

Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

Meeting to be held on Tuesday, 10 November 2020

Electoral Division affected: (All Divisions);
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Education in Lancashire - Digital Challenges and Opportunities

Contact for further information:

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Executive Summary

This reports seeks to provide members of the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee with information on the digital challenges and opportunities faced by schools in Lancashire as a result of the ongoing Covid 19 restrictions.

Recommendation

The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee is asked to:

- i. Recognise the continuing digital opportunities and challenges faced by schools across Lancashire.
- ii. Note and comment on the work undertaken by the county council to further support schools.

Background and Advice

Context

During the first stages of the lockdown it was quickly apparent that the education of children and young people would be impacted over time due to the extended gap in formal education. Once the wider lockdown was in place, schools were closed to all pupils, with the exception of children of key workers and those children and young people from groups that were considered to be potentially more vulnerable. This included looked after children and other children with involvement and support from Children's Social Care, as well as those children with additional special educational needs. The Department for Education (DfE) identified that all other children would be accessing education remotely from home.

Although the identified vulnerable groups were expected to attend school, a number were unable to due to parent's self- isolating or were only accessing part time due to restrictions schools had to put in place to keep staff and pupils safe.

Given that the move to close schools to all beyond those priority groups was done with relatively short notice, schools had little time at the start of the pandemic to prepare their pupils or families for remote learning. Initially schools provided paper

based tasks and resources, developing online materials over time, supported by Lancashire's Professional Development Services as well as a range of national and commercial providers.

Schools' duty to provide remote education

The DfE has stipulated that, where a pupil, class, group or small number of pupils need to self-isolate, or there is a local lockdown requiring pupils to remain at home, there is an expectation that all schools should be able to immediately offer learners access to remote education. Schools should also ensure that remote education, where needed, is of high-quality and aligns as closely as possible with in-school provision. Schools have had the first part of the autumn term to prepare remote learning continuity plans.

The Secretary of State gave a temporary continuity direction in order to require schools to provide remote education for state-funded, school-age children unable to attend school due to coronavirus (COVID-19). This came into effect from Thursday 22 October 2020. From this point forward, all schools need to have these remote curriculum learning plans in place.

Actions taken to address digital poverty and support remote learning

- 1) Provision of internet access and hardware: DfE Digital Access Scheme – Phase 1 – summer 2020

It was recognised by the DfE that many families may not have access to the internet and children may not have access to a suitable device.

The DfE launched a Digital Access Scheme in April 2020. This provided routers and/or a device (laptop or tablet) to three groups of children and young people:

- Children with a social worker
- Care leavers
- Year 10 pupils

The local authority (LA) collated nominations from social workers and schools for the first two groups. Schools were responsible for identifying and nominating Year 10 pupils. This meant that allocations were informed by need.

It is important to note that not all children in these groups would be allocated a device - only those who were known to have no access to the internet and/or a device at home and were not attending school full time. In addition, Lancashire's Virtual School had previously identified that some Children Looked After (CLA) learners did not have access to digital devices and already had developed a scheme using CLA pupil premium top up funding to provide laptops for these pupils. This meant that the DfE project enabled us to extend the reach of this offer.

In Phase 1 of the national offer, the LA provided forecast numbers to the DfE. The DfE had calculated a maximum number of devices that could be claimed by each LA. This calculation was based on school census data.

Lancashire requested and was allocated:

- 2163 lap tops and 446 routers for children with a social worker.
- 2582 laptops 60 and routers for year 10 pupils in maintained schools.
- Allocations were made according to identified pupil need, and in the case of CLA learners extended to those young people placed outside of Lancashire.

Several special schools requested iPads as it was felt that these would be more accessible for their children with more complex needs. As the DfE scheme did not provide these, LCC exchanged a number of laptops for iPads and then allocated the spare laptops to care leavers and looked after children who were not nominated or in care when the scheme started. LCC allocated 81 iPads. These remaining laptops will be provided to additional children looked after as required.

The DfE also provided 4G wireless routers to support learners who could not access the internet otherwise.

LCC set up a reserve list for any spare devices allocated by the DfE. Of the 124 on the reserve list all but 14 learners now have a device allocated.

All hardware provided had a firewall and other security measures installed prior to distribution by the DfE. The laptops provided to Year 10 pupils have been identified as the property of the school or setting, however in the case of children looked after these are nominally held by the LA but will be gifted to older learners to support continuity of learning post 16 and post 18.

DFE Digital Access Scheme - Phase 2 - Sept 2020

Phase 2 of the DfE scheme to address digital poverty was designed to support those pupils who were self-isolating or shielding due to complex medical conditions. This would include pupils with other medical needs that prevented them from attending school and who were also in circumstances of a local or national lockdown that prevented them from attending school.

This scheme targets pupils in year groups 3-11. The scheme is based upon the LA collation of contact details for a lead person in all maintained schools. These were submitted to the DfE. The school would be then contacted directly by the DfE in order to request devices directly. A recent example of this is St Bede's Catholic High School, Lytham St Annes who were allocated 34 laptops.

LCC continues to support schools to access devices via the DfE Phase 2 scheme and provides support with technical issues for children supported by social care and care leavers who were allocated devices in Phase 1. In addition, the DfE have provided a range of services to support schools to address issues of digital poverty including:

- Supporting access to the internet: a pilot scheme to support disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people when schools are affected by disruption to face-to-face education due to COVID-19 offering free access to BT Wi-Fi hotspots and increased data allowances on mobile devices.

