



THE EVALUATION OF EXCELLENCE CLUSTERS:

Final Report

**Sue McMeeking
Anne Lines
Sarah Blenkinsop
Sandie Schagen**

March 2004

CONTENTS

	page
1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Evaluation Activities 2003	2
1.3 Structure of the Report	3
2. MANAGEMENT AND EVALUATION OF CLUSTERS	5
2.1 Leadership of Clusters	5
2.2 Changes and Developments in Cluster Operation	6
2.3 The Role of the LEA	11
2.4 Monitoring and Evaluation of Local Clusters	12
2.5 Targets	15
2.6 Issues Arising	18
3. VIEWS OF PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATIVE WORKING	21
3.1 General Views on Partnership Working	21
3.2 Relationships between Local Schools	23
3.3 Primary-Secondary Transfer	30
3.4 Relationships with other Local Agencies	32
3.5 Sharing and Disseminating Good Practice	33
3.6 Benefits and Challenges of Partnership Working	35
3.7 Issues Arising	38
4. PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES	41
4.1 Progress of Individual Strands	41
4.2 Impact and Challenges	45
4.3 Issues Arising	53
5. THE TAILORED STRAND	55
5.1 Main Aim of Involvement in the Tailored Strand	55
5.2 Activities Undertaken	57
5.3 Training and Training Needs	59
5.4 Partnership Approach to the Tailored Strand	60
5.5 Benefits and Difficulties Encountered	62
5.6 Successes and Challenges of the Tailored Strand	63
5.7 Issues Arising	67
6. FUTURE PLANS	69
6.1 Changes Planned up to 2006	69
6.2 Expectations for 2006	70
6.3 Sustainability	71
6.4 Issues Arising	72

7. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS	75
7.1 Composition of Cluster Partnerships	75
7.2 Management and Funding	77
7.3 The Gifted and Talented Strand	79
7.4 The Learning Mentor Strand	81
7.5 The LSU Strand	83
7.6 The Tailored Strand	83
7.7 Issues for Consideration	85
REFERENCES	89

1. INTRODUCTION

This document is the final report of the longitudinal evaluation of Excellence Clusters, undertaken jointly by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) and the Centre for Educational Research at the London School of Economics (LSE). It began in July 2001 and is now complete. Three interim reports have been produced, as well as an initial progress report, and these are referenced in this document. In this chapter we outline the background to the evaluation, the research activities undertaken since the third interim report was submitted in August 2003, and the structure of the report.

1.1 Background

Excellence Clusters (EC) represent a development of the government's Excellence in Cities (EiC) policy initiative. Clusters have been formed in areas of deprivation which are not located in the inner cities. The EC initiative has four Strands (compared with seven in EiC): Gifted and Talented, Learning Mentors, Learning Support Units (LSUs) and the Tailored Strand, which is unique to EC and offers flexibility for Clusters to define an area of work reflecting local needs and priorities.

The evaluation has focused on the work of 11 Clusters: the first seven Excellence Clusters announced in October 2000 and the four Clusters announced in February 2001. All 11 Clusters began operation in September 2001, although implementation of the Strands tended to be slow.

The evaluation has adopted a mainly qualitative methodology, with three main areas of research activity:

- ♦ in-depth interviews with Cluster Chairs,¹ to gain an overall perspective of the development of the initiative; where appropriate, key LEA personnel were also interviewed; three rounds of interviews were undertaken, in the autumn term of 2001, 2002 and 2003
- ♦ surveys of all 166 schools in the 11 Clusters, undertaken in the spring term of 2002 and repeated a year later in order to facilitate assessment of progress; the response rate was approximately two-thirds in the first year, and slightly less in the second

¹ Cluster Chairs are usually headteachers from participating schools. No funding was provided for partnership managers, and therefore heads usually carry out the role in addition to their other duties; in some Clusters, the Chair rotates annually. However, a few Clusters have decided to fund a post (usually part-time) variously described as director, coordinator or manager.

- ♦ two rounds of case-study visits to selected Cluster schools were undertaken in 2002 and 2003, in order to explore the implementation and impact of Clusters at school level; during the first round, Cluster Strand coordinators were also interviewed; the second round focused particularly on the development of the Tailored Strand.

This final report focuses on the second round of visits to schools, and the final interviews with Cluster Chairs and other key personnel; it also aims to summarise the findings from the evaluation as a whole.

1.2 Evaluation Activities 2003

The second round of visits to Cluster schools took place during the summer and autumn terms of 2003. It was decided to focus on those Clusters which had parental and/or community links as a theme of their Tailored Strand work.

We felt it important to focus on the Tailored Strand, since that is the unique feature of Excellence Clusters (the three core Strands will be covered comprehensively in the evaluation of Excellence in Cities Policy). Although the overarching theme is raising attainment, Clusters are addressing this objective in different ways. Developing parental and/or community links is a path that a number of Clusters have chosen, and one that we felt would be worth exploring in depth.

We therefore visited two or three schools in each of six Clusters (a total of 14 schools). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior managers (headteachers or deputies), and staff playing key roles in Tailored Strand activities (this included teachers, Learning Mentors, and staff employed specifically to work with the families of pupils).² In total, 33 school-based personnel were interviewed.

While the visits focused on the Tailored Strand, senior managers interviewed were also questioned on broader issues relating to Cluster work and partnerships. An issue that had arisen in previous fieldwork concerned the role of the ‘more successful’ school;³ in order to explore this further, we ensured that the schools selected for visits included more successful schools as well as core schools.

² In this report the term ‘family contact worker’ is used to designate staff appointed to such roles, although different names were used in different Clusters.

³ Clusters are required to include at least one ‘more successful’ local school, such as a Beacon or Specialist school. In order to preserve anonymity, given the small number of schools involved, we refer to all such schools as ‘more successful’ rather than by specific type. The term is used as a generic description rather than a value judgement.

Between September 2003 and January 2004, the third and final interviews with Cluster Chairs⁴ were undertaken – either face-to-face (if this fitted in with a Cluster visit) or by telephone. These provided an opportunity for Chairs to reflect on the progress of the Clusters, and on the prospects for the future when Cluster funding comes to an end. Interviews were carried out with 14 key personnel from the 11 Clusters. Ten of those interviewed held, or had held until recently, the position of Cluster Chair or joint-Chair. The four remaining interviewees held, or had held until recently, the position of Cluster Coordinator or Director.

An evaluation of ten Clusters (including nine covered in this evaluation) was undertaken by Ofsted during the autumn of 2002 and spring 2003 (Ofsted, 2003). We make reference to this report where relevant.

1.3 Structure of the Report

The next chapter, based on interviews with Chairs, examines the overall management and evaluation of the initiative at local level. Chapter 3 reports the views of Chairs and senior managers within the individual schools regarding Cluster activities and partnerships. Chapter 4 reports the views of Chairs regarding the progress of the Strands, and the overall progress and outcomes of the initiative. Chapter 5 reports the development of the Tailored Strand in those Clusters with a focus on parental and community links. This chapter is largely based on interviews with school staff, but reference is also made to the Chair interviews where pertinent. Chapter 6 is based on the interviews with Chairs and considers the sustainability of the initiative and the future plans of local Clusters.

In the final chapter, we summarise the overall evaluation of Excellence Clusters, and identify issues to be considered with reference to future initiatives of a similar kind.

⁴ Here, and throughout this report, the term ‘Chair’ is used generically to include interviewees who played the key role in managing the work of a Cluster.

2. MANAGEMENT AND EVALUATION OF CLUSTERS

This chapter is based on the third and final tranche of 14 interviews carried out with Cluster Chairs and others holding key management positions at Cluster level.

The focus in this chapter is on the development and progress of Clusters *as a whole* rather than on individual schools. Aspects of Cluster management, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation are discussed. Reference is made to earlier reports to provide a picture to date of the maturing of the EC initiative.

2.1 Leadership of Clusters

The leadership of the EC initiative at local level continued to be characterised by the close involvement of the most senior staff in participating schools. Cluster Chairs or joint-Chairs were nominated or volunteering headteachers of partnership schools. As last year (see Schagen *et al.*, 2003a), the majority of interviewees holding this post, or who had held the post until recently, were headteachers of secondary schools (nine, but only one primary headteacher). The Ofsted inspection of Clusters reported that having headteachers as overall leaders and managers was useful in a number of respects, in that they:

- ◆ know the strengths and weaknesses of Cluster schools
- ◆ understand the issues and constraints affecting them
- ◆ have a direct interest in improving the education of their pupils.

Cluster headteachers were observed to work well together and were generous in giving their time to setting up the necessary local infrastructure needed to implement what was usually a clear and shared vision (Ofsted, 2003). However, their time is inevitably limited, and the lack of a central coordinator was regretted by many interviewees (see Schagen *et al.*, 2003a, and Section 2.6.1 below).

Ofsted also noted that *'The management is best where the cluster delegates the responsibility for managing the implementation of the work to an executive coordinator'*. Four interviewees held, or had held until recently, the post of Cluster Coordinator or Director with funds being top-sliced to pay for this position. In some Clusters, the post of Chair existed alongside that of overall

Cluster Coordinator or Director, in others the post of Chair was subsumed. In some cases, LEA personnel held these roles.

To preserve anonymity and facilitate easier reading of the report, all 14 interviewees are subsequently referred to as 'Chairs'.

Overall, there had been a great deal of continuity in those holding the post of Chair, providing considerable stability in terms of the leadership of many Clusters. Although there had been a change of Chair in three Clusters as it rotated to others in the partnership, nine interviewees had remained in post since the previous year and, of the 14 interviewees, nine had been in post since the early days of the initiative when they were involved in bid preparation and in the early planning stages.

In some Clusters there were reports of changes in the headship of participating schools impacting on Cluster operation at local level and within the schools. In one Cluster, the change in the headship of a participating school was seen as a benefit to the initiative because of the new headteacher's positive commitment to EC. On the other hand, the Chair of another Cluster which had seen many changes of headteachers in its schools, felt that the new headteachers were not always as committed to aspects of the initiative as previous colleagues who had been involved in the early discussions and planning of the initiative. In many Clusters, the Tailored Strand, in particular, was based on consensus between participating headteachers on what were seen as the most pressing local issues at the start of the initiative (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of the Tailored Strand). Clearly such consensus may not continue if new headteachers are appointed (or indeed, as the initiative progresses). In one Cluster where there was a policy of rotating the Chair, there had also been a lot of change in the headship of participating schools. Despite these changes, a core of people and the involvement of LEA officers throughout the initiative were reported to have provided overall continuity and stability.

2.2 Changes and Developments in Cluster Operation

In this section, changes and developments in Cluster operation over the past year are discussed. These occurred for various reasons including the introduction of other, related, government initiatives, changes within the LEA including the creation of new Cluster posts, and as the result of changes within the Clusters/schools, such as staff changes. In some instances, changes were made as a result of the inspection of the initiative carried out by Ofsted and/or as part of local monitoring and evaluation by the Clusters themselves.

2.2.1 The creation of new local Clusters

In the first tranche of 11 Clusters, two LEAs had more than one Cluster. An important development over the last year has been an increase in the number of local Clusters within these and other LEAs. This occurred as part of the expansion of the EC initiative in some local authorities and/or the transformation of Statutory Education Action Zones (EAZs) into Clusters.⁵ The availability of the Leadership Incentive Grant (LIG) had also had an impact in this regard in that it requires local schools not already in a Cluster, to make partnership arrangements.⁶

The development of these new Clusters was seen to have had a number of important consequences for the original EC partnerships. In some cases new, or more broadly-based LEA management structures had been created as some LEAs sought to develop a coherent and strategic approach to the management of the increasing number of Clusters in their authorities. For example, two Clusters (in different LEAs) reported the creation of a new LEA post of Coordinator operating across all local Clusters. In one instance, the person assuming this post had held key roles as Gifted and Talented and Learning Mentor coordinator in the original Cluster. In the second case, the new Coordinator was the former Director of the EAZ (which had become an Excellence Cluster in September 2003) and had assumed management of both the new and the original Cluster. This was felt to have resulted in economies of scale through combined management. In this Cluster, it was reported that there were joint management meetings as well as meetings of the full partnership. There had also been an increase in meetings and networking between EC Strand members. Further evidence of an increasingly coordinated response by the LEA was that the new Coordinator had also assumed responsibility for other EiC-related activities within the authority, including Aimhigher⁷ and the Behaviour Improvement Programme (BIP).⁸

⁵ By 2005, 41 Statutory EAZs will be transformed into Excellent Clusters. In some areas, this process has already begun.

⁶ Beginning in April 2003, the Leadership Incentive Grant (LIG) was made available to 1400 mainstream secondary schools in challenging circumstances and provides £125,000 per school per annum for three years. Funding is provided for leadership teams to transform the delivery of education so that pupils are not disadvantaged by any challenging circumstances faced by the schools. There is an emphasis on collaboration between schools to strengthen leadership, enhance teaching and learning and to establish a culture of high expectations. All EiC and EC secondary schools are eligible for the LIG as well as schools with less than 30 per cent of pupils achieving five or more A*-C GCSEs in 2001 or 2002, or whose pupils are drawn from areas of significant social deprivation defined as more than 35 per cent of the pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) as of January 2002.

⁷ Aimhigher began as the Excellence Challenge initiative in September 2001. Focused on 13-19 year olds, it aims to raise standards in the provision of education and to increase the numbers of young people from deprived areas entering post-16/higher education (HE). It includes an emphasis on improving the links between HE, FE colleges and schools to aid transition of students between sectors and to encourage collaborative working between all institutions in an effort to improve the provision of education. The initiative has a number of Strands. Strand 1 funds a range of school and college activities to encourage partnerships between relevant institutions and support pupils in order to successfully increase attainment, raise aspirations and promote university applications. Strand 1 has been part of the EiC and EAZ initiatives since September 2001. From September

In a third Cluster, the expansion of the EC initiative, through the creation of new Clusters and the transforming of a Statutory EAZ to a Cluster in December 2002, had led to the allocation of an additional LEA Adviser to the EC initiative. There was also report of an agreement with the LEA that the School Adviser's brief would be extended to include monitoring of some aspects of the work of the Cluster, although this had yet to materialise. However, the expansion of the initiative in the LEA had led to an overall increase in the workload of Strand coordinators who, as a consequence, were spread more thinly across the individual Clusters. In addition, poor coordination within the Strands was felt to have contributed to a net decrease in effectiveness overall in spite of the additional staffing. On a more positive note, it was felt that the relationship between the original Cluster headteachers and the LEA advisers was improving '*on a basic social level*' as they spent more time working together as part of the initiative.

The degree to which local Clusters within the same LEA were working together was variable, although, as mentioned above, two of the original tranche of LEAs involved in EC have had two Clusters since the beginning of the initiative. Whilst key staff, for example, Strand coordinators, operated across the Clusters, the extent to which the schools themselves were working together differed. In one of these original LEAs, it was reported that there had been a number of joint activities. In the second LEA, formal arrangements had been made to share practice and evaluate each other's work, but it was felt that this form of collaboration was time consuming and '*never really took off*'.

In the case where a new Cluster had been created from the recent transformation of the local EAZ, there were felt to be issues of coordination between the two Clusters as a result of differences between the EC and EAZ initiatives. For example, whilst the former EAZ had been involved in the Aimhigher programme, this was a new undertaking for the original Cluster. Work was going on to promote links and initiatives between the two Clusters with, for example, some EAZ methods of working being '*imported*' into the new arrangement. The Chair of the original Cluster felt that despite shared meetings and activities, the two local Clusters operated '*as discrete entities*'. This was also the case in a second authority where, although the original Cluster was assisting in the development of plans for the new Cluster and in

2003, all of the secondary schools involved in the EC initiative became part of this Strand of the initiative as part of the expansion of the Aimhigher programme. The focus in the EC schools is on the widening participation and the Gifted and Talented elements of the Strand.

⁸ The Behaviour Improvement Programme (BIP) was set up in July 2002 as part of the National Behaviour and Attendance Strategy. It is aimed at improving poor behaviour and attendance in schools where such issues form significant barriers to learning and pupil progress. Originally 34 local authorities were asked to target resources on a small number of secondary and primary schools with the greatest behaviour and attendance problems. Phase 2 of BIP saw it extended to a further 27 LEA areas under the EiC initiative where it forms part of the behaviour and attendance element of EiC.

offering advice and sharing information, the individual partnerships operated separately from each other.

2.2.2 New initiatives

A number of key initiatives had impacted on the work and relationships of local Clusters. The most significant of these were Aimhigher, LIG and BIP, each of which was described in footnotes earlier. The relevance of the initiatives to the work of the Clusters and the eligibility of EC schools to participate in them brought considerable extra funding into the Clusters, led to the development of relationships with other local schools/educational providers (e.g. further education (FE) and HE providers) outside of the EC network, and resulted in the expansion of Cluster ‘teams’ to include, for example, the Aimhigher coordinator. Involvement in these initiatives was felt by one Chair to be facilitated by the fact that Cluster schools already had systems in place, e.g. Learning Mentors and Gifted and Talented coordinators, which promoted involvement in related initiatives.

However, the availability of these initiatives to EC schools had not been without its problems, especially with regard to the relationship between EC schools and others not eligible to participate (see Section 3.2.3).

2.2.3 Additional funding

Additional funding made available to local Clusters through the variety of new initiatives discussed above had an important impact on their development and operation. In addition, one Cluster reported that two local councils had provided Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding for the training of 12 Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) to work in Cluster schools. Another reported that some primary schools had used the Children’s Fund and SRB funding to provide Learning Mentors.

2.2.4 Staffing issues

Personnel changes within an LEA as the result of re-organisation or review were seen as having, or likely to have, an important impact on the operation of four Clusters. In two cases, these changes were seen as being for the better. One interviewee reported that the new managing director of the education authority had been closely involved in a Cluster review and was making changes for the better. In another case, a new LEA Cluster liaison officer had been appointed, providing welcome clarity for the local Cluster where, *‘it used to be the case that it was difficult to know who we were working with’*. However, changes in personnel in the finance department of one LEA had created difficulties for two local Clusters. Whereas previously staff had a good understanding of EC funding mechanisms, the new staff did not understand the system as well, partly because EC was *‘out of the ordinary’*, i.e. out of step with normal LEA practice. In some cases, this had led to expected funds not being received. A new Adviser allocated to the Cluster

was able to sort out particular issues but, as one of the Cluster Chairs put it, *‘it is in the third year and, you think, by now I shouldn’t even have to worry about this.’*

Changes in the headship of participating schools was mentioned in Section 2.1. There were also reports of other personnel changes affecting Cluster operation within the schools. In one Cluster where several new headteachers and other staff had been appointed, the schools were less involved in Cluster activities because of the disruption this had created. One Cluster Chair reported continuing problems with the recruitment and retention of staff in the local area and the difficulties this created generally and for the initiative. He had recently seen the loss of the LSU manager in his own school which was also in the throes of recruitment. The departure or illness of key staff may also create extra work for others, disrupt Cluster activities and/or, impact on overall Cluster targets.

There were reports of expansions in the number of personnel involved in local EC initiatives, a sign of success which could however create its own problems. For example, one Chair reported that the success of the Learning Mentor Strand and the demand for such personnel in schools had led to the employment of more Learning Mentors. This was creating pressure for the Lead Learning Mentor and they were looking to increase his/her time allocation.

2.2.5 Changes in the composition of Clusters

Changes in the composition of the Clusters had occurred in one authority because of the creation of a new Cluster from the old EAZ. The original Cluster had been reduced by four schools which had moved to the new Cluster. Another authority facing the same issue had yet to decide whether the EAZ would form a new Cluster or be amalgamated with the existing one. As more EAZs are transformed into Clusters, this is likely to be an issue for an increasing number of authorities.

In another local authority, it was the closing and amalgamation of local primary schools that was seen as likely to have an effect on the Cluster in the future. The newly created (larger) schools would become part of the Cluster and would lead to a net increase in pupil numbers within the Cluster.

2.2.6 Changes in management structures and processes

As mentioned in Section 2.2.1, some changes in EC management structures had occurred as some LEAs put new structures in place in response to the increase in local Clusters and new initiatives related to the work of EC. In some cases, additional LEA personnel had been assigned to cover or include the EC initiative as part of a more strategic approach. There were mentions of a more strategic approach within individual Clusters too. One Chair reported

changes in the decision-making process, with the headteachers involved described as acting more strategically. There had been changes in the management structure, with Strand coordinators from the individual schools working alongside 'Network Learning Coordinators' and led by deputy headteachers from Cluster schools. Curriculum leaders were also involved in the new arrangements.

