

Evaluation of the Black Thrive Lambeth Employment Project

Briefing for System Stakeholders



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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) (part of Guy's and St Thomas' Foundation). 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

stakeholders in the employment system to inform their future practice.

2. How did the Employment Project work differently from other employment initiatives?

The project differed from mainstream employment projects in two main ways. First, after an initial research phase, involving community researchers with lived experience of disability, racism and/or unemployment, **the Project developed a grant programme rooted in community leadership and decision making**. This meant that £300,000 in grant funding was allocated to pilot projects run locally by individuals, groups and organisations. Second, there was a focus on **engagement with key employment system stakeholders** - notably large employment support providers, employers and the local authority - **with the goal of achieving systems change**. 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, for example by commissioners.

3. Key Findings from the evaluation

The key **findings** from the evaluation of the Employment Project are summarised below.

a. Impact on Black people in Lambeth with LTCs

We found that **Black people benefited** from involvement in the Employment Project – growing in confidence, some securing jobs, others setting up their own businesses. An increased awareness of services available in Lambeth was reported i.e.,

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>

health and mental health support, employment support services, and entrepreneurship support services. The project helped Black people to **develop self-restoration tools around mindfulness, stress management, and self-regulation**.

By **identifying and solving the personal issues that were impacting on their work lives** such as childcare commitments and housing problems, Black people were moved closer to employment.

However, we learnt about the **reluctance of Black people to participate in generic employment support** open to all populations in Lambeth and how provision specifically for Black communities such as that provided by the Employment Project, successfully engaged many Black people. This was largely attributed to issues of **trust and identification with people of the same / similar race, ethnicity, and culture** - *“Representation [in terms of race, ethnicity, health condition(s)] really matters in these spaces...for the most part, that relatability aspect allows someone the level of freedom and confidence to maybe speak about things they’ve never spoken about before...because nobody looks like them or understands them”*. (Grantee 1).

b. Impact on grant funded projects

Grant funded projects also benefited from the Employment Project’s investment (financial, moral, and practical support) and it was a catalyst for several projects developing business ideas and starting up in the first place. Learning gained on equality and inclusion influenced the few projects run by **White people (for all local populations) to reassess their perceptions and approach to diversity and inclusion** for future provision, resulting in a commitment to changing internal organisational approaches to the recruitment of trainees and working towards more diverse workforces. **Capacity building** and wellness support which were the cornerstone of the development of funded projects, enabled individuals and organisations (at a grassroots level) to learn and grow. Increased visibility of funded initiatives helped create connections and referrals systems

in some instances between grant funded projects and larger education and employment providers in Lambeth:

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).

c. Impact on employment system stakeholders

Several impacts on employment system stakeholders were also identified. Relationships, connections, and referrals were **established** at a grass roots level between the funded projects, and in some cases at a strategic level between funded projects and the local authority, NHS, and education institutions. Public sector organisations gained from grant funded projects, for example, a race - conscious program benefitted public sector employees at a time of social unrest during the intensification of the Black Lives Matter movement. White-led organisations gained profound understandings of issues of race and oppression, with **learning spread far and wide beyond the duration of the Employment Project, informing policies, procedures, and practices in future work with clients and/or partners:**

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...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 No Wrong Door (NWD) project which emerged from the Employment Project **aimed to collectively** (with five core providers) **build relationships and connections between employment support providers in Lambeth** to address a **fragmented employment support system**. This project intended to provide a seamless transition to employment support for Black and Disabled people through a coherent network of providers sharing information with each other. Whilst assessing the achievements and challenges of this project, we

discovered that as a project primarily concerned with addressing employment outcomes, the **key component identified as missing from this forum was the major employers** themselves.

4. Key learning for system stakeholders about systems change

The evaluation found that the Employment Project had begun to lay the foundations for change through work to change mental models, build relationships and connections across the system, and was beginning to have an impact on policy and practice, in areas such as the local authority Employment and Skills Board, which Black Thrive worked to reform and refocus, as well as the launch of the first DFN Project Search programme in Lambeth, supporting young Disabled people into employment. Also, the Employment Project generated a significant volume of new research that has started to bridge the gap in the employment system's understanding of the experiences and challenges of Black community members seeking work.

However, the project encountered challenges engaging specific parts of the system, including employers and the local authority, and getting those stakeholders to recognise and take responsibility for their role in systems change. There is a need for these stakeholders to commit to translating the learning from this project into their own practice, including in procurement and health services.

Overcoming these challenges **will require commitment, movement, and action from powerful actors in the employment system.** Support providers, employers and the local authority need to recognise their role in what hasn't been working for many years and **take radical action by leading activities that will affect lasting change.**

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