

Developing a Decent Neighbourhoods Standard

The Witton Lodge Community Association Demonstrator

Appendix A: Engaging with Witton Lodge Community Association



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Appendix A: Engaging with Witton Lodge Community Association

A1: Workshop with Witton Lodge community staff and volunteers



A1: Workshop with WLCA staff and volunteers

A workshop with WLCA staff and volunteers was conducted by CNM and Social Life. We met at the Perry Common Hall on the 03.02.2025. The workshop was attended by the majority of the front-line staff and a group of dedicated volunteers working across WLCA's projects and programmes, while senior leaders were absent to encourage open discussion.

The workshop used interactive group activities and facilitated discussions to explore WLCA's work and its impact on the local neighbourhood. Participants were asked to map key features of the neighbourhood, identify who engages with WLCA, and highlight community landmarks. Further discussions focused on WLCA's values, best practices, and how the organisation measures success. Below are some of the key findings.

Demographics

Participants identified a diverse population served by WLCA, with a significant presence of older adults, women, and families. While many residents are White British, WLCA also engages with Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic groups, as well as other key demographics such as unemployed individuals, single parents, disabled residents, and vulnerable households. The age profile of service users is predominantly 40 years and older. It was noted by one staff member that to a degree this reflects the people who live in the local area.

Core values

The staff and volunteer value WLCA's commitments to supporting residents, facilitating new social connections and acting as a trusted community engager. Other key values identified included promoting wellbeing, providing decent housing, supporting mental health, maintaining clean spaces, and working closely with volunteers. Overall, they described how the mission of the organisation is to support initiatives that improve the lives of the wider communities in North Birmingham.

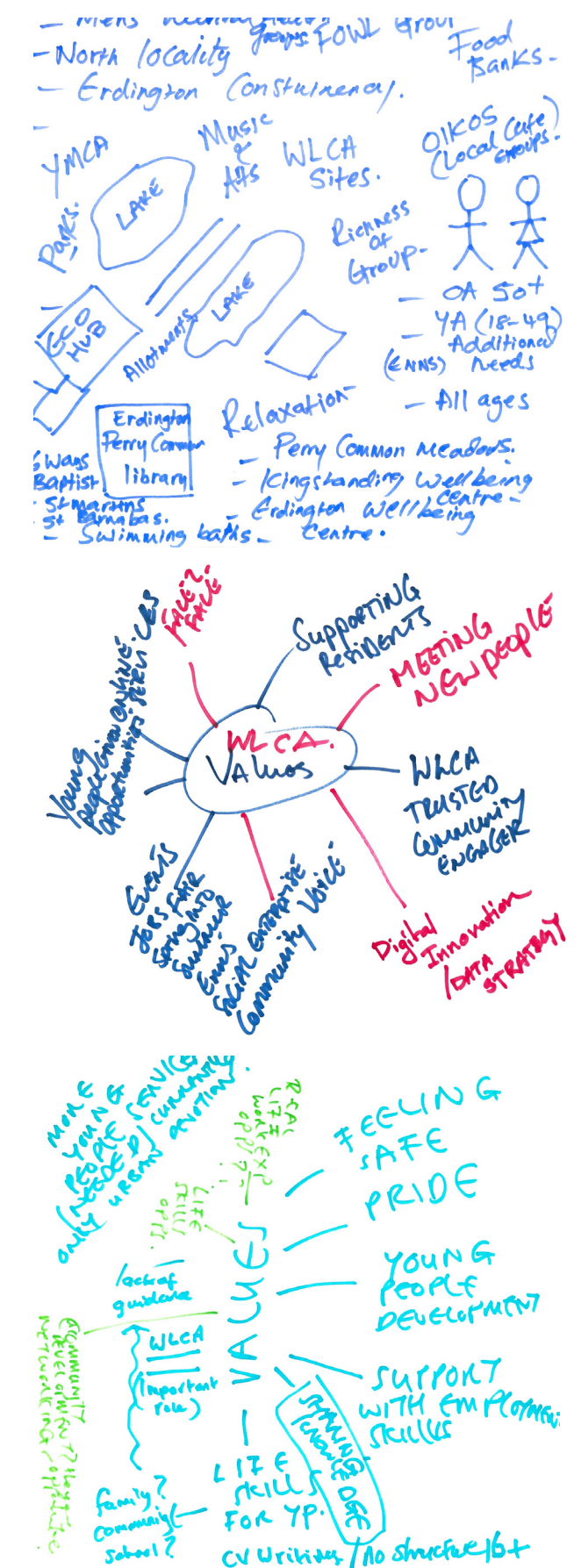


Figure A2: Outcome of staff workshops mapping values with WLCA reach

Key assets

The participants identified several key physical assets from which WLCA operates. The core assets were seen as the Perry Common Hall and Erdington High Street Hub (catering to all ages), Eco Hub (perceptually engaging an older demographic at the moment) and the soon to open Erdington Baths Enterprise Hub. Other key assets identified over which Witton Lodge doesn't have direct control, but volunteers and staff engage with regularly were Witton Lakes and Perry Common Meadows (catering for all ages) and Perry Common Library.

