

Dismantling Barriers Conference

Evaluation Report

Event Overview

Cohesion Plus delivered a major online conference on 12th November which brought together BAME leaders from the arts and private sector, to talk about their experiences as people of colour, the challenges they have faced, their lived experiences and what can be done to help dismantle some of the barriers that exist.

The Dismantling Barriers conference was attended by over 160 participants from across England, with a range of arts and cultural organisations including venues, museums and festivals participating and was supported by **Arts Council England**.



The conference was opened by **Gurvinder Sandher**, Artistic Director of Cohesion Plus who spoke about his career in the arts and the challenges and stereotypes he has faced over the years. Gurvinder explained that it was vital, now more than ever to address and discuss the ongoing limitations and barriers people of colour are still experiencing in 2020 across all aspects of society including within the arts sector.

He said although Black Lives Matter came as a jolt to many, the call for equality has always been there, going back to when he first started working in the charity and community sector in 1999 in Kent, when the McPherson Report, following the murder of Stephen Lawrence was published.

He explained that over the span of his career, more often than not when walking into large meetings and most recently, attending virtual meetings, he is still usually the only person of colour in the room, at a time when he keeps getting told that diversity and inclusion in the arts matters.

Gurvinder said that from his experience, no one from a diverse background is asking for special treatment, all that is being asked for is equal treatment.

He added that when it comes to diversity in the arts, why was it that diverse artists had to constantly change and evolve their arts forms? He gave a recent example of when he was asked by a colleague, *“we all know your background is in Bhangra dance but why can’t you show us something different.”* He wondered how often dance forms steeped in western tradition and practices such as ballet were asked if they were ever going to show ‘something different’. He explained that it led him to think about why a traditional dance form, originating from the birth place of his parents, was seen as something impermanent, something that had a shelf and attention span with western audiences, when in reality, its roots were old and interwoven into the very fabric of his identity.

Gurvinder also said that although in many ways much had changed since 1999 and great strides had been made in society and by partners such as Arts Council England, the challenges and questions were unfortunately, still very familiar.

“We all know your background is in Bhangra dance but why can’t you show us something different.”



Michelle Bramble, Chair of the North Kent Caribbean Network followed Gurvinder and gave a presentation on Unconscious Bias. As a second-generation Caribbean woman, Michelle detailed her own lived experiences growing up with racism and used those examples to discuss the nuanced and inherent biases that many harbor.

She went on to assert that while many large corporations had shown their solidarity by releasing Black Lives Matters slogans and standing by anti-racism, the true sentiment behind these words had to be proved by action, in how diverse their work places looked across all levels of staff and especially at Board level. She explained, Anti-racism is a practice and one that you need to demonstrate by doing, not merely performing.

When it came to unconscious bias she asked the attendees to ask themselves what assumptions were being made, why they came to those conclusions, when these assumptions were made, where these can cause difficulties, how can they be stopped and who these assumptions ultimately affect.

She then shared the example of Starbucks who ran a day's worth of training by closing 8,000 stores across the US in order to train 175,000 people in four hours following backlash for the way Black people had been treated in their US stores. Michelle pressed that unconscious bias training cannot be minimized to a day and that it was an ongoing processes of 'awareness, reflection and implementation'.



Jaswinder Singh Director of Asian Arts Agency gave an overview of the work that they deliver around supporting, promoting and developing international contemporary and traditional South Asian music and arts. He spoke about the importance of the arts industry stepping up, mobilising their resources to support diversity. He also felt that there needed to be more accountability by mainstream arts organisations and those in senior decision making roles.

Jaswinder asserted that training around unconscious bias and diversity should be compulsory for all arts organisations especially the larger ones.

Jaswinder felt it was important to create progressions paths for BAME staff from entry level to middle management in order to eventually have diverse senior leadership. Very often, he believed that once middle management was achieved there appeared to be a glass ceiling which was still very hard to break. Jaswinder concluded that overall, a continuous investment in diverse artists, communities, companies and leaders was needed in order to effect tangible change within the arts sector.

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Nathan Holder, author, musician and speaker presented his poem 'If I were a racist' which gave a searing critique of western, whitewashed musical education and discussed the need to decolonize current practices if music is to be truly inclusive and representative. He talked at length about the ways in which musical practices, beliefs and offering of instruments minimized opportunities for young people of colour to get to know other cultures as well as their own and that music and instruments from all over the world had been sadly homogenized under a 'world music' label. Nathan remarked that to date, he was one of a few Black male musical education consultants and that when young people see themselves represented, change will happen.



