

Open Government Partnership National Action Plan 2013 to 2015: mid-term assessment

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents more than 18,000 heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of maintained and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL has members in more than 90 per cent of secondary schools and colleges of all types, responsible for the education of more than four million young people. This places the association in a unique position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of secondary schools and of colleges.
- 2 ASCL welcomes the government's commitment to open government, and is pleased to see the progress that has been made, particularly with respect to preventing corruption, making data more open, and the openness of local government.
- 3 However, as the self-assessment document recognises there is still a great deal to be done. This applies particularly to central government and the lack of openness in policy-making.
- 4 There is still a strong sense that policy is too often made without sufficient reference to evidence, often ignoring an extensive research base in favour of anecdote or one or two pieces of research apparently selected to support a pre-determined view.
- 5 Too often evidence can be set aside because a minister has been unduly influenced by a lobby group, a think tank or a special adviser, none of whom are accountable, and whose influence is often unacknowledged or even denied. This is a hard balance to strike; ministers need to make political decisions, and to speak with a range of interested parties before making them, but it should be more open whose voice has been heard, and what evidence the minister has considered.
- 6 In the self-assessment document open policy-making is listed as a commitment and correctly linked to grand challenges 1 and 5. ASCL would argue that it also has significant implications for challenges 2 and 3, as the sense of unknown influence undermines the integrity of public life, and decisions made without due regard to evidence can clearly lead to ineffective and wasteful policies.
- 7 An aspect of open government is consultation, and again there are currently significant weaknesses. The document correctly states that consultation should take place early in the development of policy. Often this does not happen at least for formal consultation.
- 8 ASCL, and no doubt other trusted organisations, are often consulted informally at an early stage; this is welcome and valuable to government in helping to avoid spending

time and resources examining approaches that would never work, and therefore ultimately never be adopted.

- 9 But formal consultations are often conducted so late in the process of policy-formation that they engender cynicism amongst prospective respondents rather than a sense that there is a genuine desire to hear potentially dissenting views of the proposal.
- 10 This is exaggerated when consultations are conducted against absurdly short deadlines, especially when these coincide with holiday periods. This is a point made more than once by the House of Lords Committee on the Merits of Secondary Instruments, but which does not seem to have affected the behaviour of some government departments and agencies.
- 11 This consultation has allowed sufficient time for response. The previous full consultation in 2013 was arguably a little short on time, especially as it was over the summer holiday period. The document, however, refers to an intermediate stage in 2014, which elicited only 23 responses and about which this association was unaware, despite its response to the 2013 consultation. The 2014 exercise seems not to have been very open.
- 12 In summary, ASCL applauds the progress that has been made towards making government more open, but would urge more challenge of central government; in particular with regard to increasing the openness of policy-making; ensuring that a full range of interested individuals and organisations are fully consulted and the evidence that they bring properly considered. In this context there is also a need to consider how to ensure that as far as possible all sources of influence are in the open.
- 13 I hope that this is of value to your consultation, ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

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