

SFN Team · Jun 13, 2024

Doncaster Squash Club from Membership to Pay-and-Play



Viewing from the balcony at Doncaster Squash Club

Just before the pandemic, Doncaster Squash Club in the UK, a community squash club open to all members of the community, flipped its business model from a membership to a pay-and-play facility . The move was controversial, but the impact has been remarkable.

Previously, the club had an atmosphere that wasn't welcoming to new members, with only 27 regular players, including just one woman. Today, there are over 1,100 registered players.

Under the old model, members paid £86 per year and could book courts for £3. However, the club had no system to track who paid membership fees and was spending £12 per player to register them for local competitions. Financially, the club was unsustainable, with Les often using his own money for repairs and other expenses. It was unsustainable.

The change began when Les Close partnered with David Cooke, an entrepreneur and fitness coach with a background in the British Army. They aimed to create a club that welcomed everyone from the community, especially children and adolescents,

Les and David became co-directors and transformed the club into a Community Interest Company (CIC), reinvesting all profits back into the club. They abolished the annual membership fee, implementing a £5 charge per person to book a court, making the club accessible to everyone.

This decision was initially unpopular with existing members, but David believed it was essential. "The membership system was pushing more people away than it was welcoming them," he said. The new model proved successful, with the club tripling its monthly turnover in a short time.

'THE CULTURE STARTED TO CHANGE'

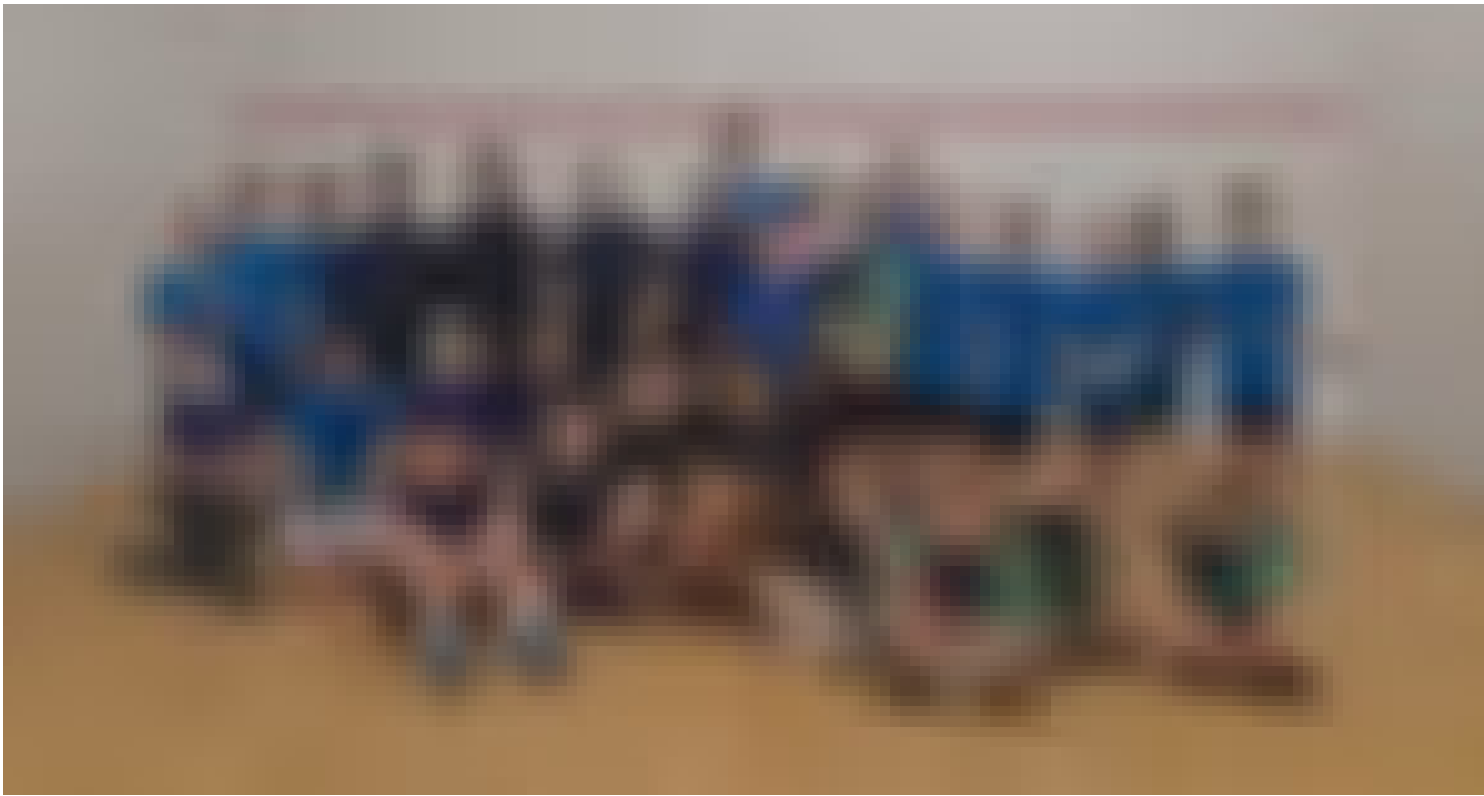
David and Les reached out to local businesses, schools, and promoted squash through social media. They also secured funding from local and national bodies, including a £200 grant from England Squash for free women's squash sessions. The club's culture shifted to become more inclusive and welcoming.



