Proving Returns on Investment in the Community with Moving Communities

The Tarka Leisure Centre in Devon as a Blueprint for Success
In June 2022, North Devon Leisure Centre, owned by North Devon Council and operated by Lex Leisure as part of Parkwood Leisure, unveiled a remarkable £15million transformation to what is now the Tarka Leisure Centre. This investment wasn’t just about upgrading its tired 1970s facilities; it was a profound investment in the local community, turning the centre into a thriving hub for health, fitness, and wellbeing.

With the aid of data in the Moving Communities platform, Tarka Leisure Centre has been able to demonstrate how this investment promotes economic and social inclusion by quantifying social value. This means the project can be evaluated not only in terms of its economic benefits, but also the ability to reduce disparities, provide opportunities to marginalised groups and provide equity to align with local government objectives.

The local council, in collaboration with Sport England, streamlined the town’s multiple leisure facilities into one comprehensive hub. The result was a state-of-the-art centre featuring a 100-station gym, a 4-court sports hall, three studio spaces, two swimming pools (including a 25m eight-lane competition pool), outdoor 3G pitches, an endless ski slope, a revitalised tennis centre, a bustling café and a soft play zone.

Community-Centric Planning:

The driving force behind this ambitious project was a commitment to improving community wellbeing through increased accessibility. The leisure centre had been an integral part of North Devon since the 1970s, and a physical activity and sports strategy were developed to address the evolving needs of the residents. The objective was clear: provide a community-led facility, while ensuring the project wouldn’t be a burden on taxpayers, both in terms of capital and revenue.

“The aim when designing Tarka Leisure Centre was to offer something for everyone; whatever age, interest, or ability,” said Glen Hall, MD of Parkwood Leisure. “We wanted the centre to be at the heart of its community and help as many people as possible get active”.

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Demonstrating the value of an investment of this size is crucial. Upon analysing the data fed into Moving Communities, the significant impact of the investment becomes clear. Compared to its predecessor, Tarka Leisure Centre has recorded over 400,000 visits in its inaugural 12 months, up from just over 200,000 in the final 12 months of operations for North Devon Leisure Centre, clearly demonstrating the effectiveness of the new centre. This substantial growth indicates that the Tarka Leisure Centre has effectively attracted and engaged the community, resulting in considerable community impact. Moreover, the variety of activities offered at the new centre has resonated with the community and the surge of visits and activity levels speaks for the community’s enthusiasm for the facility. For instance, Group Workouts experienced a remarkable 128% increase in throughput, providing nearly 35,000 activities, indicating a strong desire for group fitness and a sense of community, coming together for workouts. Similarly, swimming activities saw an impressive 66% increase; these statistics from Moving Communities reflect a vibrant, engaged and active community benefiting from Tarka’s diverse offerings. Another sign of success is that the site has even hosted numerous tours from other Local Councils looking to invest in their facilities, and it has generated interest from competitors keen to understand the cost and running of the ski slope.

Leader of North Devon Council, councillor David Worden, added: “I’m thrilled there has been huge growth in participation since Tarka Leisure Centre opened and I’m really pleased that residents of North Devon are getting active and making the most of the new facility.”

Measuring Success with Moving Communities Insights:

113% Increase in Throughput

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The investment in the Tarka Leisure Centre has not only enhanced physical wellbeing, but also had a remarkable impact on the community’s social value. Social value refers to the positive impact and benefits that activity generates for the wellbeing and development of individuals, and the community. By monetising the value, it can be used to evidence and measure the impact of investment in sport and physical activity.

In just one year of operation, the centre’s total social value increased by nearly £2m. This surge in social value is reflected in the increase in the number of participants, with 28,255 individuals benefiting from the centre, a 137% increase compared to the previous year.

The social value per person saw a substantial rise, indicating that the investment is not only reaching more people, but generating greater value for each participant too.

This value is demonstrated with the considerable improvements in physical and mental health benefits, subjective well-being, and surges in both individual development and social community development.
The success of this project serves as a compelling example of the returns on investing in leisure within local communities, with the data from Moving Communities demonstrating beyond doubt how a well-planned and community-focused project like Tarka Leisure Centre can benefit the community both in the tangible (throughput and financial returns) and intangible aspects (social value).

From community engagement to sustainable funding and economic development, Tarka Leisure Centre is a model example of how it can help Local Councils achieve the goals and address concerns for their communities.

Darren Parrott, Assistant Regional Director, sums it up: “This project is one of the proudest achievements of my career. The centre is full, the café is bustling, there is a queue of people waiting to enter. It’s a vibrant space for the community, a true ‘third place’ where people want to stay.”

**A Blueprint for Community Investment:**

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**Social Value Calculator Methodology**

- Activity & demographics data for each participant
- Total social value generated by all participants, attributed to each leisure centre
- Physical & mental health
- Subjective wellbeing
- Individual development
- Social & community development
Moving Communities Partners: