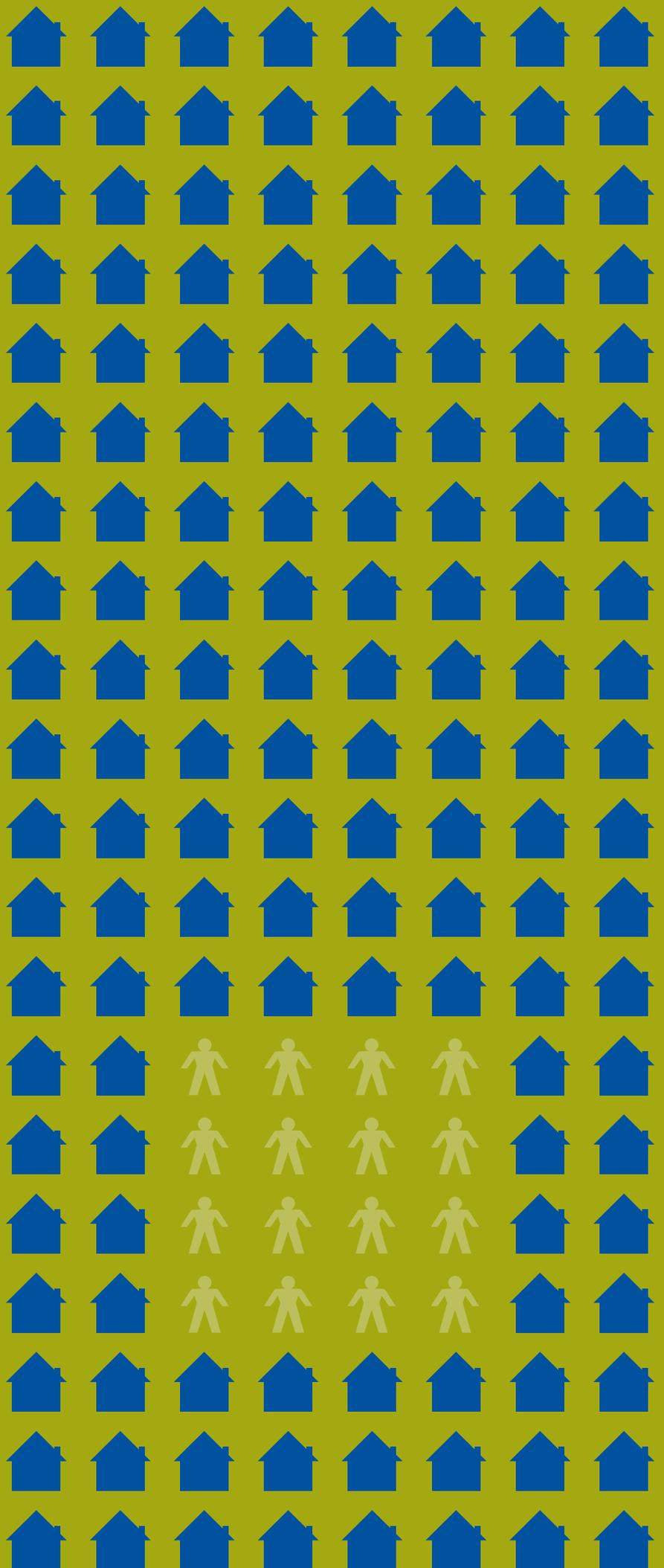


Neighbourhood
Learning Centres

Case Study

Thornton Lodge
Neighbourhood
Learning Centre
(Huddersfield)



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Introduction

Thornton Lodge Neighbourhood Learning Centre (NLC) is a newly established resource serving the Pakistani community in the Thornton Lodge and Lockwood areas of Huddersfield. The NLC has been set up by the Pakistani Community Alliance (PCA) – a formally constituted, independent community partnership body that is committed to developing the full potential of the Pakistani community. PCA has a broad membership, based on individual and organisational affiliations from all sections of the Huddersfield Pakistani community.

There is a significant and growing number of ethnic minority communities in Huddersfield. Of these, the Pakistani community forms the largest group (almost 50%) and is very much concentrated in the inner areas of Huddersfield, including Thornton Lodge and Lockwood. Within the community, high unemployment – particularly amongst young people – is compounded by poor educational attainment and further accentuated by racial/religious discrimination. This reduces competitiveness and minimises the Pakistani community's capacity to play a fuller and more active role in taking up opportunities and contributing positively to the wider community.

