

A simple guide to help the local voluntary sector engage more effectively with secondary schools

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**Creative Public Affairs**  
Engaging with Impact  
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## Context

This simple guide stems from a recent *Creative Public Affairs* commission to develop a two-year strategic plan for five local partners to take forward to encourage partnership working between Reading's secondary schools and the local voluntary sector.

In putting together the bid to the *Big Lottery Fund - Transforming Local Infrastructure programme* - the five partners recognised that the working relationship between Reading's secondary schools and the voluntary sector was "patchy with some points of light"; and that there was an urgent need to help "build trusting relationships" so that young people could benefit from a "more rounded secondary school experience".

The five partners were *Reading Voluntary Action (RVA - lead)*, *Reading Children's & Voluntary Youth Services (RCVYS)*, *Berkshire Youth*, *Berkshire Community Foundation* and *Social Enterprise Berkshire*.

Many thanks go to those who helped create this briefing; and who daily spread the message that **a sharing culture powers positive social good** (see Appendix 1).

This guide explores:

- **How secondary schools work** (culture, commissioning and Ofsted)
- **How secondary schools assess a new proposal** (the 15-point checklist) and
- **How to engage effectively with secondary schools** (Top Tips)

## **Section ONE:** How secondary schools work

### **The culture**

Secondary schools are very busy places and are “a mile deep in paperwork”. The people who run them like to have a bit of “a firm hand on the tiller”. Some people say that “schools like controlling things”.

It's important to remember that they're inundated with demands from central government to change quickly. Sometimes it's changes to the curriculum, other times it's about taking on new responsibilities such as providing independent careers advice.

A challenge for local community and voluntary organisations is that there's a really big “churn” factor with school teachers. So sustainability's a real issue. When voluntary organisations lose their school contact; they often lose the person who made things happen in the first place.

### **Commissioning**

Secondary schools do commission but it's not really their expertise. The truth is that they don't really know much about the voluntary sector; and the services it can provide to secondary schools. Often schools want a response to an immediate need; or expect services for free. There's also often a bit of a reluctance by schools to trust people they don't know.

Schools get a real kick out of successful, local projects. They like local recommendations, especially if they're from another local respected school or from a body they trust. What really rocks their boat is how your project will impact on raising student educational achievement; and making their school better. This leads us neatly onto Ofsted inspection.

## Key features of the Ofsted school inspection framework

[www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

One of the key events of a school's life is the Ofsted inspection. Inspectors assess and report on the quality of four aspects:

- **Student achievement** eg Are students prepared for the next stage of their education, training and/or employment?
- **Teaching quality** eg Have teachers and other adults created a positive climate for learning in which students are interested and engaged?
- **Student behaviour and safety** eg What's student behaviour like around the school and in lessons?
- **The quality of leadership/management of the school** eg Does the school enable all pupils to achieve their full educational potential and engage parents in supporting students' achievement?

They also inspect and report on:

- The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the students.
- The extent to which the education provided by the school meets the needs of the range of pupils at the school, and in particular the needs of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs.

- How effectively governors, or those with a similar responsibility, challenge and hold senior leaders to account for all aspects of the school's performance and ensure financial stability.

## Section TWO: How secondary schools assess a new proposal

Before you contact a secondary school with a new idea/project it's worth spending some time completing the checklist below. Answering the 15 question checklist will help you develop your proposal; and assess how ready you are to promote it. Please be honest with yourself.

### Checklist ONE: How well-prepared are you to make that call?

		✓ or X
<b>1</b>	Do you have clear, powerful messages that illustrate how your project will benefits young people at that school?	
<b>2</b>	Will you be speaking to a specific school need?	
<b>3</b>	Is the project clearly targeted (by year, subject, theme)?	
<b>4</b>	How much will the school have to pay for the service/project?	
<b>5</b>	Does the project fit into the curriculum?	
<b>6</b>	Can it be easily organised into school life?	
<b>7</b>	Have you managed to keep school outlay to a minimum eg time and people?	
<b>8</b>	Can you guarantee that their students will be safe?	
<b>9</b>	Do you have reliable evidence that you can make a big impact eg personal stories, media coverage, testimonials?	
<b>10</b>	Do they know you?	
<b>11</b>	Do they believe you're trustworthy?	
<b>12</b>	Is the project flexible (so it fits into the school's changing needs)?	
<b>13</b>	Can you prove that the project is sustainable?	
<b>14</b>	Where's the added value to the school?	
<b>15</b>	Can you prove that the project will remove a task from a busy leadership?	

**10-15 ticks:** Well done.

**0-9 ticks:** It might be an idea to spend a little more time preparing.

## Section THREE: How to engage effectively with secondary schools

These Top Tips centre around three key themes that will help you effectively engage with schools: **be pro-active, be trustworthy** and **be optimistic**.



