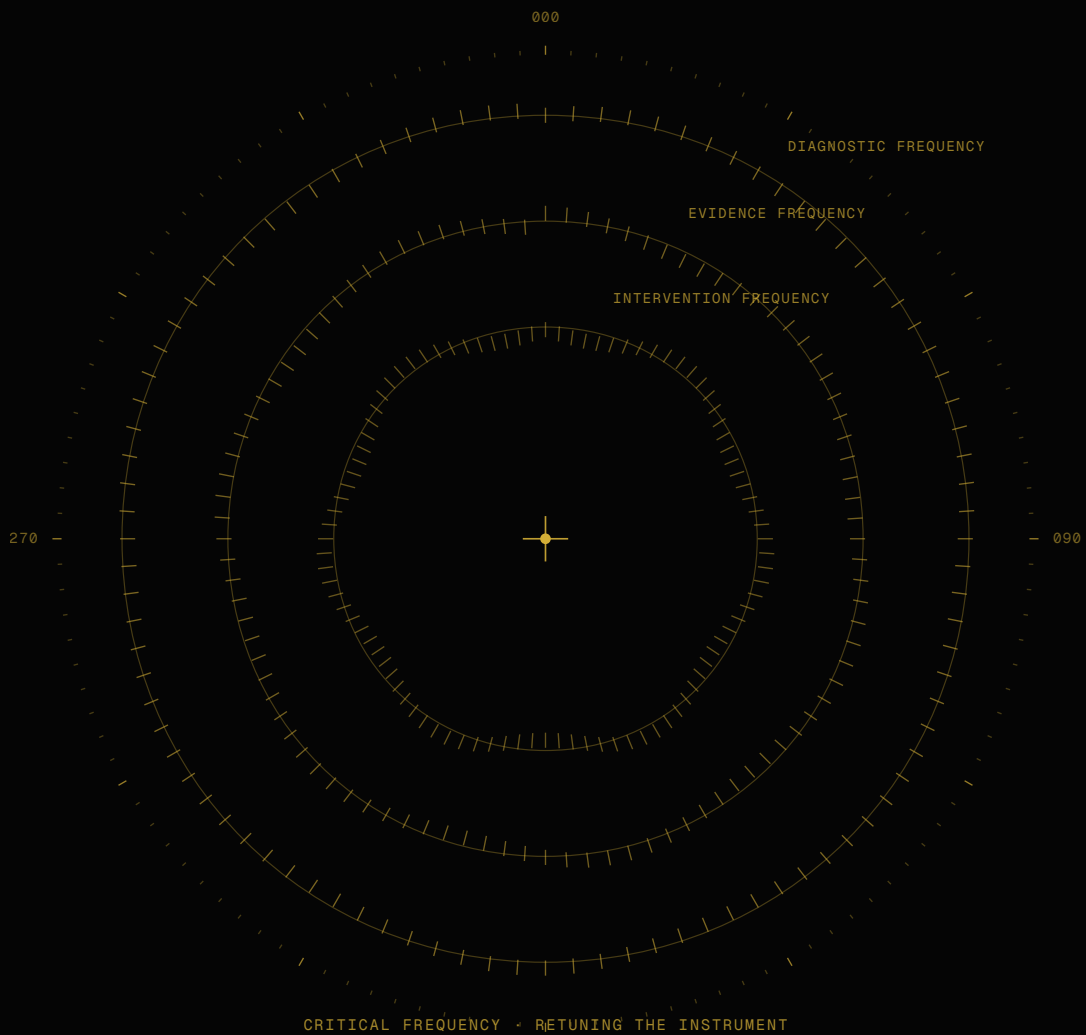




STRATEGIC ROADMAP

What we're building, and what travels.

// HERITAGE · POLICY · PLATFORM · THE PATTERN THAT TRAVELS



What we're building, and what travels

The first report ended with a promise that this one would describe what we have built. I want to honour that — but not as a project run-down.

The three things we are about to walk through were not made because we had a plan to make them. They were made because we kept asking the same question — **who are we not reaching** — and the question kept producing answers we did not expect. The answers are the work. The work is also the answer.

