



Our Lives

An exploration of the lived experiences and future needs of North Lanarkshire's Black, Asian and other Minority Ethnic people.

SUMMARY REPORT

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Introduction

This summary report provides key information on research that was commissioned by North Lanarkshire Council to explore the lived experiences and future needs of Black, Asian and other Minority Ethnic (BAME) people living in North Lanarkshire. The research focussed on four key themes: an ageing population; digital skills and inclusion; employment and skills; and community cohesion and integration. The Council also wanted to know about how gender impacts on people's experiences and how life is fairing for the Syrian refugees who have now lived in North Lanarkshire for more than seven years.





Method

The researchers used focus groups and interviews to collect rich data and insights based on the real-life experiences of the participants who were women and men from different ethnic backgrounds, different age-groups, different religions and who lived in different areas of North Lanarkshire

Table 1: Composition of focus groups by ethnicity and number of participants

Ethnic background of focus group/interview participants	Number of participants
Polish	8
Congolese	10
Black African and Caribbean (excluding Congolese)	5
Syrian	7
Indian sub-continent	12
5 one-to-one interviews conducted with the Chinese community	

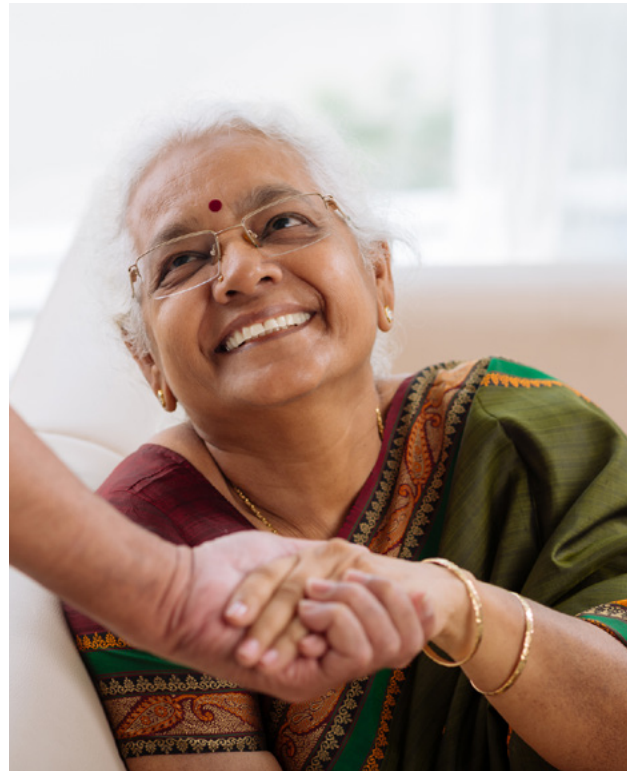


Key findings

Ageing population:

- Language was a barrier in making effective use of health and social care services especially for those who had limited or no proficiency in the English language.
- The lack of a culturally sensitive care service was leading to personal care being rejected by ethnic minority families.
- There was a perception that mainstream mental health services were western-centric and failed to acknowledge and consider alternative perspectives on mental health.
- There was frustration at the attitude of receptionists when engaging with primary health care services such as GP services to request appointments.
- Some BAME groups compared their experience of health care services in the UK unfavourably with their country of origin.
- Overall, the pandemic was viewed as having had an adverse impact on the experience of using health and social care services among BAME communities.

“I think the main areas is the language barrier ... it is quite hard to get the necessary support if the service provider cannot provide the language support. I think a lot of older ethnic minorities still cannot speak fluent English. How can a home help be of any use if they can't pick up what support the client needs?”



Digital skills and inclusion:

- In most BAME communities, there was a marked digital divide between the younger and older generations and between those who had better proficiency in English and those who lacked the necessary language skills.
- The provision of IT training by NLC and other agencies was deemed helpful. However, there were concerns that some aspects of the training did not meet the needs of learners and consequently uptake was low.
- There were mixed views among BAME communities as to whether cost was a barrier to accessing digital hardware and reliable internet services with affluent BAME families not impacted by the cost of digital devices and internet provision.
- In terms of future needs, some financial support for accessing digital and IT equipment would be welcomed by specific communities especially over concerns that digital services were overtaking face to face service provision since the pandemic.

