuals with parental responsibilities in their governance structure;
trusts should hold elections to fill these places, as appropriate.

Next you will need to agree the aims of recruitment and the strategic challenges the board will face, then agree who is on the panel and check the Articles / key dates for shortlisting, interviews, school visits. Following this, a role specification should be drafted and published for recruitment.

3.4 Pre-Opening Activities

The activities that your project manager co-ordinates will generally fall into those relating to the administration of staff, governor and pupil recruitment, marketing, community engagement, site acquisition, site building/renovation, planning permission co-ordination, curriculum design, pre-open budget management, procurement of services, and Ofsted preparation.

4. Support during pre-opening

4.1 The role of your project manager

Your project manager should also ensure that the flow of work progresses is manageable and that there are not periods where there is a surplus of activity with too little capacity, or periods where there is little activity and too much capacity. This will require intelligent project management and an ability to recognise how much time is realistically likely to be required for different tasks.

Output	Summary
<p>Governance</p>	<p>Governing bodies must have the skills at their disposal to carry out effective selection processes. Establishing a robust governance structure in the pre-opening period is essential to the continued success of your trust and your free school.</p> <p>During pre-opening, you will need to submit a complete governance plan to the FSC for approval. If you run one or more academies already, you will need to consider how you will manage the growth of your trust during the pre-opening period.</p> <p>Governors may need to seek help or training, for example, on good interviewing techniques. At least one person on any selection panel must have completed appropriate safer recruitment training (see Keeping Children Safe in Education - KCSIE). Selection panels should also take into account any advice provided by the school's HR manager or provider.</p>

<p>Consultation</p>	<p>Prior to opening your free school, you should deliver a section 10 consultation. This gives you an opportunity to communicate with the residents of the local area and community of your proposed school and to informing relevant parties about your proposal. Active communications with prospective parents, stakeholders and other providers will be paramount in a successful pre-opening.</p> <p>You should consult on things such as staff recruitment, admission arrangements, SEN, and other school policies. This is an integral part of the pre-opening as it will inform local residents of your plans and ensure you have met all legal requirements.</p> <p>Active community engagement through consultation will also prove useful when recruiting staff and establishing the reputation of your school.</p> <p>The findings will then need to be reported to the DfE and communicated with relevant stakeholders the actions you are taking to address any points raised through consultation.</p>
<p>Finance</p>	<p>In the pre-opening phase, you will receive a Project Development Grant (PDG) from the DfE. This will cover all non-capital costs associated</p>

	<p>with setting up your free school. You must consider how you will spend your money as efficiently as possible, always ensuring best value for money.</p> <p>Additionally, you must evaluate how the finances of your school will be managed when it opens. Schools that have under-recruited pupils can also have financial viability issues if their plans do not have sufficient flexibility. DfE will not open a school where it does not believe the school will recruit enough pupils to be financially viable.</p>
<p>Site</p>	<p>Finding a suitable site for your free school can be stressful. You will need to work alongside Free Schools Capital (FSC), your Project Manager, and Technical Director at the DfE to find the appropriate site for your school.</p> <p>The earlier a site is secured, relevant planning permission obtained and building works agreed, the better. Having these in place can be very useful when marketing your school to prospective parents, pupils and staff.</p> <p>Any delays in finding or securing a site can further delay the development of your whole project. The average time it takes to secure a site is 1 year. To effectively deliver your vision for the</p>

	<p>school, it is integral that you have awareness of what actions need completing to increase your opportunity of securing a suitable site in a timely matter.</p>
<p>Pupil Marketing</p>	<p>During pre-opening you will need to recruit pupils, as well as staff. Pupil recruitment will impact a larger proportion of your pre-opening, such as financial viability and curriculum plan.</p> <p>To ensure maximum take up, you will need to efficiently market your school, depending on your local area. You must market your school to encourage applications from pupils from a range of ethnic, religious and socioeconomic groups, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to promote a pupil intake that reflects the diversity of your wider local community.</p> <p>Using different platforms and engaging through various methods will suitably boost marketing and ensure it is tailored to your school's vision</p>
<p>Education Brief</p>	<p>In this stage, the education plan submitted in your application will be actualised. For this to happen successfully, you will need to recruit a headteacher designate, other members of staff and design strong educational policies. Next you will have to create a robust Education Brief to submit for the DfE and prepare for pre- and post-opening Ofsted inspections.</p>

	<p>Passing your Ofsted inspections will be integral to a successful pre-opening and further achievement of your school, providing the foundations for your schools development.</p>
<p>Admissions</p>	<p>You will also need to establish your admissions arrangements; this will help make your vision for the school a reality. For example, you may intend to prioritise places for children from disadvantaged families and you can achieve this by giving priority in your arrangements to children eligible for the pupil premium.</p> <p>Every mainstream free school must operate within the local fair access protocol. This is established by the local authority to ensure that, outside the normal admissions round, unplaced children, especially the most vulnerable, are offered a place at a suitable school as quickly as possible.</p>
<p>Senior Leadership Team</p>	<p>As part of pre-opening, you will be required to identify a Senior Executive Leader, such as an headteacher or principal executive, or CEO. This person must be top of the management hierarchy and held accountable by the board of trustees for the performance of the trust as a whole. The Senior Executive Leader should be the trust’s accounting officer.</p>

Headteacher Designate	<p>A Headteacher Designate must be established during this time developing education plans, policies. They will ensure engagement with the community and potential new pupils of the school. Before the new headteacher is recruited, the pre-opening team, led by the CEO may oversee the project. A thorough and appropriate recruitment process must be followed to ensure the highest quality of staff throughout.</p> <p>The Headteacher Designate, alongside other teaching and non-teaching staff, will draw up detailed education policies. This will assist you in the next step of submitting a strong Education Brief to the DfE and to prepare for Ofsted Inspections.</p>
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4.2 Support we can offer

Premier Advisory Group can assist with pre-opening activities, including:

- Representing you at project meetings and calls with associated preparation and follow up.
- Correspondence, informal and formal reporting
- Risk register management and mitigation
- Ad hoc advice
- General project management support

For assistance or advice, please contact Create: Schools or access one of our guides on these processes.