

Managed Information Technology (IT) Services – A Buyers Guide

Technology and the Internet has changed how we live and work. They drive business growth by increasing collaboration and innovation.

Social Care is moving towards a more digital way of working with care providers adopting a wide variety of software to enable greater transparency on how they deliver and monitor their care and support to their clients. The use of digital tools such as care planning software, electronic medication administration record systems, programmes to support staff rosters, and quality and audit software packages have all been developed to enable care providers to evidence what they are doing and when, not just for commissioners and regulators but so that we can be assured we are operating our services effectively and efficiently.

As social care professionals, we have a duty of care for those we support. This is more than delivering actual care, it also includes the information we gather and use for providing that care.

Being responsible with digital information is hard work. There are lots of things that can go wrong, including several risks that cannot be seen or predicted like computer viruses or disgruntled staff.

As a provider of social care, you are responsible for how you manage the information you gather on your clients and staff through legislation, regulatory requirements and through contracts. You may already be aware of [Cyber Essentials](#) and the [Data Security and Protection Toolkit](#) (DSPT). In time, you will not be able to provide certain services if you cannot demonstrate that you practice good data security.

You may be reading this document as an expert in social care and lack the personal expertise to define what Information Technology (IT) you need for your service, or how to look after it. You may be proficient in the use of IT but not have the time to look after it within your service. The result is that you are using IT in your service and need more knowledge or more time to make it work for you.

This document aims to offer guidance on the decision-making process of how to bring in expert help, by understanding what technology support you need and how to ensure you get the best value when using an external provider to support you. It offers you questions to ask suppliers and guidance on how to move from one supplier to another.

You may wonder what a Managed IT Service is, so we asked two IT companies to define their services and assist in writing this procurement guide.

Managed Information Technology Services is something that your business can buy from a **Managed Services Provider** (or MSP for short) to look after your computer systems on a day-to-day basis. More mature MSPs will work with you to improve how

your business runs or to increase your profits. This is explained in more detail on page 4.

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1. IT and the Social Care provider

The size of your business or service is not the most important consideration when thinking about Information Technology as even the smallest care providers will likely have at least one computer. Some of the jobs that you might be doing with a computer could include:

- Rostering when your staff need to work.
- Working out staff pay and paying your staff.
- Banking to know you have been paid.
- Paying suppliers.
- Writing and updating care plans for your clients.
- Using electronic medication administration systems.
- Using email to talk to client families.
- Using video calls for meetings
- Using video consulting with GPs and hospitals.
- Ordering food or other supplies to keep clients and staff equipped.

There is a lot more to IT than having a computer. This section of the document outlines what some of the other parts to IT include.

What Does “IT” Include:

Starting with the computer itself, you may have a computer box that stands up or lays down with a separate screen or, it may be a laptop that you can move around or take home with you. This computer may access *the Internet* using either a *cable* or by a *wireless connection*.

The link between the computer and the Internet is called a **Local Area Network (LAN)** and you will have pieces of equipment like **switches** and **access points** to make this work. If you have a large setting, you may need lots of equipment. You will also have equipment called **routers** and **firewalls** to connect your LAN to the Internet.

To go on the Internet, you will need to have an **Internet Service Provider (ISP)**, for example through BT, Virgin or Sky. You can get different types of service depending upon where you are and what you need. You may be familiar with basic services like **ADSL, FTTC or Infinity**. Not all services are available in all areas. If you are a larger care provider you may well need an “**ethernet**” or “**leased line**” service, sometimes called a **circuit**.

We are currently developing guidance on internet connectivity and broadband. This guidance will be available on the Digital Social Care website www.digitalsocialcare.co.uk later this year.

As you, the care provider, increase in size or find more ways that using a computer can make your life easier, you may need more than one. Having multiple computers enables more people to work on more things at the same time.

You may need to share information between computers and there are several ways to do this. The best way for you will be specific to your organisation and you should **always seek advice from an expert**. Getting it even slightly wrong will cause you problems later.

Your MSP will offer suggestions for information sharing and may use terms like “**on premise**” and “**Cloud**”. Both have their own advantages and disadvantages with the right one depending upon your needs and situation. However, some MSPs are fiercely loyal to one over the other and you should check this does not bias their advice.

Sharing information “**on premise**” means your data is physically located within your premises. If you have more than 5+ computers, you may need a dedicated piece of equipment called a **server** to hold those files.

The “**Cloud**” is another term for the Internet, and you will pay a subscription to your MSP for access to a service that can share your information to your people. You may hear product names like **SharePoint, OneDrive for Business** and **Google Drive**.

Regardless of where your information is being stored, you need to ensure that it has a **good quality backup**. **Even with a Cloud service, you need to have a backup**. A good backup will keep multiple copies of your data, be stored in a safe place, be resilient, automated, checked, tested and documented.

You may want to connect other IT things to your Local Area Network, such as printers and CCTV cameras. In more modern settings, care providers are also running telephones (known as **VOIP**), TVs, tablets and smart phones over their LAN.

When using a computer, regardless of how you connect them together or go on the Internet, **having good security is crucial**. Some basic security measures are:

- Unique usernames and passwords for each user.
- Routinely install security updates to your computers.
- Have anti-virus software installed and keep it updated.
- If you use email, have something check it for viruses and spam.
- Only letting people have access to enough information to do their job.

You can find more guidance on each of these measures in our [cyber security guide](#). The computers and things that you need to put with your computers will change over time. In the section called Planning and Budgeting on page 5, this document offers advice on how to approach this.

2. What are Managed IT Services?

With Managed IT Services, you agree to pay a fixed amount each month to a Managed Services Provider (MSP). They will then monitor your technology, proactively try to prevent issues and fix any problems that crop up. Normally this includes support time though some providers may have other options. It is rare that a provider will include materials like cables, spare parts or even complete computer systems.

The **bare minimum** you should expect for Managed IT Services are:

- Monitoring of your network, servers and computers for issues that need to be resolved by the provider. This should include monitoring critical services like your backups and security software.
- Preventative maintenance, like servicing your car, to ensure that your computer systems run better and for longer.
- Technical support for your team when something goes wrong.
- Transparency on what they are doing for you.

More mature MSP will have other services on offer, some included for free and some as a chargeable extra. You should expect your MSP to ask or advise you about security, backup and whether or how your business is using the Cloud. Some MSPs will also be able to help with your telephony and getting onto the Internet if you need it.

3. Internal IT Manager vs Managed Services Provider

Should you recruit an IT manager or bring in a Managed Services Provider? It depends!

If your need for technology is complex or you have lots of people using it, an internal IT manager may be better than outsourcing. This person can learn about your business and what your needs are and can be more personable and potentially respond quicker to challenges.

The drawback is that one person will not have the same breadth of knowledge available as a Managed Services Provider. You may find that even with an internal IT manager, you still need extra support from an external MSP. Many MSPs do work with and support internal IT managers.

4. Involve your key people with buying.

Whether your care provider is big or small, responsibility for technology rests at the top. This is [recommended by the National Cyber Security Centre](#) and is a rule for the [Cyber Essentials](#) standard. In your organisation, this may be the owner or directors, nominated individuals or your registered manager.

If your organisation completes the [Data Security and Protection Toolkit](#) (DSPT) you may have people fulfilling [various specific roles related to data protection](#). These roles may be fulfilled by the same person in some organisations, or a few people in larger businesses and these roles will need to input to the technology services you buy.

The Cyber Essentials standard is not mandatory for social care however, it is good practice and may be required by your insurers. Cyber Essentials will protect your business from the top 80% of security threats.

Once engaged, your Managed Service Provider should become a key person for future decision making. Your MSP should nominate a person to be the key link and to be responsible for your business; this trusted advisor will bring insight and experience to support your service. Some MSPs may also offer this level of strategic advice as a formal service.

5. Planning and Budgeting

With the key people in your business, you will already be updating your business plan and budget for technology once a year. Between updates you should review at least quarterly, more frequently in a larger business or during a period of change.

A good plan looks at the technology you have now and what your business needs for the future. It will need to align to your business goals and aspirations. Do you have old equipment that needs replacing? Is your business growing or shrinking and will you need more, or less or different technology?

These are tough questions and can often lead to more questions than answers! You should ask your Managed Services Provider for their advice on answering them. To do this, you must be comfortable with talking openly about your business plans with your MSP to get the best advice.

Your technology plan will require investment. How much money you need to invest will vary over time. An average investment of 1-2% of turnover is a good measure however, a good IT investment plan will pay itself. Do not cut corners to cut costs, it will cause problems down the road.

Allow time to put any plans into action. You may need to allow weeks or months for activity to happen. Even finding and appointing a new Managed Services Provider can take several weeks.

6. What makes a good MSP for a social care provider?

There are thousands of IT service providers in the UK. They are not all the same; some are good at what they do whereas others are exceptional. You should pick an MSP that is familiar with the specific needs of a social care provider, specifically things like keeping information safe and secure, ideally one that has experience of supporting clients through information governance tools such as the Data Security and Protection Toolkit.

