

Neighbourhood Learning Centre Group: Pen Portraits

Thornton Lodge Neighbourhood Learning Centre (Huddersfield)

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INTRODUCTION

Thornton Lodge Neighbourhood Learning Centre (NLC) is a newly established community resource serving the Pakistani community in the Thornton Lodge and Lockwood areas of Huddersfield. The Centre has been set up by the Pakistani Community Alliance (PCA), working in partnership with the Local Authority, and with the support of Voluntary Action Kirklees.

The Pakistani Community Alliance is a formally constituted independent Community Partnership Body that has been established for approximately two years. It is committed to developing the full potential of the Pakistani community, not only for its own benefit but also for the good of the wider community. At present, the Alliance has a broad membership based on individual and organisational affiliations from all sections of the Huddersfield Pakistani community.

High unemployment, particularly amongst young people, compounded by poor educational attainment and further accentuated by racial/religious discrimination reduces competitiveness and minimises the Pakistani community's capacity to play a fuller and more active role in taking up available opportunities and making a positive contribution to the wider community.

The Neighbourhood Learning Centre will offer a unique opportunity for local Pakistani people to re-engage with learning in a local, non-threatening and supportive environment for many who hitherto had not the opportunity, or who have found education institutions too threatening or imposing.

A high quality, in-depth research project has recently examined the educational needs of the adult Pakistani community in South Kirklees, with special reference to the Lockwood and Thornton Lodge areas. The comprehensive report details the findings and offers a thorough set of conclusions and recommendations that are proving to be a firm basis for the development of the Centre.

COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

The Concept of community ownership is central to the way in which the Neighbourhood Learning Centre is being set-up and run and there is a commitment to pass ownership of the Centre to local people within one year. This was a major consideration when identifying suitable premises for the Centre which is located in the heart of the Pakistani community.

The experience of the Centre demonstrates the value of timely and targeted consultation as a basis for developing community ownership. The research into the learning needs of the community (see above) involved questionnaires being sent to a sample of 300 local residents drawn at random from the electoral register. A researcher then went out to every person to complete the questionnaire with them and to offer bi-lingual support. Focus groups with key interest groups (e.g. women, young people, elderly) were also held to clarify issues emerging from the questionnaire analysis. Although labour-intensive, the benefits of

this methodology have been huge. In addition to an excellent response rate (87%) and high quality data, the one-to-one contact by the researcher has begun to develop community interest and ownership. At the time, many respondents asked what would happen as a result of the research and were assured that something would be implemented. Now they can see the Centre taking shape and are eager to participate in learning opportunities that are being organised in response to their expressed needs and preferences.

The community has previously been let down on a number of occasions when consultation has failed to result in positive local outcomes. The response to the research was not universally positive, with a significant number of respondents expressing cynicism about the likelihood that the research would actually lead to the provision of resources. The Centre has worked hard to counteract this view by beginning to offer learning opportunities as soon as possible.

The Centre is keen to build on the high level of interest generated by the research and to gain the interest and involvement of all sections of the community. It is particularly mindful of the need to engage young people, both in the running of centre and in volunteering.

To facilitate this process, volunteers are being sought to form five consultation groups as follows:

- Spark (males, 19-25 years old)
- Spark (females, 19-25 years old)
- Overseas focus group
- Women's group
- Over 50's Group (Male)

Research is also underway to form a disabled persons group.

The primary aim of these groups is to provide direction to the Centre. The groups will meet regularly and all will be asked to discuss specific issues relating to the operation and activities of the Centre, thereby providing five perspectives that can contribute to a comprehensive view of the needs of the community as a whole. Initially, the emphasis of the NLC will be on ensuring the involvement of the Pakistani community but the Centre hopes to broaden focus group membership to ensure representation from all parts of the local community. Ultimately, the aim is to develop the Centre as an inclusive resource for the local community as a whole.

The Centre is well-supported by members of the community through the Pakistani Community Alliance and other local groups and there is a huge pool of resource amongst well educated overseas arrivals and others. The first meeting of community representatives was well-attended, and the debate focused on the desire of community representatives to take ownership, despite the early stage of development of the Centre. There is a great deal of enthusiasm for, and excitement about the project and Centre staff face the challenge of maintaining the commitment of key community representatives while ensuring that the project is not hijacked by particular interest groups before it has become established as a resource for the community as a whole.

MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

The overall responsibility for the project lies with the Pakistani Community Alliance Management Committee. A sub-group (Advisory group) has been formed, including representatives of PCA and people from the immediate area, the function of which is to manage the project, maintain a community-led approach, and oversee the Neighbourhood Learning Centre's activities and progress. Some concerns were expressed about the current

make-up of the Advisory group and, while the emphasis will remain on the Pakistani Community, efforts will be made to ensure that group becomes representative of the community as a whole and that women take a prominent role in the management of the Centre.

