

Appendix 4: interviews with UK online centres learners and staff, developed into case studies

Celebrating success is key to confidence West Kent Young Women's Project

Tonbridge Women's UK online centre is in a commuter town in Kent. Yet despite the area's relative affluence, there are a large number of young women who have no qualifications, poor learning experiences and are disengaged with their local communities.

The UK online centre, which was established in 2001, is based within YWCA West Kent Young Women's Project, which has provided a safe and welcoming environment for young women to engage in personal and social development since 1996. The UK online centre has successfully developed innovative ways to use ICT as a tool for informal learning.

Fiona Palmer, co-ordinator at the centre, explains: "We're in an area with very good schools, but those who fall through the net are competing against a more qualified and skilled workforce, so the margins for failure are higher. Because we're in a commuter town, there are very few opportunities for people without qualifications to access support."

The centre is used by around 40 young women each month from the three main towns in the area –Tonbridge, Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells, and the surrounding villages. The centre staff use a variety of ways to reach people who would benefit from using the facilities, as Fiona explains:

"We get a lot of referrals from health visitors, social services, probation workers and organisations like Connexions and the Citizens Advice Bureau. We put up posters wherever we can – shops, hairdressers, doctors' surgeries - anywhere young women are likely to go. But the best promotion is word of mouth.

"When people come in for the first time, it's not necessarily for IT. They may come in with a friend for a chat, but IT is embedded in everything we do. If someone needs to find a childminder we'll help them find a website with a list of childminders in the area, so they can see how computers and the internet might be useful in their everyday lives."

When 21 year old Rachel McHale visited the UK online centre for the first time, she had no idea about the range of facilities on offer. She says: "I'm a single parent and my family live abroad, so when a friend invited me I thought it would be a good way to meet people. I was really surprised when I saw the computer room – I just thought it would be coffee and a chat!"

Rachel's son was just a month old when she first went to the centre, and she was feeling isolated.

"Rachel was going through a very hard time," says Fiona. "We encouraged her to leave her son in our crèche and she gradually started using the computers and talking about her future. She thought she wouldn't be able to go to college as she couldn't afford childcare, but we worked with her to apply for support from Student Services. They've helped her fund childcare and pay for the equipment she needed to start a beauty therapy course she wanted to do.

“A lot of women who come in have negative experiences of learning. We work with them to find what’s going to interest them and find the right programme, one that’s about getting into work or personal development rather than ‘education’. It’s important they realise they have a choice and can choose to leave at any time. Some of our biggest successes have been women who’ve chosen to leave, but then come back a few weeks later ready to learn.”

It was the flexibility and understanding of her situation shown by the UK online centre that encouraged Rachel to continue to visit.

“I have ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), and people don’t always understand. I say things without thinking, and make decisions without thinking them through. After I left school I went to college, but I quit twice, and then I just moved from job to job and I was getting very frustrated because I couldn’t settle,” she says. “At the centre, they understand me. They help because they don’t judge me or anybody else that comes in. There were a couple of times when I was ready to quit my beauty course because it was too difficult to keep up, or to carry on coping with everything, but the people at the centre helped me to stop and think about it. We talked things through and I continued with the course, which I’m really happy about. And I can come here to do my homework. The only other place I could do that is the library, but if my son makes any noise people stare. I feel much more relaxed here, I don’t have to worry what people will think, and I’m having fun at the same time.”

Fiona is incredibly proud of Rachel’s achievements. “Rachel has come so far. There were times when she felt it was all too much, but she kept going, completed some of her exams and gained a distinction in some of her work. She is on target to be qualified in June!”

Personal attention in informal surroundings can have a huge effect on the confidence of individuals, says Fiona. “If you’re living independently there’s no one to tell you to get up in the morning,” she says. “We’ll talk to them and phone them and celebrate their successes, and we frequently hear from women who tell us how they’re doing. Just recently, a young girl who’d had difficulties with learning came to tell us she’d been made supervisor in her job, and she said she wouldn’t have been able to do it without us.”

“When people do visit the centre, we offer as much help as we can to make it easy for them to return. Our crèche is funded by UK online and is free to women accessing the centre, and we refund travel fares - when you’re living on the breadline, travel is expensive. We also provide refreshments with every group. The young mums’ lunch in particular has been a very good introduction to internet learning. We talk about healthy eating, and then they go on to the internet to learn more.”

This approach has proved very successful in encouraging young women to not only learn new skills, but also to share their experiences, as Rachel explains: “The lunches are a chance for us to get together and talk about things we’ve been through. We’re learning things we would never have otherwise known. Some of the girls have been through drug or alcohol abuse or domestic violence, or they’re living in hostels. Before I came here I felt really sorry for myself, but the centre made me feel supported and I realised I wasn’t the only one in that situation, and that actually I’m quite lucky.”

Fiona and the staff at the UK online centre help young women approach learning by making it relevant to them, and showing them that they can carry out learning in a social situation.

“We still get girls that aren’t confident in their ability to learn, so we involve them by looking up a biography of someone they really like, like a pop star. We can then move on to show the benefits of using computers and how important computer skills are to gain employment, so we’ll help them to write a CV or do job searches.

“Some of the women we work with only want to use social networking sites like Bebo, so we educate them in how to use them safely. We had an incredibly inspiring workshop from someone who’d worked with the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Service. He showed the girls how easy it was to manipulate people over the internet, and showed them what to look out for. As a direct result of that talk a group of the girls went on to make their own DVD about internet safety.”

The Internet Safety DVD is just one of a series of advice films the young women have made. Another gave information about personal safety, which Rachel was key in creating. “When I started coming here I’d just got out of an abusive relationship,” she says. “I thought it was ok for him to swear at me, I thought it was normal. The staff and other girls here helped me to see that it was wrong, and now I can recognise behaviour that isn’t acceptable, and it’s been good to talk about my story and help other people. I would never have been able to do that if I hadn’t come here. It’s given me so much confidence, so much more freedom. I’d go as far to say it’s given me my life back.”

Foundations for further learning and a brighter future
David Warren, Gleadless Valley UK online centre

Following a series of personal setbacks, 42 year old David Warren from Sheffield found his life in freefall. Suffering from anxiety and depression, David needed to find something positive to help him get his life back on track, and found the Gleadless Valley UK online centre.

