

# Inspirational Stories – Lenton Swimming Pool, Nottingham

**A former baths and washhouse now offering a hub of vibrant community, health, well-being, social and educational activities and facilities.**



## The Background

The Lenton Centre originally opened in 1931 as a community washhouse to the south west of Nottingham city centre. Since that time it has evolved into a social enterprise. The pool, which is 18 x 7 metres (126 square metres) and comprised of four lanes, was originally paid for by the Old Trust and opened in 1966 as a training pool for school children and youth organisations. The Community Centre opened in 1979. A National Lottery Award of £64,000 in 1996 provided much needed finance towards the cost of expanding young people's activities and, in 1999, the Centre closed for six months for a major refurbishment.

The 25th anniversary celebrations in June 2004 were soon followed by an announcement that Nottingham City Council was to close the Centre at the end of August. The Council had carried out a strategic asset review and had decided that it had too much water space for its needs. This triggered a campaign, led by Lenton Community Association, to take over the entire building. Following a consultation exercise in the locality with local residents, business and voluntary organisations as well as fund raising by the community, a viability study and a five year business plan were produced and an architect engaged.

The General Disposal Consent was made on 26th May 2006. The Association transferred all its assets to The Lenton Centre, a new social enterprise, which purchased the building, including the swimming pool, from the Council for £10. The gym was then re-opened within weeks. The pool was finally opened in September 2008 exactly four years after being closed.

## Key Issues

Established in 2005 from the former Lenton Community Association, The Lenton Centre is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity.

The Centre itself is positioned in a side street and not on a main thoroughfare. Parking difficulties were tight but not impossible. One of the early tasks was to merge two different interests. The Community and Leisure Centres were owned by the Council but the Community Centre was run by the Community Association. In many respects, the Community Association, which was dissolved in 2005, provided a framework for the transfer of the pool to a community enterprise.

Another issue was to achieve sufficient level of buy-in from potential partners. The project attracted support from Nottingham University as well as agencies supporting





social enterprise such as Social Enterprise East Midlands (SEEM), the Development Trust Association (DTA) and the Adventure Capital Fund (ACF).

## **Evolution**

Following the initial business plan, the Council asked for more detail. The Centre obtained an ACF/DTA grant to help with a revised business plan which took a phased approach starting with the dry side and then bringing the wet side back into commission. This approach helped to build Council support for the overall project and the view that the Third Sector delivery model was the way forward.

The Centre has now developed its hub approach and offers the pool and gym, the Quakers Swim School (which provides swimming lesson income), a venue for training workshops and conferences, a youth club, massage facilities, the home of the Punjabi Centre in Nottingham and the home of Activ8Uth, a project which offers play, sport and educational opportunities for young people. In short, the maxim has been 'owned by the people, for the people'.

Having depended on grants to get started, the Centre now just breaks even. Initially ACF with £15,000 development grants, Esmee Fairburn Trust with £80,000 over two years, the Lankelly Chase Foundation, with £50,000 over three years, Lloyds TSB with £20,000 and Nottingham University, £20,000 donated to core operations. Capitalisation was built through the University, the City Council, local foundations, Awards for All and SEEM. The University was keen to invest in the local community. The initial business plan was that there would be a venture capital grant to get the gym started which would later fund the re-opening of the pool. Although attempts are made to cross subsidise the pool with the gym, ultimately it was felt that the gym was too small to drive sufficient income to achieve long term viability.

The Centre contains a caretaker's flat upstairs which was converted into offices, which are now let out. Further business opportunities come through gym membership, pool and room hire, therapy rooms, 'extra value services to office users', hot desk facilities and a shop. Eight schools now use the pool as well as Radford, Leander and Bramcote Swimming Clubs and Trent University Kayak Club. Over 300 pupils a week attend for private swimming lessons and over 3,000 pupils were learning to swim at Lenton in 2009.

## **Impact and outcomes**

The main impact has been the swimming pool itself. In the first instance, it has increased confidence levels in that the community can see a tangible outcome now that the pool is open. The community were all asking when the pool would be open. The pool has had the effect of making the whole complex more viable because people using the pool have started to use other facilities and because core overheads can be spread more widely.



There is now greater political support for the Centre with the Council making a £21,000 grant each year. The core running cost for the pool had been estimated at £60,000 (the whole centre was estimated at £150,000).

### **Key resources involved**

Lenton has a small staff and so volunteers are an important part of its offering. It therefore has a more extensive range of volunteers than the previous case studies with life guards, centre attendants and maintenance staff being voluntary. It also seeks volunteers for community leaders, leafleting, content writers for their website and advertising, fundraisers and graphic and web designers.

The Board that runs the Centre now consist of eight members although the number of members has been as high as 12 people. On the operations side, one full time member and four part time members of staff are employed. Of these, there are three duty managers and two part time attendants. These are supplemented by a team of volunteer attendants, duty managers and maintenance staff.

At all times, there is one duty manager in attendance. Monthly CPD training takes place. The Children and Young People's Team (CYPT) get their own grants and is a self contained unit within the project. This team consists of one full and two part time members of staff plus a team of volunteers.

### **Barriers**

The biggest hurdle was getting the pool open. Once the pool was open, it helped to increase the sense of purpose for the project. The Centre has also had to marshal resources to meet a wide range of programmes to meet community needs. The pool has, in a short space of time, had to create, action and access a range of pool programmes which had not previously been run at the pool by a social enterprise. Given the size of the pool, this has led to the challenge of assessing and balancing what works for the community and what is financially viable.

### **Key lessons**

One of the biggest single issues was the £450,000 in repairs that needed to be carried out. On reflection, the Centre would advise others to encourage local authorities to make an initial contribution, particularly if buildings are in a poor state.

This would avoid organisations being at a disadvantage at the start. The Lenton Centre now has a master plan for operations which tries to account for the repairs that need to be carried out. A mixture of volunteers and contractors carry out the work.



All the funds have had to be found by the Company and one of the issues has been that they have had to find out how to raise money from within the team. New organisations should look to recruit someone with experience in this field to the organisation at an early stage.