

Urgent Decision Taken on Behalf of Cabinet

Report to the Leader of the County Council and Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools

Report submitted by: Executive Director for Education and Children's Services

Part I

Electoral Division affected:
(All Divisions);

Supporting Remote Learning by Providing Laptops to Lancashire Schools

Contact for further information:

Sarah, Callaghan, Tel: (01772) 538840, Director of Education and Skills,

sarah.callaghan@lancashire.gov.uk

Executive Summary

Currently, schools are open to two key categories of pupils: vulnerable children and the children of critical workers. The Department for Education has made it explicitly clear that children and young people not falling into either of these categories should continue to access learning remotely.

Updated guidance from the Department for Education published on 7 January, 2021, sets out a minimum amount of remote education which must be provided at each Key Stage for primary and secondary schools. Access to remote learning during the pandemic is dependent on the availability of laptops.

The guidance states that schools must overcome barriers to digital access for pupils by distributing school-owned laptops by a user agreement or contract.

Lancashire has 175,701 pupils at 628 schools and to ensure that all children and young people are able to access remote learning presents a challenge. Our data tells us that 37,367 (21.3%) children and young people across the county are identified as disadvantaged, ranging from 11.9% in the Ribble Valley to 31.2% in Burnley.

The objective of this report is to meet this challenge, through the allocation of free laptops for pupils who have not been able to access remote learning through any of the national or local schemes currently available.

Reason for Urgency

This decision is urgent and cannot await the next meeting of Cabinet on 4 February 2021. The reason for this is that there is a real risk in terms of being able to secure any supply of laptops and BT Lancashire Services has confirmed 1,800 devices can be supplied immediately (at approximately £350 per device) but these devices can

only be held until 5pm today, after which point the opportunity may be lost and they may be sold to other organisations. This decision is therefore being taken on behalf of Cabinet by the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order C16(1).

Recommendation

The Leader of the County Council and the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools are asked to:

- i. Support the process outlined within this report to identify the number of pupils unable to access remote learning;
- ii. Dependent on the number identified from this process, agree the purchase of laptops and distribution to Lancashire County Council schools and colleges, for use by pupils working remotely; and
- iii. Agree to applying a prioritisation process linked to vulnerability, to work within an allocated budget.

This decision should be implemented immediately for the purposes of Standing Order C29 as any delay could adversely affect the execution of the County Council's responsibilities. The reason for this is set out above.

Background and Advice

Throughout the pandemic, Lancashire schools and settings have continued to support children and young people, responding swiftly to Department for Education guidance as it has been updated. This includes the Department for Education expectations with regard to remote learning.

However, despite the initiatives outlined below, there remains a number of children and young people who are unable to access remote learning because they do not have access to laptops and/or broadband.

This report sets out what has been put in place to date to facilitate remote learning, what gaps are emerging and how these gaps can be addressed.

The requirement to learn online at home, as part of the social distancing measures, has had the largest impact upon disadvantaged families who have no access to IT. Coronavirus has revealed the scale of the digital divide with schools increased use of interactive platforms during 2020/21.

The issue is not just about the lack of suitable hardware, it is also about access to software and data (particularly if access is via a mobile phone) and also support, as many parents and carers may not have the knowledge or resources to support digital skills development.

Support provided to date

The majority of laptops and other devices (routers, tablets, chrome books) provided to Lancashire schools during the Covid-19 pandemic have been allocated through the Department for Education scheme, Access to Technology and Get Help with Technology.

The Department for Education scheme during the first lockdown was coordinated through Lancashire County Council, with the exception of Academy Trusts, who worked directly with the Department for Education. Devices could be requested for vulnerable pupils, pupils in year 10 and care leavers, who did not have access to the internet and/or a device. 4745 laptops and 506 routers were allocated and distributed during this period.

From September 2020, the Department for Education guidance was updated and the distribution of laptops meant schools requested devices directly. As all pupils had returned to school at this time, devices were allocated only for pupils in years 3 to 11, who were isolating or shielding, or in situations that required them to learn from home. These devices are owned by the school and used to loan to pupils so were requested by schools according to need.

In the current lockdown, the Department for Education has extended this scheme, and committed to providing increased numbers of devices. Schools identify their needs and request devices directly from the Department for Education. Eligible groups have been extended to include young people in further education.

Lancashire County Council is active in ensuring schools are aware of the current scheme and how to access devices. Information is updated through regular bulletins, and support is available for schools if they have issues with the new system, alongside continuing support to schools in accessing technical support for those devices allocated in the first scheme.

The Lancashire Response

In addition to the Department for Education programme, the Virtual School (that supports our children looked after) has also provided 106 laptops and iPads for care leavers from March 2020 to date, for those who did not receive one from the Department for Education programme, and for children in special schools for whom laptops were not appropriate.

The county council has also been involved and supported a number of related projects as follows:

- The Connected Kids Programme. This is a collaborative programme involving schools, the University of Lancaster and other partners, targeting secondary pupils in the most deprived areas of Lancaster and Morecambe and helping them access devices and data.
- BAE have offered up to 500 used devices in good condition for Lancashire schools, each month for 3 months. Lancashire County Council is coordinating the distribution of these to schools with high numbers of vulnerable pupils and low numbers of laptops.

