



# Stocksbridge Community Leisure Centre



### Location

Stocksbridge, Sheffield

### Founded

2013

### Legal structure

Company Limited by Guarantee

### Description of activity

Community run leisure centre aimed at providing access to sport, recreational and leisure facilities and activities for the community and surrounding area to promote a healthy lifestyle and community wellbeing.

### Key assets

Two buildings, two swimming pools, sports hall, indoor bowls hall, three squash courts, dance studio and air conditioned fitness gym.

### Employees

9.5 full-time equivalent staff plus 20 casual

### Volunteers

55

### Biggest obstacle to success

Ageing volunteer pool and lack of local council support.

## Overview of Stocksbridge Community Leisure Centre

Stocksbridge Community Leisure Centre (SCLC) currently exists and operates due to the local community's determination to preserve a valuable community asset. SCLC is located in the largest town on the outskirts of Sheffield, which is predominantly a rural area. Before 2013 the centre was owned by Sheffield City Council and operated by a managing agent. The leisure centre includes a multi-purpose sports hall used for badminton, football, rugby and gymnastics, indoor bowls hall, dance studio, three squash courts as well as a gym and two swimming pools.

In early 2013, Sheffield City Council announced the closure of the centre due to a combination of financial constraints, low numbers of people using it and the high cost of maintenance. The announcement shocked local residents and prompted a community response. As the centre was built on land donated by a local patron and constructed with the help of donations collected by local residents, it had always been considered a valuable asset by members of the community. Consequently, a public meeting was organised to try and stop the closure, however the local authority was not prepared to reconsider their decision.

The local community started an action group and fought a public campaign, including attracting regional media attention and taking legal action against Sheffield City Council. The purpose of the legal action was to seek a judicial review of the council's decision to close the centre. The case was taken to the Leeds and Manchester court, and although a judicial review was granted, it did not stop the closure of the centre. In April 2013, the local authority closed the centre and redeployed its staff.

The action group subsequently decided to constitute a legal trust (4SLC) in order to present a business plan to the local authority to take over the community management of the leisure centre. The business plan was built around two main approaches. First, the centre would benefit from a large contribution of volunteer support time from the local community; and second, running costs would be significantly reduced through an ambitious plan to reduce annual energy costs. This approach addressed the two main challenges the local authority faced and which subsequently resulted in the centre's closure. The local authority accepted the Trust's business plan and the community gained control over the leisure centre in July 2013.



It was at this point that the Trust galvanised the local community to tackle the centre's most urgent issue: building maintenance. Over 300 volunteers from the local community responded to the Trust's call for help, and alongside support from local businesses who donated materials, equipment and skills, the centre was completely refurbished between July and September 2013.

As a result of this community effort, the centre re-opened its doors in October 2013 as a community managed business. At first, the centre was partially re-opened in order to allow some local groups to use the facilities for their own activities. However, in January 2014, the centre started to increasingly open the facilities to the general public. In February 2015, it reopened its small swimming pool and in April 2016 there was media attention around the main swimming pool opening, and SCLC started to operate at full capacity. The re-opening was coupled with the offer of a diverse range of membership packages for the gym and swim facilities to generate interest from a range of independent clubs that could hire SCLC's space, with the view of diversifying its income streams.

SCLC is now a successfully run community business with an average annual turnover of approximately £600,000 and plans to grow further in the near future.

### Stocksbridge Community Leisure Centre's journey to success

SCLC's journey from saving a community asset to becoming a successful business exemplifies the benefits of a committed local community and strong financial management. For SCLC there were two interdependent and fundamental elements to the success of their business, consistent community engagement and having a strong framework from which to manage its operations.

More specifically, community engagement is reflected in the centre's capacity to recruit and retain volunteers whilst maintaining the ability to remain price competitive in order to allow the local community to use SCLC's services. In turn, a sound business plan has enabled the centre to remain financially self-sustaining, whilst providing capacity to grow the business and continue engaging with the local community in order to preserve a valuable community asset.

#### Strong community engagement

For SCLC, the initial community support combined with a clear and common vision of what the business wanted to achieve were fundamental enabling factors to the success of the business. SCLC's success in recruiting committed volunteers who were willing to help in varied capacities was also linked to its ability to identify and effectively utilise the community resources it had at its disposal. Subsequently, members of the trust identified local people with diverse skill sets, e.g. residents with political links, legal, sports and financial skills, in order to support its various needs as it became established.

To that end, SCLC believes that an important aspect to the success of the business is to have a board of trustees sourced from the local community, who have a strong and diverse set of skills. As the centre developed, both the trustees and volunteers became very involved in all aspects and took ownership and pride in the process of getting the business established. Although some of the original trustees have stepped down from the board, a few continue to be involved and support the business and volunteer support remains strong. SCLC also notes that it is important to recognise that some skills are required at certain times of the businesses development. For example, at the early stages, SCLC required people with strong campaigning skills whereas today business skills such as knowledge of finance, marketing and human resources are more important. Therefore, identifying the relevant skills needed for a business at any given time is a valuable skill in itself that provides long-term stability to the business.

