



Department  
for Education

# **Schools' buying strategy**

**January 2017**

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## Summary

The schools' buying strategy is intended to support schools to save over £1 billion a year by 2019-20 on their non-staff spend. It aims to help all schools improve how they buy goods and services – allowing them to maximise the resources they can invest in high-quality education for their pupils and supporting them in managing cost pressures.

## Who is this publication for?

This strategy is aimed at:

- all financial staff in schools including school business managers (SBMs), finance directors and bursars
- headteachers and other school leaders
- academy trust and school governing bodies

## Main points

### The case for efficiency

Effective schools make the best use of resources – ensuring every pound is used efficiently to improve standards and have maximum impact for their pupils. This means planning educational improvement and finances together. Managing school finances is not an 'additional' responsibility or requirement – it is intrinsic for each and every high-performing school. Effective school leaders know this is a key part of their role, and taxpayers across the country expect nothing less.

At the same time, like many organisations, schools are facing pressures – for example from pay increases and employers' contributions to National Insurance and pensions. On a per pupil basis, these pressures are estimated at around 8% by 2019-20. We are committed to helping schools make efficiency savings to help manage these pressures, while continuing to improve standards for their pupils.

### Overall support on efficiency

We know that the current outdated and unfair funding system, rooted in historic decisions taken in the 2000s and before, makes it harder to make the best use of resources. We are introducing a National Funding Formula to give greater certainty on funding and allow schools to plan ahead effectively; and to ensure that resources are matched fairly and consistently across the country to school and pupil need.

We are also committed to providing support for schools to make savings. In a school-led system, the decisions on how to use available resources must be for schools. Schools will work directly with other schools to achieve greater efficiencies, whether through Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) or through individual schools working together to negotiate

deals and share services. But the department has an important role, working with the sector, to build capacity and provide the right tools, guidance and resources.

We have already published a wide range of tools and support available in [one place](#). This includes support for schools to review their level of efficiency; investigate levels of spend against other similar schools; and take action to improve efficiency in practice.

We are also bringing together support on overall school improvement, including support for improving schools' use of resources and financial health. In 2017-18, £140 million in funding will be available to support strategic school to school improvement across education, targeted at where it is most needed as we progress towards a fully school-led system. To build school capacity in leadership and governance, the department also launched the Regional Academy Growth Fund in October 2016. This aims to support the growth of successful trusts and to increase capacity to raise standards in underperforming schools. This will continue to allow trusts to expand to achieve efficiencies through economies of scale and shared procurement, supported by formal joint-governance structures.

## **Schools' buying strategy**

**We are now launching a schools' buying strategy to support schools to save over £1 billion a year by 2019-20 on their £10 billion of non-staff spend.**

In addition to the tools, guidance and support the department already provides for schools, there is more we can do.

In procuring a wide range of goods and services in often complex marketplaces, we know schools can face higher costs than they need to, losing money which could be better spent on directly improving high-quality teaching and achieving better educational outcomes for their pupils.

Schools need to buy a wide range of goods and services and they may use different suppliers, such as public sector buying organisations (PSBOs), procurement consultancies and local authority (LA) traded services, to help them do so.

This diversity can offer opportunities for schools to improve their efficiency. But provision of services is patchy, both geographically and in terms of value for money. Buyers in schools want and need to save money, but struggle to do so. The fragmented system is not built around their needs. We want to help schools to reduce the complexity and provide greater transparency and advice to signpost buyers to the right place, right product or service every time.

