Create Schools
powered by PAG

Guide to Marketing and Community Engagement

Wave 3 Special Applicants

Private & Confidential

May 2023

37th Floor, One Canada Square, Canary Wharf, London E14 5AA
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1. Introduction: The importance of marketing and community engagement

Although the Department for Education's guidance on how to apply to set up a free school no longer includes a standalone section on community engagement, it still forms a crucial part of the application process.

- Guidance on the assessment criteria for Section C2 (Rationale) of the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) free school application form requires applicants to provide "evidence of engagement, including a summary of conversations with, for example, neighbouring local authorities and commissioning bodies, schools forums and parent and carer forums."

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/special-free-school-applications/how-to-apply-to-set-up-a-special-free-school-for-local-authorities#application-process

- The assessment criteria for Section C also requires a summary of "how you have developed your strategy in consultation with the local community, local (and neighbouring local authorities), parent and schools forums and other schools with an interest, including other local special providers whose intake may be affected."

Therefore, effective engagement with key stakeholders will continue to be a core component of the annexes of a successful application as this will enable proposers to:

- Evidence engagement with, and support from key stakeholders (all free schools)
- Demonstrate that you have listened to stakeholder feedback and aligned your proposal with this (all free schools).

In addition, a diversified approach to community engagement at this stage of the process will enable you to build a base of prospective parents, staff, local governors, and supportive stakeholders upon which to build once the school enters the pre-opening phase. Carefully planned marketing and engagement activities early in the application process will maximise your chance of turning your vision into reality. The purpose of this guide is to help you identify the most focused and cost-effective marketing tactics for your proposed school.

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2. Optimising communications to attract relevant parties

2.1 Identifying key stakeholder groups

Defining key stakeholder groups will help you focus your marketing efforts to reach the relevant audience and ensure that the messaging is relevant and in the right tone.

Make a note of each stakeholder audience and considerations when communicating them, for example:

Target audience	Why are they a priority?	Key considerations when communicating with this audience
Prospective parents	The school will need to attract a minimum number of students to receive its Funding Agreement so evidencing support at this stage is key.	- Often time-poor - Often choose the school with a good reputation/ recommended by friends and family - Do not necessarily speak English as a first language. - May not fully understand what a free school is. - For Special schools, parents may feel that private provision options offer a higher quality of education
Headteachers of local schools	You will be working with local headteachers if your school is approved. Keeping headteachers informed of your plans and progress and inviting feedback will help address questions and avoid misunderstandings or misconceptions and help build positive relationships.	- May be concerned that a new school may have a detrimental impact on their roll. - Will be keen to understand the benefits of a new school (e.g. sharing of facilities)

Other examples of key stakeholders include prospective students, prospective staff, local authorities and commissioning bodies, local MP and councillors, local universities, established community groups, etc.

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2.2 Communications

Each time you plan a communication, whether it is a leaflet, social media post or an email, consider which of your stakeholder groups each communication is targeted at and ensure that the key considerations you have listed (see table above) are met.

Craft a key message around what you want your key audiences to know about your proposed school and make sure that every communication includes this message, along with a clear call to action (e.g. 'Visit our website to read more about our proposal'). Testing the language with some of your audience ahead of marketing to the masses will ensure you get off to a good start.

Also ensure that any frequently asked questions, e.g. 'When will the school open?', are covered and any known concerns, e.g. 'Will you employ qualified teachers?' are allayed and review the wording to include further FAQs as required.

We also recommend that you prepare a shorter 20-30 second elevator pitch which should be compelling, memorable, clear and succinct. Briefing the whole team on this will ensure that key messages are delivered clearly and consistently.

TOP TIPS:

- ✓ Research communications of other local schools, including other proposed free schools, to ensure that your messaging clearly reflects the proposed school's unique USPs.
- ✓ State WHAT the call to action is and WHY e.g. 'Register your support to strengthen our application and help shape the proposed school'.
- ✓ Ensure all content is proofread ahead of publication – typos and grammatical errors do not instill confidence in the quality of a proposed school!

