



# **Pioneer Community Online Centres**

A management perspective

A report to DfES by Martin Dudley, Research and Innovation Services,  
and Kevin Harris, Community Development Foundation  
September 2001

Community Development Foundation  
60 Highbury Grove  
London N5 2AG  
[www.cdf.org.uk](http://www.cdf.org.uk)

## **Introduction**

This report records our assessment of management issues relating to 'the Five' pioneer UK online centres set up under CDF management in 1999. The projects were based in various locations around England:

Granby Island, Plymouth

Windhill and Bolton Woods, Shipley East

Hangleton and Knoll, Hove

Scotswood Support Centre, Newcastle upon Tyne

The Innit Project, South Kilburn, London Borough of Brent

The centres are described in greater detail in our first report, [\*Many First Steps\*](#), submitted in the summer of 2000 and revised December 2000.

During the autumn and spring 2000 – 2001, support was provided to the five projects. As well as visits for interviews with managers, and an opportunity to talk to people using the centres, we made ad hoc visits, provided telephone and email support, and participated in an online discussion list set up by staff at Granby Island. [\*Many First Steps\*](#) was completed shortly after a seminar that we organised in June 2000. A second seminar was held in December 2000 in Bristol, the main purpose of which was to ensure that the good links between projects, and the evident sharing of good practice was continued and sustained.

The main effort was a series of structured interviews held with managers at each project in the autumn of 2000 and the early part of 2001. The first purpose of these was to plot how each project was meeting the needs of the UK Online centres pioneer programme. The interviews were designed to also allow some measure of tracking of developments, to give managers a chance to determine their success in meeting people's needs, and to discuss their progress and future plans.

This report derives largely from these interviews, and throughout uses their words and their comments as closely as possible. The interviews were based on the issues that DfES sought to test during the piloting phases. A copy of the interview schedule is located in the [Appendix](#).

## Target Audiences

Managers were asked to identify their target audiences, and to say how they prioritised the targets established in the Dfee agreement. Apart from the important point that they were serving local people in general, projects selected *categories* of people identified by them as having special needs or requiring special services. Centres mentioned categories they aimed to serve as follows:

From the beginning	Emerged after set up	Planned
Single parents	Uniformed youth groups	Men
Older people	Refugees/asylum seekers	People who experience exclusion aged 30-50
Young people in various age groups	Unemployed males	Unemployed
Unemployed/ economically inactive	People with disabilities	
Women returners	A health group	
Socially/geographically isolated people	Those with low basic skills	
Working people seeking skills	Community champions	
Unwaged dependents		
Parents		
Disaffected young people		
Those with low basic skills		
People with low levels of self-confidence		

The table is a summary of all five projects. Communication between them at the June and December 2000 seminars organised as part of this work allowed them to hear and debate priorities and share experiences, and this helped each project to develop its thinking. Other priorities emerged in the light of changing community circumstances, for example asylum seekers being seen as an opportunity to extend their services to a new client group.

Asked to indicate the success with which the needs of the audiences had been met, the highest scores (eight or more out of ten) were for women returners (HaKIT); refugees and older people (Shipley); female lone parents, refugees, uniformed youth groups, and people with low levels of self-confidence (Granby Island); young people, and *individual* people with disabilities (Innit).

Less successful (scoring three or less out of ten) – in terms of engaging people *and* of meeting their needs – were the projects’ attempts to attract unemployed people, mainly men, young teenagers and older people (Granby Island); economically inactive people and young people (HaKIT); and people with disabilities (Innit). It may be remarked that each centre (except Innit) already had its own clientele and aims, often around families, women and young people, or those seeking work and skills (HaKIT).

Centres were all prepared to develop their markets, through new partnerships (Granby Island has a contract from the Basic Skills Agency), or to meet new demands such as those for refugees and asylum seekers (Shipley and Granby Island).

