SMALL BUDGET IMPACT AWARD WINNER 2026

West Buckland School

Mini-Minds Meet: Building Connections, Growing Our Pipeline

North Devon | Co-educational day and boarding



Free, welcoming toddler sessions, run in-house with no advertising spend, brought rural families through the gates and grew nursery enrolment by 55% in a single term.

At a glance

11 to 15
families at each session

+55%
nursery enrolment in one term

3
previously home-schooled families joined

£0
spent on advertising

40% / 60%
new and repeat families, on average

Level
September 2026 applications already match September 2025, with two recruitment terms to run

The challenge

Nursery numbers had declined, and home schooling is rising in the South West. Strengthening the pipeline into the Prep School was a strategic priority, and these families need more reassurance than most before they commit.

The school's rural location was widely seen as a barrier to visiting, so the aim was to turn it into a reason to come.

BUDGET

Zero advertising. Around £150 to £200 in total costs.

The approach

The guiding idea was that facts alone don't inspire confidence; experiences do. Six strands made up the programme.

1

Start with local research

The team looked at nurseries across the area to find where West Buckland could offer something different, and built the programme around those points of difference.

2

Offer an experience, not a pitch

Free Mini-Minds Meet sessions for toddlers and their parents were deliberately warm and informal, not corporate. Families could see the school, the staff and the grounds in action without any pressure to commit.

3

Remove the barriers to attending

Free minibuses ran from key areas, driven by school volunteers, with routes refined by where families actually came from. Sessions ran on Tuesdays and Fridays, when childcare is hardest to find.

4

Turn the rural setting into a strength

Outdoor-exploration activities made the countryside setting the main attraction, replacing the idea of a remote school with the picture of a place children love to explore.

5

Use word of mouth, not glossy brochures

Promotion went through local networks, authentic social media stories and parent advocates. There was no paid advertising and no brochure.

6

Follow up personally, and do it all in-house

Every family received a branded thank-you card from the Head. Imagery, printing, staffing and activity spaces all came from within the school, using staff volunteers and areas of the school that are not timetabled.

The results

Each session drew 11 to 15 families, on average 40% new and 60% returning, which showed that the first visit gave families a reason to come back. Three families who had been home-schooling joined the school, and nursery enrolment rose by 55% in one term. The majority of attendees are now engaging with admissions, and applications for September 2026 already equal September 2025, with two recruitment terms still to run.

> *"Facts alone don't inspire confidence; experiences do."*
>
> **From the school's IMPACT Awards entry**

Where the money went

£0
on advertising

Fuel
for the free minibuses

Printing
of posters, done on site

Absorbed
teacher time and activity resources

In total the programme cost around £150 to £200, well inside the £3,000 Small Budget limit.

The programme in use







Session posters, produced in-house (top), and the thank-you card sent to every family (below)