

COMMUNITIES

Pictures by: Jonty Wilde and Gilbert Johnston

SMARTENING UP

THE CITY'S SUCCESS IN WINNING A MAJOR NATIONAL COMPETITION MEANS THAT ACCESS TO SMART NEW TECHNOLOGY IS GOING TO BE EASIER FOR ALL SUNDERLAND RESIDENTS

Right: Rachel helping local resident Norman Rain get to grips with IT.

Far Right: Children from Hetton Comprehensive School at the 'Switch On to ICT' event at the Grundfos factory.



Sunderland has beaten other local authorities across the UK to win the prestigious national Digital Challenge Award, worth £3.5 million, to help make IT more available to people in the local community. The win will also unlock additional funding from a wide range of local and national businesses.

The projects that the bid will fund include a web-based project to help children, parents, guardians and carers tackle the issue of childhood obesity and a project that is already achieving notable success - the e-Neighbourhoods Programme.

Through the programme, computers have been placed in a mix of community venues from village halls to pubs where training and technical support is available to help users develop their skills. This support comes from 'e-champions', volunteers from a variety of backgrounds who help boost people's awareness of, and expertise in, using computer technology.

Rachel Anderson, 23, from Easington Lane is one of 100 e-champions working across Sunderland. Rachel began her involvement with the Coalfield Forum as an admin worker and has developed her own computer skills to become the 'E' Forum Officer,

passing her skills on to others within her community. Her role can range from helping young people to share information on schoolwork and exams to advising a 73-year-old man who can now use e-mail to keep in touch with his family abroad.

Rachel said: "Many people have a fear of computers, but that can easily be overcome if you make technology relevant to everyday life to tackle real issues. An illustration of this is the interactive website I have been involved with, helping people gain the confidence and skills to make their own voluntary contributions."

To contact e-champion Rachel call 0191 3854935 or log on to <http://www.coalfieldforum.org>

DIGITAL CHALLENGE PROJECTS

These are just a few of the projects funded by the Digital Challenge Award that will be rolled out across the city:

ICT@Home

Providing PC's and technical infrastructure to the homes of schoolchildren who are at risk of underachieving at key stage 3.

Health Information points

These state-of-the-art kiosks will be installed in places such as GP's surgeries, hospital out patients departments and pharmacies. Users will be able to check in automatically for their appointments and will also be able to check their weight, body mass index, blood pressure and pulse.

My Sunderland

A virtual community site that will cover information on everything from local jobs to an on-line transport scheme.

For more information about any of the Digital Challenge projects call 0191 5614258 or email digital.challenge@sunderland.gov.uk



Making IT relevant to people's everyday lives is also the role of another e-champion, Barbara McClennan, Chief Executive of Education Business Connections (EBC) which works within the business, public and private sectors to develop young people's skills to meet employers' needs. Barbara said: "It's great for me to be able to use what I've learned throughout my working career to help young people use technology to their own advantage and realise that what they learn in the classroom is preparing them for the world of work."

This was demonstrated when the e-champions recently attended the 'Switch on to ICT' event at the Grundfos factory in Sunderland, funded by Urban II. Students were given the chance to see how the IT skills they learn in the classroom can be translated into the workplace. Year 11 pupils were given the opportunity to find out from a range of employers and community groups how they use IT and its applications in their particular field of work.

Each student was taken through a 'hands-on' task, showing how their skills could be used in a range of workplace tasks, everything from using software to draw up maps for an outdoor activity centre to accessing databases and producing promotional material for arts and leisure facilities.

Sunderland City Council Leader Bob Symonds said "This major national award is recognition of the innovative work that's been going on in Sunderland to make the benefits of modern technology available to the city's residents. As well as being acknowledged as a national leader in the field, the city has also been recognised for the fifth year running as one of the world's most IT intelligent cities, predominantly for our willingness to embrace new technology as a means of attracting businesses and jobs to the city."

To contact e-champion Barbara call 0191 5166411 or log on to <http://www.ebcldt.org.uk>