



BLKOUT CREATIVE LTD

Mapping Connection

Research brief

Network mapping — loneliness

For The Community Pair — Nathan Lewis & Jean-Eric Nkurikiye

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What this is

A research brief for wish list item 3 — the one item on the Digital Capabilities list with nothing yet against it. It hands the work to the Community pair with a sharpened question, a method, and a first pilot, so that "assign an owner" on 17 June is a handover, not a homework-setting.

Why BLKOUT is asking about loneliness

Loneliness is usually framed as an individual deficit — something wrong with the lonely man. We start somewhere else: loneliness is a position in a web. A man can be surrounded by scene acquaintances and have no one to call at 3am. Another aged out of club spaces and lost his whole social infrastructure with them. A third lives forty miles from the nearest Black queer anything. Each is lonely differently; each needs a different response.

BLKOUT's prime metric is reciprocal relationships. Our membership covenant promises that men will be met. This research is the diagnostic underneath both — it finds where the meeting isn't happening, and what kind of meeting is missing. Without it we are designing responses to a loneliness we haven't looked at.

The research question

Which forms of connection are scarcest for Black queer men in the UK — and where are the near-misses?

Four sub-questions give it edges:

- 1. What kind?** Confidants, companions, or community — which ring of connection is thinnest? The 3am person, the brunch regular, and the familiar nod are different resources; which is in shortest supply?
- 2. For whom?** How does the shape of disconnection change with life stage — the man newly out, the man ageing out of the scene, the man partnered and invisible, the elder?
- 3. Where?** What does the map look like outside London — and inside it, outside the postcodes the scene serves?
- 4. What's proximate?** How many men are one introduction away from the connection they want — and how many would need whole new infrastructure built? The first response is cheap; the second is a funding strategy. The map tells us the proportions.

The method — mapping as gathering

We do not run a loneliness survey. Surveys about isolation are themselves isolating, and the data arrives stripped of the relationships it describes.

Instead, the instrument is a facilitated exercise — **Constellations** — run inside gatherings we already hold. Men map their own sky of connection on paper, over food, in a room of other men doing the same. The inquiry embodies the response: an afternoon spent mapping connection is itself a connection event. The companion facilitation guide sets out the full exercise.

Three design commitments, drawn from the AI policy now before the board:

- **Consent is the line.** Men tell us about their networks in a room, on paper, knowingly. We never infer isolation from data exhaust.
- **Minimum capture.** Participants keep their own maps. What BLKOUT receives is an anonymous summary card — ring counts, optional life stage, the first half of a postcode at most (SE15, never the rest), one wish. No names of anyone, ever — not the participant's, not their people's.
- **Creation, not deficit.** The exercise maps the constellation a man is building, not the holes in his life. The gold ring — who he wants closer — is the data we most need, and it is a wish, not a wound.

What the data becomes

- **A community map, not individual files.** Summary cards aggregate into a picture: ring distributions by life stage and region, clustered wish themes. No individual is trackable in it.
- **A findings note** to the board after each round — what's scarce, for whom, what's proximate.
- **Direct feeds:** events programming (item 6) learns what kind of gathering is missing; the directory (item 13) learns where geography is the barrier; next-level Alvor (item 4) gets its first honest signal of member need; and the membership offer learns what "being met" has to mean to be real.

The digital pathway — owned infrastructure, phased by sensitivity

The paper exercise is the research instrument. Behind it sits a second question: where does connection data *live* as this work matures? We assessed sumApp — the US platform built for exactly this, where BLKOUT holds a dormant account — and the answer is to build our own, for three reasons.

The build is smaller than it looks. sumApp is four parts: member profiles on permanent personal links, a "who do you know" picker, a relationships database, and a live network map. Three of the four already exist in BLKOUT's estate — our database holds the 114-organisation civil society dataset, personal magic links are native to our auth, and the interface belongs in an app we already run. The only missing piece, the map itself, is mature open source (Sigma.js / Cytoscape.js — the same family of tools the commercial platforms are built on). A matter of weeks inside existing apps, not a new platform.

Sovereignty is non-negotiable for this data. A named web of relationships between Black queer men is the most sensitive dataset BLKOUT would ever hold. The AI policy's line — minimum data, in infrastructure we control — rules out housing it on a third-party US platform, however capable.

Phased by sensitivity, tested on BLKOUTHUB. Phase one is the organisational directory (wish list item 13) — public-entity data, low risk, immediately useful. Phase two is the person-level network, and it waits behind the membership covenant. **BLKOUTHUB is the test ground between the two:** a bounded, trusting cohort where tiered data-sovereignty agreements can be piloted — from "list my name" through "show my profile to members" to "map my connections" — with every connection requiring *both* men's consent before it exists on any map. The consent ladder is the real innovation here; the graph is just plumbing. What BLKOUTHUB proves becomes what membership offers.

One wheel not to reinvent: Network Canvas — open source, built for facilitated personal-network research interviews, data never leaves the device — is the natural digital companion to the paper exercise if the pilots outgrow paper.

Pilot plan

When	What
June	Board assigns ownership to the Community pair; exercise materials finalised
July–August	Pilot at one social — small room, 8–15 men, full exercise, learn what breaks
16 August	Scale run at the Annual Picnic — revised exercise as a station, not a session
September	First findings note to the board
October–November	Findings feed the membership decision (~24 Nov) — the covenant priced against what men actually lack

What the Community pair owns

Ownership means: choosing the pilot gathering, facilitating or delegating facilitation, holding the consent line in the room, and presenting the findings note in their own voice. Analysis support (aggregation, clustering, write-up) comes from the platform side. Budget is printing and pens — the food is already happening.

What success looks like

Not a dataset. By September we can say, with evidence from our own rooms: *this* is the connection that's scarcest, *these* are the men it's scarcest for, and *this many* of them are one introduction away from it. And the men who gave us that knowledge left the room more

connected than they arrived.

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