

UK Charity Dedicated To Erasing Digital Divide Warns Government Home Access Programme Must Not Be A Simple 'Box Shifting' Exercise

e-Learning Foundation believes Government programme could close digital divide if instigated correctly

October 30 2008: The e-Learning Foundation, a national charity working to close the digital divide in the UK, welcomes the Government's cash injection of £300 million over the next two years for a home access and believes that, if executed correctly, the programme could potentially eliminate the digital divide for the country's current generation of learners – but warns that its success must not be measured simply on how many boxes have been shifted!

Schools Minister Jim Knight has just set out steps to ensure that every child in England has access to a home computer for their school or college work. This includes a twelve month pilot scheme in Oldham and Suffolk; a quality-badge scheme for approved home access suppliers and funding for local authorities to target specific groups of children without home access to a computer or the internet.

The £300 million programme, which was announced by the Prime Minister Gordon Brown last month, is scheduled to go nationwide next autumn, providing home access to every five-to-19 year old by 2011.

The e-Learning Foundation welcomes the Government initiative, but warns that to work successfully it must not be measured simply on computer sales. "We are obviously delighted that seven years of campaigning for digital inclusion for our poorest families, and a year of hard work on the Task Force, has resulted in such a massive commitment by the Government".

"What is crucial is that this does not become a box shifting and box ticking exercise. The measures of success will not be how many computers have been sold, or how many internet connections have been signed up. Those would tell us nothing about what really matters which is sustainability of the programme, the involvement of schools, take up by

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hardest to reach and persuade families and monitoring of achievement by pupils re the computer packages provided,” added Thompson.

“We need to monitor who has **not** taken advantage of the offer as carefully as who has. The gap between Free School Meal eligibility and take-up is well known. There is no reason why this should not suffer the same problem unless specifically addressed,” further

The e-Learning Foundation believes that four key measures must be put in place to ensure the success of the programme:

1. Monitoring the take up of the hardest to reach and hardest to persuade parents, to ensure home access to those that need it.
2. The nature of use of technology in the home. If large numbers of families get home access without school intervention, the e-Learning Foundation expects the Government to monitor its use closely from the onset and be prepared to modify the programme if it becomes apparent that limited learning gains are being achieved.
3. It is important schools are involved in the programme. The e-Learning Foundation believes that schools who are not technology savvy will be let off the hook by the current programme as it bypasses the schools’ involvement and goes directly to parents. On the other hand there are schools operating ‘equity’ programmes who wish to continue using a parental donation model alongside the use of the Technology Allowance covered by this programme. The e-Learning Foundation has been assured by Government that schools wishing to work on an “aggregation model” will be allowed to do so and looks forward to seeing the details of this in practice.
4. Sustainability: The Government Home Access programme is being put in place for three years. What happens after that? The Government must ensure a sustainable programme is put in place.

“Over the coming months much work has to be done to ensure the correct measures are put in place to ensure this programme is a success and make sure our young people don’t miss out on the opportunity of a lifetime”, concluded Thompson.

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Notes for Editors:

Despite living in a digital age, where technology is part of everyday life, an astonishing 1.35 million ** school age children in the UK live in a household with no computer and a staggering 2.77 million do not have Internet access either. Over 30% of these children come from single parent households, many whom live in very deprived communities.

** Figures taken from the National Statistics Family Spending Survey 06-07

About the e-Learning Foundation

The e-Learning Foundation was launched in 2001, to ensure that every schoolchild in the UK should have home access to learning technologies when and where they want to learn.

The Foundation, a registered charity, aims to bridge the digital divide and ensure that all children, irrespective of their background, can have the same access to technology for learning at home as their better off peers. The estimated cost of this runs into £billions, so unlikely to be provided by Government alone.

The Foundation is funded through the public, private and third sector in the form of Government grants, commercial sponsorship, grants and donations.

Interviews available on request. PR Contact: Jan Howells at the e-Learning Foundation on 01932 796036 or e-mail jan@e-learningfoundation.co.uk