The Learning Platform Owner's Manual
Getting the most out of your site

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INTRODUCTION

Setting up a new learning platform or site for your school can often feel like an extraordinarily daunting process. A site manager might almost emphathise with a school child who, faced with blank sheet of paper, has little idea of how to structure their essay. These notes are intended to pass on the experience of those who have already trodden this path, helping you to develop a strategy that is suitable for your needs and situation. There is no single correct approach, but certain pitfalls to be avoided and recommendations to be followed too.

The advice which follows assumes that the reader is familiar with the basic principles of using their chosen system - including how to set up and edit sections and pages, and that the necessary software has been installed and properly configured on the network. This advice has been written specifically for schools, however, many of the points outlined are equally relevant to other organisations and sites.

Whatever the size or nature of your organisation, starting your site on the right footing is essential if it is to be a long-term success and widely adopted by internal users. Key strategic decisions will need to be made early on and it is vital that a sensible path of development is chosen - the information in this document will hopefully assist you on this journey.

About the author

David May was Head of Physics at St Paul's School in Barnes, West London for 17 years. There he became one of the first Directors of ICT in a British school, having persuaded the High Master of the benefits of computing to student's academic progress. His interest in the use of computers in the classroom already dating some years back, he recognised the need for an intranet to manage the school's growing electronic resources.

He was joined in this undertaking by two students, Joseph Mathewson and Simon Hay, who provided the technical skills and initiative necessary to develop this project according to the academic requirements specified by their teachers. The system became known as Firefly and its early development was heavily influenced by both David as well as the IT Manager, William Lines. Recognising its flexibility and ease-of-use, Firefly was also chosen to power the St Paul's School website. Within a couple of years, the school's intranet site grew to over 10,000 pages and was receiving tens of thousands of hits a day, having quickly established itself as an important focal point of the school's life for staff and students, as well as parents.

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GETTING THE RIGHT SUPPORT

Whilst it is technically possible for one person to set up a school learning platform from scratch, to drive it him/herself, to evangelise about it, to persuade everyone else to buy into the concept, etc, experience from other schools shows that active support from the top level is needed too, i.e. from the Senior Management Team (SMT).

St Paul's was one of the very first schools to set up an intranet and this came about because one department took the lead, set something up just for its own use and then persuaded the Director of Studies that it had a future. Nowadays, many schools have well developed intranets or learning platforms and thus it is almost easier to find good examples elsewhere than to set up a pilot learning platform and demonstrate this instead. Many SMTs will be already persuaded of the benefits of a learning platform anyway, so the task may well be to get them to agree on which of the many offerings to go for.

How to do so:

- Arrange to take SMT to look at a well-established installation in another school.

- Arrange for the provider of your chosen system to demonstrate it at your own school, with as many SMT present as possible, along with IT Support representation, Heads of Department etc.

- Evangelise as much and to as many people as possible, but within reason. One way or another, it is almost essential to have the SMT in full support of the project to implement the system at the earliest possible stage. This is because only the SMT has the power to require members of staff to use the learning platform for various purposes.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

This guide is largely written for those who have already chosen a learning platform. If you have, you can skip on to the next section.

When looking at potential learning platform or intranet solutions, it is obviously important to have a relatively clear idea of the type of functionality you are looking for. Every school's needs are different, but we suggest you should consider the following when weighing up your options:

- Ease of use. Make sure that you get a thorough demo of each system (preferably request your own trial site) so that you are confident that it would be both functional and easy for your users to understand. Don't just rely on the brochure! An easy-to-use system also minimises the amount of training needed to get users launched, saving you time and money.

- Look for a sensible feature list. Remember that having too many features in a piece of software is arguably worse than having too few!

- Talk to other schools using the systems you are giving serious consideration to. Most learning platform providers should be happy to provide you with contact details of a few client schools.

- Ensure that any potential systems work well for users accessing via a mobile.

- Good learning platforms should offer a reasonable degree of integration with your MIS out-of-the-box, or should require only minor additional work to achieve this. This is particularly important in situations such as teachers setting work online, where selecting a class of students (taken automatically from your school database) will save considerable time and effort compared to entering names individually.

ORGANISING YOUR ONLINE CONTENT

Having obtained the necessary approval and budgeting from senior management, as well as looked at potentially suitable systems to manage the site, you may want to begin considering possible structures for organising the content that will be put online. It is usually possible to carry out minor restructuring of your site at a later stage in its development, but it is still important to decide what key sections will be emphasised.

Most schools will seek to have both "public" and "private" content, which translates roughly into the school's website and the school's intranet or learning platform. The former is a publically available showcase for the school that serves a valuable public relations role, as well as offering a portal for communications between the school and its community, parents, Old students, etc.

It is the learning platform, however, which typically exploits a range of more advanced functionality, including allowing users to contribute to forums and enabling teaching staff to upload homework assignments for completion online. Many products make a distinction between "intranet" (which caters to more administrative matters such as meeting minutes and the lunch menu) and "learning platform" (which is focused more on sharing teaching resources and uploading homework assignments).

You will find references to both "intranet" and "learning platform" in this document, but we believe that these two products should arguably be combined, as together they cater to the overall needs of internal users and provide a single point for accessing all the information they require about school life.

It is important to consider early in the process the relationship between the website and the intranet or learning platform. The main decision involved here is whether the same system is to be used to power both sites. Some schools involve a third party solution for website hosting and then find updating the site to be considerably more complex. Others commission a professionally designed template to run on the same system, making updating easier and allowing a seamless integration with the learning platform. Whichever strategy you go for, dealing with this decision early in the process will avoid you unnecessary hassle later on.

Structuring your learning platform

Experience shows that many schools structure their learning platforms in a similar way. This simply indicates that schools (of all types) are organised along broadly similar lines and that all have well-defined categories into which school life falls. For example, it is likely that there will be main sections for Departments, Sport, Clubs/Societies and Staff, each of which will be populated with sub-sections, e.g. Geography and Chemistry (under Departments). Every school will organise their menu structure a little differently. You might want to find out what similar schools to your have done.

It's a good idea to identify no more than five or six main section titles to begin with – remember that your system may come with some out of the box, including profile and assessment pages. Too many can clutter up your pages and make it appear harder to navigate. Suggested section titles include:

Departments

This section will be the most substantial of them all. Each department should be given its own sub-section which might include some, if not all, of the following:

- Section editor permissions devolved to the department; the HoD (or a departmental member responsible for the section) determines who has editor/read-only access within the departmental section.

- A page listing details of the department's staff members (plus photos if agreed) - useful for other staff members, students, etc.

- A section for students, describing the curriculum to be followed by each year group, and giving links to all relevant public exam specifications.

- Links to electronically available resources of direct relevance to the courses followed. These might be documents, multimedia, etc.

- A section for each departmental member to use for communicating with their student groups, e.g. by posting materials to be used for homework.

- A section showing materials of background relevance to the subject, incl. field trips, etc.

Whilst each department may wish to structure its own section in its own way, students will want to be able to navigate each departmental section, confident in the knowledge that they can find what they seek. This implies that departmental sections should be structured in a similar way so that students always know where to find, for example, the Year 10 syllabus.

An excellent way of doing this is to customise the template used in the "Departments" top-level section so that part of each department's basic menu structure is pre-determined. For example, you may want to have certain menu items, e.g. "Staff members" and "Syllabus" appear at the top of the menu bar, thus indicating to each department that they should add appropriate content to these pages. These "compulsory" menu items would then be divided from other items specific to that department's desired structure.

Alternatively, some schools create a model departmental section with basic information and year groups laid out in a standard format, then ask all the academic departments to copy this structure when setting up their own sections.

It is probably advisable for every department to have a Staff section, to which only staff have access (and which by implication, is invisible to students). This section might contain some, if not all, of the following:

- Syllabuses

- Departmental handbook

- Departmental meeting minutes

- Links to any departmental resources not publically available to students. For example, some multimedia content may be available for teaching purposes only, to be held back for use in the classroom. Other resources might include downloadable tests, exam papers, etc.

- Lists of 'non-electronic' departmental resources, e.g. books, apparatus etc.

Sport

This section is another obvious one. Considerable overlap is likely here between the content displayed on the intranet or learning platform and that published to the school's website.

If the same system is used to drive both the website and the intranet, then a decision about which aspects of the sport appears in which area needs to be made. Cross-linking between the two areas can then make browsing the section into a relatively seamless experience. In such cases, it is probably best to store the bulk of sports information on the website as intranet users will always be able to access it, but public visitors will usually not have access to pages on the intranet. Each sport will probably want to be given its own sub-section which might include some, if not all, of the following content:

- A description of the sport and how it is offered at the school. This should be on the home page of the section and should showcase the activity

- Fixture lists for the sport and directions explaining how parents can visit Away matches

- Results lists and match descriptions

- Internal admin details, e.g. games, half rotas etc.

- Photo and/or video galleries of previous practice sessions or fixtures.

- A Staff Only section for other internal admin matters

It may be that a student is delegated to update aspects of the section. If so, consider giving some form of moderated write access so that new content is checked before being released for viewing by the rest of the intranet or learning platform community

Societies and clubs

Societies vary greatly from school to school and some are run by the teaching staff whilst others may be run by students. Some similarity with the Sports section is likely here, particularly in terms of which content will be published on the public website, whilst other information is reserved for internal use only. In general, there will be more student involvement in societies than in almost any other aspect of school life and so this should be reflected in their online presence too.

Many societies may have a member of staff in some sort of custodial role whilst the society is actually run by students. Hence the Society's site section should be run by a student, with the content moderated by the relevant member of staff. It is usually possible to allocate editor access that is moderated so that students may make changes but which aren't published until they are approved by a member of staff with full editor access. Each society should be given its own sub-section which might include some, if not all, of the following:

- A description of the Society via a "showcase" page

- A calendar of its meetings, etc.

- A news feed showing recent updates about the society.

- A slideshow or photo gallery of society events and activities.

- A society forum, allowing members to have group discussions online.

Houses

Schools using a House system may want to have a section for Houses, where each House might have its own sub-section which including some, if not all, of the following:

- Full read/write access devolved to the House; the Head of House (or a House Tutor responsible for the section) determines which individuals have read/write permissions within the section

- Staff Only area used for aspects of House administration

- Staff to student area

- Student to student area administered by senior students in the House, maybe using moderated write functionality so that a member of staff can approve content before publication

In addition to this (and this is relevant to day school intranets too), lower level sections should be set up for inter-House competitions with their rules, results, etc.

Staff

An intranet should, in part, be seen as a means to improve the efficiency of school life and therefore a Staff section should be a central repository for all information that typically will be of use to teaching, as well as administrative, staff. You may want to use it to store documents, lists, minutes of meetings, etc which are confidential to Staff members.

This section should obviously be permissioned such that only staff can see it when they are logged on. Further distinctions may be made between groups of Staff so that, for example, non-teaching and teaching staff members can access different parts of the Staff section. For example, a Minutes section might have "child" sections which cover Common Room meetings, HoDs meetings, Bursarial meetings, etc. and the permissions for all of these can be set so that the relevant staff can access them.

This section is designed to be a repository for all documentation relating to the running of the school. As such, it should contain the master copies of each document too, so that all users can readily access the current version. Master copies should not be stored elsewhere as there will then be no certainty regarding which version is which. The fact that all this information is located in one place makes it more readily accessible and the presence of a search function should mean that content which is indexable (such as Word documents, Excel spreadsheets, etc) can be easily found even if their location or name is not necessarily known.

"Ownership" of the various parts of this section should be distributed to the most appropriate individuals. For example, the Director of Studies might be assigned editor rights in the Inspection section, whilst the Headmaster's PA and Common Room Secretary could each be responsible for further sections.

