# Powering Up: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Steve Conway

April 2025
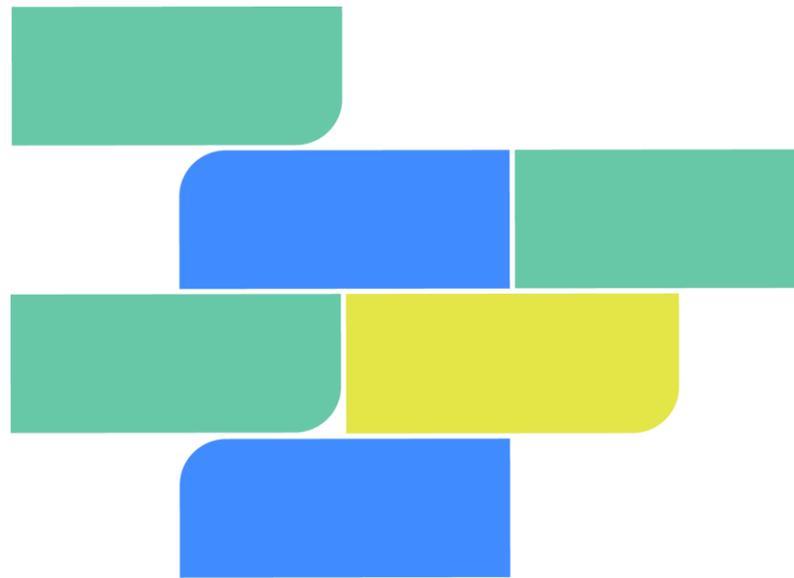
Contents

About Power to Change and Community Asset Services

Community Asset Services

Steve Conway is a Director and Founder of Community Asset Services, a not for profit worker's cooperative supporting communities, charities and social enterprises, particularly marginalised and economically excluded communities in the north west of England. Community Asset Services also work nationally with local authorities and other statutory bodies promoting safe and sustainable asset transfers to local community led organisations.

Power to Change is the think-do tank that backs community business.

We back community business from the ground up. We turn bold ideas into action so communities have the power to change what matters to them. We know community business works to build stronger communities and better places to live. We've seen people create resilient and prosperous local economies when power is in community hands. We also know the barriers that stand in the way of their success.

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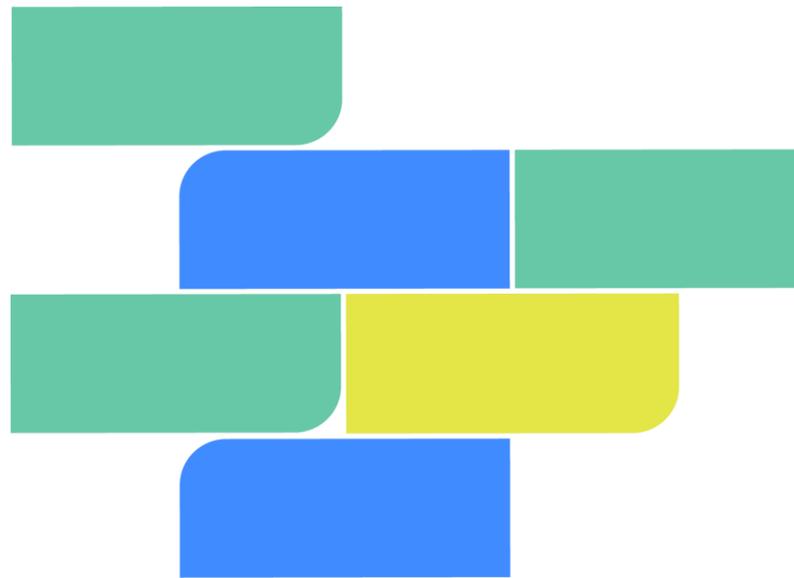
'The Table': Programme design and decision making

Programme Design

Emerging from the COVID 19 pandemic, the initial Powering Up programme design was co-designed with existing delivery partners, but only involved one marginalised and racialised led organisation, The Ubele Initiative.

Equity was embedded within the design and delivery of the programme, building in lessons from Covid-19 Community-Led Organisations Recovery Scheme (CCLORS), and incorporating lesson learnt and Key Performance Indicators from Power to Change; but, participation in the design of "the table" was limited, and a wider participation for a programme working with wider exclusion may have impacted the delivery and shape of the programme.

Improvement:

- wider and more diverse involvement at the initial design stage of the programme, regular (annual) programme reviews involving a wide range marginalised (gender, (dis)ability, sexuality) and racialised community businesses.

Decision Making

The decisions and recommendations of who to award grants and support to were made by a panel comprising the team at Powering Up. This meant it was the Programme Manager and Programme Officer, the Community Business Connectors, and, in the second-round support from a Digital Lead.

How decisions were made differed from Round 1 to Round 2, with more emphasis on Diversity and Inclusion on the second round. This was achieved through:

- "Equity Flagging" applications that came from marginalised, racialised and economically excluded (lowest 10% Index of Multiple Deprivation) communities.
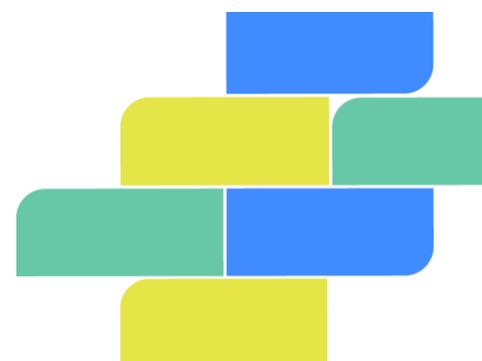
- A peer review of all rejected applications that had been equity flagged and reconsideration of the application by the panel if necessary.
- A more detailed feedback process to all applicants highlighting reasons for rejection and the offer of additional discussions on rejections.

The process of changing the mechanisms for decision making was an ongoing, iterative process and emerged through team-based discussions and workshops and consultations with the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion manager at Power to Change and incorporated recommendations from a wide range of research including:

- [Booska Paper](#) (The Ubele Initiative);
- [Minoritised Ethnic Community and Social Enterprises](#) (Middlesex University);
- [Exploring Barriers to Funding and Support Experienced by Marginalised Community Businesses](#) (Spark Insights, Locality and Power to Change)

Improvement:

- the team were in the process of negotiating and designing a wider more inclusive approach to decision making that involved marginalised and racialised community groups and leaders in the panel. A budget of £15,000 had been secured for this and wider Equity, Diversity and Inclusion work at the team, before the programme was cancelled due to restructuring at Power to Change.
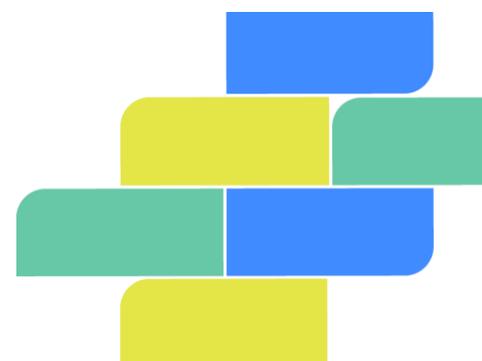
The Team

Learning from the COVID pandemic

Power to Change made a conscious decision to recruit an ethnically diverse team with experience of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion following their work with Black and Global Majority communities during the COVID pandemic and funding responses driven by the crisis.

Ed Howarth, Powering Up Programme Manager said:

"Firstly, the renewal initiative was a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and we knew that COVID was impacting communities unequally, so, our initial recruitment aim was to bring people into the team with extensive experience of EDI and lived experience of being from minoritized ethnicities. (PTC language at the time). We also experimented in the first recruitment process by using elements of the Catalyst Approach. We followed a similar process for Powering Up 2.0"

Why this mattered

Deeplish Community Association told us that the coach's and Community Business Connector's own cultural identities had a direct influence on how they engaged. By demonstrating "cultural solidarity", they created a space in which participants felt seen and understood, enabling the programme to be more resonant and impactful.

They also said the role of the Community Business Connector was essential in ensuring that the Groundwork Trust delivered work was "cultural relevant" commission (they were commissioned to support the Climate and Sustainability Work) and actively engaged people from varied backgrounds could access and benefit from the programme.

Motivez CiC indicated that the diversity of the team and Community Business Connector role was important in establishing trusting, open communications. They noted that having somebody from a funder who understands the community, language and culture reduces "code switching"[1] makes communication more effective, less time is spent creating understanding too. Although learning on both sides is vital and important if barriers are to be removed and equity achieved, on time limited

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[1] See link for a more detailed understanding, "Code Switching" refers to the mechanisms used by mainly Black professionals to safely navigate a White world and can create barriers for Black professionals where there is unfamiliarity with a particular environment, like funding.
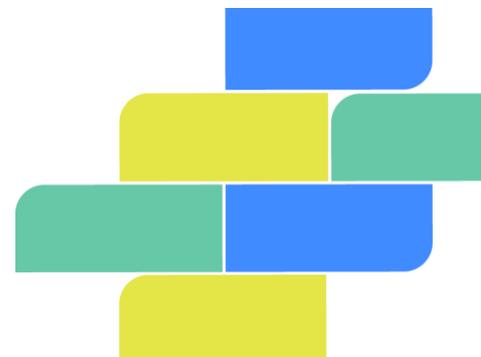
programmes this initial negotiation of culture and language can delay delivery, and lead to miscommunication in the programme.

By using a diverse team of Community Business Connectors, Power to Change were able to:

- deliver effective communications and quickly build trust with awardees;

- create cultural resonance, relevance and solidarity within the programme;

- understand the barriers and issues faced by marginalised and racialised led community businesses, making delivery of support more appropriate, focused and successful;

- demonstrate to community businesses a commitment to inclusive and equitable practice.

The team itself noticed this positive impact, **Sona Mahtani** reflected:

"Potential applicants from Black and Racially Minoritised backgrounds, women and LGBT+ resonated with the fact that I was on the team. Later we discovered there was also a Jewish man with Simon being on board and Carole sharing about how it felt excluding to be an older woman in society.

I was able to decode the content of the programme in ways they could relate to. I think with some Community Businesses during the programme, most funders would have taken a punitive stance, but our experience led us to dig deeper, wait for a better time, incorporate flexibility."

Additionally, the team was able to quickly respond and iterate to issues, challenges and work on continuous improvements to the programme by bridging the gap between marginalised community businesses and Power to Change and the programme. Again, Sona felt:

"the quality of our conversations was better in relation to segmenting the issues quite swiftly as we were creating the programme guidance, commenting on it collectively, building in caveats and flexibility. It wasn't perfect but a far more inclusive approach, in part due to the diversity of the team."

Limitations

Emerging from the COVID pandemic and its widespread and disproportionate impact on Black and Global Majority Communities, much of the initial focus was placed on equity around these
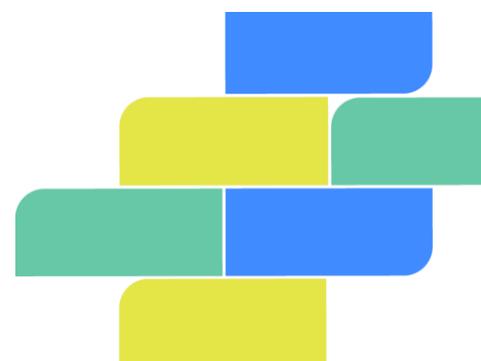
communities. As the programme evolved it was recognised by the whole team that there was a need to think beyond ethnicity and consider wider issues such as sexuality, gender, (dis)ability, and economic exclusion. The team, of four people, unintentionally included a LGBTQ perspective and was 50% female identifying.

The team was clear in recognising that oppression or exclusion in one social, economic or political field does not itself lead to a more general understanding of the oppression or exclusion of people from a different background or protected characteristic, and that even a diverse team can hold either a conscious or unconscious socialised bias.

Implicit approaches to Equity vs Explicit

From the outset of the programme the whole team's commitment was clear, it was embedded in all aspects of work, programme development and how we supported community businesses.

Equity was seen as a "a cross cutting theme", however, as team we did not define what our equitable approach was above and beyond "one size doesn't fit all" and "tailored support", and "ensuring that community businesses, especially those in the most deprived areas and those led by or supporting marginalised groups, have the resources and support they need to thrive."