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REMEMBER:

- ! Do not make any promises of a specific opening year or reveal any proposed sites at this stage; this may jeopardise site negotiations and a provisional opening year can only be agreed by the DfE once a site and the time it will take to deliver have been confirmed. *
- ! Keep messaging clear and concise – the short-term memory can only hold around seven pieces of information and most people will not remember more than three messages.
- ! Avoid 'woolly' statements that should be a given for any school, e.g., 'high standard of education' – if no school would state the opposite, leave it out!
- ! Keep language positive, e.g., 'high expectations of behaviour' rather than 'strong discipline'.
- ! Do not say anything negative about other local schools.
- ! Avoid jargon and acronyms – parents will not necessarily understand 1FE, KS1, MAT, PAN, Progress 8 or DfE!
- ! Too much 'sales' focused language will also make people switch off.

***'We will be running this wave to a strict timeline based on opening the new provision within a period of 3 to 4 years.'**

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/special-free-school-applications/how-to-apply-to-set-up-a-special-free-school-for-local-authorities#application-process

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3. Creating awareness and engaging with key stakeholders

Careful planning and identification of cost-effective methods of reaching and engaging with stakeholders are key to strengthening the application at this phase when budgets and timeframes are limited. These will also provide a strong foundation for development once an application is approved to the pre-opening phase.

3.1 Planning marketing and engagement activities

Once you have identified your key stakeholders you are ready to start planning how and when to reach these audiences. Consider:

- Where do they spend their time and what opportunities are there for interacting with these audiences face-to-face and online?
- Where do they search for and share information? What media do they watch or read?
- Who do they trust and who influences them?
- How can these audiences be reached if there are there any restrictions in place as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Encouraging local school ambassadors to get involved at this stage will:

- demonstrate the proposer group's commitment to valuing the local community's views and needs.
- provide local knowledge and a deeper understanding of the community's needs and concerns (this is especially important if the proposers are from outside the area)
- identify potential members of the local governing body, if the application is successful
- help identify any potential local detractors so the proposers can make contingency plans as appropriate (e.g. at events)
- provide extra pairs of hands for marketing the proposed school.

You will now be ready to plan relevant activities to reach your target audiences, engage with them to share your proposals and gather feedback and registrations of demand and support.

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TOP TIPS:

- ✓ Note all the channels that key supporters/partners use, e.g., website, social media and website and newsletters, and agree how these might be used to promote the proposed school. They may also host support and events where you might be able to engage face-to-face with key stakeholders, including prospective families.
- ✓ Setting a target number of registrations of demand and declarations of support from the outset will help focus your marketing efforts. The closer the number of registrations of demand is to the proposed PAN for the most likely opening years and the higher the number of declarations and letters of support that can be evidenced, the more reassurance this will give the DfE of a successful opening.
- ✓ Create a clear plan of marketing and engagement activities including who is responsible and the agreed timings for each.

- Each free school and its community are unique, there is not a 'one size fits all' solution to marketing and engagement. While a 'scattergun approach' may be tempting, focusing on activities that are most likely to reach and facilitate engagement with your target audiences will ensure that your time and budget are wisely and effectively channelled.
- Below are tried and tested, cost- effective ways to reach and engage with key stakeholders, along with the advantages and drawbacks of each, so you can decide which might work best for you.

The Rule of 7

The Marketing Rule of 7 states that a prospect needs to 'hear' an advertiser's message at least 7 times before they will take action to buy a product or service.

A variety of focused activities is key to reaching your target audiences.

Special and AP schools

Special and AP schools need to gather support from other key stakeholders and demonstrate that they have listened to feedback and aligned their proposal with this and can plan activity that fulfils these objectives, for example through emails and visits. You will also need to ensure that your wider reputation, including media reporting and social media engagement, is positive to give your application the greatest chance of success.

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Website

As most people have a smartphone on hand and are spending more time online, having a website for your proposed school is a must. It will not only serve as the key hub of information and primary destination of calls to action to the online Registration of Support form for your proposed school but will also improve the credibility of your proposal.

Advantages:

- Cost-effective and quick to set up - a simple yet professional-looking pre-application website could be built through easy-to-manage systems such as WordPress, Wix and SquareSpace; dedicated pages could also be added to your current Trust or organisation's website.
- You can provide more in-depth information than in any other type of communication and can update it immediately.
- Adding an analytics tool such as Google Analytics will enable you to track key site statistics to include in your application.

Disadvantages:

- Content and information needs to be refreshed regularly to give stakeholders a reason to keep visiting it and to demonstrate the proposer group's proactivity.
- Although there are many systems that enable websites to be set up cheaply and quickly, it takes skill and an eye for design to make the end result appear professional.
- Websites that do not appear professional or are not easy to navigate can have a negative impact on the perception of your proposed school.

