

MEETING	Gwynedd Council Cabinet
DATE	November 9, 2021
CABINET MEMBER	Councillor Cemlyn Rees Williams
OFFICER	Gwern ap Rhisiart
TITLE OF ITEM	Education Digital Strategy

Decision sought

The Cabinet is requested to:

- a) Approve the Education Digital Strategy in its entirety
- b) Agree to joint-fund up to 50% of the costs of renewing devices, with the schools expected to pay the other 50%.
- c) Agree to Gwynedd schools receiving technical support from the Authority's Information Technology service from April 2022 onwards
- d) Agree to fund technical support until April 2022 in order to speed up the timescale for introducing devices to the schools.

Background

1. In light of revising the curriculum, digital competence is a statutory responsibility across all learning areas and needs to be considered in all aspects when designing and introducing the curriculum. Digital learning is not just a vision for the future, it is the present, and unless we plan positive measures to introduce a digital provision of the highest quality consistently throughout the education system, we will live with a provision that is only suitable for the past.
2. The Welsh Government has announced financial support to improve the use of digital technology for learning and education in schools. The first cycle of investment was announced on 19th July 2019, with £50 million to be split between the 22 Local Authorities in 2019/20, and up to a further £55 million available during the next three years.
3. Digital Standards for Education were published by the Government in April 2019. The standards are a series of recommendations and guidelines around planning, managing and using a school's information technology network. The standards assist schools to understand, manage and operate their digital environment. They indicate how schools should ensure that their digital environment is one that satisfies the requirements of the school curriculum and gives more attention to future digital skills. The Government expects local authorities to offer advice and direction to schools on how to fulfil these Standards.
4. The work of developing the strategy began before the pandemic. During the extended periods where schools were closed to face-to-face learning, we saw a significant increase in schools' use of technology. Those times highlighted the need for a digital education strategy, with inconsistent experiences stemming from a lack of investment in suitable devices for children and teachers, along with inconsistency in the skills and confidence of our education workforce.

Education Digital Strategy

5. The aim of the education digital strategy is to give the best digital provision to support our learners and teachers to foster a range of skills to use technology confidently, creatively and critically, with consistency in the provision across all schools in the County.

6. The strategy outlines our ambition of using technology to improve education for learners in Gwynedd schools, and outlines our future vision of enhancing our ability to support all parts of the curriculum.
7. We will know that the strategy is successful when:
 - *There are no technical barriers that would inhibit our teachers' imagination as they plan lessons for our learners.*
 - *There are suitable devices available to support digital learning.*
 - *The experiences of pupils, teachers, assistants and the whole school community are consistently good.*
 - *There is suitable digital training available to all.*
 - *There is a measurable increase in digital skills in Gwynedd.*
 - *Schools achieve the Digital Education Standards.*
 - *The Welsh Language and our communities are supported by preparing our learners for jobs in the digital sector.*
 - *All schools are making full use of the Hwb national learning platform.*
 - *There is consistency in digital learning experiences throughout Gwynedd.*
 - *There is value for money in the digital field for Gwynedd schools.*
 - *The network supports and enables digital learning today and in the future.*
 - *There is a sustainable funding model in place.*
8. The strategy is for all schools, pupils, staff and members of the Gwynedd schools community. Through the strategy, we will provide one device per four pupils in the Foundation Phase, and one device each for all learners in year 3 to year 11, and to every teacher.
9. The strategy sets out the ambition for the experiences of pupils, teachers, assistants and the school community to be consistently good across the sectors.

All teachers in Gwynedd will have:

- a portable personal device that will allow quick access to the cloud via the school's Wi-Fi network or any other Wi-Fi network
- the ability to prepare and work from home
- access to the school's systems and pupils' information systems at the school and at their home
- access to fit-for-purpose training and professional development
- a Hwb account that will grant them access to a wide range of learning resources
- access to a fast photocopier
- an official e-mail
- access to Gwynedd Council's self-service account

Pupils' experience of technology is changing and developing, and their requirements in terms of hardware and software is evolving as technology matures and the requirements of the curriculum change. However, some factors will remain constant. Every pupil will have:

- experience of using different technology, such as Windows, Google Chromebook and Apple devices
- access to a device that will allow quick and secure access to the cloud via the school's Wi-Fi network
- the ability to study and learn from home
- a Hwb account that will allow them access to a wide range of learning resources
- an e-mail account allowing them to communicate within a limited circle and beyond, in accordance with the guidelines of individual schools
- remote access to learning resources

10. It is recommended that we adopt the strategy in its entirety, thus supporting the Council's ambition of a high-quality digital education and cross-county consistency in this key area.

