

Briefing 21-14

March 2021

Launch of the Get Help Buying for Schools Service – Government consultation

To: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in England,

For information: Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Key Points

On 11 February 2021, the government launched a public consultation exercise seeking views on the chosen in-house delivery model for Get Help Buying for Schools service.

The consultation ends on 11 March 2021.

1. Background

In 2017, the Department for Education (DfE) published the first Schools Buying Strategy. The strategy aimed to support schools to save over £1 billion a year by 2019-20 on their non-staff spend through helping all schools improve how they buy goods and services and to assist in maximising their resources.

The Department for Education launched Schools Buying Hubs pilots in the North West and South West of England which were designed to help understand whether this type of service would be beneficial and make a difference to schools. The DfE state that the delivery of the Hubs pilots in the North West and South West have demonstrated the value that direct support brings to schools and therefore it is intended that the provision will be launched as a national provision.

The aim is to deliver a user-centred service focused on providing maximum value to schools, aligning with the strategic direction of the Schools Buying Strategy and securing the best return on investment from the public purse.

2. Proposal and rationale

The DfE have studied the Regional Hubs pilots to gain an understanding of how these can best move forward to deliver a service for schools nationally and have identified that an in-house delivery model for a Get Help Buying for Schools service would deliver the most beneficial outcomes

The Get Help Buying for Schools service is a national service to help schools and academies in England complete procurements for goods and services from source to contract award, thereby enabling schools to create best value, saving time and money and reducing risk. The DfE state that they are uniquely placed to provide this service in-house.

It is believed that building the service in-house would give the DfE the flexibility to develop the service over time to meet market changes and school needs. Furthermore, through resourcing the service through the expansion of an existing team structure they would deliver the highest return on investment.

It is proposed that an outreach and engagement team would direct users to the Buying for Schools GOV.UK pages. Also, it is advised that through user-led research it has been identified that the ability to 'plan a procurement' and 'create a specification' creates the greatest value for the user. Digital product development has been prioritised to ensure that there is live digital functionality in these areas when the service launches. The vision of the service beyond launch is to develop further digital capability to enable schools to self-serve through the whole buying journey digitally.

As per the pilot, from launch, schools will be able to access support for the procurement of a selected range of goods and services. Within these areas of spend, the service will offer support in sourcing, identification of suitable frameworks and deals and aggregation opportunities. Also evidenced by the pilot, schools will benefit from access to specialist advice and support through the procurement process.

The DfE advises that they will continue to work alongside established public sector providers of deals for schools, using combined market knowledge and insight to create the very best solutions for schools.

It is proposed that the service would be available to all state-funded primary, secondary, special and alternative provision schools which have some pupils aged 5-16; and to maintained nursery schools. The service would not be provided to private, voluntary and independent early years providers, and institutions that provide only for pupils and students aged 16+. The service is not going to assist schools with contract management at this time, nor would it provide legal advice.

Details of the consultation questions can be accessed via the following link: -

[Launch of the Get Help Buying for Schools Service](#)

APSE COMMENT

Following the fragmentation of the education sector in England through policies such as the Local Government Act 1980, the Fair Funding Provision introduced in 1998, and Academisation in 2010, school leadership teams have been required to procure services that had previously been provided through the Local Education Authority (LEA). It is clear that not all schools have the required skills and knowledge to draft tenders and conduct complex procurement projects.

With the increasing pressures on school budgets and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is more important than ever that schools receive support to ensure the services being procured are fit for purpose, represent value for money for the taxpayer and support the educational needs of children. Therefore, whilst APSE pointed out in the past that the fragmentation of approach by moving away from LEA's would create the diseconomies of scale and less effective procurement of supplies and services that ensued, the DfE in-house support to assist in the procurement process is welcomed in principle and it is welcomed that the service includes academies, as Multi Academy Trusts tender for large, complex, and multiple location services, more-so than single primary or secondary schools.

APSE is concerned that the details set out in consultation are limited, and as such the scope and the full remit of the in-house service are not explicit, making it difficult to assess the full impact of the service. There are several local authorities' services and public sector purchasing organisations that have been established to provide services to schools and to meet their local requirements with a proven track record of delivering value for money and efficient services. Therefore, the DfE needs to ensure that organisations of this nature are not impacted by the introduction of a national in-house service.

In addition, APSE believes that the support provided needs to be transparent, and has to ensure that the procurement process is not strongly weighted towards cost alone, and further contributes to the 'race to the bottom' that currently exists but focuses on factors such as quality, social values, sustainability and value for money.

Local authorities have demonstrated that they can provide quality services, using local suppliers and have more favourable pay and conditions than some private sector suppliers. The APSE State of the Market survey 2021– Local Authority Catering Services highlighted that 76 percent of respondents report that their council service pays the higher living wage foundation living wage and that employer pension contributions are circa 16%, well above the statutory requirement.

Throughout the pandemic, local authorities have demonstrated flexibility, responsiveness and have delivered provision over and beyond their contractual arrangements. APSE

supports the DfE commitment to continue to work alongside established public sector providers of deals for schools.

On a final point, the procurement process is only the start and with contracts being awarded for three to five years and longer in some cases, there is a requirement to ensure that the contract is managed effectively to ensure that the service that was procured for is delivered and the quality is maintained for the lifetime of the contract. Therefore, APSE would like to see the DfE investigating how this support can be provided at the earliest opportunity.

If you have any comments that you would like to make in relation to the consultation, or you would like to share your consultation responses, please send the details to vhacking@apse.org.uk by Tuesday 9 March 2021.

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