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Youth Employment Partnerships: Lessons from the Talent Match programme evaluation



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Introduction

Partnership working is a key feature of Talent Match. This summary reviews the experience of the 21 Talent Match partnerships: it explores the models of partnership which emerged, the involvement of different stakeholders, the role of young people involved in partnership, and the drivers and constraints to partnership working.

The summary draws on evidence gathered as part of an extensive longitudinal evaluation of the programme, including three waves of visits to each Talent Match partnership and three parallel surveys of partnership organisations and their delivery partners. The findings and recommendations from this report are intended for policy makers and practitioners working at national and local levels.



About Talent Match

Talent Match is a £106 million programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund to address unemployment amongst 18-24 year olds. It is being delivered using National Lottery funding between 2014 and 2018 through partnerships in 21 Local Enterprise Partnership areas in England. The programme seeks to support young people who are furthest from the labour market through personalised, flexible provision which addresses their needs and aspirations. Participation in the programme is voluntary. Talent Match has been co-designed by and is co-delivered with young people.



Context

Talent Match was launched in 2012 at a time of considerable institutional turbulence at a local and sub-regional level in England. Local Enterprise Partnerships had only just been established and new funding programmes, whether the Department of Work and Pension's Work Programme or devolved arrangements, were only just coming on stream.

The programme required partnerships to form at a Local Enterprise Partnerships area level and for these partnerships to then develop funding proposals to the Big Lottery Fund.



About the Talent Match Partnerships

Partnerships were awarded between £1 million and £10 million of grant funds. The differences in grant funding reflected differing levels and rates of youth unemployment at the launch of the programme.

Partnership working is not a unique feature of Big Lottery Fund programmes or social programmes more generally, although Talent Match is distinctive in this field in the scale and role of the voluntary sector as a lead partner.

The programme guidance for Talent Match set out the principles the programme was to follow which were designed to enable thousands of young people to lead successful and fulfilling lives:

- **Structured opportunities:** Bringing together the public, private and voluntary and community sectors to create effective partnerships and coordination at the local level.
- **Supporting local solutions:** matching the supply of talented young people to local demand for employment and enterprise.
- **Asset based:** a belief in people powered change and the ability of young people to improve their own circumstances and life chances with the right support. Young people should be engaged and involved in all aspects of the activities we fund.
- **Strong and positive communications:** promoting positive images of young people, and changing hearts and minds.

This summary explores how Talent Match partnerships have addressed these programme design principles and the challenges they have faced.



The Partnerships

Four different types of organisation came forward to lead partnerships:

- **National VCS organisations**, in particular the lead role played by the Prince's Trust in five areas (New Anglia, South East, Tees Valley, Leicester and Leicestershire, and Lincolnshire), the Wise Group (North East) and the Shaw Trust (Worcestershire).
- **Local 'infrastructure' organisations** (e.g. CVSSs), in areas including Stoke and Staffordshire, Greater Manchester, Birmingham, Black Country, Coventry and Warwickshire, and The Marches.
- **Local specialist VCS organisations**, including Cornwall, Northamptonshire, London, Sheffield City Region, Liverpool City Region, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire.
- **Consortia based organisations**, including Humber and Leeds City Region.

The partnerships varied in scope and scale, largely reflecting the size of grant funding to an area. Partnerships recruited delivery partners, either before the bid to the Big Lottery Fund or after the announcement of the award. The benefit of the former approach was that these partnerships were able to commence delivery more quickly.

All partnerships saw the involvement of young people and the establishment of good delivery arrangements as necessary for a successful programme.



How do Talent Match partnerships work?

Partnerships work in a variety of ways and with a range of lead partners, although most built quite clearly on pre-existing characteristics in an area. The lead partner played a key role in bringing the partnership together. Individuals within the lead partner organisation often played key leadership roles, promoting the goals of the programme as a whole over a more narrow individual interest.

The features of partnerships were however largely common. There was a lead partner who played an accountable body role and put in place necessary agreements to ensure the effective governance of the programme and the accountability for expenditure. Legal agreements existed with all delivery partners although they were contracted in different ways, mostly on a grant basis but some on a payment by results or spot purchase basis. This tended to reflect the lead organisation's expertise in different contracting models and the wishes of the partnership board or committee.

Although all partnerships involved young people their involvement varied quite considerably. Perhaps most importantly some partnerships focused on involving specific groups of young people such as those with poor mental health or from particular areas, whilst others looked at involving young people in the delivery of the service, such as in peer mentoring roles.

Involvement of young people increased the legitimacy of partnerships. More importantly, it allowed the lived experience of young people distant from the labour market to shape an employment programme. This level of involvement is unique in an employment programme of this scale delivered in England.



Main Findings

A number of themes have emerged from the evaluation:

- **Partnership was a requirement of Talent Match funding.** All partnerships reported that they were operating in a turbulent policy environment. Prior experience of partnership working helped some areas to start delivery quickly.
- **Skills required of Lead Partners.** The skills and capacity of the lead partners to navigate, and exploit, complex local governance networks was consistently identified (across the waves of research) as key to facilitating delivery. No consistent evidence was found to suggest that the 'type' or focus of the lead organisation (whether a CVS/infrastructure organisation or youth work organisation) matters to the delivery of the Talent Match programme.
- **Involving Young People.** The involvement of young people has been a defining feature of the Talent Match programme. The majority of partnerships have identified youth involvement as a key feature that has assisted partnership working and delivery. For effective youth involvement the purpose of involvement needed to be clearly defined, and understood by all partners. In addition lead and delivery organisations needed to have the skills (or be supported to develop the skills) for meaningful youth involvement.
- **Legacy.** There is encouraging evidence on the legacy of partnership working. In the majority of areas, partnerships anticipate continuing to shape local employment services for young people. A key legacy of Talent Match can be seen to be the sustained collaboration between organisations.

