

From the Hebrides to the world... e-Sgoil breaks the mould



By Katie Macleod

E-Sgoil, the digital learning service from Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's Education and Children's Services Department, has grown exponentially since its launch in 2016, and now delivers online teaching across Scotland as well as throughout the Western Isles.

One milestone was the opening of a second e-Sgoil hub in Carinish in North Uist, which was formally opened in August 2017 by Deputy First Minister John Swinney, and it has recently seen the addition of a second full-time member of staff, as well as a Heritage Modern Apprentice.

Located in the old Carinish school building, the hub "was established to provide a service point for education delivery as part of the e-Sgoil structure," explains e-Sgoil Head Teacher Angus Macleannan, who is based at the e-Sgoil headquarters on Francis Street in Stornoway. "North Uist is one of the most fragile economies in the Western Isles at the moment, it's got the highest rate of population decline, so we deliberately targeted that area."

Catriona Currie, Principal Teacher of Gaelic and Social Subjects at e-Sgoil, grew up in Uist, and had been teaching in Highland Authority for 20 years before she returned to the island to take up the post at Carinish last October. "I really enjoyed working in Inverness, but the plan was always to try and get home if I could," says Catriona of the move. "I'm very lucky to have come home to such an appealing, interesting job."

Through VScene, the online video conference system used by e-Sgoil, Catriona still teaches her old 4th year Gaelic Medium History class at Inverness Royal Academy, as well as a National 5 Gaelic pupil at Dingwall Academy. She's also responsible for the Department's Quality Assurance of Online Learning Teachers, where she observes classes digitally as well as in-person.

Ann Cooper, who had previously taught for a time at Sgoil Lionacleit, joined the Cairinish e-Sgoil team in December. Without this opportunity, she says she might have had to move to the mainland for work. Ann now teaches Gaelic online to the new cohort of Modern Apprentices, at both beginner and intermediate levels, as well as to a sixth year pupil at Banchory Academy who is studying Gaelic as an elective; it's the first time Gaelic has ever been taught at the Kincardineshire school.

Through e-Sgoil, learning is being delivered not just throughout the Western Isles, but across the rest of Scotland. Mairi Mackay, originally from the Western Isles, works for e-Sgoil from her home in Perth, where she teaches Gaelic to pupils on the isle of Islay; another teacher on Jura teaches Gaelic to Primary One pupils in Mull, where parents

used the Education Scotland Act (2016) to request Gaelic language provision for their children.

And it's not only Gaelic Medium teaching e-Sgoil is offering, either. The team at e-Sgoil were recently asked by Skills Development Scotland and Education Scotland to come up with an effective means of delivering Computer Science classes, a subject area that has recently seen national staff shortages. In response, e-Sgoil are creating a pilot scheme involving schools in Dingwall, Banff, and the Western Isles, one that will assist pupils with after-school study support in the evenings, and study sessions in the run up to national exams this spring.

Outside the academic classroom, a number of musically gifted pupils in the Western Isles are currently receiving online tuition from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in Glasgow, and adult learner modern language taster sessions will be available to a wider island audience through e-Sgoil as of this month.

"The possibilities are endless, really, as long as the connections are up and running," says Catriona of e-Sgoil. "The investment in the technology is fantastic, and the quality of the back-up and support is particularly worth a mention."

In connection with the Comhairle's workforce planning strategy, the economic impacts of e-Sgoil are developing alongside the educational ones. The e-Sgoil hub at Carinish has two teachers, but it also has a Modern Apprentice, Anna Black, also from Uist. Anna is working as a Heritage Apprentice with the North Uist Historical Society, which will eventually be taking over the lease of the building, and running it in partnership with e-Sgoil.

"There's more joined-up thinking happening in terms of the economy," says Angus of the Modern Apprentice scheme and e-Sgoil's role. "It's helping to build a more sustainable future for local areas."

"It's nice seeing this building coming back into use," adds Catriona, talking of the buzz it's brought into the village. "Carinish School was closed for over a year, so I think the local community are happy to see it coming back into life. It's great that Comunn Eachdraidh Uibhist a Tuath come in to see Anna, and that we hear about their projects – it's a lively building again."

Now halfway through its second academic session, e-Sgoil is continuing to grow. "We have an increasingly larger range of subjects, and we're responding to demand not just from our own schools, but from schools across Scotland," says Allan Smithyman, e-Sgoil's Senior Education Officer.

"Nobody's sustained this in Scotland in the way that we're doing it. We're the only place that's doing it on this scale, and in a sustainable nature."