E-ACT: “a trust-wide approach to connectivity is making us more resilient”

E-ACT is a multi-academy trust (MAT) with 28 primary and secondary schools across England. Until three years ago the schools were served by around 15 internet service providers (ISPs) but consolidating connectivity with Jisc as a single provider is enhancing E-ACT’s network security and improving operational efficiencies.

“When I arrived at E-ACT I wanted to select a single connectivity provider for the whole organisation,” says chief operating officer Chris Wiseman.

“With 18,000 students, 2,600 staff and multiple sites, I think of it as very much like a university campus in its complexity and many of its requirements. UK universities and colleges rely on Jisc’s network security and reliability so we wanted to know what they could offer us.”

Jisc connectivity specialists worked with E-ACT’s own team to develop a trust-wide connectivity plan and roll it out gradually to each academy site as the trust’s existing contracts with ISPs expired. The last ones were connected to the world-class, high speed Janet Network (jisc.ac.uk/janet) in August 2021 under a five-year contract.

Additional connectivity services
E-ACT’s connectivity solution has opened up opportunities to adopt new services and work smarter. For example, its network is eduroam-enabled (jisc.ac.uk/eduroam). The eduroam roll-out has been slowed down by the COVID-19 lockdowns but soon E-ACT staff will be able to travel between all 28 sites – and to other eduroam-connected public sector premises – using eduroam to gain access to the internet through a single WiFi profile and set of credentials.

This will ensure they can spend less time getting connected and more time working productively.

The trust is also subscribed to Jisc’s managed router service (jisc.ac.uk/managed-router-service), giving E-ACT peace of mind that all its routers are appropriate to the connection and that ongoing hardware support and software upgrades are taken care of. E-ACT also adopted Jisc’s web filtering and monitoring framework (jisc.ac.uk/web-filtering) to make it easier to evaluate and procure a web filtering solution that safeguards students when they access content online and keeps the organisation compliant with its obligations under the anti-terrorism Prevent duty (gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance).

“It’s not if we will face a cyber attack – it’s when”
“Even rolling out services we haven’t sourced directly from Jisc, like our antivirus solution, is quicker and more efficient now because we’re doing it over a common network,” says Chris. “But the biggest benefit of the contract is the support we’re getting with security. The support we got from Jisc in 2018, when one of our academies faced a cyber-attack, was unbelievable and I think that’s because they occupy a distinct space as a not-for-profit built around the needs of the education sector. If we’d bought in support from a commercial provider it would have been more expensive and less fast. David Batho [head of incident response] is a star.”

With the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) continuing to highlight increasingly common ransomware attacks on UK education organisations (ncsc.gov.uk/news/alert-targeted-ransomware-attacks-on-uk-education-sector) Chris Wiseman knows that no one can be complacent. “Since the 2018 incident, which fortunately resulted in no loss of data, Jisc have been working with us to develop our security systems and response strategy. We have a security plan in place and in early 2022 Jisc will launch a ‘war game’, with Jisc cyber experts simulating a cyber-attack on us to see if the systems can be breached.”

“This is an opportunity for us to do something proactive about security, to look for weaknesses and address them, focusing on prevention, response and recovery,” says Chris.

The war game is part of a project being piloted by the Jisc CSIRT (jisc.ac.uk/csirt), a service that detects and resolves security incidents on customers’ networks. The project’s aim – with help from E-ACT and a number of universities and colleges – is to shape future incident response as security threats against education organisations evolve and multiply.

Partnership

“Just talking about connectivity is boring – it’s what that connectivity is giving us that is exciting,” says Chris.

“We feel we’ve become part of a very special partnership and our technical people love talking to Jisc about what we can do next to improve the way we deliver learning and teaching and how we manage the business side. Through things like the Jisc’s security conference we are part of a wider community sharing experiences, ideas and good practice,” he concludes.

To find out how Jisc can support your organisation, please contact:

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- or visit jisc.ac.uk/customers