As Round 2 of the funding bedded in, we followed up earlier team workshops on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion with plans to develop a whole team approach through "Targeted Universalism" an approach developed by John a. Powell, Director of the Othering & Belonging Institute at Berkeley. This would have allowed a clear operational and delivery framework and provided a mechanism for measuring impact.

Improvements:

- team adoption of a clear framework for Equity at a much earlier stage to allow a whole team approach and tool for impact measurement;

- work to develop the team, advisors and participants (e.g. on awards panels) from wider and more diverse backgrounds
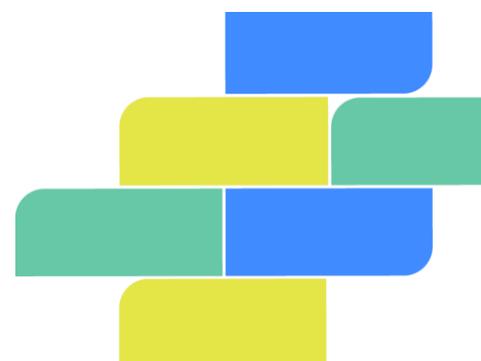
Inclusion: pre-application support, learning and improvements

Overview

During Round 1 this support was advertised on the website and through existing partnerships. Powering Up offered bookable support calls to groups that were thinking about an application.

For Round 2 we reviewed marketing and extended our reach to marginalised and racialised groups using:

- Existing social media links brought in by the Community Business Connectors;
- Networks identified by the team;
- A review of networks and contacts with the Communications and Marketing team at Power to Change.

Additionally, a slightly longer application window and more notification of the second round to prospective applicants gave more opportunity for groups to make pre-application calls.

Identifying which marginalised groups made the calls in Round 2 was helped using an "equity flag" during the application assessment helped identify which groups

In both rounds, calls were made to a Community Business Connector, calls were not limited, either in length or number and groups could arrange further calls as needed.

Calls focused on:

- eligibility, explaining the three characteristics of a community business (locally rooted, locally accountable, trading for the benefit of the local community and delivering a broad community impact);
- the application process and information needed for an application to be considered;
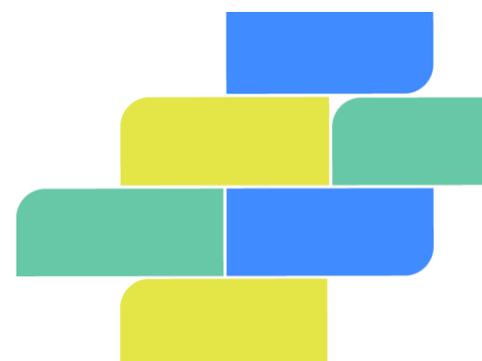
- specific question queries groups might have.

What we delivered

Round 1

- a limited and soft launch of the programme

- Twenty-four (24) pre-application support calls were made to the team of Community Business Connectors.

- During Round 1 the team did not record if the group calling was led by a marginalised or racialised community.

- From twenty-four (24) pre-application calls:

  o Twelve (50%) decided not to apply
  o Two groups were successful in their Round 1 applications

Round 2

- Of the sixty (60) pre-application support calls, seventeen (17) were flagged as being made by marginalised or racialised groups (approximately 28%). Of these groups five (5) decided not to apply (29%)
- Twelve (12) applications were made from the groups accessing support, six (6) were successful i.e. a 50% success rate. This compares to a 33% success rate for marginalised and racialised groups who made an application without pre-application support and were successful.
- In Round 2 we received eighty-four (84) applications from marginalised groups, of which 28 were successful i.e. 33% success rate vs 50% for those who received support.

Learning and Improvements
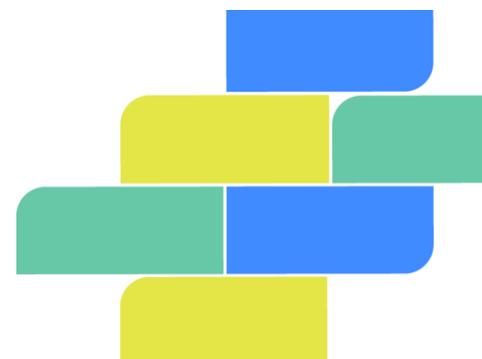
We spoke with MA from Motivez CiC about their experience of using the pre-application process.

MA told us that the support calls before application submission were very helpful, MA mentioned that on the pre-application support call they "asked lots of good questions about the process," leading to a detailed discussion about their business.

This showed a genuine curiosity from the funders' side and helped foster deeper understanding of the fund and funder and added trust to the process. MA also described how the questions and discussions enabled them to align their work with Power to Change's goals. MA shared that the support calls "definitely helped" them understand what was required in the application. This "two-way curiosity" helped them articulate their work more effectively in their application, especially around definitions of a "community business" and explain the role of the "village meetings" they were conducting in terms Power to Change could understand.

However, they highlighted that not all businesses have the same level of confidence or capacity to utilise such calls effectively. They suggested that providing a "simple guide" alongside these calls would help, especially for organisations that may not know "what questions to ask" on a support call or how to best use the call. They emphasized that not all applicants may be able to communicate as well as they did, making additional support crucial.

"Code Switching" and the role of communications and pre-application support

MA pointed to how many Black led organisations have to "code switch" when speaking with funders and White led organisations. This introduces further barriers to understanding and inclusion. White led organisations have their own "codes" too, often, formal funding applications contain jargon that privileges those familiar with the system, disproportionately excluding marginalised groups from accessing resources. "It's like a cheat code...but I feel it should be available there if you want the cheat code to be used."

Having somebody from a funder who understands the community, language and culture reduces "code switching" makes communication more effective, less time is spent creating understanding too.

Although learning on both sides is vital and important if barriers are to be removed and equity achieved, on time limited programmes this initial negotiation of culture and language can delay delivery, and lead to miscommunication in the programme. Powering Up provided a diverse team and our fund manager (Community Business Connector) understood our community, its issues, culture, background, barriers and needs.
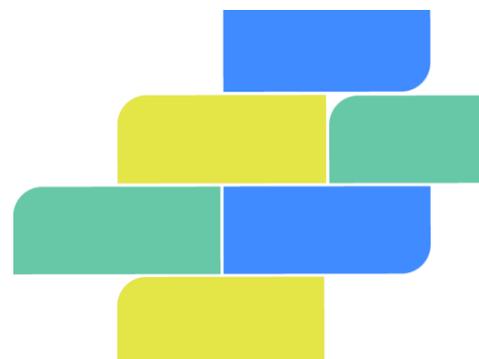
Motivez recommended:

1. Pre-application calls for applicants are an important tool for widening participation and access to funds from foundations and grant givers;

2. More accessible and simply written guides and structured prompts for support calls (and on the application form);

3. A culturally diverse team offering the support on the telephone calls;

4. A team that shows interest and enquires about the businesses calling for support, the pre-application call is as much about the community seeing if they want to work with the funder as the funder finding out about the community business.
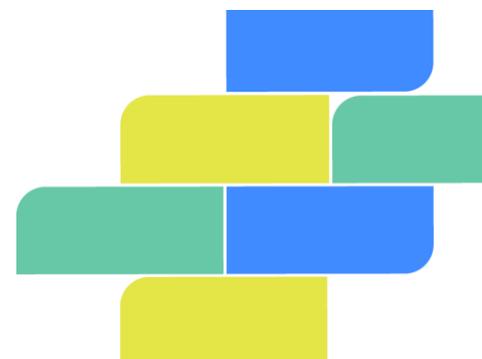
Diversity and Inclusion in the Supplier Pool

The process used for delivering support

An initial participatory Business Assessment with awardees led to a co-designed delivery plan. The plan broke down support into easily deliverable consultancy, development, training and coaching commissions, and identified approximate costs and timings.

Limited Supply Pool and Limited Diversity in Existing Networks

Suppliers for the co-designed commissions were initially meant to be drawn from a pool of contractors who had an existing relationship with Power to Change. The teams at Power to Change and Powering Up recognised that this was a small pool with very little diversity within it, and that it was also limited in experience delivering digital and climate support.

Power to Change opened up recruitment of new suppliers, this however quickly became a "bureaucratic and lengthy" process, and several smaller suppliers were put off by the complexity of the two-stage application process.

