alternative education provision at key stage 4

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National Foundation for Educational Research

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At key stage 4, pupils commonly follow a programme of GCSE courses: while there is a range of these available, they are mostly academically oriented – a feature which renders them inappropriate for a small minority of pupils. The NFER was commissioned by the Local Government Association, under its Educational Research Programme, to undertake a project designed to explore and describe the characteristics of alternative curriculum programmes for pupils at key stage 4 and to assess the degree to which they were effective in helping young people to view mainstream education and training more positively, and in opening up clear progression routes to post-16 education, training or employment.

The report is intended to help LEA staff, teachers and senior managers in schools and a range of other professionals (such as employers, Careers Service staff and college lecturers) to work collaboratively to develop appropriate curriculum programme components for young people in their final two years of statutory education.

The report is based on data from:

- nearly 200 postal questionnaires completed by a range of school staff involved with the curriculum programmes in 14 LEAs;

- 75 telephone interviews with staff in partner organisations (for example, Careers Services, Training and Enterprise Councils, business and industry, voluntary organisations);

- interviews with staff, pupils and parents in seven mainstream schools and one special school.

It examines a series of themes, derived from the research, that appear to underpin successful practice at the various stages of a curriculum programme. Extensive examples are given of practice and perceptions arising from different circumstances, aims and purposes. It was largely appropriateness to context, rather than a particular mode of provision, that defined effectiveness for this project. The experience of practitioners shows how official guidance on work-related learning in general, and on disapplication of the National Curriculum at key stage 4 in particular, can be implemented in a range of contexts.

Key themes discussed in the report include:

- **the school context**: the relationship between alternative programmes and the regular curriculum; supporting structures within the school;

- **the local context**: the identification of, and effective communication with, organisations willing to work with schools; the support of the LEA;

- **the selection of pupils** to participate in alternative programmes; criteria and processes for selection, equal opportunities issues;

- **making and sustaining collaborative partnerships**: gathering information about providers and pupil participants; matching pupils with appropriate placements; off-site support;

- **programme design and resourcing**: curriculum balance and integrity; different learning contexts; roles in programme design and partnerships; meeting pupils' social needs; engaging parental support; resourcing;

- **encouraging and acknowledging achievement**: alternative accreditation at national, local and institutional levels; celebrating achievement;

- **evaluation, monitoring and assessment of outcomes**: the collection of evidence; criteria for success; analysing costs and benefits; assessment of outcomes.

Summary of key factors in effective provision for alternative curriculum programmes

A supportive school context

A supportive school context enabled effective provision for the alternative curriculum programmes by:

- location of 'the problem' within the school itself, using data relating to disaffection, truancy, and underachievement as indicative of the necessity for curriculum reform to meet the needs of all pupils;

- recognition of the need to extend or complement the key stage 4 curriculum through close relationships with external providers, whose approaches to engaging young people in learning were allowed to feed back to the school and influence the regular curriculum as appropriate;

- a willingness to learn from experience and regard alternative provision as part of a developmental process;

- a senior management team who regarded the alternative programme as part of a whole-school approach to teaching and learning and enabled it to operate effectively;

- the appointment as coordinator of a teacher who was given sufficient time and had sufficient status, professional experience, personal skills and motivation to carry out all the required tasks effectively;

- the involvement of a range of teachers within the school – reinforcing the point that the alternative curriculum programme was a whole-school responsibility.

A supportive local context

A supportive local context enabled effective provision to be made for alternative curriculum programmes by offering:

- a wide range of external agencies willing to work with schools in supporting 14- to 16-year-olds;

- local coordination of alternative provision;

- local awareness of social exclusion indicators leading to the development of local policies and partnerships which then addressed the problems within the community, for mutual benefit;

- support from the LEA, willing to facilitate schools' access to what was available.

The local context was further enhanced when it was also tied in to:

- support from government policies and initiatives;

- support from national non-governmental organisations.

Selection procedures

Key features of selection procedures that enabled effective provision of alternative curriculum programmes included:

- the offer of alternative programmes only when all other internal curriculum options and strategies had been tried with pupils;

- efforts to ensure access to alternative programmes to all who would benefit and to prevent negative attitudes towards such programmes – attitudes emerging both from comparisons with regular programmes and from reluctance of pupils to participate on account of concerns arising from issues of gender, socio-economic background and ethnicity;

- a balance between the need to address pupils' needs and the need to give opportunities to succeed within the socially valued mainstream.

Sustaining collaborative partnerships

Collaborative partnerships between schools and other organisations helped alternative curriculum programmes to operate effectively by underpinning:

- easy access to a range of off-site provision;

- understanding on the part of schools of the range of ways in which partner organisations might be involved;

- out-of-school tutors with well developed skills in working with young people who might prove a challenge;

- a good understanding on the part of schools of the interests, aspirations and preferences of the participating young people;

- a clear identification of partner organisations' preconditions for participation;

- an appropriate match of young person and external placement;

- early and regular liaison between schools and potential providers.

Encouraging and acknowledging achievement

Effective alternative curriculum programmes encouraged and acknowledged achievement. This was enabled by:

- an investigation into the range of alternative accreditation available;

- the selection of certification that was familiar to employers locally or that was recognised nationally;

- accreditation that was flexible – for example, that could be gained in a modular fashion;

- accreditation that could act as a basis for entry level courses;

- accreditation which was appropriately designed for progression;

- ways of celebrating achievement that helped to present a positive image of the alternative curriculum programme.

Monitoring, review and evaluation

Monitoring, reviewing and evaluating the alternative curriculum programmes helped to increase their effectiveness. These processes required:

- consideration about how evidence could be collected to show the programme's contribution;

- consideration of the timing and phases of evaluation;

- consideration of collection of different types of evidence;

- efforts to ensure that stakeholders agreed on criteria for judging success or, at least, were aware of the different perceptions of this and the way in which they fitted together;

- use of evaluation data to inform and develop future programmes.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The context of the research

Any attempt at curriculum standardisation and the imposition of a national framework is, inevitably, going to attract criticism in an environment not used to it: the National Curriculum has not been immune from this. However, it is unsurprising that, once the national framework had been in place for a few years and initial complications resolved, the greatest and most enduring concerns were focused on the Programmes of Study and curriculum structure at key stage 4. It is when pupils are within two years of the end of statutory schooling that the shape of *'a balanced and broadly based curriculum which could promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils, and prepare them for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life'* (GB. Statutes, 1996) becomes the most challenging. The differences between pupils' abilities, aptitudes and interests become increasingly marked as they grow older and progress through the key stages. The immensely complex task which the key stage 4 curriculum is expected to accomplish can be gauged by remembering that these 'abilities, aptitude and interests' apply in each of the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical domains. Construct a profile related to this matrix for each of the pupils in key stage 4 in any secondary school and the heterogeneity which the curriculum has to accommodate is immediately clear.

Despite the range of pupils, abilities, aptitudes and interests, some broad pathways to positive post-16 progression are clearly established and relatively unproblematic – for example, for those who have chosen to aim for higher or further education. Other pathways are less well signposted. The way forward may not be easily perceived by pupils who are unsure of their direction, unwilling to think about what direction they wish to take, or for whom the idea of direction in their lives or planned transition is alien. It is these pupils who are often uncomfortable with the statutory demands of the key stage 4 curriculum (outlined in Appendix 2). Their unease often manifests itself in discomfort with school itself and, in turn, results in disaffection with, and disengagement from, what is offered. This report presents findings from a research project carried out at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) into alternative curriculum arrangements that can be made for pupils like these.

Previous NFER reports found strong links between disaffection and the key stage 4 curriculum (Kinder *et al.*, 1995; 1996; Kinder and Wilkin *et al.*, 1999; Kinder and Kendall *et al.*, 1999). Indeed, there is a growing realisation that one of the principal reasons given for truancy by young people in Years 10 and 11 is that the curriculum is 'irrelevant' (*inter alia* Dearing, 1996; QCA, 1998a; GB. Parliament. HoC, 1998c; Bayliss, 1999). This is not a new phenomenon. After the raising of the school leaving age in 1972, concern over the relevance of the curriculum heightened (for one account,

see Pring, 1995). As a result, in 1982, the Lower Achieving Pupils Project was set up to improve the motivation and attainment of those pupils in the last two years of school who were not expected to perform well in public examinations (Harland *et al.*, 1988). However, the continued, perceived 'irrelevance' of the mainstream curriculum has become increasingly transparent in the light of pupils' experiences within a common curriculum and the expectations of common assessment at 16 plus. It is also well known from the literature that problems such as disaffection, truancy, and under-achievement have multi-factor causes (see, for example, Kumar, 1993; Walker and Walker, 1997; GB. Parliament. HoC, 1998c). This view was again confirmed by the NFER research summarised in this report, which showed that problems surfacing in school were believed to be influenced in part by each of the following:

- **family circumstances and attitudes** – for example, poverty, parental unemployment, parentally condoned absence, low aspirations, condoned aggression;

- **community context** – economic and social deprivation, high unemployment, insular housing estates, local drug culture;

- **school experience** – the curriculum (understood in its broadest sense) on offer not suiting the needs, interests and aspirations of all pupils.

The Government has responded to these concerns by enabling and encouraging schools to offer more choices at key stage 4 (i.e. for 14- to 16-year-old pupils) (GB. Statutory Instruments. 1998; GB. DfEE/QPID, 1998; QCA, 1998a and c). Options include changes to the content of the curriculum, the mode of study, the context in which teaching and learning takes place and the means of assessment.

While this greater flexibility is welcomed, there is also uncertainty as to:

- the degree to which a young person's options at key stage 4 (in terms of the broad thrust and delivery of the curriculum rather than merely GCSE subject choices) depend on where s/he happens to go to school and in which area of the country s/he lives;

- the way in which 'alternative' provision has evolved locally and unsystematically, often as a result of the initiative of individuals or the chance interaction of a small group of individuals in different agencies/ professional areas;

- whether the placement of young people on schemes is the result of careful consideration of options or using whatever is available;

- the aims, success criteria and intended outcomes, both in the short-term and the long-term;

- the embedding of provision within related management issues (monitoring, review and evaluation; target-setting, for example)

- what constitutes 'progress' for this group of young people who, as a general rule, have only encountered failure elsewhere.

In addition, there are issues arising from the national policy context. The last years of the 1990s saw an explicit focus in government policy on social exclusion in its many guises (see, for example, GB. Parliament. HoC, 1998a, b and c; GB. Parliament. HoC, 1999a and b). These years also saw a greater understanding of the demands of the multi-agency provision critical to addressing social exclusion, and of the potential and limitations of the infrastructure (such as data exchange and management) which supported this inter-agency collaboration. It is now generally acknowledged that there is often a clutch of difficulties surrounding those who are 'socially excluded' so that it is well nigh impossible for any one agency alone to develop support which will result in that person's inclusion. Therefore a multi-agency approach is not only desirable but essential.

It is against this background that the NFER was commissioned by the Local Government Association, under its Educational Research Programme, to undertake a research project investigating *Alternative Educational Provision at Key Stage 4*. The research reported here was designed to explore and describe the characteristics of alternative curriculum programmes and to assess the degree to which they were effective in helping young people to view mainstream education and training more positively, and in opening up clear progression routes to post-16 education, training or employment.

1.2 The aims of the research

The main aims of the research project were:

• to audit the alternative provision currently on offer – both in the public and voluntary sectors – in 14 local education authorities (LEAs) across England and Wales;

• to ascertain ways in which different agencies collaborate to share relevant information, plan and design a 'package' of alternative education for young people and establish procedures by which the package as a whole is monitored, evaluated and reviewed;

• to examine the curriculum of alternative programmes in relation to their respective aims and objectives, to the National Curriculum and to the opportunities for accreditation, transition planning and reintegration into mainstream education and training post-16;

• to gain a range of perceptions about the short-term and long-term advantages and disadvantages of alternative provision and the ways in which it enhances or inhibits life-chances;

• to consider the resource implications of alternative provision and gather perceptions about cost-effectiveness.

Throughout the research project, the emphasis was on the identification, description and analysis of effective practice – that is, practice which met needs, supported young people at a difficult time of their lives and equipped them to plan positively for their future. Further information about the project and the research methodology can be found in Appendix 1.

1.3 This report

This report is intended to help LEA staff, teachers and senior managers in schools to develop the key stage 4 curriculum provision in their schools. It is also designed to assist a range of other professionals (such as employers, careers advisers and college lecturers) who work with schools to provide appropriate curriculum programme components for school-age young people.

The report examines a series of themes, derived from the research, that appear to underpin successful practice at the various stages of a curriculum programme. Examples are given of practice and perceptions arising from different circumstances, aims and purposes. It was largely appropriateness to context, rather than a particular mode of provision, that defined effectiveness for this project. Data were gathered from pupils who had participated in alternative curriculum programmes at key stage 4 and from adults who had worked to support, promote and/or deliver appropriate programmes for these pupils. The practical experience of these people shows how official guidance on work-related learning in general, and on disapplication of the National Curriculum at key stage 4 in particular (GB. Statutes, 1988; GB. DfEE, 1999; QCA, 1998a; 1999a and b) can be implemented in a range of contexts.

Note: All names of individuals and schools used in the text are pseudonyms. The views of school staff, pupils (including former pupils) and parents are quotations from taped and transcribed interviews. The views of interviewees from partner organisations are paraphrased from notes made during telephone interviews that were not recorded.

2. THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

In the first half of this chapter, a number of key underlying distinctions are set out as they help to make sense of the ways in which alternative curricula operated in schools. The second half of the chapter uses these distinctions to offer brief descriptions of some of the actual experiences of schools involved in the research.

2.1 Some underlying distinctions

The research data showed that, across local authorities, there was a range of:

- approaches to the relationship between alternative programmes and the regular curriculum;

- perspectives on 'the problem' to be addressed;

- relationships with external providers.

2.1.1 Relationship between alternative programmes and the regular curriculum

'Alternative' programmes have to be seen in the context of the 'normal' provision. The NFER data showed that schools had three main approaches to alternative curricula at key stage 4:

- **a 'satellite' programme** – separate provision made for a group of identified 'pupils with problems', with little relationship to, or impact on, the regular key stage 4 curriculum;

- **an 'extension' programme** – this was an individualised approach developed to compensate for perceived weaknesses in the breadth of content and style of delivery of the regular key stage 4 curriculum. In the short term, it enabled the school to meet the needs of particular pupils in a range of ways depending on their interests and aptitudes. In the longer term, it was used as a basis of development both of staff and of the curriculum within the school;

- **a 'complementary' programme** – an opportunity for all key stage 4 pupils to follow externally-provided vocationally-orientated options that could not be offered within the school.

The nature of the alternative programme offered by the school was often influenced by the school's perspective on the very problems that the programme was set up to ameliorate or solve.

2.1.2 Perspectives on 'the problem'

Figure 2.1 shows how schools identified a problem at key stage 4.

Figure 2.1: Indicators of schools' concerns

The information schools used to identify concerns about the curriculum at key stage 4 included:

♦ levels of, and/or patterns within, school data on, for example, attendance;

♦ the use of temporary and permanent exclusion;

♦ referrals for indiscipline;

♦ reports of acting-out and/or withdrawn behaviour;

♦ actual and predicted test and examination scores;

♦ expressions of discontent from pupils or parents.

Many of the types of data listed above were required by statute to be *collected* by schools for reporting to governors, parents, the local authority and to government. *Using* the available data as a useful tool to aid identification of concerns and to inform teaching and learning in the school took that a critical step further. In this way, the school 'owned' the problem by showing concern about school evidence indicating, for example, disaffection, truancy or under-achievement among pupils.

On the other hand, it was important not to assume that, once concerns were identified, underlying causes were easy to pinpoint. In one case study school, for example, further research into the reasons for truancy revealed a complex picture:

> *There are some children who are never seen. I know some of them because I taught them in Year 7 but it's not something they open up to me about particularly. I've talked at length with some of the teachers, with* [the coordinator of the alternative curriculum programme] *about it and also picked up some statistics for the first part of last term. It would appear that there are as many reasons for not coming in as there are individuals in some cases. It's not quite as neat or as easy to quantify as I had expected. It's not just, 'Oh, I hate going to French with Mr* [-] *so I won't go to the school.' It could be, 'I'll stay at home until I've bathed my baby brother'. It could be, 'My mum's not very well.' It could be, 'Oh, I didn't feel very well.' It could be, 'Oh, I was in for lessons one and two and didn't want to stay for lesson three.' It's a whole hornet's nest.*
>
> Deputy headteacher, case study school

There were two different perspectives on 'the problem' identified:

• The first perspective located the problem within the pupil whose behaviour/attitude was deemed unacceptable. Its view was that the pupil's needs had to be met by an alternative type of provision made by others outside school – essentially, the school distanced itself from the pupil, viewing him or her as being unable to be accommodated within regular provision;

- The second perspective located the problem within the school itself and viewed data about disaffection, truancy and under-achievement as indicating the necessity for the reform of school provision. It acknowledged that behaviours were, in part, symptoms of school failure; by addressing the latter, future disaffection might be reduced. Pupils were not rejected: rather, the concern was to meet their needs in a range of ways.

Figure 2.2 illustrates contrasting teacher views of pupils arising from these different perspectives.

Figure 2.2: Examples of contrasting teacher views of participating pupils

'Pupil as problem' perspective	'Problem lies within school' perspective
teachers described them as: • *'having low ability'* • *'being unrealistic about their future'* • *'not willing to work in class'* • *'very, very immature'* • *'requiring different rules and [lower] expectations'* • *'the most demanding pupils in the school'* • *'not wanting to be at school'* • *'provocative and awkward'* • *'the worst cases of children at the bottom of the ability range'* • *'the Alternatives'*	teachers described them as: • being *'the school's customers'* • *'going to fail academically* [unless alternative provision was made]*'* • being *'not scared to say what they think'* • being *'the school's responsibility'*
teachers believed participants saw themselves as: • *'having been binned'* • *'being in the "dimbos" group'*	teachers believed participants saw themselves as: • *'ambassadors for their school in the* [off-site] *setting'*
participating pupils described themselves as: • *'not bright enough for school'* • being *'got rid of'* to college	participating pupils described themselves as: • being *'envied'* by their peers

2.1.3   Relationships with external providers

The factors outlined above affected the school's relationships with external providers – in turn, this affected the impact of the alternative programme on the regular key stage 4 curriculum:

- Where responsibility for pupils was, essentially, 'offloaded' to an external provider, the relationship tended to be more distant: the role of the external agency was purely to make 'satellite' provision for these particular pupils;

- Where the school recognised the need to enhance the key stage 4 curriculum, closer relationships seemed to be forged with external providers: the approaches used by other agencies to engage young people in learning were allowed to influence the school's regular curriculum in future years.

The relationships between individual schools and their external partners is explored further in later chapters.

2.2   Practical outcomes

Neither the three approaches to alternative curricula nor the two perspectives on 'the problem' were clear-cut; the research evidence showed that schools were more easily categorised within a matrix or along a continuum (see Figure 2.3). For example, one school might exclude a pupil so that s/he was no longer on its roll; another might retain the pupil on roll but arrange for his/her needs to be met externally; a third school might reform the curriculum for that pupil *in order* to retain that pupil on roll.

Various responses to problems at key stage 4 can be plotted on this continuum:

- At the 'exclusion' end, the behaviour of individual pupils is deemed beyond the pale of acceptability within the school community and the pupil is asked to leave the school. The school itself does not have to make any adaptations to its curriculum: the *status quo* is maintained. Successful alternative educational programmes for excluded pupils were the subject of a parallel NFER research project (Kinder *et al.*, 2000) and so are not included here.

- Somewhere towards the middle of the continuum lies the 'satellite' response. In these cases, the school recognised that some pupils were not coping with what was on offer within the school and the solution adopted was to find something more suited to their needs and interests externally. The pupils stayed on the school roll but their needs were mainly met outside the school. Apart from adaptations of those pupils' timetables, the rest of the school's curriculum remained unchanged. These programmes were included in the NFER research reported here.

- Within the 'inclusive' half of the continuum lies the 'extension' response. In these cases, having recognised that not all pupils were thriving, the school sought to extend its own provision by drawing on the resources of external partners. Learning from this experience, the school changed by developing its own curriculum content and delivery for the next cohort of pupils – the likely result being less disaffection with, and disengagement from, the curriculum in the future.

- At the 'inclusion' end lies the 'complementary' response. The school had developed and adapted its curriculum, seeking to provide for its pupils mainly internally but recognised that, where necessary, the complementary expertise and facilities of external partners could also be used for this purpose.

Figure 2.3: The exclusive–inclusive continuum at key stage 4
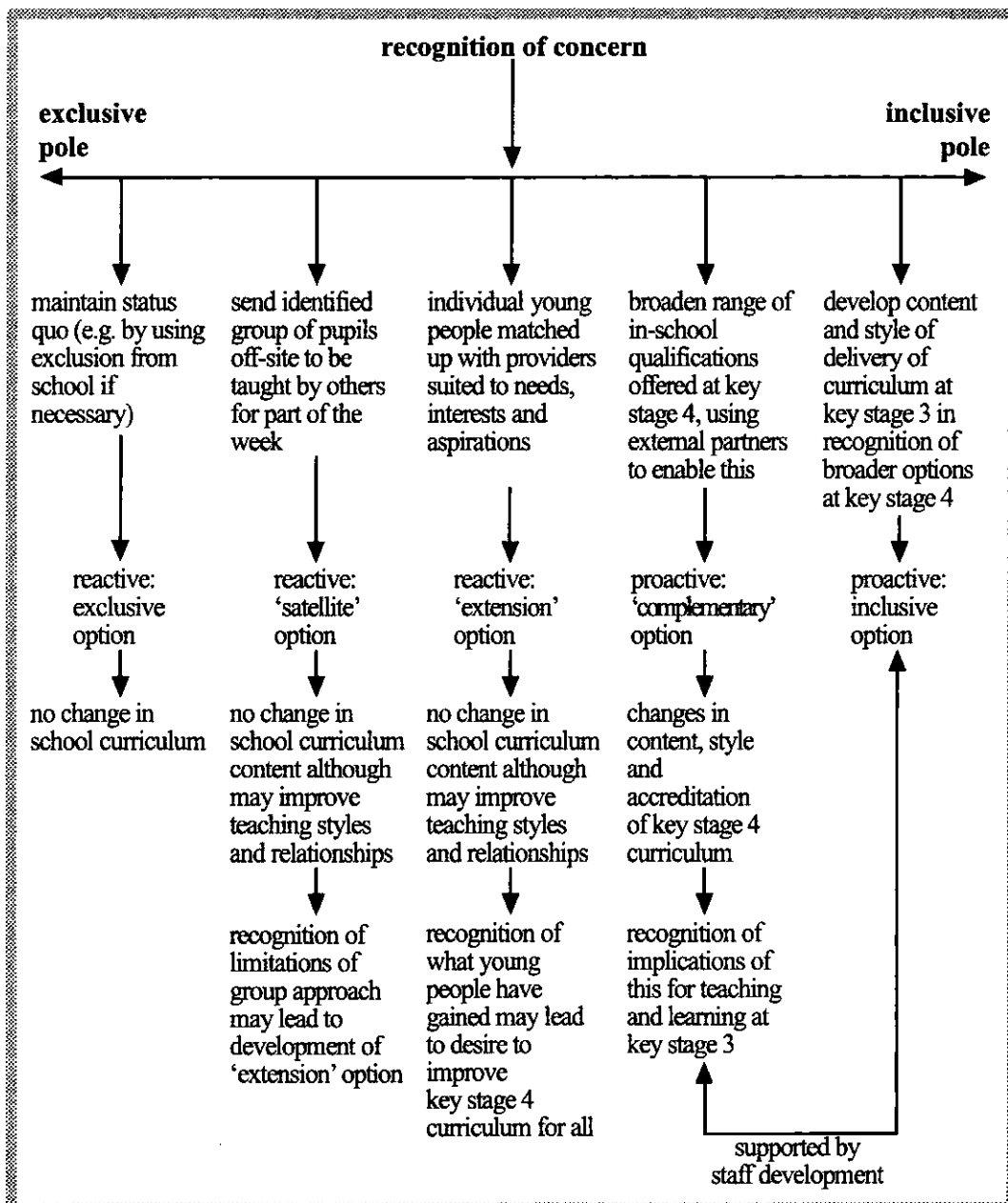
Of course, schools are dynamic organisations and cannot be summed up by simple labels or placed once and for all on a single exclusion–inclusion continuum. (For further discussion of this, see Cullen *et al.*, 1996; Clark *et al.*, 1999; Fullan, 1999; Kinder and Wilkin *et al.*, 1999.) Decision-making in schools is subject to a number of constraints and considerations. Depending on appropriateness in a given situation, the same school may, for example, decide to exclude one pupil, offer another an off-site programme; a third pupil will benefit from learning within a subject department that has decided to develop its curriculum. Schools involved in the NFER research showed evidence of having moved along the continuum – the second example below describes one school that began with a 'satellite' approach to the alternative curriculum programme but, having seen difficult pupils flourish, subsequently moved to a 'complementary' approach.

Examples are given below of how four of the eight case study schools saw their alternative curriculum programme in relation to the 'normal' key stage 4 curriculum offered in the school.

Example: Oak School – a 'satellite' programme moving towards 'extension'

At key stage 4, Oak School had already introduced two GNVQ Part 1 courses and, in Year 11, offered a basic skills Computer Literacy and Information Technology (CLAIT) course. Nevertheless, the school identified a group of pupils with a range of difficulties, including attendance problems, for whom it was felt something different from school was required. As a group, they were offered a 'satellite' programme of work-related tasters in Year 10 plus long-term work experience in Year 11.

From this experience the deputy headteacher became more aware of the ways in which the school's own curriculum could be improved, both in styles of teaching and in the range offered:

♦ suggested changes in teaching styles

I personally teach languages to one of these [alternative programme] *groups. I think we are re-thinking what we do with the style of working with them. I think to some extent we were quite naïve when we first started – we felt that working with a small group would enable us to give them more time individually and there would be a different kind of relationship and perhaps some of the fodder was fairly traditional. ... We talked about whether we should be looking at developing a curriculum which invites children to solve problems more, which is more discovery learning and involves them more as active learners. Perhaps we've still been on a conveyor belt model. In some lessons we should have been moving away from that. I wonder if to some extent we are continuing the traditional approach despite being an alternative and perhaps we should be more alternative for the next cohort. That's something that I think is coming through my first year of running this place. But it's not simply bolting on the college/[training agency] connections; it's also looking at the core provision in school. So I think, in terms of professionalism, perhaps it's extending the repertoire, the skills of staff who work with this kind of group and that's changing the way we think about the way these children would like to learn. I think the nature of our school is such that it would benefit a number of pupils actually, but certainly in terms of the alternative group, yes, it's something that is on the agenda for discussion.*

♦ suggested area for staff development

I think these children can be quite awkward, and as Deputy I've had to diffuse a number of conflicts. I think that staff could handle conflict better. These children sometimes can be quite provocative and be quite awkward because that's just how they are. Some staff immediately feel the need to clamp down and have a very rigid approach, and that's another thing which needs to be rethought – to understand and to let comments go and to handle conflict, confrontation more effectively. I think it's something we could do with as a whole school, not just with these groups.

♦ suggested move towards broadening the in-school curriculum

I think we are in the experimenting stage – [the coordinator] has been talking about employing someone on a kind of supply basis to work in school on alternative provision – someone with a [different] background. That [idea] has come from him looking at [courses like] food handling, ICT and that kind of thing.

♦ awareness of the complementary benefits of off-site experiences

I think the relevance of going to the workplace or to an alternative venue which is seen as being more to do with the adult world, the outside world, the perceived relevance is important for them. I personally think that enriches their provision. I think that's a good thing. I'm not suggesting that the provision will be 100 per cent internal in future because I think the variety is what is important.

Deputy headteacher, Oak School

Example: Alder School – a 'satellite' programme that developed into a 'complementary' one

Alder School recognised that its Year 10 and 11 curriculum was limited to GCSEs for all key stage 4 pupils. (The only exception was that pupils with significant special educational needs were offered support in basic skills.) Since pupils spanned a broad distribution of ability and socio-economic background, the staff realised that this standard curriculum contributed to disaffection at key stage 4. In response, the school accepted the chance to send some pupils part-time to the local college to take an NVQ in Building and Construction.

The school began by developing a 'satellite' type programme for a group of Year 10 pupils with identified problems. However, in the light of the progress made by pupils on the programme, and in the light of the difficulties encountered in working with external partners, the school reassessed the curriculum at key stage 4 so that the school could make appropriate provision for the needs of all its pupils.

As a result, a number of staff were trained as assessors to enable the school to offer GNVQs. All departments were asked to investigate the possibility of introducing NVQ courses by the following school year. In addition, the college-based option of an NVQ in building and construction was offered to the whole year group as part of the options available within the regular curriculum. A number of teachers became involved in delivering the theoretical part of this

course in school, thus broadening their own repertoire of skills, reclaiming 'ownership' of the pupils and increasing the coherence of the school and college-based elements of the key stage 4 curriculum.

As its sense of 'ownership' of the pupils changed, this school moved from seeing its alternative curriculum programme as a 'satellite' option for some pupils to regarding it as a 'complementary' element of the curriculum open to all pupils. At the same time, the type of relationship the school had with partner organisations changed from being one where partners provided for pupils off-site, to one where the school and its partners worked together to offer appropriate provision.

Example : Ash School – an extension programme

Ash School was aware of the shortcomings of the standard curriculum: *'we are very conscious that the core curriculum for some youngsters just isn't suitable'* (deputy headteacher). Staff sought to offer all the school's pupils an appropriate curriculum using a differentiated approach. For example, they offered a wide range of extra-curricular activities, curriculum support during the lunch-break, the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) Award in Year 10 and integrated learning support to avoid stigma.

Where behaviour suggested that this approach was not working with a very small number of pupils, exclusion was seen as an option but was used rarely and strategically. In most cases of persistently problematic behaviour, the response was to link up with external agencies which were able to provide additional elements and thus develop a curriculum programme suited to that individual. For example, one pupil was supported by regular meetings with an external mentor, whilst another attended college part-time.

Example: Silverbirch School – extension programme by default

Silverbirch School had planned to offer, within the regular Year 10 options, a 'complementary' programme involving off-site work-related training, fully integrated into the school timetable and involving no disruption to other lessons.

However, an under-developed local infrastructure of support and a consequent lack of resources forced the school to compromise and, in the short term, to settle for an 'enhancement' programme running in Year 11 whereby a small number of young people were found individually-tailored, work-related placements. The plan was for the 'complementary' programme to run in time for the next cohort of pupils to benefit.

Example :   Rowan School – extension programme

Rowan School sought to offer a *'child-centred'* curriculum for all its pupils, including those perceived as 'troubled and troublesome', mainly through a differentiated approach. The senior management team realised that up to 20 per cent of the school population were ill-served by a standard curriculum of GCSE courses so introduced more vocational elements (for example, GNVQ Part 1 and GCSE courses, such as Business Studies and Travel and Tourism). Where pupils showed signs of disengagement, the content and delivery of courses were also reviewed.

In addition, the school took a particular approach to pastoral support. Whichever members of staff or department had the most positive relationship with a 'difficult' pupil took responsibility for that pupil. This had positive outcomes and there were examples of pupils maintaining their place or achieving good results through the efforts of one department.

For a small number of pupils, however, exclusion or self-exclusion would have been inevitable without the use of an extension programme designed around individuals. External partner organisations worked with the school to offer these pupils a tailored package of in-school and out-of-school components.

Example: Redwood Special School – a 'complementary' programme

All secondary schools in the LEA were given funding to develop alternative programmes designed to ensure positive transitions for key stage 4 pupils. At Redwood School, the whole of the key stage 4 curriculum was characterised by an inclusive approach where each element played a part in building up pupils' self-confidence and independence skills in preparation for leaving school. Redwood School chose to use the additional funding to enhance its college link programme and its work experience placements for all Year 10 pupils, as well as paying for a part-time member of staff to enable senior staff to have more time to develop the whole-school curriculum.

In this case, the alternative curriculum programme was viewed as 'complementary' to what the school already offered to all its key stage 4 pupils. Since what the school already offered was entirely in keeping with the aims of the Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise (CCTE)/LEA programme, the programme flourished within a supportive context enabling further positive developments to be made in whole-school practice. The off-site components were regarded as integral to the school experience, rather than as 'bolted-on'.

2.3 A supportive context

Unsurprisingly, the research data showed that curriculum review and analysis depended on supportive senior and middle management.

2.3.1 A supportive senior management team

Senior management support was vital in ensuring that:

- a whole-school approach to teaching and learning was followed;

- the staff involved in the alternative programme had the status required to implement change and were seen as contributing to whole-school aims and purposes;

- the pupils involved in alternative programmes were not stigmatised by negative labels;

- effective liaison with external agencies was enabled;

- timetabling was sufficiently flexible to accommodate innovative provision;

- resourcing issues (both human and material) were adequately addressed.

Figure 2.4 illustrates some of these features.

Figure 2.4: Results of senior management team support

- sufficient autonomy for the coordinator's role

  I've been quite lucky over the years that both the head[teachers] I've worked with here have been very sympathetic towards special needs. They will accept my judgement on certain things.

  Coordinator, Sycamore School

- sufficient investment in the post of coordinator to enable the necessary tasks to be carried out properly

  What we basically recognised was that money should be spent on the person to do the programme: to make sure it actually happened was more important [than offering elaborate ideas]. ... We decided we must look at individual kids. That was the point at which we realised we needed someone to co-ordinate it, [someone] who was constantly available.

  Deputy headteacher, Rowan School

- resources from the school budget

  Funding from the school budget is equivalent to another member of staff. ... The finance committee of the governing body accept it, and that it was something that we felt was important in our development, and were prepared to allocate that amount of money within the school budget for this provision.

  Deputy headteacher, Oak School

  There was a need for boots and overalls at a cost of £400 or something. They were needed because the [provider] would not run [the programme] without them. We had to foot the bill so I authorised that and then it's a matter of coming back and informing people that that's how it's been spent.

  Coordinator, Oak School

- support in trying something new

    I've always seen it to be important that some alternative provision is provided, even if it's a Foundation course, so that we can offer some differentiation. That was taken away the year before last. I protested at that. I always thought it was pretty important that there should be something there. I think that is why I got involved – because I was protesting and looking for alternatives and pushing that there should be an alternative. I think that was why I was recognised as perhaps ready to do this.

    Co-ordinator, Oak School

- access to school decision-makers

    In the past, when going to schools, I visited the careers teacher and the head of Year 10 but now I go for the headteacher because they are the ones who make the decision [to participate or not]. I have found them to be very pleasant and encouraging.

    Area coordinator, industrial lead training body

2.3.2 The school coordinator

The NFER research showed that schools and partner organisations were unanimous in believing that it was important to have one person in the school with responsibility for coordinating the programme.

While it was not necessary for the programme coordinator to be a member of the senior management team, it was necessary for him or her to be invested with sufficient authority within the school to carry out the role. They needed, for example, to liaise with senior staff in other organisations, to manage a budget and authorise spending, and to negotiate with colleagues about changes to pupils' timetables. Interviewees stressed the importance of the coordinator having a range of professional skills, including excellent interpersonal, organisational and management skills and strong personal motivation to sustain what could be a difficult job. Those interviewed in the course of the research usually had a particular interest in lower-achieving and under-achieving pupils and enjoyed interaction with them.

Pupils and parents interviewed appreciated coordinators who:

- related to them as another human being rather than as a distant professional and did not 'talk down' to them;

- seemed to be able to be what another NFER publication (Kinder and Wilkin *et al.*, 1999) refers to as 'kid whisperers' (an analogy with horse whisperers);

- maintained confidence in the young person's ability to succeed, regardless of how difficult s/he appeared to be, and did not dwell on past negative experience and incidents;

- listened to the young person and thus gained an understanding of how to elicit the most positive response from him/her ('different strokes for different folks').

The coordinator's brief varied depending on the budget available (which affected the amount of staff time allocated), the number of pupils to be supported and the sort of programme involved. Examples from the case study schools of time allocated to the job included the following.

Example: Coordinator's role in Rowan School – full-time post

A full-time coordinator was employed by the school (using external funding arising from a successful local bid to the Single Regeneration Budget). This gave the coordinator time to be immediately responsive, for example, when a problem arose with a pupil at an off-site location, to visit the pupil at home, and to take the pupils to another location and pick them up again if necessary. In the view of the senior manager interviewed:

That sort of flexibility was absolutely essential. That's what we spent the [external] money on because we recognised that was the key and the rest of it we could find other ways of doing. ... What we basically recognised was that the money should be spent on the person to do the programme – to make sure it actually happens was more important [than elaborate ideas].

This approach meant that the coordinator was available both to the pupils and to the external providers, thus ensuring, for example, that one 'explosion' from a volatile young person did not result in breakdown of a placement or the external provider being put off taking another pupil. Equally, transport was arranged for the young people, so that they were not deterred by logistics from gaining access to a placement.

Example: Coordinator's role in Silverbirch School – four periods a week

The coordinator was allocated four periods a week to liaise with external organisations involved in the school's work-related learning/vocational education and transition programme. In addition, the coordinator was helped by a senior manager and by a colleague who had specific responsibility for aspects of the programme operating through the local New Start initiative. Although the overall task of running the programme was shared, it was crucially important for its success that one person had responsibility for liaising with external agencies.

Example: Coordinator's role in Oak School – two periods a week

The programme coordinator was allocated two periods a week. Initially, the time was for initiating the programme and then for in-school tutorial support to the pupils on the programme. This meant that all other aspects of the coordination role were done in non-contact time and after working hours. The small amount of time allocated to the task determined what the coordinator could achieve – for example, it limited contact with parents and the variety of options arranged for the pupils.

Example: Coordinator's role in Alder School – no specific time allocated

The deputy head took on the role of coordination, but with no specific time allocated for the task. One result of this decision was some parents feeling that teachers did not take time to get involved with the pupils on the programme. Clearly, with no time specifically allocated, it would be hard to nurture relationships with pupils and parents, be responsive and offer practical support as in the examples above.

As these examples show, there was a wide variety as regards co-ordination duties and time allocated to carry them out. A composite list of the tasks carried out by programme coordinators highlights the necessity for adequate time to fulfil the role:

- exploring local options;

- selecting (with others) the pupils to take part;

- finding out about the needs, interests and aspirations of the selected pupils;

- designing the programme;

- 'selling' the programme to colleagues, to pupils and to parents/carers;

- supporting the pupils before, during and after the programme;

- negotiating and liaising with local partner organisations;

- liaising with parents/carers;

- liaising with colleagues;

- monitoring and evaluating progress;

- reporting to all those involved.

2.3.3   Involving other teachers

Overall, evidence from some case study schools showed that it was helpful if, in addition to the coordinator, other teachers in the school were also involved in the alternative curriculum programme. In those case study schools preferring to give the programme a very low profile in the school, participating pupils tended to be stigmatised for being in 'special' provision. This difference between schools related to the conceptual distinctions discussed above: where a school retained a strong sense of 'ownership' of the pupils, adopting a 'complementary' approach to the alternative programme and allowing external agencies to influence the school's own regular curriculum, the programme was seen as a whole-school issue and so it was natural to involve other staff.

