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THE COST OF BLACK EXCELLENCE™ · SECTOR
REPORT SERIES

Public Sector

What the Excellence Tax™ Costs Black Professionals in Public Service

156 participants · Civil service, local government, social work, social care, public services

4 countries · United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia

Phase One, 2025 · Natasha Williams, Founder · The Cost of Black Excellence™ Research Institute

The public sector is accountable to everyone. It is governed by equality legislation, monitored by oversight bodies, and expected more than any other employment context to model the values it enforces in law. For Black professionals working within it, the gap between that accountability and the daily reality of their working lives is one of the most documented failures of institutional promise in this study.

This report documents what 156 Black public sector professionals civil servants, local government workers, social workers, care managers, policy professionals told us about what professional participation actually costs.

What Is the Excellence Tax™?

The Excellence Tax™ is the mandatory, uncompensated burden of additional emotional labour, identity suppression, and personal cost that Black professionals pay simply to participate in predominantly white workplaces.

Organisations demand this labour and rarely acknowledge it, compensate for it, or take steps to reduce it. The word “tax” reflects reality precisely: payment is required simply for occupying professional space. Black professionals cannot opt out without forfeiting participation entirely.

THE PUBLIC SECTOR LENS

The public sector presents a specific paradox. These organisations are legally bound by equality duties. Many have diversity and inclusion strategies, mandatory unconscious bias training, and ethnic minority staff networks. And yet 83.3% of Black public sector professionals suppress their identity to succeed professionally. 57.1% experience microaggressions frequently. 92.9% have considered leaving to protect their wellbeing.

The compliance infrastructure exists. The conditions persist. Four Excellence Taxes explain why:

TAX	HOW IT SHOWS UP IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR
Diversity Theatre Burden	Black professionals are routinely assigned to represent diversity — in panels, forums, and communications — while structural conditions remain unchanged. The performance of inclusion is extracted from the people most harmed by its absence.
Proof Burden	Credentials and expertise are questioned in institutions that employ Black professionals as evidence of their own inclusive values. Being hired does not confer credibility. 64.1% always work harder than colleagues.
Voice Suppression	The sector’s formal complaints processes — designed to protect staff — are experienced as mechanisms that protect organisations. Speaking up about discrimination risks being labelled difficult, militant, or a performance management problem.

**Evidence
Stewardship**

Black public sector professionals document discrimination, maintain records, and build cases — because organisations with extensive equality policies still require impossible proof standards when harm is named.

The Numbers

156 Black public sector professionals across the UK, US, Canada and Australia. These figures hold consistently across civil service, local government, social work, and care services.

64.1%

always work harder than colleagues just to be seen as competent — the highest “always” rate of any sector in this study

86.5%

work harder than peers (always + often) to achieve baseline competence recognition

83.3%

suppress aspects of their identity to succeed professionally in institutions governed by equality duties

90.4%

have experienced microaggressions, bias or discrimination at work (Frequently + Occasionally)

57.1%

experience microaggressions frequently — daily or weekly — the highest frequency rate of any sector studied

59.6%

report severe or significant health impacts directly attributed to their work environment

92.9%

have considered leaving a role to protect their mental or emotional wellbeing

18.6%

have already left a public sector role specifically to protect their wellbeing

52.6%

have no access to culturally sensitive support — the highest no-support rate of any sector studied

The support gap is the defining public sector finding. 52.6% of Black public sector professionals have no access to culturally sensitive support — above every other sector. Organisations with mandatory wellbeing programmes and staff networks are leaving more than half their Black workforce without support that is fit for purpose.

Public Sector vs the Overall Study

How Black public sector professionals compare to the overall research average of 1,037 participants across all sectors.

METRIC	PUBLIC SECTOR	OVERALL	DIFFERENCE
Work harder always (not just A+O)	64.1%	60.7%	Highest of any sector
Microaggression frequency (frequent)	57.1%	46.7%	+10.4 pts ABOVE average
No culturally sensitive support	52.6%	48.5%	Highest of any sector
Identity suppression	83.3%	86.8%	Consistent with average
Severe / significant health impact	59.6%	63.2%	-3.6 pts below average
Already left a role	18.6%	23.1%	-4.5 pts below average

The lower exit rate does not indicate better conditions. It reflects higher structural barriers to exit — job security, pensions, and public service mission — that keep Black professionals in environments that are harming them for longer.

THE SENIORITY FINDING

Self-employed cohort shows the highest “always” rate

In the public sector, Senior/Manager level shows the highest formal “always work harder” rate at 67.2%. The self-employed cohort at 92.9% reflects professionals who left public sector employment — often after years of unsustainable conditions — and now work independently.

CAREER LEVEL	WORK HARDER “ALWAYS”	HEALTH SEV + SIG
Entry level (n=8)	50.0%	37.5%
Mid-level (n=55)	50.9%	58.2%
Senior / Manager (n=61)	67.2%	60.7%
Director / Executive (n=13)	69.2%	53.8%
Self-employed (n=14)	92.9%	64.3%

What the Body Carries

59.6% of Black public sector professionals report severe or significant health impacts. In a sector with formal health and safety obligations, mandatory staff wellbeing provisions, and occupational health services, this figure demands an institutional explanation — not a personal one.

SEVERITY	%	WHAT THIS MEANS
Severely impacted	18.6%	Health deterioration requiring medical attention
Significantly impacted	41.0%	Substantial effects on daily functioning and capacity
Somewhat impacted	28.8%	Noticeable effects on wellbeing
Minimally / not impacted	11.5%	

SYMPTOMS EXPERIENCED IN LAST 12 MONTHS

SYMPTOM	% REPORTING
Persistent fatigue or exhaustion	70.5%
Sleep disturbances / insomnia	63.5%
Burnout or emotional collapse	57.1%
Anxiety or panic attacks	45.5%
Muscle pain or tightness	45.5%
Digestive issues	41.7%
Tension headaches or migraines	41.0%
Depression or emotional numbness	35.9%

THE GENDER DIFFERENTIAL

GROUP	HEALTH SEV+SIG	SUPPRESS IDENTITY	WORK HARDER ALWAYS
Women (n=131, 84.0%)	61.1%	86.3%	64.9%
Men (n=25, 16.0%)	52.0%	68.0%	60.0%

“The Excellence Tax shows up as the pressure to always over-perform just to be seen as equal. It is the silent editing of my tone, my truth, and sometimes my identity to fit systems that were never built with me in mind. It is being expected to educate others about bias while enduring it in real time. It is smiling through.”

Mid-level · 45–54 · United Kingdom · Public Sector

I N T H E I R O W N W O R D S

Voices from the Research

156 Black public-sector professionals documented the cost of the Excellence Tax™ to them. These organisations monitor, regulate, and enforce equality for others. They are failing their own Black workforce.

P E R F O R M A N C E & P R O O F B U R D E N

“Being overly articulate, demonstrating reason with evidence and additional evidence and seeking additional buy-in to prove a point — all of which my male and non-POC counterparts do not need or demonstrate.”

Senior/Manager · 45–54 · United Kingdom

“I often sit at the table, but it feels tokenistic. I often question whether I add value to my role. This shows up every day — working twice as hard so no one can complain about my work.”

Senior/Manager · 45–54 · United Kingdom

I D E N T I T Y S U P P R E S S I O N

“I just think I cannot be my authentic self. And don’t get me wrong — they really would not want to see my whole authentic self. But even a part of it is hard to show. The way it shows up is by masking, which is exhausting.”

Senior/Manager · 45–54 · United Kingdom

“I cannot wear my natural curly hair. I have to suppress my anger in the face of disrespect. I end up bursting in anger later — dysregulated emotions from holding it all in.”

Senior/Manager · 35–44 · Canada

THE COST OF SPEAKING UP

“When I got my first senior management role, my predecessor felt comfortable to share on the shop floor that I only got the job because I was Black. This led to burnout and extreme stress to prove I was good enough for the role and not a token pick.”

Self-employed · 45–54 · United Kingdom

“I design projects. When they are at their best stage, they are taken and given to a white person. Instead of being the project owner, I become a helper. My contribution is not acknowledged, but I am expected to acknowledge others’ contributions even when they made a very small and less valuable one.”

Senior/Manager · 55–64 · United Kingdom

WHAT YOU WISH PEOPLE UNDERSTOOD

“We are not objects they can use to pat themselves on the back, gaslighting themselves into believing they are 'progressive' and 'inclusive', all the while mistreating and disrespecting us in the background. They are happy as long as they have reached their DEI KPIs.”

Senior/Manager · 35–44 · Canada

“That hiring Black professionals is not enough. They must be supported, backed up, and mentored to advance. Without management support that defends them against racism, being hired in a sea of conscious or unconscious bias is like being thrown to the wolves.”

Director/Executive · 55–64 · United States

What Your Exit Interviews Miss

The public sector’s 18.6% exit rate is below the overall study average. This is not evidence of better conditions. It reflects structural barriers to exit: job security, pensions, length-of-service protections, and public service mission that keep Black professionals in harmful environments longer.

The 92.9% consideration rate tells a different story. Nearly every Black public sector professional in this study has considered leaving to protect their wellbeing. Most have not left yet.