“I was made redundant after 10 years working in retail management,” explains David. “I had recently been through a divorce and was just coming to terms with that when my father died very suddenly. It really shook me up. Everything came on top of everything else and it began to affect my mental health - I was diagnosed with clinical depression. I simply wasn’t coping with anything and just couldn’t function properly, so not surprisingly it took its toll on my work. I ended up being made redundant, which to be honest at first felt like a bit of a relief. But I just never realised how hard it would be to find a new job.

“I applied for dozens of jobs and most companies didn’t even bother to reply or even acknowledge my application. The job market has changed so much over the last ten years and it seems no-one wants to give you a chance to try something new if you’re over the age of 40. With every knock-back or lack of response, my confidence and self esteem slowly ebbed away. With depression it’s like you’re already in a black hole, and I could just feel myself sinking deeper and deeper.

“When I first walked into the Gleadless Valley UK online centre I was looking for some support to help me get back to work. I had experience of using EPOS (Electronic Point of Sale) systems in my retail work, but I had never really used a PC. I had no idea about word processing or spreadsheets, nor did I have any idea how computers worked beyond my brief experiences at school, which were some time

ago! I realised that if I wanted to get back to work I would need to do something about my computer literacy.”

The UK online centre in Gleadless Valley, Sheffield is in one of the most deprived council estates in the country, with further education and computer literacy levels well below the national average. Maxine Groobey, the project co-ordinator, put their success as a UK online centre down to making learning informal, accessible and fun. As well as tutors to assist in training, the centre has two ‘Learning Champions’ who are tasked with making the entire learning process un-threatening, painless and enjoyable.

She explains: “Informal learning is vitally important to people in this area. We work with people who simply wouldn’t go into a formal learning environment like a college or even to adult classes at a school. They will come in here because we’re seen as part of the community, and we make sure we make everyone welcome and start them off gently – building their confidence and skills bit by bit. In David’s case he needed to prove to himself that he was capable of learning new skills. Our approach was to coax him into learning in a stress-free environment that allowed him to progress at his own pace.”

David continues: “I went into the Gleadless Valley UK online centre to get some help in my hunt for employment. It wasn’t easy to make myself go in, but the staff were so friendly and welcoming it was easy to stay. They talked me through everything the centre had to offer, and I just felt really comfortable. They suggested I try a course, but there weren’t any structured classes or pressure to keep up, which might have been too much for me. I hadn’t considered doing a training course, but once they explained it all to me I thought, why not?”

“I went on to do two courses in word processing and desktop publishing. To my surprise I really enjoyed it. I just felt really at home in the centre. What was even more surprising is that I found myself with two UK Online Open College Network (NOCN) certificates! I had something new to put on my CV and show my achievements, and it was a really good feeling. I finally felt like I could do something right – that I wasn’t a lost cause after all.

“Going into the centre to do my training gave me a sense of purpose and a feeling that I was doing something positive. I’ve made new friends, met many interesting people and my confidence and self-esteem have gradually come back. Friends have commented on how much I’ve changed over the past few months, they even tell me that I look better. I certainly feel a lot better than I did a few months ago. The centre staff have also helped ‘coach’ me with my interviewing techniques and now each job interview I go for gets better and better. I’m less nervous and much more confident I’m actually going to get somewhere when the right thing comes up. It’s also great to know that everyone back at the centre is genuinely wishing me good luck and rooting for me. Depression is a lonely and isolating experience, so that support really means a lot.”

David’s experience at the UK online centre has allowed him to develop into more formal learning and he is currently four weeks into an NVQ in Business and Administration course through a scheme run by Valley Education and Skills Projects in partnership with Sheffield City Council.

Maxine adds: “The man we see now is very different to the man who originally walked through our doors. He’s made new friends, found new strength and is now enthusiastically working towards a nationally recognised qualification. He’s really

employable, and it's just a matter of time before someone snaps him up. David's case shows how very important soft-touch, informal learning is in getting vulnerable people to start making changes to their lives. It's an important stepping stone to help people on the route to more formal skills development or employment."

The final word goes to David. "My experience with UK online centres is not just about education, it's helped me on an emotional level too. I would never have considered doing an NVQ if I had not had the support and help from Maxine and her team. My life has improved dramatically and for the first time in ages I feel optimistic about the future. The centre is a very important part of the local community here in Gleadless Valley – it provides a lifeline for so many people. I'm just pleased I found it when I did."

**I used to be scared of the internet –
now I teach others how to use it!**
Jess Finnemore, Inverteign Family Learning Centre, Devon

Before the Inverteign Family Learning Centre opened in Teignmouth, Devon in 2002, 36-year-old Jess Finnemore was, in her own words, "just a mother of three children, sitting at home."

But since attending the centre first as a learner, then a volunteer and now a fully-paid up member of staff, Jess says she's found out how to be herself again, with a renewed sense of purpose in life.

Jess has been so inspired by her experience at the UK online centre that she's now teaching other people how to get online and discover a world of opportunities.

"I didn't do very well in my GCSEs at school, and apart from helping my husband with his bookkeeping now and again, I was just a mum. Don't get me wrong, I love my kids dearly, but bringing up children can be a thankless task, and to be honest, I was bored. I wanted to do something that was for me as me, not just me as Mum.

"I heard about the UK online centre opening, and I decided to go along to do a course on internet safety. At the time, my children were six, four and two and I was hearing the most dreadful stories what can happen online, so I wanted to find out for myself just what was out there and what the internet was all about. It wasn't just for the kids though, it was for me personally, too.

"I wasn't familiar with computers, and I found the internet downright scary! But right from my first session at the UK online centre I was really comfortable, and they just made it really easy. There were quite a few people there, some of them had used computers before, but we were all parents and all in the same sort of age range. Just having that in common helped a lot. I realised it wasn't scary – in fact it was the opposite. It was somewhere I could go to socialise, and just be me.

