
PRESERVING LOCAL LEISURE FACILITIES IN AUSTERE TIMES

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Abstract

In the austere times of the past few years it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain local leisure provision and facilities provided by local organisations. Some operations have been shut altogether while other facilities have amalgamated and some larger cities/towns have been fortunate enough to secure partnership funding to build community hubs which include libraries, leisure centres, health services and adult social care facilities.

In 2008 the author was appointed General Manager of Richmondshire Leisure Trust (RLT) a small leisure trust delivering leisure facilities and sports development for the benefit of residents and visitors in the Richmondshire District Council (RDC) area. This coincided with the period local government cuts began to bite and unfortunately leisure provision was always going to be under threat as it is a non-statutory service. The trust was only set up by RDC in 2005 to save money in the main relating to business rate relief and a voluntary management board of trustees was established to manage the chief officer. The board was made up of representatives from the local community and local councillors as advisory members. Larger authorities and leisure operators found it easier to make efficiency savings many of which had central administrative functions which serviced all their facilities.

However, RLT facilities were only initially made up of one pool (Richmond Pool) and a joint use sports facility at Richmond School which included sports hall and astro turf which was managed by the trust in community use time at evenings and weekends. As many who work in the leisure industry know pool facilities alone do not make money. Over the last few years RLT have had to be creative and innovative to stay afloat whilst also ensuring they are not taken over by a larger operator with local trustees ensuring local facilities are provided by local people. RLT have taken over the operation of a local private gym to give the organisation greater opportunities to increase income. The organisation have also taken over the operation of another small

community trust in Colburn which includes two sports halls, small gym, communal area and outdoor pitch facilities. This really has become a community hub and in a relatively deprived area of the district and now also has a thriving gymnastics and cheerleading club. The site also hosts expansion Rugby League club North Yorkshire Wildcats (they also have partnership arrangements in place with Professional Rugby League Club Wakefield Wildcats). RLT even operated the local Tourist Information Centre (TIC) for a brief period.

In austere times the management board have had to make some difficult decisions both in terms of a small number of staff redundancies and making changes to the benefits of contracted staff. The management board itself has undergone rapid changes with the author taking over as Chair of the organisation between 2010 and 2013 when the majority of the above key decisions were made. RLT are now delivering or involved with nearly 20 community events each year including the sport relief mile, santathon and a prestigious golf day aimed at engaging the local business community for sponsorship opportunities. Only a few years ago the only events which were held were the annual open day and swimathon, with notable less staffing resource and involvement in significantly more events working with the community they serve. The organisation now has a sustainable future with a true partnership in place with RDC and have transformed from a local authority leisure centre to a more commercial entity, there is also a 5 year funding agreement in place with RDC which is a major step forward after 2 to 3 years of shorter term funding arrangements. RLT staff have also gone through a culture change which the majority have embraced to ensure facilities continue to be operational.

References

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