MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

Report of:	Sue Butcher – Executive Director Children Services
	Councillor Mieka Smiles – Executive Member for Communities and Education

Submitted to:	Individual Executive Member Meeting – The Mayor – 2 February 2021

Subject:	Extension of IT Provision in Schools for Virtual Learning

Summary

Proposed decision(s)
To support an initiative to ensure Middlesbrough's children and young people have access to IT hardware and internet connection to enable remote virtual learning.

Report for:	**Key decision:**	**Confidential:**	**Is the report urgent?**
Decision	Yes – more than 2 wards will be affected.	This report is not confidential.	For the purposes of the call-in procedure, this report is urgent.

Ward(s) affected
All

What is the purpose of this report?

1. The report provides context and rationale for an investment in remote technology aimed at narrowing the digital divide and provide children and young people an equitable opportunity to learn in the current circumstances.

Why does this report require a Member decision?

2. There is a requirement for a Single Member decision to formally consider this report to agree to provide £350K funding to mitigate the impact of extended school closures as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic. The funding will support recovery from 'lost learning' for young people and the ability to participate in online learning.

Report Background

3. In December 2020, the Council committed £20,000 to support disadvantaged pupils to access IT hardware and internet connection to enable virtual learning and to mitigate disruption from learning due to the impact of Covid. 50 devices and Wi-Fi connectivity were purchased through ONEIT and a loan scheme established for schools to access. Under the original plans (when Middlesbrough was Tier 3), schools were invited to loan devices should a learning bubble need to isolate away from school. Due to the most recent

restrictions which included the closure of schools this scheme has now been exhausted and all digital devices are now loaned out (on long-term loan).

4. Under current lockdown measures schools have increased accountability to provide learning that mitigates lost learning as a result of COVID. New government guidance was published that strengthened expectations for the provision of remote education and confirmed remote education curriculum should be aligned to the classroom curriculum as much as possible. Ofsted have also confirmed schools remote learning offer will be a key focus of interim visits. This has significantly increased the onus on adequate provision of digital devices/ digital access for the young people in our town.

5. In order to fulfil this expectation, nationally DfE have increased their offer to schools by another 300,000 laptops in addition to the 700,000 already delivered and they have confirmed all schools will receive 100% of their ordered allocation. Analysis of school pupil premium numbers has revealed that this allocation only caters for a specific cohort of pupils within schools total of disadvantaged pupils meaning that some pupils will not receive a device from the DfE. Recently published data confirms that 1408 devices have now been delivered to maintained schools and approximately 7000 to Academy Trusts. Figure 1 below outlines the breakdown of disadvantaged pupils in schools across Middlesbrough.

School Type	Pupil Premium Count
Primary	5633
Secondary	3801
Special & PRU	344
Total	9778

Figure 1 number of pupil premium pupils attending Middlesbrough schools (January 2021)

On this basis, it can be concluded that not all families will be provided for and additional support is essential to bridge the gap.

Demand

6. Schools have been surveyed to understand sufficiency and the barriers leaders face in not being able to provide virtual remote education in the current circumstances. Leaders report concerns for groups such as: households with more than one child attending school; pupils not classed as formally disadvantaged under national guidelines and not having access to remote technology in the home. It is noted that families across the town are being impacted particularly those communities where deprivation is more prevalent and also areas where family members have been impacted by consequences of the pandemic such as being subject to furlough or changes in working practises resulting in recent hardship within the household.

7. Accepting the current local schemes (school based and voluntary sector/ private sector assistance) and national schemes will not meet sufficiency within the town this new proposal will further address the needs of schools.

Proposal

8. Schools have been invited to submit requests for support for additional IT technology including WIFI and digital devices. This has enabled schools to create a preferred choice based on pupil need and request systems that will fit within their local IT environment.

Total number of devices requested: **1,291**
Total number of WIFI connectivity requested: 261
Total expenditure for this option: **£345, 102**
(Appendix A)

These figures are representative of school replies and account for pupils in all key stages.

9. It is proposed funding is offered to the schools as listed above which will purchase of the necessary remote learning equipment for their pupils.

10. Funding for this scheme will be sourced from the 'Contain Expenditure Management Fund' (COMF) under the categories of:

- Targeted interventions for specific sections of the local community and workplaces
- Community-based support for those disproportionately impacted - such as the BAME population

Alternative options considered

11. Other options have been explored, including a tender process and sourcing laptops 'in – house'. It is clear these other options will incur an increased time delay in roll-out and there is a clear urgent need to provide devices as soon as possible to stop the young people of Middlesbrough being further disadvantaged by the prolonged lockdown/ school closure.

12. Other options considered also did not enable timely bespoke provision at a school level which is necessary when supporting pupils with the digital devices within the local IT school environment.

Decision(s) required:

13. It is recommended a Single Member decision supports the initiative to ensure Middlesbrough's children and young people have access to IT hardware and internet connection to enable remote virtual learning and agree funding to the sum of £350K to purchase 1,291 devices and 261 remote connectivity.

14. It is further recommended that an agreement is made with schools that under these arrangements the ownership of the devices rests with schools. The devices will not be returned to the LA creating lasting legacy of digital provision across the town.

Why is this being recommended?

15. The impact on learning for pupils not having access to remote virtual technology will widen the achievement gap. Dedicating this resource will help secure learning opportunities as well as promote safeguarding for pupils who do not have access appropriate technology in the home. In addition, this facilitation will promote the government message of wherever possible stay at home and support school closures to help effectively manage the impact of Covid.

Impact(s) of recommended decision(s)

16. Children and young people will be afforded equitable opportunities to continue to access learning and make progress in line with their peers.

Equality and Diversity

17. There will be no negative, differential impact on diverse groups and communities associated with this report.

Legal

18. A legal agreement between the LA and schools will be conditional for schools to receive funding. This agreement will stipulate the equipment becomes the responsibility of the school upon receipt.

Financial

19. A commitment of £350,000 for the provision of digital devices for young people of the town

Policy Framework

20. The proposed action has no impact on the Council's policy framework.

Risk

21. The implementation of the recommendations made within the report will support the Council in ensuring that our children and young people will be afforded opportunities and support to enable young people to succeed as well as creating a lasting digital legacy for Middlesbrough beyond the current pandemic.

22. This supports the Council's strategic 'Recovery' aims and works to help address identified risks to the achievement of key priorities outlined in Figure 3.

O4-006	If young people leaving school in Middlesbrough do not have the qualifications or skills needed to progress to further education, employment or training, then they are less likely to reach their potential, achieve economic wellbeing and contribute to future economic vitality of the town.
O4-015	If attainment at all key stages fails to narrow with national benchmarks the council could be perceived as not having a focus on education.

Figure 3. Risk register

Actions to be taken to implement the decision(s)

23. Single Member decision to agree investment

24. Agree to school requests. Appendix (A)

25. Distribute funding to schools

Appendices

26. IT requests from schools and cost per school (A)

Background papers

27. There are no background papers to this report.

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