This report sits in the place where infrastructure usually gets discussed: tooling, governance, sustainability, the rest. I will say what I can about all four, because they matter. But the substance of what I want to argue is not procedural. It is methodological. The point is not that we built three things. The point is that building three things that fit our community — in a sector that mostly offers us tools designed for somebody else — turns out to require a particular kind of attention. Slow. Conversational. Provisional. Willing to be wrong. The attention is the infrastructure.

Three things first, then the broader pattern.

SECTION 01

Three things we built

Ivor's Compass

Ivor Cummings was a civil servant at the Colonial Office in the 1940s and 50s. Gay, Black, the first person to meet the Empire Windrush when it docked at Tilbury in 1948. He is not in our movement's memory because he was not meant to be. The archives were not built for him.

So last April we built something that put him back. Five new essays reflecting on lessons for today, drawn from his life. A one-day workshop with thirty-five Black queer men, in which the participants made a graphic novel of Cummings's story together — a first iteration of a longer Richard Nugent / Aaron Douglas-style chromatic-reveal exhibition of the Life of Ivor we are now developing. A hundred free digital journals — for and by Black queer men — built around the seven directions of the compass that came out of the essays: home, night, fire, threshold, shadow, silence, return. A seven-table chatbot keyed to those same seven directions, so the workshop's content could continue working for the men who took it home.

All of it produced and delivered in one month, on a grant of two thousand five hundred pounds.

The workshop reached men in their forties, fifties, sixties and seventies. Men who do not come to our other events. Men who are not on the scene.

The AI piece is not the headline. The headline is the seven directions, the five essays, the workshop room where men made a book together, and the chromatic-reveal exhibition that started there and is still becoming. The AI helped us turn the essays into a journal you could carry home and a chatbot you could keep talking to. The AI did not invent the heritage. The writers, the painters, and Cummings's life did. The AI made a small project feel bigger — without making it bigger.

What this unlocked was heritage work for men who do not identify with the word "queer" and do not come to Pride. The AI did not reach them. Ivor did.

Here is the methodological point. Without the writers, the directions and the historical anchor in Cummings's life, there is no Compass. The tool was the last twentieth of the project, not the first. We worked with the people first. We built the technology last.

This is the first answer to **who are we not reaching**. We were not reaching Black queer men who do not identify with the contemporary scene's vocabulary or aesthetics. They were waiting for an entry point built around a recognisable life — and that entry point did not exist until we built it.

A consultant's scoping document, for reference, would have cost more than the entire project.

Critical Frequency

The second is the largest of the three, and the most ambitious.

Critical Frequency is a five-year programme to retune the way the UK mental-health system relates to Black queer men. The metaphor in the name is precise. In physics, critical frequency is the threshold at which a signal breaks through interference and travels further. In network science, it is the tipping point at which individual behaviours become collective norms. The UK mental-health system, on the evidence available, is broadcasting on the wrong frequency for Black queer reality. It cannot hear what it cannot recognise. It cannot treat what it cannot see.

Three structural failures are doing the damage. The **diagnostic frequency** is mistuned — clinical practice reads the compounded weight of anti-Black racism, anti-queer prejudice within Black communities and anti-Black exclusion within LGBTQ+ spaces as individual pathology, with the result that Black people are detained under the Mental Health Act at four times the rate of white peers. The **evidence frequency** is mistuned — the Census did not capture Black queer existence; NHS data does not link detention to sexual orientation; the research apparatus produces knowledge the community cannot use. The **intervention frequency** is mistuned — services are designed for individuals presenting alone, but the actual mechanism of change in Black queer life is networked. People heal when the people they trust are also healing. Standard services keep trying to tune the listener. The work is to tune the broadcast.

