

The drive to net access for all

A series of partnerships are leading the way in getting people from all over Scotland connected, discovers Anthony Harrington

THE Equal programme, a European Social Fund Community Initiative, is making an impact in bringing IT and the experience of broadband connectivity to various communities around Scotland.

Already, thanks to a grant made in the first round of Equal funding, which began in 2002, remote and rural communities across Scotland got the chance to see what broadband internet connectivity could do to help businesses, educational establishments and the elderly. Equal funded a mobile coach with a broadband satellite link and a team of demonstrators.

The second round of funding has just been announced and a total of 100 organisations in the UK were awarded funding. These organisations will lead Development Partnerships (DP) with specific, approved projects all aimed at testing and encouraging new ways of promoting employability, entrepreneurship, adaptability and equal opportunities. In all, 11 DPs in Scotland received funding.

Leigh Berridge, manager of the Work-Life Adaptability Development Partnership, and director of projects at Adam Smith College, one of the participating bodies, explains that a unique feature of Equal is that organisations can't apply for funding as sole entities. Funding is only granted to partnerships so applicants have to form joint arrangements and specify how their joint working brings something new to the party.

"The whole aim is to bring together people who would not really have worked together in normal circumstances. When you do this, you can really start to leverage the strengths of several organisations to create a wholly new and innovative way of reaching deprived or isolated communities," she explains.

The sums on offer from



Events such as this one in Raploch, above, are putting the wheels in motion to introduce communities to the internet

Equal are substantial. The Work-Life Partnership has a project worth £4 million in the current funding round, for example, with matching funding coming from other bodies.

"When we first applied for Equal funds, we had limited experience of the programme. I was head of external funding at Glenrothes College (now merged with Fife College to form the new Adam Smith College) and it seemed to me that this new European fund was worth investigating," she says.

The first development partnership brought together Glenrothes College, Glasgow Caledonian University, Dumfries and Galloway College, Scottish Enterprise Lanarkshire, Stirling Council and South Lanarkshire Council, Greater Pollock Development Agency, WEA, Strathclyde University and the Scottish Executive, plus Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Enterprise Highlands and Islands.

"We came up with ideas in a series of meetings and people gradually worked out how we could all work together as a development partnership," she explains.

The breadth of the partnership meant that the unit could bring a great deal of expertise

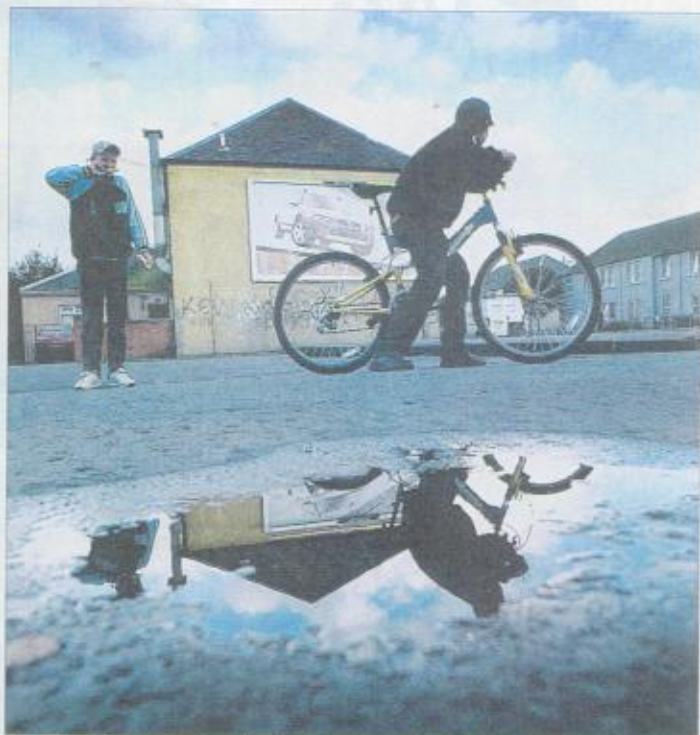
to bear. In all, the partnership received first-round funding for five initiatives. In one of these, Glasgow Caledonian University took the lead in setting up a Community of Practice in care homes across Scotland to enable staff in the homes to participate, via email and the internet, in upskilling. "For the first time, staff found they could have a real voice," Berridge says.

Another project was the broadband-enabled bus. Called the Mobile Learning Initiative (MOLI), the bus demonstrated the benefits of broadband and high-speed web access to some 4,000 small to medium-sized enterprises across Scotland

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"It was really a great initiative that enabled us to demonstrate the benefits of broadband up and down the country. We generated a tremendous amount of impetus and helped BT to reach the trigger point on a number of ADSL exchanges," Berridge explains.

In the early days of its roll-out of ADSL across Scotland, BT wanted to focus on areas



where demand was strongest. So it set up a register for each exchange and set minimum targets of subscribers it wanted to have pre-committed to taking broadband, before it would broadband initialise that exchange. The "trigger" concept has now been dropped and BT is enabling all possible exchanges.

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The second partnership, formed for the second round of funding, runs under the banner "Building Smarter Communities". It aims to develop a more inclusive Scottish workplace, one result of which will be to allow small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to operate more competitively.

The projects cover the fol-

lowing areas: the use of technology to encourage business growth in rural and disadvantaged areas; educating employers about the work-life balance ethos, engaging with the long-term unemployed and those who find it difficult to work due to the rural nature of their circumstances, or through disability, age, culture and gender; and looking at anticipated skills shortages in the context of the demographic time-bomb.

"Our MOLI initiative this time will have four mini-MOLIs, using smaller vans equipped with laptops, wireless connections and satellite broadband connections.

The Development Partnership launched the "mini-MOLI" in Raploch in late August, at a community event. "We have everything in the van from computer games and a mini recording studio for children to web design experts

who can show people how their businesses could benefit from broadband connectivity," Berridge says.

One of the mini-MOLIs will be in the Highlands and Islands, while the others will be in Fife, Raploch and in Craigmillar in Edinburgh.

According to Berridge, there will be initiatives addressing the aged, those in rural communities and the long-term unemployed. "Empowerment is one of the key themes in all our work. We now have good relationships across the Development Partnership with all the participating bodies. Plus, we have been helped by the flexibility of the funding mechanisms."

"Far from being rigidly prescriptive, it really makes it possible for people to try things to see if they work and to test what real benefits the various ideas bring to various Scottish communities," she concludes.



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Smarter
Communities



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