

Building and sustaining national ICT/education agencies:

Lessons from England (Becta)

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The Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) initiative seeks to improve the global knowledge base related to education systems analyses, assessments, diagnoses, and opportunities for dialogue. SABER-ICT aims to improve the availability of policy-related data, information, and knowledge on what matters most in using ICTs to improve the quality of education.

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Executive summary

The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta) was established in 1998 and finally closed in 2011. The government in England set out Becta's priorities in annual remit letters, and the agency's changing role is traced through the content of these letters. Becta primarily addressed school-based and technical and vocational education and it acted as the key agency in taking forward England's e-learning strategy, Harnessing Technology.

In Becta's lifetime, technology changed dramatically and the agency played an important role in building the capacity of schools and colleges to support their work and the learning of students through technology. Becta played an important role in conducting research and gathering evidence in use of technology for learning and in developing education leadership and teacher capacity to use technology across the school curriculum.

Becta's role was undoubtedly challenging. The comments and conclusions reflect stakeholder views of specific challenges and what might have been done differently and perhaps better. While every national context is different, some of the experience associated with Becta's existence may provide a starting point for reflection on the development of similarly focused ICT in Education agencies.



1. Becta's establishment and initial remit

The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta) was established in 1998 by the English¹ government's Department for Education and Employment², to provide the advice and support needed to meet the government's objectives of:

- “ensuring that technology supports efforts to drive up standards in core curriculum subjects, teaching of key skills, improvement of school effectiveness and the development of lifelong learning
- ensuring that young people leave school and college with the information and communications technology skills that they will need for the 21st Century
- ensuring that the needs of people with special educational needs are addressed”³

Notably, Becta was set up as a registered charity, with its trustees tasked with overseeing and steering the organization such that its work reflected government policy. In its first official remit letter of 1998, the government called on the new body to work closely with government ICT initiatives. Becta was also charged with developing the National Grid for Learning alongside the Department for Education and Employment. This work included developing connectivity to schools, developing infrastructure with appropriate managed service provision and developing a content structure for the Grid. Becta also was given a role in supporting and simplifying provision of support and guidance to schools, teachers and teacher-trainers, assisting Government Agencies so that they make best use of NGfL and assisting the Department in monitoring and encouraging schools' progress.

Further roles were identified in these early stages including:

- Monitoring and informing the Department of the potential for education of developments in new technologies and, where necessary, to undertake or commission innovative and independent evaluations
- Supporting the effective use of ICT in primary and secondary curriculum subjects, in school management and special educational needs
- Working in consultation with the Qualifications and Curriculum Agency⁴, the major schools subject associations (for example the Association for Science Education, the Maths Association and the Association for Language Learning and the Association for Physical Education) and “others including the commercial supply industry and with the organization established to support the work of Curriculum IT Support Groups.

¹ In 1999 Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were granted devolved powers from the UK Government to administer their domestic affairs, although they retain representation in the UK Parliament at Westminster. “Domestic affairs” include education. Becta's focus was therefore education in England, although it also built collaborative links with similar organizations in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

² English government departments responsible for education went through a series of name changes during Becta's lifetime. For schools, the Department of Education and Employment became the Department for Education and Skills then the Department of Children, Schools and Families. It is now the Department for Education.

³ Department for Education and Employment letter to Chair of the National Council for Educational Technology dated 16 January 1998.

⁴ The Qualifications and Curriculum Agency was set up under the Education Act 1997 to develop and regulate the national curriculum, assessments in schools and qualifications. In 2007 the government decided to set up an independent exams regulator, Ofqual, which took on most of QCA's regulatory functions. QCA's remaining work was carried on by QCDA until 2010.

2. The evolution of Becta

A remit or priorities letter, an official directive from government which details the priorities and targets for an organization, is a mechanism used in the United Kingdom to help provide direction and guidance for groups which are technically outside, but closely linked to, government. In the case of Becta, the remit letters served not only to help guide actions by Becta, but, because they are public documents, also helped to inform Becta partners and stakeholder groups of what was expected of Becta, and served as an important mechanism for coordination of ICT/education activities across England.

One notable feature of Becta is that, over its short life, its roles and duties were often changed or expanded, with additional responsibilities and mandates added, as detailed by the annual official remit letters. Highlights of this evolution, as detailed in the remit letters, include:

1998: Becta was required to work closely with the government's Department for Education and Employment. The government department was seen as the policy making body and also held the reins of strategy development. Becta provided expert advice, research support and worked on implementation. Becta was required to work with many different bodies including agencies, teacher organizations, and private sector organizations.

