RESEARCH

Evaluation of CMF-funded UK online centres: initial report

Hall Aitken Associates

department for
education and skills
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No 368

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1 Summary

This first report is largely based on a first survey of early users of UK online centres. A limited centre manager survey and case studies provide some background data. Substantial delays in centre opening dates and difficulty in obtaining basic data on centres has delayed the study. Data is now becoming available and so far indications are that the results are reasonably robust.

1.1 Overall progress

The aim of the UK online centres is to bridge the gap between those in society who have access to and are able to use information and communication technologies (ICT) competently, and those who do not. The Government's target is to provide 6,000 centres. The centres are intended to be located in places people visit every day, with convenient opening hours to offer easy access. The key success criteria are the extent to which the centres increase ICT awareness, ICT skills and people's participation in local communities. More than 2,000 centres in disadvantaged communities will receive support from the Capital Modernisation Fund (CMF).

The user survey indicates that **61% of users are in the target groups in terms of social and economic status.** Set against this, **60% have access to a home computer and 37% home access to the Internet** (very close to national average levels). On the other hand the **initial ICT skills level of users is generally low** - they may have access to a computer but they do not have the skills to use it. The weight of evidence suggests that **the *most* excluded groups** (i.e. those who might fall into several of the target group categories) **are not using the centres in great numbers**.

The typical user has heard about the centre by word of mouth, attends a course at a set time and is primarily interested in learning how to use a computer. This is reflected in the fact that most of their time is spent using a computer not connected to the Internet. Although survey respondents had only started using the centres recently **very high levels of progress are reported** - for example 27% claim that attendance at centre has helped them progress onto **learndirect** courses and 16% that it has helped them progress to FE/HE.

Although the amount of data from manager surveys and case studies so far is limited, they do provide important background to the user survey. **Many centres are experiencing teething problems and few are aware of support mechanisms that are available**.

It is clear that most centres are still at a very early stage in their development and **early results may not, therefore, be a reliable guide to the longer-term** outputs and impacts.

1.2 Recommendations

Taken together, these factors lead us to believe that the success of the UK online centre programme (CMF funded) cannot be properly assessed at this point. There are however some key potential weaknesses in the development of the programme that should be addressed. It is possible that without such action the centres will develop as originally envisaged, once initial teething problems have been overcome and early lessons learnt by individual centres. Our impression however is that some proactive intervention now is required.

In particular the authors recommend that

- A specific programme is put in place to **promote** to *centre mangers and staff* **such support mechanisms that currently exist** - Help is @ Hand, centres discussion group and direct support.
- Additional focus and resources are placed on **supporting centres in their efforts to target and support the more socially excluded potential users** and those who do not currently have access to a computer or the Internet. This might be through the existing Government Office staff who have provided early support.
- The **penetration of the key target groups is monitored carefully** in order to determine whether any further revenue resource may be required by centres if the programme's overall goals are to be achieved.

2

2 Methodology and related issues

The study uses a combination of user survey, centre manager survey and case studies. To date the most useful data has come from the first user survey. Substantial delays in centre opening dates and difficulty in obtaining basic data on centres has delayed the study. Data is now becoming available and so far indications are that the results are reasonably robust.

2.1 Outline methodology

This evaluation study is intended to run alongside the UK online centres (CMF funded) programme, providing both formative and summative evaluation outputs.

The overall aim of the study is to look at the impact and efficiency of the rollout of the programme as a whole, with four more specific objectives:

- to identify whether participants have increased their ICT skills
- to quantify the extent to which participants are achieving positive short term and longer term outcomes as a result of improving their ICT skills and/or having access to ICT
- to explore the issue of dead-weight and assess the magnitude of dead-weight loss
- to record the broader impact of the Learning Centres on individuals and the wider community.

The study comprises three elements (below) running in parallel throughout the programme. At present these should be completed by March 2003. Given delays in centre openings, it would be more useful to extend the time period some 6-12 months.

2.1.1 User survey

A large-scale user survey is the foundation of the study. It involves a short closed question survey form, completed by users with centre staff support where appropriate. Around nine months after the initial survey a second follow up survey will gather evidence of progress and qualitative views on the centres. The survey will be undertaken in three phases, with increasing numbers as more centres open. The first survey for the first phase has now been completed with 1,360 responses. Ultimately over 20,000 responses should be received and the

target return rate should give a statistically sound basis on which to analyse a wide range of issues by target group, and centre type, as well as for the overall initiative.

2.1.2 Manager survey

Before any other element of the evaluation can proceed the first part of our work is to gather basic details on each open centre. This includes the obvious details of centre manager name, address, email, phone number etc. The next stage has been to undertake an initial postal survey to confirm the basic data and to obtain information on which a centre typology and then sample can be constructed. This survey has obtained information on centre size, type of programming and location along with other similar data.

The main centre manager survey is being undertaken using a web based survey tool. This allows development of the survey tool over time and gives the option of easily collecting data on additional aspects of centres activities in response to findings emerging from the rest of the study. To date effort has focused on obtaining basic data. The first full manager survey is currently underway and should be analysed by the end of April 2002.

2.1.3 Case studies

The final element of the approach is 21 more in depth case studies. These will track the development of selected projects over time, and serve to verify the data from the other elements of the study and provide more qualitative information. Nine case studies are underway and provide additional information to assist in the interpretation of other data. They will become more useful as time progresses.

2.2 Delays and data difficulties

The original timescale for the evaluation was based on the assumption that the majority of the first round centres would be open by January 2001. In practice centres only began to open in any numbers in Summer 2001. The first user survey and case study visits therefore took place over October to December 2001, and this report provides feedback on this work. The second phase of user surveys is currently underway as is the follow up survey for the respondents to the first phase survey.

The researchers have experienced major problems in obtaining useful contact data for the centres. In most cases funding has been approved for more than one centre, so the initial contact name is inappropriate. Staff turnover also appears to be a major issue (with turnover rates of up to 40% in less than one year reported). These factors have combined to mean that far greater effort and time has been spent by us (and by DfES) on gathering basic data than anticipated. This has added to the delay in progressing the evaluation. There is

now a database of approximately 580 open centres with full typology data. The database is building up each week and it forms the basis for the whole study.

Fifty-nine centres were selected for the first roll-out of the User Survey. Selection was based on size and type of centre as well as type of programming provided. The types of problems encountered during the selection process included:

- Not a learning centre, reference or access point only
- No management in situ
- Not open to users yet
- Funds delayed so equipment not purchased

One particular centre explained that despite receiving the funds, purchasing the required equipment and marketing the facility they had not had any users through the doors. During the follow-up phase after distribution of the survey it was discovered that one rural centre had not received them via the post due to Foot and Mouth restrictions in the area.

2.3 User survey – commentary on analysis

The main part of this report is based on analysis of the first user survey. The authors have taken some care to ensure that the interpretation can be justified.

A total of 5,570 user questionnaires were distributed for completion by all new users between 1st October and 30th November 2001 in 59 centres selected to be representative of the 189 open centres on which full information was then available. Hall Aitken received and analysed 1,360 returns (a return rate of 24%). Questionnaires were completed by users with assistance from centre staff where required (for example where the user had some basic skills needs) but were returned by users in a sealed envelope.

At the end of the survey Hall Aitken supplied each centre manager with an analysis of the respondents from their centre, and asked them to check that the profile of respondents was representative of their centre (in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, economic status, and basic skills levels, as well as total numbers of new users). 55% of the centre managers have responded to date and the correlation between their information and Hall Aitkin's was close in most cases.

There were 766 returns from the user survey for these centres and according to the estimates of these centres' managers there were 1,097 new users in the period. Therefore, 70% of new users for these centres completed a user survey.

On this basis it is possible to conclude that the results from the user survey can be taken at least to be representative of the 59 centres involved.

