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Sustainable clubs in a changing climate

When East Lothian community sport and leisure consultancy PMR Leisure ran a conference on sustainability for community clubs to celebrate twenty years in the business we asked Wendy Sheldrick to find out what they were up to.

North Berwick is a compact little town on the edge of the North Sea, famous for the views it affords of the guano-whitened Bass Rock just off one of its family-friendly beaches. It is also the home of the equally compact consultancy headed by Penny Lochhead, a woman of English antecedents who has been in Scotland so long she passes for a local.

Words like 'local' and 'community' are important to Lochhead who recently hosted a get-together for local, and not so local, sports clubs aimed at sharing knowledge and taking the learning from the journeys of three of her longest-term clients. Such is the consultancy's reputation that over 50 volunteers from 35 clubs representing a wide variety of sports were gathered in the conference room of Inch Park Community Sports Club as the learning began.

The Inch Park facility is the most recently opened community sports club in Scotland and the first to be awarded Community Sport Hub status. As a facility it speaks of modernity and commercial acumen but inside, where its users gather, the atmosphere shouts of co-operation and coming together. With visitors coming from afar as Troon, a three-hour drive, as well as from around the corner, the club was keen to put its best foot forward and make PMR's first delivery of an independent conference on sustainability in club development in Scotland a rousing success.

To set the scene Lochhead herself took to the podium and, reining in her enthusiasm for the subject, limited herself to 25 minutes speaking time. Her first message was simple – know your club – and she then made an eloquent case for auditing your club from its governance to its coaching structure and from its financial status to its relationship with its governing body, or bodies. The case was made with an extended analogy based on bones. Clubs, she suggested, consist of: jawbones, the people who love to talk about the club but never lift a finger to do anything to help; knucklebones, the people who knock everything they don't like; wishbones, the people who have wonderful dreams but never try to put them into reality; and backbones, the people without whose commitment and work the club would end up as a mere ghost of what the club wants to be. When, and only when, you know where you are as a club is it time to consider where you want to be and Lochhead spoke of shared dreams being broken down into common goals and the areas where her experience told her clubs needed to work.

Having mapped out the journey facing the clubs in the body of the kirk, Lochhead then introduced one of the three clubs with which she has been working for upwards of eight years and who were to offer their perspective of the challenges they had met and overcome. Focusing on the need to plan for success, Dougie Samuel from Spartans CFA gave some insight into how a North Edinburgh soccer club became a "community football academy" boasting two 3G pitches and the recognition of the Scottish FA for their work in a manifestly deprived community. He also had the crowd on its feet, literally, using the Peter Kay rendition of *Is This the Way to Amarillo?* and Ronnie Corbett's unfortunate accident on the video to draw lessons about how to deal with a "difficulty in the planned vision". Penny Lochhead offered this take on Spartan CFA: "They bring hope and jobs to a very deprived part of North Edinburgh and sport is a tool for them for community cohesion in every sense of the word. This is the club everyone should aspire to be. Having been open only three years and despite the pressures of servicing a £900,000 loan, they are a sustainable and thriving social enterprise."

Following a pause for coffee, the rest of the day's programme fairly whistled by

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with a session on developing your assets, which featured architects, synthetic pitch installers, and experts in leasing and asset ownership, and the second of the community clubs, Broxburn United, whose journey started in 2003 and resulted in the opening of a £2.6 million project in August 2010.

After lunch the final session was themed A Sustainable Future. After Lochhead had made the case that profit is good if it contributes to a club's sustainability and taken a run through the steps required make fund-finding less onerous, Alastair Davis, the chief executive of Social Investment Scotland, talked loans and investment for community benefit. Then the home team took centre stage.

Malcolm Gillies used to be the highest-ranking volunteer with the Scottish Rugby Union and has long been a stalwart of Lismore Rugby Club but these days he revels in the title of Chairman Inch Park Community Sports Club. The rugby club used to play its fixtures in an unregarded corner of one of the City of Edinburgh's public parks and entertain visiting teams in a rundown former public house a 20-minute drive away. These days, as part of a partnership with Edinburgh South Cricket and Edinburgh South Football Club who also used to use the park, the club enjoys state-of-the-art facilities and is vibrant and viable with a future that is more than bright. The Inch Park journey started with pragmatism and patience and has progressed through "compromise, honesty, partnership, altruism and communication, communication, communication" to a point where the three clubs thrive under a single umbrella that functions as a sustainable business and will leave a legacy for the future.

For the conference organiser, assessing success can be difficult. No matter how well-worded you make your delegate feedback sheet, the temptation remains to reject any negative criticism and to distrust any praise. PMR's conference introduced another measure of success which cannot be quantified. As the final session ended, delegates were reminded that their entry fee included a small libation in the club's well-appointed bar and almost all took the opportunity to stop and chat. Fixtures were made, friendships cemented and plans laid; sustainable plans to create stronger clubs.

Wendy Sheldrick is research manager with PMR Leisure. Full details of the presentations are available from PMR Leisure at www.pmrleisure.co.uk

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