partnerships for schools

This case study looks at the benefits of the BSF ICT Managed Service currently being rolled out in Sheffield. It highlights the effective partnering approach taken and the communication with schools, whilst focusingon the sample schools in Sheffield that have completed their first year under the ICT Managed Service.

Sheffield City Council and Civica won the award for 'Most Effective ICT Partnership' at the Excellence in BSF Awards 2009.

Key project information

Local authority: Sheffield City Council
Partners: Civica UK Ltd and VINCI Construction UK
Project: BSF ICT Managed Service
Project cost: £3.9 million (across the sample schools)
BSF Wave: 1
Number of schools: Four Phase 1a sample schools
Number of pupils: 3,393 (across the four schools)

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Project description

The BSF ICT Managed Service is a real step change from traditional ICT provision in schools across England.

Sheffield City Council (SCC) was a pathfinder authority in Building Schools for the Future (BSF). It became clear that support for Change Management and embedding the ICT solution was key to the success of the programme. Civica has worked with Sheffield to provide a customised package of e-Learning support for each school, with a range of tailored activities designed and managed jointly by the school, the local authority and Civica. This was led by a team of dedicated staff and developed in response to the needs of the first group of schools. This is now offered to all future schools in the programme.

Civica has been working as the Sheffield Local Education Partnership (LEP) ICT partner since the beginning of the BSF programme in the city in January 2004. Civica has provided an ICT solution to meet the educational vision of the city and has responded to the challenge set by the local authority and schools in Sheffield.

Communication matters

Civica has worked closely alongside all four Phase 1a Sample Schools and in partnership with SCC, to deliver a bespoke LearnSheffield Managed Learning Environment (MLE)which is owned by, and embedded into the teaching and learning and working practices, of the schools.

LearnSheffield is an MLE that integrates teaching and learning tools, electronic systems for registration, catering and building access. In addition, appropriate hardware and software combine to deliver a fully Managed Service that embeds ICT into all aspects of practice and delivery in the schools, enriching pupils' experiences and inspiring teaching and learning. All of the pupils have used the opportunities offered by the provision of this Learning Platform.

Civica leads and manages regular engagements with each of the schools' nominated LearnSheffield MLE Project Board and has identified ongoing training needs and key priorities, linked to each school's Improvement Plan.

Angela Armytage, Headteacher at Yewlands Technology College, said: "The benefits of

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LearnSheffield and the Managed Service are enormous; it is changing the way we communicate, develop teaching and learning and saving leadership time to focus more effectively on our core purpose, raising standards."

Working closely: school staff, governors and parents

From 2010, a priority for all schools is the requirement to deliver online reporting to parents.

In collaboration with the council, Civica has developed models appropriate to each school in order to deliver organised consultation events with parents to identify their requirements. Working closely with staff and governors, they have ensured parents can access real-time online information about their children's achievements, behaviour, progress and attainment.

Civica is working closely with the schools to ensure the ICT integration and delivery is appropriate and meaningful, and understands that the process of Change Management is critical to the transformational success - with the pace, process and priorities determined by each school.

Governance plan and LEP partnering

Civica's collaborative relationship within the Sheffield LEP is underpinned by a robust governance framework centered on a meeting and reporting framework chaired and led by LEP staff. In the early development of Sheffield's BSF programme it was jointly agreed to elevate the importance of ICT in the governance process.

With this latter point in mind, in addition to attendance at the regular Project Monthly Meetings and Civica's lead role in the LEP Communications Group, an ICT Strategic Working Group (SWG) was introduced to the governance framework.

The ICT SWG has key attendees from the LEP, SCC and Civica. This group provides the relevant forum for refining the strategic approach to ICT within the school estate and BSF programme. Civica also attend all LEP Board meetings.

