THE FUTURE OF THE WELSH VIDEO NETWORK SUPPORT CENTRE

FINAL REPORT

June 2009

Contents

1.   EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1   INTRODUCTION

1.1.1   The Welsh Video Network (WVN) Support Centre exists to provide video conferencing support to Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE) institutions as well as some schools across Wales. The Support Centre is unique in the UK in the range of services it provides to encourage and support the use of video conferencing.   Funding is provided by the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) of the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) to enable the WVN Support Centre to provide a 'core' service to institutions, but it also 'sells' additional services directly to some schools, colleges and universities.

1.1.2   The WVN Support Centre is formally a part of the JANET(UK) family of services[1], though it actually operates as a semi-autonomous 'unit' within Swansea University's Library and Information Services Department. Whilst the relationship between the WVN Support Centre and JANET(UK) has proved beneficial to both parties, JANET(UK) will discontinue its involvement in managing the WVN Support Centre after March 2010.   This forthcoming change in management arrangements led DCELLS and HEFCW to commission Old Bell 3 Ltd, in association with Dateb and Enid O'Shea, to:

❑   Assess the impact, strengths and weaknesses of the service currently provided by the WVN Support Centre;

❑   Recommend whether a service should continue to be provided;

❑   Recommend models for future provision of service, if appropriate.

1.1.3   The study was undertaken against the backcloth of some important policy developments, both in relation to information and communications technologies and to teaching and learning, viz:

❑   The roll-out of the Public Sector Broadband Aggregation (PSBA) project[2];

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[1] See items 5.3.3 – 5.3.5
[2] See items 5.3.10 – 5.3.11

- ❑ A UK wide review of arrangements relating to the JISC[3] Regional Support Centres;
- ❑ The adoption of the Learning and Skills Measure (Wales) 2009;
- ❑ The development of DCELLS' Welsh Medium Education Strategy;
- ❑ The reconfiguration of Initial Teacher Training arrangements in Wales;
- ❑ Tightening public finances.

1.1.4 The study was based on a review of documents relating to the use of video conferencing in Wales and more widely, and discussions with a range of stakeholders as detailed at Annex 1.

1.2 FINDINGS

1.2.1 Over the last decade, there has been a significant level of investment in video conferencing facilities across Higher and Further Education institutions and schools in Wales, and the WVN Support Centre has been closely involved in commissioning and supporting much of the equipment installed.

1.2.2 Institutions' use of video conferencing tends to serve three broad purposes:
- ❑ Facilitating collaboration within or between institutions on the delivery of courses, including in some cases, the simultaneous delivery of courses across several sites;
- ❑ Enhancing the delivery of curricula by linking into 'live' events or facilitating interaction with teachers and learners at other sites;
- ❑ Accommodating academic and management related meetings and, thus, saving staff time and travel costs.

1.2.3 The use of video conferencing varies substantially from one institution to another, but appears to be critical to the delivery of only a handful of courses. This rather limited use of video conferencing for teaching and learning purposes clearly raises questions about the suitability of the technology for pedagogical purposes. However, a number of contributors to our study argued that the emerging WAG policies (referred to above) will provide the stimulus (which has hitherto been missing) needed to

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[3] Joint Information Systems Committee (see item 5.3.2)

encourage institutions to turn to technologies such as video conferencing to reach distributed groups of learners at minimum cost.

1.2.4   Institutions' experience of the WVN Support Centre's technical service also varied, with the most prolific users of video conferencing making most use of the Support Centre.   Regardless of this variation, however, contributors were complimentary about the technical service received and there was a widespread perception that the existence of the WVN Support Centre underpinned practitioner and technical staff's confidence in using video conferencing.

1.2.5   Those contributors who had experience of the WVN Support Centre's Learning and Teaching Advisors were also complimentary about the quality of the service offered, albeit that this strand of the Support Centre's portfolio was not considered as important as the technical support provided.   It was also notable that some Local Authorities offer their own training in the use of video conferencing for pedagogical purposes, as part of wider e-learning related continuous professional development arrangements.

1.2.6   Notwithstanding that there may be commercial alternatives, the overwhelming majority of contributors felt that the WVN Support Centre should be retained in its present form.   It was argued that without the Support Centre, institutions' use of video conferencing would dwindle, which would run counter to the spirit of emerging WAG policies.   Although the WVN Support Centre's Learning and Teaching Advisory service was not considered as significant as its much larger technical services, contributors felt that more technical and pedagogical training was needed, both in the wake of an ongoing installation/upgrade of studios and to enable institutions to respond appropriately to emerging policy.

1.2.7   Despite this consensus surrounding the need to retain the WVN Support Centre, there was less clarity about how such a service should be funded. Three alternative funding models emerged:

- ❑ A centrally funded model, whereby   DCELLS and HEFCW would provide sufficient funding to enable the WVN Support Centre to provide on-going services;
- ❑ A subscription model, whereby users paid for the service;

❑ A combined funding model, which would bring together elements of the centrally funded and the subscription model, reflecting to a large extent the situation as it currently stands.

1.2.8 There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these approaches, but on balance, we were persuaded that the centrally funded model offers the most cost effective means of developing a coherent approach to video conferencing across the whole education sector.

1.2.9 JANET(UK)'s withdrawal from the management of the WVN Support Centre makes it necessary to re-look at structural arrangements and to simplify what were perceived by some contributors as over-complicated contracting arrangements. It also provides an opportunity to consider whether and how the WVN Support Centre might fit with the on-going/emerging PSBA programme.

1.2.10 At an operational level, there were thought to be a number of advantages to maintaining the WVN Support Centre as part of Swansea University. Other potential 'homes' were identified for the centre, but none were thought particularly realistic or appropriate.

1.2.11 Whilst it would be possible for DCELLS and HEFCW (subject to WAG and EU procurement regulations) to contract directly with Swansea University for the provision of the service, some contributors saw merit in bringing the WVN under the auspices of the PSBA as a first step towards the development of a coherent all-Wales video conferencing strategy. Indeed, it was argued that the WVN Support Centre could help the PSBA programme to demonstrate efficiency savings and environmental benefits in public administration within a fairly short space of time.

1.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

1.3.1 The report makes 12 recommendations which are summarised here:

1. DCELLS and HEFCW should make a commitment to providing on-going core funding for the WVN Support Centre for the next three years, with an option to extend for a further two years.

2. DCELLS and HEFCW, in consultation with JANET(UK) should monitor closely the extent and nature of institutions' use of video conferencing in order to inform on-going WVN and WVN Support Centre activities.

3. DCELLS and HEFCW should work with the PSBA's Benefits Realisation Team to bring the WVN Support Centre under the auspices of the PSBA as soon as practicable.

4. Subject to WAG and EU procurement regulations, DCELLS, HEFCW and the PSBA team should open discussions with Swansea University about the possibility of WAG contracting directly with the University for continued provision of the WVN Support Centre's service to HEIs, FEIs and schools.

5. In the medium term, the position of the Learning and Teaching Advisory service within the WVN Support Centre should be reviewed.

6. DCELLS, HEFCW and JANET(UK) should set out how the relationship between the WVN Support Centre and parts of the JANET(UK) family of services will be maintained post March 2010.

7. DCELLS and HEFCW should work with the PSBA team, the WVN Support Centre and Local Authorities to assess the resource implications of extending the service currently provided to HEIs and FEIs to all schools in order to come up with an indicative three year 'core funding' allocation for the WVN Support Centre.

8. DCELLS, HEFCW and the PSBA project team should draw up a plan setting out the nature of the services the WVN Support Centre will deliver to HEIs, FEIs and schools as the basis of a service level agreement between these parties.

9. The WVN Support Centre should consider putting on subject-centred training in the pedagogical use of video conferencing.

10. The WVN Support Centre should work with the JISC RSC Wales to assess the level of buy-in to the benefits of video conferencing among institutions' management teams and, to develop a programme designed to raise awareness of its potential, as appropriate.

11. The WVN web-site should be updated to provide up to date and relevant information for practitioners and other stakeholders.

12. The WVN Support Centre should be charged with advising institutions on the most appropriate video conferencing solutions for them.

2.   INTRODUCTION

2.1   Old Bell 3, in association with Dateb and Enid O'Shea, was commissioned by the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) of the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) to undertake a study into the strengths and weaknesses of the Welsh Video Network Support Centre (WVNSC) and to explore how the service might be delivered in the future.   This study was undertaken between March and May 2009.

2.2   In this report we:
   □   Recall the overall aim and objectives of the study (section 2);
   □   Describe the method used to undertake the work (section 3);
   □   Provide some background to this study (section 4);
   □   Consider institutions support needs (section 5);
   □   Discuss the possible models for funding the service in future (section 6);
   □   Discuss possible structural arrangements (section 7)
   □   Present our conclusions and recommendations (section 8).

3.   AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

3.1   The underpinning purpose of this study was to:

- ❏ Assess the impact, strengths and weaknesses of the service currently provided by the Welsh Video Network Support Centre;
- ❏ Recommend whether a service should continue to be provided;
- ❏ Recommend models for future provision of service, if appropriate.

