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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FROM THE FIVE YEAR IMPACT EVALUATION  
OF THE OLD FIRE STATION - JULY 2022



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Funded by: GFS Community Enterprise

**THE  
OLD FIRE  
STATION**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## THE STORY SO FAR

**In September 2022 The Old Fire Station will celebrate its 5th Birthday. In order to capture and celebrate the story so far, the Trustees commissioned this report by Leeds Beckett University.**

The report shows the impact of the community project since its inception in 2017, during its early growth, through the pandemic and looking to the future. By consulting with the local community, partners and co-workers this report shows the project's impact on local people's health and wellbeing, the growth of strong partnership working and the solid financial footing The Old Fire Station demonstrates.

*"You'll never, never go in there and not hear laughter."*

(Community focus group)

The trustees intend that this report shows the clear advantages of the investment made, the return given and the power of partnership working.

## HOW IT BEGAN

The project originated in the collaboration between Jimbo's Fund, which was looking for a legacy project for the late Jimi Hesleden and his family, Leeds Community Foundation and local charity GIPSIL's CEO Julia Preston. Gathering momentum and vision with the addition of local charities Space2 and Zest, the project started to take form.

The collaboration had a vision of creating a community centre in the East Leeds area which had the following specific objectives:

- **The provision of a thriving hub in the heart of the area which would act as a focal point for community activity, with the intention of bring together local people, community organisations and charities.**
- **The creation of a space where local people are welcome to socialise, relax and have fun, whilst also being able to access support targeted at improving their wellbeing and quality of life.**

Whilst acknowledging that such a project would not be feasible, or indeed possible, without external funding, the founding intention was that the project would become financially self-sufficient and would develop future revenue streams which would sustain the community hub into the future.

*"We've proven that the model, I think of having six regular rent payers alongside a more dynamic room hire model works."*

(Trustee/Staff interview)

The fire station at Gipton had been a fully operational station until its closure was announced by the West Yorkshire Fire Service in 2014. The premises were identified by Julia Preston and the team at Leeds Community Foundation as the preferred location - in part due to its potential for development in line with the project vision and the status the building had held in the area during its time as a fire station.

Funding was made available to acquire and commence the renovation of the building through Jimbo's Fund, and a new charity, GFS Community Enterprise (a wholly owned subsidiary of Leeds Community Foundation) was set up to run the project. A team was put in place to manage the business planning and renovation of the site by Simpsons of York, with architectural designs by Brewster Bye.

Jimbo's Fund was, and remains, the legacy of local entrepreneur Jimi Heselden who was born and brought up in the East Leeds area before going on to manage a number of successful businesses prior to his death in 2010. Jimi never forgot the importance of "giving back" and the Heselden family wanted a legacy project for Jimi in the East Leeds area; The Old Fire Station was agreed as that project.

The renovation was concluded during 2017, with The Old Fire Station opening its doors in September that year. The Old Fire Station is now approaching its fifth anniversary. This imminent milestone was identified by management and trustees as an appropriate point to evaluate the impact that The Old Fire Station has had in the East Leeds area.

*"There are people out there who are making money and when times are good I honestly believe people have a moral obligation to use their wealth to help others."*  
(Jimi Heselden)



The Heselden Family, Jonathan Morgan and Sally-Anne Greenfield at the opening of The Old Fire Station in September 2017



*“When it comes to like aesthetics of community centres, this is probably the best-looking community centre in Leeds, it is fantastic and is it a shame that there aren’t as many like this.”*

(Community focus group)

## HOW WE WORK

A separate charitable company – GFS Community Enterprise (GFS) – was set up to host The Old Fire Station project. The initial Board of Trustees of GFS was predominantly drawn from Leeds Community Foundation’s Trustees and contacts who possessed significant experience and expertise in the areas of finance, construction and renovation.

The Board of Trustees had a clear vision from the outset that The Old Fire Station needed to be financially sustainable.

The business model initially focussed on the generation of revenue from rental of space within the building, through a combination of longer term tenants and short term room hire, and was subsequently diversified to include applications for restricted grant funding (to deliver specific programmes) and the creation of fund-raising activities held in and around the building.

At the end of the 2021/22 financial year, The Old Fire Station, aided by resident organisations on long term leases, a popular room hire offering, restricted grant income enabling a range of activity and a packed and well attended calendar of fund-raising activities, had broken even and had started to build financial reserves, including reserves specifically ring-fenced for longer term maintenance of the building. The Old Fire Station intends to be open and available to the community for the long term and is taking actions now to ensure this will be the case.

The co-location of organisations within the building has created positive outcomes other than financial such as (i) stronger partnerships, (ii) sharing of ideas and best practice, (iii) joint funding applications and (iv) sharing of resources. As a consequence, some of the resident partners now feel more visible and better connected to the community in which they are based.

The Old Fire Station and its Board of Trustees are aware that the business model should be continuously challenged, and improvements sought. It remains an aspiration that space can be expanded and further used to support the local community.

ncial management of The Old Fire Station has enabled it to deliver a significant range of activities during its first five years (listed in Appendix 3).

The Old Fire Station has proven its resilience as a community business. This was particularly evident throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrating its ability to withstand adversity, quickly responding to community need in a meaningful way, expanding partnership work, adapting to change, and continuing to grow. Although the Covid-19 pandemic presented a significant challenge to the continuance of the normal range of activities, The Old Fire Station made a commitment early in the pandemic

that it would continue to support the community. It played a significant role in the distribution of food parcels, activity packs and online delivery of activities and support. The building was also used as a drive through Covid-19 vaccination centre and was prominent in the delivery of health and safety messages within the local area.

