

# A Possible way forward for a Virtual Learning Environment in Herefordshire Schools



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## In Brief:

### Nationally:

- On line learning now needs to be a reality for all schools.
- Local authorities are responsible for ensuring that a learning platform is available to their schools (that responsibility has now been met)
- and that “by 2010 every school should have **integrated learning and management systems** (a comprehensive suite of learning platform technologies).”

### In Herefordshire:

- Many of our primary schools are some way from reaching the national expectation
- Local difficulties with the roll-out has meant that the VLE was viewed with a high degree of negativity by many Herefordshire primary schools - not in their best interests. This is changing as we work with staff and children in schools.
- Primary and secondary schools are now at various stages of implementation and have taken different routes.
- So far 50 of our 81 primary schools are using the Netmedia / It's Learning VLE, only 3 secondary schools are using the Netmedia product (the other 12 are using other platforms)

### Putting this right

- We all need to be positive about this technology and embrace it within the work of the School Improvement Service where ever possible.
- We should support all schools and unite them behind the Netmedia / It's Learning product.
- We should consider the use of some of the under spend on DSG to provide some first rate content for the VLE to make it irresistible to schools

- Support (training) for the VLE needs to be brought “in house” and delivered as a natural part of our offering of *Hands on Support* (curriculum support) for all schools.
- Consideration needs to be given to the central hosting of Sims to meet the priorities of the *Harnessing Technology Grant* (eg online reporting).

## Taking forward the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and ICT Curriculum Support in Herefordshire Schools from 2010

### National Background

We are in the middle of a 3 year DCSF / Becta programme (supported by £639.5 million of standards grant funding) entitled *Harnessing Technology*. The DCSF has allocated over £3.6 million across three years (2008-11) to Herefordshire Schools to ensure key priorities are addressed in using and applying technology to help support personalisation, closing the attainment gap and the move towards universal access to technology.

This is the latest in a long succession of standards grant funding to schools for ICT, each with specific guidance and each building on the last (previous core initiatives have been the *National Grid for Learning* and *ICT in Schools*). This is entirely a capital grant. Previously, local authorities were required to provide revenue match funding for the national digital infrastructure grants. There is no match funding requirement associated with the *Harnessing Technology Grant*. However, it is recommended by DCSF that local authorities contribute revenue funding in line with previous years.

Local authorities have the responsibility (and the funding) to ensuring that a learning platform is made available to their schools. The Government's e-strategy sets the expectation that:

- by spring 2008 every pupil should have access to a **personalised online learning space** with the potential to support an e-portfolio (provided by their local authority)
- by 2010 every school should have **integrated learning and management systems** (a comprehensive suite of learning platform technologies).

DCSF requirements of schools / LAs further states that this learning platform should include:

- **tools** - for monitoring and assessing, communication and collaboration, eg email, forums wikis, blogs, and for creating, developing and managing digital content
- **an individual area** for each learner (and member of staff) where they can store their work and personalise its layout to meet their needs

- **safe and secure**, anytime/anywhere access to learning resources.

A virtual learning environment (such as the Netmedia / It's Learning solution that has been selected in Herefordshire) is the only obvious solution that provides all of this.

## Local Background (Herefordshire)

There is a need to take positive steps at LA level to address the difficulties experienced in recent months with regard to a VLE / learning platform. This may be more easily said than done for some schools, however, and we need to take steps at LA level to ensure greater positivity of **all** schools and I propose the following (which is explained more fully in the remainder of this document):

- That we need to have **separate strategies for high schools and primary schools**. The two phases are now moving down completely different paths and it will not be possible (certainly in the short term) to bring them back together.
- That we do everything in our power to **keep schools firmly on the Netmedia / It's Learning path**. (Currently almost all primaries, with the possible exception of the Fairfield pyramid, are either using Netmedia or nothing.)
- That we find LA funding to **purchase, for all schools, high quality digital content** to run within the VLE thus making it attractive to all schools.
- That **support (training) for the VLE be incorporated into our general pedagogical support** for ICT in schools (Hands on Support) as soon as possible, so that schools see it for what it is - integral to learning rather than an optional extra.

## Netmedia / It's Learning

Herefordshire originally selected the Netmedia as its preferred platform. Netmedia has recently been acquired by It's Learning, a company with a long and established track record in this kind of technology. It's Learning has its own VLE Platform which, in our opinion, is vastly superior to Netmedia's product. We have therefore decided to migrate all schools to the It's Learning VLE. This is happening now, no further training will be provided for schools on the Netmedia platform and it is to the It's Learning platform that the remainder of this document refers.

