



BlaST Network Peer Pilot Evaluation

2024

**“How will we know if the
network is working?**

**Perhaps a way to measure
is to gather the network's
collective turnover.**

Then, watch us grow...”



This evaluation reports the findings of a pilot peer support programme, which was informed by 13 Black and Ethnically Diverse socially-trading organisations within the Liverpool City Region.

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1. Summary of findings and recommendations

BlaST's outreach work has resulted in 250 BlaST members making up 25% of Kindred's 1,000-strong membership.

This shows a pipeline of demand from Black-led STOs seeking investment to deliver growth and impact. However, BlaST's outreach and evaluations within the community has identified additional barriers to growth for Black-led social businesses.

Although Black-led STOs make up 25% of Kindred investment, they only attract 4% of other follow-on investment and grants in the cohort.

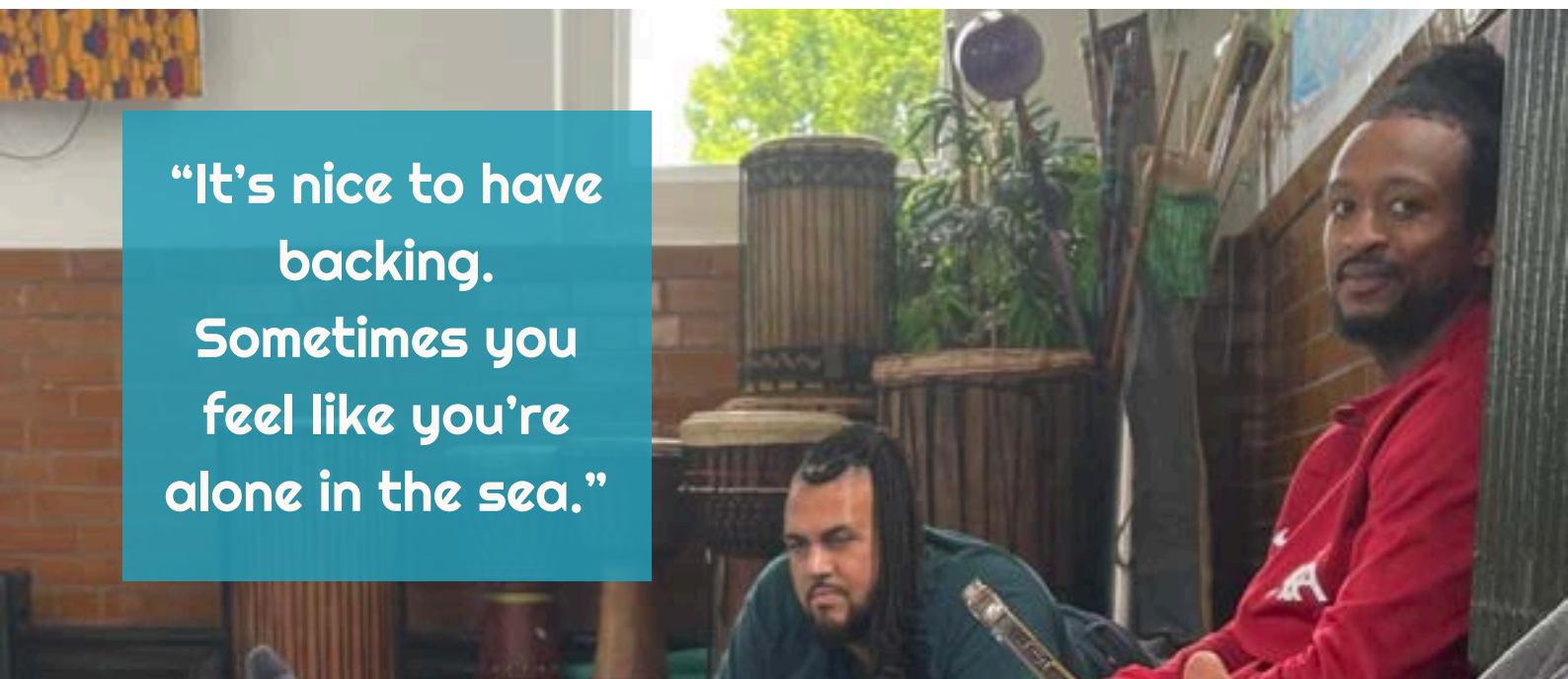
Nonetheless, our evaluation shows how they have delivered equitable growth, impact and social innovation across Liverpool City Region.

The BlaST Peer Pilot (BPP) set out to establish the factors required to sustain 25% of Kindred money and opportunities being allocated to, and fully utilised by, BlaST members.

This is designed to support them to realise their potential growth and widen their social impact.



1. A co-design process confirmed BlaST member preference for peer-to-peer support, hands-on help (practical assistance rather than advice), facilitated by someone relatable often described as “someone like me”.
2. The primary objectives of the BlaST Peer Pilot were mutually agreed as investment readiness, peer support for capacity building, collaboration, an increase in visibility and sharing experiences.
3. The evaluation suggests Black lived experience can result in anxiety about, or aversion to, working with others and risk management tools should be part of future support programmes.



