National Capacity Building Conference Report:

What 'Really' Works for Black and Asian Organisations?

Published: November 2025



ACTION FOR RACE EQUALITY

VOICE 4CHANGE ENGLAND

olmec

THE UBELE INITIATIVE

Growth

Upskilling

Strategic Planning

Improving Resources

Support

Access to Opportunities

Empowering People

Community Development

Strengthen

People, Sectors, Organisations

Funding

Confidence Building

Word cloud pulled together from comments received through the online live poll during the event.

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Introduction

On December 5, 2024, four leading national infrastructure organisations - **Action for Race Equality (ARE)**, **The Ubele Initiative**, **Voice4Change England**, and **Olmec** - joined forces to host the **National Capacity Building Conference titled "What 'Really' Works for Black and Asian-led Organisations?"**

The conference brought together practitioners, community leaders, and funders to examine current capacity-building models and explore innovative approaches to strengthen Black and Asian-led 'by and for' organisations.

This landmark event represented the first time these four organisations, with immense collective experience in capacity building, collaborated to address the fundamental question of what truly works to help Black and Asian organisations thrive in the 21st century.



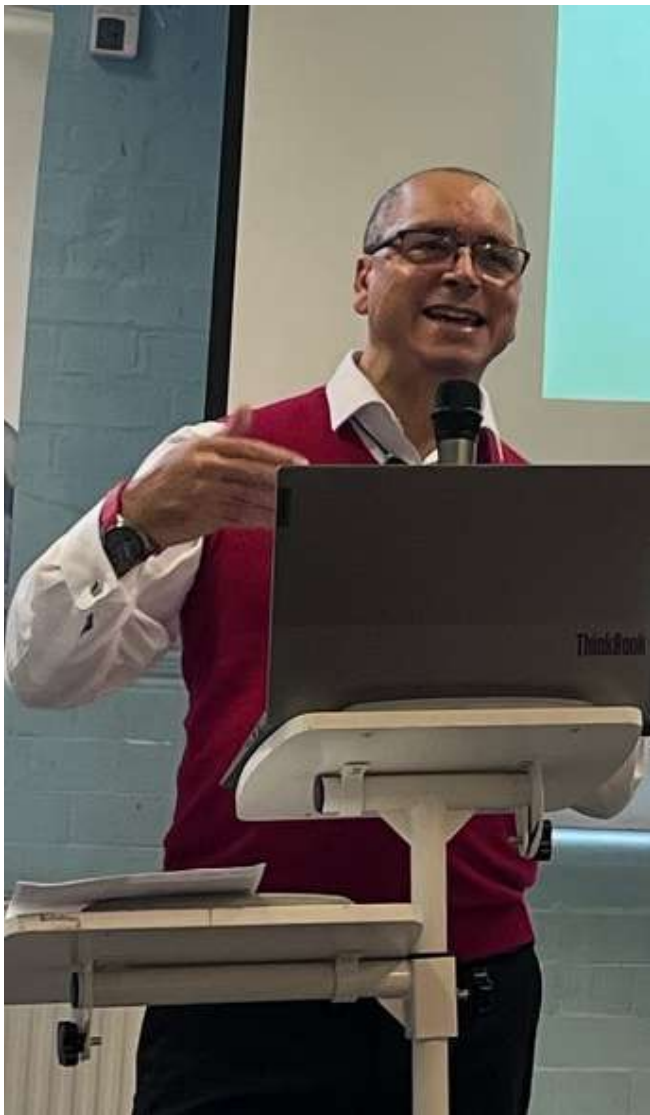
Background and Context

As of 2025, the UK charity sector comprises around 170,000 registered charities with approximately 80% operating on an annual income below £100,000. Despite their limited resources, these small charities provide essential services to local communities, offer innovative solutions to societal challenges, and contribute to a competitive landscape that ensures the efficiency of larger players.

However, these organisations face significant funding challenges, as they receive less than 10% of the sector's total income - the majority of which is often restricted to specific projects, leaving little room for organisational growth and sustainability.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the need for stronger and more resilient organisations in the face of crisis, funders - including governments, charitable trusts, foundations, and commissioners - increasingly recognised the importance of strengthening the sustainability of Black and Asian-led organisations.

The conference aimed to uncover actionable insights to support frontline service providers and community asset-based organisations in building resilience, scaling delivery, and fostering impactful leadership.



Key Themes and Insights 6

Throughout the conference, several recurring themes emerged that provide valuable insights into effective capacity building approaches for Black and Asian organisations:

Redefining Capacity Building

Conference participants contributed to a richer understanding of what capacity building means in practice:



Improving and strengthening organisations to enhance their ability to achieve aims and objectives



Resource development including funding, support, and skills enhancement



Growth and scale as a pathway to sustainability



Empowerment of both organisations and people



Systems development through creating strategic plans and efficient processes.

Time Constraints and Practical Challenges

Workshop discussions led by Voice4Change England highlighted key challenges:

- **Limited time and staffing resources** creating barriers to accessing capacity building opportunities
- **Multiple role management** within small organisations stretching existing capacity
- **Knowledge retention challenges** when staff leave organisations
- **Need for culturally competent support** that understands organisational needs and contexts

Practical solutions proposed included:

- **Building reflective planning time** into organisational processes
- **Leveraging volunteers and interns** effectively
- **Creating systems** to retain institutional knowledge
- **Implementing peer learning approaches** to maximise benefit with minimal time commitment
- **Streamlining work processes** where possible

Power Dynamics and Funding Relationships

A critical focus of the conference was examining power relationships between funders and Black and Asian organisations:

- **Need for more transparency** in how funders assess applications
- **Disproportionate application requirements** relative to grant sizes
- **Limited opportunities** for Black and Asian organisations to influence funding priorities
- **Cultural competency gaps** among funders about the specific needs and contexts of Black and Asian organisations



Recommendations for change included:

- **From Black and Asian sector perspective**: Building partnerships and consortia for collective voice; calling out gatekeepers; reframing the sector's agency beyond victimhood narratives

- **For funders**: Providing flexibility in application processes; proactively approaching communities; implementing positive action initiatives; simplifying jargon; funding bid-writing support for smaller organisations and more representative staff, consultants and Boards.



Best Practices for Capacity Building

To address these barriers, participants highlighted best practices that can enhance resilience and sustainability:

- **Inclusive application processes**: Traditional application portals can be exclusionary; alternatives such as video applications should be considered
- **Diverse leadership within funding organisations**: Funders should ensure at least 60% of their board and senior leadership are from Black and Asian backgrounds to improve cultural competence and equitable funding allocation
- **Proactive funders**: Funding bodies should engage directly with Black and Asian organisations rather than waiting for applications
- **Core funding commitments**: Offering core funding over longer periods (three, five, or ten years) provides stability and enables strategic growth
- **Light-touch evaluation:** Simplifying evaluation processes makes it easier for smaller organisations to demonstrate impact without excessive administrative burdens
- **Avoiding match funding requirements**: Requiring organisations to secure part of the funding independently excludes those with limited financial resources

Innovative Tools and Methodologies

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Olmec workshop participants explored various tools and strategies that can support the sustainability of Black and Asian organisations:

- **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**: AI can serve as a valuable research and drafting tool, assisting with funding applications, reporting, and administrative tasks. AI-driven minute-taking can also streamline internal operations
- **Collaboration and networking**: Partnering with like-minded organisations and forming coalitions can enhance advocacy efforts and improve access to resources
- **Action learning**: Implementing action learning techniques fosters continuous improvement through experiential learning and reflection
- **Theory of Change**: This framework helps organisations articulate their impact and demonstrate long-term value to funders
- **Funding alerts and sign-ups**: Staying informed about funding opportunities through automated alerts and subscription services ensures organisations do not miss critical opportunities
- **Tendering processes**: Engaging with tender opportunities enables organisations to secure long-term contracts and financial stability

Barriers and Best Practices Organisations

Workshop discussions explored specific barriers, impacts, and best practices for Black and Asian third sector organisations:

Barriers to Accessing Funding and Support
Participants identified several systemic and structural barriers that hinder funding opportunities:

- **Exclusionary funding processes**: The bureaucratic and time-consuming nature of many funding applications disproportionately disadvantages Black and Asian organisations
- **Lack of trust from funders**: Many funders hesitate to provide full funding for projects, leading to financial gaps that threaten project viability
- **Rigid organisational structures and regulations**: These create additional hurdles for smaller organisations that do not fit conventional charity models.
- **Restrictive methodologies**: Funding criteria often exclude grassroots organisations by favouring larger, more established charities
- **Limited social capital**: Many organisations lack the connections needed to access funding and support networks
- **Lack of cultural competence among funders**: Many funding bodies do not fully understand the unique needs and challenges faced by Black and Asian communities

Impacts of Funding Barriers

The consequences of these barriers are far-reaching:

- **Financial sustainability:** Many organisations resort to self-funding their projects, leading to slow growth and financial instability
- **Organisational stagnation:** Without adequate resources, these organisations struggle to scale up, making it difficult to demonstrate impact
- **Workforce well-being:** Staff experience high levels of stress and burnout, negatively affecting mental and physical health. This, in turn, compromises service quality
- **Social impact limitations**: Without sufficient funding, great organisations remain small, reducing their ability to support beneficiaries effectively



A summary of observations:

- **Short-term capacity building support has limited impact -** support should ideally span 2-3 years for sustainable change
- **Need for holistic approaches** that benefit the whole organisation, its culture, and leadership
- **Challenge of limited capacity** resulting in missed development opportunities and slow implementation of change
- **Black and Asian sector achievements often remain "under the radar"-** delivering valuable services but with limited ability to showcase messaging, learning, or impact







The Future of Capacity Building

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Looking ahead, participants identified several aspects of capacity building most relevant for the future:



Digital transformation to address the technology gap facing many Black and Asian organisations

Whole systems change approaches to improve organisational culture and efficiency

Leadership development for both existing leaders and emerging young Black and Asian leaders

Collective voice development to influence policy and systemic change

Evidence-building to better document impact and secure sustainable funding

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For Funders:

1. **Continued investment** beyond grants, including pro-bono technical support and dedicated infrastructure funding
2. **Join up** various capacity building programmes to avoid duplication, increase added value, share the learning
3. **Relationship-centered approaches** fostering trust, open communication, and collaboration
4. **Tailored, flexible support** responsive to organisations' unique contexts and needs
5. **Cultural competency** in funding practices, including engaging consultants with relevant lived experience
6. **Longer-term funding horizons** (3, 5 and 10 years) to enable meaningful organisational development
7. **Facilitation of networking** between organisations to share best practices and build collective knowledge
8. **Creation of consultancy banking systems** allowing flexibility in when organisations access support
9. **Utilisation of independent intermediaries** with situated knowledge to facilitate trust and dialogue
10. **Diverse leadership** ensuring representation of Black, Asian, & other ethnic backgrounds in funding organisations

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1. **Strategic direction development** to avoid mission drift
2. **Cross-sector collaboration** to leverage skill sharing and joint funding opportunities
3. **Whole-organisation development** to distribute leadership and build sustainability
4. **Proactive engagement** with available capacity building opportunities
5. **Storytelling and impact documentation** to increase visibility and influence funder perspectives
6. **Leveraging innovative tools** such as AI, Action Learning, and Theory of Change to enhance efficiency and demonstrate impact



Next Steps

The conference represents the beginning of a broader conversation about capacity building in the Black and Asian sector. Proposed follow-up activities include:

- **Regional roadshows** in cities outside London (potentially Sheffield, Bradford, Birmingham, or Leeds) in partnership with local organisations – three short events in the last quarter of 2025
- **Follow-up conversation / report with funders** to share learning and influence funding practices and direction
- **A cumulative reflective event** planned for 2026 for both the sector and funders to share our observations, findings and messages and for the funders to engage with the sector in an equitable space "You said, we share"



- **Utilise existing programmes, platforms and networks such as the ARE UPLIFT programme, V4CE, Equally ours, Phoenix way, ACF**, to increase sector visibility and collective voice

Conclusion

The National Capacity Building Conference highlighted the critical importance of rethinking traditional approaches to capacity building for Black and Asian-led organisations. Effective capacity building requires addressing power imbalances, providing culturally competent and flexible support, and committing to longer-term investment in organisational development.

Black and Asian third sector organisations play a crucial role in addressing social issues, yet they face systemic barriers that hinder growth and sustainability. The findings from the conference workshops highlight the need for more equitable funding practices, proactive engagement from funders, and innovative methodologies to strengthen organisational capacity.

By implementing best practices such as long-term core funding, inclusive application processes, and AI-driven efficiencies, these organisations can overcome barriers and achieve long-term impact.

Bringing together diverse perspectives from across the sector has laid the groundwork for more equitable, effective approaches to strengthening Black and Asian organisations and enabling them to better serve their communities in an increasingly challenging environment.

We'd like to thank all 40+ organisations who joined us and contributed their expertise, helping shape the discussions and insights throughout the conference proceedings.

Report produced by Action for Race Equality 2025.
Designed by Guy Thwaites

This report was compiled based on conference proceedings, workshop outputs, and participant feedback from the National Capacity Building Conference held on December 5, 2024. The conference was organised by Action for Race Equality.