

The Hub, Islington

The Hub in Islington was the first of the now global network, opened five years ago. It offers incubation space for start-ups and freelancers just a stone's throw from one of London's most popular high streets

The building

The Islington Hub is on the top floor of a once derelict warehouse in a quiet cobbled road immediately behind Angel tube station. A steep flights of steps takes you to the fourth floor and into a small gallery area where you see stacked bags of the wooden pellets that feed The Hub's wood-burning stoves.

A larger room is packed with people working at bespoke desks and tables, with a moveable screen separating them from a meeting room. Under windows facing east London is a raised breakout area. Tucked away in the corner, behind a kitchenette is the 'library' – another raised platform but with bookshelves.

The Hub is halfway through a 10-year lease negotiated by Hub founder and director Jonathan Robinson after a deal on a space in Clerkenwell fell through at the last moment. The building was occupied largely by pigeons at the time so needed extensive refurbishment including, somewhat absurdly given the challenging access, a wheelchair accessible toilet.

The carefully preserved old timbers, exposed brickwork and hot pink filing shelves give the room a warmth somewhat undermined by a predominance of woolly hats, a shared box of woolly jumper and blazing heaters. In fact the elderly glazed roof leaks heat. 'Our biggest problem is very poor insulation,' says operations director Holly Lambert (below).



What's special

Islington was Robinson's first ever hub, established after returning from voluntary work with an impoverished community in Soweto. 'What drove him was seeing what a community can achieve,' says Lambert.

Each hub is run as a franchise that goes through defined stages that set its culture and operation and its relationship with the people that use it. 'There are a lot of different examples of what a hub can look like and we've built up a lot of expertise,' Lambert says. 'We're trying now to create a set of tools so this can be done more easily.'

The Hub, Islington, is one of two operating in London, with a third due to open on a canal boat docked in the Thames at Vauxhall – a joint venture with Coin Street Community Builders. 'Islington is very much an incubation space,' Lambert says. 'Kings Cross is more for businesses that are up and running and some people naturally adhere more to the style of this space. Kings Cross is very different. Also, not everyone wants to climb four flights of stairs and to have to make their own tea.'

Lambert describes her role as that of host. 'A lot of people say joining the hub is like your first day at school, so I actively introduce people to others and create an environment where people can make a new business succeed. That's what makes us different to traditional co-working.'

Management

The Hub, Islington, is a company limited by guarantee, under director Jonathan Robinson. Behind the scenes is a members council, set up to keep management in tune with their members' needs. An advisory board is also on the cards, envisaged as a board of sector experts who joined the hub early on.

Staff

The daily operation is handled by Lambert and programmes director Alex Rinsler. A third colleague provides community mapping, monitoring week by week who is in the hub network and identifying gaps.

Lambert is helped in her role as host by a pool of five members who play host one day a month in return for free membership. 'It frees me up to connect more with members,' Lambert says. 'There are no written protocols for decisions or conduct but all of the team have different characteristics so we fit together quite nicely.'

Lambert also handles credit control. 'Our payment scheme's quite generous so if people fall behind but are honest with us that's usually fine. Just because we're social entrepreneurs that doesn't mean business rules don't apply. It can get quite heated if members don't pay but you can usually flip back pretty easily

Jon Bootland

www.sdfoundation.org.uk

Jon Bootland is director of the Sustainable Development Foundation, a not-for-profit company that runs a range of specialist programmes helping housing, health and educational organisations make better use of their buildings and advising communities on lower carbon practices. His team of experts can calculate, not just the environmental cost of construction, materials and wastage but also energy use over a building's lifetime.

They also suggest ways to make more efficient use of a building and reducing the need to travel. 'In the private sector they'd call it sweating an asset,' Bootland says. 'In public buildings it might be more about staff productivity or making service delivery more efficient. The hub, he suggests, is a good example of how to make better use of a building, even allowing for its poor insulation. 'Energy consumption per person here, they think, is 50% lower than in a traditional office due to the high occupancy rates.'

Jon's company spends around £10,000 on workspace and £3,000 on services like photocopying each year. 'We have our own desk and phone line and we use the server to store data.' He is convinced the workhub concept will soon become mainstream.

'More people are working flexibly in less formal arrangements and there are very few permanent contracts around.' But his company's days at the hub are numbered. 'We now have a team of five or six, all working here or at home. So we're getting to the point where it doesn't work for us. I looked at Regus but I'd rather be in a more organic space where we could brand our section than in separated cells.'

into 'so how's your work going?'. We've only had one instance of an organisation having to leave because they didn't pay.'

The role of host comes with mutual benefits. 'We're free to be entrepreneurs ourselves, but we also get to use the space and to share ideas with other members. It lets you connect on a different level.'

Businesses and members

The hub has about 220 active members who pay to use the space for up to five hours a month, and 15 who pay for 25 or more hours. 'Most of the people here are doing projects that try to change the way things are done.' Members' businesses are diverse, ranging from specialist consultancy to web development, creatives and micros in various business service sectors.

'All of our members work from home to varying degrees, even the unlimited users,' Lambert says. 'Most live in Hackney, though some are from south or west London. Our core group are aged 26-34 and sharing a house with others. Not many are married and not many are home owners.'

Lambert's role includes keeping the membership balanced. 'We don't want it too techie, we've had the odd broker shouting down the phone all the time, and last year we had too many life coaches. You get it instantly if someone is right for the hub. You don't have to join in but we do want people to be friendly and working towards the vision of a better future.'





Part of the host's job is to find out as much as they can about the work of each new member. A self-written piece on all new members is emailed to everyone on the mailing list.

There is no minimum sign-up so people can join for as little as one week. 'They might find it's not to their taste, they might have to drop freelancing or they might just go abroad,' says Lambert. 'We tend to see a natural three month or three year cycle. Three months is normally a good test of someone's commitment and after three years most need to move on to a bigger or more settled space.'

Hotdesking is integral to networking, Lambert says, though she concedes it raises concerns about ergonomics. 'We do need better chairs but when people move around you get more collaboration. Monitoring that is something we struggle with but we know a lot of the designers get new clients from other members and a lot work together on carbon reduction or on advisory groups.'

'We've got one company that's trying to get schools used 24/7 and it's something we've thought about for The hub too, opening it at weekends. It's also used in the evenings for language courses. Our unlimited members have their own key.'

Holly Lambert, operations manager

The challenges

The hub holds an open waiting list to maintain **capacity**, having learned the hard way not to close its list. 'Nine people left at once so we had to open it again rapidly.' Word of mouth continues to be its best advertisement, but with Twitter and Facebook both proving increasingly effective.

'We're developing an attraction strategy because printing loads of leaflets isn't much of a carbon benefit,' Lambert says. 'And being in Islington is good because you get a constant barrage of interest, particularly off the back of the growing popularity of the hub concept.'

A second challenge has been **economic**. When the downturn began, hub membership flourished initially. 'We thought we'd got through it well because a lot more people started to explore this type of working but in the last few months a lot of people have said they're going to have to go back to full-time working or downsize,' Lambert says.

Business support, she says, also needs attention. 'Business Link has done a couple of lunches but they've been a mixed bag. The general support they do I could almost do myself just by asking for suggestions from our mailing list. Most of our members are beyond the Business Link basics, asking questions instead about self-employment and their rights. I studied economic business development at university and here you get such an interesting mix here of how to do or not do business.'