

The Digital Divide

Digital Exclusion is a facet of the deep inequalities which run through the social fabric of the United Kingdom and is more widespread than previously considered. Prior to Covid 19, research was focused on the number of people who were offline. In 2019, nearly half of offline people (47%) 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 STEM Hub took the decision to move all services online as a result of the pandemic. In one of the many meetings with STEM Ambassadors, the issue of digital poverty was raised as a concern for those who would not be able to access what the Hub was providing. The Hub made it clear that doing nothing was not an option and in an increasingly digital society we had to change the landscape, not reduce the interactions. The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) responded to a request from the STEM Hub of the South East to support schools where Digital Poverty was an issue. The CAA updates their devices regularly and offered renovated Lenovo Think Pads to be donated to the Digital Poverty challenge. These computers were all individually packaged and after ensuring that they were fit for purpose, at the start of March, 267 were ready for collection by the STEM Hub team.



The Covid-19 pandemic had a greater impact on some geographical areas than others. The area around Gatwick was affected by the lockdowns and subsequent restrictions. These schools already contained some of the most deprived children within the South East. The STEM Hub staff made phone calls to all secondary schools in the Crawley area with higher than the national average percentage of free school meals. The phone calls were followed up by emails. The response for the schools was mixed. Two schools responded immediately and requested support, two more responded when approached more than once and two did not respond at all.

The net was then expanded to include primary schools who had been identified as priority schools by the funder STEM Learning. The response from one of the headteachers 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 a year and how amazingly adaptable the children have been.



The headteacher Rebecca with some of the computers delivered to Bewbush primary school.

Four secondary schools and five primary schools were supported by this initiative. The teachers and headteachers were all amazed by the support. The computers were ready for delivery in March 2021 when some of the schools were starting to reopen. The Department for Education had provided computers for children with no access at home which schools needed to request. These computers were the property of the school, and they were now being withdrawn so they could be used in classes. The loss of a computer at home was going to be a challenge for many families and as a result one school requested computers to replace the ones 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 loaned them over lockdown and might not have access, but any number is always helpful.

Thirty computers were provided to St Wilfred's to meet this need. 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!

Fifty more computers were provided to Holy Trinity CE school, where 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 took time and energy on the part of the CAA, and the response from the school explains the differences this will make to the young people in the Crawley area. As Northgate Primary School reported,

We just wanted to say a big thank you from us all here at Northgate Primary School. These will be on our school website at some point to say thank you if you would like to take a look at this when it is up.



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

As a result of this initiative, the computers were delivered to schools where they will be shared with the families in most need. It may never be known the value of the initiative, but the STEM Hub believes as a result of delivering these computers that the CAA contribution has made a huge difference to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people in society. This project was one of the highlights for the STEM Hub of the challenging year.

Post Note 2023

The CAA are about to donate another set of computers which will be provided to coastal communities. Covid-19 might no longer be news, and Digital Deprivation might not make the news, but the issue still exists and for many families the economic crisis continues to make life challenging.