



**SPORT
ENGLAND**



ACRONOVA GYMNASTICS CLUB

COMMUNITY ASSET CASE STUDY

IN BRIEF



Name: AcroNova Gymnastics Club

Overall cost: £290,000

Type: Conversion of disused council building to 10,000 sq. foot facility

Sport England contribution / fund: £125,000 (£75,000 Inspired Facilities fund, £50,000 Community fund)

Type of Organisation: A Constituted Sports Club - AcroNova Gymnastics Club

Other significant funding:

Sports: Gymnastics, tumbling

Biffa award £50,000
Foundation for Sports and Arts £20,000

Website and social media:

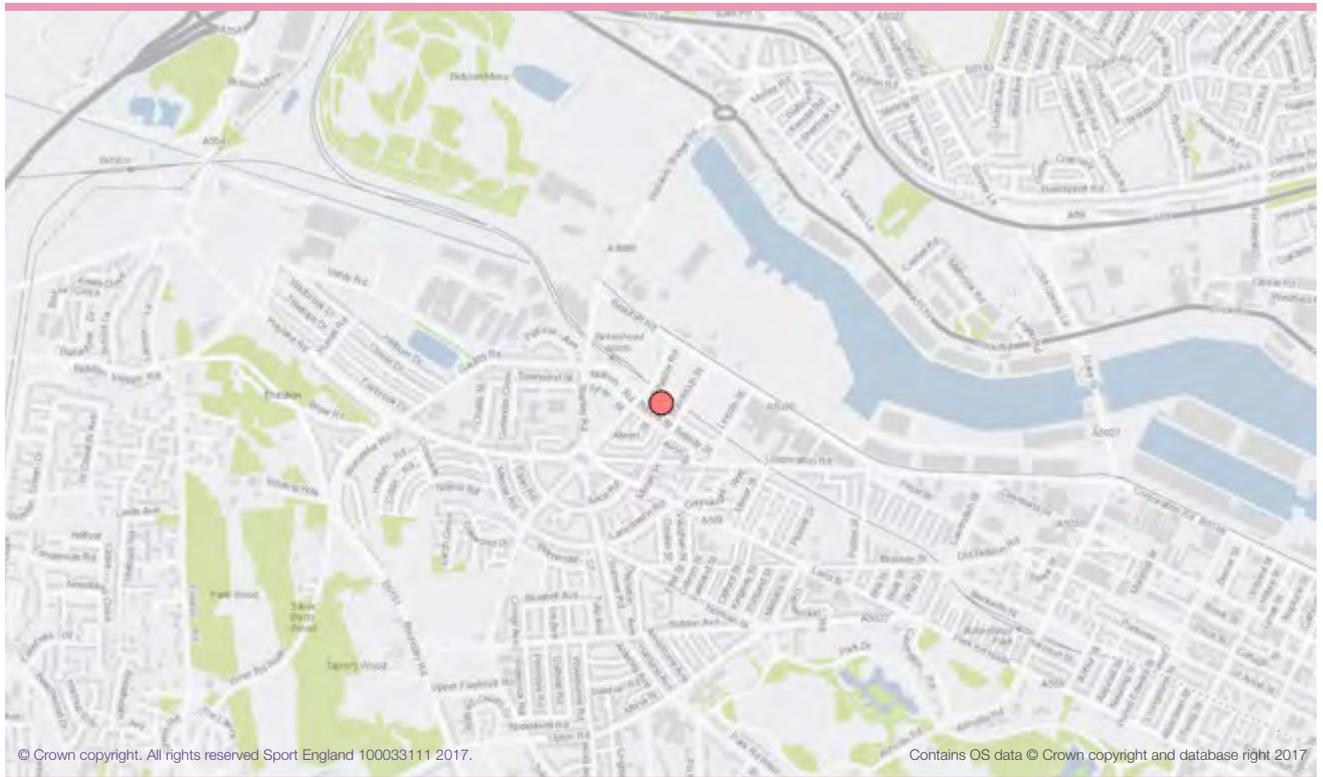
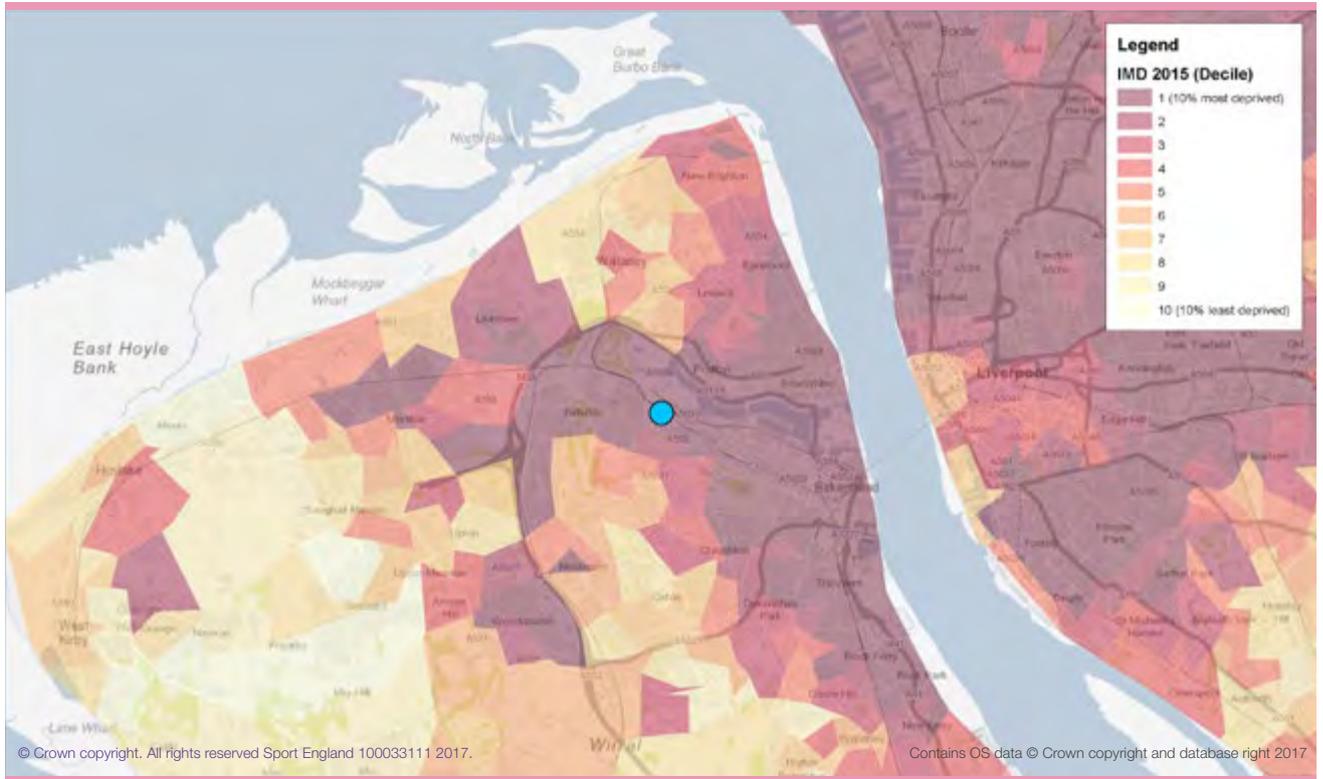
acronova-gymnastics.co.uk