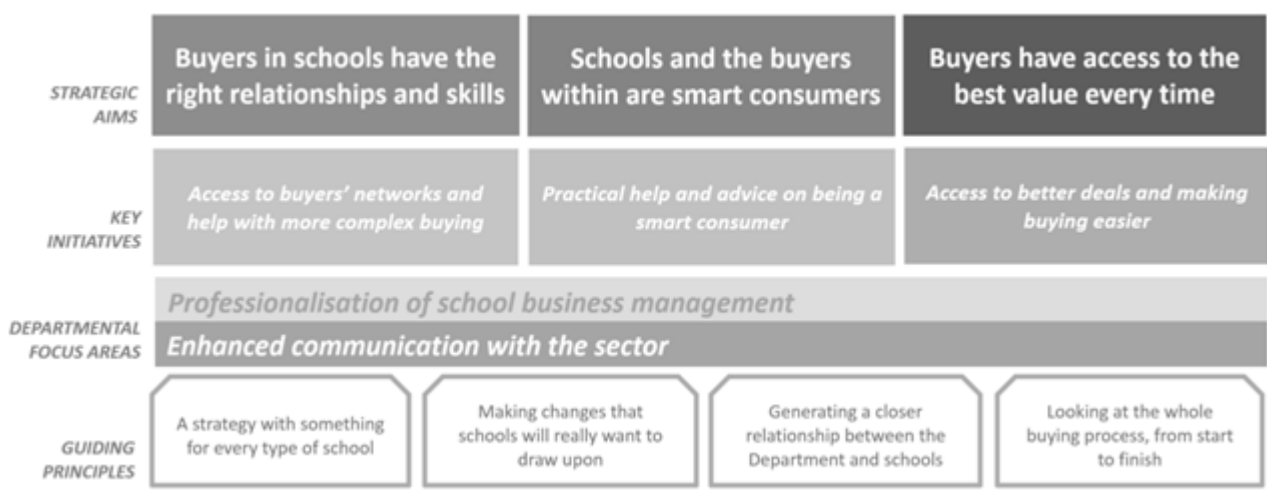
Informed directly by schools and building on best practice across the sector, the schools' buying strategy includes a range of initiatives that will:

1. **Ensure buyers in schools have the right relationships and skills** – building peer-to-peer support networks and creating regional advice and guidance services to help with complex buying

2. **Support schools to be smart consumers** – providing practical help and advice on buying decisions and contract management
3. **Ensure buyers have access to the best value every time** – giving schools access to better deals, for example on energy, printers and photocopiers, and using digital opportunities to make buying easier

The diagram below provides a summary of the strategic aims, guiding principles, and specific initiatives which are set out in more detail in the strategy.

## Key aims and initiatives



## Practical support available now for schools and school business managers

There is already a wide range of tools and support on efficiency available to schools in [one place](#).

This includes the following elements.

1. Tools for schools to **assess their level of efficiency** and investigate particular lines of spend to find opportunities for savings. An [efficiency metric](#) indicates how schools' efficiency compares to similar schools, a [benchmarking report card](#) encourages comparisons of spending data between similar schools, and a [top-ten checks](#) list provides guidance as to the types of questions governing bodies may wish to ask their school leadership teams relating to financial health.
2. **Guidance on best practice.** Guidance videos cover topics such as [strategic financial planning](#) and [collaborative buying](#), and individual [case studies](#) from schools themselves set out real life examples of how they have improved their levels of efficiency whilst continuing to focus on delivering outcomes for pupils. On each case study, there are contact details available so that schools can link up with the person who led delivery of concrete savings in these examples.
3. Support for schools to **access greater financial skills.** The [financial health checks structure](#) is designed to help schools identify what support they need to become more efficient. There are three levels of check – a 1 to 2 day review designed for schools or trusts that require a short review of their financial position; a 3 to 5 day review to address specific issues or future budget pressures identified by schools or trusts; and a 6 to 10 day review to provide in depth support to plan and deliver change for schools and trusts if in financial difficulty. The website includes a [directory](#) of some of the suppliers that can provide these checks. This support can help schools review their current financial position, as well as identify issues and take appropriate action to address them.

Specifically on **school buying**, there is a substantial amount of support already on offer for schools and school business managers to access.

There are five National Deals already available for saving money in common areas, although, as set out in the strategy below, we are committed to going significantly further. On average schools could save up to 10% on current energy deals; and over 40% by using the National Deal on multi-functional devices (MFDs, for example, printers and photocopiers). The proportion of schools currently taking advantage of these National Deals ranges from 15% on MFDs to 1% on energy supply.