LEAVING CONSIDERATION DETAIL

RESPONSE	% OF PUBLIC SECTOR PARTICIPANTS
A few times	26.9%
Frequently	26.3%
Already left	18.6%
Once	11.5%
Yes (considered)	9.6%
Never	5.1%
No	1.9%

26.3% consider leaving frequently, the highest “frequency” rate of any sector. The public sector is not retaining Black professionals under good conditions. It is retaining them through structural lock-in while the consideration rate signals a workforce on the edge.

“Being dismissed, punished for speaking truth to power. I’m emotionally and mentally exhausted, now on long-term sick leave with no intention to return. Using this time to recover and plan my exit.”

Mid-level · 45–54 · United Kingdom · Public Sector

What This Costs Public Sector Organisations

The Excellence Tax™ is a cost to public money. NHS Trusts, local councils, government departments, and public bodies absorb the financial consequences every year, funded by taxpayers, without measuring, naming, or addressing the conditions generating it.

<h2>£61,140</h2> <p>estimated Excellence Tax™ cost per Black public sector professional, per year</p>	<h2>£6.1M</h2> <p>annual cost for every 100 Black public sector professionals employed</p>
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COST COMPONENT	WHAT DRIVES IT	ANNUAL COST (100 STAFF)
Excess attrition (18.6% vs 13.3%)	Black professionals leaving despite pension and security incentives — driven entirely by wellbeing, not career strategy	£2,055,375
Presenteeism (59.6% health impact)	Public servants working through anxiety, insomnia and burnout — affecting service delivery and decision quality	£913,000+
Diversity labour extraction	Black professionals providing unpaid EDI representation, staff network leadership, and institutional consulting without recognition	£250,000
Voice suppression loss	Policy insights and service knowledge withheld by the 83.3% suppressing identity in institutions whose decisions affect the public	£750,000

Pipeline destruction	Black professionals absent from senior leadership in organisations legally required to reflect the communities they serve	£500,000
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These are public funds. Every pound spent sustaining the conditions documented in this report is a pound not spent on public services.

Three Requirements for Public Sector Organisations

Public sector organisations already have the legal frameworks, the reporting obligations, and the stated commitments to equality. What is missing is the measurement of the specific conditions these commitments are failing to address, and the accountability to change them.

01

Extend equality reporting to include Excellence Tax™ indicators — not just outcome data

Public sector equality duties require organisations to report on race equality outcomes: pay gaps, appointment rates, promotion rates. They do not require measurement of the daily conditions producing those outcomes — identity suppression, psychological safety, the performance burden. Every public body should be required to commission Excellence Tax™ assessment, with findings reported to boards, scrutiny panels, and published externally.

02

End the extraction of unpaid diversity labour and fund it properly

Black professionals in the public sector lead staff networks, sit on diversity panels, and absorb the diversity expectations of their organisations without formal timetable allocation, job description recognition, or pay. Every public sector organisation should audit the informal diversity labour performed by Black staff, formalise it within role descriptions, protect time for it, and compensate it.

03

Replace generic EAP provision with culturally competent support as a standard entitlement

52.6% of Black public sector professionals have no access to culturally sensitive support — the highest rate of any sector. Generic Employee Assistance Programmes do not address racial trauma or the specific experience of being a Black professional in a predominantly white institutional environment. Every public sector organisation should establish

funded access to Black therapists and culturally aware coaches as a standard staff entitlement.

“There is still a denial that racism exists. Even when white leaders acknowledge racism they do very little to redress the balance. I am in the North of England — very few Global Majority senior leaders in the public sector. The problem is structural and the solutions need to be structural too.”

Senior/Manager · 35–44 · United Kingdom · Public Sector

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

Natasha Williams

Natasha spent thirteen years as a Managing Director in building surveying and property — a sector where Black professionals remain severely underrepresented. She subsequently retrained as a trauma-informed coach, holds a Level 7 postgraduate Diploma in Business and Organisational Psychology, and founded The Cost of Black Excellence™ Research Institute to create the evidence base that organisations have consistently refused to collect themselves.

She delivers keynote presentations, executive briefings, and leadership sessions that translate this research into what organisations need to understand and act on. Phase Two of the research is underway, targeting 2,000 voices.

THREE WAYS TO TAKE THIS FURTHER

01

Book a Briefing

A 30-minute conversation to explore what the research means for your organisation and whether a keynote, executive briefing, or leadership session makes sense.

calendly.com/blackexcellenceresearch/meetings-with-natasha

02

Request the Full Report

The complete research report — 1,037 Voices — includes the full framework, all fifteen taxes, demographic analysis, all sector breakdowns, and organisational recommendations.

research@costofblackexcellence.com

03

Share With Leadership

If this report raises questions your senior leadership or board need to be asking, please pass it on. The research exists for the people with the power to act on it.

costofblackexcellence.com

The Excellence Tax™ operates in the gap between what organisations claim and what Black professionals experience.

This research closes that gap.

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