# Standby or Shutdown

Is the schools ICT arms race over? John Sutton assesses the impact the Spending Review will have on classroom technology...

As I write the nation is still digesting the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review. We're told that the school's budget is being protected, though what 'protected' actually means is not entirely clear. The devil is always in the detail and the consequences for individual budgets and programmes will no doubt dribble out in the months to come. In so far as ICT is directly affected, we know that the Harnessing Technology Grant has gone, and that the 'non-schools' part of the DfE budget has been cut by 12 per cent. I don't think many headteachers believe their budgets will be anything other than tight over the next few years, and since ICT is often a headline cost centre, it's inevitable that it'll be to here heads turn to rein in costs.

## Cutting back

For many schools, the methods by which ICT costs are controlled are no more than ad hoc: broken PCs won't get fixed; printer cartridges won't be ordered; large-scale capital spends will be re-examined, scaled back, or cancelled altogether. One well-organised ICT coordinator who had an established rotating kit replacement programme told me that this will be abandoned as they try to extend the maximum life expectancy of their PCs and laptops to the limit. There would have to be a very clear business case for replacing any equipment that had finally reached the point of being beyond economic repair.

Others have told me that the coming spending squeeze is making them look at their inventory of equipment, software and services in a different way. They're starting to ask which pieces of equipment provide best value for money? In most cases these questions are being asked informally, and where schools are looking at this issue at all they're assessing through anecdote and observation rather than attempting to formally measure. The key question seems to be, how engaged are the children by a particular piece of equipment/software/subscription service?

When I extended my line of questioning to asking what piece of equipment did teachers consider to be indispensable in their classroom, the responses were extremely varied. One teacher thought that her Flip video camera was the best value piece of equipment in her class. It was cheap, robust and she was unafraid of putting it into the hands of children. Another considered their visualiser to be the most important. Others (and I include myself in this) thought that without a projector life would be very tricky indeed. Conversely, when asked which item from their classroom inventory could go, many teachers thought that if their interactive whiteboard broke, they wouldn't really miss it. I know from experience that I'm finding more and more non-functioning whiteboards in classrooms that I visit (and I visit a lot) and teachers are complaining much more vociferously about dodgy projector bulbs than they are about broken whiteboards. What's clear is that there's no overall pattern – it's teachers' individual tastes, skill sets and specialisms which dictate what they find has the most impact in their own practice.

It seems to make sense, therefore, not to carry on down the road of having a 'standard' set of equipment in a classroom, but allowing some degree of personal choice in what equipment is issued, and distributing resources where they will have the most impact.
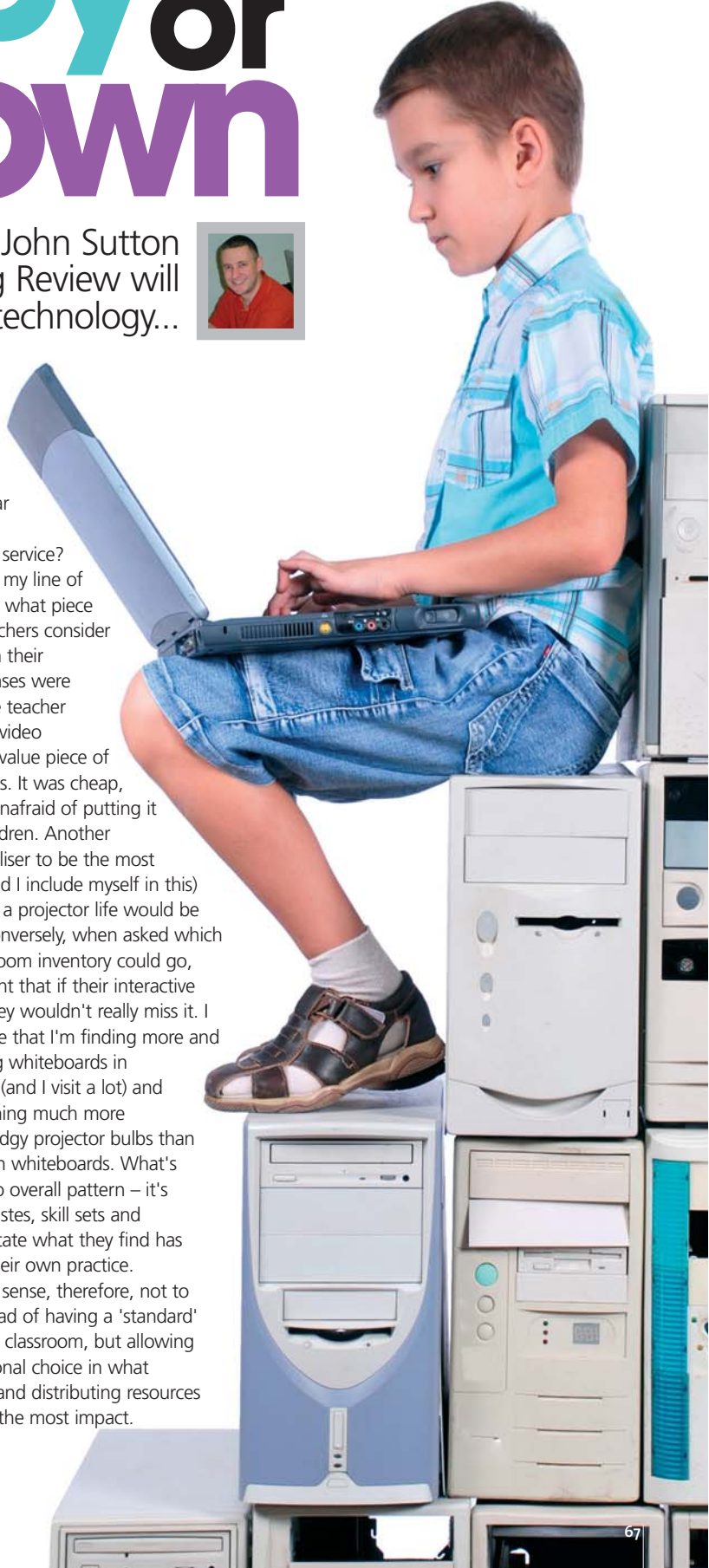
# VLE RIP?

