

Government consultation on the launch of the Get Help Buying for Schools Service

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

A. Introduction

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 21,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary and further education phase. This places the Association in a strong position to consider the work of the consultation from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.
2. ASCL welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation. We are aware that many of the organisations and agencies with which we work will have replied separately. This response is an attempt to consolidate the views of our members.
3. We note that questions 1-8 are about respondents to the consultation. This response is made on behalf of ASCL.
4. In principle, ASCL supports the view that procurement is an area where school leaders, governors and trustees would benefit from advice and support. Procurement and contract management can often be a complex process that requires specialist knowledge. However, based on the information provided and a lack of data and evidence from the Buying Hub pilot, we have reservations about the approach outlined in this consultation.
5. Implicit in this approach appears to be a view that centralisation and accountability is the best framework for change and improvement in the education system. ASCL disagrees with this principle, believing instead in a school-led, self-improving system with subsidiarity at its heart.
6. Our view is that, rather than increased centralisation, the government should instead invest in training and development for school and college business leaders, through funded programmes, bursaries, coaching and mentoring. This is the most effective way to develop and succession plan for a highly skilled and competent workforce, who can deliver on the diverse roles and responsibilities placed on schools and colleges.

B. Answers to specific questions

Question 9: To what degree do you agree with the following statement ‘The introduction of the chosen in-house delivery model of a new national buying service run by the DFE would have a positive impact on my organisation directly or indirectly’. Please let us know what the impact would be.

7. The model suggested in the consultation document is that of a centralised government procurement service, which has not been piloted. Following the publication of the Schools Buying Strategy in 2017, the government did pilot a regional buying hubs approach, with two hubs, one in the North West and one in the South West, both run by third party providers.
8. We would be able to give a more informed view on the proposed approach if there was data, information, and an evaluation of more than one model. It would be helpful to the sector if an evaluation report were published that included an analysis of the impact (including an equalities impact assessment) of the Buying Hub pilot.
9. We are concerned that colleges will not be eligible to access the service, and that a centralised service would reduce or lead to a lack of control or reduced choices by the end-user and reduce competition in the market. This could cause frustration, a lack of flexibility and adaptability in the sector. The service needs to provide equality and equity for all education institutions and be agile and responsive to changes in the sector, commercial practices, and the wider economic landscape.
10. We would pose the following questions to the government:
 - Was the Buying Hub pilot successful? What were the outcomes? What is the assessment of the effectiveness, economy, and efficiency of the Buying Hub pilot? Were there any differences in the approach and outcomes of the two hubs?
 - What will happen to the existing investment into the Schools Buying Hub resources including the websites and information?
 - How would the service upskill the existing and future workforce in schools?
 - Will there be any cost to schools?
 - Would this in anyway impact on the funding schools, academies or local authorities receive?
 - Has a regional approach been considered? If yes, why was it discounted?
 - Has the role of local authorities been considered?
 - Why is the support only for schools?
 - Will there be any third-party involvement in the proposed service delivery?
 - Does the government intend to pool contracts or facilitate group purchasing? How would this work?
 - Will any elements be mandatory for schools?
 - How will the government ensure a consistent service, that ensures equality and equity of service?

Question 10: In principle, do you or your organisation agree with the introduction of a DfE inhouse delivery model of a new national buying service which we believe will help schools secure value for money when buying goods and services?

11. This is impossible to make a judgement on as there is insufficient information on which to make a reasonable assessment and judgment.

12. There are examples of government services for schools working well and others that have delivered service below a level of reasonable expectation. For example:

- The government's **Risk Protection Arrangement** scheme for schools appears to work well. This is essentially a simple cost model, with straightforward and quick services. It has, however, caused considerable disruption to the insurance market, which has pros and cons for schools, insurance providers and the wider economy.
- There has been strong criticism levied towards the government with regard to the **free school meal voucher scheme**, along with scrutiny from the Public Accounts Committee. The contract was awarded to EdenRed with little transparency over the commercial arrangement, and the service provided was initially very poor, causing considerable additional workload for school leaders.
- Schools and colleges undertaking **COVID-19 track and trace** are receiving conflicting advice from government advisors.
- School leaders are broadly happy with the **online teacher vacancy service** for sourcing staff, but they usually use it alongside paid-for options. The main reason for this is that the government service does not enable schools to make individual adverts stand out to prospective candidates.