2003: Following a significant review, Becta's role was strengthened, made more strategic, moving towards policy-making and away from implementation.⁵

2007: Becta was required to step yet closer to policy-making, working very closely with the department, and in some cases undertaking roles (such as providing informing policy development and responding quickly to policy issues as they arose) that were previously held within the government department. Becta also was given clear leadership of the implementation of the e-learning strategy across all sectors of education. To achieve all of this Becta was again exhorted to liaise closely with a wide range of additional organizations.

2008: Becta was tasked with contributing to delivery of a wide variety of priorities for the government's Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). Becta's priorities for action included: establishing a national professional development program with regional support for workforce and leaders in the effective use of technology (including supporting a network of business leaders as advocates of flexible and online delivery); supporting equity and social cohesion; raising the quality of technology products and services through a system wide National Digital Infrastructure and aggregation of procurement leading to better value for money; considering how the effective use of technology was best embedded in any revision to the inspection process; and identifying professional workforce standards for the skills required by practitioners in the effective use of technology in teaching and learning and in business systems.

⁵ Charles Clarke, then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, stated, "ICT can make a significant contribution to teaching and learning across all areas of the curriculum, and in the teaching that takes place there. As the lead agency for ICT in schools and the learning and skills sector, Becta has a critical role to play in ensuring that ICT is a key element in education in these areas".

Harnessing Technology – Transforming Learning and Children’s Services

Published in 2005, *Harnessing Technology – Transforming Learning and Children’s Services* set out England’s e-learning strategy for all sectors of education. It built on Becta’s 2005 review which provided a synthesis of schools and post-16 education, noting the “variations in the use of ICT within and between institutions” and how these “lead to inconsistent and widely differing experiences for learners”. It noted, “we have little in the way of agreed specifications and standards for issues such as learning platforms; institutions are wasting time and effort on routine procurement administration; and we continue to miss opportunities for aggregating demand to achieve the best deals.” The *Harnessing Technology Strategy* built significantly on Becta research and evaluation of the use of technology in education. It identified a significant number of actions which were allocated to identified partners “with deliverable goals and milestones”, stating that “Becta and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) ... provide a powerful focus for using ICT to modernize education and could potentially, in the longer term, contribute to the effective use of IT in children’s services.”⁶

Roles for Becta are further described in the *Harnessing Technology Statement*, “The development and implementation of the e-strategy entail responsibilities at four different levels: strategic direction, policy development, coordinating the delivery strategy and delivery itself. We are clear that the first two responsibilities should lie with the DfES⁷ itself, advised by Becta and JISC, the Department’s lead strategic partners. Responsibility for coordinating the delivery strategy will lie with Becta and JISC⁸. Responsibility for delivery itself will lie with a wider range of partners, including Becta and JISC for specific elements.”

Reflection on the change between 2005 and 2007 suggests that in 2005, at the time of publication of the Harnessing Technology e-learning strategy, Becta was perceived as body that would implement government policy and strategy. In 2007 Becta was expected to contribute more significantly to policy and strategy development.

Reference to DIUS developments suggests also further expansion of Becta’s role in the skills area. This could be expected to include the work of further education colleges, lifelong learning and training and vocational education. Becta’s role as a lead partner in implementation of the *Harnessing Technology Strategy* pointed also to a greater requirement for developing relationships and working with a wide range of organizations. Those mentioned in the strategy are listed in Annex A.

2009: Becta’s close links and alignment in working with the Government departments are reinforced; to some observers this suggested that more effort was needed to work on these relationships; for others this was seen as a simple reminder. Noting Becta’s steady progress in the *Harnessing Technology Strategy* including capacity building brought about through continued use of ICT self-improvement tools⁹ by local government and schools, the successful negotiation with regards to school licensing of Microsoft products, and progress with regard to the Home Access Project¹⁰, Becta’s work priorities were set out to include the effective delivery and roll out of the Home Access Program; practical solutions to ensure that best practice in e-

⁶ <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/1296-2005PDF-EN-01.pdf>

⁷ DfES was the government’s Department for Education and Skills.

⁸ JISC’s primary responsibilities were associated with Higher Education.

