

Laptops and lifelines

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Please note: the information contained in this legal update is correct as of the original date of publication

As lockdown continues, technology shortages mean many pupils do not have the laptops or equipment they need to engage in remote learning. Donations from the community are helping, and to manage them correctly schools need to get their gifts and donations policies polished up and fit for purpose in order to steward the offers of equipment received from generous donors. In this article, [Laura Murphy](#) sets out what schools need to be thinking about.

As charity trustees, it is good practice for schools/academies to have a gifts/donations policy in place. This ensures that donations from the community are identified and directed correctly, including those of equipment and technology.

Why are donations important during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Lack of access and technical poverty have been a big factor for many, with increasing pressure on the requirements for home schooling. The inequality of technology and ability to 'join in' has had an impact on wellbeing (both of pupils and parents) as pressure mounts.

Difficult times can bring out a newfound resilience in communities, and the pandemic has been a classic example of this. Whilst times have been incredibly tough for schools, pupils and their families, something good has come out of the dark the generosity shown to educational institutions by local/national companies and the community.

Donations and gifts to schools have significantly increased over the course of the last year. On the surface this is a huge step forward in equipment provision and the ability to engage pupils across the country with home-schooling, significantly enhancing young people's learning experience. However, the provision is still well below the need. Although the DfE has been trying to increase the provision of equipment to schools, this doesn't cover issues such as lack of access to broadband, data packages or general bill concerns.

Vulnerable or disadvantaged?

Lack of access to the internet and laptops is now considered a vulnerable characteristic and potentially allows pupils to claim a place at school during lockdown in order to access the education they cannot get online. This could overwhelm schools, with places already up dramatically compared to the first lockdown and now an additional group of pupils who may be classed as vulnerable and who need to attend school. However, access to quality education to prevent disadvantaged pupils falling behind is a key concern during yet another lockdown with uncertain end dates.

Gifts and donations policy

Having a well-thought-out policy and procedure will enable the school to protect itself and consider any issues arising from the donation of gifts or equipment. This will include risks and issues with the equipment itself, such as wiping and clearing data, virus protection and software.

Discussing such a scheme with your insurers regarding straightforward donations and any flow of liability (if, for example, the items are found to be faulty and cause injury or damage, or if the individuals use the items to access inappropriate materials) is recommended.

In putting together such a document you will need to consider issues such as:

- transfer of ownership;
- maintenance;
- pure donation;
- clear description and that the item is taken 'as is';
- warranty position;
- safe usage; and
- any disclaimer wording.

Schools are also likely to consider prioritisation of those most in need based on their own policies, reviews and evidence. However, it should be clear how this is done in order to prevent unnecessary challenges over the handout of equipment.

If this type of scheme is something your school is thinking about in order to boost access to devices in your school community or if you are looking at putting such a policy in place, please do get in touch to discuss your needs further.

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