

Talent 25 Research Programme Brief

Strengthening the early years creative workforce

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



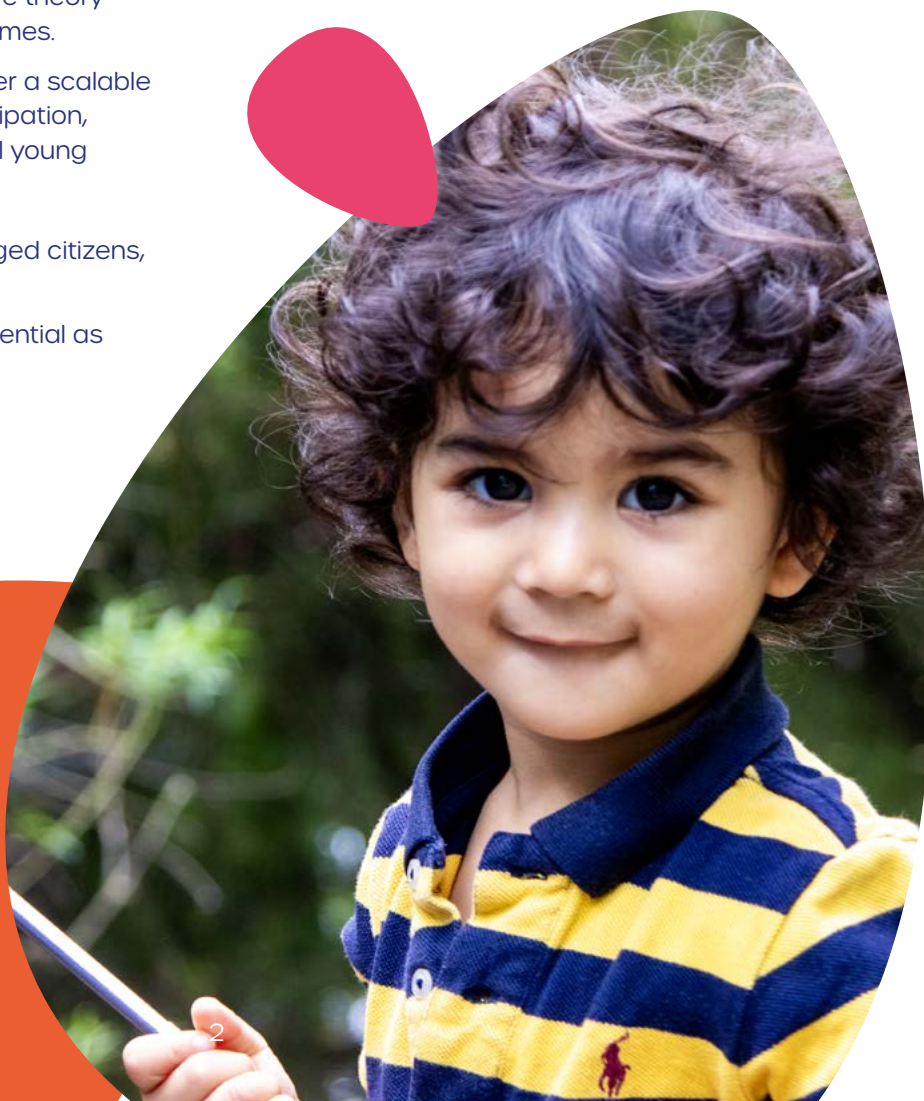
Introduction: Talent 25 longitudinal study – an overview

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 programme and creative practitioners.



Key findings: Strengthening the early years creative workforce

Creative practitioners play a vital role in inspiring children and families, supporting early learning, and embedding creativity into everyday life. Yet within the cultural sector there is no agreed definition of what constitutes an early years creative practitioner, nor a clear framework of qualifications and skills. This lack of consistency makes it difficult to ensure high-quality provision, develop the workforce, and support sustainability. Talent 25 findings suggest that building a competency framework for early years creative practitioners, co-designed with practitioners, families, and academic institutions, would help to establish clear standards, support professional development, and ensure inclusive, child-centred delivery. The findings to date include:

Role definition and status

- Early years creative practitioners are not formally defined within the cultural sector; most are self-employed and self-define their role.
- Employment patterns mirror wider cultural sector precarity, raising challenges for workforce stability and sustainability.