The day-to-day operation of the Centre is the responsibility of the Development Workers. Careful thought was given to the recruitment process in terms of the knowledge and skills required to enable the Development Workers to make rapid progress with minimum training. It was determined that a job-share offered the best solution to meeting the Centre's requirements and, while, the Centre would have liked to recruit one male and one female to the shared post, it was two male candidates who offered the best combination of skills and experience. Despite the short-term nature of the Centre's current funding, both Development Workers perceive it as a long term project and report that they are "here to stay".

The Development Workers have been involved in a considerable amount of outreach work, particularly during the early stages of the project and the Centre lacks the resources to provide them with the office back-up they require. Volunteer staff have provided much needed help in this area.

PARTNERSHIPS

A key strength of the Thornton Lodge NLC is that it is the result of a partnership between the Local Authority (Adult Education) and the voluntary sector (PCA and Voluntary Action Kirklees). This represents an important step for the Local Authority in that services are not being 'parachuted-in', but are instead being driven by the community. The support and advice available from the Local Authority has been invaluable to the PCA as it gains confidence in setting up and managing the Centre, however the Local Authority representative is conscious that, while support should be offered when needed, it is important that direction and leadership comes from within the community.

Central to the approach of the NLC is the view that "the only way to provide a comprehensive service is in partnership" and the recent research on learning needs concludes that the Centre has an important role to play in mobilising other providers. Early efforts have been invested in networking activities and significant progress has been made in establishing relationships as a basis for future partnership working. For example:

- Huddersfield Technical College are supportive of the NLC and plan 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). This has resulted in the initiation of weekly job search surgeries on in the NLC office;
- In partnership with Kirklees Benefit Advice Service an over 50s advisory session will take place on a weekly basis;
- Local Mosques have been approached and have pledged their full support to NLC, although further constructive work has been on hold during Ramadan. Mosques are strong institutions with excellent community links that are already involved in education through the provision of support with academic school work as well as religious education for local children.

- A local women's group has been approached and has identified a number of issues they feel that need to be addressed. The NLC has responded by arranging women-only classes in subjects of interest.;
- In order to minimise both duplication and competition the Centre is keen to develop links with a neighbouring Islamic girls' college where adult learning is currently offered by the Technical College.

As a partnership body, the Pakistani Community Alliance has established links with key strategic and service agencies such as Education, Social Care and Health. Many agencies have targets to achieve in relation to work undertaken with ethnic minority communities and socially excluded groups and the Centre has been approached by several who are keen to work with the NLC to reach the local community. For example, a local health initiative would like to place a worker in the Centre, and representatives of the Police may be invited to work through the Centre as a way of breaking down barriers and regaining the trust of the community.

Although keen to work with a wide range of agencies, the Centre has resisted rushing in to partnerships with the majority of service providers as it wants to ensure it first becomes established as a community owned resource. Similarly, while local politicians are supportive the Centre tries to keep their involvement passive – the Centre does not want to be used as a political football!

The NLC's involvement in the Kirklees UK On-line project will offer 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 many of 40 satellite centres currently being established in the area. The Centre plans to offer advice and support to other centres in relation to the use of other-language (e.g. Urdu) software packages.

CENTRE PROGRAMME

The in-depth research conducted prior to the opening of the Centre identified a high level of interest in short courses on a part-time basis, with only 5-6% showing an interest in returning to learning on a full-time basis. A demand for women-only courses was also identified and the Centre has responded by allocating one room to accommodate separate classes for women. This will be shared by people with disabilities and mobility problems as it offers ground floor access.

The results of the research indicated high levels of demand for learning opportunities in ICT, first aid, food hygiene and the development of language skills. Classes are being organised in these areas and Urdu software packages are being identified to facilitate the use of ICT and to support the development of language skills.

The in-depth nature of the research has provided a wealth of information about the needs and motivations of different groups. For example, women are particularly keen to develop word processing and learn to use email. They also want to gain an understanding of ICT so that they know what their children are using the computer for - are they are really doing homework as they say? There is also demand for languages (Urdu) and religious education due to concern that young people know little about their religion or native language and need to reconnect to their cultural roots.

Early indications are that the NLC will develop as a community resource that offers a range of support services in addition to learning opportunities. A benefits advice session and a job-seeking surgery are already becoming established as regular activities. The Centre is

also planning to become a source of information and advice for new arrivals from overseas who require support to facilitate their transition to the local learning and employment markets. The Centre has a major contribution to make in relation to understanding how to support and encourage people arriving from overseas. It is intended to set up a surgery providing advice that will help people to succeed in entering professions that use their existing skills and qualifications.

The programme of activities in which the Centre is involved also aims to address the longer term needs of the community. There is an apparent lack of leadership skills amongst young people in Huddersfield and one of the Centre's Development Workers is currently involved in developing the development of a high level leadership programme aimed at young people from Pakistani, Afro-Caribbean, and other ethnic communities, with the intention of nurturing and supporting confident leaders.