## The primary / secondary issue and the need for standardisation

In an ideal world we would have all schools on the same platform. The benefits of this are obvious. However, most of the secondary schools have, over the last year or so, chosen a different pathway and it is going to be difficult (if not impossible) to get them to change providers. We therefore need to find ways of making the It's Learning product attractive to primary schools whilst not disadvantaging the high schools.

It is crucial that we keep the primary schools together if we are going to be able to secure best value with VLE and content providers and be in a position to train staff and parents in using them effectively. A sufficiently positive response to Kathy Roberts' letter of 2<sup>nd</sup> September has meant that the decision has now been taken (06/10/2009) to renew the contract with It's Learning for a further 2 years and to continue to provide training and support for it from the School Improvement Service.

## VLE License (paying for the platform)

Negotiations have been taking place for some time now with It's Learning. We are confident that we have secured the best price we are likely to achieve for the product. Currently the platform is funded for schools (until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2009). Schools will need to fund the license fee for themselves after this date. This would seem to be the best way forward; schools need to take ownership of the VLE for themselves and should be making a conscious decision to purchase. There are things we can do as a local authority, however to make it more attractive to them:

## Content (and financing it)

A learning platform is precisely that, it does not include very much content. That is purchased separately. All publishers of quality content have been working hard to ensure their content is ready to be embedded into a VLE and generally speaking it is much more flexible that way.

Many authorities have used some of the 25% retained funding recommended by the DCSF to make bulk purchases on behalf of their schools.

*Local authorities are able to retain up to 25 per cent (or more with the explicit agreement of their Schools Forum) of their allocation centrally to undertake collaborative purchasing on behalf of all schools where improved value for money can be achieved. ... With the agreement of schools in their area, local authorities can retain a further proportion of the funding where there is evidence that this will achieve efficiencies from collaborative approaches to procurement such as regionally or local authority wide deployed learning platforms where the majority of local authorities have secured improved value for money. (Becta guidance)*

The decision was take 18 months ago to devolve the entire grant to our schools. This has indeed given schools greater autonomy but it has not necessarily resulted in best value for money. At present, this arrangement is also planned for the final year of the grant (2010/11). I understand that consideration has already been given to using some of the under spend on the Dedicated Schools Grant for ICT. A good use for some of that money would be to purchase subscriptions to content for all schools. This will both serve to "prime the pump" making the VLE irresistible to schools and enable us, as an authority, to secure substantial discounts on the prices that schools would be paying (and in many cases already are paying) for this content if they purchase individually. (See costings below: **a total LA spend of £355K brings a net saving of £266K**). Notes on proposed individual content follow:

### Espresso

All but 3 primaries already subscribe to this. It is excellent quality and includes a vast quantity of video based content, generally regarded as the best of its type. We have negotiated the best discount we can with Espresso over the last few years; a county purchase will give a better deal still. We have met with Espresso and they have agreed to refund all remaining individual school subscriptions if we take out a county wide implementation of the product. This will be a substantial selling point

with primary schools for the VLE. Again, the content will be much more versatile once embedded in the VLE (children can only get home access that way).

### Clip Bank

Espresso's secondary solution. Very similar to the above it style but obviously with content appropriate for KS3 & 4. Currently only one high school subscribes. Others have held off over the years because of cost and we have tried several times to find a way to a county wide implementation of this for schools as many secondary teachers are keen to have the product. Considerable savings for LA purchase (see below). Almost all secondary teacher who see this resource want it, the cost has always been the prohibiting factor at management level.

### Education City

We are currently working with this company and schools have a free trial of the product which has now been extended to the end of the autumn term while negotiations take place. The idea behind the trial is to try to coordinate a bulk purchase and so achieve a discount for schools (in reality we will only manage 25% - a county wide purchase will bring 50%). This is a vast collection of 10 minute "games" covering English, Maths, Science and PMFL. It is aimed at primary, early secondary and secondary SEN. One of its great strengths will be as a homework resource because it is so engaging for children. There are considerable advantages to using this product embedded in a VLE, most especially that the product will then track individual progress and allocate reinforcement activities where appropriate (precisely what a VLE is about). Schools are already giving very favourable feedback to the trial and many have already placed orders (now on hold).

Again, we have held negotiations with Education City and we have an acceptable way forward for reimbursing schools that already subscribe. Our relationship with the company, and therefore the support we can expect from them will be considerably enhanced by a bulk purchase. The terms of the contract we propose with Education City include free full integration into the VLE - this work would normally cost £5000 (no payment for the content until this is achieved), free training for schools, and several other benefits.