Paulette Long OBE, well known and respected senior consultant within the music industry spoke about her own experiences as often the only person of colour 'in the room' in an industry that was predominantly white. She spoke about her prolific career to date and all the work she personally had a stake in around diversifying the industry from Board level down. She also spoke about her contribution to the '**Black Women Holding CEO & Chairperson Positions' Report** which found that the music industry had 0% diverse female representation at Board and Senior levels.

Paulette gave comprehensive breakdowns around terminology and use of language as identifiable barriers when hiring as well as the need to recognize that senior management across sectors were hiring in their own image. She also discussed the many findings that had been published around hiring in the workplace and the fact that statistically, individuals with ethnic names were far less likely to make the interview stage.



Colleagues from **Deloitte, Nadine Dyer** and **Aisha Dixon** presented the 'Black Action Plan' which had been championed and rolled out across the organisation in a step to encourage discourse and actively provide support to Black employees. They explained that the action plan was created in response to the Black Lives Matter movement and aimed to help towards a companywide shift in approach and perception when engaging not only with their diverse employees but also when hiring.

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Ameet Chana, Associate Producer of Rifco Theatre Company spoke about his journey into acting and his 30 year long career. He explained that drama schools weren't readily accessible to diverse students and during his conversations with past students of colour, they were actively encouraged to whitewash their accents and mannerisms. Ironically he stated that when it then came to auditions, the roles largely called for people with accents and mannerisms from those very cultural backgrounds that had been minimised in drama school.

Ameet was proud to state that diverse led theatre companies such as Rifco Theatre Company specifically amplified British diverse voices whether they were actors, writers or designers. He stated that while the arts sector may see the specific focus on South Asian culture as a weakness, Rifco see it as an absolute strength as it is authentic and a lived truth. He commented that there was a power in having audiences see and recognize themselves and their culture on stage.



Abid Hussain, the Lead for Diversity within Arts Council England closed the conference with an in depth and insightful look into the work that he was leading on with Senior Management around diversity and inclusion and how it linked in to the new 10 Year Strategy.

He also spoke about the Race Advisory Board that has been set up as a direct result of Black Lives Matter following a letter sent to Arts Council England by BAME members from the Area Councils. Abid stated that he was incredibly heartened by the speakers and fascinated by what they had to say. He asserted that the use of language is important and should be something further examined but ultimately what the terms should look to convey is the need for equity, fairness and social justice and these should be at the heart of the discussion. Abid went onto to say that the most important thing was the need for everyone to work together in partnership and allyship to affect meaningfully change.

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Feedback and Stats

The feedback received in response to the speakers and the content of the conference was collated via an online survey which had 68 responses which is a 43% response rate and the data and comments can be viewed below:

When asked about the overall quality of the event 77% of attendees rated the conference as Excellent and 23% rated it as Good. The ease of accessibility for the conference was rated as Excellent by 74% of attendants whilst 26% rated it as Good. 86% of attendees rated the content of the conference as Excellent and a further 14% rated it as Good.

When asked what they liked most about the event, attendees provided some of the below responses:

“Hearing a range of speakers share their perspectives. Really clear expression of issues on a range of areas in the arts. Great to start with a very incisive performed poem. The whole event gave us all so many ideas of how to start driving change... More people need to be hearing this. I’ve worked with ethnic minority artist-led companies and have found some artists unwilling to discuss issues in a systemic way. Successful artists can sometimes fear being typecast as the ‘minority’ artist, particularly when they have fought hard over many, many decades to escape that label.”

“The content throughout was prescient, powerful and specific. Speakers speaking from the heart and making both current realities and actions needed for change tangible and clear.”

“The way that it challenged my own thinking. I’ve been trying to drive down my own conscious bias but today I saw sadly new unconscious areas to work on.”

“Focussed and inspirational presentations. Clear examples of how they are walking the talk articulated across all presentations. Well worth the time. Thanks for creating the space for such conversations.”

“Learnt so much from honest and insightful voices and will continue to self-educate myself and apply what I have learnt in my own practice and life.”

“Top quality speakers, provocative and real life experiences, positive voices.”

When respondents were asked whether they would recommend Cohesion Plus events 90% stated that they would. When asked what learning outcomes they took away from the conference, the following feedback was provided.

“It was great to hear from such wonderful speakers, there was a lot to take on and consider. Our organisation works hard at embedding and promoting EDI values, however always having these conversations is an important part of always improving and learning more.”