Here are some key traits that make a good Managed Services Provider:

- The people working for them are personable and speak using language that you can understand (so do not use techno speak!) They will be able to explain technology in terms that you can understand without being patronising.
- Their approach to managing your IT will be consistent yet adaptable and flexible to your unique business needs. They will be able to grow or reduce their offering with your requirements.
- They will bring benefits to your business that will outweigh their cost.
- They will always be looking to be better. This may be through training to increase knowledge or building new services to make technology work better for their clients.

Some MSPs focus on looking after certain types of business, such as law or health care. This gives them an advantage: they will know how your business works and the likely

challenges you need to overcome. Ask for case studies and references from customers in similar lines of social care to you.

There are also IT businesses where Managed IT Services is not their core business and so they offer service as a bolt-on to their service or product. Do be aware of the potential pitfalls of this add on service which may tie you in to using a product or service that might not always be appropriate to your business. You should work with an MSP that is not going to be distracted by more profitable or more dominant parts of their business.

Whatever the type of MSP that you decide to go with, they should be a trusted adviser, a key person to your business – see page 4. It needs to be more than a traditional client/supplier arrangement. The word is: relationship.

7. Questions to Ask.

Every Managed Service Provider will do something in a slightly different way, it is not very often that you can “compare apples with apples”. Here are some good questions to explore with your MSP when buying their services:

1. Service Level Agreements (SLA)

When you have an issue with your technology, you want to know that it is being fixed quickly. The term “Service Level Agreement” or SLA is used to describe a promise from the Managed Service Provider act within a specified time frame.

Nearly all MSPs will offer a “response” service level agreement. The actual speed of response will often vary for different reasons and you may have to pay more for a quicker response.

Fewer MSPs will offer a “fix” service level agreement because it is hard to predict what might break and how it needs fixing. If you are highly reliant on technology to run your business, look at resilience options and stand-by equipment.

Ask MSPs what types of service levels they have on offer and make sure you can choose one that meets the needs of your business. Bear in mind some things need fixing right away and others can wait a few hours or days.

Transparency is also important. Ask MSPs how they measure their performance of their service levels and report that information back to you. Lastly, what happens if the MSP fails to meet the expected level of service?

2. Service Hours

What hours do you work? What hours does your MSP work?

It is highly likely that as a social care provider, you work long days or even on a 24x7 basis to care for your clients. Your MSP may only want to work 9 to 5 with an early finish on Friday.

If you can care for your clients around the clock without using a computer, your MSP does not need to work the same hours as you. However, you do need to know that you can call upon your MSP out of hours if you are really stuck with an issue.

Ask your MSP what hours they work. Ask them what happens out of hours and, what happens if you report a serious issue close to the end of the working day or week.

You should be also check what additional costs may apply if you request help from your MSP out of hours. It is common that staff will ask for extra pay and the MSP passes that cost onto you, the client.

3. The Contract: How Long and Getting Out?

For you and your MSP to get the best from the relationship, it will require some form of commitment from you both. This is done as a contract, like your mobile phone or lease on your premises.

Although you should expect a contract of at least 1 year, it will take that time to build a decent working relationship with your MSP. A contract of 2-3 years is OK though you should be wary of a longer contract. If your provider asks for a longer contract term, ask them about break clauses to protect both parties.

Ask the MSP what will happen at the end of the contract term. Will the contract automatically renew for another long contract period or, will it continue “month by month”?

Ask the MSP how much notice you need to give if you want to finish the contract with them. A fair notice period would be between 1-3 months. Read through section 9 on Changing Suppliers which provides more questions to ask about giving notice to your MSP.

Lastly, you should ask your MSP what happens if they fail to live up to expectations you have agreed within the contract. If they do not keep their side of the bargain, can you give them notice to finish the contract early?

4. Onboarding Process

The first days and weeks of signing up with an MSP will be busy. During this time, the MSP should have an established “onboarding process” that will allow them to look after you quickly.

Some of the jobs that the MSP will need to do for onboarding, will include:

- Removing access from your old MSP into your systems.
- Installing tools to allow the new MSP to provide technical support.
- Writing up initial documentation on your systems.
- Password changes.
- Health and safety assessments.

Establishing contact with your other IT-related suppliers.

Depending upon how you have been using computers in your business, your MSP may have identified a package of work that needs doing to get you into a place where they are able to support you. This might be updating settings or installing extra security measures.

The most important thing your new MSP will be doing during their onboarding process, is making sure that your people know how to get in touch to receive help and guidance. Ask your MSP how they plan to communicate with your team.

