

Mayor's new employment initiative to help young black men

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The Workplace Integration Network will focus specifically on helping young black men get a foot in London's construction and digital sectors

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YOUNG BLACK men are being given a helping hand by a new initiative from the mayor of London to get them out of unemployment and into the construction and digital industries.

The new initiative, which was launched yesterday at Tideway's Southwark site, aims to help improve the unemployment rates of young black men and break down barriers they face when seeking employment in the construction and digital industries.

At the launch, mayor of London Sadiq Khan said the employment rates for young black men across capital are not good enough.

"I don't accept that there aren't talented, entrepreneurial, skillful young black men in London. There are so many that I meet every day, they're not given the opportunity. It could be the education system let them down, it could be because of discrimination, it could be because they didn't realise these jobs are for them and we've got to give them the aspiration and the hope," Khan told *The Voice*.

The scheme – Workforce Integration Network – will focus initially on increasing the number of young black men working in London's construction and digital sectors before expanding to support Londoners from various backgrounds.

Beyond the traditional methods of supporting young people into employment, the scheme will encourage employers to appropriately signpost vacancies to black and minority ethnic (BAME) applicants and run campaigns to specifically target young black men.

Many of the difficulties that young black men face when seeking employment also correspond with the factors that contribute to them getting involved in criminal activity. Although the scheme is not an anti-youth crime initiative, it's hoped that it could have an impact on redirecting young people.

Khan told *The Voice*: "One of things that's clear when you visit bereaved families who've suffered violence or you go to estates and communities where there's been an increase in

serious violent crime is they tell you that the young people there have got no sense of vision, aspiration or hope.

“And when they see, in inverted commas, successful people, those successful people have become successful by criminality. And so they need to have hope and aspiration and ambition, they need to know there’s a career path, a way out, a lawful job they can achieve.”

Bola Abisogun, a chartered quantity surveyor and founder and executive director of UrbanIS, said that a lot of the young black men he’s worked with or come across in Hackney come from a background where gangs are prevalent and that most of them want to get out.

He said the obstacles for young black men trying to get into the construction industry contribute to pushing those escaping gangs and a life of crime back into the destructive lifestyle.



PICTURED: Bola Abisogun (left) and Jeremy Crook

“There is a real stigma about being black...Young black men – those words seem to resonate with delinquency, crime, un-usefulness, they’re derogatory their demeaning, they don’t inspire confidence, they don’t say or suggest: wow that’s a group I want to engage with,” Abisogun said.

Jeremy Crook, chief executive of the Black Training and Enterprise Group (BTEG), highlighted that one of the historic difficulties in improving the representation of black men in the construction industry is that recruitment has largely relied on word of mouth.

“That word of mouth doesn’t work when you’ve just got one ethnic group that dominate the sector,” he said.

Tideway, the company responsible for delivering the Thames Tideway Tunnel is working with City Hall to tackle underrepresentation of young black men in its organisation.

“Tideway have shown the way how it’s possible to be a thriving, flourishing business but also to help young black men get access to the industry,” Khan said.

He added: “People like The Voice have a role to play as well. I mean, your readership are the sort of people we want to reach for them to realise that actually jobs in construction and digital are booming in London, they’re jobs for life, the skills you get are skills that will stand you in good stead for the future.”

Basil Nkomo, Tideway’s digital media lead, spoke about how he faced barriers he didn’t even realise still existed until he sought employment in the construction industry.



PICTURED: Basil Nkomo, Tideway's digital media lead

He was often the only black male candidate at interviews for graduate roles in the sector and said that he had to work twice as hard.

“The fact that I have to work twice as hard is a barrier,” he said.

Nkomo has been working in the industry for two years but construction wasn't the 31-year-old's first choice because “the face of construction wasn't to me a young black male”.

He agreed with the need for more role models and is himself mentoring BAME young people.

The Workforce Integration Initiative will also be working with other employers and organisations such as Moving on Up, a partnership between The Trust for London, City Bridge Trust and BTEG.

Matthew Ryder, deputy mayor for social integration, social mobility and community engagement, also attended the launch and hosted a Q&A with Abisogun and representatives from Tideway and Moving on Up.

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