



**Winning together in partnership –  
why a large District Council took a  
long-term view to partner with a  
national Managed Service provider,  
and how that decision has set their  
schools up for the future**

## The background

Salford City Council is a metropolitan district council (part of Greater Manchester) supporting a population of over 220,000 people, including 30,000 children who are educated in the city's 100 Primary and Secondary Schools.

The Council have a long-standing contract with RM, as their technology partner. This dates back to 2010, as part of a Building Schools for the Future (BSF) contract (a Private Finance Initiative – PFI) run by the Government at the time. When this came to an end in 2016, the Council ran a competitive procurement process, selecting RM to fully manage their technology estate, with a combination of both on-site and mobile technical engineers servicing the many and varied needs of 60 of its schools. After four successful years, the Council extended the contract to enable the continued implementation of their digital education strategy; including further moves to the cloud, and, in light of the Coronavirus pandemic, supporting the children of Salford with Remote Learning in case of further lockdowns or as contingency against other events that may prevent access to the classroom, such as a fire, flood, or poor weather.

Pupils of schools in Salford have seen [tremendous enhancements in the technology in their schools](#) over these ten years. Schools are now running the most modern and safest computer systems; pupils are doing their work on Google Chromebooks and iPads; broadband speeds have increased from just 10Mbps in 2010 to over 100 Mbps today, and rather than accessing computer documents locally, these are all now in the cloud, making data accessible anywhere at any time.

## Working with partners

For Salford Council, whilst there is a clear obligation to deliver value for money for the people of Salford, there is a recognition that delivering a great service is as important. This was a key component of the BSF programme at the time, to help Councils and Local Authorities to make a huge stride forward in their local provision, by looking at what “best in class” could mean.

**“The pace of change over the last 10 years has been staggering. Teaching and learning has been transformed, as has our record keeping and administrative functions. Using IT intelligently and effectively has undoubtedly given teachers more time to concentrate on teaching and the progress of their pupils”.**

**Dave Magee**, Headteacher at Mossfield Primary School



This mentality was carried forward into the procurement exercise in 2016, where the Director of Education at the time was keen not to compromise on the technology that schools were receiving at that time.



**"We coined the expression 'Blue Ribbon' to describe what we were looking for from a technology provider – an organisation that could provide the children in Salford with the very best technology that we could afford. Against that criteria we selected a large national IT partner – RM".**

Terry Walsh, ICT Contracts Manager at Salford Council



This view is echoed by many of their schools.

**"RM have been our trusted friends and mentors on this journey. As a large company, one of their key strengths is the depth and breadth of both their educational and technical knowledge, which I see as unrivalled. School IT issues and problems rarely remain unsolved for very long, they are addressed quickly and methodically. My experience is that RM listen carefully to any concerns and 'take ownership' of issues, liaising closely with other suppliers to ensure a speedy and satisfactory resolution".**

Dave Magee, Headteacher at Mossfield Primary School

Whilst no-one in 2016 could have predicted the Coronavirus pandemic, the decision to appoint a company with national and international scale, as well as having direct engagement into the likes of Microsoft and Google, ensured that Salford entered the Lockdowns of 2020 in better shape than many. They not only had the building blocks in place, but had a partner they could turn to who would support them through this uncertain period; sharing best practice from other customers in everything from remote teaching, to better communication and robust safeguarding.

**"From our early dealings with RM back in 2010 as our broadband provider to them becoming our full managed services partner via their agreement with Salford Council, the relationship has blossomed – as evidenced by the recent Coronavirus pandemic when technology really came into its own. RM supported our school in quickly getting us up and running with a new online capability, undertaking a lot of the background work to enable our teachers to deliver four live sessions per day, creating and uploading work via Google Classroom to pupils at home – our teachers have worked extremely hard, and it has all been possible because of this team effort".**

Mike Platt, Headteacher at St. Andrew's CE Primary School

But such an accolade, comes with its own high expectations. With RM expected to demonstrate what value they bring to Salford; sharing the issues they resolve long before they ever become problems, and the role they play, often behind the scenes, in equipping teachers and school colleagues with the skills and resources to do their job in educating the children of Salford.

