Letchmore Infants' – from an interview with Sally Allen

LETCHMORE INFANTS' AND NURSERY SCHOOL

Letchmore Infants' and Nursery School, based in an early-1900s building in Stevenage Old Town, is a three-form entry school and the main feeder for Almond Hill Junior School. Letchmore has capacity for approximately 320 pupils, plus 72 nursery places. It currently employs 51 staff members, including a relatively high number of support staff.

Sally Allen, School Business Manager

Co-headteachers Jo Harding and Eleanor Williams say, "Our motto is **'Let's Inspire!'**, and this underpins everything we do. We believe that education is a partnership between home and school and we try to involve parents/carers in all aspects of school life."

The school's business manager, Sally Allen, took time out of her busy schedule to talk to us about the school's recent change of management information system.

Sally's involvement in Letchmore Infants' started in her role as governor. She later became office manager and then the SIMS manager at the nearby Barclay secondary school. In 2018 she successfully applied to become business manager for Letchmore Infants' and Nursery School – a position she still holds today.

Sally first started to use SIMS after becoming business manager at Letchmore. She reports, "I was pretty much self-taught in SIMS and was a very big fan of that system. My counterpart at Almond Hill Junior School was very surprised when she heard we'd made the change to Arbor!"

The school management team first considered a move to a cloud-based information system when faced with the £15,000 cost of replacing their server. They then took advice from their IT support team about alternative options.

Understandably, there was initially some hesitation from the school leadership team, especially regarding the assessment side and functionality of a new cloud-based system. Sally says these concerns were short-lived,

"I arranged a demo with Michelle from Herts for Learning. As soon as the SLT watched that demo on how the new assessment would work, they were sold."

Sally describes how Herts for Learning provided great support, through their understanding of the challenges faced by schools and of the benefits of moving to a cloud-based information system, as well as their experience of working with other schools on similar changeover processes. This made the step-by-step implementation process easy to follow.

"We had people on hand at every step throughout the handover process, from Herts for Learning and Arbor. I could email them with any queries and felt very comfortable doing that; they were very helpful and approachable. I had absolutely no issues – it was seamless.

"Ultimately, I was quite excited to make the change to a more up-to-date and functional system," says Sally.

Letchmore Infants' School has experienced significant benefits with the new cloud-based system, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. While teachers were forced to work from home, being able to update the systems remotely instead of having to return to the school to access SIMS made everything significantly easier to manage.

Sally says, "Making the changeover in March 2020, just at the start of lockdown, was incredibly helpful timing. The pandemic has only reinforced the need for and benefits of switching to a cloud-based information system."

As with any new change, there have been some minor obstacles to overcome. For example, the school were keen to keep the assessment data from their previous system. But Sally reports, "Herts for Learning kindly downloaded the report – it had been a concern for us but was quickly resolved. We are now doing the baseline assessments for early years, using the step-by-step guide from Herts for Learning, which has been amazing."

Some teachers had initial concerns about using the new system. However, Sally reveals they soon realised that Arbor was more user-friendly, and they quickly became used to entering the new assessment information and extracting the data they needed.

One of the overriding benefits, for both the SLT and office staff, is the ease of access provided by Arbor. Previously, staff members needed to place requests for reports and information from SIMS. Now they appreciate being able to retrieve that information themselves, especially as they become more and more familiar with the new system.

In the longer term, Letchmore Infants' and Nursery School plans to move completely to cloud-based systems.

Sally says,

"Everything is quicker, faster and more seamless. I can't understand now why people would be reluctant to move to cloud-based – I would absolutely recommend that any school makes the change.

"I'm meeting with the school business manager from Almond Hill School tomorrow, and she is considering also moving to Arbor. I will highly recommend it."