### **DfEE targets**

Managers were asked to indicate the priority they gave to the DfEE categories (low, medium or high). Results were as follows:

	Priority for centre	Perceived success 1- 10 Average
Those intimidated by ICT or who feel it's irrelevant	High(5)	7
Lack confidence due to negative experiences	High(5)	7
Feel it's too late in life	High(3) Medium(2)	6
Cultural traditions make access difficult	High(3) Medium(1) Low(1)	5
Physically/psychologically isolated and feel what is on offer is not appropriate	High(4) Medium (1)	>5
Run or work in SME's which give ICT a low priority	Low(5)	>1

Given the community-based nature of the projects, the lack of support to SME's is not surprising, although there has been activity reported with very small businesses in the form of self-employed people.

### **Attracting people**

Ways of raising the profile of centres have been reported in the monthly reports to DfEE. Web days, offering free Dreamweaver courses, running courses elsewhere such as in the library, making sure there were cups of tea for the 'Silver Surfers' group, running taster sessions, open days, leafleting – these were some of the many and varied means of encouraging participation. At Innit for example, taster sessions were targeted at the Somali population, and included identifying volunteers who could train further Somali asylum seekers. Time at the centre was provided voluntarily by staff (for which funding is now being sought) with the aim of developing the capacity of the Somali residents to organise their own training (to be contracted to the centre). Similarly HaKIT arranged to deliver training to a single mothers' group at the centre. Granby Island sets out *not* to be an IT centre but to be like 'someone's front room with a computer'.

### **Opening Hours**

Providing access to IT does change the demand for opening hours, and centres have adjusted existing hours to this. Scotswood and Innit have not had staff resources to cover all the hours needed. Others have opened at weekends when they could, and even, in the case of Granby Island, 24 x 7 for a period. Different client groups can demand different hours – for example people with disabilities may feel more comfortable during quieter times when normal centre activities are less disturbing. All centres would open longer to meet demand but are constrained by lack of finance or staff time. Scotswood had training provided at certain days and times only, with no support at other times (and often at other times, the room was already in use or was locked).

### **Free access to state of the art technology**

Shiplee centres benefit from having some IT provided by the college so that they have modern reliable hardware and up to date software with broadband links to be installed. Scotswood and Granby Island have considered that low specification hardware is not a barrier to use; but at Scotswood and HaKIT in particular, lack of full time trainers has meant that the equipment has been under utilised. The proposed video-conference system at Granby Island has been successfully

demonstrated, but has not been fully exploited yet. The project's success has drawn them on to other priorities. At Scotswood, the computers were never networked, and only one PC had a dial-up internet connection: IT management was carried out by the training provider as an incidental service. Granby Island has now embarked on a computer upgrade in support of community groups. Innit has included computer upgrades and improved connections in its recent (successful) CALL plan. Centres are extending the range of software and including other kinds of digital technology.

Apart from some consumable costs, all services are provided free to recipients.

### **Support from skilled workers**

Centres cited a wide range of skills that were on offer: technical support – hardware and software knowledge; community development; youth work; information, advice and guidance (IAG), plus various kinds of educational skill. Each centre has adopted a different approach.

#### *Scotswood*

Contracted to a private training organisation under a management agreement, courses have been run at set intervals. At other times, intermittent, unsupported drop-in access was provided. More recently, other workers at the centre began to make use of the IT as part of their work with, for example young people.

#### *Innit*

The technical skills of staff, and more recently volunteers have been applied widely. Individuals with special interests have worked on specific projects, and a special course on music has been run.

#### *HaKIT*

A qualified IT trainer has run courses at the main Opportunities Centre and also at the two community centres. Otherwise there has been unsupervised access or support from the advice workers. Voluntary help is being recruited.

#### *Granby Island*

The college has provided resources, and the centre has the continuing support to individuals of its project manager. Local people in the project have been trained on the '7307' facilitation qualification, and some volunteers have improved their social skills to support others' learning.

### *ShIPLEY*

College tutors plus a new post of community networker, and the existing community development worker have delivered training and support. The non-tutors have qualifications in teaching, basic skills, web design, but they cannot act as teachers as such (they do not do programme or syllabus design and assessment). The college has been piloting a new type of delivery through the community networker, and colleges would need to be flexible with staffing to do this.