Key activities

The workshop highlighted the wide range of activities delivered by WLCA, focusing on housing, employment, and community wellbeing. These include school holiday programmes, seasonal celebrations like Christmas events, and employment initiatives such as job fairs. Wellbeing is promoted through activities like gardening, fitness sessions, and community engagement events. The Wyrley Festival of Fun stands out as a flagship event, exemplifying WLCA's commitment to fostering social connection and community spirit. Additionally, WLCA provides tailored support through Sycamore Court, which offers a programme of activities for older residents in supported living.

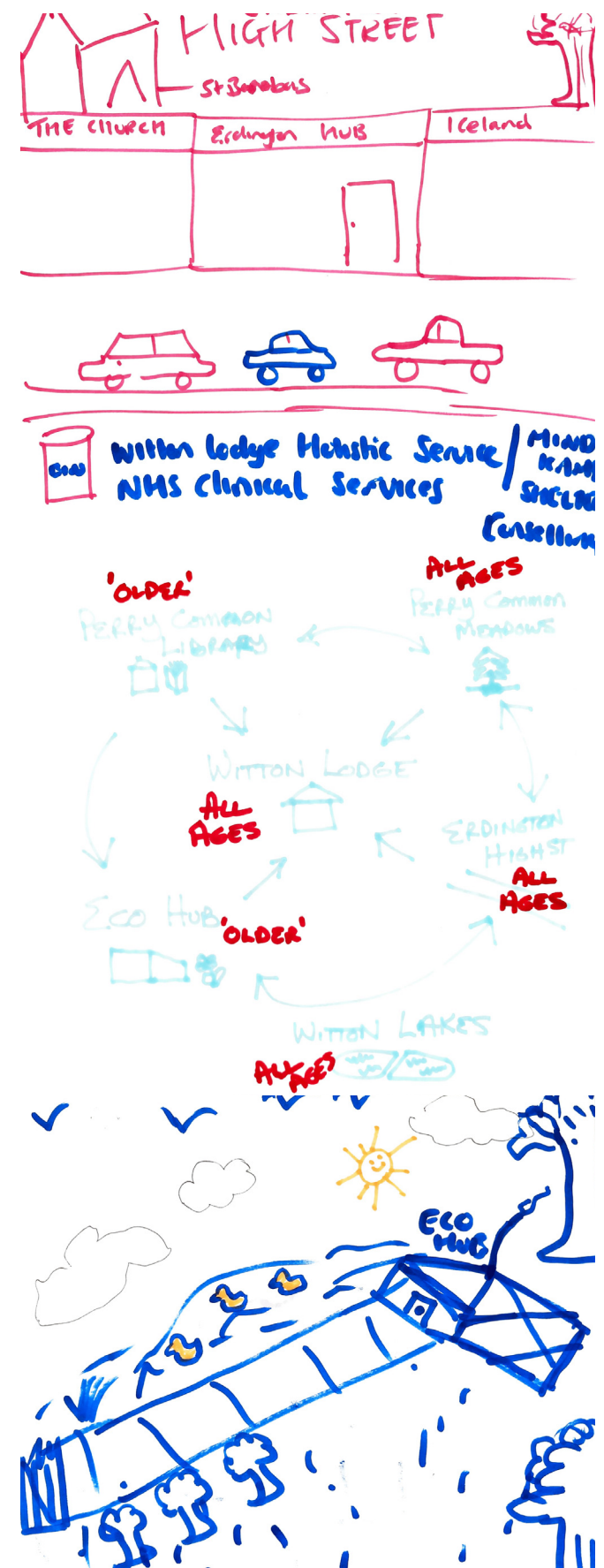


Figure A3: Illustration of key assets, workshop 03.02.2025



Figure A4: Staff and volunteers meeting

Best practices

Key best practices mentioned were face-to-face engagement with residents, good team communication, structured programmes such as the job club and strong faith groups. WLCA's have an open-door approach that welcomes all residents and a focus on maintaining high housing standards and supporting older people.

WLCA's presence across four sites (Perry Common, Eco Hub, Erdington High Street and Erdington Baths) in the locality enhances their reach and ensures they can provide services where they are most needed. Staff mentioned the multicultural nature of their team and strong volunteer engagement as a strength. Test piloting and stress testing organisational practices as well as their linkages to local governance and policy influence were seen as unique to WLCA.

There was a strong sense that the Association encourages staff to work across different work streams and encourages ongoing upskilling. Other best practices mentioned were accessibility, adaptability of evaluating services, and good facilitation of diverse events. WLCA's close presence to the housing properties they manage was also seen as a key strength.

Key impact

“We change people’s lives” was a repeated impact statement reported by staff and volunteers, indicating a high level of pride in the work that they do. Participants in the workshop reported observing positive change in people using their services, monitoring that through individual assessments and data-driven approach.

Indicators of success

Participants reported several ways WLCA’s impact is measured. Improved wellbeing, reduced isolation and increased community participation were seen as primary indicators of success. These outcomes are captured through individual assessments, satisfaction surveys and feedback forms.

Reputation and community perception were also highlighted as important measures, with word-of-mouth recommendations and positive public feedback viewed as evidence of WLCA’s influence. Participants suggested that repeat service use and ongoing engagement with WLCA’s programmes reflect community trust and the long-term effectiveness of the organisation’s work.

A softer measure of local influence was reported as the willingness of other groups and organisation to work with WLCA, demonstrating their success as a local anchor institution.



Figure A5: Staff and volunteers meeting

What is missing

The workshop identified areas where WLCA could improve outreach and engagement. Participants highlighted limited engagement with specific demographic groups, including pre-school children, younger people, men, and some faith communities. Language barriers also present challenges in connecting with residents. Suggestions for improvement included expanding cultural programming to reflect the area’s diversity:

“We could build more cultural events such as activities around Caribbean communities, Divali, other festivals.” - Staff participant

Young people’s services were a repeated refrain we heard from staff, volunteers and community members. Even though there has been some progress in that direction, the perception was that the need was greater than was being serviced and there was room for improvement. There was also a call for more services targeting young adults aged 18-25, as well as teenagers, children and families. adults aged 18-25 but also with teenagers, children and families.

A2: Workshop with senior executive team and trustees

As part of the development of the Decent Neighbourhood Standard, a semi-formal roundtable discussion was held with Witton Lodge Community Association (WLCA) senior leadership and trustees on the 05.02.2025. The session aimed to gather insights on WLCA’s operations, strategic direction, and perceived community impact. The meeting began with an overview of the project and invited to ask questions to clarify the project scope and approach. The meeting focused on WLCA’s activities and partnerships, strategic direction and values, and how the organisation measures its impact.

What is a neighbourhood?

“You can build housing, but they become homes if you do the flourishing communities” - WLCA Trustee

Defining the perceptual boundaries of neighbourhoods within which WLCA operates emerged as a key question. In our workshops, staff, volunteers and community members drew diverse and often overlapping boundaries between different perceived neighbourhoods. The green linkages - parks and valleys such as Witton Lakes and Bleak Hill Park emerged as important destinations as the defined residential areas.

Findings from the Senior Leadership and Trustee workshop further highlighted that defining a neighbourhood is complex and multifaceted. While physical assets—such as housing and community hubs—serve as clear markers, participants emphasised that neighbourhoods are also defined by social connections, safety, and a sense of belonging. The Eco Hub was identified as a key example of WLCA’s commitment to community-led spaces, fostering a sense of ownership and security for local residents.

Participants noted that neighbourhood boundaries are not always fixed. Insights from the 2017 University of Birmingham study were referenced, suggesting that 20-minute walking distances represent a natural neighbourhood boundary. However, economic and social factors often lead residents to engage with services beyond these immediate areas. The workshop also highlighted concerns that community identity has weakened due to factors such as the rise of HMOs and short-term tenancies.

Who’s responsible for the quality of a neighbourhood?

Workshop participants felt that responsibility for neighbourhood quality is shared among local organisations, authorities, and residents. The old Homes England pilot was discussed as an example of both success and challenge. While WLCA effectively improved local services (e.g., bin collections and community engagement) on a specific estate, scaling these improvements more broadly was difficult due to external partner involvement. As a result, participants agreed that WLCA focuses on areas where they have direct accountability, using their resident-led model to influence wider neighbourhood standards.

