



## Facility Part of the LEA Service Birmingham City Council

“ We felt strongly that the company would listen to what we said, value our input and resolve our questions in a market economy. Serco was big enough to take the knocks but focused enough to care. ”

Andy Jackson of Learning and Culture IT, Birmingham City Council's IT support unit.

Like many LEAs, Birmingham used to have only one main supplier for its school management information systems but four years ago, after requests from heads and teachers, it decided to offer schools a choice. Officers offered Facility from Serco as an extra option and since then 86 per cent of schools in the city have taken it up.

The change was part of the new drive for interoperability in education demanded by central government. “In the past there was a monopoly and we realised that we were part of it. If we didn't offer an alternative, the schools had no choice. Schools wanted local support but they did not want to be restricted to one product,” said Andy Jackson of Learning and Culture IT, Birmingham City Council's IT support unit.

“If a local support unit won't offer choice it's a significant constraint. Local authorities are supposed to be service providers, not service definers. There are commercial restraints within that but we decided we would support the schools, whatever they use, because they are Birmingham schools.”

## Serco and Birmingham – A Pioneering Partnership

Birmingham decided to offer Facility to schools after the company showed its willingness to provide what the LEA needed. When the team asked for extra functions they were added. “As IT professionals we were impressed. We already felt that Facility was the business. But when the extra unit was added we knew the company was prepared to listen to its customers,” Andy said.

The ultimate decision was taken by the schools themselves. Facility was one of a shortlist of products shown to schools by the LEA. Andy said: “We told the schools – here are four products, one of which you know, it’s your choice, we’ll go with what you want. The schools chose Facility.” The team agreed to continue supporting schools who remained with SIMS but only 62 in the city still use it. The remaining 390 moved to Facility.

The LEA has not regretted the move and Andy is convinced that many more will make the change when they realise the advantages. “Sticking with what we knew would have been the comfortable option. We chose the difficult route because we’re working in the schools’ best interest. We’re convinced we made the right decision.

“What Birmingham does today the others do in five years’ time. People take note when we do something different.”

## More Opportunities for Growth

Having the new arrangement is good for everyone. The schools have a choice of product and the LEA is better able to work with other authorities. Andy said: “It leaves us with a greater opportunity for trading inside and outside of the LEA. At this point we are able to offer implementation and support to schools and LEAs who might wish to export to Facility. It is a growing market and LEAs are business oriented.”

Birmingham already offers a consultancy service to other LEAs around the UK.

In addition there is potential to make huge improvements in the service offered to schools. “Competition between suppliers brings improved influence over quality, timescales, responsiveness and customer attention,” Andy said.

With Facility in place, Birmingham’s schools have gone on to make dramatic changes for the better and one of the key areas of change is in school self review and the Self Evaluation Form that is the basis of new-style inspections.

“Technology is a tool that allows you to do things you couldn’t, whether it is setting targets or creating a more flexible timetable that serves the learning process.

Technology can help you do everything faster. Collaborative working is much faster, particularly if you use the same system,” Andy said.

In order to ensure that schools get the best out of their ability to manage data, Birmingham appointed School Solutions Manager Tim Riley, an ex-headteacher and former Facility user. He said: “Lots of the potential of data management has yet to be realised. It used to be about input and there were too few tools for analysis but now, when all the data is in place, you can use it to drive standards forward.”

Using Facility ePortal teachers now feed information directly into school records and that can be used in school self review to prepare for evaluation in readiness for inspections. But the data is also available for outside bodies who need access to background information, for example, when a member of the Inclusion Support team needs to assess a child’s behaviour.

Tim explained: “Looking it up through ePortal means they can find out what events are affecting the child’s behaviour and identify patterns before they meet the child. They can analyse what’s going on without the pressures they would be under at the school and can plan strategies from a calm position, rather than an emotional one.” Some decisions can even be made without visiting the school, saving time and money for both the LEA and the school.

In other cases the system is being used to keep parents informed and involved in their children’s education. Facility ePortal gives parents access to data through password-protected links on the Internet and many use it to check on attendance, behaviour and performance. According to Tim: “Parents want to be involved. If parents don’t communicate with the school the children will take advantage. This kind of link raises levels of communication.”