3.2   The more detailed objectives of the study were to:

a) *"Provide a current perspective of the support requirements of FE and HE institutions;*

b) *Evaluate the benefits of the existing joint, centrally funded central service compared to a model where individual institutions separately purchase support;*

c) *Investigate and evaluate other ways to support institutions whose videoconferencing equipment is funded and maintained by the funding bodies;*

d) *Investigate and evaluate the effectiveness of the core service, currently supported by the funding bodies;*

e) *Investigate and evaluate the potential opportunity for other public sector bodies in Wales, e.g. local authorities, to buy in to the existing service;*

f) *Investigate and evaluate possible synergies between this service and that provided by the JISC RSC;*

g) *Demonstrate an understanding of the current funding climate for Further and Higher Education in Wales;*

h) *Investigate and evaluate whether the newly established JISC Services Company has a role to play in any future developments;*

i) *Investigate and evaluate the role of JANET(UK) in future arrangements;*

j) *Investigate what opportunities exist to deliver the service through or with the PSBA;*

k) *Recommend models to provide future support to the network, if the research identifies that support should continue to be provided".*

4. WORK PROGRAMME

4.1 The work was divided into five elements:

    3.2.1 Inception;

    3.2.2 Review of Documentation;

    3.2.3 Fieldwork with key stakeholders;

    3.2.4 Analysis and Reporting;

    3.2.5 Project Management.

4.2 In the following sections, we set out the purpose of each element of the work and describe the activities undertaken.

4.2.1 Project Inception

The purpose of this stage was:

- To clarify details of our proposal;
- To gather any relevant information held by WAG, HEFCW, JANET(UK) and partner organisations, as appropriate;
- To agree upon key stakeholders to be consulted during the course of the study;
- To establish clear lines of communication to ensure the efficient exchange of information.

This involved:

- Meeting with the Steering Group to discuss our proposal;
- Receiving and cataloguing relevant documents;
- Developing a work plan.

4.2.2 Review of Documentation

The purpose of this stage was:

- To set out clearly the context for the study;
- To provide background information in relation to:
  - The strengths and weaknesses of the existing support arrangements;
  - Alternative ways in which institutions could be supported in maintaining and using video conferencing facilities;

- The likely costs to institutions of purchasing video conferencing support on an individual basis, in the absence of the service provided by the WVN Support Centre;

o To inform discussions with a range of stakeholders.

This involved:

- A desk based review of key documents relating to Wales and the UK more generally;

- Synthesising the thrust of the documents reviewed to form an internal briefing paper for team members;

- Discussing the findings of our document review with the Steering Group;

- Developing a topic guide to steer semi structured interviews with stakeholders.

4.2.3 Fieldwork

The purpose of this stage was:

o To garner stakeholders' views of the effectiveness and relative merits of the core service currently funded by DCELLS and HEFCW;

o To assess the future support requirements, if any, of FE and HE institutions;

o To assess the implications for schools currently purchasing services from WVN of a decision to terminate or reconfigure the current service;

o To explore alternative ways in which institutions could be supported in maintaining and using video conferencing facilities funded by the ICT Strategy Branch of DCELLS and HEFCW, taking into consideration the perceived effectiveness of existing arrangements, the potential ending of JANET(UK)'s current management role, and the interplay with organisations including JANET(UK)'s Video Conferencing Service (JVCS), the Joint Information Systems Committee Regional Support Centre for Wales (JISC RSC Wales), the new JISC Services Management Company Ltd and the Public Sector Broadband Aggregation (PSBA) Network;

o To explore the potential for other bodies to capitalise upon existing or alternative arrangements;

o To recommend one or more models (if appropriate) for the ongoing provision of support to the Welsh Video Network.

This involved:

- Arranging and undertaking interviews with 27 stakeholders (whose names are given in the list of contributors shown at Annex 1);
- Undertaking focus group discussions with 15 stakeholders (whose names are included in the list of contributors shown at Annex 1);
- Reviewing documents provided by some stakeholders;
- Synthesising the findings of the fieldwork.

4.2.4 Analysis and Reporting

The purpose of this stage was:

o To produce a comprehensible, justifiable and readable report;
o To present our findings to the Steering Group.

Hitherto, this has involved:

- Presenting the findings of our fieldwork and our emerging thoughts on a way forward to the Steering Group;
- Preparing this draft report;
- Undertaking an internal "peer review" of this draft report;
- Submitting this draft report to the Steering Group.

This stage will also involve

- Receiving the Steering Group's comments upon this report and suggestions for improvement;
- Revising the report to reflect the comments of the Steering Group, as appropriate.

4.2.5 Project Management

The purpose of this stage was:

o To ensure the smooth running of the project within agreed timescales;
o To ensure effective communication with the client.

This involved:

o Monitoring the project's progress against the project plan on an ongoing basis;
o Providing the Project Manager with regular feedback on progress.

5.   BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

5.1   INTRODUCTION TO THE WVN SUPPORT CENTRE

5.1.1   The WVN Support Centre was established in 2001 to maintain and support the then newly founded Welsh Video Network (WVN), an ELWa[4] and ERDF[5] funded integrated network of 80 high quality video conferencing studios across Wales' 35[6] Higher and Further Education institutions.   The WVN built upon Higher Education institutions' existing C5C video conferencing facilities and was designed to facilitate the use of video conferencing for learning and teaching purposes.   Since 2004, ELWa and subsequently DCELLS have invested in studio based video conferencing facilities at some 50 secondary schools across Wales, and these too are served by the WVN Support Centre, albeit under separate contractual arrangements.

5.1.2   The services provided by the WVN Support Centre have evolved over time, but briefly comprise:
- ❑   Advising on the suitability of and preparing rooms for video conferencing;
- ❑   Advising on network issues and the purchase of equipment;
- ❑   Installing and commissioning studio and infrastructure equipment, hardware and software;
- ❑   Providing on-site maintenance services;
- ❑   Upgrading software;
- ❑   The proactive remote monitoring of video conferencing systems to prevent problems from affecting users;
- ❑   Troubleshooting faults;
- ❑   Providing a helpdesk service during office hours;
- ❑   Providing and maintaining Rhwydiaith[7] equipment that allows the simultaneous interpretation of video conferencing proceedings, thus enabling its clients to meet their legal obligation to hold meetings through the medium of Welsh and English;

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[4] ELWa has since been disbanded and its responsibility for funding Further Education institutions assigned to the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) within the Welsh Assembly Government

[5] European Regional Development Fund

[6] Now 34, since the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama became part of the University of Glamorgan group

[7] Rhwydiaith is a simultaneous interpretation service, which gives WVN Support Centre users the option of listening to conferences in either Welsh or English

❑ Keeping the WVN community abreast of technological developments and best practice via briefing days, a web-site and an e-mail alert service;

❑ Training practitioners in technical and pedagogical aspects of video conferencing through a very small team of Learning and Teaching Advisers.

5.1.3 The WVN Support Centre is increasingly being asked to advise Local Authorities and other public sector organisations on how best to configure such organisations' network technology for videoconferencing.

5.1.4 The WVN Support Centre is unique in the UK. In other regions, HEIs and FEIs rely for the most part on IT staff within the institutions, while schools receive support either from Local Authorities or from Regional Broadband Consortia. Several contributors to our research claimed that colleagues elsewhere in the UK envied the arrangements in Wales, though it is interesting that if this is the case, no-one has sought to replicate them more directly.

5.2 STRUCTURAL AND FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS

5.2.1 The WVN Support Centre is not a legal entity of itself. Rather it is a semi-autonomous 'unit' hosted within Swansea University's Library and Information Services Department. The Support Centre currently employs 13 full time equivalent staff and three on temporary contracts which come to an end in December 2009. The majority of staff are employed directly by Swansea University, but two peripatetic staff serving mid Wales institutions are employed and 'hosted' by Aberystwyth University, under sub-contract to Swansea University.

5.2.2 Swansea University is contracted to run the WVN Support Centre by JANET(UK) (see below), which is itself contracted to manage the service by DCELLS and HEFCW. A small number of other organisations also subscribe either to JANET(UK) or directly to Swansea University for WVN Support Centre services. Figure 5.1 shows the rather complex contracting arrangements surrounding the WVN Support Centre.

Figure 5.1: Contracting Arrangements
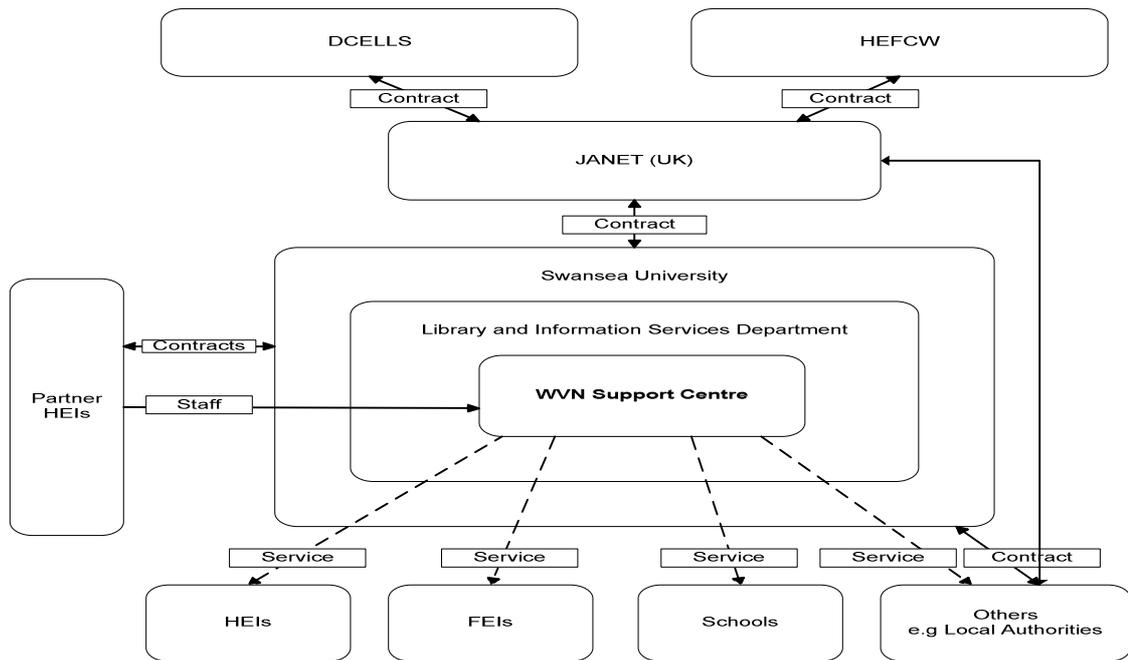
5.2.3 Arrangements for funding the WVN Support Centre are also fairly complex. However, the indicative funding for the on-going *"core"* service during 2009/10 is shown in Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1: Indicative Funding for the WVN Support Centre's "Core" Services in 2009/10

	£
JANET(UK) Management Fee	7,000
WVN Support Centre FEI/HEI 'core' service	132,000
WVN Support Centre school service (including T&L support)	180,000
Learning and Teaching Support Advisers for HEIs and FEIs	73,000
Rhwydiaith operations & maintenance	89,000
JANET Video Conferencing Service (JVCS)[8] subscription for all schools	29,000
Maintenance of funded school studios (circa)	50,000
Total	**560,000**

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[8] See item 5.5.3 below

5.2.4   In addition to these sums, the WVN Support Centre has been contracted to manage the process of refreshing 52 HEI and FEI studios between June 2007 and December 2009. The fee paid for undertaking this task (based on the additional staff costs that will be incurred) is some £180,000 per annum. Of course, the programme of refreshing studios also involved substantial capital costs which are being met either wholly or in part by DCELLS and HEFCW.

5.2.5   It should also be noted that the WVN Support Centre generates some additional income by providing services on a subscription basis to HEIs, FEIs, Local Authorities, schools and other bodies.

5.3   THE WVN SUPPORT CENTRE AND OTHER BODIES

5.3.1   The WVN Support Centre forms part of a tapestry of bodies which are in some way involved or interested in promoting and enabling the use of video conferencing for the delivery and management of public services. In this section, we provide some background to those organisations and discuss briefly their relationship with the WVN Support Centre.

JISC

5.3.2   The bodies responsible for funding Higher and Further Education across the UK also fund the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) to provide leadership in the innovative use of ICT to support education and research. JISC offers a portfolio of services, including:

❑   JANET(UK), which provides the UK's world-class joint academic broadband network, along with a range of related technical services;

❑   JISC Regional Support Centres (RSCs), which work at a regional level (Wales being one such region) to support all types of learning providers, with the exception of schools and larger HEIs, to adopt and make best use of learning technologies;

❑   JISC Services Management Company[9], which manages services such as JISC Procureweb[10] (an ICT systems procurement support service) and JISC Infonet[11]

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[9] Technically, the JISC Services Management Company will not start trading until August 2009, at which time it will assume responsibility for services managed directly by the JISC Executive at present

[10] www.procureweb.ac.uk/

(an information service designed to keep the HE and FE community aware of new developments and best practice in the use of ICT in a learning and teaching context).

JANET(UK)

5.3.3   JANET(UK) provides high bandwidth, reliable and resilient network connectivity across and beyond the UK. It also provides a range of allied services which are crucial to the effective functioning of the Welsh Video Network. These include:

❑   JANET Video Conferencing Service (JVCS), which provides a bridging facility and a booking service to enable institutions to video conference between sites easily and efficiently. All Welsh HEIs and FEIs and a significant number of schools use the JVCS booking service;

❑   JANET Video Technology Advisory Service (VTAS);

❑   JANET Computer Security and Incident Response Team (CSIRT), which offers advice on keeping networks secure.

5.3.4   Although the WVN Support Centre is anomalous amongst JANET(UK) services (in that it is the only one which is not offered across the UK as a whole), it works closely with both JVCS and VTAS. For example, a representative of the WVN Support Centre sits on the JVCS Development Group, which ensures an effective two-way flow of information. Similarly, staff from the WVN Support Centre, which has been described as *"the VTAS for Wales",* are regarded very much as part of the VTAS community of experts and the WVN Support Centre has been involved in VTAS product evaluation projects.   Indeed, it was acknowledged during our research that involvement with the WVN Support Centre has provided JANET(UK) as a whole with a valuable insight into the application of video conferencing technology in the learning and teaching environment.

5.3.5   Despite this, however, JANET(UK) has indicated that it wishes to discontinue its involvement in managing the WVN Support Centre after March 2010. The reasons for this decision were primarily to do with the complexity of financial administration surrounding the WVN Support Centre, particularly in the context of the responsible officer's wider duties and the limited resource allowed for this by current contracts with DCELLS and HEFCW. It was felt that the WVN Support Centre was now an

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[11] www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/

established, mature service capable of operating as a discrete entity. It would, however, be mutually beneficial for it to maintain links with other JANET UK services as discussed above.

JISC RSC (Wales)

5.3.6   JISC's Regional Support Centre for Wales (RSC Wales) is also hosted by Swansea University.   The RSC Wales supports smaller HEIs, FEIs, ACL providers and WBL providers to make full use of a wide range of information and learning technologies. The RSC Wales team comprises technical advisors, learning and teaching advisors and learning resource advisors. Prior to the appointment of Learning and Teaching Advisors within the WVN Support Centre, the RSC Wales and the WVN Support Centre worked together to provide 'end-user' training in the use of video conferencing.

5.3.7   The posts of the WVN Support Centre's Learning and Teaching Advisors were created in response to the finding in NFER's 2005 Review of the Video Services Network that *"there was a clear demand for more training in the pedagogy of teaching and learning through video conferencing"*.   Whilst the WVN Support Centre's Learning and Teaching Advisors specialise in the use of video conferencing, there is, to some extent, a *"grey area"* with the work done by the RSC learning and teaching advisors. Indeed, it is arguable that the line between the work of the two teams is likely to become more blurred as video conferencing becomes more closely integrated with other forms of learning technologies, including for example, 'web-streamed' lessons and 'live classrooms'.

5.3.8   It is worth noting that JISC's RSC arrangements will be reviewed in 2010 when its current operating round comes to an end.

JISC Services Management Company Limited

5.3.9   JISC is currently undergoing a re-organisation and, from August 2009, some JISC services will be delivered by a newly formed entity, the JISC Services Management Company Limited.   The services to be transferred to the JISC Services Management Company include JISC Procureweb and JISC Infonet.

PSBA

5.3.10 Public Sector Broadband Aggregation (PSBA) is a £74m, seven year, Welsh Assembly Government initiative to deliver a consolidated, all-Wales voice, video and data communications network across Wales. It is envisaged that the PSBA will bring together the networks supporting education, health, local government and other services into a single public service communications network. It is envisaged that the PSBA will generate significant cost savings as well as yielding improvements to the way in which public services are delivered.

5.3.11 The previous HE/FE Welsh Research and Education Network (WREN), the Lifelong Learning Network for Wales (LLNW) and the Health Service's Digital All-Wales Network (DAWN) 2 have provided the foundations for the PSBA network. Indeed, these networks no longer exist in their own right, having been subsumed within the PSBA network.

Health Solutions Wales

5.3.12 The Health Service in Wales is a significant user of video conferencing via the Welsh Health Videoconferencing System (WHVS), which was described in 2007 as *"the most advanced health sector video conferencing network in the UK and probably the most advanced in Europe"*. The WHVS runs over the PSBA network[12] and is supported by Health Solutions Wales (HSW), which provides services more akin to those provided by the JVCS (see above) than the WVN Support Centre.

5.3.13 Whilst there are obvious synergies between the services provided by the WVN Support Centre and HSW, it should be noted that the WVN Support Centre is considerably more 'hands-on' than HSW. For example, the WVN Support Centre installs studios, undertakes hardware and software upgrades and trains end-users, whereas HSW contracts out much of this kind of work to commercial operators.

5.4 VIDEO CONFERENCING IN THE WIDER WELSH POLICY CONTEXT

5.4.1 The Welsh Assembly Government has recently put in train a number of policies which will require learning providers to deliver services in new and innovative ways,

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[12] Having, prior to migration, run over the DAWN 2 network

whilst also generating significant *"efficiency savings"* in light of declining public finances.

