

Pathways From Poverty

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES BY ENABLING INDIVIDUALS: AN INSIGHT INTO WEST COLLEGE SCOTLAND'S FERGUSLIE LEARNING CENTRE

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Introduction

Launched in 2001, Ferguslie Learning Centre (FLC) has since gained a reputation as being at the heart of the Renfrewshire community. The centre was established as part of the regeneration of Ferguslie Park with the aim to provide education opportunities to adults at beginner level through the provision of West College Scotland and partner organisations in the area.

Today, FLC is an important contributor in providing for, guiding, and assisting learners in one of the most deprived areas in Scotland to seek qualifications, acquire employability and life skills, and gain personal and professional confidence. This extends to helping vulnerable individuals to overcome social and professional barriers as well as personal challenges, including unemployment, addiction, low self-esteem, stigma, lack of social connections, isolation, or – in case of international learners – cultural restraints. The centre also organises events and initiatives facilitating community engagement and action.

Over the last 7 years, FLC has grown in student numbers, peaking in 2018-2019 with over 250 enrolments. While the COVID19 pandemic was a challenging time for the centre, whose learners generally have less digital access and capabilities, enrolment numbers have since started to bounce back and in 2021-22, the centre welcomed 172 learners to 19 classes with an overall 85 per cent retention rate and 72 per cent of learners achieving a positive result.

In November 2022, Ferguslie Learning Centre won a College Community Learning Award for its work, dedication to the delivery of community-based learning, and the positive impact on the community it serves. With that in mind, this case study looks at what helped FLC earn this positive reputation in the community and acknowledgement from key organisations by highlighting the success and impact factors characteristic to this centre.

Success factor: Commitment by West College Scotland

When regeneration plans for the Ferguslie Park area of Paisley emerged, the idea of establishing a learning centre in the locality was seen as a way to provide education for the community and its people. WCS (previously Reid Kerr) supported by Paisley Partnership, opened its doors in June 2001 and according to Fiona McKenzie, Head of Learning Communities at FLC, it then became (and still is) an important element of the college's delivery, primarily because it provides local, flexible learning to people with social and economic barriers.

The college's commitment to FLC is critical in maintaining its success as it allocates the funds, credits and resources needed to support the learners, including student services and access to the library, as well as providing the college progression pathways offered by the centre.

As explained by Fiona McKenzie, the centre operates as a result of direct support from college staff and departments who help oversee students'

needs and provide a wide range of support. Funding for courses delivered by the centre comes via the College, through Scottish Funding Council credits.

“ The curriculum provided draws on the specialisms of the sector provision and changes annually in line with learner need, employment opportunities and national agenda. The classes start later and finish earlier to accommodate learners who have caring responsibilities, disabilities and other commitments. Taught sessions are shorter than those delivered on campus and the duration of delivery varies with learner need.

Fiona McKenzie, Head of Learning Communities, FLC

FLC operates under the college policies and procedures to ensure all delivery meets awarding body requirements and college performance indicators.



“ We are constantly trying to look at the ways in which we can find right balances and stay viable while providing a great learning experience. There are target numbers of students in classes or performance indicators that are measured by Education Scotland, indicators based on student achievement and evaluations that we take part in. We evaluate the programme every year and discuss what worked and what could be improved.

It is so important to have hubs like this to facilitate opportunities for people to take the first steps to learning in a range of different ways. FLC provides “less scary” options where there are initial non-assessed learning opportunities with progression to assessed learning, practical based subjects to facilitate confidence in learning, accredited courses to meet employment needs, especially in the local area, supported online options for those who have barriers to attendance in the centre and progression pathways and transition routes for all courses

Fiona McKenzie, Head of Learning Communities, FLC

Finally, not only does the College provide necessary support for the centre but it also allows a level of autonomy where funding is concerned. While FLC is primarily funded through WCS, it can also apply for additional opportunities that can then support centre’s provision, initiatives, and learner needs.

Success factor: Location and local knowledge

Another important factor that contributed to the successful inception and growth of FLC is the location of the centre and the involvement of people with local knowledge. FLC colleagues acknowledge the significance of this factor and point out that professionals and partners with local experience and intelligence were mobilized in order to build learning communities and played a pivotal role in how the centre was organized and developed.

