

Over two years on from the formation of the British Fashion Council's DEI Committee, where are they now?

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Over two years on from the formation of the British Fashion Council's DEI committee, Fashion Minority Report speaks to Caroline Rush, Jamie Gill, Daniel Peters, Bernie Yates, Yvie Hutton & Katie Rawle on where it all began, what has changed and where the future lies.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder and the subsequent vastly increased visibility and development of the BLM movement, light was shone on the environment of systemic racism and bias in the fashion industry. As expected, heads turned to the British Fashion Council about its lack of support for marginalised talent. Daniel Peters, DEI&I committee member, quoted that there was "unrest from the fashion community [too] in understanding what the Fashion Council were doing". The committee was established in response to this, with its members volunteering their services, network and expertise: "The committee addresses four key work streams: education; business policy; talent identification and mentoring, and communications";

explained Caroline Rush, CEO of the British Fashion Council. Katie Rawle & Yvie Hutton both work dual roles within the BFC and the DEI&I committee; they were quick to identify that there were groups who have systemically been left out of the diversity conversation — "we have to be honest that there were still people who hadn't been brought along [and] there's loads more work to do" explained Rawle.

It can be easy to presume that prior to the formation of a named DEI&I committee, nothing was being done to help the cause, though like many other internal projects; *The Halo Code* and supporting the *Samuel Ross Black British Artist Grant Programme*, the *National Saturday Club*, has been in motion for over ten years. This project

gives 13–16 year olds [across the UK] the opportunity to study extra subjects for free at their local university, college or cultural institution — helping fill knowledge gaps during formative education years. The percentage of young people engaging in the programme from widening participation backgrounds [students from underrepresented groups] has increased from 46% in 2018 to 72% in 2021, as reported by the NSC.

These projects are particularly significant for those from ethnic minority backgrounds and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, where young people may not have the support needed to make the decision to bypass traditional professional jobs for a role in the creative industry, particularly for those outside of London. "The decentralisation of the fashion sector within London, [is something] that the BFC needs to address more," says Bernie Yates, DEI&I committee member. Support is a buzzword that often arises in conversation with the committee, particularly in relation to early career support through the BFC's scholarships and grant giving. Though these have historically been offered, the committee pinpointed that the beneficiaries were not appropriately supported for the particular reasons that the monies were being awarded. On the flip side, the BFC made moves in ensuring these designer initiatives were firstly, reaching as many people as possible — and secondly [as clarified by Hutton] that the panels during the selection process were "diverse and representative of the consumer".

Katie Rawle explained that the ultimate goal is inclusion at all levels, "for the people at the top of the industry to be those who have come through these kinds of schemes, programmes and support". The same goal is echoed by the whole committee, that the day that DEI&I is no longer a named 'project' or 'committee' and instead an inbuilt, unspoken commitment of the industry, is the day their job is done. Bernie Yates, having worked on projects for decades prior to the formation of the

committee, explained "instead of bringing in people to run [DEI&I] teams, [they need to be] put somewhere where they can actually do the job that they're really good at, as opposed to being here talking about DEI&I".

In the digital age, data is king. The BFC have been working with the BBC *50:50 The Equality Project* team since 2021 to understand the racial, gender, disability and socio-economic make-up of the fashion industry, and then feed the data back to brands to try to encourage change.

Yvie Hutton has been involved in this data collection at British fashion's main event, *London Fashion Week* — though this strategy is being re-worked

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due to limitations. Even actions like this require senior commitment, as confirmed by Gill " [we need] c-suite buy-in to really understand 'where are we now?' And where can we move to?" MBS group reported that only 29% of businesses in the industry have data on the diversity of their organisation "for companies that have 250 employees and upwards, they have to report on their gender and payments. But we don't have something like that around ethnicity in the UK", says Daniel Peters.

Like much else in life, the first step in solving any problem, is admitting and recognising that there is one. The British Fashion Council and the DEI&I committee members have been instrumental in vocalising and striving towards finding a solution, and will continue to do so, but they can't act alone. However, the onus is still on the biggest players in the industry to take accountability, and put pressure on those who don't



Photo by Bernice Watson, British Fashion Council, London Fashion Week, February 2022