It was reported in one Cluster that the Cluster had developed '*enormously*' over the last year and now had a Cluster Manager, an Aimhigher coordinator plus a number of ancillary support workers. The Gifted and Talented coordinator had recently left and the new Cluster Manager was re-considering Gifted and Talented work as part of a reorganisation of Cluster administration and management. Another Cluster was considering whether it needed a Cluster Coordinator or administrator. As the LEA utilised the £10,000 they received for coordination for funding Strand coordinators, they were reported to be reluctant to provide an overall Coordinator as well. The other options considered included sharing a Coordinator with another local Cluster, and an expansion of the role of the coordinator for the Aimhigher initiative to include Cluster coordination.

2.3 The Role of the LEA

Reports indicated that the LEAs were continuing to play a variety of roles and that the degree of involvement varied. As the initiative progressed, there had been some increase in LEA involvement in the work of some Clusters, although some were more pro-active than others. Following a period of involvement of the LEA in the initial stages of the initiative, in bid preparation, etc., a small number of Clusters reported a decrease in LEA involvement to allow schools to drive the initiative for themselves.

The Ofsted inspection noted that the most successful Clusters were those with strong LEA partnerships, where LEAs had been involved in helping with the initial bid, and had continued to provide professional advice, assistance and support (Ofsted, 2003). As already discussed, a number of LEAs had personnel in place acting as Cluster Coordinators or Directors providing the opportunity for a more strategic local approach, especially important as the number of local Clusters increases and opportunities to be part of new, related initiatives present themselves. LEA personnel also held other key posts such as Strand coordinators, operating, in some cases, across Clusters where there was more than one in the LEA, which provided the opportunity for a coordinated approach across the Clusters. In addition to the creation of a more strategic overview of Cluster developments, a continuing or increasing role of the LEA mentioned by interviewees was in the monitoring and evaluation of Cluster activities.

One Cluster reported greater pro-activity by the local LEA coupled with an increased understanding of the EC initiative over the last year. Another reported that in the middle two years of the Cluster initiative, the LEA '*was not involved at all*'. Recently they had been more pro-active, with more responsibility for the initiative. Despite some difficulties, communication and involvement with the LEA had improved. Another Cluster reported that the LEA's understanding of the initiative had improved, and they had appointed a coordinator with oversight of developments within the whole authority which now had several Clusters. In another Cluster also, the creation of new management structures was seen as evidence of the LEA, '*trying to hold everything together – both the strategic and operational role*', and that while the LEA had a similar role to previous it now had '*more of a handle on what goes on*'.

The role of the LEA continued to be seen in a very positive light in some Clusters. The adoption of an LEA stance as support or facilitator for the EC schools, with an emphasis on working in close partnership with them, was well regarded. One Chair described the LEA's steering role as very important and a crucial '*spur*' to development. The LEA had acted as facilitators whilst devolving decision-making to the Cluster schools. This view was reiterated in another Cluster where a similar arrangement operated. Here it was felt that the LEA had been a driving force and that the initiative would have presented a tremendous challenge to the schools had they not had the support of the LEA: if they had left the schools to it, or been too directive, that would not have worked either.

2.4 Monitoring and Evaluation of Local Clusters

We reported last year (see Schagen *et al.*, 2003a) that processes for the monitoring and evaluation of EC were emerging. This year, most Clusters had some monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in place, although the Ofsted inspection noted that few Clusters were good at monitoring and evaluation of the initiative overall and of the individual Strands (Ofsted, 2003).

One Cluster Chair reported that monitoring and evaluation were now seen as the main challenge which was not the case in the beginning. The Ofsted inspection of Clusters had clearly focused attention on the issues and had impacted on Cluster operation, not only in terms of what was reported but also the fact that the inspection had been regarded as an important event. One Cluster Chair reported that the inspection had focused people's minds in the lead-up to the inspection and that it had '*sharpened up the vision of the Cluster*'. However, another reported that the inspection had led to a '*dip*' in Cluster development as preparations were made for the inspection. Since then, momentum had picked up and the Cluster had entered a new phase of development.

Another Cluster Chair reported that although the Cluster had a largely favourable Ofsted inspection, there were some minor issues which the LEA, conscious of its status as a high-performing LEA, was keen to address. Some LEAs have always played a role in the monitoring and evaluation of local Clusters and this has continued. In others, LEA involvement in the Cluster in this way has increased over the last year or has/will become more sharply focused. For example, one Cluster Chair reported that the LEA Advisers' brief would be extended to include EC activities and that they would monitor some of the EC work which, it was hoped, would lead to reflection and evaluation and a consideration of how EC fitted in with the local school improvement agenda.

2.4.1 Methods of local monitoring and evaluation

All of the Clusters had, or were in the process of, establishing procedures for local monitoring and evaluation. One Cluster Chair admitted to poor previous performance in this area and was making plans for a more formalised approach. Another admitted to being a '*little soft*' on the issue in the past and was tightening up its procedures, following criticism from Ofsted. The LEA was closely involved in this process. The conversion of the local EAZ to a Cluster was the stimulus for a tightening up of procedures in another Cluster. With the advent of the new Cluster, the monitoring system had been reviewed. The EAZ had been monitored against its action plan and, in particular, against the objectives it had to achieve. The original Cluster, on the other hand, had a plan that was two years old and it did not have the same clarity as the EAZ's plan. Therefore a major review leading to the same pattern of monitoring for both Clusters was planned, with each school developing an action and improvement plan for each Strand. Schools would be asked to make termly reports on progress, in a standard format and responding to specific questions (for example, detailing the percentage of time spent by Learning Mentors on different activities). This would be fed back to the Cluster so there would be a report on each of the Strands and the key issues arising.

Other Clusters also tended to focus their monitoring and evaluation on individual Strands. In two Clusters, school-based staff (for example Strand coordinators) prepared self-evaluations or completed questionnaires regarding the progress of the Strands in the school. In another, Strand audits were carried out by the LEA Strand coordinators using a similar format for each Strand, and these fed into the monitoring and evaluation process. Members of one Cluster executive group visited schools. The regular meetings of Strand coordinators also provided an important opportunity for monitoring and evaluation. One Cluster Chair reported that the main monitoring process was the regular half-termly meetings of the Strand coordinators. Another reported that information on the progress of the individual schools was shared at regular executive management group meetings, and decisions, such as whether to channel more funds to a particular school, were made. These decisions were then reported to the full partnership group. Two Cluster Chairs

described annual conferences where all the partnership headteachers considered what had been accomplished and planned for the following year.

2.4.2 Cluster successes/concerns revealed by local monitoring and evaluation

A number of Cluster successes and concerns were revealed by local evaluation and monitoring and by the Ofsted inspection. Reported here is an *overall* picture of these successes and concerns, although the following caveats provided by the interviewees should be borne in mind:

- ◆ Individual schools within the Clusters will perform differently depending on the particular focus of the initiative within those schools and the local issues faced. Commitment to the initiative or to the various Strands, and the quality of staff in key EC roles will also have an impact.
- ◆ Clusters do not all focus on the same issues.
- ◆ It is not always possible to quantify ‘success’, or to attribute improvements to the impact of one particular initiative.

Successes and concerns

The interviewees were asked to comment upon the *particular* successes and concerns revealed by monitoring and evaluation. Two respondents referred to the difficulty of determining the overall impact of the initiative, and, in one Cluster, there was concern that the primary schools involved were not improving as consistently as the secondary schools. By contrast, one Cluster reported overall improvement/progress in teaching and learning, while another mentioned increases in pupil attainment at GCSE grades A*-C.

Most respondents, however, referred to particular EC Strands when outlining successes and concerns. A number of interviewees referred to the success of the Learning Mentor Strand in terms of an overall positive impact; in addition, there were reports of a positive impact of the Strand in the primary schools in one Cluster, and an impact in some primary schools and all secondary schools in another. Another noted the success of the Strand in keeping pupils in school who might otherwise be excluded. Improvements in pupil behaviour and a lower number of permanent exclusions were attributed to the impact of both the Learning Mentor and LSU Strands and a specific reference was made to the success of the secondary LSUs. Whilst no concerns were expressed about the Learning Mentor Strand, a number of individual concerns about the LSUs were cited. These included a lack of impact on pupil behaviour and on reducing the number of permanent exclusions in one Cluster, and concern about the quality of the service received by primary schools from secondary LSUs in another Cluster.

The Gifted and Talented Strand was cited as a particular success in a number of instances. Interviewees mentioned its success in providing a clearer picture

of pupil skills and of how these could be developed, the extent to which it provided more opportunities to stimulate pupils, and the greater emphasis on providing challenge for pupils in the classroom. In one Cluster it was judged that the best Gifted and Talented practice was in the primary schools; in another Cluster the primary Gifted and Talented work was causing concern. In one Cluster, a wide range of Gifted and Talented activities were reported and it was felt that these needed to be coordinated and streamlined.

The Tailored Strand has a wide variety of foci across the individual Clusters (see Schagen *et al.*, 2002b, and Schagen *et al.*, 2003a). Particular successes attributed to this Strand were a positive impact on improving examination results in a Cluster with a focus on parental partnerships, and a successful focus on attendance issues in another. In one Cluster it was reported that there had been a sharing of relevant expertise in relation to this Strand, and participation in relevant initiatives. There were, however, a number of concerns, including dissatisfaction with some parts of the Strand in one Cluster, the need for more effective targeting of needy parents in another Cluster with a focus on parental partnerships, and the failure to meet some targets in a third. In two Clusters the Tailored Strand had been re-focused. A more detailed discussion of the Tailored Strand is in Chapter 5.

Several references were made to the positive impact of the initiative on collaboration between Cluster schools and more widely, although in one Cluster the need to ensure that good practice was rolled out to all Cluster schools was identified as an issue that needed to be addressed. Several management issues were also raised, including the need to ensure coordination within the Cluster, ensuring the effectiveness and ‘value for money’ of key personnel such as Strand coordinators, and the sporadic attendance of some headteachers at partnership meetings. On a positive note, it was felt that Cluster funding was used in innovative ways in one Cluster, and that in another there had been improvements in the targeting of funds over the past year.

2.5 Targets

2.5.1 Targets met

The interviewees were asked to consider the extent to which the schools in the Clusters had met their targets. The picture to emerge might best be described as ‘mixed’. The following excerpt taken from a Year 2 final evaluation report prepared by the Cluster Coordinator and others, gives a flavour of these mixed fortunes in one Cluster:

The overall targets remain, as in 2001/2, challenging. Apart from the outstanding success at key stage 4 with GCSE A-C grades, they have not been met. They remain aspirational and were all set above the*

2003 LEA averages! At key stage 1 the gains in reading are nearly three times that of the LEA average, and the writing figures are also better than those of the LEA as a whole. The mathematics results for the Cluster and the LEA at key stage 1 are disappointing. The Cluster figures at KS2 are well below target and only the English scores are better than all the LEA schools. At key stage 3 we have not shown any significant gain over the two years and last years [sic] success in English has not been sustained. At key stage 4 the two schools have had an outstanding year with their 5 A-C GCSE successes and we have a 19 per cent improvement, over double that of the LEA. They have sustained the 1 A*-G level of achievement but have not met their targets. They have however raised the average points score by 7 per cent [sic] to 28 per cent [sic] overall and are much closer, this year, to the target of 30 points.*

The overall unauthorised attendance figures ... for primary schools in the Cluster has still not changed significantly since 2000. Half the schools however improved on their 2002 figure but no school achieved their target. One secondary school shows little change over the two years whilst the other continues to improve.

It is good to see the number of permanent exclusions across all cluster schools sustained at only one, despite a 63 per cent rise in the other city schools. We have however had to use fixed term exclusions in some schools more frequently and have not met our targets, although fewer days were lost. At key stage 1, the overall fixed term exclusion rate doubled but 70 per cent of schools reduced the rate and $\frac{7}{13}$ achieved zero exclusions. At key stage 2 only $\frac{3}{13}$ schools improved on 2001/2 and there was a 65 per cent increase overall. At key stage 3 and key stage 4 there was a significant reduction in fixed term exclusions but the overall figure is still high.

This mixed picture was reflected by other interviewees. Whilst some Clusters reported a raising of standards overall, or of all schools meeting targets on average, variable performance in relation to the targets was the norm. In some cases, some schools had met targets, others had not, and some targets had been met or exceeded whilst others had not been met and remained aspirational. Some targets might never be met because of issues beyond the control of the schools, for example, those relating to pupil exclusion. However, whilst one Cluster Chair felt that there might not necessarily be year-on-year progress in individual Strands or subjects, it was believed that, overall, Cluster schools had moved forwards more than non-Cluster schools. Comparisons with other LEA schools were sometimes made in the discussion of targets met.

Where the meeting of specific targets was mentioned, there were a number of examples of some positive accomplishments, especially regarding pupil attainments, although it may not be possible to attribute these successes directly to the EC initiative. A number of successes regarding pupil attainment are given in the example above. In another Cluster, there were

reports of improvements in key stage 1 and key stage 2 listening skills, in key stage 1 national tests and GCSE results. Another Cluster reported improvements in key stage 2 and key stage 3 results and in the number of GCSE A*-C grades. One Cluster reported improvements in GCSE attainments above those of other local schools, and one reported an overall increase in national test scores of four per cent above other LEA schools.

Whilst two Clusters reported improved attendance figures, there were concerns about other indices of pupil behaviour, and in particular pupil exclusions, with three Clusters in particular reporting problems in meeting targets. According to one Cluster Chair, the exclusion targets would never be met because of the increase in the number of ‘*challenging*’ pupils for whom alternative provision should be made but was not available. In another Cluster, situated in an area of recent unrest, events had impacted on the schools and pupils had to be excluded; however, it was felt that the removal of disruptive pupils had made teaching and learning easier and could thus have facilitated the meeting of other targets. A third Cluster Chair also reported that one school had made a high number of exclusions which had had a dramatic impact on the Cluster overall.

2.5.2 Issues in relation to target-setting

Interviewees continued to voice a number of concerns about the Cluster targets and the target-setting process. Concerns about the targets themselves included:

- ♦ Variable success in achieving targets year-on-year may be due to the attributes of a particular cohort of pupils rather than poor teaching, etc.
- ♦ Targets set for a particular cohort at the beginning of the year are likely to be threatened when changes to the cohort occur during the year as the result of transition or a high degree of social mobility.
- ♦ Targets may not continue to be met where cohorts are lower in ability and aspirations as families move out of the local area because of specific local problems and issues.
- ♦ Some accomplishments may be impossible to quantify in terms of specific targets.
- ♦ There was some questioning of which targets schools could be solely accountable for.

There were also a number of concerns about the target-setting process occurring as part of the initiative. The fact that targets were set quickly and that there was sometimes no pupil information on which to base the targets were mentioned as important issues. This led to some questioning of the validity of the target-setting process and of the targets themselves, since, to quote one Cluster Chair, ‘*If you can’t trust the process, you can’t trust the targets either*’.

2.6 Issues Arising

The picture that emerges from the interviews with regard to the management and evaluation of the EC initiative overall, is of an initiative that is characterised by stable leadership at Cluster level but with local staffing changes creating issues and challenges.

The local monitoring and evaluation carried out revealed a number of successes, including many which related to the effectiveness of particular Strands, a positive impact on collaboration between schools, positive developments in teaching and learning, and an impact on pupil attainment. Concerns included some which related to the effectiveness of the Strands, the mixed impact of the initiative across Cluster schools and a number of management and coordination issues. There had been some success in meeting some of the targets set and especially a number of positive reports of an impact on pupil attainment. There had been some impact on pupil behaviour but this remained a concern in some Clusters – especially the issue of pupil exclusions.

A number of key issues are highlighted and discussed below.

2.6.1 Leadership

Many of the Cluster headteachers have been involved since the early days of the initiative, providing overall vision and stability within local Clusters. They have had and continue to have a key role in the leadership and management of the initiative at local level. Whilst this is seen as advantageous in some respects (see Section 2.1), it is expecting a lot of headteachers who are already overburdened (see Schagen *et al*, 2003a; Ofsted 2003). The lack of funding for an overall coordinator has been a continuing issue for many Clusters and, where funding is top-sliced to pay for such a role, this leaves less for the individual schools involved and for particular activities. This is itself a key issue, as the funding for EC is so much less than for Excellence in Cities. The EC initiative has clearly indicated the need to provide sufficient funding to ensure effective local leadership and management.

2.6.2 Coordination

The EC initiative is continuing to expand at a rapid pace leading to an increase in the number of Clusters overall, and within any individual LEA.⁹ The need

⁹ Although the focus of this evaluation has been on the first tranche of 11 Clusters which began operation in September 2001, at the time of writing (January 2004) there were 44 Clusters in operation (including two which were transformed EAZs), and another Cluster due to begin operation. It is proposed that another five will begin operation in 2004–5 and a further 15 in 2005–6, in which year the funding is to end. A further 39 Clusters will be formed before April 2005 as a result of the transformation of 39 statutory EAZs, in addition to the two EAZs that have already become Clusters, giving a total of 41 EAZs transformed.

for coordination and collaboration across local Clusters in particular can only increase as the initiative expands, if existing good practice is to be shared and if a coherent and coordinated local approach is to develop.

The spread of EC-related initiatives such as Aimhigher, LIG and BIP in the local areas increases the opportunities for cooperation and collaboration between schools, other educational providers and key local agencies, but deepens the need for a strategic and coherent approach. The role of the LEA and government in this regard will be crucial, and effective mechanisms will need to be developed and promoted.

2.6.3 Cluster composition

The issue of which schools should be part of a local Cluster has been a constant theme throughout the initiative. Whilst there was little doubt about the needs of the schools involved in EC, there has been a persistent concern that equally needy schools could not be included in the original Cluster arrangements, usually due to the limited nature of Cluster funding. Although some of the new government initiatives (e.g. LIG and BIP) target these other schools as well as EC schools, concern persists that some needy schools receive a lot of extra funding and others receive little. As the circumstances and results of some of the original EC schools improve, what might be an effective response in the light of the continuing difficulties of other local schools, and what role might these improving schools be able to play in helping others?

2.6.4 Identifying the impact of Clusters

Evaluation and monitoring strategies were reported to be highlighting particular successes. How far these successes can be directly attributed to the initiative is debatable, a point which several interviewees acknowledged, although most tended to regard the initiative as making a contribution to these successes.

3. VIEWS OF PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATIVE WORKING

The final round of interviews with school senior managers sought to elicit their views on the role and performance of their school in relation to the partnership and on how the Cluster had worked collaboratively. Aspects of partnership working were also a feature of the final round of interviews with Cluster Chairs, and both sets of data are considered in this chapter, which examines general views of partnership working, including benefits and challenges, the role of the ‘more successful’ schools within the local Clusters, relationships between local schools within and outside Cluster arrangements, student transfer issues, relationships with local agencies, and the sharing and dissemination of good practice.

3.1 General Views on Partnership Working

Fourteen schools were visited for the final round of research, six primary schools and eight secondary schools. Three of the secondary schools were described as being ‘more successful’, four were core schools and one reported that it had been included in the Cluster because of its proximity to the core group. Only one of the six primary schools was described as a more successful school. The core schools were in areas of high deprivation and were facing multiple challenges; some were designated as being in challenging circumstances while others had serious weaknesses or were in special measures. A headteacher said that selection criteria in his Cluster included the percentage of children having free school meals, attendance, examination results, ethnic diversity and all the PANDA (Ofsted) data. Primary schools were selected because they were feeders to a core secondary school, although there was also some attention paid to the socio-economic background of pupils. An example was given by the deputy headteacher of a primary school who said that *‘it was down to results. This school is 95 per cent Bangladeshi population, many of whom don’t speak English or have E2L, so our results were at the bottom end of the authority’*.

Earlier reports have indicated that collaboration was one of the major successes of Cluster partnerships, fulfilling one of the aims of the Clusters which was to provide schools with opportunities to work together. A majority of the headteachers said that, theoretically, it was possible for schools in different circumstances to work together; as one headteacher reported, the sharing of good practice could go on *‘to a great extent’*. In her view, it did not depend on schools sharing similar circumstances. In practice, however,

schools tended to find collaborative working challenging, especially if they were operating in different circumstances.

Collegiate working often depended on the individual characteristics of headteachers and their school ethos, in the opinion of one interviewee. For instance, they would need to be in agreement about the level of importance that each would attach to developing collaborative ventures. This headteacher went on to say that some schools had a 'marketing' ethos, while others were child-centred and more focussed on inclusivity; the headteachers of the latter type of school would be more likely to be keen on collaborating. The deputy headteacher of another school agreed, saying that she had really welcomed the drive for greater collaboration: *'I think that [partnership working] is the best, biggest, greatest impact out of this whole thing. There was almost a history of schools in competition, so this collaborative funding has made a big difference.'*

Comments from two headteachers in one Cluster indicated a lack of collaborative working. While they suggested that this lack of collaboration was not necessarily a weakness, especially as it was recognised that the schools were all very different, there was also now a realisation that there was scope for finding solutions to common problems. Both headteachers indicated that, in the future, it would be useful for schools to work together on some issues. The headteacher of one core secondary school showed little enthusiasm for collaboration, however, saying that his role was to direct resources, get students' behaviour correct and get the teaching and learning right. He added that, *'I see my job as protecting my staff from initiatives'*.

