

THE BUCCLEUCH CENTRE - LEADER Application

"RAISING Your GAME" - FINAL REPORT

Background to the Project

- (1) The Buccleuch Centre opened in Langholm (DG13) in 2007 and since then there has been an increase in both the number of arts organisations in the town and also in the number of performances given. This created a demand for rehearsal, workshop and storage facilities by local groups which the Centre was unable to meet. In addition there was a lack of "fit for purpose" facilities elsewhere in the community for community groups to rehearse, attend workshops or simply take part in activities such as music, drama, dance, karate, boxing and Thai boxing.
- (2) The project was led by the Buccleuch Centre and involved representatives from the interested user groups together with trustees and management of the Centre. The user groups involved included Langholm Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society, CentreStage, the Langholm Boxing and Thai Boxing Club, the Karate Group, JustDance and Langholm Youth Dance Club, Xcel and Langholm Academy. The Centre trustees included Avril Bannatyne, chair of the Users Committee, Dr Michael Tinker, chair of the Buccleuch Centre, David Stevenson, the project chair and the Buccleuch Centre manager, Hilary Jack.
- (3) The objective of the project was to create a "fit for purpose" facility - The Studio - to be used by community groups for arts and leisure purposes. The aim was to increase the number of participants, leading in turn to a rise in standards. A proper dance studio with sprung floor and wall mirrors would also be included. The main uses would be rehearsals, training, workshops and participation in music, drama, dance, Thai boxing and karate. The facilities would be self-regulatory, barrier free, low-cost and accessible to all. In addition we would appoint a Development Officer to maximise the use of The Studio and the existing Buccleuch Centre, by introducing new users and by developing new activities such as table tennis.
- (4) This is essentially a capital project and the funding package was provided by three sources – LEADER, the Holywood Trust and the David Stevenson Trust.
- (5) The main funder was LEADER who offered 45.10% of the cost of the project up to a maximum of £99,008 and this was supported by £60,000 from the Holywood Trust and £60,522 from the David Stevenson Trust.

The Project

- (6) The STUDIO is located in Langholm (DG13), was started on 3rd December, 2012 and was formally completed on 27th December, 2013.
- (7) The first five months of the project were spent on finalising the details of the plan for The STUDIO and going out to tender with the main contractor being appointed in May, 2013. Six companies were invited to tender with the lowest and successful tender coming from Thomas Graham and Son Ltd of Langholm. This was later than intended but we wished to be as sure as we could be that there would be no nasty surprises in what would be an expensive building project. The STUDIO was built over the following six months by converting a former warehouse of 420 square metres into two activity areas each of 180 sq.m. plus a general purpose room of 20 sq.m. Changing rooms, kitchen area and toilets were also provided. The conversion involved replacing the roof, insulating the walls and installing a multi-purpose sprung floor suitable for both dance and sports such as boxing and table tennis. In addition a full height mirror running the length of one wall was installed for the use of the dance, karate and boxing as well as a PA system suitable for rehearsals. The construction was completed in November, 2013 with few significant issues other than teething problems with the new roof which developed a somewhat stubborn leak and usage commenced in December, 2013. The construction phase went very much to plan, so much so that there was a saving of almost £16,000 on the cost of delivering the project. However, the key to the success of the Studio is that it delivers a high quality facility but at a price of up 80% lower than the Council owned Eskdale Sports Centre. This not only makes it accessible to more groups but the quality of facility encourages more participants and this will lead to a higher standard of performance.
- (8) The Users Committee took a softly, softly approach to bringing the facility into use so as to give themselves time to deal with any snagging issues and also to give themselves a chance to become familiar with the facility. Four new users have been introduced on a phased basis but this is still ahead of the original plan of bringing in two over 2014. The Studio construction was project managed by the MacGowan Miller Partnership, Hilary Jack, the Buccleuch Centre manager, Helen Storey from Ashleybank Investments who own the property and David Stevenson, the project chairman.
- (9) Marketing was undertaken by the Development Manager who was appointed in September, 2013. Rather than use a scatter-gun approach, we have been more targeted. We discovered at an early stage that while there was enthusiasm for the project, people just couldn't envisage the end product and they wished to wait until The Studio was built before signing up. We also found that existing venues were concerned that they would lose their users and become less viable as a result. We therefore adopted a softly, softly direct marketing approach and identified possible users rather than using mass marketing. This has also enabled the original users to settle in and snagging issues with the building to be resolved.

