

**TACKLING SYSTEMIC
RACISM THROUGH
COMMUNITY-LED
ACTION: LEARNING
AND PRACTICE**

June 2024

brap

www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

In 2022 Local Trust published an independent review¹, exploring the potential of place-based action to promote inclusion and address issues of disadvantage and discrimination, with a particular focus on tackling racism and promoting racial inclusion.

The review found that previous impact at a programme level and in communities has tended to be surface-level and led to incremental change at best. Evaluative evidence suggests that previous approaches (e.g. neighbourhood regeneration initiatives) may address, in the short-term, the needs of some people from Black and minoritised ethnic (BME) backgrounds who can engage with an initiative. Yet, they are unlikely to tackle the ‘systemic’, institutional nature of racism and the way it operates within particular neighbourhoods, towns and cities.

The review recommendations outlined practical actions (in the fields of programme design, programme support and place-based practice) that can be taken to tackle racism more effectively through place-based work.

Local Trust were keen to ensure this learning is applied and to examine the practical application of these recommendations further. In the Autumn of 2023, brap were commissioned to explore practices ‘on the ground’ amongst those involved in day-to-day running and community leadership of place-based initiatives that can improve impact in tackling systemic racism.

This report summarises the learning from that work, focusing particularly on forms of community leadership practice that can contribute to tackling systemic racism and the types of interventions and leadership support that can help leaders to achieve this.

APPROACH

Two Big Locals were invited by Local Trust to participate in this project (one from Northern England, one from Southern England). Each had already expressed an interest in engaging with issues of race equality as part of their future plans. Over a period of four months, brap worked with each Big Local as part of an action research process. This involved trying out different activities and practices in the local area, discussing and solving problems, whilst at the same time learning more about how to tackle systemic racism. brap provided guidance, advice, and capacity-building support.

¹ brap (2022) *Tackling discrimination through place-based action*, London: Local Trust

The research focused on the following key questions – with a particular focus on community development and leadership practice:

- what enables community-led place-based initiatives to tackle systemic racism?
- what are the barriers community-led place-based initiatives face in tackling systemic racism?
- what is this telling us about the type of community leadership and leadership support required to tackle systemic racism in the future?

WHAT WE FOUND

The research found that a range of norms and traditional institutional practices in community development work (which are shaped by beliefs about ‘race’) risk limiting the scope, ambition and implementation of efforts to progress race equality. We developed a range of interventions with participating Big Locals which can help community-led initiatives to take a more active role in tackling systemic racism.

Practice challenges / barriers

The report identifies four key practice areas where communities have an opportunity to question and challenge the dominance of racialised beliefs in this work in particular:

Planning for change	Improving diversity and representing the community	Mindsets	Tackling local causes of racism
• Limiting ambition for what can be achieved in the local area. • Limiting ourselves to simple, tick-box solutions to more complex/systemic problems.	• Maintaining racialised beliefs through consultation and community engagement processes (e.g. BME people are the 'problem'). • Seeing representation as the 'end goal' of tackling racism - without also sharing and building power and resources of BME groups.	• Impact of emotions people experience when talking about 'race' that can prevent action and discussion. • Lack of shared understanding about what 'race' and 'racism' are. Persistent belief that 'race' is real and a scientific fact (when it actually isn't). • People's own experience / views about 'race' impact on their motivations and leadership practice.	• Tendency to focus on more overt forms of racism through community development work. Less focus on systemic and institutional racism. • Lack of evaluation and evidence to support decision-making about the best interventions to use to tackle racism. • Despite noticing lack of impact of traditional practices, tendency to still use them.

We found that even with the best intention and effort, these practice challenges have the potential to significantly limit the scope and impact of activities to progress race equality. They reflect a broader challenge in our society – that the ‘systemic’ nature of racism means it is often covert, widespread and difficult to spot. Views about ‘race’, what is ‘normal’ and what is possible to change in our society can subtly shape the way we approach community development and community leadership.

What disrupts systemic racism?

The practices and interventions developed with Big Locals involved in this project offered some useful insights into how to navigate and deal with a number of the practice challenges described above. These are summarised below:

Planning for change	Improving diversity and representing the community	Mindsets	Tackling local causes of racism
•At the planning stage, reflecting on how we understand the problem of racism in our area and our level of ambition to address it. •Recognising the context of the problem we seek to address. If it is a complex problem - investing time and resource to learn and test different approaches to solving it.	•Noticing when racialised beliefs are shaping approaches to community engagement and representation •Encouraging mainstream service providers to account for unequal outcomes (rather than seeing BME residents as the problem) •Paying attention to power dynamics in community engagement practice. •White people playing an active role in challenging and talking about racism •Building a pipeline of future community leadership •Developing responsive/ flexible engagement mechanisms	•Effective contracting and ground-rule setting in meetings to enable people to build trust and notice the feelings and emotions they have when talking about 'race'. •Learning and development interventions to build a shared understanding of what is 'race' and racism within community groups. •Supporting leaders to recognise the relationship between their own experiences / learning and the motivation and action they take to tackle racism.	•Noticing the type of racism we seek to address. Seeking opportunities to tackle institutional / systemic forms of racism that operate more covertly in the area. •Critically reflecting on the impact of previous interventions to tackle race inequality. Noticing the temptation to use interventions that have little proven track record of success. Choosing to develop new, radical alternatives to tackle root causes of inequality. •Using and valuing a range of types of evidence to better understand root causes of racism in an area. Using alternative measures to assess progress of community initiatives.

Embedding support for community leaders in the future

The report outlines how community groups can be supported to navigate specific practice challenges they face in work on race equality. It also outlines a range of interventions that can support community groups to take steps that bring them closer to tackling systemic racism in their areas. The report ends by offering two additional, contextual factors that can support the application of improved practice in community-led place-based programmes like Big Local.

Firstly, anti-oppressive leadership in communities needs to be supported through creating the right kinds of conditions at the initial programme design stage. Approaches to tackling systemic racism can be considered early in a programme, building them into design and ongoing programme support / accountability mechanisms.

Secondly, support needs to be tailored to the existing level of development / capacity of community groups. The two participating Big Locals participating in the project already had an established 'container' and ways of working with which they could test and experiment. Engaging community groups earlier in their development would offer different opportunities to incorporate and embed anti-oppressive practice into group culture and practice from an earlier stage.

INTRODUCTION

In the Autumn of 2023, brap were commissioned to explore the application of ‘place-based practice’ (as described below) with Big Local areas. An action research approach was used to capture and reflect on the learning from this process over a four-month period. This report summarises the learning from that work, focusing particularly on forms of community leadership practice that can contribute to tackling systemic racism and the types of interventions and leadership support that can help leaders to achieve this.

The intended audience for this report is anybody involved in supporting place-based community-led change and those interested in how community-led change can tackle systemic racism.

Background

In 2022 Local Trust published an independent review², exploring the potential of place-based action to promote inclusion and address issues of disadvantage and discrimination, with a particular focus on tackling racism and promoting racial inclusion.

The review found that previous impact at a programme level and in communities has tended to be surface-level and led to incremental change at best. Recreating previous approaches to tackling racism used in many previous neighbourhood regeneration and place-based initiatives is unlikely to yield significant long-term impact. These previous approaches may address, in the short-term, the needs of some people from Black and minoritised ethnic (BME) backgrounds who can engage with an initiative. Yet, they are unlikely to tackle the ‘systemic’, institutional nature of racism¹ and the way it operates within particular neighbourhoods, towns and cities.