### **Provision for learning styles and progression**

In Shipley 90 online learners were provided with a special curriculum. Now that the College is a Ufi centre, Ufi basic skills materials will be delivered at the centres. Identification of basic skills needs is developed in conversation and during signing up. There have been issues around the boundaries of ESF funding, and there are links to the Education Advice Service for Adults. Scotswood reported successful accommodation of learning styles to individuals, and people were assessed subtly to help plan their progression, although this is a complex, variable and slow process. HaKIT has been trying to link basic IT training to raise expectations of further exploitation of employment and training advice. Granby Island rates its success as superb in this context, and the new Basic Skills work has lead half of its learners to go on to the CFE. The key is to build confidence and skills to get them into mainstream education. Again, Innit claims high success, leading people on to the courses run nearby at a community education centre. There is no adequate description of the process by which basic skills needs are determined, although Granby Island reports that it always creates activities in which the learning is embedded in an interest, such as football.

### **SME's, people and new technology**

Only Granby Island reported interest from SME's and that only in internet use. Although interaction is minimal, some project mangers do see the possibility of developing programmes, with perhaps suitable funding and the support of New Deal for Communities, aimed at local small traders. Keeping people and SME's up to date with technologies might require a sustained programme, and innovative use of community networks as well as personal contacts to offer events and services. In all cases except possibly Shipley, continued funding would be needed to keep up to date. Scotswood and Granby Island however consider that there are other opportunities for people to get at state of the art technology, with the centres carrying out the critical role of engaging people in the first place.

## **Sustainability**

Up until March 2001 the five projects *had* sustained themselves. A brief characterisation would be that:

- Innit has been sustained by enthusiasm and commitment, with eventual involvement in a wider partnership. As with all centres, it is the skills displayed in personal interactions – approachability, humour, listening, guiding, supporting – which play such a major part.
- Granby Island has been sustained because the ICTs added a new (and unexpected) dimension to its facilities that has made it a more powerful player in local partnerships and community development activities, and it has grasped the technology as a tool to engage people and activities. It has also benefited from having a dedicated manager looking after all the ICT facilities, who has given sustained effort to ensuring success. Its distribution of pioneer funding to other centres has so far borne fruit in only one of them.
- The Shipley centres have developed because of the management, technology, and leadership from the College married to the highly motivated centre staff (professional and paid) with a consistent and dependable level of support to their local communities.
- HaKIT sustained itself despite insecure finances and changes in personnel. It has offered a limited programme linked to its existing employment and training advice services, but is vulnerable to revenue funding fluctuations and shortfalls. Its outreach services have been low-key and dependent on other funded programmes.
- Scotswood contracted for a service, but its own management has been less than supportive to the project, seeing it in some cases as an irrelevance, and has been diverted by radical City council ‘Going for Growth’ plans for urban regeneration in the area. It is likely that the online centre might not persist in its current form. One major problem has been disagreements over the use of the space, and concerns over the long-term revenue implications.

## **Funding**

In all five cases, CALL funding has been found, with ESF, SRB and other matched funding.

At Scotswood the funding for a successful Round 2 CALL bid may or may not be used at the centre. It would be used to fund personal effectiveness courses, and multi-media content based around learning



skills tested by CLAIT / IBT2, aimed at men, and working with individuals. Newcastle City Council is also implementing a strategic plan for centres and access across the city. The costs of child care, travel to more appropriate learning centres, clothing for interviews, and other incentives to get people motivated are seen as important at Scotswood – and they estimated a running cost of £100k per annum.

HaKIT sees a real problem in that funding rules prevent core staff and community development being paid for, and as with other centres the premises are in effect cross-subsidised from other funding streams. An estimated annual budget of £90k was suggested. At a later interview with different staff, including the Director of the overall Hangleton and Knoll project, it was clear that although the Opportunities advice centre supported access to the learning facilities (and to the ICT in general), funding of staff in 2001 would derive from the GAINS (DfES) information, advice and guidance, and also round 2 and 3 CALL bids, which appeared to have had a chequered history. It was feared that the funding for the training provided would run out before alternative funding was available. HaKIT would be part of a network of four centres, including the public library.

