

HELSBY COMMUNITY SPORTS CLUB: REVIEW

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HELSBY COMMUNITY SPORTS CLUB: REVIEW

Executive summary

Helsby Community Sports Club (HSC) is considered to be going in the right direction. The Board is, in the main, well regarded and respected. It has been generally commended for its actions so far.

Following such an all-encompassing transformation the key concerns expressed relate to the future direction of the club including its:

- *Communications*: both internal and the Club's relationship and interaction with the local community.
- *Value for money*: the need to maintain/increase the perceived/actual value of being a member.
- *A common agenda*: ensuring that all members and sections are treated fairly and equitably and that fair finance and facilities policies are established and adhered to.
- *Governance*: Ensuring that there is clarity about the role and function of the Board and that it is fit for purpose.

The general feeling is that now is an appropriate time to review and to create a governance and operational infrastructure more in keeping with the new facilities ("needing modernisation, not broken").

The anticipated results/outcomes of making the proposed changes would include:

- Robust and trusted governance and leadership supported by a strong volunteer base.
- A cohesive club with healthy and positive relationships between individual club sections.
- Strong and sustainable links with, and moving towards greater representation of, the local community.
- Increased membership numbers and better retention of existing members.

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Introduction

After the sale of the existing premises and grounds Helsby Community Sports moved into a new purpose-built facility. The new facilities have led to a fundamental improvement in the offer made by the Club to both existing and potential new members. The prevailing view is that needs to be accompanied by a quantum step in terms of its governance, management and operation.

As a consequence of the changes already made and Club potential for further expansion and development, DS was commissioned to review its general direction, evaluate *what it means to be a member of the club* and assess the current status of the individual sporting sections.

This process also incorporates review of its approach to finance, the various sports currently and potentially offered, facility development opportunity and Club membership, including retention, recruitment and the nature of its current engagement with members.

The review, conducted between November 2021 and April 2022, comprised:

- Briefing session with the Director of Sport and the Club Secretary.
- Face-to-face consultation session with the Club Committee/leadership group
- Consultation workshops with a cross-section of the membership including representatives from each affiliated sport section; Tennis, Football, Bowls, Snooker, Running, Rugby (and Darts) together with non-affiliated volunteers, staff and community representatives.
- Delivery of a feedback session and workshop with an extended Committee/leadership group
- Production of the report.

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Key findings

Identity

It was clearly felt that the HSC should be a sports club first and foremost and that the social element is a by-product of this.

The Club is clearly identified as family orientated. The consultation process strongly supported the concept of it having the ambition (and the related ability) to enable an offer for a sporting journey from “cradle to grave”. There was also a fervent desire to, in as much as is possible, make an all sports offer including both competitive and recreational variations.

The consensus is that the Club should be “reasonably” representative of the community, (the term community at present relates to an, as yet, undefined geographic and social area). It was agreed that the community generally and specifically the age demographic, compared to those who wanted to play sport meant it would always be a less than perfect fit.

The current welcome and maintaining a friendly and helpful atmosphere is considered to be very important and should be promoted to, and through, both staff and all members. “All members should feel they belong here.” There is a real sense of the club being inclusive and being a proactive force within the community.

In summary it was felt that Helsby Sports Club should be/aspire to be:

“A family orientated welcoming and inclusive sports club, with exceptional, modern sporting and social facilities.

Offering opportunities for sporting activities varying from participation to competition, to all participants from “cradle to grave” within its community”

HSC itself and the sections

The club in its overall form is seen as an entity that members wish to get behind and take pride in. There is a strong belief in, and desire for, collaboration while recognising some of the difficulties faced and the range of personalities that a club of this type typically embraces. Supporting this concept, it was felt there was a need to do more to bring the club together. Potential ideas suggested including:

- Try each other’s sports day,
- An ‘It’s a knockout’ event.
- Quiz nights – incorporating mixed teams from the various club sections.
- A common purpose e.g., a joint multisport policy with local schools or a club maintenance programme along the lines of NatWest Rugbyforce and Cricketforce.

“You can’t force the sections to get on, but if we do things together people will become friends”

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Coaching

The question of whether the club can be/become a centre for excellent coaching was asked.

The general consensus is that this will not necessarily be at a high-performance level but that having well-qualified, motivated, enthusiastic community sports coaches should be the norm.

HSC could create a culture including resourcing its mainly volunteer coaches, to be the best version of themselves at whatever level they operate. Better athletes may from necessity may leave (with support from the Club) but they will have received top quality and enjoyable athlete-centred support at Helsby.

Community

The membership was keen that the club (reasonably) represents and should be available to people living in the local area. ("Sell this marvellous facility to the community'). In terms of catchment definition, the community was variously described as Helsby, Helsby and Frodsham or further broadened out to surrounding villages. One definition is to use a sport-by-sport basis up to the nearest alternative similar offer.

There is a very strong feeling that HSC is a sports club first and foremost, and that any social offer or community hub function must be developed in that context.

Growing the membership was seen as a positive and there is keen interest in engaging more effectively with the community. Specific ideas include events and marketing (see communications), open days, 'try sports' and using big sporting events to create a "buzz."

There is common consent that the Club should have strong links to local schools and a variety of options programme/policy/person should be considered.

Across the groups there was a strong sense of community and the feeling that the club should "put something back". Working with and making an offer, that include people of all different ages and levels of ability is a theme raised by several of the sections; suggestions include wheelchair tennis, walking rugby etc. A common strategy and approach would be popular and another way to unify the Club overall.

Volunteers

While the efforts of existing volunteers are recognised and appreciated by the membership there is a recognised need for a programme of volunteer reward, recognition and recruitment with the aim of encouraging more members to get involved, reducing the burden on the incumbents, bringing down the age profile to be more in line with the membership (see also diversity and inclusion) and beginning to formalise succession planning.