The review recommendations outlined practical actions that can be taken on three topics to tackle racism more effectively through place-based work:

- programme design: setting up place-based programmes in ways that will tackle systemic discrimination
- programme support: creating conditions for learning, encouraging accountability for progress and engaging local partners
- place-based practice: practices ‘on the ground’ amongst those involved in day-to-day running and community leadership of place-based initiatives that can improve impact in tackling systemic racism

Local Trust have been keen to ensure this learning is applied and to examine the practical application of these recommendations further.

² brap (2022) *Tackling discrimination through place-based action*, London: Local Trust

Acknowledgements

One of the ways in which systems of oppression like racism or sexism are maintained is by us believing that the challenge is too big or too long-term for us to make an impact on it in our work or in our communities. We were grateful to have the opportunity to work with two Big Local partnerships that were committed to working with these complex issues and exploring what they could do at a practical level in their day-to-day work to contribute to making a difference in their area – often in a voluntary capacity. We are grateful for these Big Locals’ time and commitment to this action research process, as well as the ongoing support from Local Trust to community development in this field.

About brap

Local Trust commissioned brap to research and write this report. Established in 1999, brap is an independent, transformative force in the equalities sector. The charity supports organisations, communities and cities with innovative approaches to learning, change, research and engagement. It has changed the way we think and do equality. For more information, visit brap.org.uk. This report was written by Dr Asif Afridi. The wider research team included: Professor Joy Warmington, Rabiya Latif, Dr Hannah Begum and Manisha Patel.

A word on terminology

Black and minoritised ethnic (BME):

We use the term ‘BME’ to refer to people who identify as Black or as part of a minoritized ethnicity, community, or group. We recognise that this is a contested term and not everyone will identify with it. We also recognise that because it is a broad term, it may not accurately express the views of those who experience discrimination on the basis of skin colour.

Systemic racism:

We describe systemic racism as the embedding of ideas of ‘race’ and racial difference into institutions, laws, culture, and societal norms in ways that combine to harm racially minoritized people.

Racialised:

Racism is a belief that human beings can be categorised into ‘races’ on the basis of physical characteristics like skin colour and facial features, that are indicators of different abilities, qualities or worth. This prejudice-based belief, action or behaviour takes place within a context of power (of the perpetrator). When groups are ‘racialised’ they are categorized and assigned qualities or worth on the basis of an assumed ‘race’.

APPROACH

Two Big Locals were invited by Local Trust to participate in this project. Each had already expressed an interest in engaging with issues of race equality as part of their future plans. brap undertook induction meetings with each Big Local partnership to review their aspirations to progress race equality in their area and to discuss ways in which brap could support their plans over the period of the project.

Over a period of four months, brap worked with each Big Local as part of an action research process. This involved trying out different activities and practices in the local area, discussing and solving problems, whilst at the same time learning more about how to tackle systemic racism. brap provided guidance, advice, and capacity-building support.

Each Big Local was encouraged to reflect on what they were learning through this process and invited to participate in reflection sessions and interviews to capture their learning. This learning, along with brap's reflections on the impact of different support interventions we applied, were analysed and then organised thematically in the report that follows.

The research focused on the following key questions – with a particular focus on community development and leadership practice:

- what enables community-led place-based initiatives to tackle systemic racism?
- what are the barriers community-led place-based initiatives face in tackling systemic racism?
- what is this telling us about the type of community leadership and leadership support required to tackle systemic racism in the future?

Case study areas

Findings from this research are anonymised to protect the confidentiality of participating Big Locals and partnership members and staff. All Big Local areas share common characteristics of high levels of deprivation, low levels of social capital and lower-than-average health outcomes. Similarly, both Big Locals involved in this project were nearing the end of a ten-year programme and partnership members already had established relationships with each other and had already engaged in planning and distributing resources for local activity. In that way, they differ from other community groups who may have recently formed or are just getting to know each other.

In order to provide additional context for the findings in this report, some additional information about each Big Local area in this study is included below:

Table 1: case study areas

	BIG LOCAL 1	BIG LOCAL 2
Demographic profile	- Northern England - Population of approximately 14,000 40% White British, 45% Non-White (mainly Asian), 15% White non-British. 66% born in UK, 34% born outside UK.	- Southern England - Population of approximately 14,000 26% White British, 56% Non-White (mainly Black, Asian and Mixed), 18% White non-British. 56% born in the UK, 44% born outside UK.
Big Local Plans related to race equality	- Recognition that whilst community groups in the area do come together, there are still significant levels of racism amongst all generations. - As part of its legacy (post 2025) Big Local seeks to equip communities with the confidence, skills and experience to look after each other and grow and prosper. Specific focus on: - Helping young people to flourish and supporting the development of future leaders - Acknowledging the presence of racism in the community and working with others to address it	Overall aim to build a unified, empowered, healthy, kind and celebrated community which makes decisions based on lived experiences and needs. Three main strands of activity: - Youth: supporting young people to better understand each other and providing practical support to access opportunities. - Health and wellbeing: community-based solutions to improve access to services and influencing provision of culturally-specific activities. - Coming together: cross-cultural activities and building community infrastructure.
Activities undertaken with brap	Partnership sought to focus on engaging young people in discussions about racism – recognising segregation between communities, lack of access to out-of-school activity locally and the important role of young people in future community development activity. brap ran capacity building support, learning and development and action research sessions with the partnership. In particular, we reflected together on the purpose of engaging young people, how this could support tackling systemic racism, and the leadership role of partnership members in this process. We also supported the co-facilitation of the engagement session with young people.	Partnership sought to focus on supporting community-based solutions to improving access to healthcare and raising awareness about culturally-specific health and care needs. In particular, the partnership was planning to engage local people from Black and minoritized ethnic (BME) backgrounds in a discussion about what could be done to improve access to healthcare. brap ran capacity building support, learning and development and action research sessions / interviews with the partnership. In particular, we reflected on the Big Local's role in tackling systemic racism in the local health and care system and how the partnership could position itself strategically to make an impact.

FINDINGS

This section is organised thematically in relation to four key practice challenges that we identified through our work in partnership with Big Locals on this project.

1. Planning for change

The ‘systemic’ nature of racism can mean that we face difficulties in noticing and changing how the world around us is shaped by ideas of ‘race’. Because views about the permanence of racial hierarchies are so prevalent and engrained, we tend to tweak within the parameters of what currently exists. For example, we may notice patterns in how our local labour market is routinely discriminating against young BME men. Yet, at the same time we may feel that the only thing we can do to address it is to teach those facing inequality to write CVs and to present themselves well to employers. Whilst, of course, helping these young men directly is crucial, the chances of changing the wider labour market practices that they are entering into are minimal if we don’t set our sights on also addressing some of these wider patterns of inequality.

A key challenge facing the community leaders we spoke to related to making enough space and to making the *right* space – to critically reflect on the *systemic* nature of race inequality in their local area. How can community leaders ensure that they understanding the full nature of the problem and not ‘tweaking’ a system that needs to be changed?

Barriers

- Many community leaders face urgent calls from their local community for action on the topic of race inequality. This pressure to take action can make leaders feel less able to take their time and undertake meaningful planning and strategizing on the topic.
- There isn’t enough understanding of race and racism across the board, which means that there is little scaffolding to build on when it comes to this agenda. Because understanding is limited, many stick with what has been previously done, regardless of its impact or limitations.
- Challenge of lack of time with many in volunteering roles and the time-limited nature of community-led programmes. It can be hard to grasp the full complexity of the issue of racism in an area and what can be done to address it systemically.