4. Two participants are actively extending peer support within their own networks by delivering versions of the programme as part of their own offer. BlaST should harness and value this method of delivering business support, and recognise it as one route of STO growth.
5. More opportunity to practically apply financial, income generation, social impact and pitch skills, both individually and collectively, were requested and should form part of the BlaST programme 24/25, as should Kindred Social Directory listings of people who can be contracted with these skills.
6. Company structure and Governance was a barrier to investment for a minority of participants and early, specialist, advice would avoid later problems in regard to issues such as ineligibility.

7. How programmes are delivered, rather than what is covered, is the critical success factor. Co-design, collaboration, peer-to-peer, and joint action opportunities should form part of future BlaST programming.

8. Participant growth should be monitored, potentially as part of the existing Annual Review process, as this is basis on which BlaST members judge its success.

9. Those who used the ten-week programme to develop a pitch were more successful in securing Kindred investment. Participants should leave the programme with a Pitch Deck.

10. Culture SOUP was popular and successful in providing visibility to, and building, the Black social business community and should be repeated and developed.

11. Other agencies have started to deliver similar activities to those first piloted by BlaST which provides members with choice. This impact on mainstream activity is a positive outcome.

12. BlaST could use more short-term pilots to stimulate mainstream change; explore how this impact is monitored; and work with partners to coordinate the offer to the growing movement of Black businesses in Liverpool City Region.





2. Background

The Black Social Traders Network (BlaST) is a network of Black-led socially trading organisations (STOs) in Liverpool City Region.

BlaST operates as a collaborating community, dedicated to recognising and amplifying the collective impact and contributions of social business leaders with Black and Ethnic Minority lived experiences.

Defining 'Black'

BlaST equips its membership with essential skills to grow their social impact.

Programmes are co-designed with members and might involve growth planning, collaborative working, how to secure new contracts, access investment, and referrals to mainstream services.

BlaST is incubated and supported by Kindred, a Liverpool City Region Social Investment Fund. 25% of Kindred investments are made to BlaST members.



“Sometimes I feel like I’m the only Black person in business, then you realise there are others with similar backgrounds, especially in the entertainment world. Then you realise you can have crossovers and do things to benefit each other.”

BlaST targets start-up and early-stage socially-trading organisations (STOs) and those transitioning from grant to viability, providing a pipeline of investment-ready ventures with a track record of growth, borrowing and repayment.

During 2022/23 BlaST’s outreach programme aimed to enhance awareness and participation among Black-led STOs through:

- ▲ A cultural celebration of Black art, culture, and business.
- ▲ Regular information and opportunities shared via email and social media.
- ▲ Door-knocking, drop-in sessions and visits to local shops, community venues and social spaces.

This led to a surge in member inquiries, and a growing pipeline of BlaST STOs with an ambition to grow, demonstrated by increased expressions of interest and funds awarded:

- ▲ Round 1, 2020/21: 52 expressions of interest, of which 25% were from BlaST. 22% of funds were awarded to BlaST members, but not all STOs subsequently drew down money as they did not consider themselves investment ready. The money remained ringfenced to BlaST members.
- ▲ Round 2, 2021/22: 73 expressions of interest of which 19% were from BlaST. 24% of Kindred money was awarded to BlaST members and/or Black-led STOs.

▲ Open Round 2024: Ten of 30 / 33% expressions of interest to date are from BlaST members and/or Black-led STOs.

▲ 25% of all Kindred members are BlaST members as of August 2024 – 250 of 1,000.

▲ The 2023 Kindred Annual Review showed that a quarter of investment is enabling Black-led social businesses to deliver approximately 20% of all Kindred portfolio employment and turnover growth, 24% year-on-year growth, and 27% of all social innovations are delivered by Black-led STOs.

▲ This growth and innovation is delivered despite BlaST STOs only attracting 4% of follow-on investment or grants. Understandably the collective appetite for follow-on investment is half that of white-led STOs.

▲ 21% of those registering on Kindred's Social Directory are BlaST members. At the time of publication, Liverpool City Region has an ethnically-diverse population of approximately 5.7%.

However it was also evident from our research that BlaST-led STOs showed slower and lower requests for and utilisation of funds compared to their white counterparts.





“It was great to be around other Black businesses, whereas before I was often the only person of colour when going to events.”

The original brief from BlaST members in 2021, coupled with feedback and demand from the outreach programme, identified barriers to social business growth for Black-led STOs.

This led BlaST to pilot a programme of peer-to-peer support for BlaST members seeking to grow their social impact.

The BlaST Peer Pilot (BPP) set out to establish the factors required to sustain 25% of Kindred money and opportunities being allocated to, and fully utilised by, BlaST members.

The BlaST Peer Pilot was informed by BlaST members, drawing on the findings of the Adebowale Commission on Social Investment, which highlighted constrained access to social investment for UK Black-led enterprises.

The Adebowale Commission advocates for investment for social businesses with Black lived experience leadership which is also being pursued by BlaST as part of the wider BlaST strategy. The link can be accessed [here](#).

2.1. What BlaST members said they wanted and needed overall

A BlaST Community Reference Group was convened in December 2022 to undertake a reflective evaluation of engagement sessions and BlaST activities to date.

