Appendix 3   The schools and local authorities: some context

In this small study, we found that local authorities played little role in co-ordinating, advising on, or supporting the parental engagement agenda for schools. We could find no one at the local authority level with this responsibility. This responsibility was largely devolved to the schools. However, in terms of technology implementation, local authorities played a key role. In this appendix, we briefly map what the five case study local authorities are doing and their strategic role in terms of the roll-out of learning platforms and online reporting specifically. Although this is a very small sample, the evidence suggests that, due to the structures in place in terms of funding, procurement and management of systems, parental engagement features low on the agenda. Parental engagement and harnessing technology did not appear to come together at the strategic level.

Learning platforms and online reporting

All of the local authorities in the study are working towards online reporting by 2010 for secondary schools and 2012 for primary schools.

In all of the case study areas, the local authorities have decided to take a co-ordinated approach to implementing learning platforms and online reporting in schools across their particular locality. Croydon and Leicester are both implementing the FUNTA learning platform. In Croydon, the learning platform was procured by the London Grid for Learning on behalf of all 33 London local authorities. In Leicester the local authority consulted the schools forum – a body of school representatives (usually headteachers) – decided on a co-ordinated, centralised approach to learning platforms. Brighton local authority has procured 'UniServity', one of Becta's recommended learning platforms. In Brighton, the local authority, in conjunction with the local school forum decided that under the Harnessing Technology Grant, the majority of funding would be held centrally. This would 'get the price down' and 'make it easier to support' and 'have a better chance of building up our knowledge of how that platform works'. In Hampshire all primary schools are being offered Studywiz as the local authority's preferred learning platform. Secondary schools in the local authority can opt in, but the majority were reported to be developing their own learning platforms. Similar plans are being made at the local authority level for the roll-out of online reporting. Local authorities are intending to either use the learning platform or another system, for example, the SharePoint platform currently used for teacher resources (Leicester) or the SIMS learning gateway – run by Captia (Brighton).

Parental engagement and consultation

None of the local authorities interviewed had directly consulted the parents on learning platforms or on the use of technologies in schools more broadly. However, individual schools may have consulted with parents. According to the local authority in Brighton, one school that trialled the Moodle learning platform did solicit the views of parents. The local authority in Brighton does suggest schools consult with parents prior to implementation, but the authority was unable to say how many had done so, or what this may have involved.

Currently, local authority ICT departments are prioritising the implementation of learning platforms in schools for use by teachers and pupils. Parental engagement is on the agenda, but it is viewed as something for the future. Local authorities claimed schools were working towards including parents:

> "Most schools gave [learning platforms] to staff, then to pupils and now they are beginning to think how they will give parental access." (Leicester)

But in no cases were parents included in the decision-making process at higher levels. One local authority specifically claimed:

> "There has been a conscious decision not to actively engage parents at this point because we feel there needs to be a sort of acceptance and a level of confidence in the schools first [...] rather than sort of letting it loose on parents." (Hampshire)

Currently local authorities are prioritising training on learning platforms to teachers and pupils. Parents are viewed as low priority and an area for future development. This is in line with the findings from Ofsted[1] earlier this year that looked at the development of learning platforms in a range of educational contexts. The report found that just one of the schools in the study had a section on their learning platform designed to be used by parents.

Schools stressed future plans to engage parents in the process by offering them training, information and finding out parents' wants, needs and limitations. More specifically, one school (Hampshire Primary) intends to have a parental liaison worker focusing particularly on ICT as part of their new learning platform implementation.

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[1] Ofsted (2009), Virtual Learning Environments: An Evaluation of Their Development in a Sample of Educational Settings, Ofsted, page 17.