Skills and knowledge gaps

- Practitioners highlight the need to understand child development, family engagement, safeguarding, and inclusive practice.
- Parents and practitioners emphasise the importance of developmental knowledge to design effective programmes.

Professional development needs

- Experiential learning, reflection, and collaboration enhance practitioners' skills, confidence, and creativity.
- Networks and mentoring support ongoing learning and the exchange of effective practice.

Towards a learning set: Potential areas for a competency framework include:

- Early years child development (0-5 years)
- Safeguarding, GDPR, confidentiality
- Partnership and multi-agency working
- Cultural competence and engaging diverse families
- Creativity and child-centred pedagogy
- Creating safe and nurturing environments
- Upholding children's rights (with reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child)
- Reflective practice and peer learning

Early years creative practitioners are central to delivering meaningful, high-quality cultural experiences for families. However, the absence of a clear definition, consistent standards, and structured professional development limits their effectiveness and sustainability. A national competency framework, developed in partnership with practitioners, families, and cultural organisations, would provide clarity, strengthen the workforce, and ensure creative opportunities meet the holistic needs of children and families.





Key messages

- Early years creative practitioners inspire children and families, but lack a defined role and recognised standards.
- Workforce precarity mirrors wider trends in the cultural sector, with most practitioners self-employed and self-defining.
- Skills and knowledge in child development, safeguarding, inclusivity, and family engagement are critical but inconsistently supported.
- Experiential learning, reflection, and collaboration strengthen practice and should be embedded in workforce development.
- A core competency framework would provide consistency, strengthen professional identity, and improve quality of delivery.

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.



Policy implications

- Develop a national competency framework for early years creative practitioners, co-designed with practitioners, families, and academic partners.
- Support workforce development through investment in training, mentoring, and peer learning opportunities.
- Recognise and resource creative practitioners as a distinct part of the early years and cultural workforce.
- Ensure inclusive practice by embedding cultural competence, safeguarding, and child-centred approaches in professional standards.
- Stabilise the workforce by addressing precarity and supporting sustainable employment models within the cultural sector.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the parents and carers participating in Talent 25, whose contributions have been central to shaping our understanding of how to engage under-served families in creative and cultural activities.

We also thank Arts Council England (ACE) and De Montfort University (DMU) for funding the pilot phase of this ground-breaking longitudinal study. Our appreciation extends to the Talent 25 senior management team, the cultural advisory group, and colleagues across DMU and ACE for their guidance and support.

Talent 25 Research Programme Team

Professor Bertha Ochieng

Principal Investigator

Christopher Owens

Programme Manager

Madeeha Malamji

Programme Assistant & Finance Coordinator

Rebecca Ochieng

Research Assistant

Olga Tyson

Research Assistant

Ruichao Wang

Research Assistant

Philippa Steel

Creative and Cultural Development Officer

Josse Lucas

Participant Engagement Coordinator

Talent 25 Research Advisory Group

Professor Kay De Vries

Professor Brian Brown

Dr Simi Akintoye

Dr Mark Crossley

Dr Abiodun Egbetokun

Dr Rachel Higdon

Melanie Knott

Dr Indrani Lahiri

Dr Adebowale Owoseni

Professor Tania Hart

Jessica Tickell (ACE)

Andrew Mowlah (ACE)

Talent 25 Programme – Executive Steering Group

Richard Russell, Arts Council England

Rebecca Blackman, Arts Council England

Professor Simon Oldroyd, De Montfort University

Professor Mike Kagioglou, De Montfort University

Further information

[Click here to read further reports from Talent 25](#)



For more information please contact:

Professor Bertha Ochieng

Talent 25 Principal Investigator

Faculty of Health & Life Sciences

De Montfort University

Edith Murphy House

The Gateway

Leicester LE1 9BH

☎ 07970 743876

✉ creativetalent25@dmu.ac.uk

🖱 talent25.org.uk

✂ @DMUtalent25

📘 @Talent25

📷 @talent25DMU

This project is funded by Arts Council England and De Montfort University

Copyright for all images and content in this report belongs to De Montfort University

Citing this report:

Ochieng, B. (2025) *Talent 25 Research Brief 05: Strengthening the early years creative workforce*. UK, Leicester, De Montfort University.

engagement. UK, Leicester, De Montfort University.

Talent 25 Research Programme Brief 05

TALENT25 



Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND