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The GES Connect Digitally Programme: Shaping parental engagement through technology

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Abstract. The engagement of parents with the education and learning of their children is known to have beneficial effects (Harris & Goodall (2007), Ofsted (2007) and DfES (2007a)). Following on from the article by Strickley (2009) which looked at the holistic view of a parental Gateway to Educational Services (GES) this paper focuses on the work, during 2009, towards the GES Connect Digitally vision (GES, 2009a). It looks, specifically from a technological standpoint, at the programme's core services namely Online School Admissions (OSA), Online Free School Meals (OFSM), Cashless Schools and Online Payments. It then sets out the approach used by the technology workstream and examines the work done so far in establishing best practice, developing and enhancing existing technology standards and looking at new and innovative initiatives. Utilising the above framework the paper attempts to resolve the question of what the minimum features and relationships are for establishing a portal that enables the vision of multi-channel access to a core set of services for parents (GES, 2009a). It concludes that, whilst there is still a year to go for the programme, increased take-up for OSA and use of the OFSM Eligibility Checking Service (ECS) are very encouraging with signs that work on the other two areas will result in the vision stated above becoming a reality. However this needs to be tempered with the significant technological challenges of digital inclusion, identity management, open standards and interoperability.

Keywords: GES Connect Digitally; Gateway; Education; Online; Admissions; Free School Meals; Eligibility Checking Service (ECS)

1 Introduction

The reports of Harris & Goodall (2007), Ofsted (2007) and DfES (2007a) conclude that the outcomes of parental involvement in the education and learning of young people are that of raising achievement, increasing attendance and improving behaviour.

In addition The Children's Plan (DCSF, 2007a) considers that a more flexible approach to parental engagement is critical to the key strands of education policy targeted to 2020.

Strickley (2009) describes the holistic view of a parental gateway in 2008. Since then funding has been secured from the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) for a GES Connect Digitally programme with a vision that:

'by 2011 parents/carers in England will have access to a core set of services, accessible through a variety of channels and technologies' GES (2009a).

The core services of the GES Connect Digitally programme have been defined as, enhanced Online School Admissions (OSA), Online Free School Meals (OFSM), Cashless Schools and Online Payments. Other key services are being managed through partner organisations such as Becta for the Home Access (Becta, 2009a) and online reporting initiatives (Becta, 2009b).

Figure 1 shows the GES Connect Digitally vision in a pictorial manner (GES, 2009b). As Strickley (2009) describes the figure moves from left to right from school admissions, which is the most mature and established application and as a result is the most utilised online educational portal, through the various other services as shown. The figure tends to move from the wider Local Authority (LA) provision at the left, through a school emphasis, to a pupil focus at the far right.

As can be seen the four core service within the GES Connect Digitally programme constitute over half of those seen as important to the vision.

