

Digital Divide

Digital exclusion is a facet of the deep inequalities which run through the social fabric of the UK and is more widespread than previously considered. Prior to Covid 19, research focused on the number of people who were offline (had no direct access to the internet). In 2019 nearly half (47%) of the people offline came from a low-income household. The link between poverty and digital exclusion is clear: if you are poor, you have less chance of being online (<https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/digitaldivide>).

The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) responded to a request from the STEM Hub of the South East to support schools where the number of students/pupils, offline, was an issue. The CAA regularly update their devices and made an offer to provide Lenovo Think Pads (185 x X230s and 165 x X230s) in support of this initiative. These computers were all, 'cleaned', checked and individually packaged to ensure they were fit for purpose and at the start of March, 267 were ready for collection and distribution to schools.



The Covid 19 pandemic has had greater impact on some areas than others and because the CAA is based close to Gatwick Airport and the town of Crawley, an area particularly affected by lockdowns and restrictions on working practices, it was decided to focus upon schools here.

Phone calls were initially made to the secondary schools in the area which had higher than the national average number of pupils entitled to free school meals (one of the government's indicators for deprivation). These calls were followed up by emails. Responses from the schools was mixed; two responded immediately and requested support, two more responded positively when approached more than once and two did not respond at all. As a result it was decided to expand the offer to those primary schools in the area identified by STEM Learning as a priority school. The response from a headteacher of a primary academy was:

Our children will benefit hugely so we are incredibly grateful. We surveyed our families at the start of this lockdown and found that 130 of our 560 children had no access to a device at all. That number dramatically increased once we realised that many parents had classified their phone as a 'device' - they had ticked 'yes' to access when the reality was there were 3+ children sharing their Mum's mobile.

We loaned out a whole load of school chromebooks in an attempt to get one into each home but are having to recall those now so they can be used in class. Without a doubt learning will never be completely the same again but it wasn't all negative by any means. Classes are still being run online

because children who are isolating/shielding are joining in virtually with those in school, assuming they have a device that is. It still astounds me how much had to change in the course of year and how amazingly adaptable the children have been.



The headteacher Rebecca with some of the computers delivered to Bewbush Primary Academy.

Four secondary schools, and five primary schools have been supported by this initiative. The teachers and headteachers were all amazed that this offer was made. The students might be back in school but the lack of a computer at home is an ongoing challenge for many families. One school requested computers to replace those school computers that had been loaned for home use.

We would be grateful to receive any additional devices available. We will be taking back in around 30 devices from students who were loaned them over lockdown and might not have access, but any number is always helpful.

To meet this request, 30 computers were given to St Wilfred's RC Secondary School. The response from the school was immediate

Thank you very much! They will be put to good use. Can I thank you once again for your generosity, these laptops will make a big difference to some of our families. What an amazing project!

50 more computers were provided to Holy trinity CE Secondary School;;Richard, the assistant head said

Wow, I am speechless!

It is people like you and these types of initiatives, which really do make a huge difference to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people in society. These young people may not thank you in person, but they will be eternally grateful that someone out there has gone out of their way to help bridge that divide in society.

This initiative has taken much time and energy on the part of the CAA and its staff and the response from this school explains the difference it will make to some of the young people in the Crawley area.

Northgate primary school similarly reported:

we just wanted to say a big thank you from us all here at Northgate Primary School. This will be on our school website at some point to say thank you.

Oriel High School staff agreed to be pictured with the computers for their school and one of the local primary schools.



By the end of day all the computers had been delivered to the schools where they will be shared with the families in most need. We may never know the value of the initiative, but the CAA contribution has made a huge difference to some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people in the South East. It has been one of the highlights for the STEM Hub in this very challenging year.