

Talent 25 Research Programme Brief

## Strengthening engagement: A road map for early years creative and cultural participation

25-year creative talent plan – a Leicester city pilot study



## Introduction: Talent 25 longitudinal study – an overview

Talent 25 is a 25-year longitudinal intervention study, launched in Leicester in 2019, that explores the impact of creative and cultural engagement from the earliest years of childhood.

- Aim: To understand how early cultural participation can shape children’s development, wellbeing, and long-term opportunities.
- Approach: 440 children and their families were recruited across 12 cohorts in the pilot phase (2019-2023). Families participated in structured creative programmes and cultural events, supported by community artists and facilitators.
- Focus: The study pays particular attention to under-served communities, where social, economic, and environmental inequalities often limit access to cultural opportunities.
- Methods: Talent 25 uses a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative data with qualitative insights from families and practitioners.
- Theoretical framework: Underpinned by the theoretical domains framework, ecological systems theory, and models of community engagement, with a comprehensive theory of change guiding expected outcomes.
- Outcomes: The study aims to deliver a scalable model for increasing cultural participation, with the long-term ambition that all young people become:
  - i. Creatively and culturally engaged citizens, and/or
  - ii. Supported to achieve their potential as creative practitioners.

Talent 25 is the first known longitudinal study of its kind. Its ambition is to offer robust evidence on how to design, deliver, and sustain creative opportunities for children and families, particularly those in under-served communities. At a time when children and families face widening inequalities in accessing cultural opportunities, at different stages of the study phases, Talent 25 aims to provide timely evidence of what works to close those gaps, that can be adopted immediately by government, local authorities, and community partners to deliver fairer outcomes.

The first cohort of families joined Talent 25 in September 2019, with the final cohort (cohort 12) recruited in October 2023. In total, 440 children aged 3-12 months and their parents/carers from across Leicester have consented to take part. The cohort is evenly split by gender, with children currently ranging in age from one to six years. Talent 25 has engaged families from 34 nationalities, speaking 42 languages, reflecting the city’s rich diversity and strengthening the study with multiple cultural perspectives. This brief draws on evidence gathered between 2019 and 2023, providing insights from early years families on the benefits and challenges of creative and cultural participation.



## Key findings: A road map for early years creative and cultural participation

Early years families from less-engaged communities continue to face significant barriers to accessing arts and cultural activities. These include lack of awareness, affordability, accessibility, and wider socio-economic challenges. Partnerships with statutory, non-statutory, and voluntary organisations – including children’s services, the NHS, local authorities, schools, and community groups – have proven essential in reaching these families and understanding the obstacles they face.

Talent 25 has developed a five-point road map to strengthen engagement and enhance participation. This framework offers practical actions for policy-makers, practitioners, and cultural organisations to ensure that children from under-represented backgrounds can access high-quality creative opportunities from the earliest years.



## The five-point road map

- 1. Conduct outreach and raise awareness**
  - Targeted campaigns to raise awareness of opportunities.
  - Clear communication of the developmental benefits of early years creativity.
  - Tailored activities that resonate with family interests and needs.
- 2. Establish meaningful partnerships**
  - Collaborate with schools, social services, healthcare, community, and voluntary groups.
  - Develop seamless referral pathways into creative and cultural activities.
  - Maintain strong relationships to ensure sustainability.
- 3. Design inclusive programme structures**
  - Address financial, transport, and time-related barriers.
  - Provide free or affordable options and flexible scheduling.
  - Deliver activities in convenient, trusted community locations.
- 4. Engage and support families**
  - Offer guidance, resources, and accessible information.
  - Provide additional support in areas such as transport or childcare.
  - Maintain dedicated staff and clear communication channels.
- 5. Monitor and evaluate engagement**
  - Track attendance, feedback, and outcomes.
  - Use data to adapt provision and improve inclusivity.
  - Share learning across sectors to inform policy and practice.

By embedding these five approaches, it is possible to recruit, engage, and sustain the participation of less-engaged families. This road map provides a practical framework for creating inclusive, accessible programmes that support children’s development, strengthen families, and contribute to reducing inequalities in cultural participation.

## Key messages

- Partnerships with statutory, voluntary, and community organisations are essential to reaching under-served families.
- Families face multiple barriers to participation – cost, transport, lack of awareness, and time pressures.
- A practical five-point road map can enhance participation: outreach, partnerships, inclusive design, family support, and evaluation.
- Consistent, accessible, and family-centred provision leads to sustained engagement and stronger outcomes.
- Embedding cultural participation in early years policy can help reduce inequalities and support holistic child development.

## Policy implications

- Adopt the road map: Policy-makers and cultural organisations should embed this five-point approach into strategies for early years engagement.
- Resource community partnerships: Fund and sustain partnerships between statutory services, schools, and local cultural providers to reach under-served families.
- Invest in inclusivity: Provide targeted funding to cover costs associated with access and participation for families facing economic disadvantage.
- Embed monitoring and evaluation: Ensure that participation data informs continuous improvement and policy development.
- Prioritise sustainability: Support long-term programmes that build trust with families rather than short-term, one-off interventions.

## Policy and practice relevance

The findings and recommendations from Talent 25 will provide timely evidence to inform national priorities across education, health, and culture. They are directly relevant to government departments, including the Department for Education (DfE), the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), as well as national bodies such as the NHS (children and young people's services) and Ofsted. The study also aligns with statutory frameworks and guidance, including Working Together to Safeguard Children, the Children Act, and early years and childcare policies and regulations. Beyond statutory bodies, the findings will support early years providers, creative and cultural organisations, and community and voluntary groups working with children and families. At international level, the insights are also of interest to organisations such as the World Health Organisation's Child and Adolescent Health and Development Unit. Locally, they will help children's services and local authorities shape strategies that promote equitable access to creative and cultural opportunities for children and families.



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