Hall Aitken have also compared the profile of the respondents with the DfES monitoring returns for the period. Some of the figures from the DfES monitoring information are incomplete and therefore do not equate to 100% for all the categories. A full analysis of correlations had not been possible but it appears that:

- There is close correlation between the profiles by age and gender for both groups.
- There is variance on the economic status, but this might be accounted for by different classifications (for example our survey includes a breakdown of part time and full time employment).
- There is a wide difference in the number of users in ethnic minority groups with our survey appearing under-representative of the whole.

At this stage it is unlikely that further analysis and correction would be appropriate, but this will be reviewed for the next report. The proportion of Asian users in particular is of interest in the next stage of the survey.

Overall it is possible to conclude that the survey results are reasonably robust and that the fact that these are early users of centres just opened is likely to be more significant than any flaws in the sample. The results should therefore be seen as initial indications only.

Figure 1 - comparison of returns for user survey with DfES MI returns

	For all centres responding		For 19 centres completing both	
	User Survey	DfES MI	User Survey	DfES MI
Gender				
Male	42%	41%	38%	39%
Female	56%	54%	61%	61%
Unknown	2%	5%	1%	
Age breakdown				
Under 16	2%	8%	3%	2%
16-25	12%	14%	13%	18%
26-35	15%	19%	16%	15%
36-45	17%	15%	15%	17%
46-55	16%	15%	15%	10%
56-64	17%	13%	15%	10%
Over 65	18%	14%	20%	14%
Unknown	2%	3%	2%	0%
		100%	100%	86%
Ethnicity				
White	81%	71%	81%	77%
Asian	6%	10%	3%	6%
Black	2.4%	6%	6%	8%
Chinese	0.4%	1%	0.7%	1%
Other	1.2%	2%	1.4%	2%
Preferred not to say/unknown	9%	10%	8%	1%
		100%	100%	94%
Employment Status				
Employed	39%	24%	32%	25%
In Education	9%	11%	10%	5%
Registered unemployed	14%	23%	15%	25%
Not registered unemployed	8%	-	7%	-
Retired	29%	17%	30%	18%
Unknown	3%	23%	6%	29%

2.4 Manager surveys

To date there have only been limited surveys, with those centres that participated in the user survey (due to the difficulties in securing centre contact details):

- A Funding Survey to determine how funding was spent and the level of matched funding
- A User Numbers Survey to get a clearer picture of how many people are participating in different activities at the centre

Both questionnaires were web-based forms, sent to 55 centres by email. Hall Aitken received 39 responses to the Funding Survey and 29 responses to the User Numbers Survey. In some cases, responses were not complete because the centre manager was not aware of how much money was invested in their centre or where it came from, and some are not clear about the UK online/CMF connection. The results should therefore be taken as indicative rather than authoritative.

3

3 Success in reaching target groups

The user survey indicates that well over 50% of users are in the target groups in terms of social and economic status. Set against this, surprisingly high numbers have access to a home computer and the Internet. On the other hand the initial ICT skills level of users is generally low.

3.1 Demographics

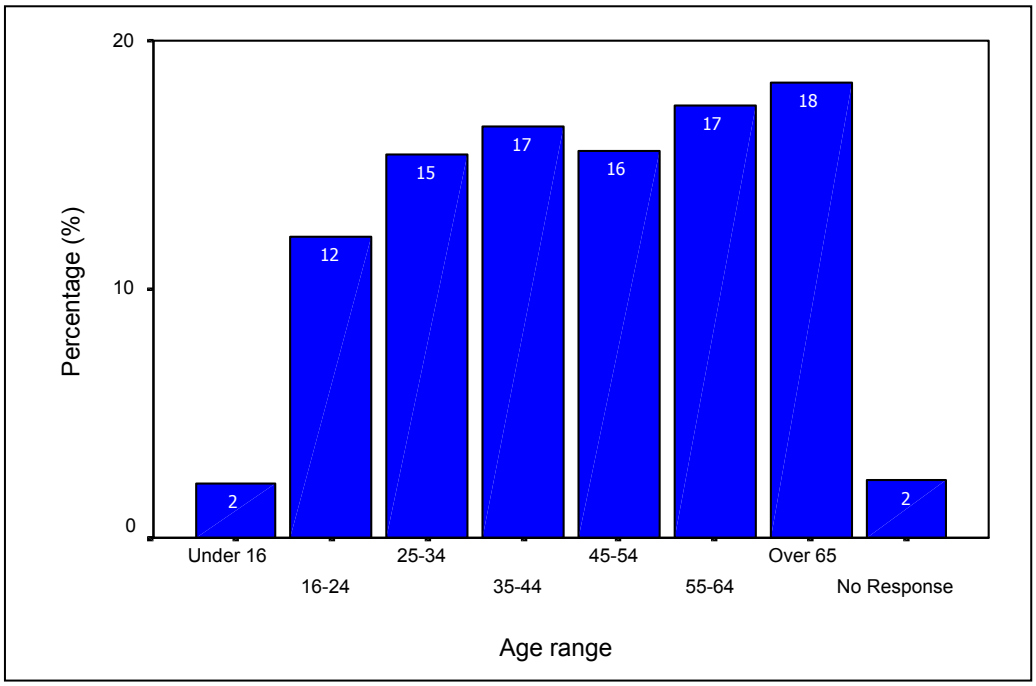
3.1.1 Gender

42% of the respondents were male and 56% were female. This represents a move towards a more equal success rate in attracting both genders than was the case in the pilot centres where only 36% of users were men.

3.1.2 Age range

There is a fairly even spread of age ranges within the respondents with a modest bias towards older people and this is shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 - age range of respondents



3.2 Socially excluded groups

A number of specific groups were identified as target groups for the UK online initiative:

- People who need help with basic skills
- Lone Parents
- People from Ethnic minorities
- Unemployed people
- People with disabilities
- People who are over 60 and not involved in learning activities

In total 61% of the sample fell into this category. Some fell into more than one of these groups, as in Figure 3 below, and might therefore be taken to be more excluded. Figure 4 shows the percentage in each group.

Figure 3 - proportion of respondents in excluded groups

	In one category	In any two categories	In any three categories	All
Number of respondents	506	309	21	836
Proportion all respondents	37%	23%	1.5%	61%

Figure 4 - excluded groups by type

	Number of respondents	Proportion of all Respondents
Unemployed	292	21%
Lone Parents	82	6%
Ethnic Minorities	137	10%
At least some difficulty with reading and writing	107	8%
At least some difficulty with numbers and arithmetic	207	15%
Disabled	104	8%
People over 65*	249	18%

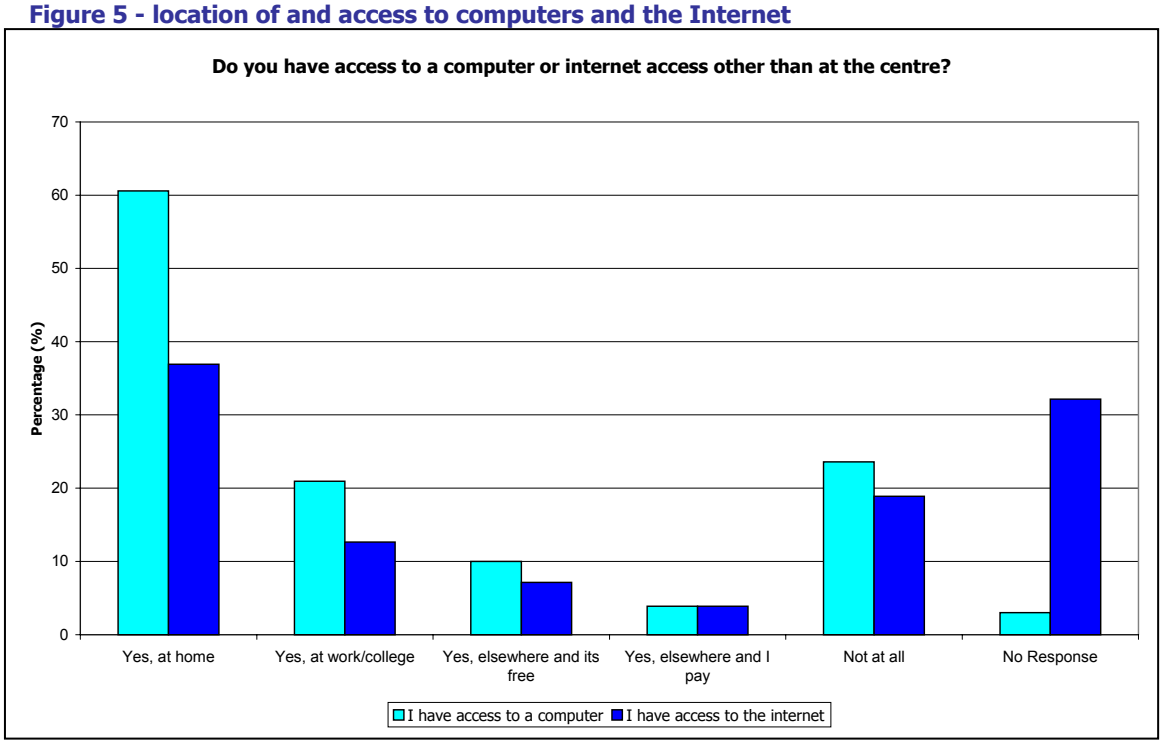
* Taken as a proxy for "People who are over 60 and not involved in learning activities". Future user surveys will ask sufficient questions to determine this group more precisely.