"Sue, the centre co-ordinator, suggested I open an e-mail account. I was a little bit dubious at first, but she talked me into it, and I'm glad she did! Straight away, I realised how handy it was. My friend from school had moved to America, so I could get in touch with her without an airmail letter and a long wait. And it's not just good for the long distance stuff. My family are scattered around the area, they don't all live near to me, so now we use e-mail to send each other family photographs and keep up on all the latest news and developments. I was very impressed with my dad, when he got himself online and found out about e-mail too! It's a great way to keep in touch.

“I went from being at home with three children under seven, to being involved with something I felt was important. Because there’s a crèche at the centre, I could go in and spend two hours being myself again, achieving something. I decided to do a City and Guilds course in ICT (Information and Communication Technologies), and then quickly went on to do the level two City and Guilds ICT, as well as Literacy and Communication courses.

“That spurred me on to do an A-level in English at night-school, and I was able to use the centre to do my coursework while the children were in the crèche. I really enjoyed doing that, and thought about going on to doing teacher training, but it wasn’t right for me at the time because I had the children to look after and it’s a really intensive course. Then Sue told me that there was a place on a shorter course at a local college to learn how to be an adult tutor, so I decided to go for it.

“I’d been volunteering at the centre for a while, and really enjoyed it. I wanted to encourage other people to come along, other parents who were in the same situation I had been in. This was a way to turn that into a proper career. The course took me a year, and when it was finished I was lucky enough to have a job waiting for me at the centre teaching ICT and literacy alongside Sue.

“Because I started as a novice, I think it helps other people to see how far I’ve come. Empathy plays a huge part when you’re teaching other adults. People have lives and kids and houses, and you need to offer them the right environment and be in the right frame of mind.

“One of the main advantages of the UK online centres is you can work at your own pace. When you have children you need to take time off, so the informal structure of the learning helps a lot. People don’t want to feel like they’re going back to being in a classroom themselves – and they don’t necessarily want to get tied into qualifications and responsibilities on top of what they’re already juggling.

“Because the centre is based at the school I can work around school hours. The drop in centre is open all day every day for parents, they can go in any time during the school day. People can come in and use the internet, or just come in for a coffee and a chat, and I find that that sort of environment encourages them to learn more. There are all sorts of different courses people can do here, like healthy eating or psychology workshops on coping with stress or how to be happy.

“As well as teaching here I do as many courses as I can. As a tutor I think it’s important never to stop learning yourself. We don’t have the internet at home, so I come into the centre when I’m not working to get online for shopping and e-mailing. I find it incredibly useful for homework – my eldest daughter is 13 and I find so much information I can use to help her.

“Coming into the UK online centre has helped everything – every area of my life. When I think what I was like six years ago and what I’m like now... Back then, I was bored, restless and shy. Now I’m so much more confident – I’ve got a purpose, a job I love and I’ve made so many friends. There’s a great little network here that supports you all the way. Hardly a week goes by when someone doesn’t come into the centre with a problem, and we all rally round to help.

“I’m doing a lot of work with older people now, as well as with other mums who have kids at the school. Some of them are in their eighties, and they all want to learn something new. I don’t just sit them down and say, ‘off you go’, we talk everything

through with them and make sure they're relaxed with what they're doing, and we tell them they're free to stop at any time. We sign them up with myguide and set them up with e-mail, and before they know it, they're away! It's a great feeling to see someone you've helped getting a real kick and real use out of computers and the internet. For some people – me included – it's a whole new lease of life.

“To people who say there's no point in learning, I'd say just look at me! It's never too late to start, and you never really stop – you just don't know you're doing it. I think that's probably the best way.”

Learning gave Margaret a new lease of life Margaret Sellars, Inverteign Family Learning Centre

When 66 year old Margaret Sellars retired from work due to ill health, she left her home town of Hayes in Middlesex and moved to the coastal town of Teignmouth in Devon with her husband. Although Margaret had retired from work, she wasn't ready to put her feet up just yet and was looking for something to do with her life.

So, when she saw that her local UK online centre, the Inverteign Family Learning Centre, was offering drop-in computer sessions she decided to go along.

“I didn't really know anything about computers,” she says. “I had a very old one that you could do word processing on, but I'd never used the internet. In my job as a classroom assistant we had a computer, but all we had to do was just type in children's names, nothing much more than that.

As well wanting to expand her knowledge, Margaret had a very particular reason for learning more about computers.

“I wanted to learn how to use e-mail because my son lives abroad. He's been in Dubai for the last 15 years, and we'd always kept in touch by letter. But his nearest post-box was about half an hour away from where he worked, so it wasn't very convenient. Although he works with computers, he'd never suggested keeping in touch by e-mail – I don't think he thought I was capable!

“When I first went into the centre I wasn't really sure what to expect, but I was immediately made to feel very welcome. I told the tutor I wanted to learn how to use the computer and be able to type more quickly – I was only able to do one finger typing. There were lots of other people there, but I didn't realise it was a lesson as it seemed so informal! But rather than turn me away and ask me to come back when the lesson had finished, she showed me the computer and suggested I play around with it to see how I got on. To be honest, if she had asked me to come back later I probably wouldn't have gone back.”

“But everyone was very friendly, and I really enjoyed it. I thought you'd need a huge amount of knowledge to get started, so I was surprised to learn how easy it all was and I picked it up a lot more quickly than I thought I would.

“We started to learn about e-mail by first of all e-mailing each other in the room, and seeing how quickly it arrived. Then the tutors set us up with our own e-mail account, and before long I even knew how to add attachments!

“I carried on going to the drop-in centre, and even took exams! I did a City & Guilds certificate in Word Processing, but it didn't feel at all like learning because of the

atmosphere – it was more of a social event. I was even relaxed in the exam, because it was at the centre and I felt comfortable there. I didn't feel at all threatened, whereas if I'd have gone to college I would have done. In fact if college was the only option I wouldn't have done it – I wouldn't have had the courage to walk in the first place."

Although Margaret enjoyed her job working in a primary school, she had very poor experiences of learning herself and couldn't face the prospect of a formal, structured course.

"When I left work I lost all confidence in myself. When I was younger I found it difficult to learn as I was always being told I was awful, so I believed it. At the centre it was such a gradual process at my own pace, as I progressed with the lessons I realised that I *could* do it. As soon as that happened, my confidence began to flow back."

"The more I learned, the more confident I became. After about two years of going to the centre, I was asked if I would help to run one of the classes. I would never have dreamed of being able to do anything like that before, but I was thrilled to be given the chance to help others learn what I had.

"The work I do is mainly with the blind group that attends the UK online centre. I'll get everything turned on and set up the computers with the special programme they use, then it's just a case of helping the tutor, giving individual tuition if someone needs help, making tea and coffee and generally just having a good time!"

Because Margaret was a newcomer to the area, she was keen to meet new people and the Inverteign centre provided her with a much-needed place to socialise.

"The social aspect of the centre is wonderful – everyone is so friendly," she enthuses. "I got to know lots of people, and as a newcomer to the area it really helped me to settle in. Through contacts I made there I joined the Towns Women's Guild and we have a Monday club where we meet up, play games and socialise."

Although Margaret is now an old-hand at ICT, there is always more to learn, as she explains:

"Even though I know so much more about computers now, there are still things I need help with. I recently bought a digital camera and didn't know how to use it, and the staff at the centre were fantastic. They helped me to upload pictures, adapt them and sent them to my family.

"When my son found out I could e-mail, he was amazed! I cropped some photographs of my grandson and sent them to him, and he was really proud of me. I also have family in Australia and America, as well as relatives all over England and it's so easy to keep in touch with them all now I can e-mail. Before, I had to write a letter and it would take a few days to get there and a few days to get back. With e-mail, it's immediate, you say what you want to say and get a response straight away. I've also used the internet to book holidays, and I used it to look up health issues when I was going to Dubai to see my son for the first time."

Although the Inverteign centre has helped Margaret to expand both her knowledge and her social circle, there's one area she's glad has definitely NOT expanded – her waistline!

“If I hadn’t gone to the UK online centre, I think I’d be three stone heavier as I’d just be sitting at home! As well as meeting so many people there and getting out and about, I do a belly dancing class which is a really fun way of keeping fit. I’d never have dared to do that before!

And it’s not only Margaret that’s benefited from going into the Inverteign Family Learning UK online centre. She explains: “My husband is very anti-technology, and while he’s not a complete convert he has come into the centre with me, and he’s actually been persuaded to use the computers to help him learn how to read a bit better. The tutor found him some special courses which are suitable for adults and because it’s on the computer it’s all quite private, relevant and actually easy to follow. Thanks to the staff at the centre he’s now a regular at the local library at the grand old age of 73. I never thought I’d see the day, and I don’t think he did either. It’s been brilliant for both of us.

“I recommend the UK online centre to everyone I meet. Lots of people say they don’t like schools, and I explain that it isn’t like that at all. I tell them what a lovely place it is, and that it’s just like meeting a group of friends. And above all – it’s never too late!”

**UK online centre activities in Havant
take users on a journey of digital learning
The Really Helpful IT Company, Hampshire**

The neighbourhoods surrounding the Leigh Park area of Havant, on the south coast of Hampshire, are some of the most socially deprived areas in the South East of England. The Really Helpful IT Company is a social enterprise which manages and runs three UK online centres: two in Leigh Park and one in Hayling Island.

Paula Graham is project manager for all three UK online centres. She says: “All three centres play a pivotal role in helping people improve their ICT skills and engage with their local communities. Our aim is to help to improve skills, build self esteem and inspire confidence. All our projects work towards connecting people to technology and other opportunities, including new online local and social networks, further education, employment, improved health awareness and online government services. We also help to progress people onto further learning or employment related activities wherever we can.”

The centres each target specific audiences, based on the different communities they serve. Paula explains: “Leigh Park is a community centre with lots of different activities going on. We have a really diverse range of people dropping in; elderly people, job seekers, the long-term unemployed, single parents and young people who have dropped out of school.

“The Pride of Place centre was originally set up by Hampshire Constabulary to provide information and to offer help and support to people in difficult circumstances, including victims of domestic violence and ex-offenders. It’s home to Police Community Support Officers (PCSO) and Accredited Community Support Officers (ACSO) as well as the UK online centre itself. People using this facility often include single mothers who have experienced some kind of domestic trauma, are troubled and vulnerable and they regard this place as secure,

confidential, safe, and a place to help them connect with the outside world, learn new skills and get into work or education.

“The Hayling Island Community Centre, meanwhile, is set in a semi rural location and works with a lot of older people. On average, up to 3,000 people come through the doors each year to do activities which include dance, art, sports, flower arranging, literacy and numeracy classes with embedded ICT skills, and also the free computer sessions provided by The Really Helpful IT Co

While around 95% of 19 – 24 year olds in the UK have internet access experience, less than 19% of those over 65 can say the same. The Hayling Island centre aims to redress that balance, and the users are mainly over 50.”

The main UK online centre activities are facilitated drop-in sessions and Introductory ICT ‘tasters’, including **myguide**. The centre aims to take people through a User Journey, starting off slowly and building in more formal skills and courses.

Paula says: “People are introduced to surfing, searching and emailing, and encouraged to find out more about using the internet to explore government services. Typically once they’ve got the bug for computers and they’ve got into the swing of learning, they move on to more structured computer courses in things like word processing, spreadsheets and databases, depending what they want to learn and where their interests lie. All learners get certificates after attending a training session, and some then go on to further learning to get qualifications. We help them build their confidence and build their skills at their own pace, and it’s amazing to see the transformation that support and patience can make to someone who didn’t think they were clever or didn’t think they could succeed.

“To further assist in the progression of skills, we signpost people to relevant partner organisations, such as local colleges and employment services. We’ve got a strong partnership with Havant College and they run Skills for Life courses at the centres, and we regularly refer people to them to go on to further learning.”

The trick, according to Paula, is to get to the right people in the right places. She explains: “We promote sessions and courses through local newsletters, community magazines, and a local radio station. We also promote through leaflets at housing offices, Havant Borough Council civic offices, health centres and libraries. What’s more we take our computers out to places like homeless hostels and residential homes to raise awareness, hold open days and events. What we try to do is to talk to people in the community about what interests them and what they want to learn so we can tailor our courses accordingly, and respond to their needs and requests. It’s the best way to get people involved and get them motivated.”

Every year The Really Helpful IT Company sees hundreds of people coming in for training courses and drop-in sessions, and Paula and her staff are incredibly encouraged by the variety of skills these people are amassing through using the centres.

“We’ve had so many success stories, it’s difficult to single any particular group out!” she says. “From young people, to ‘silver surfers’ – they’re taking the skills they learn here and applying them to their everyday lives, with huge benefits. Just to give you a few examples: a group of young people at risk of offending

produced DVDs about issues affecting their lives and communities, and as well as having great fun producing the video they also have something to show to family and friends that will be relevant to them.

“Then there’s the group of people from MIND who built their own website to highlight the services MIND offer, and their own experiences of mental health issues. It’s been a great way to get people working together on a project they believe in, and building their ICT skills at the same time. We’ve also worked with Home Start to encourage parents to look up healthy living and tips on family activities, and devised programmes with Women’s Aid, a domestic violence charity, to help them use the internet to research issues that affect them and learn preventative measures. Many of our older learners have gone on to use their new skills to keep in touch with each other, increase their social activities and social circles by making new friends and finding new hobbies. It’s not going too far to say that for some it really has been a whole new lease of life.

“With so much of what goes on at our centres, there might not be people getting qualifications left, right and centre, but there are people progressing, and there are people making real and valuable changes to their lives that they wouldn’t be able to make without us. What we do here isn’t just about skills, or ICT, or socialising, or support, it’s about all of those things – and more. And for the people we work with, it really does work well.”

**“Don’t get left behind by technology –
you’re never too old to learn new skills”**

That’s the advice from John Smith, aged 73, who is just about to begin his second ICT course at Destinations@Saltburn, a UK online centre in Saltburn, Teesside. John was afraid that he was being left behind by new technology. But after an Introduction to Technology course, he has purchased his own computer and has got to grips with the web, word processing, spreadsheets and lots more.

He says: “I left school without any formal qualifications and spent my early career travelling around working in the meat industry. I worked in East Africa, Australia and South Africa as a manager in a food canning factory, eventually moving Saltburn in Teesside. For 24 happy years I ran a newsagent and general shop, but when I reached my 70th birthday, I decided it was time to slow down, retire and enjoy some leisure time.

“Over the last few years I began to notice that when reading articles in the newspaper or magazines, there are fewer addresses and telephone numbers for contact information – everything points you towards a web site. I had no idea how to go about using the internet or emails and began to feel I was being left behind. I knew nothing about technology. My only experience of it had been specific equipment used during my working life. I had certainly never used a personal computer or laptop or anything like that.

“Destinations @ Saltburn is an internet café and I used to go in there to drink coffee. There was always a lively atmosphere with people doing all kinds of things on computers. I got chatting to Carol and Sue who work there, and they suggested that I sign up for a course. With Carol and Sue’s help and advice, I began the Introduction to Information Technology course. I used to go into the centre three or four times a week and gradually built up my skills and understanding. I was a little

nervous at first because it was all so new. But the staff were very helpful and gave me all the time and help I needed to get the most from the course.

“The course taught me all about the terminology, how to get started and find your way around a computer – all of which was totally new to me. It took me a little while to get used to naming and storing files and creating and locating folders. But eventually it all started to become clear and my confidence just grew and grew.

“Before long I was also learning how to send and receive emails, use the internet, create zip files and basic word processing documents. It even covered the basics of spreadsheets. I’ve now signed up for a second course which will focus on word processing and document management, and give me more detail on what I’ve already been doing.

“Being retired, I didn’t need computer skills to help me get a job, but I was very keen to make sure I wasn’t left behind. At my age I don’t want to be bothered with exams and I don’t need a qualification for my CV – I just want to understand what everyone else is talking about and be able to participate in the age of technology.

“Nowadays the internet is a first port of call for anyone looking for information. It was important to me to be able access that information, particularly as we live in a part of the country that’s quite rural. It can be a long way to the nearest convenience and with computers you can keep connected practically anywhere. You can get your shopping delivered, get your pension, look at your bank account and all sorts. In fact it’s getting to the point where if you’re not up to speed you’re left out, and I didn’t want that to happen to me.”

John is such a convert to computers he’s actually decided to buy one to use at home. He adds: “Before I did the course I would never have bought my own computer, but it’s just so useful it was worth the expense. As well as learning all the basics, my course has given me the ability and confidence to sit and logically work through any computing problem I may have – and so far, I’ve managed to get to grips with it all. I feel I’ve done the difficult bit to get this far, so I’m determined to keep my skills up to date and refreshed.

“Having my own computer means I can now organise my leisure time better. I can research things on the web, book tickets, check opening times and generally get advance information before I go anywhere. It all goes to show that you’re never too old to learn new skills. Anyone in my position who’s worried about technology and who wants to learn something new should definitely visit their local UK online centre – there’s so much there. The staff are marvellous, they bend over backwards to help you get the right course and their friendliness and enthusiasm really helps give you the confidence to just have a go.

“The best thing is, I’m not afraid of technology any more and I can’t wait to start my new course. When you get older and stop working sometimes your world shrinks down. Computers and the internet can open it back up again, and I for one am a huge fan.”

**Learning made fun is learning made easy
Inverteign Family Learning Centre, Devon**

Teignmouth is a coastal town in South Devon, but despite its enviable location, the area is one of the 20% most deprived in the south west of England. Housing in the west of the town is predominantly social, but because it is a relatively small pocket

within a very beautiful area of the country, the needs of the people who live there are often overlooked.

The Inverteign Family Learning Centre, a UK online centre, was set up in 2003 specifically to tackle the issues affecting people living in West Teignmouth. Based within the grounds of the Inverteign Primary School, the majority of visitors are young mothers under the age of 35, with a high percentage of single parents. The centre also works with a large number of older learners throughout the wider community and offers support to unemployed people in the area. With a monthly footfall of more than 1200 people, the centre is obviously a much-needed resource, and received funding to extend its work with socially excluded groups through the Social Impact Demonstrator project. The money has allowed the centre to reach even more people, and hone both learning programmes and community relationships.