## Five National Deals opportunities

Area	Savings opportunity
<a href="#">Energy supply</a>	Average saving opportunities of up to 10% on schools' energy spend.
<a href="#">Multi-functional Devices (MFDs)</a>	Saving opportunities of over 40% for individual schools' photocopier and printer costs. Over 3,300 schools are already benefiting from this deal.
<a href="#">Microsoft MoU</a>	Covers all Microsoft software licensing needs for schools delivering discounts of around 80% against Microsoft Recommended Retail Prices.
<a href="#">ICT for education</a>	Specifically tailored to meet schools' technology requirements. One local authority recently used the deal for a school and achieved a saving of £100,000 on the original contract price.
<a href="#">Risk Protection Arrangement (RPA)</a>	Available for all academy trusts and multi-academy trusts to opt in as an alternative to commercial insurance with over 55% of academies already signed up.

The National Deals have been developed with schools' needs in mind, and offer good value. We think schools should strongly consider these deals, unless even better deals are available locally, to ensure every pound is used efficiently to improve standards and have maximum impact for their pupils.

Available DfE guidance and training for schools on improving their buying includes:

- [Buying for schools guidance](#) – to help schools run an efficient procurement process when buying goods and services
- [Developing commercial capability](#) – a set of free to access training modules designed to help improve commercial capability and to aid sharing of effective practice between schools
- [Cloud services guidance](#) – to help schools understand some of the key considerations when thinking about moving their ICT to cloud based service provision

Finally, the department supports the [Salix energy efficiency loans scheme](#). Salix provides schools with interest-free loans to help pay the upfront costs of energy efficiency improvements such as low-energy lighting, insulation and boilers. The loan is paid back entirely through the savings schools make on their energy bills. The scheme has already provided over £43 million of capital investment to 1,200 schools, supporting total lifetime

savings of £99 million. There is now a further £60 million of new funds available over the next 5 years.



## User research summary

The schools' buying strategy sets out the further steps we are now committed to taking. It has been informed by research and user testing by 2020 Delivery, an independent public sector consultancy firm with extensive experience working on similar projects in other public services. The research found that many buyers – we also use the term School Business Managers (SBMs) in the strategy to refer to anyone who carries out some or all of the functions typically undertaken by a buyer – were keen to make efficiency savings, and felt a strong responsibility to do so given that their budgets consist of public money and the savings can be used to invest in and improve school outcomes. However, buyers did not consistently feel that commercially-focused approaches were understood or appreciated more widely in their schools and they identified numerous examples of where the current system was not conducive to helping them buy effectively. Below are the key themes that emerged from the research. Further details are set out at Annex A.

### **SBMs often feel 'alone' and professionally isolated in their roles**

- An SBM is often the only person within a school tasked with procuring goods and services, and this is in addition to other duties. They are often the only person who also has direct responsibility for commercial efficiency. Others in the school, such as teachers, do not always appear to understand the SBM role and the focus on commercial priorities. Often SBMs take encouragement and advice from their peers but without an external network it is much more difficult to learn more about the sector and the options in the market. Some are in networks and find them really useful, but many are not.

### **SBMs often do not have the status in schools to bring about change**

- With educational outcomes rightly at the centre of any school's ethos, buyers in many schools struggle to make a case for change on a commercial or financial level and often lack the levers or status to bring about school-wide change.

### **SBMs can be overwhelmed by the different options and choices available**

- There are many suppliers, as well as intermediary Public Sector Buying Organisations (PSBOs) and consultancies. They all promise to offer the best value for money. It is difficult to be aware of and understand all the options available, let alone identify the best choice.

### **Procurement is only a small part of most SBM roles**

- SBMs often have HR, finance, administration, and much more within their day-to-day responsibilities. Not only are they stretched for time to devote to the best procurement practice, but it would not be cost-effective to develop professional skills in high value procurement activities that only occur from time to time.

## Strategic aims

Drawing directly on the user research, the schools' buying strategy has three key areas of focus: skills and relationships; smart consumers; and access to best value. With improvements in these areas, buyers will have opportunities to achieve better value through price and easier access to markets. All three need to be addressed together in order to bring about lasting change within a school-led system.

### Skills and relationships

**Access to peer support and expertise:** SBMs in schools often have very varied roles, and need to balance procurement with other responsibilities such as HR and finance. The strategy aims to enable SBMs to get access to the peer support and expertise they need in areas of procurement that they undertake frequently as well as in the areas that they only work on from time to time.

