SCHOOLS IT INFRASTRUCTURE PLAN FOR 2024-28

Report by the Chief Officer, Education and Children's Services

PURPOSE

1.1   The purpose of the Report is to inform Members of the challenges in meeting our obligations regarding "Enhancing learning and teaching through the use of digital technology" due to reductions in funding allocations for IT infrastructure, equipment and digital devices for schools and to provide updates regarding alternative proposals to maintain and support the provision.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1   In February 2018 the Education, Sport and Children's Services Committee considered a Report providing an outline of the strategy and expectations of the Scottish Government in terms of digital learning. The Report detailed an IT refurbishment schedule and an itemized investment plan for each school with detail and priced at market prices at the time. The investment required to maintain Comhairle school IT systems at the level required was £2.3 million. Subsequently the Comhairle allocated its available capital for 2018-2023 to various projects. The allocation to Schools IT represented 39% of the requested £2.3million - a total capital allocation of £900k over the 5 years from 2018-2023.

2.2   The Scottish Government 100 Day pledge when re-elected was "*the SNP will roll out a new programme to deliver into the hands of every school child in Scotland a laptop, Chromebook, or tablet to use in school and at home. It will come with a free internet connection and full technical support. It will be updated, when necessary, replaced when needed and upgraded as technology improves. As a child moves through their school life, it will change with them, going from the simpler devices needed at P1 to the more advanced in the senior phase of secondary. And we will build in partnership with the teaching profession, the support they need to help our children as they learn on the new devices.*" There was £13million initially allocated for this by the Scottish Government. This would have meant around £100k for the Comhairle if this fund was distributed. Ultimately, the funding was re-allocated to Connecting Scotland for low-income families and then re-allocated elsewhere in the current financial year to meet deficits in other programmes.

2.3   The Department are also now looking at new infrastructure arrangements for the delivery of IT in schools with a more cloud-based approach and lower cost IT hardware, especially in primary schools. The Department are currently introducing Chromebooks in Primary Schools and progressing the setup and management of a Google tenancy. This new approach also includes working with Google and Tablet academy to improve and upskill our teachers in the delivery of digital education and learning in the classroom. This approach is intended to maximise the impact of the Comhairle investment in digital technology for the classroom.

2.4   It is important to acknowledge that the new approach and the current investment plan for the schools IT infrastructure is unsustainable financially without future injections of funding by the Scottish Government for Digital Devices for pupils and a more realistic allocation from the Comhairle capital budget in 2028. Without this funding it will be challenging for the Comhairle to meet its obligations regarding the future delivery of Digital Learning and Teaching in Western Isles schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1   It is recommended that the Comhairle notes the Report.

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Appendix:	1. Scottish Government National Strategy – Enhancing Learning and Teaching through the use of digital technology. Summary.
	2. Schools IT Investment Plan 2024-28.
Background Papers:	Report to Education, Sport and Children's Services Committee of February 2018.

IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The following implications are applicable in terms of the Report.

Resource Implications	Implications/None
Financial	New approach and direction minimise financial burden to the Comhairle of the IT infrastructure in schools. More funding for devices is critical to maintain level of service in schools.
Legal	
Staffing	
Assets and Property	
Strategic Implications	**Implications/None**
Risk	Continued underfunding will mean the Western Isles not meeting its obligations for digital teaching and learning.
Equalities	
Corporate Strategy	
Environmental Impact	
Consultation	

BACKGROUND

5.1 In February 2018 the Education, Sport and Children's Services Committee considered a Report which gave an outline of the strategy and expectations of the Scottish Government in terms of digital learning. Appendix 1 provided a full summary of the Scottish Government strategy "Enhancing Learning and Teaching Through the Use of Digital Technology" which detailed the Comhairle obligations regarding digital learning as a local authority. Appendix 2 was compiled by the Schools IT Team in conjunction with the Report author outlining the investment required for the following capital program in 2018-2023. The Report detailed what was required, why it was required and the standard that the Comhairle was trying to maintain and the level of investment required. The Report also had an IT refurbishment schedule and an itemized investment plan for each school with detail and priced at market prices at the time. The investment required to maintain our school IT systems at the level required was £2.3 million. Subsequently the Comhairle allocated its available capital for 2018-2023 to various projects. The allocation to Schools IT represented 39% of the requested £2.3million - a total capital allocation of £900k over the 5 years from 2018-2023.

5.2 A direct result of this was a reduction to the planned schools IT refurbishment program and only 5 schools got an IT refurbishment during the period 2018 – 2022: Sgoil an Rubha, Balivanich, Sir E Scott (and one to one laptop for secondary), Daliburgh and Pairc. Sgoil Lionacleit and Castlebay Secondary pupils got one to one laptops and Sir E Scott, and some Nicolson Institute pupils received laptops as part of a COVID grant from the Scottish Government. The rollout to Nicolson Institute pupils was completed with additional funding from Department revenue budgets. The only other activity in terms of schools IT was recent failure replacements and partial pupil laptop upgrades in some primary schools – around 220 devices. This fell far short of the 2018 plans to meet the obligations regarding digital learning and teaching with some infrastructure approaching the end of useful life.

