

Realising potential: insights into the design and delivery of pre-vocational programmes

Humber Learning Consortium



This case study focuses on how Humber learning Consortium (HLC) effectively uses subcontracting arrangements to secure a wide range of personal development and employability programmes alongside mainstream delivery. Through specific examination of the Talent Match programme, the case study also shows how service users are placed at the centre of decision-making and so ensures participants take a positive approach to learning, are proud of their achievements, and are successful in progressing to further study and/or into employment, often overcoming significant barriers.

Brief description

With the tag-line “Passionate about Learning”, HLC is a management and quality hub for providers across the Humber and Yorkshire: they provide a ‘single port of call’ so that funders can engage efficiently and effectively with a range of provider agencies, in particular voluntary and community organisations. Published data shows that in 2014/15 HLC worked through a total of some 50 delivery partners. This “honest broker” management model secures access to public funding that many - often small VCS - providers may not otherwise have received, assures funders that activity and evidence meet their requirements, and is effective in responding to learner and funder needs. HLC’s strong approach to quality and performance management also secures positive external assessments, and helps build the capacity of subcontracted partners. Adoption of a risk-based procurement process, and a sliding scale of management charges, generates cost-efficient delivery and ensures due diligence.

HLC’s published core values include a belief that “the learner should be at the heart of decision-making”, and this has strongly informed the management of a five-year Talent Match contract awarded by The Big Lottery Fund and now just starting its third year. Targeted at long-term unemployed young people in the 18-24 age-group, this is one of 21 projects being delivered across England in areas with the highest number of NEETs, and aims to “improve the lives of 1,455 long-term unemployed young people living in the Humber LEP area”.

697 young people (48% of the 5-year target) have been engaged to date, of whom 94 have progressed into employment or self-employment and 66 have gone into further learning, including 14 Trainees and 19 Apprentices. A Young People’s Partnership plays a key role in project management, tendering and delivery; this ensures that young people’s needs steer the project. Playing a proactive role in the project empowers them and improves their employability and life skills.

“the learner should be at the heart of decision-making”

Effective practice - the detail

Robust procurement and effective delivery partner support

HLC's partnership approach has made it one of the region's most successful ESF learning and skills providers, as well as the largest Community Learning provider in the Humber sub-region, outside the local authorities. The Consortium's service portfolio includes:

- The management of contracts on behalf of delivery partners;
- Quality improvement advice and support, ensuring compliance with the OFSTED Common Inspection Framework;
- Data management services;
- Continuing professional development; and
- The provision of bespoke virtual learning environments and micro-sites.

“We have always had strong data and contract management processes, including monthly meetings with contract managers and SMT members, but these have been enhanced, in part because of the absorption of another significant contract in the last year. Monthly meetings now include consideration of headline and partner success rates; a learner attendance management system was introduced in 2014; and since June 2015 we have used Pro-achieve to review quarterly success rate data forensically and agree actions with individual providers. A stronger subcontract was introduced in May 2014, following consideration by the Board. In terms of procurement, we have enhanced our due diligence of new partners, which now involves more qualitative assessment, discussions with learners and pre-contract monitoring/observation of teaching, learning and assessment (OTLA) visits by the quality team. As a result, we have for 2015/16 not re-contracted with five former providers. Performance review has also been enhanced, and all partners are risk assessed – high, medium, low – across key areas of performance, quality and leadership and management: two of our delivery partners were uprated to high risk at the 2014/15 end-of-year review.”

Paul Rands

Deputy CEO

HLC has boosted their quality management capacity and now have a full-time Quality Manager, a highly experienced colleague who formerly managed an ESF contract, who is supported by three associates to undertake OTLA activities and quality monitoring; and they have recruited a learning and skills contract manager with ten years' experience of managing apprenticeships. Paul has spent more of his time, as Deputy CEO, overseeing the transfer and management of ASB and Apprenticeship contracts. A Functional Skills Task and Finish Group was set up in July 2015 in response to low English and/or maths success rates in a small number of providers, supported by a specialist consultant; and the College addressed related issues identified via OTLA.

HLC has a well-resourced administration team which assist delivery partners through workshops, guidance, checklists and one-to-one support. We also have an audit team that have led on our last eight audits and found zero funding errors: this team is available to support and advise sub-contracted providers on audit systems and evidence requirements. Our MIS team are also available to support delivery partners both with technical queries and also report writing, using our PICS and Pro-achieve software systems.”

