



Heritage
Compass

Black Heritage Walks Network

Background

Black Heritage Walks Network was set up in 2018, initially to capture the stories and history of the Windrush generation in the Handsworth area of Birmingham. The Network was set up by three volunteers, and was established formally as a CIC two years ago. The Network currently has 9 walks and the offer has developed to include boat, scooter and bike tours. The organisation is now undertaking other activities, including exhibitions, film festivals, workshops and, most recently, an arts project as part of the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham. In the period of Covid-19 disruption the Network undertook some health and wellbeing projects, including commissioned culturally sensitive social prescription activities on behalf of the NHS.



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What Black Heritage Walks Network needed from Heritage Compass

The Network has grown considerably in four years and moved beyond the model of undertaking walks, to lead on progressive projects and activities in response to the environment. The organisation's relationships with communities is at the heart of its work and coproduces with its stakeholders to deliver meaningful activities in Birmingham. However, the organisation has been running on a partially voluntary basis and responding to opportunities as they come along. The Network wanted to develop its thinking and planning, to come up with a sustainable approach to running the CIC - including increasing paid staff and developing the profile and positioning of the organisation.

In broadening its range of activities the Network was gaining access to a wider range of income, and developing its track record. In addition, the Network wanted to be a position to support other potential walking networks in other locations, and to provide training and peer support to encourage others to develop their Black Heritage offer.

Developing a sustainable model and business development plan

The managing director led the Network's engagement with the Heritage Compass programme to develop a sustainable model and business development plan. One of the things which emerged in the early stages of establishing the plan were internal differences between members of team about the wider vision for the organisation. This led to conflicting reasons for the purpose of participating in the Heritage Compass programme. The team members really had to engage significantly with each other to explain their thinking for the organisation and to think about how to communicate with each other as the planning progressed.

The business plan is being written in a moving environment, due to the new opportunities presented to team, as a result of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games – new workstreams, developing new income strands, building new connections and developing their profile (e.g. the Managing Director was invited to be a judge for the West Midlands Tourism Awards). At the time of writing this case study, the organisation is bidding for a variety of funding. The plan will be finished in December 2022, and the team are now confident that it provides a sense direction for the next 3 years and some of the wider ambitions for a five-year horizon.

The team has formalised the articulations of their vision, including a short and a long PowerPoint Presentation, so that they are able to share their vision and plans with stakeholders and respond to opportunities. The Network feel that this really underpins their offer now when they are going out to new connections, stakeholders and potential partners and funders.

How Heritage Compass has been useful

The team from Black Heritage Walks Network have found the programme useful in two key ways. The mentor and the critical friend have worked directly with members of the Network team on the business plan and sustainable model for the future of the Network. The team feel that both these experts have really understood the ethos of the business and what they aimed to achieve. The mentor worked above and beyond to meet the Network's expectations. The Network was assigned a mentor with expertise in financial planning and that was felt to have been really helpful, and in some cases had really pushed team members to think carefully and explore different possibilities.

The organisation also feels it has benefited from the training and the wider connections via the Symposium and other channels. The training has been a useful way to learn about how other organisations operate and explore a variety of organisational models and transferable skills. The team also felt that they learnt from helping other organisations solve their problems during the training session. More generally, the opportunities to be prompted to think about things in different ways and to make different connections has been valuable. The programme has given the team a chance to explore how other heritage organisations and projects operate and look at the possible models and approaches.

The Network team had a very busy period during the process of the programme and so sometimes found it difficult to engage as fully as they would have liked. The timing of the start of the programme (at a busy season for the organisation) and the relatively intense nature of it and expectations like completing learning journals, has not always been easy to respond to. It has been clear to Network that in this programme you get out what you put in – you have to engage. Success depends on the capacity to write the business plan or seek the advice and support which is available. Despite these challenges, Heritage Compass has been a constant reference in the Network's internal team meetings and there has been constant learning, which has been integral to the organisation's development. Having the bursary as part of the support has been quite a significant factor in the ability of the team to engage with the programme and get the most out of it.

Practically speaking, the Black Heritage Walks Network team feels that the Heritage Compass programme has contributed to the following outcomes for the organisation:

1	Developing the organisational structure and work streams
2	An Operational Plan
3	Successful recruitment volunteers to widen the team, including robust volunteer recruitment procedures
4	Identifying a marketing plan and budget. The Network had in this period had two major features on BBC and also featured in the Observer
5	Embedding the organisation's core work streams - walks, social prescribing (Windrush wellbeing)
6	Securing contracts and long-term commitments with key national and local partners, such as National Trust, Birmingham Museums Trust, Birmingham City University and Simmer Down Arts
7	Becoming an anchor for other black heritage organisations across the UK and developing a black heritage training model (Roundhouse , Northampton, TWR)
8	Positioning the Network as a key strategic sounding board for the decolonisation of British history in both England and Wales, with the Network leading on a core body of work to enhance black heritage education tools in North Wales.