One impact of the end of the Harnessing Technology Grant will be the direct invoicing of schools for their learning platform. Many Local Authorities have held back a portion of the grant in order to provide an authority-wide platform. The subscription invoice for this service will now go directly to schools and, in most cases, will amount to over £2,000. This is going to cause a lot of soul searching on the part of school leaders, and the 'value for money' question will come to the fore. One Local Authority advisor told me privately that they expected up to three quarters of their schools not to renew. Many would argue that the exposure of the VLE industry to proper market forces was long overdue and I would expect sub scription prices to tumble.

## Time for a change

However, all of this is largely tinkering around the edges of the existing model for ICT provision in schools. Maybe the constrained financial environment we find ourselves in could lead to a radical rethink of our approach? In a recent article for the Association of Teachers and Lecturers website (http://bit.ly/yorston), Ian Yorston argued that schools no longer need ICT: "Our schools are now a desert swept with the winds of yesterday's technology; meanwhile our students can be found drinking from an oasis of smartphones, smart apps and smart interfaces. They have answers to questions we haven't even dared to ask. They outsmart us at every turn."

Why, he asks, if children are upgrading their phones every 12 months, are schools investing in equipment that's expected to last for five years, yet be obsolete in one? Doug Dickinson (http://bit.ly/ictwisely) goes further: "Educational institutions cannot keep up with society's rapid pace of technological change and money is draining away in the trying."

Of course, in primary schools it would be very unlikely to find children with smartphones in their pockets, but this shouldn't stop us looking at their hand-held game platforms. A quick show of hands to demonstrate ownership of Nintendos will reveal just how many children have access to a Wi-Fi-enabled device. The current DSi has a camera, a voice recorder and a web browser built in for less than £120 per unit (and that's without searching for educational bulk discounts). Shouldn't schools be investing their precious ICT budget in providing a robust and high-capacity wireless platform instead of lots of PCs? Furthermore, are teachers actually equipped to take advantage of all the computing power schools place at their fingertips in any case? Should we be concentrating it more in the hands of the children?

There are signs that things are changing. I recently undertook a technology refresh project in a large Manchester primary. Not only had they invested in a very high spec wireless network, but every single piece of software that went on the system was open source and free to install. The wireless network was designed to allow simple guest access to the internet, enabling children to use their own Nintendos and iPods in school. As the development of hand-held computing devices continues to accelerate, this trend will become entrenched. Local resellers that I know tell me that sales of the latest fourth generation of managed wireless networks to the primary sector are very strong. It's still a leap of faith to believe that the controlling tendencies within schools will be relaxed to the extent that they'll encourage children to bring their own kit in.

So, perhaps the Consumer Spending Review will have a positive impact in some ways after all. Perhaps schools will finally conclude that they can no longer hope to keep up in the technological arms race and will look to different models instead.

## Further reading

For a useful review of the Consumer Spending Review as it affects schools, visit Research Machine's blogpost on the subject: http://bit.ly/csreview
For the Institute for Fiscal Studies' view on how they anticipate the review will affect schools, visit http://bit.ly/IFSpaper