Peterborough Virtual School – Digital Access Policy

Digital access is essential for effective learning. For children in care, who are already navigating the complexities of being in care, the absence of adequate digital devices such as laptops can significantly hinder their educational progress.

Why is digital access important for educational progress?

- Most schools and education providers have online learning platforms which host resources, homework tasks, and interactive learning modules.
- Students require access to the internet to use it for research, accessing e-books, and utilizing educational tools.
- Digital devices facilitate communication between students and teachers through emails, virtual classrooms, and other forums.
- Proficiency with digital technology is important to build skills for future employment and to ensure access to a range of opportunities and services.

What are the barriers which exacerbate the impact of poor digital access for children in care?

- Children in care may move homes frequently, leading to disruptions in their educational experience. Access to digital devices can support consistency of access to education at times of transition.
- Children in care may not have a personal laptops or tablet, making it difficult to complete homework or other tasks.
- Children in care may lack access to tech-savvy adults who can help them navigate digital tools effectively, hindering their ability to access their learning and impacting on effective maintenance of the device.

What may be the consequences of poor digital access?

- Academic Underperformance: Without proper digital access, children are at risk of falling behind academically.
- Social Exclusion: Digital connectivity is also a social tool. Lack of access can lead to feelings of isolation as these children are unable to participate in online social platforms or school-related activities.
- Missed Opportunities: Digital literacy is a critical component of modern education. Children without access miss out on developing these essential skills, which can limit their future opportunities.

To mitigate these barriers, the Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) grant can be used to fund digital access for children in care of Statutory School Age. At the discretion of the Virtual School Head, this may be extended to those in Year 12 and above, including Care Leavers in Higher Education.

How should IT equipment be requested?

- For most children, IT equipment, including laptops and tablets, will be purchased via their education provider following a request made for PP+ funding through the PEP. This will ensure that devices purchased are compatible with specific platforms commissioned by education providers and that safeguarding, licensing and maintenance can be effectively managed.
- Typically, the maximum PP+ available to purchase a laptop or tablet and accessories is £500 (at KS3&4) or £250 (at KS1&2). If a device is required in upper KS2, consideration should be made as to which device would best support through into secondary education. If there are reasons why more expensive

device is required, for example to fulfil certain course requirements, this will be considered on an individual basis.

- Software, including Microsoft Office packages, may also be purchased using PP+ except for specific packages detailed in EHCPs as these should be provided through SEND funding.
- Appropriate safeguarding, licensing and maintenance should be undertaken in line with the policies of the education provider and child's home placement.
- Any equipment purchased using PP+ is the property of the child and therefore should transfer with them in the case of school or home moves. IT safeguarding packages applied by schools should be removed ahead of planned transitions away from the education setting.
- It is recognised that IT equipment does become out-dated over time, however it is expected that PP+ should not be used to replace equipment more frequently than every 3 years.

How should IT equipment be requested for children not on the roll of a school or other education setting?

- The Virtual School retains a small stock or laptops and tablets which can be issued to children who are not on the roll of a school or setting; this may include:
  - Children recorded as CME
  - Children who have moved home and are dependent on accessing online provision whilst a new education provider is identified
  - Newly arrived unaccompanied children in care (UCiC) of statutory school age
- Devices for children not on the roll of a school or other education setting can be requested by the social worker using the Digital Access Request Form

Are young people aged 16-25 eligible?

- It is expected that consideration will be taken during Year 11 around digital access needs as part of post-16 transition planning. All requests should be made through the PEP – careful consideration should be given at this point to the most appropriate device depending upon the pathway which has been selected, including HE aspirations.
- For students in Years 12 and 13 with digital access needs, these will be considered on an individual basis. Social workers or personal advisers can make a request via the Digital Access Request Form
- Decision will be made considering:
  - Any previous devices which have been supplied
  - The reasons for needing the device
  - Future pathway planning
- Newly arrived unaccompanied children in care (UCiC) will be issued with a laptop to support their education pathway subject to sustained and positive engagement in education. This will be monitored by the Virtual School team.
- All care leavers (aged 18-25) moving into higher education pathways will be provided with a suitable laptop or alternative device. It is expected that software, including Microsoft Office packages, will be provided by the higher education provider – if this is not the case requests will be considered on an individual basis.

What conditions are in place?

- All children should be supported to use IT equipment appropriately, within boundaries set out according to their age and by their carers, and social workers.
- Typically, children and carers will be expected to sign and adhere to acceptable use policies issued by their education providers.

- For children who have been supplied with a device directly from the Virtual School, this will not be issued until the appropriate acceptable use agreement has been signed by the child, carer and social worker.
  - ➢ Acceptable Use Agreement (Statutory School Age)
  - ➢ Acceptable Use Agreement (16-25)
- Parental controls should be put in place and governed by the carer until the young person is at least 16
- Young people will not be asked to return their device to PCC, even if they leave care, unless they break the conditions laid out in the acceptable use agreement, in which case PCC reserves the right to take the IT Equipment back.
- End of life IT Equipment must be disposed of in accordance with Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Legislation which includes Data Protection, Duty of Care and Hazardous Waste Regulations.

Warranty and Repairs

- Devices provided by Peterborough Virtual School will be subject to a one-year warranty which will cover technical issues with the device. In the first instance concerns should be raised to virtualschool@peterborough.gov.uk. This does not cover damage or loss through negligence, accident, theft, or malicious action. In these cases, the Virtual School should be contacted and will consider such situations on a case-by-case basis and have the discretion to fund or part fund replacement or repair.
- Whilst laptops are under repair, it is expected that the education provider or care home would be able to offer a substitute device temporarily.
- There is no expectation that carers will protect these devices under their household insurance, but they may do so at their discretion, however, this will not be funded.

Reliable internet access is important. It is expected that all children in care and care leavers should have suitable Wi-Fi access in their homes. Where this is not in place, Peterborough Virtual School will work alongside key partners to consider how this can be secured. This may be achieved through subsidies for broadband services or providing mobile hotspots, or through signposting to opportunities provided by other organisations such as FREE Broadband & Unlimited data for active job seekers - Care Leaver Covenant.