**Relationships in schools:** we have heard that buyers are often not encouraged to carry out efficiency measures, and at worst prevented from doing so. They can also be discouraged from getting involved in local buyer networks. SBMs have an essential role in ensuring the financial health of schools, and it is necessary for them to have a strong and supportive relationship with headteachers, governors and teaching staff who fully understand and support the importance of their role.

"I've had a school business manager at another school call me up and ask me to ring her headteacher to explain why she should be able to come to our local SBM network meeting. She shouldn't need permission to develop the professional network she needs."

- **SBM**

### Smart consumers

**Better knowledge of what to buy, and when:** with a disparate market and lots of suppliers and products on offer, it is often a challenge for SBMs to know what product to buy and the frequency of when to purchase. This strategy will help schools to access the right products which meet their needs, and to reduce demand for the products that do not.

**Better contracts leading to better contract management:** even when good deals are done, the benefits can be lost through poor management of suppliers. One reason for this is contracts not including the most appropriate mechanisms to report performance, manage changing requirements, and deliver continual improvements. The strategy will help to develop and share best practice both on the structure of contracts and on supplier management to ensure contracts continue to deliver a quality service and value for money.

## Buyers have access to the best value every time

**A more navigable and transparent market:** the current market has lots of suppliers as well as intermediary bodies such as PSBOs, procurement consultancies, and LA-Traded Services. We want schools to know where to look by cutting out some of the complexity, providing greater transparency, and introducing tools and advice that signpost buyers directly to the right place.

**Easy routes to identify and take advantage of the best value:** once buyers have found the right places for purchasing, they need to be able to identify the best value. Schools should be aware of the national and regional deals offering the very best option, and understand what products and services will serve them best over the lifetime of a contract. This would also facilitate opportunities for schools to collaborate and aggregate demand, as this often means a better price and experience in jointly developing the best contracts.

**A market that is open to a broad range of good-value suppliers:** many schools tend to stick with their current suppliers out of convenience but this can mean missed opportunities for finding the best value. Suppliers, especially smaller ones, perceive they face a lot of red tape and communication hurdles when trying to reach schools and we aim to help the best-value suppliers and schools to find each other.

“There is so much red tape for trying to get on a local framework agreement. We believe we offer good value but the schools don’t know where to find us.”

- **Supplier**

## Guiding principles

The principles below underpin the schools' buying strategy. In a school-led system, the decisions on how to use available resources must be for schools and trusts. Schools will work directly with other schools to achieve greater efficiencies, whether through MATs or through individual schools working together to negotiate deals and share services. But the department has an important role, working with the sector, to build capacity and provide the right tools, guidance and resources.

- **A strategy with something for every type of school:** the initiatives we deliver need to support all schools from a small rural primary with stretched commercial resources and lower capability in buying to a large urban MAT with more in-house skills and resources. We know that the experience within schools varies significantly; the strategy will provide a spectrum of support that can be drawn upon at different levels.
- **Making changes that schools will really want to draw upon:** the strategy must deliver services and tools that schools will choose to take advantage of, and that are most relevant to their individual needs. For this to work best, the initiatives must be highly engaging and demonstrate tangible savings.
- **Generating a closer relationship between schools and the department:** as schools become more financially independent within a school-led system, we need to develop a closer relationship to ensure the schools who are most in need of support receive it. Accordingly, we need to improve the clarity and relevance of our communications so that they better reach the schools who need support.
- **Looking at the whole buying process, from start to finish:** the strategy considers every aspect of the procurement process. Even when much effort is placed on the 'buying' aspect of procurement, less attention is paid to how much is ordered in the first place, and how contracts are managed and re-negotiated. There are opportunities to refine this process and make efficiency savings through all stages of the procurement process.

## Key initiatives

Based on the evidence from users, we have developed a range of initiatives to support improved schools' buying. Building on our strategic aims, the key initiatives are:

1. **Access to buyers' networks and help with more complex buying**
2. **Practical help and advice on being a smart consumer**
3. **Access to better deals and making buying easier**

## 1. Access to buyers' networks and help with more complex buying

### Local SBM Networks

**The aim:** to provide all SBMs with a first line of support to ask questions and share knowledge at a local level.

In many regions and sub-regions of the country, SBMs and buyers within schools communicate through both online and face-to-face networks. Networks are helpful in many professional areas, but in the area of procurement, they are crucial for helping buyers to compare prices and suppliers and share tips and best practice. We want to support and extend these networks, and help to create them where they do not currently exist, so that SBMs across the country have a first line of trusted support to access when they are in need of advice.