PEOPLE AND PLACE

Category	
ONS Urban / Rural	
Top tier classification	Urban
Second tier classification	Major conurbation
Geographical setting	
Location description:	In Birkenhead, part of Merseyside conurbation, across the Mersey from Liverpool city centre. North West of England.
Local Authority Population	321,238 ¹
Local Authority and Region	
Local authority	Wirral
Region	North West
IMD	
LSOA ranking position	36 ² (this is in the 1% most deprived neighbourhoods in England).

1 Source: Mid-Year Population Estimates 2016, ONS

2 Each LSOA is ranked out of 32,844 LSOAs in England; where 1 is the most deprived



RESOURCES



PROJECT COST:

Total project cost: £290,000

Purpose: Renovation of a dilapidated building and conversion into a gymnasium with car park.

SPORT ENGLAND CONTRIBUTION

Inspired Facilities Fund: £75,000 to create car park and install elevator.

Community Grant: £50,000 towards renovation of dilapidated building.

OTHER GRANT FUNDING

- **£50,000** from the Big Lottery for a celebratory launch event
- **£20,000** from the Foundation for Sport and the Arts used to purchase a sprung floor and track
- **£10,000** from Awards for All for equipment
- **£2,500** yearly grants from Magenta Housing

OTHER SOURCES OF FINANCE

AcroNova are very active fundraisers. As well as generating budget surpluses from subscriptions and fees, members of the club have raised over £10,000 for equipment from a variety of activities. These include paid bag packing at a local supermarket (£1,144) a sponsored 'bounce' event (£2,043), sponsored walks, raffles, car boot sales and BBQs. Children at the club raised over £1,100 to buy an electric wheelchair for one of the coaches. Further funds have been raised from the local giving 'Grow Your Tenner' campaign.





OTHER SUPPORT

Most significant: Volunteer time and their ability to source low cost materials and building services at cost has helped the project significantly. The list of free or heavily discounted materials is impressive: a complete Howells kitchen including two pizza ovens was provided for £500, a free Wickes kitchen, a donation of unwanted foldaway seating by Pacific Theatre, low cost installation of Wi-Fi infrastructure by Virgin Media, and free timber for the bio-mass boiler provided by local tree surgeons.

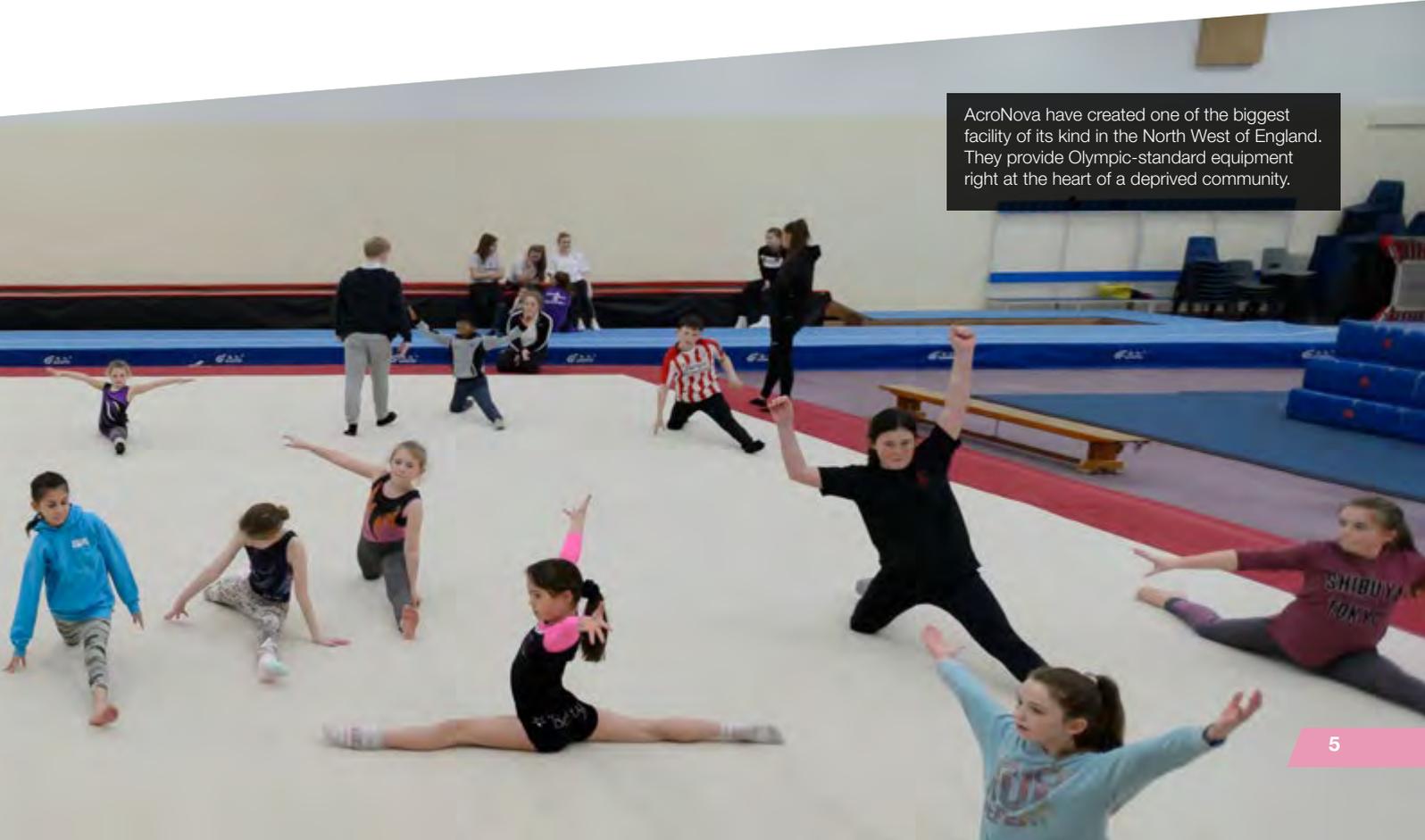
Political: The council and local politicians including Angela Eagle MP have been hugely supportive of the club both publicly but also in the provision of practical help for grant applications and with the community asset transfer.

Professional: The club has benefited from the skills of its members parents with one leading the conversion of the facility, another providing specialist glazing services for the viewing gallery, and another providing low cost accounting services.

Local Community: The club is volunteer-led and staffed, with all the club officers living locally. As well as running the club, most of the volunteering time is allocated to coaching gymnasts. The volunteering offer is now more formalized and accredited.

“A COUPLE OF PARENTS NOW WANT TO BE COACHES, A FEW WANT TO BE JUDGES AND MORE EXPERIENCED GYMNASTS ARE COMING IN TO HELP OUT AS WORK EXPERIENCE – WE DIDN’T HAVE THE CAPACITY BEFORE, NOW WE CAN ACCOMMODATE SIX OR SEVEN.”

ANDY THURLOW, SECRETARY AND HEAD COACH



AcroNova have created one of the biggest facility of its kind in the North West of England. They provide Olympic-standard equipment right at the heart of a deprived community.

THE JOURNEY

KEY EVENTS AND MILESTONES

Date	Event
2008	AcroNova Gymnastics Club founded (as Wallasey Gymnastics) Jim Mulholland becomes chair of the club
2010	Decision taken to find own facility (club name changed Acronova) New facility site identified
2012	Agreement for lease for new facility received from Wirral Council
2014	Conversion work commenced
2016	Facility opened

FIRST IDEAS

The Spark: The idea for the facility emerged when the price for use of the sports hall built alongside and managed by St Joseph's School was raised from £600 to £750 per week. The club worked out how much it was costing and decided that they needed to find a home of their own:

"By 2010 they had had £18,000 from our club. So we decided to find somewhere of our own."

Jim Mulholland, chair AcroNova
Gymnastics Club

Audience development: Andy Thurlow, head coach and club secretary/founder, added that the club had a strong desire to have a permanent site in order to provide a legacy for the younger coaches.

"We were in hired facility from the school. We had a floor we had to roll out at the beginning and put away. Didn't have a tumble track. Had very heavy 15m tumble track. Wanted something better and something for a legacy to leave for up and coming coaches."

The location: After asking around amongst local contacts and 'movers and shakers' the club was put in touch with David Dickenson, asset management surveyor at Wirral Council – the person responsible for community asset transfers. He identified the site at Buccleugh Street which had been owned by a brewery and acquired by the council after it fell into disuse.



FIRST STEPS

As Buccleugh Street was a substantial site with two buildings, AcroNova were encouraged to take it on with another community group that required office facilities. The buildings were in a poor state of repair and so an architect was appointed to come up with designs for the development. AcroNova felt they would be too expensive and made it clear to the council that the third party would need to cover the costs, at which point they chose to move on. Other gymnastics clubs were then approached with a view to jointly developing and sharing the site, but all declined.

FORMATION

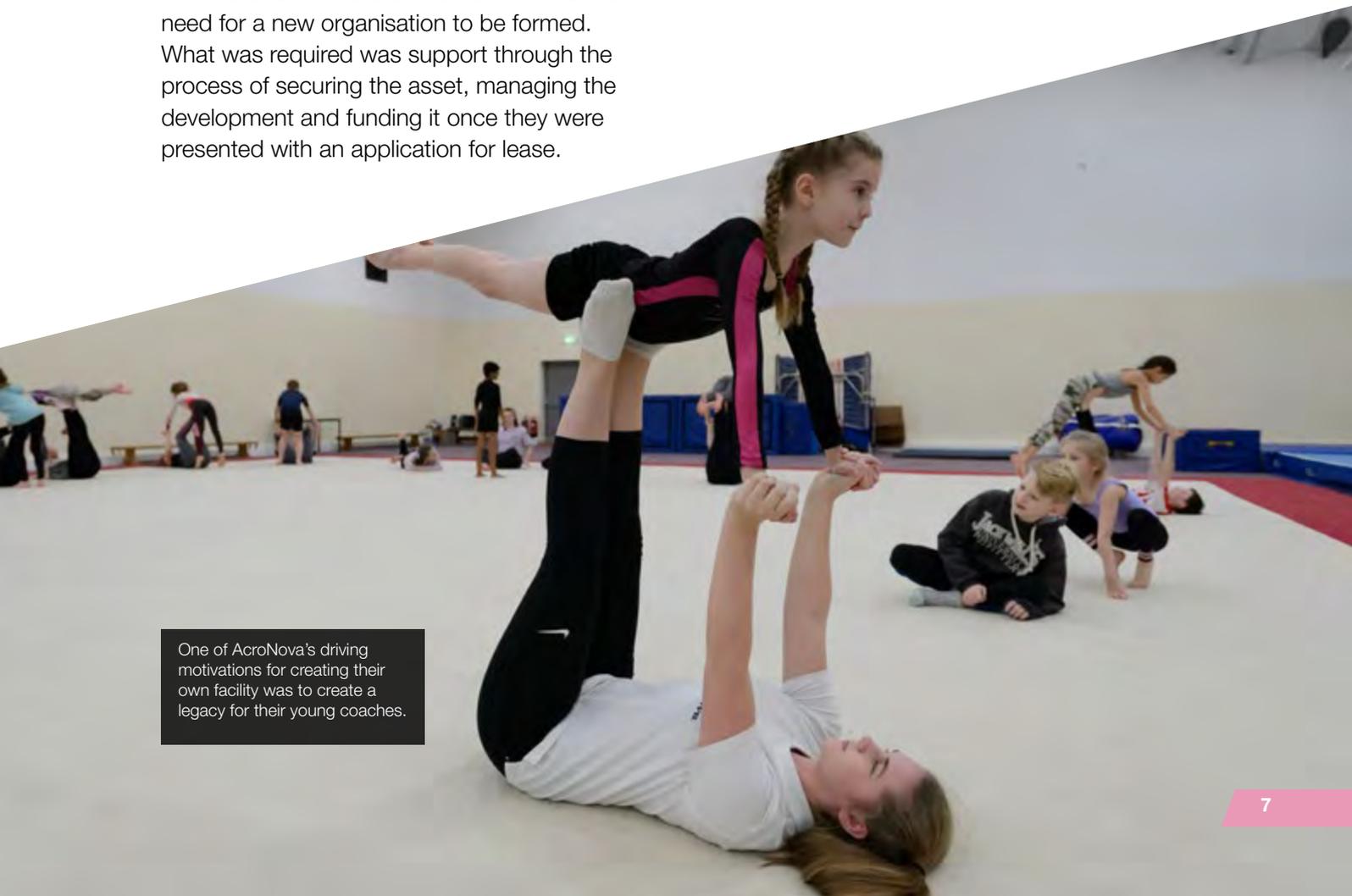
As AcroNova was a well-established, constituted club led by well-regarded local residents who were known to the council there was no need for a new organisation to be formed. What was required was support through the process of securing the asset, managing the development and funding it once they were presented with an application for lease.

CAPACITY BUILDING

The application for lease outlined the council's expectations for the development and regulations that would need to be met. In return for securing a 100-year lease, at peppercorn rent, AcroNova were expected to demonstrate step-by-step how the council's expectations would be satisfied. Their ability to do so was based on a combination of the ongoing support from David Dickenson and the club leaders' willingness to research, learn and work hard to create and deliver a viable plan.

Once Jim and Andy had identified their requirements and prepared initial designs the original project manager backed out, leaving the club leaders to manage it themselves. They were greatly assisted by a local builder, who was involved with the club, offering to deliver the project at cost.

One of AcroNova's driving motivations for creating their own facility was to create a legacy for their young coaches.



FUNDING

Fundraising proved to be a slow and sometimes demoralizing process, with most applications not acknowledged or responded to. This taught the group that every penny secured had to be made to work. The first funds, which came from the FSA and 'Awards for All', were used to secure the sprung floor and equipment. Rather than using traditional suppliers, with time on their side, a source in Beijing was identified who could deliver at two thirds of the cost.

This marquee purchase helped to build confidence that the project was real and that the people behind it would make it happen. It worked to bring other funders to the table including a Biffa Award. The fact that this award required a 10% contribution from a third party kept the team on their toes, seeking funds from whatever sources they could and making them work as hard for the project as they could. Keen to ensure the project stayed on track the council provided support for further funding applications, including the successful bid to us.

Once in place, those driving the project would call in favours to get materials donated or at the cheapest price. They also made smart decisions on insulation and heating, ensuring the sustainability of the project by keeping long-term costs down. This, the transfer and conversion of a non-sports facility and the clear intention to involve disadvantaged and disabled groups helped to secure our ongoing interest. It ultimately led to AcroNova's receipt of an Inspired Facility grant. This was used to complete the renovation of the building and to install a lift to make the entire facility accessible.

DEVELOPMENT

The asset transfer was a relatively straightforward process that was facilitated by:

- The existing facility being an eyesore, unsafe and harbinger of anti-social behaviour.
- A local authority desire to see it developed and support for planning permission.
- Confidence in the AcroNova leadership team.

Aside from the rhythms of the funding cycle, once underway, progress was constrained by the need to make the derelict building safe. It was structurally unsound, requiring the walls to be pinned to an internal steel structure and the whole building to be secured to the ground by pile drivers. With children, including disabled children, being the principle users of the facility safety was paramount. Despite the need for cost control, fire regulations were exceeded with the latest fire prevention techniques extending 'escape' times to two and a half hours.

One of the main drivers of this project was the club's desire to get the most out of every penny they were spending. This intention drove decisions to install state-of-the-art insulation materials and to heat the new gymnasium using overhead panels powered by a bio-mass boiler. Local tree surgeons have agreed to provide wooden logs for free, delivering huge reductions in energy costs. The demolition of a second derelict building in front of the new gymnasium also allowed for the creation of a natural drainage system under a gravel car park, reducing water rates from £10,000 to £150 a year.