Enablers

(a) Expanding ambition for change

Firstly, it can help to spend time reflecting on the type of change we want to make in tackling racism. We used different methods to assess the ‘track’ and direction of travel that each Big Local was on when we first met with them. The simple diagnostic tool below (Table 1) can be used by other community groups to reflect on how we understand the problem of racism and what can be done by them to

address it. These introductory discussions enabled Big Locals to critically reflect on the trajectory of their current work and what it would help them to achieve.

Example: Expanding ambition for change

In Big Local area 1, in our initial conversations we talked about segregation between different ethnic groups in the local area and how the Big Local would like to bring people together and learn more about each other. As our conversations progressed, the group reflected that deeper work would be required to support people to talk about issues of racism in the area and how they can play out between residents. As one participant put it:

It is important to raise these issues, it's easy enough to say we do Equal Opps and do a tick box exercise. But you have to think more deeply, and you have helped us to do that, and I don't think we've cracked it yet

Big Local Area 1

(b) What type of challenge are we trying to address?

Often in this work, action is paramount. Many communities have been untouched by mainstream initiatives and, as previously mentioned, time-limited funding can increase the desire for action. However, the complexity of the challenges that communities face can lead to action which has little permanency or penetration of the identified issues. Thinking about the type of problem and the tools that are needed to address it can make for more helpful decision-making processes. It is important for those leading community initiatives to understand the context within which decisions are being made – are the issues simple, complicated, complex and so on?

Many Big Local partnership members we spoke to emphasized the importance of undertaking initiatives quickly in response to community need. Responding quickly to the topic of racism and its impact is of course important, but we also talked with communities about how they can make sufficient space to acknowledge and grapple with the complexity of the challenge in their local area. One participant (Big Local 1) reflecting on the benefits of discussions as part of this project commented:

All the food for thought that you have given us to look at things that we haven't considered before, in particular that things are more complex than you realize and steering us into thinking differently about where we are going.

Diagram 2 below was developed by Snowden and Boone (2007) and describes different decision-making contexts that leaders can find themselves in. It is called the Cynefin Model and has been described as a 'sense-making' tool. We have found part of this framework to be a useful tool to help

Table 2: Diagnostic – what track are we on in our response to tackling racism?

	TRACK 1	TRACK 2	TRACK 3	TRACK 4	TRACK 5
What is the challenge/problem?	Things are OK in our area	People need more help to connect with how things are done where we live.	We need to know more about other's cultures/religions etc	We don't have enough representation and involvement of people from BME backgrounds	We don't understand enough about the structures and beliefs that perpetuate racism and we are not challenging them.
What do we need to do?	We don't need to do anything	More opportunities for people to connect with others and get to understand how things work around here Examples: more information about how to get access to resources/facilities	We need to understand and celebrate our differences. Examples: events to celebrate differences (fun, food, fashion). Outreach and engagement activities, language and translation services.	We need to involve more people from diverse backgrounds and benefit from diverse voices in our area. Examples: Improving inclusiveness of our own engagement/decision-making spaces Showing that voices of marginalised groups are valued and heard.	We need to understand and address wider structures and beliefs that perpetuate racial inequality in our area. Examples: Working with other partners to understand our different roles in tackling racism. Personal reflection on our own racial biases and how these can affect what we do to tackle racial inequality.
What do we want to achieve?	No change	People become better at fitting into how things are done around here	More awareness of cultures of different groups in the area.	Greater feeling of inclusion and belonging for BME groups in decision-making spaces. People from BME backgrounds feel heard and that their ways of communicating are valued.	Shared analysis of how racial inequality happens at a structural level in the local area and how we're going to tackle it together. Greater awareness about our own views about 'race' and how we can make an impact on racism.

groups make sense of the type of challenge they are dealing with and how they could be making decisions:

Table 3: Cynefin Model

DECISION-MAKING CONTEXT	NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE	RESPONSE	EXAMPLE
Simple	“Known knowns” – stable situation where rules are in place. If you do X, expect Y.	Sensing, categorising (finding the rule to follow) and responding.	A factory assembly line – predictable, cause-and-effect are clear and everyone knows what to do.
Complicated	“Known unknowns” – relationship between cause and effect requires expertise	Sensing, analysing (establishing cause and effect) then responding.	A surgeon operating on a body – assessing the facts, analysing and then applying good operating practice based on their expertise.
Complex	“Unknown unknowns” – no right answers. Cause and effect can only be worked out afterwards.	Probing (trying things out to see what emerges), sensing, responding.	Raising a baby – protocols don’t often help, each baby is unique, need to try different approaches and experiment to discover what works.

Source: adapted from Snowden and Boone 2007

Frameworks like this can be helpful in noticing the context for different types of decisions we need to make in relation to tackling racism. If the problem is simple (e.g. not having data on the ethnicity of people who attend a community centre, or not having enough access to translation services) – then there are rules, best practices and protocols that can be followed to solve this. Yet, if the situation is complex (e.g. BME people are not attending the community centre and health outcomes of BME people are significantly lower in the area) – then this doesn’t lend itself to simple solutions. This was a situation that Big Local area 2 were facing in their area. In this situation, racial inequality in health and care is a *complex* problem that is hard to shift. More time is required to understand the local health and care system and the relationship of the community centre and staff and volunteers to this. The work required needs to be emergent (responding to different things that are learnt and tested) through collaboration with others in the local system.

2. Improving diversity and representing the community

Increasing representation of people from BME backgrounds involved in decisions was a key aim of both Big Locals involved in this project. Yet representation and community engagement can be thorny and challenging topics for community leaders to navigate. We worked with both Big Local areas to explore these topics and examined how systemic racism can sometimes interrupt our efforts to make progress in this field.

Barriers

Participants talked about the following barriers to improving diversity and representing the community:

- Lack of access to up-to-date information about which groups live in the area and community groups who are working with them
- Barriers to building trust with some local residents from BME backgrounds (e.g. the Big Local may be seen as part of the 'authorities' that residents have not been treated well by in the past)
- Governance and decision-making structures not suiting some members of the community (e.g. young people not wanting to/having time to attend regular formal meetings)

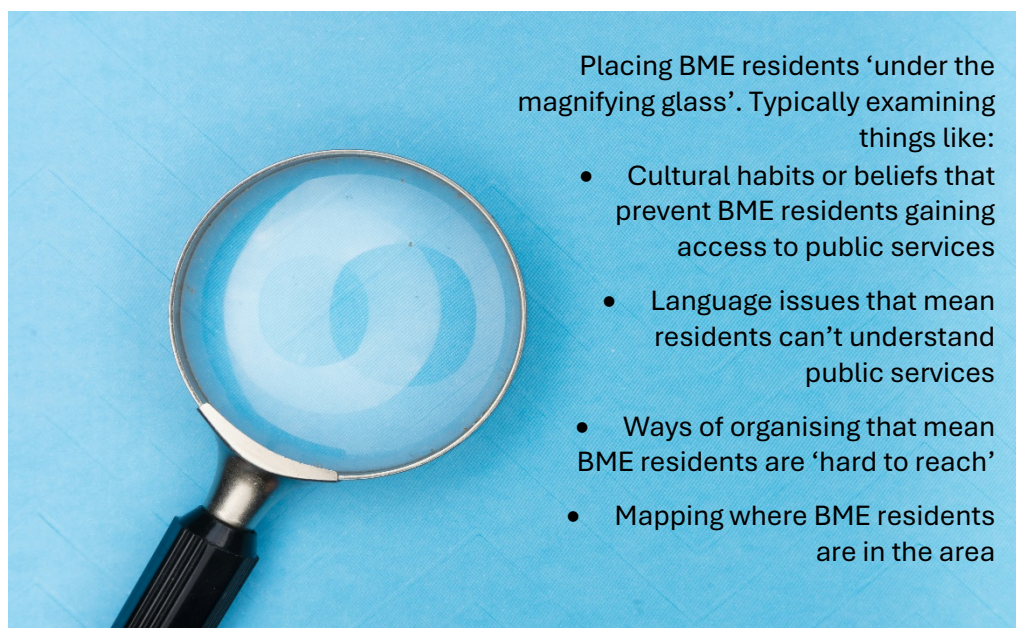
Enablers

(a) Challenging racialised beliefs in the local system

Often the process of consulting people from BME backgrounds is loaded with assumptions about whose responsibility it is to change, and what 'normal' and different looks like in our society. Developing awareness about this can help to strategically position community engagement practice.