At that time BlaST members prioritised support requirements in five key areas:

1. Reducing feelings of isolation
2. Channelling opportunities to support network members
3. Supporting the creation of viable growth plans
4. Facilitating access to funding and investment
5. Enhancing the visibility of members within the network

[Click here for more details on BlaST's origins and previous evaluations.](#)



2.2. The wider programme delivered by BlaST in 2022/23



1. The BlaST network regularly communicated stories, facilitated collaboration and peer-to-peer support between members to overcome feelings of isolation.
2. Opportunities were shared both individually and collectively among all members.
3. Partnerships were established to assist with growth plans, and referrals were made for hands-on help.
4. An investment readiness program was piloted to provide access to funding and enhance learning.
5. A coordinated effort was made to promote BlaST network visibility within Liverpool City Region.

3. The BlaST Peer Pilot Brief

The insights and feedback gathered from this work informed the development of a ten-week BlaST Peer Pilot programme with the aim of building and sustaining a pipeline of STOs able to utilise Kindred investment.


The initial sessions were used to co-design the BlaST Peer Pilot programme with the stated objective to address key challenges that limit growth related to money, support, and impact for Black-led STOs. The co-design process further emphasised a preference for peer-to-peer support and hands-on help (practical assistance rather than advice), facilitated by someone relatable, often described as “someone like me”.

The original brief from BlaST suggested:

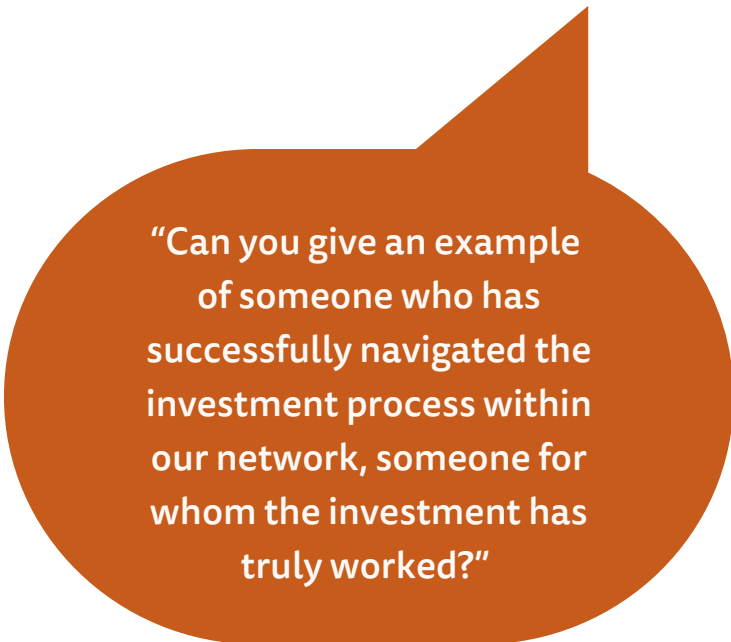
“The success of BlaST should be judged by the growth of our businesses.”

This evaluation criteria remained a basis for the BlaST Peer Pilot programme and wider related activities.

Voices from BlaST members



“We need more support; perhaps BlaST can coach others to increase capacity.”



“Can you give an example of someone who has successfully navigated the investment process within our network, someone for whom the investment has truly worked?”

4. The BlaST Peer Pilot

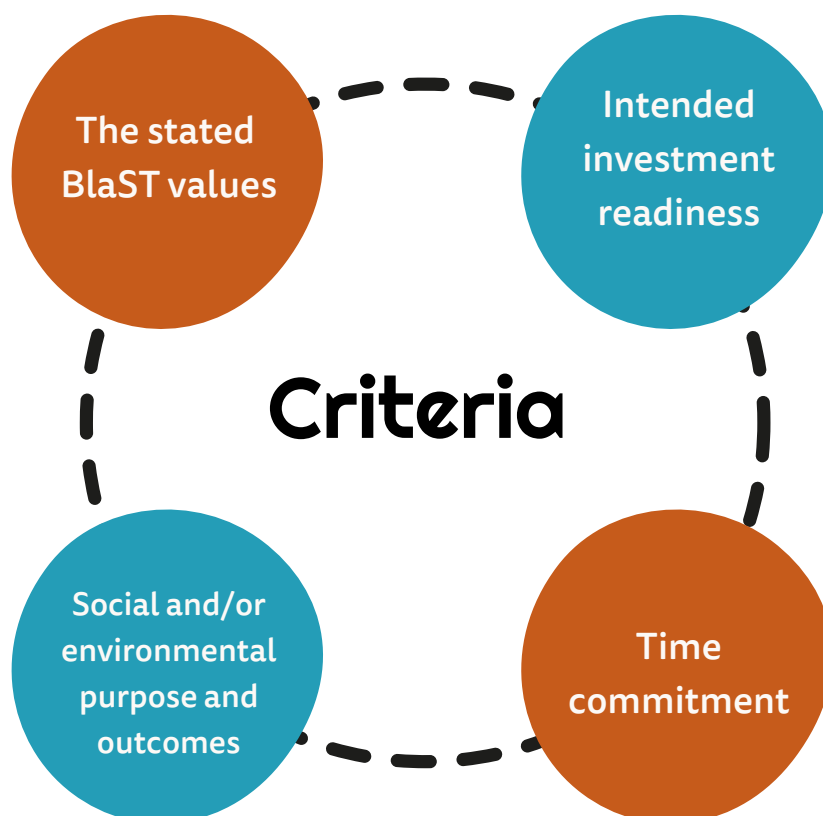
The BlaST Peer Pilot ran from May to July 2023 as a targeted initiative designed to empower ten Black social traders to collaborate in the design and implementation of peer-to-peer support for investment readiness.

The pilot used a peer-led expertise framework with some participants sharing their lived experiences and expertise, delivering sessions alongside other experts and practitioners.

The opportunity to join the pilot programme was advertised to the whole BlaST network on social media, in the newsletter and by direct e-mail to all registered members. A simple expression of interest was requested.

Applications were dealt with on a first-come, first-served basis subject to meeting the criteria.

Prior to the pilot, an exploration of the business support landscape was conducted, and network members not suited to the pilot were directed to other regional agencies offering business support.

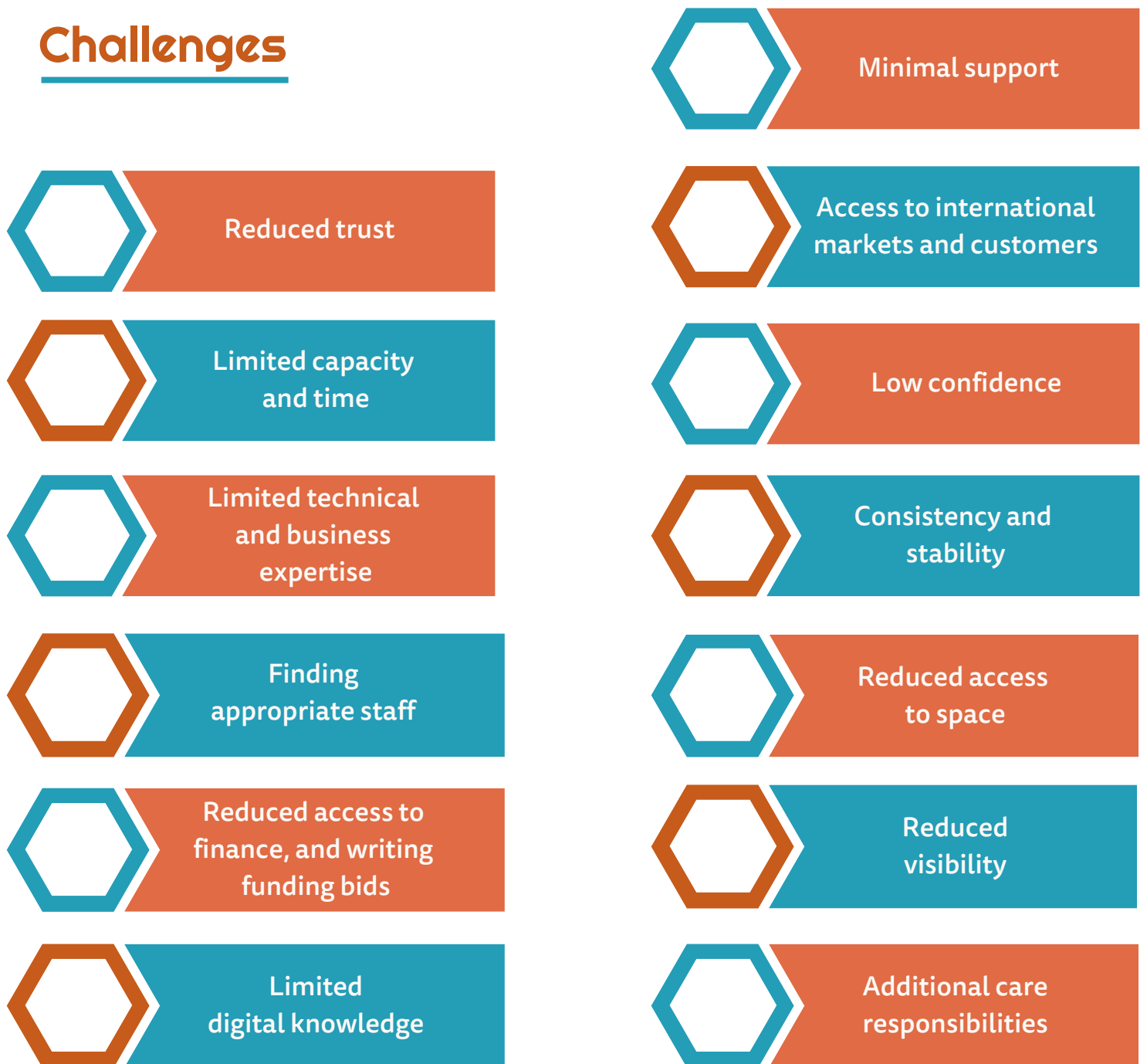


5. What took place

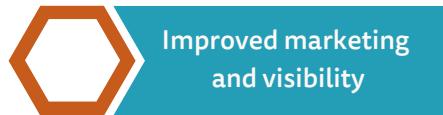
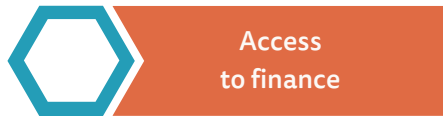
Ten BlaST members were recruited to the pilot and nine participants completed the programme. (One withdrew due to personal circumstances).

