

making responsible

# decisions over school ICT budgets

We examine the role of Becta in advising the education sector on ICT purchasing when vendors are making highly attractive offers directly to schools

Economic power is something you don't normally associate with the teaching profession. But with families cutting back expenditure on ICT equipment, and corporates freezing investment until the recession cloud has passed, the £1 billion that UK schools will be spending on ICT this year could throw a lifeline to the country's technology suppliers. As a result, there are some amazing offers around in the marketplace for ICT hardware and software of every description. Some of the deals will relate to current generation hardware that cannot find buyers at anywhere near the 'recommended' price: vendors will be cutting prices to clear their shelves. There is an understandable temptation to take advantage of these huge cash savings, which could see schools being able to buy twenty new laptops where their budget would only have stretched to a dozen machines a few months ago.

Are such offers what they seem in the advertisement? Far from suggesting that vendors are indulging in sharp practice, a low price up-front could mean that the kit bought for a school works out to be more expensive in the longer term when maintenance, support and upgrades over the entire life of the product are taken into account.

Prices can be lower for reasons other than suppliers attempting to liquidate their stocks quickly. There may have been a fundamental change in the underlying technology that enables ICT equipment to be offered at much reduced prices while delivering performance in the product and acceptable margins for the supplier.

Netbook PCs based on the low-cost Intel Atom chip are a good example of that phenomenon: we look in depth at the Intel development on page 66 of this edition.

And on the software front, could the lower price be due to the fact that a vendor with fewer overheads has introduced a range of quality applications at prices significantly below those of the high-profile market leaders?

The same questions about the lifetime cost of the hardware or software still need to be asked, of course, before a responsible decision can be made.