A common belief in our society is that White people and culture are 'the norm' and people from BME backgrounds are 'the other' and are 'different'. Often this 'norm' of Whiteness is unquestioned and unexamined – it is taken for granted that the system should work for people with lighter skin, who communicate in a particular way. At the same time, the problem of inequality is often located with those who are 'othered' (people from BME backgrounds). These groups are placed 'under the magnifying glass' and efforts are focused on trying to find out what it is about people who are 'different' that means they experience inequality (see diagram 1 for some examples of how this is done). Parallel to this process, mainstream public services and how they operate receive less scrutiny – maintaining existing systems of power and inequality.

Diagram1: The lens we use to examine 'difference'



We explored with Big Local area 2 how partnership members might avoid repeating this dynamic in their consultation work with local BME residents to understand their views about access to health and care services. As one partnership member put it, they wanted to avoid the ‘hamster wheel’ of community engagement – where BME residents are consulted every year and are asked to prove the inequality they face, but little changes in the mainstream health and care system.

We offered the group a simple exercise which helped delve deeper into underlying beliefs held within the health and care system about BME communities. Following the exercise, we discussed how the Big Local could **position its engagement work strategically to ensure that they are not sustaining racialised beliefs held about BME communities**. The exercise is summarised below for other groups that may wish to reflect on this:

Consider the statements below:

BME communities don’t benefit from our local health and care system because...

1. They don’t speak the language and find it hard to navigate the system
2. They don’t trust the health and care system
3. They want more representative health and care services

What beliefs maintain each of these statements?

What messages does the health and care system hear in relation to this problem?

What is the impact of these messages?

Participants in the exercise shared how beliefs about BME residents and who is responsible for change can be perpetuated through public consultation activities. Beliefs like:

- people from the same ethnic background are better equipped to support those who share their background
- people who are of White ethnicity can’t be expected to understand/treat those of other ethnicities
- the complexity of the system requires a level of knowledge and literacy to navigate it
- you are in some way less intelligent if you don’t have English as a first language

We discussed how in community engagement practice the magnifying glass tends to be focused on understanding the needs and behaviours of people from BME backgrounds (‘why aren’t they coming to us’), rather than how and why mainstream public services are designed and delivered in ways that tend to benefit White-presenting people more. The group discussed how the narrative around ‘hard-to-reach’ communities is so ingrained that emphasis is on the ‘other’ to sort out the problem.

These conversations supported partnership members to reflect on what their Big Local needs to focus on to get closer to making an impact on systemic racism in their local health and care system. As one participant in the learning session shared:

The session helped massively... I've spent a lot of time self-reflecting on how I think and the assumptions I make. I had seen our focus area as how we can build health literacy and advocacy amongst groups who are experiencing poor health outcomes. I had seen that advocacy around supporting these groups to better navigate the health system and their needs. Moving forward I'm seeing that we need work with these groups to educate and inform the statutory health system about the ways in which it often has these exclusionary beliefs embedded into the way they think. They need to go on a journey as well. So, moving to working on both supporting community groups and focusing on the statutory groups that are meant to serve the community. Those [statutory] services can be supported to go on a journey with how they understand their role, power, and responsibility to evolve. I'm starting to focus on how we involve them in the work we do. (Participant Big Local Area 2).

(b) Building spaces where people feel heard: a power building approach

Increasing representation alone does not guarantee that people from BME backgrounds will have the power to make decisions and that they will feel included and heard. Similarly, asking people to 'represent' one aspect of their identity alone (such as ethnicity or religion) can put people into a box that they may not want to be put in and can lead to stereotyping and assumptions about the diversity of experience people bring. It can also put undue pressure on people to speak for *their* 'community'. The Big Local programme aims to operate differently to this by asking partnership members to join because they live or work in the area – it does not ask people to represent particular demographic groups or communities.

Yet, participants in this project also noted that people from BME backgrounds are often expected to hold the responsibility for coming up with solutions and the emotional labour for sharing their experiences on issues of race inequality or for speaking out about racism in their community. As one participant (Big Local area 2) put it: "there is a habit of categorising people in community that we need to move away from." People need to feel that they have agency and power to contribute and that they can be themselves in places where they are asked for their opinion. Paying attention to these issues of power and agency can help community-led initiatives to benefit effectively from the diversity of views, skills and experiences that local residents bring.

See example on the next page.

EXAMPLE

Building power of young people to participate in decision-making

Big Local area 1 had a specific ambition to run an engagement session with young people to ask them more about how they experience racial inequality and segregation in the area and what they feel could be done about it. The Big Local had achieved limited engagement with young people thus far and they hoped that these young people would offer a new perspective to help them respond to issues of race inequality in the area.

We explored with partnership members how they could create the kind of environment where young people can feel heard. We explored how we could be aware of the power dynamics in the room when discussing issues of racism with young people. How could partnership members use their power effectively and responsibly to encourage engagement of young people? How could the partnership help build the power of young people in the longer-term too - supporting them to draw on their skills, knowledge and experience and to build this over time?

Four key learning points from our work with Big Local area 1 on their community engagement approach are summarised below:

The importance of speaking about racism as a White person

When preparing for the engagement session with young people, the Big Local recognised that it may only be members of the partnership from White ethnic backgrounds that could attend the session. They feared young people (largely from BME backgrounds) might feel the partnership doesn't represent their communities and their interests. The group discussed the importance of modelling the change they'd like to see in their community – by speaking about racism as White-presenting community leaders and creating space for young people to discuss these issues.

Being aware of the power we hold

The group discussed the types of power that communities may assume they hold. White partnership members discussed the power attached in our society to lighter skin. The group also discussed how the Big Local is likely to be seen as a group with resources and influence by local residents – and possibly perceived as being the same as the 'authorities' (like the police or the local authority). When discussing issues of race inequality with local residents, these issues are important to acknowledge and address directly because they are likely to affect how people engage. As an example, young people from some ethnic backgrounds may

not want to speak to the police because of unfair treatment. The Big Local discussed the importance of being clear about the power and responsibilities they have within the local area – as well as the scope for influence that young people have on their future work.

Building a pipeline of future community leadership

Partnership members in Big Local area 1 shared their concerns about the longer-term future of community development activity in the area. How could young people be supported to engage in the future of community development? How could the Big Local contribute to the next generation of community leaders and build its legacy? The group recognised that running a youth engagement session or improving diversity of partnership membership should not be seen as a final goal for the partnership. Instead, young people needed longer-term investment and opportunities to build their leadership capacity and engage with local challenges (including racism). Young people also needed access to funding to undertake grass-roots social action activities. This led to the Big Local organising a youth leadership programme in the area.