The core idea is that the Staff section as a whole forms the primary means of communicating all administrative matters to the staff. It's a "one stop shop" for any staff member wishing to find out information about the running of the school, and is designed to replace the many folders, paper documents, lists and more which schools rely on traditionally and which are harder to keep up-to-date.

You may want to include quick links to other sections such as the Junior School (if appropriate), your school webmail system and your library catalogue.

Structuring the website

This document is focused primarily on the learning platform or intranet and assumes that the public-facing website is set up, by and large, as a separate entity. Many schools will have a separate webmaster to maintain and develop the website and may well decide on third party hosting of the site as well.

Nevertheless, there will be many areas of overlap between the learning platform and the website, with associated duplication of information, so care must be taken to minimise problems caused by this. For example, such items as school calendars, sports fixtures and school plays may have justifiable places within both the learning platform and the website; keeping the information up to date in both places could be a real challenge if separate systems are used to host them. It would therefore arguably be simpler if both were managed within the same system.

This would mean:

- Calendar views could be kept in sync whether they exist on the intranet or website, by loading them all from a single underlying data source.

- Sports fixtures can be kept consistent, for example, by keeping them on one page within the main site but linking to that page from the intranet.

It is clear that, where the website webmaster and the intranet manager are different people, close contact must be established between them in order to minimise duplication and establish how to deal with topics which lie on the boundary between them. For instance, should the football results be published on the website, on the learning platform or on both?

MOTIVATING PEOPLE TO USE THE SYSTEM

As with any new project there will be early adopters, there will be those resistant to change and there will be a large group in between. There are two hurdles to overcome, that of getting individuals to use the site content in the first place, as well as getting them to add more of it.

One important strategy to help achieve these goals is to reduce unnecessary "barriers to entry" for users, for example by making the learning platform the default homepage for all network users, as well as enabling automatic login to spare users the inconvenience of digging out their credentials every time.

Utilising content

An intranet or learning platform is only as good as its content, so the first phase of getting staff and students to appreciate the system is to post useful and important content of general interest to the school community. For example:

- Lunch menus - Often overlooked, experience from existing mature school intranets shows that (perhaps unsurprisingly) these pages are frequently the most popular with users. The ability to delegate responsibility for content means that the catering department can take direct charge of this section and ensure that the information stays up to date.

- The Staff Handbook - You may want to initially focus on getting staff on board so that they begin to contribute more useful content. One possible way is to follow the decision of some schools to place their entire staff handbook online. Prior to this, each member of staff is typically handed a large arch file containing dozens of rules, regulations, lists, etc, and would be expected to update this periodically when a change was made. As many have often found, it is quite difficult to keep the handbook up to date and often different members of staff find themselves consulting different versions of a document. It is also harder to find the information wanted as it can only be inefficiently indexed. By placing the handbook online, all paper copies are made redundant and upon school inspections, the inspectors can be given access to the intranet Staff section so they too can view the handbook.

- Timetables - Information about lesson times for each set can be stored within departmental pages as a useful reference to students. In addition, some learning platform systems will allow users to view consolidated information about their personal timetable, usually on the homepage. In most cases, this can be automatically drawn in from the school database.

- School notices - A list or feed of general school notices can be set up and updated as a useful reference for both staff and students.

All other general Staff information should also only be available on the learning platform. Those members of staff who wish to have paper copies of everything can still do so, but they must visit the site first and print out what they want. Not all will do this, so the total amount of paper used for this purpose will be smaller than had all communication been done via paper.

Experience from other schools suggests that the more useful a site's content, the more users appreciate the features on offer, and it is then a much smaller step to encourage departments to develop their own sections. Of course, none of the above is possible unless all users have easy access to the site and to internal email too.

Some schools have a policy that every teaching room should be equipped with a computer, staff can then do student registration online and have regular access to both the intranet or learning platform and email. These all rely on policy changes driven by the SMT.

Creating content

Even with the most user-friendly of systems, adding and amending content can seldom be done by the average user without some basic training. As a comparison, sending emails is a pretty straightforward exercise, but a user with no previous experience still needs training to gain the necessary skill.

