

Paris Smith: on song with the YMCA

Southampton-based law firm Paris Smith is a major supporter of local charities and delighted to count YMCA Fairthorne Group as both a client and a member of its Charity Forum information exchange. *The Business Magazine* looks at how the relationship has evolved

Not every charity has a famous song. Whether the Village People’s disco classic YMCA helps or hinders its image has often been a moot point for the eponymous charity.

“Surveys have shown that while our brand awareness among the public is very high, the perception of what we actually do is quite low,” pointed out Chris Hand, CEO of YMCA Fairthorne Group, which runs the charity’s operations in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

“We are a community-based charity that provides opportunities for people to lead happy and healthy lives. We do this by working in communities with as many people as would like to be involved with us,” he explained.

Hand made his personal peace with the pop song in 2000 at a local YMCA festival organised for young carers. “We had a disco in the evening and seeing 650 youngsters loudly singing YMCA with all the actions made me feel very proud,” he recalled.

The YMCA was formed in 1844; the YMCA Fairthorne Group started in 2002 and is one of around 100 organisations in the UK that form the YMCA ‘federation’.

Experienced legal team

Paris Smith had previously supported YMCA Fairthorne with informal advice and providing volunteers at its Young Carers weekend and was in the frame when the charity decided to change its legal adviser.

YMCA Fairthorne opted to move to regional law firm to Paris Smith. “As a client, we wanted a more personal service where we feel we are important to our law firm,” said Hand. “We are a specialist charity as well as a housing association, and this involves areas of law that Paris Smith is perfectly capable of dealing with very well.”

Paris Smith’s reputation as a local firm with a 200-year history serving the Solent area was another important consideration for YMCA Fairthorne. So was the firm’s commitment to the voluntary sector, demonstrated by setting up its Charity Forum to exchange ideas and advice.

“The firm definitely feels like it is rooted in Southampton and the local area. They have been very helpful providing us with local charity and community



Chris Hand

connections. It’s been a very good fit for us,” said Hand.

Paris Smith has a team of 15 specialising in charity and education work. At a broader level, many of the firm’s partners and staff are involved in the local community as trustees of charities and school governors.

“We are one of the largest provider of legal services to charities in the Central South,” said Paris Smith partner Nick Vaughan. “As specialists in the charity sector we deal with most things charities need to know about and we understand the issues they face. There has always been a strong culture at Paris Smith of supporting our local community.”

Vaughan leads the Paris Smith team for YMCA Fairthorne, supported by commercial property partner James Snaith and David Eminton, head of

dispute resolution who works on the more contentious aspects of acquiring and disposing of properties. Laura Trapnell, head of the IP team, has advised YMCA Fairthorne on branding matters and Liam Doughty on corporate finance issues

One of Paris Smith’s first assignments for YMCA Fairthorne was conveyancing work for moving its head office from the 100-acre Fairthorne Manor, near Botley, to Bugle Street in the centre of Southampton.

As well as running an education and community facility at Fairthorne Manor, the charity focuses on early years childcare provision and operating a growing number of local community centres across its region. YMCA Fairthorne also has around 100 residential units in Southampton and a similar number in Basingstoke, with others on the Isle of Wight. A core of around 300 employees rises to nearer 450 during holiday periods, when demand peaks for its holiday camps and childcare services.



Nursery – one of YMCA’s Early Years staff reading a book to children



Nursery – Fairthorne Manor nursery children out on a boat trip

“Our operation is based on a social enterprise model. We earn money where we can and spend it where we need to. We don’t do anything that we don’t think will contribute to our mission,” said Hand.

Childcare provision currently accounts for around 55% of its activities. “If you want to make a difference and help change people’s lives then the early years is a great place to start,” he pointed out.

Rapid response

YMCA Fairthorne has opened two new community centres in the last two years and a further eight are planned. “Our business strategy calls for quite an aggressive property acquisition programme and that’s where we rely on Paris Smith, who have also provided a useful legal perspective on our business plan,” said Hand.

The firm works on a mixed property portfolio of freehold and leasehold properties. “We advise on the purchase and disposal of leases, as well as making sure properties can be used for all the services YMCA Fairthorne wants to offer,” said Vaughan.

Completing deals for community centres in New Milton and Andover put YMCA Fairthorne under intense time pressure. “For New Milton, we had to allocate central government grant aid in a time frame that gave us less than 12 months to build and open the centre,” said Hand. “The positive experience with Paris Smith gave us a very good template for getting future community centres off the ground.”

Finalising contracts to build the community centre in Andover provided Hand with a “stressful day” that Paris Smith helped him overcome. “We needed to order the frame for the building but didn’t know if we owned the land or had planning permission or a bank loan in place. It all came right by the end of the day. It was good to know we had Paris Smith there with us every step of the way,” said Hand.

“It’s good to be considered a trusted member of the YMCA Fairthorne team,” said Vaughan. “It makes it easier to discuss issues and projects with them, as well as liaise with other professional advisers, so we can help deliver projects on time.”

Actions speak louder than words

Paris Smith has proved its value to YMCA Fairthorne time and again.



Daycamps at Fairthorne Manor – Felix (in the middle in his wheelchair) wanted to go to daycamps like any other child and managed to get as many of his school mates to come with him. YMCA offers places for children who require 1:1 support, called our ‘buddies’



Housing support – a tenant being provided support by a YMCA member or staff to complete job applications/support applications

“Actions speak louder than words. Nick delivers what he says he will when he says he will,” noted Hand.

“We feel they always do a good job. Another way our relationship is strong is in our social interactions. We invite Nick and his team to our events and they make the effort to attend. It’s not just about business for them, they care about us as a charity and as a client,” he added.

For Paris Smith it’s a simple matter of pride. “We’re very proud of the work we do in the charity and education sectors. YMCA Fairthorne is an important part of that and we were delighted when they appointed us,” said Vaughan.

Networking and the Charity Forum

The Paris Smith Charity Forum has around 350 members from across the region. The firm arranges an annual event along with regular seminars throughout the year. “We believe it is the biggest gathering of charities in the south,” said Vaughan.

“The Forum is a useful opportunity for us to network and there are always good speakers on topics like fundraising, volunteering and finance,” said Hand.

The going is getting tougher for many charities, observed Vaughan: “Government funds are more difficult to obtain. There are more hoops to jump through and the sector is becoming more heavily regulated. The Charity Commission expects charities to act like businesses in areas such as health and safety and on employment issues. That’s why Paris Smith set up the Charity Forum to provide support for local organisations like YMCA Fairthorne.”

parissmith.co.uk