Community Ownership

Thornton Lodge NLC will offer local people the opportunity to re-engage with learning in a local, non-threatening and supportive environment. The concept of community ownership is central to the operation of the NLC, and PCA is committed to transferring ownership to local people within 12-18 months of the Centre's opening (see Management Arrangements section below). Management meetings are very open and non-members are welcome to sit-in and find out what is being discussed.

Prior to the establishment of the NLC, a high quality, in-depth research project was undertaken to examine the educational needs of the adult Pakistani community in South Kirklees, with special reference to the Lockwood and Thornton Lodge areas. Questionnaires were sent to a random sample of 300 local residents who were then visited by a researcher who completed the questionnaire with them, offering bi-lingual support if required. Although labour-intensive, the benefits of this methodology have been huge. An excellent response rate (87%) and high quality data have underpinned conclusions and recommendations that are providing a firm basis for the development of the NLC.

The community has felt let down on a number of occasions in the past when consultation exercises have failed to result in positive local outcomes: a significant number of research respondents expressed cynicism about the likelihood that the research would actually lead to the

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provision of resources. However, the face-to-face contact by the researcher began the process of generating community interest and, as soon as the NLC began to take shape, people started to drop in and to express their eagerness to participate in learning opportunities.

The NLC is well supported by members of the community through PCA and other local groups and there is a great deal of enthusiasm for, and excitement about, the project. The first meeting of community representatives was well-attended, with discussions focusing on the desire for community ownership, despite the early stage of development of the Centre. An early challenge faced by NLC staff was to maintain commitment and enthusiasm of community representatives, while ensuring that the project was not 'hijacked' by particular interest groups before it had become established as a resource for the community as a whole.

An important factor in the success of the Centre has been the open door policy. All visitors are welcomed and encouraged to use the facilities, even if only to make a cup of tea. In conversations with users, the NLC team stress that the Centre belongs to the community and, as people gain confidence, they rapidly begin contributing ideas and exploring ways of getting involved.

When the Centre first opened, many people believed that bars or shutters would be needed for security purposes. In the event, however, there has not been a single incident of theft or vandalism against the Centre, suggesting that the NLC is indeed perceived as belonging to the community. This is the first time that the community has been provided with a resource that is community-led, rather than serviced by others. The NLC is providing a focus for community cohesion where people can interact, connect to mainstream services and gain the confidence to take up the opportunities that are available to them.

Management Arrangements

Overall accountability for the project lies with the PCA Management Committee, while day-to-day management is the responsibility of the NLC Management Committee. This is comprised of representatives of PCA, the local community, and service providers, whose involvement helps to avoid duplication of provision and aids planning and communication.

The NLC Management Committee is charged with overseeing the NLC's progress and maintaining a community led approach. It meets monthly and provides the PCA with a written progress report on both the NLC project and the UK online project that is based within the Centre. A link person, who is a member of both management groups, facilitates communication and the flow of feedback.

The day-to-day operation of the NLC is the responsibility of the Development Worker, who works closely with the UK online tutor.

The Development Worker reports to the NLC Management Committee, providing feedback on activities and becoming involved in discussions about future developments. The UK online project worker reports formally to Kirklees Communities On Line (KCOL) – the Kirklees UK online project – with parallel accountabilities through PCA.

Reference has already been made to PCA's commitment to pass ownership of the NLC to the community. It is intended that, within the next three to six months, the NLC will become a properly constituted, independent, locally owned organisation – allowing PCA to move on to other projects. The Management Committee has recently begun to explore the possibility of setting up an Advisory Group – with representatives of Voluntary Action Kirklees (VAK), education, regeneration and other agencies, and local partnerships – to act as a steering group and prepare the ground for PCA withdrawal. The idea of a local learning forum is also being considered as a mechanism for community involvement in the running of the NLC.

Partnerships

Thornton Lodge NLC is the result of a partnership between the local authority (Kirklees Metropolitan Council, Education Service) and the voluntary sector (PCA and VAK). The emerging NLC represents a positive step towards service delivery that is community-driven rather than being 'parachuted-in' by the local authority. The support and advice given by the local authority and VAK has been invaluable to the PCA as it has gained confidence in managing the project. Importantly, local authority and VAK representatives have taken the view that, while support should be available, direction and leadership must come from within the community.

The opportunity to ally the NLC and KCOL (UK online) projects has brought tremendous resources – both ICT and human – to the NLC, and offers further opportunities for partnership working. As one of 14 Neighbourhood ICT Centres, Thornton Lodge NLC will develop close links with the other 13 ICT Centres and with the many satellite centres currently being established in the area. The NLC plans to offer advice and support to other centres in relation to the use of other-language (e.g. Urdu) software packages.