**"In Salford we are very proud of what we deliver for our community, and RM have helped us in that. I believe we were the first Local Authority to really engage with the 'as-a-service' model for wireless connections, back-up, and many of the evolving digital technologies that have become common place".**

Terry Walsh, ICT Contracts Manager at Salford Council

When done well, IT should just blend into the background and not become a budget item that is discussed as being ripe for cut-backs. There should be a recognition of the intrinsic role technology plays in teaching and learning. This position has taken some time to create but appears to be genuinely true in Salford.

**"You could call RM the 'fourth emergency service' – that is how critical they are to what we do".**

Terry Walsh, ICT Contracts Manager at Salford Council



## A people business

The challenge for an organisation that does not manufacture something is that they are judged on the quality of their people, and being human beings, this can lead to levels of subjectivity and variability. It also means that the person who is the "face" of the company, often a middle-ranking engineer or Account Manager, has a lot of pressure on their head. This is especially true in the case of a company like RM, where that individual is themselves dependent on many experts who sit behind them, some of which are overseas.

**"Equally important to us is that RM engineers and school liaison officers retain 'the personal touch'. Visits are not just reactive, they are regular and scheduled, ensuring that RM engineers and managers get know their schools extremely well. This relationship was crucial in developing the future strategy and procurement in our school. Senior leaders need to have someone who knows their setting 'inside out' if they are to trust them to give pertinent advice and strategy. This is one of the key differences that a partnership with RM brings. We have been able to develop our IT provision incrementally, based on a shared understanding of our needs and the budget we have available".**

Dave Magee, Headteacher at Mossfield Primary School

It will also be interesting to see how this role evolves in time, as more and more support is provided remotely. In the same way, the role of technology is now much higher on the list of “enablers” when it comes to a school or Local Authority developing their own education strategy.

**“The word ‘engineer’ is an interesting one in today’s world. Most of the RM engineers in Salford schools do not walk around with screwdrivers to fix things. Instead, they advise our headteachers on their technology roadmaps and visions, and support teachers and other colleagues on getting the most from a new application, or to share best practice in using new technology”.**

Terry Walsh, ICT Contracts Manager at Salford Council

For Salford, technology was always part of the mix, but the pandemic brought this to the fore; not least in being the conduit for communication between teachers, teachers and pupils, teachers and parents, and across schools within the city.

**“We see RM as a partner – not a supplier. Whilst RM is a business, and needs to make a profit, we recognise that they will only do that if customers continue to trust them to do what they say and promise – this keeps them honest. A true partner doesn’t just do what is asked of them – if they don’t agree with a request they say so, and make counter suggestions based on their own expertise”.**

Terry Walsh, ICT Contracts Manager at Salford Council

## The digital journey

For Salford Council, the leadership team at the time recognised the importance of digitising schools and embarked on a “journey to the cloud” many years ago, investigating a common digital platform in 2016/17, by starting to look at the Google suite of software. This led to each school having their own domain, and this single move proved the catalyst to a digital future.

**“At the time, few schools saw the value of what we were doing, as Remote Learning was a pipedream away. Now they look back and think how farsighted we were. Without the pandemic, some schools may still have seen it as a wasted investment, but many of our more advanced schools were already using the platform and getting benefit from it”.**

Terry Walsh, ICT Contracts Manager at Salford Council



Networking capability was already changing, with onsite servers becoming questioned:

- teachers do not work 9am-4pm, so need to access files outside of these hours – from multiple locations
- when a server fails (or if more capacity is needed), schools could not afford the lump-sum capital investment of a new server
- software licensing was becoming prohibitive for individual instances
- schools were starting to take disaster recovery more seriously realising the risks from localised servers (irrespective of any back-up they may have had in place).

Against this background, the Council made the decision to move towards a serverless cloud-based estate and have never looked back.

