

Talent 25 Research Programme Overview

Understanding the impact of creative engagement from the early years

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



Introduction

Talent 25 is a 25-year study examining how sustained access to creative and cultural opportunities from the early years influences children's development, long-term engagement and a range of outcomes that emerge over time. The programme pilots a targeted action-research approach with families in Leicester, co-designing activities that are meaningful, regular, and accessible. By working with families, practitioners, and cultural organisations, Talent 25 is generating evidence on what supports wider participation, reduces inequalities, and fosters both lifelong engagement in cultural activities and potential pathways into the creative industries. The study is funded by Arts Council England and De Montfort University.

Talent 25 at a glance

Type:

25-year longitudinal study and action-research programme

Location:

Leicester, UK

Start:

September 2019

Participants:

440 children and their families; participants recruited across 34 nationalities, speaking 42 languages; balanced by gender

Design:

Mixed methods, Theory of Change, staggered-entry cohorts, co-designed interventions

Current phase:

Completion of first four-year action-research cycle with ongoing longitudinal follow-up

Key messages

- Early engagement matters: Participation in creative and cultural activities from the early years can shape children's development and wellbeing.
- Equity focus: Talent 25 presents a model to engage under-served communities experiencing multiple barriers to participate in creative and cultural activities
- Creativity as a right: Embed creativity within early childhood and as part of core social provision alongside health and education – not a bolt-on, but as a right for every child.
- Workforce implications: Findings highlight the need for a competency framework and training pathways for early years creative practitioners.
- Global first: To our knowledge, this is the first longitudinal study worldwide to follow children's creative journeys over 25 years.
- Evidence for change: The study's findings aim to inform local and national cultural policy at different stages of the programme.

Why longitudinal?

A longitudinal design allows Talent 25 to capture how creative participation evolves from the early years, across different stages of childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. This approach makes it possible to:

- Track patterns of engagement over time, starting in the early years and continuing into later life.
- Identify when and why participation in creative and cultural activities drops off – and how to prevent it.
- Understand the short, medium and long-term impacts of sustained creative engagement.
- Link the timing, intensity, and type of participation to outcomes across the life course.

Aims of the research programme

1. To pilot an action research programme in Leicester that focuses on early years children and by nature their families (from currently under-served demographic groups). Additionally, to begin to understand the interventions needed to increase cultural opportunities and engagement at the earliest possible point.
2. To understand the barriers to cultural engagement from the earliest possible point and the interventions most effective in overcoming them.
3. To ensure a voice for participants in the design of the cultural offer (in this case the families – including the early years children, as this becomes appropriate over time).
4. To offer cultural activities that are accessible, local, relevant, regular, social and enjoyable.
5. To include a diverse offer from established cultural organisations, but also amateur, self-led, participatory and digital activity.
6. To examine the impact of the quality of the offer on the participants at different stages of the project.
7. To increase the long-term cultural engagement of identified early years children (and their families).
8. To better understand and respond to the cultural needs of children and young people, regardless of background.
9. To examine the impact of the activities on participants at different stages of the project and identify the short, medium and long-term outcomes.
10. To track the cultural engagement of identified participants over a timeframe that goes beyond four years (for example, to observe if the expected patterns of drop-off in engagement change as a result of intervention).
11. To publish a research report with replicable recommendations to increase the cultural engagement of young people across the country and influence policy.

Given that Talent 25 is longitudinal study, the stated aims are reviewed at different stages of the project.

Research programme outcomes

The agreed outcomes of the talent plan are that every young person will, after the first 25 years of their life, be either or both:

1. A culturally, creatively engaged citizen and a lifelong participant in creative and cultural activity.
2. Someone who has had the opportunity to achieve their potential and develop their talent as a creative practitioner.

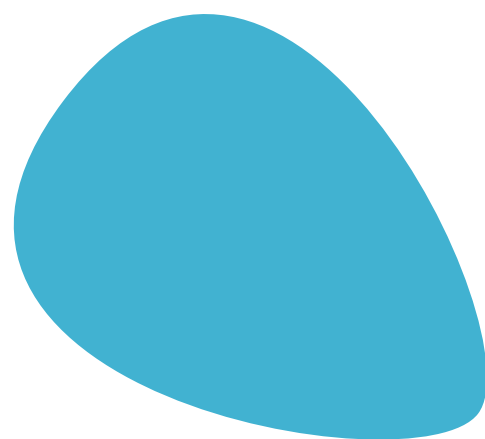
Research questions

The key research question has been defined as:

How can we ensure the next generation of culturally engaged citizens?

