

The Hub, Bristol

The Hub at Bristol is a co-working space above the Arnolfini Arts Centre, with views across the city centre waterfront. It is used by a wide range of creative and environmental businesses and freelancers

The building

The Hub in Bristol is part of an international chain of workhubs set up in the wake of The Hub in Islington, London. Bristol, the organisation's first non-London location in the UK, opened in 2006. In 2008 it took a floor above the Arnolfini Arts Centre in the heart of Bristol, where it offers commanding views over the waterways and is well positioned for cafés and restaurants, including a café with wifi on the ground floor. The Hub puts a strong emphasis on co-working, with bespoke curved tables allowing three people to work near one another. This encourages collaboration.



Hub members come in when they need to

What's special

Although part of a branded chain, each hub finds its own funding and often has its own distinct identity and target market. Costs are kept low by sharing some services, like the website, broadband provider and logo designs.

The Bristol Hub's members include a good number of businesses advising on low carbon practices, in fitting with the hub's ethos: 'professionals pursuing initiatives for a better world'. But the business mix goes wider. 'It's important we are not "sectoral";' says manager Helen Ripper. 'We see environmentalism as

part of our identity but have designers, consultants, IT specialists and specialist charities using this space. You don't have to restrict membership to one sector to create a thriving business cluster.'

The hub actively encourages collaboration. 'There is a strong sense of community here,' says Ripper. Members who do very different things often end up collaborating and sharing knowledge. For start-ups there is a wealth of experience – it's a place where people learn business skills very fast.

'Hubs are a great equaliser. We have very powerful micro businesses here but also fragile but talented start-ups. No member is more important than another and that makes for a very collaborative atmosphere. Traditional managed workspaces can be more hierarchical with some people having bigger and better spaces. Here every space is equally good.'

A big part of the appeal to home-based workers is very flexible terms of use. 'Our users can be in charge of their own work patterns and how much they use the hub. We can change tariffs easily so if someone is away a lot or their business slips a bit, they can easily cut their hours and work more from home. That's something traditional managed workspaces just don't offer.'

The feel is informal but learned, with the open plan design making for a studios atmosphere. Can it be a bit too quiet though, like a library? 'We don't have a problem with people making phone calls, that kind of noise. But yes, I think it is hard for people to be shouty here,' Ripper says. 'Users think that's a good thing. If someone needs to be a lot louder than a normal phone call, they can use break out spaces or the meeting room.'

Management

The Bristol Hub, like all the others in the group, is a separate not-for-profit company, in effect run as a franchise. Each hub has its own board. Here the chairman runs a sustainability consultancy. The board has quarterly meetings with a membership of 12 including three hub members.

Facilities/services

- Open from 9am to 5.30pm
- Virtual office (post only)
- Broadband/wifi
- VoIP phone system
- Secure storage room
- A3 colour scanner/printer
- Meeting room/event hire including whole space out of hours
- Special events (eg Bristol University social enterprise weekend course)
- Social/networking events eg film viewings, wind down drinks on Friday evenings, 'sexy salad'

Antony Clark

www.meaningfulnumbers.co.uk

Antony is a chartered management accountant. He joined the hub in June 2009, initially renting space for two days a week. But with twins aged under two at home, he's now paying for a full-time space, though still working one day a week at home. Until recently Antony was very much the office-based professional, spending 17 years first as a manager at the Tate & Lyle Group then with Northcliffe Media, though working from home for much of his last year.

After a long expected redundancy in 2009, he toyed with the idea of making a new career out of an invention. He tested the waters before making a more pragmatic decision to set up business as a 'finance director for small businesses'.

Looking for premises, he first approached the University of the South West of England. 'It has an innovation centre but it's more for small businesses, not individuals. It wasn't a good fit. They suggested I come here and I'm glad they did.' His working day has become much more flexible. 'I can work really hard in the morning, here or at home, then spend the afternoon in the park with the twins.

'I am more productive here and it gets me out socially. Even if I had a big swanky house with an office, I'd still want to visit here.'

- lunches once a week and guest speakers
- Comfortable space – break out areas, sofas etc
- Light touch training/mentoring, eg 'learning lunches' twice a month
- Monthly email newsletter.

A shared online invoicing system keeps costs down. Hub usage is tracked through login and phone use is automatically billed through the VoIP system.

The finances

The main source of income aside from workspace and membership fees is event and meeting space hire. The hub does not get grants, making ample use of unpaid and voluntary help to supplement very limited staffing. The reception role is important, with staff, placements and volunteers going to great efforts to help all users and visitors.

Even in the recession, the hub was self-financing but only by reining in staff costs (down from two full-time workers to one). The business plan, long term, is looking for sponsorship to play a bigger role.



Staff

Helen Ripper is currently the only paid employee. But she is joined by interns and volunteers (including members) who help with all important meetings and greeting at reception. 'It's very important that when a member or a potential member comes in, there is someone there to offer to help them that day. The concept of reception is different to a managed workspace. We often do little tasks for members and, importantly, introduce them to others when they need expertise, ideas or knowledge. Those introductions are often the seed for major project collaboration and even business partnerships.'

Businesses and members

Bristol Hub now has over 100 members, at least two-thirds based at home and using the hub ad hoc or part-time. Home use is not formally measured or tracked. At its peak before the recession member numbers were closer to 140 with many on higher tariffs (spending more time here).

Mike Thornton

oneshot.com

Mike has spent four years trying to turn his idea of using video streaming of properties for rent or sale into a viable business. 'The best way to describe it is like a Google Earth style visit to all parts of a property for sale.' Mike employs two technicians who work from their homes, in Norwich and Leicester, setting up his database. But finding the right business partners is proving a tougher call. 'Because of the nature of the project and the technology it ticks away in the background,' Mike says. Happily the family brewery has offered a second income allowing him to persevere. 'I can't work here all the time because my company's not at the point where I can afford to do so. On Monday I did a sales and marketing course at home, I spent Tuesday and Wednesday at the brewery filling in for my sister who's just had a kid. Thursday I was out visiting clients. Today I'm in here doing oneshot.' Mike plans to stay on at Bristol Hub. 'The basic idea's genius – it's how people operate in business today. Why would I want to rent an office? I'd just be paying more to be in another place by myself.'



The challenges

The summer of 2009 saw a dip in membership and income, which picked up again in autumn. 'We found the downturn created more interest in joining,' says Ripper. 'A good number of new members had set up business using redundancy payments instead of looking for another job as an employee. For them, we offer a flexible package which enables them to work from home but also a very professional business address for meetings, and somewhere to feel less isolated or collaborate.' Hub membership and using home as a the main office is much cheaper than full-time space in an office, she adds.

Word of mouth is the main marketing tool. 'Come to work in a cool place' has worked well in the past, with a somewhat exclusive 'hidden gem' feel to the place. Is it so appropriate in a downturn? Ripper acknowledges that the hub is somewhat invisible. There is no signage outside and little marketing. 'It's something we do need to look at,' she says. She is wary of overly commercial promotion. 'It might damage our special reputation as an unusual and club-like premises that isn't a bog standard office.'

