

## **Narrowing the digital divide in schools and colleges**

### **Response of the Association of School and College Leaders**

#### **A. Introduction**

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is a trade union and professional association representing over 25,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business leaders 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 children and young people across primary, secondary, post-16 and specialist education. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.
2. ASCL welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation. Our response is based on the views of our members, obtained through discussions with representatives from ASCL Council, our Business Leader online forums, and emails and messages from other members.
3. When considering the impact of any proposals on different groups, it is ASCL's policy to consider not only the nine protected characteristics included in the Equality Act 2010, but also other groups which might be disproportionately affected, particularly those who are socio-economically disadvantaged. We have answered any equality impact questions on this basis.

#### **B. Key points**

4. Overall, ASCL members are supportive of the digital and technology standards and the vision to embed these by 2030. Many have already started to embed the standards into their settings. To ensure that all settings can do this, they must be supported both with adequate funding that is accessed and distributed fairly, and with technical expertise to implement the standards. This will be necessary to ensure the digital divide is closed.
5. Members expressed the most concerns about meeting the digital leadership and governance and cyber security standards.

#### **C. Answers to specific questions**

##### **Prioritising essential technology infrastructure**

###### ***For schools and colleges***

**Question 15: Is it feasible for your school or college to meet these four standards (leadership and governance, broadband internet, wireless networks and network switches) by 2030?**

**And**

***For academy trusts, local authorities, college governing bodies, diocese acting on behalf of governing bodies, and site trustees***

**Question 16: Is it feasible for the schools and colleges in your organisation to meet these four standards (leadership and governance, broadband internet, wireless networks and network switches) by 2030?**

6. In a member poll, 77% of school and college leaders agreed it was feasible to meet these standards by 2030. However, many members expressed concerns that the digital leadership and governance standard would be challenging to meet, due to lack of technical capability and capacity.

**Question 17: Do you have the strategic capacity and capability to ensure that schools and colleges in your organisation have essential technology infrastructure?**

7. This depends on the context in which the setting is operating. Some larger trusts and some local authorities may have more technical knowledge, skills, capability and services to lead digital strategy and transformation than others. It is unlikely that many standalone settings will have the technical capability needed. Additionally, all settings require funding to support their digital strategy and ongoing monitoring.
8. Many members expressed concerns about meeting the digital leadership and governance standard. It is a workload and capacity challenge to fit this in with so many other competing priorities. There is a lack of senior expertise to support decision-making in many settings. Members reported many confusing and sometimes conflicting systems, processes and opinions with variations in price.

**Question 18: What support would you need to take on a strategic leadership role for technology?**

9. Many members felt that the digital leadership and governance standards were the most concerning to meet, closely followed by the cyber standards. Members would welcome technical support and guidance in these areas.
10. A tool or checklist for each standard would make it easier to assess compliance.
11. Additionally, members would welcome specific ringfenced funding to support investment in digital and technology. There have been limited funding streams available to schools and colleges in this area, and those which exist, such as Connect the Classroom, have been unequally distributed.

***For organisations and suppliers who support schools and colleges***

**Question 19: How has your organisation aligned its products or services to support schools and colleges to meet the standards?**

12. We are not an organisation that provides services of this nature to schools and colleges. However, some members report that they struggle to fully understand and interpret all the detail in the standards, due to limited technical skills in this area, and therefore find it challenging to review responses to tenders and ensure value for money.

**Question 20: What could the Department do to enable you in this shared goal?**

13. We are not an organisation that provides services of this nature to schools and colleges, so are unable to answer this question.

***For everyone***

**Question 21: Are there specific elements of these standards that you or the schools and colleges you support would struggle to meet?**

14. Our members told us that they would most struggle to meet the digital leadership and governance and the cyber security standards. This is due to a lack of senior expertise to lead this piece of work (technical capability) and workload challenges with several competing priorities in their settings. Additionally, cyber security is a newer evolving risk, and settings without capability or the ability to invest in up-to-date systems and processes, or indeed in some cases to even know what these are, may struggle to be protected.

