



# Learning platforms

## Primary



Making IT personal



The term learning platform describes a broad range of ICT systems used to deliver and support learning. The government's target is that all pupils will be able to access a personalised online workspace, capable of supporting an e-portfolio, by 2007-08.



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This booklet explains the Department for Education and Skills' policy and funding arrangements for learning platforms. These arrangements have been designed to help your school invest successfully in a learning platform that suits the needs of pupils and staff.

The term 'learning platform' refers to a combination of IT services that support teaching and learning. Through a learning platform, hardware, software and supporting services are brought together to enable more effective ways of working within and outside the classroom.

This booklet should be read in conjunction with wider guidance about learning services, provided by Becta. This is available on the Becta website at: [www.becta.org.uk/publications](http://www.becta.org.uk/publications), under the 'School Leaders' section.



Learning platforms can be put together in different ways, using software and services from a number of different suppliers. Although it will be important to choose the right complementary technologies, you need to understand first how you might use the resources and services a basic learning platform can deliver.

At the heart of any learning platform is the concept of an online personal learning space for the pupil. This space should offer teachers and pupils' access to stored work, e-learning resources, communication and collaboration with peers, and the facility to track progress.

With password controlled access to a learning platform:

- the pupil can work from any computer with an internet connection (preferably broadband) in school, from home or elsewhere
- teachers can check individual pupil progress much more easily, and offer advice and resources tailored to the particular needs of an individual student
- parents or guardians can readily look at schoolwork from a home computer or community access point and become more closely involved in the pupil's development.

Where the learning platform is integrated with a school's management information system (MIS) these benefits deepen for everyone, offering school managers and teachers, in particular, significant and time-saving administrative efficiencies.

You may have come across many of these ideas described as a Virtual Learning Environment or a Managed Learning Environment (VLE or MLE). VLEs and MLEs may also be described as learning platforms.

## *Personalisation*

The concept of personalisation is central to government plans to transform learning and teaching through the use of information and communication technologies (ICT). The aim is to raise pupils' achievement in school at all ability levels, as well as reducing the burden on teachers. Personalisation is a theme that runs through the October 2005 White Paper.

*4.6 Now we must go much further and create an education system that focuses on the needs of the individual child. This ... means every pupil being able to extend their learning and develop their interests and aptitudes through extra support and tuition beyond the school day.*

The White Paper acknowledges the central role of ICT, and specifically a personal learning space, in this vision.

*4.42 By 2008 all schools will be able to offer access to e-learning resources both in and out of school. We will encourage all schools, by this date, to make available a personal online space to every pupil.*

Learning platforms in schools can support and underpin a number of other government initiatives in education. For example, school workforce reform such as managing the government's 10 per cent

Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) statutory requirement, will be significantly easier using an appropriate and embedded learning platform.

### *The core service*

You'll need to seek detailed advice about the best technology and service arrangements for a learning platform in your school.

The starting point should be your Local Authority (LA) and/or Regional Broadband Consortium (RBC). To locate your RBC, see <http://broadband.ngfl.gov.uk/>. Further information about learning platforms is in the guidance available from Becta at [www.becta.org.uk/publications](http://www.becta.org.uk/publications), in the 'School Leaders' section.

Learning platforms will vary from school to school but the basic functional specification, currently being developed by Becta, might include:

- communication and collaboration tools e.g. web-based email to enable peer/mentor dialogue
- safe and secure, individual online working space for the school workforce and pupils enabling anytime, anywhere learning
- tools to enable teachers to manage and tailor digital content to user needs and learning styles, and to track user progress.

## **The benefits**

### *Parental involvement*

With a learning platform it is easy for schools to offer parents or guardians detailed information about their child's work and progress, or indeed to communicate information about school events and activities.

A well designed service, integrated with the school's MIS, can also provide information about attendance, achievement and behaviour. The school can also use email or text messaging to alert parents quickly and efficiently about potential issues, or simply as a news channel to keep parents informed.

### *Anytime, anywhere learning*

With their materials online, teachers and pupils can manage their time more efficiently. Pupils can access their work when they want to, for example in the evenings, during periods of prolonged absence or during holiday periods. Easy access to additional materials can build confidence in young learners struggling with particular subjects, or stretch more able children by encouraging them to research topics more widely.