The involvement of a local builder associated with the club was another big money-saver for AcroNova. He delivered the project at cost and, having been involved from the start, understood and met the specifics of its plans. The quality of what has been achieved has been recognised with the building's nomination for a LABC North West Building Excellence Award.

BUSINESS PLANNING

The project was originally inspired by a desire to reduce the marginal cost of delivery from a hired facility. As such, with the movement to a much larger site the business case is based on both increased revenue and reduced marginal costs which is emphasized by the commitment to sustainable heating and waste water management.

In terms of revenue it is hoped that throughput will increase year on year following the move to the new building which is represented in the following table with Year 1 representing the pre transfer position and Year 2 the transition year.

Year	Event
1	12,700
2	1,400
4	20,500
4	26,740
5	32,980

AcroNova charge £30 a month for 25 hours of contact, other clubs of similar status charge £96 for 12 hours. Thanks to the energy-efficient new building, nominal rental costs and a planned increase in income thanks to the expanded capacity of their facility they intend to keep their charges static. AcroNova is based in one of England's most deprived areas. Keeping local access to their facilities affordable is hugely important to the club. They operate a discreet policy of never turning away children who cannot afford to pay:

“IT’S AFFORDABLE – £4 A SESSION FOR 1.5HRS ON WEEKEND, DISABILITY SESSIONS ARE £3. WE ARE THE CHEAPEST AROUND. THERE ARE A COUPLE OF KIDS THAT YOU WOULD NEVER TURN AWAY IF THEY CAN’T AFFORD TO PAY – ONLY WE KNOW THAT,”

KAREN JONES, WELFARE OFFICER

Given that the projected operating costs of are considerably less than the old rental costs, the club can be self-sufficient even with current levels of income due to the peppercorn rent, water rate discounts (CASC) and installation of a bio mass heating/water system which delivers financial savings of 97% compared to other fossil fuels. This will also draw an income from government via the heating tariff, supporting the club’s further development.

The club’s expanded capacity means that new activity strands are projected to deliver a doubling of the income stream by the end of year three with the extra revenue being used to continue the development of the building, employ part-time staff for cleaning, reception and administrative duties and to buy new equipment.

Initial outlays on state of the art insulation and heating systems have removed the burden of on-going energy bills, reducing them by 97%. Installing a natural drainage system under their car park has slashed water rates from £10,000 to £150 a year.



INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

The main support for the project came through the excellent local authority for the asset transfer and associated planning permission as well as support with the preparation of funding bids. By using local contacts and suppliers they got better deals than was possible using framework suppliers.

THE FUTURE

The club is ambitious and keen to continue improving the facility and grow the usage. Links have been established with Wigan Seagulls whose gymnasts travel to use the facility. The club is also in talks with a local school with a view to their coaches going into the school and the facility being used for end of term/year exhibitions etc.

A bank of foldaway chairs has been bought from a local theatre in order that audiences can be seated beside the floor at tournaments and display events.

Additional developments that are underway include a judges room that gives them somewhere to retire to away from competitors. Drawing on Jim and Andy's musical and technical skills an AV room is also being installed to ensure the facility benefits from professional lighting and sound equipment.

As well as being committed to an inclusive approach that makes gymnastics accessible for all the club is also keen to produce competitive gymnasts with the goal of taking part in European competition as a medium term goal.

USP

AcroNova is a genuinely inclusive community club that has created a first class facility. It is the club members and leaders that have driven the development both in terms of vision and practical application on the back of a shared passion and entrepreneurial zeal to support their children and give something to the young people of the community.

“ROBBIE, THE BUILDER, DID IT FOR THE KIDS. IT'S ABOUT GIVING SOMETHING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY,”

JIM MULHOLLAND, CHAIR



IMPACT



USAGE

- **Throughput:** 600 attendances per week (target 1000)
- **Unique users:** 500 - 200+ recreational, 209 members (British Gymnastics) and around 75 in the disability groups
- **Gender:** 85% female
- **Age range:** 5 –18
- **Disability:** 75 from 2 special educational needs schools. Affiliated with Special Olympics
- **IMD:** Predominant postcodes are CH44 / 45 / 46 (but young people travel up to eight miles to attend).

Since opening in September 2016 they have nearly doubled membership. The disability group on Friday has increased three-fold. The club now also works with a local special school from Pensby. The group attend the facility once or twice a week. They not only use the sports facility but undertake informal behaviour sessions in the cafeteria.

