

Minutes of the Computer Committee meeting held on 17th May 2021 at 13:00pm via Teams

Present: Jason Randall, Allison Lewis, Ian Elliott, Charlie Weiss, Catherine Reid, Jason Carroll, Larry Paulson, Ignas Budvytis, Saul Samuels Moselle (UCS)

Apologies: Aylmer Johnson, Qi Guo

1. Declarations of Interest

None

2. MMA

None

3. IT Dept Update

We have been busy during the last lockdown period supporting staff, fellows and students. During this period a lot of fellows decided to replace their existing laptops/desktops so IE has been very busy with these.

We have been working from home unless it was absolutely essential to be on site and apart from one occasion we have only ever had one member of staff present at a time. This has worked very well with most work being carried out from home. We have equipment in WCDC and JR said that he successfully managed to remotely wipe four servers from home.

We are now back to manning the office on a three week rota basis as before. This will be kept under review as we anticipate that things may change again on June 21st when the next Government advice is issued. If things go well then in theory we could all go back into the office but whether we actually want to do this is up for discussion. We may see requests for flexible working which is currently being discussed by HODS as it is recognised that there needs to be a mechanism in place to help achieve a good work/life balance. We have found it challenging at times but as a team we have done extremely well.

AL has been working on osTicket. She is using a test environment with updated versions of webserver software and PHP with a view to upgrading the live system later this year.

AL has also been working over the summer to replace network switches that we purchased last year. Most of these have been commissioned this year with just one or two left to do. We have also taken delivery of our new core switches which link sites together and hopefully these will be installed by the end of the year.

About two months ago a zero day Exchange server vulnerability was announced. Microsoft immediately released some patches but unfortunately the hackers were ready and servers were already being attacked. We immediately started patching all of our servers after the announcement at around 08:00 that morning and it took all day to complete this. We initially thought we were safe but Microsoft then started releasing tools to show if you had been infiltrated and on running them we found activity on two of our servers. This activity was probably more of an automated routine used to install backdoor software which was detected by running various scanning tools. In the intervening time we discovered no serious activity had occurred but to be on the safe side we restored both servers to a point in time before the hack occurred. Two subsequent scans have revealed nothing and no loss of service occurred.

Our CCTV servers are now virtualised replacing the physical equipment based at WCDC. This has gone well and they are easily the busiest servers in our environment although manageable.

We have also migrated the College website from the MWS which is being shut down due to the service making a loss. This affected around 150 institution websites. We migrated over the last two weeks and just a few bugs remain which are being fixed. The new host for the website is Cambridge based Mythic Beasts (a company part-founded by ex-Clare students). It actually works out cheaper to host than the MWS and is going well so far.

We have sent out emails to staff and fellows re the UIS Hermes to Exchange Online (EoL) migration project. According to UIS we have 229 active Hermes accounts but only 98 of these have been accessed so far this year. Ten of these belong to staff with the rest belonging to fellows or retirees. JR is to start emailing people on this list asking them to start their migrations and we have six months left to complete this. The simplest thing for people to do would be to change their @cam delivery address in lookup to point to EoL if they already have an account but the migration procedure is not arduous. LP once more expressed his displeasure at being tied into Microsoft products and the possible implications to people like himself who are soon to retire. He mentioned that Computer Lab staff are looking at possible third party solutions and JR stated that anyone was entitled to do this.

4. Draft 21-22 Budget

Printer/toner usage figures are up as we start to come out of lockdown.

Computer software costs are going up by around £3k as we need to upgrade SQL Server from 2012 to 2022.

Networking costs are increasing by around £6k as St Regis is now back in operation so there will be annual costs associated with that such as fibre rental and increased wi-fi provision. Network improvements are also planned for the Gatehouse in Ashby Court where two members of Housekeeping staff are running off one piece of shared CAT 5 cable instead of fibre. We need PoE so we can also provide a wi-fi access point and fixed desk phones.

MCS costs are down by around £2k as we are not replacing any Dell PCs this year due to COVID restricting the number of machines in operation. We can wait until next year to see if increased usage gives us a need for more machines.

Maintenance/Service costs have decreased by over 50% because we had provisionally budgeted last year to upgrade the website which didn't happen. The current thinking is that one of the College's Trust funds may pay for any redevelopment so this sum has been removed.

WCDC costs have increased due to their intention to start charging us £3k per annum for rack rental. This has historically been very cheap as we only paid for electricity and fibre rental but as they are running at a loss this has changed. Although this had only ever been a verbal contract JR has reminded them of the agreement but they are now keen to formalise the agreement. Despite other options being available JR said that it was still working out as the cheapest option.

There was a huge amount of depreciation in last year's budget which this year is not there. This skews the figures somewhat and without this the overall budget is around £5k less than last year. This may well alter when the final figures are compiled as we don't know the full depreciation figure yet.

Overall the budget keeps us operationally secure with no corners being cut.

SSM asked how much of the budget comes from the connection charge and what that figure is as a percentage. JR said that it was listed under Internet Service Income and came in at £55,911 (about 20%).

5. UCS Report

SSM asked if there were any plans to improve/revamp the website which is acknowledged as not being great. He also asked if any UCS input would be possible with regard to any future redesigns. JR explained that there is currently a website working group chaired by Jonathan Goodman although it hasn't met for over a year. JC confirmed that there has been past UCS representation on this group but SSM was not aware of this and thought that involvement may have been from the previous UCS rep. JR recommended that he contact JG but he would find out who had previously been representing the UCS in the working group. JR also stated that a design brief had already been created along with a "wants" list with a few companies being earmarked for approach.

SSM then asked if there were any plans to improve the rooms database which is not very easy to use or accessible according to student feedback. JR explained that AL has taken on the role of maintaining the database from a fellow and whilst we would like to improve it we simply don't have the resources to do this. AL confirmed this and said that whilst we always listen to student feedback the database is extremely complex and intricate to maintain. Although it has been moved to an updated Filemaker platform this has not improved its functionality. JR said that this really needs a separate full time member of staff but we currently don't have the resources for this. We can maintain it but no more as things stand.

SSM asked if there are plans to start re-opening the MCS rooms as the pandemic eases. JR confirmed that they will now be open 24/7 as of today with the exception of the FML which can be booked through Moodle. Numbers of machines are still restricted due to social distancing needs and in the case of the Castle House facility ventilation issues. This room has also been badly affected in recent months by numerous floods but the room has now been redecorated and is back in use. AL is on site today and will be reinstalling machines in this area. The website has been updated to reflect these provisions.

SSM asked if there were any plans to modernise the printing facilities in the FML. JR said that we already have a new Sharp MFD in the downstairs room and would like to increase provision but costs may curtail this. He has plans to install an MFD at St Regis if costs are reasonable.

6. MCR Report

No rep present

7. AOB

None

Provisional dates of next year's meetings

Monday 11th October 2021

Monday 22nd November 2021

Monday 24th January 2022

Monday 14th March 2022

Monday 16th May 2022