

North Lincolnshire is a unitary authority in the region of Yorkshire and the Humber in England with a population of over 153,000. It borders onto North East Lincolnshire, Lincolnshire, South Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire and the East Riding of Yorkshire. North Lincolnshire Council, located in Scunthorpe, have created a team supporting Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in 84 schools across the county. The Children's & Young People's Services ICT team, consisting of six full-time staff, work alongside the Council's corporate Information Technology (IT) team and provide a range of IT services to schools including broadband, Admin support, Primary Pupil Tracking and Primary Curriculum IT support.

THE CHALLENGES OF MANAGING MULTIPLE DEVICES

As the use of IT in schools increases the school ICT support team faces a growing number of support challenges - including Capita's Schools Information Management System (SIMS) moving into the classroom, proliferation of computers in schools, and increasing buy-in to Curriculum support – which in turn was putting a strain on resources. In addition the separate Admin/Curriculum networks mean that Curriculum systems could not be accessed remotely by support staff, leading to more unscheduled onsite visits, with the associated inefficiencies and travel costs.

“We found ourselves having to provide more in the way of support, with the same resources in the team,” comments David Jackson ICT Manager, Children's & Young People's Services for North Lincolnshire Council. “Our objective was to move towards a more proactive support model, providing a managed service where as a team we are on the front foot with support, as opposed to being purely reactive.”

The team identified some key areas that would need addressing, among them remote support to all devices in schools, from any location; the automation of time-consuming, repetitive manual tasks; availability of up-to-date information about IT environments in schools, such as software licences, hardware inventories and security information; and the ability to deploy new applications and packages remotely. “We quickly realised that an investment in new technology was required, as to transform our service model we needed better support tools and better information,” outlines Jackson.

Discussions with Education specialist Redstor, with whom North Lincs had successfully launched a remote backup solution to schools, revealed a new technology, CentraStage, which has been developed specifically to support IT in schools.

CENTRASTAGE

CentraStage, a SIMS technical partner, is a remote device management technology designed specifically for Education service providers, to simplify the management and support of thousands of school devices, even over multiple and disparate networks and all through an intuitive web-based management interface. Core functionality includes audit, monitoring, remote support, software deployment and reporting.

“We saw that CentraStage would not just provide our team with the tools and information that we needed, but it would enable us to devolve some of that functionality to schools, enabling the ICT Team to offer new services to schools such as IT inventory capabilities, and software licence management”.

An immediate problem was with remote support. Jackson continues “Our technicians make scheduled visits to schools to support their IT and provide on-site assistance, but we had to make an increasing number of unscheduled troubleshooting visits and this was proving inefficient. As dependency on IT increases in schools,

we really needed a technology that would enable us to reach any and every device, from anywhere. Our technicians are highly mobile, and it was becoming unsustainable to perform all remote support from the office”.

CentraStage provides a diverse range of remote support capabilities; this is underpinned by the fact that access to any device can take place via any web browser, regardless of network, enabling far greater levels of mobile and flexible working for support staff. The system also tracks and logs all remote support activity, enabling teams to record and demonstrate the value to schools of their ‘offsite’ support.

Jackson highlights that there were numerous remote support applications to choose from. “When we looked at CentraStage for remote support, it provided everything we needed. However we rapidly realised that there was huge functionality and value outside of remote support. CentraStage will link every device in schools with our support staff, which gives us a single, accessible view of our environment, something that we have never had before.”

A MAJOR STEP FORWARD FOR THE AUTHORITY

The CentraStage agent, installed on each device, makes an outbound connection to the central server, meaning no changes were required to the network; therefore all devices, even Curriculum devices, or teacher laptops used from home, can establish a connection to the central server. The agent transmits up-to-date audit and monitoring information into the central database, and advanced search and filtering capability provides flexible reporting.

Jackson continues; “When we looked at where our resources were being used, SIMS server upgrades were a huge overhead as the team performs these for schools. We estimated that over 130 man days per year were being spent logging in to SIMS servers, running SIMS Online Update Service (SOLUS), and then checking the result”. CentraStage, using its deployment capability, can automate this process via a single, central script – this is scheduled to run across all SIMS servers once the Local Authority (LA) has released the update through Schools Manager. The success or failure of SOLUS is tracked through CentraStage and with enhanced error reporting built in, any problems can be quickly resolved. “Using CentraStage for this alone will save us huge amounts of time and resource, and it will ensure our schools are kept up-to-date with SIMS releases. It has been a major step forward.”

Christian Nagele, Managing Director of CentraStage, says, “North Lincs, like many LAs, are supporting huge, disparate IT environments on limited human and financial resources. As schools become increasingly reliant on IT, Primaries especially are looking to their IT support organisation to enhance their service offering and provide robust Service Level Agreements (SLAs). We have designed and built CentraStage for this challenging support environment, with input and feedback from LAs across the United Kingdom, and we are delighted to see the benefits it is bringing to North Lincs.”

CONCLUSION

Jackson concludes “As the team progresses down the road of offering a managed IT support service to schools, we needed an affordable tool to enable this transition. CentraStage provides us with immediate technical benefits and immediate time and money savings, but it also underpins our vision of broadening the service portfolio - server monitoring, school inventory and software licence management, software deployment, security management – so that our schools can get on with the business of teaching without worrying about their IT”.

ABOUT CENTRASTAGE

CentraStage is a remote device management software technology designed specifically for Education service providers, to simplify the management and support of thousands of remote school devices, even over multiple and disparate networks and all through an intuitive web-based management interface. Functionality includes audit, monitoring, remote support, software deployment and reporting. CentraStage software is costed for the Education market and is priced to go on every device. Our technology reduces the service provider's software and support costs, optimises/maintains the deployed infrastructure, and enhances and improves service levels.