A number of schools organise training by department, the sequence of events being something like this:

- Departments first need to be persuaded of the merits of using the learning platform. This could be achieved by holding staff meetings, or using parts of existing staff meetings to show examples of what's been done in the school already, or in other schools, etc. It should be highlighted that a good learning platform can render the whole learning process more effective and open the doors to new methods of teaching. Many schools have benefited from a content-rich learning platform allowing them to carry on basic teaching and assignment-setting during cases of unexpected school closure, where normally that latter would have made this impossible.

- Once departments have bought into the concept, some schools will have each appoint a "learning platform rep/champion". Though it is important that all teaching staff are given thorough basic training on using the system such that they do not rely on their "champion" colleague to contribute content, "champions" are useful as experts on the system who staff can approach for further help. Ideally "champions" are Heads of Department, but if not, people with reasonable IT literacy and an enthusiasm to develop the departmental area.

- The learning platform or intranet manager should then arrange a series of training sessions for the reps/champions, and at different levels too. For example, a basic course could focus simply on adding a new page as well as adding and editing text, images and links - this would ideally be done by giving each rep write access to an area on the learning platform site where they may experiment without affecting anything else.

- More advanced courses on adding calendars, spreadsheets, streaming video etc. could also be run, but the initial focus should be on getting content added to departmental areas. Beyond departmental champions, all staff who show particular enthusiasm for using and contributing to the learning platform should also be encouraged to attend more advanced training sessions to develop their skills and allow them to participate even more effectively.

Departments should be persuaded at an early stage not only to store their records of meetings on the learning platform, but also to write them directly into pages of the site, rather than using Word and then transferring the content afterwards.

Some departments will need more encouragement than others at this stage and it is important not to allow the departmental section growth to slip down the priority list. Some external assistance might be needed and a lot of progress can be made in a short time by someone outside the department (e.g. the learning platform manager) sitting down with the Head of Department and:

- Structuring resource areas to have a suitable folder system. For example, by setting up a Staff folder with sub-folders for minutes, departmental memos, etc.

- Moving existing departmental resources into the right resource folders.

- Using file lists to display uploaded resources on appropriate departmental learning platform pages

- Organising training courses not solely for departmental reps but also aimed at any user, which should continue on a regular basis so that all staff members have the opportunity to become skilled.

Further Staff encouragement

Departments can take the lead in encouraging each member to add content to their area on the learning platform, by:

- Nominating departmental members to maintain different sections. For example, if the Maths department has a Head of Junior Maths, the latter could be responsible for maintaining everything to do with, say, GCSE Maths on the learning platform.

- Requiring department members to share their own resources by posting them on the departmental area. A Geography teacher might have some good images of glaciation, for example, which could then be added to a teaching resources part of the Geography site.

Setting homework online

Teachers might find it useful to set up personal pages on their subject area where, for example, details of homework set and other information can be posted for their students to read. It is also arguably sensible to put the actual assignments themselves online where possible. A good learning platform system will include functionality that allows you to push an assignment to a particular group of students, have them complete it and return the work electronically, all online.

Here it's really useful if your learning platform is able to integrate with your school's MIS, as this makes teachers' lives much easier by enabling them to simply select a class from a list, rather than manually enter the name of every student they want to assign the work to.

The system should also allow you to track the progress of submissions and even mark them online. This is useful for avoiding the situation where teachers ask their students to return essays by e-mail, only to find that by the end of the week their inbox is a jumbled mess of files from individuals with (often) unidentifiable addresses. It also means that students don't find themselves unable to complete an assignment because they left that vital worksheet at home and can't find anybody to scan and send it to them. Furthermore, teachers are able to benefit from having a lasting record of the work that has been submitted for them by students, where they can easily return to every submission and view not only answers but the feedback left at the time.

Motivating students to use the system

It is important not to overlook the importance of motivating students to use the system actively in their day-to-day school life. As mentioned with staff earlier, one pre-requisite is that they are able to consider the content as both useful and current, particularly as they often do not possess a stake in content to the same level as their teachers. One possibility is to give them limited editorial rights in particular areas of the site, most likely subject to approval by a member of staff before they are actually published.

