

Surrey Personalised Learning Space (PLS) Programme

Frequently Asked Questions

Updated April 2009

Q1. What is a 'Learning Platform'?

It is an umbrella term that describes a broad range of ICT systems used to deliver and support learning and teaching. It usually combines several functions, such as organising, mapping and delivering curriculum activities, and the facility for learners and teachers to have a dialogue about the activity, all via ICT. So, you might hear the term learning platform being applied to a virtual learning environment (VLE) or to the components of a managed learning environment (MLE).

Q2. What is a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)?

A Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is a software tool which brings together resources for curriculum mapping, delivery, assessment, tutor support, communication and tracking.

Q3. What is a Managed Learning Environment (MLE)?

A Managed Learning Environment (MLE) refers to the whole range of information systems and processes that support learning and the management of learning within an institution. It includes VLEs, Management Information Systems and other support systems.

Q4. Why does a school need a Learning Platform?

When used appropriately, a Learning Platform can transform the learning and teaching experience and greatly enhance the personalisation of learning.

The DCSF e-Strategy *Harnessing Technology: Transforming Learning and Children's Services* sets out the government's targets for ensuring that better use is made of ICT in schools to improve standards, pupils' interest in learning and use of teachers' time. There is a specific target in the strategy: all pupils need to be able to access a personal online workspace, capable of supporting an e-portfolio, by 2007-08.

The e-Strategy may be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/publications/e-strategy

Q5. How may a school benefit from a Learning Platform?

Learning Platforms can offer a range of benefits for all those involved in learning both inside and outside the classroom. These benefits extend to teachers, pupils, parents and the process of school administration and management.

The benefits are brought about by bringing together hardware, software and supporting services and Learning Platforms should provide the following range of ICT-based functions:

- Content management - Enables teaching staff to create, store and repurpose online resources and coursework

- Curriculum mapping and planning - Provides tools and storage to support assessment for learning, personalisation and lesson planning
- Learner engagement and administration - Provides access to pupil information, attendance, timetabling, e-portfolios and management information
- Tools and services - Provides communication and collaboration tools such as email, messaging, discussion forums and blogs

These functions offer numerous advantages to all those involved and the following examples outline the practical benefits on offer to each group involved.

Learning Platforms provide the following practical benefits for **teachers**:

- The online sharing of teaching materials and resources in school and at home ready for printing out or use with an interactive whiteboard
- Resources can be put online as they are created - page by page or lesson plan by lesson plan
- Learning materials can be customised and adapted for the exact needs of pupils
- Lesson plans can be easily accessed online from colleagues to support supply cover
- Individual and group progress can be assessed, monitored and tracked
- Pupils can submit work to one easily managed area
- Individual management of timetables, diary, email and discussions via a personal desktop space
- Increased ICT competence and confidence

Learning Platforms provide the following practical benefits for **pupils**:

- Online access and sharing of learning materials outside lesson time and from other locations such as the library and home
- Online storage of work and notes for use in assignments, homework and revision outside school hours
- Work can be carried out at an individual pace and with a wider choice of learning styles through a more personalised curriculum
- Online portfolios can be created using digital photos and videos as well as text
- ICT and online skills can be improved
- Homework and assignments can be submitted online for marking and assessment
- Online communication with other students and teachers via email and through live discussions and forums

Learning Platforms provide the following practical benefits for **parents**:

- Home access allowing them to play a greater part in a child's learning
- Support for a child's learning which takes place outside school
- Access to a child's personal homepage to keep track of their work and curriculum
- Viewing of a child's reports, attendance data and scores in assessment activities
- Effective communication with teachers, school administrators and others supporting their child's learning
- Engagement with wider school issues through online communication tools and become active partners with the school

Learning Platforms provide the following practical benefits for **school administration and management**:

- Up-to-date management information on attendance and attainment
- Tracking of individual and group progress
- Collation of summative and formative assessments
- Reduction in administrative burdens for teachers by using transferable data
- Communication within a school and beyond on a one-to-one, one-to-many or many-to-many basis
- Increased communication with parents

Q6. What is the Surrey Personalised Learning Space (PLS) and why is it needed?

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has set the expectation that **“by spring 2008 every pupil should have access to a personalised online learning space with the potential to support an e-portfolio”** and **“by 2010 every school should have integrated learning and management systems”**.

