



# Learning and Review Report

## Executive Summary

October 2015

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Talent Match is a BIG Lottery-funded programme investing £108 million in 21 Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) areas across England over 5 years. It seeks to support 18-24 year olds who are furthest away from the labour market to move towards sustainable employment. Talent Match Birmingham and Solihull was awarded £7.6 million and is being led by BVSC who commissioned Merida Associates to undertake learning and review research to capture the programme's journey from inception in July 2014 to September 2015 and to review the implementation of the Demonstrator Model, which is the local approach to delivering Talent Match outcomes. The Model covers referral routes into the programme, support offered by coaches, wrap around support, volunteering placements and paid work opportunities through the Talent Match Company, and describes these elements as 'pathways' into sustained employment. Each participant will have a personalised experience of the programme, one designed to meet individual need. The programme is overseen by a Core Strategic Partnership of cross-sector agencies from Birmingham and Solihull and Talent Match Ambassadors who are all young adults.

## Methodology

Merida used the Theory of Change approach, as recommended by BIG Lottery, to work with the Talent Match staff team and explore how programme activities lead to outcomes that support the overall aims of the programme. The consequent Theory of Change model helped to shape the inquiry questions for the review. The outcomes that are the stepping stones to employment were identified as:

- Increased self-esteem
- Increased confidence
- Increased motivation
- Improved communication skills
- Young adults develop aspirations
- Young adults develop positive attitudes to work

*“I'm really happy I chose to get help from Talent Match it's the best decision I made... I really enjoy my visits with my coach he keeps me positive and motivated and always looks out for me.”  
(Participant)*

The assumption is that young adults who achieve these outcomes will be more resilient, more work-ready and better able to cope with the day-to-day workplace environment. A mixed methodology was used in the research including interviews and workshops with all key stakeholder groups and online surveys for participants, core partners and volunteer placement agencies.

Talent Match helped to recruit 3 peer researchers from the Ambassadors group to work alongside the Merida team and help gather evidence from participants. Peer researchers also contributed to the design of evaluation questions and methods, discussed findings and informed recommendations.

## Context

Since the submission of the Talent Match Birmingham and Solihull proposal to the BIG Lottery there have been a number of important changes in the strategic and operational context in which the programme operates. These can be summarised as:

- Fewer young adults are claiming unemployment benefits
- There are more programmes and initiatives to work with 18-24 year olds classed as NEET than there were when Talent Match was designed
- There has been a significant increase in the number of jobs available in both Birmingham and Solihull

## Progress to Date

Performance figures at the end of Year 2 Quarter 3 identify that there are 167 young adults engaged on the programme of which 16 are classed as 'Hidden NEET'.<sup>1</sup> To the end of September 2015, 29 young adults have secured employment through the Talent Match Company, of which 2 have moved into sustainable jobs; 2 participants have taken up apprenticeships; 4 have moved into formal education; 19 young adults have undertaken a volunteering placement and 14 are volunteering on a regular basis.

Talent Match is working to improve its uncontactable and/or dropout rate, which currently stands at 54% (3 months) and 59% (6 months).

In looking at the performance of Talent Match to date it is important to understand how a number of factors have contributed to lower than expected performance across all elements of the programme:

- Establishing BVSC as a Contracting Authority and developing commissioning processes that comply with EU regulations to procure wrap around support
- Changes to the number of NEET young adults, combined with higher numbers of participants with complex needs
- Participants taking longer to progress along their individual pathways than predicted
- Challenges in aligning data management systems with national requirements

Talent Match has put a Performance Action Plan in place and anticipate the plan will start to show improvements in outcomes in the next quarter.

*“What is different is that it is really tailored to individual needs...and you have the same coach, so you build a relationship” (Participant)*

## Talent Match Participants

Most participants identified their goal in engaging with Talent Match was to get a job; some people said they want to gain qualifications, skills or experience and to improve their confidence and employability. Data



<sup>1</sup> Not receiving benefits and not working, self-employed, in formal education or training at the baseline stage.

presented to the Core Strategic Partners in August 2015 showed that, on entry, two-thirds of participants were assessed as needing considerable support before they would be ready for the workplace. Just 9 young adults were assessed as ready for work.

Overall participants commented that they feel more positive, confident and motivated. Coaching was the main benefit they identified. Participants liked that coaches offer support and challenge, the push to move forward balanced with the sense that someone was "on their side". Another benefit was the possibility of securing paid work through the Talent Match Company that would be recognised work experience and could lead to a sustained job.

Young adults identified that the flexibility of Talent Match allowed them to try out different work roles through volunteering or paid placements, to see if it was what they wanted to do, and they could access wrap around support and coaching at any point on their own pathway. Young adults said Talent Match helped them to become more organised and to gain more confidence, for

instance in travelling independently and becoming more autonomous. Some reflected that being given the power to make their own decisions was a bit uncomfortable but overall felt it was beneficial.



*“My coach is really supportive and it's amazing to have someone help you look for jobs and placements that are tailored to your interests. Talent Match focuses on you as an individual, which is really refreshing, I'll definitely be recommending the programme to friends”. (Participant)*

The concept of the Talent Match Ambassador role was developed by young adults during the pre-programme consultation to ensure that young adults are engaged in shaping the

programme and the development of the Demonstrator Model. The Ambassadors group is in the process of being revitalised, a coach has been assigned to develop the group and a volunteer co-ordinator has been appointed to support the new Ambassadors.

### Review of Demonstrator Model

All the elements of the Demonstrator Model are commissioned and in place and there is evidence that the coach role is being well received by participants and is working well. Participants identified that the Talent Match approach feels personally tailored to their needs and aspirations. Due to small numbers, however, it is not yet possible to give an evidence-based and therefore robust view of whether or not the model is successful at getting young adults into sustainable employment. The first 3 participants into the Talent Match Company have recently exited, of whom 2 moved into sustainable jobs which indicates that the model addresses the

barriers young adults face in moving into the labour market and suggests that the approach will deliver results.

There are currently three key challenges for Talent Match:

- Reductions in the number of young adults claiming work-related benefits
- Reaching those Hidden NEETs who are not engaged with the benefits system
- The need to strategically position the programme against the other initiatives in Birmingham and Solihull that are likely to be 'competing' for the same cohort of young adults

The full report poses questions for the programme to consider including:

- *Given the reduced number of unemployed young adults in the economy and anecdotal evidence about young adults entering the programme with more complex needs than may have been originally anticipated, can Talent Match use the information generated from the new database and the National Evaluation datasets about the needs of participants to further develop and hone support pathways to support young adults with more complex needs who may eventually make up the majority of the cohort?*
- *Could a better understanding of the needs of the Talent Match cohort to date help to strategically position the programme in a distinctive 'niche' that may enhance collaboration with other initiatives for this client group?*
- *What other partners (outside those already involved in the CSP) may Talent Match need to engage with strategically to understand more about reaching and working with 'hidden NEET' young adults?*
- *How could more interactive communication channels be developed to offer wrap around support providers, volunteer placements providers and employers an opportunity to feedback what is working well and what has not worked so well?*

There is evidence to demonstrate that the Talent Match team are working hard to address supply issues in relation to employment and volunteering placements and have put systems in place to ensure that the commissioning of individual packages of wrap around support is done as quickly as OJEU legal requirements allow. This combined with the performance improvement planning already in place should see many of the previous barriers to performance addressed.

The current investment in developing the Ambassadors group should strengthen the continuing influence of participants within the programme. There is no doubting the passion that the Talent Match team has for working with young adults and their commitment to delivering a programme that meets young adults' needs and helps move them into employment, this has been evident in the research process.

Merida Associates would like to thank everyone who took part in the research for the generous contribution of their time and their frank and open participation.

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