A virtual learning environment for North Tyneside schools

A case study about how Bramble Education partner ThinkIT increased collaboration and engagement in North Tyneside schools by providing a virtual learning environment

*The outcome has been exceptionally strong, and initial feedback positive. Given the scale of what's been achieved, I agree a very large pat on the back to you all.****Jonathan Chicken - Senior School Improvement Officer for North Tyneside Council***

The problem

North Tyneside Council has approximately 25,000 pupils in 77 schools across the local authority. While a number of schools have become academies, the local authority ICT service still provides services to over 80% of the schools.

North Tyneside's wirtual learning environment (VLE) system was coming to the end of its useful life and the LA were looking for an alternative solution, one that would engage people and encourage collaboration within and across schools.

However, purchasing a new VLE solution for over 25,000 pupils and staff would exceed EU procurement thresholds, and going out to tender in the usual manner would involve significant time and cost.

North Tyneside schools use Google apps and Gmail. It was critical that any new solution should preserve and maintain existing content and emails, and there must be no loss of functionality for schools during migration to the new system.

The Solution

North Tyneside heard about the Think IT framework through the National Education Network (NEN) group of Regional Broadband Consortia that provide connectivity to education across the UK. Once the North Tyneside Procurement Team had confirmed that the framework was legitimate and fit for purpose, Think IT were invited to present the wide range of solutions available through the framework.

Airhead was one of those solutions, and in addition to the usual benefits, such as ease of use and being available on any device, the ICT team could see the power of the collaboration features and the potential to use it as the VLE replacement. Combined with Airhead was the Groupcall Identity as a Service (IDaaS) single sign-on solution. They knew that this would be great, especially for younger pupils as they would be able to access all of their content and data with just one password.

Teams from Groupcall, Airhead and a Think IT Project Manager worked closely with the North Tyneside ICT Manager and her team. They put together a four month programme to create and test a new environment before migrating all 77 schools, along with all of their associated Google Apps, data and Gmail accounts. for approximately 25,000 users. This included regular communication with all of the schools to keep them informed of progress and next steps.

A lead user from each school was trained in how to use Airhead the week before cut-over. The lead user then cascaded that training to staff in their schools and everyone was issued new Gmail passwords.

The Benefits

The cut-over was a great success and went according to plan with no technical issues. The day after cut-over the team received support requests for approximately 450 users, less than 2% of the total user base. Over 95% of those calls were because the user had forgotten, or incorrectly entered their password.

The schools now have an up-to-date, award winning platform that enables them to share content such as lesson plans in a way they couldn't before. Users find it easy to log in and now have any time, anywhere, any device access to their school apps and data. Some schools have already given parents access to Airhead so they can support their children's learning.

The Council now have budget control over their VLE provision to schools and have a guaranteed price for the next 3 years. That's in addition to the hundreds of hours and thousands of pounds they saved on procurement by buying directly off the framework.