⁹ Self improvement tools included Becta’s self review framework which provided a model for schools and their stakeholders to self assess their position and progress in adoption of technology for learning, to prioritize and plan future development and also provided a route to assessment and public recognition of ICT capability through the ICT Mark.

¹⁰ The Home Access Program aimed to bring access to technology and connectivity within the reach of disadvantaged children and families.

learning is available and accessible across the system; and best practice for 14-19 partnerships and consortia of providers based on a clear vision on the use of ICT to support objectives for young people. The need for Becta to develop robust processes which provide assurances of effective delivery of its remit were emphasized as well as the need for Becta to share its knowledge of the system and its ICT expertise with the Department and the group of organizations with which the Department was working.

Becta funding

Becta was a government funded agency. A guide to the level of Becta's budget is set out in Becta's remit letter date 19 March 2009¹¹.

The letter states, under the heading "Funding, Efficiency, Reducing Burdens and Sustainable Development":

"To deliver the priorities set out in this letter, Becta's baseline budget for 2009-10 is £108,785,000 which comprises £62,585,00 program and running costs, £6,300,000 capital and £39, 900,000 capital for Home Access. See Annex A attached for reference.

Included in the £62,585,000 is £396,905 we expect Becta to make in efficiency savings in 2009-10. Becta must ensure that these agreed efficiency savings are recycled into front-line activities.

We expect Becta to play a prominent role in policy discussions about the role of technology in addressing challenges within the current economic climate. In particular we would like Becta to play a lead role in developing propositions to achieve future efficiencies through new approaches to technology systems and infrastructure in the different sectors of education and training."

As noted above the Remit Letter's Annex A provides further budget details and which can be found at the web address given below.

Becta's closure

A new government was elected in May 2010 and later that month it was announced that Becta was to be closed. Becta was finally closed in March 2011, at which time some of Becta's functions were taken over by other organizations:

- Policy development, liaison and support function – *transferred to Government Department for Education*
- Research and analysis function – *transferred to Government Department for Education and the Institute of Education*
- Development of relationships with private and public sector suppliers – *transferred initially to the Department for Education*
- Information regarding Becta led work continued to be made available through a range of websites. These included the ICT services framework, self-review framework and the information management strategy framework.

¹¹ <http://www.teachfind.com/becta/about-becta-becta-remit-becta>

3. Post-Becta analysis

Many views¹² have been expressed on Becta's closure. Some reflect views of those who supported or had particularly benefited from Becta's work. Other views are from those who did not agree, at least in part, with some of the positions taken by Becta and the way in which the organization operated.

The following observations arise from conversations and interviews that reflected on the organization's strengths and weaknesses, and what might be learned from Becta's experience.

Becta's role and relationship with government and policy

Becta was an institution that was initially designed to enable an education world that knew little about technology to make sensible decisions about its adoption. To fulfill this role, Becta became involved in: developing research and evidence; developing procurement and purchasing systems and strategies; and leading opinion. Becta's remit letters over the years demonstrate that, over time, Becta was drawn closer to government policy making. While its role in policy making and policy implementation brought Becta close to its sponsoring government department, its role in other areas such as regulation and the development and management of procurement demanded independence. ***The tension between the need for independence and closeness to government created challenges for Becta.*** Some believe that Becta could have been better positioned if greater priority had been given to communicating good practice, stimulating communities to encourage those communications, and providing advice on government policy.

Changing remit

Becta's remit sometimes appeared unclear and complex, not least when that remit changed annually. Simplification might have been achieved through making it a five year remit with an annual review of priorities. Managing the remit in this way could have improved focus and ensured that more projects and programs were seen through to completion. Some commentators reflected that Becta's remit was not always clearly linked to government priorities. Clearer lines between government priorities and Becta's remit could have helped relationships between government agencies; provided their roles were made clear and their joint aim for education was self-evident.

Risk taking

Becta's organization and behaviors were perceived to be close to those of a government department with similar approaches risk. Some suggest that greater independence from government would have encouraged a more risk taking and an entrepreneurial approach within Becta, and that approach might have been beneficial. Constraints such as those associated with the auditing of public finance expenditure meant that established and agreed measures had to be used in assessment. *One example:* When Becta sought to identify recipients of computers associated with their Home Access Program, assessment of deserving cases had to be auditable. As a result, existing measures of relative wealth, such as an individual's qualification for free school meals, had to be used to identify qualifying children or families, while other measures, such as the lack of access to connectivity and computing, lack of access to learning, and actual wealth were not acceptable.