What Black Heritage Walks Network needs next

The organisation has almost completed its business plan and is currently applying for funding from a number of different sources. It has also undertaken significant work to build its profile, develop networks and find ways to influence wider strategic developments taking place, e.g. the contributing to the 10 and 20 year plans for the local authority heritage forum. The Network is also developing some training for a potential peer network in Northampton, and beginning to share its own learning with others. The crucial thing now is working towards a paid staff team and an ongoing mix of activities which bring in the necessary funds. Alongside this, the organisation is upgrading and professionalising systems such as bookings website and other key operational elements. In the future, the Network is particularly keen to continue to make new connections and learn from others across the Heritage Compass programme.



Black Heritage Walks Network

Advice for other organisations

Black Heritage Walks Network would recommend the Heritage Compass programme to other similar organisations. They have found it to be an in-depth, demanding programme that understands the sector's needs, and has really pushed and challenged the Network to produce a real vision and robust plan for the future. The advice they would give to other organisations is: set out your goals, and be relentless in fulfilling them.

Black Heritage Walks Network

Update

February 2024

Black Heritage Walks Network have been growing and developing their work since the initial case study was undertaken. They are now at a critical mass which means that they need part time administrative help, with key business skills, to support the running of the organisation. They are also working with a bid writer in order to develop a range of funding applications to enable the organisation to expand its reach, and the organisation feels that it now has a track record which enables it to bid well.

Reflecting back on the Heritage Compass programme, one of the founders Garry Stewart feels that it raised the bar for Black Heritage Walks Network; at the same time, this has raised the workload and means that the organisation really understands how much it has to do in order to achieve its ambitions. The programme helped them to really strategize properly for the business, to come up with a new business plan and implement new approaches which have enabled them to build their audience. Key to this is the sense that the organisation really understands where it wants to go, and has clarity about what it is trying to do.

Part of this sense of clarity is understanding and articulating the space for Black Heritage Walks Network in the city of Birmingham, and the tourism sector. It is an African-Caribbean led and focused organisation, and is the only one in the tourism sector in Birmingham and the wider West Midlands which is doing this kind of work. A key part of the way in which Garry and his team conceive of the organisation is as a business which has a product which is relevant to corporate and other visitors to the city; they have been building relationships with commercial conference organisers, who are now asking them to run activities as part of those conferences.

Raising the profile of the organisation in the Birmingham and wider West Midlands area has also been key, and Garry is particularly involved in networking and engaging with other fora and networks to ensure that the organisation has a presence. The organisation has succeeded in gaining media coverage from both the BBC, ITV and Channel 5, and is working towards increasing its presence and brand, from t-shirts through to tourism awards.

The organisation is also doing some work reflecting on the experience for volunteers and for paying walk participants, exploring how different 'user' experiences work and benchmarking the organisation's activities against

organisations offering similar things. The organisation aspires to a volunteer experience which is excellent in all areas. More generally, the organisation has significantly diversified its offer: the walks are now a smaller part of a bigger whole. Projects like the Worlds Re-imagined project, as part of the Commonwealth Games, have given Black Heritage Walks Network connections to other organisations, and a new, multi-year project to deliver non-walking work has emerged from those connections.

A key part of the development of the organisation has been sharing the learning from Heritage Compass, and more generally building the capacity and confidence of a wider group of team members to lead on things and speak for the organisation. For example, a key staff member has been delegated with the task of reviewing the existing volunteer programme and considering options. Another staff member is taking a presentation which Garry has produced as a result of the Heritage Compass programme, and will be delivering it at the forthcoming Annual General Meeting of the Network.

Ultimately, Garry and his team are still digesting much of what they learnt from the Heritage Compass programme, and working through the tasks which they set themselves as a result of participating in the programme. Garry has particularly found the learning from other organisation – both what was working, and what was not – very useful in building the direction and confidence of Black Heritage Walks Network. When we asked Garry what the Network might need in the future, he suggested that the Heritage Compass programme would benefit from being extended, to allow participants to 'check-in' and refresh their knowledge, and gain support, over time; in reality, Garry feels the range of work he has set himself and the Network which comes from the Heritage Compass experience is potentially a five-year programme, rather than a one-year programme. Garry would also have been interested in Heritage Compass being an accredited programme, recognising the degree of individual learning and development which takes place for those individuals who participate throughout the programme; there has been a significant element of personal, professional development for participants.