Onboarding should be a well thought out and documented process that your new MSP has done many times before. Ask your MSP what their onboarding process looks like. Does your new MSP have documentation that can be shared amongst your team to explain what is going to happen?

5. Testimonials

Earlier in this document, we said that some Managed Service Providers focus on certain types of customers. You do not *need* a MSP like this though you do want one that has proven experience within the social care sector.

Who is this MSP already working for? Ask for reference customers and follow those up with a phone call. You will only be given the best customers for a reference so ask some probing questions.

Here are some questions that you could ask:

- What does the MSP consistently do well?
- What could the MSP do to improve?
- Have you had any issues with MSP and how did they overcome them?
- Have you had any success stories or “big wins” with MSP?

6. Keeping the Managed Service Provider secure

The software tools used by an MSP will give them **full access to your systems** around the clock. They need these tools to properly look after you, meaning you must trust your MSP is playing their part to keep their own systems safe and secure.

Here are some questions you could ask your MSP to ensure they take steps to stay secure themselves to help keep you secure:

- Do they have Cyber Essentials, IASME or ISO27001 certification?
- How do they provide security awareness training to their people?
- How do they track their people accessing your computer system?
- How do they keep the passwords to your systems secure?

When you complete the Data Security and Protection Toolkit, you will need to know that your supplier has a cyber security accreditation to answer evidence item 10.2.1.

If your MSP is going to have full access to your systems, it should be done using a dedicated support account that is unique to them. If you use services like Microsoft 365, you can give “Delegated Administration” to your MSP. This allows you to track their use of your systems.

Ask your MSP how they will, within their business, track which of their support people have been accessing your systems. They should be able to tell you who, when and why access is being used. If you have or plan to get Cyber Essentials for your business, you will need this information for question A7.6.

7. Keeping your data secure

In sections 5 and 6 of this document, we wrote about the importance of being able to share information about your business with your MSP to get the best advice from them.

Combined with the access they have to your computer systems, **your MSP will be close to highly sensitive and confidential information** about you, your business and the clients that you look after.

Ask your MSP to sign a “non-disclosure agreement” (NDA). This agreement is a legal document that will provide you additional protection and recourse if your MSP were to share your confidential information without your permission.

A mature MSP will have a mutual NDA drafted into their support contract or as a separate agreement. However, we recommend asking a solicitor to draft an agreement that you can use with your MSP and other suppliers.

8. Insurance

Nobody wants to think that they are going to get it wrong but sometimes, it does not quite go to plan. If your MSP gives you poor advice or gets it completely wrong, and it causes you a serious issue, there may be grounds for compensation or a refund of services.

Your MSP will have professional indemnity insurance to cover themselves in the event of them being the cause of a problem. Ask your MSP what insurance they have in place and to what financial limit and request a copy for your records.

8. Common Pitfalls

Bringing in a new MSP should be plain sailing and the start of an amazing relationship that could well last for years. However, things can go wrong, and sometimes your new IT partner is not so amazing as you initially thought during the courting period.

Here are some of the common pitfalls that may come up:

Limitations on Support Hours

When your potential MSP is presenting their support options to you, you should be aware that some MSPs fully include support hours and others do not. Some MSPs charge differently for support.

Here are different ways that you may find your MSP charges:

- The first 15 minutes of a support ticket is included and then you pay.
- Inclusive remote support but on-site support is extra.
- Support time is included but project time is not.

- Adding new users is sometimes included and sometimes not.
- There is a limit on the number of support hours available in a month.
- If you have a monthly allowance of support time, does unused time rollover into the next month?

Over promise and under deliver

It is common for a salesperson to tell you that they can do everything, with bells and whistles thrown in. This sounds fantastic until you have signed on the dotted line and it turns out that your new MSP is not able to deliver on all those promises.

It is important that you set clear a clear picture with your new MSP around what is expected from BOTH sides and make sure they can do their part. It is better to do this from day one and address any concerns at the start.

Before you sign contracts and place orders, ask your potential MSP what happens if they do not live up to expectation. Will you get some money back or be able to sack them or, will you be expected to live with poor service?

“Land and Expand!”

We all love a bargain and sometimes, to get a deal over the line, a supplier may offer a service at a cut down price. Once you are over the line and tied in, suddenly you find that you are being told to buy extras that were not part of the original package.

You should be clear about what the service you are buying includes and does not include. Ask what else may be required later to avoid surprise and costs that you did not plan for.