- Providing guidance to schools on how to secure government funding to set up a digital education platform, which has been supported through 'The Key' – a digital school improvement platform for schools leader. This enabled schools to access one of two free-to-use digital education platforms: G Suite for Education or Office 365 Education.
- Support for schools to source peer to peer support to make effective use of technology via the EdTech Demonstrator Programme. This platform supports schools and settings to engage with a wider network of schools and colleges who are already using remote education technology resources for help and support.

The full range of national support to address digital poverty and to strengthen remote learning has been shared with schools through LCC's regular COVID-19 bulletin, currently issued twice weekly via the Schools' Portal.

2) Connected Kids Programme

This is a programme based in Lancaster area and coordinated by Lancaster University.

It is collaborative programme involving schools and the Eden North Partnership and focuses on providing targeted support to secondary age pupils in the most deprived areas of Lancaster and Morecambe through the provision of devices and data. To date this project has supported approximately 320 young people.

In addition primary school pupils have been given resources and home activity packs designed by Lancaster University staff and sponsored by Wilkinson's; these were distributed to those pupils who were not able to access resources online.

3) Lancashire Digital Skills Partnership Group

Lancashire have a Digital Skills Partnership Steering Group which is looking at the wider population and digital need, with the aim of providing digital equality. A lottery bid for funding to support this work was submitted but was unfortunately unsuccessful. However the Lancashire Digital Skills Partnership Steering Group are looking at a Lancashire wide campaign to engage businesses to make donations to supply devices and data to young people. It is hoped that this project will be launched during the second half of the autumn term.

4) Support for education for pupils learning at home

At a national level the DfE have provided an extensive list of on-line learning platforms that parents, carers and schools can access free of charge. In addition, school-led webinars have been made available for teachers to provide guidance on how to adapt teaching practice for remote education. Teachers can access examples of annotated lesson plans for remote teaching and read case studies and webinars on curriculum content choices and sequencing. In addition a resources package has been provided including guidance on selecting the right educational resources for individual schools.

Schools can also access a self-assessment framework via the DfE, to help school leaders and governors consider how to strengthen their remote education offer.

Lancashire's Professional Development Service

LCC has published regular bulletins and newsletters to schools and parents throughout the pandemic to provide advice and guidance on home education, learning activities and links to on line platforms. Subject specific consultancy support for primary and secondary schools to support the planning and delivery of remote learning has been provided by Lancashire Teaching and Learning Consultant teams and a range of resource materials produced such as new English Bridging Units to support planning for primary schools.

The Virtual School has provided links to free learning platforms on the website and access for all looked after children and previously looked after children to the Britannica Learning Platform.

Schools and colleges

Work is underway to collate and share good practice examples of support for remote learning through advisory contact with schools. Schools who buy into school improvement support with LCC via the Setting Support Guarantee (SSG) will be supported to review and evaluate their remote learning provision. Early feedback indicates that schools have a wide range of platforms and approaches to remote learning that are tailored to the needs and capacity within their school.

One example of good practice in establishing the nature of take up of remote learning came from Mount Carmel school:

The school held an afterschool online assembly with Year 7 and Year 8 to find out who had access to technology then followed up those students who did not engage. This enabled them to confirm that approximately 75% of pupils (120/160) had the access and commitment to engage. Following this, the school has developed a strategy for following up on those students who do not access the expected remote learning when isolating. This involves the learning mentors or teaching assistants linked to the year group contacting the pupil(s) and supporting them to access /complete the learning at the end of the notational school day.

Early indication suggests that this has been well received and is supporting pupil engagement. However a school's capacity to sustain such a model may be tested in the event of increasing numbers of pupils and / or staff being required to self-isolate. An LCC audit of schools' engagement with and experiences of developing online learning has identified the following:

Strengths:

- Use of a range of external learning platforms.
- Good virtual training and telephone support for families to access remote learning.
- Schools having a bank of laptops that they can lend out to different pupils as isolating bubbles change.

- Schools analysing uptake, engagement and impact of remote learning.

Barriers:

- Schools still need to invest in technology to support non eligible pupils.
- Larger families find it difficult to provide separate devices for all children to access remote learning.
- Some families find it difficult to navigate learning sites, user names and passwords.
- Parental access to broadband or broadband of sufficient quality.
- The time that is required of parents to ensure that children can engage meaningfully with remote learning, particularly in primary.

Summary

- A range of national and local initiatives are being utilised in a coherent manner to ensure that where schools identify pupils who cannot access digital learning, the need is swiftly addressed.
- There is a wide range of remote learning provision across Lancashire schools.
- The remote learning provision is challenging for schools with significant levels of infection.
- The planning for and provision of quality remote learning is a priority for all schools and settings and will be a focus for ongoing school review and development work on both a local and national level.
- There remains a need to improve local connectivity and to support access to the internet for some families.

Consultations

NA

Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

Risk management

Finance

There was no direct grant that came into the LA, request for laptops were made against specific criteria and were either applied for by the LA or directly by schools (dependent on the DfE prescribed criteria and process).

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985
List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Tel
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Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate

NA