

LEADER

Community-Led Local Development



National Rural Network

LEADER 2014-2020 NRN CASE STUDY

Project name: SWEETS Community and Adult Education Centre

Date: February 2017 to February 2018

Local Action Group: Westmeath LCDC

Implementing Partner: Westmeath Community Development

Type of Beneficiary: CLG & Registered Charity

Priority & Focus Area: Theme 1: Economic Development, Enterprise Development and Job Creation/Sub theme: Broadband

Project Beneficiary Name/Organisation: South Westmeath Employment Education and Training Services (SWEETS)

Address: The Crescent, Kilbeggan, Co. Westmeath

Further information: www.sweets.ie

SWEETS COMMUNITY AND ADULT EDUCATION CENTRE

Summary

South Westmeath Employment Education and Training Services (SWEETS) is a community services project located in rural Westmeath. IT training is a core activity of SWEETS. This project facilitated SWEETS to upgrade its laptop equipment. The equipment facilitated SWEETS to deliver higher quality IT courses in a more effective learning environment. Improvements in training delivery aided better student experiences, learning and confidence building. SWEETS IT training is a vital service to the rural community supporting access and engagement with the modern digital world, bringing social and economic benefits to its local rural area..

Context

Established in 2001, SWEETS is a community services project located in Kilbeggan, county Westmeath. It provides adult education and training services and acts as a community information centre. Alongside this, SWEETS provides a wide range of other services to the community from event facilities for local groups to CV preparation, mock interview advice and practice. As a social enterprise, its training courses and wider services are a key part of its funding model. It also receives important core public funding from the Department of Rural and Community Development through Pobal.



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SWEETS has been providing community adult education in Westmeath since 1997. It is an accredited FETAC QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) training centre and is registered with SOLAS as a training organisation. SWEETS develops its course programme in collaboration with the community. Each January and September it holds an open day where community members provide their views on local education and training needs. This flexibility and engagement is very important to develop courses of most value to the local community. For example, the recent recovery of jobs in the construction industry has created a need for Safe Pass training.

The provision of IT training is a core activity of SWEETS. In doing so it must have the most up to date equipment to maintain its reputation as a training organisation and to effectively deliver courses. The provision of grant aid has enabled SWEETS to purchase up-to-date laptops and software. Because of changes and advances in technology, updates to equipment are needed approximately on a five yearly basis, sometimes earlier.



IT course at SWEETS training centre. Image Credit: SWEETS

The project is linked with Westmeath's 2014 to 2020 Local Development Strategy objective to assist the economic and social development of rural areas in the county through the provision of ICT training and other supports to communities and enterprises.

Objectives

This project aimed to support and develop SWEETS IT training activities. Its core objectives were to:

Upgrade equipment and software to bring it up-to-date.

Enable SWEETS to deliver and expand its range of IT training courses to rural dwellers.

Enable SWEETS to deliver basic IT training for priority groups to ensure availability and access to broadband services and markets for all.

Improve access to on-line services for people living in rural and remote areas, especially those at risk of social exclusion and isolation, offering up-skilling and social contact.

Activities

SWEETS submitted an expression of interest to Westmeath Community Development in February 2017 to upgrade its laptop computer equipment. The project was fully completed in February 2018 when the LEADER grant was paid. SWEETS existing laptops were purchased in 2011. A 50% grant from the previous LEADER (2007-13) programme facilitated the purchase of these laptops. This LEADER grant provided for 75% of the cost of purchase of 16 new Dell Vostro laptops which included the Microsoft Office software.

The purchase of laptops was required for a number of reasons. One fundamental reason was to maintain the professionalism and quality of computer training provided. The current stock of laptops did not provide the capacity and quality needed by SWEETS. The age of the laptops created challenges for tutors such as technical issues arising during classes. Demand for course places at times outstripped the stock of current laptops. Prior to purchase of the new laptops front office laptops had to be used in training classes. This impacted efficiency as administrative





staff were inhibited from progressing wider operational and support tasks of the organisation.

The mobility of laptops and the practical benefits this brings is vital to SWEETS delivery of computer courses outside its own training centre. Before 2011 computer courses were delivered at the training centre using desktop PCs. Investing in laptop equipment gives mobility and allows SWEETS tutors to deliver courses at a variety of locations. For example, if delivering computer training in the community the new laptops have longer battery life and can retain charge to allow delivery of a few hours of classes without needing recharging. Battery life is important as it minimises the need for use of cables in training locations where from a health and safety point of view their use is best avoided.