OTHER LOCAL IMPACT

Quality local facility

The size and quality of the facility created is perhaps unique for a club of AcroNova's status. This was driven by the community asset transfer process whereby the club came up with a plan for the space they were given rather than designing a new build to meet their existing needs. This has resulted in the transformation of a disused, semi-derelict and unsafe building that was a hub for anti-social behaviour into a start-of-the-art, sustainable, environmentally friendly, safe and accessible sports facility in the heart of the most deprived area in the Wirral.

Visitors

The quality of AcroNova's facilities draws in gymnasts from across the Wirral. It's become a community hub with parents choosing to stay and watch their children perform from the viewing gallery, where they can enjoy a cup of tea or snack. The kitchen operates on an honesty-box scheme, with people paying whatever they can afford.

Under-represented groups

The welfare officer described the young people as 'a bit wild' but the club are committed to work with all young people in the area to provide an opportunity for participation.

One of the young coaches noted the impact of the state of the art facility on the users, pointing to increased confidence and enhanced performance:

Jade Dixon, 26, has attended the club since she was 14. She now coaches:

"WE HAVE BIGGER CLASSES. IT'S GIVEN EVERYONE A BOOST AS IT'S A NICE PLACE TO TRAIN. WE NEVER USED TO HAVE MANY PARENTS STAY, BUT NOW A FEW DO, AND HELP WITH COSTUMES AND VOLUNTEERING."



Initiatives:

- A free breakfast club on the morning of day time sessions ensuring children have something to eat regardless of their social background
- An informal subsidisation policy whereby all members pay a flat fee except those who are exempted on a need-to-know basis
- Specialist training in disability sport development for coaches
- Coach development pathways for participants enabling them to achieve personal progression whilst contributing back to the club and community
- Partnering with local schools and specialist disability schools to extend the club's reach into the community
- Floodlit 50 space car-park with 10 disabled bays to accommodate visitors when hosting training/workshops/field events including regional competitions.

Stakeholder survey

In our stakeholder survey, 67.8% were very satisfied with the facility and 72.9% very satisfied or satisfied with the services provided. 96.4% said the facility had had a positive social impact locally.

SPORT ENGLAND OUTCOMES

Through our funding we aim to nurture projects which address the five health, social and economic outcomes set out in the Government's Sporting Future strategy. We feel that AcroNova strongly supports two of these outcomes in particular; individual development and social & community development.

AcroNova operate in an area which is ranked as the 24th most deprived in England. It's the 12th most deprived nationally in terms of health and disability.

The provision of a state of the art sports facility in the residential heart of this community brings sporting opportunities to the doorstep and, coupled with low fees, informal subsidies and partnerships with local schools will make those opportunities affordable to the most deprived.

Great efforts have also been made to ensure the building is fully accessible with our Inspired Facilities grant enabling the installation of a lift to the mezzanine floor and a car park with 10 disabled spaces.



The quality of AcroNova's facilities draws in gymnasts from across the Wirral. It's become a community hub with parents choosing to stay and watch their children perform from the viewing gallery, where they can enjoy a cup of tea or snack. The kitchen operates on an honesty-box scheme, with people paying whatever they can afford.

OTHER STRATEGIC OUTCOMES

Health and wellbeing: As well as the general health and fitness benefits that all participants obtain from attending AcroNova, the building has itself become a source of local pride. This was once a derelict site, located on a street where the lighting had been suspended due to local authority cuts. A place people were reluctant to park their cars for fear of them being vandalised. It's now a safe, secure, well-lit site that's welcoming to local people and visitors alike.

Personal development: Redeveloping the site has itself provided a range of opportunities for personal development, ranging from club leaders researching the latest approaches to sustainable building design and maintenance through to children engaging in and initiating diverse fundraising activities. AcroNova provides a range of opportunities for sporting and personal development as participants graduate through performance grades and then become coaches themselves.

Community development: This project has resulted in the creation of the biggest facility of its type in the North West of England. AcroNova now provide Olympic-standard equipment right in the heart of a deprived community. It's hoped that this will increase participation and widen access to sport; reduce antisocial behaviour in the area; and improve health and wellbeing amongst participants and parents.

“WE’RE AIMED AT ANY YOUNGSTER FROM AGE FIVE – WE DON’T DISCRIMINATE, ANY AGE AND ANY ABILITY, IT’S HERE FOR EVERYBODY. WE HAVE AN OPEN DOOR POLICY. THE PARENTS SIT UPSTAIRS AND HAVE A TEA OR COFFEE. THEY CONTRIBUTE TO THE HONESTY BOX BUT IF THEY HAVEN’T GOT IT, IT DOESN’T MATTER.”

KAREN JONES, WELFARE OFFICER

The club remains committed to a policy of community involvement in the longer term both in terms of who makes use of the facility but also how it's managed and run. They intend to ensure that they remain accessible to as many groups, individuals and people with specific needs as possible. Participants can shape the club with their own committee which meets with the main committee to discuss what's happening in the club and ideas for improving it.