One way of encouraging students to use the system is to make it a key reference point for them to find out homework assignments and other school tasks. For this to work, the relevant staff need to ensure that tasks get regularly published on the learning platform and that these remain up to date. Some learning platform systems include a dashboard-style interface where students can see a consolidated list of items that they are due to complete, or tasks to be carried out. These items are usually pushed through to them by staff, but some systems also allow students to set themselves personal tasks as a reminder, or just to help with organisation.

As mentioned previously, students can also be charged with responsibility for certain sections concerning extra-curricular activities they are involved with, such as societies, charity/community work or Model UN.

They can also contribute content to the learning platform in other ways. For example, some systems allow you to easily set up dedicated, private workspaces for use by individual groups, say a team of students involved in a Chemistry experiment. Such features enable them to have an area where they can write to freely and share information amongst themselves as well as with their supervisor, without the risk of other users wandering in. Arrangements like these are more efficient than constant e-mail/paper circulation amongst the group's members, and provide a central point for accessing information about project/group work from anywhere.

The creation of discussion board pages or "forums" also allow students to participate by responding with their views to topics or questions, either created by teaching staff or by other students. Examples of possible discussion boards include a weekly debate page, or a classifieds list.

Getting parents involved too

Some intranet sites have sections dedicated to parents of students. These usually allow parents to log into the site using either a network login or a separate account system, meaning that you could set up individual accounts for parents to be able to access relevant information on the school intranet.

In such cases, you may want to delegate responsibility for content in parts of these sections to selected parents themselves, for example the Parents' Association pages or related events, including school auctions/fêtes. Giving parents some responsibility for the content in their own section of the intranet helps provide them with a sense of ownership. This tends to encourage frequent visits to the site and helps to ensure parents remain both actively involved with each other, as well as close to the school community as a whole.

MIGRATING FROM ONE SYSTEM TO ANOTHER

The move from one learning platform system to another often involves a range of quite different challenges to an altogether new site. The main obstacles often relate to staff who are reluctant to make the move and to adapt to new methods. One way of attempting to tackle this is to pursue a strategy that combines elements of both carrot and stick. Specifically in terms of the "stick", it might be sensible to warn departments that in the short-term at least, they may continue to use the old system however, funding will be either restricted or withdrawn for this and technical support will no longer be provided.

If departments maintain their own systems for whatever reason, they should be notified that they will have to fund and support these using their own budget and resources (assuming they weren't doing so already). In terms of the "carrot" on the other hand, IT management should ensure that staff receive all the support they may require to migrate to and make the most of the new system.

Additionally:

- Staff are more likely to be positively receptive to the move if they are briefed on the key reasons for it in the first place, particularly if the benefits that will be brought to them are specifically highlighted.

- Site migration is an excellent chance to purge the learning platform or intranet of old, outdated content. Ensure that staff receive plenty of guidance on what material should be migrated and how, as well as what, content they may want to drop. It is all too easy for entire sections-worth of content to be simply transferred across without sifting out some of the material that is no longer of interest to most users. It is also worth seeing whether material that is migrated can be organised in a way that allows users to find the content they are seeking more effectively.

MANAGING A GROWING SITE

One of the advantages of distributed ownership is that, assuming that section owners start in the right directions, the site can grow without a great deal of intervention from the manager.

What does "right direction" mean?

Whilst the learning platform does not need to look as beautiful as the website as its target audience is different, it's very important to encourage a consistent "look and feel" to make navigation easier and the appearance more acceptable.

- A "house style" should be adopted, which could be as basic as requesting that all pages be written using the default font. Improvements on this might involve encouraging the use of

one of a small range of image sizes on pages, a consistent use of headings styles, etc. The aim is to avoid pages looking very different from one another.

- Remember that whilst aesthetic style should be consistent, editors should be encouraged to be creative through the variety of content types that are put online for users to enjoy. Encourage teaching staff to use video and audio on their departmental pages, as well as blogs and forums, the latter of which student users can participate in. Some departments may even want to use these to hold regular debates.

- Ensure that your site and its content remains mobile-friendly. Periodically review pages using popular mobile devices and encourage users to report any issues with accessing content via their phone or tablet. If appropriate, talk to your learning platform provider about having a site template developed that will help you ensure content displays more effectively on smaller screens.

- Where material is copied and pasted into the site from elsewhere, encourage the removal of embedded HTML to avoid including unnecessary code, standardise the font, etc. Most good learning platform systems have tools built in to do this easily.

- Avoid inserting large numbers of high-resolution images onto site pages. As well looking unsightly on small screens, these will increase the time required for pages to load and as a result, challenge the patience of users.

- Encourage the transfer of as much existing documentation as possible to site pages rather than leaving them as (usually) Office documents hidden behind lists of links. Firstly, this reduces the database space taken up by such documents significantly, but secondly, it also makes them more accessible. Human nature is such that many users will not click a link if they know they have to wait for Word, Adobe Reader, etc. to load first. However, if the click takes them to another web page instead, they are more likely to proceed through.

- Encourage good practice for such things as lists with columns, where tabbing fails to do the job in web pages. It may take some time, but it will be much better in the long run if the message "tabs bad, tables good" can be absorbed, and not just for web pages too!

- Insist that the structure of each departmental site follows similar lines so that students can find their way around. (see Structuring your site).

- Encourage the development of a hierarchical menu structure by grouping common pages as "children" of top level "parent" pages. Section owners must avoid having excessively long lists of pages in the navigation menu as this makes each item harder to notice.

- Encourage section owners to delete out-of-date pages. This requires that they periodically review the pages for which they are responsible to see what (a) needs updating and (b) needs deletion. Where pages are needed to be kept for archive reasons, a section called "Archive" could be created, acting as the "parent" for all old pages.

Hearing back from users

Ensure that users have channels through which they can easily send back comments and other feedback about either site content or their user experience. This is particularly important at the early stages of the site's existence, when it is essential that the system provides a positive user experience

if takeup is going to be widespread. However, feedback is also useful for flagging up issues that may emerge or which have laid buried on more mature installations.

You might want to carry out periodical surveys and most learning platform systems will include a facility that allows you to do this within the site. However, it is important to organise surveys sparingly to avoid causing a nuisance to users. Once a term should be considered a sensible maximum.

Ensuring your web content remains current

The site manager should periodically review sample sections/pages to assess their "freshness" and discuss them with their owner(s). Regular use of the site reports functionality on some systems can reveal where content reviewing may be needed. This often includes the ability to purge the site of old pages, but this must not be done indiscriminately as valuable material may be accidentally destroyed, much to the wrath of the author(s).

CONCLUSION

Building a successful learning platform or intranet is an ongoing process. To be effective and draw useful content as well as engage users, it needs to be regularly monitored, updated, developed and improved. Beyond the advice given in this document, your learning platform provider should be able to help further with getting the most out of your system.

Additionally, it is a good idea to harness the power of existing user communities and most providers will be happy to put you in contact with other schools that use the same system, so that you can share ideas and tips. Your learning platform provider may organise regular user group meetings where they will not only present their latest software developments, but also give you a chance to network with colleagues from other client schools. These events are also a great opportunity to air your feedback on using the system, in the hope that your provider will take views on board and implement any suggested improvements in due course.

A successful learning platform is undeniably a very significant investment, not just financially, but in terms of the time and personal commitment required by individuals across the school. However, the rewards for those who choose to put the required effort into the project are very great - successful systems can streamline school administration, make learning more flexible and effective as well as improve communication and collaboration across the entire community of staff, students and parents.

There are lessons to be learnt from every learning platform project at a school. For that reason, we're always very keen to hear about your experiences and any advice you would like to share. We will incorporate these contributions in later editions of this document. Please feel free to share this document with colleagues and others. We would ask that you leave in the attribution to the author and Firefly Solutions, who funded its writing and publishing.

Finally and most of all, good luck with your learning platform project and have lots of fun!