Surrey commissioned VT Four S to specify and cost the provision of a Personalised Learning Space (PLS) solution for Surrey schools to meet this DCSF target. Currently the PLS provision makes available an online learning space for 140,000 pupils of up to 1 Gb. Dependent on decisions at an LA level, the system is expandable to include consideration of the following:

- Personalised online learning space (up to 20Gb of online storage space for day to day work)
- Email services will be provided for all users. Students and staff mail boxes will be able to store up to 200Mb of data
- E-portfolio (secure space for the storage and presentation of assessment work)
- Integrated Management Information Systems (EDIX, SIMS, EMS). Integration of other MI systems will also be catered for.

The Surrey PLS is designed to work in conjunction with a **Learning Platform** as its user interface.

Q7. What are the advantages of a single Learning Platform for Surrey schools? Why should my school become part of the programme?

This is a programme designed to support **all** Surrey schools in making effective use of new technologies. It is part of Surrey’s response to the Government’s e-learning strategy (“Harnessing Technology”). The emphasis of this programme is not on introducing more technologies, but making more and better use of ICT. A Surrey-wide solution will achieve best value for money in terms of cost, functionality, resilience and sustainability through maximising economies of scale.

There are enormous benefits in a collaborative approach ensuring that content and communication can be shared amongst all Surrey schools in a secure way. In particular, a Surrey-wide solution will:

- Facilitate 14-19 student mobility as students working in different learning establishments will access one common system with one e-Portfolio

- Facilitate Key Stage 2-3 student mobility as pupils will continue to use the same system at secondary as they used at primary school
- Facilitate staff mobility between schools, reducing training time and costs and enabling greater collaboration between schools
- Reduce the cost of training and support for each school through economies of scale
- Facilitate home access – siblings at different schools will all access the same system providing a common interface for parents and children
- Enable the easier exchange of content, data and sharing of best practice across the County
- Provide access to potential pan-Surrey facilities, such as an online content store
- Enable individual schools to have a greater influence on the Surrey Learning Platform future road-map, through a Surrey-wide reference group

Q8. How was Fronter selected as the preferred Learning Platform supplier for Surrey?

Surrey asked VT Four S to run a mini-competition from the Becta Learning Services Framework to recommend a preferred supplier. A Touchstone Group of Surrey schools helped to specify and select the preferred solution.

7 bidder responses were short listed to 4 by the Touchstone Group. These 4 then presented to the Group and provided demo accounts, etc. The Group identified Fronter as their clear favourite and VT Four S reported this recommendation to Surrey.

Q9. Why was the selection process for the Learning Platform limited to the ten suppliers on the Becta Framework? Why did you not consider other Learning Platform providers?

The Becta Learning Platform Services Framework provides UK schools, colleges and local authorities with an EU approved supplier network to deliver high quality, value for money Learning Platform services.

The Framework of 10 suppliers is EU compliant, which means local authorities, schools and colleges are free to conduct a **mini competition** among the approved suppliers, reducing the cost and time of a full procurement. The 10 suppliers were selected following a rigorous and comprehensive evaluation process. Their performance will be closely monitored by Becta for the 3 year duration of the Framework.

The Framework has two advantages. Firstly it makes the whole procurement process much easier and so much cheaper. Secondly, purchasers can be confident they are buying robust and sustainable technology and services which give value for money.

Surrey and VT Four S have taken full advice from Becta regarding this procurement. Had Surrey wished to consider other Learning Platform providers not on the Becta Framework, then due to the size of the contract there would have been no choice but to run a full EU procurement. Such a procurement process would have taken many months to conclude and would have cost a considerable amount of money. Additional technical testing to ensure compliance with Surrey School's requirements would have also been required.

Q10. How much will my school have to pay?

Currently the online personalised learning space (PLS) will be provided free of charge. Discussions are currently taking place on how the PLS will be funded in the future.

Detailed costs for the Surrey Fronter Learning Platform Offer (LP) are available on the Surrey offer section of the Surrey MLE Website at www.surreymle.net .

Q11. Have Surrey schools met the DCSF target that every pupil should have a personalised learning space?

VT Four S and Surrey LA are working closely with Becta on the development of the Surrey PLS. Our procurement strategy has been approved by Becta and as a result, Surrey schools are deemed by Becta as having met the 2008 target.

Q12. How will the Surrey PLS and Learning Platform be deployed?

