

Inspirational Stories – Jesmond Swimming Pool, Newcastle

A leading example of sustaining an urban social enterprise pool over many years

The Background

Jesmond Swimming Pool, which was originally built in 1938 at a cost of £20,391 and is situated in an affluent area of Newcastle, was closed in 1991. The closure was followed by sit-ins at the pool by local residents. Prior to this, the City of Newcastle Council had carried out a strategic review of its facilities and, aided by Sport England's facility modelling, had arrived at the conclusion that there was an over provision of water space.

At the time, Jesmond was the third best financially performing pool but it was felt that Jesmond users could readily transfer to other pools. In February 1991, the Council announced that the pool was to close and public protest led to a meeting taking place at St George's Church. Although there had been a Friends of Jesmond Pool body formed in 1989, the Jesmond Swimming Project (JSP) formed 23 days before the closure of the pool and now led the response from the community. Two days later, it published an interim report proposing that the pool should be re-opened. Intense planning and preparation took place throughout the rest of the year and in December the Foundation for Sports and the Arts awarded a grant of £50,000. This led to the pool re-opening in April 1992 under community management. In 2002, Jesmond Swimming Pool was awarded the runner's up prize in the national Social Enterprise Awards and was quoted as an exemplar at the launch of the North East Social Enterprise Action Plan. In 2007, it was a finalist in the Tyne and Wear section of the North East Business Awards.

Key Issues

In 1991, a residents' action group was formed and Glenn Armstrong, later to manage the pool, was employed as a consultant to review the overall position and to write a business plan for a new operation of the pool.

The main initial issue was managing the funding gap and how to establish an organisation to run the pool. The early steering group realised that it was vital to avoid the pool being drained down after its closure. The Council's contribution to pool maintenance was to repair broken and damaged windows.

Credibility was a further concern. Local people were only likely to invest time and money in the pool if it were seen as having a future.



Initially the Trust was granted a five year lease on the building. The second lease was for 25 years. The length of this lease was mostly driven by banks who, before making any loans, wanted to see a longer future for the operation. The current lease is for 99 years. The Council own the site and the Trust own and operate all fixtures and fittings in the building. The Trust has never really been capitalised because, until the refurbishment, it always had enough money to pay for its needs based on existing funds and trading operations. As with many organisations of this nature, there was no initial sinking fund set aside to pay for any major building work but the Trust planned from the first day of its existence to generate one which they managed to achieve quickly.

These issues were all addressed at an early stage. In the first instance, a 12 person trust was established primarily comprised of local residents. At least half of these are still trustees to this day. Funding was also considered at an early stage and the Trust created a scheme based on pledges, the pledge being that money would be donated to the Trust only if the pool re-opened.

On this basis, a critical mass of 200 residents signed up with half price swimming admission in the future being part of the package.

Evolution

Whereas in the last year of operation under the local authority the pool had made a loss of approximately £60,000, the first year of operation as a social enterprise pool led to a £60,000 profit. This was mostly due to three factors - first, increased hours of use. The hours were almost double those hours previously offered. Secondly, it was also due to operational savings on energy use. Thirdly, it was due to committed staff effort. The Trust had very limited operational volunteer help in the first few years. The pool then ran at a profit for the next 12 years.

Staff culture has been another important strength. People enjoyed working in the environment. Five members of staff have worked at the pool since 1992 and are full time, Eight staff are part time employees and approximately 20 people volunteer their time to help. 80% of the staff has been at the pool for 10 years or more.

In terms of finance, income each year is between £500,000 and £600,000 and leasehold building improvements depreciated over a 40 year period.

Impact and outcomes

Increasingly the Trust has become confident in its long-term future and commitment from the community led to the pool being refurbished in 2002. This refurbishment was part funded by surpluses made over the previous years on trading which represented £1.2 million of the total. The Trust also spent seven to eight years working towards making a lottery application and £760,000 was obtained in lottery support. Since that time, the Trust has been breaking even for most years.



The Trust feels that its professional staff are now employed on better terms and conditions than if they had been employed in the public sector. They made a conscious decision not to employ former local authority staff as they wanted to build new staff cultures.

The Trustee's Report for 2008 refers to the objective 'to provide a working environment that values and develops all of its people to ensure business success, whilst being inclusive and participative'.

Full staff participation is encouraged in the running and success of the project. The Trust is looking to increase activity and one area for this has been outreach work which involves running programmes in schools in summer holidays. Another area of outreach work has been in advising other Trusts which are just becoming established. To date, some eight trusts including trusts as far away as Wales have been advised and this particular area of work has been supported by talks at conferences on social enterprises and social accounting.

When Wolsingham School Pool, in nearby Durham, was being transferred to community enterprise, Jesmond advised them to train sixth formers from the school as lifeguards and to support their volunteering with regular CPD. This helped Wolsingham initially to keep its staffing costs to a reasonable level.

Over the last two years, the Trust has also looked at different ways of raising money. Funding has been attracted from local ward committees to encourage over 50's to use the gym and for a summer activity scheme in South Jesmond. Business Link funding was also forthcoming to relaunch the website. E-on and the Energy Savings Trust also funded the installation of solar panels.

A number of community social enterprise pools have not been afforded the opportunity of taking part in the Government's Free Swimming programme but Newcastle City Council worked with Jesmond Pool to offer both swimming for over 60's and under 16's. Prior to this, there were between 115,000 and 120,000 attendances per year and this is now set to increase. Among the users, four schools and Newcastle Dolphins, as part of the City of Newcastle Squad, utilise the pool.

Ultimately everything the pool does is customer driven. The building is open from 7 a.m. to 10p.m. The Trust have also tried to involve local people in the decision making process. At one stage, as a way of trying to explain why they had to charge higher entry fees, the Trust distributed a survey which contained the question 'how much are you prepared to pay for a swim?' The underlying point was that from time to time it is important to ask people 'do you want this pool?'

Key resources involved

An application to the Foundation for Sport and the Arts required significant resources as did a bid to the National Lottery. Some six years effort went into the planning and obtaining of a



lottery grant of £1.5 million in 2002. The main resources in terms of manpower came at the start of the project with the grant application, the extension of the lease and fund raising all taking place in the first few years.

Barriers

The Trust introduced a gym but felt that one of the things they had to avoid was in making it too 'clubby' so that it was accessible to everyone. This was addressed by calling everyone subscribers rather than members and allowing people to become a subscriber for as short a period of time as a month.

One of the big barriers had been in convincing the Council that the new enterprise had a future but, almost immediately income started to outstrip expenditure. The Trust tightly controlled running costs and opened the pool for longer hours than before as well as on bank holidays. New activities were developed to meet customer requirements.

Key lessons

The Trust have found that in a social enterprise, financial accounts do not provide complete information simply because they are focused on finance and do not take into account the annual position as far as people are concerned.

In view of the fact that the Trust is very much about people and the time and value that they add to the business, they have introduced social accounts. A detailed structure for setting out accounts of this nature can be found by visiting the last four years of Jesmond's social accounts at, http://www.jesmondpool.co.uk/social_accounts.asp

The maintenance of a building, particularly a swimming pool, in line with the lease agreement is always a challenge. The lesson learnt is to make sure that maintenance is on-going and carried out on a regular basis.