“The support we would like to see is yes maybe training for us. We would like it to be in 2 languages for it to be effective”

“If you look at the prices at the moment, everything is high. So, wages completely dropping for the income and getting a computer right, what am I going to buy a computer or pay for electricity or food .. you have to prioritise.”



Employment and skills:

- Occupational segregation in the labour market was viewed as being rife with BAME employees overrepresented in low status and low paid jobs.
- There was a perception that racial discrimination and lack of opportunities for BAME people in the labour market contributed to unemployment and confinement to low level jobs.
- For some BAME groups, language was a barrier to attaining high paid and high-status jobs even for those who possessed good educational qualifications and experience from their country of origin.
- Self-employment was an attractive option for many BAME groups as it provided an escape route from unemployment and low paid jobs and compensated for lack of educational qualifications.
- BAME groups would welcome training schemes and better support from agencies and organisations to help boost skills that could help enhance employment prospects.
- There was frustration that skills and qualifications acquired overseas were not always recognised in the UK and this impacted on the ability to compete in the labour market.

“There are people here who came over with great qualifications like electricians and plumbers but they are working for low paid jobs now because they can’t bring themselves to speak English so they are working well below their qualifications and skills”

“Unemployment is high in our community because when we came here we didn’t have experience. So for every job, they ask for experience and more training and if you don’t have that training then how do you get a job ... we need more training and apprenticeship opportunities including for adults”



Community cohesion and integration:

- Integration with the host or white majority community was broadly supported by all BAME groups but language was viewed as a key barrier especially for those born overseas and the elderly.
- Despite support for integration, most BAME groups believed in the importance of maintaining their cultural and religious identity.
- The ability to speak English was viewed as important by BAME groups for a variety of reasons. However, some BAME groups did not feel that ESOL classes were effectively tailored to their needs.
- There was a broad consensus that the diverse cultures of ethnic minority groups were not celebrated by NLC in ways seen elsewhere in Scotland.
- Racism from the white community was not a major issue but children experienced a degree of racial microaggression at school.
- Most BAME groups had a better relationship with other ethnic minority groups than with the white community due to facing common challenges and having shared values and interests.
- Most BAME groups felt relatively safe in their neighbourhoods and did not have too many concerns when going about their day-to-day activities.
- Engagement with the political process was low as most BAME communities did not feel that politicians at local or national level did enough to address the issues they faced.

“Yes I think it (integration) is important ... for a couple of years when I first came here I did not want to integrate with anyone especially people from here as I did not feel Scotland was my home. However, after a few years I now see this place as home and I now try to connect with local people”

“The girls suffer more bullying because of the hijab. Schools would benefit if they had an awareness of other cultures and showed the positive of each religion ... seeing your child bullied and crying makes you uncomfortable”



The findings reported above are broadly representative of all or most BAME communities who took part in the research. However, there are also findings that are unique to specific BAME groups that are highlighted below.

Polish Community:

- The Polish community perceived themselves as having a stronger work ethic than their Scottish counterparts but felt they lacked confidence in asserting their rights at work.
- Despite taking on work that was below the level of education and skills that had been acquired in Poland, there was a belief that the UK offered opportunities for career progression.
- Polish participants were divided on whether they would stay in the UK permanently with some expecting to return to Poland at some stage in the future.

Chinese Community:

- The Chinese community would welcome a care home service designed specifically for elderly members of the Chinese community.
- There was a feeling that some ethnic minority groups received more resources from the Council than the Chinese community.
- Although most Chinese people were doing financially well, success came at certain costs such as anti-social hours and poor working conditions.
- The Chinese community was underrepresented in politics at both local and Parliamentary level, not just in Scotland but across the UK. This was down to apathy among the Chinese community about participating in politics and mistrust of authorities.

Black African and Caribbean Community:

- Health services, including GPs, needed to employ more people from ethnic minority backgrounds to create a more welcoming environment for ethnically diverse service users of both primary and secondary health care services.
- There were concerns that some community centres and community facilities did not have access to reliable internet services.
- There was a lack of trust when it came to white co-workers and a perception that they were out to make life hard for black employees in the workplace.
- There was perceived discrimination in the allocation of housing with ethnic minorities offered poor and unsuitable housing in comparison to white people.

