

ICT accessibility: why SENCOs need to start lobbying now

With the Building Schools for the Future (BSF), £45bn of capital investment for secondary education is up for grabs – but failure to prioritise ICT accessibility will lead to an even bigger gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’, warns **John Liddle**, head of services to education at national computing and disability charity, AbilityNet

Prioritise accessibility

Building Schools for the Future aims to finance the rebuilding, remodelling or refurbishment of each of England’s 3,500 state secondary schools over the next 15 years. As such it should offer huge scope to make some real progress in ICT provision and accessibility for children with SEN and disabilities in education.

By lobbying to get the accessibility element of the programme correct, we have the potential to enrich the lives and opportunities of hundreds of thousands of children who would otherwise face barriers to learning. However, failure to prioritise accessibility on the BSF agenda will result in the gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ in the access to learning ‘stakes’ becoming ever wider. A trend which can only be exacerbated by the growth of innovative learning strategies, such as virtual learning platforms, developed often with no consideration paid to the access requirements of the ‘non-standard’ pupil. While 21st century educational practice can expand the horizons of many, the self same advances can reduce the prospects of the minority – those in greatest need of support and encouragement.

21st-century ICT

The sheer scale of the BSF undertaking and the sums involved should afford those involved in SEN a heartening vision of the future. Of the overall ‘pot’, some £4.5bn will be directed towards ICT provision to support 21st-century learning and teaching in the establishments concerned. The figure is based on each student attracting a £1,450 ICT allowance with a further £225 for infrastructure such as cabling.

At last we have the chance to exert power and influence! With these figures at stake, we can literally oblige ICT suppliers to get accessibility right. The collective force of the education procurement managers across the country now has the clout to specify exactly what is required in terms of universal access and can demand that ICT suppliers and service providers re-evaluate

their ‘offer’ and make the necessary changes to meet the needs of our children. For the first time we can question appropriateness and viability and insist that our pupils’ needs are met rather than passively accepting what is being provided.

Not an automatic process

It would be naive to think that this process is likely to be automatic, however. With the recentralisation of funding, ‘sharp end’ SEN considerations may not be a top priority with your BSF team. What is more, there are reasons to suspect that the very nature of BSF bureaucracy itself will tend to mitigate against our concerns being taken seriously.

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For any local authority or school undergoing BSF, it is a very stressful time – a flood of strategy formulation, documentation and administration, and conflicting priorities.

Local BSF managers will be immersed in the complexities of identifying the appropriate ‘educational vision’ for their particular local authority and its ‘secondary school estate’. They will be elaborating their ‘strategy for change’, securing funding, identifying suppliers, establishing their local education partnership, designing and constructing new buildings and considering the implementation of a managed ICT service. While they grapple with a sea of detail and the necessity of balancing the needs of a plethora of key stakeholders – a ‘little’ thing like ICT accessibility can easily slip off the agenda with little chance of every being reinstated.

Stretching the budget

Moreover, there will no doubt be a significant number of dissenters warning

about the perils of attempting to ‘stretch’ the budget to encompass universal access. An allowance of £1,450 may seem impressive, but it has to cover every aspect of ICT provision within the school – supporting learning, teaching and management. This includes computers, the ICT infrastructure, teaching and learning technologies, software, management information systems and even innovations such as cashless catering with ‘smart cards’.

Online learning platforms (or virtual learning environments) and the need to have these managed and supported through a third party provider, will inevitably be one of the new elements which many establishments will be required to weave into their new ICT ‘formula’.

We must also bear in mind that while building accessibility is closely steered and ‘policed’ by fairly prescriptive legislation, there are, as yet, no such regulations governing accessible ICT – only good practice guidelines, which are open to a variety of interpretations and styles of implementation.

These challenges mean that for many authorities it might seem less of a problem to achieve minimum accessibility standards and to write local SEN professionals out of the equation altogether. AbilityNet’s experience would tend to testify that this is largely the case and that SEN professionals’ opinions have not been proactively sought during the consultation process; indeed some of our colleagues in the ‘early wave’ phase of the project did not even realise that they had a stake in BSF until it had effectively by-passed them – a potential tragedy for their students and for future SEN pupils in the area.

Push for engagement

It is time to take action, be proactive and ensure the voices of SEN professionals working locally to make their voices heard! Visit the project’s area of www.bsf.gov.uk and check out in which wave of the initiative your local authority comes on board. Find out who is responsible for BSF

within your authority, introduce yourself and make sure that ICT accessibility and the needs of your SEN students are at the forefront of their minds through every aspect of their work.

Use existing networks, table the main issues at meetings, find out if your school head is aware of the situation and if they are not, apprise them of the key points. 'Up the ante' and push the needs of SEN students to the top of the agenda. If you don't champion their cause, then they will fall through the BSF net, probably for ever.

It is essential that those responsible for procurement understand their responsibilities and the needs of the children within your school and authority both now and into the future.

What can you contribute?

Once you have gained your rightful recognition as a key stakeholder in the BSF process, it's time for your input. Here are some of the things you can help the BSF team with:

- Give them an understanding of what accessibility is all about, why it is important, what it looks like and what difference it makes to the pupils.
- Help them to understand the needs of the current cohort of students, while being clear that the unknown needs of future students are just as important.
- Share experiences of the past – both lessons learned when things have gone wrong, and good practice when accessibility was right.
- Have a debate about how far to go with accessibility. For example, would you compromise on functionality for all learners to meet the access needs of those with the most complex needs? Or would you go for a parallel solution for those learners?
- What about local issues? What assistive technology solutions are in place already? What are the support staff's expertise levels like? Are there legacy technology issues to address around assistive technology solutions?

Key issues in accessibility

When it comes to your BSF team specifying requirements to suppliers, there are many issues to consider. Here are a few key ones:

- What are the accessibility requirements of any hardware such as PCs to be ordered? For example, easily accessible USB ports at the front of PCs for attaching peripheral access devices such as trackerballs.
- Are there hardware compatibility issues

for common access software titles such as soundcards for voice recognition packages?

- Do you need any legacy connections such as USB or serial for switches, special keyboards or alternative mice in use?
- Will the choice of hardware impact on the range of compatible assistive technology available – PC, Mac, Thin Client etc?
- What are the accessibility criteria which might influence the right choice of teaching and learning tools for the classroom?
- Are interactive whiteboards height adjustable? Can you access them if you cannot use the pen supplied? Can you access them remotely from your desk if you cannot get to the front of the class?
- How will our SEN students access the proposed virtual learning environment? Do they meet relevant accessibility standards such as those from W3C's web accessibility initiative? Do these standards go far enough?
- Operating system issues – what assistive technology options are available

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within the operating system? Will such accessibility features in the operating system be locked down? What range of third-party assistive technology solutions is available for the operating system?

- Managed services issues – will the way that managed ICT services are run have an impact on accessibility of students with SEN and disabilities? For example, is there a possibility that local technicians with specialist knowledge will be lost and replaced by more generic technicians from the managed ICT services company?
- What about user-specific files – clicker grids, predictions lexicons etc – can these travel to wherever a student logs on? Are these files lost should a machine break down and be replaced under an instant replacement service?

Make the vision a reality

Inclusivity means universally applicable, encompassing everything from computers to whiteboards and right across the spectrum of disability from vision impairment, to physical disabilities and from dyslexia to learning difficulties. Whatever the adaptive hardware or

software combination a child uses to access ICT, he or she should not be excluded from making full use of his/her school's equipment nor from accessing the curriculum and participating fully in classwork and homework.

Let's not forget just how powerful ICT, properly adapted, can be – it could have a critical role to play within the BSF process. It has the potential to massively improve access to learning for all SEN and disabled learners both now and into the future. Conversely, without the necessary action now, it could also prove to be a wasted opportunity – a small and easily overlooked element which will be quickly forgotten in the excitement of a huge build programme which will transform the fabric of our schools. It is the responsibility of all of us to see that this huge potential is exploited and optimised.

The Primary Capital Programme

While Building Schools for the Future is concerned with secondary schools, the Primary Capital Programme which was announced in 2006 has similar aims for primary schools, ie fully equipping them for 21st-century learning, at the heart of the community, with children's services in reach of every family. It also aims to rebuild, remodel or refurbish at least half of primary schools.

How ICT will fit into this initiative has not been fully outlined yet, but it has been highlighted as a key element. This means that the ideas and principles discussed here are going to be as relevant for primary schools under the Primary Capital Programme as they are for secondary schools under BSF.

AbilityNet and Building Schools for the Future

AbilityNet is working with both local authorities and suppliers to ensure accessible BSF delivery. Our education team is advising some of the early waves of local authorities involved in BSF including Waltham Forest, Leicester City and Manchester, to ensure that their new ICT solutions are fully inclusive. We are also working at a strategic level with Becta – the government's key partner in the development and delivery of its education ICT strategy – to provide key guidance to initiatives such as BSF.

To find out more about how we can support you with ensuring an accessible BSF programme please contact education@abilitynet.org.uk