Additionally, Powering Up quickly identified the limited availability of specialist providers from marginalised and racialised communities in the Digital and Climate space. Despite lengthy searches and discussions with the Black Environment Network It proved impossible to recruit suitable candidates for two community businesses who wanted climate support delivered by people from their racialised communities.

To address these problems and meet the awardees support needs a "spot purchase" process was agreed with Power to Change.
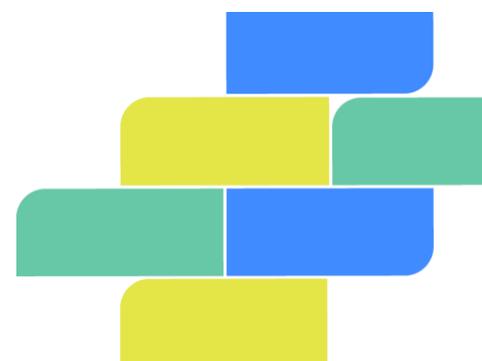
Spot Purchases

Spot Purchases were one off contracts and agreements with contractors and suppliers who were not part of the Power to Change pool of approved consultants or organisations. These suppliers were identified through a combination of:

- Awardee preference or existing relationship with a local contractor;

- Climate or Digital lead specialist knowledge and insight, networks and connections;

- A search and discussion between the Community Business and the Community Business Connector;

- An open call through, for example, environmental networks.

All spot purchases (and all non-spot purchase) appointments were subject to approval by the Community Business, who agreed waivers and agreements around Conflict of Interest.

Motivez CIC

This CiC told us that providing businesses with the flexibility to choose or recommend their own consultants, alongside offering predefined external support, increases control and allows businesses to tailor support to their specific needs.

MA appreciated being able to work with "T" their in-house contact, instead of being required to use the external consultant recommended by Power to Change.

They explained how this internal consultant, who "believes in the vision" of the business, allowed them to "prioritise" their needs more effectively. This flexibility in choosing who to work with made the process more efficient, as they had "more control over who to choose."

They suggested that Power to Change should continue offering both predefined consultants and the option for businesses to propose their own trusted contacts

Selby Trust

Selby Trust told Powering Up that Spot Purchasing allowed them to choose suppliers aligned with their community's needs, it delivered and fostered "cultural relevance" and removed barriers to the effective delivery of the support they needed.
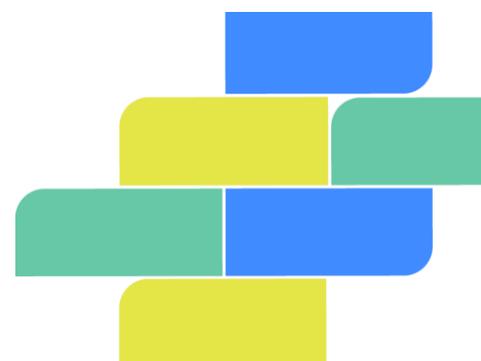
"The supplier was from the community, and because she lived in the local area, she knew the challenges, the skills, the type of people we work with."

Using a consultant with local knowledge reduced cultural misunderstandings, ensuring the training and support they needed around their environmental project was relatable to a diverse workforce.

This was seen by the Trust as "Barrier Removal":

"If we would have been restricted to go with a prepopulated supplier... it would have taken almost three months to get them on board, and that would have been a loss of time for us."

Suppliers with community knowledge brought cultural competence to the programme, fostering trust and engagement. Training delivered by someone who understood the community's lived experiences was crucial.

"Most... of our staff is from the local community and represents the majority of the local community... having somebody train them... was quite beneficial for them to understand and connect with."

The training provider's identity and local expertise reduced potential alienation or cultural gaps, promoting inclusive learning.

Spot Purchase Coaching at Deeplish Community Association

Deeplish Community Association (DCA) is a Global majority led centre in Greater Manchester. They shared that the programme fostered a sense of ownership and agency in addressing environmental issues.