A further reason driving the need for this project was that in recent years SWEETS observed a trend among some students having preference to use their own laptops in computer training classes. This can aid learning and SWEETS encourages this practice if it is the student's preferred approach. However often student's personal laptops were younger and faster than SWEETS own. This resulted in students using equipment of different capabilities creating challenges for tutors during classes.

The project was also important to help build on the existing strengths of SWEETS supporting the organisation's future sustainability. Its location in a rural area means that training participants do not have to travel long distances to avail of training opportunities. SWEETS tends to have more female than male clients on training courses. SWEETS local accessibility facilitates access, such as day-time courses that run during school hours when parents have time to access them in-between childcare duties.

"We can't be two steps behind and the new laptops help us to move forward. We couldn't proceed without the new laptops to provide training that is fair to all students. The upgraded equipment helps us provide training to students on a level playing field".

Martha McMahon, IT Tutor, SWEETS

Results

The new equipment has enhanced SWEETS existing suite of computer training courses. The laptops mean that courses are run more efficiently. Issues with slow laptops, different keyboard layouts or software versions is eliminated in classes using these machines. The project has successfully increased accessibility to IT training in rural areas. The new equipment has allowed SWEETS to accommodate bigger groups in computer classes. Small class sizes are important to SWEETS but classes that previously averaged around 8 people can now be increased to 10 or more.



Entrance to SWEETS training and community information centre. Image Credit: NRN

The equipment upgrade has enabled SWEETS to provide learners with the most up to date IT hardware and software enhancing the organisation's reputation and service delivery. Return clients are very important to SWEETS which enables growth of its market base. Clients who take beginner courses often move on to advanced courses. A positive initial experience is important to facilitate this.

SWEETS has found adult education in IT has strong social benefits. It instils confidence so that people can effectively engage with and benefit from the contemporary digital world. Courses provide a social space for rural people combatting social isolation. IT training improves access to online services and markets for those suffering marginalisation caused by educational disadvantage and/or rural isolation.

IT training also has socio-economic benefits. It encourages the sharing of ideas and opens opportunities leading to





growth in community activity and enterprise. SWEETS QQI computer courses are a stepping stone for people returning to education and/or wishing to pursue further education and training, as well as those seeking their first time occupation, to advance/up-skill in their current job or change jobs. This project has assisted SWEETS sustain its current level of employees (3 full-time and 4 part-time). The organisation now has one full-time IT tutor. Previously this was staffed by two part-time roles.

was an element of uncertainty over whether this would be realised. SWEETS sourced bridging finance through a local community fund. This facilitated SWEETS to have the equipment in place for the start of new computer courses in January. Nevertheless, an important lesson to note is the difficulty for non-profit organisations to finance and run projects when grant supports run over a long timeframe and with uncertain timelines.



SWEETS location at the Crescent, Kilbeggan, Co. Westmeath. Image Credit: NRN

“As an adult education and training centre it is important that we have modern, up to date equipment to ensure the best outcome for our clients...our tutors are very happy to have such equipment and our clients are happy and impressed. We have to be mindful of our reputation as a QQI training centre at all times. We hope that the courses we provide will assist clients to get online for the first time, improve their skills while providing a pleasant social occasion to all of our learners”.

Brendan McGough, Manager, SWEETS

Lessons

The project has reinforced the importance of its initial driver that up to date equipment is essential to providing computer training. The project had multiple, multifaceted benefits, from both the SWEETS staff and SWEETS client perspective. The equipment has facilitated tutors deliver higher quality courses in a more effective learning environment. Improvements in training delivery aided better student experiences and learning. More broadly reduction in technical issues also assists confidence building in the use of digital technologies.

Understanding the detail and depth of information required as part of the LEADER application process is important to project realisation. Overall the process took one year from initial expression of interest to grant payment. SWEETS had experience of applying for funding under the previous LEADER programme which facilitated the process. The year long timeframe was a drawback in the context of this project. SWEETS had hoped to have the new equipment in place for courses starting in September and January. There

Funding

Total project budget (i)+(ii)+(iii) =	€8,874.24
+ (i) Rural Development Programme support (a)+(b)	€6,655.68
+ (a) EAFRD (EU) contribution	€4,179.77
+ (b) National / Regional contribution	€2,475.91
+ (ii) Private / Own funds	€2,218.56
+ (iii) Other funding sources	n/a

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