

The Lenton Centre



Main theme: Use of building / Asset

The Lenton Centre was formed in 2005 after the Lenton Community Association purchased their local leisure centre from Nottingham City Council who planned to close it down. The Lenton Centre offers a wide range of facilities to the community including a pool, gym and offices for local businesses. Elizabeth Didcock, chair of the Lenton Centre explains how the local community came to the building themselves.

“The building has been here for about 70 years and has always provided facilities for the community. I came to Lenton as a university student and my children all learned to swim in the pool, went to mother toddler parties there and things like that. In 2004 the council decided to close Lenton Leisure Centre really quickly. They had tried to do this a couple of times before but couldn’t because of pressure from the Lenton Community Association. The association was well organised and they were vociferous in their opposition.

The council has a long-term plan to close smaller leisure centres, which they did believe could run at a profit. They were planning to build large leisure centres in the bigger towns, which is what some people wanted. We campaigned to keep the Lenton Leisure Centre open because that was not what we wanted. As part of our campaign we created a business plan that proposed a business model that was very different from the local council’s. We asked if we could run the centre ourselves and in early 2005 brought the whole building for £10.

We were able to open our gym within a matter of weeks, which is mainly aimed at the students in the community, but the pool was shut for four years before it re-opened. We were able to attract grant funding to do

a lot of the refurbishment work but we did face some real problems. The old swimming pool boiler would not light and we had to buy a new one. That was an extra £18,000 that we didn’t expect to spend.”

When taking on the running of the Lenton Centre the trustees had to make some important decisions and overcome difficult challenges...

“The decision to run the centre ourselves put us, quite literally, in a sink or swim situation. Because we took on the centre as a result of the campaign we had a lot of support from local people in the media. We re-opened the swimming pool in September 2008. In the past the pool had generated a lot of income from private and school swimming lessons. The main decision we faced was whether or not to run these ourselves. Eventually we decided to let another business operate the pool and charge a £40 hire fee each time they use it. I think it would have been a lot more complicated if we had decided to run it ourselves.

The pool isn’t open to the public as much as the community would like and that is a difficult problem. We are trying to expand our public swimming hours but the problem is that doesn’t make much money because we need at least ten people in there to cover our overheads. The pool is much better suited to group swimming and lessons. When the council the pool only three schools used it; now we eleven schools that come to us. Charlotte, who the school swimming lessons, had a great reputation and she has been very successful with that.”

Elizabeth offers the following advice from her experience as chair of the Lenton

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Centre...

"I think it best to have your strategic objectives set out at the beginning. Ours weren't clear enough and that has caused some problems. For example as we have expanded there have been a lot more cars coming to us. We encourage people not to drive but some people come from far away. We allow people to park in the yard behind the building but we also designated the yard as a games area for young people. We need the parking space for swimming lessons, which is one of the keys to our financial success. However, we need the games area to keep the community happy. It's a difficult problem to solve.

Also, I don't think our business plan was clear enough. We were so focussed on getting things done that we didn't plan as much as we should have. We're in such a different situation than we expected to be in and that is something we're trying to sort out now. I think we would have really benefited from having more people with business expertise on the board.

We have also been too reliant on our chief executive Carl Towner, if he disappeared tomorrow we wouldn't be able to cope! It's dangerous to be so reliant on key individuals and at the moment I'm trying to make sure our processes are written down. Carl is a project manager by trade and has been training others to do duty manager work. In the last six months two fantastic duty managers have joined us to replace other people. Since they arrived things have really stepped up.

I think we were very fortunate that our project came out a campaign that generated so much interest from local people and the media. I think if we have just taken the centre on without that energy behind us we would have struggled. We are very lucky to have such an affinity with

the local community who have us in getting where we are now."

Key lessons:

- If you are developing a trading activity that is outside your organisation's expertise, consider partnering with an organisation that has relevant experience.
- Make sure you clarify strategic objectives at the outset. Where there is conflict over the use of resources decide which stakeholders or activities will take precedence.
- Be wary of letting trading activities become too reliant on individuals and document the processes involved.

Legal structure: Charitable Company
Main activity: Leisure Centre
Number of employees: 4
Turnover: £250,000
Location: Lenton, Nottingham
Date formed: 2005
Date written: July 2010
Website: www.lentoncentre.org.uk

This case study is one of a series produced by the Capacity Builders funded 'Stepping Up To Enterprise' project in the East Midlands.

The case studies tell the stories of voluntary or community organisations and how they moved to developing trading. The case studies are available on the website www.oneeastmidlands.org.uk/sute.