¹² During the preparation of this case study, interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders and interested parties including teachers, former senior staff in other agencies and in Becta, former Ministers, industry representatives and education commentators.

Becta prescription and regulation

Becta had roles both in terms of implementation of policy and in regulation of education technology industry. ***This mixed role was difficult to achieve.*** Regulation took the form of procurement frameworks. Commercial IT companies had to comply with, then apply to be accepted on to procurement frameworks, for example, for Learning Platform providers; schools or Local Authorities would then select their suppliers from the framework.

The frameworks received a mixed response, particularly from the ICT industry. One criticism was that once a product or organization was accepted on to the framework, there was little assessment of continuing suitability and whether the product or organization continued to meet the standards required by the framework. A further observation regarding the frameworks was that they could work against innovation. Some participating organizations would be inclined to work to the minimum standards required by the frameworks. With a more open approach greater effort might have been put into development and maintenance of good working relationships between the supplier and their client.

ICT policy, implementation and accountability

Becta, in the judgment of some observers, was at its best when its work was closely aligned with government policy priorities. An example of good alignment was in development of the Home Access program. The policy sought to give access to technology and connectivity to families that were otherwise excluded and the program worked directly to provide that access. As a result of the close alignment between policy and Becta's implementation, the program was widely understood and supported. ***Becta programs were not as well understood and supported when they were not commissioned as part of broader government change programs.*** There is a fine balance between being perceived as an honest broker and in an independent and expert role, and being viewed as interfering as when setting standards and constructing frameworks with which other parties must comply.

Becta's approach to evidence and research

Some consider Becta's research to be its most important contribution to the development of technology in support of education, both domestically and internationally. However, ***concern has been expressed about the Becta's role both as developer of an agenda for ICT in education and as a commissioner of research.*** Some consider Becta was over reliant on its own research rather than drawing on that of other groups. At the same time, there is a counter view that Becta was at the forefront of the development of technology supported learning and as such, had to conduct its own research. It was suggested also that Becta could have undertaken more by way of international benchmarking and also drawn more on research from around the world.

Relationships

Becta was perceived by many educationalists in the sector as an 'honest broker' which, while taking forward government policies, did so in a fair and independent way, drawing on its specialist expertise. Becta had strong relationships with Local Authorities leading to influencing mechanisms that were reasonably effective and could help to drive real change in classroom education. However, some feel that Becta could have done more to position itself well with stakeholders. Its relationship with industry was perhaps particularly challenging. "Representing the interests of education to industry" seems a reasonable role, perhaps only if industry's roles in innovation and its interest in developing and improving its products are acknowledged. ***The combination of representing the interests of education to industry can be particularly challenging when it is combined with quasi-regulatory roles.***

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Becta was established in 1998 and closed in 2011. Initially much of its focus was on building a National Grid for Learning. While Becta existed, it worked closely with government, its agencies, with Local Education Authorities, schools, teachers and pupils to develop the use of technology to support learning in schools. In that period also, use of technology changed from something that was considered to be the domain of computing teachers, to something that affected every teacher. Some of its work was particularly successful and had significant positive impact, some less so. Its ImpaCT2 studies demonstrated learning gains that were possible through technology supported learning.

Becta's experience may offer those who study it evidence of successful organizational arrangements, policies and implementations of the use of technology to support education, and how to achieve similar success in a range circumstances. It may also offer an indication of approaches that were less successful and therefore to be avoided.

The **remit letter** was an important tool used to help provide strategic direction for Becta. An examination of the various remit letters which helped define Becta's strategic objectives and priorities over time suggests the following key lessons:

- *If an agency is set up to address technology in education, it is important that the government consults that agency. Consultation is likely to help the agency develop its expertise and is likely also to add weight to perception of the agency.*
- *If the overarching purpose of the agency is to change culture within education with respect to the adoption and adaptation of technology for education, then differing periods of cycles should be recognized. Political cycles may be 2-5 years or more, depending on the political systems within countries. Academic cycles are typically one year. The cycle of cultural change is generally viewed as much longer. So the structure and remit of the agency should be such that life of the agency is long enough to meet its overarching purpose.*
- *The model of a multi-year remit letter, with potential to adjust priorities within the letter at shorter notice may be one way to provide stability, confidence and appropriate flexibility rather than in making major changes annually. While allowing change in the agency's overall remit is a good idea, it is important for the confidence of the education community and the success in education of students that projects are completed or ended appropriately before moving on to new priorities.*
- *A clear remit that can be related directly to government policy in education could help to add weight and strength to the agency's work. The ICT agency's remit could for example associate its success to progress in development of access to learning, in child literacy or in the costs of teaching if these are parts of government policy. Such wider, but specific aims could improve the perception of the agency by government departments and their officers, and also in aligning the work of the ICT agency with other education bodies and agencies.*

Based on the Becta experience, some additional conclusions can be drawn of potential relevance to similar institutions in other countries:

Leadership and staffing should reflect the major focus of the organization. Care should be taken with the focus of the agency: Is its focus technology, or should the greater focus be on pedagogy for use of technology, or some other application of technology?

Roles of different players within the structure should be clearly defined. These players include sponsoring government department, the board of the agency, and the executive of the agency.

Attention should be paid to the expected role of the agency. If it is intended that the agency act as an arm of government and to take on the behaviors of officers of government then this should be explicit. If, however, it is intended that the agency use its arms-length role to be more entrepreneurial and willing to take risks then that should be made clear. In each case, leadership and staffing should reflect the role and expected behaviors within the organization.

Development of good working and influencing relationships is likely to be critical to success of an ICT in Education Agency. If it is agreed that development of good working and influencing relationships is critical, then the roles of the agency and its leadership and staffing should be appointed with that in mind. For a long standing agency, relationship building and development should be considered as part of the professional development undertaken by agency staff.

Care should be taken with combinations of standard setting and regulation responsibilities with influencing and supporting. In England many agencies divided responsibilities between different bodies such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency which passed its regulatory responsibilities to Ofqual. Splitting in this way reduces the risks of conflict between regulatory and other roles.

Those developing the strategy for an ICT in Education agency should consider whether its aim is to build dependency or to build capacity. If expertise and knowledge is held within the agency then dependency of schools and other organizations may also be sustained. However, a capacity building approach may be more successful in developing a rapidly improving system in which the improvements are sustainable because of well-developed ownership and understanding of the school community. Tools such as Becta's *Self Review Framework* can help to build that capacity within the system and can make a contribution to developing networks and communities of practice that in turn contribute to sustainability.

Care should be taken to avoid the risks of developing research to justify predetermined policy -- evidence based policy making would seem to be a better approach. The initial objectives were to have Becta promote good and valuable uses of technology at a time when a small number of schools were IT literate and IT interested. When developing research, it is suggested existing sources domestically and internationally should be recognized, and new research commissioned to fill particular gaps and to explore particular areas of special interest.

Becta's closure following the introduction of a new government in 2010 may lead some readers to the conclusion that this is a cautionary tale, given a sense of loss given all that was invested through Becta in developing the use of information and communications technology in schools in England. It certainly is a cautionary tale if you have a similar agency and you want that agency to continue its work.