The first session, and expressions of interest, were used to design the programme detail and confirm what members wanted from the sessions, the challenges they faced, and the opportunities and outcomes they wanted to achieve.

Challenges



Desired outcomes



The challenges and objectives were refined by the group who collectively agreed the programmes objectives as:

Peer to Peer Pilot objectives

The challenges and objectives were refined by the group who collectively agreed the programmes objectives as:

- Enhance investment readiness
- Foster peer support for capacity building
- Increase visibility for participants
- Facilitate learning and sharing experiences
- Collaborate

The programme consisted of weekly three-hour in-person sessions over ten weeks. Facilitators and participants co-designed each session to ensure relevance and effectiveness.

6. Weekly focus areas

Week 1



May 15: Wellbeing and performance optimisation using a holistic approach

Peer-delivered

The session facilitated participants to articulate who they were and their journey so far. Evaluations suggested the session was very successful in building trust between participants and with the programme leaders, and provided a platform for cooperation throughout the programme.

The exercises allowed each participant to position themselves / assess their social impact through self-analysis, and then work together to gain group feedback and reflection.

Participants also articulated the context or motivation for their individual journey – and had the opportunity to feel proud for coming so far – and identify where they might support each other to get to shared skills and experience during the pilot.

Week 2

May 22: Peer learning and collaboration opportunities within STOs

Peer-delivered (on programme)

Alan used his background as holistic health coach/therapist to provide a framework for participants to understand the impact of Adverse (Childhood) Experiences (ACEs) and how this can affect life outcomes. He offered tools and techniques to manage impacts in adult life and in business.

The evaluation suggested participants recognised that the impact of systemic racism on Black lived experience can cause an aversion to working with others. The session provided tools to manage this risk and it was agreed other risk management tools would be useful and applied.

The session asked 'Do you collaborate with others?' and 'Do you ask for help if you need it?' and participants completed a self-assessment.

"Why I started my business was a way to support myself whilst removing myself from a damaging environment."

"The hidden discrimination within institutions was so harmful that I couldn't work for anyone; I started my own thing just to get by."

The session offered an opportunity to those averse to growth to accept their own growth as part of their support for others.

Barriers to growth

- ▲ BlaST members relied on very small and even micro markets within a closed community
- ▲ Survival-mode businesses
- ▲ Only function in a safe space, to protect psychological safety

Further support requested

- ▲ Tools to interface with a world where those hostilities are real
- ▲ Safe space/support network – strong want to continue with this small group/peer approach
- ▲ Coaching programme
- ▲ Cascading support in the network

Week 3

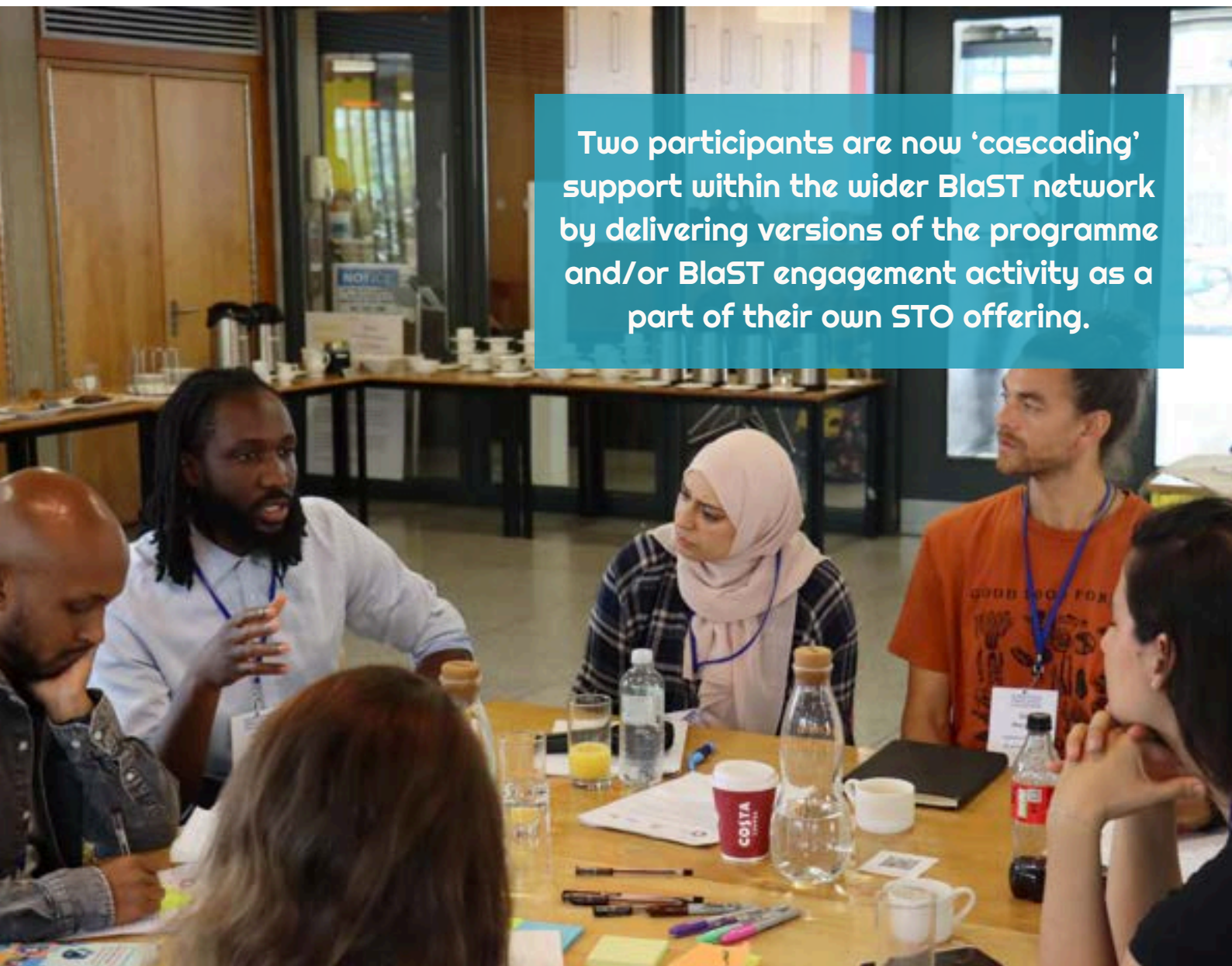
June 5: Storytelling techniques for effective customer engagement