Examples of ways in which other teachers were involved included:

- working with lecturers from the local further education college to plan and co-deliver the college component of the programme;

- sharing one full-time equivalent post among several subject teachers so that the pupils on the programme could be taught as a separate group for a number of subjects;

- teaching the theoretical, classroom-based part of courses, with the practical side covered in college;

- participating in a car/minibus rota to transport pupils to and from off-site locations.

Involving other teachers in the programme in ways such as these helped to create a supportive climate in the school, benefiting the coordinator in carrying out that role and reassuring the pupils taking part that the school still took responsibility for them by showing an interest in them.

2.4 Limitations at school level

The experiences of the case study schools suggested that alternative provision would be restricted by in-school factors such as:

- limited budgets (affecting, for example, the amount of staff time allocated, the number of placement fees that could be afforded, etc.);

- limited staff time (leading to the necessity to prioritise and the slow resolution of problems);

- constraints of operating around the main key stage 4 timetable;

- entrenched attitudes of pupils (where, for example, addictive drugs played a part);

- unsupportive attitudes from some staff and/or some parents.

External factors restricting provision included a limited number of places being available on courses, and a limited range of local possibilities.

These issues are discussed further in the remainder of this report. Here they serve to highlight the fact that any environment has both opportunities and constraints.

2.5 Summary of good practice points

Based on the evidence presented in Chapter 2, good practice seems to be promoted when schools:

- located 'the problem' within the school itself, viewing data about disaffection, truancy and under-achievement as indicators of the necessity for the reform of school provision. It acknowledged that behaviours were, in part, symptoms of school failure; by addressing the latter, future disaffection might be reduced. Pupils were not rejected; rather, the concern was to meet their needs in a range of ways;

- recognised the need to extend or to complement the key stage 4 curriculum through close relationships with external providers, whose approaches to engaging young people in learning were allowed to influence the regular curriculum offer in future years;

- were willing to learn from experience. For some schools, beginning with a 'satellite' programme that offered separate provision for identified pupils and distanced itself from the rest of the school, was part of a development process. There was evidence that some moved on from this approach towards an 'extension' approach (i.e. offering individualised programmes for pupils with particular interests and aptitudes) or even a 'complementary' approach that broadened the possibilities at key stage 4 for all pupils by drawing on the resources of other organisations;

- had a supportive senior management team that enabled the alternative curriculum programme to operate effectively, supporting staff and pupils directly involved, and ensuring that the programme was viewed as part of a whole school approach to teaching and learning;

- appointed a coordinator with sufficient status to carry out all the tasks required effectively. The coordinator had excellent interpersonal, organisational and management skills and personal values that motivated her/him to cope with what could be a difficult and demanding role;

- involved other teachers in a range of ways designed to show that the participating pupils were still 'owned' by the school and that the alternative curriculum programme was a whole-school responsibility.

3. THE LOCAL CONTEXT

At local level, certain facilitating conditions enabled alternative curriculum programmes to work particularly well:

- a range of external partners willing to work with schools;

- an infrastructure for local co-ordination of alternative provision;

- links with national agencies, governmental or non-governmental;

- an LEA willing to support and facilitate schools in making the most of what was available.
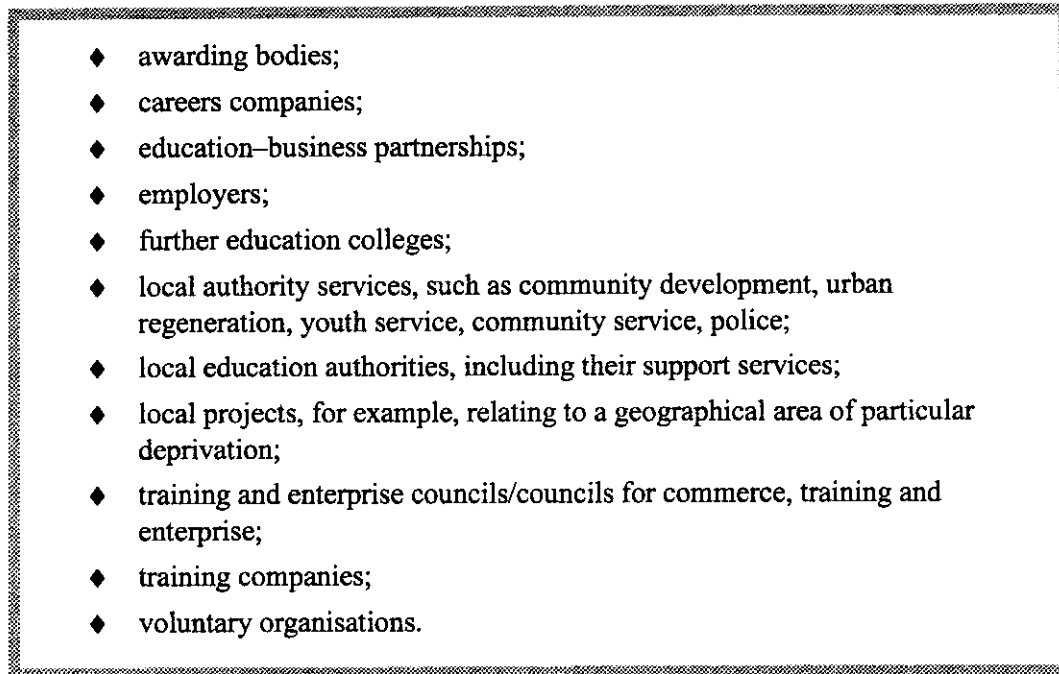
3.1 Organisations willing to work with schools

As was noted in Chapter 2, problems manifesting themselves in pupil disaffection, truancy or under-achievement are likely to have a number of causes. Although there are various strategies that schools themselves can adopt in seeking to address concerns at key stage 4, some young people have deep-set problems arising from a conjunction of causes that schools on their own cannot solve. In recognition of this, working with other organisations has become a necessary part of schools' repertoire of responses (for example, GB. DfEE, 1999). The NFER research found that there was a wide range of other organisations willing to work with schools to do something positive for key stage 4 pupils ('disaffected/disengaged' and others).

Although the NFER research focused on schools engaged in collaborative arrangement with other organisations to deliver an alternative curriculum programme, the strategies which these schools put in place to bring about internal organisational change to address concerns at key stage 4 were also considered. There were two broad strategies. First, there was review and development of the content and delivery of the curriculum – for example, including non-GCSE courses accrediting basic skills, key skills, personal and social skills, and vocationally-orientated courses; experimenting with a range of different teaching styles. Second, there was staff development to support curricular changes in content, delivery and assessment, on interacting with teenagers and on avoiding confrontation and conflict.

In response to the initial questionnaire developed for the NFER research, 82 schools from the 14 LEAs contacted reported being involved in alternative education programmes. A composite list of the types of organisations with which these schools worked is given in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: Types of organisations involved with responding schools in offering alternative curriculum programmes at key stage 4

♦ awarding bodies;

♦ careers companies;

♦ education–business partnerships;

♦ employers;

♦ further education colleges;

♦ local authority services, such as community development, urban regeneration, youth service, community service, police;

♦ local education authorities, including their support services;

♦ local projects, for example, relating to a geographical area of particular deprivation;

♦ training and enterprise councils/councils for commerce, training and enterprise;

♦ training companies;

♦ voluntary organisations.

It was noticeable, however, that in a national climate in which multi-agency and multi-disciplinary working were strongly promoted, different schools and their partner organisations worked together in ways that illustrated different stages of development of 'joint working' and 'partnership'. For example, a number of those interviewed from organisations working with schools spoke, not in terms of multi-disciplinary working or multi-agency approaches, but in terms of 'helping' schools and of 'making a contribution to the local community'.

The NFER research interviews with partner organisations indicated that their involvement with schools was prompted by one or more of four stimuli (see Fig 3.2 for specific examples):

• **altruism** – for example, a sense of responsibility to the community;

• **opportunism** – for example, the recognition of a marketing opportunity for courses or services, the chance to heighten the profile of a service, industry or vocational area, or simply seizing the opportunity created by funding becoming available for this sort of work;

• **development of existing practice** – for example, organic growth of existing work or of a previous pilot project;

• **external pressure/invitation to participate** – for example, from government, the local council or Training and Enterprise Council, local employers or individuals.

Interestingly, pressure from the Government, though an important stimulant, was rarely cited as the only factor prompting involvement with schools in providing for 14- to 16-year olds, suggesting that a more local or immediate catalyst may be necessary.

In general, flexible, locally-negotiated programmes based on local networks worked well. One theme that emerged strongly from the NFER research was that local communities have their own 'eco-system' and young people who do not plan to move away from their own locality must find, or be found, a productive place within that system. This requires local knowledge and good working relationships at local level. Alternative curriculum programmes seemed to be most effective when they both developed locally and linked in to local networks, resulting in mutual benefits.

Figure 3.2: Why get involved?

INTERNAL MOTIVATION:

- **altruism**

  'it seemed like a neighbourly thing to do; a community act' (primary school teacher)

  'the college Chancellor was keen to support students with challenging behaviour' (FE college interviewee)

  'we did it as a service to the community' (FE college interviewee)

  'we saw it as doing our bit' (training organisation interviewee)

- **opportunism/self-interest**

  'it was an obvious niche in the market to target this group [disaffected young people]*'* (careers service interviewee)

  'this is a profitable course that helps to fund our charitable work' (interviewee from an industrial sector body/charitable trust)

  'it raises the profile of the college and raises young people's awareness of what the college offers' (FE college interviewee)

- **what was already in place**

  'the pilot had shown the advantages of this approach' (training and enterprise council interviewee)

  'we already had an existing database of training providers and employers where students can be placed so all we had to do was adapt it, tweak it to meet the needs of the school' (voluntary organisation interviewee)

EXTERNAL MOTIVATION:

- **external pressure/invitation to participate**

  'recent legislation put pressure on us to work with all types of young people and the government realised that young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties were not being targeted' (careers service interviewee)

  'we do it to meet employer demand' (interviewee from a training organisation/ charitable trust)

  'it came about as the result of numerous telephone enquiries from parents and teachers about an alternative to the national curriculum' (FE college interviewee)

  'it was set up due to demand from schools to keep students on track when [school] *attendance drops'* (FE college interviewee)

- **part of organisation's brief**

  A number of agencies, notably, for example, careers services (GB. DfEE, 1998) and colleges of further education, have an obligation to meet the needs of young people in their community.

  '*it's part of our mission of service to the community*' (FE college interviewee)

  '*this sort of work is now in our business plan because of the government contract*' (careers service manager)

3.2 Local coordination of provision

The ease with which schools were able to find out about the range of local possibilities varied depending on the stage of development of any local enabling infrastructure. Analysis of the data collected indicated that schools in different LEAs faced very different circumstances in this regard. In part, this variation arose from the fact that the period covered by the NFER research coincided with a period of government-generated activity including:

- the first round of New Start;

- the DfEE-funding of 21 action research projects;

- the DfEE-funded pilot projects on inclusion;

- Standards Fund Work Related Learning projects;

- the setting up of the first Education Action Zones;

- a further round of local government reorganisation.

These initiatives all added to local variation – an LEA in whole or in part could be involved in all, none or any combination of them. The effects on the local infrastructure supporting work with 14- to 16-year olds, therefore, varied enormously and did not always add to the coherence of the local picture from schools' point of view:

> *The alternative curriculum programme and the New Start programme aren't running as one project. There are a lot of funding complications attached to the whole thing – it will fall together at some point in the future. I am completely lost – I have got my head around the alternative curriculum but I have no idea where New Start fits in to anything.*
>
> Head of Year 10, case study school

> *There have been too many initiatives recently – people feel swamped. That's why things went wrong* [with a previous attempt at local coordination of effort].
>
> School coordinator, case study school

The data from the 14 LEAs included in the research offer views of different stages of local development, as the examples below illustrate.

From the NFER research data it became clear that often a key prerequisite for local coordination of efforts and local strategic vision, was local awareness (sometimes based on local research) of disaffection, truancy, under-achievement and exclusion from school as problems that were indicative of social exclusion among young people in transition. This sense of a shared client group, as it were, meant that a community response made rational and cost-effective sense.

In best practice, this awareness was translated into local polices and partnerships designed to tackle social exclusion in the area. The NFER research showed that, in some areas, at least, a range of agencies understood the mutual benefit to the community to be derived from curriculum programmes that supported young people and enabled them to move into positive progression routes after the end of compulsory education. The following examples show how local policies and partnerships could underpin flexible, locally-negotiated provision.

Example: Education Action Zone status (Midlands Metropolitan Authority)

Context:
This authority covered a large city where many families lived in disadvantaged circumstances, caught in a generational cycle of deprivation. A mix of different ethnic groups had settled in the area.

Awareness:
There was a strong local awareness of the problems facing the city:

The LEA recognised the needs of disaffected young people and the need to address the unacceptable drop-out rate at key stage 4. Since needs and reasons varied, a range of solutions was sought. In addition, the Training and Enterprise Council and schools also saw a glaring need for an alternative for school-age pupils. (TEC interviewee)

In [this city], *there is a widespread awareness of the need to address disaffection affecting so many young people.* (careers service interviewee)

There was a community-wide recognition of a need for young people to be in closer contact with local professionals. (interviewee from education business partnership)

The whole initiative grew from grass roots. There is a widespread recognition that the mainstream education system and the National Curriculum are not meeting the needs of a vast number of pupils. (Chief executive of local project)

Local policies:
The response of the authority was to put in place a city-wide strategy to tackle social exclusion with the long-term aim of rejuvenating the city.

Local partnerships:
Following a successful Education Action Zone bid for the most deprived area of the city, a number of organisations and bodies (such as the careers company, the LEA, the local council and the TEC) worked together with schools, colleges etc. supporting disaffected and excluded pupils. This was regarded as working

well because it built on *'a tradition of working collaboratively and a willingness to deal with the City and its problems by working together'* (careers service interviewee). The same interviewee mentioned that the wider community was consulted about the programmes offered to young people to ensure that they would *'cater for local needs'*.

Example: Joint bid for central funding* (Northern Metropolitan Authority)

Context:
This relatively compact authority had many families suffering from *'multiple deprivation'* as a result of major redundancies in the coal and steel industries.

Awareness:
Research carried out by the careers company showed that many young people were disaffected in school and were not making a successful transition to positive post-16 options. The National Curriculum at key stage 4 was perceived as inappropriate for these pupils.

Local policies:
The local authority had adopted an inclusive approach to education, which, according to all those interviewed, was widely endorsed within the community.

Local partnerships:
The local policies were manifested in local partnerships. The LEA and the Chamber for Commerce, Training and Enterprise were successful in gaining joint funding from the Single Regeneration Budget for a project to support young people in making a positive transition from school to post-16 progression routes. After a successful pilot year, this money was devolved through individual contracts to every school with key stage 4 pupils. The inclusion of every school was an important reflection of local policy. At the same time, the CCTE *'encouraged collaboration and networking to break down the isolation of schools'* (CCTE interviewee). The local careers company was involved in evaluating the programme and collaborating with existing local networks:

> *We are involved in a number of local partnerships concerning pre- and post-16 cohorts of young people. ... One aim is to develop and maintain community networks.* (careers service interviewee)

This networking approach was successful:

> *We were approached by the careers people. ... Our involvement grew out of the* [local area regeneration] *Partnership and the* [local area] *Training Managers Association's bi-monthly meetings.* (training organisation interviewee)

> *The money came from the TEC so we set it [the school link] up.* (FE college interviewee)

> *Us, the TEC and the schools – we're all interested in disaffected students in Year 11.* (training organisation interviewee)

* The Single Regeneration Budget Challenge Fund. For details of this and other sources of funding, see
G.B. DfEE. QPID (1998).

Example: Local research used as basis of local partnerships (Welsh Authority)

Context:
A former mining area, suffering from high unemployment and social deprivation – one of its towns was referred to by an interviewee as *'the capital of disaffection'*.

Awareness:
The local TEC sponsored research into the young people in the area who had 'dropped out' of education, employment and training. As a result, awareness of the relevant issues was high.

Local policies:
The local authority acted on the findings of the local research in its implementation of the national policy agenda on the promotion of lifelong learning and the Youth Access Initiative, as well as producing a coordinated Children's Service Plan. An over-arching lifelong learning strategy was used to empower authority-wide partnerships at strategic level.

Local partnerships:
At operational level, these partnerships resulted in the development of:

♦   a teaching and learning pack, based on pre-vocational skills, produced by the careers service, funded by the TEC and used by every type of educational establishment – from schools to secure units for young offenders;

♦   a programme for young people on the verge of permanent exclusion which focused on vocational training through extended work experience. This was part of the education department's service plan and involved schools, the youth service, learning support service and social workers working together with local training providers and employers.

Example: Other examples in brief

Other examples included:

♦   an inner London authority where the local **Education Business Partnership** coordinated a programme of extended pre-vocational work experience/training;

♦   a large county authority where one **Education Welfare Officer** used her knowledge of the area to suggest suitable placements to schools. This then evolved into organising area meetings, bringing together all those offering provision to 14- to 16-year olds and all schools interested in using this provision;

♦   a new authority that set up **a local advisory body** to promote and enable pre-/ vocational education for 14- to 19-year olds. It set up a scheme focusing on positive progression post-16, acting as a clearing house for schools looking for local external provision for selected pupils;

♦   a metropolitan authority that used the opportunities afforded by New Start to explore what was available locally, develop **an electronic database of local provision** which was regularly updated, and make this available to schools on the local intranet.

It is clear from other sources (see, for example, The Crescent Partnership, 1999; Jones, 1999; Mackie and Siora, 2000) that local coordination of efforts to support young people at risk of social exclusion (in its widest sense) has continued to develop – particularly, but not exclusively, as a result of the New Start Programme.

3.3 Support from national agencies

Although local networks were crucial to the success of alternative curriculum programmes, the importance of a supportive context at national level to energise existing local work and stimulate the creation of new programmes should not be ignored.

3.3.1 Influence of government policies

A number of government policies were welcomed as being supportive of local efforts to ensure that young people were enabled to follow positive progression routes during their transition from school to the adult world (see Figure 3.3). The placing of social inclusion high on the political agenda gave a new urgency and legitimacy to work in this area. The fact that the Government was seen to have recognised the problem was helpful to those who wished to introduce a local strategy for social exclusion. The New Start Programme was particularly welcomed – the move towards first identifying and then coordinating local support structures was evident in each of the LEAs involved in the NFER research that had successfully bid for New Start money.

Figure 3.3: Government policies welcomed as being supportive at local level

♦ the **re-focusing of the careers services** on work with disengaged young people most at risk of becoming 'NEETs' (not in education, employment or training). In some cases, this made the careers service a key player in local networks, bringing schools into contact with local providers:

When [coordinator] *contacted* [the career company], *he found that they too had received funding for working with disaffected pupils and the jigsaw came together quite well in that respect. So, I don't think he really had to look too hard, I think organisations were themselves coming to terms with new opportunities for working with students and it wasn't very hard to find out who they were once we started.*

Deputy headteacher

♦ the **broadening of the statutory curriculum at key stage 4**, to promote further work-related learning:

We support the Dearing recommendations [(Dearing, 1994)] *because they open up opportunities for work like this.*

Careers adviser

Blunkett has the right idea – I am pleased he recognises the constraints of the National Curriculum for some young people and I hope this will impact positively on disaffection.