More specific questions to assist with baselining the pilot activity are:

1. How do these early years individuals and their families, from identified areas, engage in artistic activities and cultural events?
2. What are the factors that inhibit and facilitate engagement for these early years individuals and their families?
3. What aspects of a programme of interventions are likely to increase engagement for these early years individuals and their families?



Research framework and methods

Theoretical base:

Theoretical Domains Framework (Atkins et al., 2017); Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory; early years development and habit-formation models; community engagement (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993); Participatory approaches (McCarthy & Jinnett, 2001).

Theory of Change:

Defines inputs, activities, mechanisms, and outcomes (short/medium/long-term). Guides replication and adaptation.

Design:

Mixed methods combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, participatory/creative approaches, and observation.

Measures:

Baseline and follow-up data on socio-demographics, attitudes, quality of life, creative engagement, and (as children mature) developmental outcomes such as personal/social development, literacy, and expressive arts.

Analysis:

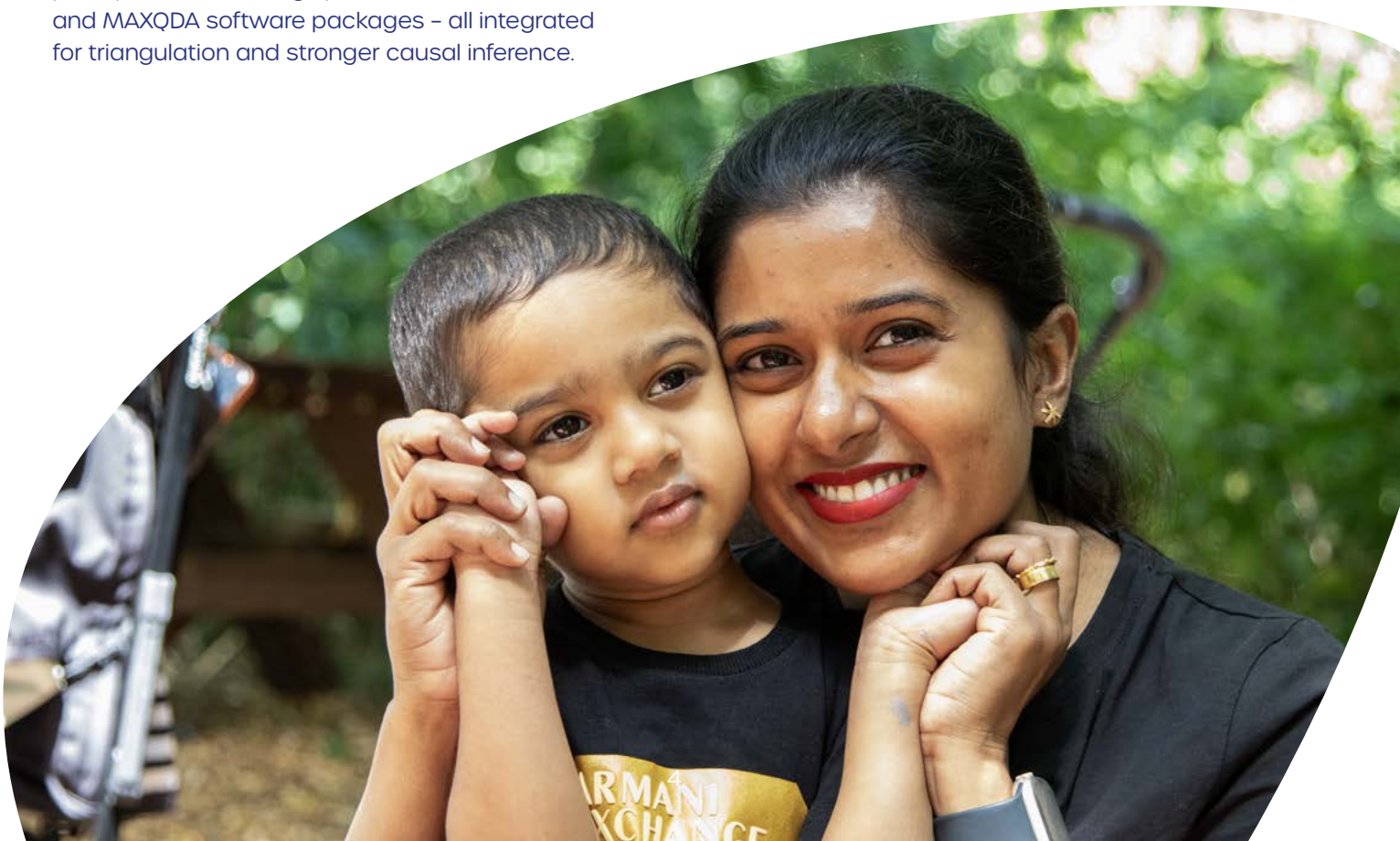
Quantitative – using statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) and analysis of variance (ANOVA), plus qualitative – using specialist NVivo and MAXQDA software packages – all integrated for triangulation and stronger causal inference.