Your MSP may uncover problems that you were not aware. These problems, left alone, could cause issues and extra cost later. You should also expect your MSP to look more towards the longer term by making constructive recommendations for upgrades and changes. Any proposals to make change should be with proper justification.

Oh - that is going to be extra!

Once you have defined the contract that your MSP is going to provide, it should clearly set out what is included and what is not included. This helps avoid unexpected costs and helps build a great relationship between your business and the MSP – no surprises!

As technology has become more distributed with “cloud-based” services, some MSPs are starting to differentiate between Managed IT Support and Managed IT Services. You should work with your MSP to set out expectations of these differences and what is included before signing the contract.

For Managed IT Support, you should expect to see things like:

- Checking backups are running OK.

- Helping your people with local issues on their computers
- Installing patches and security updates

For Managed IT Services, the MSP will be helping you with the setup of services like Microsoft 365 and Google Business.

We are not responsible for that...

As you get more confident with your computer systems, you will find more jobs that you can do with them. Some of those jobs are listed on page 2. This may mean setting up new relationships with companies that specialise in things like rostering or medication management.

When something does not work with the software packages you use in your business, you want to pick up the phone to one place and get the issue sorted quickly. However, it is not always within the gift of your MSP to solve issues with third party software - a common example of this happening is with accountancy or care planning software. Often, the MSP is blamed when the issue may well be with the software supplier.

Talk to your MSP about the other IT-related companies you work with. Ask what happens if you have an issue. Will your MSP own the issue to help you get it resolved or pass you off to the other supplier?

9. Changing Suppliers

Bringing in a new MSP to look after your systems is a big thing, whether it is for the first time or to replace an existing MSPs. The typical relationship with an MSP will run for 10 years. This is not because it is a 10-year contract but because it is a long-lasting mutually beneficial relationship that means you do not want to change provider.

Changing your supplier should be easy though there are things that will need consideration to avoid any issues. This section of the document looks at those issues.

Giving Notice

We wrote earlier in the document about getting into a contract with your Managed Services Provider. When it comes to changing suppliers, you should look back to the contract to understand the right way to exit the contract.

You will need to know:

- How to give notice. Should it be a formal letter, or will an email suffice?
- Who are you giving notice to? Should it go to a specific person?
- When should you give notice? Is there a notice period for the contract?

Transition Periods

When you are changing your Managed Service Provider, you will need to decide when the old supplier stops looking after your affairs and the new MSP starts. You may want to pay both MSPs to look after you for a short period of overlap, this is called a **transition**.

Transition periods are useful for the new MSP to work alongside the old MSP and learn about your business and systems. Not all MSPs will want to give or receive help, so it is best to ask your new supplier for their preference.

If they do ask for a period of transition, ask further questions to understand what the transition looks like. How long will it last for and at what point will the new MSP take responsibility from your old supplier.

You and your team need to be clear about which MSP you are calling up for support if you experience any issues during the transition period and you must make sure your staff are clear who to contact. This should be part of the **Onboarding Process** explained on page 9.

Documentation

To look after your systems, most MSPs will create documentation containing the key facts about your computer systems.

It may contain detail on things like:

- Usernames and passwords for systems, software and equipment.
- Lists of the equipment and software that you have.
- Networking information.
- How, where and when your systems are backed up.
- Details for 3rd parties, like phone numbers and contract details.
- Key contacts within your business.

When first engaging with your MSP, before contracts are signed, you should ask what documentation they will be holding on your business. You should also ask who owns that information at the end of your contract with them.

When first engaging with your MSP, before contracts are signed, you should ask what documentation they will be holding on your business. You should also ask who owns that information at the end of your contract with them. This should be covered in the **contracts** you have between you and the MSP.

Even if things have broken down between you and your old MSP, the **bare minimum** information they should be providing is the passwords to your systems. Some MSPs do have tools for keeping passwords safe and, if you ask, can give you access to those systems. You should always have quick access to your passwords in case of emergency.

Internal Communications

When changing suppliers, your team needs to know when to stop talking to the old MSP and start requesting assistance from the new. They need to know how to contact the new MSP and what to expect when they do.

Your new MSP should help you with this and a good opportunity to do so, is when you work through their “onboarding process”. We wrote about onboarding earlier in this document on page 9.

Cutting Ties and Removing Access

Earlier on, we wrote about your Managed Services Provider needing access to most or all your computer systems for them to provide service. With a new MSP coming in, access given to your old supplier needs turning off and normally, your new MSP will do this.

Always check that your new MSP is doing this and, to be sure, ask them to ensure every password on your systems is changed where possible. You do not want your previous supplier coming back into your systems later, by accident or deliberately.