

# Inspirational Stories – Chipping Norton Lido

## The pool that grew out of a fire brigade fund

### The Background

Chipping Norton Lido, winner of the ASA's Swimtastic Gold Award in 2007 as a community project as well as Oxfordshire Business Awards Winner in 2008, opened in 1970 following over seven years of fundraising by local people. There was therefore a fair amount of 'emotional investment' in the pool. West Oxfordshire District Council took over the running of the pool in 1974 and subsequently engaged Wycombe Leisure to manage operations.

In July 2002, a new indoor heated pool was opened in the town and the Council decided to close the open air pool.

An organisation, 'KOPO' or 'Keep Our Pool Open', was formed in 2003. The organisation was formed around a 'Use it or Lose It' campaign which collected 3,000 names on a petition. With the support of the town council, the group lobbied West Oxfordshire District Council which agreed to a one year reprieve.

In 2004, West Oxfordshire District Council stated that they were no longer willing to subsidise the pool and offered to pass the pool to the KOPO committee. The following year, West Oxfordshire District Council provided a grant for half the money it had previously been providing and Chipping Norton Town Council provided a further £6,000 for two years to keep the pool running.

### Key Issues

The pool is now run by Chipping Norton Lido Ltd, a company limited by guarantee as well as a registered charity. The Board consists of eight trustees. The staff consists of 20 casual and part time staff including a manager, life guards and front of office staff. In order to minimise risk, the Trust do not use volunteer life guards and duty managers are part time paid professionals.

Despite experiencing a reasonable level of political buy-in from the town council and West Oxfordshire District Council, in the absence of any core funding, the pool has yet to break even after four years. One of the reasons for this is the size and shape of the pool plus restrictions to the lease which limit some of the activities that can take place which would generate additional income.

The start of each outdoor season tends to absorb more money in heating and bringing the pool into a ready-to-use state. The Trust, therefore, try to encourage





people to buy season tickets as a way of guaranteeing money at the start of the year in April. It also helps to keep people swimming through to September as they like to ensure that they get value for money by swimming throughout the season.

## **Evolution**

The Trust has always argued that despite the two pools in the town serving 7,000 residents and a total catchment, including villages, of 28,000 people, they are serving two different customers.

Within the programme, a certain amount of boisterous play and 'bombing' from the poolside are allowed and, in addition to music, the café is open. It offers an opportunity for teenagers to be noisy together without many adults being present. Much of the session is self-policed by fellow members of the group. The Trust also use the session as an opportunity to identify junior lifeguards and as a way of discouraging vandalism of the pool by people in this age group during the winter months when it is unoccupied.

Sustainability is an issue in outdoor as well as indoor pools. The addressing of this tied in well with the pool's needs for more efficient heating. Funding was obtained from the Low Carbon Buildings Programme Phase 2, the Community Sustainable Energy Programme, the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment and EDF's Green Energy Fund for a ground source heating system plus associated solar photovoltaic panels. £135,000 of the £140,000 needed has been raised.

## **Key resources involved**

During the course of the 2008-9 winter, the plant room was re-built and new UV system installed using funds raised from applications to local trusts, a specific public showers' appeal and grant support from the District and Town Councils.

There has always been the risk of plant breaking down and contingency needs to be made to combat this eventuality. The potential closing of the pool due to disruption of plant and a subsequent loss of income always need to be weighed against the financial and human resources required to meet this contingency.

On a long term basis, the Trust plans to build a reserve of £50,000 to meet the replacement and maintenance of plant, effectively forming a sinking fund.

## **Barriers**

The Trust knows it needs to offer something else to make the pool more viable and is continuing its efforts to expand the range of services it can offer and to identify potential new ways of using the site during the closed season.



One area that did cause concern was TUPE as it was felt that to undertake the transference of a pension scheme would be beyond the resources of the Trust.

Ultimately there were no permanent members of staff transferred from the local authority.

### **Key lessons**

In a small town, it is often easier to mobilise a group of like minded people who are willing to work together for a common purpose. KOPO raised £16,939 which was transferred into the Trust's accounts. This aided cash flow in Year 2.

With a turnover of £79,845 in 2005 and £85,288 in 2006 and expenses of £75,873 and £73,948 in these two years, it helped to ease the financial position.

Whilst the cost of utilities, repairs and maintenance in 2006 was 32% of overall costs, even with part time staff, wages and people linked expenses amounted to approximately 53% of costs.

Volunteers at Chipping Norton will therefore remain vital to the future cause and this is common to all community trust enterprises.

In an open air pool, hedging against the weather is always an issue and can only truly be addressed by extending the product range beyond that of the swimming pool itself. For instance, in 2008 the summer weather was poor for a second summer running. Numbers increased from 12,249 to 13,612 and casual swimming income increased by some £2,000 but attendances were still down by 3,500 on 2006 when the summer was good.