

Operating a Trust-owned community sports facility as a sustainable business

Nottingham Wildcats Arena, Nottingham Academy

Since its inception in a one-court gym at Dayncourt School 32 years ago, the Nottingham Wildcats Basketball Club has grown extensively both in popularity and in business terms.

In 2001 the club moved to its own purpose-built facility to cater for the high levels of demand. It now owns this facility and runs it through a community trust.

Project background

A turning point for the club came in the late eighties when the Wildcats Club was running unsustainably. It was paying out thousands of pounds of court hire without having a sufficient revenue stream to cover the costs.

This was the main reason the club reviewed its business model and looked for its own facility.

Ten years later, a preferred site on ground at the Jesse Boot primary school, was identified. Head teacher Steve Clark and Nottingham city council area manager, Chris Prior of the Wildcats club set up a steering group that secured backing from the English Basketball Association and the leader of the local council.

Using evidence it had collated to demonstrate local need, the steering group was able to do a deal with the Jesse Boot Primary School and city council to build on the school's disused tennis courts.

The school site location put the facility right in the heart of its community in an area of extreme disadvantage. This created a perfect match for the community culture which has

been promoted by establishing a community trust to manage the arena.

It wasn't just about finding the right site, the project's success also relied on having the right people driving it through.

While Steve helped to gain the support of the school governors; Chris engaged local politicians to win their backing. While a third member of the team, Pauline Prior, used her a background in sport to provide National Lottery application and project advice.

Since the building of the arena, Jesse Boot primary school and two other nearby schools, Greenwood Dale and Elliott Durham, have come together to form the Nottingham Academy.

When it is complete, this will be the biggest academy in England with over 3,500 pupils aged from 3-19years.

This has created new opportunities for the Wildcats and the academy intends to provide a fourth full size basketball court which will be used and managed by the Arena on behalf of academy, after hours.

Facilities available

- Small hall basketball arena - two full size basketball courts with four metre run offs with the centre converted to one show court marked across hall with seating for 400 spectators. The hall size is equivalent to eight badminton courts.
- Multi sports hall - one full size basketball court with two marked mini basketball courts

- Exercise studio
- Fitness suite
- Lecture theatre/conference Suite/IT suite.
- Training and resources centre,

Sustaining use of facilities

The arena's main opening times are:

- 9am till 10pm Monday to Friday
- 9am till 6pm Saturdays
- 9am till 4pm Sundays.

When there is sufficient demand, the arena can open until 11pm to host national league matches and events.

The mix of facilities means that, as well as providing a varied programme of activities and being used by the whole community, the arena can also serve as a base for both national and international competition.

The Trust lets the facility back to the Nottingham Academy for exclusive use of the sports halls, dance studio and changing between 9am and 4.30pm during the week.

This has proved to be the most cost effective facility management option. It has saved the academy the capital costs of building a new school sports hall of the same size.

Two evenings are booked out for central venue basketball leagues.

Saturday mornings have block bookings for mini basketball initiatives; whilst club training sessions occupy two evening slots.

Other block bookings include dance clubs, martial arts, table tennis, korfbal and Nottingham County football youth teams.

Club players can train most days whenever the basketball hall is free.

Over 50 volunteers help support the operations at the arena. This mainly consists of supportive parents, willing to lend a hand on a variety of jobs including DIY, covering

reception, or supervision duties when hosting large events.

Two development staff, funded by trust income, have strong links into volunteer training and coach education programmes to offer a pathway into more formal volunteering and coaching opportunities.

Developing a good volunteer base is not only key to the arena's long term success but also helps build up loyalty and strengthen the sense of community.

Charitable trust management model

The steering group took the following steps to develop a trust that could manage the Wildcats Arena.

- The steering group formed in 1999 was led by a small team of volunteers, including:
 - Chris Prior – Chairman of the Wildcats Club
 - Pauline Prior – Arena Manager for nine years
 - Steve Clarke – Head Teacher of the Jesse Boot Primary School
 - Tom Huggan - a qualified solicitor– who was willing to offer the necessary legal support in-kind.