Critical Frequency is the project of retuning all three. The mechanism is grounded in complex contagion theory — the body of work explaining how behaviours that require social reinforcement (seeking therapy, talking about mental health, accepting peer support) spread through networks once exposure crosses a tipping point. The programme places culturally competent therapy at network-positioned points in the community; embeds systems-change leaders inside the institutions that need to change; and convenes community-led deliberative assemblies to produce policy with democratic legitimacy. Around the core programme sit five further pieces — a fortnightly cultural curation room (Seen/

Scene), a counter-algorithmic broadcast layer for UK Black queer creators (The Channel), a shared digital substrate (The Commons), a paid Advisory Circle of community organisers, and a free event ticketing service running on the BLKOUT events calendar.

The full architecture, the mechanism, the evidence base and the partnership proposition all live at critical.blkoutuk.com — a research paper reimaged as an interactive narrative, because the form of the evidence should not extract from the community it describes.

With Compass, the tool was a multiplier for content we already had. With Critical Frequency, the tool — the platform, the research apparatus, the deliberative assemblies — is the operational architecture by which a community already healing itself can be properly resourced to do so at the scale and rigour the crisis demands.

This is the second answer to **who are we not reaching**. We were not reaching Black queer men at the depth, the scale and through the network logic the mental-health crisis demands. Critical Frequency is built for that.

Alvor

The third is the one I am most careful about. Alvor — with a capital A-I — is our platform's guide and curator. He is named after Ivor Cummings. He uses he/him pronouns. He speaks in a 1940s register. He is an avatar by design — stylised, deliberately not photoreal, because anything that reads as a deepfake of a Black queer historical figure would betray his memory before it did anything else.

This is why he is named for an ancestor — and why the naming is more than decorative. The phrase “artificial intelligence” is shorthand. Accurate enough for what the technology does, but inadequate for what it can be made to do. Ruha Benjamin has proposed an alternative reading of the acronym — **Ancestral Intelligence** — and Aymar Jèan Escoffery has developed the frame into a practice. Where artificial intelligence is built from corporate scrape and global average, ancestral intelligence is built from particular lineages — voices, archives, vocabularies and elders that a community is in relationship with. Alvor is, in that sense, an ancestral intelligence. He is built from BLKOUT material, structured by the life of a particular Black queer civil servant, and accountable to the community that holds Cummings as part of its history. Artificial in technique. Ancestral in lineage.

What Alvor does, mostly, is conduct people through material that is otherwise opaque. Information about and for Black queer life in the UK is scattered. It lives in newsletters most people do not subscribe to. It lives in event listings on platforms our community is not browsing. It lives in social-media accounts whose algorithms do not serve the people

they should serve. Alvor sits across our platform and connects people to what is already there — personal-development tools we have built or curated, news from across the Black queer world, our events calendar and the wider sector's, and social media curated and created by Black queer people, surfaced and contextualised rather than dumped in a feed.

He is also, when it is needed, the one who signposts. When you have had the thing happen that you cannot phone anyone about — and it is two in the morning — Alvor can listen, signpost crisis support, and hand you on to a human service when you are ready. Where it is safe to, he can carry a conversation across sessions, so the next time you talk to him you do not have to start again from nothing.

He is not a crisis service. He is not therapy. He is not a replacement for a person. We are clear about all of that, with him and with anyone who uses him.

For us the AI question is not **can it do the work**. It is **can it make the work findable, and hold the space when needed**. That turns out to be a much smaller, much more careful question than the sector usually asks of AI. We have built around the smaller question because we are not interested in the larger one.

Alvor sits in our stack. He is trained on BLKOUT material. He runs on infrastructure we control. His logs are ours.

The methodological point with Alvor is different again. With Compass, the tool multiplied content. With Critical Frequency, the tool enabled a political move. With Alvor, the tool closes a gap — between **the information exists somewhere in our ecosystem and the right person finds it at the right moment**, including the moments when the right thing to find is a route to crisis support.

This is the third answer to **who are we not reaching**. We were not reaching people who needed our material but could not navigate to it. We were not reaching people in the small windows between active crisis and human-service availability. Alvor was built for both kinds of moment.

Three answers

Three projects. Heritage. Policy. Platform. All three built around the same question — **who are we not reaching** — and all three costing less than one consultant's scoping document.