Whilst there were sometimes difficulties in collaborative working, there were also many successes. Senior school staff in some Clusters provided examples of how they shared expertise with colleagues from other schools:

- ◆ A deputy headteacher said that, in his Cluster, schools tended to specialise in different subjects and staff went for coaching to the appropriate lead school.
- ◆ In another Cluster, collaboration had stimulated exchanges of information between schools. A headteacher remarked that it was always good to find out how a school in similar circumstances deals with a specific issue.
- ◆ Two schools had found that appointing a member of the non-teaching staff to act as a link person with their partner schools had been beneficial in channelling communications, since the link people were not constrained by a teaching role.

An issue encountered in many Clusters was that schools were grouped together in ways that were not a comfortable fit. This was particularly evident in the choice of more successful schools that were often geographically distant

from the core schools and in areas that did not suffer the same levels of deprivation. This issue is discussed in more detail in the next section.

3.2 Relationships between Local Schools

In this section, relationships between local schools involved in the Cluster initiative are discussed. Included here is a discussion of the role played by those schools designated as ‘more successful’. The relationship between Cluster schools and other local schools is also discussed.

3.2.1 Relationships between Cluster Schools

Ofsted noted that relationships between Cluster schools had improved significantly and that headteachers had a better understanding of the issues faced by their primary and secondary school colleagues (Ofsted, 2003).

We have reported previously (see, for example, Schagen *et al.*, 2003a) that the EC initiative was welcomed for the opportunity it provided for fostering closer relationships and understanding between schools. Whilst there remained some variation in the importance attached to the initiative amongst Cluster schools, the overall commitment of most schools formally part of Clusters was reported. There was further evidence of effective partnerships and good relationships between schools and a continued view that the fostering of collaboration between schools was one of the main successes of the initiative overall.

The development of relationships between Cluster schools was facilitated by formal management structures. These included regular meetings and networking of the headteachers of all partnership schools, of Strand coordinators and others with key roles such as Learning Mentors. Whole Cluster events, such as INSET and ‘celebration’ days also served to develop the links between Cluster schools. One Cluster Chair reported that the EC schools now did things together because they were part of the local Cluster e.g. hosting performances for other schools: *‘It is all possible due to being in the Cluster...the network.’*

There was further evidence this year of some very positive relationships between Cluster schools. The joint Chairs of one Cluster reported a very close relationship between their two schools (one primary and one secondary). They had found it easy to work together and felt that their collaboration was constructive and useful: *‘We are even taking kids from her school now, we didn’t do that before’*. Another Cluster reported *‘a more collegiate approach to budget issues and problems’*. This was an important point in an authority where the allocation of resources to schools was described as *‘a contentious issue’*, and where secondary schools generally saw themselves in competition rather than in cooperation with each other, with all schools wanting more

rather than focusing on their needs.¹⁰ Another Cluster Chair reported that a school having difficulty in reaching its targets (because of the absence of the headteacher who had led the initiative in the school) had been paired with another Cluster school. It was reported in another Cluster that a Cluster school which had gone into special measures had emerged in record time: *'part of that was the support they had from other members of the Cluster'*.

There was some variation between Clusters in terms of the types of school partnerships being developed, although, overall, both within-phase and cross-phase relationships had been established and were working successfully.

Whilst one Cluster Chair reported that an increase in the collaborative ventures across schools in the same phase was a key feature of Cluster development over the last year, the primary schools were felt to have been more effective in this regard, for example, working collaboratively on classroom-based projects. Their greater effectiveness in this regard was felt to be a reflection of the fact that primary headteachers have a more direct involvement and impact on the curriculum than secondary headteachers. Because of this, it was felt that a different model to promote collaboration between the secondary schools was required and this was being investigated. In another Cluster, however, the secondary schools involved were looking at common curriculum approaches including common timetabling across the schools so they could offer joint courses.

We reported previously (see Schagen *et al.*, 2003a) that the initiative had a positive impact on the fostering of closer liaison between primary and secondary schools. A number of specific cross-phase arrangements were mentioned this year. One Cluster reported the establishment of 'mini-clusters' consisting of each of the core secondary schools working with two or three local primary schools. The secondary schools were reported to have a contractual relationship with these primary schools with regard to Learning Mentor and LSU provision. This was said to build upon previous arrangements. Because of the geographical spread of schools, another had also set up mini-Clusters based around the secondary schools within which liaison occurred rather than across the whole Cluster. Another Cluster Chair reported good links between secondary schools and neighbouring primaries which included master classes for gifted and talented pupils.

3.2.2 Role of 'more successful' school

The guidance for Clusters stated that each must include at least one 'more successful' school, although their role was not well-defined at the outset. In this light, it is perhaps not surprising that the role these schools should play as

¹⁰ Although Ofsted (2003) reported that *'Clusters use various formulae to ensure that money goes to those schools that have most to do'* (para 29), they noted in their conclusions that Clusters *'are still reluctant to make uncomfortable decisions to redirect resources. Partnerships need to recognise that Cluster funding should be channelled to where it will have the greatest effect'* (para 79).

part of local Clusters, has been a key issue throughout the initiative and one to which we have made previous reference (see for example, Schagen, *et al.*, 2002 and Schagen *et al.*, 2003a). The Ofsted inspection too noted that headteachers were often unclear about the role these schools should play in local Clusters (Ofsted, 2003).

In 2003, we reported the emergence of a number of positive relationships between these and other Cluster schools. This trend has continued and there were further positive contributions to the overall work of the Cluster and a development in the role over the last year. Although, in a few Clusters, the ‘more successful’ school still played little or no role, the headteachers of most more successful schools were happy to be involved. One secondary headteacher had been ‘*enormously pleased to be invited to be part of the scheme*’, and overall, senior managers in such schools tended to express appreciation of their membership of the Cluster, although, in a few cases, the additional funding appeared to be an important reason for their enthusiasm.

The interviews with Cluster Chairs and school senior managers gave an indication of the types of role being played by these schools within the various Clusters:

- ♦ One Cluster Chair reported that the local Beacon School had provided a focus for activities and a venue for events, for example, the annual Cluster conference was held at the school.
- ♦ Another Chair reported a change for the better in the response of the school, with the headteacher allowing staff to work with staff from other Cluster schools and to make important inputs to the work of the Cluster, e.g. as Strand coordinators and data manager.
- ♦ One Cluster Chair reported that the headteacher of the ‘more successful’ primary school had been centrally involved in the work of the Cluster as Chair of the Executive Group and had also taken a lead in the Learning Mentor Strand.
- ♦ Another interviewee reported that one infant school was closely involved with the Tailored Strand as part of its focus on writing. Another school was less involved because of changes in staffing, but took a lead on coaching because it was a full training school.¹¹
- ♦ The involvement of a Beacon primary school in the work of the Cluster was seen by one Cluster Chair as having a very positive impact. The headteacher had assumed responsibility for the Gifted and Talented Strand in the primary schools. He was described as very positive and had worked very collaboratively with other local primary schools.

¹¹ Training Schools are funded to facilitate networks of schools and Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) established to develop and implement initial teacher training (ITT). There are currently 168 primary and secondary training schools.

Two Cluster Chairs in particular commented on a greater impact being made by primary rather than secondary more successful schools where both were represented in the Cluster. In the Cluster discussed in the third example above, it was felt that the more successful secondary school had not worked as well in disseminating best practice as the primary school mentioned. According to the Chair of the Cluster, the secondary school saw its role as offering to help rather than being more pro-active, and other schools did not often take up the offer of help. Whilst the school led on the Gifted and Talented Strand for the secondary schools, this was felt to be the weakest Strand of the initiative. Similarly, the Chair of the Cluster discussed in the fifth example felt that the more successful secondary school had made less impact than the primary school although the school had been fully involved in the work of the Cluster. In another Cluster, whilst the more successful primary school was felt to work well with other schools because it had emerged from special measures to its current position through rapid improvement, the secondary school did not seem to have a great deal in common with the other Cluster secondary schools.

It continues to be the view amongst Cluster Chairs that the more successful schools should, in the words of one Cluster Chair, *'be facing similar challenges and disadvantages and making a very good job of it'*. They may be also seen as valuable (or not) in their ability to offer the kind of expertise being sought by Clusters in the current climate. In one Cluster, for example, concern was expressed that the more successful school had not always made a *'sufficient contribution'*, yet received *'huge extra funding for the contribution they were expected to make'*. In another, the Chair felt that it was hard to envisage the contribution the secondary school could make and how its inclusion might impact on the Cluster in the long term, since *'so many agendas have changed since that school was chosen as the more successful school. It's not a Specialist College, so that expertise isn't there, it hasn't become a Leading Edge [school] yet, we hope it will eventually.'*

There is an issue here about the role more successful schools should play and the impact they might reasonably be expected to have, given that their circumstances and pupil composition is often very different to that of other Cluster schools. This is an issue to which we have made previous reference (see references above) and which continued to be a concern this year. Ofsted too observed that where these schools were very different in nature to other Cluster schools, headteachers claimed their practices were not relevant to those of other schools (Ofsted, 2003). One Cluster Chair felt that part of the problem was that the role of these schools had never been made explicit and the lack of guidance on the contribution such schools might make had contributed to the difficulties. The uncertainty about the role it was appropriate for these schools to play was also evident within the schools themselves. Even at the time of the final round of interviews for this study,

some school staff were still indicating a lack of clarity about the function of more successful schools.

There were differences in the degree to which linking with more successful schools had encouraged core schools to adopt some of their successful practices, depending on a number of factors which included both the ideological and geographical distance between them. In some Clusters there was scant evidence that dialogues were taking place between staff in more successful and core schools, or that more formalised forms of good practice exchanges were taking place; indeed two senior managers in one Cluster reported that the more successful secondary school had played no role in the partnership. Others reported that there was no communication at all with the more successful school.

Headteachers in some core schools suggested that learning from more successful schools, which were usually viewed as being in less difficult circumstances, did not always sit happily with staff. This resulted in fewer exchanges of ideas and pedagogy than might have been anticipated at the outset. The headteacher of a more successful school remarked on the lack of collaboration, saying: *'We are a Beacon School as well and one of our Beacon strengths is parental and community involvement. The other Cluster schools can tap into this expertise if they want to, but they haven't yet'*. He recognised that, in addition to geographical distance, the school's Beacon status and its location in a less deprived area created a barrier between it and the other Cluster schools. He felt that other schools might be unwilling to accept help from a school in very different circumstances, and therefore did not wish to be proactive in offering expertise.

Other schools also had reservations about the ease with which they could work with dissimilar partners. As the headteacher of a Beacon primary school remarked: *'I get a lot of visits for all the things we offer under Beacon, but no one from the Cluster has come...Perhaps they just didn't see that [we] had things that would be of interest to them. It's to do with their perception or their need'*. Ofsted also reported that headteachers of the more successful schools were often reluctant to identify their own good practice so as not to alienate other Cluster schools (Ofsted, 2003).

The lack of similarity between core and more successful schools was sometimes raised as a barrier to closer collaboration by headteachers of core schools. They claimed that, since the more successful schools did not serve the same community or experience the same difficulties, it was difficult to see how they could provide examples of how best to deal with their particular issues and concerns. For example, a headteacher of a core secondary said that the successful schools were often in more middle-class areas and in completely different circumstances, adding that they could not offer him anything. On the other hand, another headteacher welcomed his school's link

with a more successful school, *'because it is outside of [town name] and therefore not tarred with the same negative image as the other schools in the Cluster'*.

The terms of the Cluster arrangements may also have had an impact on the role played by successful schools within the individual Clusters. Some senior managers from Cluster schools did not single out more successful schools as playing a particular role within the Cluster; rather, all schools worked together collaboratively. A Cluster Chair also reported that, while the designated school played a full role as an equal member of the Cluster and was fully involved in meetings and made contributions, it had not *'taken a lead'*. This was because the Cluster operated on the principle that no one school was *'superior'* to any of the others and that *'we all have things to learn from each other'*. However, the general view amongst the other schools in this Cluster was that it was difficult to see how the school could lead others that were very different in composition and when it was not involved in some of the Strands, e.g. the LSU Strand.

The geographical distance from other Cluster schools presented another issue to the more successful schools because, if they focused collaborative working on the schools within the Cluster, their own feeder and transfer schools would not be included as they tended to be outside of the Cluster. They tended to continue working with their existing feeder and transfer schools, while also participating in Cluster meetings.

Evidence from the schools suggested that it was the more successful schools that tended to express appreciation of the lessons they had learned from their partner schools. A deputy headteacher of a more successful high school remarked that good practice could be shared *'massively'*. She went on to talk about how her school could benefit from collaboration: *'If you go to a school in special measures, the staff have had to have intensive training, intensive change, so they are almost more up to date with modern teaching techniques than staff in the school where that has not been necessary...So, definitely, it's a two-way process'*. The headteacher of another more successful secondary school said that there were no problems with working with other schools in the Cluster, *'they are ready to learn from one another, I don't find there's a barrier there at all'*. This headteacher said that they had been able to learn from the core schools about how to deal with challenging pupils.

Headteachers of some core schools expressed a wish to learn from the more successful schools but complained that they were offered little or no support. On the other hand, there were more successful schools reporting they had experience to impart but there had been no demand for it. While these two examples were from different Clusters, they do lead to questions about whether or not Cluster schools were communicating as well as they should.

3.2.3 Links with other local schools

Despite the persistence of some issues relating to the inclusion of some but not other local schools in Clusters and some local jealousies regarding funding, the senior managers interviewed in the schools reported that their involvement in the Cluster initiative had not injured relationships with other local (non-Cluster) schools. Indeed, many Clusters worked on establishing links with other schools in their local areas, and many EC activities continued to promote links between EC and non-EC schools and other educational providers. Examples of these links are provided below:

- ◆ One Cluster comprised only of secondary schools had developed links with 20 primary schools. It was working with Years 5 and 6 on ‘*everything from maths to dance*’ in the way of curriculum development. Years 5 and 6 had been linked in with Years 8 and 9 and this curriculum initiative had been operating since March 2003.
- ◆ Another Cluster reported that EC activities had promoted links between schools and with the local FE provider because of the overlap between some Cluster activities and other initiatives targeted at 14-19 year olds.
- ◆ In another Cluster, the Learning Mentor and LSU work had led to links with other local schools. Rather than have a separate network for Cluster schools (since some other schools already had LSUs or had developed them since) it was decided to have an LEA-wide network of LSUs. Whilst this was felt to be a difficult area in which to share good practice because all schools seemed to run their LSU in their own distinctive way to suit their own circumstances, the Cluster schools were able to bring substantial help to other schools.
- ◆ Another Cluster reported joint meetings within and outside the Cluster, the holding of a ‘Sharing Excellence Fair’, and the development of a training model for coaching across the local authority.
- ◆ One Cluster held local conferences to which non-Cluster schools were invited, and distributed documentation from the conferences.
- ◆ One Cluster school had released staff to provide INSET for local, non-Cluster schools.

Links had also developed through involvement in other initiatives such as Aimhigher, LIG and BIP, bringing Cluster schools into contact with other local schools. One Cluster Chair, for example, was involved in supporting another Cluster in putting in their Aimhigher bid. (This Cluster Chair had led the Aimhigher bid for the local area.) Another Cluster Chair reported that EC, LIG, BIP and Aimhigher were all fostering partnerships between schools. It was reported that these various partnerships would be used as the basis for setting up collegiates within the area.¹² The EC model would be used in two

¹² Collegiates consist of groups of local schools working together, building upon the differences between them. They are seen as a means of addressing several key government concerns aimed at severing the link between underachievement and disadvantage; the provision of a broader 14-19 curriculum; and ensuring that the specialist schools system is responsive to parental choice.

of these collegiates. It was reported in one Cluster, however, that whilst other initiatives had promoted links with other schools, the non-Cluster schools had not, in turn, been involved in Cluster activities.

Links between schools were also being promoted by the creation of LEA-wide posts with responsibility for all the Clusters within the LEA. Such posts give the LEA a more strategic overview and the opportunities to promote closer relationships and sharing between all local schools – Cluster and non-Cluster schools alike. A key and increasing issue regarding the relationship with local schools for two Clusters was that of other schools' jealousy or resentment because of the amount of funding targeted at Cluster schools. This has been a problem since the start of the initiative but has been exacerbated by the provision of further funds for Cluster schools via initiatives such as LIG, BIP, and Aimhigher. One Cluster reported that whilst half of the local secondary schools belonged to a Cluster, half did not. This was creating a two-tier system because of the difficult financial circumstances of those secondary schools not in receipt of the extra funding. The Chair of the Cluster felt that the government seemed to see the EC initiative as a way of identifying areas of deprivation and channelling further money, yet other local schools might be in greater need of certain types of support (e.g. behaviour support through BIP) than Cluster schools. This had been the case in his own LEA and had created problems for the LEA which had tried to take a strategic view but had no means of accessing the BIP funding. It was felt that the situation was further exacerbated by the fact that not enough was being done to promote links with non-Cluster schools.

On a related point, another Cluster Chair reported changes in the circumstances of Cluster schools. His own school had now dropped to below the 35 per cent FSM level which was a prerequisite of Cluster involvement, while two other local secondary schools had risen above this threshold because part of their intake was now going to his school. In short, his school's involvement in the initiative had improved the fortunes of the school so that it was no longer in challenging circumstances but this had had a negative effect on other local schools.

3.3 Primary-Secondary Transfer

All primary schools were able to identify between one and three local schools to which most of their Year 6 pupils transferred. Most secondary school staff reported that students tended to transfer to their schools from two to six local primary schools, some of which were not in the Cluster. A few of the schools said that transfers took place with between 14 and 30 schools but there were usually particular circumstances leading to this much wider catchment area, such as being a single-sex or faith school.

While schools usually reported that there had been good transition stage links before the advent of the Cluster arrangements, some were also able to detail improvements that had taken place as a result of working more closely together. A Learning Mentor from a single-sex secondary school that had reported transfers from 20 schools, only half of which were in the Cluster, said that membership of the Cluster *'has certainly helped us with transition. We are getting used to knowing the kids and meeting them beforehand...This has made transition for individuals easier'*. A deputy headteacher from the same school gave an explanation of the process: *'There are a lot more cross-Cluster events, with coordination [across schools] with the SENCOs, from headteachers, management, teachers at all levels. They all work together, share ideas, with the aim of making it a seamless transition'*.

The headteacher of the more successful primary school in the same Cluster said that, in her view, involvement in the Cluster would help to promote primary-secondary transfer because there was additional collaboration and schools had come together to look at the curriculum and to look at the communities.

One of the more successful secondary schools, which reported receiving pupils from about 30 schools, only two of which were in the Cluster, nevertheless mentioned how the Cluster arrangements contributed to transition. The headteacher explained the process:

We decided that transition would be a good thing to focus on, so we have three days where the Year 6s come up, we use Key Stage 3 transition money to invite the Year 6 [teacher] and SENCO from the feeder primaries to come up to observe their kids in action. The Learning Mentors also bring in parents who may have been reluctant to come to school, who we felt sure we wouldn't have seen otherwise. They've been, met the staff, had a cup of tea, seen the LSU, so we hope we have broken down some barriers there.

One Cluster had decided that improving transition arrangements would be instrumental in enhancing links between primary and secondary schools. A primary headteacher said that, *'In the Cluster we are looking for things that would link us through, so transition came quite clearly into the foreground'*. In his opinion, the main benefit of working with Cluster schools was the gain in terms of continuity and progression, right through from key stage 1 to secondary school. He said that more activities had been set up to facilitate transfer and that the process operated more smoothly than in the past because the schools were now more used to working together.

Senior managers from three of the schools visited expressed doubt as to whether Cluster working had helped promote primary to secondary continuity and progress. One manager thought there had been little or no impact, while the other two said that there had not been as much progress as they would

have liked. A secondary headteacher in an area that had a good many small primary schools said that his school had not had enough time to spend on transition processes and, in addition, he was not happy with restricting liaison activities to primary schools that were members of the Cluster. Remarking that there had been reasonably good links with secondary schools before, the headteacher of a primary school said that she had hoped the Cluster would improve them; for example, she had hoped that pupils that had Learning Mentors in her school would be linked to a Learning Mentor in the secondary school, but that did not appear to have happened.

In local authorities where there were few or no sixth forms, some of the secondary school staff reported on links with tertiary providers such as sixth form colleges and further education colleges. Although links with the tertiary sector were not so strong as for the primary to secondary transition, some Clusters had forged closer links in order to enhance transition.

3.4 Relationships with other Local Agencies

We reported previously (see Schagen *et al.*, 2003a) that links with other local agencies were under-developed in some Clusters despite the recognition that such links were necessary to promote coordination and coherence in the tackling of local issues and to prevent the duplication of effort. This year, there was an indication of an increase in links: the Cluster Chair interviews indicated that all of the Clusters were developing links with other local agencies. In some Clusters these links were extensive: in others, less so.

In some cases, involvement with initiatives such as Aimhigher brought the Clusters into contact with other local agencies. The Connexions Service was the most cited link (referred to in eight Clusters). In some cases, but not all, this had arisen through involvement in the Aimhigher initiative. In one Cluster, the manager of the Connexions service was a member of the EC partnership board. Another Cluster had arranged meetings with Connexions Personal Advisers to ensure that they were not covering the same ground in different ways. This had not been particularly successful because Connexions had not been very effective locally.

A wide variety of other links were reported. A selection of these are described below to give a flavour of the types of partnerships being developed and the focus of activities:

- ♦ Links with the Youth Service were reported in one Cluster, where all of the secondary schools employed youth workers to support the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme in the schools.
- ♦ In the same Cluster there were links with the District Council which held an assembly each year. The EC secondary schools had already

participated in the assembly where they gave a successful presentation of the work of the Cluster. It was hoped that the primary schools would do something similar in 2004. The Council had also worked closely with gifted and talented pupils on town planning projects.

- ◆ Links with a local supermarket chain and a local food initiative as part of a focus on healthy diet and food preparation was reported by the same Cluster.
- ◆ One Cluster reported links with the Children's University, working with primary pupils at weekends and at summer schools.
- ◆ Another Cluster reported links with the Adult Education Service through the focus of the Tailored Strand on family partnerships, and was looking into links with local behaviour support teams to support the work of Learning Mentors and the family partnership team.
- ◆ This same Cluster described involvement in an Open University programme involving nine local schools and 105 gifted and talented pupils. The three secondary schools involved in the Cluster were part of the programme, which also included six other local schools.

Other links mentioned included the Library Service, the police, Family Learning, Sure Start, local FE and HE providers, local and non-local EAZs, and arts and environmental facilities.

3.5 Sharing and Disseminating Good Practice

3.5.1 With non-Cluster local schools

A range of formal, local mechanisms for the dissemination of Cluster good practice were mentioned by Cluster Chairs, including:

- ◆ Invitations to practitioners to attend partnership meetings to share good practice.
- ◆ Regular meetings of local headteachers and senior LEA officers, where Cluster progress was shared and ideas discussed.
- ◆ A database of examples of good practice to which EC contributed.
- ◆ Specific local events/activity days/conferences focusing on aspects of good practice, e.g. behaviour management, and teaching and learning strategies, or events to 'celebrate' good practice.
- ◆ Sharing practice through involvement in other local initiatives, e.g. LIG. One Cluster Chair reported that representatives from two LIG schools outside the Cluster had been invited to EC board meetings. Another reported that other local networks, including LIG, Aimhigher, the 14-19 network, and subject networks fed into each other.

- ♦ Training events, e.g. for Gifted and Talented coordinators, and for other groups not part of EC. For example one Cluster reported that Learning Mentors and Communities that Care shared training.
- ♦ The establishment of local forums. One Cluster Chair reported that an EiC and Good Practice Secondary Forum had been established which fed into other local structures.
- ♦ Visits to and from local schools.
- ♦ Regular newsletters.
- ♦ Local displays of Cluster work.
- ♦ Activities and good practice feeding into the LEA's Continuing Professional Development (CPD) mechanisms, for example, for Learning Mentors.

Informal mechanisms reported included networking and word of mouth.

3.5.2 With other Clusters

Only two Cluster Chairs indicated that there had been little or no sharing of good practice with other Clusters. Most Chairs reported sharing practice with other Clusters within the same LEA where two or more existed, and/or beyond.

Formal ways of sharing good practice were through specific events including road shows, good practice fairs, national conferences, exchanges and visits to and from other Clusters, through a variety of networks (e.g. amongst Strand coordinators, Learning Mentors, an LSU network, and through the Gifted and Talented network), offering advice, e.g. to EAZs undergoing transformation to local Clusters, joint activities (e.g. between Clusters in the same LEA), and the distribution of material on Cluster practice. On a more informal level, some Clusters reported the sharing of good practice between Strand coordinators at regular meetings across local Clusters, and the development of an effective e-mail network.

Two Clusters within the same LEA reported a formal programme of exchange visits and an ongoing arrangement involving the Gifted and Talented Strand in the primary schools, whereby each Cluster was evaluating aspects of the work of the other. There were no formal links between the secondary schools in the two Clusters. Time was a pressing issue, and the view was expressed in one of the Clusters that the amount of time it took to make such arrangements was not warranted. Another Cluster had links with its sister Cluster in the same LEA and had shared in joint activities, and a third had developed what was described as very good links with another local Cluster, again involving shared activities. There had been joint training events, for example, for Learning Mentors, and joint planning activities.

Other activities specifically mentioned included:

- ♦ hosting visits from other Clusters to see aspects of EC operation
- ♦ specific EC-related web-sites
- ♦ good practice fairs
- ♦ the development of written material, e.g. handbooks for Learning Mentors, made available to other Clusters
- ♦ addressing national conferences.

Time for collaboration and sharing and the absence of any systematic mechanisms have remained key issues for some Clusters. One Cluster Chair felt that it was hard to share practice in any systematic way because there was insufficient time and too many things to do within one's own Cluster and/or school. It was felt that there was no time allocated for the dissemination of good practice. This was a view shared in another Cluster which had only rarely shared practice because there was no capacity within the Cluster to do so. There was criticism of the DfES for not doing more to facilitate this. Although an 'e-mail' system of communication had been established by the DfES it was felt that this was a *mechanism* of dissemination, not a *method*.

3.6 Benefits and Challenges of Partnership Working

School senior managers were able to identify a number of benefits of Cluster working, including staff development, opportunities to exchange ideas with colleagues in other schools, the enhancement of experiences provided for pupils, more or better links with the community and, of course, additional funding. Cluster management groups had sometimes been the driving force behind cross-Cluster policies, including:

- ♦ reciprocal arrangements for placing pupils who were at risk of permanent exclusion
- ♦ working together to ensure cross-borough standards
- ♦ professional dialogues between headteachers and also between lead Learning Mentors.

Some headteachers referred to changes that Cluster working had made to the culture of schools, such that they were moving away from competition, towards being more collaborative. For example, a primary headteacher said that she was now meeting colleagues on a regular basis, which she described as a return to the way schools proceeded '*in the old days*'. She went on to say that Cluster working had brought about a new kind of companionship between the leaders of the schools. Sharing ideas and practices also saved schools from wasting time, each working individually to achieve the same outcome,

according to the headteacher of a primary school, who said: *'If we work together we have a chance to work across the board. We don't have to reinvent the wheel. We've all had similar problems and can help each other. It is nice to know you're not alone'*.

A number of schools were able to provide illustrations of ways in which ideas they had developed had been useful to other Cluster schools. The headteacher of a primary school said she hoped that her school had benefited partner schools, adding that each school is strong in different elements (in her school it was behaviour management) and Cluster partners could learn from each other.

In another Cluster, one school's LSU had been praised by Ofsted and they were able to disseminate working practices to other Cluster schools, while another school had pioneered a job description for Learning Mentors that had been taken up by others. Further examples of good practice that had been shared with, and taken up by, Cluster partners were given by the headteacher of a primary school. This school had shared their development of a 'walking bus' to get the children to school and had also instituted parents' workshops, which were highly regarded by other schools' Gifted and Talented coordinators. In another Cluster, a secondary headteacher said his school had used the funding: *'to develop Circle Time and nurture groups and now as a school we are in great demand for teaching other schools how to do it'*. The headteacher of a primary school in the same Cluster said he hoped his school had benefited others: *'We are in a ward with one of the highest levels of deprivation and unemployment, so if other schools come and work with us and realise we have things that are being done positively...there is no reason they can't do them in their areas'*.

There were some dissenting voices, however, including a secondary headteacher who felt there were *'two conflicting messages'*. He pointed out that he was responsible for recruiting the maximum number of pupils each year, and for achieving good GCSE results; this put him into competition with other schools in the Cluster. He questioned whether he should allow the sharing of his school's good practice with others, or keep it 'in-house' to provide the school with a lead. The headteacher of a more successful primary school was also reluctant to share good practice, but for a different reason: *'We haven't wanted it to feel that we are there to show them what to do. We haven't pushed our expertise.'* (see Section 3.2.2).

Cluster membership had also led to the development of new roles in schools, such as Learning Mentors, and these staff too, often held regular meetings to share ideas and to develop Strand activities. The headteacher of one primary school was *'meeting with headteachers and other colleagues in similar circumstances once a month. It's useful because we can compare notes, and there are networks for the [family contact workers] and the Learning Mentors*

[as well]'. The deputy headteacher of a secondary school had seen the benefits for staff: *'I think it has really opened staff's eyes to the kinds of strategies and techniques that people can use in schools. It has almost enriched the experiences of staff here'*.

Staff development was another benefit mentioned by a number of senior staff. For example, in one Cluster there had been combined staff development for LSU managers. Staff in a secondary school in this Cluster were working with primary schools to help develop innovative teaching and learning. In the words of the headteacher, partnership exists *'more for the doers than the management'*. A deputy headteacher said that, because there was now *'more time and space'*, she was able to attend a conference of interest to other Cluster schools which would be of benefit to them, presumably because she was able to represent the staff and also to cascade information to them.

Benefits to pupils were also illustrated by senior staff, for example by the deputy headteacher of a primary school who referred to a technology day held at another Cluster school where *'the children and teachers and Learning Mentors are all working together. So there is a lot of formal and informal cross-over'*. The deputy headteacher of a more successful secondary school noted another advantage of sharing across schools: *'[the school] also gets multi-cultural links from the other schools, big time. There are not many Asian and Afro-Caribbean students [at this school] at all, so when they are linking with the three other high schools in particular, they are getting a real multi-cultural experience that they probably wouldn't be able to get any other way'*.

The deputy headteacher of a secondary school spoke of the wider benefits provided by Cluster events: *'All the schools work together, and work with their wider community as well. Parents are involved in pupils' learning. One school wouldn't work as well with the community as a Cluster of schools do'*.

One of the more successful secondary schools had reached out beyond the Cluster. The headteacher said that schools had come from far away to see what they were doing: *'oddly enough, the biggest impact has been across the borough with schools who are not in the Cluster'*. She said that the school had sent out advanced skills teachers (ASTs) to give presentations, and the Gifted and Talented lead coordinator to provide INSET, but not to Cluster schools. She did acknowledge, however, that the school's imminent appointment as a Specialist School for Modern Foreign Languages may have been the driving force behind some of the requests for trainers.

Inevitably there were some challenges to working with other Cluster schools. For the more successful schools these were often related to the distance between themselves and other partner schools, which in some cases was many miles. In some cases, there was a different ethos in individual schools that

made collaboration more difficult. As one headteacher of a secondary school pointed out, *'The Cluster is a contrived geographical grouping. It is not a natural grouping of schools, it is superficial'*. Another barrier to partnership working was the time it took to set up and to attend meetings, as well as the additional preparation time needed to jointly plan activities.

Two interviewees in one Cluster mentioned the fact that some schools identified for Cluster membership had not participated, while interviewees from other Clusters felt let down by weak coordination of various Strands that had meant that they had not been as successful as they would have wished. One of the headteachers who had expressed difficulties with sharing good practice pointed out that:

The challenge is that the government are spouting cooperation and collaboration as their ethos, while still running a market-led education system. So you set schools up to be competitive, you publish league tables where you put schools head to head in terms of results, you do all those things to drive a competitive business culture into the world of education, you then shout you're going to be collaborative and cooperative...The system is essentially cut-throat competition.

A primary school headteacher in the same Cluster pointed out that the challenge for his school had been that the more successful secondary school had not participated at all in the Cluster. He went on to say that, although he was sure that his staff could have learned from them, there had been no offers of help whatsoever.

3.7 Issues Arising

There were several issues relating to the role and participation of the more successful schools in the Clusters. Firstly, they tended to be some distance away from the core schools and in less deprived communities and some did not participate fully (or even at all) in Cluster activities. In addition, their pupils often transferred to or from schools outside of the Cluster, so there were no close links at the time of transition. Teachers in core schools tended to question how these successful schools, with such different experiences, could help them deal with the pressing concerns they had in their community.

It was reported by some interviewees that schools sometimes had difficulty working together if they had a different ethos, or if the headteachers of partner schools differed widely in their views of how the Cluster should operate.

Since the Clusters covered only a proportion of schools in an LEA, even the core schools found that feeder schools were not always included. This led to some difficulties, firstly in organising transition activities: should they (could they?) include non-Cluster schools? If pupils had not necessarily transferred

to or from other Cluster schools, they would not have had the same pre-transition contacts or experiences. In addition, those children identified as Gifted and Talented that moved from Cluster schools to non-Cluster schools could lose the enhanced provision they had formerly received.

There is a continuing need for collaboration between local schools in addressing important local issues and the need to involve key local agencies to promote coordination and coherence. The most effective types of partnerships, e.g. Cluster-wide, 'mini-Cluster' or a cross-Cluster approach, will need to be determined in the light of the issues being addressed.

The effectiveness of local Clusters in promoting collaboration between schools, other educational institutions and local agencies is being demonstrated. Clearly there is a wealth of expertise being built up in local Clusters and a need to spread this expertise more widely. There needs to be an effective strategy and mechanisms for the sharing and dissemination of good practice. These may need to be established at both local and national levels. The time needed for EC staff to engage in these important activities needs to be built into the initiative.

4. PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES

Using data from the interviews carried out with Chairs, this chapter focuses on the development of the Cluster Strands over the last year and the value added by the various Strands. The impact of the initiative on Cluster schools, parents and the local community, and on raising pupil attainments and expectations are also considered; the main challenges faced are discussed.

4.1 Progress of Individual Strands

Interviewees were asked to provide a brief up-date on the progress of the individual Strands of the initiative, commenting in particular on management structures, benefits and challenges.

4.1.1 Gifted and Talented

There were mixed feelings about the progress of the Gifted and Talented Strand across the Clusters. Ofsted, too, noted variations between the Clusters, but concluded that the implementation and effect of the Strand was satisfactory overall (Ofsted, 2003).

In general, Chairs of six Clusters felt the Strand had made good progress, particularly in terms of having identified cohorts of gifted and talented pupils, and extending provision to meet their needs. General responses included, *'there have been extensive developments'*, *'it is moving successfully'* and *'it is a very innovative programme'*. However, the other five Chairs commented that this Strand had perhaps not progressed at the same pace as the other Strands and that issues were still being addressed. One Chair made the specific comment that *'we are still facing the challenge of making sure the Strand has impact across the whole school in every classroom'*, suggesting that provision had not been embedded in teaching and learning. Similarly, another Chair experiencing problems with the Strand said that this was the current focus of the Cluster activity.

When asked about specific progress, Cluster Chairs most frequently referred to the management and coordination of the Strand. Central coordination undertaken by the Strand Coordinators was thought, in most cases, to have helped schools to develop successful partnerships. The Chairs of six Clusters made specific reference to *'excellent'* or *'well-managed'* coordination of the Strand, and two others referred to the success of the school-based coordinators, which had led to partnership developments across schools. For instance, one Chair commented, *'it is well-managed and well-organised...the*

[Strand] *coordinator knows what he wants and keeps them [school coordinators] up to scratch*'. However, another Chair felt it had been harder to coordinate the Strand in larger secondary schools because of other responsibilities held by coordinators and a lack of time, which had resulted in '*cross-departmental variation*' in terms of provision for gifted and talented pupils. In contrast, in another Cluster, the Chair felt that more progress had been made in secondary schools, and primary schools were '*following behind*'.

The general consensus, however, was that, despite some teething problems, the Gifted and Talented Strand enabled schools to offer activities that were '*not affordable otherwise*'.

4.1.2 Learning Mentors

It was clear from interviews with Cluster Chairs as well as schools, that the Learning Mentor Strand was considered to be very successful. In fact, in some cases it was thought to be the most positive Strand. Ofsted too noted that Learning Mentors were a highly valued and important part of provision (Ofsted, 2003). One Chair commented that the Strand was '*unremittingly successful*'. Indeed, a common view amongst Chairs was that Clusters needed more provision: '*they [Learning Mentors] are good...we just need more*'. Seven Clusters had recently recruited additional Learning Mentors, although not all were funded with Cluster money (three mentioned the use of alternative funds). One Chair commented, '*As other sources of funds have come along, this is what schools are going for...further involvement of Learning Mentors*'. In one case, the use of alternative funding for Learning Mentors had caused management and coordination issues; the Cluster Chair felt she was not in a position to influence Learning Mentors not funded by Cluster money, and had more scope in deciding how the Cluster-funded Learning Mentor should work.

Two Cluster Chairs reported that the increase in the number of Learning Mentors had put added pressure on the management of the Strand. In one of the Clusters, an additional burden had been placed on the lead Learning Mentor, and lack of time for the role was seen as a real issue. There was no Lead Learning Mentor in the other Cluster, and the responsibility for managing Learning Mentors had been given to headteachers, which was not considered by the Chair to be ideal; the management of this Strand was described as the '*weakest*'.

However, in three Clusters, initial concerns about a lack of understanding of the role of the Learning Mentors, and inconsistencies as a result, had been ironed out. One of the Cluster Chairs commented that '*Learning Mentor policy is more homogenous now across the Cluster...they are working to the same agenda*'. Another Chair said that the common training received by Learning Mentors had helped them to share practice. Similarly, in the third Cluster, the Chair said they were working on developing a universal induction

process for new Learning Mentors, to help prevent differences arising in role and expectations.

The only other criticism of the Learning Mentor Strand was made by one Chair, who reported that Learning Mentors were recruited to a central team, rather than by individual schools, which in hindsight had caused problems. Some Learning Mentors had not suited the needs of all schools, and Learning Mentors could not focus on the particular needs of an individual school. It should be noted, however, that this is not a criticism of the Strand as such, but of the way it was implemented in one particular Cluster.

Despite these problems, the Learning Mentor Strand was highly valued across the Clusters, and was considered particularly successful.

4.1.3 Learning Support Units

Ofsted noted that the quality of provision in all Cluster LSUs was good or satisfactory (Ofsted, 2003).

In this evaluation, there were mixed feelings among Cluster Chairs regarding the progress of the LSU Strand. Chairs in five Clusters made positive comments about progress. One Chair felt that the LSUs had helped to develop staff professionally: *'from a staff development point of view it has been very effective on an individual basis'*. However, the drawback had been that staff had moved on to better jobs elsewhere as a result. Another Chair reported that primary school headteachers perceived LSUs to be working well; they were happy to hear that pupils they would have expected to be excluded soon after joining secondary school were still in school a year on. One Chair mentioned that LSUs had been *'a cause for concern'* in the past, due to inconsistencies in how they were operated, but had improved: *'they are now working to the same song sheet'*. Two other Chairs simply made general comments about LSUs: *'They have been successful across all schools'* and *'They are making fairly solid progress.'*

Five Chairs raised some concerns about the progress of the LSU Strand. Three of them were worried that LSU provision was *'reactionary'* rather than *'preventative'*; although on the one hand the LSUs were effective in *'managing the most disruptive'*, they were also criticised for being used as a *'hidey hole for some of the naughtier kids'* (rather than helping to prevent young people from **becoming** the 'naughty kids'). As one of these Chairs commented:

There are some individual young people coming in which they [LSU staff] don't know how to handle. There is not suitable provision for these students. The most suitable use of LSUs is to deal with children who still have some motivation and see the point of coming to school. [However] teachers want the extreme cases dealt with.

Another Chair saw the ‘success’ of the Strand in terms of keeping the most difficult children ‘*out of teachers’ hair*’. Another Chair who was critical of LSUs mentioned the cost, and felt that the funds could be more appropriately spent on additional Learning Mentor provision, which was considered to be more beneficial in terms of impact. The remaining Chair reported that the only LSU in the Cluster was located at a school which, although in serious weaknesses, did not experience behaviour problems; the school had not invited students from elsewhere to attend the LSU as ‘*they’ve got enough to deal with already*’, and thus it was considered redundant.

4.1.4 The Tailored Strand

The Tailored Strand is discussed in some detail in Chapter 5. Here we focus on the Chairs’ view of the progress of the Strand.

Given the variation in the Tailored Strand, which focuses on the needs of individual Clusters, it is not surprising that Chairs made very diverse comments in relation to the progress of the Strand. Ofsted also observed that this Strand was the most variable in terms of implementation and effect (Ofsted, 2003).

In eight Clusters, Chairs made positive comments about the success of the Strand. As one Chair commented, ‘*It is the one we all wanted, so it’s the one we all want to put something into*’. In three Clusters where the focus of the Strand had been on developing family partnerships, positive comments related to the increased liaison with parents. Another Chair particularly praised the increased opportunities given to pupils as a result of the Strand (literacy-related focus). In another Cluster, where the Strand focused on minimising the impact of pupil turbulence through casual admissions, the Strand had experienced a slow start, but the Chair reported quantifiable increases in attendance. Another Chair was positive about Strand progress over the last year as they had appointed a central Strand coordinator; such coordination had not existed before and the lack had caused problems.

In three Clusters, less positive comments were made by Chairs. In one case, the Tailored Strand (focusing on the ‘European Dimension’) appeared to clash with activities taking place through another initiative: ‘*people kept asking, “what are we supposed to be doing?”*’ Meetings had taken place to ‘*tie things up*’ between the two initiatives, and the situation was considered to be improving. In another Cluster, ten new headteachers were in post since the start of the initiative; the Chair did not think they were ‘*wedded*’ to the focus of the Strand. In the remaining Cluster, the Tailored Strand aimed to develop family partnerships, although a Cluster evaluation revealed that schools thought the wrong pupils and families were involved; as a result, the focus of the Strand was being redefined and specific pupils and families were being targeted.

An issue raised by one Chair is worth considering; that is that however positive the Tailored Strand is deemed to be, some successes will be hard to measure and quantify.

4.2 Impact and Challenges

In this section we report on the overall impact of the EC initiative, on the schools, parents and local communities and on pupil attainment and expectations. The value added by the individual Strands is also considered, together with the main successes and challenges faced in delivering the initiative.

4.2.1 Impact on Cluster schools and the local community

Interviewees were asked to consider the extent to which the EC initiative had an impact on Cluster schools and on the local community. These are considered separately below.

Impact on Cluster schools

In assessing the impact of the initiative on the schools, three Clusters felt that it was very difficult to separate out any specific effects and ascribe impact to EC over and above that of other initiatives. Other interviewees were confident of an impact, but felt that it might take some time to be demonstrated.

In the majority of cases, however, interviewees felt able to indicate some impact of the EC initiative to date. An increase in collaboration between schools was identified as a key benefit (see Section 4.2.2 for specific examples of such collaboration). It was felt that EC had provided the opportunity for local schools to collaborate and had fostered closer links between them, although other initiatives such as Aimhigher, BIP and LIG were also making a positive contribution in this regard.

One Cluster had seen ten new headteachers in its EC schools. A key aspect of collaboration in this Cluster was helping new staff taking up posts in EC schools. Other aspects of collaboration included engagement in the development of good practice, ideas and ways of working, and contributing to continuing professional development (CPD). In another Cluster it was felt that networks of Strand leaders/coordinators were an effective means of liaison and the sharing of knowledge across the Clusters and within their own schools.

The funding provided by the EC initiative to tackle areas of concern continued to be widely welcomed. A particularly important impact of the additional funding, noted by one Chair, was on small schools which may have limited budgets for funding projects such as those facilitated by EC.

Alongside the enthusiasm for the additional funds, a number of concerns continued to be noted. A desire to include other local schools under the EC umbrella (which has been an issue in some Clusters since the start of the initiative), was felt to be hindered by the fact that the available funding would be too thinly spread. In one Cluster where there was a desire to work with more schools, the Chair commented on the feeling within the Cluster that *'it is being done on the cheap'* especially when compared with the money available for EiC. Some EC schools receive a relatively small amount of funding and may regard some aspects of the initiative, particularly the LSUs, as taking too large a slice of available monies and being too expensive to run. Even with the additional money provided by EC, many schools faced enormous difficulties and the EC funding could be stretched only so far. Whilst Cluster schools were eligible for additional funding through a variety of newer initiatives such as Aimhigher, LIG and BIP, this was exacerbating problems in some local areas where it was felt other, non-EC schools had greater need for some of this funding (see Section 3.2.3 for a more detailed discussion of this issue). The effective targeting of funds was further hindered by the fact that the 'more successful' schools which were required to be part of local Cluster arrangements, also had access to this additional money when perhaps their need was not as great as the need of other local schools.

Other areas of impact mentioned were:

- ◆ A positive impact of the Gifted and Talented Strand in particular which was felt to have had an impact on more able pupils when *'it was tempting to always focus on naughty children'*.
- ◆ School staff in one Cluster had been able to support their colleagues during a difficult time of LEA primary school review.
- ◆ The EC initiative had led to the creation of posts and systems, such as Learning Mentors and provision for gifted and talented pupils, which facilitated participation in related initiatives.

Impact on parents and the local community

A positive impact on parents was reported. This was often seen as an increase in parental engagement with their children and with the school. For example:

- ◆ a specific focus on the engagement of children and families, as part of the Tailored Strand in some Clusters, had helped to ensure that parents were sending children to school and helping them to thrive once they were there
- ◆ an increase in the number of parents visiting the schools, for example, parents of pupils identified as Gifted and Talented
- ◆ improved attendance at parents' evenings
- ◆ greater involvement of parents in the life of the school leading to the development of stronger school communities.

Ofsted reported a high degree of success of work that focused on engaging disadvantaged families. They also noted improvements in the attitudes of parents towards education (Ofsted, 2003).

Whilst several interviewees felt that it was difficult to assess or quantify the impact of the initiative within the local community, reports of such an impact included:

- ♦ a positive impact of the Learning Mentor Strand on pupil attendance which removed pupils from local streets
- ♦ an increase in the number of pupils attending local secondary schools, rather than schools outside the local area
- ♦ a positive impact of particular initiatives such as the Children's University on out-of-school-hours activities including sports and recreational activities
- ♦ support from the local community for what the schools were trying to do as part of the EC initiative.

In addition, an increase in the links between Cluster schools and a variety of local agencies was reported earlier (see Section 3.4).

4.2.2 Main successes

Interviewees were asked to consider the main successes of the EC initiative for the schools involved. Particular successes are presented below.

- ♦ **Collaborative Working:** It was noted in Section 4.2.1 that a key area of impact was on collaborative working. This was also seen as one of the initiative's key successes and mentioned specifically in five Clusters. Working with schools of a different type and phase was seen as positive in two Clusters where the opportunity may not previously have presented itself. The opportunity to work in collaboration with other local schools was seen in stark contrast to the environment of local competition which has been prevalent in recent years.
- ♦ **Addressing Key Issues.** The opportunity the initiative presented for a more concentrated focus on areas of local concern and the targeting of support was seen as important. It was felt that collaborative working was enhanced by having a tight focus and a need to concentrate on addressing key issues.
- ♦ **New Approaches:** The opportunity to work in new ways, for example through the use of Learning Mentors.
- ♦ **Identification and sharing of good practice:** This was seen as one of the main successes of the initiative in one Cluster.
- ♦ **Impact on Teaching and Learning:** There were several references to the success of the initiative in this regard. References were made to the positive impact on pupil attainment (see Section 4.2.3 for more details), as

well as on approaches to teaching and learning and the raising of the focus of Gifted and Talented teaching.

- ◆ **Relationships with Local Community:** In a Cluster reporting a number of links with local organisations, the Cluster Chair reported improved relationships with the local community. It was felt that more young people and their parents were aware of community issues and local projects and the part they could play.
- ◆ **Pupil Effects:** In addition to some impact on pupil attainment, other successes cited included the raising of pupil expectations (see below), improving the behaviour of a significant minority of pupils, and pupils being happy about the success of others rather than feel aggrieved that they had missed out.

4.2.3 Impact of EC on pupil attainment and expectations

Interviewees were asked about the extent to which the EC initiative had raised attainment and pupil expectations. These are discussed separately below.

Pupil attainment

Ofsted noted ‘an *encouraging effect on raising attainment*’ (Ofsted, 2003, p. 9) although it was unrealistic to expect widespread and/or dramatic impact given the short lifespan of the initiative.

Cluster Chairs interviewed here, also ascribed a positive impact of the initiative on pupil attainment, although there was variation in the extent they felt able to do so and a number of qualifications were made. For example, one Cluster Chair felt that where the initiative had been successful it had raised attainment, but this needed to be examined over a longer period of time. In another Cluster, it was felt that it was difficult to ascribe a particular impact to EC when the whole of the current educational agenda was concerned with raising standards and pupil attainment, but that attainment had improved and it was hoped that EC had made a positive contribution to this improvement. It was also anticipated that initiatives such as Aimhigher would have a future impact. In the same Cluster, it was reported by another interviewee that there had been an increase in attainment of the gifted and talented pupils but it was difficult to ‘*disaggregate the effect of Clusters from other effects*’ and that some non-Cluster schools had seen even higher increases in attainment.

In some cases, the impact on pupil attainment was seen as variable. In one Cluster, for example, it was felt that it was easier to see an impact at key stage 2 than at key stage 3. It was anticipated that there would be a positive impact because more pupils were engaged in learning. Because key stage 4 targets were set higher than the LEA’s educational development plan, it was felt that targets might not have been met as yet. In another Cluster where it was felt that attainment had risen *overall*, there had been a dip in the results of some non-Cluster LEA schools in 2003. Some of the Cluster secondary schools

(including the more successful school) had missed some targets, but not by much. However some of the Cluster primary schools had missed targets by a greater margin.

Whilst there were some reports of an impact on pupil attainment, it was not always possible to be certain of the exact details. Improvements in performance across all key stages were reported. These included improvements in national tests and in GCSE A*-C grades. In some cases, improvements above those of other LEA schools were reported.

Pupil expectations and self-esteem

Once again, some interviewees were cautious in reporting a positive impact of the initiative on pupil expectations and self-esteem. The difficulty of measurement was noted, as was the difficulty of ascribing specific impact to the EC initiative. In the words of one Cluster Chair, *'All these initiatives focus teachers' minds on what is going on'*. However, a positive impact of the work of the Learning Mentors on pupil self-esteem was noted, and there were reports of previously disaffected pupils attending school and enjoying it.

Others felt the main success of the initiative was in raising the expectations of pupils but that more needed to be done. One Cluster Chair admitted some concern about pupil expectations. Despite increases in GCSE results in 2002 and 2003, the number of pupils taking up post-16 education had not increased. A lack of confidence and self-esteem as well as practical difficulties, such as lack of transport, created problems for pupils who were required to take up FE provision beyond their immediate localities. Whereas it was felt that transition between key stages 2 and 3 had improved for the most able, the focus of attention needed to be on the transition between key stages 4 and 5. Involvement of the Cluster in the Aimhigher initiative was seen in a positive light because of the emphasis on post-16 education. The Chair felt that there was *'a lot of work to do on how people can go onto the next stage'*.

4.2.4 The value added by EC Strands

Interviewees were asked to consider the extent to which the various Strands of the initiative added value to the quality of education in Cluster schools.

There were comments about the positive contribution of the Learning Mentor Strand in five Clusters. Apart from overall assessments of the effectiveness of this particular Strand, a number of specific examples were provided. Learning Mentors were reported to have played a key role in removing barriers to learning and to have increased the self-esteem of pupils. One Cluster reported a positive impact on pupil attainment and on the attitude and behaviour of the majority of pupils working with Learning Mentors. There was a downward trend in the incidents of bullying and racism and the need for physical restraint.

In one Cluster, the LSU Strand was reported to have had a positive impact on pupil attainment. In another Cluster, the success of the Strand was attributed to the fact that the LSUs kept the more difficult pupils '*out of teachers' hair*'.

There were also a number of comments about the additionality contributed by the Gifted and Talented Strand. In one Cluster, it was felt that the Strand had brought a broader definition and approach to special educational needs. One Cluster Chair reported that the Gifted and Talented Strand had exposed significant gaps in provision for pupils in both primary and secondary schools. This was beginning to be addressed through the initiative. In two Clusters, it was boosting the performance of pupils who were '*achieving what they should be achieving*', as well as having a positive effect on the confidence of pupils who were able to see that achieving the highest grades was possible. In one of these Clusters it was felt that the Gifted and Talented Strand was having an impact on all pupils at primary level and not just the ones identified as gifted and talented, because they were able to join in Gifted and Talented activities.

Two Clusters commented in particular on the contribution made by the Tailored Strand. In one Cluster, with a focus on enrichment activities, it was reported that the Strand provided the opportunity for pupils to engage in a range of experiences which they would not otherwise have had. For children who had never been to a farm or to the seaside, such experiences had had a dramatic impact on their linguistic development. In the other Cluster, with a focus on literacy and overall standards at key stage 4, there had been some impact on attainment, including improvements in reading and writing at key stage 1 and key stage 3, and improvements in the performance of pupils at GCSE. Here, the Cluster Chair felt improvements in attainment were an indication of the overall additionality of the initiative.

In addition to these observations about the various Strands, some interviewees commented upon the overall impact of the initiative. One Chair felt that the initiative contributed a '*high degree of value added especially in the secondary schools*'. Two of the schools were among the top six in the LEA in terms of the value-added measure. Another Cluster Chair felt that '*positive results*' could be attributed to the initiative overall and that one of the key successes of the initiative was in terms of an impact on pupil performance.

4.2.5 Main challenges in delivering the initiative

Interviewees were asked to comment upon the main challenges they had faced in delivering the initiative to date. The challenges identified by Chairs related to the way the Clusters were organised and funded, a number of within-school issues including staffing, and specific Strand-related challenges.

The organisation and funding of Clusters

The organisation and funding of the Clusters had created challenges in four Clusters. In one Cluster, where LEA support was described as '*less than helpful*', the restructuring of the LEA, involving considerable changes in personnel, had contributed to some management problems, although other changes were seen to have been beneficial (see also Section 2.3 for a discussion of the LEA role in the Clusters). It was also felt, however, that the '*diverse nature and sprawl*' of the Cluster was, in itself, a challenge, with its numerous geographical links and involvement in a range of other activities.

Challenges for other Clusters related to the way the Clusters were funded. The desire to include other, equally needy, local schools in Cluster arrangements is an issue to which we have previously referred (Schagen *et al.*, 2001). This was still a particular issue for two Clusters where other local schools continued to seek involvement or where the Cluster schools themselves felt it would be beneficial for them to work with more local schools. In another Cluster, where the challenge was seen as targeting funds most effectively, the ability of successful schools to access EC and other funding was seen as an impediment.

Within-school challenges

Of the within-school challenges identified, a number were concerned with staffing, including recruitment and retention. The loss of a high number of headteachers in one Cluster and the problems this created for the Tailored Strand in particular has already been mentioned (see Section 2.1). In another Cluster which had seen a number of changes in senior staff, support and mentoring in the early stages of appointments was needed, even when new staff were committed to the targets for the initiative. The difficulties of providing staffing support for other Cluster schools experiencing staffing shortages, was an issue in another Cluster.

In two Clusters, the issue had been one of maintaining the momentum of the initiative. One Cluster Chair felt that a major challenge had been encouraging participating schools to give the initiative high priority when other concerns were more pressing and competed for attention. Maintaining the impetus of the initiative, despite a number of funding issues created by standardising formula funding, had been a key challenge in another Cluster. Simply keeping the process going, enabling cover and release time and keeping up morale were described as huge issues.

Challenges of particular Strands

Four Clusters reported particular Strand challenges. In one Cluster, additional management time had been needed. In another, the Gifted and Talented Strand presented a challenge in that, in the long term, it required a differentiated curriculum. '*Once you have got over the initial add-ons* [i.e.

enrichment activities] *the rest is what goes on day to day and is about the quality of the teaching staff.*' Whilst the Cluster Chair felt that for good teachers this was a matter of course, others might struggle to deliver a differentiated curriculum. *'I can't say we've cracked it'*. The Tailored Strand had presented particular challenges in two other Clusters. In one of these, the focus was on engaging parents, and whilst there had been some success, further engagement was a continuing challenge in an area where they were *'working from a fairly low baseline'*. Insufficient flexibility in the Tailored Strand for particular EC schools had created problems in another Cluster.

4.2.6 Current EC challenges

As a follow-up to the above question, interviewees were also asked what they regarded as the main, current challenges facing the initiative.

A key issue in five Clusters was sustaining the momentum of development, sustaining and/or improving on performance, and continuing to work towards the targets set. In one Cluster it was felt that this required clarity of aims and strategy across all Cluster schools. Funding difficulties had created problems in one Cluster (see Section 4.2.5) and were mentioned by another Cluster as a current challenge for the initiative. This Cluster had also experienced severe budget shortfalls in ordinary funding during 2003, accompanied by threats of a shorter working week and staff shortages. In this very difficult situation, where it was easy for additional funding to be swallowed up in simply coping, *'it was important to remember what you are doing, keep your eye on the ball and continue to make progress on the Strands'*.

A number of issues relating to the management of the initiative were also mentioned. These included the amount of administration and paperwork for one Cluster Director, and managing the demands of the initiative with other demands for one Cluster Chair. In one Cluster it was felt that there was a need to focus on monitoring and evaluation which was less of an issue at the start of operation. The Chair of the Cluster admitted that staff were *'not good at it'* because of difficulties they found in criticising others and a concern for professional courtesy. The newly-appointed Cluster Manager was to be responsible for monitoring which, it was felt, would solve this problem.

A number of issues concerning relationships between Cluster schools and between Cluster and non-Cluster schools was mentioned by one interviewee. The LEA had recently seen the creation of a second Cluster and there was concern about how the two would work together. A key issue was the management of the relationship between Cluster and non-Cluster schools within the authority, which had suffered financial shortfalls. Non-Cluster schools had seen increasing amounts of funding passing to Cluster schools through EC and newer initiatives, such as Aimhigher, BIP and LIG,¹³ and this

¹³ See footnotes in Section 2.2.1 for details of these initiatives.

had created resentment and a two-tier system of schools receiving additional funding and those not eligible. Spreading the outcomes of the EC initiative to other local schools was seen as an ameliorative measure although the Chair of the Cluster felt that not enough had been done in this regard. For another Cluster, the role of the 'more successful' school was seen as a continuing challenge.

In some cases, it was the particular Strands of the initiative that presented challenges. In one Cluster, the Tailored Strand presented challenges because ten new headteachers had taken up post since the focus of the Strand was agreed between the original Cluster heads (see Section 4.1.4). In another Cluster, the original Strand had focused on family partnership teams working with parents, but it was felt that they were not working with the parents in greatest need of support. The Strand had since been changed to become more targeted and focused.

The Learning Mentor and LSU Strands were identified as presenting particular challenges in two Clusters. In one of these, it was felt that the two LSUs needed to work to reduce the number of temporary exclusions which was the key target. This had been hampered in one LSU by the departure of the LSU manager. It was also felt that schools needed to work together more closely to address attendance issues: a question of sharing practice with those schools in the Cluster that had managed to '*crack it*'. Funding shortfalls within the LEA left another Cluster facing difficult decisions in relation to the Learning Mentor/LSU Strands. There was a shortfall in funding (because the LEA had not increased their budget) which would impact on the number of Learning Mentors or on the number and/or funding of the LSUs. Since there were no primary LSUs, the primary headteachers were against any reduction in Learning Mentors. There was concern that this issue would lead to division between the primary and secondary schools involved in the Cluster. The leadership of the Learning Mentor Strand was also an issue and described as having the weakest management at LEA level. There was also no link Learning Mentor and the Strand was being managed by the Cluster headteachers.

4.3 Issues Arising

Disentangling the specific impact of the EC initiative on particular outcomes is a difficult issue. Although some interviewees felt confident in ascribing impact to the initiative and others were more circumspect, positive impacts and a variety of outcomes for the initiative as a whole and for the individual Strands were described.

As a whole, the initiative was felt to have had an impact on collaborative working between schools, had provided the opportunity to address key issues

and to try new ways of working, had led to the identification and sharing of good practice, and had a positive impact on teaching and learning. An impact on pupil attainment and pupil attitudes was also noted although this was variable. An increase in links and impact of the initiative within the local community was also reported.

While the progress of the Gifted and Talented and the LSU Strands was somewhat mixed, progress within the Tailored Strand was seen in more positive terms overall, with the Learning Mentor Strand generally regarded as the most successful. To some extent, all of the Strands were seen as contributing to pupil attainment. The Learning Mentor Strand was seen as having a positive impact on pupil behaviour. This Strand and the Gifted and Talented Strand were seen as making a positive contribution to pupil attitudes, self-esteem and self-confidence. The Tailored and Gifted and Talented Strands were valued for the increased opportunities they brought into the schools.

Cluster schools had faced, and continued to face, a number of challenges. These related to the organisation and funding of the Clusters, a number of within-school challenges and the challenges presented by particular Strands.

Whilst the funding provided by EC was widely welcomed for the opportunities it provided, additional funding would have facilitated the expansion of the initiative within the Cluster schools and to other local schools. Whilst Cluster schools have become eligible for other monies, this has created problems with other local schools which are in difficult financial circumstances.

