

OFE STATEMENT

OFE Adds its Comments to UK Government Standards Hub Proposals on Document Formats

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The Comment cycle for the UK Government's Proposals on Document Formats have created a level of interest unseen in our industry for many years. Indeed, probably not since the original controversies when 'OOXML' was put to the vote in ISO – an exercise for which the administrators involved must now look back with deep embarrassment. So why is it that a seemingly 'dry' topic like Document Formats have fired up so many interested citizens and industry suppliers? To understand you need firstly to recognise the importance of the Open Standards Principles previously committed by the Government, with support from the very top. Those have been acclaimed worldwide, because they are seen as an essential step towards providing a level playing field for all suppliers, covering all business models, allowing all technologies, and particularly encouraging competition from SMEs. The current focus and progress on 'digital by default' and use of agile development would simply not be possible without open standards. But of course the biggest win is to break out from the lock-in to single supplier solutions, probably the most costly and single biggest inhibitor to competition and innovation in public sector IT for the last decade.

Document formats provide a litmus test for those Open Standards Principles. Document formats not only underpin the ability of governments, companies, and citizens to preserve their information potentially for eternity (or not), but have become a way in which individual applications suppliers can lock-in their users. The essential need for open documents formats, truly independent of any supplier can be understood by all. So when such a route is challenged then interest is immediate. Add that to the dominant supplier expressing outrage that their standard is not getting equal treatment, and you get exactly the result see on the Standards Hub, with probably a majority of at least 10 to 1 (I have yet to count) supporting the UKG Proposals. No doubt the 'losers' will seek to minimise by just saying many of these are individual hobbyists, and the voice of industry must count stronger. Some indeed may be hobbyists but they are also citizens, and document formats is one open standard which directly impacts citizens – why should anyone require a citizen to select (and pay) a specific solution, just to meet the wishes of a major supplier?

So we now wait to see the outcome of the deliberations from UK Government. We already hear from commentators that if the Proposals are confirmed then at least one supplier can be expected to challenge the outcome. Claiming it was unrepresentative of the industry, despite the Open Standards Principles, on which the Proposals are founded, being exhaustively debated and accepted, and these Proposals being subject to a formal Challenge, open to all, which preceded the current round of Comments. We will see.

But one thing is sure, as we said both in our original [Response](#) and in our current [Comment](#), Document Formats present potentially the single most challenging area for adoption of Open Standards and it is vital that UKG 'stand up to be counted' in its implementation of the Open Standards Principles.

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