“ Kathleen has great local knowledge. This knowledge of student interest and requirement along with local and national employment data help us in the planning stages and help us shape the curriculum

Fiona McKenzie, Head of Learning Communities, FLC

Opening the centre in Fergulslie Park was a strategic decision as it ensured that it would be visible, accessible, and convenient to members of the community. As explained by the centre’s administrator Kathleen Brown,

“ We work really well with other people and institutions in the community, because it is part of the hub of the whole area. A lot of people congregate here. There are different groups and services here (e.g., clinic, nursery). So, a lot of people come here already, which makes it an ideal place for the centre. It also means that a lot of people who don’t know anything about us are more likely to find out about us.

Kathleen Brown, Centre Manager, FLC





Marina McCracken, Communities' Coordinator, added that this is also particularly helpful for learners who can only take classes part time and have other commitments in the area. The centre's location makes it much easier to incorporate learning into everyday lives than, for example, the college campus which is not always ideal for a community learner.

The interviewed students and FLC colleagues emphasized that the people who come to the centre are very comfortable with its environment as they are familiar with the people, they know that they are welcome anytime and that the centre's staff have their best interest at heart.

“ People from the area know all about us. We try and support them with employability, inform about opportunities, because we do keep in touch with partners, and we know what's going on in the local area.

Kathleen Brown, Centre Manager, FLC

Fiona agreed that people are central to the centre's success. She also suggests that where you learn makes a difference too, which is why they regularly discuss what additional services and facilities the college could provide for learners in the building to ensure the centre is a positive environment to come and learn in.

Success factor: the flexibility of the programme and its delivery

When the centre started, provision focussed a lot on IT classes, which was probably because IT was, at that point, in its infancy, and people needed to learn basic digital skills. However, as time passed, adding other curricula became crucial to the centre's approach. Currently, programmes are planned in a way that allows learners to combine gaining confidence, acquiring knowledge, gaining practical skills, and getting inspired for further education, or taking on employment or volunteering opportunities.

The centre delivers several courses at levels ranging from non-certificate to SCQF level 3-5 and college-certified options. The programme includes courses in digital and media literacy, administration, social care, criminology, health and wellbeing, childcare, and creative writing. While some courses are skill and craft-oriented, focusing on areas such as building, horticulture, landscaping, sewing and furnishing. Other courses are tailored to facilitate research, independent and critical thinking, and problem-solving skills in an accessible and engaging manner (e.g., Local Investigations, Criminology: Crime Scenes). FLC also runs classes geared towards personal growth, social and self-esteem, as well as support sessions for those who need assistance in applying for college or employment.

“ All courses follow SQA requirements. Depending on the subject matter, it will sometimes be more practical and other times more academic. The assessments are also structured differently, with some courses assessed throughout the course, others at the end of the course, and some non-assessed. So, they may be structured in a different way, but they still have to meet certain requirements.

Kathleen Brown, Centre Manager, FLC

The programme is revised on a regular basis and is changed in accordance with courses' popularity, learner needs, job market dynamics, national policy agendas, and delivery capabilities, as well as the impact of socio-economic changes. For example, during the COVID19 pandemic, the centre incorporated more subjects and practices focusing on personal development, mental wellbeing and mindfulness. FLC also liaise with sector staff to strategically look at employability and to make sure this is factored in when creating the right course offer.

“ I plan the programme, looking at what's available in the area, so there is no duplication. And I work with partners to try and enhance our services or if there are skills that they require, or they know the skills that groups require. And they can then come to me, and we have discussion whether we can do that at the centre or externally.

**Marina McCracken,
Communities' Coordinator, FLC**

The courses are free of charge to anyone who is interested and eligible, i.e., in receipt of benefits or on low income, and learners can take more than one course. As well as benefiting from free courses, learners are provided with a student card, which gives them access to West College Scotland libraries, student services (e.g., counselling), and studentship-based discounts.