Centre co-ordinator Sue Henley describes the support on offer: “There are basically three groups or kinds of learning for local families. The first is adult learning for people to improve their core skills in ICT, literacy and numeracy, and we also do life skills such as stress management. The second strand is providing workshops and opportunities to enable parents to support their children’s learning, and ICT is embedded in everything we do - especially the internet. We’ll look at the school curriculum and help parents to identify websites that children and families can use together, the BBC is a very good resource, and we also recommend the directgov website. The third area is families learning together, which is diverse as a family workshop on the Chinese New Year, 3,2,1 club for parents and preschool children and the Family Bushcraft Survival Challenge

“We also offer learning opportunities for older people – we provide courses for complete beginners, as well as twice weekly drop-in sessions, a short progression course for people ready to take things a bit further, and an internet family history group. We usually use **myguide** to get people started as it’s very effective. The e-mail is brilliant for beginners, and we use the products embedded within the tutorials with people who come into the drop-in sessions. We also have an ICT access course for visually impaired learners, which we run in partnership with Seeing, a local charity.”

The centre places great importance on partnerships with other community groups and charities throughout the area, and sees them as a way of highlighting the importance of ICT in everyday life. Sue explains: “We work very closely with Surestart locally, we refer to each other and run joint projects such as the baby club. The fundamental philosophy that we work to is that we embed ICT in every activity in the centre so our users can take on board how essential it is. For example, we recently did a project to make hanging mobiles to go over babies’ cots using designs and instructions from the internet.”

This approach has proved incredibly successful. Research carried out by staff at Inverteign has shown that 90% of people questioned had used directgov or devon.gov.uk for a specific purpose. Respondents were looking up an incredibly varied range of information, including recycling collections, swimming pool opening times, school places, library transactions, getting a bus pass for an elderly parent, finding out about the minimum wage, practising driving theory tests, tax credits, council tax, passports, finding out about probate and advice on places to go in Devon.

“We were actually quite shocked, but very pleased, with the results,” says Sue.

Many of the parents using the centre have poor experiences of learning, but are keen to become more involved with their children's education. The on-site crèche ensures that parents with children below school-age are not excluded from the facilities.

"So many young parents have a poor experience of school, few or no qualifications and absolutely no adult learning before they come here," adds Sue. "They come in to support their children but they're often very reticent or nervous. While they won't do an ICT course as such, they will learn gradually through other workshops. Suddenly they realise they know a lot of it already! That takes away the fear factor, and that can often be the biggest barrier of all. If learning and computers stop being threatening and start being useful and even fun, the battle is halfway won.

"The social aspect for parents and older people is also incredibly important within the learning we offer. It's core to what we do – if you try and separate it out it doesn't work. When we ask people the reason they come into the centre, the main response we get is because they want to meet new people. We make sure that happens here automatically. We always break groups or classes for coffee and cake, and the whole atmosphere is very much encouraging people to interact and work together, sharing both personal and learning experiences. Research we've just done with parents shows every single person we asked had made a new friend or friends by coming to the centre."

As a result of their time at the centre, parents are able to have a positive impact on their children's experiences with learning, both in and out of school.

"Our aim is for parents to use the centre while their children are in school. The priority during that time is for them to become ICT literate and frequent and confident users of the internet," says Sue. "We would also hope they might have done a literacy and numeracy course and that they would regularly come into the centre to participate in the range of family learning activities we offer, where everyone learns together. We recently staged a family bush craft challenge at half-term. Families came into the centre to learn bush craft skills, then we all went to the local forest to put them into practice and do some outdoor cooking."

Although the centre is primarily aimed at parents, a high number of learners are older people who are new to the world of ICT.

Sue continues: "The main barrier for our older learners that it's completely foreign technology, and a lot of them won't have done any learning since they left school. The most important thing we do to help them learn is so obvious it's ridiculous; we just make everybody very welcome and relaxed. We'll have an introductory session and sit and talk people through the use of ICT and its benefits so that they start off knowing why it's worth it, and I think that gets people fired up. We get everyone to introduce each other and make sure they bond as a group and that really works because everybody's in the same boat. Nobody learns unless they're relaxed.

"We had one older learner who came into the centre as a complete beginner and she was very nervous. She said the reason she came back again was that the second time she came into the centre someone remembered her name. She went on to do a beginners course in ICT, got a CLAIT qualification and now she works as a volunteer and has been fundamental to our work with visually impaired learners. She's a perfect example of someone who's benefited enormously from learning about ICT, and is taking those skills to help other people make the same journey."

The staff and volunteers at Inverteign place a huge amount of importance on personalising the learning experience, and styles of engagement and delivery will vary for each individual learner.

“The main thing is spending time with people, finding out what they want to do, what their interests are, and if they’re parents talking to them about their children, “Sue explains. “It depends entirely on the individual - sometimes people will come in who have real barriers to learning, they may have health problems, mental health problems or poor experiences of formal education. It’s about being very flexible and spending time with anyone who’s new to the centre on a one-to-one basis, finding out what their strengths are and what they want. The amount of time it takes with an individual to make them feel relaxed and ready to learn is vastly underestimated.

“From my years working at ground level I’d say the most important thing we do is make time for people. It takes time to build a relationship and introduce them to learning in a way that’s non-threatening. Eventually most will continue to do the more formal courses, many will even take qualifications, and some will move on to one of the local colleges or use their skills to find work or volunteering opportunities. The thirst for learning and drive to succeed from people who are traditionally very hard to engage is quite overwhelming. It’s not that people don’t want to learn, it’s just that *we’re* still learning how best to reach them, motivate and engage them.”

Part of that learning experience for the centres’ staff is how they can grow along side the people who come into the centre.

“We adapt all the time, everything is organic,” concludes Sue. “Users are very involved in the learning we provide, and most of the workshops are things that learners have suggested to us. Anything new we’re thinking of doing we ask people in the centre if it’s a good idea. We also ask people what we can do to bring more people in. User involvement at every level is crucial if we’re going to sustain provision and get to those very disengaged, very hard-to-reach people. I think we’re already making a difference, and together, we can help even more people get back into learning, get involved with the community and keep up with their children, changing times and changing technologies.”

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Learning gave Lukas the confidence to teach Lukas Windrow, Liscard/Birkenhead YMCA

A young man from the Wirral has got his life back on track, thanks to his local UK online centre.