**What we will do:** we are currently creating a Network Leaders' Forum to bring together leading members of the many existing networks, creating face-to-face opportunities to share knowledge and best practice. This will be fully up and running by June 2017 and will also allow the department to identify areas of the country where support through networks is more limited. Over the next twelve months, we will provide support and assistance for the extension of networks, and the creation of networks where no provision exists. We know that most of the many beneficial networks have emerged organically and we will continue to encourage and support buyers in how they run and develop their own networks.

### Helping with complex buying

**The aim:** to help schools with challenging and complex procurement tasks.

When a buyer's immediate network does not have the specific expertise in certain areas they need access to specialised, expert knowledge to help them. As well as expertise, tasks such as developing and managing services for a catering contract, or collaborating with schools for an aggregated purchase - which can mean better value for schools if done well - take a lot of time and effort for SBMs. We believe that buyers should have a place to go when they find themselves in these situations, having access to specialist category expertise to help structure deals to deliver better value. In addition, suppliers have often expressed the value of a single regional unit that promotes collaborative buying. Collaborative buying and demand aggregation would be advantageous: this would reduce the high cost of service involved with engaging with large numbers of individual schools and further boost value.

**What we will do:** we will pilot School Buying Hubs in 2017.

School Buying Hubs will be single regional units designed to communicate with and support all schools in their area, including through phone and online services. They will provide category expertise and specialist advice to help deliver better value. They can add particular value for goods and services which can be effectively bought on a regional basis. Often for schools this covers areas of spend that are complex, infrequent and high

value, including the delivery of important services such as catering, cleaning and premises.

The hubs will offer the following key services:

- expert advice and guidance – to reduce spend across all categories
- help with complex contracts – to reduce the spend on complex areas, particularly services such as catering, cleaning and premises.
- promotion of local collaboration and aggregation – to reduce prices and therefore the amount spent on areas such as learning resources, ICT learning resources and administrative supplies.

In addition hubs will also provide:

- market intelligence
- contract management support

We will start procurement in April 2017; operate pilot hubs from September 2017 to thoroughly test the approach; and seek to expand successful approaches to deliver at scale in 2018-19. Piloting the hubs will allow the department to evaluate which of their proposed functions are of most use to schools, and therefore to tailor the final design of the hubs to maximise their ability to help schools deliver better value.

## **2. Practical help and advice on being a smart consumer**

### **Smarter consumer guidance**

**The aim:** to help headteachers and governors to better support buyers and to help schools become smarter consumers.

Buyers in schools often feel that they lack the necessary advice and support from headteachers and governors, who for their part don't feel they have the knowledge and tools to provide appropriate oversight of purchasing decisions. User research suggested that an easy way to support efficiencies and smarter buying would be the production of best practice checklists. These lists would be developed collaboratively between procurement experts and schools. For example, we know schools are tied into expensive contracts on photocopying when photocopying prices should typically be as low as 0.54 to 0.65 pence a sheet for black and white and 2.36 to 2.45 pence a sheet for colour. We also know some schools would benefit from guidance on things like the structure of commission payments on energy deals.

In addition, we are aware that many schools are looking to reduce waste in areas such as food, energy and printing. Reducing this sort of waste should mean that more money can go towards resourcing teaching staff or essential learning resources – and this can often be achieved through behavioural and organisational changes.

**What we will do:** By spring 2017, we will create a first tranche of guidance which will be regularly updated and refreshed. This will include products such as best practice checklists to help take governors and headteachers in less commercially-aware schools

to a greater level of useful challenge, and guidance on being a smarter consumer focusing on how schools can develop their own innovative ways to reduce waste.

The guidance will be piloted to ensure that it is easy to use and interact with. We will then work with the sector to share and promote the checklists and best practice nationally.