13. School leaders also advise us that often potential suppliers working to Crown Commercial Frameworks will offer better prices and terms for off-framework arrangements.

14. This mixed picture of current DfE-led services suggests that the introduction of any new service should be carefully planned and piloted, in order to ensure that it operates effectively and delivers the level service schools and colleges need and expect.

Question 11: To what extent do you agree our Get Help Buying for Schools service would add value to schools' procurement activity?

15. Again, with little detail to the proposal it is difficult to make an informed judgement.

16. On the assumption that the government is intending to facilitate group purchasing, the positives from centralising a purchasing function and pooling contracts can include cost savings and standardisation of product or service delivery, standardisation of process and procedure, volume purchases, call-off arrangements, possibly better prices, potentially better terms, and ability to work with larger suppliers. Bulk or group buying strengthens the bargaining power of the buyer, but there is also a greater risk of using fewer suppliers should anything go wrong, such as supply of essential services being interrupted or financial difficulty. The downside is the lack of control and choice of the end-user.

17. The government must consider the overall impact on public finances and look at detailed cost-modelling analysis. How much will the service cost taxpayers? What savings are realistically likely to be realised? How will best value be achieved? Will there be any cost to schools? Will there be any impact on the funding schools receive?

Question 12: To what extent do you agree that this service would enable school's greater accessibility to procurement support?

18. ASCL agrees that investing further with more resources to provide additional procurement support to schools obviously implies that schools will have more accessibility to procurement support. To what degree this will be achieved will clearly depend on how well resourced the service is, the capacity available, the experience and skills of the team, and whether they can meet the requirements and demands of service users.
19. We are aware that, during the pandemic, members of the existing DfE Schools Commercial Team have been seconded to other areas. Resources were redirected at a time when schools needed increased support with procurement, the loss of self-generated income, and contract management.

Question 13: To what extent do you agree that a self-serve digital process on Buying For Schools Gov.uk pages will enable schools greater accessibility to procurement support when needed?

20. This is impossible to make a judgement on without further information and data. Our members' view is that there is already extensive guidance available for procurement. What is needed more is support with implementing the procurement guidance, such as support with running a tender process and ongoing contract management.

Question 14: Do you have any suggestions for our new service regarding elements of procurement support that would be especially valuable for your organisation?

21. Yes. The essential elements of providing procurement support to schools and colleges should include:
 - access to training and development resources
 - advice and guidance support
 - opportunity to speak to an expert – school and college leaders value being able to speak directly with experts and advisors who can provide consistent guidance and support
 - detailed case studies from a range of contexts
 - templates
 - guidance on ethical and sustainable purchasing
 - encouragement to continue looking at local suppliers and SMEs
 - transparency about the cost of the service
 - evaluation and published information that provides information to the public on the effectiveness and efficiency of a public funded service

22. It would be useful for schools to specify who will deal with any problems that arise with contracts if a central system is used, and how they will be dealt with, particularly where there are issues following use of a framework.

Question 15: Do you have any comments on the chosen design and operation of the new service?

23. Providing only one option rather suggests that a decision has already been made by the government, and we would question whether this is a meaningful consultation.

24. It is not clear why the service would not help schools with contract management nor provide legal advice. When they are offering access to a service that conducts procurement on their behalf from source to contract award, the legal terms and conditions are an essential part of the procurement process. Surely to ensure a robust service conducting procurement on behalf of schools, contract management and legal advice would be implicit in the service delivery.

Additional information

25. We think there are some specific areas on which schools would appreciate further guidance and support:

- Procurement of external and internal audit service. Following the changes to the requirement for these two services to be provided by different providers, some schools are finding it challenging to find organisations who want to tender.
- Catering has been a particular area of concern for members during the pandemic, as has been widely highlighted to the government.
- Advice and guidance on income generation and mitigating the loss of significant self-generated income streams.

C. Conclusion

26. We are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this consultation.

27. We hope that this response is of value to the process. ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

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