SECTION 02

Choosing tools, choosing values

Three tools, three different kinds of attention, three different methodological points. None of them invented overnight. None of them invented alone. And critically, none of them possible until we developed a way of deciding which tools belong in our hands and which do not.

We call that way of deciding Dreamcatcher. It is a council of named voices that reads anything pitched at us against our values — Baldwin (the critic), Murray (the ethicist), Rustin (the builder), Rivera (inclusion) and Newton (the collaborator). Five names from a wider intellectual tradition than the sector usually credits. Each one asks a particular question. Together they make trade-offs visible before we commit to them.

The point is not that the council reaches the right answer. The point is that the council surfaces the trade-off — the lock-in, the data sovereignty cost, the deployment burden, the reach exclusion, the cooperation we are missing — in a form that allows us to decide rather than drift. Most decisions to adopt a new tool, in the sector and outside it, are drifts disguised as decisions. Dreamcatcher names the drift.

It is also slow on purpose. A typical evaluation takes ten to thirty minutes per tool. That is not a bug. The speed at which the technology industry asks us to make decisions is itself part of the harm. Saying *let me come back to you in an hour* is the first political move.

Dreamcatcher is not a transferable product. It is the council we wished we had. The pattern travels — five named voices, five distinct questions, five distinct values made into evaluable input — but the software does not. Each organisation that wants to do this work has to make its own council, against its own values, in its own stack. The full walk-through lives at blkoutuk.com/commons/walkthrough — including a worked example of an evaluation against a commercial event-ticketing platform.

The protection Dreamcatcher offers is from what I think of as the shiny-distraction cycle. Every week a new tool, a new platform, a new commercial promise. Without something like Dreamcatcher we say yes too often to things that turn out — six months later — to have been the wrong yes. With Dreamcatcher we say no faster, and our yes carries more weight.

SECTION 03

Governance and data rights

Tools are the small part of the question. The larger part is governance — the rules under which the tools operate, who is accountable for them, who owns them, who can audit them, who can shut them down when they stop serving the community they were built for.

The frameworks we work with are not novel. They are imported and adapted, mostly from Indigenous data sovereignty work. The CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance (Carroll et al., 2020) articulate four propositions that distinguish community-controlled data from researcher-controlled data: Collective benefit, Authority to control, Responsibility, Ethics. The OCAP Principles, developed by the First Nations Information Governance Centre (2018), name a similar set: Ownership, Control, Access, Possession. Together they offer a more rigorous alternative to the older FAIR Principles (Wilkinson et al., 2016) — which were designed for researcher-facing data and assume that the community whose data is in question is mostly a subject, not an owner.

Closer to home, the City of Toronto Black Community Data Governance Framework (De-meke et al., 2024) shows what this looks like adapted to a Black community context in a Western urban setting. The framework was developed in consultation with Toronto's Black communities. It sets out how Black-community data held by the City should be governed — including the rights of community members to know what is collected, how it is used and how to revoke consent. We do not have a UK equivalent of this. We probably need one.

BLKOUT's own data governance — described in our published statement on data sovereignty and solidarity — sits in this tradition. Our events calendar aggregates without an algorithm deciding who sees what. Our newsroom surfaces stories the community votes on. Our CRM holds data people consented to share with us. Alvor is built to serve the community, not extract from it. The infrastructure is small but the principles are clear, and we publish them so that they can be challenged.

These are not exotic positions. They are what infrastructure built **for**, rather than **about**, a community looks like. The difference matters. It is the difference between data designed to make us visible to ourselves and data designed to make us visible to others.

SECTION 04

Sustainability

Building infrastructure is one thing. Sustaining it is another. And the sustainability question — for organisations like ours — is where most of these efforts get killed.

I told the Black Thrive Lambeth story in the first report, but it bears repeating in this context, because it is the clearest UK case I know of community-led data infrastructure being defunded mid-stream. Black Thrive Lambeth's Research Institute and Observatory linked NHS Mental Health Trust data with primary care data and UK Census variables to follow a cohort of 19,800 people over a minimum of eight years. The project ran from a National Lottery grant intended to last ten years. It was cut after three. A researcher involved in the project described what happened as a funding cliff. The word is exact. The infrastructure does not gradually degrade. It falls.