### **3. Access to better deals and making buying easier**

#### **Better Deals**

**The aim:** to help buyers to understand, access and sign up to the best value deals developed at a national level.

The Schools Commercial Team in the department works to promote the best value deals to schools. The department, Crown Commercial Service (CCS) or PSBOs already offer deals in areas which it makes sense to address nationally, such as energy, multi-functional devices (MFDs), and IT services. Although they represent a proven option for schools in terms of value, they have in the past been less than user-friendly and difficult to understand. Our commitment is to make future deals much simpler to understand and sign up to and more appropriate for schools' needs. We also want to make it easy for schools to access the best value in a simple way when converting to academy status, establishing a new free school or as part of a MAT expansion. For maintained schools going through the academy conversion process, this is an ideal opportunity to consider their future buying strategies and organisational effectiveness.

**What we will do:** Over the next 3 months, we will introduce school-friendly national deals set out in groups. The first group of new National Deals will include the launch of a new MFD deal in February and a new water deal in April. This will be followed by several further groups at approximately 6-monthly intervals. For each group we will work closely with schools, stakeholders and suppliers to ensure that deals are both easily accessible to schools and are tailored to the needs of the schools sector.

We will develop a bundle of better deals that package National Deals up together in an easy to access way. These deals will be available to all schools, though key changes such as conversion to academy status, establishing a new free school or a MAT expansion provide particular opportunities for us to bundle deals together to help support schools to switch to new suppliers. We will also put in place commercial support to assist in the actual transition phase for these schools, such as advice on buying legal and HR advice.

#### **Making the most of digital opportunities**

**The aim:** to make better use of digital opportunities to access the marketplace, save schools time and money, and stimulate a more competitive market.

In buying everyday items such as stationery, the research conducted by 2020 Delivery showed that buyers feel overwhelmed by the number of catalogues available, and are unsure of where to go for the best value. Moreover, teachers spend a lot of time creating

paper orders, and buyers then spend time collating these and entering them onto suppliers' online ordering systems. There is a great opportunity to streamline this activity.

Similarly, the typically manual process to find and engage with service suppliers offering more complex deals, such as for estates or energy, is time consuming and not effective. Digital enablement to support these processes has brought huge benefits in the public and private sectors. For example, a simple tool comparing prices between providers of similar services would provide greater price transparency and make it easier for schools to find the best deals.

***What we will do:*** In spring 2017 we will procure external experts to develop these tools, piloting them with schools from summer 2017. These tools will enable schools to compare prices more easily and access a wide range of suppliers through a single platform specifically designed around their needs. Different tools will be designed with particular buying journeys in mind; the process for buying energy for example is very different to the process for buying stationery. We will also continue to work closely with other government digital initiatives to utilise and benefit from their knowledge and expertise.



## **Departmental focus areas**

In addition to these key initiatives, the department will take forward work in two cross-cutting areas to help underpin the overall strategy.

### **Greater professionalisation of school business management**

The work by 2020 Delivery emphasised the importance of school business management in schools, not only in the context of procurement but in securing the best use of schools' resources more widely. The department agrees with this view and will engage with the sector to better coordinate work on improving the skills and status of school business management professionals, into a single plan.

The work will cover:

- ensuring an adequate supply of skilled business management staff for state-funded schools, and an improved career structure for them within and between schools and MATs
- ensuring that suitable and high quality courses and qualifications are available for business management staff at all levels
- raising the status of the business management function within schools and across the sector as a whole

### **Enhanced communication with the sector**

For the schools' buying strategy to be a success, there is a strong need to communicate better with the sector – especially when explaining to schools what support is on offer. For each of the key initiatives we will undertake user-testing work and seek feedback from the sector through early engagement, pilots and user-centric design. This will enable us to explore new ways of communicating to the sector on efficiency, in a way that works for schools and school business managers.

## **Annex A: 2020 Delivery user research**

The schools' buying strategy has been informed by extensive user research and testing led by 2020 Delivery, an independent public sector consultancy firm. This annex provides a short summary of their approach and findings for key user groups.

### **Initial user research understanding the situation on the ground**

The user research included qualitative and quantitative research. It included a variety of schools including small rural primaries, primary and secondary academies, SATs, and MATs and professional sector organisations. User research interviews were conducted with SBMs, finance directors, governors, headteachers, LAs and PSBOs. Additional telephone interviews were conducted with individuals who were asked to share their views on the proposed initiatives and were then invited to discuss which information sources were most influential for them.

### **Headteachers**

The experience and role of headteachers in the sector relating to procurement varied a lot. In very small rural primary schools, the research found headteachers took the large share of procurement responsibilities, project managing the extension of a school building in one example. Some headteachers reported that they like to leave most procurement responsibilities in the hands of their SBMs, whereas others preferred to retain some of the decision-making and management. The priorities for all the headteachers surveyed were educational outcomes and the progress of their students. The strategy seeks to facilitate this by reducing the burden of procurement responsibilities upon headteachers.

### **Teachers**

A number of the teachers said they found ordering routine items such as text books and stationery for their classrooms or departments a cumbersome process. It takes time to select items and place an order, and then perhaps re-submit once the order has been approved. Simplifying their experience as much as possible would mean they had more time for their teaching work.

### **Governors**

Governors overall were very aware of the financial position of schools, and investing in their schools' financial health. Their key reported need was to have better knowledge or tools to help them to contribute to commercial conversations.

## Suppliers

The research found that suppliers were very frustrated by the channels through which they sell to schools. They found getting onto frameworks a complex process, and some felt that frameworks discriminate against small suppliers. Given that schools tend to be autonomous purchasing units, suppliers spend a lot of money trying to reach and sell to them. They wanted school access to be easier. However, it is important that schools feel confidence in suppliers, and this is about balancing the needs of both parties in a way that ultimately means that schools get the best value for money.

## Response to the strategy

The strategy was tested by 2020 Delivery through both qualitative and quantitative means. A survey of SBMs and other buyers as well as a number of in-depth interviews were undertaken.

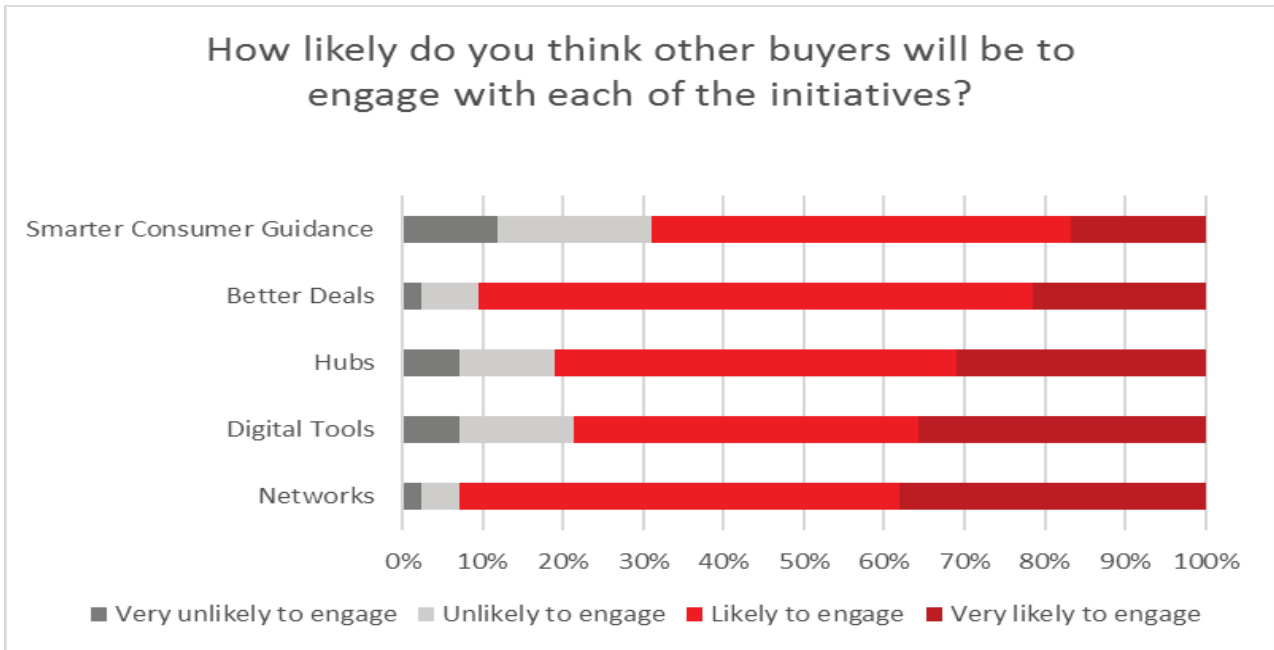
Respondents were positive about the overall strategy. In particular, they liked the increased appreciation of and appeal to local networks, and responded well to the idea of simplification of the current complex public procurement system. Key concerns raised were about duplicating or over-writing existing good work, and the need to learn from the fact that some similar things had been attempted before, without success.

