

# Opportunities Challenges and Changes

ICT Service Delivery Across CSNs 2009 – 2012

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## **Introduction – The immediate situation**

The Gordon Schools CSN consists of the academy, thirteen primary schools, and a curriculum support unit. In line with other Aberdeenshire CSNs the schools are provided with a mainly cabled infrastructure, and a range of ICTs providing both administrative and curricular network services, teaching and learning tools and video conferencing. These diverse systems require a broad range of ICT support skills, which are currently provided in a fragmented way, with an academy based ICT Support Technician managing the curricular network, and separate server and primary school support teams based in Aberdeen. Therefore, the immediate challenge is to rationalise the support provided by introducing an integrated service strategy. This is being addressed by the modernisation review of education ICT support, which is now nearing completion. The review marks a significant change in the way ICT support services will be delivered in the years to come. With its strong emphasis on consistent use of the ICT helpdesk, the revised structure promises to deliver a more professional, efficient and transparent service to schools.

## **The next twelve months**

Implementation of the new structure will involve a process of change management. Over the next twelve months it will be necessary to advise teachers, SMTs and general support staff of the changes, and to persuade them that the revised service will be more efficient, responsive and accountable. Furthermore, it will be necessary to ensure that end-users and support staff make proper use of the helpdesk to ensure that support issues are logged and delegated efficiently. It should be made clear to both school staff and pupils that the old informal system of addressing a technician in the corridor to report a fault is no longer appropriate. This can be achieved at the local level by consultation between the ICT support staff, the CSN support services coordinator, PTs and members of the SMT. I am aware that this process has already been started with the proposed introduction, from 1<sup>st</sup> June, of a self-service call logging system. This appears to be in line with the current P&ICT Service Plan (P&ICT, 2007-2010) which proposes:

*The development and implementation of an ICT strategy for the Council that optimises the use of new technology and the development of new electronic channels of customer service such as “self service on the Web”.*

The authority has a number of initiatives in the pipeline which promise to improve the quality of ICTs within educational establishments. These include the installation of wireless access points to provide full wireless coverage, improvements to cabled infrastructure, new LAN switches where required, provision of wireless notebooks, new video conferencing systems, and the purchase of licences for normally expensive software applications such as Autodesk Inventor, Sibelius and Read & Write Gold. The benefits to teaching and learning are immediately apparent. Additionally, the new video conferencing systems, while benefiting the teaching and learning process, also presents an opportunity for remote visual communication between ICT support staff, for example team briefings and training sessions.

But this new technology also presents a challenge. There is inevitably a support overhead which will place considerable demands on the new ICT team. Additionally, the advent of fast internet access and web based systems such as GLOW and SEEMIS, combined with the delivery of staff briefings and newsletters via email, means that the availability of a fully functioning workstation in every classroom is now essential. From recent personal experience, because SEEMIS is now required for daily registration, I have noticed a considerable increase in urgent requests for support at the start of each day. As schools move towards SEEMIS registration for every period this demand will increase.

## Long term strategy

According to HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE, 2007) *'The level and quality of technical support is very important in maintaining the confidence of learners and teaching staff in the reliability of access to equipment and software. Where this support is prompt and effective, learners and teaching staff do not hesitate to plan for the use of ICT in their learning and teaching. Where the level of technical support is poor, user confidence that they will have reliable access falls, and learners and teaching staff make far fewer plans to use ICT.'*

In order to provide an ICT support service which is professional, highly skilled and efficient, and remains so for the foreseeable future, it will be necessary to work within a framework of Best Practice for IT Service Management, such as that proposed by the IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL), or possibly BECTA's Framework for ICT Technical Support (FITS 2004) which is based on ITIL. Additionally, a rolling program of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for ICT support staff will be required, to ensure that skill levels are kept up to date in a fast changing technical environment.

If we assume that all support calls have been formally recorded through the helpdesk over a three year period, there would be a substantial database of support issues. This would provide an opportunity for patterns of commonly recurring faults to be identified. Stock faults could be matched to standardised solutions, and an extensive knowledge base could be developed. This would be available to all ICT support staff within the authority to reduce the necessity of 'reinventing the wheel'. Additionally, in line with the Scottish Executive's Efficient Government and Shared Services initiative, it would be possible to share this knowledge with partner organisations such as Aberdeen City, Highland and Moray Councils, with the opportunity for a reciprocal arrangement. Other opportunities for service improvement might include increased use of remote management and network monitoring systems to provide early warnings of impending faults, identify performance bottlenecks, improve response times and reduce the need for school visits.

The challenges facing the ICT support service over the next few years are difficult to predict. In the current economic climate it may be difficult to maintain staffing levels, and for existing staff the necessary funding for training may not be readily available. The political map is almost certain to change, possibly with associated cuts in public sector spending. This might have knock-on effects for education and local government services in general.

### Other challenges include:

- The increasing threat to network systems from viruses and other malware
- Problems associated with the environmentally safe disposal of obsolete hardware
- Vandalism and deliberate misuse of equipment
- Protecting pupils from inappropriate content whilst ensuring that the internet remains a valuable tool for study and research

In conclusion, the pace of change, and the rapid development of ICT is unlikely to slow down, and it will be necessary for the service to keep abreast of the changes and deal with the challenges if it is to live up to its vision *"To be valued because we provide the best services by being modern, forward thinking and supportive in all we do"*.

## References

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