Written evidence submitted by Miss Rashida Din

Equality of access to laptops and internet access in future contingency planning:

What lessons do we need to learn as a school after the Covid 19 lockdown?

I work at a SEMH Academy provision teaching young people that have been permanently excluded from mainstream schools. Many of these from disadvantaged backgrounds from Bedford Town and the surrounding rural villages. During the March 2020 national lockdown our Academy moved to a blended learning offer, which included rotated groups in school, 1:1 zoom lessons, online work and paper packs. Every child was assigned a mentor to support both learning and SEMH issues. Engagement from parents and students varied tremendously, and once lockdown was over we decided to have all children in full time at the start of the September term to narrow the ever increasing gap in attainment and ways to support further.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in May 2020 identified ensuring access to technology is key particularly for disadvantaged students for quality learning. During the lockdown period student's that did not have access to laptops or a device they could work from home, we loaned out ours. We applied for free government laptops (only 2 were allocated and have configuring issues). During a snapshot questionnaire to identify what percentage of students had access to broadband, we identified 30% of the current Year 11 students did not have this at home and only one student had access to full fibre broadband (Fig 1).
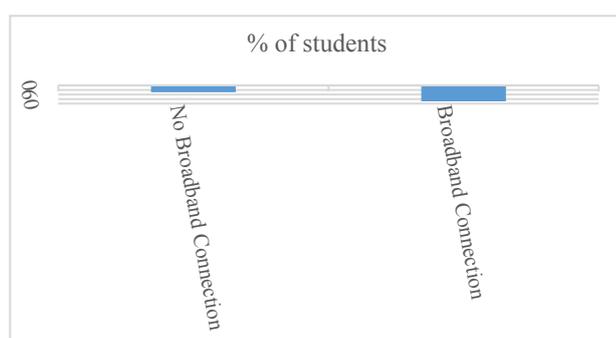

Fig 1 – Broadband access

This level of inequality is a trend nationally. Ofcom identified in May 2020 that only 12% of homes have full fibre broadband. New research by Lloyds Bank (2019) identified 11% of young people accessing the internet could not do so with a computer on a broadband connection. <u>This level of inequality is an issue if we have future lockdowns, if we do not mitigate with free internet dongles alongside laptops for students.</u>

Conclusion

A high tech approach for quality teaching of online lessons can only be effective if students can access high speed fibre broadband, but yet a large section of our young people, especially those that are disadvantaged already, do not have access to even a regular broadband connection. Lack of access reinforces disadvantage in future educational access, and equality of access to a digital future for all as nation should be a priority.

References:

Lloyds Bank, 2019. Digital access skills and confidence research paper (lloydsbank.com)

Ofcom, 2020. Supercharging investment in fibre broadband - Ofcom

EEF, 2020. Best evidence on supporting students to learn remotely | Education Endowment Foundation | EEF

December 2020