- Chorley and South Ribble District Councils are seeking to provide devices for a number of vulnerable pupils in their area.
- Wyre and Lancaster Councils are offering laptops as part of the Northern Powerhouse initiative, to schools within their area.

Identified gaps in provision

Despite the significant response to proactively manage any barriers to remote learning in Lancashire, there are some children who are not currently able to engage in remote learning. Early indicators show that this is impacting on pupils in the early years who have not been able to take advantage of the Department for Education scheme. In addition to this, some schools were not offered the full numbers they required from the scheme, and some areas do not benefit from local initiatives.

To better understand how wide ranging this gap in provision is, a process is outlined within this report to capture a more accurate picture.

Sourcing the laptops

It is the intention to source internet enabled Chromebook's, through our contract with BT Lancashire Service. The equipment will be bought through BT Business Direct and will be delivered directly to schools. There are approximately 1,800 devices available immediately, and we are awaiting further information on what else can be sourced over the coming period.

Process

To ensure that all children are afforded the same access to remote learning, it is recommended that:

- A click sheet is uploaded to the schools portal, enabling schools to request laptops indicating what their current requirements are, if any local initiatives are already supporting their school and how/if they have already benefited from a Department for Education laptop request.
- The click sheets will be collated and a transparent and consistent prioritisation process will be undertaken, linked to the percentage of vulnerable children, those in receipt of free school meals and other indicators of deprivation to ensure that those most in need receive a laptop.
- Processes will be put in place to ensure that any remote access is managed securely.
- Laptops will be distributed to schools.

Timeline

29.01.21	Creation of Click sheet
01.02.21	Click sheet uploaded to schools portal
02.02.21	Bulletin announcement of the laptop offer
02.02.21 – 16.02.21	Return of school requests
16.02.21-19.02.21	Due diligence to allocate according to need
16.02.21	Sourcing of laptops complete
20.02.21	Confirmation letter to schools with allocated

	numbers and delivery date
w/e 20.02.21 onwards	Delivery of laptops to LCC schools

Consultations

N/A

Implications:

This item has the following implications, as indicated:

Risk management

Until the process is triggered to identify the number of laptops required, it is difficult to predict with any accuracy the scale of the issue.

To mitigate the risk of raising expectations that cannot then be met, the process will be managed sensitively, and the message to schools will make clear that a prioritisation approach may have to be undertaken.

All relevant safeguarding controls will be put in place, to ensure there is no risk to the laptops being used inappropriately.

There is a reputational risk if we are unable to secure sufficient devices, or if there are problems in delivering the devices. To mitigate this risk, we will work with our contracted providers and also maintain ongoing communication with our schools and settings.

Financial

Funding of £1m has been identified from unringfenced COVID-19 grant to support the provision of laptops through the prioritisation process outlined in the report. The initial order of c1,800 laptops will cost in the region of £630,000 and work will continue to secure additional devices up to the £1m available budget.

Legal

Each school will be asked to sign a basic agreement essentially acknowledging that the equipment is theirs and that the county council accepts no responsibility for it from that point onwards. This will include ensuring that schools are aware of their responsibilities regarding safeguarding the devices from misuse.

Procurement

As the expenditure is being made through an existing contract (BT Business Direct) held by BTLS on the county council's behalf, there are no procurement implications in respect of that expenditure.

List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Tel
-------	------	-------------

None

Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate

N/A

Urgent Decision Taken on behalf of Cabinet: Declarations

Leader of the County Council

Supporting Remote Learning by Providing Laptops to Lancashire Schools

Original recommendation, as set out in the report, approved without amendment. Yes/No *

Original recommendation amended and decision as follows: Yes/No *

I have a pecuniary/non-pecuniary interest in this matter. Yes/No *

If an interest is declared please give details below:

.....
Leader of the County Council

insert date

Chief Officer

I certify that this is an appropriate and accurate record within the terms of Standing Order C30(2) and (3) of the decision taken by the Cabinet Member.

.....
insert title of authorising officer

insert date

*Delete as appropriate

This decision is to be taken by more than one Cabinet Member and all relevant Cabinet Members must be in agreement with the decision

Urgent Decision Taken on behalf of Cabinet: Declarations

Cabinet Member for Children Young People and Schools

Supporting Remote Learning by Providing Laptops to Lancashire Schools

Original recommendation, as set out in the report, approved without amendment. Yes/No *

Original recommendation amended and decision as follows: Yes/No *

I have a pecuniary/non-pecuniary interest in this matter. Yes/No *

If an interest is declared please give details below:

.....
Cabinet Member for Children Young People
and Schools

insert date

Chief Officer

I certify that this is an appropriate and accurate record within the terms of Standing Order C30(2) and (3) of the decision taken by the Cabinet Member.

.....
insert title of authorising officer

insert date

*Delete as appropriate

This decision is to be taken by more than one Cabinet Member and all relevant Cabinet Members must be in agreement with the decision