Community and regeneration projects

As part of the wider strategic agenda in Sheffield, the LEP has engaged partners in a number of other community initiatives. Here are some initiatives that Civica is playing a key role in:

- to increase local employee engagement from 47 to 75 per cent
- offering 125 work experience opportunities
- placements for more than 20 university sponsored students
- achieve more than 70 local apprenticeships
- provision of staff for career talks and technical discussions

Civica is also working closely with Talbot Specialist School and its parents to develop a home/school communication site on the MLE. This enables an efficient exchange of information, particularly important for the needs of students with learning difficulties. Parents and teachers can share ideas and discuss options in a completely secure online environment. Successes and challenges, in the form of notes, photos and short videos, can be quickly shared, bridging the gap between home and school and supporting pupils in their developments. This model of a home-school partnership is also being developed in the other mainstream schools.

Added value

Each school has an External Facing Website which mirrors the MLE and is easily maintainable by the schools without the need for intervention or extra costs. This is an extension of LearnSheffield which is updated by those pupils and teachers that have the correct privileges. It is used to communicate externally and engage with the local community. This is particularly beneficial during the planning, consultation and construction stages of each school in order to keep all parties up to date. This also enables pupils and teachers to take ownership of the online aspect of community engagement.

Civica recognised the need at Talbot Specialist School to develop a bespoke site that was appropriate for pupils with severe learning difficulties. Civica spent time with them and their teachers to gain an understanding of their needs and continues to work with the school to develop a simplified interface that facilitates communication, motivation and independence for these learners.

Civica has worked with Yewlands Technology College and Alive T.V. (a South Yorkshire Community organisation) for students to produce a video on the reaction of school staff and students to the new BSF ICT solution. The full 10 minute video can be seen at: http://www.alivetv.co.uk/e107_plugins/eplayer/eplayer.php?view.298.0.10

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School satisfaction

Schools have used the expertise and support available to them to extend and enrich delivery of the curriculum through the use of technology. For example, in response to the requirements of the 14-19 curriculum, Civica has worked with Yewlands Technology College to develop an online model for submission and tracking of skills-based learning and the creation of E-Portfolios.

At Yewlands Technology College, LearnSheffield is being used to showcase pupils' skills and achievements, particularly those undertaking the Technology Diploma. Pupils can upload proof of their thinking skills, personal qualities and interpersonal skills to the website so that their teachers and peers, sometimes from associated schools or organisations, can give feedback. This can be anything from a photo to a podcast, a presentation or a weblink, and can be uploaded and accessed from anywhere. This part of the site was created in partnership with the Skills for Learning Team at the school.

At Silverdale School, a specialist language college, Civica staff are working with the Modern Foreign Languages Department to develop meaningful and appropriate ways for learning to take place using handheld devices, blogs and podcasts to deliver language learning that is innovative and creative.

The ICT Managed Service provides the schools and authority with a detailed monthly report covering performance during the previous month and highlighting key issues. The reports, which are discussed with each school every month, give a clear picture of how the Managed Service has performed. The performance since the start of the Managed Service has been excellent, with only two incidents in the whole period since September 2008. Silverdale, a school that prior to BSF, was almost entirely paper based for communicating internally and to its stakeholders, the emphasis has been on ensuring the robustness of its administration systems. All key data is now created, stored and accessed electronically.

In September 2008, over 50 per cent of teaching staff nominated ICT as their priority for CPD: in 2009 only 2 per cent chose this option giving their increased confidence and skills in ICT a reason for this.

A year since the opening of Yewlands Technology College (a National Challenge School) there has been over a 10 per cent improvement in their GCSE results.

Over 70 per cent of all staff - teaching and non-teaching - access the MLE on a daily basis. The whole school community now can communicate electronically, thereby freeing up time for more valuable pursuits.

Civica has worked with this school to address training needs and works with small groups of teachers to not only train them in how to use their new systems, but also deliver some basic training in ICT in the process.

Impact of partnership management processes

As part of the Sheffield LEP, Civica has established a New Projects Approval Process (NPAP), which combines ICT provision with building work strategy. This has led to the strong integration of ICT in the sample schools, clearly demonstrated by the ICT infrastructure within each of the schools, in response to the individual pedagogies.