Peer-delivered

This session equipped people with storytelling techniques. Participants welcomed the open and expressive – but confidential – environment. They collectively devised a “Code of Confidence” at the start of the session.

The session worked well for all attendees, generating good feedback. Participants left confident they could tell their story.

However, this did not always translate into the investment pitch in a less secure or peer environment – see Week 4.



Two participants are now ‘cascading’ support within the wider BlaST network by delivering versions of the programme and/or BlaST engagement activity as a part of their own STO offering.

Week 4

June 12: Navigating tendering processes for resource acquisition

Kindred team member-delivered

The session provided bid writing routes into funds and where to look for them.

The session was welcomed but participants wanted more time and opportunity on bids, tenders and income generation.

Feedback suggested this information session is followed up with an opportunity to apply the skills practically.

Income – practical workshop and further support



Attend a practical workshop where attendees write and cost their bid



Technical income generation and application skills



Listing of people to use for bid, tender and contract writing (on Directory)



Opportunities to do a collaborative bid with specialist advice or support available to review



Week 5



June 19: Governance, ethical conduct, compliance and risk management

Peer-led, plus Kindred team member-delivered

The session provided guidance on policies and highlighting the importance of having the right policy to access Kindred investment.

It provided help on how to keep it simple, giving examples of policies currently being used by other BlaST members.

Feedback confirmed further support would be useful including:

Governance



Setting up and
converting companies



Developing a Board
and the role of a Board

(These issues later proved a barrier for some participants seeking to access Kindred investment.)

Week 6

An additional session was provided for those seeking investment in which the HACT calculator was opened and demonstrated.

- Define and comprehend the concept of social value.
- Familiarisation with the Social Value Act and the opportunities
- Kindred, Social Trading Organizations and their impact in Liverpool
- What is your impact
- Explore the different approaches to measuring social impact.

June 26: Defining, measuring, and optimising social impact

Kindred associate/BlaST founder-delivered

The session provided an introduction to social impact and demystified the tools available. The session received good feedback and participants requested more.

Social Impact suggestions for more

Participants workshop to have a go at their own social impact assessment with support available

Listing of people who can help/provide social impact measurement and support (on Directory)

Practical experience with a session to bring work back to

This arose as important in the BlaST closed round as it is a requirement of investment readiness

Further feedback for workshop session in which participants do calculations themselves with help available rather than being shown how to do it

Week 7

July 3: Financial discussions on capital for business growth and scaling

Not peer-delivered, as planned: peer leader (not on programme) was unable to attend at short notice. Kindred team members delivered instead at short notice.

Kindred staff members x 2 delivered

The session engaged participants in a discussion about their attitudes to and their scale of ambition for, money. Data on the requests for and take-up of finance nationally and at Kindred was shared.

Participants explored barriers to money and the extent to which money (or other factors) were a barrier to growth.

The discussion revealed:

Barriers to growth

- ▲ A high level of confusion about grant, investment, debt and contracts
- ▲ Money was perceived as a technical barrier, but emerged as an emotional barrier
- ▲ Technical skills were relatively high, but confidence in applying those skills in ways that could be shared or widely understood was low
- ▲ What people required money for and how to use investment to grow was low
- ▲ When presented with a potential funding scenario, there was reluctance to use available resources for individual business gain. This stemmed from past and ongoing inequities in resource distribution. While grounded in lived experience, cultural traditions, and a commitment to fairness, this focus on collective impact may limit opportunities for individual business growth
- ▲ A number of businesses appeared to be operating at unviable levels / very low incomes taken by founders

Potential solutions

Despite the primarily cultural and psychological barriers expressed in the workshop, feedback focused on:

- ▲ More technical support for pre-investment
- ▲ Closed sessions in which small groups could give and gain support from each other
- ▲ To include both money for growth skills and money confidence
- ▲ One-to-one money support

Week 8

July 10: Action Learning – real-world problem-solving of business insights

Peer-delivered (on programme)

Action learning techniques were shared and applied in practice with one of the participants volunteering their business as the focus of the Action Learning set.