5.4.2   The 14-19 Learning Pathways policy, for example, aims to enable more young people to achieve their full potential. This it intends to do by *"transforming"* learning provision so that young people have *"broader, more flexible learning options matched by enhanced support and guidance"*[13]. DCELLS' 14-19 Learning Pathways policy is underpinned by the Learning and Skills Measure (Wales) 2009, which *"places a duty on headteachers, governing bodies, local authorities and further education institutions to co-operate in securing a minimum learners' entitlement, so that learners are given a broad range of options to choose from, both vocational and academic"*[14].

5.4.3   Similarly, DCELLS' Welsh Medium Education Strategy consultation document (May 2009)[15] suggests that pressure will be put upon learning providers to *"increase the availability and choice of courses available [sic] through the medium of Welsh"*[16].

5.4.4   It is expected that learning technologies, including video conferencing, will have a part to play in bringing about the changes required, particularly in terms of enabling providers to reach distributed groups of learners in a cost effective manner.   Indeed, it has been argued that the establishment of the WVN was *"ahead of policy"* and that learning providers' failure to use video conferencing extensively hitherto merely reflects the absence of policy requiring them to do so.   Some might argue that the adoption of the *"transformation agenda"* represents *"policy catching up"* with the thinking that lay behind the investment made in the WVN several years ago.

5.4.5   Whilst this argument may be valid, an alternative possibility should also be considered, that is that video conferencing does not offer the potential for learning which some commentators (not least the largely technically minded contributors to our study) believe that it has.

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[13] Skills that Work For Wales, Item 2.11
[14] Ibid, Item 2.13
[15] http://wales.gov.uk/consultations/education/wms/?lang=en
[16] Ibid, Item 1.12

6. INSTITUTIONS' SUPPORT NEEDS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

6.1.1 In this section we draw upon the findings of our fieldwork to:

❏ Provide an indication of the nature of video conferencing facilities installed at schools, FEIs and HEIs across Wales;

❏ Provide a flavour of the use made of those facilities;

❏ Provide an insight into the *"effectiveness of the core"* and wider services provided by the WVNSC from a users' standpoint (objective d);

❏ Offer a *"perspective of the support requirements of FE and HE institutions"* as well as those of schools (objective a)*;*

6.2 BACKGROUND

6.2.1 The extent and precise nature of video conferencing facilities installed at contributors' employing institutions varied, though the majority had video conferencing 'studios' of one form or another. Most of these studios had been specified, procured and installed by the WVN Support Centre as part of successive video conferencing infrastructure investment programmes funded by DCELLS[17] and HEFCW. Some institutions which had benefited from these video conferencing infrastructure programmes had invested their own resources to enhance or add to the facilities installed, whilst others had decommissioned outmoded or underutilised studios. Some HEIs and FEIs had also invested in non-studio based video conferencing facilities, including desktop systems.

6.2.2 Facilities at a number of non-CYDAG[18] schools had been paid for by their Local Authorities, using DCELLS' Common Investment Fund monies in some cases. In some instances, the WVN Support Centre had been commissioned to specify, procure and install equipment on the Local Authorities' behalf. To some extent, schools have opted for roll-about video conferencing equipment rather than designated video conferencing studios.

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[17] Or its predecessor organisation, ELWa
[18] CYDAG is the association of Welsh medium and bilingual schools. DCELLS has funded the installation and support of studios at a number of Welsh medium and bilingual schools under successive Welsh Language Video Conferencing projects

6.2.3   It is notable that there are marked differences in the bandwidth available to different schools. Contributors from some schools spoke of their sites having access to 100Mb bandwidth, whilst others spoke of 5Mb connections. This clearly impairs some schools' capacity to use video conferencing (and other information and communications technologies) effectively and points to an urgent need for Local Authorities to work closely with the PSBA team to upgrade inadequate bandwidth.

6.3   USE MADE OF VIDEO CONFERENCING

6.3.1   The use made of video conferencing facilities also varied from one institution to another.   Some schools had got to grips with the use of video conferencing to facilitate collaboration with other institutions on the delivery of courses or elements of courses, whilst others used video conferencing as a means of enhancing rather than delivering the curriculum. Examples of the use of video conferencing for curriculum enrichment activities included a weekly link up between a Swansea primary school and a school in Germany to enhance language lessons at both schools, the participation of secondary school pupils in a virtual debate as part of their Welsh Baccalaureate course and links between both primary and secondary schools and organisations as diverse as the National Library of Wales and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in relation to the Key Stage 2 literacy and science curricula.

6.3.2   The use made of facilities in FE and HE settings also varied, with one HEI making some use of video conferencing to deliver courses simultaneously at more than one site, whilst others tended to confine their use to academic and administrative meetings. One FEI had forged ahead with the use of video conferencing to deliver significant elements of courses to its own students as well as to learners at schools and colleges across Wales[19].   Other FEIs were more limited in their use of video conferencing for teaching purposes, although they still made incidental use of video conferencing to *"add value"* to courses delivered in more traditional ways.

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[19] James, P. and Hopkinson, L. (2008) Sustainable ICT in Further and Higher Education: *A Report for the Joint Information Services Committee (JISC)* cites Coleg Meirion Dwyfor as the UK's leading user of video conferencing in the spring of 2008, *"accounting for around a quarter of all calls on the [JANET] network"*

6.3.3   Contributors from schools and FEIs tended to see the use of video conferencing for teaching and learning purposes as something that is still very much in its infancy and it was only critical to the delivery of a handful of courses.   However, there was a widespread expectation that policy developments discussed in Chapter 4 would provide a catalyst for video conferencing to become a far more prominent part of a battery of approaches to the delivery of a wider range of subject choices to 14-19 year olds.   Similarly, the reconfiguration of Initial Teacher Training arrangements in Wales, as well as partnerships emerging in the wake of HEFCW's wider Reconfiguration and Collaboration agenda, was expected to lead to an increased use of video conferencing for learning and teaching purposes within the HE sector.   In acknowledging this, contributors cautioned against underestimating the challenge of coordinating different institutions' timetables or of planning and organising effective teaching using video conferencing – *"teachers need to be better prepared when using video conferencing to teach".*

6.3.4   Both FEIs and HEIs, particularly multi-site institutions, made considerably more use of video conferencing for internal meetings and for staff training (including the delivery of elements of PGCE courses) than did schools.   HEIs also tended to make use of video conferencing for research and academic meetings.   Contributors said that using video conferencing in this way helped to improve communications across distributed organisations and helped collaboration between researchers from different institutions.

6.3.5   Crucially, contributors also contended that this cut down substantially on the time spent *"on the road"* by staff, which had the double benefit of using staff time more effectively, whilst also helping to reduce organisations' carbon footprints.   However, whilst this clearly has its merits, it begs the question whether the right video conferencing solutions have been adopted, in that a rather less costly approach could have been taken to address organisational or green efficiency objectives rather than ambitions of pedagogical efficiency and effectiveness.   Whilst the approach taken was largely determined by DCELLS and HEFCW, there is clearly scope for WVN Support Centre to keep abreast of developments in the full range of video conferencing solutions, including desk-top and web-based solutions, to inform the nature of future investments. In order to do this, they should, undoubtedly, continue to share knowledge with other VTAS partners.

6.4 PERCEPTIONS OF THE SERVICE PROVIDED BY THE WVN SUPPORT CENTRE

6.4.1 A majority of contributors to this study represented institutions covered by either the DCELLS/HEFCW funded WVN Support Centre 'core contract', or other DCELLS funded arrangements, such as support services attached to Welsh Language Video Project or Strategic Investment Fund video conferencing infrastructure projects. In addition to these groups, some Local Authorities subscribed to the WVN Support Centre on behalf of their schools, whilst others relied on a mixture of hardware suppliers' maintenance contracts and their own technicians to support schools in their areas.

6.4.2 The extent to which eligible institutions used the WVN Support Centres' services varied considerably, with some calling the Support Centre on a weekly basis for help in *"troubleshooting"* problems, whilst others had not used the service for several months, for the simple reason that their video conferencing equipment worked well most of the time. Rather predictably, those organisations which made most use of video conferencing tended also to call upon the WVN Support Centre's services most often.

6.4.3 It was notable that most institutions turned to the JVCS helpline to resolve connection problems in the first instance, which suggests that users are fairly clear about the relative roles of the JVCS and the WVN Support Centre.

6.4.4 Contributors were overwhelmingly complimentary about the speed and quality of service provided by the WVN Support Centre, with the following comments providing a flavour of the views expressed:
- ❏ *"they're very responsive";*
- ❏ *"first class from day one";*
- ❏ *"they don't make people our end feel like idiots if they've done something really simple wrong";*
- ❏ *"they're the experts … they have the overall knowledge of the kit … we leave it to them";*
- ❏ *"they do what it says on the tin;*
- ❏ *"if all my support services were like the WVN … as supportive as them … my job would be a lot easier".*

6.4.5   It was notable that HEIs and FEIs with dedicated ICT departments made ready use of the WVN Support Centre, particularly to help specify, procure and install video conferencing equipment, including equipment bought by institutions from their own resources. One contributor commented – *"if I was putting in a new suite, the first people I'd contact would be WVN … they'd spec the kit and work with us … to be honest, I'd more or less leave it in their hands … they're the experts"*. Other, stakeholders perceived that WVN Support Centre staff possessed an impressive level of technical knowledge and demonstrated a willingness and ability to work flexibly with a variety of technical solutions.

6.4.6   An overwhelming majority of contributors believed that the existence of the WVN Support Centre was fundamental to maintaining practitioners' confidence in the WVN's reliability, regardless of whether or how often they used its services.   One contributor captured the mood of many by saying that *"teachers, if they get put off early on because of technical problems or because it doesn't work … they won't touch it again … you have to keep the level of service up … you need 99% up time if you're delivering courses"* and the general perception was that the WVN Support Centre ensures that level of functioning.   In essence, proponents of video conferencing as a tool for delivering or enhancing learning believed they could not afford the risk of systems not working and institutions which lacked ICT expertise, as was the case in many schools which relied on the knowledge of *"a deputy head who's interested in IT",* needed the assurance of an accessible and affordable support service to retain their confidence in video conferencing as a realistic delivery tool.

6.4.7   Other benefits which contributors felt that the Welsh education sector as a whole and/or individual institutions had derived from the existence of the WVN Support Centre were:

❑   It had helped to standardise video conferencing solutions across much of Wales, which means that equipment was largely interoperable and is as a consequence, helpful to encouraging the use of video conferencing;

❑   It had secured economies of scale in the procurement of equipment as well as by, for example, reorganising gatekeepers from being placed at institutions to being located at the Central Points of Presence (CPoPs), thus reducing the number of gatekeepers from 34 to 7;

❑ Its central procurement model meant more 'clout' with manufacturers to achieve modifications or developments, such as the Polycom bi-lingual control unit interface;

❑ It made up for the lack of technical expertise, particularly in some small institutions and local authorities;

❑ One FEI claimed that the availability of the Support Centre's free and obliging service had enabled its ICT department and some of its teachers to develop a degree of video conferencing expertise.

6.4.8   Rather fewer contributors had experience of the WVN Support Centre's Learning and Teaching support, although a number claimed to have received *"technical training"* from WVN Support Centre staff following the installation of equipment.

6.4.9   Those contributors who had experience of Learning and Teaching Advisors were generally complimentary, although they were by no means regarded as indispensable.   One FEI representative argued that WVN Support Centre Learning and Teaching Advisors had more credibility in training practitioners than did the college's own teacher training or technical staff because they possessed both the pedagogical and technical skills needed and, therefore, straddled a difficult divide. As one contributor put it, the fact that Learning and Teaching Advisors *"speak the same language"* had been important in establishing their credibility with teaching staff.

6.4.10 A key strength of Learning and Teaching Advisors was said to be their ability to work in an integrated fashion with technical staff, for example by advising on the layout of studios to ensure their suitability for use in a learning context.

6.4.11 Contributors from Local Authorities or schools were considerably less likely to have come across Learning and Teaching Advisors and it was clear that some Local Authorities had put in place their own arrangements for training and supporting teachers in the use of video conferencing for pedagogical purposes, as part of wider continuous professional development arrangements.

6.5   ***EXPECTATIONS ABOUT FUTURE NEEDS***

6.5.1   The overwhelming majority of contributors argued that the WVN Support Centre should be retained, not least because without the service, it was felt that the use of video conferencing would face *"a slow and pitiful death"* due to a lack of confidence that the system would work smoothly. Several contributors were adamant that their institutions would withdraw courses which currently relied (wholly or in part) upon video conferencing for their delivery if the WVN Support Centre did not exist. Its potential abolition, it was argued, would run counter to emerging policy, which pointed to the need for more innovative, flexible and cost effective methods of delivering a wider range of learning options to a greater number of learners. As one contributor put it, *"pulling back would be a mistake at this time"* and another argued that *"we would lose the potential to deliver the transformation agenda".*

6.5.2   One contributor pointed out that, in the absence of the WVN Support Centre, the HE and FE sectors alone would need to employ at least 34 people with high level skills in video conferencing technologies *"just to keep the system running"*. This, it was argued would have inevitable cost and recruitment implications.

6.5.3   Contributors were more mixed in their views about the importance of the Learning and Teaching Advisory service. Some argued that it was central to the successful adoption and use of video conferencing for pedagogical purposes, others felt that their institutions had sufficient experience of using video conferencing for teaching to train their own staff and some looked to other providers (mainly Local Authorities) for such training.

6.5.4   Arguably, the litmus test of the value attached to the service by institutions would be their propensity to pay for Learning and Teaching Advisors' input in the absence of a free service. Rather tellingly, none of our contributors thought their institutions would be prepared to do so, particularly in the current budgetary climate.

6.5.5   Despite this, however, a number of contributors foresaw the need for more technical and pedagogical training, both in the short and medium term. In the short term, it was envisaged that demand would be driven by the current installation/upgrade of studios and, in the medium term, it was thought that demand would be fuelled by the policy changes already discussed.   In particular, contributors thought that there was

room for subject specific training sessions, possibly organised in partnership with fforwm's[20] curriculum groups for FE and the HE Academy for HE. Indeed, this could help overcome a tendency in some institutions for technical staff to attend training run by Learning and Teaching Advisors and then to be charged with *"cascading"* messages to their teacher colleagues. It was also thought that the WVN web-site could usefully provide:

❑ Information about how Learning and Teaching Advisors can help practitioners;

❑ Details of forthcoming WVN Support Centre events[21];

❑ Web-streams of events to enable practitioners to view them at their leisure;

❑ Up to date news and case studies[22].

6.5.6 Contributors pointed to a couple of wider practitioner skills development issues that needed to be considered, viz:

❑ the use of technology for teaching, including the use of video conferencing, should be embedded into PGCE courses;

❑ many practitioners needed training in the use of information and learning technologies (ILTs) in the widest sense, and not just in the use of video conferencing.

6.5.7 There was a general feeling that the senior management of many institutions remained ignorant or unconvinced of the possibilities afforded by video conferencing, with many regarding it as a "*frill … something that isn't at the top half of the agenda and not part of core business".* On this basis, it was argued that a programme of 'enlightenment' needed to be developed and delivered to alert institutions to or convince institutions of the potential benefits to be derived from engaging with video conferencing – there was a need, for example, to be "*more proactive in going into schools and opening their eyes to the possibilities video conferencing offers".* Of course, this argument needs to be seen in the context of the fact that the stakeholders we interviewed consisted almost exclusively of individuals who were already convinced of the value of ILTs in general and Video Conferencing in particular. It may well be that the senior management teams in some institutions simply have a more pragmatic or even realistic view of the relative importance of

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[20] fforwm is the representative body of Wales' 22 Further Education Institutions
[21] The most recent event featured on the web-site as at May 2009 was the April 2008 *"Next Generation"* briefing day
[22] Case studies currently featured on the web-site date back to 2003

technological solutions within the overall armoury of tools to meet institutional goals and targets.

6.5.8   Finally, some contributors felt that the WVN Support Centre could usefully provide them with regular e-mail information about *"what's going on where with video conferencing"* and a 'match-making' service with potential partners in the delivery of courses in certain subject areas.   It was acknowledged that this happened to a degree on an informal basis – *"if ever XX [WVN Support Centre staff member] sees anything or hears anything, he drops us a line".* To some extent this function is already performed by JANET Collaborate[23].

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[23] JANET Collaborate seeks to bring together practitioners with a shared l interests in the delivery of live educational content by videoconference: http://www.janetcollaborate.ac.uk/

7. MODELS FOR FUNDING THE PROVISION OF SERVICE

7.1 INTRODUCTION

7.1.1 In this section, we draw upon the findings of our fieldwork to:

❑ Consider *"the benefits of the existing joint, centrally funded central service compared to a model where individual institutions separately purchase support"* (objective b);

❑ Explore *"other ways to support institutions whose video conferencing equipment is funded and maintained by the funding bodies"* (objective c);

❑ Assess the *"potential opportunity for other public sector bodies in Wales to buy in to the existing service"* (objective e);

❑ Come to a conclusion about the most appropriate model for funding video conferencing support services in the future.

7.2 APPROACHES TO SUPPORTING THE USE OF VIDEO CONFERENCING

7.2.1 Whilst contributors acknowledged that technical support for video conferencing could be provided by commercial operators or, indeed, by some larger institutions' own ICT departments, the overwhelming consensus was that the WVN Support Centre should be retained, regardless of any 'structural' changes.

7.2.2 There was certainly no appetite among HEI or FEI contributors for looking to commercial organisations for technical support - *"the quality of the service we get from them* [the WVN Support Centre] *on the technical side is really very good … we wouldn't be able to get that from the private sector … we get to speak to a person and they know what we are doing … losing that would really worry me"*. It was argued that commercial alternatives would be prohibitively expensive, at an estimated £5k to £6k per studio per annum: though arguably this is not significantly more expensive (but certainly not cheaper either) than the service currently paid for by DCELLS/HEFCW for the core network of studios. However, it was also argued that the quality of the service from commercial operators would inevitably be inferior – *"external support can look good on paper, but when it actually comes to a problem … they say it's next day, but when they're coming from Newcastle and they realise*

where we are, it's a different story … they don't have the local knowledge". Another contributor contended that *"video conferencing is still very much in its infancy as a tool for education and collaboration, and institutions need to know that support is available completely and not restricted by what is or is not in a contract".*

7.2.3   A number of contributors alluded to the WVN Support Centre's *"strong public sector ethos",* with one commenting that *"it's nice to work with an organisation that's not financially led … with the WVN, it's about the service, it's about the teaching, it's about the learning … it's about education rather than making a buck".*

7.2.4   The general view was that the WVN Support Centre was the organisation best placed to provide Learning and Teaching Advisory services, although some perceived that the JISC RSC Wales could fulfil elements of this function, given more staff to cope with the additional work this would entail. Mention was also made of the FE Network of ILT Champions, 'Learntech', although it was recognised that it lacks the remit or resources to provide anything other than informal support to Network members as it stands.

7.3   APPROACHES TO FUNDING A SUPPORT SERVICE

7.3.1   Contributors from HEIs and FEIs, which currently benefit from the WVN Support Centre's service under the terms of the 'core contract' funded by DCELLS and HEFCW, were clear that this arrangement worked well and saw no reason to change it. They saw no advantage to allocating the monies currently 'top-sliced' to fund the WVN Support Centre to individual institutions to enable them to decide how to invest it themselves. It was argued that:

❑   *"we [institutions] have never seen the money in the first place, so we don't miss it";*

❑   *"they [institutions] aren't used to paying … so it would be difficult to persuade them that they should pay";*

❑   *"Most JANET services are free"* to FEIs and HEIs, and in the interest of consistency, the WVN Support Centre's service should remain centrally funded and *"free at the point of use";*

❑   it would *"amount to relatively little money"* for each one *"certainly too little to pay for [commercial] support";*

❑   The current arrangement was efficient in that the WVN Support Centre did not have to *"go round with a begging bowl"* to generate subscriptions or *"invoice*

goodness knows how many institutions"; thus, incurring greater administrative costs.

7.3.2 Whilst most contributors from the FE and HE sectors thought that their employing institutions would subscribe to a WVN Support Centre service, there was a suspicion that others might not, particularly given the current financial climate. Notwithstanding that some institutions already paid the WVN Support Centre to service studios that fell outside the 'core contract', the contention was that funding allocated to institutions would *"fall between the cracks … it wouldn't be ring-fenced … it would be used for something else … or there wouldn't be enough to do something useful with it"*. Contributors feared that insufficient numbers of institutions would subscribe to make the service viable - *"some of the colleges would think that they could do without it … but they couldn't … and it would disintegrate into a shambles"*. There was also a feeling that video conferencing would be beyond the reach, financially and technically, of smaller institutions without the backing of a subsidised WVN Support Centre.

7.3.3 Finally, it was thought that it could be harmful to put the WVN Support Centre in a position where it might have to refuse to serve institutions which had not subscribed for its services. As it stands, the WVN Support Centre *"is very open to help and discuss issues"* as they arose and to work with institutions to solve problems. Without the central funding model, it was feared that the WVN Support Centre's *"attitude would start to change from a 'can do' to a 'can't do' one"*.

7.3.4 Contributors from the HE and FE sectors were clear that their institutions would not pay for Learning and Teaching advice in the absence of the WVN Support Centre's free service.

7.3.5 DCELLS currently funds all Welsh schools' subscription to the JVCS (the JANET bridging and booking service) as well as meeting the costs of a limited technical support and advisory service. Whilst this, to all intents and purposes, mimics the top-slicing arrangements in place for HEIs and FEIs (albeit at a considerably lower level of funding per institution), it was not generally understood as such by contributors from schools and Local Authorities. Whilst representatives from schools and Local Authorities could see the attractions of the 'top-sliced', centrally funded model adopted in respect of FEI and HEIs, they were not enthusiastic about the prospect of

top-slicing (further) school budgets to fund the WVN Support Centre, whether at a DCELLS or Local Authority level. One contributor argued that any decision on whether to subscribe to the WVN Support Centre should be left to local groupings such as 14-19 partnerships, another felt that it was for Local Authorities to decide and yet another felt that it should be up to individual schools.

7.3.6 Of course, it must be remembered that not all schools use the WVN Support Centre's services, some being served by their governing Local Authorities, and others doing without any support arrangements. Contributors were clear that schools would find it hard to *"find money"* to pay for support services. Certainly, there has been a trend among many schools not to subscribe for WVN Support Centre services after the initial set-up period. One school representative said that until such time as his school became reliant upon video conferencing for the delivery of courses, it would be difficult to justify spending money on supporting video conferencing equipment. In essence, he argued that the use of video conferencing for teaching purposes would need to become embedded into the schools' plans and practices i.e. to become 'mission critical' before it would be prepared to compromise other priorities in order to support the system.

7.3.7 The argument was made that it would be preferable to have a coherent approach to funding across all sectors, rather than the somewhat bitty arrangements in place at the moment. Indeed, some contributors argued that DCELLS with HEFCW should make a long term commitment (at least three years) to supporting the WVN Support Centre as a provider of services to the whole spectrum of learning providers, from primary schools through to HEIs. In making a long term commitment of this nature, DCELLS would need to work closely with Local Authorities' education and ICT departments to ensure the effective integration of services as a Wales and local level.

7.3.8 Other contributors argued for a combination of a central and subscription funding. In devising a subscription system, however, various considerations would need to be taken into account:
- ❑ The affordability of subscriptions at an institutional level;
- ❑ The level of use which individual institutions are likely to make of the Support Centre's services;
- ❑ The relationship between installation and on-going support services;

❑ The possibility of cross subsidising smaller institutions e.g. rural schools, which arguably stand to benefit most from being able to use video conferencing, but are least able to pay for support

❑ The possibility of incentivising the use of video conferencing for learning and teaching purposes by, for example, charging lower subscription rates to institutions making more use of video conferencing, though in this case, account would need to be taken of the video conferencing facilities which institutions have at their disposal;

❑ Mechanisms to encourage strongly institutions (or local authorities) to subscribe for the service.

7.3.9 Table 6.1 below summarises the relative merits of each of the three potential models put forward for funding the WVN Support Centre.

Table 6.1: Relative Merits of each Three Possible Funding Models

	Central	Combined	Subscription
Provide platform for strategic approach	✔	✔	
Provide a sustainable model for supporting the education sector	✔	✔	
Security for WVN Support Centre	✔	✔	
Render service answerable to 'client'		✔	✔
Offer 'client' choice (though some may not subscribe)		✔	✔
Economic incentive towards efficiency		✔	✔
Administratively simple	✔		

7.3.10 The central funding approach would involve DCELLS and HEFCW providing sufficient core funding for the WVN Support Centre to provide on-going technical support and advisory services to all HEIs, FEIs and schools. This approach would have the advantage of being administratively simple (in relative terms) and, therefore, less costly to run. It should also facilitate the development of a 'national video conferencing plan', designed to complement key DCELLS and HEFCW policies (e.g. DCELLS' 14-19 Learning Pathways policy and its Welsh Medium Education Strategy and HEFCW's Reconfiguration and Collaboration agenda).

7.3.11 A wholly centrally funded model would, inevitably, be more expensive to run than is currently the case, quite simply because it would involve serving a larger number of

institutions and of supporting video conferencing facilities not currently covered by the 'core' contract.   However, it would provide some degree of security about future revenues and would make it easier for the WVN Support Centre to recruit and retain the highly skilled technicians needed to run the service. It would also provide the WVN Support Centre with the confidence to explore developments in the full range of video conferencing technologies, including desk-top and web-based solutions such as new Microsoft applications.

7.3.12 It might be argued that a central funding model would not encourage the WVN Support Centre to be as responsive or as efficient as it might, whereas a market based model would. However, this disadvantage of such a grant based model could be mitigated by the adoption and monitoring of a clear service level agreement.

7.3.13 The adoption of a subscription model would, in theory at least, lead to the greatest level of responsiveness and efficiency, albeit that the need to contract with individual institutions would rather diminish that efficiency.   However, our fieldwork suggested strongly that a subscription model would not be sustainable in practice because insufficient numbers of institutions would be prepared to subscribe to the service to render it viable. In practice, we believe that there is a high risk that effort devoted at this stage to developing a subscription model to replace the current arrangements from mid 2010 would end up being wasted, as the model is unlikely to 'fly' in reality. If continuing with core, top-sliced funding at least in respect of HEIs/FEIs is no longer acceptable to or affordable by DCELLS/HEFCW, it would probably be better to arrange for an orderly wind-down of the current Support Centre, and to urge individual institutions to put in place their own individual or collective arrangements for the future.

7.3.14 The 'combined' funding model would, to all intents and purposes, represent a continuation of arrangements currently in place, although the WVN Support Centre may well seek to step-up the number of supplementary contracts it has in place with individual institutions and/or Local Authorities.   This approach offers the advantages of both the central funding and subscription models, but also compounds the disadvantage of the subscription model in that it would be the most complex and most costly model to administer. In particular, it needs to be recognised that the current model involves a proliferation of contracts, many of them quite small but each of them with separate budget lines, invoicing arrangements and reporting

requirements and that this involves a degree of administrative complexity (not least for some of the clients, such as DCELLS) which is disproportionate to the sums involved. Of course, this is to a large extent, a reflection of the way in which DCELLS and HEFCW have, over the years, engaged the WVN Support Centre to undertake different 'projects', such as the Welsh Language Video Project and the current 'refresh' assignment, for example. Should DCELLS and HEFCW agree to continue funding the WVN Support Centre, the opportunity should not be missed to simplify and clarify the contracting arrangements going forward.