“As a white person, some of ‘If I Were a Racist’ was a surprise to me, so I need to, want to, look at that. Also perspectives of music learning rang true - again, as a white person having the joy taken out of music by having sheet music as the only option when I was little.”

“Numerous learning outcomes garnered from the conference, in particular around use of language when thinking about removing barriers and focusing on inclusivity.”

“The content throughout was prescient, powerful and specific. Speakers speaking from the heart and making both current realities and actions needed for change tangible and clear.”

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“How to take forward practical ideas that we can implement in our own diversity action planning.”

“Invaluable information from people talking about their own experiences - lots of relevant information - all the speakers had useful comments to make. Working in music education, I especially found Nate Holders links useful.”

“3 recommendations from speakers were really useful, plus thinking around positive action and terminology that I can share within the sector.”

“Much better understanding of how institutions need to be more relevant to the communities we serve, and the barriers for entry into the sector in terms of recruitment and board members.”

“Taking risk with programme. Lots of the excuses had been used in my own organisation and sometimes by me I’m ashamed to say... The power and passion to which Nathan Holder spoke about music education really rocked me ...And much more. It was truly excellent.”

“Reminder of the trauma, bravery and exhaustion for those that have been sharing stories of racism and the warning that this trauma is exacerbated if action is not seen. Thinking about the impact of COVID-19 on the sector and that minority groups are increasingly likely to be forced to leave I have some clear steps and questions for my own team on the changes we can make to our education programme, and am empowered and excited to progress these - Nathan Holder’s poem and presentation was really helpful as was Deloitte’s black action plan - and that anti-racism practice must be embedded and threaded through our work not layered on top.”

“Convinced me I need to recruit more board members and how I might go about that. Gave me more of a push to take responsibility for the research needed to make more connections outside usual circles to offer opportunities. Checked myself on some use of language and how I might frame things better when discussing diversity. I’d been uncomfortable about the way BAME was used at the beginning of the year, but familiarity with hearing it so often had made me more likely to use it in problematic ways - so it was good to be prompted to return to my original thinking. Made me more aware of the things I need to scrutinise to check I’m not including bias in the ways my organisation communicates and offers opportunities.”

“So, so many learning points for me - that diversity and inclusion are two very different things, to acknowledge that the “moment of truth” will be uncomfortable.”

“Although controversial, there is need for compulsory Unconscious Bias Training in cultural organisations, including in the higher managerial levels. The urgent need to diversify boards, directors and heads of cultural organisations, and institutions in general. The need to provide more opportunities and support for young people to access the cultural sector.”

“To look at equity in all areas of our service - especially from a white, middle class, middle aged, privileged position. The event put previous unconscious bias training into perspective and made it more real and vital through the lived stories.”

“For the funding sector and white led organizations to encourage black leadership and senior roles within the creative sector. Black organisations on the same level of funding as those of white led organisations. Representation of black and Asian leaders sitting at the decision making table and being accountable.”

“Lots of the excuses had been used in my own organisation and sometimes by me I’m ashamed to say...(the conference) was truly excellent.”

Next Steps

As a small organisation we are incredibly proud that we were able to deliver an online conference with nearly 200 registrations which ran efficiently and smoothly. We felt it vital that the conference take place in the wake of what has been a tumultuous time. The aim of the conference was to not to debate the authenticity of these issues, this year alone has proved otherwise in a very stark fashion. Rather we wanted to provide a space where racial barriers and system biases can be discussed and examined openly. We wanted to encourage dialogue and dispel the fear of saying the 'wrong thing'. It is only by acknowledging 'the wrong things said' can we move forward and walk an inclusive path of learning.

The feedback underlines the importance of having events like this, where the arts sector can come together, to listen, learn, and share lived experiences. Moving forward we hope that other organisations take the lead and look to hold similar events looking at diversity in the arts sector.

One message which came through strongly during the conference in the chat function was around the term BAME and the need to shift away from its use. It is important that ethnically diverse communities are looked at as separate entities rather than a homogenous group as we are all aware that when it comes to the arts, some ethnic groups are more empowered than others. The term BAME therefore groups together various ethnic groups and protected strands and ultimately skews results around the perceived 'progress' made by all sectors.

On the back of the success of this event we will look to organise a similar event next year where we hope to see how things have progressed. We hope to look back and see that 2020 was truly the year that reset the foundations of the establishment when it comes to diversity and inclusion in the arts, rather than lamenting on another missed opportunity. **There are only so many opportunities we will get to not only talk the talk, but more importantly walk the walk.**

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