### *Personalised learning*

Teachers can tailor learning to the individual needs of their pupils, assigning different tasks to different pupils according to abilities and preferred learning styles. Tracking tools can help teachers identify problems early, and more easily reinforce particular learning objectives. Quick and easy data analysis for pupils across a class or in subject areas can also offer useful comparative insights that may inform lesson plans. The administrative efficiencies that a learning platform can create should help teachers assess, review and meet the individual needs of their pupils.

### *Better use of teaching time*

Learning platforms can help teachers share resources and lesson plans more easily, encouraging collaboration and development of ideas. Online subject forums can be set up across a Local Authority or RBC, enabling primary school teachers to talk to colleagues in other schools and share thoughts, ideas and lesson plans about their specialist areas.

Integrating the learning platform with the school MIS can also address school management issues. For example, because all data and documentation is immediately available to all relevant staff, incidents and issues can be addressed more efficiently and are less open to dispute.

### *Supply teacher effectiveness*

Lesson plans can be stored centrally in a learning platform system. When a teacher is absent, supply or cover teachers can continue more easily the planned programme of teaching, minimising disruption to the class and providing coherence and continuity in pupils' learning.

### *Collaboration*

Email and chat tools make it easy for pupils to communicate within a school or even across schools, working through problems together, exchanging useful ideas and sources of information.

### *Cross-institutional working*

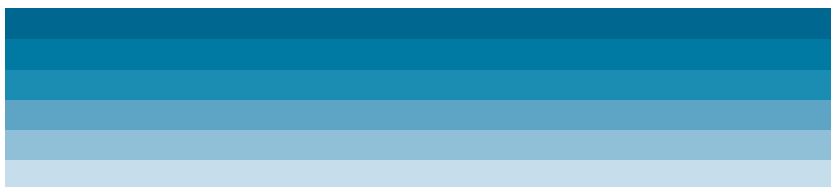
Learning platforms can be used across feeder primaries and their secondary schools to smooth the transition from Year 6 to Year 7, helping to avoid the Year 7 'dip'.

### *Supporting an e-portfolio*

Learning platforms should support an e-portfolio, including examples of the pupils' work. The e-portfolio will offer a picture of the pupil's ability as he or she moves up from year to year and from primary to secondary school.

## *Pupil inclusion*

Out of school access to an online personalised learning space means that if a pupil is absent over a prolonged period, he or she can easily stay in touch with lessons, teachers and classmates. It can also be a more productive learning environment for children who do not thrive in traditional classroom settings. Very young children are increasingly able with different forms of ICT and have shown themselves adept at these non-traditional ways of working.





### *How funding is allocated*

The Standards Fund allocation system is being replaced. From 2006-2007 onwards the capital funding allocation for schools, called *devolved formula capital*, will include ICT funding for learning platforms provision.

Schools also have provision to support learning platforms included within their *revenue funding*.

Schools' *devolved formula capital* and *revenue funding* are both allocated to Local Authorities, who must pass these funds directly to schools.

From 2006-2007, Local Authorities will have some retained capital funding, through their Connectivity allocation, which is intended to fund core learning platform provision to all schools, either through the local authority or RBC. This funding is designed to encourage schools to introduce learning platform services into their working practices.