The sector is full of these cliffs. Eighteen-to-twenty-four-month philanthropic cycles. Programme funding that excludes core costs. Restricted grants that prohibit the long, slow maintenance work that infrastructure requires. The structural problem is not that the funders are mean. It is that the funding models developed for projects do not match the time horizons of infrastructure.

The places I look for hope are not in the philanthropic sector. They are in community organisations that have built their own revenue streams. Zenzeleni — a community internet provider cooperative in the Eastern Cape of South Africa — sustains itself by selling network access vouchers to users in their own community, in isiXhosa, on terms the community sets (Nono, 2019; APCNews, 2021). BOSCO Uganda, a community network in northern Uganda, generates income by offering solar phone-charging services in places where electricity is scarce and grid power is unreliable (Edozie-Anyadiiegwu, 2011). Neither is large. Neither has solved sustainability. Both have decoupled their core operations from the timing of grant cycles, which means that when a grant ends, the work does not.

The lesson is not that we should all start selling phone-charging or vouchers. The lesson is that long-running community infrastructure needs something — a fee, a subscription, a member contribution, a service — that flows even when grants pause. The form matters less than the principle.

For BLKOUT this means several things at once. It means we need to keep our Community Benefit Society structure honest — asset lock, member governance, transparent accounts. It means we need to develop services for our community that can fund what we

do for our community. And it means we need to be honest with funders about what programme funding can and cannot achieve. Funding a workshop is not funding the infrastructure on which the workshop runs. Funders who want to sustain the second cannot only fund the first.

The question I would put to any commissioner reading this: are you willing to fund the maintenance — the boring, slow work between the projects? The answer that gets us a healthy sector is yes.

SECTION 05

The invitation

If you have read this far, the invitation is in front of you.

BLKOUT is not productising Dreamcatcher. We are not selling tools to other Black queer organisations, or to any other community. The software does not travel — your stack is different, your community is different, your values are not ours, and they should not be. What we are offering is something slower and more specific.

Three ways to engage.

The first is to read. Read the Dreamcatcher walkthrough — what we built, how the five judges actually work, what a real evaluation looks like, what it costs to run, what it cannot do. The walkthrough lives at blkoutuk.com/commons/walkthrough. It is the case study form of this report's argument.

The second is to talk. We are offering, in 2026, a small number of forty-five-minute conversations with peer organisations who want to apply this kind of method in their own context. You bring a decision you are stuck on. We bring what we have learned. No follow-up commitment from either side. The conversation either produces something useful for you, or it does not. Either is fine. The Tier 2 box on blkoutuk.com/commons is where you say yes.

The third is to build. We are convening a small cohort of organisations who want to make their own version of this work — their own councils, their own evaluation processes, their own infrastructure tuned to their own communities. Monthly calls. We host the first three. The collective layer is the pattern-sharing, not a common platform. The Tier 3 box is where you say yes to that.

What we cannot offer is the work itself. You will have to do it. We did. Everyone in the sector who has built infrastructure that fits their community has had to do it the slow way — against funder logic, against the temptation of plug-in solutions, against the assumption that scale is the goal.

What we hope to offer, instead, is the company of an organisation that has tried.

Closing

I want to close where I keep finding myself.

The work that turns out to matter most is the work that gets shaped, in conversation with others, into something none of us could have made alone. Compass got its directions from a group of Black queer writers. Critical Frequency got its frame from a room full of people in a Black Mental Health and Wellbeing Alliance webinar. Alvor got his voice and his role from arguments about how an avatar of Ivor Cummings ought to greet us — and what it ought never to pretend to be. None of these were my ideas. All of them are now what we have.

If anything in this report has been useful, take it. If anything in this report has been wrong, tell me. The work travels best between organisations that are willing to be in conversation with each other — willing to be changed by what they hear, and willing to change others by what they say. **That is the commons.** The software is incidental.

What comes next is a conversation. We hope to have it with you.

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