Candidates are typically expected to contact and/or meet the communities' team to discuss the most appropriate options and book a place on the course(s) of interest. Then, they would need to meet with Kathleen and check that the course they have selected is the best option for them based on their level, skills, and interests. In this way, the candidate's situation is best matched with appropriate courses and future opportunities.





The centre is also reflective about what works best from the delivery perspective. For example, previously the academic session had been split into three blocks (trimesters), but it was noticed that this approach was suboptimal for learners who might need more time to get through a course. The centre switched to two semesters (Aug-Dec and Jan-June), with an average course now running for about 9 to 16 weeks in a semester.

In addition, to being as flexible as possible, the centre organises the schedule for classes to run throughout the week, sets course times that fit around learners' commitments and circumstances (including care responsibilities, disabilities, employment), as well as providing distance and blended learning options for those who face mobility or travel restraints. Finally, in some instances the learners can be supported to finish courses over more than one academic session if challenges arise. This reduces potential pressure as some learners are permitted to suspend their studies and pick up where they left off at a later stage.

The interviewed learners pointed out that flexibility is very important. The fact that lecturers allow learners space for slowing down, having better or worse days, and to work accordingly, increases chances of continuing and finishing, as well as helping to foster personal growth and resilience.

“ There were a lot of people who joined at different points in the semester, and to not keep anyone behind waiting, the lecturer worked with people of different levels at the same time. So, you can finish at your pace, and there is always someone who is ready to help. That's what brings people here – you don't get that pressure of learning. Here, you don't feel the pressure of the assessment because they know when you are ready, and that makes it much more appealing for those who see education as something inaccessible and distant for them. It is accepted and acknowledged that different people have different issues, life circumstances, learning capabilities, mental health challenges, and that is supported and adjusted to when it comes to teaching.

Anonymous learner, FLC

Learners' positive feedback is testament to the importance of flexibility applied throughout the course design and delivery process which, as Marina puts it, 'is not just about a vocational qualification, but also life skills, how we can help learners in life?'



Success factor: Culture of support and collaboration

The centre is run by a dedicated team of experienced professionals, who are the first point of contact and continuous providers of support mechanisms available to learners. They ensure that students are advised on optimal course options, linked to the right provisions, teams, and opportunities (e.g., progression, partners).

FLC acknowledges having strength in the ways it invites, welcomes, engages, integrates, and guides its learners, as well as how much of a transformative value it can have on someone's outlook and quality of life, not just in the moment but also long-term.

“ What I do is look after the students when they come to the centre. And we work together to ensure that the classes are run and the students are looked after, that they get all the support that they need and is available whether that is with partner organisations, or college staff, or any things that are running on the main campus – we tap into as much as we possibly can. You must listen to people. Give people motivation. Welcome people, hear about their lives, no judgement. Things happen in people's lives, but we try do our best to make them feel that it can get better, that they can come back.

Kathleen Brown, Centre Manager, FLC

This perspective extends to lecturing staff who come to deliver programme courses. Fiona points out that all lecturers have skills in different areas, and in working with different groups. However, they are all equally dedicated, and share an understanding that this is not a typical 9 to 5 teaching job, and that one needs to understand the complexity of some learners' lives.

The learners confirmed that lecturers' flexibility, humility and humanity played a critical role in them

feeling welcomed, understood, and motivated. As put by one of the learners,

“ Lecturers just stay with you until you get it, and it really aligns with what my dad taught me – ‘there is no such thing as a can't’. It is the passion and dedication of the teachers that I also really love about here. It doesn't make you feel so b_____ stupid. The lecturers here are like one of us, they are nothing like you would imagine a lecturer to be (bigger than anyone), and that's the image a lot of people have.

Anonymous Learner, FLC

The learners' testimonies generally mirrored the positive effect the approach of looking after different aspects of learners' wellbeing has. They explained how feeling supported and witnessing dedication of the FLC team and lecturers not only helps them engage and carry on, but also inspires them and fosters the culture of collaboration.

“ I had a class that was quite popular, with a lot of students, and what I noticed and found great is that students were helping each other. This is also the case outside the classroom, as the students connect and support one another when needed.