Early efforts invested in networking activities have led to significant progress in establishing partnership working. For example:-

- Huddersfield Technical College is supportive of the NLC and plans to work collaboratively to address local learning needs;
- affiliate membership has been acquired with the GAIN (Guidance, Advice and Information Network) Partnership;
- consultation has taken place with the local employment initiative, Job Placement Link (JPL), and a weekly job search surgery has been established in the NLC office;

- in partnership with Kirklees Benefit Advice Service, an over 50s advisory session is taking place on a weekly basis;
- local mosques have been approached and have pledged their full support to the NLC. Mosques are strong institutions with excellent community links and an existing educational role through the provision of support with academic school work, as well as religious education for local children;
- links have been developed with a neighbouring Islamic girls' college and NLC users are frequently referred to the adult learning opportunities offered there by the Technical College.

Programme

Despite limited funding for learning delivery (see section on Funding below), the NLC has worked hard to respond to demand. Effective networking minimises duplication of opportunities and referrals are common where existing local provision is appropriate to learner needs. The KCOL project worker offers support for ICT users and the well-established ICT group is largely comprised of older men – a group that rarely participate in education.

A small amount of Local Authority funding has been used to support learning delivery, including a Driving Theory course. A family learning project during the 6 week summer holiday encouraged children to use the Centre to enhance maths, English and science skills, on condition that they were accompanied by a parent. Local people have also taken up the challenge of offering learning opportunities. For example, a recently qualified beauty therapist delivered a taster course – her first ever teaching experience!

The NLC is negotiating with Huddersfield Technical College to establish locally run teacher training courses aimed particularly at mosque Imam and the many graduates from Pakistan who have the skills to teach. However, it would like to see more learning being delivered from within the community and less reliance on existing FE provision. Flexibility of delivery is crucial and college courses require a level of commitment that many local people find difficult to give. One learner reported that, at the NLC she felt comfortable to join a class late or leave early if need be, whereas in a college she would have missed the session altogether.

Thornton Lodge NLC has begun to develop information and advice services on learning and work. A benefits advice session and a job-seeking surgery are regular activities. The NLC is also working to become a focal point for information and advice for new arrivals from overseas in order to facilitate their transition into local learning employment markets. For example, an overseas graduate group has been established and has had some early success in supporting well qualified individuals into appropriate employment.

The NLC is also acting as a catalyst for local people to take forward their own activities. People come in to the Centre with an idea they want to develop and are given support to move forward with their plans. For example:

- working with the NLC, an elderly group of gardeners have extended their remit to include exercise, becoming the 'Healthy Gardeners Group';
- a small group of young people have established EMAD – Ethnic Minorities Against Drugs – using the NLC as their base. With funding from the Community Cohesion Fund, a 6-month action plan has been developed to tackle drug awareness and engage substance misusers in mainstream activities. Since establishing EMAD, three unemployed members of the group have found jobs in related areas of work;
- a chance visit from a group of firemen, who "*popped in to see what the NLC is all about*", led to an event being held at the NLC to raise awareness of career opportunities in the Fire Service. As a result, several members of the local community are pursuing employment in this field;
- a member of the local community is working to 'establish a residents' association. While this has proved difficult in the past, he is hopeful that, with the NLC as a focal point, it will be possible to build on the 'buzz' that has been generated by the presence of the Centre;
- a local environmental project, funded by SRB, is using the Centre to display plans and to seek ideas and feedback via an 'ideas book' in the NLC reception area. The NLC is keen to become a focal point for all types of community consultation.

Awareness Raising and Marketing

The centre is ideally situated in the heart of the ethnic minority community and began attracting the attention of passers-by long before it opened its doors to the public. The highly visible location, adjacent to local shops on a busy thoroughfare, has helped to build a high profile for the Centre.

Flyers have been distributed promoting the Centre as "Fun, Friendly and Free" and a successful community fun fair, held during the summer, also served to promote the NLC as a welcoming and enjoyable place to learn. Launch events for the NLC and KCOL projects have been well-attended by representatives of a wide range of agencies, and invitations to visit have been taken up by both the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council.

The NLC has identified a huge marketing opportunity through its relationship with the SRB environmental project. Free smoke alarms and low energy light bulbs are being offered to every household in the area and the NLC will act as the distribution point. A visit to the NLC will be necessary for everyone wishing to claim their free goods.

