

## ICT TECHNICAL SUPPORT

**Report By: Head of Inspection, Advice and School Performance Service**

### Wards Affected

Countywide

### Purpose

1. To consider the progress being made towards providing a satisfactory ICT technical support service to schools.

### Financial Implications

2. Schools buy into the service from their delegated budgets. However, an additional £40,000 is provided centrally to support SIMS (the school administration software) and £120,000 is currently allocated from the Standards Fund grant for Broadband connection to support the ICT technical team.

### Report

3. The Council is required to ensure that schools have access to good quality ICT technical support service for school administration and for ICT in the curriculum. The Council, however, does not have to provide the service directly. The difficulty for Herefordshire schools and for the Council is that the alternatives available within the County are very limited.
4. Some schools employ their own technicians and this has proved successful in a number of large high schools. A few schools have bought in services from outside companies but these have often been very expensive, particularly when the companies themselves have gone out of business in the middle of a contract. In addition, schools have found that private companies tend to deliver exactly what is in the contract and no more.
5. The provision of an ICT technical service to all schools is always going to be problematic in a rural County such as Herefordshire.

The main difficulties are:

- (a) the geographic spread of 105 schools and PRUs, many of them very small, and the considerable time taken in travelling between them;
- (b) many schools cannot afford the true cost of such a service and some have unrealistic expectations as to what an ICT technician can do for them;
- (c) schools have a huge variety of ICT systems, hardware and software operating, particularly within the curriculum;
- (d) the technology keeps changing: five years ago few schools had access to broadband, internal networks or electronic whiteboards;

- (e) the problem of recruiting and retaining technicians of the right quality who understand the needs of schools and can multi-specialise;
- (f) the technical expertise of teachers themselves in ICT; some are outstandingly good, some have more limited knowledge and others have no technical knowledge at all.
6. The feedback from schools, particularly in the last financial year 2002–2003, suggested some discontent with the way in which the service was operating, particularly in relation to technical support for ICT in the curriculum. The main cause of frustration was not the quality of work undertaken by the technicians when they arrived at school, but rather the inability of schools to find out whether or not a technician would be coming and when they would be on site. Schools also felt that the service they were receiving from the helpline was unreliable, with many calls not returned expeditiously.
7. Before the start of the new financial year 2003–2004, the Education Systems Support (ESS) Service who deliver the service from Rotherwas had a series of meetings with headteachers and representatives from the ICT curriculum team in IASPS, in an attempt to sort out the problems and establish a realistic set of expectations as to:
- what the ESS services could actually deliver
  - what schools could properly expect once they had bought into the service
8. In order to increase the number of technicians available to support the work in schools, charges to schools were raised and technical support increased via the broadband project. The technicians were re-organised on a regional basis so that schools with contracts could expect a routine visit from the same technician once a fortnight. This has enabled closer relationships to be established and allowed technician to understand the particular needs of the schools with which they work.
9. Informal evidence suggests that the contracts are now working much better. There has been a sharp reduction in the number of complaints from headteachers coming directly to the Head of IASPS, and a noticeable drop in the number of complaints raised at routine Headteacher meetings. However, a recent survey (October 2003) undertaken as part of the best value review of the IASPS service, suggests that around 10% of schools still consider the service to be unsatisfactory. Evidence from the school take-up figures listed in paragraphs 10 and 11 below suggests that it is in the area of ICT technical support in the curriculum where continued monitoring is needed.
10. Currently, 104 of the 105 schools and PRUs have signed up for ICT technical support for school administration. The annual charging system is as follows –

	<i>Fixed Charge</i>	<i>Charge per pupil</i>
High School	£1025	£4.90
Primary Schools with FMS	£720	£4.60
Primary School	£360	£4.60

11. Currently 64 schools have signed up for ICT technical support for the curriculum. The annual charging system is as follows –

	<i>Fixed Charge</i>	<i>Charge Per Pupil</i>
100 Pupils	£1130	£4.40
100-300 pupils	£1690	£4.40
300+pupils	£3380	£4.40

## RECOMMENDATION

**That the Committee consider the report and comment on areas of concern and the scope for further improvement.**

## BACKGROUND PAPERS

- None identified