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Diversity and Inclusion

In terms of inclusion there a general belief that the Club needs to encourage more diversity and be proactive about attracting and retaining women and girls. A specific cross-section programme is an option.

It was particularly felt that football and rugby should offer a stronger female option.

A linked question raise was whether there are women members who are willing, available and can offer time and capacity to get involved at board level to help drive this diversity utilising their insight, personal experiences and perspective - to help develop the range of thinking within the group. This would clearly be welcomed.

Communications

This aspect of Club operation is generally felt to be limited and inward focused.

Internally the most consistent complaint appears to be the limited extent to which messaging from the Board reaches the membership. This seems to centre on what is perceived to be a lack of communication from the Management Board. Conversely, there is Board perception that the way in which members do (or don't) communicate with it is also problematic.

Concerns were also expressed about the quality and quantity of external communications in terms of marketing the Club – (how can we best) 'sell this marvellous facility'. One example many people commented on was how good the newsletter is. The accompanying question was, however, who does it get to? It was also felt that very little use was made of social media either for generic communication or for marketing.

A further question raise was that, if the Club is to make greater use of social media – which is almost inevitably going to be needed, who can help?

Finance

Despite the quantum changes in the facility and accompanying finances the membership appears to have complete confidence in the financial running of the club, in terms of the approach to sustainability and provision of future funding. Broadly speaking the philosophy of a sports club with an attached social facility is recognised and applauded.

It was generally felt that the Board/Treasurer are getting the balance of sport: income generation right (including the CASC issues). Members were supportive of the concept that "If we get it right and sports sections make bookings and run their own events there will be an accompanying reduced need for outside events".

Is more transparency an option? It would not be perfect, but it might delimit some of the speculation and misinformation. Is there equity between sections? Do some pay more than take from the club?

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These are, given the different player volumes, age brackets and nature of various sports, perennial issues for multi-sports clubs. The key is to ensure that there is a full understanding of what is collected/spent/invested where and why – so that differences of opinion are, at the very least, underscored by an acceptance of transparency and a rationale to challenge and reshape.

Prior to reaching any decisions with regard to the balance and make up of professional staff and volunteers to make the club function optimally effectively, it was universally considered to be prudent and advisable to gain a minimum 12-month operational sense check in respect of income and expenditure. Any decisions about major changes to staffing levels will need to be subject to a clear understanding of the financial position going forward and the planning, introduction and resourcing of an effective volunteering plan. A range of principles are needed in respect of fiscal operational targets and outcomes and ensuing actions, for example:

- If HSC does better than breaks even will the surplus be used to contribute to reserves.
- Should funding for needed investment be borrowed to enable the Club to do it now secured against future income streams?

(There was broad consensus about the need to ensure that a break-even figure must include funding to “keep the club feeling brand new”).

In a broader context, social drinkers were considered to be important both for income and as valid venue users but it was, equally, felt that their needs should not dictate the environment – sport & family first!

Management and leadership

It is important to run a prolonged period of trading at approaching normal usage levels to gain a greater understanding of the financial position and projection accuracy. Together with the staffing/volunteering review this will help establish the “right blend” of leadership, management and fiscal policy.

The Board and the membership want a balance maintaining the Club as a community organisation, run by and on behalf of the membership but recognising the increased demands of the new facility, which needs paid staff to function at the desired level.

The Club needs to function in a way that does not overwhelm the voluntary leadership and management, however, it does not have to compromise its ethos to fund its existence.

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Facilities policy

Time was taken to consider the question of whether the Club could/should aspire to a major capital project – and whether this would be a goal/ ambition that would help to unite it? A swimming pool was considered a nonstarter. The option to install a sports hall (possibly in the medium to long term) was something about which some members have very strong views. However, the majority of members appear to be open-minded to the idea while for some it is just “too much, too far away”. There is broad consensus about the need for an objective feasibility study to inform the debate – Including advice on the “realistic” availability of grants to inform any prioritisation.

There was a broad view that provision for all sports should be brought up to “county standard.” Rugby, running (or a combined/hybrid solution) are behind the other sports in this area. The consensus was to get all sports “up to scratch first” before embarking upon any other major projects.

Strong feelings were also expressed about the need for more activities for children when parents are participating and/or socialising post-sport. These include provision of an outdoor playground, soft play area etc. Concurrent concerns were raised about supervision, insurance and child protection responsibilities – all considerations to be included in the debate.

Whether and how the facility could be extended/amended to accommodate former members and/ or youth was another topic raised. Both are considered to be valued current/potential club members and neither, at present, has a ‘natural setting’. Key question asked include:

- Where do the “former members” of the old club/older members fit?
- Does the club need to provide a “snug” style bar area?
- Is there anywhere for teenagers – next generation of sports members to go?

The prevailing view is that HSC should deal with each new improved facilities decision on its own merits. Members are happy having a directive policy without the Club “painting itself into a corner”.

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Recommendation about further work and support

The following strategy actions are recommended:

- Create a 'welcome club' campaign for members incorporating policy development and training for staff.
- Develop a programme of events to bring the whole club together.
- Set out a process to link strongly with the community, including a programme of events, robust links to local schools and a potential CSR programme.
- Development of a clear volunteer reward, recruitment, and recognition plan.
- Review communications internal and external communications with specific reference to the role of the Management Board.
- Review the role and make-up of the Management Board and work towards delivery of any targeted changes.
- Review HSC's financial position and projections in tandem with the staffing/volunteering review - to establish the right blend of leadership and management.
- Commission a facilities feasibility study and, pending the outcomes of this, create a policy and initial investment programme.
- In terms of diversity and inclusion, take short term steps based upon longer term objectives for, and a policy link to, the Executive Board.