

## 5.1 Demonstrating parental demand

### *Why it matters*

Free School applications will only be approved where there is demonstrable parental demand. The DfE will want to see evidence of parental demand for three reasons:

- If there are no pupils, there is no need for a school;
- If your application is successful the DfE will be giving you money for capital, lead-in costs (before you open) and start-up costs (before you are full). They want to see robust evidence that the school will be the size you predict before they commit that money; and
- The principle behind the Free School policy is to give more parents and pupils the option of a good school – you must therefore engage with local parents.

Evidence of demand is likely to be one of the **most time-consuming elements** of the application process and one that you should start work on this immediately.

**Please note:** if your application is for a special school or **alternative provision** there is a different process. Separate guidance will be available when the relevant application forms are published on the DfE website.

### *What is required*

You will need to survey parents and provide a list of parents who would **identify the school as a choice for their child** if it were available. You need to include the age of the child or the school year the child is currently in (if relevant). Your list should only include parents for whom the school would be a realistic option (ie. within a reasonable distance); if the school is going to be in Cornwall you should not list families living in Newcastle (unless they are going to move.)

You need to provide a list of parents with children of the relevant age equivalent, **as a minimum**, to 50% enrolment in your first two years of operation. If you do not do this your application will not be accepted.

#### **Examples:**

- An application for a secondary school opening in 2012 with 120 children per year, starting with Year 7 only, would need to show demand for **AT LEAST 60 children** currently in Year 5 and **60 children** currently in Year 4.
- An application for an all-through school opening in 2012 with 60 pupils per year at primary and 150 per year at secondary, starting both the primary (Reception) and secondary (Year 7) phases in your first year, would need to show demand for **AT LEAST 75 children** currently in Year 5, **75 children** currently in Year 4, **30 children** who will be age 4 in September 2012, and **30 children** who will be age 4 in September 2013.

If you can provide more evidence of parental demand than the minimum requirement you should do so. Your application will be compared against others, so the more demand you can demonstrate, the stronger the application.

If you are proposing a 16-19 school you may also wish to sign up pupils rather than their parents.

**When submitting survey data, you should submit the age of the children, and the postcode of everyone who signed your petition, but not their names.**

However, you should keep a record of their names in case you are called on to produce them at a later date.

The list of names that you provide to the DfE is likely to look something like this:

We asked parents whether they would include our new school in the choices for their child if they could. We explained our school to parents as follows:  ‘[INSERT TEXT SPECIFIC TO YOUR SCHOOL PROPOSAL]’.	
Age of child(ren)	Postcode (will not be published)
9	AB1 2CD
8, 9	EF3 4GH

Your application should also include the list of questions included in your parental survey. These should be specific to your school. You do not need to provide copies of the individual completed survey forms.

**If you are holding this data in electronic form, do not forget to register with the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO):**

[http://www.ico.gov.uk/for\\_organisations/data\\_protection/notification.aspx](http://www.ico.gov.uk/for_organisations/data_protection/notification.aspx)

When collecting evidence you should ensure that you get contact details of parents in order to keep them informed. Their job details and experience might also be useful – please see marketing section below for more details.

**Existing Independent Schools: Petitioning**

Existing schools who wish to become Free Schools will need to petition both current parents and parents of pupils who do not currently attend the school. Make sure that the data is presented separately for these two groups.

You should describe the groups of parents you have engaged with while gathering supporting evidence. You need to show that you are engaging with parents from a range of backgrounds. You

must also demonstrate how you have, or how you intend to, raise awareness of the school amongst deprived or disadvantaged families and how you have made the school attractive to pupils from these families. If you are proposing a faith school, you must also demonstrate that you are engaging with parents of other faiths and none. For example, you might describe the other places of worship and non-faith you have visited to generate parental support.

You may also, at this point in the application, consider providing wider demographic data about local need in the area.

### ***How to gather evidence of demand***

There are no 'quick-fix' ways of getting parents signed up to your school. This process will take time. You know your local area best – and there will be organisations, meeting-places, and a local context that will be unique to where you live.

You need to consider three key questions:

- Who am I looking to reach?
- Where do those people get their information?
- What resources are available for evidence gathering – in terms of money, time and other people?

There are five main tools you can use:

- Other people (through word of mouth, networking, and involving key community members);
- Paid or free advertising;
- Printed material (such as leaflets);
- Your website (and others, including social media); and
- Local and national media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television).

#### Word of mouth

If you are a parent group, or have a significant number of local parents on board, you will probably already know lots of other parents with children of the relevant age. Do your children attend a local primary school or nursery? Could that provide opportunities to speak with other parents? Are there local sports clubs, after-school activities or other activities for families? If you are not a parent group you should still be thinking about organisations and institutions with which parents tend to be involved. Parental advocates can be a powerful tool for your Free School.

Talking is time-consuming – but it is the most effective way for you to get your message across. The members of the applicant group and the parents who are already on board are your best advocates. Once parents have signed up you should try to involve them in spreading the word about your school.

You may want to consider ways of getting lots of parents together in the same room – for example coffee mornings, open days or evenings. Try to arrange a variety of opportunities; some parents will feel comfortable in a large public meeting, while others will only be willing to discuss your plans in their own home or a familiar environment.

Some places you may wish to think about include:

- Potential feeder schools and nurseries;
- Community organisations and clubs;
- Places of worship; and
- Out-of-school-clubs.

You could also consider using stalls in public places. Many supermarkets, libraries and other public places have regular slots for community groups to set up a stall to publicise themselves.

### Advertising

Advertising can be expensive, so you should think carefully about whether it is worth it and whether it will reach your target audience. Before you commit to advertising you should think of whether there are any opportunities for inexpensive advertising. Are there free local newspapers or low-cost community newsletters that parents are likely to read? Can you get local shops or community centres to put up posters for free? Are there websites you can use for free? Parent-focused sites such as mumsnet and netmums provide a great way to communicate with lots of local people without paying.

### Leaflets

A short, simple leaflet can be very effective, and you should be able to distil your message and your case into a few clear words or statements. Leaflets can be relatively cheap to produce. You should not be paying a fortune for slick design at this point – focus on getting your case right.

You should make plans for targeted delivery of your leaflets (local residents, relevant shops, nurseries, libraries, etc.). Will each member of your team commit to a few streets each? Can you get help from some of the parents who have already signed up?

### Websites

Bear in mind that people are likely to search for information about your school online. Simple websites are free to make with Open Source software (see [NSN guidance on setting up a website](#)) and can provide a way of getting your message across to people and registering interest. Your advertising and word-of-mouth promotion can drive people to your website for more information.

In order to increase the amount of traffic to your website you will need to find ways to make sure people know about it. Can you set up a Facebook or Twitter account? Are there other websites that can link to yours?

## The media

Local media is likely to be very important for your Free School. They will be interested in what you are doing and even small papers will reach tens of thousands of people. You should find out who the local journalists are, and familiarise yourself with what they write about and cover. Local radio and TV are also important. You do, however, need to think carefully before you engage with media and ensure that you are very clear about the messages you are hoping to communicate.

If you are considering talking to journalists and would like advice before you do please do contact one of the NSN advisers.

**Please Note:** In this section you are demonstrating ‘demand’ rather than ‘need’. You do not need to include details of demographic pressure or lack of local school places in order for your application to be approved. However, it may help with your capital allocation and it is also useful background evidence. There is a huge amount of data available to the general public covering availability of school places, applications and local standards. If there is basic need, or a lack of a particular kind of education provision in your area, you can find the statistics to demonstrate this through Partnerships for Schools, the DfE, Local Authorities and the NSN website.

## ***Further information***

**Contact NSN** for tailored specialist advice: [info@newschoolsnetwork.org](mailto:info@newschoolsnetwork.org)

**NSN draft Petition and Survey:** Please contact us for more information.

**NSN support in finding contacts:** NSN can provide some help reaching contacts in the area. Potential options include:

- Looking at our map database for people in the local area;
- Calling to ask to be placed in contact with individuals or groups in the area;
- Attending conference and networking events; and
- Participating in the NSN Connect Forum

**NSN support in creating a website:** You can find out how to set up your own free website through our guide here: <https://sites.google.com/a/newschoolsnetwork.org/template-for-website/>.

**NSN support in gathering local data:** You can gather local data from our site [here](#).

You may wish to use [Mumsnet \(www.mumsnet.com\)](http://www.mumsnet.com) and [Netmums \(www.netmums.com\)](http://www.netmums.com) to talk about your local school plans.

**Partnerships for Schools** – [www.partnershipsforschools.org.uk](http://www.partnershipsforschools.org.uk)

**Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO):**

[http://www.ico.gov.uk/for\\_organisations/data\\_protection/notification.aspx](http://www.ico.gov.uk/for_organisations/data_protection/notification.aspx)