Granby plans to buy-in staff from an ILM as part of its CALL development as well as provide new-build accommodation. Round 2 CALL funding has come with £40k per annum for three years for staff, plus £100k from Basic Skills funds, of which £46k is for equipment. As before, some of this is for partner centres. So far it has not received FEFC funding but its relationship with the CFE now makes this possible. ICT also draws in people for other reasons, giving outputs to draw down funding and allow sharing of e.g. childcare facilities. Insurance and consumables costs have grown, and this causes some difficulty. More significant has been the way that ICT provision has increasingly become almost the major role of the centre, and from this has flowed an increasing consultancy role for the centre across the local and even national arena.

Innit sees the need for horizon-scanning not only of the technology (needed by all centres) but of financial and funding opportunities. It has been helped by being involved in partnerships – college, NDC, Crime Concern; by developing trading such as PC support and upgrades on a percentage fee basis; and, like Granby, by donations. Against this, Innit has been hindered by unforeseen costs for hardware and software, and lack of skill and time to seek sponsors and income. It estimates an annual budget of £220k to operate effectively.

Shipleys' continued programme depends on a bid for ERDF funding due to be announced in June 2001, which achieves sustainability of staffing until 2003. The college is already preparing an exit strategy. It sees the elements of sustainability as:

- Community venues with a network of computers to ensure a regular throughput of learners
- Links to college online learning resources
- Provision of accreditation and therefore access to FEFC funds – which will support staff costs.

The model is based on the Business Skills Workshops at Shipley College where staffing is from the core budget and where enough activity will get FEFC funding for staff – depending on demographics, the catchment and funding for widening participation. The catch is that if people want to get a job they need evidence of qualifications, which means being linked to a college, or being an accredited centre, which could undermine the rationale of community based learning.

At Innit, staff have been teasing out a relationship with North West London College. Starting with Webwise and email teaching means that staff can be seen as tutors, with Innit as a college satellite or entry point to college accredited courses. So far they have adopted an unstructured approach, rather than acting as a college online centre. Other strands developing at the project have been Innit's involvement in SRB and the NDC. In both cases Innit has been using its skills and facilities – to train NDC Board members, write ICT strategies, develop web sites and training at home – to carve out and be paid for a 'commercial' niche for itself. It is deriving revenue from people coming from outside its designated area for 'fun' and creative use of IT. Access to CALL/NOF funding should allow the employment of a full-time project worker. The legal (charitable) status of the centre has yet to be sorted out, and centre staff express disappointment in the level of management support they have received from Brent Council Regeneration Unit.

### **Links with other programmes in the area**

As time has gone on, centres have developed existing and new links. Just some of these are:

- Webwise, colleges, acting as a 'server and a hub' to New Deal for Communities, assisting New Deal people referred for the Job Centre, and offering start-up learning for people progressing to community education, ITEC and the Ufi access centre (Innit).
- A Fresh Start 2001 'new horizons' course at Knoll Community Centre, having 'intermediate' status from the Job Centre, a real partnership with the public library, but looking for and providing drop-in support to other programmes such as Millennium Volunteers (HaKIT).
- A written partnership agreement with Plymouth CFE; involvement in Plymouth Online; access to remote public library services; a place on the NDC board, a role in ensuring community consultation, and provision of ICTs as a tool to

community organisations involved in the NDC; and acting as a joint funder with the CFE of a Special Needs Photography project (Granby Island).

- LearnDirect, Shipley Communities Online which is part of the Regeneration Board (though Shipley is no longer in the worst 10% on the DETR deprivation index), and via SCOL to a whole range of guidance agencies, community broadcasting, TAPS – the ICT demonstrating cutting edge action in deprived communities, and as in other projects providing the platform for engagement in wider activities (Shipley centres).
- Links via local MP to computers and learning packages; fulfilling a local community role for learning opportunities where the local college centre is seen as ineffective in meeting the needs of non-traditional learners; the Area Strategy and actions elsewhere in the centre, although there has been no specific targeting of people on other programmes, nor has the ICT led to new relationships (Scotswood).

## **The most socially and digitally excluded**

### **Who are they?**

Reference has been made in the report *Pioneer And Pathfinder Evaluation: Final Report* (Hall-Aitken 2000) to socially and digitally excluded people. Digital exclusion is seen as a combination of lack of access to technology, and a lack of skills to use it. We asked Project Managers to define who they thought were so excluded, and the answers are contained in the table below.

