



# Council makes the connection

IAN CAMPBELL investigates how grassroots initiatives are helping citizens of South Dublin bridge the digital divide

**W**HEN South Dublin County Council's (SDCC)

Connect initiatives won the Local eGovernment Award at last month's Irish e-Government Awards, it was just the latest chapter in an unfolding adventure for one of Ireland's most progressive councils.

SDCC has been a long-standing pioneer in its use of technology, but what it identified with its Connect services was the need to help citizens engage with it from their end. "We have been applying technology within our organisation for five to six years and have seen lots of benefits," explains Lorna Maxwell, Connect project manager.

"We felt it was time that we helped others understand the benefits. There is no point building online services if you don't encourage people to use them. We have some disadvantaged communities in our area and if they are not accessing the online services then those services are a waste of time."

The council had worked closely with the Local Government Computer Services Board on the Mobhaile project, helping communities create their own online presence. Last year the council looked to take this kind of initiative a stage further and set up a dedicated project team. Connect was the outcome.

Connect Schools is one of the projects where the objective is to help teachers and staff in St Aidan's Community School, West Tallaght, to develop a virtual learning environment. Through the introduction of

an innovative learning culture the goal is to see if school attendance can be improved and more positive educational outcomes achieved.

"Research shows that when teenagers participate more actively in education they are less likely to participate in anti-social behaviour," says Maxwell. "Their employment prospects also improve greatly."

The first project is focused on 90 first-year students, each issued with a laptop supplied by PC Peripherals who won the tender with a specification that includes a longer-lasting battery. The school's 58 teachers have had laptops since last April and are pivotal to the success of the pilot. "They have been amazing," says Maxwell. "They have developed interactive classroom content with an element of IT built into every subject."

According to Maxwell, they all work over and above their normal hours because they believe the initiative will make a difference. "They have put so much work into this project and we haven't had a single teacher resisting it."

The school has successfully created a virtual learning environment. Laptops are hooked up to projectors, giving the lessons a multimedia component. The school has 2Mbps broadband from Irish Broadband as part of the Department of Education's schools initiative and is in the process of rolling out a Wi-Fi network.

The plan for Connect Schools is that the first-year pupils will be using technology throughout their secondary-school experience. Maxwell and her team are currently setting up performance indicators to measure

the effects to see if attendance and classroom engagement are better, and ultimately if more of the students go on to take the Leaving Cert.

In another project called ACE (Access to College Education), a group of sixth-year students are being actively targeted to see if exposure to IT in the classroom will spark an interest that could carry them through to third level.

"We're trying to turn around the experience of young people who have grown up in an area that has traditionally been disadvantaged," explains Maxwell. "Outside of school, they understand technology and use it in a way that adults don't get. It's something we want them to use in the classroom."

Maxwell and her team will also be interested in the teachers' reaction. In a typical year the school would lose six to 10 staff members. Because of Connect Schools, teachers are now committed to staying and supporting the project. This will give pupils more continuity in the classroom, which can only help the learning environment.

Heidi Tully is one of the schoolteachers who has embraced the initiative. One of 10 teachers in a core group that helps facilitate peer-to-peer training, she says there is huge enthusiasm among staff for the project and tangible benefits are already being felt.

"We have seen attendance and punctuality improve. There is a real incentive for students to come in; they are engaging more and less inclined to disrupt," she says.

As a past pupil of the school, she felt immediately that the project would have a positive impact on the school

and was keen to get involved. "I was very much in favour of bringing IT into the classroom," she says.

"I see it as a medium to facilitate teaching, not as something that replaces the human element. As an English and history teacher I saw new possibilities in the classroom for learning. It's a brilliant tool that lets students take ownership of their own learning."

There has also been some interesting role reversal. "Many of the students are already very skilled in technology and they have been teaching the teachers a few things," adds Tully.

There are three other parts to the SDCC Connect programme. Connect Web carries on where Mobhaile left off. Currently, 100 community groups have their own websites hosted on SDCC's site. Because they are run by volunteers who tend to come and go, the challenge is to cultivate sustainable support. This includes a plan to introduce online training in the skills required to create and run the sites.

Connect Me is aimed at all local citizens, based around geographic information system mapping to help residents and visitors find local amenities. Whole new communities are springing up in the area and it's a useful way for people to find their way around, locating everything from doctors' surgeries to local resident associations. The online service will map the location in relation to the user's address.

Connect Centres is another scheme that has been set up to encourage local community centres to provide public internet access alongside more traditional facilities, such as

sports halls and meeting rooms. It is seen as a natural extension to the progressive work the SDCC has done in connecting its libraries. It was among the first in Ireland to go Wi-Fi and have proved popular with immigrants who use the Skype over the PCs for free phone calls home.

Local IT companies from the many business parks in the area are working with the centres to provide IT support and training. "It's about getting people online and using technology, but it's also about building something that is sustainable," says Maxwell. "It's about creating awareness and conquering the digital divide."

For Places of interest in Dublin you can view the [Visitors Map](#)



Overall Winners of eGovernment Award South Dublin County Council (from left): Dave Downey, Joe Horan chairman, Minister Tom Kitt TD, Lorna Maxwell, Ronan Herron, Teresa Walsh, Pat Smith, Denise Egan, Billy Leonard and Sabrina Fogarty