Parr Sports and Community Centre
A sports club that is transforming a deprived district of St Helens

Sector: Sport and leisure
Location: St Helens Liverpool City Region
Grant awarded: £174,515 through the Community Business Fund
Grant date: January 2019
Ownership: CIO (Charitable Incorporated Organisation)
Grant purpose
To refurbish a community centre that provides sports facilities, room hire, a café and training programmes for the community in order to create sustainable revenues and improved social outcomes in an area of considerable deprivation.

Locally rooted
Based in one of the top 1% most deprived areas of England, Parr draws the majority (93%) of its members from the streets around the centre.

Accountable to the community
The centre has over 500 members who pay £1 a year. They have full voting rights at their AGM, including the appointment of trustees.

Broad community impact
Participation in sports at Parr is actively reducing crime levels and improving health outcomes in the neighbourhood. The centre provides a safe, welcoming, supportive environment for young people, which many don’t get anywhere else in the area.

St Helens in Lancashire is a town with a proud history of coal mining and glass making. It was the home of such industrial giants as Pilkington, Beechams and Ravenhead glass and had half a dozen major collieries; Pilkingtons is now the town’s only remaining large industrial employer whilst the last pit closed in 1993.

The process of de-industrialisation has left St Helens with major issues. It is in the top ten boroughs for drugs-related admissions to hospital and in the bottom 10% for childhood obesity. Knife crime is also rising rapidly in the area with the spread of ‘county lines’ gangs out of the main cities across the North West.

St Helens is known worldwide for its professional rugby league club, which compete in the Super League, the top tier of competition in Europe. That is not the only sport that has put the town on the
map; boxing champs such as Gary Stretch and Martin Murray hail from St Helens. Wild Card ABC (an amateur boxing club named after Manny Pacquiao’s boxing gym in California), the driving force behind Parr Sports has also produced its fair crop of champions. But a boxing club based in the heart of such a disadvantaged area offers far more than health benefits to its neighbourhoods.

We fight for fun, for social acceptance. To be different, to defend ourselves. To hold our heads high, to build our confidence. To be pushed out of our comfort zones. It has changed how I see myself

Young person who trains at the centre

Parr Sports and Community Centre was established in June 2016 to undertake an asset transfer of a run-down youth centre previously managed by St Helen’s Council. This took place in May 2017 on the basis of a 25-year lease. Power to Change awarded Parr Sports a grant of £174, 515 in January 2019 toward the refurbishment of the building and the salary of a part-time Centre Manager.

The benefits of taking part in sports are well proven but boxing is a particular hook for many young people. Its values of discipline and self care go far beyond mere fitness; you can read further research on this subject here and here.

In places like St Helens, sports like boxing can play a key role in keeping vulnerable young people out of involvement in gangs and the reduction of crime levels. These risks became clear to Dominic Hodnett when he moved into the area; he knew from his own past that boxing could provide a hook to a better path. He set up sessions in a tiny hall in Parr, expecting 10 people to turn up instead of the 30 who came along.
Dominic knew little about running a club and the governance, safeguarding and fundraising involved so he engaged Sported, a 3,000 strong membership based organisation steeped in helping communities to use sport to tackle some of the knottiest issues around youth violence, community cohesion and mental health. They provided a range of services and benefits, in particular a skilled mentor to help him stabilise and grow the club.

Sported could see that facilities were always the key issue but through their support and now that of Power to Change and others, the organisation progressed from the tiny hall, to an old shipping container and finally to the merger with Parr Sports in 2018. This has meant massive increase in membership potential and a far more central location within the community. Dominic continues to run Parr Sports and was recently given the Pride of St Helens award for his work in the community.

Since Wild Card merged with Parr Sports 18 months ago, crime is down 30% in the area and the police are more likely to be seen sparring at the gym than on patrol in the area. The club has also won awards from the Merseyside Police Authority for its work in the community.
And in case you still thought that boxing was a sport just for boys and men, out of an active membership of just over 500, 52% are female.

You’ll see more emotional boxers than you would athletes in other sport. Like, you will see a grown man cry, that’s a good thing because it breaks down stigmas - that you don’t have to be so tough

Young person who trains at the centre

Trading for local benefit

Power to Change’s money sits alongside grant funding from organisations such as the Steve Morgan Foundation, Bernard Sunley Charitable Foundation, Sport England, Garfield Weston and Enovert. Over £400k has been raised in total to refurbish the centre.

As well as refurbishing the basic infrastructure of the building, the funding has gone towards two multi use games areas that get hired out for football, rugby and other sports. The enterprising nature of this community business was recognised recently by the Steve Morgan Foundation who commended Parr Sports in their Entrepreneur Awards for Community Impact in September 2019.

The needs of specific groups of local people who have been previously marginalised have also been recognised in the provision of walking football for seniors, day-time care for local mothers and sports facilities for those with disabilities.