Another important element of developing strong links with the local community is the fact that they are the primary users of the services offered by the centre. SCLC's knowledge of the local community and its needs has allowed them to develop and successfully operate a variety of programmes for young people, families, older people and local schools.

#### Having access to engaged volunteers

For SCLC, having the support of a committed volunteer base is testament to the importance of being part of a strong local community. Although SCLC readily acknowledges that the initial and ongoing support volunteers provide to the business is invaluable to its success, it also believes that there are benefits (albeit less tangible ones) for volunteers themselves. For instance, the centre believes that volunteers benefit from a sense of social inclusion within their local community, creating new friends, making valuable contributions and feeling proud they have supported the safeguarding of a valuable community asset which has contributed to creating local employment.

Despite being a leisure centre, the business was originally conceived as a community hub by SCLC. This has come to fruition as it has become a focal point for other initiatives and community events. For instance, there is now an inter-generational volunteer pool with both young and older people volunteering and sharing and transferring their skills.

Despite the level of community engagement SCLC has had, the business recognised early on that it would be unfeasible for them to rely on volunteers alone to deliver its services. SCLC also believes that at this stage it is unfair to ask volunteers to assume certain responsibilities, e.g. finance or legal responsibilities. In the early stages of the business volunteers were taking on some of these responsibilities but fairly quickly a small nucleus of key staff started to take over these responsibilities and the volunteers were relieved from those roles. Subsequently, as the business became



financially more stable, additional paid staff were recruited to facilitate the smooth operation of the business e.g. key management roles, financial and sport development officers.

**Being financially self-sustaining**

A tangible success for SCLC is to see that the centre is restored and open to everyone in the community and that it is financially self-sustainable. SCLC reports an average turnover of £600,000 per annum, generated primarily from fees and charges for its services and facilities. The centre is not grant dependent but does receive some funding from the Town Council to support the operation of the swimming pool. SCLS also generates income from fundraising activities.

A major challenge for the business to reach financial self-sustainability was reducing the operational costs of the swimming pools. When SCLC first took over the running of the centre the swimming pools were neglected and unsafe to use, requiring a large capital investment to make them functional and safe. After securing the required investment the pools are currently fully functional and usage levels are high. For SCLC this is an example of the success of its business, and demonstrates their ability to achieve something which looked to be a significant challenge at the time.

Another important factor that contributed to SCLC’s success was the strategy to reduce running costs by investing in efficient and renewable energy technologies. The business initially used grants and loans to invest in solar panels and biomass boilers and used government incentive schemes to receive cash back for using this technology. SCLC also replaced all lighting with LED lights, installed a voltage optimiser and invested in upgraded double glazing in its main pool to retain heat more efficiently. As a result, the business’ energy costs were significantly reduced, therefore reducing operational costs and contributing to their overall sustainability.

**Growing the business into other areas and developing strong partnerships**

Although, as part of the management transfer process in 2013, the business received a residual small amount of capital investment from the local authority, it was clear the business would not receive any future financial support from this source. From the outset, SCLC focused on developing new relationships with a numerous funders and local organisations. They also developed networking with a range of community groups and organisations, schools and sports providers. The objective of this partnership development was to incentivise these groups to use SCLC’s facilities.

SCLC is still pursuing its strategy of diversifying its services and creating new partnerships. For example, the business is currently participating in a ‘People Keeping Well’ initiative looking to develop a model of social prescribing within the community, and in conjunction with a local retail park in developing health and well-being services through a Public

Health funding programme ‘Well North’. SCLC is also looking into developing specialist services, for instance, bespoke sport sessions for people with dementia.

**Future direction**

SCLC has plans to expand their services and find innovative ways to increase the use of their facilities. At the current time, the business is exploring how to improve access and better utilise the centre’s underused space. In addition, SCLC is exploring the potential to develop Oxley Park, over 30 acres of green space and woodland that surrounds the centre which was bequeathed to the community by a local benefactor. Looking to the future, SCLC is very confident the business will be successful in the long term due to its strong aspirations and business base. In particular, the business is confident that its strategic approach to minimise cost is an effective strategy that will allow them to continue delivering services with consistent quality.

The business has a clear objective to remain competitive in terms of pricing in order to guarantee a regular monthly income. At present, the business is still growing and the future looks secure with regards to consistent income streams from trading as the business becomes less dependent on grants.

**Financial information**

The following table provides an overview of Stocksbridge Leisure Centre Trust income, expenditure and assets for the period 01/04/2016 to 31/03/2017.

<b>Income</b>	<b>£591,907</b>
<b>Expenditure</b>	<b>£487,708</b>
<b>Difference between income and expenditure</b>	<b>£104,199</b>
<b>Surplus/deficit on ordinary activities before taxation</b>	<b>£104,199</b>
<b>Annual income from grant or subsidy</b>	<b>£49,620</b>
<b>Fixed assets</b>	<b>£241,961</b>
<b>Current assets</b>	<b>Stocks: £6,428 Debtors: £58,155 Cash at bank and in hand: £426,974</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>£491,557</b>
<b>Net assets</b>	<b>£576,229</b>

Source: Stocksbridge Leisure Centre Trust Accounts 2017, Companies House