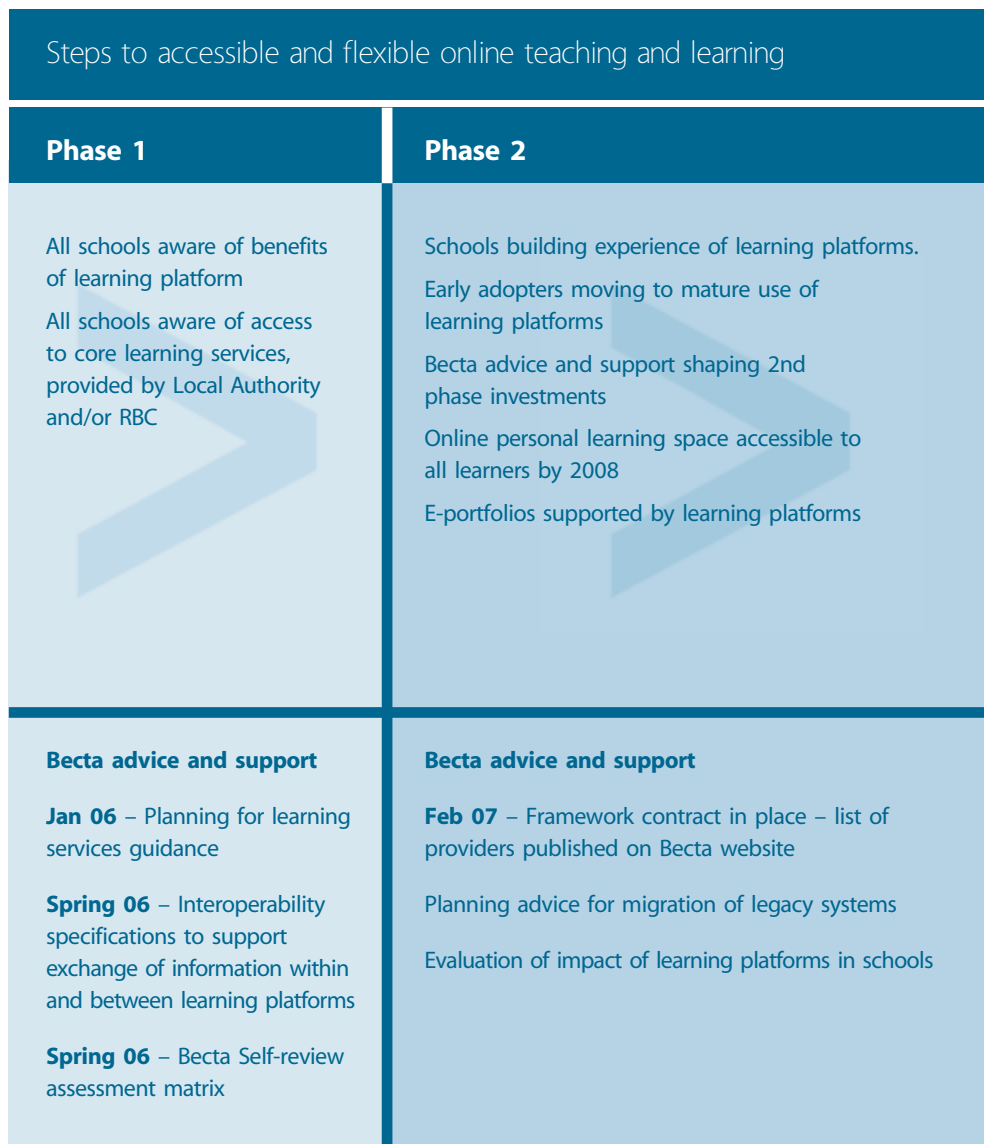
### ***Achieving economies of scale***

Funding allocations to Local Authorities and schools are based on achieving economies of scale i.e. aggregation of costs. For instance, a Regional Broadband Consortium (RBC), Local Authority or cluster of schools can save money when purchasing learning platforms because they buy services and support in bulk.

### ***Phased approach to implementation***

We are taking a phased view of the investment in management and development of learning platforms in schools, see *Figure 1*. We believe that as schools become more and more familiar with this technology, they will be better placed to work with specialist advisers from RBCs, Local Authorities and Becta to achieve an optimum deployment of learning platform tools and services.

Figure 1



## Phase 3

Anytime, anywhere access to school resources for learners and the school workforce, at the pace, place and time to suit

Earlier investments creating an informed customer base

VFM and economies of scale are realised by schools who invest in learning platforms supplied by LAs and/or RBCs

Industry responding to customer needs

Specifications and framework contract are used to best advantage

Improved resource planning, supporting school workforce reforms

More efficient management and pupil data handling

Opportunities for Assessment for Learning realised

### **Becta advice and support**

Migration from legacy systems

Refresh of framework contract

Continuing planning advice

Becta – British Educational Communications and Technology Agency

### *Phase 1 – first steps with a learning platform*

We want to encourage more schools to take up affordable learning platform provision, preferably supplied by their Local Authority or RBC, minimising the risk of schools purchasing inappropriate products or overly expensive technical support.

To enable this, we're allocating additional funds to Local Authorities either to themselves provide, or buy from their RBC, a core learning platform service for their schools. Schools are encouraged to take advantage of this position where practicable.

Schools can consider supplementing the core provision, by purchasing additional tools that best meet their individual needs. In the short term, our objective is for schools to gain experience and build their learning platform knowledge base. This should help them embed learning platforms across all areas of school life – in teaching, in learning and in school management. This experience should help schools work through the cultural changes required to get most benefit from their learning platform investment.

### *Phase 2 – building on knowledge gained*

In the medium term, our objective is for schools to be in a position to assess properly their learning platform functionality requirements.

Becta is preparing functionality specifications for learning services, due out in spring 2006. These will help suppliers to design products that can exchange information and allow interoperability between the wide range of e-learning materials and software required to meet the learning needs of a diverse range of students. This approach is designed to give schools, Local Authorities and RBCs much greater product choice and flexibility.

A procurement framework of suppliers is due in early 2007. The framework is designed to ensure that learning platform products meet the necessary interoperability standards and offer best value cost options.

By this stage schools should be well grounded in their use of learning platforms, and better informed about the optimum ways to deliver their curriculum activities through ICT.

### ***Phase 3 – a long term view***

It is our objective that use of a learning platform is embedded into every school's working practice by this stage. This requires robust knowledge about the application of the technology and change management skills.

Because these changes go to the heart of teaching practice, the implementation of a learning platform must be tailored to the needs of each individual school.



**Q** *What is a learning platform?*

**A** It is an umbrella term that describes a broad range of ICT systems used to deliver and support learning. As a minimum, we expect it to combine communication and collaboration tools, secure individual online working space, tools to enable teachers to manage and tailor content to user needs, pupil progress tracking and anytime/anywhere access. 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).

**Q** *Why shouldn't my school simply wait for the learning platform framework to be in place before deciding which learning platform to buy?*

**A** Your school will make better use of the framework if it already has some experience of how a learning platform works, and understands what the various functions can do.

If your school already has a learning platform in place, it probably makes sense to wait until the framework arrives, rather than change providers in the interim.

However, if you have yet to invest in a learning platform, working with your Local Authority and/or RBC to access a core service will help build the required experience and enable your school to make better judgements about learning platform provision in the longer term.

**Q** *By gearing up Local Authorities (LAs) and RBCs in April 2006, aren't you pre-empting the framework agreement that is not due out until early 2007?*

**A** Becta is already putting together learning platform functional specifications for release in spring 2006. These will allow LAs and RBCs to ensure that their systems are interoperable and conformant before the framework contract is in place in early 2007. In the short term, we

want schools to benefit from the chance to gain experience by accessing affordable learning platform provision that is as low-risk as possible. This should help ensure that schools are better-informed customers when the framework is in place.

**Q** *My school has a learning platform at the moment. It costs us a lot and we don't really use it that much. What should we do now?*

**A** There may be specific issues that can be resolved with your provider, for instance, training. Or you might need to speak with your Local Authority and/or RBC to see if there is a cheaper and better option for your school available at an LA or RBC level.

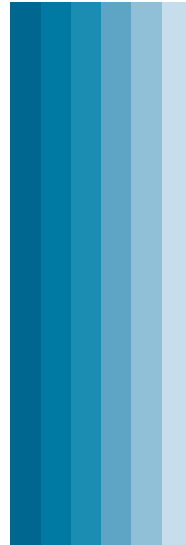
Early in 2006, Becta will be producing a self-evaluation tool for schools. This will help schools assess where they are in terms of readiness for a learning platform. Check the Becta site at [www.becta.org.uk/schools](http://www.becta.org.uk/schools) for news of this facility.

**Q** *Why not just give the additional money that you're planning to channel through Local Authorities to schools instead?*

**A** The sum involved is significant only when measured against the economies of scale and aggregated costs that can be wrought by bulk purchasing from the strategic local or regional perspective. The DfES' policy is about ensuring best value for money by aggregating purchasing at the most appropriate level.

For more examples of DfES' Frequently Asked Questions about learning platforms, go to:

[www.teachernet.gov.uk/learningplatforms](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/learningplatforms)





### **Crocketts Lane Primary School, Sandwell**

Since June 2004 Crocketts Lane Primary School has used the learning platform developed at Shireland Language College, the secondary school in its cluster. It is one of seven Sandwell primaries involved in the ICT Test Bed project. The primary schools see the learning platform as a means of communicating and sharing resources, a spur to developing a critical mass of resources and as a key technology for enabling home-school links.

## *Implementation*

All staff have had two or three sessions in twilights or during non contact days to see how to access and upload information. Initially, each school set up a calendar and used some of the other more basic management tools, although some still run paper versions in parallel. At Crocketts Lane, staff must place all their planning documents on the learning platform.

As an entirely web-based application, the learning platform can be accessed anywhere that staff have an internet connection. Pupils have email through the learning platform, with many using it to communicate with their teachers. The school has introduced protocols for replies e.g. whether staff should copy to colleagues when emailing an individual and the expectations should any form of abuse be reported by email.

(All emails from staff to pupils are now copied to a dummy address which is checked half-termly.)

## *Learning and teaching*

Having encountered issues in identifying suitable primary content, the primary heads have recently decided to make the first appointment to a primary content creation team. A particularly successful project has been the production of units delivering the requirement for schools to offer a modern foreign language to Key Stage 2 pupils. Since the learning platform is built on technology

that gives support for community languages, there is potential for much wider development in this area.

Personalised learning is firmly on the agenda. The learning platform offers “the facility to target individuals according to their needs,” explains Alan Dodson, the Test Bed project co-ordinator. “It allows the students to plot their own track through their learning. If they have got a bank of resources, they can work at their own pace and they get instant feedback when it is marked.”

## Benefits

### *To school leaders*

Ensures consistency in planning and access for curriculum leaders to key documents.

### *To teachers*

Frees time to work wherever they feel most comfortable.

### *To pupils*

Opens up a significant opportunity for personalised learning.

### *To parents*

Involves them in their children’s learning.

## **Warren Junior School, Barking and Dagenham**

Warren Junior School is heavily committed to developing ICT in learning and teaching, with considerable investment of time as well as money through the ICT Test Bed project.

Curriculum coordination presents a particular issue for Warren Junior as it has four classes in each year group. Head of lower school, Matthew Goodyear, is aware that curriculum content can vary across the school when plans are kept on paper; members of staff may have different versions in their folders, leading to delivery of “multiple curricula”. A learning platform can provide management control over modifications to ensure that staff are taking a consistent approach.

### ***Implementation***

The school received a day’s training from the learning platform supplier, which was very helpful for the teachers involved. The school then selected three curriculum areas: science (overseen by the deputy head), music (overseen by the music coordinator) and ICT (overseen by the full time ICT Test Bed coordinator) as a starting point for delivery through ICT. The intention was that for each subject, one unit of work would be developed and uploaded onto the learning platform ready for the next school year. In this way, the whole curriculum for these areas would be completed over a four year period.

Matthew argues strongly that a learning platform cannot be treated like any other off-the-shelf software; its implementation needs significant project management. There is a danger that a learning platform can dictate methods of curriculum delivery through its underlying model of learning.

“Any school embarking on a learning platform either needs to be very clear about how they do things traditionally or they need to be very clear about how they want to do things electronically” he says.

Matthew is watching developments closely as he sees considerable advantages in working with the Local Authority (LA).

“I am not convinced that an individual school is the level at which a learning platform should be implemented. There are real benefits of doing it at an LA level.” He suggests that the whole process needs to be driven by a different model of learning, aligned more closely to modern methods of teaching in primary schools and of staff management. Such a project needs people who can concentrate purely on these issues and their implementation.

