

Talent 25 Research Programme Brief

Pathways to Trust: Building sustainable partnerships with under-served communities

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 pathways to trust building with diverse communities.

Key findings: Pathways to trust: Building sustainable partnerships with under-served communities

Building trust with under-served communities is essential for creating meaningful, sustainable change. The Talent 25 programme has developed a framework of approaches that moves beyond consultation towards genuine partnership. These methods can be applied across education, health, cultural, and community sectors to strengthen relationships and improve equity of access.

Community profiling

- Community profiling (Hawtin et al., 1994) offers a structured way to understand the needs and resources of a population, undertaken with the community’s active involvement.
- In Leicester, profiling using indices of multiple deprivation (IMD) identified low-income and minority-background communities.
- Key local assets (libraries, GP surgeries, voluntary organisations, community centres) were mapped as entry points for engagement.
- User-friendly, plain-language information sheets explained the programme’s objectives, benefits, and expectations – helping families to make informed choices.

Inform approach

Transparency is critical for trust. Talent 25 ensured parents/carers understood the programme and its potential impact through:

- Social media and community radio
- Working with community gatekeepers and organisations
- Attendance at community events
- Flyers, posters, and leaflets in local facilities
- Accessible, plain-language information materials

Engage approach

Engagement focused on listening to barriers and co-identifying solutions. Examples included:

- Providing free local activities and transport support
- Assisting with digital access (such as email set-up)
- Offering refreshments to reduce participation costs
- Providing in-person options for families less comfortable with technology
- Respecting confidentiality where families wished to limit wider disclosure

This approach fostered sustained dialogue and helped build trust through responsiveness.

Co-design approach

Engagement moved beyond participation to co-design, with families shaping programme activities and feedback mechanisms. Data collection and creative sessions were adapted to reflect parents' lived experiences, ensuring their perspectives were central to programme development (Carrol & Nortoft, 2022; NHS England, 2023; Ochieng et al., 2021).

Co-production approach

Still developing within Talent 25, co-production establishes equal partnerships between families and programme teams. The family forum of 12 parents is a first step in embedding parents' voices into governance and decision-making. Co-production recognises the expertise of lived experience and builds shared ownership of outcomes (Oliver et al., 2022).

Asset-based community development (ABCD)

- ABCD (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) shifts focus from community 'deficits' to strengths.
- Talent 25 used this model to identify and leverage existing resources, build partnerships with key stakeholders, and promote empowerment.
- This approach aligns with the national standards for community engagement (2016), ensuring communities are active partners, not passive recipients.

Together, these approaches demonstrate that building trust with under-served communities is not a one-off exercise but a process of sustained, reciprocal relationships. By progressing from informing and engaging towards co-design and co-production, organisations can create partnerships that are credible, inclusive, and sustainable.

Key messages

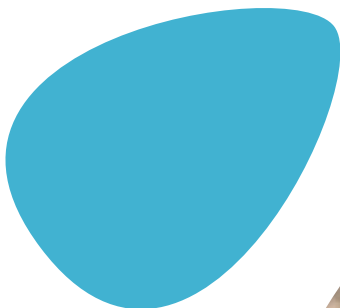
- Building trust with under-served communities requires sustained, two-way relationships – not one-off consultations.
- Community profiling is an essential first step for identifying needs, resources, and trusted entry points.
- Transparent communication through trusted channels (community radio, gatekeepers, plain-language materials) enables families to make informed choices.
- Practical enablers (transport, refreshments, digital support, confidentiality) break down barriers and build credibility.
- Co-design ensures families' lived experiences shape programmes; co-production embeds their voices in governance and decision-making.
- Asset-based community development re-frames communities as resourceful and resilient, shifting the focus from deficits to strengths.
- Progression from inform ► engage ► co-design ► co-production creates partnerships that are inclusive, equitable, and sustainable.

Policy implications

- Embed trust-building in policy: Recognise relationship-building as a core outcome in cultural, health, and education strategies, not an optional activity.
- Invest in community profiling: Fund localised approaches to identify under-served groups and the assets that can support engagement.
- Support transparent outreach: Resource communication through trusted, culturally relevant channels to reduce misinformation and increase accessibility.
- Remove practical barriers: Provide funding for transport, childcare, refreshments, and digital inclusion to enable equitable participation.
- Strengthen co-production: Establish formal mechanisms (such as family forums and advisory groups) to embed lived experience into governance and programme design.
- Adopt asset-based approaches: Re-frame policy and practice to build on community strengths, avoiding deficit-based narratives.
- Plan for sustainability: Prioritise long-term partnerships over short-term projects to ensure lasting trust and equitable outcomes.

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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