Humber Learning Consortium has a very clear policy on its “top-slice” charging for its services, and also has transparent data on its website showing the proportion of received funding retained. This depends on the funding source, the complexity and management time involved, and is related to the risk factor applied to individual provider organisations. The policy is kept under annual review. Current charges are shown as:

- 10% of contract value delivered for ESF projects;
- a three-point sliding scale for SFA contracts other than Community Learning, from 10% to 20%;
- 12% of contract value delivered for activity under the Community Learning funding stream.

Ensuring quality delivery and supporting provider capacity

HLC believes provider quality support and development is the cornerstone to effective delivery, and has invested heavily in this.

Delivery partners have access to HLC’s “Aiming for Excellence” programme, a training and support service which builds capacity in provider organisations. Facets of the programme include:

- HLC Masterclass seminars delivered by expert practitioners;
- Teaching and learning conference;
- One-to-one quality support from the HLC team, including observations of teaching, learning and assessment;
- Bi-monthly Quality Improvement Network (QuIN) meetings;
- Quality support website with access to a wide range of resources;
- Peer group support and moderation events; and
- Sharing best practice events: topics covered have included how to increase recruitment, and how to develop strong progression routes.

When HLC was last inspected (October 2015, Grade Two) OFSTED found that **“managers support subcontractors effectively to provide learning and training to the most disadvantaged groups and communities, [and have] plans to expand the curriculum into new vocational areas”** addressing LEP priorities. **“Learners make good progress from low starting points, with many overcoming significant barriers to move into further education and employment [and] benefit from being in safe, secure and supportive learning environments which enable them to develop confidence and make progress into further study, volunteering and employment. Managers work well with employers to design productive work experience placements for trainees, preparing them effectively for employment [while] tutors manage learning skilfully to ensure the learners are motivated, engaged and enjoy their programmes.”**

HLC has also developed internal expertise on Health and Safety and on Safeguarding, including e-safety, Prevent and sexual exploitation awareness, and on equality and diversity. Related workshops, other development events, risk assessments, guidance and access to template documents, training toolkits and best practice examples are all available to providers via HLC.

A short meeting with representative delivery partners – mainly involved in Talent Match or community learning programmes – confirmed the OFSTED judgement that HLC “continues to energetically deliver the organisation’s core mission to build the capacity of voluntary and community groups to provide training and learning to the most disadvantaged groups and communities, while at the same time improving outcomes for learners” and that “managers provide good support to develop the quality of provision of their subcontractors through extensive professional development and a well-organised quality improvement network”. Comments passed at the meeting included:

“managers provide good support to develop the quality of provision of their subcontractors through extensive professional development and a well-organised quality improvement network”

- “We are a long-standing partner, and find HLC generally supportive: there have been blips, but they are very open, and very good”;
- “HLC apply realistic timescales and have clear processes and systems”;
- “It’s very much a two-way process; we are helpfully informed on how to deliver to meet funders’ requirements”;
- “They practice what they preach – I especially like how they now employ interns from Talent Match; they recognise that everyone’s learners have different abilities, and that we adopt different approaches”;
- “The HLC model of contract management, including bringing providers together via QuINs and monthly meetings, helps to establish connectivity with the subcontractor network: we don’t feel alone”; and
- “It’s a good group of people, a team: recent expansion means they’ve now got separate folk each a specialist in their field”.

The one concern, supported by a minority of subcontractors, related to the volume of paperwork expected, which was considered disproportionate (e.g. completion of a 6-page Prevent document following an 8-hour programme; administration of on-line SFA and OFSTED learner satisfaction surveys), but this was recognised as being required by funders, and HLC was praised for “trying to minimise it as far as possible”.

“They practice what they preach – I especially like how they now employ interns from Talent Match; they recognise that everyone’s learners have different abilities, and that we adopt different approaches”

Talent Match: a marriage of youth and community approaches with employability training

Talent Match Humber, managed under the HLC umbrella and targeted at 18-24 year-old JCP claimants who have been unemployed for at least 52 weeks who are struggling to find career opportunities, is in operational terms run as a distinct project and cost-centre. It is managed by a small central team of four workers and two interns recruited from project beneficiaries. Contract targets relate to overall throughput; the percentage of participants that find sustainable employment (22% target); participant progress into apprenticeships/traineeships or other formal learning/training (30% target); demonstrable increase in self-confidence (80% target); and a demonstrable increase in an ability to cope with unemployment (80% target).

The soft skills here are assessed against a set of on-line questions in a confidential career development questionnaire. This Common Data Framework (CDF), designed and administered by Sheffield Hallam University, is given to Talent Match participants at their engagement with the programme and subsequently used at month 3, month 6, month 12 and (if still on programme) month 24.

A Young People's Partnership, with membership drawn from young people across the Humber region, chairs the Talent Match Humber Core Partnership, which acts as a steering group for the project.

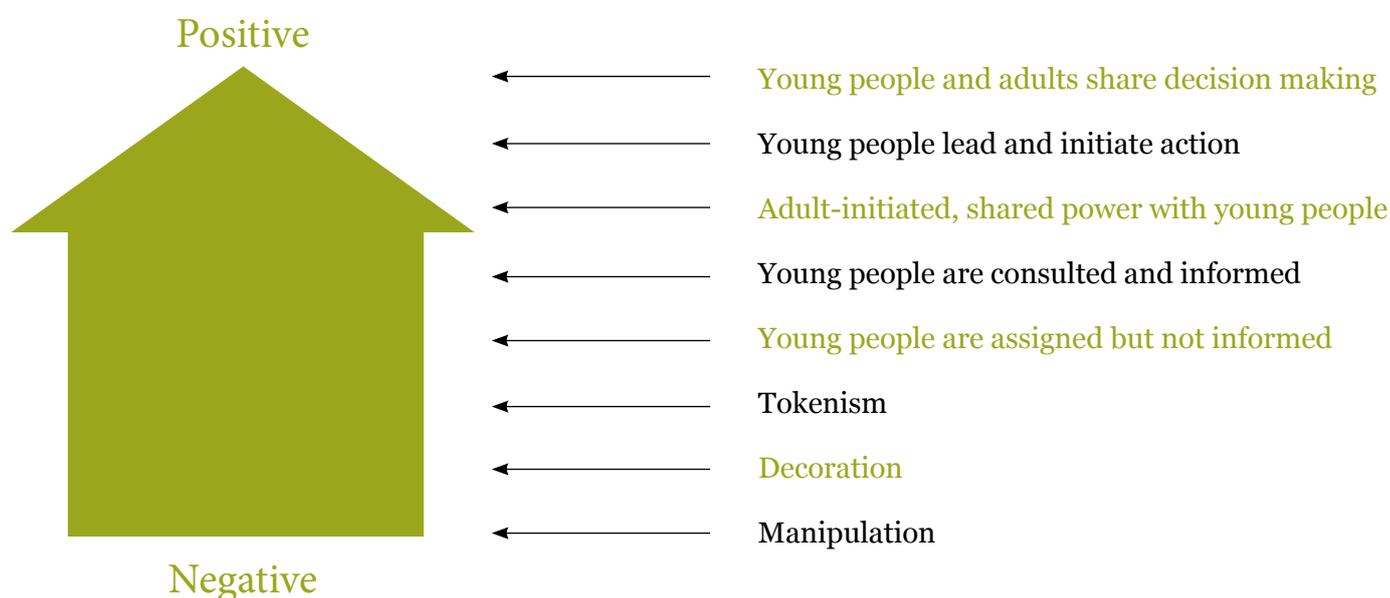
The Young People's Partnership (YPP) works to help widen understanding of the barriers faced by young people, stimulates employer links and job experience opportunities, and acts as a mechanism for peer support, where young people can help young people. Its members speak eloquently of how the YPP opens up opportunities that would not otherwise be available to them, and how participating in its work gives self-confidence and boosts self-esteem. Video clips on the HLC-hosted Talent Match Humber website give clear testimony to this.

At its outset targeted at young people in 22 "hotspot" wards in Hull, North Lincolnshire, East Riding and North East Lincolnshire, Talent Match Humber activity was focused originally on nine thematic groups (mental health, homelessness, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, ex-offenders, gypsies and travellers, black and minority ethnic communities, young carers and lone parents). Since its inception Talent Match Humber has added Care Leavers to the list of thematic groups the project targets. There is now a specific project in Hull that works holistically with this group of young people.

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The Talent Match team has recently reviewed existing provider contracts, not renewing six, and has undertaken a new procurement round, adding new agencies to its delivery partnership. It is now working through 20 contracted providers. Contracting decisions have been based in part on “pitches” to a YPP panel, a “Dragon’s Den” style process which – like the officer team – applies an assessment against Hart’s ladder of participation, a model first developed for UNICEF use in 1992 and which can be used when developing and working on youth participation projects:

Hart’s ladder of participation¹



Members of the YPP are becoming increasingly active in supporting other young people across the Humber: they develop and deliver projects in their own right, and are increasingly being asked to speak at events on topics such as project co-design and youth unemployment. A recent initiative – People Against Disability Discrimination (PADD) – is again designed by young people for young people, and seeks to raise awareness and to promote the positive aspect of employing a person with a hidden disability such as autism, learning disability, dyslexia or depression.

¹ According to Wikipedia, “Hart’s Ladder of Participation ... aims to enable young people to take an active part in decision making, and give them the opportunity to have a ‘voice’ in society. Hart states there are 8 steps on the ‘Ladder of Participation”. The first three steps ... are considered not be engaging young people in active youth participation, but instead provide a pathway to move up onto the other stages. The following five steps after this look at how to fully integrate young people into the decision making process and how to get them actively involved. These steps evolve....” (See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Youth_participation for the full entry)

A taste of the courses, development opportunities and activities available to those engaged in Talent Match Humber is suggested by the following list, abridged from an on-line prospectus for the first phase of the project:

- Personal development and employability skills;
- Condition management;
- Personal mentoring;
- Job application skills, including CV design, on-line job search skills and mock interviews;
- Opportunities for work experience or volunteering;
- Volunteer training, including safeguarding, equality and diversity, first aid and health and safety;
- Key skills development, including employability, conflict resolution, developing positive relationships and team-building;
- ICT training;
- Accredited and non-accredited learning programmes;
- Assisted transition into formal study and/or work;
- Work in social enterprises, including active participation in community interest companies set up and run by young people;
- How to develop and test out ideas for business creation; and
- Further enterprise skills, business planning and bidding for resources.

All such opportunities are offered without charge to the participants. Several include childcare facilities, some offer free access to a gym and dance studio; all include IAG and, where necessary, referral to specialist services offering support (e.g. debt advice, housing, health etc.).

“The key characteristic of the Talent Match Humber approach is that young people are encouraged and empowered to make their own choices about what they want to do. The role of the central team, mentors and individual delivery partners is to facilitate this process, and to ensure the choices made are realistic and relevant to the situation in which the young person finds themselves. Each young person’s programme is personalised, providing flexible entry points and pathways, and a variety of services and activities, including specialist wrap-around support. As a result young people will be more able to secure employment or self-employment, take up apprenticeships, or enter further learning.”

Chantelle Snee
Development Officer

One delivery partner manager described the **role as “one-to-one mentoring, to draw out what the programme beneficiaries want to do with their lives: a mix of personal and social development, training needs assessment and experience planning. Essentially this is co-design: for example, the young person can decide they don’t want to follow a functional skills programme, but the mentor role is to make sure they understand the implications of that decision.** What we see, case by case, by individuals and by groups of young people, is personal and collective assumption of responsibility. Obviously this is geared towards employability, but it’s not just about qualifications and jobs, it’s also about confidence growth and soft skills development.”

Benefits for the college, for staff and for learners

Tutors and learners develop an inclusive and purposeful atmosphere which supports learning. High numbers of learners, who are drawn from the most disadvantaged wards and social groups, and who are furthest away from the labour market, progress well from very low starting points. Learners are engaged and motivated, enjoy their programmes, and display a good understanding of the diverse communities in which they live and work.

Learners develop a positive attitude to their studies, and take pride in their achievements. They develop as individuals, and gain an essential range of skills and behaviours relevant to their personal lives, volunteering and paid work.

Learners become more confident in speaking by sharing their experiences and technical knowledge, are better able to work in teams, and readily take on new responsibilities and self-determination.

Well-established contract management relationships between HLC and its subcontractors bring a strong focus on improving programmes, maintaining the high achievements of all learners and safeguarding their well-being.

The majority of learners progress onto positive destinations.

The visit to Humber Learning Consortium confirmed the OFSTED view that “**learners from vulnerable groups gain life-enhancing benefits from participating in courses that develop their self-confidence, provide them with new skills to help them overcome barriers, and provide them with valuable volunteering [and employment] opportunities**”.

Provider background

The Humber Learning Consortium (HLC) was founded in 2001 and acts through a range of sub-contracted delivery partners to work with hard-to-reach learners and make a positive difference to their lives and aspirations. Set up as a company limited by guarantee and with charitable status, and overseen by a 7-strong Board, HLC has a fundamental commitment to disadvantaged learners and a strong focus on the development and support of delivery partners. It focuses its work on deprived communities and marginalised groups. Its 2014/15 funding portfolio included SFA contracts for ASB, apprenticeships and traineeships and Community Learning (including two CL Mental Health projects), carrying a total annual value of £1.02m; a 24+ Advanced Learning Loans facility; a five-year Big Lottery funded Talent Match project worth just over £1m a year; and ESIF funding which carried a total value of £5.03m for SFA/ESF NEET and Community Grant projects.

Excluding apprenticeships, the majority of this provision is at Level 1. Adult learners make up 90% of HLC's non-Talent Match provision, many having significant barriers to entering voluntary and paid work, including learning difficulties and disabilities. Community learning provision is primarily used as an access and engagement route, and comprises courses of up to 50 hours per year: learners on these courses are encouraged to progress to accredited NOCN and CERTA courses offered by delivery partners.

Providers are encouraged to use the HLC website to list forthcoming courses and events: six are currently (early February 2016) posting information on a total of 27 learning opportunities, including photography classes, IT, music, the benefits of engaging in community arts activities, a range of personal development programmes (e.g. understanding abusive relationships, developing confidence and assertiveness) and various employability-focused courses including operating in a working environment, retail skills, customer service, and teamwork; the offer also includes sessions on problem solving, and on equality and diversity.

Data supplied by HLC, and based on 2014/15 performance, indicates that its apprenticeship work performs above benchmark for all measures relating to 19-23 and 24+ age-groups; that its classroom-based ASB-funded work is above benchmark for overall success rates, including English and maths; and that the English and maths elements of traineeships are above the provider group benchmark, though 2% below national benchmarks. Overall traineeships achieved a 54.8% positive destination rate. 16-18 Traineeship success rates fell to 61% in 2014/15, but this was largely attributable to poor performance by one new provider, which is now subject to an HLC-devised improvement plan under which they are already improving their success rate. As noted in the inspection report, the Consortium carefully negotiated a major new contract from another provider at the start of 2014/15. Year-on-year comparison of success rates show that HLC has secured significant improvement in a short period of time: the overall Apprenticeship success rate, at 76.3%, is some 22% above that achieved by the old provider in 2013/14, while ASB-funded work shows a 9% improvement, to 90.6%. HLC data also highlights the extent to which its provision is effectively targeted: in 2014/15 35% of its Apprentices came from the most disadvantaged wards, 68% of Trainees and 60% of ASB-funded learners came from these postcodes.

Locality

HLC is based in the Myton ward of Kingston upon Hull, though its subcontractors deliver across Hull and the Humber region, North East Lincolnshire and parts of Yorkshire. In the city of Kingston upon Hull 66% of the population are qualified at level 2 and above, compared to 70% in the wider Yorkshire and Humber region, and 73% in Great Britain as a whole. The unemployment rate in Hull is nearly double the rate for the rest of the country.

Some 9.2% of the Yorkshire and Humber region population have a minority ethnic background, compared with 10.7% in the UK at large. The largest single group is the Asian community, which is concentrated in West Yorkshire, and to a lesser extent South Yorkshire. Outside the main Yorkshire cities ethnic minorities account for some 5-6% of the population; their incidence in Hull is low at 1.8%.

Background to the Project

This case study forms part of a suite of six which were developed between January and March 2016. They provide insights and illustrations which will be of benefit to leaders, managers and practitioners when they are:

- Developing and delivering their pre-vocational offer;
- Considering the implications for the professional development support needs of staff involved in prevocational design and delivery.

The Foundation would like to thank all six case study providers; for their time, commitment and help with the development and final production of the case study material.

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Annex 1

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