People staying at home and losing skills	Women suffering abuse at home
40-50 year old unemployed males	Lone single mothers on daily survival
Asian people and other minorities	The “disorganised”
People with mental health problems	Those lacking interest in IT (including older people)
People with poor experiences of education	Self-excluded people, including young people
Those with a <i>habit</i> of dis-engagement	

## **How to reach them?**

Centre managers discussed a range of ideas. Traditional community development, outreach and capacity building will work given time and other resources, and will involve the network of professional workers through the social services, police and benefits systems. However, gaps will still be present. Local knowledge and personal contact is invaluable here – having a centre worker as at Granby Island for example, who will visit people at home following suggestions to centre staff.

Special actions to entice and engage people involve offering (non-means tested) incentives: ILA's, dedicated events and times, existing targeted programmes with a new ICT component, offering childcare, and creating a marketing plan aimed at and involving people from specific groups; plus other incentives such as extra benefits, paying for time (people lose income even from the black economy when they take up learning opportunities); and perhaps most importantly taking a holistic approach to health, environment and jobs by giving people the space, time and energy to take up a challenge and compete for and win work, even a distance away. It is the 'community' in community centre and a personal approach that can make a difference. It can also be important to develop and make known a 'ladder of opportunities' (to meet national shortages in ICT skills); from basic skills through to office skills, programming, hardware support and management, or involvement in creative media. Developing such local skills can create an environment where business and community may flourish through new economic activity, changing the nature of the community. The role of the ICT may vary initially: basic skills teaching can be managed by learning through play with ICT, or ICTs used as a tool of engagement by offering something new and fun.

## **Home access**

The interviews aimed to discover the relationship between access at the centres and access at home, on the assumption that people might learn at a centre before or after acquiring kit at home, seeking a comfortable environment in which to pick up skills, or cheap online time, or support and advice on IT problems. Some of these issues are also being addressed in the Wired Up Communities programme.

Access to free IT resources, help and a social environment are clear needs expressed by many. At one centre it was noted, 'for whoever is wired up, this is the hub'. The Computers Within Reach activity at Granby Island created a barrier - you have to take up 10 hours training – only overcome by attendance at the centre. Innit could see a

portfolio of services: technical FAQ's, buying guides, upgrades, local events, and access via email to expertise: all of which would bring people into contact with the centre. Staff can also do training at home if funded and authorised to do so. At Shipley it was also thought that people need a structured start to their exposure to ICT at the outset, followed by self-learning in a social environment with later learning at home as confidence increased. Innit already offer hardware support on an agency basis.

## **Skills and competences**

Centre staff were asked what *new* skills and competences they thought were required in their work. Most of the management, technical and mentoring skills suggested in the question prompt were accepted. These were

Management skills: planning, negotiation, budgeting,  
partnership working, consultation  
Technical skills: hardware, networks, user support  
Training and mentoring skills.

Of course if, a college or other agency provides these skills, the centre could be highly vulnerable if the relationship was not sustained. Key areas of skills development appear to be:

- marketing, business planning and project management;
- volunteer and other human resource management;
- research and information-finding skills;
- ICT technical knowledge for existing staff;
- training and teaching in a community context;
- working skills (team building, time management, legal issues etc);
- partnership building and strategic planning;
- reviewing and monitoring.

One respondent described the sensation of having to learn as you go as 'I know you are not a pilot, try to fly this plane'. Crucially too, centres need skills in facilitation / mentoring / teaching; to be able to assess learning outcomes and provide advice and guidance; and to be able to assess special needs. Mentoring support and special training courses are possible responses to this need.

## **Community ownership**

One feature that underpins community development and regeneration initiatives is the notion that they will be more successful and

sustained if they are 'community owned'. How is this ownership assessed? One way may be to develop indicators with local people themselves. The interview tried to allow time for discussion of such indicators for benchmarks of community ownership. These were based on those originally developed by Yorkshire Forward. It was not possible to prioritise this issue in the discussions, and little emerged in the time available, although one project has found the original work beneficial in planning other activities. Further work could prove valuable in clarifying tests of ownership, which may be an important issue in future sustainability.