The level of interest already shown by members of the local community has led the Development Workers to conclude that, in the short term, there is likely to be more demand for learning than can be met. Similarly, the strong links to a wide range of service agencies and community projects suggest that there is demand for a wider range of learning and support services than it is possible to accommodate within the existing Centre. The Development Workers suggest that, ultimately, the NLC could become a 'virtual learning centre' in which the NLC office takes on the role of coordinator and catalyst, while learning provision delivered in a variety of community locations to serve different needs. The establishment, from scratch, of a new learning centre offers the opportunity to experiment with a range of delivery models.

MARKETING

The centre is ideally located in the heart of the ethnic minority community and has already stirred considerable curiosity in the area, therefore raising awareness of the project from the outset. People from the immediate area have been going in to the Centre to ask what it is and what they stand to gain. This has been a very encouraging sign and a reflection of the fact that the local community has long desired a resource of this nature to be operational in their area.

To some extent, the local community were primed to expect some kind of activity following the completion of the research project on local learning needs. The very thorough conclusions and recommendations arising from this research are forming basis for the Centre's marketing and social inclusion strategies.

A newly launched, bilingual community newsletter, produced by PCA, is intended to act as a voice for the local Pakistani community and as a useful vehicle for those wish to communicate with and creatively engage the Pakistani community in their programmes and activities. This publication is seen as having the potential to effectively promote the NLC and to be a key method of contacting people at grass roots level.

FUNDING

The funding available through the Neighbourhood Learning Centre pilot project has enabled the Centre to become established from scratch as it has paid for the rent and decoration of premises, the creation of the post of Development Worker, office equipment, administrative support, and staff and volunteer development costs.

The NLC funding has acted as catalyst to bring in money and resources from other initiatives and the Centre has attracted UK On-line funding for 14 computers as part of Kirklees' £3million project to establish 14 Neighbourhood ICT Centres and approximately

40 satellite centres in the community.

However, the Centre remains heavily reliant on the fixed, short term funding associated with the NLC project. One year is not considered sufficient time for the Centre to become firmly established. The lead-in time for attracting new funding can be long and, while the Centre has had some early success in attracting money for specific resources and small programmes, there is an urgent need to secure core funding for the longer term. If the Centre is unable to continue after its first year this will be a big loss to the community. Furthermore, having raised expectations, the disappearance of the Centre is likely to exacerbate problems of cynicism within the community and will represent a “public relations nightmare” for the Local Authority, the Pakistani Community Alliance, and others involved in establishing the Centre.

EVALUATION

The Centre is in the process of developing systems for monitoring and evaluation, including a monthly feedback sheet for monitoring progress and a form for collecting feedback from events such as open days. The Advisory group will also play an important role in monitoring the project, with progress discussed during regular meetings.

The community itself is described as ‘hypercritical’ and the Centre staff expect to receive feedback from users on an informal basis in addition to introducing a more formal system for collecting feedback on the progress people are making in learning and their level of enjoyment. The demand for ICT learning is high and the Centre is interested in monitoring what people are using their ICT skills for.

Ideally, the Centre would like to engage an independent consultant to follow the project and produce an in-depth report on progress to ensure that the many lessons learned along the way are not lost as staff become caught up in the day-to-day running of the Centre. It is felt that a document that ‘captures the story’ of the developing Centre would be useful both for evaluation purposes and as a resource for other community organisations engaged in establishing future neighbourhood learning centres. However, the Centre currently lacks the resources necessary to commission an independent evaluation.

In the short term, indicators of success will include evidence that users are spreading the word about the Centre 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 NLC is a small centre in a large community and it will take several years before the impact of the Centre is seen on the community as a whole. The Centre would like to be able to conduct another in-depth research project after 5 years to explore the impact of the Centre on employability and motivation within the community.

LEARNING POINTS

- Detailed research into the learning needs of the community can provide invaluable information to underpin the development of a new learning centre. Although labour intensive, face to face contact by the researcher can lead to an in-depth understanding of the needs and motivations of different target groups of learners and can begin to generate interest in the Centre amongst members of the local community.
- It is important that consultation is quickly followed by action. If community members fail to see positive changes as the result of consultation exercises they will become cynical about the extent to which their views are being taken seriously. It is essential to combat community cynicism through the implementation of concrete projects and to involve local people in both the planning and delivery stages of development.

- 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 project as a long term venture.
- Raising awareness amongst other providers of the purpose of the Centre can help to minimise competition and can prepare the way for a collaborative approach to meeting the needs of the community.
- A visible location in the heart of the community can help to raise the profile of the developing Centre.
- It can be difficult to find appropriate people to serve on the management committee as there is a danger, particularly in the developmental phase, that community representatives will attempt to 'hijack' the project to further their own agenda.
- A NLC that is based in the heart of a deprived community will attract the support of local agencies wishing to use the Centre 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.