VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

PORTFOLIO RESPONSIBILITY: CHILDREN'S SERVICES

CABINET   **31 JULY 2008**

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

Following consultation with schools, the report seeks formal approval of the virtual learning environment (VLE) platform arrangements and signing of the contract with the preferred supplier of the VLE service.

Key Decision

This is a Key Decision because it is likely to result in the Council incurring expenditure above £500,000 and is likely to be significant in terms of its effect on communities living or working in Herefordshire in an area comprising one or more wards.

It was not included in the Forward Plan however inclusion in the agenda gives the required notice in accordance with Section 15 of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Access to Information) Regulations 2000.

Recommendation

THAT the strategy for providing a virtual learning environment for schools be agreed and that the contract with the preferred supplier be approved for signature.

Reasons

1.   The reasons for the recommendation are that following a procurement process a preferred supplier has been selected to provide a virtual learning environment for schools in the county. This will enable them to meet requirements for an online learning platform.

Considerations

2.   The then DfES strategy to transform learning in schools and children's services focuses on what the technology can do for informing and advising citizens, for supporting children, young people, and adult learners in their encounters with the system, and for transforming the experience of learning. There are six requirements of the strategy:

- An integrated online information service for all citizens.
- Integrated online personal support for children and learners.
- A collaborative approach to personalised learning activities.
- A good quality ICT training and support package for teachers & practitioners.

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
Michael Peters, Interim Head of Services on (01432) 260804

- A leadership and development package for organisational capability in ICT.
- A common digital infrastructure to support transformation and reform in schools.

3. To deliver the strategy the DCSF introduced a number of grants, most recently the Harnessing Technology Grant (HTG). Guidance for the use of the grant was issued by The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency, (BECTA) at the end of November 2007, which was subsequently modified in January 2008. The Council followed BECTA guidance and framework to procure the VLE service.

4. In line with other local authorities, the county adopted a strategy to establish an online platform to support personalised learning and to achieve far greater integration of information to support improvement in quality of teaching, learning and communication. The provision of the service was put out to tender. The Council established a Partnership Project Board, (including school representatives), to manage the procurement of the service. The Project Board recommended that the preferred contractor be Netmedia.

5. Schools will receive capital and revenue resources to enable them to deliver their responsibilities for a virtual learning environment for learners. The key resource comes from the 3 year Harnessing Technology Grant, (HTG). The first year is £1.32m. This grant is a capital allocation and cannot be used to support revenue services.

6. The conditions of the HTG are that 75% must be devolved to schools. It is proposed to devolve almost 98% of the grant, retaining £25k for purchasing central servers. As indicated earlier the grant devolution proposed is:

- Secondary Schools: £26,250 flat rate + £27 per pupil.
- Primary Schools: £3,550 flat rate + £27 per pupil.

7. It is anticipated that each school will use its resources in 2008/09 to secure:

- Broadband costs for 2008/09.
- Hands on support to enable effective use of ICT in schools and
- First line support for the virtual learning environment (VLE).

In the first year the VLE itself will be at no charge to the schools as this service was paid for as part of the pre contract agreement with the provider Netmedia.

8. Schools have expressed a range of concerns about the overall approach to meeting this requirement of establishing an online platform. These concerns included:

- The length of time to agree a contract with the preferred provider.
- Having sufficient resources in the right format to provide the service.
- Quality and clarity of ICT support services to schools from services across the Council.
- Clarity on what the virtual learning environment will be and how pupils and staff will access it.

9. The proposals agreed by the Schools Forum were to:

- Proceed with Netmedia to establish the VLE and use pre paid resources to provide a service to schools at no charge for Year 1.
- Provide schools with Service Agreements for traded and base budget ICT support services from Children and Young People's Services and Corporate

Services seeking 'buy in' from schools for services covering ICT support for schools.

Financial Implications

10. The per school cost and the overall Netmedia costs for the contract period are as follows:

	Year 1 2008/09 £	Year 2 2009/10 £	Year 3 20020/11 £
Per Primary School cost	0	1,271	1,305
Per Secondary School cost	0	3,861	3,945
Netmedia Cost	180,542	179,542	183,725

11. The above confirms that schools will not be charged with any revenue costs for the contract with Netmedia in 2008/9.

12. The contract is for three years with an option to terminate after the first twelve months. There are no financial implications to the Council provided the contract is effective. However schools will have to use their own revenue funding to purchase the VLE services from Netmedia in years 2 and 3 from their Dedicated Schools Grant funding.

13. The Council will issue schools with guidance on expenditure categories covered by the Harnessing Technology Grant (HTG). Schools will be required to follow the guidance.

14. The Council will meet the HTG requirements by delegating 98% of the funding thus exceeding the 75% requirement. The levels of delegation are covered at paragraph 7.

15. Voluntary Aided schools cannot recover VAT. Their capital expenditure may incur VAT which will be non recoverable. The HTG allocations to schools have taken account of this and VA schools have received an adjusted amount to reflect this position.

Legal Implications

16. The Council will be entering into a legally binding contract with Netmedia. A clause reflecting the option to terminate after twelve months has already been inserted into the draft. As the VLE will utilise children's personal data the contract should also contain a robust security plan to ensure that data is properly protected and only used in accordance with the relevant legislation.

Risk Management

17.   The key risks are:

a) Schools choosing not to purchase the service	The service is at no cost to the schools until April 2009. A first line of support will be established using staff well known to schools. This should enable schools to access the service effectively. A robust change management plan should be created to ensure schools are fully aware of the benefits of the Netmedia VLE.
b) Netmedia does not provide the service quality required	The BECTA framework agreement was used as a basis for the contract and Legal Services were involved in the initial negotiations. Concluding negotiations were led by the Director. There will be regular reviews with the provider to assure quality. A project board was established supported by a Corporate Programmes project manager

Alternative Options

18.   There are no Alternative Options.

Consultees

19.   The consultees included schools, Schools Forum

Appendices

20.   None.

Background Papers

These should be:

Presentation to Heads from 19 June 2008.

Schools Forum report 3 July 2008 including the proposed allocation of HTG to schools.

Illustration of schools income and expenditure for ICT.

Project Board notes and minutes including recommendations from the Head of ICT.

Papers showing the procurement process and decisions made.