## **Relationship with business**

Good and fair priced equipment has been sourced, call centre training has been offered or is under discussion, and there have been some donations of material and equipment. On the whole, services to businesses have been very limited – to small print jobs, adverts and web sites – although one project plans to offer beta-testing services to ICT manufacturers. Shipley College finds it difficult to work with SMEs using ESF unless the private sector can get ERDF funding, and the barriers and pathways to a link between e-commerce and e-community remain obscure. A few business opportunities have arisen with local people involved at the centres – childcare, PC build and upgrades, a new marketing cooperative, a possible internet café, text processing of a poetry collection in Urdu - but these have been largely unplanned and fortuitous.

## **Other Issues**

Managers were asked what they would recommend to other centres as good practice.

### *Equipment*

- Consider the ICT as a tool to engage people and their interests – for example a 'silver surfer' class has now taken on a life of its own as a social group.
- Establish that the community, not the centre, owns the kit.
- Allow and encourage experimentation and freedom of use of the net (within time and space limits) so that programmes of support can develop. Don't over-plan.
- Use it for any purpose that people ask for, not as in the 'specification' of the programme.
- Buy the best kit and furniture you can afford.

### *People*

- Pay the staff.
- Develop a vision and values for the community.
- Plan for cultural diversity, and equality.
- Consider if there are any issues around male and female tutors and male and female learners.
- There are issues around using college tutors at the centre who need to adapt to new surroundings and require new skill sets. Use dedicated tutors if possible.
- Staff should be dedicated and proactive.

### *Community*

- Involve local people from the outset.
- Listen to local needs.
- Develop mentoring and training skills in others to spread the skills throughout the community.

### *Organisation*

- Ensure that the 'rules' are made explicit through guidance, a quiet word and a notice. Let people design their own rules as far as possible.
- Involve learners in supporting others.
- Base the online centre in a multi-purpose centre.
- Small groups of dedicated learners work better than larger groups – even if they don't contribute as many statistical outputs.
- Organise and commit to team working and information sharing.
- Review activities in a planned manner.
- Listen to what people say.
- Link to other strategies such as regeneration on a local and regional basis, local partnerships etc.

### *Funding*

- Ensure there is sustained revenue funding over time and look for sustainable actions.

## **Recommendations to meet DfES objectives**

- Create and web publish personal case studies as exemplars.
- Where possible, DfES managers should take a hands on approach to assessing centres in order to deal with any difficulties early on.
- Make sure centre staff have ICT capability and vision.
- Exit strategies and forward plans for community ownership must be built into the process.
- Shadow train people for their future roles.

- Ensure there is a project component for community consultation.
- Understand that development takes time – it depends on organic growth.
- Plan for a people-led approach.
- Inclusivity means that people manage things for themselves, and do what they want, to get what they want.
- Devolve responsibility to local providers.
- Avoid if possible a direct link between learning and other benefits.
- Avoid output driven actions, and reward participation.
- Recognise that the Programme cannot be prescriptive – unless it is a college.
- Don't expect an account of all that is planned up front.
- A nationally accredited community and ICT skills unit should be developed which will fit in to a number of NVQs as a core element, funded through CFEs and delivered at both the college and the centre.



## Appendix

### Pioneer Learning Centres Managers' Interview Schedule

Centre .....

Interview with ..... Date .....

A Contract with DfEE /CDF

#### Target Audiences

<i>Identified by the Centre</i>	<i>B = from beginning N = served now P = planned</i>	<i>Success 1- 10</i>

#### DfEE targets

	<i>Priority for centre</i>	<i>Success 1- 10</i>
Those intimidated by ICT or feel its irrelevant		
Lack confidence due to negative experiences		
Feel its too late in life		
Cultural traditions make access difficult		
Physically/psychologically isolated and feel what is on offer is not appropriate		
Run or work in sme's which give ICT a low priority		

#### A Objectives

Give me some examples of imaginative or innovative ideas you have used for attracting adults and small businesses.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]