Funding

Thornton Lodge NLC has been set up from scratch with funding from the national pilot project. This funding has paid for the rental and decoration of premises, the creation of the post of Development Worker, office equipment, administrative support, and staff and volunteer development costs. A contribution of £3k from the Local Authority has covered the costs of a small amount of learning delivery. UK online funding has provided the Centre with 14 computers and a full-time ICT project worker.

The urgent need to secure core funding for the longer term was recognised at an early stage. However, the one year duration of the pilot has proved insufficient to achieve this. There is often a long lead-in time for new funding and the Centre has taken time to become established and to develop capacity in relation to understanding funding streams and processes.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The progress of the project is monitored by the NLC Management Committee through regular monthly meetings. Several members of this Committee are also student users of the NLC and therefore well-placed to provide feedback on the operation of the Centre.

Systems have been put in place to monitor demand and collect feedback, as follows:-

- a register is maintained of all Centre users;
- an 'interest log' is kept in reception to record interest in learning opportunities and to note the days and times that would suit potential learners. This information is transferred to a database, enabling Centre workers to monitor demand;
- a very simple evaluation sheet is completed by learners at the end of every course;
- the ICT system's in-built monitoring system maintains a record of each user, including their reason for logging on (e.g. course, internet access). This information is recorded on the KCOL database and can be accessed by the NLC's UK online project worker.
- development workers are beginning to record destinations of learners through informal feedback and are considering developing more formal follow-up systems. Focus groups have been tried, but it has proved difficult to track people and bring them together following completion of learning.

The Development and ICT Workers regularly engage individual learners in discussion, or talk to groups of students at the end of a class. Changes implemented in response to user feedback include the shortening of learning sessions from three to two hours, and the allocation of one day a week to 'women only' activities.

Short-term indicators of success include evidence that users are spreading the word about the NLC and that demand is increasing as a result. In the longer term, it is hoped that the Centre will enable people to play a fuller and more confident role within the community. The level of demand already experienced by the Centre, the number of spin-off activities (e.g. EMAD, Residents Association), and anecdotal evidence of increased vibrancy and a 'buzz' in the community, are evidence that the Centre is already impacting positively on community confidence and motivation.

Sustainability

The NLC is urgently seeking funding to maintain the operation of the Centre. Despite the support of local politicians and a growing interest in NLCs amongst other communities in Kirklees, Thornton Lodge NLC has yet to convert support into resources. If, having raised expectations, the NLC ceases to operate, this will exacerbate problems of cynicism within the community and will represent a "*public relations nightmare*" for the local authority, the PCA, and others involved in establishing the NLC.

The failure of a well thought-out and carefully developed bid to the LSC Co-financing fund was a major disappointment to all involved. The NLC will continue to target the LSC for funding but it is frustrating for the Centre that, despite local indicators of deprivation, the NLC does not fall within an area defined as eligible for Neighbourhood Renewal Funding. The Local Authority is seeking to identify short-term funding to allow the Centre to remain operational until alternative resources are obtained.

There is clear evidence that the NLC is becoming an important focal point in the community and is generating demand for a wide range of services. With its success, the NLC staff and management committee are increasingly required to think strategically, keep up to date with available funding streams and develop bids, while continuing to support the day-to-day operation of the Centre. Capacity building will continue to be important if the NLC is to maximise its potential as a community-owned resource.

Learning Points

- Face-to-face research and consultation activities can provide invaluable information to underpin the development of a new learning centre, and can begin to generate interest in the NLC amongst members of the local community.
- It is important that consultation is quickly followed by action, with local people involved in both planning and delivery. This will help to capitalise on interest generated by research and minimise cynicism about the value of consultation.
- A visible location in the heart of the community can help to raise the profile of the developing NLC: "location is key – more important than having beautiful facilities".
- Where the community has very high expectations of the new NLC, these may prove to be unrealistic in the short term. It is essential that people are encouraged to view the NLC as a long-term venture.
- Informing other providers of the purpose of the NLC can help to minimise competitiveness and can prepare the way for a collaborative approach to meeting the needs of the community.
- An NLC that is based in the heart of a deprived community will attract the interest of a range of agencies which wish to market their services. This may be beneficial to the community and may further the objectives of the NLC. However, it is important that the Centre does not lose focus as a result of trying to accommodate the needs of a wide range of partner agencies.
- The concept of neighbourhood learning is not well understood. There remains a need to make a strong case for community-led learning and to communicate the NLC concept to potential funding bodies and other learning providers.
- The support of the local authority and voluntary sector umbrella bodies is valuable, but direction and leadership must come from within the community.