— Anonymous learner, FLC

“ For me, FLC is not just a building, it is the amazing people – Zanya, Kathleen, Marina are always there. If they see you on the street, they always say hello, ask how things are, they always try and find information that we need. They do what's the best for the community. It is about the people who care about you, who give you support, who understand that even when you don't feel well, you are still ok. Even if they see that there is something you cannot study now, they try and find and offer you something.

Anonymous learner, FLC

“ It is a relaxing way of learning, because you are learning, and you don’t notice that you are doing that. We also learn from each other – we share our skills, and that is not something that you can learn from the books. You can feel that you are part of learning, it gives you a sense of ownership of your knowledge and skills.

Anonymous learner, FLC

The culture of collaboration extends beyond the classroom, and learners work with FLC colleagues to discuss their possible next steps. Zanya McCartney, the centre’s learning advisor, explains that she is one of the colleagues who does course evaluations with learners, asking them what they want to do next, and guiding them to either part time or full-time studies at the college, jobs, or other courses. When it comes to college, students might need to do some additional courses that will prepare them to take this step. However, progression routes are generally integrated at the centre, making it possible for learners, if they wish, to embark upon further college study after their course.

For those who are not interested in further education beyond FLC, options including applying for employment, volunteering, or taking other courses are suggested. FLC partners with several local organisations who advise the centre on the local economic needs that could be matched with learners’ newly gained qualifications. They also come to the centre to talk about volunteering and other opportunities that could help learners to either gain new skills or apply the ones they have learned on their course with FLC.



Impact factor: changing lives and mindsets

The many factors that are reflective of the Ferguslie Learning Centre’s success are also helpful in explaining its impact. Learners shared what impact it had on their lives and outlooks, highlighting not just the importance of formal achievements but other positive effects.

“ It is a lifeline, to be honest with you. I mean I was in a really bad state – I gave up in life A LOT. But one of my passions is gardening, and I was suggested FLC by another group as at the time FLC started Landscaping and introduction to Horticulture. It basically gave me a purpose every week, new people and friendships, it gave me a lot of confidence to do things, to help others.

Anonymous learner, FLC

“ It makes you feel like a 100%. I’ve always been a bit of an introvert, so I remember the first week, I felt a bit intimidated, thinking I am not good and brave enough to do this. But once you start, the sense of commitment you get from everybody, you learn that we are not so different. So now, when I walk through that door, I can’t wait to come back next week!

Anonymous learner, FLC

“ You live in the darkest cloud, and you come here, and you find some sunshine. It was a massive change on my confidence and mental health too. My kids were concerned about me, and now they are really proud of me, so it takes a lot of pressure off them too.

Anonymous learner, FLC



Gaining friendships, confidence, soft skills, and a sense of community, as well as having a positive impact on personal and family life and serving as a route out of life-threatening behaviours were all mentioned as things learners either experienced themselves or witnessed others experience as a benefit of taking the step into FLC.

As pointed out by Fiona, the centre produces positive results for students and SMART targets help to measure and demonstrate the success of the centre. However, she also notes that numbers do not always do justice to the wider impact on individuals, their families, and communities that engagement with FLC can trigger. These impacts are life-long and accumulative, including individuals, their families and their communities developing further aspirations and a sense of agency over their future.

Impact factor: facilitating aspirations and personal growth

FLC's colleagues understand their role and emphasise the importance of investing in local, accessible, flexible, and free learning as it gives people a chance to shift their lives by starting a journey that might not otherwise have seemed possible.

“ It's a stepping stone that gets you onto that journey, and then you can do the rest if you want to.

Fiona McKenzie, Head of Learning Communities, FLC

The most tangible outcome of taking on learning in the centre is getting qualifications and certification. However, as well as facilitating skills and progression pathways, it often raises aspirations, boosts confidence, inspires curiosity and initiates a passion for life-long learning.



“ **My friend convinced me to come here before COVID. I was very apprehensive about it, but she was persistent. I realised very quickly that it wasn't a typical classroom. I did a few courses and got really interested in learning more. It even gave me the confidence to go to college, and I am currently in the second year in uni studying Psychology, thanks to being here, really. I would not have come anywhere near education otherwise. And now I have a different outlook about the assessments, deadlines, my abilities.**

Anonymous learner, FLC

“ **I've never been a prolific writer but coming to creative writing classes gave me an opportunity to open something in me. It helps to look at yourself and understand yourself too. I actually want to try and write a book about my grandchildren, [who have cerebral palsy] and have a hell of a battle in front of them.**

Anonymous learner, FLC

“ **Certificates was another highlight for me. I have pictures of all my certificates on my phone, and I send them to my children, family and friends, and they always say 'check you out' – it gives your confidence a hell of a boost!**

Anonymous learner, FLC

“ **When I show my achievements to my children, I show to them that education is important, and that life-long learning is good. And now, that the prices are skyrocketing, we are all looking for extra skills, we understand that we cannot rely on one job; you must think two steps ahead, and how you can get your skills higher, so that you can provide for your family. Here you can get both, the qualification, and the motivation to do that stuff.**

Anonymous learner, FLC



Impact factor: building a community of action

As well as equipping and inspiring people to take control of their lives, the testimonies evidence how experience at the centre prompts learners to take action at the community level. One of the learners told how the skills gained in gardening, landscaping and horticulture courses prompted her to volunteer locally, and help a local school to rejuvenate their garden.

“ **After doing Horticulture, I've got involved in voluntary project in the local area, where we clear up fields, plant and grow plants and vegetables. I advise neighbours on gardening, and I know how to explain things in simple manner using the language I heard here. We work quite a lot with environment in Ferguslie Park, so we pick litter, and work with the Wildlife Trust. I am happy to involve others too, especially when it comes to breaking barriers of isolation and giving purpose. I invited this elderly couple to help us, and it was wonderful to see how meaningful they found it. It gave them something to do, somewhere to be, someone to meet.**

Anonymous learner

Fiona explains this as a ripple effect; that once learners get a bit more confidence, it extends to feeling more confident of what you know, what you can do and how to use it in helping others, whether that is family, neighbours, the centre, or the community as a whole, as the above examples of former learners offering free-of-charge classes show. The hesitation that you might do something wrong disappears after you learn and feel ownership of what you know.

Limitations and challenges

Although FLC colleagues did not point to any significant challenges, one thing that they suggested could be a potential challenge moving forward is the implications of them not getting sufficient numbers in certain classes. As Fiona explained

“ Class sizes have to be viable and reach a certain minimum for the college to be able to staff the class

Fiona McKenzie, Head of Learning Communities, FLC

Marina added that there are also natural class size limits, simply from the point of view of logistics and the quality of learning, as depending on the course and needs of learners, even 14 can be a lot. Therefore, balancing between student needs, the centre’s capabilities and anticipating expectations vs enrolment can sometimes be challenging.

Moving forward

Considering the growth and impact that the Ferguslie Learning Centre has seen over the years, its colleagues are determined to continue being an active part of the community and its mission. Although they are conscious of the financial pressures that may affect the college sector and therefore the centre, Fiona says they are keen for the centre to grow and the model to scale long term.

“ FLC is unique in that it provides more than a vibrant learning experience. It is a place where people can learn, interact, socialise, help each other, help themselves, help their families and children, gain skills, widen their perspective, gain confidence, have fun and improve their environment. People can find out what they’re good at, re-discover their skills, build on their strengths, achieve their ambitions and change their lives. For the future, I would like FLC to grow and develop. I would like the wider impact of learning here to be recognised

Fiona McKenzie, Head of Learning Communities, FLC

Kathleen added that it would be great if this growth strategy could involve not only FLC colleagues going to the college but also the college’s colleagues coming and sharing the centre’s best practices particularly where student support and engagement are concerned. This point is confirmed by some of the learners who report feeling much more welcomed, involved and appreciated in the smaller environment of FLC than in the college environment, where it can sometimes feel more impersonal. From this perspective, seeing more transitions from the centre to the college in the future is something that would benefit everybody.

Note of Thanks

Ferguslie Learning Centre colleagues would like to thank West College Scotland for its unwavering support and collaboration.

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