At the same time, they installed RM Unify – a piece of software that enabled all of their schools to access every piece of software they needed from one portal and with one single log-on, whether they were a Google or a Microsoft school.

**"Parents loved our remote learning capability as it took the pressure off them to act as teachers. Our children welcomed it as they were able to engage daily with their teachers, receiving instantaneous feedback on their work. We are grateful to RM for helping make this happen. The provision has been so successful that when children returned to school on 8th March this year, teachers reported fewer gaps in learning for the children in their classes than we initially feared".**

Mike Platt, Headteacher at St. Andrew's CE Primary School



When the pandemic first hit in March 2020, all of the schools in Salford were prepared for how their teaching and learning had to adapt for the new conditions.



**"Our partnership with RM has never been stronger than over the last 12 months. We faced a situation without precedent in Coronavirus. With so much for staff to deal with, we knew we had a 'safe pair of hands' guiding our approach to remote learning. The school and RM had already laid much of the ground work well before the pandemic took hold, with G Suite and RM Unify already implemented; children and staff extensively trained and well versed in their use; with a reassurance that both systems were easy to use and proven to work robustly and reliably".**

Dave Magee, Headteacher at Mossfield Primary School

More recently the Council have installed Microsoft Intune, which has proved very effective in help them meet their safeguarding obligations, whilst also being able to keep a track of all of the devices that the school have acquired, whether purchased themselves or received via the DfE laptop scheme.

**"InTune is amazing. With one button I can track who has what device, and what it is being used for. I know of other Councils who do not have this software and are really struggling to be able to account for all of the devices they have".**

Terry Walsh, ICT Contracts Manager at Salford Council

Whilst the journey is not yet complete at Salford, they have made huge strides over the last 5 years. The next stage may be towards Blended Learning – building on the technology schools now have, coupled with the changing environment in which pupils want to learn.

**"Wherever this journey takes us, we know we are better positioned today than we ever could be, and RM have played a big role in that. In some ways, it is now down to us to ensure that opportunity is not wasted".**

Terry Walsh, ICT Contracts Manager at Salford Council



## The lessons learnt

1. **Invest in a decent technology roadmap at the start** – as the name suggests, knowing where you are going is a huge advantage. With that you can make best use of the skills that exist in schools, along with the support you get from an external Managed Services partner.
2. **Avoid jargon** – this map needs to be written in plain language, and benefit-led. It needs to record the vision in terms of outcomes, describe what exists today, what the gaps are, and how those gaps will be closed – what you will get rid of (e.g. servers and laptops) and what you will replace that with (e.g. Chromebooks). It should have clear timelines and costs.
3. **Share the ownership** – such a plan should be owned jointly by the SLT, the Business Manager and the people responsible for IT within each school.
4. **Get help** – much of this will be challenging for even your best people, so call upon the experts that you are paying good money for. In the case of Salford this is RM, who have developed similar technology roadmaps for many other schools, trusts and Local Authorities.
5. **Listen** – ask your schools where they want to get to, and then provide the technology they will need to get there. Ultimately it is their vision, but you can help them along the way.

**"Above all, you need to recognise that this is not easy – but keep in mind: 'no input no outcome'".**

**Terry Walsh**, ICT Contracts Manager at Salford Council



## The legacy

For Salford, this has been a long-term journey to more modernised schools with technology at the heart. The pandemic did not slow them down, and if anything, it enabled them to move at pace, and demonstrate the value of the building blocks that were already there.

**"Twelve months ago, I would never have said that this level of technology use would be seen at St Andrew's but it has and our network has really stood up to the test. It has been so successful that we are now reviewing how we can further develop and use this platform as part of our everyday curriculum at school and at home".**

**Mike Platt**, Headteacher at St. Andrew's CE Primary School





**"For me personally, I hope that we are in a position where people truly recognise the value of a third-party Managed Service provider; where we do not spend time each year negotiating renewals and extensions, but instead work together on delivering better outcomes for the children of Salford".**

**Terry Walsh**, ICT Contracts Manager at Salford Council

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