FE college lecturer

♦ **new initiatives**, such as New Start, specifically intended to improve local provision for disaffected/disengaged young people:

> *We became involved as a result of the New Start initiative ... the Government recognised the need to identify the existing infrastructure of support – this was, in many cases, already occurring at local level, but the government drive formalised the process. Recent changes, both nationally and locally, have meant effective partnerships are developing.*
>
> TEC interviewee

♦ the move towards **coherence at policy level**:

> *I'm also a magistrate so I see* [the young people] *move up the ladder* [of offending]. *I'm keen on a more collaborative approach even at Secretary of State level – on the ground, a lot of us are working with the same young people.*
>
> TEC interviewee

♦ **some changes in the training world**:

> *The image of the vocational route has improved with Youth Training and vocational training – we do now have vacancies for high flyers on the vocational route.*
>
> Training agency interviewee

Also mentioned were:

♦ the duty of local authorities to develop Children's Service Plans, which was found to encouraged a coordinated approach to meeting the needs of young people;

♦ the promotion of life-long learning.

Interviewees expressed their concern about the possibly transient nature of some government support: short-term funding and competitive bidding were not considered conducive to the sustenance and maintenance of initiatives which are so vital for vulnerable people.

In addition, other elements of the national policy context were perceived as militating against local collaboration for alternative provision. Perceptions of the inappropriateness of the National Curriculum have already been mentioned. In addition, reference was made to the focus on attainment at 16 plus in public examinations and resource limitations resulting from the organisation of post-16 education and training.

3.3.2 Work of non-governmental agencies/ organisations

Schools and other providers who took part in the NFER research were supported by the work of a number of non-governmental agencies/ organisations operating at national level. These included:

• **voluntary sector organisations** – some willing to work with anyone interested and others with a remit to work with disaffected/disengaged young people;

- **private sector businesses** – usually working through a local Education Business Partnership, a local Compact or a specific company scheme;

- **industry lead bodies** – building on the renewed emphasis on work-related learning at key stage 4 to encourage young people to follow careers in particular vocational sectors.

A useful directory of similar sources of support was edited by Sowerby (1998). Figure 3.4 gives some examples of how those interviewed from such organisations saw their role in particular local areas.

Figure 3.4: Interviewees from non-governmental agencies describe their role

- industry lead body

    Ron Dearing [(Dearing, 1994)] *recommended that schools should have a vocational input in Years 10 and 11. The CITB [Construction Industry Training Board] took this on board in 1995. They formed the Construction Partnership to do so. I am one of these people. I visit schools, colleges, etc. to promote the NVQ1 in Building Crafts or the GNVQ in Construction in the Built Environment. ... This [programme] fills a gap in the curriculum for those who are disaffected (not necessarily of low ability). They are labelled failures and become disillusioned – this gives another dimension to their academic qualifications and helps them up the career ladder. It's a good preparation for young people and offers them a lot of potential.*

    Local coordinator, Construction Partnership

- national voluntary organisation

    It was a very small, internal evaluation of our post-16 programme in the north-west that started us thinking about why young people were dropping out after a few weeks. We wondered if there were common features. The issues that came out included that there was a group of young people who had very poor school attendance, often over a period of two years, and other educational problems. We talked to a number of TECs and decided to focus on pre-16. Initially, we looked purely at the world of work but we have broadened out since then. The first programmes were all part-time. We are not teachers or social workers so we concentrate on what we do best – training and the transition to post-16. ... Now we run full programmes linked in with FE colleges covering ICT, key skills and work-related learning. We are also trying to involve other voluntary organisations concerned with aspects such as drugs education or health education. We now have a lot more to do with LEAs and Social Services but the TECs are still involved.

    Regional Development Officer

3.4 The role of the LEA

The research data indicated that LEAs had the potential to play a pivotal role in enabling schools to give some of their pupils access to alternative curriculum programmes at key stage 4, both as mediators of national and local policy initiatives and as key members of local partnerships.

Schools valued the efforts of LEAs to organise local networking meetings. For example, both the deputy headteacher and the Year 10 head from Ash School valued the constructive approach – focusing on practical and local ways forward (a 'what could *we* do' approach) – adopted at an LEA area meeting of representatives from all secondary schools and all interested providers, such as further education colleges. Equally, a year head from Oak School benefited from the regular review and information-sharing meetings of representatives from all parties involved in the local New Start initiative. In another LEA, where such a forum did not exist, three teachers interviewed in Silverbirch School separately spoke about the need for one. Its purpose would be facilitating the creation of appropriate programmes for pupils by raising awareness, on the one hand, of pupil needs, interests and aspirations, and, on the other, of what possibilities for collaboration existed locally.

The research data also indicated that interviewees saw the potential for LEAs to contribute in other key ways, including a role in:

- **establishing a quality framework**, for example, relating to health and safety and insurance requirements when young people are off-site during school hours (national guidance on this has since been published (G.B. DfEE. QPID, 1999)). For a broader set of quality criteria, developed for a local New Start partnership, see Jones (1999) – its principles could be used as the basis for other local quality frameworks;

- **facilitating the maintenance of support for particularly vulnerable pupils post-16** – for example, this might be achieved by coordination between the LEA and further education colleges and other post-16 providers;

- **providing staff development** – a) for those involved in running the programmes: for example, one coordinator would have liked the chance to go on a course to allow him to reflect on his experience of setting up and managing the school's alternative curriculum programme; and b) for teachers working with sometimes difficult young people: for example, a senior manager recognised the need for whole-school staff development on working with adolescents in non-confrontational ways;

- **ensuring the availability of opportunities for girls** to benefit from alternative curriculum programmes that reflect their needs, interests and aspirations (the gender imbalance in provision is discussed in Chapter 5).

- **developing classroom support for teachers** – the idea being that supported teachers were more able and willing to offer support to their pupils and hence help to prevent the occurrence of disaffection and disengagement from learning.

From the data, it was clear that LEAs could (and did) play their part in making the local context a supportive one for schools and providers to develop effective alternative curriculum programmes.

3.5 Constraints at local level

Partner organisations, however willing they were to work with schools, also faced constraints. Those highlighted by the research were:

financial – for example,

- one interviewee from an LEA noted that some schemes depended on bidding and that this sometimes meant the programme could not be available to all schools;

- a small employer offering long-term work experience explained that if this had any financial impact, he would pull out;

- an interviewee from a training organisation noted that they did not have the money to cover pupil transport;

limitations on the number of places offered – for example,

- one training organisation only took a small number of pupils because they wanted to offer high quality support to each one;

timing – for example,

- one interviewee from a national training organisation explained that construction firms could only offer support to school pupils at very specific times because the trade went through cycles of boom (when there was no time to spare) and slump (when staffing was reduced).

Recognising such limitations helps schools and partner organisations set realistic aims and targets for themselves and the participating young people.

3.6 Summary of good practice points

Based on the evidence presented in Chapter 3, good practice seemed to be promoted when the following facilitating conditions characterised the local context:

▪ a wide range of external agencies willing to work with schools in supporting 14- to 16-year olds;

▪ some form of local coordination of alternative provision, such as a local coordinating agency (or person) or a regularly-updated electronic database of providers;

▪ local awareness of social exclusion indicators developing into local policies and partnerships, tackling the problems as a community for mutual benefit;

▪ supportive government policies and initiatives;

▪ support from national non-governmental organisations, such as voluntary sector agencies, public sector businesses and/or industrial lead bodies;

▪ a supportive LEA, willing to facilitate schools' access to what was available.

Provision seemed to work best when it grew out of:

▪ flexible, locally-negotiated programme possibilities based on local networks. These could grow as a result of demand from schools, or schools could be encouraged to use them, where they existed already, so long as there was a mechanism by which schools could access this information: for example, a directory available on a local intranet or in a regularly-updated, looseleaf file.
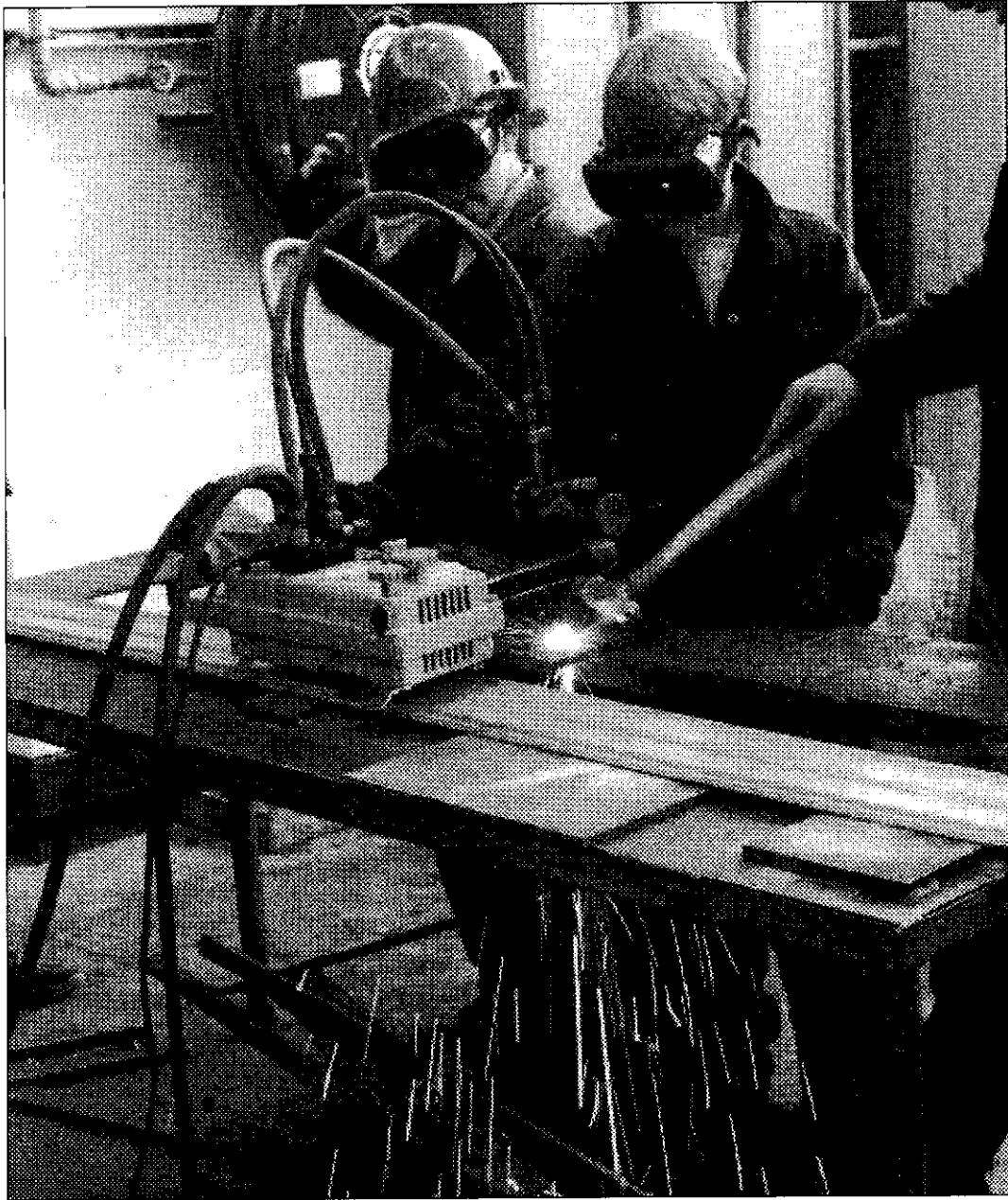
4. SELECTING THE PUPILS

Having established that there was cause for concern about the current educational experience offered to pupils in key stage 4, and having decided to offer an alternative curriculum programme, schools had to consider which pupils needed this type of support.

4.1 Profile of participating pupils

Table 4.1 shows the frequency with which different categories of pupils were included on alternative curriculum programmes in the 82 schools that provided details of such programmes in reply to the initial NFER questionnaire.

Table 4.1: Types of pupils participating in the programmes

Type of pupil	Frequency n=82 schools*
disaffected (not yet at risk of exclusion)	64
poor attendees	61
on the verge of exclusion	40
other (see below)	40
history of exclusion	19
no response	3
details of 'other'	
less academically able	13
learning difficulties	8
individuals with special cases	8
unspecified special educational needs	4
emotional and behavioural difficulties	4
pupil choice (open option)	4
no details given	3
whole year group included	2

*   school could answer for one or for two programmes; multiple-response question, therefore numbers do not sum to total N

From the case study schools, it was clear that this selection process was informed, in part, by previous experience of the pupils currently at key stage 4. Usually, schools had tried to support the pupils by internal strategies first, before trying a curriculum programme involving external partners.

Example: Internal support strategies

A head of house described the pupils as almost 'selecting themselves' by behaviour that brought them to the attention of staff, including *'really atrocious behaviour that has gone on for some time'*, a reluctance to work despite a lot of support, unexplained absences from school or quiet, withdrawn behaviour. However, before considering an alternative programme, the school would have tried to support the pupil within the standard school provision. She described the process as follows:

They almost self-select by bringing themselves to one's attention and at various times we look through the whole house list ...from time to time to keep a check on which youngsters are causing us worries. There are youngsters that almost shine out due to the number of referrals by teachers. ... I would have thought in most cases they are youngsters where we have worked closely with the parents, trying to find some route for the youngster within mainstream education – how we can support during lessons. We normally have done a fair bit of work, trying to support the normal education before we start going elsewhere.

Head of house, Ash School

'Supporting the normal education' included regular meetings with pastoral staff, enlisting the support of parents, running regular, staffed support sessions in a range of curriculum subjects during lunchtimes, and reducing the number of GCSE examinations to be taken by these pupils.

Overall, the data from the eight case study schools suggested that one or more of six main factors were taken into account when deciding which pupils should be included:

- **special educational needs** (on register or with statement of special educational needs);

- **emotional concerns** (but not on special educational needs register), for example, low self-esteem, low motivation, immature, disaffected;

- **learning concerns** (but not on special educational needs register), for example, low reading age, under-achieving, disengaged, not interested in academic learning;

- **behavioural concerns** (but not on special educational needs register), for example, acting out, withdrawn, truanting, disruptive;

- **age** (i.e. from Year 10 *or* Year 11 *or* from both);

- **interest** (including pupils who had no particular problems within the curriculum – this was done to increase the status of the programme).

Underlying a number of the factors listed above were concepts, such as 'special educational needs' and 'disaffection', whose meanings would be contested both within and between schools and which often overlapped. These are discussed in more detail below. The boundaries between them were by no means clear. This highlights the importance of the social inclusion agenda, which adopts a broader brush approach and demands a multi-agency response to meet the needs of young people with a variety of needs.

4.2 'Special educational needs' and 'disaffection'

The research data gave evidence that there were various interpretations and understandings of how alternative curriculum programmes ought to relate to pupils variously labelled as having special educational needs and/or disaffection. Before different school approaches to this are reported, it is worth making a few points about this situation, particularly as the concepts of 'special educational needs' and 'disaffection' derive from different traditions and debates and are not necessarily logically connected.

First, since the earliest days of the National Curriculum there was debate as to the appropriateness of the Programmes of Study and, indeed, the whole curriculum structure, for pupils with special educational needs. On the one hand, some commentators have been at pains to show why the National Curriculum is unsuitable for pupils with significant special educational needs. On the other hand, other commentators have explained in detail how the National Curriculum can benefit these pupils and be relevant to, and meet, their needs (see, for example, Ashdown *et al.*, 1991; Carpenter *et al.*, 1996). The revisions following the Dearing Report (1994) offered schools greater flexibility about the application of the Programmes of Study (for example, pupils might pursue the Programmes of Study for an earlier, rather than age-related, key stage). Thus, while there has always been the opportunity to present the curriculum in ways suitable for pupils with special educational needs (including off-site provision), disapplication for individual pupils with statements was discouraged in most local education authorities.

Second, there is no common definition of 'disaffection' (see, for example, Kinder *et al.*, 1995; 1996; 1998; Kinder and Kendall *et al.*, 1999; GB. Parliament. HoC, Education and Employment Committee, 1998). Thus this label will be attached to different pupils according to difference in school cultures. A common characteristic in applying the label is 'pupils who do not fit the normal provision' but this is, of course, totally context specific, as is shown by the literature on inclusive schools and, to a certain extent, effective schools (where effectiveness is assessed by the degree of participation by the totality of the school roll) – see, *inter alia*, Ainscow (1999).

Third, the relationship between 'disaffection', which, whatever its roots, will probably present itself in some degree of behaviour deemed inappropriate to the school environment, and the facet of special educational needs commonly termed 'emotional and behavioural difficulties', is controversial. There are a number of scenarios. Some pupils will present with behavioural difficulties and/or disaffection because they have unaddressed learning difficulties. Some will be labelled 'disaffected' because they have significant emotional and/or behavioural difficulties. Some will be labelled disaffected because, simply, they have 'grown out' of school. These pupils are street-wise, competent and able in other contexts; they find what school has to offer irrelevant, tedious and offensive to their self-esteem and attributed status in other milieu. There is ample anecdotal evidence of the way in which young people perceive teachers. It is

significant – and there is evidence for this in this report – that when young people praise some alternative provision by contrasting it to the school experience they usually refer to the fact that they are 'respected', 'treated as people', not 'shouted at' and not 'made to feel small'. Regardless of the accuracy of their perceptions, the weight of the evidence is that these are very real concerns to the vast majority of young people who fail to make positive relations with adults in school – but are somehow able to in different contexts. The point at issue here is that the young people in this group have neither special educational needs nor emotional and behavioural difficulties (other than those which are purely interactive and for which the catalyst seems to be a particular school experience). They may display 'disaffection' but some practitioners working with them prefer to suggest that they are 'disappointed' with what the education system has offered them.

4.2.1 Stances adopted by schools

The complex relationship between the concepts of special educational needs and disaffection, on the one hand, and access to alternative curriculum programmes, on the other, is illustrated by the range of stances taken by the case study schools.

Stance 1: Special educational needs seen as separate issue

Two of the case study schools deliberately excluded from an alternative curriculum programme anyone on the register of special educational needs, because it was felt that these pupils were already receiving additional support. From other evidence, this criterion of non-eligibility would seem to rest on shaky foundations.

First, support for pupils on the register of special needs is generally designed to provide access to the regular curriculum: this assumes that the regular curriculum is the most appropriate for all pupils with special educational needs. One of the main characteristics of alternative provision is that it provides the opportunity for young people who have had a career of failure or struggle within school to experience a completely different curriculum package – involving different activities, with new adults who have not experienced their frailties for the past four years. It is rarely 'more of the same'. Since the support provided in these two ways is for different purposes, it is illogical to debar those on the register for special educational needs (who are supported in order to access the 'normal' curriculum) from the opportunity to participate in an alternative curriculum programme.

Secondly, pupils will be on the special educational needs register for a variety of reasons. For example, some may have specific learning difficulties and there may be absolutely no need to consider an alternative curriculum – rather, to ensure that arrangements are in place so that they can gain access to the regular curriculum. But others may be on the register on account of their behavioural difficulties. Previous research has shown that some schools direct 'naughty/difficult' pupils down the disciplinary route, via heads of year/house and so forth, while other schools direct them towards the special

needs route, where they will be subject to interventions determined by their special educational (see, for example, Cooper *et al.*, 1994 ; Munn *et al.*, 2000). Since whether or not pupils can be categorised as having special educational needs depends on which approach a given school adopts, again it seems illogical to debar those on the register from the opportunity to participate in an alternative curriculum programme.