The PLS and LP deployment will follow 5 distinct phases:

- PLS Proof of Concept
- LP Proof of Concept
- Pilot of Standard Rollout
- Complete Rollout
- Next Steps

Q13. My school has already invested in a Learning Platform. Won't we lose out?

Those schools which have already invested time and money into the development of their own Learning Platform will not be disadvantaged, as the aim is for the Surrey PLS to interoperate with any Becta-compliant Learning Platform that a school may already have in place (i.e. it complies with inter-operability standards). Through the economies of scale created, the hosted learning space provided by the PLS will be cheaper, larger and more sustainable than that which an individual school could procure commercially. Thus schools may continue to use their current Learning Platform while taking full advantage of the PLS for data storage, etc.

Q14. Who will manage the administrative element of the Learning Platform? For example, who will create new users and delete old ones?

Schools will be expected to manage the day to day operational elements of the LP but full training and support will be provided within the Surrey Fronter Offer. An appropriate training and support package should be part of any package when an alternative Learning platform is procured.

Q15. How will the Surrey Learning Platform work with my Management Information System (MIS)?

Becta are leading the development of Frameworks which will ensure that MIS, Learning Platforms and other systems, as well as content, are increasingly integrated and provide a complete managed learning environment (MLE) for schools. This will avoid duplication of data, data entry and the need for multiple passwords. Surrey is working with partners and

suppliers to ensure this integration will materialise for Surrey Schools. The standards have not been finalised, but they are likely to include SIF and Shibboleth.

Q16. Will my broadband connectivity be sufficient to run the Surrey PLS?

VT Four S will monitor how PLS impacts on the performance of the broadband network to any Surrey school. VT Four S will be trialing the PLS system before it is fully deployed to all schools. As part of this trial, we will be monitoring carefully any potential impact the system may have on the existing broadband network. This work will be used to inform the requirements for the new broadband contract to be procured.

Q17. Where does a Learning Platform fit into school strategy?

As part of Headteacher and senior management team planning to improve learning and teaching within a school, learning platform technology can be used to help realise goals. This works best when it is properly embedded and used *where appropriate* and across the whole school. A learning platform can help bridge any gap that emerges once the school leadership has considered where the school is now, in terms of learning and teaching delivery, against where it would like to be in the future.

Q18. The staff at my school are under pressure due to workload and other initiatives how will this programme help to address this?

ICT can help to address workload issues and support school staff and students in working more effectively. There are a number of case studies available to illustrate this. The introduction of any new system or change in general does require some resources and this is true for Learning Platforms. VT Four S will develop case studies of practice with schools. This will include considering implementation issues and how the ongoing management of a Learning Platform can be effectively managed.

Q19. How should a school prepare for a Learning Platform?

Effective implementation of a learning platform will lead to improvements in the delivery of learning and teaching. However, to ensure success, it is essential that the school leadership team consider how the school currently manages:

- Knowledge and on-line resources inside the school
- Motivation of pupils *and* staff
- Involvement of pupils in their learning
- Out of school access for pupils to their work and learning resources
- Involvement of parents in encouraging and monitoring their child's achievement
- Pupil behavioural management
- The creation of opportunities for teachers' professional development.

Q20. How long will it take for a school to implement a Learning Platform?

The process of successful implementation usually involves changing culture and practice within the school. This takes time. However, the length of time taken will depend upon the knowledge levels and current usage already in place. These factors should be taken into account by the Headteacher and senior management team when planning delivery, with a realistic timescale for full implementation across the school. There are case studies in the

Secondary and Primary schools booklets Learning Platforms - Making IT Personal. These publications can be found on the information and guidance section of the Surrey MLE website at www.surreymle.net . The full implementation of learning platform needs to be seen as long term initiative and is best viewed as a 3 year project in a typical school.

Q21. Is there any best practice about how schools should implement a Learning Platform?

In practice, successful learning platform implementation is only achieved when the whole school community, led by the senior management team, understands and is committed to the cultural change/change management exercise needed to fully support e-learning throughout the school. An example of how some schools implemented learning platforms can be found at the back of the Secondary and Primary schools booklets Learning Platforms - Making IT Personal. These publications can be found on the information and guidance section of the Surrey MLE website at www.surreymle.net. Additionally, VT Four S will be working with schools to develop examples of good practice in relation to Learning Platform implementation.

Q22. Is there now an assumption that every teacher MUST have internet access at home?

The DCSF makes no presumption that every teacher must have internet access at home. The requirement is that a school's learning platform should be available for anytime/anywhere access. It is up to the head teacher and senior management team in each school to decide upon and agree measures, or protocols, for managing the e-workload. Planning will undoubtedly need to reflect available resources, including the capacity for learners and teachers to connect to the system outside school.

There are tools and information that can help head teachers plan their approach to this, for example information on the Becta website at <http://schools.becta.org.uk/> . In particular the self-evaluation matrix and the learning platform matrix will help schools assess their readiness to evolve with a learning platform.

Q23. Is the intention that children as young as 5 year olds should be accessing the Learning Platform from home?

The DCSF does not have an expectation that all pupils of any age will be logging on to their school's learning platform services from home. The DCSF does have an expectation that all schools' learning platform systems should be available for access from outside school premises and hours, for teachers and students that want to and can take advantage of anytime/anywhere accessibility.

Primary schools that have successfully embedded a learning platform agree that a child aged 5 years can benefit from digital technology applied to learning. However, the level of out-of-school activity expected from a very young child, with regard to accessing a learning platform, is a matter for the individual school and parents to agree upon, taking into account the availability of out-of-school resources and a child's ability level.

Q24. Whilst there are obvious benefits from Learning Platforms for Secondary Schools and their pupils — what are the benefits for Key Stage 1 and Foundation pupils?

As with both the primary and secondary sectors, there is a commitment in the Foundation Stage to use ICT to enhance learning and teaching across all areas of education. The use of technology — for example digital photos, video, electronic toys and the use of internet — will help children at Foundation Stage begin to recognise the importance of ICT. The concept of learning platforms will underpin the use of ICT as an important tool in learning and teaching. Additionally a learning platform has real potential for extending parental engagement to support young learners. A number of Surrey infant schools have started implementing a Learning Platform and VT Four S will consider how their expertise can best be shared. Early indications are that even for very young children a learning platform is a motivational and engaging resource. It is recognised that the use of a Learning Platform with younger children needs to complement other methods of supporting their learning and not replace them.

Q25. What work has been done in preparation for Learning Platforms in Special Schools?

The issue of inclusion is fundamental to learning services technology. The Surrey Learning Platform procurement specifies how the learning platform interface must cater for those with special needs (e.g. is compatible with a screen reader or follows accessibility guidelines). In addition, Becta is exploring with industry and other stakeholders the 'reasonable adjustments' for accessibility and inclusion, and how these could be addressed in a range of content and systems.

Q26. How much support will VT Four S offer schools if they choose not to go with Fronter?

On behalf of Surrey, VT Four S will be providing the training and support package associated with the Surrey Fronter Learning Platform Offer. It will also provide general advice and guidance on implementing Learning Platforms and how they can contribute to pupil learning and the management of the school. This guidance should be applicable to any learning platform which a school chooses to procure. Currently, VT Four S will not be providing specific training on alternative Learning Platforms as this should be part of the package when an alternative Learning platform is procured.

Q27. When do schools need to sign up for Fronter if they want to take up the offer?

Full information about the Surrey Fronter Offer is available on the Surrey MLE website at www.surreymle.net along with dates by which submissions of interest should be sent to VT Four S.

Q28. How will costs be reduced for a smaller school or an Infant and Nursery school?

As part of the negotiation of the Surrey Fronter Offer, VT Four S have ensured that different size schools are taken into account and that there is flexibility within the training packages in order that costs are reduced for smaller schools.

Q29. What happens to a pupil's PLS if they move to a school within Surrey. Can the work be transferred to another LA if they leave Surrey?

Currently if a pupil moves to another school within Surrey they will retain their access to their PLS storage through their individual log in. If a child leaves to go to another LA then they will need to be advised to download any work they have saved to a different storage location. VT Four S are looking at ways to ensure that users of the PLS system are given sufficient time to retrieve their work if they move from a Surrey school.

Q30. What plans are there to deal with the issue of children with no internet access at home?

This will need to include a range of strategies and might include the following: school provision before and after school, access to libraries and community facilities, appropriate use of learning platforms within the normal school hours and potential use of the school's ICT provision for pupils beyond the school. Consideration will also need to be given to any home access schemes which are currently being planned nationally.