

27 February 2019

**OPTIONS FOR THE MAINTENANCE AND IMPROVEMENT OF THE
HERTFORDSHIRE GRID FOR LEARNING**

Report of the Director of Children's Services

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1. Purpose

To agree an approach to the future maintenance, re-development and improvement of the Hertfordshire Grid for Learning (HGfL or The Grid).

2. Summary

HGfL is increasingly outdated and its future viability in its current form is insecure. However, it is a heavily used and important resource both for schools and the County Council. There is a need to develop a new approach to modernise what is provided. This paper seeks agreement to an approach and funding for redeveloping and improving the HGfL so it is fit for purpose.

3. Recommendations

That Forum agrees:

- (i) Herts for Learning (HfL) are commissioned by Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) to implement a new vision for The Grid for learning with a significantly enhanced website and improved user experience
- (ii) That the proposal is developed in detail in close collaboration with schools, undertaken via the ICT Partnership Working Group
- (iii) The £130k one-off cost of this improved website would be paid for as set out in Section 5 below; and if savings can be achieved then any lower contribution is paid from the same sources in the same proportions
- (iv) That in consequence an increase in the centrally retained central schools services budget of £80k is agreed for 2019/20

- (v) The £20k per annum cost to cover on-going hosting, platform maintenance and support would be covered from the Central Services School Block (CSSB) of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) from 2020-21 onwards.

4. Background

The Grid was set up more than 20 years ago as a site for free teaching resources and subject support for Hertfordshire schools.

The Grid has expanded over time to cover school leadership and management as well as key strategic information for schools. It is heavily used by a wide range of staff in schools and settings across the county to access school administration and operational content supplied by HCC teams including traded services content from HfL. Historically it has provided a single point of access to information for schools in Hertfordshire.

The Grid remains heavily utilised by Hertfordshire schools. For 2018 the data shows:

- An average 36,000 unique visitors per month
- Over a million visitors over the year
- More than 6 million pages of content viewed

Despite the 2017 launch of an upgraded HfL website with significant teaching and learning content, resources and access to services such as the HR and Safeguarding portals, the appeal of The Grid remains.

The current HCC/HfL contract requires HfL to deliver the following with regard to the HGfL:

1. Daily updating for The Grid, including a fast-track facility for urgent requests from HCC teams
2. Managing the news page which is the default page for most Hertfordshire schools
3. Reviewing and updating of existing content areas and developing new content areas with HCC and HfL e.g. LGBT, anti-bullying, PHSE
4. Ensuring The Grid communications are consistent across all websites and digital channels including hertfordshire.gov.uk and Schools Bulletin
5. Maintaining the intranet as a restricted service for Hertfordshire maintained schools and academies
6. Managing relationship with RM (third-party hosting company)
7. Full technical support including:
 - Responding to user enquiries
 - Liaising with ICT helpdesk and Hertfordshire Internet & Connectivity Service (HICS) on connectivity issues
 - Facilitating access to other HCC systems/websites through The Grid

The content of The Grid serves a range of different purposes. These include:

- Making available to all schools publicly available information in a convenient way.
- Making available to all schools information relating to HCC's own functions, that needs to be disseminated to all schools.
- Making available to all maintained schools content that is statutory.
- Making available information from other organisations that could be of use or interest to schools.

However, there are now a number of challenges facing the HGfL. These are as follows:

- The sheer quantity of information on The Grid and its diverse audiences means it can be difficult to search and locate information
- Staff reductions and team changes at HCC means content is not being reviewed and updated as frequently
- Subject advisers have less time to review and update content
- The Grid looks old fashioned
- Only semi-responsive for mobile usage
- Dreamweaver software is older website management technology, is harder to update and may reach end of life
- The Grid is structurally difficult to maintain and make major changes
- Limited functionality e.g. not able to offer user accounts in order to restrict access to content.

HCC has been in discussion with HfL about developing options to develop and improve the current HGfL website.

As part of this work, in November 2018, a presentation was given by HfL at the ICT Partnership Working Group meeting setting out the possible different options for investment in The Grid.

HfL set out some options and a proposal for a long-term vision for The Grid which would result in a:

- More streamlined site that can be regularly reviewed and updated
- Focus on key communications and operational content rather than teaching and learning resources
- New modern platform (content management system) allowing easier maintenance and a responsive, refreshed design
- New model for the intranet with potential log-in access to different levels of restricted content
 - Restricted content is accessible by all Hertfordshire schools/all maintained schools

- Some content migrated to the HfL website and accessible only by schools who buy that service from HfL e.g. data management and financial services.

In the discussion that followed, there was clear recognition that the HGfL is well respected and is still heavily utilised by Hertfordshire schools and is essential for the dissemination of information and documents. The Group concluded that it does therefore need to be retained and remodelled.

It was also agreed that an appropriate programme of research would be undertaken with Hertfordshire schools prior to commencement of development.

The issue of open content was debated. Currently, access to The Grid is open to everyone and it is used by many people outside of Hertfordshire, albeit that this use does not in itself cost HCC or schools extra money.

It was therefore agreed that there was a preference for the implementation of user log-in accounts which would address this issue. This would most likely work in the same way as the HfL website i.e. most schools would have their own account and be able to manage individual user accounts for their own staff.

As part of the commission HfL would explore with key stakeholders including the ICT Partnership Working Group the potential of offering different levels of access:

1. Open area of the website with content available for all to access
2. Content accessible by all Hertfordshire schools regardless of status in order for the local authority to fulfil its statutory duties; and
3. Whether there could be a deeper level of content accessible only for eligible schools depending upon status of schools/eligibility related to the funding mechanism for support.

This vision for The Grid would result in an enhanced website with a full review and migration of content to the new platform and would significantly improve user experience. HCC would need to review and make recommendations on the retention or deletion of HCC supplied content.

The ICT Partnership Working Group concluded therefore that this is the option that they wanted to be taken forward to Schools Forum.

This vision requires significant investment. HfL estimate the cost to be in the region of £150k:

- Cost of web development £100k (based on HfL site development costs) and this includes the cost of the new site build and additional resource for comprehensive content review.
- Hosting and support £20k annually. There will be significantly more hosting and support costs as a result of The Grid moving onto a more advanced platform.
- £30k to cover additional staff time resource for HfL to undertake a fundamental review and phased migration of legacy content, reviewing, removing and updating as appropriate.

5. Next steps

Significant work will now be required to take forward the proposals set out above to the next stage – when we have defined exactly what the new Grid would do and its relationships with other sources of information. This needs to be done collaboratively between HCC, HfL and schools, and we assume that the ICT Partnership Working Group would be the best body to take this forward. The Heads Associations of course are welcome to suggest an alternative if they prefer.

However, at this stage we do require a degree of commitment in principle to funding the proposed solution, to justify and give a framework to the next stages of development work. Given the scope of The Grid as described above, we would propose funding in the following way:

Web development and content review (£130k, one-off):

Contribution from Centrally-retained DSG in the CSSB, to reflect the element of The Grid which relates to HCC's responsibilities for strategic planning of the education system and providing relevant information to all schools, including on such matters as Elective Home Education. This would require an in-year allocation of some of the current uncommitted DSG carry-forward in 2019-20 to the CSSB to cover this	£80,000
Contribution from de-delegated maintained schools funding to reflect the element of The Grid which will directly support maintained schools only and will be access-restricted. This will be drawn from the current-year underspending on de-delegated DSG linked to the decision of HCC itself to fund the Education Manager role for which some de-delegated funding was originally provided.	£40,000
Contribution from HCC own funding	£10,000
Contribution from HCC to review HCC-provided content	to be undertaken by HCC at nil cost

Ongoing maintenance (£20k).

This would be funded from within the CSSB and would require compensatory savings somewhere from within existing expenditure from that DSG Block.

Conclusion

The Forum is asked to agree the recommendations as set out in Section 3 of this paper.