Developing responsive engagement mechanisms

In early conversations, Big Local area 1 saw their role mainly as gathering information from young people about their views on racism and then using the engagement session to inform their future work. In later conversations, partnership members were discussing how they could change their own thinking and behaviour to support their future relationship with young people in the area over time. Whilst this is only a subtle shift, it did prompt a range of discussions about changes to practice. As an example, the partnership recognised their approach to engagement and decision-making would need to adapt and be more flexible to involve a wider range of people: “*we are quite meeting heavy*” (Big Local area 1 participant).

3. Mindsets

Our underlying beliefs about ‘race’ and racism and our capacity to talk about them affect how we choose to lead on this agenda. Yet, we found that there is not often space for community leaders to discuss this openly with others and to develop their own stance on these issues. Through our work with Big Locals, we offered some learning interventions to help community leaders reflect on their own relationship to ‘race’ and racism and to notice the beliefs and mindsets in our heads that shape what we do to progress race equality. Headline themes from that work are included in this section.

Barriers

- Impact of different emotions that people can experience when talking about ‘race’. Emotions like fear, shame, guilt, anger and defensiveness can make it harder for people to communicate or listen to others.

As a white person it can feel harder to speak about racism because people might see me in a particular way (Big Local area 1).

If you notice it how do you call it out in a way that keeps the conversation going and doesn’t shut the others down so much so that they become defensive. People feel like it’s a cycle – we can talk about it for a bit. Then they don’t want to talk about it anymore. We are uncomfortable – we don’t want to address it (Big Local area 2).

- Different levels of exposure to issues of ‘racism’ can make it harder for community groups to get on the same page and develop a shared definition about what racism is and what needs to be done to tackle it.

Enablers

(a) Creating open spaces for discussion

We discussed with Big Locals participating in this project how to create effective spaces to discuss the topic of ‘race’ and racism. Setting ground rules for a conversation and supporting people to bring themselves fully into the discussion is a really important part of the work for community leaders interested in facilitating conversations of this type. Systemic racism can operate in subtle ways when community groups talk about issues of ‘race’. For example, it can encourage us to focus most of our time and effort on blaming specific individuals for getting the language on ‘race’ wrong – whilst at the same time leaving important conversations about the actual impact of racism in the area and outcomes people experience in education, employment and housing off the table. We are encouraged to individualise and blame specific people for lack of progress – when there is also a bigger challenge that we are all affected by (the impact of beliefs about ‘race’ that shape how we think and act).

This complex issue can be addressed, to some degree, through effective contracting and setting up strong ground-rules at the start of discussions. At the start of sessions with Big Locals on this project for instance, we discussed how emotions are likely to come up (e.g. guilt, shame, defensiveness) and that it is useful to notice these, because they are giving us information about where we stand on different issues. Often, we react to emotions like shame, guilt or anger by retreating from conversations or by shouting and engaging in conflict. We can also make space to be curious about these emotions and ask ourselves what they mean for us and for our relationships with others. Community leaders can model this by noticing their own emotions when working on these issues and using that information to inform their work with groups. It is also important to note that this type of practice is challenge and requires a level of self-reflection and emotional intelligence if it is to be done well.

(b) Developing a shared understanding of what 'race' and racism is

In any community group there will be a range of views about what 'race' and racism are and how they show up in the local area. People have different personal experiences of these issues, but also levels of education on this topic vary widely. Big Locals participating in this programme described the benefit of learning and development interventions around 'race' and racism so that groups have a shared language and core understanding of the topic. In particular, we explored with groups how the idea of 'race' is based on the idea that there are different biological 'races' and that those with darker skin are inferior compared to those with lighter skin. Whilst it has been proven that there is no scientific, factual basis behind the idea of biological 'race'³, the social construct of 'race' persists and we are all socialised into it in different ways. We explored how, as long as this idea continues in our world, it will continue to try to remake itself.

(c) Noticing the beliefs we hold about 'race'

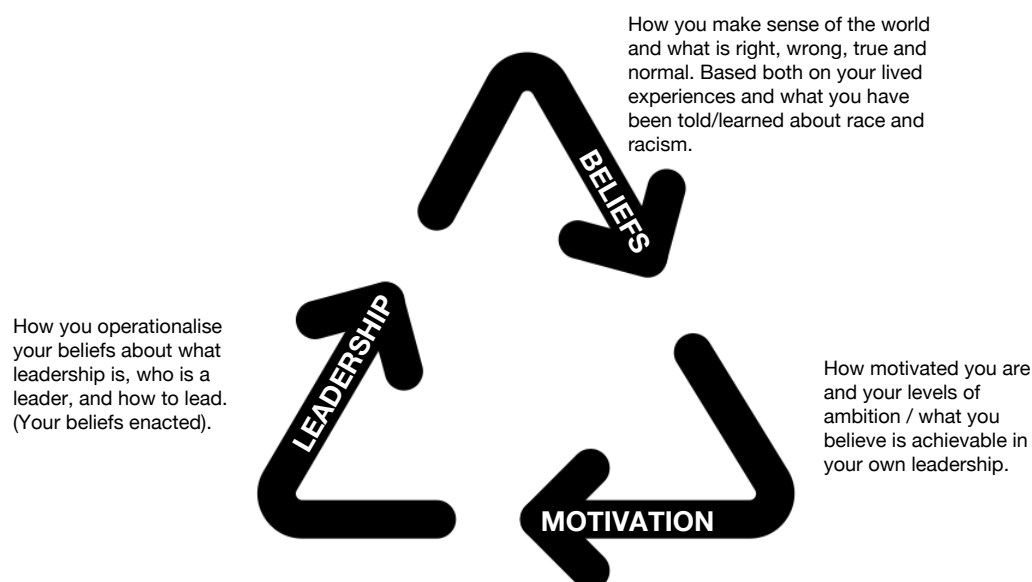
When working with Big Local partnership members, we noticed the importance of community leaders recognising the relationship between the beliefs they hold about 'race' and how they choose to lead on this agenda. Partnership members talked about their own lived experience of racism and how this and their own social identities can affect what they think is possible to change on this agenda. As one participant put it:

We will be better on supporting projects that support people. Feel better informed on it. Perhaps we have been a little bit complacent on these issues because it seems generally people get on outside what we have highlighted during meetings. (Participant Big Local Area 2)

Community leaders have an opportunity to interrogate these beliefs, how this shapes their levels of motivation and ambition for the work and to learn more about how this is affecting their practice (see Diagram 2 below for a simple description of how beliefs, motivations and leadership practice relate).

³ Cooper R.S., Kaufman J.S., Ward R. (2003) 'Race and genomics'. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 348:1166-70

Diagram 2: Beliefs, motivation and leadership practice



A key area of challenge for some community leaders from White ethnic groups is the fear of not having sufficient lived experience or knowledge to have anything authentic to contribute on the issue of race equality (an example of one of the ‘beliefs’ in the diagram above). Yet, we discussed with a Big Local on this project how important it is for White people to model taking- action to tackle racism for other parts of the community to see. An ‘anti-racist’ approach actively invites White people into the work with an acknowledgment of the particular role they have to play dismantling race and racism. Indeed, anti-racism values coalition building as a way of overcoming the divisions created by processes of racialisation and oppression⁴.

