



**How one Primary School in the West Midlands put technology at the heart of their school turnaround**



## The background

Newtown Primary School is a small yet vibrant single-form-entry primary school on the borders of Dudley and Sandwell in the West Midlands. With around 220 pupils, 9 teaching staff, and a similar number of key support staff, the school is currently in special measures for historic reasons, but well on the way to becoming reclassified as a "Good" school. They joined Stour Vale Academy Trust – a successful multi-academy trust, which strives for excellence in both academic achievement and character development – in April 2020.

The catchment for the school is relatively economically deprived, where pupils struggled with the provision of technology during the pandemic, meaning many were unable to access online resources at that time. This was compounded with a lot of change at the school in that period – with minimal technology in place when the first lockdown was announced, coupled with an infrastructure hampered by slow broadband and legacy devices that had clearly seen better days.

**“When we were appointed three years ago, it was clear that a lot of things were not fit for purpose – from slow staff laptops to old-fashioned interactive whiteboards. When it came to technology we were looking for a big change”.**

Gareth Ludlam, Deputy Headteacher

It was at this time that the academy appointed a new, passionate Senior Leadership Team, committed to continuous improvement across the whole school, with staff working together to ensure their children develop so that they eventually leave as successful learners, responsible citizens and resilient individuals.

## The technology vision

A key part of this new approach involved a new attitude towards technology within the school. One of the first decisions was to take on the services of a third-party technology partner. Their in-house technician was seconded from another local school who had worked with RM for some time, and he recommended RM to Newtown Primary's SLT as a suitable partner.

**“We had another company providing a service at the time, but I did not find them as supportive as I was used to from RM at my other school. I was also left to fend for myself a lot, which I raised with the Trust and they supported my request for us to swap the old company for RM, and we've never looked back”.**

Viren Patel, Computer Technician



Even before the pandemic, the school wanted to give their children access to computing devices that worked reliably and which the children could use easily and effectively.



**“We signed up to RM Unify at the very start – this provided a very simple interface for children to navigate themselves, but where teachers still had control over what they could access in their class. It sped up the process of logging in and meant that children were getting more out of their time in computing, but also when used in their other lessons – such as maths, English and science”.**

Gareth Ludlam, Deputy Headteacher



Next, the school upgraded from sedentary desktops in the corner of a Computer Room, to dynamic Chromebooks that they could move between classes and even take outside if they needed to.

As with many schools, many of the staff had worked in other establishments before coming to Newtown, so they were aware what could be done.

**“One of the challenges we inherited was a set-up whereby if anything went wrong with our technology, we had to try and resolve it ourselves, or wait a week for when the third-party engineer was next due to visit. The situation now with RM is completely different – they are monitoring things remotely such that most problems are resolved before we even know about them, and those issues we do get, they can fix most remotely or can talk us through via very simple steps for us to solve ourselves”.**

Gareth Ludlam, Deputy Headteacher

Schools also talk to other schools and it soon became apparent that some things that the team had been told were not possible, were clearly not true. Stour Vale Academy Trust is a Trust where their schools are empowered to drive what they want to do individually – meaning that every school within the Trust approaches things like technology differently.

**“I knew what I wanted to do with our technology, but RM were helpful in building on that by suggesting new ideas that they had, that I had not thought of”.**

Viren Patel, Computer Technician



Importantly, when a third-party is accepted as a partner, that comes with obligations too. Whilst a partner can be trusted to do what they have said they will do, they are expected to bring something more to the party.

**“I want us to be proactive as a school – not reactive as we were in the past. I want RM to keep coming to us with new ideas and the latest innovations they are aware of from their place in this industry. As a true partner I want RM to do more than just deliver the contract”.**

Gareth Ludlam, Deputy Headteacher

## Implementing the vision

Just as the school was embarking on implementing this new vision, the pandemic hit.

**“The pandemic was tough for us, as we had very little of our new plan in place. What we had done, however, is roll out RM Unify – which proved a huge benefit as we could put all the apps in one place for the children to access remotely”.**

Viren Patel, Computer Technician

As a company, RM is aware that schools have choices, but they also know that after 50 years working solely in the education sector, they understand the unique needs of a school – often in ways that other third-party suppliers do not appreciate as they do not have that same heritage.

**“What worked really well was the flexibility that RM showed. We knew that to implement the new infrastructure meant there would be times when our staff couldn’t do certain things. RM talked us through the plan – when we would lose certain functionality and for how long – but they were great in changing things around to better suit what we needed to do, and it all ran very smoothly with minimum impact on our staff. Everything was done in a way to suit us”.**

Viren Patel, Computer Technician



As we leave the pandemic behind and roll on a couple of years, it is clear that the technology set up at Newtown Primary School today is barely comparable with what they had at the start of 2020. They have a new server, modern policies and procedures, superfast connectivity that acts as the glue to make it all work, online safety software – something that some schools take for granted but they just did not have – and new laptops and Chromebooks that take the place of the very much dated desktops. Best of all, it all just works.

**“As well as the new kit, attitudes towards technology have also changed. Before, children never really enjoyed computing – we didn’t have the latest software, and our devices were slow and clunky. Now it is something they look forward to and take pride in. Pupils love getting the Chromebooks out and staff are much more confident in using them”.**

Viren Patel, Computer Technician



## Sharing best practice

1. **It all starts with a vision.** Technology is here to stay. It is not an add-on, but needs to be a component part of a school’s business strategy. But there needs to be a clearly articulated goal of where you want to get to before anyone starts developing or designing anything.
2. **Don’t wait – go the full hog!** One of the lessons that Newtown Primary reflect on is that they made their technology journey in steps. With hindsight they wish that they had made the decision to go all the way from the very outset, rather than doing it in stages. The phased approach not only costs more, but also delays the full benefits.
3. **Plan, plan and plan again** – technology change is a big thing. Investing time at the outset to know where you are going, and all the tasks along the way is important – both to give you clarity, but also to be able to take people with you.
4. **Don’t be afraid to ask for help.** Schools are first and foremost a place for teaching and learning. Asking external experts for help on things outside of that brief – for example in different approaches to technology – is not a weakness. In fact it is a sign of strength.
5. **Do not under-estimate the value of having someone else to turn to.** Technology can go wrong. It is not always intuitive. But having someone on the end of a phone or computer link who can talk you through what you need to do to resolve an issue, or get more from what you have, can save you hours of teaching time.
6. **Have a roadmap for the future.** Sadly technology ages faster than we do, so recognising the need for a continuous investment roadmap to replace and enhance your systems will ensure that you do not end up back where you started.

## The future

Schools that have started from a dark place, but with a clear vision of where they wish to get to, and then a great story that describes their journey, are always those whose view of the future is the most enlightening and optimistic. Newtown Primary School is a case in point. When the current team joined circa three years ago, the school had gone into special measures and there was a lot that needed to change. Shortly after agreeing what they needed to do, they were in the grip of a global pandemic.

Despite this, the team today are enthusiastic about what the future holds, having seen what is possible, and whilst they recognise that their journey has only just started, they can see the benefits emerging from their hard work.

**“My hope is for a future where technology has become fully embodied across all schools – where it is accepted as a tool that positively impacts teaching and learning”.**

**Gareth Ludlam, Deputy Headteacher**

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