**Question 22: Please share any best practice examples regarding managing essential technology infrastructure.**

15. This isn't data that ASCL collates. However, members would find it useful to have a knowledge base for the sector to draw upon.

**Managing the risks of technology**

***For schools and colleges***

**Question 24: Is it feasible for your school or college to meet the cyber security standards by 2030?**

***And***

***For academy trusts, local authorities, college governing bodies, diocese acting on behalf of governing bodies, and site trustees***

**Question 26: Is it feasible for the schools and colleges in your organisation to meet the cyber security by 2030?**

16. A high proportion of members felt it was feasible to meet the standard by 2030. However, this is an area that concerned some members due to a lack of the technical capability needed, a lack of sufficient funding to ensure systems are adequate and secure, alongside workload challenges with several competing priorities. Cyber is a new and developing risk to which leaders haven't previously been exposed. If settings have not been able to invest in up-to-date systems and processes, including additional security measures such as Multi Factor Authentication and dedicating time towards staff training and raising awareness, this will present a more challenging task to meet the standards.

***For schools and colleges***

**Question 25: To what degree is your school or college meeting the filtering and monitoring standards?**

**And**

***For academy trusts, local authorities, college governing bodies, diocese acting on behalf of governing bodies, and site trustees***

**Question 27: Do you think the schools and colleges in your organisation are meeting the filtering and monitoring standards?**

17. ASCL doesn't routinely collect data on this.

***For everyone***

**Question 28: Are there are specific elements of the cyber security standards that you, or the schools and colleges you support, would struggle to meet?**

18. Cyber security is a constant, evolving risk that many leaders feel is outside their expertise. If settings have not been able to invest in up-to-date systems and processes, including additional security measures such as Multi Factor Authentication and dedicating time towards staff training and raising awareness, meeting the standards may be challenging. Specific elements of the standards will be different for different settings depending on context, technical capability and access to funding.

**Question 29: Are there are specific elements of the filtering and monitoring standards that you, or the schools and colleges you support, are struggling to meet?**

19. ASCL doesn't routinely collect data on this.

**Question 30: What additional support would you or the schools and colleges you support need to proactively manage the risks of technology, including meeting the cyber security and filtering and monitoring standards**

20. It is essential that schools and colleges receive technical guidance, support and funding to ensure they are protected. Cyber security is an evolving threat that is wider than the education sector. School and college leaders should not be expected to be experts in managing cyber security. Settings should be supported by national experts. This may include utilising support from the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) to provide clear directions to schools and colleges.

**Gathering evidence: Harnessing the benefits of technology**

***For everyone***

**Question 31: Is this the right set of standards to help schools and colleges maximise the potential benefits of technology?**

21. On balance, the majority of members felt these were the right set of standards. However, not all members were aware of the standards or the content within them. It is important to educate and support the sector on these if they are to be implemented effectively.

22. A tool or checklist for each standard would make it easier to assess compliance.

23. Some members expressed that hardware for schools to make available to students is not mentioned. Schools need to be able to offer students access to hardware to enable them to harness digital technologies. This requires significant funding, which is not

currently within budgets. It is challenging to implement a digital strategy if there is no equipment within a school for whole classes to use to harness technology.

24. Some members felt a standard around AI should be developed.

**Question 32: What is the best way the Department for Education can support schools and colleges to meet the remainder of the digital and technology standards within their existing technology budgets?**

25. Given the current inadequate funding landscape, it is very challenging for schools and colleges to invest in the digital and technology standards. Settings require ringfenced funds to invest in their digital strategy and infrastructure. Failure to invest will store up future challenges.

26. Training tools and checklists for leaders to self-assess would be useful.

***For everyone***

**Question 33: Please share any examples of best practice which has allowed your organisation to use technology to:**

- provide new teaching and learning opportunities
- improve inclusivity, including for students with SEND

27. Through our membership we are aware of the PedTech Report <sup>1</sup> and the reference to innovations in pedagogy by Dr Fiona Aubrey Smith. We have also shared with our members case studies from LEO Academy Trust. We believe that this report and these examples are very powerful in explaining how technology can strengthen inclusive teaching as core, rather than introducing technology as an additional inclusion resource.