When 18 year old Lukas Windrow left school, he had just a few GCSEs and little motivation or ambition for his future. Lukas has been totally deaf in one ear since birth and wears a hearing aid, and he found that his crowded secondary school was ill equipped to deal with his needs.

“Because I’m deaf in one ear, I really struggle to hear what people are saying. Being in a classroom with 30 or so other kids talking away made it more or less impossible

to keep up with the teachers. None of my teachers could use sign language, so I more or less gave up trying,” explains Lukas.

“I was also regularly bullied about being deaf, which made going to school really difficult. I found it hard to tell people I was deaf and even harder to keep asking them to repeat what they said. I had to really try just to be able to do the everyday things the other kids were doing, and I felt like I was missing out on so much. I just sort of faded into the background and stayed there.”

By the time Lukas left school he felt completely despondent about education and learning. The bullying he had been subjected to had resulted in a severe lack of confidence.

“I just used to spend my time drinking, and because of that I never had any money,” Lukas remembers. “I got into a cycle of sleeping all day, not getting up until mid-afternoon, and then getting drunk every night. I was just living from day to day and I really wasn’t excited about my future because I couldn’t see things ever changing.”

But a chance conversation with a friend was the catalyst to Lukas turning his life around, and giving him a positive future to look forward to.

“For as long as I can remember I’ve been fascinated by computers, but I’d never really done anything about it. I was chatting with a friend one day and he mentioned the a UK online centre in Liscard, not far from where I lived. He asked if I’d go along with him, so I decided to give it a go. Although my confidence had been knocked at school I felt ok about going there because I wasn’t on my own, and my friend persuaded me that I’d be ok and the staff would look after me. He was right!

“As soon as I went in I was warmly greeted and the staff explained everything they could do for me to get me started on the computers. The other great thing was that they never made a big issue out of my deafness - they just said that they could get me any help I needed and that was that. It was so reassuring being in an environment where I was totally accepted, and so different to what I’d been used to. It felt right from the moment I first walked in the door.”

Because Lukas felt so comfortable being at the UK online centre, his confidence quickly returned. The centre staff noticed his natural IT abilities and asked if he’d consider becoming a volunteer, and help IT-novices get to grips with the basics of computers and the internet.

“Being asked to volunteer was a massive boost to my confidence,” says Lukas. “They thought I could do it, and that I’d be good at it. No one’s ever really had that sort of faith in me before, so it really meant a lot. What’s more, I really enjoy it, and I think I am quite good at it, because I know how people feel when they first walk in here. It’s really nice to be able to help other people, and really satisfying to see their skills and confidence grow and know I might have had a little bit to do with it.”

As Lukas’ confidence has grown, he’s become much better at explaining and talking about his hearing. “I used to have a real problem asking people to repeat themselves, but now I have no problem at all. If I don’t hear what somebody says I just say, ‘I’m deaf, would you mind repeating what you just said?’ In some cases the UK online centre staff will organise an interpreter for me so I’m not missing out on anything anymore, which is such a good feeling. Because of that I had the confidence to take more courses, and I’ve done some group things that I just never

thought I'd be able to do before – like Fire Warden training and First Aid at Work certificates.”

A few months after he started going to the CBED UK online centre in Liscard, Lukas moved into the Birkenhead YMCA. When Alex Melbourne at Birkenhead YMCA found out about Lukas's IT skills and volunteering experience, he asked him to head up the Y Café, an internet café which was due to open at the YMCA.

“When Alex asked me to get involved with the Y café I was so pleased,” says Lukas. “It's open to the public, as well as residents at the YMCA, and I manage the online section. I set people up on **myguide**, help them with their e-mail accounts, show them how to find things or transfer data – whatever they need, really. I'm also able to continue with my European Computer Driving Licence course while I'm there so I'm still able to learn.”

“When I get my ECDL qualification I want to study further and either become a website designer or a computer administrator. I've discovered that I'm really good with databases and creating reports, and I'm also really drawn to the creative aspects of web design. I've already done my own website with the help of a friend, and I've recently started playing drums in a band called 'Kids of Infidelity' – they've asked me to do a website for the band which I'm really looking forward to.”

Lukas realised just how far he'd come when he received a telephone call from Alexander with some very special news. “I was in the park with my mates when Alex called to tell me I'd won a UK online centres award – I couldn't believe it!” he grins. “I was so excited, and all my mates were really buzzing for me. I was just happy that UK online centres were helping me qualifications so I could get a good job – for them to then say I deserve an award was just amazing.

“When I think about how things were less than a year ago - I could barely get out of bed before lunchtime. I was going nowhere, and to be honest I was in a bit of a dark place. Now, I have qualifications and I know exactly what I want to do with my life. UK online centres has helped me in so many ways – I get up early, I'm off the drink, and I want to help other people to do the same. Thanks to UK online centres and the fantastic people at X centre, I'm determined to push myself to the limit, and beyond. I know I can do it.

“I'd say to other people that haven't got on at school or don't think learning is for them, to just try something different. It doesn't matter if you've got some sort of disability or problem or whatever getting in your way. There are places and people out there – like UK online centres - that can help you help yourself. Trust me – if I can do it, anyone can.”

Community spirit is alive and well for HaKIT HaKIT, West Hove

HaKIT (Hangleton and Knoll IT) is part of the Hangleton & Knoll Project, a resident-led community development charity in West Hove. Knoll is in the top ten of the UK's most deprived areas and contains a large amount of social housing. Neighbouring Hangleton is a very mixed area, with some streets having social housing flats on one side and million-pound detached houses on the other.

As well as the mix of housing, there's a real mix of skills. Some of the residents are highly skilled professionals, but there are high rates of illiteracy, particularly among young people

The HaKIT centres – there are two, one in St Richards in Knoll and one in Hangleton – work with people of all ages and from a diverse range of backgrounds in a bid to address this gap. Learning needs range from basic IT skills to Desk Top Publishing courses for the editors of the local newsletter, as centre manager Ruth Melia explains.

“We really have no criteria for our learners – if they're local residents they're welcome!” she says. “We work with a very varied selection of people - parents who come to us because of our free crèche, people who don't speak English as their first language, older people – it really is a diverse mix. We also run homework clubs for children aged seven to 11, and have skateboarding groups who use the computers to find places to go for trips, or a football team that uses them to write grant applications. It really is a community centre in every sense of the word.

“What's really good for us here at the centre is that no matter where people come from, or what they come into the centre for, they have so much fun and meet so many people they end up coming back for more. People who just come in to learn basic computer skills have such a good time they end up fulfilling a whole CLAIT accredited course.”

The courses on offer at HaKIT are as diverse as the people who use them. Ruth says: “We offer ten different taster courses running throughout the day and evening, which vary from website session groups for people who want to create a website to a structured 12-week DTP accredited course. We also run a regular free drop-in which is open to anybody at all. We get a real mix of people coming along to that, from older people who come along to see what the internet's all about, to young people who want to do a CV. Lots of people who come to the drop-in will come along for the company as it's a really friendly place, so they'll just have a cup of coffee and a chat. We find that this is a very good way of introducing people to the services at HaKIT, and they'll often go on to sign up for a course.

“We're also keen to remain as flexible as possible, so we don't stick to fixed opening times. Apart from the drop-in between 10 and 12 on Wednesday, all our other opening times are on demand. For example, the group that ran the local newspaper could only get together on a Saturday morning so we ran the Desk Top Publishing course then.”

Because of the varying skills levels of people using the centre, Ruth is keen to stress that each learner is treated individually.

“When people come in for the first time we always make sure the tutor knows who's coming in, and they greet them by name. We make sure we stress to people that it's very informal and they can learn as much or as little as they like. Each of our tutors has their own ways of encouraging people to use the internet, but we always adapt to what the person wants. We always use myguide as it's a fantastic resource and people tend to get to grips with it quite quickly. That's really important because it's a great confidence boost for people, and they can see how far they've come in such a short time.”

According to Ruth, central to the centres' success is the fact that most of the people who deliver the training were all learners themselves.

“The majority of the training is done by the Hangleton and Knoll Computer Club,” she explains. “They are a group of women who got together and undertook lots of IT training. They then formed a group to deliver courses in Hangleton Library. I thought it would be good to work with them because they all started as computer novices and they knew what it was like to start from scratch. That really helps to put people at their ease – they can see how far their tutors have come and it gives them the confidence to have a go themselves.

“We also use a lot of volunteers among the local residents. One man runs a digital photography course for us because he has a huge amount of knowledge in that area; another used to be a learner in the centre before he went back to work, and now he helps out with the drop-in centre.

“But I think what really makes the difference is that people don’t see us as just a computer centre. People can come in and learn the skills, then go out and use them for the benefit of the whole community, for example the photographers taking pictures for their newsletter. Every step of the way people are learning or re-discovering skills and putting them into practice. And people can dip in and out. We might have someone who just wants to learn something very specific, but once they know we’re here they’ll come when they want to find out something else, and then maybe it’ll be the right time for them to stay and learn even more.”

The centres’ approach has proved hugely successful, and whether learners go on to formal courses or not, the affect on the residents is apparent.

“When you come into the centre the first thing you notice is everyone smiling,” says Ruth. “The feedback we get is always really positive, and people just really enjoy coming here. One of our volunteers said that coming into the centre is her ‘me time’. Another older lady said since she’s been coming here she’s busier than before she retired! There’s a definite buzz about the place, and it makes people want to stay. More importantly, it makes people want to keep coming back.

“Winning one of the UK online centre Outstanding Centre Awards is a huge boost for us, because not only does it acknowledge the work that our tutors do, but it shows that community training can and does work. IT is now embedded within our community and people are much happier as a result.”

Greenwich families get to see IT ‘through their eyes’ Greenwich Online, London

A community ICT project in Greenwich has given parents and pupils from three primary schools the opportunity to take a glimpse at their local neighbourhood through fresh eyes, and pick up some new skills along the way.

The ‘Through My Eyes’ project as led by UK online centre tutors from two local centres - Greenwich Online and Abbeywood Community Learning Centre. It brought together parents and pupils from Boxgrove School, Alexander McLeod School and Abbey Wood School, for a digital photography and ICT (Information Communications Technology) masterclass.

Project Co-ordinator Steve Boscic explains: “‘Through My Eyes’ was a great opportunity for families to explore their surroundings and see their local environment in a new light. We wanted people to look at the community through the lens of a

digital camera, and see how that changed how they saw the things around them. Most importantly though, we wanted to get parents and kids learning together.

“For some parents, once they drop their little ones off at school, they don’t have another chance to engage with them until they come home. By that time you’re into the family routine of tea and bedtime, and there’s often very little spare time for learning or exploring new things together. The project offered parents a chance to be part of their children’s day-time and school-time lives, and the chance to make use of the state-of-the-art facilities at the Abbeywood UK online centre.

“There’s always been a great deal of quality community work going on in the borough yet, largely, such schemes and initiatives take place in isolation. ‘Through My Eyes’ tried to bridge that gap and get the different partners working together. The focus was very much on cross-generational learning – photography and ICT are things that interest people of all ages, and it was great to see the kids leading their parents in computer suite.”

One Abbeywood parent, Ronnie Preston, certainly had an eye-opener. He took his ten year old daughter Emily along to take up the photography challenge. He says: “Emily’s older sister is already pretty handy with a camera, so typically, this one wanted to show what she could do and prove that there’s another hotshot photographer in the family! The project was a nice way for us to spend time together and a wonderful opportunity to see a different aspect of our community. What was really great about ‘Through My Eyes’ was that the kids were put in charge – they were shown how to operate the camera and they were off, out and about looking for interesting subjects and models. It was quite a feat to keep up!

“But it was at the UK online centre where Emily really came into her own. She really got into the IT side of things, and particularly enjoyed using the computer to manipulate the digital photographs she’d taken, adding text and choosing her favourite songs to accompany them.

“I enjoyed working with other parents that I otherwise would have not met. Together we learned all sorts of new skills, and I personally gained a lot from it. I felt the tutors at the UK online centre were fantastic, especially with the parents, many of whom had never used a computer before. It just goes to show that with the right people behind you, you can get involved with learning whatever age you are, and have fun at the same time. Me and Emily loved every minute of it!”