4. Tackling the causes of racism in an area

A key finding from a previous literature review of the impact of place-based initiatives⁵ was that many have failed to address the structural causes of poverty and inequality. Initiatives often focus on tackling the symptoms rather than the causes of racism.

Addressing the immediate needs of disadvantaged communities is, of course, important. But it is also useful to think about and address the long-term *causes* of inequality and discrimination that are specific to that area. Through conversations with Big Locals, we examined how race inequality is perpetuated within their local area, and what it could take to adopt a more strategic, long-term approach to tackling racial inequality.

⁴ See brap.org.uk/post/moving-from-not-racist-to-anti-racism

⁵ brap (2022) op. cit.

Barriers

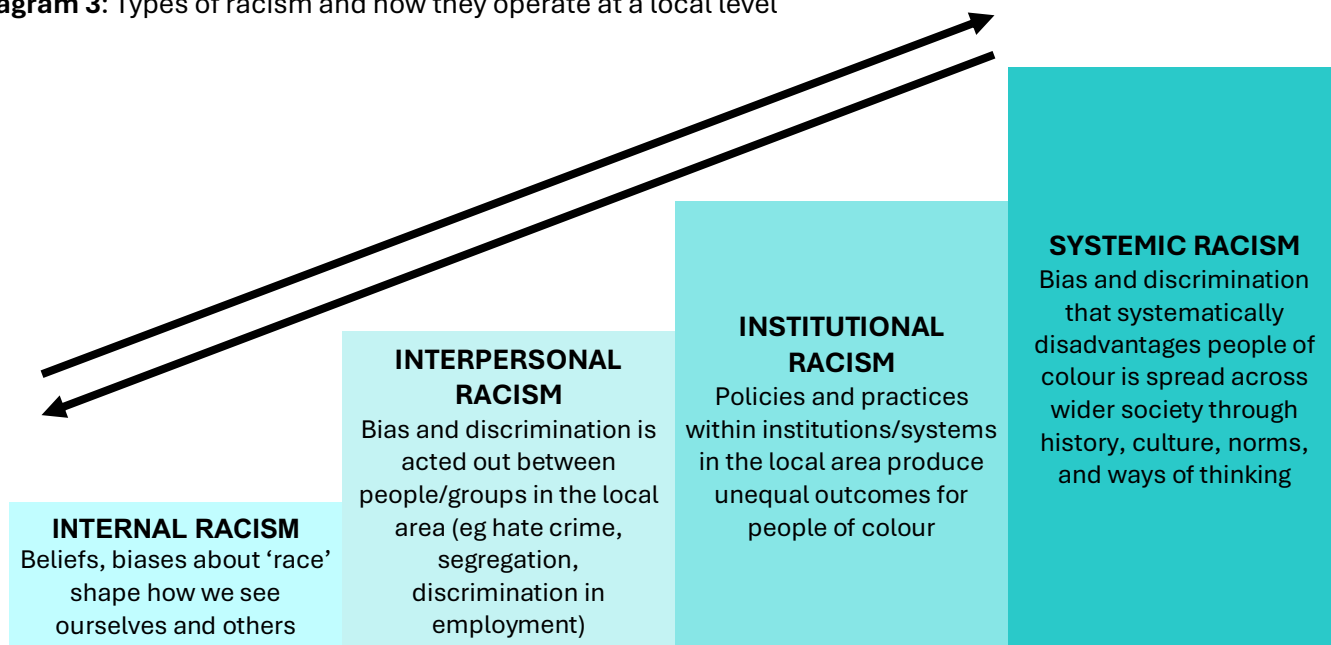
- Many community-led initiatives rely heavily on volunteers and are engaged primarily in frontline support (e.g. running food banks or organising community events). There are limits to the level of time and capacity that community groups have to engage in discussions with other stakeholders (e.g. policy-makers, local authority staff, etc).
- A common assumption is that ‘racism’ is only about overt acts of racism between people in the community – such as hate crime and racist language. This can mean that some other more covert, structural forms of racism in the area (such as institutional racism) receive less attention when community groups are planning what to do on this topic.
- Community groups don’t always have access to or capacity to use up-to-date demographic data and evidence of inequality (on issues like employment, education and housing) when they are at the planning stage in making improvements in their local area.

Enablers

(a) *Developing a strategic focus for change*

Racism operates at different levels and in different ways (see diagram 3). Community leaders can work more strategically when they know which ‘type’ of racism they seek to address.

Diagram 3: Types of racism and how they operate at a local level



Developing awareness of different types of racism and how they operate can support community groups to understand where they can best intervene in their work and how.

Example

Big Local area 2 wished to help address racial inequality in the local labour market by supporting young BME residents to build their confidence, skills and employability. Through an initial conversation with brap and exploring different types of racism, we discussed how there is also important work to do more ‘upstream’ in the local labour market (moving higher in the diagram above and expanding ambitions for change). In particular, we discussed looking at local employers’ hiring policies and practices to understand how they may be leading to racial inequality in employment (institutional racism) and bringing local employers and colleges together to discuss how they could contribute to change in the wider labour market.

(b) Examining root causes and testing new approaches

A key concern for both Big Locals was ensuring that their efforts to tackle racism were not ‘performative’ (showing the world they were doing something, but not really changing much in the process). Big Locals talked about a desire to make the maximum impact they could in their area with this work. Yet, we discussed how the quality of interventions in this field more broadly isn’t often scrutinised. Community-led initiatives across the country often choose from a list of common interventions that have been used by other community groups in the past to progress race equality, such as:

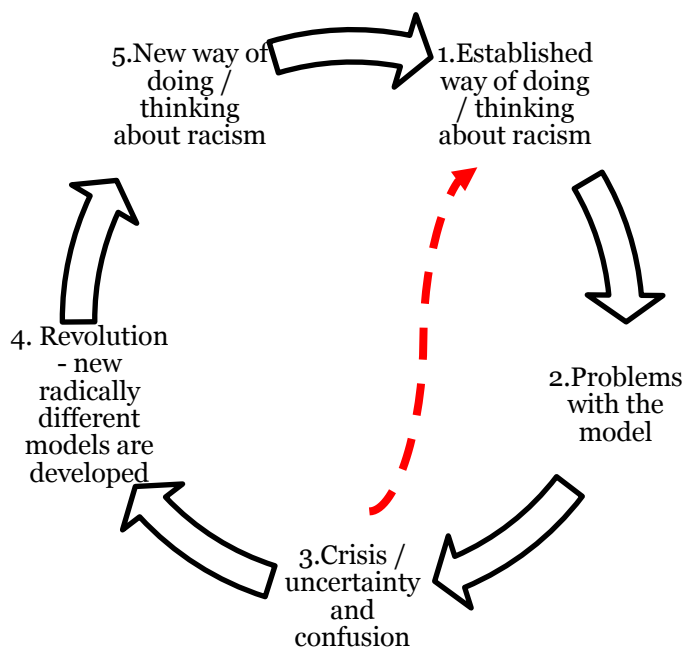
- community engagement and consultation
- organising community events for people from BME backgrounds
- improving monitoring and assessing access to services
- developing new internal equality, diversity and inclusion policies
- creating new partnerships with or giving grants to local BME community groups
- conducting research and mapping local communities to understand them and their needs better

Whilst often important and well-intentioned work, these interventions are not always used based on evidence about the impact that they are likely to have. Evaluation in the field of place-based race equality interventions is relatively scant in the UK⁶. Similarly, when organisations show that they are doing something, anything can be seen as ‘enough’. This can make it really difficult for community groups to discern which activities to pursue (even if they start to notice that doing the same thing year-on-year isn’t having the impact they would like it to).