TOP TIPS:

- ✓ Make it clear how people can contact you – consider a dedicated email address and phone line.
- ✓ A news section including information on community engagement activities and the progress of the application, etc. will help keep content fresh and up to date.
- ✓ Promote upcoming events and promotion days through an events page.
- ✓ A social media feed will also keep content current.
- ✓ A regularly updated FAQs page featuring frequently asked questions with answers will help minimise the same questions being repeated.

REMEMBER:

- ! Check that your website complies with legal requirements.
- ! Traffic from social media posts will be directed to a single web page so ensure that the content of the landing page is relevant and concise.

With a crowded playing field of social media platforms and the average social media user in the UK having 6.3 accounts**, it is important to research which platforms your target audience uses and focus your attention on these. If your Trust or organisation already uses social media, tapping into existing followers on these channels can help promote the proposed school.

The table below may help you channel your efforts accordingly:

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Platform	Description	Activity to consider
Facebook	• Social networking site where users can post comments, share images and videos, post links to web content and create groups/networks. • 46.6 million users in the UK in 2022* • Largest user group is people aged 25-34 • 60% of the UK population (13+) can be reached with ads through Facebook advertising**	• Encourage supporters to Like and follow your page in all communications • Regular posts – expect high levels of engagement. • Test images, videos and messaging to maximise organic reach. • Encourage relevant local/community/parent groups pages to share your content. • The decline of organic reach means that more company pages are turning to advertising. • Promote events and completion of the Registration of Support from etc. through ads targeted to people of the relevant age group, with the relevant interests in the target geographic area
Instagram	• Social networking site with an emphasis on visual sharing • 34 million users (Mar 2022) *** • Largest user group is people aged 25-34 • 55% of the UK population can be reached through advertising*	• More suitable for image sharing once the school is approved to pre-opening (site images, etc.) • At this stage, users can be targeted through the same Facebook campaign without the need to set up an Instagram account
Twitter	• Online news and social networking site where people communicate in short tweets • 23.3 million users in the UK* • 31% of the UK population can be reached through Twitter ads	• Treat this as a news feed, directing followers to more in-depth content on your website • Many relevant local businesses, community groups and media pages etc. will follow you back and potentially retweet to their network • A direct line to local news journalists who often have a Twitter account when you have news to share

* https://www.statista.com/topics/3236/social-media-usage-in-the-uk/#dossierKeyfigures

**https://www.avocadosocial.com/uk-social-media-statistics-2022

***https://www.statista.com/statistics/1018012/instagram-users-united-kingdom

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Flyers

Printed items have a higher perceived value and a longer 'shelf life' than digital communications. Flyers are cost-effective to produce and are not only an excellent way to reach your target audience through distribution in places they are likely to visit but also facilitate face-to-face activities such as canvassing, events and meetings.

Advantages:

- A tangible communication helps the proposed school feels more 'real'.
- A way to engage people who do not regularly go online.
- Relatively cheap and fast to print.
- These can be designed using the many templates available online or in Publisher, etc. if you do not have the budget for a professional designer at this stage.

Disadvantages:

- Flyer templates still require a level of expertise to produce a professional-looking design with a clear call to action.
- It can be difficult to stand out in places that display multiple flyers at once.
- Distribution is a time-consuming process.

TOP TIPS:

- ✓ A5 flyers are large enough to get your message across and can fit in standard display stands, be pinned to community boards and fit through letterboxes and in community magazines.
- ✓ Create a distribution list and allocate areas to representatives to ensure targeted and comprehensive coverage.
- ✓ Think outside the box – in addition to local children's clubs, community and faith centres, libraries, supportive nurseries and schools etc. distribute to places such as cafes, hairdressers, children's shoe shops etc.
- ✓ Independent businesses are more likely to display flyers than large chains; the exception to this is some supermarket chains that have community boards.
- ✓ Replenish flyers as necessary.
- ✓ A digital version can be promoted for sharing on social media and in messaging groups etc.
- ✓ Explore opportunities to distribute to local community magazines. Some may be willing to do this for free.

REMEMBER:

- ! Ensure you order enough flyers; printing an extra 1,000 will not cost much more per unit whilst this is on press but will cost a lot more per unit if you reorder later on.

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Emails, surveys and visits to key members of the local community

Letters of support from key community representatives such as headteachers, MP & councillors, leaders of community organisations etc. will help give the DfE confidence that your proposal will fit the needs of its local community.