The large numbers of retired people reflects the age range of respondents to the questionnaire.

3.3 Access to computers and the Internet

A further way in which the target groups for the programme were identified was in terms of access to the Internet. It was perceived that many people in the target areas for the centres would have no Internet access, compared to national averages of over 38% of UK households with Internet access and 51% of UK adults having accessed the Internet at home, work or at a public access point (July 2001 National Statistics omnibus survey).

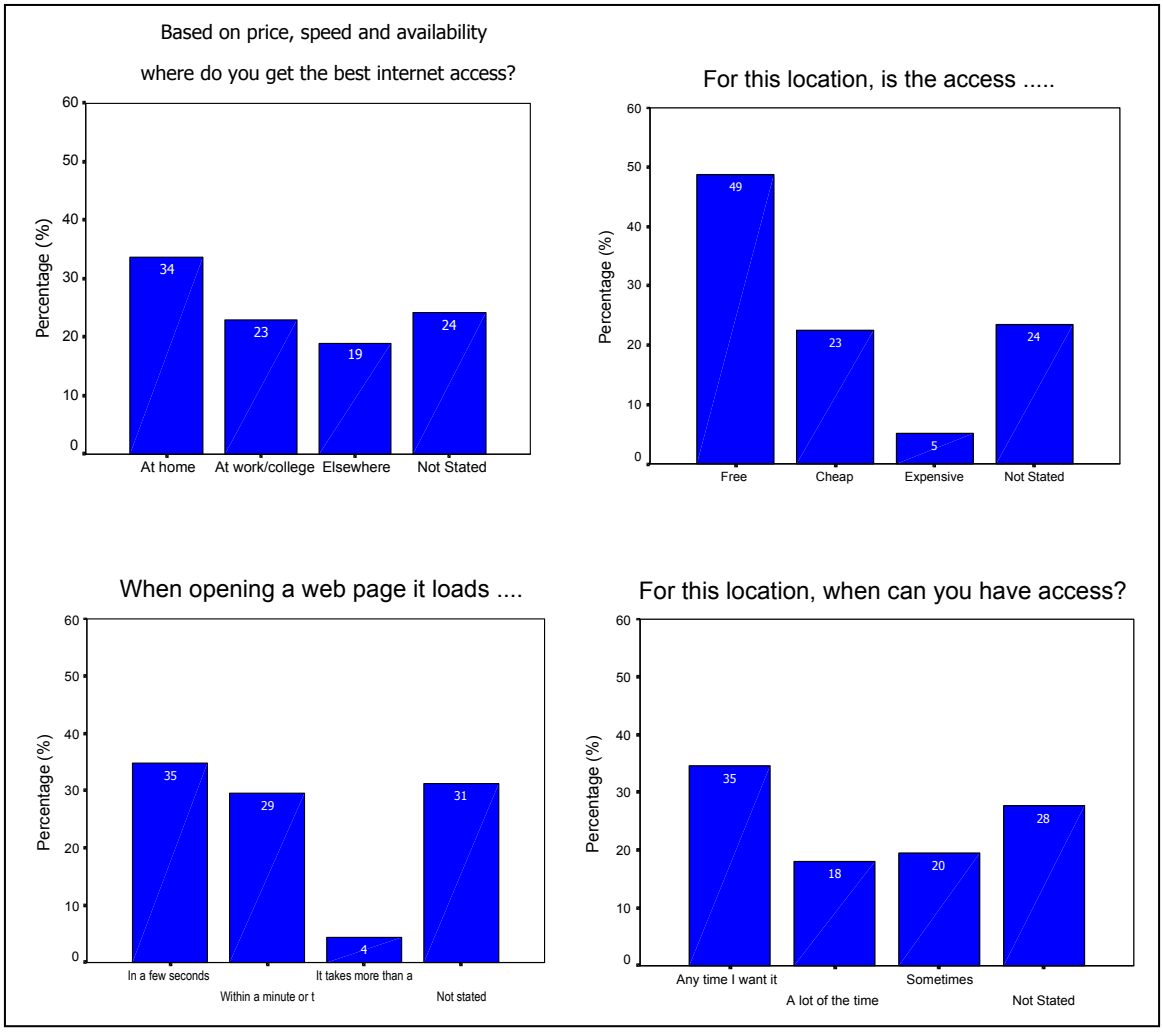
Figure 5 - location of and access to computers and the Internet



In fact 37% said they had access at home and only 19% said that they *only* had access to the Internet at the centre. Some 24% of the respondents have no access to a computer apart from at the UK online Centre but 61% said that they had access to a computer at home.

It appears that the profile of centre users appears to match national averages in terms of Internet access and probably in terms of home computer ownership. It could be that the quality of access (e.g. speed of internet connection and age of computers) might be less than for the national average, but responses to more detailed questions suggest that this is not the case.