AcroNova has become a hub for community action with parents and children organising a bag pack at a local Morrisons supermarket followed by a sponsored bounce, raising a total of £3,187 towards the facility. This community orientation reaches beyond support for the club itself. A sound system and disco lighting was recently lent to St James' church for a two-day fashion show, raising money for the church restoration fund.

Economic development: Whilst largely delivered at cost, the building work to redevelop the site has been carried out by local contractors. Much of the building material was also sourced locally. It's thought that this resulted in an estimated direct contribution of £250,000 to the local economy. Perhaps more significantly the redevelopment of the site fits well with the regeneration plan for the area which includes housing and infrastructure developments that would have been less attractive and viable without this work. The transfer of the asset to the community has also removed a burden from the local authority in terms of ongoing maintenance costs and the need to respond to local instances of anti-social behaviour.

Because of the size and quality of the facility, AcroNova have been contacted by the North West branch of the British Gymnastic Association about possible use of the facility for competitive regional events. This would also bring significant extra revenue into the area.

New ways of working: The transfer of the asset to AcroNova drove the development to adopt a more entrepreneurial approach towards fundraising and procurement. This has undoubtedly delivered a lower-cost facility within a shorter time frame than would otherwise have been possible. The installation of a glazed viewing gallery on the mezzanine floor has allowed the club to separate participants from parents, reducing distractions for the children, generating greater focus and allowing the coaches to coach and the parents to watch.

There is a kitchen area which operates on an honesty-box basis, with people making their own refreshments and leaving voluntary contributions. This has encouraged a wider sense of community ownership and respect for the facility.

The club has a strong young volunteering model and many of the coaches have come through the club as participant, volunteer coaches. This has created a bank of positive local role models for the younger gymnasts.

New types of organisation: Rather than being a gymnastics club that hires a space and delivers coaching sessions for a set period of time, AcroNova is now a community hub which, increasingly, is in use even when formal coaching is not being delivered. The process of redeveloping the site has built skills, commitment and levels of ambition.

The success has been based on the hours of volunteering invested by three main contributors, Jim, Andy and Karen. Karen describes the importance of them taking on specific defined roles, which they are committed to developing:

“JIM DOES GRANTS, ANDY AND CLIFF DO THE BUILDING AND I’M LIKE THE MOTHER HEN – MORE INVOLVED IN THE COMMUNITY AND THE PEOPLE.”

Innovations:

- AcroNova is a strong example of an environmentally friendly sports facility with:
 - A biomass boiler that saves money (including tax credits) and has minimal CO² emissions
 - Minimal heat loss due to high quality insulation. The building has been given an ‘A’ rating for energy efficiency
 - A natural waste water drainage system under the car park. Below it is 600mm of lime stone 150 tonnes of limestone that soaks away, so there is no water retention. As such, the club has no waste water rates on the car park area
- It’s only one of three clubs with a full-length tumbling facility in the North West and the only one on the Wirral.



AcroNova run a club which is open to all. Specialist training for their coaches in disability sport development has broadened the classes they can offer. They’ve also taken steps to make the building as accessible as possible, using our Inspired Facilities grant to install a lift to the mezzanine level and a car park with ten disabled spaces.

TIPS FROM ACRONOVA

- Seek help with the application form and grant process
- Be flexible – don't be too concerned if it doesn't go to plan and 'go with the flow' to some extent, but persevere
- Don't underestimate the costs, watch contractors closely and use ones you know and who are committed to the project if you can; be creative.

WHAT THEY WOULD DO DIFFERENTLY

- Do it earlier
- Manage it yourself from the start
- Only use contractors you know and who are committed to the project.



GOOD PRACTICE

- Set an opening deadline and publish it.

“WE NEEDED A HUGE PUSH AT THE END – I TOOK THREE WEEKS’ HOLIDAY FROM WORK AND PUSHED TO GET IT FINISHED,”

ANDY THURLOW, CLUB SECRETARY

- Take participation levels as the barometer of success
- Expect unexpected outcomes – AcroNova didn't expect that a special educational needs school would take up use of the facility
- Invest in sustainable building methods including biomass boiler, insulation and natural drainage
- Recycle unwanted resources such as tree cuttings, ex-display kitchens and unwanted theatre seating
- Source equipment from non-traditional sources e.g. sprung floor procured from China.

SOME LEARNING FOR SPORT ENGLAND

AcroNova suggest that we should:

- Be pro-active in highlighting the availability of additional funds
- Provide procurement guidance rather than access to a framework of contractors
- Provide template specifications for the use of sustainable building methods.



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