Participants also highlighted WLCA’s role in key partnerships, such as the North Birmingham Economic Recovery Board, which enables the organisation to advocate for change while continuing to deliver practical improvements within their areas of control.

Strategic Direction

Values

Senior Leadership and Trustee (SET) echoed the values identified in the staff and volunteer workshop, promoting openness, inclusivity, and being resident-led. This community-first approach is embedded across all services, with staff working from GP practices, libraries, and community hubs to ensure accessibility.

A key insight was the importance of lived experience—many board members and staff live locally, fostering a genuine commitment to improving the area. Participants highlighted that WLCA is not just about housing but about holistic community development, addressing health, education, and economic needs.

Strategic growth and adaptability

WLCA’s strategy is rooted in consultation and a deep understanding of local issues. This approach has led to innovative projects, including the Eco Hub, health initiatives on Erdington High Street, and the business hub at Erdington Baths.

A major strategic challenge is financial sustainability, as much of WLCA’s work relies on grant funding, which can be unpredictable. Despite this, participants highlighted WLCA’s financial strength and willingness to take risks and invest in long-term community benefits.

Responsibility and the future

Workshop participants agreed that WLCA takes responsibility for improving local areas by addressing issues like empty properties and fuel poverty. As the organisation grows, there is a commitment to preserving grassroots values, ensuring performance reviews and strategic decisions remain community-focused while adapting to future needs.

Impact

WLCA measures impact at multiple levels. At a personal level, every interaction matters; people leave knowing someone cares. The Perry Common Community Hall acts as a safe space, providing referrals to essential services, particularly for those facing housing insecurity. On a broader scale, WLCA is shifting narratives about areas like Erdington, challenging negative perceptions and building community pride. Participants noted that external policies, like austerity measures, significantly impact residents but remain outside their control.

When considering new opportunities, the organisation ensures alignment with core service areas: **housing, employment, health, environment, and community life**. This strategic focus ensures that funding decisions reflect local priorities rather than external Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

A key theme was trust. WLCA is seen as a reliable, community-first organisation. During the pandemic, the community knew “Witton Lodge will be there,” reinforcing their reputation. Many residents return for additional support or refer family and friends, reflecting deep-rooted trust and ongoing relationships.

Participants emphasised the intangible impacts **such as changing perceptions and building relationships** which are harder to measure but crucial for community well-being. WLCA uses case studies to bring these stories to life, though there is an identified need to improve how they capture softer outcomes like personal transformation and community trust.

A3: Attending the North Birmingham Economic Recovery Board

We attended as observers the North Birmingham Economic Recovery Board, in which Witton Lodge plays a key part. The standing meeting focused on strategies to address ongoing economic challenges in the region, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. Discussions highlighted the need for targeted business and employment support, with plans to provide funding and resources for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) while also investing in skills training and job opportunities for young people and disadvantaged groups.

Infrastructure development was a key priority, with updates on major projects aimed at driving economic growth and attracting sustainable investment.

Collaboration emerged as a crucial theme, especially the role of partnerships between local authorities, businesses, and community organisations in fostering long-term resilience. Witton Lodge Community Association appears to play a pivotal role in supporting local regeneration, housing initiatives, and community-led employment programmes.

The meeting also underscored the influence that Witton Lodge Community Association holds with local MPs and Councillors, partner organisations, developers, educator providers and local and regional government agencies who were all present.

The North Birmingham Economic Recovery Board website can be seen here: <https://www.northbirminghameconomicrecovery.co.uk/>

Witton Lodge Community Association (WLCA) is a Community Association and Community Landlord. The organisation was established in 1994 by residents of Perry Common, and over the decades WLCA has evolved into an active resident-led organisation dedicated to improving housing, health, employment, and community life in North Birmingham. WLCA delivers practical services to the local community while aiming to create a sense of belonging and place-identity for residents.

www.wittonlodge.org.uk

The Centre for the New Midlands (CNM) is the only independent, not-for-profit think tank for the West Midlands. The Centre creates a space to debate and shape better region, fostering collaboration across society, industry, and academia. CNM has a strong track record in research spanning digital innovation, infrastructure, people and skills, and housing and communities.

www.thenewmidlands.org.uk

Social Life is an independent research organisation created by the Young Foundation in 2012, to become a specialist centre of research and innovation about the social life of communities. Our work is about understanding how peoples' day-to-day experience of local places is shaped by the built environment - housing, public spaces, parks and local high streets - and how change, through regeneration, new development or small improvements to public spaces, affects the social fabric, opportunities and wellbeing of local areas.

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