

The Big Society comes to Castleton Baths

As the prime minister was giving it large about the Big Society on Merseyside, Mick Owen was on a poolside just along the M62 hearing how one swimming club is already well on its way to taking its destiny in-house.

On the morning that *The Leisure Review* went to Castleton Baths, David Cameron was travelling to Liverpool to re-launch his Big Society idea with the announcement that four target areas had been identified and were beginning the experiment. The basic premise seems to be that people should be trusted with running their own lives with less interference from the state. Apparently schools, hospitals and even public houses can be run by voluntary groups, or a mix of voluntary groups and the commercial sector, and Big Government should get out of their way and let them. In a corner of Rochdale, a town that proudly proclaims itself the birthplace of the Co-operative Movement, the experiment is already under way.

Mark Crouch is the head coach of Aquabears Swimming Club formed in 1979 to meet "the need for a high-level competitive training club and as a local centre of excellence in Rochdale". The club has a fine record and boasts four GB swimmers among its alumni including Keri-Anne Payne, a woman who brought back an open water silver medal from Beijing. Crouch has a fine record himself, having coached as far afield as Curacao in Central America, Australia and Gateshead, and, with more than twenty years on poolside as a professional coach, he knows his way around the aquatics world. Which is probably just as well given the fact that he is solely responsible for the Victorian-era pool which at 7.15am is being ploughed up by swimmers on their way to the top.

In 2005 the 25-yard, four-lane pool was given a major refurbishment by Rochdale MBC with a false roof obscuring the old balcony and slipper baths ripped out to make meeting and dry training rooms. Offices and a staff room were manufactured and a modern facility – albeit in a traditional shell with a stubbornly Victorian foyer – was created. Even with the latest technology, however, the challenge to make money with a simple tank and basic ancillary facilities is a tough one and "reducing deficit" is often the loss-cutting tack taken by those asked to run "traditional" pools. In 2007 Rochdale out-sourced the management of its cultural services to the Link4Life Cultural Trust, which immediately set about making Castleton Baths less of a drain on resources. Were it not for the inherent requirement to make the community asset a benefit to the wider community, that is "the public", the pool may well have been closed in the last three years and the threat of closure still hangs over it; although the volunteers of Aquabears of Rochdale take a more optimistic view of its future.

Having ushered his last group of the morning off poolside and tidied away his coaching equipment, the former Great Britain coach explained the current situation: "We rent the building at a reduced rate but for that we have to staff the building. We have to provide lifeguards, do the cleaning and we also have guys who are trained in the plant room and do the water tests. We do all that and for that we get a reduction in our hourly rate." Given the discounted rate – which is a commercially sensitive piece of information – Crouch's assessment is that: "It's a reasonable situation in that we don't, for example, pay for this office space." And the club also has sole access to a fitness room and a meeting room as part of the deal, "but we between us run the facility and [Link4Life] are making a huge saving".

It may be a saving to the trust but it is Link4Life that meets the utility bills and the invoices for chemicals, so how confident is Crouch that, should Cameron's initiative take hold, Aquabears, perhaps reconfigured as a social enterprise, would cope? He goes back to a point when this offer was actually on the table. "It would have been better if in 2005 when the property was renovated we had been more confident about the running costs," he said. "I think our chairman at the time wasn't quite sure what the running costs would be and at that time prices had gone up quite significantly. There was combination of factors: [the council] weren't happy with the business plan and we weren't happy taking on a facility we knew nothing about." It was a hesitation that Crouch now regrets. "Just recently with budget cuts coming it was suggested that this was one of the facilities that may close. We said we would be interested in running the building again and, having therefore been allowed to see the running costs, we think we could make a go of it."

The question is whether there is a will to see such a development within the ownership and management of the pool. When *The Leisure Review* contacted managing director of Link4Life Craig McAteer he explained his perspective:

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Mark Crouch: leading a club with a fine legacy of performance

As he locked up behind us he explained what was on the old pool's agenda for the rest of the day: "There won't be anyone in here again till we go in for our after-school session." Which seems something of a waste.



Castleton Baths: a venue with a rich and lengthy history

"Aquabears is the premier swimming club in the borough with an impressive record of achievement. Since its formation in 1979 the club has been synonymous with Castleton Baths therefore any proposal for the club to be more involved in the management of the site would be of huge benefit to them and their members, and clearly a lease would provide for a greater security of tenure going forward." Since McAteer is also the chair of Sporta, the national association representing social enterprises in culture and leisure, it seemed opportune to ask if any developments at Castleton could serve as a model for other trusts and authorities as part of David Cameron's Big Society agenda. Again he was happy to answer our query: "The management and even ownership of public assets by community groups and organisations has been on the agenda for some time. The new coalition government is clearly encouraging even greater involvement by third sector organisations – voluntary bodies, social enterprises, co-operatives and charities – in the running of public services and given the current economic climate and consequent efficiency programmes, it is becoming even more practical to not only consider, but actively seek, alternative models of delivery."

Whether Mark Crouch's swimming club follows in the footsteps of the Rochdale Pioneers Society and becomes one of those models only time will tell but as he locked up behind us he explained what was on the old pool's agenda for the rest of the day: "There won't be anyone in here again till we go in for our after-school session." Which seems something of a waste.



Home to the Aquabears: Rochdale pioneers?

Mick Owen is the managing editor of *The Leisure Review*

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