Evaluation of the Black Thrive Lambeth Employment Project

Briefing for Funders

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1. About the Black Thrive Employment Project

Black Thrive Lambeth works to address inequalities that negatively affect the mental health and wellbeing of Black people in Lambeth. Its vision is that Black residents in Lambeth are able to thrive, experience good mental health and wellbeing, and are supported by relevant accessible and high-quality services. It convenes the Black Thrive Lambeth Partnership, which includes representatives from the local NHS, Lambeth Council, the Metropolitan Police, and the local Black community. These partners have committed to **improving the mental health and wellbeing of Black communities** in Lambeth by **addressing racism** across the services that are supposed to support them: **this is referred to as 'systems change'**.

The Employment Project was delivered by Black Thrive Lambeth between March 2020 and June 2022 with funding provided by Impact on Urban Health (IoUH). A full evaluation report for the Project has been written by researchers from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University who have been working alongside Black Thrive Lambeth since 2018.[1]

The Project aimed to improve employment prospects for Black people with long-term health conditions (LTCs), including mental ill health, by promoting different ways of working and anti-racist approaches within local employment services and organisations. The purpose of this briefing is to distil some of the key messages from the evaluation for funders to inform their future practice.

2. How did funding work differently in the Employment Project?

The Employment Project was funded through a grant from Impact on Urban Health (part of Guy's and St Thomas' Foundation). After an initial research phase, involving community researchers with lived experience of disability, racism and/or unemployment, the Project developed a grants process that was also rooted in community leadership. This was a departure from mainstream employment programmes. The intention was **to change what the system funded, change the understanding of the issues through collecting data not previously available, and change how the system was organised**.

The Black Thrive Employment Project as a Grant-Making Project

The Project set up **a community grant-making approach**, through which £300,000 in grant funding was allocated to pilot projects run locally by individuals, groups and organisations. An Employment Working Group set up by Black Thrive Lambeth consisting of Black professionals and members of Lambeth's communities with lived experience of managing one or more LTCs **co-designed the funding process** (application form, eligibility criteria etc), and **decided which projects should receive funding** over two rounds.

In total, 13 grants were awarded to those working on employment support initiatives for Black people with LTCs. All but two of **the funded projects were run by Black professionals with lived experience** of race inequity, disability and/or experiences of mental ill health or other long-term conditions. Some groups

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1 The full report can be downloaded here: https://www.shu.ac.uk/centre-regional-economic-social-research/publications/black-thrive-a-summative-assessment-of-impact-and-systems-change

hadn't received funding before and were piloting their projects. None had previously delivered their services to exclusively Black and Disabled cohorts. Projects aimed to address barriers to employment and LTCs by, for example, developing employability skills, offering coaching, mentoring, dyslexia screenings, wellness activities combined with employment information, advice, and guidance.

Capacity building fund

Capacity building support was built into the Employment Project, allowing grantees to access experts for one-to-one and group support with tasks such as writing funding bids and accessing funding, marketing and branding, and acquiring knowledge about different business models and structures. The primary aim of this range of support was **to meet the professional development needs of grantees** to ensure **funded projects became sustainable** and thrived beyond the lifetime of the project. This approach mirrors elements of a 'funding plus' approach.[2]

Wellbeing Fund

This fund could be used to purchase wellbeing activities / services (e.g., therapy, fitness sessions, and massage) for grantees, **recognising that working with people with challenging circumstances, in emotionally charged situations impacted on those delivering services**. The emotional burden of undertaking such roles was augmented for those with lived experience of the issues they supported their clients with, and became even more challenging against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and racial injustices highlighted by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

No Wrong Door funding and changing systems from the top

The No Wrong Door (NWD) project began as a sub-project of the BT 'Employment Project', also funded by Impact on Urban Health (IoUH). After running for around 18 months, further funding was secured for the initiative because the capacity and resource in the BT Employment Project Team was limited. The NWD project aimed to **build relationships and connections between employment support providers in Lambeth** and address a fragmented support system, prone to duplication, resulting in the individual seeking support having a disjointed employment support journey. By creating a coherent network of providers who share information with each other, the intention is to ensure that each Black and Disabled individual receives a seamless transition to the employment support they require at the next stage of their journey.

In addition to NWD, Black Thrive worked with system partners to **reform key policy forums** such as the local authority-led Employment and Skills Board and to influence commissioning processes, including trying to develop the nature and range of data, and making equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) targets more strategic.

