



Warren Smyth

Chief Executive Officer

Abbeycroft Leisure

“Allow others to influence on your behalf by getting the right people in the room doing what they are good at, but only if they are working towards the same goal”

Warren Smyth is Chief Executive Officer of Abbeycroft Leisure, a not-for-profit social enterprise providing a diverse range of facilities and services on behalf of councils and stakeholders in Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. Warren came on the programme in early 2021 in the midst of the pandemic to get a better understanding of the environment we are now working in, and system thinking and use this to help create a longer-term strategy for his organisation.

Warren acknowledges that as the programme developed, he realised he didn't know enough about either his communities or some of his partners. However, more importantly he realised that the role of facilities particularly the role of trusts was fundamentally misunderstood. It was clear he feels from the group discussions on the programme that there was a divide between those running facilities and others on the programme and some were almost dismissive of the role facilities can and should play in the health and community challenges being discussed. He also realised that facilities were being expected to provide something for everyone rather than the wider sport and physical activity sector working together with facilities to provide universally across places and communities. He reflects on this still being a void in the sector that is proving difficult to bridge.

Whilst Warren approached the programme with quiet strategic ambitions one of the key points of learning were the need to truly listen to system partners and the community about their challenges and needs.

Following the programme Warren started to focus on trying to overcome the barriers between the community and the facilities he was managing and finding a way of developing a more joined up offer that provided more opportunities for those in

greatest need. Above all he wanted to try to understand how they could really deliver on 'Proportionate Universalism' in practice and integrate this into their approach.

For Warren the pandemic was simply 'madness' but helping communities he believes forced greater empathy to emerge throughout the system. This also brought him closer to his partners who he was already working with before the pandemic, but it brought a significant shift in their relationships. The partners started to see the trust differently, not just a leisure operator but as the charity it was. The risk that the service provided and which they helped fund could be lost stimulated a desire to help them survive. Warren believes that this sense of potential loss raised the perceived value of the facilities and the activities provided, with this increased positivity continuing.

In terms of understanding his communities Warren also realised that data was only a small part of the story and getting closer to the lived experience of communities through conversations would be necessary but resource intensive. To address this Warren introduced several test and learn scenarios to understand better the community and its needs and these are still ongoing.



For Warren the pandemic was simply 'madness' but helping communities he believes forced greater empathy to emerge throughout the system.

Warren reflects on the fact that by really listening it has helped him get a much better and deeper understanding of the challenges being faced by the partners they really need to influence.

The trust is already working in several co-located facilities but are now looking at how they maximise the opportunity to move towards integration that tackles some of the inequalities they were seeing and hearing about.

Warren has also taken over the Chair of a physical activity leadership group involving system partners and using this role to gain a much better understanding of some of the key issues faced by system partners and to then influence what can be offered together to address these challenges.

Warren reflects on the fact that by really listening it has helped him get a much better and deeper understanding of the challenges being faced by the partners they really need to influence.

He acknowledges that whilst he may have listened before he didn't listen deeply enough to really understand the wider cultural challenges partner organisations faced. Whilst he and his management team may have believed health should work with them and buy into what they could do and even if health leaders shared these beliefs and had bought into them it does not necessarily mean all those working in the health system also shared them.

Positive messaging from the 'top table' does not always result in positive action further down the organisation. He realised that he and his team needed to 'dig underneath the headlines' to understand what was possible and build relationships throughout the system which once again would take time and resources.

Warren and his team are still on the journey with regard to defining a new strategy that seeks to address community needs but within a context of a financial plan now driven by recovery from the pandemic. These financial challenges remain significant, but clarity is emerging, and some new investments have been achieved in services that were previously not funded.

Warren has reflected on his own learning and would share these thoughts

- Understanding who we really need to influence, and their needs and challenges is really important before considering when and how we position ourselves.
- Developing a financial strategy in the current climate that reflects the concept of 'Proportionate Universalism' is challenging and will remain so. It will not happen overnight.
- Allow others to influence on your behalf by getting the right people in the room doing what they are good at, but only if they are working towards the same goal.
- Take time to continually reflect on not only the vision but how it can be made real and remember the 'how' will not be achieved alone. Active listening and questions are critical to understanding and not assumptions and preconceived ideas.
- Go where the energy is, you might be right but if no one else has the same opinion don't waste your time. Warren ends by reflecting on some of the powerful stories he has heard from individuals and how the system has treated them and how this now motivates him to continue to do more for those in need.