Respondents strongly supported all of the proposed functions of the School Buying Hubs, but suggested an appetite for a broader role, outside of procurement (such as HR).

The online marketplace was also supported, and respondents confirmed that basic/everyday goods should be sold there. They are looking for a marketplace that radically simplifies the buying process and facilitates finding best value.

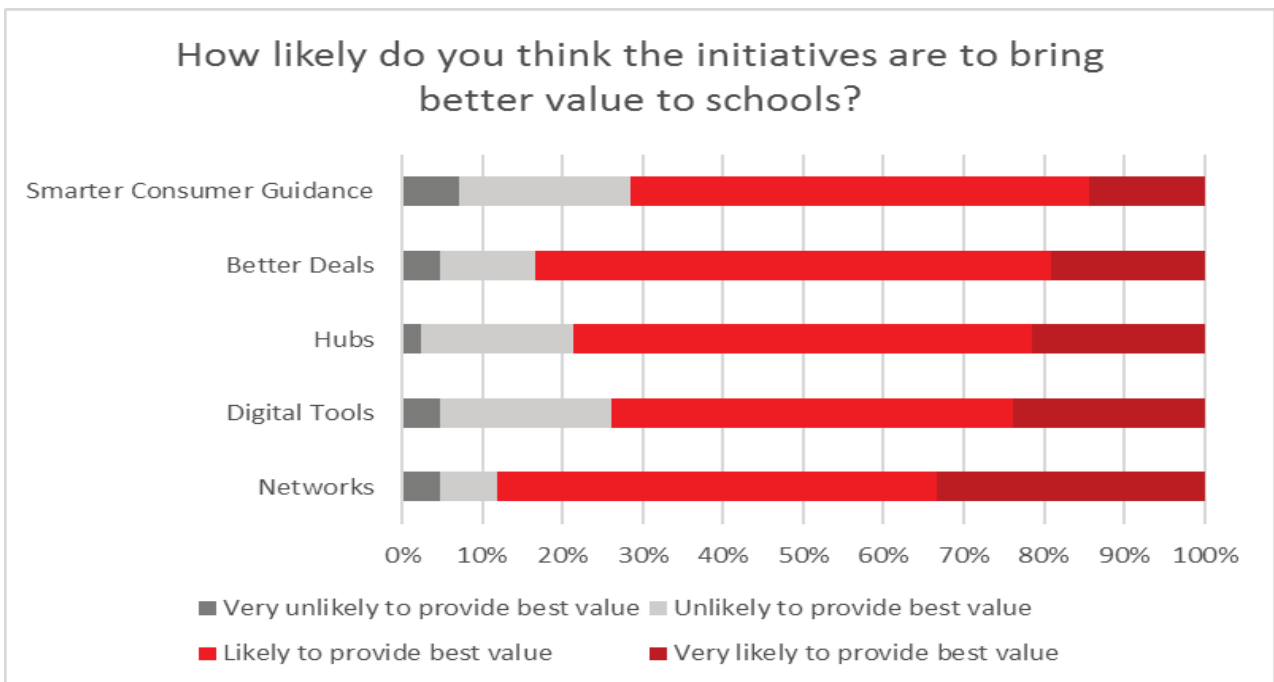
# Survey Findings

Figure 1: Results from SBM survey



Source: 2020 Delivery SBM survey

Figure 2: Results from SBM survey



Source: 2020 Delivery SBM survey



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for Education

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