

# PLAYING AN ACTIVE ROLE



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**S**ome Wards within Hereford City and Leominster are in the top 20% of the most deprived areas in the UK. Residents in these areas in particular can struggle to access the facilities they need to keep active and healthy. HALO LEISURE has used the social enterprise business model to provide affordable and accessible facilities at nine leisure centres and swimming pools throughout Herefordshire. SE talked to Chief Executive JON ARGENT to find out how the organisation has become so successful.

"Differentiation is very important in a market such as ours," he says, "but we believe we have a unique selling point in that people know that all the profits made from our centres are invested directly back into the local community.

"We also pride ourselves on offering more than just fitness and leisure activities. Our centres also promote social inclusion and community safety. Our initiatives to encourage young people to participate in exercise and sporting activities, for example, have seen a reduction in anti-social behaviour, as children feel they have a purpose in life and are beginning to form relationships with older people in the community."

Halo Leisure was established as a leisure trust (a specific form of social enterprise) in 2002, when the council was under pressure to provide extra funding for its leisure centres. The organisation's founders saw an opportunity to lease the leisure centres and reach the widest customer base practicable, resulting in health and fitness activities becoming available to a more diverse demographic than ever before.

"Our users include a high proportion of older adults, unemployed people, disabled people and families with young children," says Jon. "Thanks to Halo, there are now a number of programmes on offer which encourage these people to get fit." The programmes include free swimming, a Fit 4 Free scheme for 12-16 year olds and reduced fees for senior citizens and disabled people.

"Due to financial constraints or the inability to travel to their local sports centres, the well-being of people in Herefordshire is suffering," says Jon. "Increasing numbers of children are leaving school overweight and obese, and the health of older people is also being affected. Since taking over the centres, we have been able to help tackle these issues. We have received excellent feedback from our users, the council and the community, and we have ploughed our profits back into the service to enable us to continue to grow. We are proud to have eliminated a number of barriers to participation and as a result we are working towards a healthier, happier community."

Halo has experienced continued growth over the past seven years and now has a turnover of over £6.5million and almost 200 full-time staff. Its success has been recognised by its receiving 'Highly Commended' under the national framework of excellence. "We have been able to show that social enterprises are

able to compete successfully with the market leaders – private gyms and other competitors," says Jon. "I believe part of our success is down to the way we structure our business. However, it would not have been possible without the local community's support for our services. We hope we can continue to become a larger, more diverse organisation and be recognised nationally, in the future, for our good practice."

Research has shown that users and non-users believe it is important that their leisure services are delivered by a social enterprise rather than the council. The leisure trust model has now been used by a number of councils throughout the UK. Jon believes the model is increasing in popularity because it is likely to be wholly committed to providing just one service and will not be faced with financial constraints from other departments.

As well as running the nine centres in Herefordshire, Halo has supported the needs of over 70 other businesses throughout the UK. It offers asset management software, supports local businesses in specialist areas including human resource development, and supports local authorities in outsourcing leisure services and partnership monitoring. "The consultancy service we offer to companies around the UK has proven to be extremely popular and is something that we are looking to take to an international level in the future. The profits we have made from this arm of our business have been invested back into the charity." Speaking about SEWM's Flagship Social Enterprise Programme, Jon comments: "We are looking forward to the new opportunities this programme will bring for sharing our business model and supporting other social enterprises in the region." **se**



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**IT'S A FACT** Halo Leisure: Leases nine leisure centres from Herefordshire Council / Receives over **1.5 million** visitors to its centres each year / Has an annual turnover of over **£6.7 million** / Employs **190** staff / Is one of only two companies to achieve the level of at least '**Highly Commended**' for all facilities it manages in the Quest quality awards supported by Sport England / Achieved **Investor in People** status in 2009 / Has saved and reinvested over **£37.5 million** since inception in 2002.

## MAKING CONTACT

Halo Leisure | [www.haloleisure.org.uk](http://www.haloleisure.org.uk)

**i** **Halo Leisure** is a social enterprise and registered charity, established in 2002. Staff care passionately about creating and providing opportunities for the whole community to participate in active leisure and are dedicated to providing an exciting, value for money, inclusive service.

**STUDY VISIT** | Halo Leisure will be hosting a study visit on **5 February 2010**. To register your interest, contact [s.crowder@socialenterprisewm.org.uk](mailto:s.crowder@socialenterprisewm.org.uk)