

PARTNERSHIPS

playing together

A partnership between a community college, a leisure business and a Premiership football club has enabled all those involved to benefit from improved sporting and educational facilities

Charlton Athletic is a Premiership football club which has just celebrated its centenary season. However, 20 years ago it was outside the top-flight of English football and struggling to attract crowds of around 5000. Worse, it was forced to leave its spiritual home, The Valley, and for a while had to share grounds with other London clubs before returning home in 1992.

Since then, the club has implemented a development programme for its ground, which now regularly attracts capacity crowds of 27,000.

Charlton teamed up with Greenwich Leisure Limited and Greenwich Community College to make the development of the ground a reality. The West Stand was rebuilt, incorporating a fitness centre and gym, together with a new North Stand that houses the London Leisure College.

Peter Varney, group chief executive at Charlton Athletic, explains the club's thinking behind its community access strategy: 'In 1991, we had 5000 fans. Now we have 27,000. This is partly because we have been active in the community. By opening the college and the gymnasium, we are not only giving something back to the community from where we draw our support, but there are also real commercial benefits for the club.'

Mark Sesnan, managing director of Greenwich Leisure Limited, a staff-led leisure trust, says that the iconic nature of football has made the collaboration a win-win for all parties. The project, which attracted European funding, enabled the club to build its new stands, incorporating the facilities needed for the gym and college in the design. For GLL, which manages nearly 50 public leisure centres, the location is 'a massive draw' for gym members.

Geoff Pine, principal of Greenwich Community College, says the venue has also been 'enormously successful in attracting students'. The college has over 20,000 students on leisure and sports-related courses.

Varney adds: 'If you are Manchester United, then you are in a particular place in the market. If you are a Charlton, then you have to develop your brand in a different way. In a very purposeful manner, we have gone about building a genuine community club. If Sky TV is covering a Manchester United match, they are likely to do an

interview with Wayne Rooney or Ryan Giggs.

When they come to Charlton, they cover the community aspects of the club. We have a different story to tell.'

When asked about what makes partnerships work, Varney advises: 'Be clear about your

objectives and what you want from it. You need a wider perspective and to understand there is an element of corporate social responsibility as well as an element of profit making. If you can do this, real benefits can accrue.'

we are giving something back to the community and there are real commercial benefits for the club

n This is an edited version of a story taken from *Match Winners: a guide to commercial collaborations between social enterprise and private sector business*, available free from the DTI Small Business Service. www.sbs.gov.uk/socialenterprise

n GLL managing director Mark Sesnan (left) and Charlton Athletic group chief executive Peter Varney in the stadium, which has been extensively remodelled



comment
CHARLTON ATHLETIC

Charlton Athletic has achieved an impressive turnaround that has partly been due to implementation of an imaginative CSR strategy. As a result, the club has increased the number of supporters attending matches and gained respect from the local community.

features of particular interest are:

- n the club's leisure programme attracts all age groups
- n a local college has realized the potential of linking with a big brand organization
- n mutual benefit from partnership of organizations

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POLLY BRADEN