Cluster schools are located in areas of disadvantage and may experience a high degree of staff turnover. Staffing changes within the schools had created some difficulties. Maintaining initiative momentum in the light of these changes, and of the financial difficulties experienced by some schools, had been and remained a challenge in some Clusters.

5. THE TAILORED STRAND

Previous reports have indicated the amount of flexibility that Clusters were allowed in their choice of a focus for the Tailored Strand. Based on a questionnaire survey of Cluster schools, the second interim report (Schagen *et al.*, 2003a) listed five main areas of activity for the Tailored Strand: curriculum teaching and learning, parents/family, subject-specific, cultural, and community. The rationale for allowing Clusters such flexibility was to enable them to design the Strand to meet specific local needs and circumstances. However, although the main thrust of the Tailored Strand had been determined at partnership level, some Clusters had opted for different foci at primary and secondary level or had developed two (or more), allowing schools to choose one or other. Other Clusters had chosen a broad focus that each school could fine-tune to suit their particular needs. Some Clusters, or individual schools, had combined the management and operation of some of the Strands, in order to provide a more integrated approach.

Researchers tended to find, during early fieldwork visits, that Tailored Strand activities were taking longer to get 'off the ground' than the other Strands because they had to be designed by the individual Clusters. Tailored Strand activities seemed to promise good things but were still in the throes of development. However, by the time of the final round of fieldwork, it was envisaged that the activities would be well under way and that respondents would be able to report on the progress, successes and issues arising from their choice of, and design for, the Strand.

5.1 Main Aim of Involvement in the Tailored Strand

Six **Clusters** were visited during the final round of fieldwork, selected because they were understood to be focusing their Tailored Strand on family and community involvement.¹⁴ However, it was found that not all of the **schools** selected for visits were focusing on family and community aspects; for example, the more successful schools tended to have better links with parents and had therefore concentrated on another aspect of children's development. Of the 14 schools visited, eight had focused on family and community aspects; one had concentrated on transitions but had included some family work as part of this focus, while one core school and four more successful schools had chosen to develop another area of concern.

¹⁴ In one case, family involvement was an aspect of a Tailored Strand directed towards transitions.

The more successful schools tended to be outside of the deprived catchment area of the other Cluster schools and were therefore less likely to have the same types of problems. Some said they had developed good links with parents; as one headteacher said *'we thought we had reasonable dialogue [with the parents] already'*. The headteacher of one more successful school pointed out that, although contact with the parents of under-achieving children was patchy, *'there is 85 per cent plus attendance at parents' evenings and similar events'*. This school had chosen to use the Tailored Strand resources to develop the Gifted and Talented Strand since, as the headteacher commented, *'a lot of the work is focused on under-achievers'*.

Clusters that had chosen family and community for their Tailored Strand activities had done so in order to develop better contacts with parents and to foster closer school/home links. The reasons given for choosing the family and community focus were generally expressed in terms of raising parents' awareness and expectations of the school. Raising parental awareness would lead to them becoming more engaged with their children's learning, according to interviewees. The result of this would be better motivated (and more self-confident) pupils and an improvement in their subsequent performance and outcomes.

However, while most Clusters concentrated on family contacts as a main focus, one chose to begin by focussing on the local community. They had developed a range of cross-Cluster activities aimed at enhancing knowledge and understanding of local history and injecting a feeling of pride into the community. According to one headteacher, this Cluster's Tailored Strand had the following main objectives:

1. to involve parents in the educational process
2. to empower the pupils to become more independent learners by enhancing pupils' key and thinking skills
3. to raise pupils' and parents' awareness of their cultural and historical identity by celebrating the town's past, present and future.

The aim of the activities, according to various interviewees, was *'to be as inventive as possible'*, in order to enhance young people's experiences, to involve the whole family, to *'improve everyone's achievement levels'* and to help them recognise that each family member had different talents and that they could all achieve something. In the opinion of the Cluster management group, if schools were to raise awareness and project a positive image of the community they would ultimately persuade parents to take more interest in their children's progress. As the Cluster Chair remarked, *'We do a lot of community involvement but it's the parental bit, getting more parents into school more often'*.

In choosing the family and community perspective for their Tailored Strand, teachers and other professionals had identified a number of factors that appeared to inhibit home/school contacts. These factors were primarily related to the attitudes of parents and guardians. For example they were said not to be confident in the school environment as a result of poor experiences during their own school life, and consequently they did not value education highly. A lack of rapport between teachers and parents was also identified; this was attributed to teachers' confident manner which was said to engender feelings of low self-worth in the parents. The parents' resulting lack of confidence led to them avoid the school because they were uncomfortable conversing with teachers.

It was interesting to note that interviewees usually identified parents or guardians as the 'problem', citing their attitudes towards education and their relationships with the school and looking for ways of changing their perceptions. Family contact workers in one Cluster, however, had taken a wider view of the issues, suggesting they could be addressed by raising teachers' awareness of both parents' perceptions of them and of the effects that their confidence had on people who already tended to suffer from low self-esteem.

Parental confidence in entering the school and interacting with teachers was viewed by many Clusters as essential in developing their support for their children's education. Engaging parents in this way, it was claimed, would help raise their children's confidence in education and their expectations, which would lead to a better performance by the children and a subsequent gain in self-esteem. Schools also wanted to help remove another barrier to learning by helping parents develop both their basic skills and their confidence so they could give their children more support in their studies.

5.2 Activities Undertaken

Schools' attempts to form closer links with pupils' families usually involved either home visits or getting the parents into the school. Three Clusters had recruited a team of workers to make these contacts with parents, while in other Clusters, such appointments were made by individual schools. Some Clusters had mobilised Learning Mentors for the role, or it had been taken on by Gifted (or Able) and Talented Coordinators and SENCOs. All of these different types of staff had been involved in activities aimed at bringing parents into the school but, on the whole, home visits were carried out by Learning Mentors or family contact workers, sometimes at the request of teachers and SENCOs.

Where family contact workers had been recruited, they tended to be given a great deal of autonomy in making and keeping contacts. These individuals usually worked with families that were referred by year heads or Learning

Mentors, but the amount of time they spent working with the family and the kinds of interventions they employed were often left to their discretion. They also built links with external professionals (e.g. social workers), so that any families that had other needs could be more easily referred.

Events for which parents were invited into schools included:

- ◆ formal and informal presentations of relevance to their children's schooling
- ◆ participation in workshops and activities especially developed for them
- ◆ involvement in activities undertaken by their children, or events designed to celebrate their children's achievements.

Illustrations of the types of programmes identified in the interviews are given below.

One Cluster had recruited nine family contact workers to carry out **home/school visits**, each working across a number of schools within broad geographical areas. Each had a case-load of about 10-15 families (referred by year heads or Learning Mentors) with whom they would be in contact over a six-week period. The families were visited at home and were given telephone numbers so they could contact the worker at any time, even at evenings and weekends. The family contact worker had also developed close links with social services, to provide a 'multi-agency approach'.

A primary school had arranged **parents' workshops**. Each year group had an afternoon set aside for a curriculum-related workshop so that parents could come in and work with their children and find out what their children were learning at school. The school had also developed a series of mathematics games to help the children learn at home, and parents were invited to learn how to play them so they could help their children. A further aim of these projects was to raise parental interest enough to impact on their children's education, perhaps by encouraging parents to come into school and support staff.

Parenting courses were another way in which one school had liaised with parents. They had arranged for health visitors to come in to give talks to parents on aspects of health or safety in the home. The family contact worker was closely involved in organising and marketing these courses, as well as taking mothers to conferences and on outings. In her view, these activities '*helped improve liaison with families and community*'. A deputy headteacher reported that this was done '*just to get the parents to be more involved and really taking more active part [in their children's education]*'.

In a school with large numbers of refugee children, a theatre group production for Year 6 pupils proved a useful way of contacting parents. Parents were invited to attend a performance on the subject of transition, which gave them some insight into the school system in the UK. The Learning Mentor viewed the occasion as an opportunity to meet with the parents and to start up a discussion about any concerns they might have about the transition. The Learning Mentor was then able to follow up the contacts through home visits to refugee families, in order to advise them on appropriate preparation for the high school.

Focusing on the community, one partnership had run a number of large-scale events (e.g. poetry days) involving pupils from all Cluster schools. At the end of each event a celebration was held, attended by both pupils and parents, in which presentations were made by some of the pupils. A headteacher reported that these events were intended to celebrate the achievements of the pupils and to *'draw in the parents to show that schools are friendly, benign places that are attempting to move the children on'*. In his opinion, *'anything that involves parents has got to breed some degree of familiarity and it's got to be a good thing'*.

5.3 Training and Training Needs

Of the 18 interviewees involved in delivering Tailored Strand activities in the schools, only five were teachers; the remaining 13 provided their support through other roles, such as Learning Mentors (seven) or family contact workers (six). Inevitably, given the wide variety of levels and roles reported by the interviewees, there was a wide range of backgrounds and experiences that they could bring to their work on Tailored Strand activities. It was evident, also, that the interviewees' training and training needs would be equally wide ranging.

All but one of the teachers interviewed held other senior roles in their school; one was both a deputy headteacher and the school's SENCO, and there were two other SENCOs and one teacher who was a year head.

None of the teachers interviewed expressed a need for further training to help them with their Tailored Strand activities. As well as being very experienced, they had also received ongoing professional development, and their pastoral roles were particularly relevant to Tailored Strand activities aimed at developing and improving contact with pupils' families.

The teachers interviewed about the activities were usually Tailored Strand coordinators. In this role they attended coordinators meetings and they said that attending such groups was a very positive aspect of their Cluster, since they were able to discuss things rather than being isolated. One pointed out

that such gatherings also helped coordinators to develop ideas and learn from their peers, as the meetings provided them with opportunities to *'bounce ideas off everybody'*.

Learning Mentors came from a range of backgrounds and experience and subsequently had a variety of training needs when they were recruited. National training had been put in place for Learning Mentors and those interviewed had all participated in a five-day course.

Family contact workers also came from a range of backgrounds and experience and some were very well-qualified. Many of them had worked for their local authority in other roles and had received appropriate training. Not all of those recruited for the family contact role had attended courses in preparation for their new responsibilities. Nevertheless, some reported that they had participated in training prior to, or upon taking up, their role.

Two of the Clusters put all of the family contact workers through a few days' training together, prior to starting their work. In a third Cluster, interviewees appeared to have determined their own training needs, perhaps with the help of a line manager or with colleagues.

The six family contact workers highlighted the amount of experience and training they had received in previous jobs: *'We brought a lot of training to it already. But we've particularly taken up two initiatives...and we needed to be trained in both of those...so that's been our training'*. Another had a background in formal education and had worked for the local authority in environmental health and environmental education, as well as being a trained counsellor and psychotherapist. On the whole, family contact workers reported few outstanding training needs and one interviewee remarked that, if such needs existed, *'we could request training if we wanted something'*.

5.4 Partnership Approach to the Tailored Strand

Schools that had adopted family and community activities as the focus for their Tailored Strand reported varying levels of contact between their staff and teaching and non-teaching staff in other schools for the purposes of sharing ideas, practices and resources. For example, some interviewees envisaged little need to build closer links with other schools, as their activities were designed specifically to suit the conditions of their school. This was the case even amongst those schools that were fully committed to the focus of the Strand.

In two of the three Clusters that had appointed a team of family contact workers, interviewees said that they worked in more than one school and such an arrangement would clearly create opportunities for closer links. An

interviewee in the third Cluster indicated however that, whilst she had worked across three schools in the past, she was now working in only one. Family contact workers in all three Clusters said they held regular meetings (one mentioned weekly meetings), through which they could exchange information and ideas.

Tailored Strand activities had provided some staff with opportunities to engage in, and improve relationships with, staff from other schools. In some cases it was described as especially helpful in breaking down barriers between primary and secondary schools and creating better understanding. Meetings between Tailored Strand staff at a Cluster level had also provided scope for discussing and sharing practice and experiences, which many staff found valuable.

In some Clusters, sharing good practice about parental contacts was perceived as essential. Interviewees in one Cluster, for example, indicated that lines of communication had been set up for family contact workers through membership of a forum. A family contact worker in another Cluster mentioned that she attended termly meetings to share good practice with staff from other schools and that the group even included some headteachers. Indeed this group had also shared information with schools from outside the Cluster. However, during an interview in another school in the same Cluster, the Learning Mentor tasked with organising the forum complained that there was insufficient collaboration between Cluster members. Her organisational role provided her with an overview of Tailored Strand activities, so she was also able to comment on the way that individual schools worked in '*quite diverse*' ways and she commented that there was little consistency.

In contrast with family contact workers recruited by a Cluster, staff who were recruited directly by schools to carry out a family contact role (and thus were not employed by the Cluster) sometimes had few contacts with Tailored Strand staff in other schools. These staff were usually line-managed by a teacher and worked entirely within their school and community. They took no part in Cluster meetings and any contacts with other Tailored Strand workers were usually about exchanges of information relating to transitions. Such interactions tended to be between those working in secondary schools and their feeder primary schools.

Commencing their Tailored Strand with community activities had ensured the participation of all schools in one of the Clusters. There was a good attendance at Strand coordinators' meetings, at which planning took place for the next half-term's programme. A further strength was that each programme of activities finished with a communal event, to which all schools sent representatives and also invited parents. These events had proved very successful and interviewees were motivated by the response they had received and the level of interest they had raised in parents.

Tailored Strand activities focused on the family and community could also provide opportunities for multi-agency working in which schools could link with other professionals, including representatives of social services, health and housing departments. As one interviewee commented, this enabled her to discuss families in need and deal with issues before they became crises.

5.5 Benefits and Difficulties Encountered

Schools reported benefits from Tailored Strand activities relating to family and community. A number of interviewees remarked upon the improved contacts with parents, which were considered to be a key factor in helping children achieve; as a Tailored Strand coordinator said, '*Children have definitely benefited*'. A family outreach worker in another Cluster explained how relationships with parents had improved:

Our core groups are getting bigger. We are gaining the trust of more and more parents as we go on. I think that can only be beneficial. It is helping them and helping their kids...that's a great success. A big success is also how we've worked with other agencies and drawn from other resources in the community to support parents.

Another worker in a third Cluster pointed to the benefits to teachers of family outreach work: '*it allows them to teach*'. They know that if they are not able to deal with particular issues to do with a child '*then and there*', the child's needs can be addressed through either Learning Mentors or family support.

The family and community Tailored Strand activities were not without their difficulties, however. A Tailored Strand coordinator mentioned the time involved in organising events across schools, especially waiting for others to provide information. There were also the ever-present difficulties imposed by time limitations, which were described by one family contact worker who said, '*...the more you identify what needs to be done... The real challenge is achieving the maximum you can in the time you have*'. Resourcing was another issue. As a family contact worker explained, '*not that the money isn't there, we've got a big underspend in some areas but there is no system in place to make it easy for us the draw money out...*'.

School staff sometimes questioned the role and working practices of family contact workers. As one family contact worker reported, the problem was '*not being recognised by the school. Not really having a role from the school point of view*'. This worker added that, '*schools organise things for parents and we don't get to hear about them. When the Cluster paperwork was written up, we weren't written into the fabric of it*'.

Finally, multi-agency working also had its problems, especially the transfer of information such as individual education plans and child protection issues from outside agencies. There was a perception by non-teaching staff in schools that, while outside professionals would share information with teachers, they were reluctant to do so with other workers whose role impinged on the welfare of pupils and families.

5.6 Successes and Challenges of the Tailored Strand

Senior managers held mixed views on the extent to which the Tailored Strand had met the aims of Cluster schools. Nearly half (six) of those interviewed expressed satisfaction with the extent to which the aims had been met. However, as was noted at the beginning of this chapter, the fact that not all schools had focused on family and community meant that most had been able to pursue activities they deemed relevant to the needs of their school. Nevertheless, one senior manager questioned the Cluster's choice of Tailored Strand activity.

In one of the schools, a headteacher remarked on his satisfaction with the outcomes and embeddedness of the Tailored Strand activities, going on to say that the original idea had seemed nebulous but his staff *'have picked up and run with it'*, and gone further than had been expected. There were some, however, who reported fewer results, or were more cautious, about outcomes from the Tailored Strand activities. One interviewee remarked that, *'there is still a long way to go'*, adding that although the Strand activities were under way, it was a rolling programme and there was still much to be done.

A secondary school headteacher expressed difficulty in assessing the results of the activities. He said that, although there might have been outcomes for primary schools, he had yet to see evidence of any effect on his school: *'I don't think we'll see it yet'*. He added that, *'you might see a lot of evidence of activity, but I don't think it is tight enough in terms of evidence'*.

The most noticeable achievement, according to five of the senior managers, was the increased attendance of parents at parents' evenings and other school functions. In one school, a family outreach worker remarked that, *'I think we've been very successful with parents'*. She went on to say that many of these were, *'families who don't qualify for social work support, but yet they really need some support...The parents really appreciate that the school has bothered [to take such an interest in them]'*. The school's Learning Mentor explained why she thought they had been successful, *'[The parents and children] feel special and important, and that someone does actually care'*. The school was confident that they were re-engaging parents and families, especially among those that were hard to reach.

Family outreach workers sometimes organised workshops for parents. These were aimed at improving communications, persuading parents to come into school, and showing them how they could help and encourage their children to learn. A headteacher said that the success of the Tailored Strand in her school had been better attendance by parents at workshops. She also added that the fact that someone was employed to facilitate these links was a great ‘success’ in itself, *‘someone who is not constrained by a teaching role, or having to be in the classroom’*.

The deputy headteacher in another primary school spoke of the success of workshops for parents, adding that both mothers and fathers attended:

It would be the workshops, with the parents coming in. We get more parents coming in, with children, and we have children phoning them up at lunchtime because they desperately want their parents to come, so there is a buzz about it, but it’s just using that now to take it somewhere else.

Schools tended to view improving attendance at parents’ evenings and workshops as a building block towards the development of better parental attitudes towards education in general. The outcomes they were seeking, however, were in terms of improved motivation, attitudes and performance by their pupils. Some schools felt able to claim improved attainment:

- ◆ A primary school that had 46 per cent of its pupils with identified special needs reported that their Tailored Strand had been a huge success and, as a result, their National Test results had gone *‘sky high’*.
- ◆ A secondary headteacher reported improvements in GCSE results, saying that some pupils were more engaged in their learning, which he regarded as having justified the school’s approach to working with families.

In addition to improved attainment, Tailored Strand staff also reported other successes for their activities, including:

- ◆ an impact on attendance
- ◆ a reduction in unauthorised absences
- ◆ a lower rate of exclusion
- ◆ improvements in pupils’ self esteem
- ◆ help for school-phobic pupils
- ◆ increases in punctuality.

One interviewee commented that more parents were engaging with the school and feeling less intimidated about approaching teachers. Teaching staff also felt supported because they had someone else there to deal with family-related issues and referrals. Another said that opportunities had been created to

organise meetings with Asian families to discuss the serious impact on their children's education of long holidays during term time.

However, a family contact worker was more circumspect in her evaluation of the Strand, saying that, *'It is quite difficult to measure. A lot of our work involves building the confidence of parents, and I find that very difficult to measure, unless they have attended so many courses and are moving on themselves. But it's a slow process to gain relationships...'* An interviewee in a similar role remarked that, *'It could take a lifetime before the impact is shown'*. The long development period before results could be assessed was also referred to by a group of family contact workers in another Cluster who said, *'It is really long-term work to make a significant impact'*.

Some interviewees said their work on the Tailored Strand activities had impacted on the community. Staff had been able to involve themselves in multi-agency working within the community, which provided enhanced opportunities to approach family difficulties in a holistic way. In one example, a school's Learning Mentor had realised that there were large numbers of parents who were suffering from mental health problems and, as a result of her discovery, a district psychiatric nurse had been allocated to liaise with them.

A number of headteachers expressed satisfaction with the way that their staff were working together on the Tailored Strand. Teaching and family contact staff were working well together to achieve improved outcomes for their pupils. In particular, there were comments about sharing good practice both within the school and with other Cluster schools. A primary school, for example, had shared good practice about special needs pupils with one of its transfer secondary schools.

Tailored Strand organisers also met with some challenges or barriers. As has already been noted by one interviewee, monitoring and evaluation to assess the impact of the activities had its share of difficulty, especially as the other Strands contributed to the outcomes and it was hard to quantify which Strand produced which result.