Congolese Community:

- There is a digital divide between Congolese men and Congolese women due to women having childcare commitments and not having access to affordable childcare and being primarily housebound. This meant men had more opportunity to attend classes to get training in IT skills.
- Congolese women would like the Council to provide greater access to IT equipment. While libraries did have computers these were always in demand and because libraries had specific opening and closing times, this was not always convenient.
- Congolese males were struggling to find suitable employment due to lack of training and prior work experience.
- Schools were not doing enough to demonstrate their inclusivity, for example primary schools had no pictures of Black children on their walls.



Syrian Community:

- There was a need for access to doctors who shared the same gender as patients due to cultural reasons as members of the Syrian community felt uncomfortable being examined by practitioners from the opposite sex when accessing health care services.
- The adults among the Syrian community were reliant on their young children for language support as the latter had attended school in Scotland. Children were often translating for their parents and the elderly in various situations.
- Syrian women who were mothers were keen for their daughters to get educated rather than get married very young and become housewives.
- Syrian women are happy to pursue employment and volunteering work once their children are older.
- The pursuit of self-employment was appealing to Syrian women but they lacked the funding to make this a reality.
- There was a perception that Syrian men were struggling to find appropriate employment for a number of reasons such as jobs on offer not matching their skills, language barrier, and because some were suffering from health conditions acquired as a result of the conflict in Syria. Agencies geared to help find employment such as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) were not viewed as supportive.
- There was disappointment that Syrian families were not given the choice to send their children to non-denominational schools.
- Children had experienced racial bullying at school including name calling and girls were harassed because they wore the hijab.
- The value of integrating in Scottish society was accepted but this would not be at the cost of neglecting religious and cultural practices.
- The experience of fleeing persecution and the trauma of war had shaped or impacted the engagement of the Syrian community with certain services such as the police.

Indian sub-continent Community:

- There was a lack of awareness of where to seek support in the future as more members of the Indian sub-continent community were becoming older and needed personal care, especially if they lived on their own and had no family support.
- A key barrier to the recruitment of more ethnic minority carers was the depiction of care work being a menial job.
- Hospital care services were not culturally sensitive with some

hospitals unaware of 'halal' food. This meant that secondary health care services were not meeting the needs of patients from minority faiths.

- It was noted that NLC provided funding and resources for IT training in different languages. However, these were poorly attended and viewed as a lost opportunity.
- There was a feeling that the areas where participants reside had an impact on experience of racism. Those living in affluent areas and who attended schools

there were less likely to experience issues than those who lived in deprived areas.

- It was difficult to gauge the prevalence of domestic abuse in the Indian sub-continent community but it was felt that it did exist and that it was very much hidden as it was considered a taboo area in Asian society.
- Some men from the Indian sub-continent were viewed as having a backward culture and were keen to push their own career forward whilst holding women back.





A gender perspective

In relation to the different experiences of women and men, the research did not extract anything of note from the Polish, Chinese and Black African and Caribbean communities. However, for the remaining BAME groups there were some specific concerns that are worth highlighting:

- In the Congolese refugee community, there is a digital and English language divide between men and women due to women being primarily housebound with childcare commitments. Not having access to affordable childcare meant that Congolese women lacked the opportunity to attend English classes and IT training. Congolese women also expressed an interest in pursuing employment but found this challenging because their male counterparts were not willing to share the burden of childcare.

- In relation to the Syrian refugee community, women conveyed a desire to pursue employment including volunteering opportunities but only once their children were older and required less monitoring and supervision:

“We want to work with something that is giving back to the community. I would love to volunteer on anything to do with care or mental health”



- Women from the Indian sub-continent stressed that domestic abuse existed in their community but was very much hidden as it was viewed as a taboo area in their culture. The lack of a confidential and culturally sensitive support service discouraged women from speaking out:

“Domestic abuse I would say is very much hidden because of the communities. The Pakistani community here everyone knows each other, and they are very reluctant to bring it out in the open but it is very much there and there is no specific services here in Lanarkshire to provide that sort of cultural support as well. So, whatever happens, it is behind closed doors”

- Indian-subcontinent women also felt that they were held back from realising their full potential by a dominant male culture among their community:

“I think in general it’s a man’s world. This also applies to the white community but is more so in our communities”

“A lot of Asian women in Lanarkshire can only access services if men are ok with it. If they (men) are not happy with women folk accessing a service they can cause hindrances and put up barriers....it is very much a patriarchal society”



Discussion

How should we interpret the findings about the lived experiences and future needs of BAME communities in North Lanarkshire? The evidence from this research suggests that the health and social care system needs to develop greater awareness of diverse cultures and provide support that is sensitive to cultural attitudes and practices if it is to meet the future needs of BAME communities. In relation to personal care in particular, the lack of a culturally appropriate care service is putting additional pressure on BAME families to plug the gap.

The investigation also reveals a familiar story of language being a barrier to access and effective engagement and uptake of health and social care services. Research undertaken by the Centre for Migration, Policy, and Society has documented how the language barrier among migrant and refugee communities can lead to less favourable outcomes in a number of domains such as health and social care. Studies across the UK acknowledge that over the next few decades we are likely to see a rise in the number of elderly BAME people needing care and if care services are not able to provide a culturally competent service, then negative outcomes are likely to persist for the foreseeable future.

Studies undertaken across the UK have identified that digital exclusion is a real problem faced by BAME groups, especially refugee communities. Digital exclusion is likely to remain an issue if IT training does not meet the needs of learners and if elderly service users do not engage with training. There is already growing evidence to suggest that digital exclusion is associated with social isolation especially among the elderly and this was especially obvious during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, as highlighted in this research, there is a digital divide between the younger and older generations and also between those with differing levels of proficiency in the English language. Engaging older people in IT training and language support classes will help bridge the digital divide among generations.

In relation to employment and skills, this research reveals that self-employment is a popular avenue for attaining employment for many BAME communities due to a number of reasons including discrimination and disadvantage in the labour market. In this respect, the findings validate studies that have consistently revealed the disproportionately higher rates of self-employment among BAME groups in the UK. The research also concurs with literature that underscores problems encountered by BAME individuals in relation to seeking employment and being confined to low-income employment with lower prospects for promotion and progression.

In considering the theme of community cohesion and integration, the findings indicate a general perception that the cultures of ethnic minority groups are not adequately celebrated or showcased across North Lanarkshire. Most BAME groups appear to have a better relationship with other BAME communities than the white community, with the language barrier and differing expectations and practices in relation to culture and religion the main impediment to greater cohesion with the host community.

The language barrier appears to be a key denominator in the negative outcomes for most BAME communities in relation to multiple areas. It is evident from the voices of BAME communities in this research that the language barrier is impacting negatively on the experience of services received. It is also worsening digital illiteracy and exclusion as the lack of confidence created by a poor grasp of the English language is hindering engagement with IT training and digital services. Furthermore, lack of proficiency in English is hampering employment opportunities, both in terms of applying for jobs and performance at work, and impacting on the ability to develop social bonds with the host community. These outcomes align with other evidence that poor language and communication skills impede the chances of successful integration.

In relation to gender, for women from the refugee communities in particular, the lack of adequate childcare prevented them from accessing ESOL classes and thereby achieving English language proficiency. This had a subsequent effect on their ability to integrate with the local community and pursue employment.

The findings reported from this research have implications for a range of stakeholders. In addition to NLC, health and social care providers, employment agencies, business support organisations, educational authorities and voluntary and third sector organisations and community groups need to consider the implications and respond appropriately. The issues faced by BAME communities suggest that a coordinated approach among relevant stakeholders is needed to address the challenges faced by BAME groups across the key themes explored in this research.



General recommendations

Ageing population and health care:

- Poor proficiency in the English language is adversely impacting the ability of BAME communities to engage effectively with health and social care services. Health boards and other service providers should review the current level of interpreting services they offer and consider recruiting more interpreters to address the language barrier, which is a particular issue among the elderly.
- In view of the increasing numbers of elderly people among BAME communities, there is a need for an overhaul of the current system of personal care to ensure that it is culturally sensitive and can meet the demands of BAME families. In particular, service providers need to ensure that the training regime implemented for those who undertake care roles incorporates an understanding of the cultural needs of diverse communities. NLC could also explore ways of recruiting more carers from BAME backgrounds.

In this respect, outreach work in BAME communities may prove helpful.

