

Stepping Up Leadership Programme

The “Stepping Up” Leadership Development Programme was created to increase the ethnic diversity of leadership across sectors in Bristol. It brought organisations together to identify potential leaders from ethnic minority backgrounds in their workforces and enlist them onto a year long scheme designed to build their confidence, develop their talent and unlock their potential.

The programme was established in 2017 and adopted Bristol’s “One City Approach”. This means the scheme was not solely driven by Bristol City Council, but all participating organisations were involved in its development and success. Now in its fourth year, the scheme is on track to meet its target of placing 400 diverse leaders in the region by 2023. It has since expanded to include disabled people and women of all races, as well as creating a sister programme, “Horumar”, which is a similar scheme designed specifically for Somali women.

Who was involved?

The impetus for the programme came from Bristol’s Mayor, Marvin Rees and Deputy Mayor, Councillor Asher Craig. Before their election, they had committed to the *Manifesto for Race Equality* which sought to “*practise positive action, for example, to provide targeted training for BAME people to improve workforce diversity.*”¹ Once elected, the Council convened a roundtable conversation in 2016 bringing together public, private and third sector organisations with members of the public to discuss how to achieve their aims on race. This resulted in them spearheading the Stepping Up programme which aimed to change the leadership landscape in Bristol.

In 2017, the City Council established a team to engage local organisations and launch the programme, with Professor Christine Bamford as the Architect and Programme Director. Engaging cross-sector partners was needed to recruit participants and sponsor the programme. Once involved, stakeholders also helped shape the scheme and provided mentoring opportunities. In the first instance, the team engaged public services from across the city, including from the police, healthcare services, universities and fire and rescue departments. Many of the leaders of these organisations already sat on Bristol’s Race Equality Strategic Leaders Group and were brought into the goals of the programme.

“In the early stages of engagement, myself, Helen Sinclair Ross and Cherene Whitfield visited every key stakeholder and had the dialogue. It was a call to action which came from the Mayor and Deputy Mayor, but we were the grass roots negotiating team.” - Christine Bamford, Stepping Up Architect and Programme Director

The programme also sought to engage private and third sector partners, as they wanted to create change in leadership across the whole city. The team initially contacted organisations which had attended the roundtable event or where they had a pre-existing relationship. Over the past four years, they have successfully recruited private sector organisations from across industries including legal, banking, accounting, consulting and filmmaking. This provides further opportunities for mentoring which enriches the experience for programme participants.

¹ Bristol: Manifesto For Race Equality, <https://www.bristolonecity.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/manifesto-booklet2-1.pdf>

How were decisions made?

The programme was co-created with partner organisations who helped to design the mentoring scheme, including suggesting the type of support mentors could offer and how often they could meet. This ensured the programme was designed in a way that would be deliverable across sectors. During their engagement activities, the council team would discuss components of the programme and ask where the organisation could play a role, whether in providing in-kind support or offering speakers.

“Stepping Up is the result of co-creation with our partners. We talk to people about what the programme should look like. The collaboration has been so close that it doesn’t feel like a council programme, but it doesn’t feel like a private sector programme. It’s unique and different and maybe that’s the best.” - Helen Sinclair Ross, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Bristol City Council

While delivering the course, there’s an acknowledgment that race is considered a sensitive topic and it is important to continually engage regional partners to ensure race equality in the workplace is a priority. Reflecting this, the programme has a steering group which involves all major participating organisations to engage and review content. The Race Equality Strategic Leaders Group also receives bi-monthly reports about the programme.

What has been the impact?

The Stepping Up Programme has brought organisations together under the shared purpose to improve the diversity of the city’s leadership. An evaluation of the programme suggests it has been successful in achieving this by improving the confidence of its participants and creating a talent pipeline, with over 400 individuals having been on the Stepping Up and sister programme Horumar for Somali Women across different sectors. Engagement with the programme has been higher than anticipated, with double the target number of people taking part in the first cohort. An external evaluation of the programme has shown that participants’ confidence and self-assurance more than doubled having completed the programme.²

Several spin off programmes have also been developed including:

- Horumar, which means forward in Somali. Horumar supports Somali women to gain confidence and step up to find a job or start a business, with sixty Somali women participating so far. It has also received national acclaim including from the Cabinet Office Disparity Unit which indicated that there is no other programme in the UK like Horumar. The programme was founded by Stepping Up participants Zahra Kosar, Sayidali Hassan, Moestak Hussein, Nadia Chowdhury and Debra Newrick.
- “Get Ready Step Up”, which was developed after Stepping Up 2021 was over-prescribed by seventy individuals registering. To meet this unprecedented demand an access programme has been introduced which prepares individuals for the selection process for the 2022 intake.

These programmes are translating into a more diverse leadership in Bristol, as around half of previous participants have since “stepped up” into more senior roles. For example, a former programme participant explained that he had been supporting his organisation’s diversity and inclusion manager in a practitioner role. After completing the scheme, he felt equipped to successfully apply to become the

² “Stepping Up: Diversity Leadership Experience”, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wx6I59dDNQWW0V83pONfG6TOsQHby_-o/view

manager, crediting the scheme for developing his confidence and ability. Individuals have also volunteered to become magistrates and school governors, creating a new leadership landscape. The programme has offered people the opportunity to fulfil their potential and removed excuses from organisations who claim to want a more diverse workforce but say they are unable to find candidates.