7.3.15 On balance, we are persuaded that the centrally funded model offers the best way forward, albeit that it may not be possible to achieve this by April 2010. Clearly, this will not necessarily be a popular approach from a school or Local Authority perspective, but we believe that it will provide the most cost effective means of developing a coherent approach to video conferencing across the whole education sector, as part of a wider all-Wales approach to video conferencing[24].

7.3.16 In making the case for the WVN Support Centre to continue as a *"public sector solution"* it is recognised that it would need to be well managed and cost effective to avoid criticism that it could displace a potentially more efficient market solution. This will require careful planning and full engagement with stakeholders.

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[24] See next chapter

8. STRUCTURAL ARRANGEMENTS

8.1 INTRODUCTION

8.1.1 JANET(UK)'s decision to discontinue its involvement in running the WVN Support Centre affords an opportunity to consider the future of the WVN Support Centre in the context of forthcoming changes to the JISC family of services as well as developments initiated under the aegis of the PSBA programme[25]. In particular, it provides an opportunity to look for synergies in the use and support of video conferencing with other parts of the public sector in Wales. However, these wider developments are likely to unfold over a rather longer timeframe than that available to alter the arrangements for funding and managing the WVN Support Centre. On this basis, we explore here issues that need to be addressed in the coming few months before moving on to longer term considerations.

8.1.2 In considering structural and funding arrangements, we were not asked to explore the procurement processes in any detail. We recognise, however, that DCELLS, HEFCW and other stakeholders are very likely to have to follow Official Journal of the European Community (OJEC) tendering procedures for a contract of this size and that it will not be possible to pre-determine the outcome of such an exercise.

8.2 THE IMMEDIATE TERM

8.2.1 As discussed in Chapter 4, the WVN Support Centre has hitherto been 'housed' by Swansea University, although 'branded' part of the JANET(UK) family. DCELLS and HEFCW currently contract JANET(UK) to run the WVN Support Centre, and it in turn sub-contracts Swansea University to deliver the service. Those contributors who were aware of these arrangements understood that things had been set up in this way for *"political and historic"* reasons and tended to agree that there were too many layers to the current system. Indeed, a number of contributors suggested that the most logical way forward would be for DCELLS and HEFCW to contract directly with Swansea University for the provision of the service. There would be a number of distinct advantages to doing this:

❑ Experience and knowledge would be retained, thus avoiding a decline in service;

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[25] Which addresses objectives f, h, i and j of this study

- There should be no disruption to staff;

- There would be no need to consider Transfer of Undertakings, Protection of Employment (TUPE) regulations (including the thorny issue of 'taking on' the very favourable pension conditions to which WVN Support Centre staff are currently subject under Swansea University's superannuation scheme, and which would probably be a "deal breaker" for any private sector provider);

- Established relationships with 'clients' and 'partner' organisations would not be lost;

- There would be no need to relocate people or equipment.

8.2.2   Other potential 'homes' for the WVN Support Centre in the short term might be:

- The RSC Wales, though its remit does not cover schools at present. Furthermore, the JISC RSCs' remit will be revised August 2010, making it very difficult for them to take on new commitments in the meantime;

- The new JISC Services Management Company, though the Support Centre was thought to be a poor fit with the other functions managed by JISC Services Management Company. Stakeholders also felt that JISC Services Management Company *"will have enough on its plate"* over the next year or so in establishing itself;

- A new limited company - WVN Support Centre Limited - capable of contracting in its own right;

- Subsume the WVN Support Centre within WAG.

8.2.3   None of these alternative options was considered realistic or, indeed, appropriate by the stakeholders we consulted.

8.2.4   DCELLS and HEFCW would, of course, need to consider WAG and EU procurement regulations in moving forward. Given the relatively short time available to make these changes and the fairly cumbersome procurement processes which will be involved in letting any new contract, it might be wise to explore the possibility of extending the contract with JANET(UK) for a period of, say, six months from April 2010.

8.2.5   Regardless of where the WVN Support Centre is accommodated in the immediate term, contributors were keen to ensure its connections with other parts of the JANET(UK) family were not compromised as a result of changes to the arrangements for managing and funding the Support Centre. In particular,

contributors were anxious to ensure that arrangements with the JVCS booking service remained unchanged, which would involve DCELLS and HEFCW continuing to subscribe to the service on institutions' behalf.

8.2.6 Over the lifetime of the current arrangements, JANET(UK) has been asked to administer several contracts in respect of the 'core' service funded by DCELLS and HEFCW, contracts relating to four separate Welsh Language Video Conferencing projects and contracts relating to a number of Strategic Investment Fund projects. These rather convoluted arrangements have been the result of DCELLS' allocating revenue funding to meet the costs of employing technical and administrative staff to meet the additional demands made upon the WVN Support Centre in the wake of successive capital investment projects. In addition, JANET(UK) and Swansea University currently administer contracts with 70 individual schools on behalf of the WVN Support Centre. While we understand that the contracting between DCELLS and JANET(UK) has been simplified for the remaining period of the current contract with JANET(UK), it is essential that there is a long-term solution based on consolidating the contractual relationship between DCELLS and the WVN Support Centre (or the organisation with legal responsibility for it) into one Service Level Agreement which should set out all those services which DCELLS wishes to 'buy' from the WVN Support Centre to sustain FEIs' and schools' use of video conferencing.

8.3 THE LONGER TERM

8.3.1 A number of contributors saw the PSBA programme as a vehicle for bringing about *"joined up thinking"* across different parts of the public sector, ideally through the development of an all-Wales video conferencing strategy. This was thought particularly apposite in the areas of learning, health and local government, given that the Lifelong Learning and Health networks already fall under the PSBA 'umbrella'. It was argued that bringing the WVN under the auspices of the PSBA could represent a *"systematic solution"* to taking forward the strengths (or as one contributor put it, *"sweat the assets"*) of the WVN Support Centre for the benefit of the public sector more generally. Indeed, it was thought that the WVN Support Centre was in a position to help the PSBA programme to secure demonstrable efficiency savings and environmental benefits in public administration within a fairly short space of time. This would be particularly valuable for the PSBA, which like other broadband

aggregation projects, involves high front end costs in order to generate financial savings in the longer term.

8.3.2 Whilst contributors generally saw the merits of bringing the WVN Support Centre into the PSBA fold, there was some concern that its primary focus upon education and learning should not be lost or diluted as a result. Others saw the potential broadening of the WVN Support Centre's remit under the PSBA umbrella as an opportunity to make the WVN Learning and Teaching Advisory service part of the JISC RSC's portfolio and, thus, avoid an overlap to which the increasing integration of video conferencing with other forms of e-learning would inevitably lead. This chimed with a view that it might be better to think of the video conferencing services in spatial terms rather than in terms of government departments or service areas. Certainly, this kind of approach would sit more comfortably with any longer term ambitions to merge the WVN Support Centre and Health Solutions Wales' services under the auspices of the PSBA.

8.3.3 Another slight concern revolved around a perception that the PSBA was relatively new and arguably lacked much in the way of implementation mechanisms at this stage.

8.3.4 If the WVN Support Centre is to come under the auspices of the PSBA programme, we see no reason why the WAG (in the guise of the PSBA team) should not continue to contract with Swansea University for the provision of the service (subject, of course to appropriate procurement arrangements). However, discussions about the transfer of budgets between WAG departments will need to be held between the PSBA team and colleagues from DCELLS. Discussion will also need to be held with representatives of HEFCW.

9. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 INTRODUCTION

9.1.1 In this chapter, we return to the aims of this study and present our conclusions and recommendations in terms of:

- ❑ Whether or not the WVN Support Centre service should continue to be funded;
- ❑ What arrangements, if any, should be put in place to fund it;
- ❑ What could be done to improve the service, should it continue to be funded.

9.2 SHOULD THE SERVICE CONTINUE?

9.2.1 The WVN Support Centre was established to underpin the use of video conferencing within Welsh HEIs and FEIs. It formed part of a package which saw the installation of high specification video conferencing studios at all Welsh HEIs and FEIs to form the Welsh Video Network (WVN). A learning and teaching advisory service was added to the WVN Support Centre's portfolio some four years after its establishment, primarily to develop practitioners' video related pedagogical skills, the absence of which was believed to be dampening their use of video conferencing for teaching purposes.

9.2.2 A handful of institutions make significant use of video conferencing for teaching purposes, with one FEI being held out as a leader at a UK level. However, the picture remains fairly mixed, both in terms of the extent and nature of video conferencing usage across institutions. Indeed, given that video conferencing has been around for almost 20 years within the HE sector, its continued low levels of usage for teaching purposes rather begs the question whether the technology, in practice, lends itself to pedagogical purposes, at least within institutions which themselves are not (in general) geographically dispersed.

9.2.3 There was a widespread consensus among contributors to this study, however, that the WVN concept was ahead of its time and that policy is only now catching up with the initiative. There was an expectation that DCELLS policies such as the 14-19

Pathways, the Welsh Medium Education Strategy and the reconfiguration of Initial Teacher Training arrangements, combined with tightening public finances, will provide the driver necessary for institutions to engage in a meaningful way with video conferencing technology.   It was argued that these policy developments may well spur institutions (and groups of institutions) to look for innovative ways of reaching and serving small and distributed groups of learners and that video conferencing may well have come of age for pedagogical purposes.

9.2.4   Furthermore, the overwhelming consensus among contributors to our study was that the service provided by the WVN Support Centre is fundamental to maintaining institutions' and practitioners' faith in the WVN, which in turn is key to the use of video conferencing for learning and teaching purposes.   There was a strong perception that the loss of the WVN Support Centre would hinder any growth, if not lead to a decline in the use made of video conferencing.

9.2.5   These arguments lead us to conclude that the WVN Support Centre should be retained for at least the next three years, to allow judgements to be made as to the relevance of video conferencing in an evolving learning landscape.

Recommendation 1

DCELLS and HEFCW should make a commitment to providing on-going core funding for the WVN Support Centre for the next three years, with an option to extend for a further two years.

9.2.6   In making this commitment, we believe that DCELLS and HEFCW should keep a close eye on the extent and nature of institutions' use of video conferencing over the coming three years or so.   This will enable informed judgements to be made about the realism of current expectations that institutions will engage more seriously with video conferencing in the wake of emerging policy developments and tightening public finances.

> ***Recommendation 2***
>
> DCELLS and HEFCW, in consultation with JANET(UK) should continue to monitor closely the extent and nature of HEIs' FEIs' and schools' use of video conferencing. The findings of such a monitoring exercise should inform on-going activities, both in the WVN and the WVN Support Centre.

9.3 MODEL FOR THE FUTURE

9.3.1 This section is predicated upon our first recommendation that the WVN Support Centre should be retained. It addresses two interrelated issues:

❑ Where, in structural terms, should the WVN Support Centre be located?

❑ How should the WVN Support Centre be funded?

9.3.2 We believe that the WVN Support Centre should be brought under the auspices of the PSBA as soon as practicable in order to smooth the way for joint working across sectors and ensure the best use of videoconferencing expertise across the public sector in Wales. This will require the PSBA team to be involved in discussions about the changes facing the WVN Support Centre. It will also require discussions about the transfer of budgets between DCELLS, HEFCW and the PSBA team.

> ***Recommendation 3***
>
> DCELLS and HEFCW should work with the PSBA's Benefits Realisation Team to bring the WVN Support Centre under the auspices of the PSBA as soon as practicable.

9.3.3 The WVN Support Centre is hosted by Swansea University and, subject to Swansea University's agreement – and, of course, ensuring compliance with competition rules - we see no merit in changing this arrangement.

Recommendation 4

DCELLS, HEFCW and the PSBA team should open discussions as soon as possible with Swansea University about the possibility of WAG, in the guise of the PSBA team, contracting directly with the University for continued provision of the WVN Support Centre's service to HEIs, FEIs and schools.   This arrangement, whereby the PSBA would manage the provision of services to the whole education sector, would require a Service Level Agreement to be drawn up between the PSBA and HEFCW. In taking this recommendation forward, it will be essential to clarify the way in which WAG and EU procurement regulations must be applied and to ensure that discussion do not prejudice the outcome of any competitive tendering exercise.

9.3.4   Whilst we believe that the WVN Support Centre's service should remain intact for the time being, consideration should be given in the medium term to how well the Learning and Teaching Advisory service fits as part of the PSBA programme. It may, at that time, be appropriate to transfer responsibility for training practitioners in the technical and pedagogical use of video conferencing to the JISC RSC Wales, notwithstanding that arrangements surrounding its funding and management may have changed by then.

Recommendation 5

In the medium term (supposing the WVN Support Centre has been successfully transferred into the PSBA programme), the position of the Learning and Teaching Advisory service within the WVN Support Centre should be reviewed.   Consideration should be given at that time to whether the service would fit better with that of the JISC RSC Wales.

9.3.5   Although technically detached from JANET(UK) from April 2010, it will be important for the WVN Support Centre to maintain its close links with other parts of the JANET(UK) family of services e.g. by continuing to use the JVCS bridging and booking service at least in the short term, and by continued involvement with VTAS.

> ***Recommendation 6***
>
> In bringing the WVN Support Centre's current relationship with JANET(UK) to an end, DCELLS, HEFCW and JANET(UK) should set out how the relationship between the WVN Support Centre and parts of the JANET(UK) family of services will be maintained.

9.3.6   In section 6 of this report, we explored three alternative models for funding the WVN Support Centre in the future:

- ❑ The provision by DCELLS and HEFCW of funding to run a comprehensive support service for HEIs, FEIs and schools;

- ❑ Allow individual institutions the subscribe to a support service, and allocating the funding currently top-sliced from HEIs' and FEIs' budgets to enable them to do so if they chose;

- ❑ A combination of these two approaches, whereby DCELLS and HEFCW provide funding for a basic service and institutions then subscribe for additional support.

9.3.7   Our fieldwork suggested strongly that a subscription model would not work in practice and we, therefore, recommend that DCELLS and HEFCW provide sufficient funding to enable the WVN Support Centre to provide a 'core' service to all HEIs, FEIs and schools.   Clearly, consideration will need to be given to what this will entail for the WVN Support Centre in practice, to 'sizing' the task of servicing schools as well as HEIs and FEIs.   Furthermore, given expectations that policy developments will lead to greater use being made of video conferencing, the level of resource required to deliver the support service will need to be monitored closely over time.   In extending the current centrally funded model to schools, DCELLS will need to work closely with Local Authorities to ensure their buy-in to the approach taken and to avoid wasteful duplication.

> ***Recommendation 7***
>
> DCELLS and HEFCW should work with the PSBA team, the WVN Support Centre and Local Authorities to assess the resource implications of extending the service currently provided to HEIs and FEIs to all schools.   Having done this, DCELLS/the PSBA team (depending upon the speed with which the hand-over of responsibility can be achieved) should set out an indicative three year 'core funding' allocation for the WVN Support Centre.

9.3.8   The way in which the WVN Support Centre (or its host organisation) is contracted to deliver services needs to be revised. The number of contracts needs to be reduced and the philosophy underlying those contracts needs to change from one based on funding staff to one based on 'buying' a service.

Recommendation 8

DCELLS, HEFCW and PSBA project team should draw up a plan setting out the nature of the services the WVN Support Centre will deliver to HEIs, FEIs and schools and how services should be delivered The plan should form the basis of a service level agreement between DCELLS/HEFCW/the PSBA and the WVN Support Centre.

9.4   POTENTIAL APPROACHES TO IMPROVING THE SERVICE PROVIDED

9.4.1   Those who had experience of the WVN Support Centre were overwhelmingly complimentary about the speed and quality of the service provided. It was clear that institutions, including those with significant levels of internal technical expertise, deferred to the WVN Support Centre to solve technical problems, perceiving Support Centre staff to be *"the experts"*. This meant that individual institutions avoided the need to employ video conferencing experts, whether as members of staff or by means of service contracts.

9.4.2   Fewer contributors had experience of the WVN Support Centre's Learning and Teaching Advisors, although those that did thought that they had been of value to their institutions.   Their ability to work across the technical/pedagogical skill gap was regarded as a particular advantage. It was thought, however, that more could be done to reach subject teachers.

Recommendation 9

The WVN Support Centre should consider putting on subject-centred training in the pedagogical use of video conferencing for FE and schools. This might be best achieved in partnership with Local Authority and Fforwm subject advisors or subject groups.

9.4.3   It was argued that senior managers at many institutions fail to understand the possibilities that video conferencing offers and that the use of video conferencing is not, therefore, central to their institutional development plans. Our fieldwork did not allow us to test this thesis, but we perceive that there may be merit in doing so and, if it is proved correct, in developing and delivering a programme designed to raise awareness of the potential benefits to be derived from engaging with video conferencing.

Recommendation 10

The WVN Support Centre should work with the JISC RSC Wales (which is already working with FEIs/HEIs) to assess the level of buy-in to the benefits of video conferencing among institutions' management teams and, if appropriate, to develop a programme designed to raise awareness of its potential.

9.4.4   The WVN web-site provides a potentially valuable resource for disseminating information about video conferencing. Yet a great deal of the content on the web-site is dated.

Recommendation 11

The WVN web-site should be updated to provide:

❑   Information about how Learning and Teaching Advisors can help practitioners;

❑   Details of forthcoming WVN Support Centre events;

❑   Web-streams of events to enable practitioners to view them at their leisure;

❑   Up to date news and case studies, written from a pedagogical rather than technical perspective.

9.4.5   Our fieldwork revealed anecdotal evidence that institutions have generated cost savings as well as reducing their carbon footprints by using their video conferencing studios for meetings.   However, such meetings could be accommodated quite adequately, and at considerably less cost, using other forms of video conferencing solutions.   The likely use to made of video conferencing should shape the nature of equipment installed at institutions.

> ***Recommendation 12***
>
> The WVN Support Centre should be charged with advising institutions on the most appropriate video conferencing solutions for them. This will require the WVN Support Centre to keep abreast of developments in the full range of video conferencing solutions.

ANNEX 1: LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

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