- A one size fits all approach based on a western centric model is not effective at meeting the mental health needs of BAME communities. Primary and secondary health care services therefore need to acknowledge alternative perspectives on mental health. Working with a range of stakeholders including community gatekeepers and faith leaders would be helpful in creating and promoting greater understanding of alternative approaches to mental health.
- More trained practitioners are required to support service users from the refugee communities who have experienced trauma and persecution in their country of origin. This is important in helping refugees settle in the UK and provide a sense of stability and security to individuals.

- Hospitals should be doing more to meet the cultural needs of ethnic minority patients including in relation to dietary, spiritual and religious matters. Overall, health service providers at all levels of health care need to develop cultural competence.
- Places of worship could benefit from more resources and support from NLC as they are viewed by some BAME communities as ideal venues to help tackle social isolation among the elderly.
- Mainstream day care centres should incorporate more culturally sensitive activities to attract greater engagement and participation from elderly members of the BAME community.

Digital skills and inclusion:

- The move by NLC and other service providers to move services online since the pandemic has led to social marginalisation among the elderly in BAME communities who have lower levels of digital literacy and language skills. There is a need to review this approach and consider providing more face to face opportunities to address the digital skills gap and consider ways to engage the elderly in IT

training to improve future digital competency. At present, some elderly people are missing out on important information that is only available online.

- NLC and other stakeholders need to improve the provision of IT training to BAME communities by tailoring such provision to the specific requirements of BAME groups and offering training in a variety of languages other than English.

- NLC should explore the possibility of making more venues available where BAME communities can access the internet, digital hardware and IT equipment.
- NLC should investigate possible further avenues for financial support to help low income BAME households acquire better quality digital and IT equipment.



Employment and skills:

- Employees from BAME backgrounds are overrepresented in low status and low paid jobs and face discrimination in the recruitment and selection process. Employers across North Lanarkshire should sign up to more schemes and charter marks that embrace or promote equal opportunities in employment to help improve workplace and labour market opportunities for BAME groups.
- Members of BAME communities have indicated that the skills and qualifications some of them acquired in their countries of origin are not always recognised and valued in the UK and this hampers employment prospects further. Relevant agencies and organisations such as the DWP should implement strategies that could help boost employment skills and opportunities for BAME groups. This could include exploring the extent to which skills and qualifications acquired by BAME communities before their arrival to the UK can be matched to equivalent qualifications recognised in the UK.
- Business support agencies such as Business Gateway and Scottish Enterprise could explore ways in which they can tailor their advice to assist individuals from the BAME communities wishing to pursue entrepreneurial activity. Agencies and authorities could investigate partnership and collaboration with other organisations to provide specific support to for example, refugee communities wishing to engage in entrepreneurship. One such example to draw on could be TERN (The Entrepreneurial Refugee Network), a non-profit social enterprise set up in London to provide business advice, support and start-up training tailored to the needs of refugees (TERN, 2022).



Community cohesion and integration:

- Given the value of language in helping to promote community integration and cohesion, NLC should evaluate the curriculum delivered in ESOL classes to ensure that it is tailored to the needs of learners.
- NLC should take a more proactive approach in celebrating diverse cultures across the North Lanarkshire region.
- Children from BAME backgrounds have reported experiencing racial microaggression and bullying at school. NLC should ensure that schools showcase the region's rich ethnic and racial diversity in their educational provision to promote tolerance and greater understanding between BAME groups and the host community.
- NLC should explore the feasibility of allowing families from minority faith communities to choose whether to send their children to a denominational or non-denominational school.
- Greater diversity of the workforce in NLC and partner agencies would help to improve the uptake of council services among BAME service users as well as increase BAME groups' sense of belonging to the host community.
- NLC should give greater consideration to the safety and security of BAME families when offering housing in certain areas and this should be considered in the criteria applied by housing providers.
- More transparency from NLC about the criteria used to allocate resources to certain BAME groups is required in order to address concerns of favouritism that some BAME groups benefit from more resources than others.
- Elected officials at both council and parliamentary level need to do more work to understand the needs of BAME communities, especially out with election time. This would go some way to allay concerns that the views of BAME groups only matter when elections are approaching.
- Political parties in North Lanarkshire should work more closely with BAME communities to encourage interest in politics and consider active ways in which to increase representation of BAME groups in the political process.
- More work is required to gain access to BAME communities living in areas which are poorly represented in this research. This includes Kilsyth and the Northern Corridor. Perhaps collaboration with third sector organisations and community groups could be beneficial here.