### *Learning and teaching*

Matthew can see real applications for a learning platform in very specific circumstances. He is responsible for teaching Religious Education (RE) to the whole school as a large class, while most staff are engaged in their Performance Planning and Assessment (PPA) work. This “assembly” is run more like a lesson, with follow-up

activities for pupils in their own classes. He is intending to create these activities using the facilities of the learning platform, especially its ability to manage multiple choice tests and give instant feedback to the learner. This approach should be in place at the start of 2006, but there are many cultural change issues to be addressed, through staff training and familiarising pupils with the system.

## *Benefits*

### *To school leaders*

Ensures consistency in planning and access for curriculum leaders to key documents.

### *To teachers*

Supports provision of PPA time through making available shared activities

### *To pupils*

Gives instant feedback to the learner.

## **Whitehouse Common Primary**

Whitehouse Common Primary School has grown from the merger of junior and infant schools on neighbouring sites. There are still separate reception lobbies and staffrooms. The school had an urgent need to improve communications and information management. It decided to adopt the learning platform provided via the Birmingham Grid for Learning (BGfL) broadband subscription.

### *Implementation*

The e-Learning manager, Jamie Barry, received a day's training on the main features of the system, including how to post resources and customise the desktop. Much of the development has come from Jamie experimenting with how to make features relevant to the work of the school in an effective way for staff. A half-day inset was run early in September 2005 on the basic features of the system, especially how to use the calendar and email, and how to upload files.

Staff are required to check BGfL PLUS daily, including email and the school's calendar. Logging into the "mydesktop" feature immediately shows important notices, whether from the school or from the Local Authority (LA). The school is moving towards an "e-briefing" to avoid cumbersome regular gatherings of staff in one of the staffrooms. Other key information, such as assembly and duty

rotas, the ICT suite timetable and lists of pupils with medical conditions, are immediately available from this screen.

The system also provides a “myclasses” area. Although initially intended for storage of resources for use directly in lessons, Whitehouse Common has been using it to file important information including planning. Subject leaders only used to have access to electronic documents through the school network, but these were often presented or filed in an inconsistent manner. Planning was often done at home and brought in on memory stick or disks, but the latter were plagued by corruption. PLUS allows staff to plan at home, using common templates, put file work directly into a uniform structure, available anywhere through the internet, without fear of losing work. With two classes in each year group, staff can now look immediately at their year partner’s planning, while subject leaders can email suggested modifications to teachers.

Other information stored in the “myclasses” area includes any INSET and training notes, minutes from any meetings, governing body information and School Improvement Planning. This information is available for all staff, including teaching, support and admin staff, to view and edit wherever necessary. The governing body has also been allocated access to areas of relevance to them.

## *Learning and teaching*

Although facilities exist to use the system for lesson delivery, the school has decided to allow staff first to gain confidence in the features currently in use during this academic year. ICT is a key action point in the school, but development of the learning platform is only one strand. Jamie has seen teacher confidence in general use of ICT grow significantly. Since staff are required to log on to BGfL PLUS daily, they are more willing to persevere and solve simple problems. Alongside consistent planning, this is having a positive impact in classrooms, where 80 percent of teachers already have interactive whiteboards.

### *Benefits*

#### *To school leaders*

Creates consistency in curriculum planning and gives flexibility for monitoring

Provides a clear structure for communications, ensuring staff see key messages.

#### *To teachers*

Enhances and encourages shared planning, giving an overview of curriculum development in the school

Raises awareness of expectations and standards.

### *To teaching assistants (TAs)*

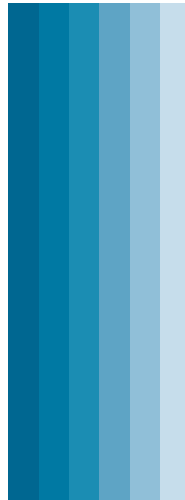
Gives TAs access to key communications, documents, policies, pupil Individual Education Plan (IEPs) and other information, which they too often did not see in the past.

### *To pupils*

Improved lesson planning and staff confidence in ICT supports more engaging class content.

### *To parents*

Provides access to school information through the website.