Costs of renewing devices

11. The Strategy is based on a substantial supply of devices for pupils and teachers in the schools of Gwynedd, using the grant resources that are available from the Government to pay for the supply in the first place.
12. The Welsh Government grant is conditional on securing a budget for replacing the equipment when it reaches the end of its life. With the life of all devices being approximately 5 years, we estimate that the requirement to renew devices will follow this profile;

2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
£489,837	£1,452,937	£1,091,693	£422,415	£427,630

13. This means that by the next renewal cycle which will begin in 2024/25, and based on current prices, we will need a fund of £3.9m to renew the equipment.
14. A number of options have been considered to address the renewal costs, including;
 - Asking schools to pay for renewal as part of the terms of the scheme
 - Making a cut to schools' budgets to pay for renewal
 - The Council to fund the cost as part of the annual bids process

15. The Education Department gathered the views of schools on their ability to contribute towards the scheme's renewal costs. Although the schools were unanimous in their support for the strategy, several of the schools stated that they could not contribute towards the costs of sustaining the scheme without support.

16. It is recommended that schools should be expected to pay half the cost by opening a renewal fund, noting that they can ensure adequate finance in that Fund by whichever means they wish (through a contribution from the schools' end-of-year balances, by allocating a permanent budget in their budgets, or through other sources).

17. The Cabinet is requested to agree to joint-fund the other half of the cost through an annual revenue contribution.

Maintenance

18. It is essential that there is effective support to the new digital provision to be installed, continuing to support the historical provision that is already in the schools for some time.

No pupil in Gwynedd should miss any education because of technical problems. Devices that are not working should be repaired within an acceptable time, with a temporary replacement device being provided as soon as possible if the situation cannot be rectified immediately.

19. It is difficult to predict the demand for the service as what is offered through the strategy is markedly different to what is already supported, in terms of the range of devices and the infrastructure that are in place in the schools. Research shows that there is no one model or technician-to-child ratio that could be used as a predictor of the demand for service. There is an increase in the number of devices supported under the new model, but on the other hand, our wish to formalise and reconcile the experience between schools is likely to reduce the demand.

20. We can presume that there will be less demand for service from the primary sector than the secondary sector, because teachers and pupils move from one classroom to the other in the secondary sector, which could lead to more challenges.

21. All primary schools are fully dependent on the services of Cynnal, whilst just over half of our secondary schools employ a local technician in addition to the core agreement with Cynnal. One secondary school has chosen not to sign up to the core agreement by Cynnal, but is receiving SIMS support.
22. Recently the concerns and complaints about the Cynnal service have been increasing across all sectors. The matters have been raised at the advisory groups and Cynnal are receiving regular e-mails from our schools highlighting the challenges.
23. The schools are generally sympathetic to the technicians' situation, and commend their commitment to the work. The support model has not evolved over time and consequently the service is dealing with a significant number of calls, the majority of which are calls about failure. Up to 25% of technicians' time goes on travelling from school to school.
24. The Council's Information Technology Service already supports school networks, and an increasing number are now receiving a telephony service too.
25. It is recommended that Gwynedd schools should receive support from the Authority's Information Technology Service. The service has produced a plan that would evolve over the next four years. The model includes employing technicians who already work within the secondary sector in-house in the Authority.

Year 1	Years 2 and 3	Year 4
<p>A central structure that will install new procedures and configuration for pupils and teachers' laptops, projects for migration from local arrangements, and a service that continuously engages with the schools. The schools' local arrangements (technicians) remain unchanged during the first year. Year 1 cost is £1,013,059.</p>	<p>With new arrangements established, we anticipate that the advantages of a uniform provision and a move from local arrangements will become evident. This means that the support pattern can be changed by forming support hubs across the County, based in our secondary schools. We can cut down the number who are in this role, by removing the technicians' current posts and creating 7 new posts. We will also cut down the number on the front line, and share this provision between the technicians and the Service Desk.</p> <p>The other change is to reduce the number of digital enablement officers from 3 to 2, since the extra demand and pressures of the early days will reduce after establishing the provision. Years 2 and 3 cost £846,704</p>	<p>Rationalise further by reducing the number of technical officers in the central team from 11 to 9, taking advantage of matured support arrangements, but introducing a new post to meet cyber-security requirements. Year 4 cost £808,223</p>

26. The current costs of the service by Cynnal and technicians within the secondary schools is £830,635 per annum. We anticipate that additional support of £182,944 would be required in the first year, £16,069 in the second and third year, and by the fourth year the support will be £22,412 a year cheaper. By the end of year 5 the new model will have cost £170,258 more, but by the end of year 10 it will have saved a total of £58,200.
27. Directing Gwynedd schools to obtain support from the Authority's Information Technology service would have far-reaching implications for Cynnal. The decision would affect the company's viability to serve schools in other Authorities.

Short Term Technical Support

28. A little over 6,000 devices have been distributed to primary schools over the past year. These devices are supported by one technician within the corporate service, with the cooperation of the Information Technology Service and Cynnal.

29. We intend to introduce just over 1,000 laptops to the teachers and 4,000 for pupils in the secondary sector as part of implementing the digital strategy, using the grant investment received from the Welsh Government.
30. There are support implications to any additional device introduced, and we cannot absorb this extra demand within our current support structures. We ask for additional financial support to put together a support team in preparation for supporting the schools fully on 1st April, 2022.
31. Financial support of £230,000 would be required to deliver a support structure from December until the end of March, but since Cynnal will continue to support the historical provision in the school, it will be possible to deliver a reduced structure for the transitional period. The support we request in order to deliver the temporary structure would be a one-off sum of £148,000 which will give a firm foundation for delivering the digital strategy.

Equality Assessment

32. The equality assessment highlights that the implementation of the digital strategy will not have an impact on equality, whether it be features of or a general duty.
33. It is envisaged that the digital education strategy will strengthen equality attitudes because it will ensure universal access to digital education, especially those from less advantaged backgrounds.
34. Robust equality policies are implemented across Gwynedd schools and these will continue to be implemented.

Well-being Assessment

35. Following consideration and assessment in accordance with the requirements of the well-being act, the 7 well-being goals and the Council's well-being objectives were considered and it is concluded that the strategy meets the requirements. This strategy will allow us to respond to and meet the needs of the children today, while strengthening their future well-being.
36. The proposed proposal will ensure a fair opportunity for all Gwynedd children to acquire excellent digital skills, essential skills for the future.

Views of the statutory officers

The Monitoring Officer: The adoption of the Strategy represents a fundamental change in the digital provision and the inter relationship between the Councils and the schools in this area. The recommendations are consistent with the conditions of the financing for this change which has been provided by the Welsh Government. There is also a recognition that there are re-structuring implications around the current provision which goes hand in hand with the increase in internal capacity to provide the Service. This is the subject to further connected report.

Head of Finance: The Cabinet adopted the strategy in principle in September 2020, delaying a decision to adopt it in full until there was clarity of the financial commitment. Now, as the report states, we are aware of these commitments and it would be appropriate for Cabinet to adopt the Gwynedd Schools Digital Strategy as long as there is agreement on bearing the additional costs.

Once we received the significant grant from the Welsh Government to invest in the original equipment for our pupils, it is inevitable that permanent resources must be found from the Council for the cost of refurbishing the equipment (we were aware of that when Cabinet adopted the strategy in principle last year and decided to accept the grant). In order for all pupils in Gwynedd to have access to digital learning this year, due consideration must be given to the request for adequate funding.

In these unusual circumstances, subject to the schools signing up to meet half the cost of refurbishing the computers, the Cabinet would be able to move £2m between funds to establish a renewal fund to start planning the work as outlined in the table in paragraph 12. If Cabinet confirms the priority by resolution on this now, we will plan appropriately for it.

Further, I appreciate the need to increase the Council's internal IT capacity to provide support to schools, and it makes sense that this team is established as soon as possible. Cabinet could fund the requirement for £148,000 of one-off funding from the Transformation Fund, and with this investment the in-house Service would be able to start the work of presenting laptops for teachers and secondary pupils.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Gwynedd Schools Digital Strategy

Appendix 2 Equality Assessment

Appendix 3 Well-being Assessment