

How to fund systems change: Lessons from the Black Thrive Lambeth Employment Project

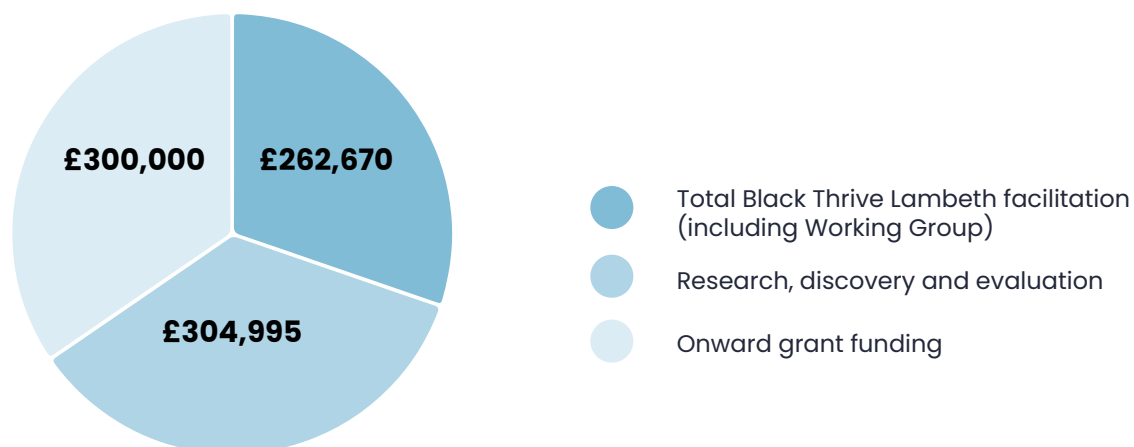


How to fund systems change: Lessons from the Black Thrive Lambeth Employment Project

The Black Thrive Lambeth Employment Project received funding from [Impact on Urban Health](#) to improve employment outcomes for Black people with long-term physical and mental health conditions in Lambeth, South London. The project was underpinned by an understanding that the current systems related to employment are problematic, discriminating, and marginalising for Black people with long-term conditions. It sought to tackle this by affecting change in these systems. As noted by Karen Pittman, CEO of the Forum on Youth Investment at Tamarack's Community Change Institute in Vancouver: *"Programmatic interventions help people beat the odds, systemic interventions can help change their odds."*

The Black Thrive Lambeth Employment Project has explored how funding can be better leveraged or changed to improve outcomes for Black people with long-term conditions based on an understanding that funding holds significant power in achieving systemic change. This power has been recognised by key funders, for example Lankelly Chase reflected on the difference between their grant-making practice and the uncertainties inherent in the complex reality of social change: *"We still gave three-year £100k grants and asked for proposals setting out outcomes. We invested so much time upfront in the assessment based on an illusion of control and certainty."* They recognised that, *"we were part of the system whether we liked it or not. The minute we came in as funders, we were part of it. If we are part of it, we need to ask questions of ourselves – how is it that we work, how do we need to change?"* The learning from the Black Thrive Lambeth Employment Project and an assessment of its work against five areas of recognised best practice funding approaches for system change are represented in this resource. The rating key below will be used to assess the extent to which the project's initial aims, as well as what eventually emerged in practice, aligns with best practice for funding systems change work.

Employment Project Budget



Rating Key ● Achieved, or significantly progressed. ● In progress, or somewhat achieved. ● Limited or no implementation.

No 1

Prioritise learning over measuring outcomes



Prioritise learning over measuring outcomes

EXAMPLES FROM THE EMPLOYMENT PROJECT

The original Employment Project proposal stated: *“We propose to adopt an action research¹ approach to this project. This will involve starting with a discovery phase, trialling solutions, evaluating and learning from action taken and making changes to improve the prospects of achieving desired results. This means that discovery will continue throughout the project.”*

- The project started with a significant investment in ‘discovery’, led by community and peer researchers from The Social Innovation Partnership (TSIP) and The McPin Foundation. Of the three main budget headings, the largest amount was spent on research and evaluation.
- Funding both a Developmental Evaluation and a Summative Evaluation allowed for learning and adaptation ‘in real time’ alongside retrospective analysis of impact.
- The funder was keen to understand our learning and provided opportunities for us to share these via workshops and check-ins. They also attended and engaged with our own learning events.
- Data and learning could be collected and shared in creative ways, such as stories and videos. Our funder also offered communications support to promote any events or resources we created.
- There was a clear co-learning journey between us and our funder and a sense of horizontal accountability.
- A culture of learning allowed us to discuss our mistakes in an honest and reflective way with our funder.

The Employment Project did, however, have some pre-defined outputs and parameters and the Black Thrive Lambeth team felt a sense of responsibility to produce tangible outcomes, which slightly moved the centre of gravity of the project away from learning.

QUOTE FROM DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION

“How much can we learn from the funding process that is created by the Working Group, that can examine or challenge the funding processes and practices that we have?”

ADVANCE INTENTION 

EMERGED IN PRACTICE 

¹“Action research is a method used for improving practice. It involves action, evaluation, and critical reflection and – based on the evidence gathered – changes in practice are then implemented.” Koshy et al. 2010 p.2

No 2

**Embrace complexity,
reject the illusion of control**



Embrace complexity, reject the illusion of control

EXAMPLES FROM THE EMPLOYMENT PROJECT

- A flexible approach to the funding and activities of the project allowed us to change direction and adapt. There was a recognition of the complex and messy nature of this work.
- While there were reporting requirements and outcomes targets to hit, deadlines were flexible and we were able to report back to our funder in a framework/style that best suited our needs.
- The funder recognised the fact we have a deep understanding of the problem and a clear vision for systems change – yet the journey towards this is largely unknown.
- The funder embraced a participatory grant-making approach as part of this project (although the parameters and scope of this were predefined without initial community involvement).

QUOTE FROM DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION

“...Because we have such autonomy over how this money is spent... we can really affect the most change by funding new and innovative ideas that wouldn't normally be funded by traditional funders because of all their strict rules and regulations.”

ADVANCE INTENTION



EMERGED IN PRACTICE



No 3

Invest in relationships, networks and partnerships



Invest in relationships, networks and partnerships

EXAMPLES FROM THE EMPLOYMENT PROJECT

- We had a trusting relationship with our funder, who listened to our needs and acted with humility. They also recognised the value in funding relational work that seeks to build interdependence within a system.
- The original Employment Project proposal emphasised partnerships, ranging from community members to researchers, employment support providers, employers and healthcare professionals, but Covid restrictions had a negative impact on the practicality and psychology of building strong partnerships early on.
- Additionally, Black Thrive Lambeth was funded in isolation to work with systems that did not have accountability to the same set of shared outcomes or the same funder. A lack of shared resourcing directly impacted achieving a shared agenda, shared data systems and shared responsibility with system stakeholders.
- Using a collective funding model, where systems and expert organisations worked together on shared goals, could have created clearer lines of accountability earlier on.
- Black Thrive Lambeth was funded as part of a cohort of other organisations working on similar issues. Greater emphasis on creating/convening a network of grantees could have led to a culture of collaboration, peer support and co-learning earlier on.
- Relatively late in the project, the Black Thrive Lambeth team established a 'No Wrong Door Partnership' of lived experience experts, employment support providers and other professionals, which will continue beyond the life of the employment project.

QUOTE FROM DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION

"It's rarely money that shifts systems. I think there's a whole networking aspect that sits around it."

ADVANCE INTENTION



EMERGED IN PRACTICE



Rating Key



Achieved, or significantly progressed.



In progress, or somewhat achieved.



Limited or no implementation.

No 4

Recognise power dynamics and offer bespoke support



Recognise power dynamics and offer bespoke support

EXAMPLES FROM THE EMPLOYMENT PROJECT

- There was a recognition of the inherent power imbalances between:
 - A White-led grant-maker funding a Black-led organisation.
 - “Professionals” representing organisations or roles and community members.
- In recognition of the additional emotional labour needed to work from a racialised/lived experience perspective, bespoke support was offered to the Black Thrive Lambeth team, peer researchers, Working Group members and grantees in the form of a wellbeing fund (particularly during the pandemic).
- Funding was also used to offer bespoke capacity-building support and training to grantees.

QUOTE FROM DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION

“The wellbeing fund is fantastic...when you do this kind of work you don't really know how much of 'you' you put inside of helping other people and I think this is the first time that us that are shouting from the rooftops that this work is important, that somebody said 'ok but how can we support you, so you can continue to deliver?’”

ADVANCE INTENTION 

EMERGED IN PRACTICE 

No 5

Avoid short funding cycles and restricted resources



Avoid short funding cycles and restricted resources

EXAMPLES FROM THE EMPLOYMENT PROJECT

- Funding was given to Black Thrive Lambeth to employ two people to deliver this project in two years. There was insufficient discussion in advance between Black Thrive Lambeth and the funder as to the scale of ambition given the resource and timescale.
- Funding was not completely unrestricted – while there was a degree of financial flexibility, other parts of the budget were restricted to certain set activities.

QUOTE FROM DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION

*"I know it is absolutely possible to create radical change.
There's a bit of an issue about whether we can do it in two years."*

ADVANCE INTENTION 

EMERGED IN PRACTICE 

References and further reading

- A Whole New World: Funding and commissioning in complexity. Available [here](#)
- Embracing complexity: Towards a shared understanding of funding systems change. Available [here](#)
- Exploring the new world: Practical insights for funding, commissioning and managing in complexity. Available [here](#)
- Evaluating Systems Change Results. Available [here](#)
- Funding Place-based Systems Change. Available [here](#)
- Human Learning Systems: Funding and Commissioning. Available [here](#)
- Lankelly Chase cited [here](#)
- Pittman, K (2015) cited [here](#)



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