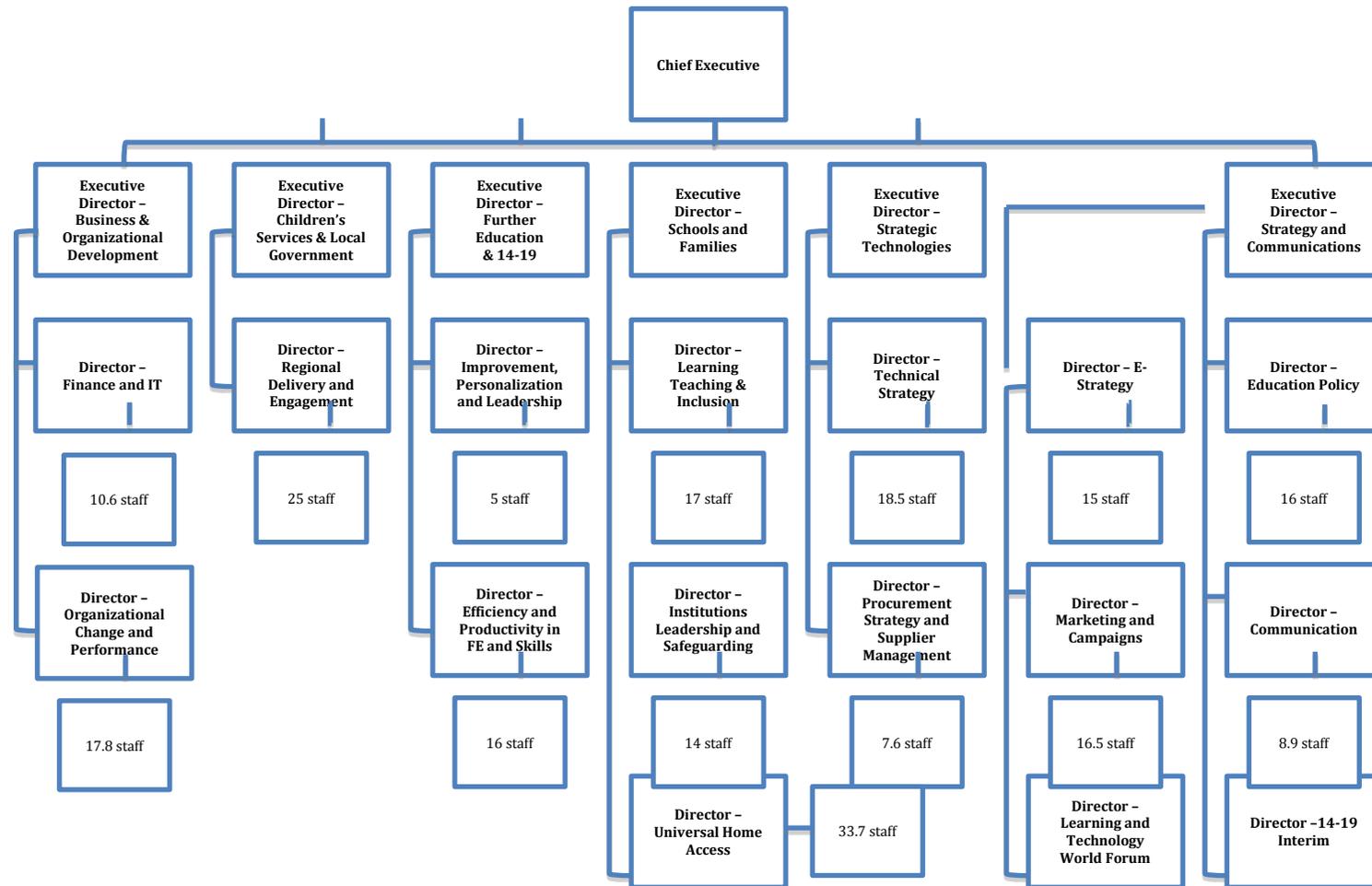
However, Becta's rise and fall can be viewed in another light. Becta's research provided important and persuasive evidence of what worked when it comes to technology and education, its tools helped build capacity and community around the use of technology for learning, it contributed to the development of strategic leadership of ICT. It sought to develop procurement practices that would bring best value for public investment in technology for learning and it acted as a point of aggregation of demand for companies working in education technology.

Becta's existence helped to provide access to technology and to change attitudes to technology for learning, attitudes that will help form the foundations of future development. Perhaps the

important thing is that such organizations do not need to last forever, but that their influence should last beyond their own lifetime.