Figure 6 - quality and accessibility of Internet access



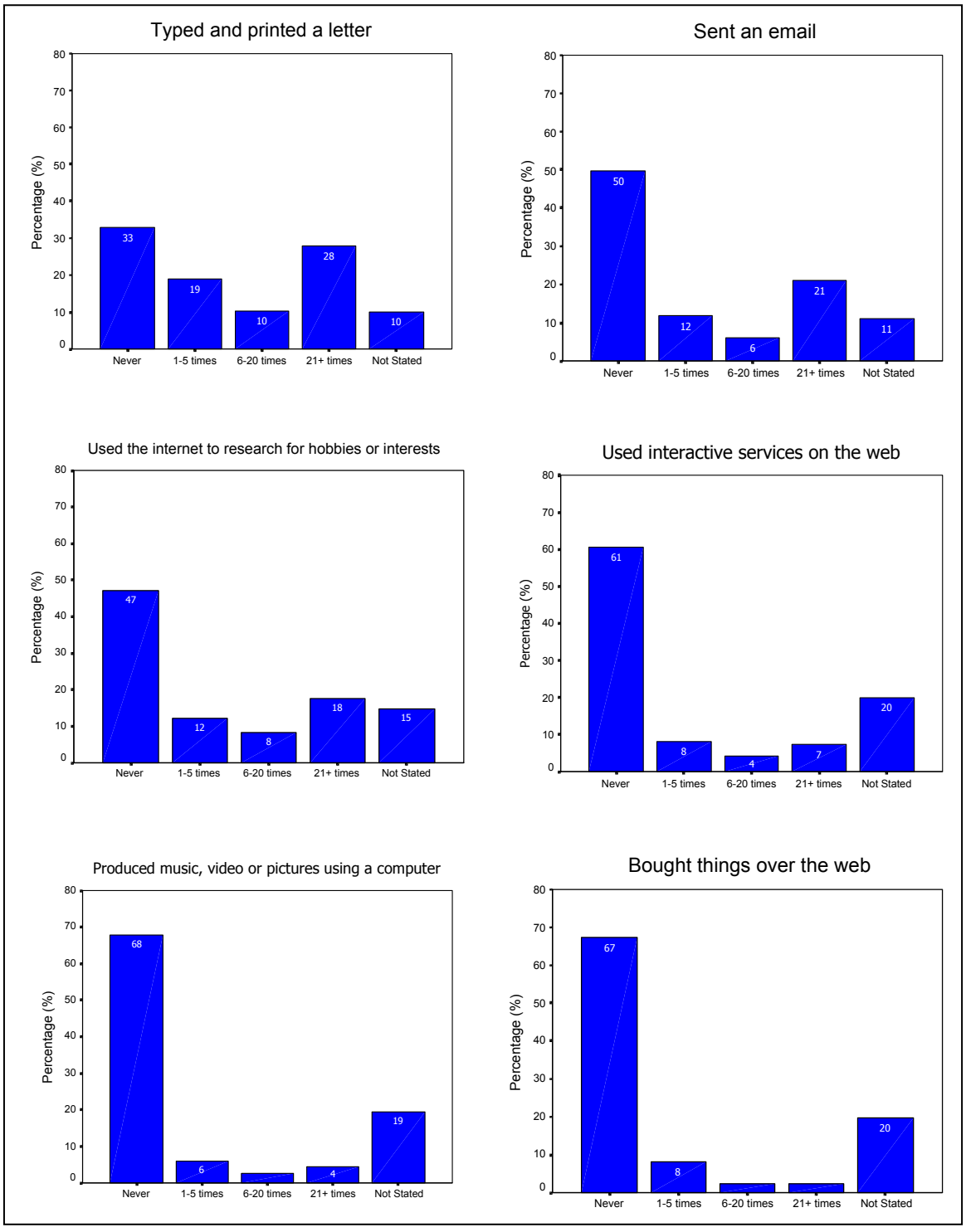
When the levels of computer ownership and Internet access are analysed only for those falling into one of the identified socially excluded groups, a slight change can be detected. Computer ownership for example falls to 57% from 60% and Internet access at home to 33% from 37%. These variations are within the 'margins of error' for the sample size and in any case are very slight.

It seems clear that, whatever sample errors may be present, the level of access to computers and the Internet (for the ***early users*** of these centres at least) is very high.

3.4 ICT skills

The final method of identifying the target group was by the level of ICT skills, which would be low. Actual levels can be seen in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7 - experience/skills in ICT

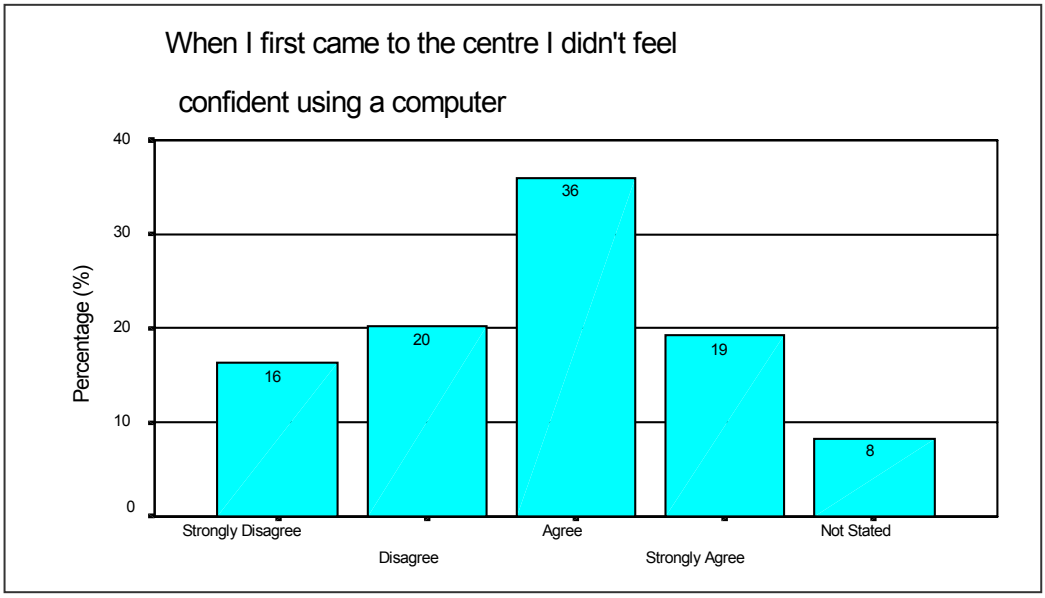


Consideration of users' skills and use of ICT shows much lower levels than might be expected given the apparent level of access to computers and the Internet. Although 31% have typed a letter more than 21 times, there are still 37% who have never undertaken this most basic task. Over 55% appear never to have sent an email or used the web, and only just over 20% have significant experience of either.

For any type of more advanced use of ICT such as online shopping, use of online services and production of audio-visual outputs, experience is negligible.

This impression of a low level of skills is reinforced by users' assessment of their own confidence levels shown in Figure 8 below.

Figure 8 - users initial confidence levels

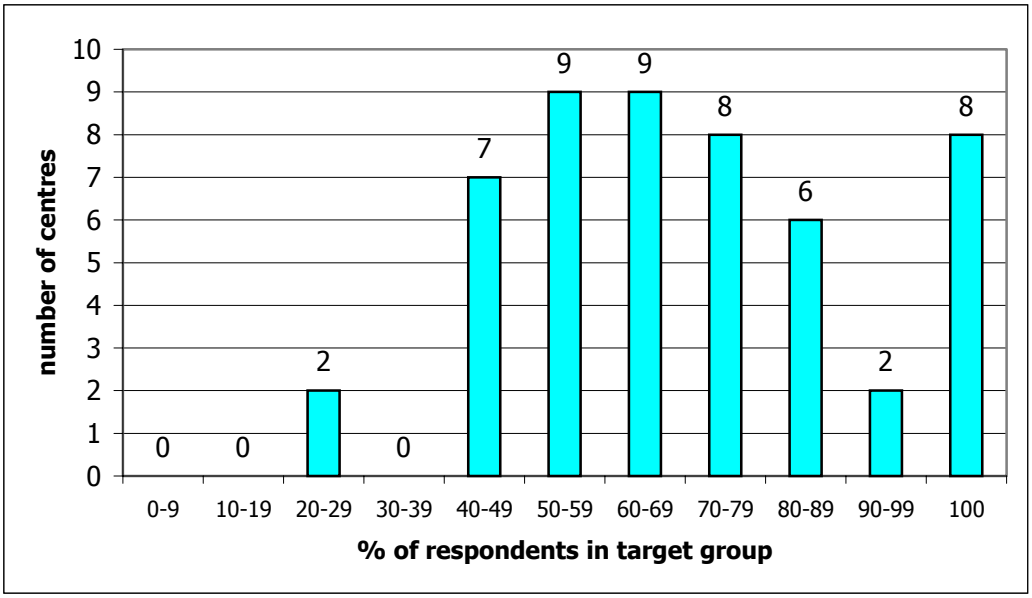


3.5 Spread of success

Although at this stage it is too early to put too much weight on the more detailed analysis of user survey data, consideration of the varying degrees of success of different centres is interesting.

- Some centres have users that are almost entirely drawn from the target socially excluded groups, whilst others have very few. The spread is shown in Figure 9.
- Fixed sites tend to have a higher proportion of the excluded group (66%) when compared with both mobile (49%) and outreach (52%). Other differences do not appear to have such an impact.

