



Croxteth Sports and Wellbeing Centre, Liverpool



Location

Liverpool

Founded

26th January 1984 (Taken over by Alt Valley Community Trust 2009)

Legal structure

Registered Charity: part of Alt Valley Community Trust

Description of activity

Fully equipped gym, children’s play centre, spa, boxing gym, squash courts, activity room, two outdoor all-weather 3G pitches, sports hall (for a range of fitness classes, as well as external events, e.g. badminton competitions and cultural events)

Key assets

Sports and Wellbeing Centre

Staff and volunteers

Six staff

Overview

Alt Valley Community Trust (AVCT) is the organisation that owns Croxteth Sports and Wellbeing Centre. AVCT was established in 1983 as an educational charity and today owns a number of assets across North East Liverpool, including three community centres, three libraries, two sports centres, and a college.

The sports centre was previously run by Liverpool City Council, although the building was owned by the YMCA. The council was intending to close the sports centre in 2009 and approached AVCT to see if it would be willing to take it over. AVCT and the YMCA agreed a purchase price for the building of £228,000. The building was purchased via funding from the Adventure Capital Fund: a grant of £30,000, and a loan for the rest. This is being paid back over 10 years at £26,000 per year and the building will be owned outright by December 2019.

What difference community ownership makes

“It’s not a facility in the community any longer, it’s a facility for the community and it’s recognised that way.”

Provision of a range of high quality fitness and wellbeing facilities for the community

AVCT felt that it was taking a risk by purchasing the sports centre as it did not have experience in this sector and it meant that money was stretched for the organisation. However, the sports centre would have been closed without its intervention and it felt that it was an important part of the infrastructure of the area which was needed by the local community.



On taking ownership of the centre, the first priority of AVCT was to improve the quality and range of provision that the centre offered. Initial grants and funding allowed the building to be refurbished and equipment, which was of poor quality and often damaged, to be replaced. Prior to community ownership the centre was not well-utilised and was not seen as a welcoming place, particularly for women and children. One of the priorities for the refurbishment was to open the centre up and remove barriers (e.g. turnstiles, security, glass partitions on reception). A key part of improving usage of the centre was to involve local people in running the centre, to bring in local intelligence about what the community needed and to build good relationships with customers. This has been very successful and the users of the sports centre are now primarily women rather than men.

The sports manager, who was initially employed to run the centre, was described as being very influential in this change of culture: *“it was the local contact that made the difference. So she knew the area, she knew the people [...] she asked for the CCTV cameras to be taken away. And all the lads who were hanging round outside making real nuisances of themselves and people would be frightened of them, she invited them in to say ‘this is your centre’ so it was a total change in culture.”*

Ability to be flexible and responsive to community needs

Another benefit of community ownership of the centre is the ability to be flexible and responsive to the needs of the community. This is the result of a greater level of connectedness between the community and the centre, and being free and able to more quickly adapt their services (compared to council-run facilities for instance). Social media has been utilised very effectively by the centre’s recently-appointed strategic wellbeing manager to promote the activities and facilities available, and to monitor and respond to any feedback.

Examples of this responsiveness include creating classes for people who may feel less confident to attend (e.g. due to weight issues). For example, ‘Ravin’ Fit’ is a popular fitness/dance class led by a local prestigious DJ where the lights are turned off and participants are given glow-sticks. Other measures taken to improve the inclusivity of the centre include ensuring the times of fitness classes fit in with commitments of their target customers (e.g. parents doing the school run) and creating spaces around equipment for prams so that new mothers can bring their babies with them.

Reducing social isolation and improving community cohesion

The sports and wellbeing centre is situated in an area with high levels of deprivation which can mean that some members of the community are quite vulnerable. One of the priorities for AVCT when it took over the sports centre was to ensure it was inclusive for non-traditional sports centre users. The centre’s aim is to *“get more people more active more often”* focusing on the health and wellbeing of the community as a whole. This is reflected in the friendly way they engage with people using the centre, allowing them to build relationships and signpost people to other services, both within and beyond AVCT. *“It’s that sort of relationship building and knowing people by name, and encouraging them, signposting them to something else. So they might come in the gym, but then they might come on an adult ed course with us, or they might have a member of their family who wants to come on one of our employment programmes so the whole family can get involved in what we do.”*

Examples of the benefits of this ethos on reducing social isolation and improving community cohesion were particularly evident where ‘non-traditional’ sports centre activities had been set up following sports centre staff identifying a need in their customers. For example, a support group called ‘Just for You’ was created for women who had addicts in their family. Additionally, staff have been able to identify families who are isolated (often from Eastern-European backgrounds) and supported them to engage with social activities, providing a link to wider support and services, and improving community cohesion across people of different ethnic backgrounds.

Regeneration

Community ownership of the sports centre (and other buildings owned by AVCT) has had a direct impact in terms of retaining and improving the services provided in the local area and preventing the building from becoming derelict. It also provides employment for people in the local area and has a positive impact on other businesses and the appeal of the area for businesses and residents. Croxteth is now a more desirable place to live as a result and is a more sustainable community.



Financial health

Being financially sustainable is the only major challenge for Croxteth Sports and Wellbeing Centre. Currently, mortgage repayments and a lack of subsidies that council-run facilities benefit from mean that the wider community organisation is subsidising the sports centre. More recently, competition from a growing number of budget gyms and other facilities have also presented challenges. These are mitigated by the wider benefits provided by the centre, including access and signposting to a range of different services, and involvement of non-traditional gym users who might otherwise be socially isolated or feel unable to access sports and wellbeing activities.

Initial funding and grants and support from the community organisation (AVCT)

Significant initial investment in the centre via grants supported the asset in the early stages of community ownership. Along with the loan from the Adventure Capital Fund to purchase the building, AVCT received £450,000 in funding from the Social Enterprise Investment Fund, and around £150,000 in smaller grants for the first fit-out of the centre. It also received annual grants from the council to support the running and maintenance of the health and wellbeing centre. The grants started at £105,000 per year but this was reduced and eventually cut completely about four years ago. Whilst this has meant that the asset experiences a shortfall each year, it benefits from being part of the wider community organisation (AVCT) which is able to subsidise it financially and share good practice to support the running of the centre. The financial health of the asset is expected to improve in the near future as the mortgage will be fully paid off in December 2019.

Additionally, income for the asset is created through a range of strands. In particular, it aims to increase the predictability of its income through fitness memberships which are paid regularly via direct debit. Membership is increasing at a reasonable rate.

Competition

The recent rise in the number of budget gyms, along with investment of the city council and the FA in a 4G sports pitch, has created direct competition and poses financial challenges for the centre. However, AVCT manage this through their focus on community needs, providing a welcoming environment for all rather than “*creaming off the people that have got money in their pocket.*”

When the community purchased the building, the purpose of the centre was changed from “*sports and leisure*” to “*sports and wellbeing.*” This is reflected in the

range of services offered, and means that the centre offers a wider range of services than other facilities. Additionally, the community focus of the centre creates a range of benefits and impacts (as described earlier) that mitigate the risks posed by the competitive market of sports and fitness.

Financial information

The following table provides an overview of Alt Valley’s income, expenditure and assets for the year ending 31st March 2018.

Income	£1.72m
Expenditure	£1.65m
Difference between income and expenditure	£71,601
Surplus/deficit on ordinary activities before taxation	Not available
Annual income from grant or subsidy	£691,048
Fixed assets	£3.70m
Current assets (Debtors; cash at bank and in hand)	£166,558
Creditors: amounts falling due within one year	Not available
Total	Not available
Net assets	-£136,553