The Old Fire Station has been aware from its inception that the local community should be involved in its operation, and steering groups have been used to gather opinion from the community ahead of the renovations and ongoing through networking in the local area. The Old Fire Station is aware that its continued success relies upon backing from the local community and is currently working on ideas to appoint community ambassadors and regularly seek opinion through resident organisations and other local groups.

*“What I like about the fire station is it’s a collective of organisations that want to achieve things exactly the same as what we do.”*  
(Trustee/Staff interview)



*“Covid on the one hand disrupted work and development of some plans, but also prompted new ways of working and closer partnerships and some of that will be kept going forward.”*  
(Trustee/Staff interview)



*“I am so happy I found this place, I have met new people, got advice about the area and how to keep my bills down, everyone is so friendly and nice, I want to come more often. The zero-waste food and clothing has helped reduce my anxiety about cost of living.*

*Being in a relaxed setting with friendly people is really helpful after the Covid lockdowns. I love and need this place!”*

*(Questionnaire respondent)*

## **EVALUATING OUR IMPACT**

The Old Fire Station appointed an independent team from Leeds Beckett University to perform the evaluation to specifically consider:

- The impact and reach of The Old Fire Station and conclude a Social Return on Investment (“SROI”) analysis; and
- The perception of The Old Fire Station from the perspective of multiple stakeholders (including trustees, staff, resident organisations, external partners, volunteers and the local community).

The data required to conclude the evaluation was collected from (i) impact questionnaires completed by those who attend The Old Fire Station or form part of the local community, (ii) monitoring data and financial records provided, (iii) conclusion of interviews and focus groups with a varied group of stakeholders and (iv) the completion of feedback sheets by children who regularly visit and use the facilities at The Old Fire Station.

The data gathering exercise took place during April and May 2022 and, at the end of this period, 272 questionnaires were returned, 16 stakeholder interviews and 1 focus group held, and 7 feedback sheets completed by young people in the 7 – 12 age range.

It is clear from the evidence obtained that of those people who attend The Old Fire Station, a significant proportion (representing 45.6% of respondents excluding staff) visit at least once a week. More important in evaluating the impact of The Old Fire Station on its community is the fact that 30.9% of those who visited were from the same postcode area as The Old Fire Station and a further 33.2% were from neighbouring postcodes. The Old Fire Station is attracting the very people it was created to help!

The evaluation has identified the fact that a large proportion (83.6%) of those who attend identify as white. Although this figure is consistent with the percentage of people identifying as white within the city of Leeds, it is acknowledged by The Old Fire Station that actions should be identified to try and attract those from different ethnicities.

*“I think the heart of the building is really the café because the people come here not necessarily knowing what we offer, not really knowing what they need. And then once they get in the building. And they head in, you know, and that’s the friendly café, that’s when they start to see the notices or... they’ll, they’ll hear me and [NAME] talking and they’ll come and I’ll have a chat... And it really encourages them to do more.”*

(Trustee/Staff interview)

The café within the building is a significant draw and this was validated by the evidence collected, with 62.9% of respondents citing a visit to the café as one of their reasons for visiting The Old Fire Station. The classes, activities and events held at the building were also popular, with 59.9% of respondents citing these as a reason for visiting.

The classes, activities and events held at The Old Fire Station are intended to (i) support a wide range of people, including those with learning difficulties or those affected by homelessness, and (ii) promote initiatives such as healthy eating. The high percentage of people regularly visiting and attending classes is indicative of the fact that The Old Fire Station is reaching those people it was intended to help.

The Old Fire Station continues to raise its profile in the local area through joining local networks and through the current **Meet Me at The Old Fire Station** partnership initiative, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund. The evaluation also highlighted that, in addition to increased awareness, The Old Fire Station should continue to identify opportunities to develop its offerings and surroundings, in particular (i) family focussed activities, (ii) greater diversity and (iii) community room hire.

The evaluation provides corroboration that not only has The Old Fire Station been able to reach the local community, but is also reaching those in more vulnerable groups of society. In particular, the evidence suggests those who attend and use The Old Fire Station have better levels of ‘good health’ when compared to national data and when compared to those who often have feelings of loneliness.

The evaluation identified that those who visit The Old Fire Station consider themselves as having more people to talk to and more friends, and reported feeling less lonely and more relaxed. The social impact of The Old Fire Station on those who attend is evident from both the assessment of those who visit the building and organisations operating out of it

*“I’ve met more people, made new friends and have activities to attend 3 days a week. It gives structure to my week which is important to me and a place just call in for a coffee”*

(Questionnaire respondent)

Finally, it must be acknowledged that The Old Fire Station has created numerous volunteering opportunities for people from the local community. Those who volunteer have experienced positive outcomes and, in many cases, have also found that the act of volunteering has improved their employability. There are a number of great stories of volunteers who have put the skills and confidence learned at The Old Fire Station to use in paid employment.

When looking at the overall impact, it is calculated that The Old Fire Station has an SROI of at least £20.41 and is directly contributing to annual savings within the National Health Service of £365,004

## **THE OLD FIRE STATION’S STATEMENT FOR THE FUTURE**

We are confident that the five years that have elapsed since The Old Fire Station opened represent only the start of our journey. In order to build on our success to date and create something even better, we know there are a number of actions for us to take. In particular:

- **We will further enhance the engagement of the community in what we do.**
- **We will ensure that our setting remains as welcoming as it is today and identify those changes which will make it even better.**
- **We will augment the relationships with our existing external partners and seek new opportunities to develop our partnership network.**
- **We will ensure that our activities and opportunities are diverse and appeal to a range of differing communities.**





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