

Sports Recycler

Combining healthy lifestyle, landfill reduction and work experience

Sports Recycler provides a socially beneficial solution to an environmental problem. The social enterprise based in South Shields salvages and refurbishes discarded bicycles and offers them back to the local community for hire or purchase at a low cost. It is helping to promote a healthy lifestyle and make it more affordable to people on low incomes, and it is also providing training and work experience.



Manager Trish Armitage (centre) with two volunteers (left) and two representatives of Premier Waste Management

Set up in 2005, Sports Recycler currently employs one full-time worker and has a team of 10 volunteers. These are people disadvantaged in the job market, either due to long-term unemployment or mental or physical health issues. They are trained in bike maintenance, customer service and first aid. They help Sports Recycler to rescue and refurbish an average of 250 cycles a year.

To sustain its core activity – the recycling of bikes for reuse by the community – Sports Recycler offers a range of services including bike servicing and maintenance, bike maintenance courses, 'try before you buy' hire of fitness equipment (such as treadmills, rowing machines, weights and Wii Fit), the hire of a van, minibus and cycle trailers, and guided tours geared to specific needs of the group.

The guided tours are much appreciated by community groups such as the Wear Kids Sunderland Youth Offending Service who praised Sports Recycler for “providing a full and comprehensive ride package which enabled ... young people to experience the delights of mountain biking”, stating “the programme was delivered in a fully professional manner which allowed the young people (and staff!!) to push themselves beyond their comfort limits while remaining safe.”

In 2008 Sports Recycler set up a separate company, Experiential (North East) Ltd, to operate as a more commercial trading arm. Experiential has two business operations: Cybercycler, an online shop selling cycles and accessories, and Ecocycler, a fleet of cycle rickshaws available for hire for events and functions.

Ecocycler became an instant success through a contract with South Tyneside Council as part of its 'Picture Yourself in South Shields' campaign during which locals and visitors were transported along designated routes to local beauty spots and the town centre via the Ecocycles.

The profits made by Experiential are donated to Sports Recycler.

In addition, Sports Recycler has received support from Business Link, South Tyneside Means Business and other funders including the Big Lottery Fund, Coalfields Regeneration Trust and the North of England Enterprise Investment Centre.

Despite the success and positive impact of Sports Recycler's work, and the growing profile of social enterprise in general, manager Trish Armitage recognises the challenges facing social enterprise, and the need for it to distinguish itself as different from both private business and the voluntary and community sector.

"A social enterprise is a business; despite our not for profit basis, we aim to make a surplus as this goes straight back into providing services for the local community," says Trish Armitage. "Social entrepreneurs should step away from the 'project' idea common to many highly valued organisations and groups within the voluntary and community sector. Social enterprise is indeed a part of the Third Sector, but has a significantly different place within that sector to said voluntary and community groups."

"Just as with other businesses, social enterprise needs to develop and evolve – too many social enterprises have flown too high too quickly and folded just as quickly. It may be a hard slog, and a good reputation can take some earning; entrepreneurs should be constantly looking for ways to improve and progress and respond to the needs of the community as the team at Sports Recycler are dedicated to doing."

Where the money comes from

Sports Recycler is a sustainable social enterprise because its income comes from a variety of sources as follows:

- 15% from its own trading activities (bike servicing, hire of equipment, guided tours etc)
- 35% from the trading activities of Experiential
- 35% from service level agreements or contracts
- 15% from grants.

Contact

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Ecocycle driver Dave Arundel takes a close look at 'Conversation Piece' by artist Juan Munoz at Little Haven Beach, South Shields