Inevitably, time constraints were barriers to the success of the Strand. Besides the difficulties staff had in finding enough time to do all that was planned, there were issues about the long process of development before programmes were put in place. Some participants were looking for quick results and they had been disappointed. One secondary headteacher, who thought the Tailored Strand had had little impact beyond primary schools so far in his Cluster, was dismissive of the Strand:

I don't think it's had any impact. I think it is a very difficult concept to manage and I don't think that the job definition and the outcomes and

the targets were tight enough in the first place. People were put in post then the thing was then somehow meant to become effective, and it hasn't worked. If I was you, I would say where are the demonstrable outcomes. I think it has potential but I think it was more geared at younger children and young families and early intervention. If in time I see more kids coming at the point of transition with support, with parents who are more able to communicate... think it is more of a long-term project.

The lack of a clear definition for the roles of non-teaching staff, especially family contact workers, sometimes led to difficulties in schools. Teaching staff were unsure of their roles or status and, in addition, the roles of Learning Mentors and family contact workers could conflict with those of teachers. For example, a Learning Mentor remarked that her role sometimes put her into conflict with teachers because she was an advocate for the pupils and there were also issues about confidentiality. A group of family contact workers in one of the Clusters reported that they had to overcome the negative attitudes that school staff held about parents, as well as dealing with a lack of recognition by the schools. This group had found communications with schools difficult and this had not been helped by a lack of resources.

The nature of the communities themselves added to the difficulties that staff experienced in trying to make improvements. Schools that had sizeable populations of transient families (e.g. asylum seekers), who may move into and out of an area fairly quickly, sometimes found that their work with a family was in vain if they moved on elsewhere. In a Cluster with a large Asian population, a family contact worker reported that mothers had little time to attend the workshops she organised because of other family commitments. Another interviewee found she had difficulties because she did not speak Bengali.

Although some interviewees had expressed satisfaction with multi-agency working, others, especially family contact workers, had had some difficulties in their relationships with other agencies, particularly at the initial stages. One interviewee said that building bridges with Social Services had been challenging because their staff were sceptical about her role and qualifications. Initially, sharing information was not a two-way process which was a hindrance to what she was tasked to achieve. In this case, however, the problems had since been overcome.

The headteacher of a primary school remarked that, despite the school's efforts, parents were not interested in contact with the school and did not see school as being important, so she was still finding it a challenge to get them interested. A deputy headteacher, whose school seemed to be making some headway, thought that it was not enough:

No matter how good it has been, it is still not good enough. Where we are maybe getting a third of the parents coming in, we would prefer – anything more than that. It is still not a priority for them. They will come in, but if it's raining they won't. Or if there is something else going on. You might get a good turn-out sometimes, better than expected, but you can't always guarantee it.

5.7 Issues Arising

The aim of Clusters was to encourage schools to work together on various activities in order to develop ways of dealing with the difficulties that many of them faced. However, as far as the Tailored Strand was concerned, there was some evidence that this did not always happen. In particular, the more successful schools had chosen another focus because they tended to already have good relationships with parents. Cluster schools had generally chosen the Tailored Strand activity as a group, usually after a preliminary data collection exercise. In developing the Strand further, however, some schools seem to have worked independently, which raises doubt about the amount of cross-fertilisation of ideas and dissemination of practice that has occurred.

Three Clusters had taken on family contact workers to help forge links with families and the community. However, there were some issues about their role, and whether they were accepted by teaching staff in schools and staff in other agencies providing support for families. There was also evidence that some of the workers recruited were unclear about their role and would have benefited from more carefully-defined job specifications. It would have been helpful if teachers too, had been advised of the role that family contact workers had been recruited to play.

Family contact workers recruited by individual schools sometimes reported that they had few opportunities to discuss their role and to exchange ideas and practices with others. Such opportunities could provide these workers with a support network, as well as ideas for improving practice.

While many headteachers were enthusiastic about the Tailored Strand activities and their progress, there were some who were unhappy with the Strand. The fact that Clusters had tended to devise a fairly broad specification for the Strand, allowing schools to address their individual needs, probably prevented further disillusion with the Strand activities.

Monitoring and evaluation of the Strand tended not to have been thoroughly implemented. This may have been partly due to the individual approach that many schools had taken to the design of their activities (hence setting up a Cluster-wide evaluation strategy might have been unhelpful). Consequently,

there was little tangible evidence to support individual schools' claims about the impact of the programmes.

6. FUTURE PLANS

In this chapter of the report we consider the future plans of the 11 Clusters, until the end of funding in 2006, and beyond.

6.1 Changes Planned up to 2006

Interviewees were asked if they envisaged any major changes in the remit, management or composition of the Cluster up to 2006. Four Cluster Chairs envisaged no major changes; one felt that the changes had already occurred and these now needed to be embedded. Others anticipated some changes would be made as a result of local EAZs becoming Clusters, local school reorganisation, involvement in other initiatives and changes in funding arrangements.

By 2005, all Statutory EAZs will be transformed into Excellence Clusters. This process had already begun in some areas and was discussed in Section 2.1.2. Future transformations were expected to have an impact in one Cluster where it was felt there might be scope for the ex-director of the EAZ to take on a role as full-time coordinator of local Clusters (as had already happened in the LEA where another Cluster was situated).

School reorganisation within the local area was seen as likely to impact on the composition of two Clusters. One Cluster located in an LEA which had recently been through a process of review expected the composition of the Cluster to change as a result of the amalgamation of local primary schools. Two new, larger primary schools would become part of the Cluster. In the second Cluster it was anticipated that the Building Schools for the Future programme might have an impact as it involved identifying schools for possible closure and expansion.¹⁵ Whilst the programme was not due to begin until 2007/8, there was a possibility that it might begin earlier.

The need for the integration of EC with a number of related initiatives, such as Aimhigher, BIP and LIG was anticipated as an impact in two Clusters. Some changes were already apparent in one Cluster where an Aimhigher coordinator was in place and where links with local FE and HE providers were planned.

¹⁵ The Building Schools for the Future programme began implementation in June 2003 and is concerned with plans 'to provide 21st – Century facilities for every secondary school pupil in the next 10 to 15 years from 2005'. LEAs interested in the programme were required to express interest in funding for 2005/6 by October 2003 and interest for subsequent years by December 2003. LEAs prioritised for funding in 2005-6 will be announced early in 2004; other applications will be assessed and announced later in the year.

In Clusters, it was anticipated that there would be some change in future funding arrangements. One Cluster was looking at an approach that was more targeted on need. A shortfall in funding in another Cluster and the problems this had created for the Learning Mentor and LSU Strands (see Section 4.2.6) was seen as likely to lead to the Cluster having to *'ditch some good things to save ourselves splitting apart because of the Learning Mentor/LSU Strand'*.

6.2 Expectations for 2006

Interviewees were asked to consider where they expected their Cluster partnership to be in terms of its progress and achievements in 2006. These expectations were discussed mainly in terms of pupil attainment and behaviour outcomes, but reference was also made to Cluster partnerships and ways of working.

In one Cluster it was felt that there was a need to ensure that the original targets were met and that pupil progress could be demonstrated. In a second Cluster hope was expressed that these original targets would have been met and even surpassed. In three other Clusters, it was hoped that partnership schools would be, nearer to or beyond, LEA or national averages. In one of these Clusters, it was hoped that there would be progress in relation to GCSEs and national tests and, in another Cluster, in relation to key stage 2 in particular. In one Cluster it was reported that the rate of improvement of EC schools in relation to some key targets was already ahead of other LEA schools. In another Cluster, it was hoped that by 2006 it would be possible to demonstrate that attainment for individuals was more rapid than in other schools and that progress towards attendance and exclusion targets would show a more positive trend than in other schools. Despite the need to show that targets had been met, one Cluster Chair felt that the scope for achievement was limited and that perhaps too much was expected. Other achievements might not be measurable in terms of targets achieved, for example, the improved engagement of pupils and the strengthening of educational management.

In two Clusters, it was anticipated that involvement in other initiatives such as Aimhigher would lead to changes in partnership working. One Cluster Chair thought that collaboration between schools might be strengthened post-2006 although this might not be attributable solely to the EC initiative. Another anticipated that involvement in Aimhigher and BIP would lead to substantial changes in partnership working. A positive impact of collaboration on professional development was also anticipated in this Cluster. A third Cluster Chair was hopeful of a resolution of current difficulties within the partnership and, whilst one Cluster Director was unsure if he would still be in post, he felt that, *'The Cluster will be something of substance that people will be proud of. It has developed new ways of working'*.

6.3 Sustainability

The EC initiative will be funded only until 2006. Although this is two years hence, some Clusters were beginning to give some thought to the future of the initiative beyond this point and what provision would be made to facilitate continuation.

In order to make some assessment of the likelihood of the continuation of arrangements made and/or activities carried out under the auspices of EC, interviewees were asked to comment on whether their EC partnerships would continue beyond 2006 and if so, what provision would be made to facilitate continuation.

Views on the continuation of EC partnerships, were mixed. Most interviewees felt that there would be, or hoped there would be, continuation of at least some arrangements and activities begun as part of EC. In one Cluster, one of the joint-Chairs (headteacher of participating secondary school) anticipated that the partnership as a whole would not continue and that the secondary schools involved would not continue to meet because without the funding there was no incentive to collaborate. The other joint-Chair (headteacher of a participating primary school) thought that the primary schools would continue to meet.

In a second Cluster, it was felt that the partnership between primary and secondary schools established by EC would continue because of the rigour that the initiative had brought to the primary-secondary relationship. Both the Tailored Strand and the work of the Learning Mentors had focused on points of transition including primary-secondary transition. The Year 6 and 7 tutors and managers would still be in post and this would facilitate continued collaboration. It was also hoped that Learning Mentors would continue to be in post after 2006.

In a Cluster which had established 'mini-Cluster' arrangements centred around the secondary schools involved, it was felt that these arrangement might continue beyond the end of funding. It was felt unlikely that the whole partnership would continue to meet because of the geographical spread of schools across the Cluster. In another Cluster, it was felt that the initiative had demonstrated the value of partnership working and that this approach would be adopted more widely within the LEA. The Chair of the Cluster hoped that the EC partnership would continue even without additional funding although this was dependent on what, if any, partnership arrangements succeeded EC.

It was anticipated by one Cluster that new partnership arrangements would build upon EC structures. In another Cluster, it was hoped that EC schools would continue to work together and with other local schools in new partnerships set up as part of the Specialist Schools Initiative. *'Because you are in partnership then with others and we have made sure that part of our*

partner schools are the Excellence Cluster schools and therefore we will work with them on that particular project'. In a further Cluster, the issue of what would happen post-2006 was seen as a major challenge. It was felt that continuation and exit strategies needed careful consideration with any planning for the future of the EC initiative needing to be considered alongside the plans for other relevant initiatives.

Although most interviewees felt that there would be, or hoped there would be, continuation of at least some arrangements and activities begun as part of EC, the issue of funding was a key concern. It was felt that the work of some of the Strands such as the Gifted and Talented Strand would, or could be, embedded in regular school arrangements. One Chair reported that Cluster activities were *'so embedded that I can't see how we can manage without'*, and yet expressed concerns about the ability of individual schools to accommodate the initiative without additional funds.

Finding funding for particular key posts such as Learning Mentors or Tailored Strand posts was seen as particularly problematic, with the continuance of these posts dependent on the availability of additional funds. In one Cluster it was felt that the LSUs were less cost-effective in supporting pupils, and this provision would be reviewed with the possibility of discontinuing the LSU in one school and replacing it with Learning Mentors. Additional funding through other initiatives was envisaged as a way of facilitating the continuation of some activities begun under EC. In one Cluster, for example, it was anticipated that the new behaviour and attendance Strand of the key stage 3 strategy would enable secondary schools to continue to fund Learning Mentors and LSUs. It was felt, however, that the primary schools would not be able to absorb the costs of the Learning Mentors currently provided with Cluster funding, although some primary schools had accessed other funding sources such as SRB and the Children's Fund. In a second Cluster, it was felt that EC work focusing on key stage 3 and key stage 4 would continue as part of the collegiates initiative (see Section 4.2.2). This initiative is centred around the idea of local schools working in partnership and therefore would be a mechanism for taking school partnerships forward.

Although some Clusters reported the commitment of participating schools to find the necessary monies from their own budgets, this was seen as problematic in the context of the recent school funding difficulties.

6.4 Issues Arising

The theory of the management of educational change indicates that the period of transition between external support, including funding, and its incorporation into the everyday structures and procedures of the schools, is a critical one (see, for example, Miles and Huberman, 1984, Miles and Seashore-Louis,

1987). This process is variously described as embedding, routinisation, or institutionalisation, and is regarded as crucial if initiatives are to continue beyond the period of external support. Although external funding for EC will continue until 2006, some Clusters were beginning to consider what, if any, aspects of the initiative might be taken forward. Some were hoping to continue the work and structures established under the auspices of EC through other related initiatives, such as collegiates and the Specialist Schools Initiative. Others saw a need to ensure that changes were embedded into the working of the schools.

A key issue will be the ability of schools to ensure provision from their own budgets for those Strands with high costs, including costs for specialist staff, for example, Learning Mentors, and the running costs of units such as LSUs. There were numerous references to the successes of the various Strands and to the fact that *'changes have been made in the schools which cannot be rolled back'*. On the other hand, the process of embedding can be a long one taking many years, and some interviewees felt that the process was by no means complete. For example, one Chair felt that the changes made so far would need two or three years to 'lock in'. How schools facilitate the continuation of the initiative and which aspects will be taken forward, will be a key issue in the future.

7. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final chapter we provide a summary of the findings from the whole evaluation of Excellence Clusters, looking at the composition of Clusters, management and funding, and the four Strands. We also identify issues arising which we believe merit further consideration if the DfES should decide to launch a similar initiative in future.

7.1 Composition of Cluster Partnerships

Clusters partnerships were formed between schools, usually within the same LEA and, as far as possible, within a defined geographical area of deprivation so that they were composed of 'rational' groups. The aim of these partnerships was to tackle problems of underachievement and social exclusion. The Clusters were grouped around core schools, defined as those that had been identified as having a history of under-performance and disadvantage. However, they also had to include 'more successful' or high performing schools, sometimes with Beacon or Specialist status.

Of the 168 schools in the 11 Clusters which were the subject of the evaluation, two-thirds were primary schools (an average of ten per Cluster), and one third were secondary schools (an average of five per Cluster). Unlike Excellence in Cities partnerships, Clusters did not include all the schools in an LEA, and this was heavily criticised by many of the interviewees. For example, in order to ensure that funding was not spread too thinly, the number of primary schools had to be restricted, which meant excluding some that had natural (and perhaps long-held) links with secondary schools. There was also disquiet about the exclusion of schools that were equally needful of the additional resourcing provided by Cluster funding, especially in light of the funding provision that Clusters felt obliged to make to more successful schools that were not facing the same disadvantages. During the early days there were reports of some resentment being displayed by schools outside of the Clusters, and recent interviews suggested that (in some cases, at least) the resentment was still there.

More successful schools tended to be geographically distanced from the core schools and sited in areas with less severe deprivation. It was claimed that they therefore did not work so naturally with the other schools in the partnership. Throughout the research period some core school headteachers questioned their inclusion in the Cluster, saying that the more successful schools did not face the same problems and it was difficult to see how they could contribute to the partnership. However, while they claimed that the

more successful schools seemed to have no clearly identified role, the first inspection report (Ofsted, 2003) criticised Clusters for their failure to specify a role for them.

Senior managers of some secondary schools, while expressing a desire for wider collaboration with partner schools, also commented on their recent history, which was one of competition between schools in order to recruit pupils. Indeed, even in the last round of research interviews, some headteachers mentioned that they were still receiving ‘mixed messages’ regarding collaboration and competition.

Partnerships and Collaboration

The Cluster partnerships involved links between similar schools in the same catchment area and serving similar kinds of children. Throughout all the questionnaire surveys and research visits, communication and collaboration between the schools in the partnerships was highlighted as the greatest benefit brought by the Cluster arrangements. Senior managers spoke of forming very strong links with other Cluster schools, and mentioned the advantages of being able to share ideas, expertise and good practice in teaching and learning. They also welcomed opportunities for innovation and learning through new or different perspectives. In some cases they were regenerating former links with local schools (following recent competition) or developing existing links further. These findings were endorsed by the first Ofsted inspection which reported that *‘relationships between Cluster schools have improved significantly’*.

Cluster partnerships had also supported the forming of new links between the partners. These were strengthened through regular Cluster meetings, firstly of senior managers and later, as the work of the Strands got underway, Strand coordinators, and other teachers and non-teaching staff. Networks were also set up, for example in one Cluster all the primary schools formed links, while in others Learning Mentors or family contact workers had their own networks, both formal meetings and informal contact by email and telephone.

Some Clusters had also developed or enhanced links with LEA schools that had not been included in the partnership, in order to share ideas and practice. Various activities were reported, including training for staff in non-Cluster schools, involving these schools in activities for Gifted and Talented pupils, and sharing ideas and practice through conferences or websites. In one LEA, SRB funding had been used to extend the provision of Learning Mentors into schools outside the Cluster.

There was also evidence of Clusters forming links with each other, usually those closest to them, and often at the level of individual Strands. The Learning Mentor and Gifted and Talented Strands were most often mentioned. Learning Mentors had all participated in the same national training and it was

suggested that this had helped them to form networks with other Clusters. In addition, there was a structure in place, facilitated by the National Mentoring Network, which provided a contact point at the regional level. Some of the Gifted and Talented coordinators had similarly shared training sessions which had led to networking, while others had cascaded training to other Clusters.

7.2 Management and Funding

The issues of management and funding are closely linked, as the scope for Cluster management depended on available funding. The amount of funding for individual Clusters varied considerably (see Schagen *et al.*, 2003a), but was on average significantly less than the funding of EiC partnerships – a fact noted by several interviewees who regarded Clusters as '*EiC on the cheap*'. From the beginning, it was made clear to Cluster partnerships that funds were not intended to finance a central coordinator. Funds could be used – and indeed, were used – for Strand coordinators, but the majority of partnerships (and Ofsted too) felt that this was inadequate in terms of meeting the need for overall project management. Some partnerships felt so strongly about this that they agreed to use some of their funding to finance a (part-time) Cluster Director or Coordinator, although this of course reduced the amount of funding available for other Cluster staffing and activities.

The role of the LEA varied considerably across partnerships: some were regarded as a crucial, active part of their respective Clusters, while others, having helped to establish the Cluster, chose to leave its operation to the schools involved. Strand coordinators were appointed, usually part-time (in a few cases, an individual was appointed full-time to cover two Strands, or one Strand in two Clusters within the same LEA). There were often delays before coordinators took up their posts (either because of difficulties in finding suitable candidates, or because the person appointed needed to give a long period of notice). Hence some Strands did not commence full operation until weeks or even months after the Cluster was formally established.

As noted above, the amount of funding available to Clusters varied considerably, and there appeared to be no clear relationship between the funds allocated and the number of schools included in each Cluster (see Schagen *et al.*, 2003a). As the total sum was fixed, some Clusters were concerned about including too many schools, as this would mean that the funds were spread more thinly.

Partnerships were free to decide how the Cluster funding would be allocated to individual schools. Funding was usually top sliced in order to pay for Cluster-level appointments (e.g. Strand coordinators, and in some cases a Cluster Director) and joint activities. Most partnerships devised formulae to divide the remaining funding between member schools. The formula might be

different for each Strand (and not all schools had to be involved in every Strand). Formulae typically included a flat-rate element and an element which varied according to factors such as total pupil numbers and percentage eligible for free school meals. Funding for Learning Mentors and LSUs would depend on the location of the latter, and the way in which Clusters decided to deploy their Learning Mentors.

In some schools, the EC initiative was able to build upon and extend management structures already in place as the result of previous related initiatives. In the early stages, most of the school-level Cluster management and coordination tended to be undertaken by headteachers. SMT involvement was regarded as important in giving the impetus and status which the initiative needed in order to become established in schools. As time went on, the initiative began to spread through schools, and other senior members of staff began to take on key roles, e.g. as Strand coordinators. In some schools, links across the Strands were actively fostered in order to promote the view of an integrated initiative.

As EC became established, some schools reported that all staff were involved in the initiative, at least to some extent. For example, they might have attended Gifted and Talented Strand INSET, or implemented schemes of work designed to cater for Gifted and Talented pupils; they could have had a Learning Mentor working in their classroom. However, some activities only involved particular groups of staff, and those with a low level of involvement may not have been aware of the initiative as a whole, or seen it as of great concern to them. Further, some headteachers deliberately restricted the 'spread' of the initiative in order to avoid over-burdening staff.

Cluster funding was used by schools for a variety of purposes, principally staffing and responsibility points, resources and equipment. It was often noted that LSUs are particularly expensive to run, and the sum allocated was considered insufficient for the purpose. Of the schools that responded to the surveys, more than half of those with an LSU on site had found it necessary to supplement LSU funds from their own school budget. A third of responding secondary schools, and a smaller proportion of primary schools, had also supplemented the Learning Mentor Strand (in 2003, the same applied to the Gifted and Talented Strand, although the sums involved were much smaller). A small number of schools reported that Strand funding had freed resources to be spent elsewhere in the school.