Figure 9 - variation in centres success in attracting socially excluded groups



3.6 Conclusions

On the basis of this survey the evidence on the degree of success in reaching the target groups is mixed:

- Around 61% of respondents fell in to one or other of the socially excluded target groups. The levels of multiple disadvantage are much lower and it may be that the most excluded groups are not being attracted.
- The level of computer ownership and Internet access appears to be around the national average and on this basis the users cannot, for the most part, be said to be excluded from access in a physical sense. The level of access reinforces the impression that the most excluded (i.e. poorest) groups are not being attracted in great numbers.
- Skill levels are low and most users appear to fall well within the category of "those who do not have the skills…" to use ICT.
- In summary the initial users of the early opening centres are those who have access to a computer and/or the Internet but who do not have the skills to use it. This is consistent with who might be expected to be the early users of a new service – i.e. those who will most easily identify their need.
- The variation in centres' success in attracting socially excluded groups is interesting and should form an important part of the analysis of future surveys. Reasons for such variations will now be investigated.

4

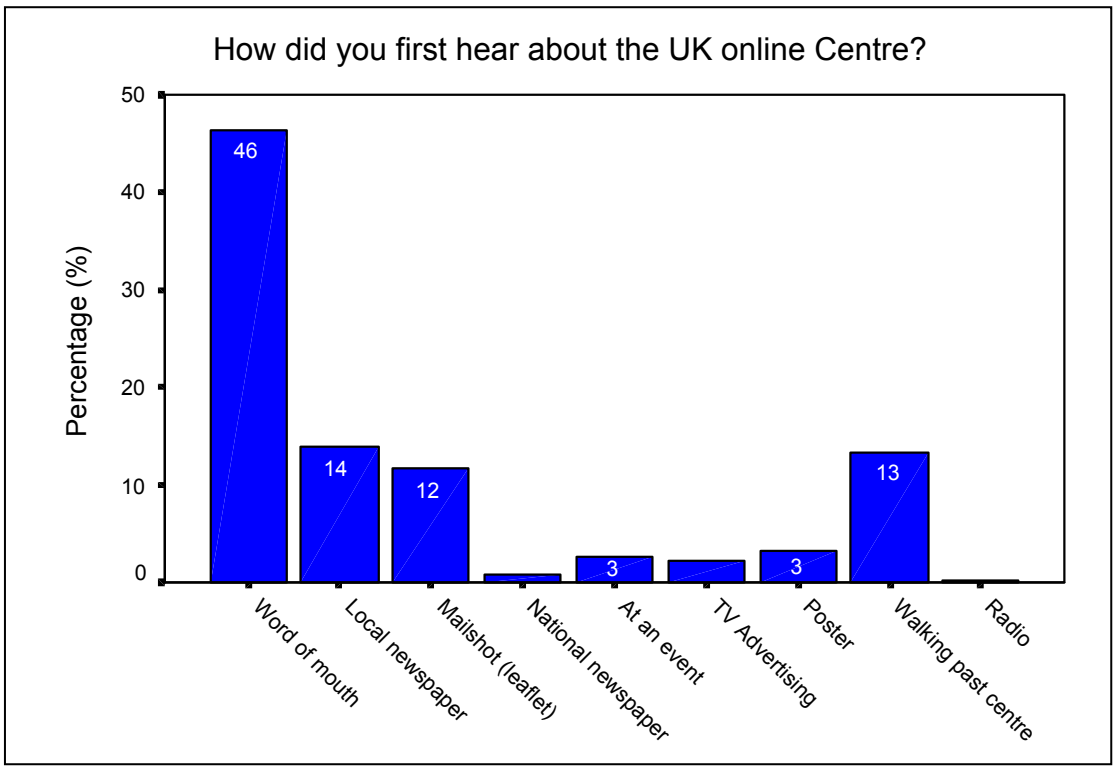
4 User motivation and first impressions

The typical user has heard about the centre by word of mouth, attends a course at a set time and is primarily interested in learning how to use a computer. This is reflected in the fact that most of their time is spent using a computer not connected to the Internet. Although survey respondents had only started using the centres recently very high levels of progress are reported.

4.1 Marketing and motivation

Figure 10 below shows the methods that the respondents first heard about the centres with almost 46% noting word of mouth. Nevertheless local newspaper, mail shot and walking past the centre are all significant. In a separate question just under 4% indicated that they had used the UK online Freephone number.

Figure 10 - success of different marketing methods



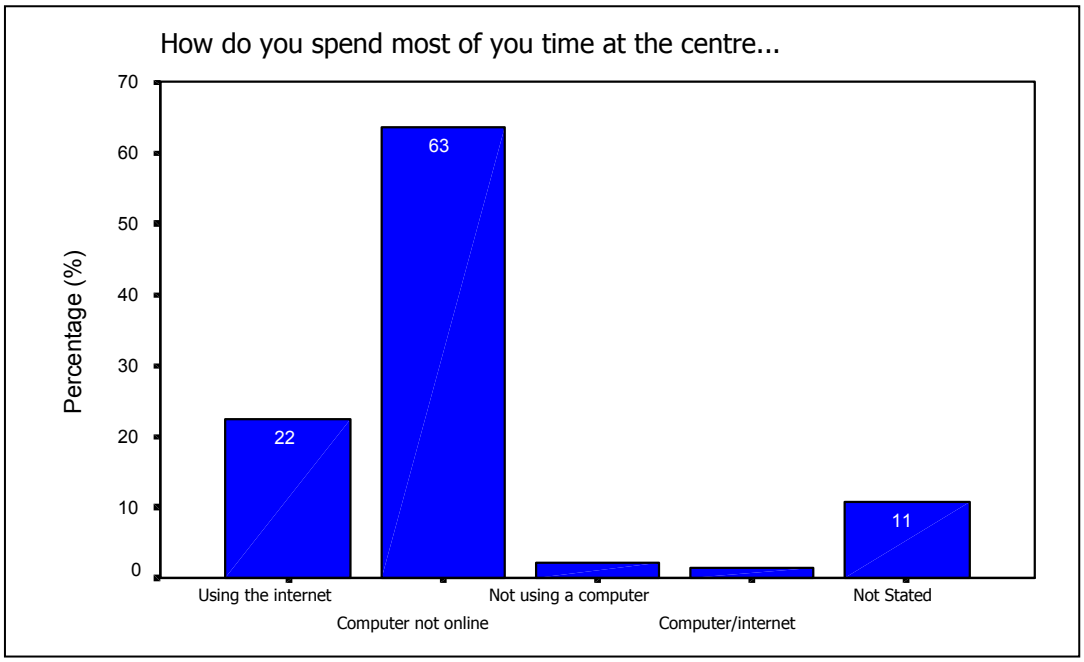
Respondents were then asked why they came along to the centre, the most popular reason by a substantial margin was to learn how to use a computer followed by sending e-mails to friends and family.

Figure 11 - reasons for first coming to the centre

Reason	%
To learn to use a computer	71.1%
To send emails to friends and family	27.1%
To pursue a hobby or interest	25.5%
To get free access to the internet	21.6%
To go on to more advanced non-IT courses	18.3%
To meet other people	16.2%
To learn to make posters and leaflets	14.6%
To learn how to create a website	14.6%
To be able to help my children/grandchildren with schoolwork	13.5%
To get involved in the community	6.6%
To be able to produce music, video or photographs	5.6%
To play games on the computers	4.1%
Not stated	2.8%

4.2 Experience at the centre/project

Figure 12 - main activity at the centre/project



It appears that the majority of time is spent at the centre in using computers but not the Internet. This correlates with our experience on visits to projects. Much

of the time seems to be spent on computer courses such as CLAIT, providing an introduction to word processing etc - the Internet is a secondary activity.

