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# CASE STUDY

## *Bill Holroyd CBE DL*

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*Bill Holroyd* has invested in and been a director of more than 25 companies in the past 15 years. He is the founder and current Chairman of the Bolton-based charity [OnSide Youth Zones](#).

The development of OnSide stemmed from his time as Chairman of the Bolton Lads and Girls Club, where he was overwhelmed by the positive impact it made on the lives of young people in the area. OnSide aims to build a network of 21<sup>st</sup> century youth facilities across the UK, giving young people quality, safe and affordable places to go in their leisure time. In addition to his role as Chairman, Bill also has responsibility for capital fundraising and links with national government.

### *Q. How did your philanthropy journey begin?*

My mum drummed into us as kids that you can't succeed in life unless you're in balance yourself, and you can't build happiness on other people's unhappiness.

There have been a number of people in my life who were a source of inspiration and help to me along the way – even the teacher who expelled me from school for being mischievous! I've had great advice throughout my life and I feel a sense of responsibility to pay that back by giving others the same opportunities. I probably see 100 people a year who come to me for business advice or to pitch an idea, and I'll always make time for them – I see that as part of my philanthropy.

So within my means I've always been reasonably philanthropic, but my 'lightbulb moment' – when it all really started – was when I became Chairman of the Bolton Lads and Girls Club in 2005. I got involved out of the blue – I'm not from Bolton, I have no links there whatsoever, and I'd never worked with young people. But someone phoned me up and asked if I'd like to be Chairman and for some inexplicable reason I just said 'yes' immediately. I knew it vaguely by reputation as being somewhere great, and deep in my psyche I suppose there must have been a desire to do it!

### *Q. How did your involvement with the Club develop?*

When I went there for the first time, I was completely and utterly blown away. If I say to people 'close your eyes and draw a mental picture of a youth club', everyone draws the same picture – leaky roof, creaky floorboards and a broken ping pong table. It's testament to how bad we've become at looking after kids in their leisure time. In fact, if I want to get people interested in what we're doing, I have to avoid saying the words 'youth club' because they just go to sleep.

No kid in their right mind would want to go to rubbish premises. But there is a massive need out there. You suddenly think of these kids where you would normally see them – on the street – and think, 'They really do not have anywhere decent to go'. You realise that nobody's dealing with it.

Bolton was different. They'd created a world-class facility that had kids queuing out the door. The first time I walked into this place, there were 300 kids in a fabulous building, occupied with 20 different activities from sports to creative arts – dance, art, music, drama. Then there were options for kids who just needed somewhere to chill out or do their homework. They have 350 volunteers, and they even have a waiting list! The community loves it and the kids love it. It's a great example of the public sector, the private sector, the volunteers and the kids all working together. Kids are like blotting paper – you give

them a good environment and they soak it up. I saw how good it was and thought 'wow, we'd better replicate this'.

It's similar to spotting a great investment – you travel the world and you see great ideas and some great ways of doing things – and your business brain clicks in and says 'right, this needs rolling out across the country'. So I suppose that was the moment that I got seriously into philanthropy.

I did three years as the Chairman, which was just giving time really – although of course I gave a bit of money. Then in the last year there I said 'can I have your permission to use your intellectual property, because I think this is appropriate for every town in the country?' What was missing was an enabling organisation. So at that time, I had some money and I put some money in, but what I gave was 80% of my time – my working life.

If you ask an entrepreneur what's his most precious resource, it won't be money, it will be time. I treated it like a business, got together the money from wherever I could, and we set about showing people how to replicate it. The numbers are quite scary: it's £6m to open one of these centres and it's £1m a year to run one. So we set up OnSide and that's where it started.

*Q. Was anyone else involved, or was it all down to you?*

No, I opened my black book! Everyone I approached knew about the Bolton Lads and Girls Club, and I think they trusted me. We put together a board of really talented people; they were all activists, they weren't just sat there to go through the motions, they all took on one aspect of the work. We were able to recruit people, got more money coming in, and then it started coming together. You know, at the outset I didn't say 'I'm going to give 80% of my time', it's just turned out that way. I just said 'I'm going to go at this flat out', but that's what I do – I invest and I grow things.

I've always been an investor in first stage businesses – the hardest end, the start-ups. A few of them have gone really well, a few have been disasters! But you learn. I looked at OnSide as a business that needed to grow. We had to get the best people and be as business-like as possible, with the financial controls, the management of growth and the marketing. People moan about marketing in charities, but it's too big a job to do unprofessionally. We have a small advertising budget, but I'd like it to be ten times what it is because unless people know what the need is and what the solution is, then you just don't get anywhere.

