

REPORT FOR SCHOOLS FORUM

1.	Date of meeting:	22nd November 2019
2.	Title:	Schools Connect
3.	Directorate:	Finance and Customer Services

1. Background

1.1. The Schools Connect Service offers ICT support services, through individual Service Level Agreements (SLAs) for schools to buy back. In broad terms these services include:

- Systems (Capita Schools Information Management System (SIMS)) and remote technical support
- Broadband/Internet and content filtering
- On-site technical support

1.2. The number of schools taking up support services has dropped steadily over the last few years and fallen sharply over the last year, as highlighted in the table below. This is as a result of the formation of larger Academy Trusts providing their own ICT Services, and/or the take up of third-party provision at reduced cost.

	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021 (projected)
Number of maintained schools	54	42	38	35
Number of Academy schools	59	56	54	19
Total	109	98	92	54
Net reduction per year		11	6	38
Cumulative reduction			17	55

1.3. There are currently 38 maintained and 54 academy schools which buy back Schools Connect services. Of these, 38 schools have signalled their intention to no longer buy-back services from April 2020.

1.4. Given the reduction in schools buying back services, coupled with those that have indicated their intention to no longer buy-back, then a tipping-point has been reached where the costs of providing the service will exceed the income - the service will be delivering at a loss, which is unsustainable for RMBC.

2. Key Issues

2.1. It is apparent that with a further 38 schools no longer buying back Schools Connect services, expenditure will exceed income in the 2020/21 financial year and beyond.

- 2.2. A price increase of between 46% and 51% would need to be applied to the remaining schools in order to continue to provide the services, which would still be subject to future uncertainty given the downward trend in schools buying-back the service.
- 2.3. Given this situation it has become difficult to retain staff and consequently knowledge and experience has already left the service, making it difficult to deliver a quality and valued service.
- 2.4. As a result of the above, RMBC is intending to close the Schools Connect service at the end of the current financial year.
- 2.5. The schools currently buying back services would need to find an alternative provider(s) for the services they wish to continue to need. There are several alternative providers that include Barnsley MBC, Doncaster MBC, Impelling Solutions, Other Academy Trusts (E.g. Aston, Wales High School), ACS Group. who may provide some or all the needs. By highlighting the above, RMBC is not endorsing these, merely highlighting that other providers exist.
- 2.6. The following services would subsequently be withdrawn:
- RMBC provisioned network connection
 - RMBC content filtered internet service
 - Access to the internal RMBC Intranet service.
 - Access to the RMBC Managed Office 365 Tenancy and service, this includes email and associated Microsoft Applications. Specifically, “@rotherham.school” main school email accounts and “@rgfl.org” email accounts.
 - Access to RMBC online services E5 (Cedar, and E-returns) – alternative means of access are being investigated
 - Access via Schools Connected VPN solution
 - ICT Support for both admin and curriculum
 - Provision of on-site support for subscribing schools
 - Provision of SIMS support for subscribing schools
 - RBUSS backup solution for admin and curriculum
- 2.7. RMBC is prepared to consider providing internet and content filtering services, which would be subject to more specific discussion.
- 2.8. Schools Connect has historically and to date provided support to schools in maintaining data quality standards and key statutory performance returns to the Local Education Authority via the B2B SIMS Service. Whilst RMBC will continue to provide the B2B SIMS Service for schools, RMBC will not be able to apply any changes to a specific schools’ configuration. That would need to be undertaken by the school themselves or through their provider.
- 2.9. As a result of the intended closure of the service, Schools will need to enter into their own arrangements with Capita UK for the continued provision of the SIMS system.

3. Key actions and relevant timelines

- 3.1. A report was taken to the Children and Young Peoples Directorate Leadership Team on 22 August 2019, highlighting the current review of Schools Connect and seeking their view as to the likely impact as they see it.

The main concern is the potential impact on the flow of data between schools and the LEA which has been supported by Schools Connect. The Director therefore was concerned to the potential close of the service although recognises the financial difficulties that have been presented, which is a matter for the Director of Finance and Customer Services. The Director requested a report is presented to the Schools Forum outlining the Councils position/decision – hence this report.

- 3.2. Write to all current schools to give notice of RMBC's intention to terminate the service on 31st March 2020 – immediately following this meeting.
- 3.3. In conjunction with Schools, arrange to terminate or novate third-party related supply contracts to ensure expiry or novation with effect from 1st April 2020 – within the necessary contract termination period.

4. Risks and mitigation

- 4.1. Schools securing alternative provider(s) for the services they still require a service/support for (network connectivity, content filtering, VPN Solution).
 - There are alternative providers in the market which is well established and offer competitive rates.
- 4.2. Schools will not be able to access RMBC intranet services.
 - Alternative sources could be provided through SharePoint or managed links to the RMBC intranet.
- 4.3. Schools will have to migrate to their own Microsoft Office 365 Tenancy and will have to provide their own email and Microsoft Office 365 Applications.
 - RMBC can assist with this transition.
- 4.4. Schools will not be able to access RMBC online services- E5.
 - Alternative technical solutions are available which will require Information Governance sign off and design and configuration.
- 4.5. Timescales involved in procuring and moving to alternative provider(s).
 - RMBC will support schools as part of the transition.
 - RMBC will undertake the necessary de-commissioning work.
- 4.6. Access to RMBC systems/services provided to schools who also buy-back HR/payroll services from RMBC.
 - Access provision is already in place for schools who buy-back HR/payroll services but don't buy-back Schools Connect support.

5. Recommendations to Schools Forum

- 5.1. That Schools Forum note the content of this report and the intention of RMBC to close the Schools Connect service on 31st March 2020 for the reasons outlined.

5.2. That Schools Forum note the actions that will be taken by RMBC and those required of Schools, between now and the closure of the Schools Connect service, as highlighted in this report.

5.3. That Schools Forum acknowledges that RMBC is prepared to continue to provide network/internet and content filtering services, so long as this remains viable following discussion and confirmation from those schools that wish to keep this provision from RMBC.

6. Name and contact details

Susan Gray, Service Manager (Digital Services), Customer, Information & Digital Services, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

Email: susan.gray@rotherham.gov.uk

Tel: 01709 254814

Steve Langrick, Head of Digital Services, Customer, Information & Digital Services, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

Email: steve.langrick@rotherham.gov.uk

Tel: 01709 822277