⁶ brap (2022) op. cit.

Community groups risk being stuck in a closed loop similar to the one represented by the red dotted arrow on diagram 4 below. Established ways of doing things aren't necessarily resulting in the outcomes expected (problems with the model). This leads to uncertainty and confusion about what to do. But the common response to this is to look back to established ways of doing things to solve problems with the model.

Diagram 4: closed loop of designing race equality activities



Through this project, we found that helping community groups to notice problems with current interventions and reflecting on root causes of race inequality specific to their area supported them to move to Stage 4 on the diagram and think about and develop alternatives (rather than jump to adopting established ways of doing things). Another key intervention was engaging with a range of different types of evidence to understand root causes of racism in an area. With Big Local Area 2 we talked about the importance of valuing accounts of first-hand experience of inequality (rather than only the statistics and quantitative data that tend to be valued by their local health sector). We also discussed how the Big Local itself could judge its progress differently than it had before if it is setting its sights on influencing health and care professionals (e.g. measuring how well it is building relationships with different parts of the health and care system).

The following is a good example of the wider challenge that many community groups face when trying to innovate and test new ground in this type of work.

Example

Reflecting on root causes of inequality and developing new approaches to respond to them

Big Local area 1 were aware that some local young people were engaged in anti-social behaviour and there was low-level conflict between young people from different ethnic groups. A common response to this type of challenge is to provide short-term diversionary activities to engage young people and bring them together outside of school. This might help to address some of the symptoms of the problem in the short term. Yet, some in the group acknowledged that this was unlikely to address the underlying challenges that young people face in the area. Anti-social behaviour was a symptom of something deeper – involving not just those young people who were identified as causing trouble.

The group were supported to slow down and look more closely at the underlying causes of anti-social behaviour and segregation amongst young people. We introduced discussion about the root causes of the challenge and the group reflected on the impact of previous efforts to engage young people with a critical lens.

The group talked about the lack of impact of quick-fix solutions to anti-social behaviour and segregation. They recognised there is a local perception that segregation is because young Muslims don't talk to other members of the community. But there are some bigger, structural dynamics at play in that area that are combining to reinforce inequality and division. Firstly, there is a large geographical divide with a main road running between two areas with separate schools catering for largely different cultural/religious groups. Secondly, young people face racism and a wholesale lack of investment in youth services, significant youth unemployment and limited space for sustained cross-community development work.

This led to a conversation about the Big Local taking a more active role in building the longer-term capacity and leadership of young people in the area. The Big Local started to identify a strategic role it could play in the future around:

- listening well to young people and elevating their concerns
- creating effective spaces for local people to talk about racism and inequality
- undertaking influencing work to affect decisions about local investment in youth service provision
- offering development opportunities to build the leadership of young people and support their involvement in future social action in the area (building a legacy for the work of the Big Local)

With this particular Big Local Partnership, a key intervention point with the group was investing time in and listening for new ways of doing things to emerge. The group did this, whilst at the same time, noticing and resisting the temptation to jump to traditional approaches where there is little evidence of long-term positive impact.

CONCLUSIONS

This report has shared what can happen when a modest level of external support is offered to Big Local partnerships to help their efforts to promote race equality in their area. Particular attention has been placed on exploring how community leadership practice can contribute to recognising and tackling systemic racism and the types of interventions and leadership support that can help leaders to achieve this.

Four months was a relatively short timeframe to support community groups to mobilise activity to tackle systemic racism. However, we have found that even during this limited time, some of the support interventions we've offered have helped participants to think and act differently in their race equality practice (as described in this report).

In this final section of the report, we summarise some of the key challenges that Big Locals have faced when trying to take a more strategic, systemic, long-term approach to tackling racism in their area. We also indicate useful areas for intervention and support that can help those leading change in communities to address these challenges.

What keeps systemic racism intact?

Dr Sanjiv Lingayah describes 'systemic racism' as:

The condition where society's laws, institutional practices, customs and guiding ideas combine to harm racially minoritized populations in ways not experienced by white counterparts... System outcomes are not by accident, they are by design. If systems consistently deliver negative outcomes for particular populations, that is by choice. These outcomes happen 'on purpose'⁷.

A common perception of racism is that it is always visible and 'overt' (e.g physical and verbal abuse of people from BME backgrounds). Whilst this is a type of racism, systemic racism is not well understood – because it is normalised within our society. As such systemic racism is widespread, covert and often very difficult to spot. Like any living system, systemic racism is able to adapt and re-invent itself in order to maintain its dominance and influence. For example, if we do not adopt a critical lens, even despite our best intentions, systemic racism can show up in *how* we think about and do race equality work in communities.

In this report we have shown how norms and traditional institutional practices in community development work (which are shaped by beliefs about 'race') risk limiting the scope, ambition and implementation of efforts to progress race equality. The report has identified four key areas where communities have an opportunity to question and challenge the dominance of racialised beliefs in this work:

⁷ Lingayah, S. (2021) *It takes a system: the systemic nature of racism and pathways to systems change*, London: ROTA

Table 4: practice challenges

Planning for change	Improving diversity and representing the community	Mindsets	Tackling local causes of racism
•Limiting ambition for what can be achieved in the local area. •Limiting ourselves to simple, tick-box solutions to more complex/systemic problems.	•Maintaining racialised beliefs through consultation and community engagement processes (e.g. BME people are the 'problem'). •Seeing representation as the 'end goal' of tackling racism - without also sharing and building power and resources of BME groups.	•Impact of emotions people experience when talking about 'race' that can prevent action and discussion. •Lack of shared understanding about what 'race' and 'racism' are. Persistent belief that 'race' is real and a scientific fact (when it actually isn't). •People's own experience / views about 'race' impact on their motivations and leadership practice.	•Tendency to focus on more overt forms of racism through community development work. Less focus on systemic and institutional racism. •Lack of evaluation and evidence to support decision-making about the best interventions to use to tackle racism. •Despite noticing lack of impact of traditional practices, tendency to still use them.

What disrupts systemic racism?

Even with the best intention and effort, the practice challenges identified above have the potential to significantly limit the scope and impact of activities to progress race equality. Community groups face the additional challenge of a relatively low expectation of success in this field too because beliefs in the permanence of racial hierarchies are so prevalent and engrained. As a result, we tend to tweak within the parameters of what currently exists. Sometimes doing something, anything, to address the worst effects of racism in society is seen as enough. Work to directly address the symptoms of systemic racism (such as unequal access to employment and education) is valuable work. This type of activity is rightly celebrated and important. Yet, what about those who choose to set their sights on tackling some of the *causes* of the more persistent, long-term patterns of race inequality they are seeing in their community?