Gender-specific recommendations

In addition to the above set of general recommendations, it is worth considering specific actions that could benefit women from various BAME groups:

- As reported in this research, Congolese women face challenges in their attempts to improve their proficiency in the English language and achieve digital literacy on par with their male counterparts. This is down to their confinement to household chores such as looking after children. NLC and other agencies could consider investing more resources into providing childcare facilities that would allow Congolese women to participate in English classes and IT training.
- We have also gathered from this research that Syrian women with children not requiring regular supervision would be open to volunteering opportunities. NLC and other organisations should consider Syrian women for appropriate opportunities within the voluntary sector. This would also have the added benefit of increasing Syrian women's sense of belonging to the local community.
- Syrian females were also more likely to face discrimination as a result of wearing the hijab. The authorities should consider ways to support Syrian women to report such instances of discrimination. Relevant measures should also be put in place through community groups and schools to educate local communities about diverse cultures and practices to promote tolerance.
- Women from the Indian sub-continent indicated that domestic abuse was an issue within their community but was very much a taboo area, which made it challenging to address. There was a suggestion that the absence of a culturally sensitive support service made it difficult for victims to come forward. NLC in conjunction with other stakeholders should explore the possibilities of setting up a support service staffed by those with appropriate cultural awareness training. To tackle this issue sensitively and successfully will require a change in mindset among men from the Indian sub-continent and any support networks should therefore also engage with males from the Indian-sub-continent to educate them about the negative impact of domestic abuse.
- To help women from the Indian subcontinent realise their potential and develop careers and contribute to the labour market, relevant organisations across North Lanarkshire should consider investment in training courses that can help improve interpersonal skills and empower women within their local communities. There should also be consideration given to setting up a women's organisation dedicated to the needs of women from the Indian sub-continent similar to those that exist in Glasgow. Women in this research bemoaned the absence of such organisations devoted to their needs.

Lessons from the experiences of the Syrian refugees: 7 years on

Based on the views expressed by the Syrian refugee community in this research there are lessons that the authorities can learn that will allow them to consider appropriate interventions. Some of the suggested policy interventions have already been captured in the general set of recommendations identified above but it is worth recapping that in relation to health and social care, services need to ensure that they are responsive to the needs of the individual. This should include ensuring that services have the capacity to be culturally appropriate when providing care and treatment.

There is a need to focus on improving the language skills of the adults among the Syrian refugee community. Without effective language skills, work prospects for those fit and able are being hampered as is the ability to integrate effectively with the host community.

Schools in North Lanarkshire could also do a better job at celebrating the rich diversity of cultures including the Syrian culture. This could go some way towards tackling microaggression and bullying faced by Syrian children. As noted in the findings, Syrian females who wore the hijab were concerned about the abuse and discrimination they encountered.



The next steps

The evidence gathered leads to the conclusion that while BAME communities in general are positive about life in North Lanarkshire, there are areas where they face challenges and barriers that will require policy interventions and institutional support from the authorities and agencies at both local and national level.

While the challenges experienced by BAME groups reported in this research are broadly synonymous with those revealed elsewhere in the UK, the findings from this research are invaluable as they represent the voices of North Lanarkshire's ethnic minority communities which up until this point have been largely neglected. The need to gauge the lived experiences of BAME groups was made more pertinent by the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement over the past few years, which placed greater spotlight on the plight of BAME communities.

Furthermore, understanding the lived experiences of BAME groups in North Lanarkshire will allow lessons to be learned about the prospective needs of future immigrant and refugee communities arriving in the area as well as improving the present circumstances facing BAME communities.

The findings reported in this research have implications for all our partners in the public private and third sector organisations and community groups. The issues faced by BAME communities suggest that a coordinated approach among relevant stakeholders is needed to address the challenges faced by BAME people across the key themes explored in this research if advances are to be made.

The research findings and recommendations will be considered by the North Lanarkshire Strategic Leadership Board (SLB) to ensure a wider co-ordinated partnership approach to taking forward the priorities and needs identified through the research.

The research findings and Partnership response will then be presented to North Lanarkshire's BAME communities. This will pave the way

“.....for NLC and other agencies to work with BAME communities and allow them to be co-constructors of policy approaches that can help meet their future needs while at the same time instilling a sense of empowerment among those communities” - Dr Mohammed Ishaq



