NEW ONLINE SYSTEM TAPS INTO 'E-GRANTS' IN LAOIS

Laois Partnership Board is due to launch a new online system to help staff efficiently and effectively manage the data and paperwork involved in the grant application process. Developed by Dublin-based web solutions company eConcepts, there are now plans to roll out this new online facility to other community partnership groups around the country.

Laois Partnership worked with a digital development company eConcepts over a five-month period to develop what is referred to as the 'eGrants' system. This was developed with the following five key goals:

- To significantly reduce the time our staff spend writing the standard documentation by automating the preparation of such documents.
- To improve the accuracy of data as grant applications move through the various stages of the process.
- To build a tool which could digest, and interpret the cohort of applications and help the organisation see trends.
- To develop a robust and secure system which we can add additional tools onto in the future.
- To have a smooth mobile option so our staff can log key information while onsite instead of writing notes, and typing them later.

Laois Partnership worked with eConcept Web Solutions – a Dublin-based digital development company with experience in the regional development sector. Pat Kennedy, director of eConcepts said, "The project took five months to complete. We were really fortunate in that a representative in Laois Partnership really understood the potential to streamline so many of the actions required in the process.

"We were really amazed with the number of steps and paperwork involved in the grant application process. There was a lot of work put into it but we are delighted with the results and so is the client."

THE 'E-GRANTS' SYSTEM
The system which they are calling 'eGrants' allows staff in the Laois Partnership Board to:
- Import project names and references for the national database run by Pobal.
- Log information throughout the process and will then auto compile documents such as:

Laois Partnership Board is beginning to train relevant staff on how to use the 'eGrants' system.

   o Expression of Interest Report
   o Synopsis Report
   o Table of Quote/Breakdown of Claims
   o Project Evaluations
   o Meeting Evaluation Sheets
   o Register of Assets
   o Meeting Memos/Letters/Funding Letter checks
- Based on figures entered, the system will run relevant calculations.

An eTownz community development workshop organised by Pat Kennedy (third left) was funded by Clare County Council through the REDZ programme to develop opportunities for the creative sector in the Shannon area.

Mark O'Leary and Pat Kennedy – co-owners of web solutions company e-Concepts. For further information email p.kennedy@econcepts.ie or visit **www.econcepts.ie/**

The system is almost ready to go live and Laois Partnership is beginning to train relevant staff on how to use the system. Mark Clancy of Laois Partnership explained: "We are very happy with the new system that Pat and his team have developed. We see it as an important tool that will help us to meet the very stringent and seemingly never-ending paperwork requirements of the new LEADER programme.

"This will free up staff to spend more time dealing directly with our clients to develop projects on the ground. We have just begun logging applications and already we are seeing potential to add additional features and functionality which is possible due to the flexibility in the system."

The system is being made ready for use in similar situations around the country. As Pat Kennedy, explained: "We are now providing this as an off-the-shelf solution. We will take a version of the system and customise it to the particular needs of the organisation. Once deployed we actually hand over the lock and keys, leaving the organisation with a robust system which they control fully with minimal ongoing costs."

E-TOWNZ READY TO TEAM UP WITH COMMUNITIES

The company has also been researching different methods of online tools that could revolutionise the community development sector, and recently finished up an 18-month research project with Dr Maura Farrell and her team in the Sustainable Community Department of NUI Galway.

With the support of Enterprise Ireland, the eTownz project has focused on community planning and project management. Social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have had a transformative impact on how community groups communicate and raise awareness of their activities on social media.

According to Pat Kennedy, "Our research has been a very interesting journey and we believe we have a system that could really transform the community development sector in Ireland and possibly, eventually across the world."

He added that unlike traditional paper-based community plans, the eTownz community plan is ever evolving. "Contributors can continually add new ideas, provide feedback, suggest new projects, log their success and update progress. The planner also allows existing regional, club or local plans to be included in the system."

PROJECT MANAGEMENT TOOL

The project management tool is designed for local clubs, groups and volunteers. The systems allows community admins to add new clubs/groups; club admins to add new projects and assign tasks to volunteers, while volunteers themselves can follow club activities, review their tasks and log volunteered hours.

"By logging this information projects can be run more efficiently, making best use of local volunteers' time; new people can be encouraged to get involved either online or offline; and the community can better recognise and acknowledge the work of local volunteers," noted Pat.

The team recently presented their research in Brussels at the European Network for Rural Development, where it was well received, and now plans to launch the eTownz dashboard in June.

The eTownz Dashboard and associated phone app will be available on a monthly subscription fee to interested communities, once the community profile is live, people from across the community can register for free and get involved.

Local community administrators are assigned and this means all clubs, projects and plans in the system can be overseen by locals.

Communities who wish to improve their planning and management of local development activities can get more information on **www.eTownz.com** or email **pat@eTownz.com**