The Big Local groups that we had the pleasure of working with on this project showed determination and interest in thinking about their role in addressing root causes of race inequality. The practices and interventions we developed with these groups have offered some useful insights into how to navigate and deal with a number of the practice challenges described above. These are summarised below:

Table 5: approaches to disrupting systemic racism

Planning for change	Improving diversity and representing the community	Mindsets	Tackling local causes of racism
•At the planning stage, reflecting on how we understand the problem of racism in our area and our level of ambition to address it. •Recognising the context of the problem we seek to address. If it is a complex problem - investing time and resource to learn and test different approaches to solving it.	•Noticing when racialised beliefs are shaping approaches to community engagement and representation •Encouraging mainstream service providers to account for unequal outcomes (rather than seeing BME residents as the problem) •Paying attention to power dynamics in community engagement practice. •White people playing an active role in challenging and talking about racism •Building a pipeline of future community leadership •Developing responsive/ flexible engagement mechanisms	•Effective contracting and ground-rule setting in meetings to enable people to build trust and notice the feelings and emotions they have when talking about 'race'. •Learning and development interventions to build a shared understanding of what is 'race' and racism within community groups. •Supporting leaders to recognise the relationship between their own experiences / learning and the motivation and action they take to tackle racism.	•Noticing the type of racism we seek to address. Seeking opportunities to tackle institutional / systemic forms of racism that operate more covertly in the area. •Critically reflecting on the impact of previous interventions to tackle race inequality. Noticing the temptation to use interventions that have little proven track record of success. Choosing to develop new, radical alternatives to tackle root causes of inequality. •Using and valuing a range of types of evidence to better understand root causes of racism in an area. Using alternative measures to assess progress of community initiatives.

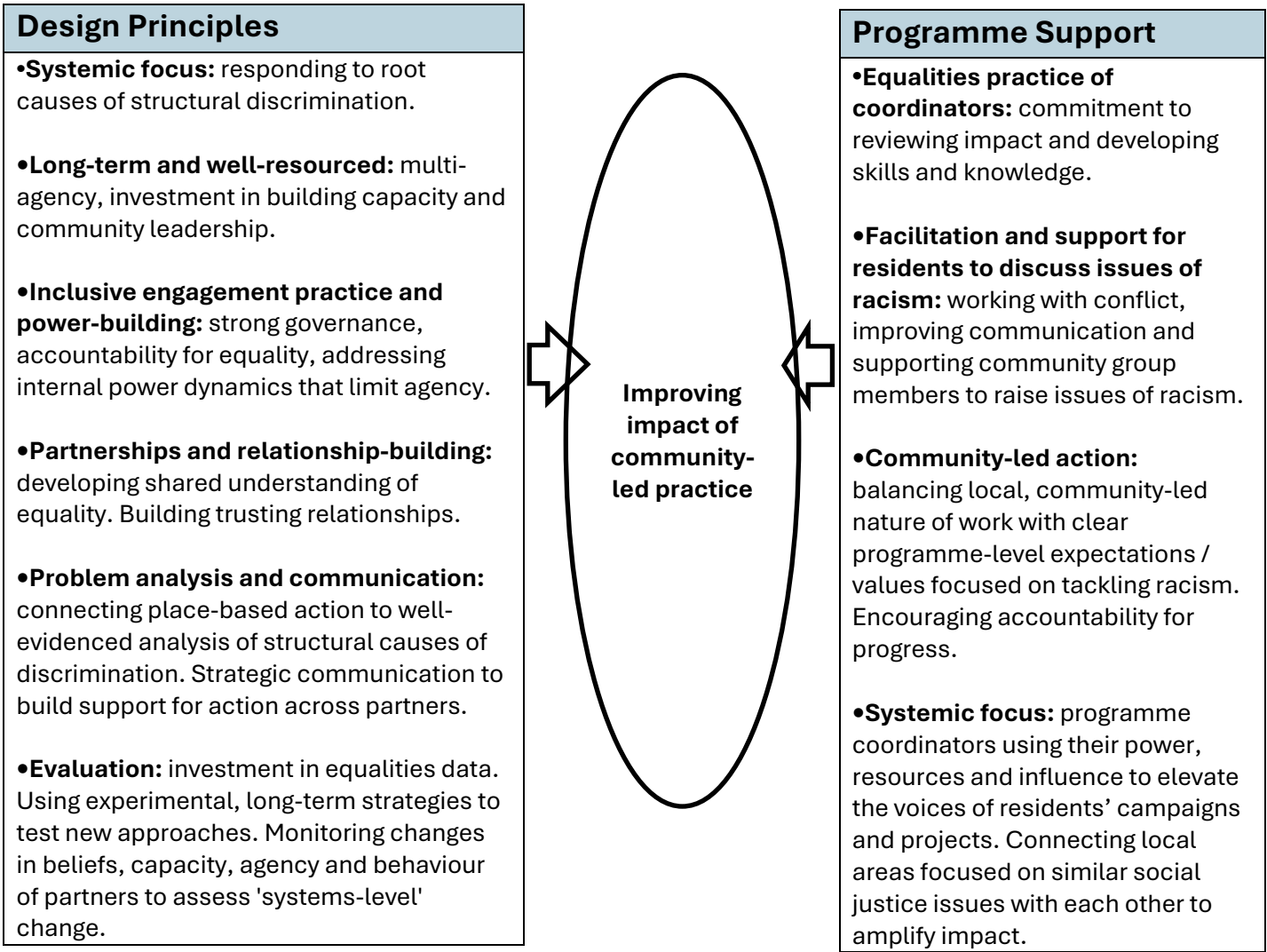
Embedding support for community leaders in the future

This report has outlined how community groups can be supported to navigate specific practice challenges they face in work on race equality. The report also outlines a range of interventions that can support community groups to take steps that bring them closer to tackling systemic racism in their areas. Finally, we offer briefly below two additional, contextual factors that can support the application of improved practice in community-led place-based programmes like Big Local.

(a) Equity by design

Place-based programmes seeking to embed community leadership practices of the type outlined in this report also need to consider the role of **overall programme design** and **support mechanisms** for local community groups. A reminder of key themes from brap’s review (2022) is offered below– emphasizing that effective anti-oppressive leadership in communities can be supported through creating the right conditions at initial programme design stage. Approaches to tackling systemic racism can be considered early in a programme, building them in to design and ongoing programme support / accountability mechanisms.

Diagram 5: programme design and programme support



(b) Matching support to level of development / capacity

The two participating Big Locals joined this project at a particular stage of their development – with already established governance models, funding practices and ways of working. The groups we were worked with were mainly volunteers – though each had at least one paid worker who could support application of practice. It is important to acknowledge this context when drawing out learning from this project to support other community groups.

The group already had an established ‘container’ with which they could test and experiment. Focus was placed with these groups on reflective practice exercises to examine the impact of previous approaches, learning and development activities and trying out and testing new ways of thinking about the topic of ‘race’ and racism in their community.

Whilst we didn’t get a chance to test this as part of this project, community groups that are earlier in their development would likely benefit from additional types of support too. Working with groups early in their development offers opportunities to incorporate and embed anti-oppressive practice into group culture and practice from an earlier stage.

We offer below some examples of areas of practice for further exploration:

- Governance: developing decision-making models that match the emergent, experimental nature of work to tackle systemic racism. For example, developing ‘inquiry’ groups that are recruited based on expertise to test and learn about how to tackle particular discrimination challenges in the local area. Focusing on long-term capacity building (e.g. shadowing opportunities, leadership development) to develop a pipeline of leaders from groups that have been traditionally excluded in the past.
- Building culture: outlining early in a group’s development the types of behaviours and ways of working with each other that are supportive of anti-oppressive practice. Committing to hold each other to account for these practices and using feedback and review processes to ensure these practices are embedded in the group’s work over time.
- Data-gathering and analysis: supporting community groups to explore different types of evidence that describe root causes of inequality and discrimination in their area.
- Evaluation and learning practice: taking a long-term view of the impact that place-based programmes want to have on tackling systemic inequality in their area. Developing learning and evaluation methods that match the level of ambition and help community groups to understand their progress in progressing equality.