



Giving choice to schools Manchester City Council

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Vince Slatford, Support manager, Manchester City Council

Case study - Manchester City Council

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Jude Ledger, Principal Training and Marketing Manager at the education department

Education advisory board Becta has recommended that local authorities should give schools more choice when they buy management information systems but some authorities already support more than one product.

Manchester City Council has supported two products for nearly three years so schools have a choice about what they use to manage their data. Facility was first introduced into Manchester by Wythenshawe Education Action Zone three years ago.

The city council agreed to provide support because Facility worked well in the schools that had it. The city's pupil referral units have also adopted it because it offers a central data store with many points of access though the web-based interface ePortal.

In the past the authority supported just one product so there are more people in the education department who can offer support to its users but staffing is changing as demand for Facility increases.

Support manager Vince Slatford specialises in Facility support and, because more groups are starting to use it the council has recently taken on another member of staff. "Use of Facility is growing and if it continues we might need to take on another," Vince said.

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The availability of two products has proved popular with schools and council officials. "There has been a very positive response from the schools knowing that they have a choice. Our education officers are delighted that we are ahead of other authorities in this. In light of the Becta report it was realised how restricting it is to offer support for just one product."

Becta's report "School Management Information Systems and Value for Money" said past market dominance by one supplier led to schools being committed to that software by their local authorities in spite of heavy increases in support and licence costs. Becta wants to see a more open market within an EU-compliant framework and believes local authorities should support choice.

Vince said: "From a local authority's point of view offering support for more than one product is treating schools like a business and every business wants options to make the most beneficial choice."

Jude Ledger, Principal Training and Marketing Manager at the education department, said offering choice gives schools the best opportunities for success. "We have to offer the best and that isn't one product or another, it's a choice so the school can choose what's best for its requirements.

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She also believes that limiting options restricts growth within the authority. "If you only have one product you lose the potential for learning. But if you have two systems you see different aspects of what can be done."

There are also financial benefits in supporting both products, Vince added. "We get revenue by supporting the products, both within the authority boundary and from outside. We have offered training to some schools from outside Manchester as well as some independent schools."