

Local Authority Improves ICT Services to Schools, Boosting Classroom Innovation

Warwickshire Local Authority

industry:

Education and Government

country:

United Kingdom

business challenge:

It became costly to maintain 5,000 desktops across 250 schools as technicians had to manually complete installations and upgrades

solution:

A solution to make applications available to users from any PC

services:

Integration and deployment services for Microsoft Solutions

results:

- Faster, simpler deployments to school desktops without any disruption to students improve productivity in the classrooms
- Remote streaming of applications enables better support and service to the schools, by freeing up IT technicians' time
- Schools are now free to innovate with new software as teachers can use the application to demonstrate beta versions of software safely
- Increased security for schools as the data remains in the school, and is only available to authorised staff from a PC

Executive Summary

Warwickshire Local Authority sought to improve its managed ICT service for schools by **streamlining application delivery and improving security for remote access to school networks**. Now, IT technicians are freed up to **focus on delivering better support, and teachers can easily evaluate innovative new software on school computers**.

Company overview

Located in central England, Warwickshire Local Authority provides a fully-managed IT service to more than 5,000 desktops across 250 schools. This includes both software applications and IT support.

Business Challenge

Local authorities in England play a vital role supporting national e-learning initiatives such as the "Harnessing Technology" e-Strategy and National Digital Infrastructure. Warwickshire Local Authority is no exception. It is a leader in helping schools raise standards in teaching, learning, and school management through the effective use of technology.

It provides ICT services to more than 5,000 desktops across 250 schools in the county, over a rural area of central England. Their services include delivering software applications—including e-learning, Microsoft® Office suites and management information systems—plus support from its team of advisory teachers and technical support staff. However, the local authority wanted to improve its service to meet growing demand.

Historically, technicians performed upgrades and installations during their regular visits to schools—typically half a day every two weeks. But this meant most of their time was taken up with routine work, instead of developing new ways for teachers to integrate technology with their teaching.

What's more, teachers were unable to try out new software in their teaching.

Chris Page, Technical Development Manager, Warwickshire Local Authority, says:

"We're in a catch-22 situation. We want schools to have the flexibility to install their own software—but traditionally a managed desktop can stifle this. We have to have greater control, because when a school installs a new application, it may cause problems when we deploy updates to our core suite of software."

Finally, more school employees than ever need access to applications and files to carry out routine tasks.

Page says: "In the past, only two or three people used school management information systems. Now, most teachers and administrators update marks and add notes to student records—and at the same time, schools are highly concerned about data protection and computer security."

The Local Authority wanted to strengthen their managed-service offering by:

- Streamlining application delivery to support innovative teachers
- Simplifying upgrades and installations to free IT technicians' time during school visits
- Improving security and data protection.

“SoftGrid has made our IT environment **extremely flexible and saved us significant costs**. Once an application has been sequenced it can be **accessed by users anywhere in minutes**.”

David Banton, Network Manager, Avon Valley School

Solution Provided

Warwickshire Local Authority offers the Capita Schools Information Management System (SIMS) as one of its services. However, SIMS is designed as a school-level application, and could not easily be accessed from outside the school.

In designing a solution, Warwickshire worked with a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner to identify a solution that could build on Warwickshire's existing framework—which includes Microsoft Internet Security and Acceleration (ISA) Server 2006 and Active Directory® service. It comprised Microsoft Intelligent Application Gateway (IAG) 2007 and Microsoft SoftGrid® Application Virtualization, part of the Microsoft Desktop Optimization Pack for Software Assurance. The authority was one of the first in the country to use these two applications to deliver “Instant Applications” and “SIMS Anytime, Anywhere”.

SoftGrid works by streaming applications to client computers. The applications are not installed on user desktops, but can be used securely by users “on demand”, wherever they are. Now, thanks to SoftGrid, applications are available immediately from any PC.

“SoftGrid has made our IT environment extremely flexible and saved us significant costs. Once an application has been sequenced it can be accessed by users anywhere in minutes. SoftGrid has also allowed us to have more control over our licensing because we can limit how many users can run an application.”

said **David Banton, Network Manager from Avon Valley School**.

What's more, IT technicians and advisory teachers can demonstrate new specialist software to schools across the network, without having to install it on a local computer.

“It's so much easier to let teachers try new software in the classroom,”

said **Richard Chapman, E-Learning Adviser**.

IAG 2007 can define granular policy of what users can access from different locations: within schools, at home, and from anywhere using a public Internet connection. The local authority can use IAG 2007 to offer users more flexible access without compromising security, and schools can implement permissions in addition to those set by the local authority. For example, teachers can log on from home to use SIMS in a way that meets a school's data protection and privacy policies. “It's so easy to log in from home and get to SIMS whenever I need to,” said Sandra Moreland from The Willows C of E Primary School.

In December 2006, the Microsoft Gold Partner deployed a successful proof of concept, and spent a further six weeks planning and deploying the solution across the county's managed-service system. It worked with the local authority to establish the checks which PCs connecting to the system would have to pass, which applications would be available and who required access to them.

Business Benefits

Warwickshire Local Authority can now deploy updates more quickly and offer better-quality services to its schools. Teachers can trial new software safely without affecting system stability, and can access management information systems securely.

- Faster, simpler deployments to school desktops. Previously, technicians would have to take a classroom out of use and disrupt lessons to deliver upgrades.

Page says: “With SoftGrid, everything takes place in the background, without any disruption to school operations.”

- Better support and service to the schools, by freeing up IT technicians' time.

Page says: “The time savings are immense. Typically, a technician visits a school for half a day every two weeks to carry out support jobs—including upgrades and installations we can now do instantly using SoftGrid. My people can now work on other tasks during their visits, and provide a higher-quality service to schools.”

- Schools free to innovate with new software. Teachers can use SoftGrid to use demonstration and beta versions of software safely, and advisory teachers can show new software to any school in the county they visit, at the push of a button.

Page says: “We can deploy trial or beta versions for a fixed period, knowing that it won't affect our core applications because it's virtualised and kept separate from the other applications on the machine.”

- Increased security for schools. The local authority can use IAG 2007 to offer schools secure access to their staff in several ways to suit their preferences.

Page says: “Instead of installing SIMS on teachers' laptops, we can give them access to the software, across the network, using IAG 2007. This way, we know the data remains in the school, and is only available to authorised staff from a PC which passes the security tests performed by the IAG 2007 web client.”