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building schools for the future

This case study looks at the ICT managed service provided by the VT Group in Lewisham, with particular reference to delivery at Forest Hill School.

In early 2009, Partnership for Schools (PfS) selected Forest Hill School to feature in a film about the BSF ICT Managed Service with students, teachers, and IT staff explaining the benefits of the new system.

Key project information

ICT Managed Service provider: VT Group

Project: Forest Hill School

No of pupils: 1,500 aged 11 to 16

Specialism: Performing Arts

School complete: 2008

Cost of Managed Service: £900,000

Managed service contract opt-in: Five years

Local authority: London Borough of Lewisham

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Project description

The London Borough of Lewisham, through its Local Education Partnership, will see every secondary school and all the special needs facilities in the borough either re-built or refurbished over the next decade. Seventeen schools in total will benefit as part of the £320 million programme.

As part of the programme, VT Group's Education business is delivering ICT managed services, including the provision of hardware and ongoing support, across the secondary estate – empowering 15,500 students and staff across the life of the project providing a bespoke ICT set-up and managed service.

Forest Hill School is the first BSF secondary school in Lewisham to reap the benefits of a robust, innovative and exciting vision for its staff and students.

Initial infrastructure

Forest Hill School joined BSF in December 2007 at the tail end of a complete rebuild which had been finished under a Private Finance Initiative with another contractor. An initial interim solution was required to get the PFI contractor's ICT infrastructure in place to support VT's high network standards. With just three weeks before the students return, the VT team worked tirelessly across Forest Hill's site to achieve this. Their focus then concentrated on the installation of the robust system that now facilitates transformational learning. This was designed with a collaborative approach between the headteacher's initial concept and VT education ICT experts who developed it.

"VT helped us shape our vision and that was absolutely critical for us. We had our own ideas, but they actually really helped us to flex those out and showed us what was possible," said Peter Walsh, Headteacher during the process at Forest Hill School.

As the foundation stone, VT installed excellent access to ICT for the students, including a new network server, VoIP telephony for cost free calling

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and over 500 laptops deployed in conjunction with the flexible wireless networking (across the entire site which allows a better than 2:1 ratio of students to laptops) and secure storage trolleys. The day to day running of the school is a secure internet based remote back-up server which uses an encrypted data transfer to protect key information and supplement the business continuity. This means that students can have access to information, applications and services online 24/7 year round, to work on and submit assignments and have them marked and returned through the Fronter Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

Stimulating learning

The VLE Learning Environment has been designed to stimulate discussion across departments, act as a resource bank which both teachers and students can add to, and provide learning beyond the traditional classroom, moving school hours beyond nine to three.

Since the creation of a single sign-on service, and the introduction of the school's own in-house training programme, the number of unique logins has increased by 900 per cent in 9 months.

This in turn empowers students with a personalised, flexible approach to studying, to find their own pathway.

Furthermore Forest Hill is the first Lewisham school to benefit from the SIMS Learning Gateway (SLG), providing teachers, pupils and parents 24/7 secure access to pupil data and school documents provided through the management information system. Parents can keep track of their child's progress, attendance and behaviour and progress as well as access to school documents for greater online collaboration. Pupils can view timetables, assessment records and learning targets as well as being able to take part in group work and discussions to resolve problems through the system's powerful collaboration tools.

The SLG provides greater flexibility to teachers, now able to produce reports or update mark sheets outside of school. Teachers also have the capability to view test results at the press of a button before setting an assignment on the learning environment, to ensure that the work specifically targets a group or individuals' needs.

This strengthens the personalised learning already introduced for each student through the managed learning environment, which targets their appropriate level.

"This is the first time we have been able to use this level of infrastructure," said Tom Cooper, Strategic Leader ICT at Lewisham. "In the past we have had systems that are inferior to the commercial sector, but this is toward the leading edge. We are really excited about the difference this is making in schools."

Free external and internal calls, video conferencing and direct service desk contact for teachers occur through the secure VoIP network. "The excellent wireless networking and flexible laptop ICT equipment provided for our students empowers their learning opportunities," enthuses Jon Munt, Assistant Headteacher at Forest Hill School.

VT's supply chain for the project includes Cisco, Dell and Microsoft, all of whom have made commitments to the Lewisham's BSF programme offering supply and support at optimum costs throughout the five- year ICT contract.

The long-term requirement to give students and staff access to an industry standard system that was both robust and adaptable has now been achieved.

Transforming education and the managed service

As anyone who is involved with BSF is aware, providing technology is not the total solution to transforming education. While today's students are digital 'natives' and have a high expectation of technology - their home life revolving around a fast moving IT culture, many teachers are digital 'immigrants' playing catch up with those they teach. The challenge within the classroom is to achieve an environment where students do not feel they are stepping back in time, where the successful delivery of learning and teaching is both engaging and fully utilises the resources that BSF provides.

VT was able to deliver a highly competitive ICT package across Lewisham that meets the resource aspirations of teachers and students. But more than this, using ex-teachers in a flexible IT consultative knowledge pool, VT also delivers expert, rounded advice to transform

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lessons and education, enabling teachers to harness the technology and bring their subjects alive.

For example, software applications such as Moviemaker and Photostory 3 were introduced into Forest Hill's Art and Design department to develop approaches to student focused study of the work of artists, designers and craftworkers. It provided a means to analyse, critically review and make digital presentations in a far more thoughtful and engaging way than purely text based analysis. Using these packages and industry standard programs such as Photoshop, digital cameras and visualisers, students are able to digitally edit images, integrate information from the internet and create visual and time-based outcomes. A typical Year 10 project may involve students in searching for and selecting suitable artists to inform the development of their ideas and design work.

Through professional development provided by VT, teachers' levels of confidence in using ICT in the classroom have risen at an extraordinary pace. Subject-specific staff are now enthused and planning what they want to achieve in teaching and learning through ICT and consultants have continued to work with departments at the school on a regular basis to further develop cross-curricular projects.

As building sustainability within a school is essential, VT's training model hinges on the school identifying enthusiastic champions to develop and promote expertise and good practice. Forest Hill School requested that a number of teachers, as part of their Continuing Professional Development (CPD), become accredited Promethean interactive whiteboard (IWB) users, allowing them to train and share best practice with their colleagues. A VT education consultant facilitated the training, focusing on harnessing the potential of the Promethean ActivBoard to create stimulating and challenging results. This led to a high level of staff engagement, building capacity within the school. All teachers involved have become both accredited and 'champions' delivering highly acclaimed IWB training to their colleagues,

"The training first gave the teachers the vision of what could be done in their subject areas," said Jon Munt. "The subject specific consultants really gave the teachers confidence that they were working with someone who had been in their shoes. Once they showed them what could be done, it really inspired and enthused them. Confidence started to creep in and that can really make a difference."

Within the new ICT context, a training plan strategy was also put into place to improve standards of learning and teaching. Key development priorities were identified and VT, alongside Forest Hill's Senior Leadership Team, are engaged in an ongoing audit of staff skills and competencies within the context of learning, teaching, leadership and management.

Celebrating success

With a degree of scepticism still overshadowing the early managed services within BSF, a day of celebration was organised in October 2008 to showcase what had been achieved at Forest Hill School. The day was organised jointly by VT and the school.

A key theme of the day was keeping schools well informed about the managed service and the role that it plays across the borough. In particular it highlighted how managed services offer flexibility in terms of sharing knowledge amongst technicians and the supported schools, empowering learning amongst students and staff. Over 100 delegates took the opportunity to listen to key note speakers such as headteacher Peter Walsh, Steve Moss Strategic Director for ICT at PfS, and VT's education experts.

National recognition

In early 2009, Forest Hill School, the London Borough of Lewisham and VT staff took part in a film to explain the benefits of the BSF ICT Managed Service and how new ICT infrastructure and equipment was changing teaching and learning in the borough's schools. The project was also recognised by Cisco for the innovative large-scale wireless technology implementation and is one of Cisco's key education reference sites in Europe.

Tom Cooper added: "It has been a real pleasure to work with VT to produce a resilient, reliable ICT infrastructure which gives us the flexibility to Innovate. VT has, from an ICT perspective, delivered well and above our expectations by the introduction of a partnering approach which fully meets the needs of all stakeholders."

In June 2009, based on Forest Hill School, VT's Education business won the 'Best use of ICT to create a learning community' category in the British Council for Schools Environments (BCSE) Industry Awards. The awards celebrate the best practice in the design and construction of schools across the

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UK, with 170 entries vying for top slot across the 13 categories.

Dr Marcus Watson, VT's Managing Director, Education said: "This award is clear recognition of the successful partnering between VT, Forest Hill School, and the London Borough of Lewisham.

Together, we have implemented a creative use of ICT throughout the school. Understanding the relationship between technology and education and the effects that this has on the life chances for children and young people is at the heart of our work in Lewisham and I'm delighted that Forest Hill has been recognised as centre stage."

Key contact

Charles Pigden, ICT Programme Manager for VT Group's Education business
E: Charles.pigden@vtplc.com

Tom Cooper, Strategic Leader ICT at the London Borough of Lewisham
E: Tom.cooper@lewisham.gov.uk

Further information

The film about the ICT Managed Service in BSF which features Forest Hill School can be www.partnershipsforschools.org.uk/library/the_role_of_ict.jsp

For more information about VT Education and Skills see:
www.vtplc.com/Ouroperations/VTEducationandSkills/Education

For more information about Lewisham's school building programme see:
www.lewisham.gov.uk/EducationAndLearning/Schools/SchoolBuildingProgramme/

VT partnered with the construction company, Costain, to form a joint venture, Learning21 – the only BSF consortium in which the design, construction, ICT and facilities management services are led by an education company.

Learning21 successfully secured the contract to form a Local Education Partnership (LEP) with the borough to deliver the Pathfinder Programme to rebuild or refurbish the borough's secondary and special schools and to roll-out new ICT provision across all 17 of them. Work began in 2007 with the construction of the first two schools and the roll-out of ICT provision.

The role of VT was initially top down, playing a key part in the consortium, managing the LEP, investing equity in it, managing the supply chain, delivering and supporting the ICT managed service. However, with a borough wide strategy in place, VT is now pushing from the bottom up, providing transformational ICT training for teachers and staff and providing on-going facilities management at the schools once they are operational.