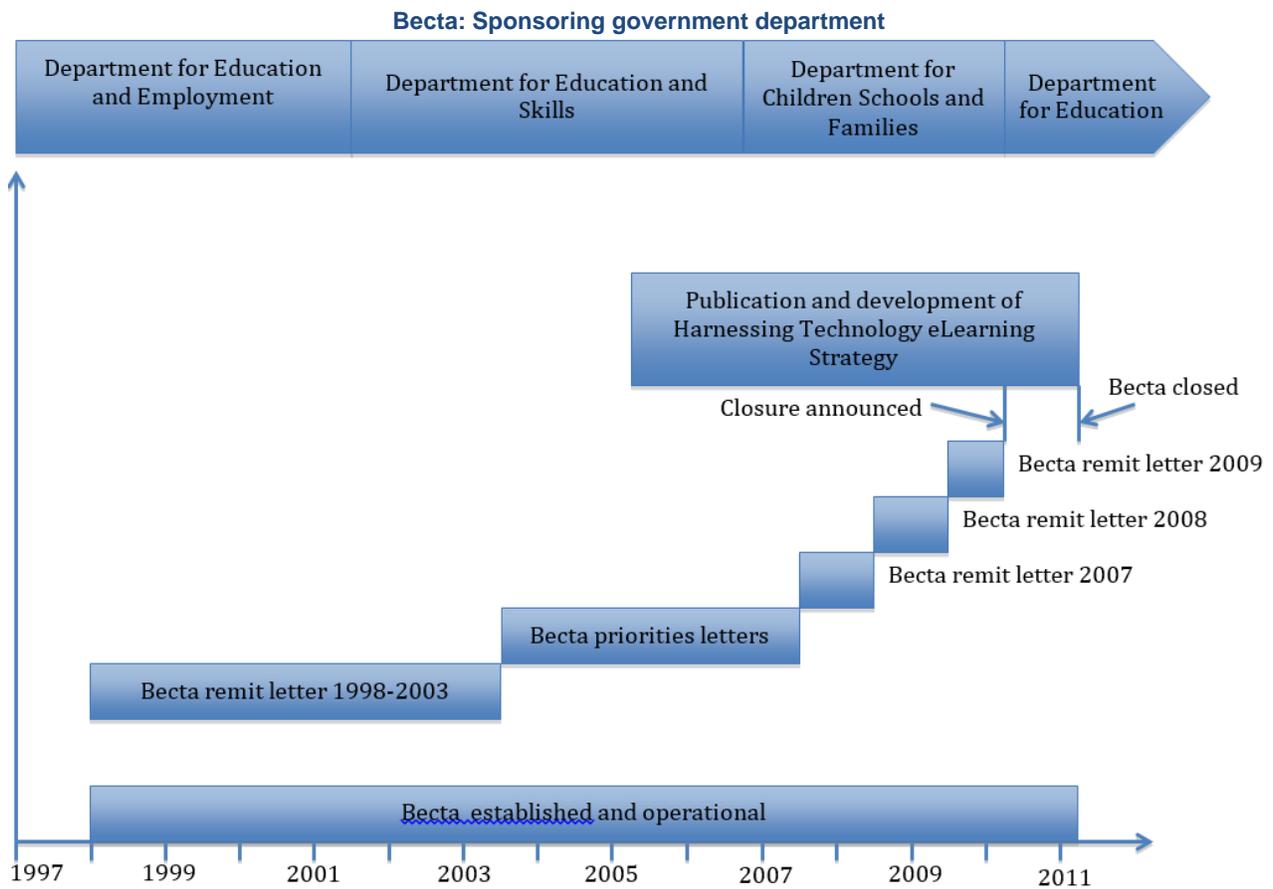


Annex A: Becta organogram (October 2010)¹³



¹³ Note: Where figures such as 17.8 staff are quoted in the organogram above, they represent the full-time equivalent Becta staff working in the area concerned and reporting to the relevant directors or executive directors. The figures are calculated from the Becta organogram at <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/b/becta%20organisation%20chart%20as%20of%2030%20june%202010.pdf> published at 30 June 2010.

Annex B: Becta: Timeline



Annex C: Becta: Key governing documents

Remit letter 1998-2003: Development of National Grid for Learning including schools' connectivity, technical infrastructure, service provision and content structure working closely with Department for Education and Employment

Priorities letter 2003: Following review Becta's role strengthened and began to move closer to policy making

Harnessing Technology E-learning Strategy: Becta took on playing the lead role in developing and implementing the Harnessing Technology eLearning Strategy

Remit letter 2007: Becta encouraged to work yet more closely with the Department for Children Schools and Families and encouraged to liaise closely with a range of additional education focused organizations

Remit letter 2008: Becta encouraged to develop a national professional development program for effective use of technology; to raise quality of technology products and services through aggregation of procurement and identifying professional workforce standards

Remit letter 2009: Becta directly supporting Departmental priorities such as the Home Access program providing computers and connectivity for disadvantaged groups



References

This paper was informed by conversations regarding Becta held with a range of stakeholders. Among these interviews (via email or face to face) were conversations with the following parties:

- Charles Clarke, former Secretary of State of Education and Skills
- Dawn Hallybone, primary school teacher and expert technology practitioner
- Bob Harrison, education advisor to Toshiba and former consultant to Becta
- Professor Rose Luckin, London Knowledge Lab and former Becta Board Member
- Niel McLean, former Executive Director, Becta
- Steve Moss, former Director, Partnerships for Schools
- Dr Vanessa Pittard, former Director of Research and Evidence, Becta
- Dominic Savage, Director General, British Education Suppliers Association, former Becta Board member
- Tony Richardson, former Executive Director of Strategy, Becta
- Lord Knight of Weymouth, former Minister of State for Schools and Learners

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