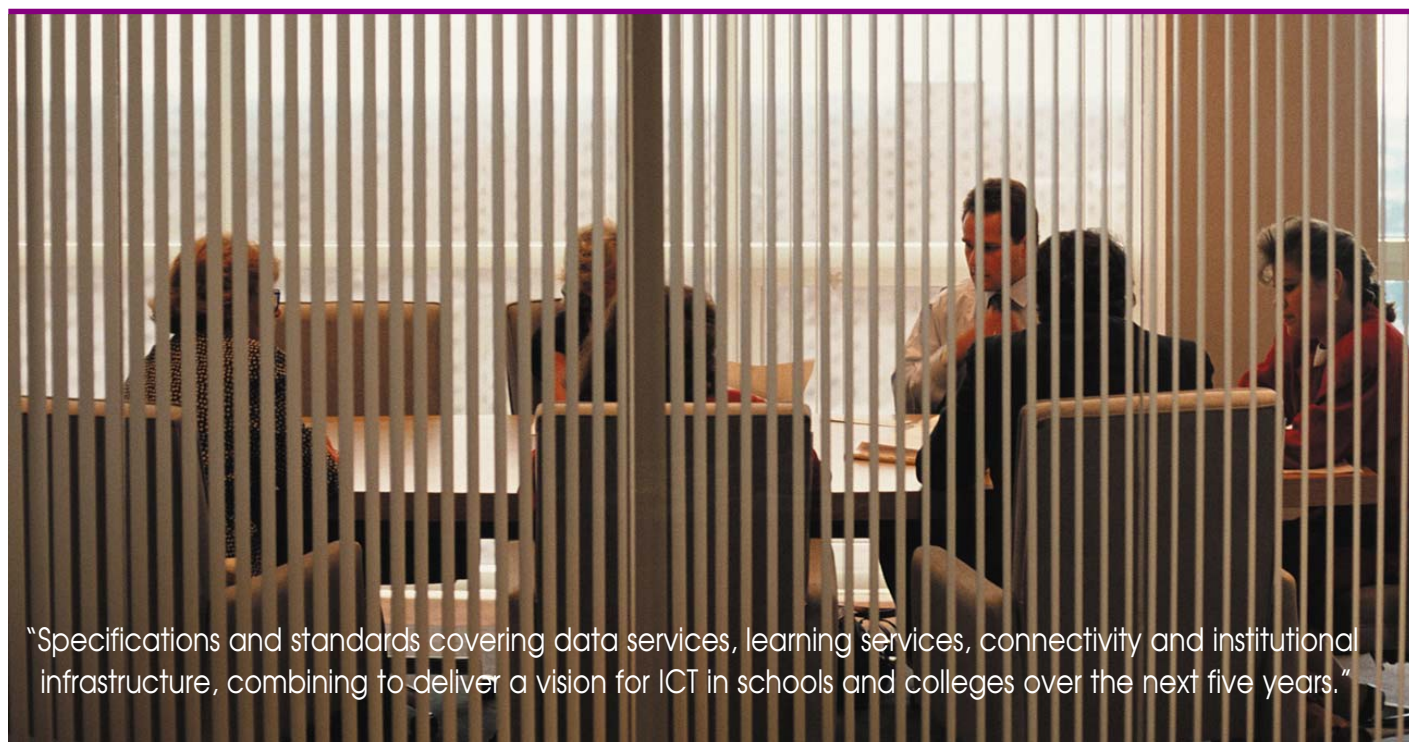
## The evolving role of Becta

The organisation that is best placed to take up those points is Becta, the government agency leading the national drive to ensure the effective and innovative use of technology throughout learning.

Its scope is essentially the application of ICT in schools and colleges, whether as a vehicle for teaching and learning subjects from across the curriculum, or its administration: Becta is not involved in the teaching of ICT as a subject specifically.

Becta's primary geographical focus is on education in England as it is funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), though most of the purchasing agreements that it develops cover all of the UK. Additional funding from DIUS (the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills) means that Becta's target audience is extending upwards from schools into the Further Education and Skills sector.

The agency is perhaps best known in educational circles for its national digital infrastructure, which aims to deliver a sustainable, reliable and coherent infrastructure for education and the underpinning procurement specifications. These are intended to provide schools



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and local authorities with specifications and standards for four essential services covering data services, learning services, connectivity and institutional infrastructure, which will combine to deliver a vision for ICT in schools and colleges over the next five years.

Becta also invites vendors periodically to compete for participation in National Framework Agreements which cover specific segments of the ICT spectrum and typically run four years. Where an agreement is to be established in response to demand from the education sector, a fully EU-compliant framework competition process is mounted, which opens up the bidding internationally.

There is also a period of early market testing which helps Becta establish the size and characteristics of the particular segment of the market it is addressing.

### **Securing a place on Becta lists**

Being placed on an approved list of providers is a two-stage process. Applicants who remain after the first cull of the competition stage are narrowed down to leave a short list of potentially capable suppliers from which – after extensive evaluation process - an approved list of suppliers is selected and added to the appropriate framework agreement.

As Peter Hughes, the Head of Procurement Arrangements at Becta explained, approval means more than just checking the financial

credentials of a supplier. “Having undertaken a comprehensive vetting of applicants, we are confident that those who are finally accepted have demonstrated their ability to deliver their particular product set or solution responsibly. More to the point, we have had a long track record in this arena and have accumulated extensive expertise in ICT policy and its application to educational establishments.”

For any vendor to reach the list of approved suppliers, they will have demonstrated compliance with our defined service requirements which covers both product and service offering. “That also means assessing the strength of the vendor’s support capabilities. We recognise that schools will need to call on the services of the vendor’s help desk facilities from time to time and we pay special attention to those facilities in our own examination.

“Another aspect that we assess is the total cost of ownership of an ICT solution, taking into account any maintenance costs and upgrades that may be needed to accommodate changes in the application environment.”

### **A case for Becta Specifications**

An argument for using a Becta specification or a framework agreement (where one exists) is that it is extremely unlikely that any school, or even a local authority acting as a purchasing agent for the establishments within its orbit, would have available the research or

Schools and local authorities have no statutory requirement to accept Becta's advice. They are free to conduct their own investigations, and purchase whatever technology they consider meets their requirements, either for teaching or administration. There is little evidence to suggest that the freedom of choice which the self-administered funding provides has found school budgets falling prey to crooked salesmen offering technologies that were out of date a decade ago.



physical resources to undertake all those aspects of evaluation .

Schools or their local authorities which choose to purchase by reference to a Becta specification or under one of its framework agreements can therefore avoid the time and uncertainty of conducting their own exhaustive tendering processes.

They make their selection from a shorter 'clean' list of suppliers whose products and services are deemed to be fit for purpose and provide the lowest practicable total cost of ownership.

The framework agreements themselves, which have been based on Becta's understanding of the potential demand for the featured ICT solution, allow purchasers to benefit from those aggregated sales.