### E Gadgets (Lancashire Digital)

Teaching content in the form of ready made interactive whiteboard files that run in ActivInspire (the whiteboard software in all out primary schools). We demonstrated these at the last ICT coordinators' conference.

### MyMaths ([mymaths.co.uk](http://mymaths.co.uk))

A well respected and established platform that extends any VLE by giving access to structures quizzes, games and activities to improve the numeracy of all pupils and students. This is highly regarded by secondary schools at the moment and many primary schools are beginning to use this resource to boost the attainment of all KS2 pupils. Again, this is a resource that engages children and will therefore be of benefit for out of school learning.

## Costings for proposed digital content (with comparisons between LA / school purchase)

		<b>Primary + Special (85)</b>	<b>Secondary (14)</b>
	NOR	£ 12,373	£ 9,208
<b>Education City (2 year)</b>			
LA purchase *	£	100,251	£ 13,034
School purchase *	£	200,502	£ 26,068
Difference	£	100,251	£ 13,034
<b>Espresso (2 years)</b>			
LA purchase *	£	132,984	
School purchase *	£	163,755	
Difference	£	30,771	
<b>Clip Bank (2 years)</b>			
LA purchase *			£ 84,000
School purchase *			£ 128,100
Difference			£ 44,100
<b>E-gadgets</b>			
LA purchase *	£	3,000	
School purchase *	£	78,540	
Difference	£	75,540	
<b>MyMaths (2 years)</b>			
LA purchase *	£	16,632	£ 5,031
School purchase *	£	18,480	£ 5,590
Difference	£	1,848	£ 559
Total LA spend (prim / sec)	£	252,867	£ 102,065
Total LA spend (all phases)	<b>£</b>	<b>354,932</b>	
Total school spend	£	621,035	
Total Saving	£	266,103	

\* **LA purchase** = central purchase for all school, **School purchase** = the same purchase by schools individually

## Training and Support (VLE and Hands on Support)

The time is now right to bring training support for the VLE into the general offering to schools (primary) made through what we are still calling *Hands on Support* (i.e. the support given by the ICT team within the School Improvement Service). It is not



appropriate for schools to look upon the VLE as an optional extra. We have a good reputation with our primary schools for delivering high quality advice and support for ICT in the classroom, bringing the VLE support into this would very quickly help the more reluctant schools to view the VLE more positively, especially when training in other aspects of ICT begins to involve the VLE (as it now should and will).

The whole issue of Hands on Support service level agreements needs to be looked at with some urgency and consideration given to bringing VLE support into this SLA.

It is difficult to see how schools will derive best value from a free lance trainer coming in to deliver VLE training in isolation. Indeed we are looking, as a team, to pull other aspects of ICT training (such as Espresso) "in house" at the moment. We are in a much better position to provide relevant training for schools because we understand (and often set) the rest of the ICT agenda and can integrate training.

### Centralised hosting of SIMS

An important requirement of learning platforms (by 2010) is that data is automatically and easily transferable between it and the school's information management system. For some time now the possibility of centrally hosing schools' SIMS data has been considered, now would be a good time to move this forward as doing so would make the integration of the data much more straight forward.

Increasingly schools are using SIMS Assessment Manger to record pupil progress. One common criticism from teachers is that they cannot easily use this data at home. The hosting of the data on a server external to the school would simplify this whole process. There are additional benefits beyond this and proper discussions need to be held with ICT Services.

### The future

The proposals for content above are for 2 year licenses. It is not possible at this stage to know what funding will be available to schools for ICT beyond the life of the current funding stream, the *Harnessing Technology Grant*. The fact is that there has been a constant succession of standards funding for ICT to schools since 1997 and such funding streams have always included an element of retained funding by LAs or the ability to "top-slice". Given the uncertain future of public funding streams it is particularly difficult to predict what might happen. If the possibility does not exist in the future for LA purchases then the next best thing will be for us to revert to purchasing on schools' behalf. Hopefully the "pump priming" will ensure that schools wish to continue using the resources in question. They all have a very good return rate with schools.

### What happens now?

A business case based on the proposals in this document is being made to Schools Forum for consideration (alongside other proposals for the DSG under spend) at their meeting on 7<sup>th</sup> December. Representations can be made by schools to representatives on that body before the meeting. We will take the necessary action after a decision has been made to secure what content we can for schools.