



Haringey Council

[No.]

Agenda item:

CABINET

On 18 September 2007

Report Title: **Wi-Fi in Schools – Cabinet Response to Recommendations from Overview and Scrutiny**

Forward Plan reference number (if applicable): **[add reference]**

Report of: **Cabinet Member for Children and Young People’s Service**

Wards(s) affected: **All**

Report for: **Key**

1. Purpose

1.1 To respond to recommendations presented by the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny to Cabinet on 26th July 2007.

2. Introduction by Cabinet Member

2.1 I have carefully considered the recommendations from Overview and Scrutiny and this report sets out my conclusions and recommendation to Cabinet.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 That the recommendations from Overview and Scrutiny be rejected, apart from:
- 3.2 That schools using wi-fi systems be asked to ensure that they are switched on only as necessary to reduce energy waste and costs.
- 3.3 That the Director of the Children and Young People’s Service write to all schools drawing attention to the current DCSF advice.

Report Authorised by:

**Sharon Shoesmith,
Director, The Children and Young People’s Service**

Contact Officer:

**Ian Bailey,
Deputy Director, Business Support and Development
The Children and Young People’s Service**

4. Head of Legal Services Comments

4.1 The Head of Legal Services has been consulted on the content of this report. The primary duty regarding matters concerning the health and safety of pupils, where these are related to the equipment used within a maintained school, rests with the governing body of the school. However the Authority has a residual duty in relation to such matters involving health and safety and has the power to offer advice or to give appropriate directions. Members are therefore advised to give careful consideration to the issues raised in the report. Since this is a matter on which the consideration of expert advice is necessary, Members should take into account the expert views set out in summary form and referred to within the report.

5. Director of Finance Comments

5.1 There are no financial implications and the Acting Director of Finance has no specific comments to make on this report.

6. Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

6.1 Cited in text

7. Background

7.1 The Chair of Overview and Scrutiny presented the following recommendation to Cabinet on 26 July 2007.

Recommendation 1

That a seminar be arranged by the Council for headteachers, governors and parents, to provide information and to debate the issues on Wi-Fi and its usage, including health effects, and that the seminar includes information on alternative ways to provide internet access.

Recommendation 2

That the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People write to Chairs of School Governing Bodies on the issue of Wi-Fi recommending that:

- I. Governing Bodies give particular consideration to the use of “wired-in” systems as the preferred option when IT networks are being developed.
- II. Governing Bodies be asked to consult fully with parents and staff over the introduction of new Wi-Fi systems in the school, before they are implemented.
- III. Where Wi-Fi is already in use in schools, Governing Bodies be asked to undertake a full consultation with parents and staff over its continued use.

IV. Schools using Wi-Fi systems be asked to ensure they are only switched on when necessary.

7.2 Overview and Scrutiny Committee had previously, on 2 July 2007, received presentations from a small number of local residents expressing concern (fuelled by a recent Panorama documentary) that the ‘weak electromagnetic fields’ around wireless computer networks (‘Wi-Fi’) cause harm to the development of children. This group proposed banning Wi-Fi on the basis of ‘the precautionary principle’. They also received a report from the Director of the Children and Young People’s Services. This reviewed the national and international guidance and showed that it unanimously states that there is no scientifically valid evidence of harmful effects from weak electromagnetism. The report also recognised, as did Overview and Scrutiny, that the Council does not have the resources or expertise to judge between conflicting views. Accordingly, the report concluded that the Council should not seek to offer advice other than that provided by the relevant national bodies.

8 Response of the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People to the Overview and Scrutiny recommendations and report.

8.1 I have carefully considered the report with officers. I should like to emphasise two points:

- I. The installation or otherwise of Wi-Fi networking facilities in schools is ultimately at the discretion of each school’s own governing body and head teacher. Haringey Council’s role is to provide advice and support to schools based upon best guidance and good practice. We cannot dictate to schools.
- II. The Council lacks the skills and resources to independently assess the scientific evidence relating to the safety of Wi-Fi. Nor do schools have such expertise.

8.2 The Health Protection Agency (HPA) exists to provide “an integrated approach to protecting UK public health through the provision of support and advice to the NHS, local authorities, emergency services, other Arms Length Bodies, the Department of Health and the Devolved Administrations”. I must emphasise that the HPA is widely regarded as the definitive source of information and advice in the UK about Wi-Fi safety. The HPA guidance says: that there is “no reason why schools and others should not use Wi-Fi equipment”. The UK Government and the WHO endorse the HPA view.

8.3 The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) have recently updated their guidance, as follows:

WiFi: no known risk

The Government has moved to reassure teachers that the use of wireless computer networks (WiFi) in schools does not pose any known risk to staff or pupils.

Nearly half of UK primary schools and more than 70 per cent of secondary schools have installed WiFi to connect PCs, but recent media coverage has raised concerns over possible health effects of wireless signals.

However, the Health Protection Agency has advised the DfES that it does not consider WiFi to be harmful. As a result, the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta) and the DfES have recommended the deployment of wireless networks in schools.

A DfES spokesman says: "Where used effectively, these networks directly support the use of ICT in raising standards and attainment. It is for schools using their professional judgement to determine how best to deploy the available technology. WiFi is used widely in homes, offices and in public areas. On the basis of current evidence and expert safety advice, Becta believes that there is no need to change its advice and discourage the use of wireless networks."

DCSF July 2007

- 8.4 If we accept the recommendations of the Committee then in effect we will be sending a mixed message to schools. The schools in turn will be faced with considerable pressure from different lobby groups and will be placed in a position where they have to adjudicate. I believe this would put them in an intolerable situation.
- 8.5 Furthermore, given that the HPA have reviewed the reputable scientific evidence and it appears that (contrary to the claims of campaigners) there exists no robust scientific evidence of any harmful effects of weak electromagnetism, it would be wrong for the Council to do other than refer schools to the DCSF guidance (above). To arrange a seminar would only serve to encourage the view that the Council is challenging the national scientific consensus.
- 8.6 I therefore propose to Cabinet that the recommendations from Overview and Scrutiny be rejected, with the following exception.
- 8.7 The recommendation that schools using wi-fi systems be asked to ensure that they are only switched on as necessary has the merit of encouraging good energy conservation practice and should be endorsed by Cabinet.
- 8.8 I also propose that the Director of the Children and Young People's Service write to all schools drawing attention to the current DCSF advice.