# Nelson’s language divide highlights urgent need for integration reforms



In a quiet corner of northern England, the town of Nelson has become a focal point for discussions around immigration and language integration. Here, in Pendle Borough, nearly 38% of residents from non-English speaking backgrounds struggle with the language—a stark contrast to the national average. Tariq Hussain, a local shopkeeper, embodies these challenges as he shares his disconnect from broader political narratives. "I speak little English," he admits, reflecting on his limited engagement with British news and the headlines that could directly influence his life.

The town's demographics have shifted dramatically over the past few decades. Once a thriving centre during the industrial revolution, known for its cotton weaving and confectionery, Nelson now carries the weight of a changing community. The latest census reports that approximately 52.6% of its residents are of Asian descent, predominantly of Pakistani heritage, while white residents have dwindled to about 43%. This demographic shift highlights a community that has redefined its identity, with a significant influx of newcomers since the mid-20th century.

Pendle Borough holds the highest percentage of residents with poor English proficiency in the UK, revealing a pressing issue for integration. The town's cultural landscape is dominated by languages such as Punjabi and Urdu, alongside the more recent arrivals of Dari and Arabic, which echo the rich tapestry of global migration. The lack of English language skills among these populations is compounded by social dynamics where many residents interact primarily within their cultural enclaves.

Keir Starmer’s Labour Party has proposed raising English language requirements across immigration pathways, advocating for greater integration. This proposal resonates in Nelson, where the local sentiment includes concerns about becoming a "valley of strangers," as expressed by both locals and community leaders. Many Pakistani women, like those Azhar speaks of, often remain homebound and thus have little opportunity to learn English.

Zafar Ali, a long-time resident, reminisced about a time when learning English was a communal necessity. "In my day, we were eager to integrate," he stated, critiquing the current immigration policies that he feels allow unchecked arrivals without considering their language preparedness. This sentiment is echoed across the community, suggesting a growing frustration with insufficient governmental attention to language skills as a cornerstone of successful integration.

Yet, amidst the hardship, there are signs of aspiration. Azhar, a community organiser, points out that many newer arrivals are resourceful and motivated, even if they do not yet master English. For example, Afghan asylum seeker Umid Ehsani, who has just begun his journey in the UK, dreams of becoming a professional boxer and is ardently pursuing language classes. His story illustrates a sliver of hope in Nelson's complex societal fabric.

Conversely, the local pub, once a hub of community interaction, stands largely empty—an emblem of a town increasingly divided along cultural lines. Landlady Samantha Barrett describes the struggles she faces operating in a predominantly Muslim town, where alcohol consumption is less common and patronage dwindles. "It's never going to be good," she admits, bridging the gap between the town's heritage and its evolving identity.

The struggles of local businesses, paired with the challenges of assimilation, underline the broader issues facing communities grappling with immigration. The once-vibrant Main Street now competes with a sprawl of shops catering to Asian customers, while the town's main shopping centre faces demolition, a testament to shifting economic realities.

Yet, the contours of Nelson are not entirely bleak. Young local women, such as 24-year-old Baligha Sahfi, are embracing English as pivotal to their future in the UK. Her journey from Pakistan and her keen interest in learning the language illuminate the potential for societal bridging, even if obstacles remain.

In summary, Nelson stands as a microcosm of Britain’s broader immigration discourse. The interplay of diverse cultures, marked by both integration efforts and linguistic barriers, captures the essence of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. As discussions surrounding immigration evolve, so too must the approach to language education, which remains a crucial element for fostering a cohesive and inclusive society in this historic mill town.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
2. Paragraph 3
3. Paragraph 4
4. Paragraph 4
5. Paragraph 6
6. Paragraph 4
7. Paragraph 5

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14719907/Britains-valley-strangers-Muslim-majority-northern-town-no-point-speaking-English.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.varbes.com/demographics/pendle-demographics> - This article provides detailed demographic information about Pendle, including population statistics, age distribution, and language proficiency. It highlights that 87.6% of Pendle residents speak English as their main language, with 3.8% reporting poor English language skills and 0.9% speaking no English at all. The article also discusses the ethnic composition of Pendle, noting that 29.4% of residents identify as 'Other than white', with 26.7% identifying as Asian, Asian British, or Asian Welsh, and 25.6% identifying as Pakistani. Additionally, it mentions that 70.6% of Pendle residents identify their ethnicity as 'White'.
3. <https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/lancashire-insight/population-and-households/population-and-households-census-2021-articles/main-language-spoken/> - This article presents data from the 2021 Census on the main languages spoken in Lancashire. It reveals that in Pendle, 85.9% of households use English as their main language, with 6% of households having no one using English as their main language. The article also provides insights into other languages spoken in the area, including Polish, Urdu, Panjabi, Romanian, and Gujarati. It highlights that at the ward level, there are areas in Pendle where more than 20% of households have no one using English as their main language.
4. <https://www.lancs.live/news/lancashire-news/fascinating-map-shows-second-most-26709184> - This article discusses the variation in language across Lancashire, highlighting that in Pendle, 87.64% of residents speak English as their main language. It also presents data on the second most popular languages spoken in each area, providing a visual representation of linguistic diversity in the region. The article emphasizes the importance of understanding language distribution for community planning and integration efforts.
5. <https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/lancashire-insight/population-and-households/population-and-households-census-2021-articles/population-by-ethnicity-and-change-2011-21/> - This article provides insights into the ethnic composition of Lancashire based on the 2021 Census. It notes that Pendle has a diverse population, with 29.4% of residents identifying as 'Other than white', and 26.7% identifying as Asian, Asian British, or Asian Welsh. The article also highlights that 25.6% of Pendle residents identify as Pakistani, an increase from 17.1% in 2011. Additionally, it mentions that 70.6% of Pendle residents identify their ethnicity as 'White'.
6. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson,\_Lancashire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson%2C_Lancashire) - This Wikipedia page provides comprehensive information about Nelson, a town in Lancashire, England. It includes details on the town's history, demographics, economy, and notable people. The page notes that Nelson developed as a mill town during the Industrial Revolution and had a population of 29,135 in the 2011 Census. It also mentions that in the 2021 census, the Asian population in Nelson was 57.5%, with the White population making up 37.8% of the total population.
7. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-lancashire-16108027> - This BBC News article reports on Pendle Borough Council's achievement in winning an award from the Plain English Campaign. The award recognizes the council's commitment to writing clear and easy-to-understand documents. The article includes statements from council spokeswoman Claire Tulloch and Marie Clair from the Plain English Campaign, highlighting the importance of clear communication in council publications.