## **Ardleigh Green Junior School, Havering**

Ardleigh Green uses the broadband service provided by its Regional Broadband Consortium, the London Grid for Learning (LGfL), giving the school access to web space and online communication tools such as discussion boards and email.

### *Implementation*

In the context of learning platform usage, Headteacher John Morris says that “the whole issue of staff competency is a potential stumbling block to any learning platform.”

As a result, all staff at Ardleigh Green, including the administration team, spent a series of Saturdays undertaking a course which led to European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) accreditation through the school. At the same time John does not think it reasonable to expect all staff to devote the necessary time or to develop the required levels of competency to develop resources. So the school relies heavily on the ICT co-ordinator, Jackie Avis’ skills to take and adapt resources. She is allocated half a day per week for this work.

“What I think is quite unique about the shared area that Jackie has produced,” John Morris says, “is that it is not just a case of downloading content from the web. There is some content, but a lot is tailor-made. You see the curriculum need and develop the resource accordingly.”

## *Learning and teaching*

Jackie uses a lot of templates and “adaptations” to structure work. These provide interactive tools for teachers to build content including crosswords, word searches and tools for presenting graphical information, without needing Flash development or web-authoring skills.

The templates can also be used by pupils to present their work. Pupils writing up a science module on freezing and melting uploaded photographs of their work to their LGfL pages and used the templates to structure the whole process. Some pupils went home that night and showed their parents the work they had done using the school’s LGfL portal. Jackie has also used the chat facility for pupils in Year 6 to discuss their concerns about moving to secondary school.

## *Beyond school*

The school has logged email addresses for some 80 per cent of parents and can use LGfL to email newsletters to these homes, as well as post a copy on the website for any pupil who loses a letter. An annual ICT meeting is held for parents, in addition to those for literacy and numeracy, to explain what pupils will encounter in their learning at school. Pupils in Year 3 are asked to access the internet at home and show an adult that they have done so; this information is recorded in the individual’s log book. Parents can also study a basic ICT skills course using materials posted on the website.

## *Benefits*

### *To teachers*

Presents all materials in one place for a particular topic, so they do not have to sift through for themselves.

### *To teaching assistants*

Integrates them further into the school community through email and information on the website.

### *To pupils*

Adds a new dimension to lessons, which they find refreshing and motivating.

### *To parents*

Brings them closer to pupils' learning, as they can view work posted on an individual's home page

Improves access to important school information by download from the website.



You can get more detailed advice about learning platform functionality and specifications from the Becta web site.

[http://www.becta.org.uk/corporate/publications/publications\\_detail.cfm?currentbrand=all&pubid=250&cart=](http://www.becta.org.uk/corporate/publications/publications_detail.cfm?currentbrand=all&pubid=250&cart=)

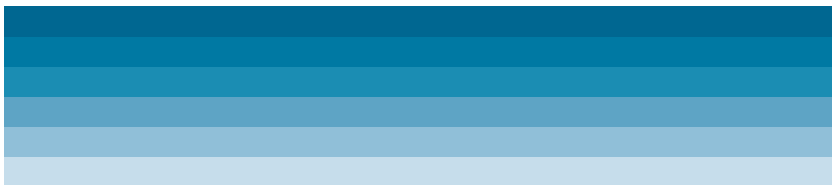
<http://www.ictadvice.org.uk/index.php?section=te&rid=1994&wn=1>

<http://www.becta.org.uk/> Search under “learning platforms for schools” to get a downloadable version of this document.

And <http://www.becta.org.uk/leas>

For more general, and technical, information on managed learning environments and virtual learning environments, search under those headings at: <http://www.becta.org.uk/> for a range of references.

Talk to your local authority or RBC about funding and basic service provision. Go to: <http://broadband.ngfl.gov.uk>, for contact details of your appropriate RBC.





A booklet for the primary school workforce providing clear policy and funding guidance for learning platforms.

Copies of this publication can be obtained from:

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PO Box 5050  
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Tel: 0845 60 222 60  
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email: [dfes@prolog.uk.com](mailto:dfes@prolog.uk.com)

Please quote ref: 2101-2005DBW-EN

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ISBN: 1-84478-643-9

PPSTERL/D35/1205/752

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