This involved sharing the business challenges and others asking questions to enable the founder to arrive at their own plan of action to move forward.

This session was by far the most positively received of all sessions in feedback. The practical tools and applying them in the session worked well.



“It’s daunting sometimes making that first step, thinking, ‘Do I belong here?’ And you do, everybody belongs here, and the BlaST Network helps get you into that mindset that you are valid and valued. It’s just about putting the first foot through the door.”

Week 9



July 17: Building confidence for effective decision-making and trading

Peer-delivered (on programme)

This revisited session one at the request of the participants in advance of the end of the programme and pitch event.

The session focused on tips for confidence / people talked about what they do – and offered storytelling tools.

Week 10

July 24: Finalising and presenting pitch decks; discussing brand awareness

Delivered by external professional

This session offered an introduction to brand awareness. It also provided time for one-to-one support to prepare pitch decks.

Pitch decks were supposed to be being developed throughout the programme.

Some participants prepared pitch decks, some left preparation until the last minute, and some didn't do a pitch deck or felt ill-equipped to create one.

Pitch Deck suggestions

- ▲ Should Kindred/BlaST develop pitch decks for people – it's a skill – as happened in year 1 round?
- ▲ Would a practical workshop session be more helpful?
- ▲ More sessions are required to do this, with a focus just on the pitch deck
- ▲ Participants didn't want advice on what to do. They wanted the opportunity to have a go at doing it with learned skills and help to hand



Those who used the ten-week programme to develop a pitch were more successful in securing Kindred investment.

7. Culture SOUP

The programme culminated in a “Culture SOUP” event, designed to celebrate cultural diversity and provide a platform for participants to pitch their ideas to a supportive audience.

The event sought to enhance both the visibility of Black-led STOs and increase community engagement with BlaST and its membership in the sector.

The opportunity to pitch was open to everyone, including BlaST members who had not attended the pilot programme.

The processes and systems used by Liverpool SOUP were applied throughout and Liverpool SOUP leaders provided learning and support to BlaST.

A shortlist of four pitches were selected by an independent panel of peers from 25 submissions, three of which had been part of the programme.

Approximately 70 people attended the pitch night and an award of £1,000 was made, based on a clear audience majority vote, to one of the pitches. The remaining three pitches received small awards.

The winning pitch was a participant on the BlaST Peer Pilot.

Culture SOUP received positive feedback over a sustained period with requests for it to be repeated and developed.



8. Other complementary support activities

Other complementary support activities were made available to the pilot participants, and other BlaST members, including:

- ▲ Visits to conferences and events in other cities supporting and consulting on support to Black-led social purpose organisations and businesses.
- ▲ Regular mailouts and direct messaging of matched opportunities.
- ▲ One-to-one support sessions and access to other training and coaching opportunities.



Changing the mainstream

Since BlaST was established, other agencies have started to deliver similar complementary activities.

This suggests BlaST activity has the ability to affect mainstream activity.

Short-term activities should be intentionally used to change mainstream provision to better serve BlaST members.

This is tracked going forward to monitor BlaST's influence and this strategy.

9. Next Steps & Destinations

Of the 13 pilot programme participants, almost all have taken the next step towards growth and/or finding investment to grow:

- ▲ Two participants were investment-ready and have secured social investment from Kindred. They will continue to receive growth support from Kindred as investees and benefit from associated partner programmes and funding opportunities.
- ▲ Two participants successfully applied to join the Innervision Business Support Growth Programme, commissioned by the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority and Race Equality Hub.
- ▲ Four participants have received development awards from Kindred and three of those have joined the Enterprise Trade Up Programme being run by partner School For Social Entrepreneurs.
- ▲ One participant is receiving one-to-one support and currently re-establishing their business following a forced re-location, and has expressed interest in Kindred investment.
- ▲ Two are additionally receiving one-to-one support to address investment readiness gaps. It is anticipated they will apply for social investment to grow when ready.
- ▲ Two participants remain sole traders.





10. Evaluation feedback

Outputs


What participants received:

 Business growth advice and guidance


 Access a network of peers who offered support and capacity


 Tools and learning for investment readiness

 Storytelling techniques and design work to present ideas

 Tools to communicate social value and impact

 Increased visibility within Liverpool City Region


"I recognise the value of what's being created here, we need more of it, and I'm prepared to put time and energy into supporting it to happen."


"BlaST has created an environment that feels like a safe space to risk failing."

Outcomes

Extent to which original objectives were achieved:

“For me, the only risk is not taking action.”

“ I’m committed every day to coming and being a part of the group, because being in a room on a programme like this, with traders with the same cultural roots, with the same social roots, connecting to the city, connecting to who we are as a community within this city is critically needed.”



Enhanced investment readiness by 50%



Fostered peer support for capacity building by 70%



Increased visibility for participants by 80%



Facilitated learning and sharing experiences by 90%



Collaboration improved by 90%



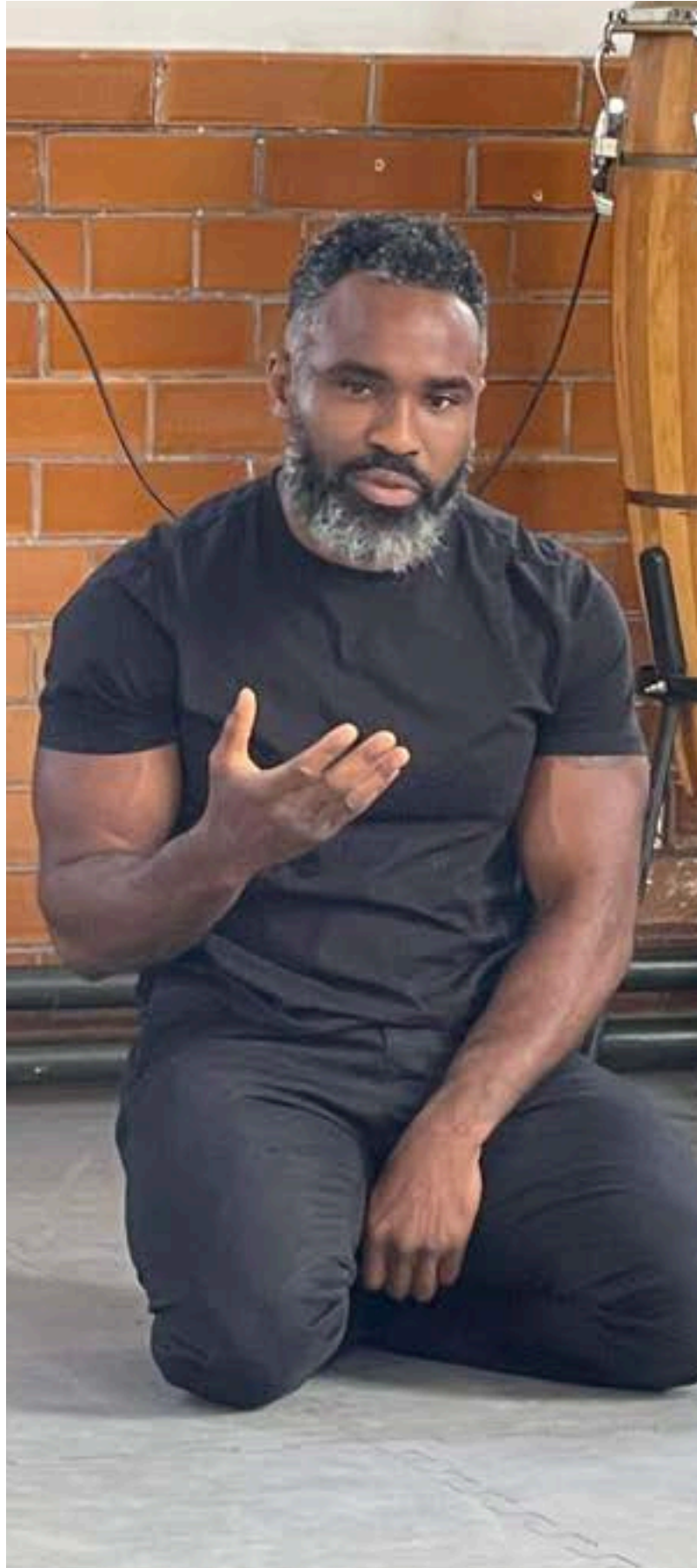
What participants felt was missing or wanted more of

Finance

- ▲ Need for comprehensive growth plans /growth plan / growth options
- ▲ How to use money to grow impact and wealth
- ▲ Understanding money
- ▲ Contracts / procurement / winning work
- ▲ Grants – how and what to go for
- ▲ Pricing and viability options
- ▲ Identifying market growth / where the money is coming from
- ▲ Is there a market for what I / you do?
- ▲ Accounting for money / public money

Pitching

- ▲ Evaluating ourselves
- ▲ Pitching / feedback – who are your customers?



Impact

- ▲ Measuring and knowing the impact you're making

Governance

- ▲ Being a company and why – support to become one
- ▲ Policies and procedures to protect you and your customers

Emerging themes How (rather than what) is delivered

- ▲ Peer support
- ▲ Hands-on assistance
- ▲ Increased visibility
- ▲ Addressing feelings of isolation, building resilience and burnout groups
- ▲ Countering risk averse behaviour



- ▲ Confidence of participants had increased but better alignment with Kindred 5 Star investment-readiness programme is required
- ▲ Collaboration came out more strongly as an objective at the end of the programme
- ▲ Black businesses want to do more than talk together, they want to do something together
- ▲ To be offered as a follow-up opportunity



BlaST

kindred-lcr.co.uk/blast



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**Inclusive
Recovery
Fund**



DCMS
Department for
Digital, Culture,
Media & Sport



**power to
change**

business in
community
hands



**LIVERPOOL
CITY REGION**
CORPORATE AUTHORITY

METROMAYOR
LIVERPOOL CITY REGION