

HfL AGM 2020 – Transcript of Managing Director’s Review

Our socially distanced and remote AGM comes six months into the most extraordinary period that most of us have ever known. And who would have thought that six months to the day since the Prime Minister announced the first national lockdown, we would be facing new restrictions on how we lead our lives?

Normally, I would be spending most of this speech reflecting on the 12 months to last March and on the exam results of Hertfordshire schools, yet this hardly seems relevant in the midst of such uncertainty, nor indeed is it possible following the exam fiasco of this summer. It is however worth noting that we finished the 2019-20 financial year in a strong position, which set us up very strongly to face the challenges that the COVID-19 crisis has brought. Our reserves provide us with a cushion to help protect jobs and to invest in services that schools and settings need as they welcome children back and seek to minimise the impact of what has been up to six months of lost time in the classroom. We must also continue to invest in our staff to ensure that they have the training and tools to deliver in this new environment.

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, we have worked in close partnership with Hertfordshire County Council to continue to support schools and settings and to help them adapt to the particular demands put on them by the crisis and the changing expectations of the Government. We have adapted our services to enable us to deliver most of our work remotely, and have changed the content and focus to ensure that it is relevant to the needs of schools and settings now. At the same time, we have prudently managed costs to ensure that we minimise the impact of reduced revenues (particularly for some Pay as You Use services).

Looking on the positive side, the crisis has enabled us to accelerate some of our key change initiatives and has helped us to move more rapidly along certain axes of our strategic plan. For example, our digital agenda has seen a major leap forward as we have used digital tools for remote working and introduced a new set of online courses and webinars. Our commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility has been strengthened as we have had to reduce printing (effectively to zero) and have massively reduced travel to schools, settings and the office.

I am pleased to say that the feedback we have had from schools and settings to our adapted and new services has been extremely encouraging. Over half of the primary schools in Hertfordshire have chosen to buy one or more modules of Back on Track, our curriculum and assessment programme specifically designed to help get pupils back on track after such a long break from regular school for so many of them. At the end of summer 2020, HfL led national installs of GSuite for Education for Google through the 2020 DfE Platform Provisioning Programme (almost 100 installs). Almost our entire CPD programme is now online, providing greater flexibility for school staff to access training when it suits them, and allowing us to reach more schools and settings.

This has been an incredibly difficult period for everyone involved in education and there is no doubt that the challenges will remain over the next six months. The Government is clearly committed to doing everything it can to ensure that schools and settings stay open for all young people and we will continue to do our part to support them in doing so. Where it best meets school needs, and is considered safe to do so, our advisers, consultants and technicians will work with leaders and staff in their schools. At the same time, we will continue to deliver as much as we can remotely to help protect both our own and school employees.

Twelve months ago, we published our commitment to a wider CSR agenda, including challenging targets to reduce our carbon footprint. Inevitably some of this work has had to take a backseat, despite the benefits I mentioned earlier. However, as we look forward, we cannot dilute our commitments – the climate emergency has not gone away, and we must continue to play our part. We now have a baseline measurement of our carbon footprint and will from now on report annually our progress to reducing our environmental impact. My aim is that over the next 12 months we will be able to develop credible plans that will allow us to become carbon neutral by 2030. I also hope that we can again pick up on our plans to help schools reduce their carbon footprint – whilst recognising of course that this is not the top priority at the moment.

Earlier this year, we published a very strong commitment to address the challenges raised by the Black Lives Matter in the light of the shocking murder of George Floyd and countless others who have lost their lives due to unrelenting racial injustices. HfL acknowledges that systemic racism is a problem that must be addressed everywhere. We have a duty to face up to the difficult conversations that ultimately result in the lifting of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) voices. Looking internally, BAME colleagues are under-represented at all levels of HfL. Sadly, this does reflect the situation in education in Hertfordshire, but it is not something we can accept and are committed to translating that public commitment into action.

Our new forum for colleagues who identify as BAME has met many times and put forward a roadmap for change, both within HfL, and also for how we can help schools to address this challenge. We have introduced blind CVs until the final interview stage of recruiting colleagues to HfL, and are doing the same for all senior leader recruitment that we support in schools. We will challenge and encourage all governing bodies to reflect on their composition and how they can ensure greater diversity amongst their members.

As Gavin mentioned earlier, this autumn we will be holding elections for four non-executive directors – three from Primary Schools and one from Special Schools. I would like to take this opportunity to encourage Heads and Governors who identify as BAME to consider standing in those elections. We must increase the diversity of the HfL Board, and this is a great opportunity for us to do so. I recognise how stretched school leaders are, but we hope you will consider how you could play a role to help guide HfL in its work.

During the last 12 months we have continued to push forward our internal transformation programme, with notably a very significant investment in new systems to replace the legacy finance and HR systems on which we were operating. Although this may seem like an internal matter, it is crucial for the long term management of the business, providing us with better management information and insight to serve more schools and settings more effectively and efficiently. This is something we could have chosen to delay in the light of COVID, but I am pleased that we have continued to move forward, and I am sure that we will see the benefits of this work as we come out of the COVID crisis.

HfL relies on strong executive leadership for its continued success. I am pleased that the Executive Team has been stable throughout this year and that we have therefore been able to strengthen our teamwork and understanding. This team strength has been evident throughout the crisis, although there have of course been challenging moments. I am lucky to work with such a talented and dedicated team.

In closing, I would like to thank my colleagues for the resilience and adaptability they have shown to meet the challenges of the past 12 months. Like so many organisations, we have found that things we thought were impossible can be done, and we have shown great creativity as we have addressed the challenges we have faced. I have no doubt that we have demonstrated and lived up to our values of trust, inspiration and collaboration.

I am prouder than ever of the work we do but I recognise that this would not be possible without the partnership between HfL, Hertfordshire County Council, schools and settings across the county. I would like to thank you all for this partnership and the support you give us to improve continually our service for you. We recognise that you have a choice as to whether or not you use our services, and that we must therefore continue to do all we can to retain your support, becoming even more “customer-centric”. It is only in doing so that we can ensure that every child across Hertfordshire has access to a great education, wherever they live and whatever their circumstances.

Andrew de Csilléry
Managing Director
Herts for Learning Ltd

23 September 2020