Clusters tended to be slow in setting up procedures for monitoring and evaluation: some were still in the process of doing so when the final round of fieldwork was undertaken in 2003. There was a sense that it had become a more urgent issue than it was considered to be in the early stages. Some had an overall Cluster focus (headteachers were required to complete evaluation forms, for discussion at partnership meetings) and some were Strand-based,

the systems being devised by Strand coordinators. In addition, some schools were adopting their own individual approach to monitoring and evaluation.

Asked to comment on the particular successes and concerns revealed by monitoring and evaluation, most interviewees made reference to individual Strands. References were also made to the positive impact of the initiative on collaboration between Cluster schools. In terms of meeting targets, the picture was mixed. It was often reported that some targets had been met but not others, or that some schools had met their targets and others had not. Interviewees reported a number of positive achievements, especially regarding pupil attainment, but were often unable to provide evidence linking raised attainment with Cluster activities.

7.3 The Gifted and Talented Strand

The first school survey, undertaken early in 2002, indicated that all responding secondary schools had a coordinator for Gifted and Talented pupils, and a large majority of primary schools had a designated Responsible Teacher. The majority were appointed (most had volunteered, or been recruited internally) in September 2001 – when the first 11 Clusters officially began operation – although some had been appointed earlier, and some later. Some Strand coordinators were not able to take up their posts until January 2002, and there were also concerns about the timing of the Strand training, which meant that some staff had to wait weeks or months for a course. For these reasons, the Strand was slow to start in some schools. However, other schools made progress independently, by developing policies and identifying pupils.

From the start, the Gifted and Talented Strand attracted a great deal of enthusiasm, but also concern. It was seen as the Strand most directly linked to the raising standards agenda; some interviewees felt that it was right to ‘*do something*’ for the most able young people, to counterbalance the time and resources devoted to supporting those with behavioural problems. At the same time, there were concerns about the potential impact of formally identifying a Gifted and Talented cohort, and about what might happen if a child so identified moved school and found that they were no longer classified as Gifted and Talented.

Guidance issued by the then DfEE says that ten per cent of each cohort should be identified as gifted or talented (in the proportion two thirds gifted to one third talented). The 2002 survey indicated that Cluster schools had identified proportions ranging from eight per cent (Year 3) to 13 per cent (Year 6).¹⁶ Gifted pupils were identified (as in EiC) by standardised tests, and by recommendations from teachers (and in some cases, parents or peers). Some

¹⁶ Secondary cohorts were all within this range. When the survey was repeated in 2003, the range was from seven per cent (Year 12) to 14 per cent (Years 5 and 6).

interviews reported that it was considered more difficult to identify talented pupils. One case-study school visited in the summer term of 2002, had not identified pupils by that time, as the coordinator was still receiving training. Other schools had spent a considerable amount of time in identifying pupils, and reported that it was still therefore *'early days'* in terms of provision.

Most schools began their Strand provision by offering 'add-on' enrichment opportunities, although four had begun by focusing solely on in-class provision. It was generally recognised that the latter was crucial – it was necessary to embed provision within everyday teaching and learning – but there was some uncertainty about how it could best be done, and need for additional support. It was felt that the national training had not provided enough examples of practical activities to use in the classroom, which would stimulate and motivate gifted pupils. The final round of interviews with Chairs (2003-04) indicated that some Clusters were still struggling with this issue.

Experience over the two years following implementation of the Strand suggested that both the fears and the expectations outlined above were (at least to some extent) justified. Coordinators and Responsible Teachers derived personal satisfaction from seeing pupils motivated by the new opportunities given to them. But some reported problems in gaining motivation and commitment from their colleagues, either because they had other, more pressing, priorities, or because they disliked the philosophy behind the Strand, which they perceived as *'elitist'*.

Gifted and talented pupils had been *'stretched'*, made to *'feel special'*, and *'in terms of attitudes and aspirations, it has been an outstanding success'*. (The EiC Gifted and Talented Strand Study indicated similar positive changes in pupils' attitudes – see Pocklington *et al.*, 2002.) However, some interviewees were concerned that the raised expectations could make pupils feel pressured, and that their 'street cred' might be ruined by their identification as Gifted and Talented. Views of the impact on other children were similarly mixed. Some coordinators felt that changes in classroom practice would benefit all pupils, and that aspirations generally would be raised. On the other hand, there was concern that children who had not quite made it onto the register of gifted and talented pupils might feel excluded and de-motivated.

It is worth noting that, even in the 2003 survey, a number of respondents were still using the phrase *'early days'*, and the Gifted and Talented Strand was said to be *'just beginning to have an impact'*. In the 2002 school visits, monitoring and evaluation was said to be *'in its infancy'*; some Strand coordinators expressed the view that it was too early to monitor, or that they would address the issue the following year. Strategies mentioned were often vague, and it was apparent that schools (and Clusters) needed further support with monitoring and evaluation. There were reports in the 2003 survey of

increased pupil attainment, which was cited by some as evidence of the impact of the Gifted and Talented Strand. In terms of impact on the school as a whole, respondents mentioned improved teaching strategies and differentiation, in addition to the raised expectations and increased opportunities mentioned above.

7.4 The Learning Mentor Strand

The Learning Mentor Strand generated by far the most enthusiasm across the Clusters, and was deemed to be the most successful of the four Strands.

Thirteen of the 29 secondary schools which responded to the most recent school survey (January 2003) had one Learning Mentor funded by Excellence Clusters; 12 had from two to five, and one school claimed to have 20. Most of the 69 primary schools had one EC-funded Learning Mentor, 11 had two and a further two primary schools had three Learning Mentors. The general consensus was that, given the perceived success of the Strand, schools would benefit from additional Learning Mentors. When alternative funding was available, additional Learning Mentors were often what schools opted for. At the time of the most recent survey, nine primary and nine secondary schools had Learning Mentors in addition to those funded by the EC initiative. This had caused some management and coordination problems, with lead Learning Mentors and/or Chairs not feeling able to tell non-EC funded Learning Mentors how they should work. As schools were so positive about Learning Mentors, there was concern about what would happen once EC funding came to an end.

In primary and secondary schools across the Clusters, most Learning Mentors were ex-learning support assistants, although some came from other backgrounds, including youth work and teaching. There were some initial challenges at the outset of the initiative in terms of establishing a consistent role for Learning Mentors within Clusters. It was often left to individual schools to decide how Learning Mentors would work, and in some cases they took on a role similar to that of a learning support assistant in classes (which was highly criticised by some interviewees, who felt that mentors were best utilised by working with pupils on a one-to-one basis outside the classroom environment). However, most Clusters found ways of solving these initial problems; for example, they established induction sessions for new Learning Mentors, so a consistent approach could be adopted across schools.

The aim of the Learning Mentors varied across Clusters, but generally they focused on removing barriers to learning, reducing exclusions, increasing attendance; and combating behaviour problems. In some Clusters, Learning Mentors played a major role in smoothing primary-secondary transfer. For example, some primary and secondary schools shared Learning Mentors, or

primary Learning Mentors visited secondary schools to talk to teachers about pupils who would be attending their school.

Most Learning Mentors did targeted work with individual pupils e.g. one-to-one sessions, often on a weekly basis (although, in exceptional cases, pupils could be seen more frequently). Learning Mentors also worked with groups of targeted pupils. Drop-in sessions were available in some Clusters, although this was a less frequent approach. Other activities included working with parents (e.g. home visits) and running out-of-hours activities.

Training for new Learning Mentors was considered important, although a lack of funding had made this difficult in some cases; most of the EC funding for Learning Mentors went on salaries, leaving little for training. However, regular meetings for Learning Mentors were taking place across Clusters, which had served as informal 'training' e.g. there were opportunities to share good practice and learn from one another.

Learning Mentors were thought to have had a positive impact on the pupils being mentored. For instance, there were reports across the Clusters of a positive impact on pupils' behaviour, social skills, attendance, self confidence and self-esteem, and attitudes towards school. There were also some reports of improvements in terms of attainment (e.g. at GCSE C-D borderline cases). There was some evidence of Learning Mentors having an impact on the involvement of parents in school e.g. attendance at parents' evenings improved. Across Clusters, pupils who had been mentored had generally given positive feedback about their experiences and appeared keen to attend sessions.

To some extent, the Learning Mentor Strand had also had an impact on pupils not being mentored: those who worked in the classroom might help other children, and some Learning Mentors ran clubs which were open to all. There were suggestions of indirect impact on classes if disruptive pupils spent time with a Learning Mentor. Having a Learning Mentor could be seen as a privilege, and there were reports of other pupils asking if they too could have a mentor.

Learning Mentors were expected to provide quite a lot of monitoring information on pupils' referral, during the programme and on exit from mentoring e.g. perspectives of teachers, parents and the pupils themselves. However, it was acknowledged that evaluation of the information was difficult, and the impact of Learning Mentors, though considered to be real, was often hard to quantify.

7.5 The LSU Strand

There were more mixed feelings regarding the success of the LSU Strand. The original intention was that each Cluster would have a number of LSUs, located in what partnerships agreed were the most appropriate schools. At the time of the most recent EC school survey (January 2003), 17 of the 29 secondary schools included in the survey, and only two of the 69 primary schools, had an LSU on site. Access to LSUs on other sites was also quite uncommon; LSUs were used almost exclusively by pupils from the schools where they were situated. In most cases, LSUs funded by EC were 'created' from previous provision. Smaller numbers of pupils attended primary LSUs than secondary LSUs, and primary school pupils spent fewer days on average attending the units than secondary pupils.

Pupils were referred to LSUs mainly because of behavioural issues, although some schools mentioned a range of criteria e.g. attendance and learning difficulties as well as behaviour. Pupils were usually identified by teachers, but referred to the LSU via the school management team (e.g. heads of year). The intention in most LSUs was to cover the same curriculum as in normal classes, but this was not always the case. Some thought it was necessary to focus on behaviour and anger management as well as the normal curriculum, whereas others deliberately did not cover the normal curriculum at all (e.g. focusing on 'life skills' activities instead).

There were reports of positive impact on pupils attending LSUs, although it appeared that there were varying degrees of success; some LSUs were reported to be highly effective, and others were 'struggling'. Positive impact was reported in relation to improvements in behaviour, successful reintegration, the prevention of exclusions, educational progress and improvements in attendance/punctuality. However, there was some criticism of LSUs being reactionary rather than preventative, and of being used simply as a 'hiding place' for badly behaved pupils. The general perception was that Learning Mentors had been more successful than LSUs, although it was considered difficult to measure the impact of both Strands. However, the attendance and attainment of pupils attending LSUs was usually monitored.

7.6 The Tailored Strand

Implementation of the Tailored Strand was very slow. The Strand was a new concept unique to Excellence Clusters and, unlike the other Strands, there were few guidelines on how to approach the activities. The focus of the Strand had to be agreed with all Cluster members and schemes for taking the planning forward had to be developed and implemented. In the early days of the evaluation, nearly half of the schools surveyed indicated that they were still carrying out preparatory work; it seemed that Clusters had concentrated

on putting the other Strands in place before beginning work on the Tailored Strand.

Some Clusters had more than one focus for their Tailored Strand, organised so that secondary schools and primary schools could each work on an area that was of particular relevance to them. However, according to the Ofsted inspection, working on two or three separate Tailored Strand programmes had caused some difficulties for Clusters, since their effort and resources were dissipated, leading to less effective results. Other Clusters, or individual schools, had linked their Tailored Strand work with one of the other Strands, if the focus was on a related area.

Despite the slow start, responses to the first school questionnaire survey were generally positive; half of the secondary schools and a third of the primary schools reported that the Tailored Strand would meet their needs significantly or completely, while others mentioned specific anticipated impacts. This positive feedback was probably brought about by the fact that Clusters had been able to focus on local areas of need and had the opportunity to be creative in their solutions. Positive results were also acknowledged by Ofsted, who found that Clusters where the Tailored Strand activities had focussed on engaging with disadvantaged families had been especially successful, and parents' attitudes towards education had shown some improvement.

The second questionnaire survey revealed that the main areas of focus for the Tailored Strand were curriculum teaching and learning, parents and family, specific subjects and cultural and community issues. However, it also indicated that, although some activities were taking place, the Tailored Strand was only just becoming operational. This was acknowledged by the Ofsted inspection which reported that it had taken Clusters some time to establish the scope and purpose of the Strand.

As would be expected, differences were identified between the main Tailored Strand activities undertaken by primary schools and secondary schools. In primary schools, curriculum enrichment was most often mentioned. Activities were wide-ranging and included environmental and arts projects, summer schools and festivals, poetry writing workshops and theatre visits, and thinking skills. In the secondary schools, the main activities were curriculum enrichment, thinking skills and study skills, and involvement in community activities.

Asked to comment on whether their Tailored Strand activities would meet the needs of their school, about a third said they would meet them completely or fully, or would have great or significant impact. The predicted success of the Tailored Strand was again attributed to the fact that they were able to focus on their own identified areas of need and to the additional resources available for the activities.

In the final phase of the evaluation, Cluster Chairs were asked for their assessment of the Tailored Strand. Despite the long start-up period, progress was being made and positive feedback was received from eight of the Cluster Chairs. This would, of course, be expected, since the Clusters themselves had determined the focus of the Strands. Three Cluster Chairs made less positive comments about the progress of the Strand; two indicated a need for clearer direction while, in the third Cluster, there had been a lot of changes of school senior managers and those that were newly-appointed were thought to be less committed to the Strand focus.

School visits for the final phase of the evaluation looked at the Tailored Strand in more depth, focusing on family and community activities. Senior managers in schools had mixed views on the extent to which the Tailored Strand had met their aims; some were very enthusiastic, noting better attendance at parents' evenings and improved communication with hard-to-reach families, others, while acknowledging that good things were happening, said it was too soon to identify any measurable impact. There were a few senior managers who felt the wrong choice of Tailored Strand had been made, or doubted that the activities would have significant impact.

It is difficult to understand why senior managers in Cluster schools were unhappy with the focus of Tailored Strand activities, since they had usually been involved in the choice; although, of course, some schools had had changes in the SMT since the Cluster was set up. It also appeared likely that some schools had worked alone, adapting the Tailored Strand activities to suit their own needs and having little consultation with other Cluster members. These findings, however, lend support to a conclusion of the Ofsted inspection which was that the Tailored Strand needs strong leadership, well-defined goals, a clearly articulated implementation strategy and high quality training for teachers and non-teaching staff who are delivering the activities.

7.7 Issues for Consideration

Establishing partnerships

There were a number of concerns about the way in which Clusters were formed: the inclusion of some schools and the exclusion of others was considered unreasonable or unjustified, the role of the 'more successful' school was often unclear, and their inclusion in the Cluster was sometimes considered unhelpful. It might be better, when establishing future partnerships, to include all the schools within an LEA, as in EiC (though this would obviously be a more expensive option) or to allow schools more freedom in selecting their own partners. If schools which are situated some distance away (as was often the case with more successful schools) are to be included in a partnership, the rationale should be made clear, as well as the role which they are expected to play.

On the whole, partnerships were considered successful, and schools felt that they had benefited from working together. However, concerns were expressed about '*mixed messages*' coming from the government, promoting collaboration while at the same time encouraging competition between schools. It is important that different policies should not appear to have conflicting emphases.

Need for long-term view

There is a need to take a long-term view of major educational initiatives. A long lead-in time is usually required, and this was especially the case with Clusters, as the initiative relies very heavily on key staffing appointments (Learning Mentors as well as Strand coordinators); many of these were not in post until half-way through the first year of EC. There was also a recognition that it would take time for the impact of Cluster activities to be felt. Clusters were therefore concerned that the initiative would be over before the activities could be firmly embedded in school life, and the benefits apparent. During a period of uncertainty, they were concerned about the continuation of staff appointments, and relieved when it was announced that funding was to be continued until 2006. It is suggested that five years should be considered as the minimum lifespan if initiatives of this kind are to be successful and sustainable.

It is also important that exit strategies should be considered from the beginning of a project. Clusters valued the work of Learning Mentors in particular, and several schools said that it would now find it difficult to manage without them. However, concerns were expressed about how they would be able to continue to pay Learning Mentors' salaries after Cluster funding had ceased. While some schools felt that they would manage to do this, somehow, others were less optimistic. Such issues need to be considered from the start of an initiative, and appropriate guidance given.

The EC Strands

Three of the Strands were prescribed (although there was some freedom within them – Clusters could decide where to locate their Learning Mentors and LSUs, and what kind of work to do with pupils identified as gifted and talented), but the Tailored Strand was completely flexible: Clusters could decide for themselves on its focus as well as its activities. The freedom to define a Strand in accordance with local needs and priorities was welcomed by Clusters; however, it meant that the Strand was slow to get under way. Freedom to decide meant that discussion and negotiation was needed before an implementation plan could be devised. Clusters were of course required to specify their Tailored Strand as part of the plan they submitted to DfES, so in theory agreement should have been reached before they began operation. In practice, however, there were still doubts and uncertainty about what exactly

was to be done, especially when new headteachers were appointed who may not have agreed about the original decision.

By contrast, for the other three Strands it was clear what Clusters had to do, and therefore (subject to the appointment of relevant staff) they tended to get on and do it. In general, Clusters managed to deploy Learning Mentors in a way that was acceptable to member schools, and to achieve an acceptable balance of Cluster-based and school-based Gifted and Talented activities. However, LSUs were not shared between schools in the way that was originally envisaged. This was partly because schools where LSUs were situated (i.e. those with the most severe behaviour problems, often with LSUs operating pre-Clusters) felt that they did not have spare capacity to offer other schools; but there were also the practical difficulties involved in transporting pupils to other sites. Hence the majority of schools' declared preference for Learning Mentors, as it was possible to fund several for the cost of an LSU, and therefore more schools could benefit. For the future, the message is that sharing resources may be problematic if the resources concerned are tied to one particular location.

Evaluation

When asked to identify the successes of EC, or of individual Strands, respondents found it difficult to attribute outcomes directly to the impact of Clusters. Several quoted improved performance in national tests or GCSEs, in some cases emphasising that the results of Cluster schools had improved more than those of the LEA generally. This is a promising indication of the Cluster's success, but it is not possible to be certain that it is due to Clusters without a full value-added analysis which controls for other factors which may have an impact. This kind of analysis is being undertaken for the EiC evaluation, but not for Clusters.

It may in any case be questioned what kind of impact an initiative such as EC should be expected to have. The Learning Mentor and LSU Strands might be expected to have an impact on behaviour, attitudes and self-esteem, which are less easy for schools to measure than attainment (although the Learning Mentor Strand in particular was perceived to be a great success). Further, some Strands are likely to directly affect only a small proportion of the pupils in a given school; even assuming that there is a strong positive impact on the attainment of pupils who participate, this may not be sufficient to raise the average attainment of the school by a measurable amount.

REFERENCES

MILES, M. and HUBERMAN, A.H. (1984). *Qualitative Data Analysis: a Sourcebook of New Methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

MILES, M. and LOUIS, K. (1987). 'Research on institutionalization: a reflective view.' In: MILES, M., EKHOLM, M. and VANDENBERGHE, R. (Eds) *Lasting School Improvement: Exploring the Process of Institutionalization*. Paris: OECD-ISIP, Leuven/Amersfoort ACCO.

OFFICE FOR STANDARDS IN EDUCATION (2003). *Excellence Clusters: the First Ten Inspections* (HMI 1732) [online]. Available: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk> [12 March, 2004].

SCHAGEN, S., BLENKINSOP, S., BRAUN, A., LINES, A., McMEEKING, S. and PENNELL, H. (2003a). *The Evaluation of Excellence Clusters: Second Interim Report* [online]. Available: <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research/eic.asp> [12 March, 2004].

POCKLINGTON, K., FLETCHER-CAMPBELL, F. and KENDALL, L. (2002). *The Gifted and Talented Strand of EIC* (Excellence in Cities Report 04-1/2002) [online]. Available: [http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research/documents/EIC/04\(1\)-2002.doc](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research/documents/EIC/04(1)-2002.doc) [17 July, 2003].

SCHAGEN, S., BLENKINSOP, S., BRAUN, A., LINES, A. and McMEEKING, S. (2003b). *The Evaluation of Excellence Clusters: Third Interim Report* [online]. Available: <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/research/documents/EIC/Thirdint.doc> [12 March, 2004].

SCHAGEN, S., McMEEKING, S, and BLENKINSOP, S (2001). *The Evaluation of Excellence Clusters: Progress Report*. Unpublished report.

SCHAGEN, S., McMEEKING, S., BLENKINSOP, S., WEST, A. and PENNELL, H. (2002). *The Evaluation of Excellence Clusters: Interim Report*. Unpublished report.