

The Black Thrive Lambeth Employment Project

Summary of Key Findings About Impact and Systems Change



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This report provides a summary of the key findings from an **independent evaluation of the Employment Project delivered by Black Thrive Lambeth**.¹ The Employment Project was delivered between March 2020 and June 2022 with funding provided by Impact on Urban Health (IoUH). The report 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.

Black Thrive Lambeth **focuses on the mental health and wellbeing of Black communities in Lambeth**. It aims to promote equality and address discrimination in mental health services and the wider public sector. The Black Thrive Lambeth partnership includes representatives from the local NHS, Lambeth Council, The Metropolitan Police, and local Black community members. 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 has been one of the largest and highest-profile initiatives undertaken by Black Thrive Lambeth** so far. It 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. Key activities delivered by the Employment Project included:

- Small grants to local, Black and Disabled-led employment support groups, with decisions about who should receive the grants made by a working group of local Black residents.
- Support for grant recipients to strengthen their organisations and promote positive wellbeing for staff and/or volunteers.
- Research and evaluation around the employment support needs, challenges and experiences of local Black people with LTCs.

The main findings from the evaluation are as follows.

1. The importance of funding and supporting Black and Disabled-led employment support groups

Many of the projects that received grants from the Black Thrive Lambeth Employment Project were small, local, not-for-profit groups. Many were led by people with personal experiences of LTCs and unemployment. This was the first time many of these groups had received funding to provide employment related support or engage with the employment system. The evidence collected shows that this approach had several benefits.

- **Impact on Black people with LTCs:** some people were able to get paid work, or more meaningful work, due to the help they received through the project. Some reported feeling more confident to find or engage in paid work, and others were able to access skills and training that will better equip them for work in the future. Some people also reported wider improvements

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>

including to their physical and mental health, wellbeing, confidence and self-esteem. In some examples people's family members and carers reported benefits as well.

"One of my clients attended the first interview he'd had in 10 years...Another client has almost completed her degree which she was going to do and applied to go onto a midwifery course, she's now been appointed a parent governor, and this was a parent who had a quite challenging relationship with the school." (Grantee 3)

"... participants left the programme more aware of services that are available, whether that's health services, mental health services, entrepreneurship support services, employment support services... in Lambeth as a result of the project". (Grantee 5)

- **Impact on funded groups:** employment support groups who received funding found this valuable. Without the funding some projects would not have happened, and others engaged many more people than before. They also received extra support to help them make their organisations stronger and to help staff wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Practically speaking, it's enabled me to get closer to an idea, so as I said before, [name of project] initially came into the world through this pilot, this Employability Project...but what the project has enabled me to do, is to start exploring ideas around how we can support Black people and Black communities, better, to open their possibilities of flourishing." (Grantee 6)

"So now, you know, [our organisation] has been heard about from many places. People call us, you know, to find out...do we have the workshops still going on. You know. We're in touch with the Jobcentres Plus now...They're always contacting us for to send referrals. So, it's brought us out there." (Grantee 7)

"They...made sure that we had all the resources to be able to make this move or to engage in this particular pot of funding to support our businesses moving forward because they believe in what we're doing, so that level of

empowerment is benefiting me now and I'm about to finish working with Black Thrive, that for me is long-term change." (Grantee 1)

- **Impact on employment support delivery:** the project raised awareness of the challenges Black people with long-term health conditions experience with white-led employment support services. It also raised awareness of the types of anti-racist approaches that can be used to provide employment support.

"This project has fast-tracked us with confidence and strategies...this work basically super boosted the way in which we are addressing anti-oppressive practices. And we've learned from doing this really focused piece of work around working in a local community with a specific group thinking about Black heritage. In a way before we had lots of various different people coming to the organisation and we didn't place race centre on a – in a team meeting. We might have been dancing around the issues. We thought we were working in an anti-oppressive way, but we weren't." (Stakeholder 7)

The evaluation identified some of key factors that help bring about change to people's lives. These included:

- Taking a **care-focussed approach that builds trust** and means that people can access support that is tailored to their needs.
- Taking account of **trauma linked to racism and discrimination** that can affect Black people's ability to find work and their wider physical and mental health.
- Ensuring that **people with personal experience of mental and/or physical ill-health and unemployment** are involved in designing and providing support.
- Being **flexible when giving grants to small groups** and having regular conversations with large support providers to understand and respond to their needs.

These factors can be thought of as **the ‘seeds’ or ‘ingredients’ of effective employment support for Black people** with long-term health conditions. They should be a key part of future services and interventions across the public, private and voluntary sectors.

These findings show the importance of not taking a ‘one size fits all approach’: a wide range of very different types of support is needed to take account of different personal, cultural and learning needs. Although this was a key feature of the Black Thrive Lambeth Employment Project, larger employment support providers in Lambeth do not currently take this type of approach.

Because these grants only took up a small amount of the total funding for this project and were a drop in the ocean compared with the funding for employment support in Lambeth overall, their impact in the community was relatively small when you look at the total number of people supported and how many people moved into or closer to employment. The impact of these projects was limited by their lack of connections to larger employment support providers and because they struggled to link-up with local employers. Black Thrive Lambeth and their funders likely underestimated just how much support grant recipients would need to make a lasting impact. Future similar projects may require even more investment in grants, support staff and capacity building to achieve lasting change.

“It affected all levels of the project – the fact that it was so short cycle. The fact one person effectively through most of the project was delivering everything and there was so much pressure on her to deliver everything – the working group, the system change work – to meet with the council, to meet with a partnership board, to meet with us... the grantees, do the wellbeing support. [It] was symptomatic of the way the funding had been structured top down to Black Thrive. They needed more funding for more staff. To do system change work you need more staff; you need more money; you need more time.” (Stakeholder 7)

2. Understanding the impact on systems change

The evaluation showed that systems change can take a long time – longer than most typical projects last. This meant that many people involved with

the Black Thrive Lambeth Employment Project struggled to identify examples of major systems change. However, the the Employment Project has made some progress: key people have started to acknowledge the link between race/racism, health and employment, and new relationships and connections have been made between people and organisations involved in providing employment support.

“Black Thrive have the ears and the interest of so many important players in Lambeth that there is real scope to do something really exciting but then I think there’s also a challenge... I think it’s at a critical point where it could do something great. I think whether that’s working with some kind of – another external person to, kind of, come in and, you know, observe, like you said, and do that and actually advise them to kind of say, right, let’s just focus in on that and like let’s check you’ve got the right partners in place to do that then it would be a shame for it to be a missed opportunity because the components are absolutely there to do something amazing.” (Stakeholder 6)

Some examples of positive change include:

- Lambeth Council’s Employment and Skills Board has been reformed and is refocussed to include the needs and experiences of Black people with LTCs.
- The launch of the DFN Project Search programme, which supports young Disabled people to find work.
- The No Wrong Door project, which is actively building links between employment support providers, which did not exist before.
- The growth in confidence of small, local, Black and Disabled-led groups, who received grants and support through the project.
- New evidence, that has started to improve large employment support providers’ understanding of the experiences and challenges of Black people seeking work.

“So I’ve had some conversations [with the NHS], did it change my relationships with them? Not directly, but I guess I, I have a little bit more understanding about what bridges are potentially required or what questions and organisation, a big employer like the NHS may want to ask somebody coming out of a, of a project like this.” (Grantee 6)

Despite this progress, many challenges still stand in the way of systems change. These include improving employers’ understanding of race/racism and mental and physical ill-health; and changing the way the public sector designs and purchases employment support to build on the lessons from this project. Overcoming these challenges needs a combination of commitment and action from the public and private sectors, which will not be easy, and will need ongoing input from Black Thrive Lambeth to make the arguments for change.

Black Thrive Lambeth and their funder may have underestimated the size of the challenges that can arise in systems change work. The employment support system was less well connected and less willing to change than they had expected. The COVID-19 pandemic also made it very difficult, as the local authority, employers and large employment support providers were focussed on the impact of the pandemic and had limited time to think about how they should address issues of race, racism and ill-health.

Putting these challenges to one side, the evaluation findings still raise important questions about whether large employment support providers, employers and the local authority are willing, able and knowledgeable enough to: a) recognise the problems of racism, mental/physical ill-health and employment and, b) take the radical action needed to bring about lasting change. The Black Thrive Lambeth Employment Project Team struggled to get large, existing large employment support providers, employers and Lambeth Council to listen and commit to activities that might lead to lasting change. At the moment, this unwillingness to listen and act is the biggest barrier to change.

“We met a lot of challenges on the way largely around the collaborative itself or the shared referral system itself, so we were having quite regular conversations monthly with the rest

of the partners as well as Black Thrive and I think it was largely one of the key challenges around just partnership working, trying to get disparate voices in the room to agree on things, trying to make sure everybody has the same understanding and everybody has the same sort of commitment and able to push or pull in the same direction, so yes of course we are all around table all the time, so everybody was always available, however, there may have been varying different understanding within the group.” (Grantee 2)

These findings show systems change projects can be quite tricky to understand. Although most partners understood the overall goals of the project, they struggled to describe the role that they or their organisation should play. This lack of understanding about how to ‘do’ systems change could be a major barrier to achieving lasting change.

3. Value for money of the Employment Project

The term ‘value for money’ is about understanding whether public or charitable funds are spent as efficiently or effectively as possible. However, assessing the value for money of systems change projects is complicated as many of the impacts cannot be described in monetary terms. For this project, the evaluation team generated four ‘value scenarios’ – examples of the types of value for money possible - to help demonstrate the financial case for systems change. These highlighted the importance of:

- Creating opportunities for sustained and meaningful employment for Black people.
- Improving the mental and physical health and wellbeing of Black people.
- Reducing demand on key public services.
- Enabling the financial growth and sustainability of small, local, Black and Disabled-led employment support groups.

Black Thrive Lambeth and their funder may have underestimated the challenges for grant recipients of collecting data that was good enough to fully assess the Employment Project's 'value for money'. Much of the data collected by the funded groups was incomplete and inconsistent. Significant additional support would have been needed to help them collect evidence in a robust way. It should also be noted that the employment system itself does not have the systems, processes or measures needed to measure impact properly.

These data challenges are not unique. There have been very similar issues in other projects focussing on employment, race and physical/mental health. Data collection by funded groups is most effective when the requirements are tightly defined and focus on a small number of key data points and measures. Key findings should be communicated back to funded groups, as well as to funders, as this helps groups see how their data has been used and how they can use it themselves to evidence the value of their work.

4. Limitations of our findings

There are several limitations to the evaluation findings that readers should be aware of. First, the limited data collected by funded groups means that it has not been possible to quantitatively assess outcomes relating to employment and wider wellbeing. This has also limited our ability to produce a robust value for money assessment. However, it is also important to ask whether it is proportionate to ask smaller organisations to collect lots of data when their capacity is limited. Future projects should focus on a small number of measures that are straightforward to collect and ensure support and troubleshooting advice is available.

Second, in order to avoid over-burdening the funded projects or the people they were trying to help, we did not engage directly with Black people with

LTCs who received support. This is a gap. Instead, we have relied on the funded projects to elevate the voices and experiences of the people they supported. This means that there is a risk that the 'best' stories have been picked to show the projects in the most positive light.

Finally, our ability to assess progress toward the overall goal of systems change is limited by time. Our findings show that systems change can take a long time and needs to be assessed over a longer period, probably between five and ten years. If Black Thrive Lambeth and their funders want to understand the lasting impact of this project, they will need to look at this again in further down the line. This might, however, be challenging. The more time that has passed, the harder it will be to link any changes in the employment system with the seeds sown by this project.

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