The reverse scenario was the case in one mainstream case study school that offered the alternative curriculum *only* to those on the register. It would have been interesting to have compared the profiles of pupils on the register in these contrasting schools. Other schools did not use identification on the register as an eligibility criterion.

Stance 2: 'Legitimate' versus 'illegitimate' disaffection

There was evidence from interviews conducted in the case study schools that certain perceptions of individual pupils went *pari passu* with the explicit or implicit 'labels' which teachers attached to pupils who were in the broad band of potential candidates for alternative provision. For example, teachers interviewed spoke of pupils who were categorised as 'disaffected' and displayed the behaviour of disaffection but who, nevertheless, responded to teachers insofar as they had not severed all relations, articulated their dissatisfaction with what school had to offer and had supportive homes. These pupils, teachers considered, were 'legitimate' candidates for alternative provision. Implicit in this perspective was that pupils who had severed relations or whose interpersonal skills were negligible and who did not have supportive homes, would not be deemed suitable candidates.

The underlying rationale for the patronage of the 'suitable' type of pupil was unclear. For example, it could have been 'rough justice' in that ownership was felt for the 'good rogues' with whom staff could do business and that these pupils were felt to 'deserve' another attempt at setting them on a right road. Alternatively, it could have been that previous evaluations suggested that it was these young people who thrived in the particular alternative provision on offer and it was thus cost-effective and beneficial all round for them to be selected: the data could have shown, for example, that those deemed 'unsuitable' rarely thrived in these circumstances. However, it could also have been the case that those deemed 'unsuitable' had simply irritated and threatened (psychologically) staff throughout their school careers and staff had lost patience with them, judging that 'poor home circumstances' would further restrict their capacity to respond. It could be that it is these very young people who most need the support and motivation which a carefully designed and supported alternative programme might offer. There is ample evidence that the most challenging young person can be reunited with mainstream education and training if the conditions are right. It is these young people who may most benefit from a fresh start, from having to develop and practise social skills in circumstances where people have no preconceptions of their previous failures, and from the celebration of achievements which result where the programme is carefully monitored and supported.

Example: One pupil's re-engagement with learning under the right conditions

Joseph was utterly vacant at school ... he was completely and utterly turned off. He wasn't difficult, he just didn't connect with whatever was going on around, he just drifted through school and I remember talking to his English teacher who said, 'The one thing you can get Joseph to talk about is his sister'. He had a younger sister who he was incredibly fond of, and that was the one point at which he suddenly came alive and talked, otherwise he just did not talk. He'd smile at you but he didn't talk much.

I remember visiting him in his Trident work placement, and thinking, ... what are they going to make of him?' He was with a builder, and they thought he was stunning. They thought he was absolutely brilliant. He was a different person there; he was alive and his face was animated, he was talking and he was confident. I suppose the thing I'd like most would be for teachers to see that on a regular basis, especially those kids on [the alternative programme].

Deputy headteacher, Rowan School

In a similar fashion, teachers identified pupils who would benefit from alternative provision but 'could not be trusted'. (The literature indicates that this view of some pupils is not uncommon – see, for example, Munn *et al.*, 2000.) Again, where the evidence for this came from was not clear. Equally it was not clear if the behaviour, first, would recur in a different context; second, was entirely a factor of the young person – rather than the inappropriate situation into which s/he had been put; and, third, was not something that ought to be addressed in a supportive environment.

Stance 3: Disaffection requiring complementary expertise

In contrast to an approach that made a 'legitimate/illegitimate' distinction, some teachers believed that all disaffected/disengaged pupils were worth trying to help but believed that some pupils had problems so great that no school-based intervention could '*get to them*' on its own.

For example, teachers in Rowan School expressed this distinction – one of them explained it as follows:

I have the basic philosophy that [the pupils] *are all great, that they all deserve* [the intervention]. *[But] I think when you get into the addictive personality, you are talking about something that, I think, perhaps mainstream schools aren't best equipped to deal with. ... Now we are talking about a very small minority – but there is – that we can't talk to, can't get to.*

This small minority of 'unreachable' pupils were those known to be caught up in local drug culture, addicted not just to the effects of the drugs but also to the perceived excitement of the lifestyle surrounding drugs – large amounts of money and easily available sex.

Examples: 'Unreachable' pupils

> ... I am thinking about the only student I have ever excluded permanently. ... I worked very hard with that boy. He was a terrible attender. He did have behavioural problems while he was in school – he did become violent, but we worked very, very hard with him, and tried to work with the family, but mum didn't come into school for any of the appointments we made. The family are very heavily involved with drugs and I just couldn't seem to win with him.
>
> I tried outside agencies, I tried outreach, but they weren't much help. We had a meeting in school with them but they never offered any help or support so we were on our own really. We tried various things, but the boy became violent and it was dangerous to have him in school, because of many, many reasons and he was on drugs – he was on hard heroine – as well. I had to exclude him permanently for the safety of other children and staff.
>
> The other boy who is in my year now and who is not attending at the moment, he is on [a drugs rehabilitation programme]. He is on 30 milligrams of methodone a day but he is topping it up with heroin and he is not keeping his appointments, and he certainly not coming into school. So at the moment [the alternative programme] is not working for him.
>
> Head of Year 10, Rowan School

Faced with pupils addicted to narcotics and to the age-old lure of other adults offering money and sex, schools could feel that the attractions they could offer (the prospect of qualifications and a job) did not have sufficient force. In this situation, a locally-cohesive, multi-agency joint action approach would have helped. In addition to the efforts of the school – along with local employers, training organisations and colleges providing the programme – there were clear grounds for joint action by the drugs team and the police.

4.2.2 Importance of equality of opportunity

Limitations on the research interviews, in terms of the areas that had to be covered in the time available, restricted any in-depth exploration of these issues. However, for reasons of equality of opportunity for young people in key stage 4 across the country, it is clearly incumbent on decision-makers to collect, and be able to produce, the data which justify decisions which affect a young person's future. This is particularly important in the light of the government's drive, via such strategies as inspection and target-setting, to raise the standards in all schools and to eliminate practices which militate against some young people reaching their potential.

Prior to the research, the hypothesis was that the nature, and even the possibility, of alternative provision at key stage 4 was dependent on what provision was available locally. While the empirical evidence confirmed this hypothesis, it showed that the situation was made even more uncertain for the individual pupil by in-school gate-keeping and selection procedures.

It would appear, admittedly on the relatively limited evidence of the 14 LEAs involved, that a pupil deemed 'eligible' in one school might not be eligible for the same provision in another school in the same locality. This raises interesting questions regarding not only the identification and assessment of need but also decision-making as to the optimal curriculum offered to meet those assessed needs. Pupils are, after all, 'entitled' to a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum.

4.3 Selection processes

Figure 4.1 provides a summary of selection processes in the case study schools. It shows the staff involved in the selection process, the main reasons why pupils were selected, when this selection took place and when the alternative curriculum programme started.

Figure 4.1: A summary of pupil selection processes in the case study schools

Case study school	Selected by	Reason for selection	When identified	Alternative curriculum programme started
Sycamore School	special educational needs co-ordinator/programme co-ordinator	all those at Stage 3 of the special educational needs Code of Practice – unrealistic to attempt eight or nine subjects; the curriculum was causing them problems	end of Year 9	beginning of Year 10
Pine School	co-ordinator and classroom teacher	mainly based on attendance problems (70–90% attendance)	end of Year 9	beginning of Year 10
Redwood Special School	[not applicable]	whole of Year 10 and Year 11	[not applicable]	beginning of Year 10
Rowan School	co-ordinator, year heads, form tutors	range of individual problems but characterised collectively as unable to survive in mainstream school without the intervention due to 'grossly diminished self-esteem'	end of Year 9, draft list of pupils to monitor in Years 10 and 11	if and when it became necessary in Year 10 or 11
Silverbirch School	co-ordinator and year head	Year 11 only; disengaged, truanting	during Year 10	beginning of Year 11
Alder School	1997/98 cohort: teacher assessment and head of year plus test results 1998/99 cohort: offered to all as an option but numbers limited again via advice from teachers	both cohorts: main reason was disaffection	end of Year 9	beginning of Year 10

Case study school	Selected by	Reason for selection	When identified	Alternative curriculum programme started
Oak School	co-ordinator with deputy head, heads of year and form tutors	mainly based on poor attendance (50-60%) plus additional reasons that varied according to the individual	end of Year 9	beginning of Year 10
Ash School	deputy heads, heads of house	individual reasons but collectively characterised by having been brought to the attention of the head of house	during Year 10	as necessary during Year 11

4.3.1 The timing of selection

The research carried out in the case study schools showed that parents, pupils and teachers believed that the sooner schools recognised a pupil was having problems in school, the easier it was to identify the nature of the problem/s and to begin searching for a suitable solution. However, the schools varied in the approach they adopted, with some schools seeing 'the solution' as an alternative curriculum from the start of key stage 4 and others seeing it as support in the mainstream curriculum first, with an alternative curriculum as a reserve option. Thus, the issue of the right time to select pupils to start of an alternative programme also related to the length of the alternative programme (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2: Length of programmes

Length of time pupils attended programme	Frequency n=82 schools*
More than two terms to one school year	60
half a term or less	8
varies†	7
more than one term to a term and a half	6
more than one school year†	6
missing responses	6
more than half a term to one term	5
more than a term and a half to two terms	4
† These answer options were added by respondents.	

* schools could answer for one or for two programmes

Some of the case study schools identified pupils for an alternative curriculum programme at the end of key stage 3, seeking to pre-empt expected failure and disengagement at key stage 4 by steering the pupils into the alternative programme. On the other hand, given the value attached to a successful

mainstream education and to GSCE examination passes, there was an understandable reluctance to jeopardise entitlement to the National Curriculum by introducing an alternative curriculum programme without giving pupils the chance to 'have a go' at the normal key stage 4 curriculum. These schools placed emphasis on offering a range of supportive in-school strategies prior to trying an alternative programme. Hence, while five case study schools started the selected pupils on their alternative programmes at the beginning of key stage 4, Silverbirch School delayed until Year 11, while Rowan and Ash Schools delayed for as long as possible, starting pupils at different times. Indeed, the senior management team at Rowan School resisted pressure from an external funder to identify in advance a cohort of pupils for the programme, believing that all pupils should be given the chance to succeed in the culturally-valued mainstream.

Within the schools offering an alternative curriculum over the whole two years of key stage 4, there was another distinction – some offered the alternative programme as an option like any other to *all* Year 9 pupils: others offered it *only* to the identified pupils. The case study data suggested that offering the alternative programme within the key stage 4 options at the end of Year 9 was more effective in engaging pupils' commitment to it than offering it to pre-selected pupils only. In part, this was because pre-selected pupils could feel stigmatised and coerced while those who had chosen it from a range of other options (even if their choice was 'steered' by advice from teachers) felt positive 'ownership' of that choice.

4.3.2 The length of programmes

One of the research questions concerned programme duration. Table 4.2 shows the situation in schools responding to the NFER questionnaire. Some schools ran programmes that lasted more than one school year. Of the eight case study schools, four ran alternative programmes that lasted for the two years of key stage 4.

The focus of the NFER questionnaire to schools was the academic year 1997/98. For this reason and for the reason given above, the closed question about length of programme did not include an option, 'more than one school year'. If that option had been included on the questionnaire, it is likely that the number selecting it would have been greater.

4.4 Gender, socio-economic background and ethnicity

The NFER research asked partner organisations for information about the cohort of young people involved in alternative curriculum programmes during the academic year 1997/98. This information showed that boys were much more likely than girls to participate in such programmes. The most common ratio of boys to girls was 7:3. Half of the 75 partner organisations were involved in programmes in which *at least* 70 per cent of

participants were boys. A greater number of programmes only had boys on them than only had girls. In terms of socio-economic background, the majority of programmes served those from 'economically and socially disadvantaged' areas. Only four programmes involving the 74 partner organisations interviewed also included pupils from 'relatively prosperous and socially advantaged' backgrounds – in these cases, there were said to be family reasons for the pupils' disengagement from the normal key stage 4 curriculum. Most of the pupils served by programmes were White although pupils from other ethnic groups also figured. Usually, interviewees felt that the programme participants reflected the range of ethnic groups living in the area served.

Interviewees commented more on the socio-economic backgrounds of participants than on either their gender or ethnicity. A selection of these comments is given in Figure 4.2 below.

Figure 4.2: Gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background of participants (a selection of providers' views)

Eighty to eighty-five per cent of participants are White males. Most live on large, peripheral housing estates. These White lads have no sense of belonging, no cultural heritage and little hope. Most of these pupils come from long-term unemployed households in socially and economically deprived circumstances or from single parent families. They are impoverished culturally, financially and morally – they come from fragmented communities and live in a vacuum.

Voluntary organisation interviewee

A hundred per cent of participants are White males. These young people come from an old mining town. The community is very insular and has a history of long-term unemployment. They are culturally disadvantaged.

Education business partnership interviewee

We have 70 per cent male and 30 per cent female. They are all White except for one Black Caribbean. Almost all of them live on a large council estate in a pretty deprived area. They come from poor families.

Interviewee from a local project

There are different ways of looking at these findings. It is well-known that White working-class boys form the majority of pupils excluded from school (see, for example, Parsons, 1999; Munn *et al.*, 2000) and with statements of emotional and behavioural difficulties (see, for example, Tomlinson, 1988; Riddell, 1996; Daniels *et al.*, 1999). Their over-representation in curriculum programmes designed in part to prevent disaffection, acting-out and exclusion from school is therefore not surprising. It seems as if the pupils most 'at risk' of school failure are being catered for by such programmes. On the other hand, this may be masking a mismatch between expectations of White working-class boys and expectations of acceptable, successful school pupils – system-level inequality in expectations and outcomes may be being augmented by special programmes targeting White working-class boys.

The next most common ethnic groups to be included also mirrored the figures on exclusions from school – Black Caribbean, Black Other and Pakistani pupils were most frequently cited after White pupils. Further research would be needed to ascertain reasons behind the profile of pupils participating in alternative curriculum programmes. For example, it could be that preventative measures are being offered to the groups most 'at risk' of exclusion. On the other hand, it could be that disadvantaged groups are being disproportionately singled out for alternative, as opposed to mainstream, curriculum – a move that may put them at a further disadvantage compared to successful middle-class White peers.

Relatively small numbers of girls were involved in the alternative curriculum programmes and the data suggested that there may be other features militating against girls' interests, including:

- **losing out to the male majority** – where programmes were designed for groups, as opposed to individuals, the particular interests of the minority of girls included could be lost, as provision was chosen to suit the male majority – for example, girls felt this happened in Oak School. (This mirrors findings about provision for excluded girls in alternative provision – for a review of the literature on this, see Cullen and Lloyd, 1997);

- **lack of female coordinator** – where coordinators were male and there was no female teacher taking a friendly interest in them, it could be harder for girls to be open about their problems, aspirations and interests – for example, parents felt this happened in Rowan School;

- **lack of interest from industry/trade associations** – where schools lacked the resources to offer an in-school option and looked for other organisations to sponsor provision, it was harder to find this for 'girl-friendly' options – for example, Alder School was supported by the Construction Industry Training Board in offering an NVQ in Building and Construction but could not find any trade association willing to support the school in setting up an NVQ in Business and Administration to attract girls.

In selecting pupils to participate in alternative curriculum programmes, schools need to be careful that they are enhancing rather than limiting pupils' opportunities for success. They also need to be aware of the effects of any stereotyping and assessment which is not firmly evidence-based. This issue also relates, of course, to the expected *outcomes* of the alternative provision. For example, in some circumstances, alternative accreditation can be more powerful in securing employment than two low-grade GCSEs. Schools can monitor these outcomes to ensure that what pupils are offered enhances, rather than diminishes, their life-chances.

4.5 Summary of good practice points

Based on the evidence presented in Chapter 4, good practice seems to be promoted when schools:

■ tried internal support strategies before offering a curriculum programme involving external partners;

■ thought carefully about the contextual nature, and negative consequences, of the potentially stigmatising labels sometimes applied to pupils (for example, 'special educational needs', 'disaffected', 'untrustworthy', 'disruptive') and sought to ensure equality of opportunity to access alternative programmes regardless of these labels;

■ balanced the need for early support for identified problems with pupils' entitlement to the National Curriculum and to 'have a go' at succeeding within the socially-valued mainstream;

■ were aware of the potential for gender, social class and ethnicity to interact in ways that keep some people at a relative disadvantage to others and therefore took care to guard against stereotypes, thus enhancing, rather than limiting, pupils' potential for success.
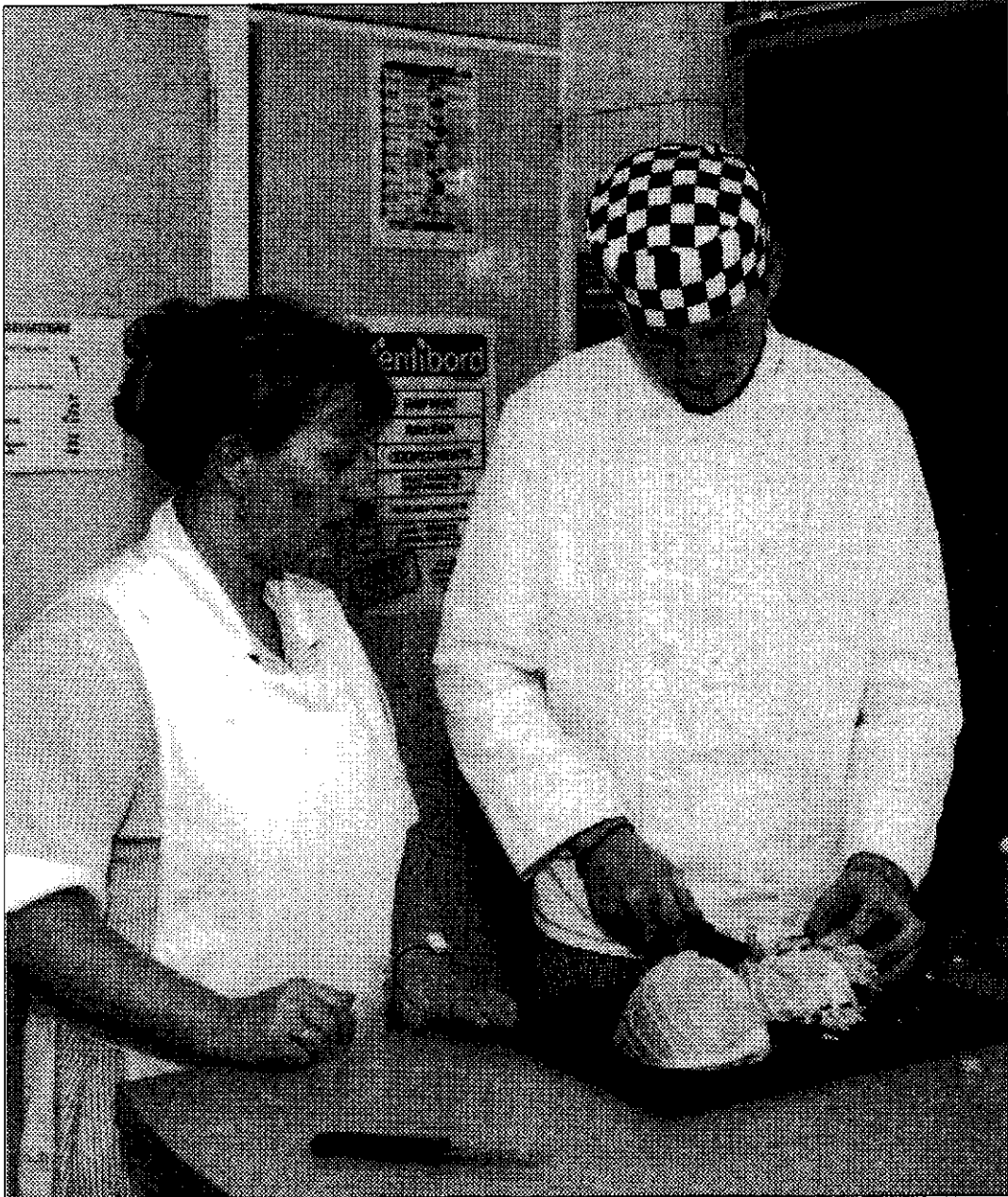
5. COLLABORATION: MAKING AND SUSTAINING CONNECTIONS

Effective programme design depended on, first, adequate knowledge of:

* available off-site provision – what was on offer and who delivered it;

* the needs, interests and aspirations of the identified pupils;

* the conditions set for participation by external providers;

* the best way of matching pupils with provision.