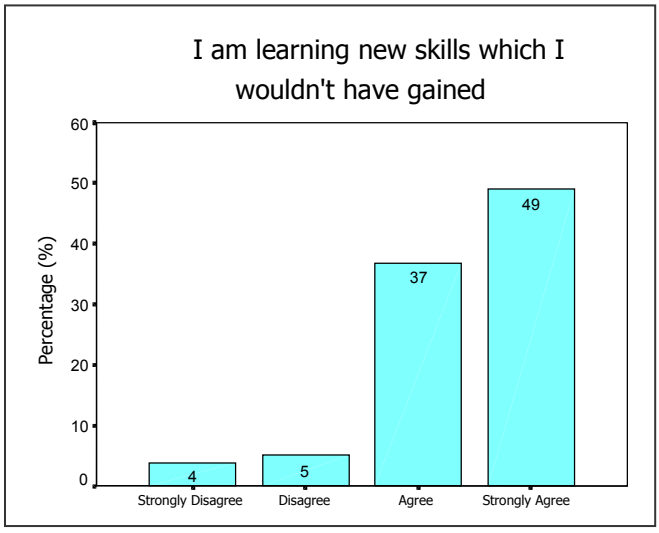
Further investigation of the type of activity suggests that:

- 10% claim to visit centres to follow online courses
- 23% just drop in to use the computers
- 65% attend a computing course at a set time

4.3 Early results

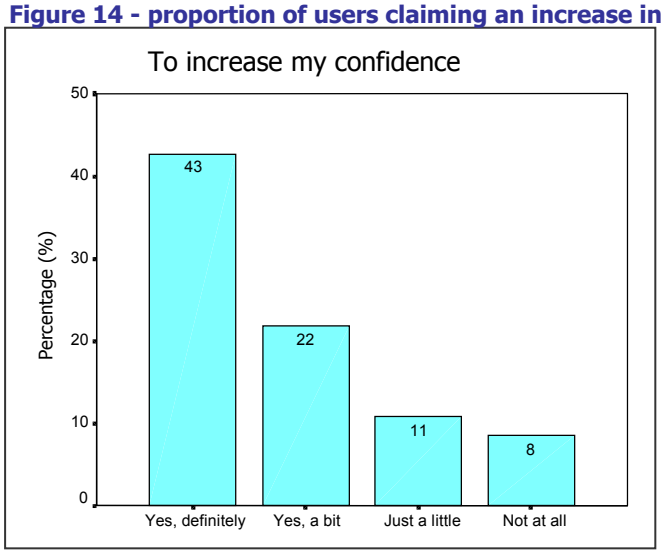
As the users in the survey had only recently started using the centres, it is too early to look for significant results. Nevertheless many claimed that they had already benefited to a significant degree.

Figure 13 - proportion of users learning new skills



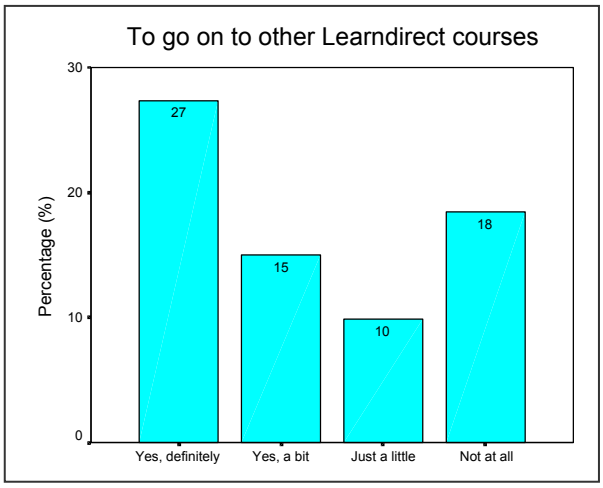
On the whole, respondents agreed that they didn't feel confident using a computer when they first came to the centre unless someone was around to help. A majority, 61%, of respondents strongly agreed (and a further 36% agreed) that staff were friendly and helpful and 49% stated that they strongly agreed that they were learning new skills which they wouldn't have gained without coming to the centre.

Figure 14 - proportion of users claiming an increase in confidence



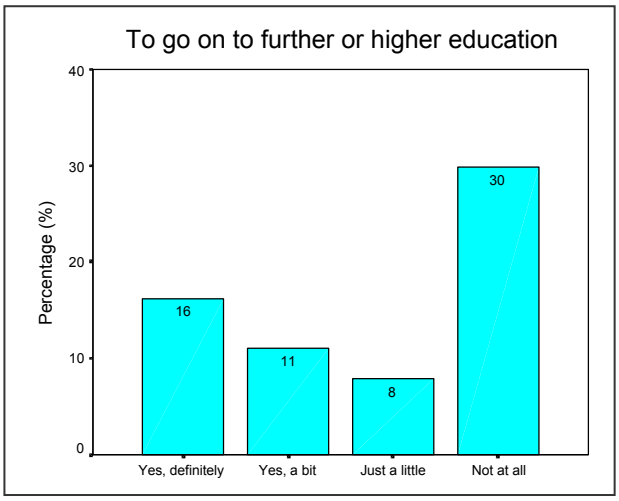
43% said that the centre had definitely helped to increase their confidence, and a further 40% said that it had helped them to move on to more advanced IT courses. In terms of helping people find jobs 13% said that it had definitely helped them get a job and 12% said it had helped them to get a better job or promotion.

Figure 15 progressions to learndirect



Responses to other questions illustrate that coming to the centre has enabled users to move on to other learning activities with 27% stating they had gone on to other **learndirect** courses since coming to the centre.

Figure 16 - progression to FE/HE



Given the limited time that users had been attending the centres, 16% indicated that their attendance had definitely helped them to progress to FE or HE. This figure seems very high but it is an indication that users are moving into other areas of learning.

Finally around 45% of respondents agreed and 45% strongly agreed with the statement that they would, or have already told others about the centre, so they can use it too. This tends to indicate high levels of satisfaction with the centres/projects at present.

4.4 Conclusions

For the early users the UK online centres appear to be providing a positive and constructive experience. Although most respondents to the survey had only been attending the centre a short time, they make strong claims for success:

- 43% strongly agree that their time at the centre has helped increase their confidence, and this is the most significant result.
- Over 90% agree that they are learning new skills.
- 27% and 16% respectively, are certain that attending the centres has helped them progress onto further learndirect courses and FE/HE.

These are strong indications of success, and are echoed in the levels of satisfaction, with around 90% indicating that they will tell others about the centre and 97% agreeing that staff were friendly and helpful.

At the same time, the indication that users are primarily interested in learning how to use a computer and primarily attend programmed courses might suggest most users are well-motivated people who have been waiting for such a centre to open locally. This is not to reduce the achievement but reinforces the impression that *early* users of these centres are not from the most excluded groups.

5

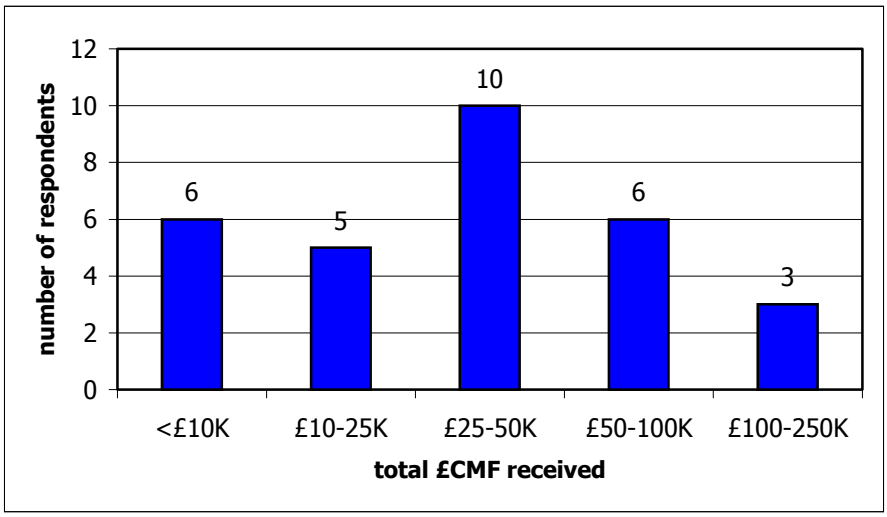
5 Centre manager surveys and case studies

Although the amount of data from manager surveys and case studies so far is limited, they do provide important background to the user survey. All the manager survey returns and case studies are drawn from the centres involved in the user survey. It is clear that most centres are still at a very early stage in their development and early results may not, therefore, be a reliable guide to the longer-term outputs and impacts.

5.1 Level and use of funding

Of the 39 centres responding to the Funding Survey, only 30 could say how much capital funding they had received through CMF. For these, the amounts received are shown in ranges in Figure 17 below.

Figure 17 - amount of CMF funding received by centres



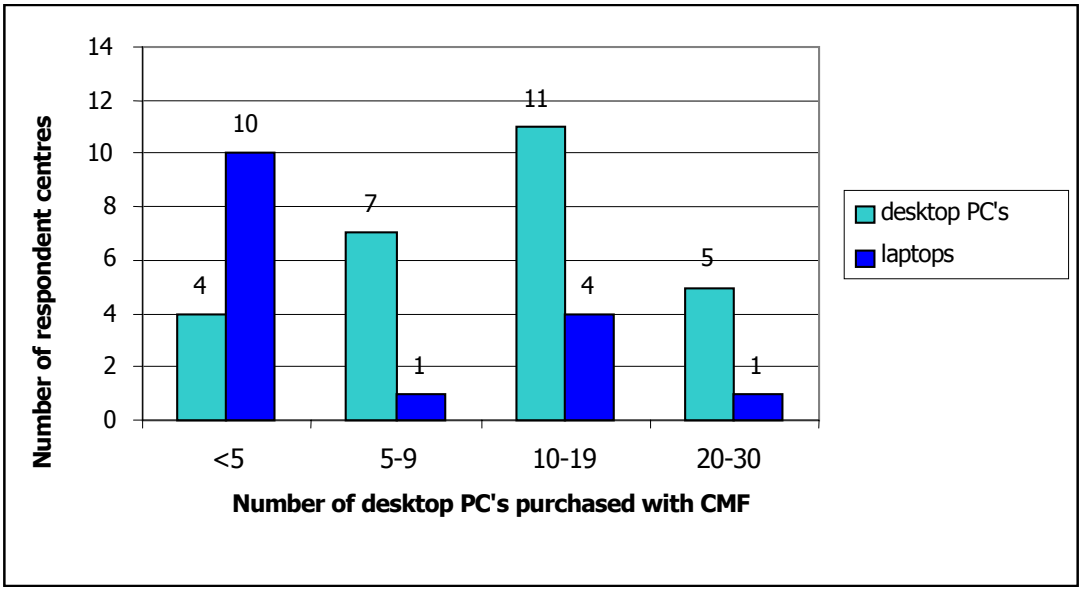
Capital funding for UK online centres surveyed received widely ranging amounts of funding – from just under £5,000 to £225,000. Answers were fairly evenly spread but with a larger number receiving £25,000 to £50,000.

Only 3 of the 30 centres had received match capital funding. These were all centres that had received more than £50,000 of CMF. There was no pattern as

to whether matching funding was more or less than the amount of CMF received. These centres had match funding from a Local authority, the Coalfield Regeneration Trust and ERDF. One centre still awaiting CMF had match funding agreed through New Deal for Communities and the local authority, in addition to in-kind support.

Hall Aitken asked respondents to specify the number of desktop computers and laptops they had purchased with their capital funding, and also what other items they had purchased. All but 4 centres responding (87%) had purchased desktop computers and half had purchased laptops. The numbers of computers purchased for each centre with CMF is shown in Figure 18 below.

Figure 18 Number of computers purchased with CMF



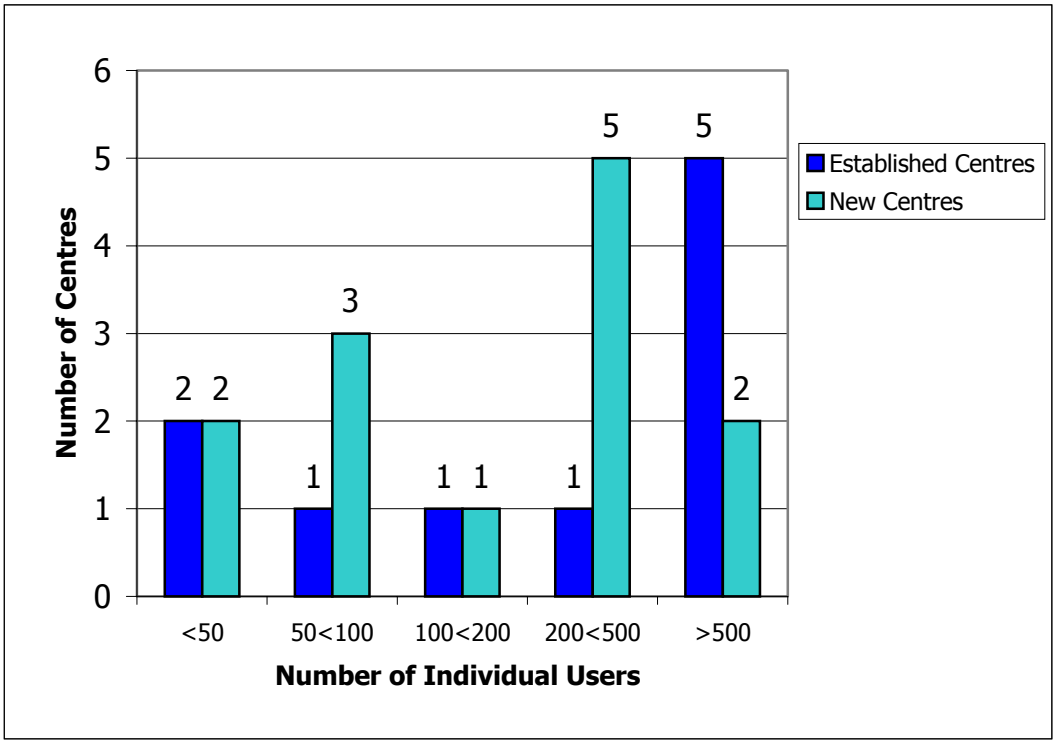
With the majority of centres in the sample being fixed operations, it is not surprising that higher numbers of the computers purchased were desktop PC's. There were several centres that purchased only a very small number of computers, but the largest number had 10-19 PC's.

5.2 User numbers

Many of the UK online centres are already established centres that have had some previous level of ICT provision. Others are completely new - either new ICT facilities in existing community/training centres, or in some cases an entirely new provision. There are differences between the two groups of centres in many ways.

Established centres have over double the number of users than new centres, shown in Figure 19 below. Given that the researchers asked for numbers of users since becoming a UK online centre this indicates that established centres might have a head start in terms of attracting new users. At this stage it is impossible to tell whether they would have been equally successful if they had not received CMF funding.

Figure 19: Number of Individual Users



5.3 Analysis of type of use

The survey asked for basic information on the number of users undertaking formally programmed (taught) courses as opposed to more flexible self-paced courses. The results can be seen in Figure 20 below. Established centres are more focused on taught courses than new centres with approximately three times as many people undertaking taught courses than self paced courses.

New centres have more than double the number of users on self-paced than on taught courses. This might suggest that established centres are continuing with broadly the same offering as before they became UK online centres, whereas new centres are more likely to offer self-paced supported learning.

New centres have over double the number of users on self-paced courses than established centres, but few on **learndirect** courses. The low numbers on learndirect courses is likely to be a result of not yet having developed relationships with **learndirect**.

Figure 20 - users on learndirect and other self paced courses

	Established Centres	Proportion of Total	New Centres	Proportion of Total
Individuals undertaking Learndirect	880	11%	90	2%
Individuals undertaking Self-paced Courses	1044	13%	2608	65%
Number of Users	8204		4018	

Approximately 30% of users of new sites are casual, using the centres for Internet and PC access; the average number of visits per casual user is around four since the opening of the centres. In established centres approximately 50% of users are casual and the average number of visits per casual user is also four. It should be noted that this is based on an incomplete sample, as approximately one third of the whole sample did not provide numbers for footfall.