5.3 The Scottish Government 100 Day pledge when re-elected was "*the SNP will roll out a new programme to deliver into the hands of every school child in Scotland a laptop, Chromebook, or tablet to use in school and at home. It will come with a free internet connection and full technical support. It will be updated, when necessary, replaced when needed and upgraded as technology improves. As a child moves through their school life, it will change with them, going from the simpler devices needed at P1 to the more advanced in the senior phase of secondary. And we will build in partnership with the teaching profession, the support they need to help our children as they learn on the new devices.*" There

was £13million initially allocated for this by the Scottish Government. This would have meant around £100k for the Comhairle if this fund was distributed. Ultimately, the funding was re-allocated to Connecting Scotland for low-income families and then re-allocated elsewhere this financial year to meet deficits in other programmes.

5.4   The Comhairle rolled out digital devices to secondary pupils across the Western Isles. This happened before, during and after COVID. The early laptops issued are now in need of replacement and are coming to end of life. There is currently no funding available or anticipated to enable this replacement programme to get underway. The number of secondary pupil laptops still working and operational when funding becomes available in the 2028-2033 capital programme is likely to be very low unless the Scottish Government revisits its pledge made during the last election.

5.5   During the budget build discussions for 2023/24, it was outlined at the Policy and Resources Committee that there would be a reduction in the Capital funding available to the Comhairle of over 30% in 2023-2028. The lack of investment in the 5 years up to 2023 and the potential 30% reduction in the 2023-2028 capital allocation for Schools IT necessitated a new approach and more realistic plans to meet our obligations regarding Digital Learning and the Schools IT infrastructure. The Department agreed to utilize its revenue carry forward to help with future proofing to offset the impact of the likely 30% shortfall in IT capital allocations for the 2023-2028 period and to address the critical IT switch and Wi-Fi access point failures already arising in our schools. The allocation to the Department by the Comhairle for 2023-28 turned out to be significantly lower than the previous allocation and best case for the Department is £250k which is a 73% reduction in funding since the last capital program. This funding may be reduced to fund additional cyberattack costs across the Comhairle. Considering these reductions, the Department have re-prioritised the schools IT investment program to maximise the use of the funds remaining available and have implemented a new direction for the delivery of digital learning and teaching using more cost-effective systems and hardware.

        DETAIL

6.1   The Department have accepted the significant reduction and insufficiency of Comhairle capital funding for Schools IT and the loss of any funding from the Scottish Government for digital devices in schools. The Department have addressed the current critical issues by replacing the outdated and failing switches and Wi-Fi access points in all our schools from CFCR funding created from revenue budget carry forwards. Recent switch failures have highlighted the vulnerability of the whole Schools IT infrastructure. The Department are also now looking at new infrastructure arrangements for the delivery of IT in schools with a more cloud-based approach and lower cost IT hardware, especially in primary schools. The Department are currently introducing Chromebooks in Primary Schools and progressing the setup and management of a Google tenancy.

6.2   This new approach also includes working with Google and Tablet academy to improve and upskill our teachers in the delivery of digital education and learning in the classroom. An initial cohort of teachers were trained by Google and Tablet Academy in the delivery of digital teaching and learning in the classroom. Each teacher in this initial cohort received a full classroom of Chromebooks for their pupils on completion of their studies. The Department strategy is to train our teachers to deliver digital teaching and learning in the classroom and follow up by equipping these teachers with a full complement of Chromebooks for their classes. This approach is intended to maximise the impact of the Comhairle investment in digital technology for the classroom. Further cohorts of teachers will undertake this training on an ongoing basis. Chromebook rollouts for the classes of these teachers are planned for when they complete their studies, but this will be dependent on available funding at the time.

6.3   Also included in the new approach is the replacement of outdated expensive smartboard technology with more cost-effective multifunction digital screens which is well underway for most schools. This part of the strategy is currently being reviewed for future replacements, and we are working with

Smart to assess the viability of their new digital Smart screens and the Gaelic language version of their Lumio software. It is important we continue this new approach and the allocation of the full £250k capital from the 2023-28 capital programme is essential for us to continue this work effectively.

CONCLUSION

7.1   It is important to acknowledge that the new approach and the current investment plan for the schools IT infrastructure is unsustainable financially without future injections of funding by the Scottish Government for Digital Devices for pupils and a more realistic allocation for the Comhairle capital budget in 2028. Without this funding it will be challenging for the Comhairle to meet its obligations regarding the future delivery of Digital Learning and Teaching in Western Isles schools.