### 1/Be pro-active

Stephen Covey in his influential book *The 7 habits of highly effective people* defines a pro-active person as someone who's driven by his/her **personal values**; and having **the initiative and the responsibility to make things happen**. SO:

- Have some clear, powerful messages already worked out (before you contact the school) as to what you want schools to think, feel and do as a result of working with you? Frame the message in positive action and impact. Who will benefit and how?
- Have a contact name within the school when you phone reception. If you don't have one, then you could try business and enterprise, deputy heads, subject heads, pastoral heads or PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) heads, inclusion unit managers, SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator), welfare and pastoral leads.
- If you can find someone with a bit of influence in the school – who people trust - to introduce you to the "right" person - perhaps a governor or a member of staff in the school – that would be great. Or perhaps you know someone who used to go to that school who might have some leverage?
- Recognise and value the passion of individual teachers. They're often the ones that are going to "squeeze you into the school".
- Time it right. September's a good time to approach schools. Avoid post-April.
- Always be clear about which area/year you want to work in.

- It's useful to repeat this: create and deliver clear, succinct and powerful messages that are going to attract the attention of the "right person" to your idea (project, product, service).
- Demonstrate value, outcomes and long-term sustainability.
- Add value to the curriculum. If you concentrate on what's core (English, Maths and Science) you'll probably have more luck.
- Have evidence of your successes: real stories, feedback, statistics and outcomes information.
- Frame the messages in the offer around their needs, what the school wants and how the project will benefit their students. Be clear about where you're pitching (year, subject, theme); how it's value for money; and how you intend to measure success.
- Be realistic about your goals, abilities and capacities.
- Know your costs inside out and what a reasonable rate is for that service – for instance - by comparing and contrasting locally.
- Try another way in if the school's not interested in your original idea. Perhaps you could offer a talk?
- Think about how you can add value to the school: perhaps you could run a trial session for teachers after-school; or offer to be around at a parents' evening. Share a sample lesson plan?
- Be super-nice. Respond positively to whatever happens.

Please try not to:

- Cold call schools.
- E-mail/mail bomb schools.
- Phone up during school hours expecting to talk to a teacher.
- Contact the head teachers as they're always very busy. Their PAs can be very helpful people. They know the school and can help you find the right person.
- Antagonise the school receptionists.



## 2/Be trustworthy

It's useful to remember that trust is a trophy that's given to you by other people because you've proved to be trustworthy. So:

- Promote honest conversations with the secondary schools. When you pitch your project be honest about what you can and can't deliver.
- Show schools you can deliver a relatively flexible, high quality service that meets an urgent need of theirs that'll benefit their students/their parents/families.
- Set clear boundaries: what will you and won't you do in the medium and long-term. A lot of "drift" can happen when working with schools.
- Ask questions. Ensure you have the "difficult conversations" upfront. But be mindful: tread with care, tact and diplomacy.
- Clarify what the school wants out of your session(s). This is really important in faith-based schools where you have to be clear about what messages you're going to promote?
- Answer positively to any questions.
- Provide evidence of your expertise: good, local, professional testimonials; well-designed websites; professional marketing collateral.
- Set up relationships with young people. They're key. They know the school curriculum and how they feel about their school experience.
- Dress appropriately professionally and turn up on time. Remember you're on show as soon as you come through the school gates.
- Respond to any communication promptly. Tardiness costs relationships.
- Ensure you, staff and volunteers have had safeguarding training. Be clear about how you can assure schools of your safeguarding credentials through your policies and processes. If you're doing an out-of-school trip – for instance - be clear about your protocols and procedures.
- Be aware that if you want to use school venues (before or after hours), schools may charge premium prices to maximise revenue - even if you're using the facility for community use



### 3/Be optimistic

Here's some tips on how to promote a positive mind-set. Why not try out a few?

- **Feed your personal energy.** Stay inspired.
- Repeat after me: **Change is possible.**
- **Talk to your values rather than your feelings.** It helps you and others to engage with what really matters.
- Always **keep your destination in mind.**
- Keep reminding yourself that **people can do great things together** especially if you **make the messages personal.** Focus on people's everyday concerns and interests.
- Consistently **talk about what you do and why you're doing it.** Again concentrate on positive messages that concentrate on impact, outcomes and benefits. Check what people are paying attention to. There's your hook!
- **Share your successes** eg announce when you've arrived at one of your milestones.
- **Choose how you want to be seen.** How are you communicating your project's identity? Are you going to invite opinion/feedback on how things are going? Will you be promoting your work internally in newsletters, bulletins and social media? Seek local news coverage when success happens.
- **Help others understand how they can get involved** in the work you're doing and how they can make a difference in their local communities.
- Finally, **never give up hope.**

**Good luck!** I hope you found this guide helpful. I'd love to hear how you get on. I'm always happy to promote good stories.

**Contact details** If you need any help on communication, lobbying, campaigning and working with the media, please do get in touch:

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## **Appendix 1: A big thank you to**

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