



Co-operative Councils

Innovation Network

Digital Inclusion

South Ribble Borough Council

Tackling the Digital Divide in Schools

Throughout the Covid-19 restrictions since the new school year began in September 2020, it was clear that when classroom 'bubbles' were forced to self-isolate and learn remotely, many children were being left behind in their education. This is due to the digital divide; with many children from less advantaged backgrounds not having access to a device or only having access to an unsuitable device such as a mobile phone. There was also an issue of children having to share one device amongst several children and adults within the home. There are also many households who do not have access to the internet, restricting children's ability to learn remotely.

Upon the announcement of the third lockdown, and the instruction for all schools to take place remotely, it was evident that this would disproportionately impact the education of children from poorer backgrounds- the Sutton Trust found that only 26% of working-class children were taking part in 5 hours of lessons per day, compared to 40% of middle-class children. South Ribble Borough Council took the decision to support these children, and consultation began with schools in the poorest wards of the Borough to ascertain what gaps and needs were existing. As predicted, it was reported that many children from disadvantaged backgrounds did not have access to a device and/ or did not have access to the internet, and the DfE schemes alone were not filling the whole gap.

South Ribble Borough Council worked closely with the schools to ascertain in what ways it could best support the disadvantaged pupils, and it became apparent that the ability to access devices quickly would make a profound difference to individual children's ability to learn. Using schools' feedback on what devices would be effective, South Ribble Borough Council purchased Lenovo MT tablets, and on Friday 5th February 2021 provided 151 children from the 10 poorest schools in the Borough with a device on which they could access online learning. The cost of the 151 devices was £20k. Schools were provided with guidance on how they could access existing schemes to enable these pupils to get online and access the internet from these devices. The schemes included the BT WiFi voucher access, the governments collaboration with 10 network providers to supply 3G, and the government scheme for accessing wireless routers.

The Council have donated the devices to schools, and so it is hoped that even after the pandemic and remote learning, this project can continue to have a positive impact on children's lives and support the next generation to be digitally enabled.

One of the schools involved in the project gave the following message:

"I cannot stress enough the positive impact this will have on our children's lives and learning experiences during the pandemic and beyond."

Following the completion of this Pilot Project, Lancashire County Council have pledged £1million to tackle this problem county wide, and big local businesses have set up similar projects; these are extremely exciting and welcomed announcements. Digital exclusion is a growing inequality which is being further exacerbated by the pandemic, and it is hoped schemes like these make some steps in tackling this inequality.

For further information contact:

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