A part of the 100 new regular players

"We spread the word that everybody had the opportunity to come and play. The elitist culture started to change and become more welcoming," says David. Soon, 100 new regular players were coming through the doors.

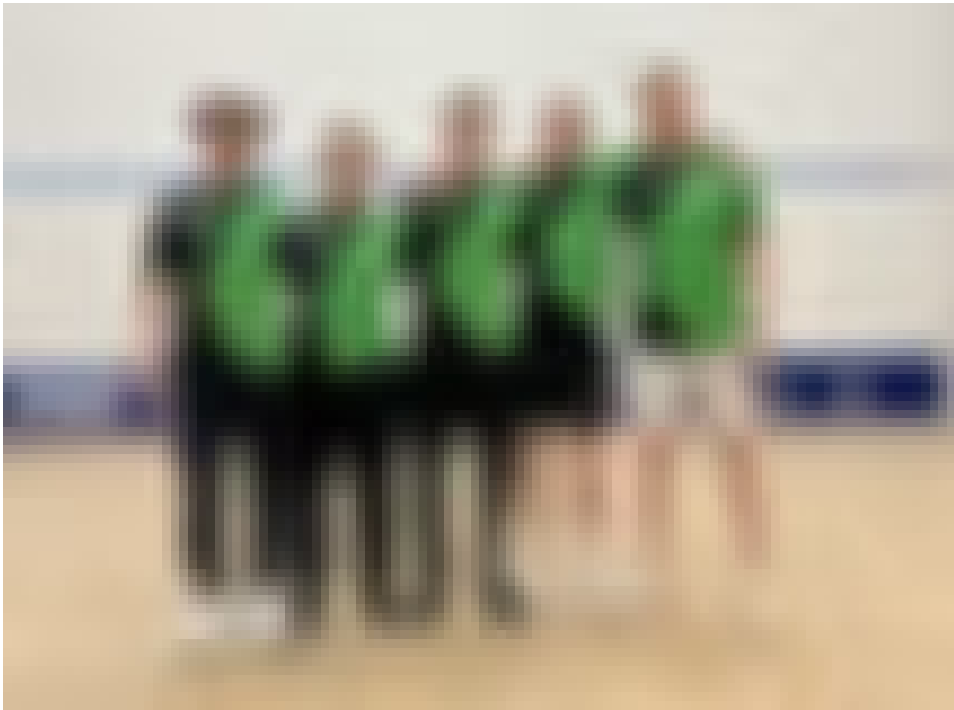
Since the pandemic, the club's growth has accelerated. From a membership of around 150, only 37 of whom were regular players, the club now has 1,100 registered players. Court bookings have increased to 16 per night on average.



Junior program has also flourished, growing to 40 players

The junior program has also flourished, growing to 40 players and hosting its first Sheffield and District junior competition. Long-standing member Ted McQueen has been instrumental in this development.

DONCASTER'S SQUASH ROLE MODELS



Coaches of the Doncaster Squash Club

Doncaster Squash Club has also invested in coaches and role models to inspire both juniors and adults. Notable figures include New Zealand international Joel Arscott, Yorkshire Premier League team captain, world No.55 Simon Herbert, England Masters player Darren Lewis, and top PSA players Joel Makin, Patrick Rooney, and Scotland No.1 Greg Lobban.

In March, the Doncaster Ghosts, named after their sponsor who breeds peregrine falcons, won the Yorkshire Premier League title for the first time. "These players create a real buzz and inspire the next generation," said David.

The club has expanded from three to six teams, with two more waiting to join local leagues when court time is available.

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Les and David faced challenges in transforming the club, but they have no regrets. "Our membership fee was actually relatively cheap," said David. "I've spoken to people at other clubs where fees can be up to £400 per year. That just puts people off. We would be very reticent to go down that membership route again."

The club is now a melting pot of people, free from elitism and cliques, offering a welcoming environment where members can enjoy squash, the gym, and a thriving social scene. Despite some initial resistance, the positive outcomes have validated their approach.

Dave Cooke told Doncaster Squash Club's story during a Squash Facilities Network session at the PSA Foundation's Squash Summit in Birmingham in June 2024. [Read more](#)