The second critical aspect was the balance between the elements. This chapter explores the preparatory process: the design of coherent and appropriate programmes for pupils from separate component parts is considered in Chapter 6.

5.1. Finding out about local options

5.1.1 Accessing off-site provision

Alternative curriculum programmes were made up of a number of component parts – some school-based and some based off-site. For example, a pupil's weekly programme might be two days in school, two days in college and one day working in a work place. Depending on the degree of coordination and infrastructure in different locations (see Chapter 3), the off-site components could be accessed by schools in any combination of three different ways:

* **reactive**
  through direct marketing – external organisations running projects, courses or tasters 'marketed' these to LEAs and schools who then 'bought in' to them;

* **proactive**
  through an ad hoc arrangement – schools, sometimes after discussions with knowledgeable people in the LEA and/or careers company, initiated contact with organisations, such as further education colleges, training companies, local employers, and negotiated mutually-agreed arrangements

* *through a third party* – schools contacted a third party (this could be either an agency or an individual) which then contacted local providers and found suitable components for the pupils' programmes.

Approaches were either:

- **demand-led** – where pupils were identified first and then external components, such as a college course or a work placement, were found to suit them; or

- **supply-led** – where existing component parts, such as a vocational taster course or a youth work project, were identified first – for example, as a result of receiving promotional material – and pupils were then found to fit them.

The latter happened, for instance, when a school was made aware of possible provision in the local area and then realised that it could be beneficial for certain pupils. This meant that the existence of external courses or placements increased the use of alternative curriculum programmes for pupils.

5.1.2 The range of contributions offered

As Tables 5.1 and 5.2 show, external organisations worked with schools in a range of ways.

Table 5.1: Schools' views of partner organisations' contribution to programmes

What is the nature of the external involvement?	Frequency n=82 schools*
course provider	69
staffing	58
facilities	55
funding	43
mentors	20
other	15
no response given	6

* school could answer for one or for two programmes; multiple-response question therefore numbers do not sum to total N.

Table 5.2:   Partner organisations' views of their contribution to programmes

How is your organisation involved in the programme?	Frequency n=75
staff	31
deliver the course (i.e. out-of-school tutors)	27
produce the syllabus/plan of work	20
act as mentors	17
organise work placements	16
provide work/training placements	14
other staff (e.g. seconded to manage or coordinate the programme)	10
offer expertise to teachers	10
act as external verifier	10
other type of involvement	
facilities	30
funding	25
other (e.g. involved in assessment, monitoring, evaluation)	8
information not collected	6

Source: NFER semi-structured telephone interviews with partner organisations;multiple-response
question therefore numbers do not sum to total N

Often, a partner organisation would play more than one role as the examples below show.

Example: Contributions made by local authorities

The information collected during the research indicated that schools and their LEAs worked together on alternative curriculum programmes in three main types of relationship:

♦ a *strategic relationship,* where LEA involvement in *strategic partnerships* with other bodies and interested parties, such as New Start initiatives, and in *strategic policy developments,* such as lifelong learning or social inclusion, had an effect on schools;

♦ a *financial relationship,* where the LEA contributed funding to alternative curriculum programmes either directly or as broker of money obtained from other sources;

♦ a *direct relationship* between school staff involved in alternative programmes and LEA staff (such as secondary or special needs advisers, education welfare officers or educational psychologists).

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Example: Contributions made by FE colleges

Further education colleges provided:

- ♦ individual infill places on selected courses;
- ♦ specific courses for school pupils only – sometimes for pupils from a single school, sometimes from a variety of local schools.

In addition, colleges sometimes offered:

- ♦ pastoral and/or careers support and guidance to pupils attending college;
- ♦ liaison with all schools sending pupils to the college;
- ♦ liaison with parents of pupils attending college.

Example: Contributions made by awarding bodies

- ♦ devised the syllabus;
- ♦ offered support and advice to teachers;
- ♦ arranged for external moderation, verification and assessment as necessary;
- ♦ offered accreditation.

It was important for schools to have the necessary information not only about which organisations might be willing to contribute to a programme but also the type/s of contribution on offer.

5.2   Finding out about participating pupils

5.2.1   At school level

From the experiences of the case study schools, it was clear that the better the programme designers got to know the pupils selected for the programme, the easier it was to design a programme for them. And the better suited the pupil was to the programme, the better the outcomes (see section on Successful assessment and matching, below).

Coordinators in the case study schools made efforts to find out more about the pupils:

- **as individuals** – they talked to the pupils on a one-to-one basis about their interests, hobbies, hopes for the future;
- **as pupils** – they learned from their colleagues' knowledge of the pupils – this meant using documentary evidence gathered (such as attendance rates and rates of referral) plus discussions with year heads, form tutors, heads of house and other pastoral staff;

- **as members of a family** – they talked to the pupils' parents/carers.

Since colleagues, pupils and parents are three of the stakeholder groups that are vital to the success of the programme, listening to them and learning from them at this early stage may also lay the foundations for involving them in the main thrust of the initiative. During this research, no teaching colleagues objected to being asked for their opinions by the programme coordinator but some did complain that they had not been consulted. Similarly, pupils and parents interviewed valued being asked their views by the coordinator and, conversely, felt aggrieved when this did not happen.

5.2.2 At external partner level

It was not only schools who needed to find out more about the pupils; partner organisations, too, often had set criteria which they expected the participating pupils to meet (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1: Conditions of participation set by providing organisations

particular types of pupil (usually specified by the funder) – for example:

- ♦ an LEA support service accepted Year 11 pupils onto a programme addressing non-attendance but only if they lived in one postcode area of the city;
- ♦ a local regeneration project offered a basic skills programme to pupils who were under-achieving compared to their potential and their peer group.

needs analysis – for example:

- ♦ a community youth project accepted pupils on condition that a needs analysis was done to indicate the individual education plan that would best suit them.

induction/interview process (might involve pupil, parent, teacher) – looking for those perceived as *'worthy of help'* or for a certain *'suitability for the scheme'* or for a pupil's *'ability to cope'* – for example:

- ♦ an employer accepted work placement pupils on the basis of a mini-interview;
- ♦ a local compact invited pupils to participate in an initial activity day to give them a feel for the course and to allow staff to assess their suitability;
- ♦ a further education college interviewed school-nominated pupils and then discussed with the school which ones to accept.

evidence of ability to attend, to complete work and to behave – for example:

- ♦ a further education college asked the pupils to offer evidence that they could meet the attendance requirements, complete work and behave in a civilised manner (evidence of their intention to do these things was accepted).

evidence of engagement with the content (interest in, enthusiasm for, commitment to, prepared to take part in, what was offered) – for example:

- ♦ in particular, employers, training organisations and colleges offering vocational courses sought evidence of these qualities.

subject to specific limitations – for example:

- ♦ a limit being set on the number in any particular session;
- ♦ an insistence on having a balanced group, mixing boys and girls.

As Figure 5.3 above shows, organisations providing off-site educational experiences for pupils varied in the conditions, if any, that they set for such participation. Those marketing particular projects, courses or tasters were most likely to have conditions for participation: those that agreed to *ad hoc* arrangements with schools were least likely to have preconditions. The research evidence suggested that an absence of conditions reflected a concern not to discriminate against particular groups of pupils – although some admitted to having '*unspoken*' criteria based on a pupil's willingness to attend, behave and put in some effort.

Sometimes, as the quotation below illustrates, a partner organisation might initially allow schools to select the pupils but then, having experienced the results of this, decide to impose particular conditions:

> *Up to this September [1998], it [pupil selection] had been the choice of the schools but what myself and the college have felt is that what we need to do is some screening so that when schools identify a cohort (usually more than required), we should screen them so that we take those who are motivated by the industry. ... We want to avoid being a dumping ground, to avoid being used as a way of schools getting rid of young people they don't want.*
>
> Area coordinator, Construction Partnership

The types of pupils targeted by any particular provider could be very general or very specific.

Example: General and specific types of pupil targeted

♦ documentation for one college's pre-16 link course stated only that participating pupils should be drawn from 'the whole ability range';

♦ documentation for a voluntary sector local project specified that pupils targeted should fall into at least two of the following categories:

- higher than average discipline referrals for the year group;

- higher absentee rate than the year group;

- non-participation in extra-curricular activities;

- two or more National Curriculum levels below the expected for the year group;

- lack of career orientation;

- low socio-economic status (judged by free school meals indicator).

Because there are so many variables, it makes sense for schools and providers to discuss conditions of participation right from the start (see Nature of liaison, below).

5.3 Quality of assessment and matching

5.3.1 Assessment and mismatching

Every case of disappointment about the programme outcomes found during this research could be traced back to (among other things) a failure to assess and, if necessary, to reassess pupil needs, interests and aspirations sufficiently, resulting in a mismatch with inappropriate programme components. Mismatches included:

- a girl with no interest in hairdressing being sent on a long-term work placement to a hair salon;

- pupils with no interest in, or aptitude for, construction work (according to the employer interviewed) being selected to take part in a building project with a local firm;

- girls who were only interested in childcare being sent along with a group of boys to a taster engineering course – perhaps not surprisingly, some of them decided to truant from the engineering sessions.

Why did such mismatches occur? Three factors seemed to come into play. First, pupils' awareness of their own needs, interests and aspirations could be at different stages of development. Some had very clear ideas of what they hoped to do after school, some knew what interested them but had not translated this into an imagined future for themselves, while a third group came from a background of long-term unemployment and found it hard to imagine themselves in any future employment. It could be difficult, therefore, for the coordinator to decide how much weight to give to pupils' views.

Secondly, the coordinator's response could be constrained by the range of options available locally, thus making it difficult to match every pupil with appropriate external components. (The local context is discussed in Chapter 3.)

The third factor explaining mismatches was that the response to pupils' expressions of interest and aspiration could be skewed by teachers' personal opinions about what constituted suitable aspirations. These personal opinions often related to gender and social class issues. It was noticeable that the suitability of working class girls' expressed interests and aspirations were questioned more frequently than boys'. The examples below illustrate how the factors came into play in some real cases.

Example: Limited local options – plus gender (and possibly class) issues

Three girls knew exactly what they wanted to do after they left school – two wanted to do childcare and the third wanted to be a hairdresser. With these pupils, the coordinator faced a dilemma. He knew that there were no infill places on childcare or hairdressing courses available locally. He did not have time to negotiate individual placements with employers. There was a taster engineering course available at a local training centre and taster courses at the local college. He explained this to the girls but also tried to get round the limited options by suggesting that what was available would be worth trying as it would widen the girls' experiences. The girls started on the available programme but one truanted regularly from it and the other two were so unhappy that they begged to be allowed back into the mainstream school curriculum.

The coordinator had included the girls on the available programme because he and other school staff believed that the girls' interests and aspirations had been unduly influenced by gender stereotypes of suitable occupations. Two of the girls participated in a group interview as part of the NFER research and expressed their awareness of the distinction between 'lads' stuff', which they did not want to do, and 'girls' stuff', which they did want to do:

Angela: *They make us do things we don't really want to do – like engineering; not everyone wants to do engineering. I would prefer it if I could do more girls' stuff.*

Alex: *You haven't even been to engineering!*

Angela: *That's because it is all boys.*

Ruth: *All the girls want to do childcare.*

Researcher: *Do you think that if you could do more 'girls' stuff' that you would enjoy it more?*

Ruth: *Yeah – I'd like it more if there were more girls in my group.*

Researcher: *Do you think that things like painting and decorating and engineering are all boys' only things?*

Angela: *Painting and decorating is more for boys. We just want to do childcare.*

The coordinator and a member of the senior management team saw such views as being a 'working-class attitude' that was behind the times and counter to equality of opportunity. When asked about gaps in local provision, the coordinator replied:

One of the key things that keeps coming across, I think, in terms of gender, is that it's worked better for boys than for girls. I think that the reason for that difficulty is the lack of courses that are stereotypically female-oriented – childcare courses, hairdressing and so on. And with the type of young people we are dealing with, they very definitely say 'Oh, that's for girls, that's for boys'. We have girls who would like to do childcare courses, catering or hairdressing courses, and that is quite definitely a turn-off for boys. They see these quite definite gender stereotypes in terms of working areas.

Example: Influence of family and community unemployment

> Some pupils came from a home and/or community background where there were few, if any, employed adults to act as role models of a regular lifestyle, let alone of job aspirations. Some of these pupils found it difficult to imagine a meaningful future for themselves:
>
> William: *I don't like either [school or the out-of-school alternatives].*
>
> Researcher: *Tell me what you don't like about them both.*
>
> William: *It's a pain having to get up to go there.*
>
> Researcher: *What would you rather be doing?*
>
> William: *Stay home. You can learn more at home from the telly.*
>
> Pupil group interview, Oak School
>
> *Debbie*: I used to go to Beauty but I've stopped going now. It was dead boring. They didn't do the things I was expecting. I expected to cut people's hair and stuff. I can go back and do the next lot if I want to, but I don't.
>
> *Ben*: She'd rather go out instead, stay at home and do nothing.
>
> *Ryan*: But that ain't no good because she's not learning. She's not even doing her GCSEs and that's why she should be doing [name of programme], but if you don't do either then that's crap.
>
> *Researcher*: What was the problem, Debbie?
>
> *Debbie*: The teachers didn't want me to do another course, so Mum just told me to go home after my dinner. Mum wasn't that keen on me going anyway.
>
> Pupil group interview, Pine School

Overall, the NFER research evidence suggested that mismatches were most likely to occur with 'satellite' type programmes – as shown in Chapter 2, these were characterised by a distancing of the school from both the group of participating pupils and external providers.

5.3.2 Successful assessment and matching

Although there were some problems with matching pupils to appropriate components of their programmes, the research provided evidence of many successful pairings. Successful linking of pupils with appropriate external options resulted from a number of factors:

* the school had to be willing to **listen to pupils' views** and to act on these even where pupils had perhaps surprising interests;

* the school had to offer some **flexibility** – pupils needed to be allowed to try things out knowing that if, after giving it a fair try, it turned out that they did not find their choice interesting or to their taste, the school would support them in changing to another option;

- the school had to be **aware of family and community patterns of employment** and to be willing for pupils to follow in these patterns if that was what the pupils wanted. Certainly, advice and guidance from the careers adviser should be made available to the pupils to ensure that other options and opportunities were set before them. Equally, though, school staff had to acknowledge that an educated middle-class view of an acceptable career, and of what 'success' means, may not be shared by everyone in a school's community. For some pupils and their families, remaining in the local area may be of much greater importance than the prospect of better opportunities elsewhere.

Example: Flexibility

Joseph: *When this was first mentioned to me I thought, 'Oh, they are just going to put me on a job I don't like'. Then Mr Murray said, 'It's entirely up to you what you want'.*

Mother: *But how do they know what they want to do until they go and try it?*

Father: *Trial and error, isn't it? The first try was in a garage – apprentice mechanic.*

Joseph: *I wanted to be a mechanic.*

Father: *He didn't like it.*

Mother: *He did three days and he said, 'I can't stand it, it's cold, I get mucky, I'm not doing that because I don't like it'.*

John: *And Mr Murray took him straight down and put him into a job he wanted.*

Mother: *Even though he showed an interest in engines and what have you, and same as Mr Murray said, 'He did say about liking engines and cars and motorbikes but we have now found out he just likes to do that for a couple of hours, so that was a hobby'. And as soon as they took him down into a garage Joseph said, 'I ain't going back there no more, I don't like it, I hate it'. And when Mr Murray asked what had changed his mind he said, he said, 'It's alright to do it for a couple of hours, but not like I've been doing it'. So that was a hobby then. Darren didn't think that it was the job – he didn't think there were all that to it. So instead of going through college to do a mechanics course and this that and the other – what a waste of time, what a waste, that would have just been a complete waste. So he had that opportunity to find out.*

Programme 'graduate' and his parents, Rowan School

Example: Family and community patterns of employment (especially for boys)

♦ Alder School – situated in large, industrial port:

My dad does construction work and I have helped him a lot so I knew that was what I wanted to do. (Brian)

My grandad was in the merchant navy and I think that is what I want to do. If I get good enough grades, then I will try to get into that. (Colin)

The college course helps me in my hobby after school. I've got a lathe in my shed; I've had it for four years. My grandad was a joiner. I did my work experience at [local joinery firm], where he works. When I leave school, I'd like to get a job there, refurbishing old furniture. (Johnny)

♦ Ash School – situated in agricultural, rural area:

Sean was pleased to be going to college part-time to do car mechanics but said: *I'd prefer to do agricultural mechanics – working on tractors.*

♦ Sycamore School – situated in former mining area with high unemployment

All the pupils interviewed wanted to work locally to be near their families – they hoped to get jobs in small, local businesses, mainly in the service sector.

Example: Willingness to listen – even to those with unusual interests

Kenny was diagnosed as having Asperger's Syndrome (on the autistic spectrum) and was school phobic. However, he was obsessively interested in trains and, as part of his alternative curriculum programme, was able to work two days a week on the local station. He was so successful that, at the time of the research, he had been promised a full-time job on leaving school.

Stephen was academically able but deeply disaffected at school and in trouble at home. His only interest appeared to be basketball. As part of his alternative programme, he worked two days a week as an assistant groundsman at the local basketball stadium. Seeing his keen interest, the team allowed him to join in practices, realised his talents and soon had him in the team. At the time of the research, Stephen had secured a place at an American basketball academy.

Roger became school phobic as a result of bullying at school. He was passionately interested in exotic birds and wanted to become a vet. Rather than putting him off such an ambition (he was behind in his work because of missing school), Roger's school arranged for him to work two days a week in a local pet shop – in return, he agreed to try one day in school and two days in college. After leaving school, Roger went full-time to college to study for GCSEs – at the time of the research, he was doing well in college and was determined to progress to A levels and then to university to realise his dream.

The matching of pupils and providers seemed, on the basis of the research evidence, to be more successful in individualised 'extension' programmes and interest-based 'complementary' programmes.

5.3.3 Effects of opting for individualised or group programmes

A school's decision to offer individualised or group programmes could affect the matching process in both positive and negative ways. In the light of pupils' diverse difficulties at key stage 4, schools need to decide whether to offer:

- **one programme** and offer it to all school- or self-selected pupils; or,

- **a number of different options** tailored to the needs, interests and aspirations of individual pupils.

There are advantages and disadvantages to each approach. These are summarised in Figure 5.2 below. The decision made reflected, to an extent, the overall approach in the school to the relationship between the alternative programme and the regular key stage 4 curriculum (see Chapter 2) – one programme offered to an identified group of problem pupils tended to be the choice of schools adopting a 'satellite' approach and was more likely to lead to pupils feeling 'disowned' by the school, while schools choosing to offer different options tended to view these as an extension of the school's regular curriculum and allowed the regular curriculum to be influenced by them. This made participating pupils feel they were still a valued part of the school, rather than distanced from it.

Figure 5.2: Individualised versus group programmes: perceptions of advantages and disadvantages

	Advantages	Disadvantages
individualised programmes	• based around individual needs, interests and aspirations • avoids identification with 'sink group' label • individual pupil has a say in the constituent elements of the programme thus increasing a sense of engagement	• may make timetabling difficult • may be limited by practical constraints, for example, range of local options, time available for coordinator to negotiate an individual programme
group programmes	• easier to timetable • easier to plan • simplifies induction process • easier to make formal link with school curriculum • can broaden horizons (pupils try courses they would not have chosen individually) • can provide mutual support	• lack of individual choice may cause disaffection if some pupils dislike elements of the programme • may result in negative group identity or label • combination of pupil personalities and of problems may be difficult, limiting what can be achieved

The case study schools that tended to adopt an 'extension' approach deliberately avoided creating any sense of an identifiable group of pupils who participated in an alternative curriculum programme. Each pupil selected was offered an individually-tailored programme that met identified needs. Even when more than one pupil went to the same off-site location, when in school they participated in their chosen subject classes as normal and were offered individual support in catching up on missed lessons etc. The emphasis in these schools was on individual solutions for individual problems. The role of the school was seen as meeting individual needs, if necessary, by drawing on the resources of external partners.

On the other hand, the case study schools that tended to adopt a distancing approach – viewing the selected pupils as slightly apart from the more 'acceptable' pupils in the school – reinforced the group identity of pupils on the programme by also teaching them as a group during at least some of their time in school. For example, two of the case study schools offered tutorial support in school for the group and one case study school kept the group together for classes in a range of subjects. The emphasis in these schools was on pupils offering each other peer group support. In itself, there is nothing wrong with this, but, where it, in effect, represented the withdrawal of broader school support for them, it could lead to pupils feeling stigmatised. Sometimes, too – and perhaps because of this sense of being devalued within the school – the group dynamics proved problematic and could turn into a negative influence without careful management.

Group programmes seemed to be most effective in meeting the needs of pupils when the group had been selected on the basis of being interested in the curriculum content offered on the programme. This 'complementary' type of programme reflected a perspective that located 'the problem' within the school (see Chapter 2). Rather than a particular group of pupils being seen as not fitting in to the school, the school curriculum was seen as not being wide enough to cater for the range of pupil interests.

This is fine where pupils know and can articulate their interests. Inevitably, some did not have a clear sense of what it was that interested them, often because of their limited access to social networks and stimulating experiences (see Chapter 8). For this reason, pupils taking part in a group, vocationally-orientated, programme could include those who had not expressed an interest in that particular area – the intention in these cases being to broaden pupils' horizons and/or to stimulate their interest and motivation through the new learning environment and teaching approaches encountered. So long as there was flexibility to leave if, for instance, it quickly became apparent that a particular vocational area was not for them, allowing a few undecided pupils to experience a 'taster' by joining a group selected because of genuine interest in an area of work seemed to work better than selecting a disparate group of pupils and sending them on 'taster' courses.

As the following example shows, Oak School recognised that its curriculum did not cater for all its pupils. Nevertheless, it began by offering one inflexible programme of taster modules to a disparate group of pupils, alike only in being viewed as 'a problem'. As both the pupils and the coordinator learned from experience, however, the programme was adapted to reflect pupil interests.

Example: Shift from group programme towards more individual choice

Oak School began by offering one set programme of taster courses to a pupil group selected on the basis of being 'a problem' in school. As a result of some adverse individual reactions to these courses, the programme was adapted, offering more optional elements and work placements geared to individuals' interests and aptitudes. The programme coordinator likened offering one set alternative programme to offering one set National Curriculum:

What I tend [to say when] selling [the programme] to staff and senior management is, 'This provision is a product of recognising that the National Curriculum is not applicable to all – but this is not necessarily applicable to all either. It will only cater for certain types.'

Programme coordinator

Just as there was no clear boundary in practice between the different approach to programmes adopted by schools, the boundary between a group programme and an individualised approach was also sometimes blurred, as both the example above and the example below show.

Example: Whole year group participate but wide range of courses offered

Redwood Special School catered for pupils with moderate learning difficulties. All 12 pupils in Year 10 participated in the alternative curriculum programme (i.e. no selection of pupils except by year group). However, within this group programme, the school sought to ensure that the courses covered in the local further education college included a broad range to suit the different interests of the pupils in the year group. This worked for Redwood School because it complemented the school-based curriculum and approach and because none of its pupils were perceived as (or felt themselves to be) disaffected with or disengaged from that curriculum.

5.4 Tutoring skills

Most staff interviewed from providing organisations were well aware that the pupils selected for alternative programmes were often difficult and demanded particular skills from their tutors. The following comments were typical: *'not all staff can do it'* (LEA-employed tutor); *'not all staff are good at it'* (FE lecturer); *'it's stressful, staff need support'* (trainer). The research suggested that it was imperative to use experienced tutors who had proven skills in working with young people who had been accustomed to viewing education negatively; behaviour problems were encountered in off-site locations if tutors had not the necessary skills. Tutors were required to:

*   be firm, friendly and patient;

*   recognise students' need to learn at their own pace;

*   be willing to listen to students' perceptions; and

*   be committed to providing learning experiences that students enjoyed.

In some cases, appropriate tutors were not recruited because the school had decided not to tell the providing organisation that the participating pupils were perceived as difficult in any way. Arguably, this could work in the pupils' best interests if a 'clean slate' approach was being taken or if it was apparent that the provider would not have taken them on if the type of pupil sent had been known, even if that pupil would not necessarily have been 'difficult' in another location. Providers varied in their willingness to take on additional problems. However, if providers were not aware of the baseline from which they were starting with young people, they were hindered in their efforts to provide appropriately and to monitor and evaluate progress.

5.5 Nature of liaison

Overall, the best programme outcomes occurred when close liaison took place between school and provider right from the start. The research evidence suggested that initial discussions with the provider would, at a minimum, cover the following key questions:

*   Are any conditions for participation set?

*   Are tutors suited to work with school-age young people?

*   Will prior learning be acknowledged?

*   What system can be put in place for monitoring attendance, behaviour and progress?

*   How can off-site learning best be integrated into, or reinforced by, school-based learning?

*   How will pupils' social and pastoral needs be catered for by the providing organisation?

If these initial discussions resulted in the school and organisation deciding to work together, then regular liaison was facilitated by the school nominating a named link person, usually the programme coordinator, and asking the provider to nominate one also.

5.6 Summary of good practice points

Based on the research evidence presented in Chapter 5, good practice seemed to be promoted when:

■ schools could access a range of off-site provision easily – for example, as a result of providers promoting their projects, courses or tasters or through a local coordinating system;

■ schools understood the range of ways in which different organisations might be involved;

■ out-of-school tutors had well-developed interpersonal skills, were experienced in working with (sometimes difficult) young people, and had appropriate training and qualifications (at least in their own field; at best, in working with young people also);

■ schools made efforts to find out more about pupils as individuals, as pupils and as members of a family in order to discover their needs, interests and aspirations;

■ partner organisations made known to schools any conditions for participation;

■ schools and partner organisations worked together to match pupils and provision appropriately – this required a willingness to listen to pupils, some flexibility and an awareness of family and community patterns of employment (or unemployment);

■ schools offered individualised 'extension' type programmes and/or interest-based, group 'complementary' programmes – in these cases, successful matching of pupil and appropriate provision was more likely;

■ early liaison took place between schools and potential providers.
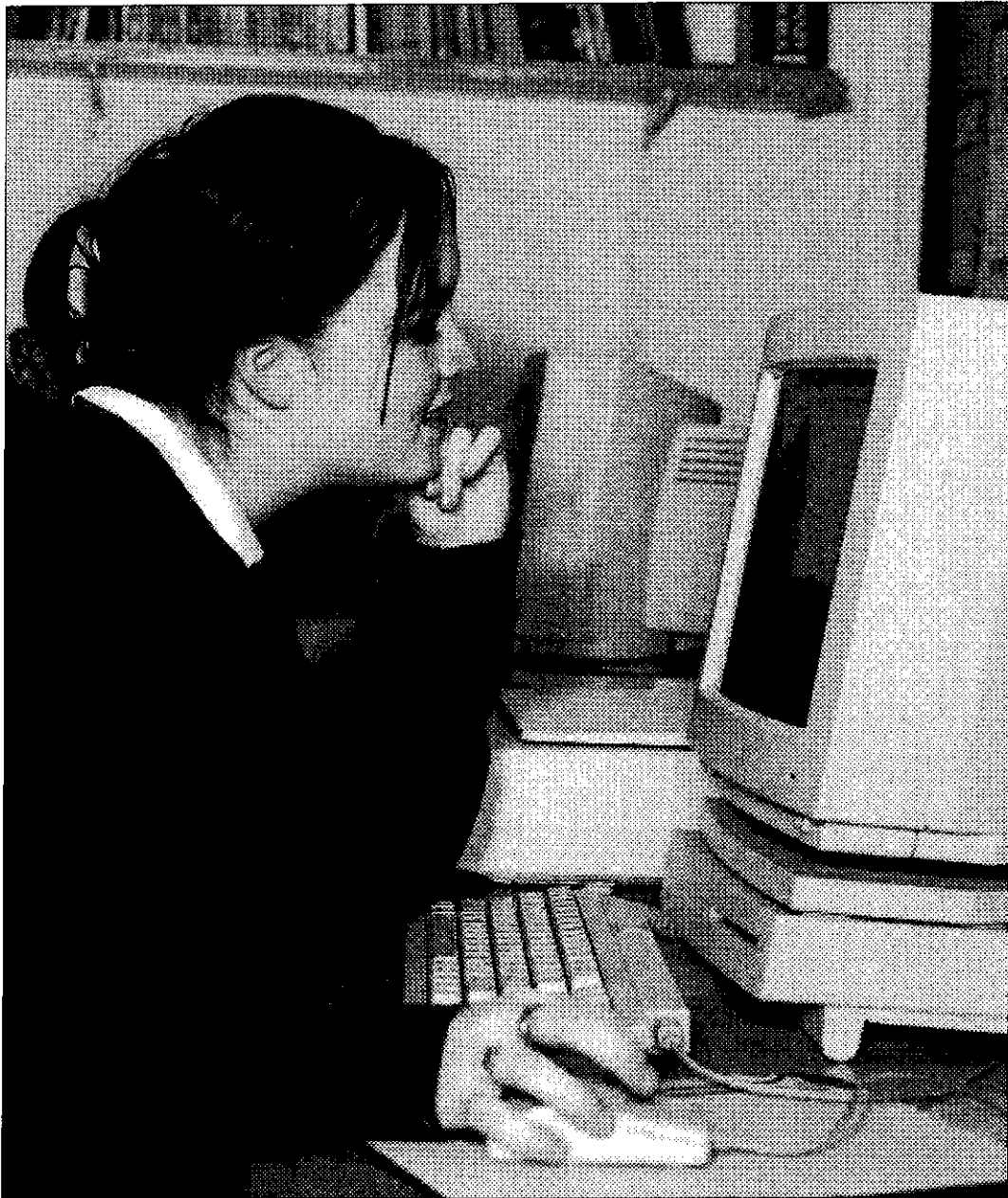
6. PROGRAMME DESIGN AND RESOURCING

The programmes investigated during the NFER research were constructed from the curriculum areas of the statutory key stage 4 curriculum, taught in a range of different learning contexts. Evidence showed that effectiveness lay in the balance between selecting the most appropriate curriculum areas and learning contexts for particular pupils, and ensuring that these formed a coherent educational experience rather than a series of disparate activities.

6.1 'Alternative' curriculum balance

Although personal, social and health education (PSHE), careers advice and work-related learning are all part of the regular key stage 4 curriculum, they often became the focus of the alternative programmes.

A composite list of *sector specific* vocational areas studied or experienced by pupils on the alternative curriculum programmes included in the NFER research is as follows:
- agriculture (e.g., pig rearing, farm work, stables work);
- small animal care;
- brickwork;
- building;
- business administration;
- care assistance;
- catering;
- classroom assistance;
- countryside services;
- creative arts;
- design;
- food safety;
- garage work/car mechanics;
- hairdressing;
- health and beauty;
- health and safety at work (specific to relevant vocational area);
- health and social care;
- mechanical engineering;
- mortuary work;
- nursing;

- office skills;
- painting and decorating;
- plastering;
- retail (e.g., in a pet shop, newsagent, department store);
- sport and leisure (e.g., gym instruction, lifeguarding, trainee basketball player);
- welding;
- woodcraft/joinery.

In addition, provision was made for *generic* work-related skills such as:

- role-playing interviews;
- practice in completing application forms;
- work on improving the presentation of the pupils' National Record of Achievement and *curriculum vitae;*
- organising a fundraising 'enterprise';

together with a range of topics covered during the PSHE components:

- assertiveness training;
- behaviour management techniques;
- citizenship rights and responsibilities;
- decision-making skills;
- disability;
- emotions;
- opportunities awareness;
- personal hygiene;
- personal presentation;
- racism;
- relating to authority;
- relationships;
- team work skills;
- time-keeping.

These issues were explored using a variety of teaching methods, such as:

- experiential learning;
- modelling of skills and techniques;
- counselling;
- groupwork/discussion;
- teambuilding exercises.

This exploration took place within activities such as business mentoring, community service, residential experience, sports, arts activities, outdoor pursuits.

Earlier research by the NFER (Kinder and Kendall *et al.*, 1999) drew attention to the importance of leisure activities within an alternative curriculum programme. Some examples of programmes that included such activities were found in the current NFER research but this component did not figure as strongly as expected. Where it did, it was regarded as an invaluable way of encouraging the development of personal and social strengths and of providing pupils with an *entrée* into constructive social activities and networks that would stand them in good stead on leaving school. This is of particular importance for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who perhaps have no other source of encouragement to join in mainstream leisure activities in the community, such as sport, outdoor pursuits and cultural activities (for instance, theatre, art galleries) that more advantaged young people take for granted.

6.1.1 Selecting curriculum areas

The choice of curricular areas to be included in a programme for a particular pupil or group of pupils was, obviously, influenced by a number of factors, including:

- the National Curriculum framework;
- the academic abilities of the pupils;
- the interests of the pupils;
- the local availability of suitable part-time courses or placements.
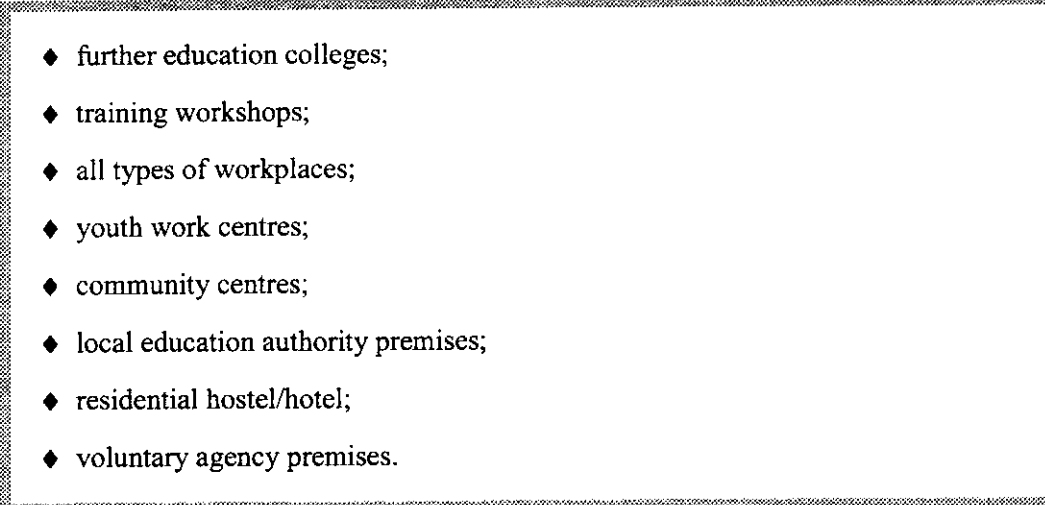
Those operating programmes within the newly created Education Action Zones were freed from the need to keep within the statutory bounds of the National Curriculum but others were concerned to keep to these, sometimes erroneously perceiving them to be more constrictive than, in fact, they were. The NFER research suggested that there was some misunderstanding of the nature of the National Curriculum (for the statutory position, see Appendix 2) and that some teachers and partner organisation staff seemed unaware that the legislation left room for the adaptation and innovation described above.

The learning difficulties of some of the selected pupils in the case study schools meant that they were working below level 3 of the National Curriculum and did not have access to GCSE (see the following chapter for information on alternative accreditation). For example, in one school the pupils on the alternative programme studied English and maths at a functional level. Their English work concentrated on their ability to read and fill in application forms. One parent interviewed approved of this as being 'relevant and useful'. However, by no means all pupils selected for the programmes were of low academic ability – many continued to study for a number of GCSEs. Usually the GCSE subjects had been selected as those the pupils were best at and/or enjoyed the most.

6.2 The range of learning contexts

Each curricular area included in a programme could be taught in one or more school-based or off-site learning context. The range of learning contexts identified during the NFER research is given in Figure 6.1

Figure 6.1: Range of learning contexts

- further education colleges;
- training workshops;
- all types of workplaces;
- youth work centres;
- community centres;
- local education authority premises;
- residential hostel/hotel;
- voluntary agency premises.

6.2.1 Selecting learning contexts

Choices were, of course, constrained by what was available locally: schools used existing networks of contacts with local college and employers and had regard to the local reputation of providers, especially those who were keen to develop options year on year.

A school might choose a college so that pupils could practise independent travel, learn how to behave appropriately in an environment where 'adult status' was the norm, and foster an interest in something to which they could progress full-time post-16. Work places were chosen specifically with respect to their vocational area while sheltered training workshops were used for pupils who need a higher degree of support.

Adults interviewed in the course of the NFER research recognised the benefits for disaffected pupils of the stimulation of a different environment (particularly one in which they had no history of failure or which had negative connotations, such as school had for school refusers/phobics or the victims of bullying) and the availability of facilities not available in schools.

Pupil interviewees contrasted the off-site locations with school. While the overall picture painted is one of extremes, it has to be remembered that some of the pupils had had an atypical school experience – an experience that was inextricably linked with their 'disaffection'. Pupils' views are set out in Figure 6.2.

Figure 6.2: Pupils' views of school/out-of-school contexts

	Disliked about school	Liked about out-of-school contexts
relationships with adults	• formal • bossy • treated like a child • views ignored relaxed	• relaxed • friendly • treated like an adult • views listened to
nature of work	• mainly written work • theoretical knowledge	• mainly practical work • applied knowledge
pace of work	• set by teacher	• set by young person
engagement	• disaffection • disinterest	• enjoyment • interest
attendance	• legal compulsion	• choice
respect	• demanded • based on teacher's position of authority	• voluntarily given • based on tutor's knowledge and competence
achievement of expected skills	• experience of failure	• experience of success

Learning in new environments gave opportunities for a focus on positive feedback, encouragement and praise, and a more informal adult/young person, tutor/pupil relationship which enhanced learning. These opportunities depended, however, on the effective selection of both tutors (able to forge positive relationships and build on successes) and pupils (able to respond to the situation rather than remain isolated).

6.2.2 Health and safety considerations

Very occasionally, health and safety legislation caused problems. As one further education college lecturer explained:

As a provider of vocational courses, we have the buildings, furniture, computers and specialist equipment for the pupils. For example, we have hairdressing and beauty salons and catering kitchens. There are sometimes difficulties with Health and Safety – in some instances because children are under 18 and other times because neither the college nor the pupils can afford specialist outfits, such as boots with steel toe-caps or hard hats for building.