5.4 Case Studies

The case studies are longitudinal in nature, following the development of a small number of centres in depth. Hall Aitken are gathering information about the surrounding area and wider impacts of the centres as well as gathering more in-depth information about progress in the centre.

5.4.1 Common issues

To date a number of common points have emerged from our visits to the ten centres described below and to the fifty other centres visited in the course of distributing the user survey:

- Although centres have started and are open, in many cases the full project is not yet established. In pre-existing centres the CMF equipment may not yet be installed. In new centres Internet connectivity is often not yet established and a wide range of 'teething problems' are apparent.
- The nature of the centres is very varied indeed. Although some common difficulties such as staff recruitment and technical support are apparent, the experience of each is very different.
- Most centres feel relatively isolated from wider networks and support, relying heavily on local support if it exists. Very few (as low as 10%) of centres are aware of the Help is @ Hand Website and associated 'centres' discussion group.
- Many centres are in the process of responding to early successes and failures. The longer-term success of the initiative is likely to depend on how these early issues are resolved, not on the early results themselves.

5.4.2 Summary of case study centres

The Boatshed at Mablethorpe: Open and running courses but not yet online, and planning to become a **learndirect** centre. They have two part-time managers, neither having a complete picture of the centre's operations. It has a good environment with mixed user types and is busy with a college rather than community atmosphere. Appears to be reaching excluded groups successfully.

Northumberland College Mobile Bus: Out on the road offering courses but not yet online or accessing college resources. No real problems experienced during the visit except for time restrictions. Quite small but well equipped facility serving rural and isolated areas.

Ocean Road Project: Offers informal ICT courses for drop-in users, not structured or certified programming. There does not appear to be an ICT strategy for the area – facility moved to new premises alongside other similar projects. Fairly successful in attracting local residents with a welcoming and supportive feel, reaching target groups.

Focus Foyer: learndirect centre delivering informal drop-in ICT as well as more structured accredited training. Good services in a safe, comfortable environment with facilities for the disabled etc. This is also a residential facility supporting economically and socially excluded group, especially young adults. Main area of concern would be how to reach local people who do not use the centre yet.

Optimum Centre: Main site very well developed and very well equipped. Unlikely that they are reaching any target group as main site used exclusively by students and staff, other sites have some drop in but often they do not have the capacity to serve them due to numbers involved in formal learning that use the centres.

Kedleston Road Centre: Focused on outreach, although not currently operational as UK online centre. Seems to be reaching target groups so should continue to do so. No record system in place although they are trying to put something together.

Oakthorpe Primary School: Has been open since September and seems to be running well, though funding is an issue. At the time of the visit there were many people doing courses using their ILA's - their discontinuation has meant that the low-income audience will be affected. They seem to be hitting excluded groups, particularly low income and unemployed parents who had given their children a negative attitude toward learning before they started coming to the centre.

Loughborough College: Has a variety of UK online provision, allowing for progression routes and various "ways in". The centre users tend to be from deprived or isolated outlying areas, except for the Netsp@ace Internet café users, drawn from a more mixed user base. The Scholfield Centre, which was

planned to serve homeless people, was delayed in its start by changes in management at Loughborough College and the loss of contacts with homeless groups, though the centre has used its computers to help other disadvantaged people.

Dudley MBC/Peripatetic Head Office: Open since April 2001 and well-established, running basic skills classes/courses, both formal qualifications and PC peripheral introductions. A relaxed atmosphere with helpful staff that are aware of the social and economic problems faced by the users. There are no childcare facilities in the centre but they can offer childcare places for those attending courses. Despite limited provision for the disabled in the building the impression is that the location may be a barrier to people with a disability.

Riley's: Based in a shopping centre, it opened in April 2001. As a drop-in centre it does not offer any formal courses at the moment, although they are able to offer a lot of one-to-one help for people. The centre felt that they were attracting people from all of the excluded groups, but looking at the targets for the last quarter there were a lack of people with basic skills and of single parents. They are trying to resolve this with providing childcare facilities, and plan to do a large leaflet drop to attract more people from a nearby deprived area.

5.5 Conclusions

The manager surveys and case studies do not yet provide robust data on which to base firm conclusions. They do however provide a useful level of background that helps to explain some elements of the user survey. In particular the clear impression is that, in the period October to December 2001, most centres were only just becoming established. Early results may not therefore be a good guide as to how these centres and the programme overall will develop. More specifically:

- The spread of types and sizes of centres is very wide, from small outreach projects with a handful of laptops, to major fixed centres with 50 or more Internet enabled workstations.
- Around 50% of the centres already existed in some form before CMF funding. At present the newer centres seem to be providing a much more informal type of programming than the programmed course offering of established centres.
- Many centres have opened without full internet connectivity and establishing connectivity often provides more difficulties than had been anticipated.

6

6 Overall conclusions and recommendations

It is too early to draw firm conclusions but some recommendations can be made.

6.1 Conclusions

Drawing together the data so far available it appears that:

- Although centres have started and are open, in many cases the full project is not yet established. In pre-existing centres the CMF equipment may not yet be installed. In new centres Internet connectivity is often not yet established and a wide range of 'teething problems' are apparent.
- The nature of the centres is very varied indeed. Although some common difficulties such as staff recruitment and technical support are apparent, the experience of each is very different.
- Most centres feel relatively isolated from wider networks and support, relying heavily on local support if it exists. Very few (as low as 10%) of centres are aware of the Help is @ Hand Website and associated 'centres' discussion group.
- On the basis of the user survey the evidence on the degree of success in reaching the target groups is mixed. Although around 61% of respondents fell in to one or other of the socially excluded target groups the level of computer ownership and Internet access appears to be around the national average. On the other hand user skill levels are low and most users appear to fall well within the category of "those who do not have the skills…" to use ICT.
- The broad range of evidence suggests that the *most* excluded groups are not being attracted to the centres in large numbers. The initial users of the early opening centres are those who have access to a computer and or the Internet but who do not have the skills to use it. This is consistent with who might be expected to be the early users of a new service – i.e. those who will most easily identify their need.
- For the early users the UK online centres appear to be providing a positive and constructive experience. Although most respondents to the survey had only been attending the centre a short time, they make strong claims for success. Levels of confidence have increased, over 90% agree that they are learning new skills and 27% are certain that attending the centres has helped them progress onto further **learndirect** courses.

- These are strong indications of success, and are echoed in the levels of satisfaction, with around 90% indicating that they will tell others about the centre and 97% agreeing that staff were friendly and helpful.

6.2 Recommendations

These conclusions lead us overall to believe that the success of the UK online centre programme (CMF funded) cannot be properly assessed at this point. There are however some key potential weaknesses in the development of the programme that should be addressed. It is possible that without such action the centres will develop as originally envisaged, once initial teething problems have been overcome and early lessons learnt by individual centres. Our impression however is that some proactive intervention now is required.

In particular the authors recommend that

- A specific programme is put in place to promote to *centre mangers and staff* such support mechanisms that currently exist - Help is @ Hand, centres discussion group and direct support.
- Additional focus and resources are placed on supporting centres in their efforts to target and support the more socially excluded potential users and those who do not currently have access to a computer or the Internet. This might be through the existing Government Office staff who have provided early support.
- The penetration of the key target groups is monitored carefully in order to determine whether any further revenue resource may be required by centres if the programme's overall goals are to be achieved.

6.3 Further research

This first report suggests a number of areas for further research as this evaluation proceeds. In addition to the overall goals of the evaluation, the researchers propose to focus on:

- Exploring the reasons for the differences in centres' success in reaching excluded target groups.
- Exploring the relationship between type of programming and results.
- Tracking any changes in centres functioning once the initial set up period has passed.