*Q. Why do you think it's important for philanthropists to work with others?*

The Big Society is a great idea, but it doesn't happen in a vacuum. When you get the public, private and volunteer sector working together it is awesome. It is unbelievably productive. Each party on their own can make a mess of it, but together they have all the resources and enthusiasm they need. It's astounded me: if we totted it up we'd be at over £70m in donations by councils, the government and the private sector, because they can see that it's a big solution, done professionally, for a big problem.

I've never been turned down when I've asked someone to join in. Somebody three weeks ago phoned me up and said, 'I'm giving you £10m'. Wow. We've had pledges of £3m, of £5m. We've had councils unlock land with every possible covenant on it. When they really want to do something they've carved a way through it all to make land available in the right place – a philanthropist on their own couldn't achieve that. That's the power of bringing everyone together.

*Q. You've talked about OnSide being an 'enabling organisation'. What do you mean by that?*

Everybody just wants someone to take care of all the 'doing' and make sure it's sustainable. There's nothing worse as a philanthropist than chucking money at something and then finding it boarded up in two years' time – it's deeply hurtful. So giving money and knowing there's a management structure around it to ensure that money is properly used, and it's results-based and sustainable, and it's continuously improving – that helps enormously. At the end of every session our Youth Zones have a critique: What could we have done better? How can we do it better tomorrow? Are our customers happy? What can we do to improve the service?

I've been astounded by the response. Our donors are on a different level, they just see the way that we could change Britain – honestly, I know it sounds ridiculous, but everybody's said everything we've done is ridiculous. We see no reason on earth why within the next ten years every child in the country couldn't have somewhere safe and inspiring to go in their leisure time.

These facilities [at OnSide] are modern and fit for purpose. There are trained staff doing every activity – it's not done on an amateurish basis. And there's no pressure on the kids to do anything. But the important thing is they're having a relationship with adults who, in their main lives, are something to be avoided at all costs, usually because they're 'authority'. They're surprised that there are volunteers around them – people who are spending time with them because they *want* to – and that is transformational to the relationship.

*Q. What advice would you give to other people who are at the start of their philanthropy journey?*

I would say, 'get involved'. For lots of people – and you know, I'm the same – most of it's tokenism. You write a cheque just to get out of doing something. I've bought another cricket bat, yet another signed rugby shirt, I've even got a motorcycle that I bought at a charity auction! And that's all well and good, but if you want to really do something then you have to give something of yourself.

When I first went to Bolton Lads and Girls Club, I was way out of my comfort zone. It scared the living daylights out of me, because these were the kids who you suddenly realised you'd cross the street to avoid. But it's sort of a case of 'no pain no gain'. And it's hard because your time is precious. Managing my diary is probably the most challenging thing, and sometimes I think 'Do I really want to go to a Youth Zone this evening?', but when you're there, it's all worth it.

Use your skills and bring your business brain to the table. I help to grow businesses – that's what I do. Do what you do, do it well, and make sure whatever you support is sustainable. You also have to get good at saying 'no' – not nastily, but in an explained, reasoned way be clear that you can only do so much. You can't do everything, and sometimes saying no is a torturous thing. But I prefer to do some things properly, rather than a load of things badly – that's what works for me.

*Q. Is your family involved in your philanthropy?*

My family have always known about OnSide and been very supportive. My wife Julie and I talked about it and agreed that it was what we wanted to do.

We've also recently set up a family charitable trust, partly to support OnSide but also to get the kids more involved. We've always supported local things and hope that our children will be involved as they get older. I know as a parent that probably 80% of how they're going to turn out is embedded in how they spend their leisure time and their interaction with other people, and only 20% is their education. They love it at school and it's transformed their lives. They wouldn't say boo to a goose when they went there and now they're interesting people, they're involved in all manner of activities from drama to art. Well, why shouldn't every kid have that opportunity?

*Q. What do you see as the key challenges and opportunities for philanthropy in the UK?*

In my opinion, we need to focus on communities. In our Youth Zones, you get a complete reflection of all the groups in the local community, and they all get on perfectly. But many of our communities are becoming increasingly divided and intolerant and that's very worrying. That's why it's so important for the charity sector and the private sector and the public sector to be working together.

*Q. How do you see your philanthropy developing in the future?*

We've got ambitious goals for OnSide – we want every young person in the UK to have somewhere safe and inspiring to go in their leisure time. I don't see any reason why we can't achieve that. We have a great network of supporters and some great businesses involved.

On a personal level, we've now got a great team of people in place and I'd like to step back a bit into more of a non-executive role. I've given a huge amount of my time for many years, and there are other things I'd like to do!

I will continue to give. After 2008, when things were very hard, I made a deal with myself that if everything came good again, I would give 20% of everything I made to our charitable foundation. And I've stuck to that. A good friend of mine has a very simple mantra: 'Work hard and be nice to people'. And I love that! It comes back to that idea of having balance in your life. You can achieve superficial happiness by having ever more ridiculous assets, but if it's all one way, you don't achieve anything like deep-down happiness.

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