The programme is also breaking down silos between sectors and organisations. Participants working in public services are likely to be mentored by someone from a private organisation, which allows for cross-sector learning. Stepping Up Alumni networks have been created, allowing participants to maintain relationships with each other and creating new middle management networks. Having completed the scheme, participants are encouraged to act as advocates for diversity and inclusion within their organisation and perpetuate further change.

“The ethos of the programme is changing the landscape of leadership across the city. It’s not just levelling up at the top though, you’re taught to develop yourself within an organisation and act as a catalyst of change.” - Richard Stokes, Culture and Inclusion Manager and former Stepping Up participant, Avon Fire and Rescue

The programme has won multiple awards, including most recently the CIPD Award for “Best Diversity and Inclusion Initiative” and being named the overall winner across all categories, both of which are important in setting industry standards and attracting more organisations to the scheme. It now recruits participants from neighbouring councils as far away as Gloucestershire, and other cities are looking to set up similar schemes, with Stepping Up acting as the blueprint.

Challenges for collaboration

Motivations

- Racial inequality in senior positions was a consistent problem across sectors in Bristol, pointing towards the need for large scale social change driven by a system response. Organisations had tried in the past to improve diversity with internal programmes but had been unsuccessful due to the **narrow organisation-specific focus** that looked at the issue at an organisation rather than system level.

Structures

- **Organisational hierarchies** often restricted access to the data which evidenced the lack of diversity in Bristol’s leadership. This promoted **general risk-aversion** as organisations did not want to admit they all faced a similar problem, discouraging organisations from working together to find and take a new approach.

Enablers of collaboration

Motivations

- The programme enabled collaboration by bringing sectors together with **a clear shared purpose** as no sector working in Bristol had leaders that adequately represented their community. By identifying a shared purpose through activities like the 2016 roundtable and developing a common solution from this, the programme brought organisations together, allowing them to focus on a **common outcome**.
- The **buy-in from senior leaders** across the city was also important to the programme’s success. The endorsement from Marvin Rees, Bristol’s first black mayor, propelled action including

establishing the Race Equality Strategic Leaders group from a manifesto pledge. Organisations were only able to send their most senior leaders to the Strategic Leaders' Group, signalling that they were serious in making changes. This helped further encourage collaboration from the private sector. Similarly, the involvement of Professor Bamford and her expertise gave credibility and academic rigour to the scheme.

Relationships

- The team adopted a **solutions-focused tone** from the beginning, acknowledging that the City Council faced the same challenges and approached partners with an opportunity to tackle them together. In return, they found that private sector organisations were keen to be led by the public sector and would offer “in-kind” support to establish the scheme, such as venues, technology and speakers.

“The first roundtable event, someone said to me, ‘I’ve never seen so many private sector organisations and I’ve worked in the council for twenty years.’ We knew there was an appetite there. Knowing they wanted to change the leadership landscape, but they didn’t have the opportunities or resources on their own.” - Chereke Whitfield, Stepping Up Project Manager, Bristol City Council

- Maintaining **open, frequent communication** with partners and participants allowed for further collaboration. It was important for the programme team to listen to partners and recognise where they had made a mistake.
- For example, once the first cohort had been recruited, the team learned through social media that they had not included any Somali people, one of Bristol’s largest ethnic minority groups. The team reacted instantly by **engaging with the local Somalian Resource Centre** and invited them to help develop a grassroots scheme focusing specifically on Somali women. This has since transformed into the sister programme Horumar.
- The team’s **facilitative style of leadership** meant they were able to engage with the local Somali community and build a distinct programme that reflected their needs. For example, the Horumar scheme takes a grassroots approach as formal mentoring in a commercial setting was seen as not appropriate for this group. By adapting the scheme, the team has been able to deliver leadership support in a way that reflects the community rather than expecting individuals to volunteer for a scheme that is not suitable for them.

Table 1: Summary of challenges and enablers

	Challenges for collaboration	Enablers of collaboration
Motivations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrow organisation-specific focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear shared purpose • Buy-in from senior leaders
Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational hierarchies • Risk aversion 	
Relationships		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solutions focused tone • Open and frequent communication • Facilitative style of leadership

Lessons learned for collaborative leadership

Embrace system working and break down silos: If organisations are all facing the same problem, it makes sense to collaborate, share learning and find solutions together. To achieve this, you need to break down silos within and across sectors. While the City Council does not dominate Bristol's "One City Approach" they did provide the impetus, so local government needs to be innovative in driving change.

"The city council isn't solving stuff alone. We've been working in our silos and we've been failing miserably. We need real intention from the top and bottom of an organisation. We need to forget silos for big change." - Councillor Asher Craig, Deputy Mayor of Bristol City Council

Gather data effectively: Organisations should proactively use data to uncover problems in the system, such as a lack of diverse leadership. It is vital to have the evidence needed to justify the extent of a problem, and where it exists. This makes it easier to articulate to potential partners and will also help target any solutions. For example, there are plans to set up a similar scheme in Liverpool. During discussions, the data revealed the region had a lack of ethnic minority leaders particularly within their public services. As such, they plan to address this sector first through the Liverpool City Council Civic Leadership Programme, to encourage people from ethnic minority backgrounds into political leadership positions.

Different tones for different sectors: When first approaching private sector organisations, the Stepping Up team would explain the commercial benefits of a more diverse leadership team, which better reflects their customer base. This contrasted with how the team spoke to the public sector, where they tended to take a more values-based approach on the importance of diversity. The team built a coalition of organisations bought into a shared vision by adapting their tone and messages to different audiences, reflecting the organisational context.

If you would like to find more details about the Stepping Up programme then you can visit their website or contact the team here: www.steppingupbristol.com