Participants

The first phase recruited multiple infant cohorts of children (3-12 months at entry) and their parents/carers from September 2019 to October 2023 using a staggered-entry approach. Cohort 1 began in September 2019; Cohort 12 joined in October 2023. Children now range from ages 1-6, evenly split by gender. The children and their families reflect Leicester's diversity: 34 nationalities, 42 languages.

Ethics, data & governance

Approved by De Montfort University's Research Ethics Committee and NHS-HRA (19/LO/1431). Procedures comply with GDPR, safeguarding, and data governance standards. Consent is obtained from parents/carers, with children invited to self-consent as they mature. Secure data storage, regular engagement, and accessible communication support retention across the 25-year study.



Why Talent 25 matters for policy

The implications of Talent 25 extend across cultural, educational, health, social, and economic policy. Below are five illustrative themes with examples generated from the findings to date:

1. Equity and inclusion

- i. Ensure fair access to creative and cultural opportunities for children and families from all backgrounds.
- ii. Example: Embed cultural competence and inclusive practices in engagement with families from diverse backgrounds.

2. Place-based planning

- i. Embed creative engagement within local early years, health, and family services.
- ii. Example: Integrate cultural activities into family hubs and community-based early years provision.

3. Workforce and skills development

- i. Build capacity in the early years' cultural workforce through training, standards and career pathways.
- ii. Example: Define and invest in the role of early years creative practitioner.

4. Progression pathways

- i. Support sustained routes from early engagement through to lifelong participation or careers in the creative industries.
- ii. Example: Design progression pathways from early creative play to youth engagement and professional practice.

5. System learning and evidence use

- i. Use longitudinal evidence to inform national and local strategies, ensuring policies are grounded in what works.
- ii. Example: Apply Talent 25 findings to shape national guidance on early years cultural entitlement.

Further information

Click here to read further reports from Talent 25

References

1. Atkins L, Francis J, Islam R, O'Connor D, Patey A, Ivers N, Foy R, Duncan EM, Colquhoun H, Grimshaw JM, Lawton R, Michie S. A guide to using the Theoretical Domains Framework of behaviour change to investigate implementation problems. *Implement Sci.* 2017 Jun 21;12(1):77. doi: 10.1186/s13012-017-0605-9.
2. Bronfenbrenner, U. (2005) *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development.* Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: SAGE Publications
3. Kretzmann, J. P., and McKnight, J. L. (1993) *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets.* Chicago, USA: ACTA Publications.
4. McCarthy, K. F. and Jinnett J. J. (2001) *A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts.* https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1323.html

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 contents in this report belongs to De Montfort University

Citing this report:

Ochieng, B. (2025) *Talent 25 Research Programme Overview: Understanding the impact of creative engagement from the early years - 25-year creative talent plan - a Leicester city pilot study*. UK Leicester, De Montfort University.

TALENT25 



Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND