COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR

Building our communities

Leading the way…e-sgoil learning gains worldwide recognition

By **Katie Macleod**

When e-Sgoil, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's digital learning service, launched in 2016, no-one could have predicted how fast it would grow – or how it would be making waves in education not just locally, but internationally, too.

e-Sgoil – which has its headquarters in Stornoway and a satellite hub in Carinish, North Uist, with plans for a third in Iochdar, South Uist, in the works – currently teaches into ten local authorities across Scotland, and has expanded the range of subjects being taught to include everything from Gaelic and Maths to Physics and Chanter.

"The number of authorities we teach across at any one time can fluctuate from week to week," explains Angus Maclennan, Head Teacher at e-Sgoil. "We're quite often doing supply where we cover classes until such time as schools are able to recruit their own staff, or somebody comes back from sick leave or maternity leave."

e-Sgoil works by putting teachers in front of classrooms via video calling software known as VScene. With everyone able to see and engage with one another face-to-face, it's an example of "remote teaching" that's being used for emergency cover, specialist input into classrooms, and even pupil-led learning.

"It works best when we're using the people who are already there," says Steven Graham, e-Sgoil's Principal Teacher of STEM. "By teaming them up, whether that's teachers being teamed up with students, or students being paired up with one another, there are all sorts of possibilities for collaboration and pupils working together and learning from one another, as well as learning from the teacher."

In recent months this has taken multiple forms. A psychology teacher based part-time in The Nicolson Institute also teaches psychology to schools across the Western Isles and Aberdeenshire from e-Sgoil, and e-Sgoil Psychology pupils receive input from either UHI or Strathclyde University lecturers when their teacher is committed elsewhere. In Sgoil Lionacleit, a sixth-year Advanced Higher German student is practicing her speaking and listening skills with a fellow student in Dunbartonshire.

Another recent pilot programme saw a secondary biology teacher offer weekly science lessons to Primary 5-7 pupils at Sir E Scott School, with the pilot being capped off with an online e-Sgoil session which saw input from a neuroscientist based in London, and a Skills Development Scotland representative discussing STEM careers. The programme – delivered entirely in Gaelic – was so well received it was then delivered via e-Sgoil from Sir E Scott School to Back School.

The digital connections take place between pupils too, as well as between teachers. In March, schools in the Western Isles linked up via VScene with partner schools in Shetland to give presentations on the life, language, and culture of their respective island homes. As Angus notes, pupil-led learning is an area e-Sgoil will be developing and focusing on over the next year.

"The possibilities are endless for bringing people into the classroom," says Steven of e-Sgoil's potential. "You're looking at removing the geographical barriers that prevent some of our pupils here in the Western Isles from having the experiences that our more urban pupils perhaps have better access to e-Sgoil is a way to overcome these barriers."

e-Sgoil has added educational benefits too, on top of opening up the range of subjects to young people throughout the islands and across Scotland: it allows pupils to develop digital communication skills that are only becoming more important in the world of work. "It's not just about delivering subject content, it's about delivering a digital skillset and collaborative learning approaches through the delivery of the course content," says Angus.

And then there's the economic factor, as e-Sgoil allows teachers to work and teach from their own smaller communities. e-Sgoil's Principal Teacher of Gaelic and Social Subjects, Catriona Currie, is just one example. Originally from Uist, Catriona had worked for 20 years in Highland Council, before returning home to take up the e-Sgoil post in Carinish, where she is now raising her young family.

"We've got teachers who're based in the Western Isles, who're employed in the Western Isles, who're contributing to the Western Isles economy, but their classes are either on the mainland or quite a distance from their home," says Steven, pointing out that their staff

includes teachers with caring responsibilities, those who are semi-retired, and those with young families. Angus adds that e-Sgoil is offering employment "in a flexible way that suits lots of teachers who would otherwise be lost to the teaching profession."

Despite their success, the e-Sgoil team are keen to emphasise that they don't have a magic wand for rural education. Difficulties can arise with technological software or getting teachers familiar with the systems quickly.

But as Steven points out "at the end of the day, we want to do what's best for pupils and not just pick and choose the easy ones for e-Sgoil. We're working in schools at the moment where unless we were able to give them short-term emergency cover, they would not have a subject specialist in front of that class – that's the reality of it."

Angus agrees. "We could quite easily refuse to take things on if they're too challenging, but if you do that, you're not going to move forward, you're not going to develop your systems. We've been pushing the agenda and having to react very, very quickly to a changing landscape. We have to risk reputational damage for the sake of the pupils."

"We are very grateful to partner agencies such as Ajenta, SQA, SDS, GTCS and teaching unions who have helped us to find new ways of delivering courses and programmes. Without flexibility and innovation on their part, pupils in remote areas would have missed out on a range of opportunities."

Whatever challenges e-Sgoil may face day-to-day, they are already ahead of the curve, and other professionals are taking note. The Irish government recently invited e-Sgoil staff to Dublin to discuss their work, and the team are already working on a consultancy basis with the Welsh government. Earlier this year, a professor from Japan travelled to Stornoway to see how he could learn from the work being done in the Western Isles, and apply it to the Japanese islands that are facing similar issues of rural depopulation and demand for teaching staff.

On top of all that there are even more plans for the future: the continued support of the National Gaelic Language Plan; the potential for children who can't attend school to learn through e-Sgoil; the option for community learning initiatives to be delivered through the department; and the upcoming delivery of driving theory lessons in Arabic to recently arrived Syrian refugees in Dingwall. e-Sgoil, it seems, is expanding beyond the classroom, as well as beyond borders.

It's a lot of progress in just three years. "All of the ingredients were really there," says Steven. "The specialist teachers were there; the pupils were there needing to be taught; the IT is now up to where it needs to be in terms of the school's network and the kit that's available. All that we've done really is take these ingredients, pull them all together, joined the dots effectively, and e-Sgoil was born."