Emails outlining your proposal will make these key stakeholders aware of your proposal and inviting them to meet face-to-face will allow you to discuss your proposal in depth and build rapport upon which to build if your application is successful.

Online surveys are a useful tool for gathering quantitative data to support your application by demonstrating that there is a high level of interest in establishing a new school in the local area.

Advantages:	Disadvantages:
• Letters will evidence engagement and support • Supportive community members may agree to promote the application via their social media channels and newsletters etc., giving your proposal further reach and endorsement.	• Face-to-face meetings with multiple community representatives can be time-consuming.

TOP TIPS:

- ✓ Create a database of key community representatives.
- ✓ Send a letter of support template; making the process as quick and easy as possible for busy people will increase the chances of written pledges of support.

REMEMBER:

! Ensure that the processing of any personal data and all communications are GDPR-compliant

Visits to supportive schools

Schools or pre-schools with children who are of the right age to eventually apply for your proposed school may allow you to display flyers in their main reception area or even authorise you to talk with parents in the playground or at the school gates. They may also promote your proposal and any events via their parent newsletters and social media channels.

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Advantages:	Disadvantages:
• Direct face-to-face engagement with many prospective families in one location. • Activity that is endorsed by an educational institution will increase parents' confidence in your proposal.	• Can become challenging if there is opposition to your proposed school.

TOP TIPS:

! Can become challenging if there is opposition to your proposed school.

REMEMBER:

! In areas where English is not widely spoken as a first language, try to select representatives who speak the most commonly spoken languages.

Events

Stakeholders who invest the time to attend an event have a high level of interest in your proposed school and are more likely to express their support and provide in-depth feedback than those who are approached through canvassing. Face-to-face contact, e.g., parent/carer forums can be very persuasive and this is an excellent way to get committed parents and volunteers involved.

Advantages:	Disadvantages:
• On-the-spot completion of the Registration of Support form to evidence support and demand for the application. • An event allows ample time to collect meaningful feedback on the proposal.	• Can become challenging if there is opposition to your proposed school. • Time-intensive and requires representatives to give up their evenings and weekends.

TOP TIPS:

✓ Hold events on different days and at different times to maximise attendance.
✓ Less formal drop-in style events tend to attract more people.
✓ Include an Events page on the website and promote these across all communication channels.

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REMEMBER:

- ! Plan events ahead to give plenty of time to publicise these.
- ! Ensure that the selected venue has good parking and disabled access and facilities.
- ! Encourage all attendees to complete the online Registration of Support form and make a laptop or paper copies accessible for this purpose.
- ! Record any questions asked at the event and add these to the FAQ section of the website.
- ! Prepare a contingency plan should detractors attend.

3.2 Monitoring which tactics work

Identifying which marketing and communication tactics work will help you adapt activity during the application phase to channel your efforts most effectively. Ask people how they heard about the proposed school at every opportunity (e.g., on the Registration of Support form, feedback forms at events etc.) and analyse the results to see what has worked.

This will also help you plan your time and budget accordingly when actively recruiting students during the pre-opening phase.

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4. The application has been submitted

What next?

Preparing a free school application requires a huge amount of time and dedication. As tempting as it may be to sit back and wait for news of an interview, it is important to continue to listen to key stakeholders and gather evidence of demand and support:

- You will be expected to update the DfE on further engagement at the interview.

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5. Support from Create: Schools and PAG

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.

We are here to help academy trusts, schools and other organisations ensure the best outcomes for children and young people across the country by setting up more great schools.

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

5.1 What does this support involve?

- A diagnostic tool to identify key priorities for your application and provide tailored support options
- A bespoke project plan to map out key milestones of the application process and help you manage capacity
- Advice on how to maximise community engagement and identify key stakeholders
- Advice to local authorities on arranging and delivering bidder's days and key engagement
- with trusts and organisations
- In-depth reviews of your application with detailed, actionable feedback provided
- Access to Create: Schools' range of highly skilled and experienced external associates and partners
- Networking opportunities with successful free school proposers
- Advice and support to prepare for Department for Education interviews

Get in touch with Create: Schools here.

In addition, PAG (Premier Advisory Group) can support trusts to conduct community engagement drawing on our experience of previous waves, as well as delivering pre-opening and academy conversion project management. Get in touch to find out how.

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