As part of the programme they required coaching support for their Chief Executive, and the selection and Spot Purchase of a culturally aligned coach with relevant expertise (a local Pakistani woman) significantly boosted the effectiveness of the coaching experience. The coach understood the organisation's cultural and local challenges and was a key success factor during their participation in the programme. The coaching programme fostered valuable partnerships with local, regional, and national entities such as the University of Manchester and local health services, enhancing organisational outreach and impact

Spot Purchasing reinforced the belief and shared experience of DCA being in control of the process and delivery. This also contributed to a deeper sense of community ownership of the climate change strategy and reinforced the commitment to long-term, equitable change.
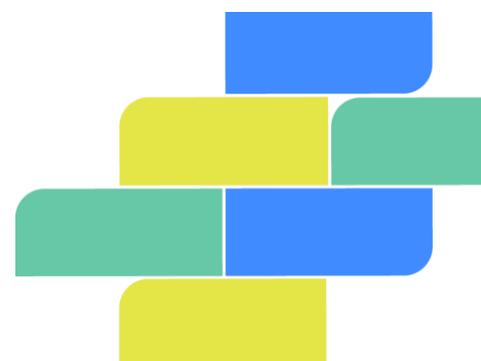
The programme stood out as unique because it respected diversity, adapted to the community's needs, and had long-lasting impact, unlike more traditional, pressure-driven grant programmes.
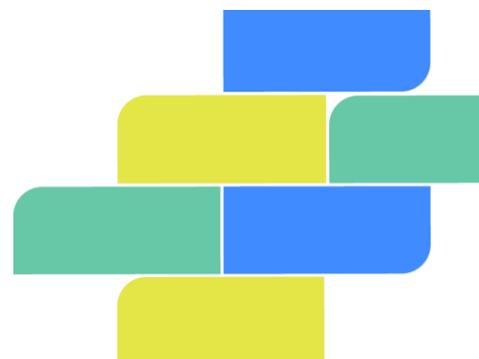
Supplier Pool Lessons & Improvement

Overview

The barriers faced by racialised and minoritised communities extend into the world of contracting and suppliers for delivery of contracts.

Sustainable Communities CIC were interviewed for this work and noted that they faced poor communication and sudden changes during the framework application process, leading them to withdraw. They felt the process lacked focus on diversity and was too complex for smaller organisations. Overall, it felt exclusionary and inaccessible.

There is a duty and opportunity for grant providers and capacity building programmes to improve access and involvement of diverse suppliers, and to remove barriers that prevent this participation.

Recommendations including those provided by Sustainable Communities CIC:

These recommendations provide a good starting point for this work:

- **Clear Communication:** Maintain transparency in processes and assign a contact person for queries.

- **Inclusive Outreach:** Organise events to engage diverse suppliers and explain the importance of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion.

- **Simple Application Stages:** Implement a two-step process, starting with a brief expression of interest.

- **Integrate Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Criteria:** Include questions about diversity experience in selection.
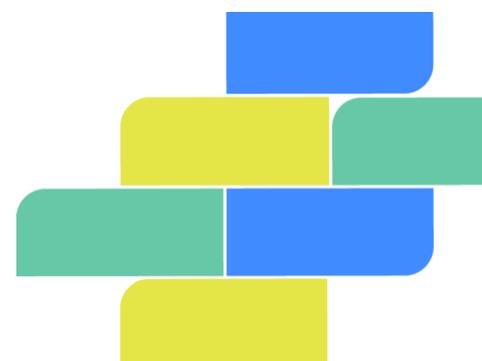
- **Track Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Outcomes:** Introduce Key Performance Indicators to monitor and promote supplier diversity.

Good Practice Example – Drive Domestic Abuse Project

N has sign posted to the Domestic Abuse project he is part of. This project promotes diversity by encouraging applications from organisations serving specific communities. The project holds online market-warming events to explain opportunities and support organisations that serve LGBTQ+, Asian, and African-Caribbean communities. This proactive approach supports smaller organisations and fosters more inclusive participation.

- **Spot Purchasing:** Spot Purchasing provides an opportunity to improve support to Community Businesses, while broadening Inclusiveness and Diversity in contracts used by funders and capacity builders. This approach places choice and control into the hands of marginalised communities by allowing them to make the choices they want and need for their communities.

  Cultural barriers can be removed and "cultural resonance" used to improve the efficiency of consultancies and training. Local knowledge can be applied and lead to better outcomes and sustainable gains.

- **Preparation ahead of a programme launch is essential:** Preparation and management of a supplier pool prior to a programme's launch is essential to avoid delays and lengthy searches for appropriate suppliers.

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