Here is a cross section of the types of potential user with which our Development Officer discussed possible use of the STUDIO and the current status of these discussions:-

- Langholm Art Club (now users)
- Langholm Bridge Club (now users)
- Langholm Rugby Club (now users)
- Zumba Lady from Carlisle (who also does other exercise classes)
- Marie Frances Dance Classes (not going to use at present)
- Zumba Lady from Penrith who is now running a class
- Langholm Gets Active (now users)
- Tai Chi (now users)
- Acupuncture (decided not suitable)
- Parenting Classes and Baby Massage (Outcome still awaited)
- Flower arranging (Kathryn Cavers) (Possibly one for the future)
- Painting for Idiots man (Not likely now that art club are in)
- Various Slimming Clubs (no result)
- D&G Council re adult education classes (not interested unless we can provide a class)
- Spanish Language tutor (wants us to provide the class)

(10) The beneficiaries of the STUDIO are residents in DG13 and DG14. From the analysis of the users, it can be seen that more than twice as many women (254) as men (98) used the facility but we were very surprised to find that there were almost as many over 25s (171) used the STUDIO as those under 25 (181).

Also from the Usage statistics it can be seen that each activity is not concentrated on a particular age group so that there is considerable cross generational activity taking place. It will be greater than the bare facts as shown by the figures as there is generally two groups in the STUDIO at the same time.

Sharing a common interest across generations can only lead to a better community with better social cohesion.

(11) Our original budget was £219,530.00 and our final cost was £203,671.77, a saving of just under £16,000.00. In reality, we did better than that as we were able to purchase boxing and table tennis equipment from the savings we had made. The savings themselves mainly came in the cost of the mechanical and electrical part of the contract and in the operating costs of the STUDIO because it was brought on stream later than in the original plan.

(12) In the course of creating the Studio, the main lessons we learned were that:-

- a building project always takes longer to execute than you expect
- possible users are reluctant to commit to changing their existing facility until they can see the finished article.
- Taking a softly, softly approach to bringing a new facility on stream, particularly if volunteers are involved, pays greater dividends than trying to launch on day one with all guns blazing.

- On the positive side, we underestimated the amount of pride people have taken in having an attractive new venue for their activities and how quickly new participants have joined up because of this. The boxing club is a good example.

(13) The STUDIO is a finite project and as such will neither be mainstreamed nor transferred.

(14) The key to the sustainability of this project will be the Users Committee. The essence of this project is that it is self-regulated by volunteers from the user groups and that the use of paid staff is avoided. On that basis it will be low cost and self sustaining. The role of the Development Officer is short term and should not exceed two years as it would then defeat the object of the exercise!

(15) Rural communities generally feel that they are last in line and that the larger towns get the best facilities. They are also concerned that core facilities will be removed from their community and centralised to achieve what often prove to be imaginary cost savings. The providers of public services such as health, education and the police must remember that such services are essential to a community and that centralisation has a demoralising effect. Each service is a vital part of the social infrastructure of a community and cost saving centralisation undermines the work of a community to develop and become a better place in which to live. By providing modern facilities which are low cost, accessible and which encourage more residents to participate in community activities, it shows they are valued citizens and the net result is simply an increase in community spirit and civic pride.

(16) We believe the model we have used to create the STUDIO is a good example of best practice and is transferable. However, because we wished to ensure the STUDIO was a success and within its budget, we were late in completing it and have been unable to execute a transfer of best practice. We do, however, believe that the way it has been executed as a total project is a best practice model for other organisations or communities.