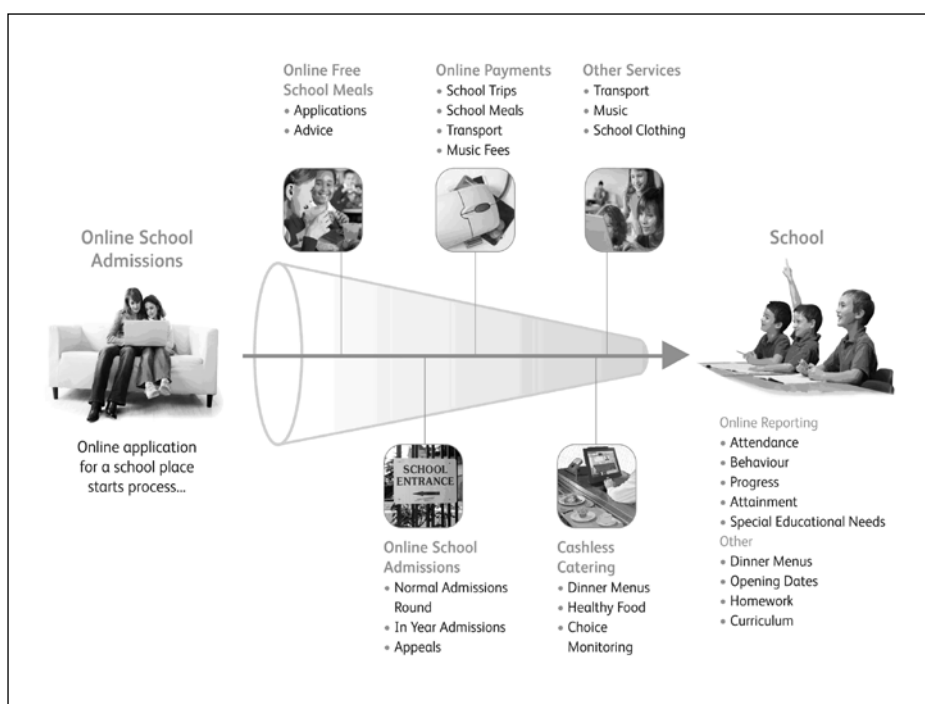


Figure 1 The GES Connect Digitally vision

2 Workstream Structure

In order to facilitate the services envisaged the technological infrastructure needs to be considered, tested and implemented. This is the role of the technology workstream within the GES Connect Digitally programme.

Technology is one of several workstreams within the Programme. The aim of the workstream is to help LAs transition from the present to a future state, by enabling the ICT required to deliver the vision.

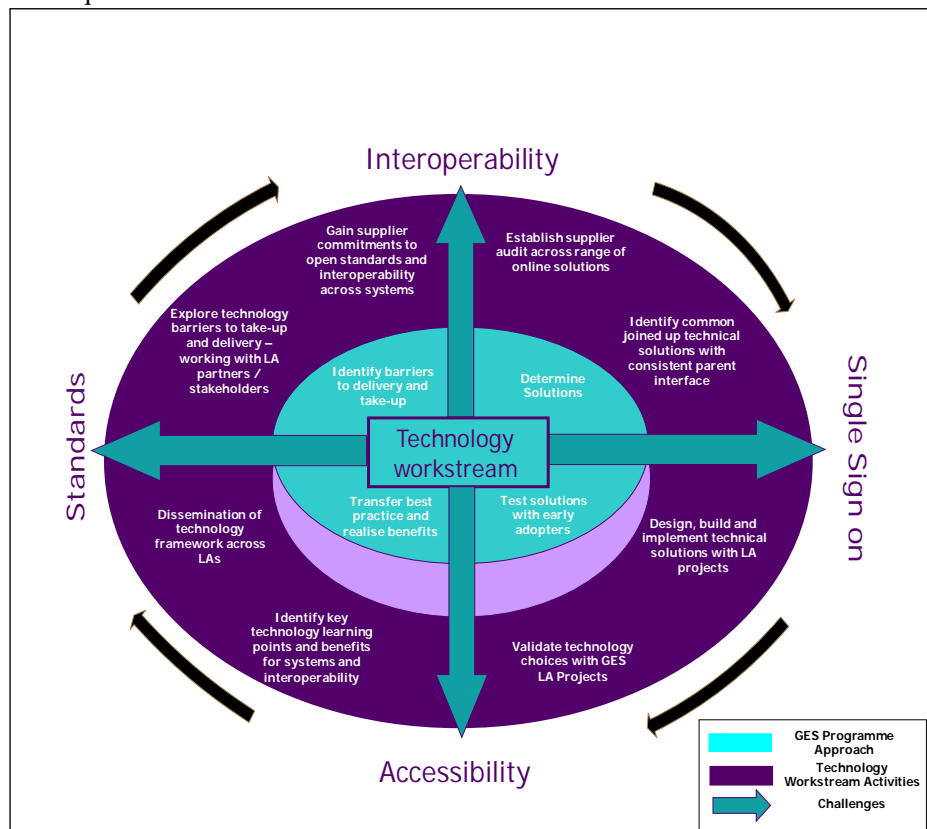


Figure 2 Technology approach

Figure 2 (GES, 2009c) shows the technology approach to delivering solutions that will enable the vision. Essentially it explores barriers, gains supplier commitment to open and interoperable standards, establishes an audit of existing technical and online solutions, designs, builds, implements and validates technology options and then identifies key lessons learned to inform an overall technological framework.

It shows how this workstream fits into the overall GES Connect Digitally programme approach of identifying barriers, determining solutions and testing and transferring outcomes. The technology workstream objectives are as follows:

- To help local authorities join up and improve parental services through the use of technology whilst building upon existing platforms.
- To enhance and improve online school admissions services for parent/carers enabled by technology.
- To enhance and improve the efficiency of systems and processes within local authorities.
- To identify common features for application across local authorities.
- To produce specifications to support development work.
- To provide guidance based on LA project experience.
- To transfer guidance and learning from LA projects into the GES Connect Digitally delivery framework.

In order to achieve these the workstream has utilised a combination of projects within partner LAs, case studies with trailblazers, questionnaires, workshops, site visits and desk-based research and has in particular focused on:

- Research into existing practice in schools and LAs.
- Projects investigating new initiatives.
- Review and development of existing materials.
- Evaluation and review of existing and emerging technologies.
- Promotion and marketing of good practice.
- Creation of and participation in the GES Connect Digitally Community of Practice (IDEA, 2009)

The results of these have been fed into the following recommendations.

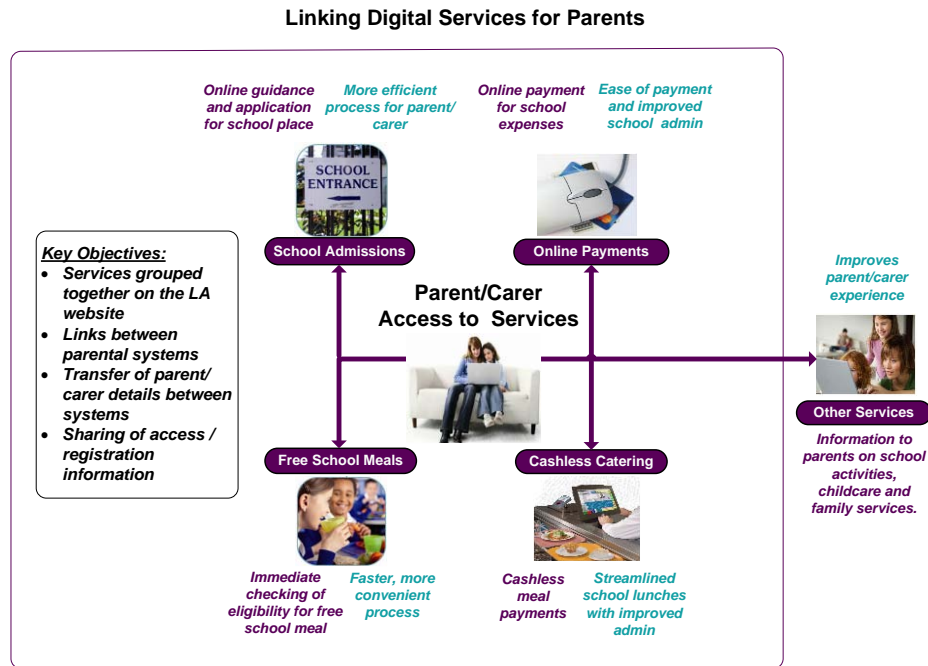


Figure 3 Linking digital services to parents

3 Linking services

One of the key areas of the GES Connect Digitally vision is the linking of the various services together so that the parent has a single point of entry or gateway.

Figure 3 (GES 2009d) shows how this may be visualised. As can be seen the four main services are shown linked together with other related services and areas.

In order to streamline the systems and ensure a seamless journey, using the evidence from the work described in section 2, the workstream has developed a series of 'standards' for the core services.

4 Generic Features and Guidance

Generic proposed features which apply to each core service when delivered online are itemised below.

4.1 Form Design and Usability

Online forms should include field level validation to improve the quality and consistency of data. They should use language which is clear and concise with help and guidance that is contextual, succinct and provided at the point where it is needed.

They should pass strict usability testing by the supplier, LA and users before release to the public website (COI, 2009) and provide guidance to the parent/carer which ensures that the consistency of core data captured for the online process is of a high quality. In addition they should provide meaningful and useful error messages and include the ability for parents/carers to consent to the sharing of their data where appropriate.

4.2 Data Sharing

Subject to legal considerations data may be shared across systems where appropriate and it should adhere to the LA data management strategy. In addition online forms may be pre-populated with existing data for parents/carers who are already known to the LA.

4.3 Parent/Carer Contact

There should be a contact facility available to support parents/carers using a variety of access channels.

4.4 Access and Security

A registration process should exist to establish secure access to any online forms where parents/carers must be able to enter, save and retrieve the application at any time where the business process allows this. There should be a statement of standards for LA access, security and authentication including the protection of all databases and processes. In particular data should be protected to prevent destruction or corruption and this should include frequent file saves and amendment logs to ensure the ability of the system to re-create itself. These specific security processes should be included as part of a wider contingency plan and data should be protected by LA database access and authentication protocols.

4.5 Links

Links between online services may be established across parental systems operated by the LA such as OSA, online reporting, OFSM, cashless catering and online payments. Within the LA website links with other relevant services including Parent Know How Directory (now Family Information Direct, DCSF, 2009a), schools' websites and to national websites containing information pertaining to benefits, parental services and the child's education e.g. Directgov. (Directgov, 2009).

4.6 Compliance and Compatibility

LAs should consider legal guidelines, including the Disability Discrimination Act (HMSO, 2005) and the World Wide Web Consortium (WAI, 2009) and whether software is compatible with industry recognised internet browsers. e.g. Internet Explorer; Firefox; Safari; Opera.

4.7 Service Availability

LAs should consider service level agreements to ensure any system downtime is kept to an agreed minimum and should utilise appropriate protective technology to minimise service disruption as a result of usage peaks or disruptive forces such as hackers, malware and viruses.

4.8 Dependencies and Guidance

The detailed specific requirements for each online system will be different in each LA and will be dependent on a number of factors. These will include processes, procedures and policies, local systems, existing online forms, infrastructure and overall strategy and standards.

4.9 Minimum features for each of the core services

In addition to the work in section 2 the development of the minimum features for each service has applied findings from:

- Experience and lessons learned through Hertfordshire County Council's and a number of other LA implementations of online systems and processes (IDEA, 2009).
- Compliance with Data Protection (HMSO, 1998) and Freedom of Information Acts (HMSO, 2000).
- Documentation from the DCSF Eligibility Checking Service (ECS) (DCSF, 2009c).
- School Food Trust guidance on Cashless Catering. (School Food Trust, 2009).

The following sections give a brief synopsis of the specific service and features that are desirable for its online parental portal.

5 Online School Admissions

OSA is a key element of the overall strategy of engaging parents/carers in educational services for their children. Referenced as a key priority in the Digital Britain (DCMS, 2009) report it is integral to the provision of multi access channels for citizen access.

Building on the successes achieved by the eAdmissions project which delivered outstanding results with 150 LAs going live with OSA in 2006 (eAdmissions, 2006) the GES Connect Digitally programme has engaged in a series of LA projects with a view to enhance the OSA process and ultimately the take-up from an already impressive 30% in 2008, 44% in 2009 and a target of 50% in 2010.

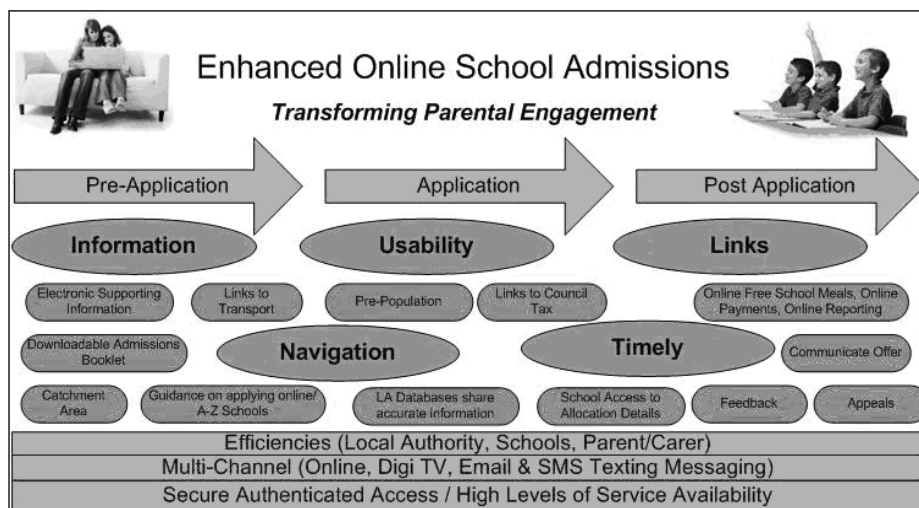


Figure 4 Enhanced online school admissions

Figure 4 shows how the OSA process may be broken down into the 3 main sub-processes of pre-application where the parent/carers will search for information about the prospective schools available; application during which the actual application will be made and submitted; and post-application during which the offer and subsequent preparation for the school place occurs. The figure shows the links and possible channels that may be part of this process.

The list below outlines how LAs can enhance the service beyond the Minimum Feature List set agreed in 2004 (eAdmissions, 2006) to deliver a service transformation for parental engagement.

Using the broad headings described above these are:

- Support for pre-application research including improved links to a downloadable admissions booklet and information about applying online - FAQs, processes, registration, Fair Processing Notices (DCSF, 2009b), Data Protection (HMSO, 1998). Clearly presented opening and closing dates, an A-Z of schools' websites within the LA, Ofsted, DCSF, EduBase etc (Edubase, 2009), school uniform information and application processes, home-school transport service and catchment area information for each parent/carers based on their address.
- Support for the application process including the ability to define areas of allowable applications based on the child's date of birth or correct LA application form based on the home address and postcode. A PIN/password supplied to the parent/carers either with the registration pack or as part of the online registration. Online validation within the form for a range of fields

together with facilitation, where possible, of all transactions to be undertaken electronically e.g. proof of residency, religious affiliation, birth certificates, pre-admission application, and any other certificates or evidence.

- Additionally there should be an optional alert prior to allocation day to remind the parent/carer that the results will be available online on results day via email, SMS or automated phone message and the ability to view the current school catchment area details, if applicable, within a defined area together with previous longest home to school distance for over subscribed schools. Other alerts should also be available, on request, to advise the parent/carer of important dates such as the closure of the form, tests and appeals and electronic links to Choice Advisers or similar via email, telephone or SMS Text Message.
- Post application processes should be supported by the confirmation of application receipt containing information useful to the parent/carer e.g. application reference number, contact information, synopsis of information transferred, next steps and links to other information. Allocation (offers) details should be available online together with useful information, links to other services such as online free school meals, offered school website, online payments and details regarding online reporting.
- There should be a facility for schools to view a limited version of all applications online irrespective of how they were made and they should also be able to view allocation details, when available
- Parents/carers should have access to an online email facility to deal with queries throughout the admissions and appeals process and there should be the opportunity to lodge an appeal online should they be dissatisfied with their allocated place.

Many of the above features are already included in admissions online forms. However the list is intended as a blueprint for future developments and not a minimum feature list.

6 Cashless Catering

School cashless catering systems make lunchtime in schools more efficient and mean children do not need to carry dinner money. As a result benefits are realised for children, members of staff, schools and parents (School Food Trust, 2009).

Minimum features may include links to online payment systems where parents/carers pay online for school catering using credit and debit card and the ability to accept cheques and Bank Automated Credits (BACs).

There should also be the provision of a reporting functionality for the school so that catering can be managed electronically and similar reporting functionality for parents/carers so that they can have access to menus and other catering related information.

More work needs to be done in this area and cashless catering will be a focus of the workstream in the second year of the programme.

7 Online Free School Meals

Historically the application for FSM by a parent/carer for their child involved a lengthy application process including time consuming paper-based evidence for eligibility checking. This would need to be repeated on an annual basis (GES, 2009a). The result of this process was often stigma for the parent and child resulting in some non take-up of the benefit.

The DCSF has developed an FSM online Eligibility Checking Service (ECS) (DCSF, 2009c) which checks the eligibility for FSM against Her Majesty's Revenues and Customs (HMRC), Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Home Office databases. This supports LAs in the delivery of an efficient service to parents/carers, which streamlines eligibility checking when processing applications.

The long term vision for OFSM is of a seamless 'end-to-end' service enabling parents/carers to apply online for FSM in one quick, simple and easy process incorporating real-time eligibility checking. Parents/carers and LAs will be rapidly informed of eligibility and, by automated notification to schools, children will be offered a FSM by the start of the next working week.

Figure 5 below shows the proposed system described above from start to finish.

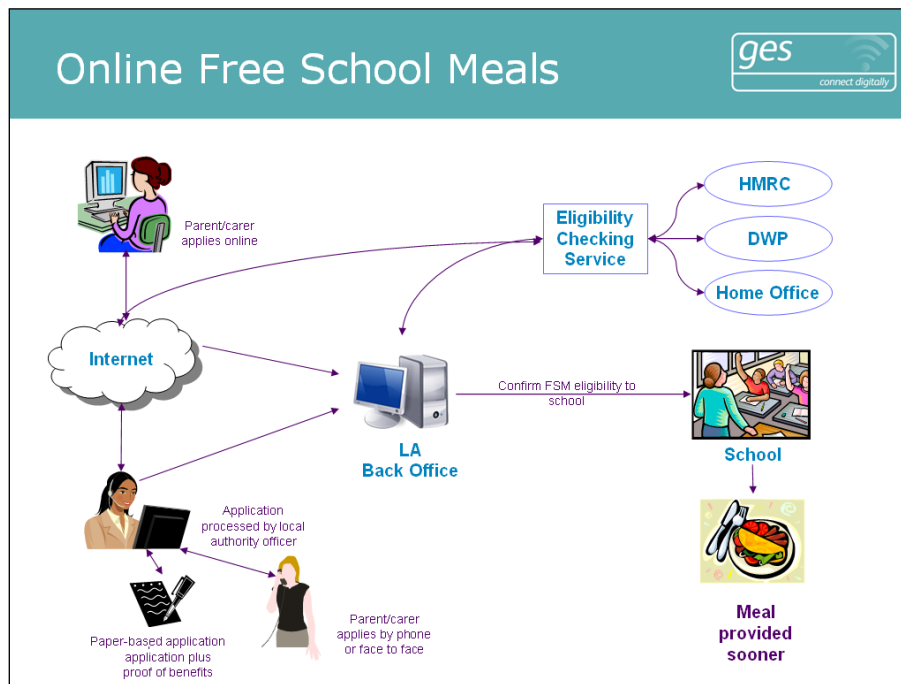


Figure 5 Online Free School Meals process

The following outlines the suggested minimum features required to establish an OFSM service for parents/carers delivered through an online form provided by the LA:

- The form may be deployed as an internally developed LA web-form or as part of an OFSM system. (Some LAs have developed a single form to capture applications across a range of benefit areas). It should include guidance to the parent/carer regarding the OFSM application process, eligibility criteria and on specific areas of the process (GES 2009e) and should give confirmation of application receipt.
- Following the confirmation of eligibility, the process should provide guidance to the parent/carer on how the process will proceed within the LA and the school through to the provision of FSM for the child. The process should integrate with the ECS to provide immediate eligibility checking of an application.
- 109 LAs in England used the ECS in September 2009, this is a 50% increase year on year, with 93% of checks resulting in an eligibility match. Early adopters will be implementing a full online service (as in figure 5) early in 2010.

8 Online Payments

Online Payment systems enable parents/carers to pay for a range of school-related items, such as their child's school dinners, trips, music lessons, clubs, and uniforms online.

Minimum features may include:

- The ability to make payments online using credit or debit cards or the direct payment of money into a specified central account including optional reminders for payments which are due. The system should integrate with cashless catering systems and management information systems allowing the provision of reporting functionality for parents/carers and schools including the ability for the school to identify and manage non-payments.
- Systems should also consider the potential for integration with other products such as PayPoint, enabling retailers to accept payment on schools' behalf, the ability to manage and administer FSM for schools and parents/carers and the ability to make regular payments e.g. standing orders.
- Whilst the advantages of Online Payments are clear the implementation across LAs appears to be somewhat inconsistent and this will be a key area of investigation in the next year of the programme.

9 Success Measures

In order to measure progress the programme has put into place a series of success measures. These are that by 2011:

- OSA, over 50 % of parents/carers nationally will apply for a school place online.
- OFSM, 60 % of LAs will have removed the need for parents/carers to provide paper proof of benefit
- Grouping services, 75 % of LAs will signpost other parental services from GES Connect Digitally core services e.g. advice on OFSM and other relevant services during the schools admissions application process.

10 Conclusions

Good progress has been achieved in the first 12 months of the programme including:

- OSA take-up figures show 44% of parents nationally applied online in 2009-2010 with some LAs achieving 90% and higher.
- Increase in the use of the ECS is increasing month on month.
- The use of cashless catering and Online Payments, although less mature than the than OSA and FSM, are becoming increasingly significant in LA and school transactions.

It is clear that the work done so far in responding to the question of what the minimum features and relationships for the core services should be is assisting the implementation of the programme's vision. However there are areas that need urgent review:

- Digital inclusion is key for the high take-up and participation required to make this programme effective and efficient. The Becta (2009a) 'Home Access' project together with the use of non-PC based internet access devices will be key to this.
- A single portal requires a single sign on and the issues of identity management and security are high on the agenda. Alignment with the Information Standards Board (ISB, 2009), Becta, Office for Government Commerce (OGC) and enterprising implementations existing within LAs are to be a focus for next year's project areas.
- Open standards and interoperability will not only allow the seamless combination of different services but should also enable the key links between LAs, schools and parents. In this respect the Systems Interoperability Framework (SIFA, 2009), ISB (2009) and Becta are important partners.

The success of the programme will inevitably hinge on resolving these important issues and the next twelve months will be critical. It is hoped that a subsequent paper will review the progress achieved in the second year of the programme.

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