

Inspirational Stories – Portishead Pool, North Somerset

An example of a community pool which uses its landscape and setting to create new funding streams.



The Background

First opened in 1961, Portishead Open Air Pool was re-opened in May 2009. Managed by the Portishead Pool Community Trust, the pool had previously been run by DC Leisure on behalf of North Somerset Council. Situated in the Lakegrounds in Portishead, the 33.3 x 12 metre pool enjoys panoramic views over the Bristol Channel and features sun terraces which offer perspectives over a wide expanse of water and countryside.

Key Issues

The Trust has a five man board, all of whom have full time jobs in other fields. The day to day management is carried out by a full time pool manager, five full time professional and nine casual lifeguards who are also all professionals. The local authority initially transferred the pool to the Trust for one year with the option of a 99 year lease if the Trust could establish that the pool could be sustainable. Supporters of the pool are being encouraged to become members of the Trust. Two categories of membership have been offered - annual membership of £10 and a founder membership of £250.

The founder managed Swimming Pools membership also offers lifetime membership and is designed to encourage people to pay up-front thereby strengthening cash flow during the early stages under new management.

Membership is open to all interested parties, whether residents or otherwise. Each member has the right to vote, the right to stand for election to the committee and the right to have a say in the future direction of the pool.

Evolution

In 2008 the weather was bad and attendances dropped to 8,000 for the whole season. The local authority also ran an indoor pool, Parish Wharf Leisure Centre, and was therefore faced with the difficult task of meeting the costs of two pools in one town. The pool was closed under local authority ownership in September 2008 and opened as a community trust in May 2009. In that time, the Trust was created from among local residents. The pool had been used by local residents as well as by people from Bristol and following petitions by local residents, the local authority gave local residents the opportunity to run the pool for the community.



Impact and outcomes

The goodwill created by the announcement that the pool would be reopened created a ground swell of volunteering. A strong community spirit made it easier to obtain volunteers to help with painting and building work and enabled sufficient reception staff to be found to cover all the shifts.

Once the pool was re-opened it was recognised that the community had been empowered and was capable of running the pool. The Trust also realised that a strong volunteering element at the start was likely to be reflected in both individual financial support and the likelihood of making the Trust sustainable.

Two further factors had a big impact on the outcomes. First, the weather in the summer of 2009 was much better than the previous two years and, in the first three weeks of the pool opening, the pool received more than 10,000 attendances.

Secondly, Ty's Great British Adventure was filmed at the pool which gave the pool much needed publicity with many people simply coming to visit the pool as a response to the film. The film fronted by Ty Pennington, star of the US TV programme, Extreme Makeover Home Edition, galvanised volunteers into painting the sun terraces and the pool surrounds. Pennington's team spent a week in helping to renovate the pool and the programme will appear on UKTV Style.

In terms of the impact on decision making, the management feel that the staff culture is quite different to that of a local authority with staff members willing to invest personal time in what has effectively become a 'psychological contract' between them, the community and the pool.

Key resources involved

In addition to manpower to help refurbish parts of the pool, the Trust has encouraged volunteering using the Internet. Individual volunteers can now go on line and enter their details stating what times they would be available to run the reception. This has reduced the necessity for back office administration and has allowed volunteers to buy into the process. Volunteers can also agree to work on maintenance tasks and office administration by volunteering over the Internet.

Barriers

The main initial barrier was the difficulty in establishing the Trust in a relatively short period of time. When it became known that the pool was closing in September 2008, the challenge from the local authority to the community was to demonstrate that they were serious about running it.



A group of regular pool users who knew one another got together and quickly formed a Trust in October but translating dreams into reality was a more difficult task. The real challenge was that the local authority asked the Trust to complete a business plan which needed to be completed in 18 days.

This plan was ultimately approved by the local authority paving the way for the pool to be re-opened in May 2009. Money also needed to be spent on a new entrance and fire exit to the pool and planning permission was sought and agreed for this. The next challenge will be sustaining the pool over the coming years. The target income from swimming related activities for 2009 was £45,000 and the business plan looks for 5% growth year on year over the next five years. Further ways of generating income need to be sought.

This was immediately addressed in two ways – First, the Trust are looking at utilising the pool as an ice rink in the winter and using the sun terracing as an area for concerts in the spring/autumn.

Secondly, the Trust went to local food establishments and asked if they would be interested in running a café. In June 2009, a tapas bar was opened, the Lockhouse Lounge, a private and separate enterprise, which utilises views across the Bristol Channel. A five year lease has been agreed and the two organisations plan to work together to generate common customers for the future.

Key lessons

One of the key lessons identified was to set up a swimming lesson programme as early as possible because it can generate considerable income. The Trust had little time to do this in the first year to look for a range of potential customer groups and build a varied pool programme offering opportunities to customer groups not provided for by competitors. Two triathlon clubs have begun to use the pool; there have been enquiries for scuba diving and water polo; and pool parties in the right environment will always attract custom looking to the future, pools that stand on their own should always look at ways of delivering allied products. The Trust are in discussion with the local fire brigade about the possibility of working together to create a small gym.