Overall, taking an approach that was rooted in the community, and that put grant-making power in the hands of Black residents, provided an innovative use of funding, passing it down to groups truly embedded in the Lambeth neighbourhood. The extra financial support for groups in the form of the capacity building fund and the wellbeing fund **recognised both groups' organisational development needs, and the trauma that individuals may have experienced in their lives as a result of racism and ableism**. The NWD project funding brought in a top-down approach to complement the bottom-up approach of grant-making, seeking to resource Black Thrive to coordinate and extend its network, and change ways of working to work better for Black residents.

While not complete, and constrained by some challenges discussed below, this could be described as the beginnings of a **whole-system funding approach**, building in both top-down and bottom-up strategic work, with meaningful and lasting systems change as its ultimate goal.

3. What impact did the Employment Project funding model have for funders, grantees and the employment system?

As well as delivering change for a number of individuals who benefited from the work of groups funded by the Employment Project, the Project also showcased innovative features of its funding

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2   IVAR (2021) Lessons about Funding Plus. https://www.ivar.org.uk/funding-plus/

programme which had an impact on funders, grantees and the wider employment system. Part of the aim of the Project was to secure systems change for Black residents with experience of disability and unemployment in Lambeth. While this aim could not have been fully achieved over the short lifespan of the Project, the ways in which it used its funding has begun to create conditions for driving this change further in the longer term.

Wrap-around support

The additional funding streams for capacity building and wellbeing support were seen as a **systemic shift in the way of delivering funding**. The intensive support given to grantees across the main project grants, additional capacity building support and wellbeing grants had a significant impact on grantees, the strength of their organisations, and their perceived ability to grow in the future.

This support represented **'added value'** for grantees who were better equipped to empower Lambeth's Black population. In their interviews, Black Thrive Lambeth was described by grant-funded groups as being a source of support permanently available to help develop their ideas, working with them to help them achieve positive outcomes – a rare concept amongst traditional funders. A stakeholder reaffirmed that the reason behind this approach was to empower grantees to be able to apply for more funding to sustain their projects beyond the lifetime of the Employment Project, by giving them "the tools and the capacity to continue on doing the work… tailored work for Black people with long term health conditions (Stakeholder 4). The projects also helped grantee organisations to secure further work and apply for future funding.

> … even if you didn't know how to access experts in that space they compiled a list of experts that we could tap into, so they were very intentional about how they supported us and made sure that we had all the resources to be able to make this move or to engage in this particular pot of funding… that for me is long term change and really, really intentional about supporting grass root organisations doing the work on the ground. (Grantee 1)

One interviewee, however, also pointed out that they did not necessarily know who the funders are, or which would be best to approach for future funding for specialist work around Black culture, community and disability. This may be an additional future support need, to help funded projects transition and survive after their initial funding has ended.

A number of interviewees also highlighted how Black Thrive Lambeth had funded groups that **would not otherwise necessarily have access to funding in the first place**, because of their lack of expertise in securing grants, and their lack of track record in managing them. One interviewee claimed that *"their philosophy absolutely has broken barriers and supported groups where they wouldn't be supported before."* (Grantee 3) Black Thrive interviewees also noted how useful it was that grantees knew from the beginning who else had been funded, so they could build connections and relationships across groups. The holistic approach to grant making meant that grantees were supported every step of the way with all parts of their projects.

Trauma-informed funding

Recognising the impact of trauma through lived experience of racism and ableism was central to the grant-making approach. This was apparent in the types of projects funded and the way they worked with Black residents, but also in the extra support provided to grantees. This included initiatives such as the Wellbeing Fund and providing space for feedback from grantees and action in response.

> We're asking people who have lived experienced, right, to apply, but what does that mean and what does that imply? My feedback was actually, if you don't have structures of care and a structure support system within your organisation, already built in, right, or to be cognisant of that, we have to be very wary of asking people to do this work... That feedback then triggered them [Black Thrive] to go, oh, can we support these individuals… (Grantee 6)

This is an important reflection for future projects. Due to the nature of this work and the racism and ableism experienced by many involved, those in receipt of grant funding, people on the grant-making working groups and those working directly for Black Thrive might all face situations that risk re-traumatising them. **Trauma-informed wrap-around support** should be available to people at all of these levels.

The impact on funders: steps towards systems change

Systems change takes a long time. This is something acknowledged clearly by interviewees. Nevertheless, the Black Thrive Employment Project has made some strides in terms of introducing their own funders to new ideas that transfer power from budget holders to communities.

> I think longer term it's something that can actually happen and provide Black people a lot more say, or access to services that supports them… overall all of what Black Thrive is doing and I think there's some incremental changes that have been happening. I think some people are feeling empowered, but like I say the grass roots organisation, those with the lived experiences feel like they've got a body that could support them in setting up their own ideas for some of these systems change and actually work through more effectively to get them the outcomes they are looking for. (Grantee 2)

Indeed, the Employment Project as a whole, including its various strands, impacted on the funder, imparting learning that reportedly led to **them contemplating rolling out wellbeing type funds across all their projects**. In their interview, the funder emphasised that the insights gained from the Employment Project had informed their thinking about the different components that are required when funding and working with projects. A drive to work better with those projects allocated funding was expressed:

> I think it's probably about working in trusted partnerships and evolving our work as a funder, and I was learning about how to be a good and better funder in these spaces, versus like… more traditional type approach I guess, which is 'here's some money, have some outcomes', but that's fairly reductionist because I think even if funders operate in that way they can be different as well (Stakeholder 11).

Finally, the 'No Wrong Door' project also sought to influence the way that local authority commissioners funded services. Black Thrive interviewees told us that part of the aim of this project is to **encourage commissioners to fund services in a more collaborative manner**, and in a way that enabled greater coordination. Although Black Thrive was able to secure funding for No Wrong Door from Impact on Urban Health, external system partners had not yet engaged in the project to the degree that they needed to make it successful. Despite considerable efforts, stakeholders within Black Thrive Lambeth and externally reported that organisations struggled with being open about what worked well and less well within their services, understanding their roles in the project, and providing further contacts and relationships themselves. It is hoped that as this element of the project continues, these shared understandings will become embedded across the employment system.

Interviewees from Black Thrive Lambeth noted that the nature of their relationship with funder Impact on Urban Health meant that the impact of that funding was still developing. The initial funding, and its flexible, developmental nature, had put them in a position to apply for further funding. As one stakeholder said: *"If you fund the backbone, we can have resources to do different things"* (Stakeholder 9).

What were the challenges for funding, funders and grantees?

The Employment Project has begun to lay the foundations for change through work to change mental models, build relationships and connections across the system, and is beginning to have an impact on policy and practice.

Challenges remain with engaging specific parts of the system, such as employers, and translating learning into practice, including in procurement and health services. Overcoming some of these challenges will require commitment, movement and action from external stakeholders, which may be difficult to secure. Black Thrive is already building on its early work to continue to shift these mindsets.

Upon reflection, it seems that Black Thrive Lambeth and their funders underestimated the scale of the challenge in affecting change within the employment system in Lambeth. Black Thrive interviewees commented on how the local authority was starting much 'further back' than it had originally anticipated. In part, this was due to misplaced

assumptions about the pre-existing coherence and interconnectedness of the employment system (including the extent to which a system existed at all), alongside its ability and willingness to change. In addition, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic at the very start of the project undoubtedly made it even more difficult to secure meaningful engagement and affect large scale change at the speed required.

The COVID-19 pandemic also meant Black Thrive had to adapt its plans for this group quickly and wasn't able to run it in the way it originally envisaged. One potential area for learning is around providing similar support for those on the grant-making group, including access to some of the same kinds of capacity building support that grantees themselves had access to so that they feel fully equipped and able to make sound strategic grant-making decisions.

The findings of the Project evaluation raise questions about the extent to which external partners in the employment system were willing, able and sufficiently knowledgeable to recognise existing problems and take the radical action needed to affect lasting change. Reflecting this, it was a consistent struggle for the Black Thrive Employment Team to engage key system actors and have them lead activities that might lead to lasting change. Ultimately, the intransigence and closed-off nature of the employment system was the biggest barrier to change.

Our findings suggest that the grantees' reach and outcomes were limited by their distance from the employment system which meant they struggled to engage employers and employment support providers in their work. It appears that Black Thrive and its funders underestimated just how much

support and capacity building the grant-funded groups required to get them to a point where they might be able to engage with the system in a meaningful way. It may be that future multi-faceted programmes such as this require additional human resources (i.e., more investment in funded staff and capacity building costs) to achieve all of their goals. Funding the 'backbone' sufficiently, as it is described above, can help extend and embed this work.

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