Tom was able to advise on how to become a company by guarantee and writing a memorandum of articles, which has saved the group thousands of pounds in solicitor fees.

- Eighteen months after identifying the school site, the steering group had everything in place to form The Jesse Boot Wildcats Community Basketball and Sports Community Trust.

A charitable trust as a company limited by guarantee was identified as the most suitable model as it gave the arena the flexibility to manage the



interests of the club, the school and the community

- Being a charity brings financial benefits. For example, it is essential if you wish to receive Lottery funding.

The trust and club have been kept as separate entities to enable club-only benefits to be pursued, such as Clubmark accreditation.

- Some original steering group members were nominated to become trustees in a voluntary capacity. Their collective role it is to protect the interests and community focus of the trust.
- The trustees established their own trustees group with a separate AGM to the Main board. This provides a way of controlling and protecting a strong voice of trustees that show support for the original vision.
- The trustees' voice is represented through to the Main Trust Board at a level agreed in a Memorandum of Articles. This dictates that the Main Board is made up of nine trustees of whom five are from the club, three from Nottingham Academy and one from the user groups.

Making it work

The trust has agreed a 99 year lease at a peppercorn rent for from Nottingham city council and is making savings through agreed rate relief.

This gives the trust the reassurance of a long term home its worth developing plans for.

Wildcats is one of only a few clubs in the UK to own its own facility of this scale and still be operating sustainably 10 years on.

Chris Prior knows sustained use and partnerships are important.

In the months before the arena opened, he worked with local leagues to centralise all games at the arena.

In 2001, with the support of the Wildcats Arena, the city's Maid Marian league used the venue as a central site for clubs across Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire to play their games every Wednesday evening. The local male league, the Sherwood League, also centralised its junior divisions and these play every Friday evening.

Club use has given the arena important stream of 'guaranteed income generation since its inception. This income has supported salaries for two core members of staff to manage and develop of the Arena.

Ten years on, the trust still employs the original two staff members. The loyalty and dedication shown has been instrumental in shaping and realising the arena's full potential.

Recruiting the right management team is critical for any facility project. They need to be happy work flexibly, promote the desired culture and ethos and undertake tasks beyond their role to ensure things get done.

A further reason for the arena's success was the choice of location. Building the arena on the edge of a primary school and in close proximity to two other schools has created usage agreements that help everyone:

Nottingham Academy benefits from a cheaper rental option rather than building its own facility

The trust benefits from a substantial block-booked yearly income from the academy for hire of the sports halls, dance studio and changing rooms during the school day.

A continued drive to attract more clubs, events and programmes to the Arena has generated new business as well as ensuring business from existing users is retained.

Korfball is the latest sport customer, now hiring the Arena for majority of its national and international events.

As the Arena is situated in an area of extreme disadvantage, setting realistic hire charges was vital to establishing a regular member

base. The trust has found setting prices structure just below local-authority-run facilities encourages take up by the local community.

As well as the trust's two full time development staff, the Nottingham Academy employs a fulltime basketball coach to deliver the sessions for its students. This also benefits the Nottingham Wildcats as time is allocated for the Coach to run the Senior Wildcats team.

The main challenges

Even with a sinking fund in place, big items of expenditure, such as the rising costs of flooring will remain an ongoing challenge for the Trust to financially plan for.

For a high specification facility there is also the challenge of ongoing maintenance to maintain the standard of facility that users come to expect.

Total arena operating costs for 2010

Income per year	£254,682
Expenditure per year	£241,328
Total surplus	£13,354

Top tips

- Look for trade-offs - it is an effective way to get things done at little or no cost.
- Identify the right people at the start to be involved in the trust and the running of the facility. Choosing influential individuals with skill sets and business minds that can be utilised to develop the facility will save time and cost.
- Continually think of ways to develop a facility on without losing sight of the original mission.
- Respect the loyalty that grows over time amongst members and supporters of the club.
- Operating as a trust provides more flexibility and fewer operating restrictions
- Understand your customers. The trustees appreciate the challenges of starting up a club or programme. This is why they support any new user group by charging per person rather than charging a fixed rent in the first year. This gives the group time to establish itself without the worry of not covering costs.

Further information

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