Just as important, the argument runs, is the comfort factor that Becta's body of research provides for schools (and now colleges) keen to make the 'right' purchases, particularly when the subject matter is relatively complex and many establishments would not have access to the necessary expertise.

### **Freedom of choice for purchasers**

From its publicly-funded position on the edge of the ICT marketplace, Becta must support freedom of choice between vendors and ICT solutions.– subject of course to applications meeting the test of being fit for purpose.

There is a strong focus on users describing what teaching and learning outcomes they

require from ICT rather than prescribing the technology solutions themselves.

Consequently Becta has developed a range of functional specifications that users can adopt to specify their desired educational outcomes and the approved framework suppliers have been evaluated to translate these into the most suitable and affordable ICT solutions.

Peter Hughes again: "One of our objectives is to provide schools with a broad range of choice for the ICT solutions that they specify and acquire. For example, we are trying to ensure that schools understand that there are alternatives to proprietary software in many areas: we are currently increasing awareness of opensource material.

"While we are not advocating Opensource in preference to proprietary applications, we are keen that purchasers have all the choices."

### **No requirement to use Becta**

Mr Hughes makes a good case for the role of Becta. But schools and local authorities have no statutory requirement to accept the agency's advice.

They are free to conduct their own investigations, and purchase whatever technology they consider meets their requirements, either for teaching or administration. There is little evidence to suggest that the freedom of choice which the self-administered funding provides has found school budgets falling prey to crooked salesmen offering technologies that were out of date a decade ago.

A 2007 Local Authorities survey noted that over 75% of the authorities who responded use Becta Frameworks. In just under 75% of cases, local authorities act as aggregators of demand for schools wishing to purchase ICT equipment and services.

There are indeed many examples of experienced resellers building up a close professional relationship with schools in their locality over a period of years.

As independent businesses, they cannot afford to be selling systems that are beset with problems. They will be offering hardware and applications which they know work well in practice and can be offered at competitive prices.

Perhaps more to the point, they can explain the educational benefits of their solutions and demonstrate the life-time cost of ownership that Becta quite correctly maintains is a key consideration when purchasing.

And because they are local businesses, often with other connections to a school, they are prepared to go the extra mile in supporting their customers in the field. More than ever before, they will make the investment in time and understanding to support schools.

### Market opportunities outside Becta

Establishing a relationship with Becta should nonetheless be a foregone conclusion for local authorities: as the agency is fully funded, its services are provided without charge. Yet the agency is still actively marketing itself to local authorities around the UK that have still not 'signed up'.

Hughes finds it difficult to understand why any authority would want to turn down the offer of assistance with its ICT purchasing if there are no financial obligations.

A 2007 Local Authorities survey noted that over three quarters of the authorities who responded use Becta Frameworks. "Also, in just under three quarters of cases, local authorities report they now act as aggregators of demand for schools wishing to purchase ICT equipment and services."

Taking those figures at face value, and assuming that every local authority responded to the Becta survey, and that *all* ICT purchases were made through that channel, there is at least one quarter of ICT expenditure not accounted for by this route. On the basis of £1

billion annual spend, that would suggest that there is a market worth a minimum of £250 million for direct sales to schools.

### Valuable role in initiatives

Whatever its relationship with schools and local authorities might now be, Becta has an unequivocal role when there are Government-led initiatives to be rolled out.

As Mr Hughes recalled, there was a decision to implement Learning Platforms - sometimes referred to as virtual or managed learning environments. "As central government funding was involved, it was vital that the learning platforms which schools implemented would meet recognised standards. National Framework Agreements ensured that those standards would be met. There are, however, fewer initiatives of that kind."

It would appear that the pilot launch of the government's Universal Home Access (UHA) programme in 2009 will be the next major involvement for Becta. UHA is intended to give every learner access to computing technology, the necessary connectivity, and the Internet service in a phased roll-out starting in Spring 2009 with a pilot in Ipswich and Bolton.

It supersedes the Computers for Pupils initiative which has seen funding targeted at improving ICT access at home for some of the less privileged members of the community.

Specifying the technology involved in such programmes and organising the framework agreements to put them into practice is the kind of task for which Becta is well suited.

### Teachers aware of purchasing power

As the economic realities of the ICT sector bite home and prices for ad hoc deals fall sharply, the chances are that Becta will find at least part of its role overtaken by a generation of increasingly ICT-aware teachers and local authority advisors who feel sufficiently well equipped to seize an offer when they see one, and know that it really is a bargain.