We found that partnership on its own does not guarantee successful outcomes for young people such as employment or improved well-being. Nonetheless is a component of an effective programme, alongside factors such as the project quality, the characteristics of young people, or the local labour market context.



What are the drivers and constraints of partnership working?

Enabling factors:

- **Quality of partnership leads:** Partnership leads play a key role in setting the tone and direction for the partnership, managing relationships between partners (both strategic and delivery partners) and acting as an 'independent broker' in driving the local Talent Match programmes forward.
- **Previous experience of partnership working:** In some cases the organisations concerned had previous experience of partnership working and were able to translate this to Talent Match. For partnership leads previous experience of partnership working was important – and if it was in the same local area often they were able to utilise their existing contacts to benefit Talent Match.
- **Involvement of young people:** Several partnerships highlighted the important contribution made by young people in bringing a different dynamic to partnerships. The 'lived experience' of young people seeking employment helped shape the nature and delivery of Talent Match activities, and indeed delivery partners. Examples included the involvement of young people in interview panels for the selection of delivery partners, their role as peer mentors and in challenging assumptions of voluntary and statutory organisations around the needs of young people.
- **Test and learn:** In partnership visits a common refrain from interviewees was the value of 'test and learn'. This enabled partnerships to adapt activities which were not working, and to try new ones. More generally this provided a positive atmosphere for partnership working that was rather different from those previously experienced.

Constraining factors:

- **Long lead in period to Talent Match going 'live':** Talent Match was characterised by a long lead in period of at least 12 months. This was reflected in staff turnover before the delivery phase began, difficulties sustaining the engagement of local partners (especially employers) and changes in local area need.
- **Other local initiatives to address youth unemployment:** Other initiatives emerged during Talent Match delivery to address youth employment (such as EU funded programmes) or government policies developed around apprenticeships and traineeships. Whilst these provided local opportunities they also required partnerships to respond accordingly.
- **Difficulties in learning across delivery partners:** In some partnerships there was a separation of strategic partners on boards from delivery partners. This meant that learning from grassroots experience of delivery could be difficult. The early commissioning of evaluations to run alongside programme delivery helped alleviate some of these barriers and provided a common focus for strategic and delivery partners.
- **The climate of austerity in the public sector** and cost pressures faced by organisations in other sectors meant that some individual partners had increased workloads in their 'day jobs' which meant the time that they could devote to Talent Match was limited. Lack of attendance at partnership meetings was an issue for some partnerships.

- **Engaging employers.** This was seen to be difficult at the outset of the programme but over time most partnerships successfully engaged both representatives of employers to act in board member roles or engaged partners willing to provide employment opportunities.



Working at the Local Enterprise Partnership level

At the time the focus of the programme on Local Enterprise Partnership areas was innovative, and represented a new level of engagement for the Big Lottery Fund. Working at this level allowed for the targeting of funding and for working with 21 partnerships covering far greater geographical scale than may otherwise have been possible. However, engagement between Local Enterprise Partnerships and Talent Match partnerships has varied considerably, and may have limited opportunities to better design employment support which combines demand (support to employers) and supply side (support to young people) interventions.

Where these opportunities have emerged it has been due to efforts by Local Enterprise Partnerships and lead partners to forge a common area level approach to addressing young people's unemployment. Examples of such joint initiatives can be found in the Liverpool City Region (around mental health), the Humber (around supporting people with hidden disabilities) and Leicester and Leicestershire (around mentoring).





Lessons

Working in partnership is necessary for effective programme delivery. The lessons from the evaluation of the Talent Match programme are as follows:

- 1. Partnership working is required to build local employment ecosystems.** Local employment support ecosystems will vary from place to place, in terms of employer involvement, the quality of existing relationships and to some extent the policy levers which local partners will have. Talent Match shows that large and small voluntary and community sector organisations are an important part of this ecosystem.
- 2. Lead partner capability is important for delivery.** The skills, capacity and legitimacy of lead partners were essential to the formation of effective partnerships. These factors enabled partnerships to develop quickly and be effective at addressing challenges, whether local, for instance in managing the performance of delivery partners, or more broadly such as an emerging need or a new funding opportunity.
- 3. Involving young people should feature in all youth employment programmes.** Talent Match shows how this can be done and the different forms it can take. It increased the legitimacy of the programme and gave credibility to decisions to change programme direction. It generally helped partnerships understand the needs of those young people furthest from the labour market. However, the resources for involving young people need to be built into programme design.
- 4. Employer engagement is a key area for VCS organisations to develop if they are to deliver employment programmes.** Employer engagement varied across partnerships and was perhaps a new challenge to some lead partner organisations. All addressed early shortcomings. Some partnerships were helped by the early involvement of larger or influential

local employers.

- 5. Partnerships evolve and develop and future employment support should build on rather than duplicate or replace existing arrangements.** There are considerable costs in starting afresh with creating new partnerships and the Talent Match youth employment partnerships should form part of any future local employment ecosystem.





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