

DfE-funded Laptops for Disadvantaged and Vulnerable Children

Purpose of Report

- A decision is needed on the future ownership of chromebooks and routers provided to schools by the Department for Education (DfE), via North Yorkshire County Council.

Introduction

- North Yorkshire County Council was allocated 989 digital devices and 238 wireless routers by the Department for Education in 2020 to distribute to eligible vulnerable or disadvantaged children and young people across the County. A child or young person needed to have a social worker or be a Year 10 student in receipt of free school meals to be eligible.
- Devices were distributed according to requests from schools for these eligible students.
- The DfE announced that schools would order any additional devices and routers directly from their supplier from the beginning of Autumn term 2020 onwards, with no ongoing involvement of the local authority. However, we supported schools to identify their allocation of devices and to order these through the DfE portal.
- The DfE allocated each school a number of devices and routers based on their assessment of need. As of 11th May 2021, 4,419 devices (laptops and tablets) in total have been delivered or dispatched to North Yorkshire since the start of the scheme - this includes the 989 delivered directly to NYCC, with the rest to maintained schools. This does not include devices delivered to academy trusts.
- The approach below has been discussed with the Leaving Care Team, Schools ICT, finance team and legal.

DfE Guidance on Ownership of Devices and Support

- The DfE guidance originally stated that local authorities and academy trusts own the laptops and tablets, and can loan them to children and young people. However, this was later changed and the DfE allowed devices to be gifted to schools or students if the responsible local authority so wished.¹
- We loaned our devices to students (via schools) and directly to young people leaving care based on the original guidance. This was on an understanding that they remained the property of North Yorkshire County Council. Our priority has been to make sure that devices are used by students for as long as they are needed.
- We asked schools and parents to sign a short loan agreement – we did not want this agreement to be a barrier to students and schools accepting devices. A small number of schools and parents rejected the devices because of the need to sign an agreement.
- We asked that schools notified us of any change in circumstances with students. For example, if they changed school and/or lost a device. This has happened in a small number of instances. We are aware of some instances in which a device has not been kept securely –

¹ [Who owns the devices, and how to distribute them to children and young people - Laptops and tablets - GOV.UK \(education.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/532212/Who_owns_the_devices_and_how_to_distribute_them_to_children_and_young_people_-_Laptops_and_tablets_-_GOV.UK_(education.gov.uk).pdf)

we have taken steps to recover, and reallocate, these devices. There is no active monitoring of the location of devices.

- On 19th May, the DfE sent an email to confirm that they will provide data for 4G routers until 31 July 2021 and that laptops and tablets that came with security software licenses that will expire on 30 September 2021. Without further action, the routers will not provide internet access and the users of laptops/tablets will be able to freely access any online content and devices. The DfE have said that *“It’s your responsibility to safeguard the young people in your care.”*

Proposal

- We propose that devices loaned to students are gifted to schools for ongoing management and use. We propose that devices loaned to care leavers are gifted to them, under the guidance of the Leaving Care team. This will have a small cost implication for individual schools but can form part of the school’s IT structure which they will already manage.
- This approach will mean that there is no ongoing involvement of NYCC. It will reduce any cost incurred trying to recover devices and make sure that devices can be recycled and reused by schools to meet need.
- We propose that children and young people in possession of routers are told that the data will not be provided after 31 July 2021. Any child under 18 will be asked to return their router to school for disposal. Any young person with a router over 18 will be told how to reset the router and use their own SIM card in the router if they wish to continue access to data – this will be at their own cost (or could be funded by another third party).

Cost implications

- To date, NYCC – through schools ICT - has provided support to end users to set-up the devices and to solve general IT problems so that the end user can use the device. The Children and Young People’s Service (CYPS) worked with schools to identify the need in schools. The DfE has not provided funding for this activity. The estimated cost to date is £14,245 over the last 11 months (this does not include the input from CYPS or the support of integrated passenger transport to get devices to schools).
- If NYCC wished to retain ownership of devices and retain the current level of protection for end users, there would be an additional cost of web filtering. The cost would be up to £30,000 per annum to implement and licence for 12 months – we would need to take further advice from the procurement team. Although an additional cost may be incurred by schools, this will be spread across schools throughout the county and the devices could be re-used as they see fit to meet student need. They would also be the owners of the devices.
- If NYCC continued to provide children and young people with free 4G connectivity via 4G routers the costs will be approximately £34,272 per annum. This is based on a 4G SIM with 8GB data at £144 per user per annum. To maintain web filtering for the 4G Routers we would also need to buy and implement a cloud based filtering solution – this would be an additional £10,000 per annum
- In addition to the above, the continued ownership of these devices requires an ongoing resource within schools ICT to manage a help-line and respond to user requests. The warranty on both the Chromebooks and the Routers will end at in July 2021. At this point, there is nothing that NYCC could do to resolve a faulty device, other than buy a new device

for the child/young person. The devices are entry-level devices are likely to fault over the next 2 / 3 years.

- The devices have minimal residual value if returned to NYCC. Any devices returned to NYCC will be refurbished and recycled, but we do not believe that there is a need for NYCC to retain ownership of these devices. The DfE incurred all original costs to buy the device.
- There would be a cost incurred for the officer time taken to transfer ownership of these devices to schools, from within CYPS and schools ICT. Existing staff would deliver this.

Risks

- If no action is taken then these devices – which are the property of NYCC - could be used by children and young people to access illegal or inappropriate content.
- This process may reveal that a number of assets are of an unknown location. We will fulfil any obligations we have but do not intend to take further action against an individual or school unless there was evidence of deliberate misuse.
- A school may reject this proposal and ask that they be returned to NYCC. We would request that the school facilitated the return of all of their devices, but this involve NYCC cost to ship, store and then manage the devices.

Recommendation

That the Corporate Director – Children and Young People’s Service, in conjunction with the Executive Member for Education & Skills agree :

1. that devices loaned to students are gifted to schools for ongoing management and use
2. that devices loaned to care leavers are gifted to them, under the guidance of the Leaving Care team.

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