28. LEO Academy Trust provides a theory into practice model; our members have found this extremely useful. We believe that this model should be share more broadly.

29. We particularly like they are not just examples of utilising assisted technology but strong examples of inclusive teaching that is useful for all settings, particularly those pupils with SEND.

***For everyone***

**Question 34: Please share any examples of best practice which has allowed your organisation to use technology to:**

- improve workload efficiencies
- offer cost savings and efficiencies

30. ASCL does not routinely collect this data.

**Question 35: What are the current evidence gaps the Department for Education need to fill to support the education sector to maximise the benefits of technology?**

31. Whilst some schools and colleges have technical capability in-house or through the LA, many don't. They are using their best endeavours to protect their settings, but this causes vulnerabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://lgfl.net/teaching/Pedtech-LEO-PedTech-pres-Oct23>

32. Some settings may not have been able to invest in the necessary infrastructure to meet the requirements in the standards.
33. Relevant, up to date training for staff and students is required.
34. To maximise the benefits of technology, schools require adequate funding to invest in hardware to open up technological access to students.

## **Public Sector Equality Duty**

### ***For everyone***

**Question 36: What comments or concerns do you have, if any, about how the proposals in this consultation document may affect you or individuals (both adults and children) with particular protected characteristics (as defined by the Equality Act 2010)?**

35. We recognise the power of digital innovation and assisted technology for enabling equitable outcomes for children and young people.
36. We have particular concerns about digital poverty and the inequity of digital resource distribution across our schools and colleges.
37. Arguably, digital inequities have a disproportionate impact on those young people with protected characteristics, particularly those with special educational needs, for whom digital accessibility can have a profound and positive impact.

**Question 37: What comments or concerns do you have, if any, about how the proposals in this consultation document may affect children and young people with special educational needs?**

38. We are concerned about a lack of accessible policies across the wider education landscape (all policies should align to address digital inequality).
39. The gap is widening depending on the digital investment schools can afford. Schools which have an enrichment of resources are experiencing the 'Matthew effect' (i.e. that individuals that possess certain advantages tend to accumulate more opportunities, resources and success over time).
40. Currently speech-to-text is built into many resources. However, this is not always effectively used due to gaps in teacher knowledge and awareness.
41. The digitising of the exams system could enhance accessibility for all and strengthen inclusion for those with special educational needs.

## **Gathering evidence: on environmental impact**

### ***For everyone***

**Question 38: Are you aware of the environmental impacts of technology?**

42. Many members confirmed that they were aware of the environmental impacts of technology.

**Question 39: Do you consider environmental impacts when purchasing technology?**

43. More than half of members confirmed that they do consider environmental impacts.

**Question 40: Are there any specific environmental considerations that should be included in the DfE's digital and technology standards?**

44. Yes, it may be useful to include the following to support schools and colleges:
- E-waste management – supporting disposal and refurbishment or recycling of electronic devices.
  - Sustainable procurement – contracting for supplies that support a sustainability strategy for technology, including sustainability KPIs, reporting the carbon footprint of goods and services, and promotion of circular economy practices.
  - Energy efficiency – ensuring that digital devices and infrastructure are energy efficient.
  - Environmental impact monitoring – using digital technologies to monitor and report on the environmental impact of education activities. This can include tracking energy usage and carbon emissions.
  - Education and careers – integrating climate changed education into the curriculum to raise awareness amongst students and staff regarding the importance of sustainability in digital technology.

**D. Conclusion**

45. We welcome the attention paid to supporting the sector to meet the digital and technology standards.
46. We urge the government to adequately fund and support schools and colleges by providing technical capability and guidance to help all settings to develop and implement a digital strategy that supports teaching and learning.
47. I hope that this response is of value to your consultation. ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

Emma Harrison  
Business Leadership Specialist  
Association of School and College Leaders  
May 2025