The primary benefit to this approach is that Civica works with each school from the start in order to deliver the right blend of ICT provision within the infrastructure, for example fixed or mobile technology, or a mix of the two. This has also led to staffing changes within SCC and the relocation of council ICT staff and the development of a single BSF client team.

Following the successful completion of the first four schools, a series of structured 'lessons learned' workshops were held. These covered all aspects of construction, ICT interface, teaching and learning environments, as well as operational use of the buildings. These workshops were attended by all stakeholders from headteachers to key sub-contractors. Collectively, this work has led to significant continuous improvement in project delivery and design including a reduction in project development time of more than 20 per cent.

The challenges

The main challenge that Civica had to overcome when beginning to work as part of the Sheffield LEP was the fact that previously there was no ICT Managed Service in operation. Therefore Civica has had to create this from scratch, by fully engaging and building a strong relationship with each school and working closely alongside stakeholders to ensure that all parties were comfortable with the direction it was taking. They needed to fully trust and understand the service that was going to be delivered and also to dispel any myths and preconceptions of the BSF ICT Managed Service that the schools may have had.

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Now Civica and the council have the knowledge and evidence of how this can be rolled out across all of the schools for the benefit of the schools, pupils and the community. Although, still keeping very much front of mind that one size does not fit all when it comes to ICT provision within BSF schools, each school has its own identity and vision which is and will be mirrored with the ICT.

Following on from this, another challenge was the Change Management strategy for the project as this did not exist. Sheffield was a pathfinder authority so this was not funded by BSF; therefore Civica took this on as a project beyond their remit which was funded by the council. The team outlined and implemented a programme tailored for each school. It is extremely important that a Change Management strategy is established ahead of the start of the project in order to fully engage all stakeholders and embed ICT at the heart of each project.

Another obstacle to overcome in the early stages of the project was the design and integration of the MLE, LearnSheffield. The schools were keen to see and work with the MLE before it was up and running. However the approach taken by Civica was that of working with each school to create an MLE completely tailored to suit the needs and vision of each school, therefore it was not possible for the schools to work with it before it was delivered by Civica, the authority and the school. Civica worked with each school extremely closely from the very start so that each one could take ownership of their MLE in order to make it work for them.

Next steps

In February 2010, High Storrs School is due to open which is a refurbishment of a grade II listed building. Two SEN schools are due to open at Easter 2010 and by September 2010, another seven schools, which are mix of Design and Build (D&B) and ICT only. This equates to almost half of the schools estate in Sheffield that will be part of the BSF ICT Managed Service. . Civica will also begin the Change Management and engagement process, including access to LearnSheffield with the remaining half of the schools estate in preparation for the delivery of the ICT Managed Service.

Civica will be implementing 'Wireless-N' to the schools, which is a new, faster wireless network with improved performance and in September 2010 will be introducing the next release of LearnSheffield, whereby new technologies will be supplemented to the current system to enhance its performance and functionality across the city.

Top Tips

It is important that the 'make do and mend' mind set towards ICT provision of some more traditional schools is left behind as we move in to the realm of 21st century teaching and learning through BSF. It is the sole job of the ICT Managed Service to make the technology work no matter what, taking the risk and burden away from schools.

Schools can relinquish management of ICT maintenance and provision to a provider whilst remaining in the driving seat when it comes to implementing the strategy for the ICT. This can be done successfully by maintaining an extensive engagement process between each school, the authority and the ICT provider.

In order to ensure that all of the ICT provision is in place on deadline and within budget it is important to have a clear cut off point as to when decisions over ICT hardware and devices are made. Making last minute decisions can put pressure on the provider to deliver the agreed provision. ICT providers are well placed to advise on changes in technology in terms of how early devices and hardware can be ordered.

Key contact

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Further information

Information on the Sheffield LEP, latest programme details, news items, downloads and links from around the UK as well as photographs from completed projects in Sheffield is available at the Sheffield BSF website: www.SheffieldBSFschools.com