The issue, raised in the above quotation, of paying for protective clothing (for example, steel-capped boots, hard hats, goggles and gloves required when pupils undertook engineering or construction work or training) was sometimes resolved by the school paying, or by sponsorship from companies representing the industry concerned.

Example: Health and Safety implications not recognised at first

As part of his alternative curriculum programme, a Year 11 boy worked part-time in a hospital mortuary, alongside his father. The health and safety implications were not recognised, at first. However, when it was time for him to leave school and look for full-time work, the hospital authorities realised that, legally, the boy was too young to do such work. His father explained the situation:

Father. It is classed as a high risk job, what with infection and this, that and the other. They said he was too young to actually work in the mortuary full time. I think [the hospital manager] was just covering – just in case. You know what I mean? It wouldn't have been very nice something appearing in the papers about a 16-year-old contracting infections in a mortuary. You know what I mean? Wouldn't look good on the hospital.

Son: I really enjoyed it and I wanted to stay but I couldn't really.

Father. Apart for his age they would have taken him on full-time. Wrong age, you know.

Son: Also you got to do other stuff, undertaking, portering. I helped out with measuring bodies, watching over the post-mortem being done.

6.3 Roles in programme design

6.3.1 Schools

The research showed that schools usually took the lead in deciding which curriculum areas and which learning contexts should be included in an alternative programme designed for specific pupils, as individuals or as groups. However, as Figure 6.3 shows, some schools also involved pupils and parents directly in that decision and data suggested that an element of pupil choice increased the potential for success of programmes and, conversely, where choice was lacking, success was variable. The case study schools varied as to how choice was introduced into programmes. One school arranged individually-tailored programmes based on external components chosen by pupils; in return, the school demanded that the pupils attended school and worked hard there during the rest of the week. Another school faced limited local availability of external options but allowed pupils to choose freely from those that were available. Interviewees from partner organisations also regarded pupil choice as a motivating factor, particularly as this contrasted with pupils' sense of compulsion about school.

Figure 6.3: Who designed the overall programme?

◆ **school**

For example:

- school staff members only; pupil choice in some components;
- school staff members with input from the identified *group* of pupils;
- school coordinator plus individual pupils; parents' views also sought.

◆ **school plus partner organisation**

For example:

- school staff in discussion with LEA education welfare officer, plus parent and pupil views;
- school plus employer;
- school plus further education college.

6.3.2 Partner organisations

While schools took the lead in designing the overall programme for pupils, partner organisations designed many individual components of alternative curriculum programmes, especially those covered in non-school contexts such as college or training tasters. Figure 6.4 summarises the position.

Figure 6.4: Component parts of programmes designed by partner organisations

◆ **individual partner organisations**

For example:

- employer only;
- local youth workers;
- careers company.

◆ **local strategic body**

For example:

- LEA area meeting plus individual choice of pupil; parents' views also sought;
- city-wide advisory body, with scope for pupil choice;
- LEA initiative allowing for pupil choice;
- representative working group.

◆ **national industrial body**

For example:

- course on food hygiene (Chartered Institute of Environmental Health);
- industry initiative, plus pupil choice (construction industry).

◆ **awarding body**

For example:

- National Vocational Qualifications courses;
- National Youth Agency Award scheme;
- ASDAN Youth Award.

Many interviewees from partner organisations referred to the importance of programme components being relevant and appropriate to the young person's interests, academic skills and transition aims. They perceived the relationship between what they offered and the regular school curriculum in a range of ways such as:

- **enabling access** to the regular curriculum – for example, taster courses used to give opportunities for success in a particular area of the curriculum and so re-engage the pupil in that area;

- **extending** the range of learning opportunities – particularly by way of vocational experience or cultural visits to art galleries or the theatre;

- **reinforcing** – for example, a careers service module on preparedness for work, which was specifically designed with disaffected young people in mind but which built on previous careers advice and guidance given in the pupils' schools.

6.3.3 Parents

The case study schools varied in the extent to which they involved parents in discussion about which particular curriculum areas and learning contexts would be appropriate for their son or daughter. Schools did this by personal, face-to-face or telephone interviews with parents.

Parents did not always want to be involved. Sometimes this was because of problems in the home, but sometimes it was because the son or daughter was against parental involvement. In these cases, the coordinator relied on discussion with the pupils concerned. Generally, though, parents valued the chance to visit the school to have a positive discussion about their child's education – this often contrasted with a previous history of home-school discussions that had focused on problems.

Very few partner organisations involved in this research involved parents in designing component parts of the programme for their son or daughter. There were one or two examples of this, though, and in both cases parental involvement at the design stage was perceived as helping to ensure the appropriateness of the programme.

Sometimes when parents were involved in programme design, it was in the unusual circumstances where they had taken the initiative in trying to set up a programme. For instance, a further education college received telephone calls from parents who had taken the initiative in trying to design a programme for their son or daughter based on part-time school plus other LEA provision and further education courses. These parents were described as 'desperate' and the college link-person found himself counselling parents as they tried, *'to find their way through the web of school/LEA/FE. There is no well-trodden path for them to follow.'*

Although rare, this was not the only example uncovered by the research of parents taking the initiative in suggesting alternative curriculum provision for their son or daughter. Explanations for this could be that there was a

problematic relationship with the school or that the school was unsupported by local coordinating structures.

6.3.4 The community

Only one person interviewed for the NFER research specifically mentioned consulting the wider community about what some or all of a programme should be like. In that one case, consultation with the community took place because the organisations involved sought to 'cater for local needs'. The programme component was aimed at disaffected pupils who had been excluded from school or had poor attendance records, and it focused on work-related learning. The whole consultation process was described as follows:

> *We devised the course largely in accordance with suggestions from professionals associated with disaffected and excluded pupils. Schools, Youth Services and the wider community are consulted to ascertain their thoughts on what would be useful and valuable to include. We aim to cater for local needs. We also conform, or at least attempt to respond, to LEA and DfEE guidelines and Ofsted recommendations. Young people are consulted to an extent but not in any formal sense.*
>
> Careers adviser (paraphrased from notes)

In other cases, inter-agency panels, working groups, networks and strategic bodies served as mechanisms for consulting the 'community'. Where local support is canvassed from the start, there is a greater likelihood of the programme being valued by parents, employers, training agencies and colleges. It is likely that the community will become increasingly important in this respect, in the light of recent government initiatives (Nicholas, 2000).

6.4 Meeting pupils' social needs

From the experiences of the case study schools and, in particular, from the views expressed by participating pupils, it became clear that programmes and their component parts were more effective when some thought had been given to how pupils' social and pastoral needs were to be met in off-site locations. Pupils' needs varied partly because the social organisation of programme components varied. During an off-site component of their alternative educational programme, pupils might be:

- the only pupil there;
- part of a discrete group (all key stage 4 pupils and all from one school);
- part of an existing group (that might include excluded pupils, key stage 4 pupils from other schools, older people, younger pupils).

Figure 6.5 summarises the variation in the social profile that pupils encountered. When informed of the social mix of participants in the off-site component, schools could prepare their pupils appropriately. Equally,

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informed of likely social and pastoral needs of the young people, providers could prepare strategies to meet those needs. There was evidence that pupils benefited the most from programmes that undertook such preparation.

Figure 6.5: Social profile of participants in programme components

Variables for social profile				
Gender	*Socio-economic*	*Ethnic groups*	*Age*	*School*
• mainly one sex • only one sex • even nos. girls & boys	• disadvantaged mainly • disadvantaged only • mixed	• mainly one group • only one group • mixed	• key stage 4 only • also older • also younger	• own school only • other schools also

Pupil reactions to these differing social contexts depended upon individual pupils' backgrounds, personalities and previous social experiences. Some of the case study schools were sensitive to the fact that many, sometimes all, of the pupils included in the alternative curriculum programmes came from disadvantaged social and/or economic circumstances and had had limited social experiences. Figure 6.6 sets out the main forms of social exclusion experienced by pupils interviewed during the NFER research that influenced their ability to benefit from the alternative curriculum programmes.

Figure 6.6: Forms of social exclusion experienced by pupils interviewed

◆ Some pupils were familiar only with their own housing estate – travelling by bus into the town centre college (about two miles away) was experienced by some of them as very challenging and threatening and, in one case, was enough to deter from attending the college. The **confined geographic (and therefore social) space** in which they felt comfortable had limited their social and cultural experiences and made the business of moving out of that space difficult. This view of locality was alien to the experience of many teachers and other professionals and required them to make a leap of empathic imagination to understand its reality for the pupils.

◆ Some pupils expressed their sense of belonging within only a very limited geographic area through **territorial rivalries and hatreds** – for these pupils, mixing with pupils from a school in a rival territory could cause problems. Examples cited during the research included fighting, refusing to attend a course because it meant being taught alongside people from another area, even refusal of an interview for a modern apprenticeship on realising that taking up such a place would require mixing with people from a rival territory.

◆ Some pupils had **no immediate family models of an employed lifestyle** and could have difficulty imagining themselves as employed adults and engaging in the world of work.

♦ Some pupils had a very **limited circle of social contacts** – entering and being in a large college or noisy training workshop was experienced by some of them as very challenging and threatening. Often these pupils had difficulties in secondary school because they found that social milieu too big and frightening. Their positive reminiscences of primary school (with smaller numbers and one teacher per year) contrasted with negative experiences of secondary school (with large numbers of pupils and many teachers encountered every day). For them, being asked to manage in yet more challenging social circumstances could be too much to cope with unless support was available.

Many of the pupils interviewed in the course of the NFER research experienced all the above forms of social exclusion from mainstream society: that is, a sense of belonging within only a very limited geographic area (often expressed in territorial rivalry, even hatreds), a sense of being divorced from the world of work, and connection to a very limited social network.

These factors meant that access to the opportunities offered through off-site learning locations and an interesting curriculum could only be fully grasped when appropriate support, which acknowledged these realities, was also in place.

6.4.1   Management of the timetable

A school's approach to timetable management with respect to alternative curriculum provision affected issues such as transport to and from off-site locations, disjunctions between learning contexts, and missed schoolwork whilst pupils were off-site. Interviews conducted during the NFER research suggested that these issues caused anxieties for both parents and pupils.

Off-site activities might occupy a regular slot each week or be irregular or arranged for small groups or individuals, the latter being more disruptive as regards the regular curriculum. Where pupils following an alternative programme were not taught as a discrete teaching group at school, pupils would often miss lessons – both core and optional National Curriculum subjects were missed under different arrangements. Some schools offered pupils support in catching-up with lessons missed but others expected them to make up the missed work by themselves.

Arrangements for off-site work in the case study schools took one of the following approaches:

- whole year group out together (complementary programme): in the case study special school, the timetable for Year 10 had been constructed to enable the whole year group to go to college two days a week and to benefit from extended work experience placements;

- alternative programme group out together (satellite programme): a timetable was designed for the alternative curriculum group as a subset of the whole year timetable, enabling the selected pupils both to be taught in school and to attend off-site locations as a group;

- individuals within group out together (extension programme): pupils with individualised programmes went to off-site locations at a regular time each week, allowing the year group timetable to be planned in advance, but exceptional arrangements were negotiable so that individual pupils could attend a course or work placement at other times;

- individuals out at different times (extension programme): this caused most disruption to existing teaching groups within the school, as individuals joined different teaching groups when in school in order to gain access to lessons missed when they were at college.

6.4.2 Transport

During the research, the issue of transport to and from the off-site locations came up frequently as a major area of concern. As well as being a practical matter, concern about transport to and from different locations reflected pupils' concerns, frequently shared by their parents, about moving out of the geographic and social space with which they were familiar.

Figure 6.7: Transport: some problems and solutions

Problem: fares were too expensive for pupils to pay, plus pupils felt they belonged only within a limited geographic area

- A local agreement was reached with the main bus company, giving pupils on the programme a free bus pass for use at anytime. This removed the poverty barrier and greatly expanded pupils' sense of social space by enabling them, for example, to go to the seaside together.

Problem: pupils lived in a rural area and had to travel a long way to the nearest further education college

- A local campaign was successful in lobbying for an improved bus service from outlying villages to the local town. Pupils on the programme were eligible for a bus pass offering reduced fares.

Problem: inner-city pupils were fearful of travelling by bus

- In one LEA, pupils were transported in education officers' cars until they felt confident enough to travel the route by bus.

- In one school, a pool of teachers took turns to drop off and pick up the pupils. Although this did not address pupils' fears of travelling, it offered an important opportunity for discussion and reflection about their experiences, showed them that teachers cared about them, and involved teachers other than the coordinator in the day-to-day running of the programme.

- In another school, teachers accompanied the pupils on practice journeys until the pupils felt confident. The pupils arranged to meet at one bus stop and to travel together.

6.4.3 Induction to new experiences

Many of the curriculum programmes aimed to increase pupils' sense of responsibility for themselves, to make them more independent and to prepare them for transition. This aim was better achieved when pupils were inducted into the new demands being placed on them by one or more supportive adults known to them – usually the coordinator or other teacher/s. Figure 6.8 contrasts the outcomes of induction in two case study schools.

Figure 6.8: Effect of induction processes on outcomes

Poor induction: pupils left outside their comfort zone	Good induction: pupils' comfort zones expand
• bus route not experienced in advance • no prior discussion of how to deal with unexpected circumstances during the journey or while off-site • cursory induction to college • school staff visit college once or rarely ↓ **sense of fear, insecurity and distrust** • loss of confidence • failure to achieve increased independence • attendance drops	• practice journeys on bus route • prior discussion of how to deal with unexpected circumstances during the journey or while off-site • careful induction to college • school staff visit college regularly ↓ **sense of safety, security, trust** • improved self-esteem • increased independence successfully achieved • high attendance maintained

6.5 Coherent packages

A successful programme design integrated learning across all the learning contexts.

6.5.1 Ways of linking teaching in-school and off-site

Schools and providers benefited from early discussions about the relationship between off-site and school-based learning and from setting up means of linking them, in order to ease pupils' transition between the familiar learning context of the school and the new, off-site contexts of learning.

Figure 6.9: Methods used in the case study schools to link off-site and school-based learning

◆ continuation of work in area of identified interest;

◆ teacher visits to off-site location for observation of the pupils working and dialogue with the tutor/s;

◆ joint planning of course content by teachers and college tutors;

◆ joint teaching of certain sessions by college tutors and teachers;

◆ joint delivery of theoretical aspects of vocational course by tutors off-site and by teachers in school;

◆ teacher attendance at college courses with students – (for example, to offer pastoral support and to ensure lessons were pitched at a level that allowed pupils access to learning);

◆ in-school tutorial session for discussion of and reflection on off-site learning (agenda set by pupils);

◆ in-school teaching sessions to support/reinforce learning off-site (liaison between school and providers);

◆ formal 'mapping' onto requirements of National Curriculum.

Almost all the programmes and programme components studied in the NFER research were designed to take account of prior learning and/or interest. It is worth noting, however, that some programmes included components that were deliberately kept distinct from school-based learning. The disjunction of curriculum content and learning style between the school-based and out-of-school contexts was deliberate, usually because of a 'fresh start' policy. For example, one programme included a basic food hygiene course and the course provider felt that, as this course was available to all, including adults, it had no bearing on prior learning and should be regarded as a 'stand alone' qualification, an additional achievement, regardless of what had or had not been studied in school.

However, even such fresh start approaches required liaison between the provider and the school so that the pupil knew what to expect, the school was not disappointed and the off-site teaching was pitched at the right level.

Methods used to enable schools and providers to liaise over pupils' prior learning are presented in Figure 6.10.

Figure 6.10: Methods used to ensure appropriate links between programme components and pupils' previous learning or interest

♦ meeting with parents;

♦ use of Record of Achievement;

♦ discussion with school staff;

♦ discussion with pupil;

♦ baseline testing;

♦ attitudinal survey;

♦ liaison with 'go-between' figure (e.g. education welfare officer, LEA link officer, probation officer);

♦ development of individual action plans.

Frequently, more than one of these methods was employed, as the examples given in Figure 6.11 show. This was necessary because pupils' and parents' views, for example, could be partial or selective, or a Record of Achievement might be too general.

Figure 6.11: Examples of the process: providers finding out about pupils' prior learning/interest

Provider	Liaison process
careers company	Pupils and teachers were interviewed and each pupil's Record of Achievement was discussed with him/her.
further education college (i)	In Year 10 – initial taster courses offered. In Year 11 – a mentor helps the pupil to evaluate which taster best suited his/her needs. Pupil enrols on chosen course.
further education college (ii)	Based on liaison with the pupils' school, everything the students did was linked into something they should or would have done at school. The idea was to prevent them becoming detached from the school environment.
'Go-between' agency (found placements for pupils nominated by local schools)	Met with staff from pupils' schools, had discussions with pupils, asked each pupil to take a baseline test and to complete an attitudinal survey. This information was used to aid selection of suitable components for each pupil and to ensure that these took account of prior learning/interest.
local project	Through discussion with the school, areas that needed to be covered were jointly identified.
training organisation (i)	During the summer term prior to involvement, a planning meeting was held with the schools to ensure that there would be no repetition of what pupils had already learned. This prior planning also meant that participation could be built into the timetable.

training organisation (ii)	The process varied from school to school. For example, sometimes the school coordinator or the parents visited the training agency to discuss prior learning and interests. Pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties from a special school came with their teachers to experience a workshop. Information about pupils' prior learning and interest was passed to the vocational team, who matched each pupil with a suitable employer from their database.
training organisation (iii)	In collaboration with the LEA link officer, discussion of what the pupils have learned, what they have enjoyed, and what teaching methods worked for them. This information used to inform individual action plans for the pupils.

The way in which pupils' interest in the subject or vocational area acted as a motivator was also recognised by providers. For example, one interviewee from a pre-vocational project explained that, *'They become more involved and interested in areas they consider relevant to their future'*. An interviewee from another local pre-vocational project stated that, *'Pupils are able to motivate themselves because they are involved in an area of training that they have opted for and are interested in'*. Good practice would be to ensure that providers know of pupils' prior learning and interests right from the start of the programme.

6.6 Engaging parental support

Parental support is a well-recognised factor in educational success; this was no less true of the alternative curriculum programmes. Schools and other organisations involved were aware of this and often made efforts to engage such support right from the beginning of the programme. It is a health and safety requirement that parental permission be obtained for pupils to attend off-site activities; the research data suggested that schools and partner organisations were aware of this requirement and usually fulfilled it.

The case study schools contacted parents by letter, by telephone or at parents' evenings at the beginning of the programmes to explain what was involved and why it was felt to be appropriate for their son or daughter.

Example: One school's efforts to engage parental support

A case study school for pupils with moderate learning difficulties and related emotional and behavioural difficulties made a particular effort to present the off-site components of the programme to parents in a positive light. Parents were invited to the school for a special session during the first week of Year 10 (the school year in which pupils participated in the programme). The school staff sought to help parents understand what it would mean for them to let their son or daughter go to college. One aim of the programme was that the

pupils should learn to travel safely on their own – a critical life-skill. Understandably, parents were concerned about this and school staff allayed fears by explaining the detailed preparation that the school undertook to prepare the pupils to travel on their own. The programme coordinator described the process as follows:

We have worked in our curriculum time at looking at the bus numbers of how they are going to get there – of where their bus stops are. They can ring up, use the school phone and find out the times. This gets reported to parents so that the parents know exactly what is happening. So, if somebody doesn't come home till half past eight at night and the parents are frantic with worry, it's not down to me not giving them information or anything like that. It's because so-and-so's had an aberration and seen their friends and disappeared off to the markets or wherever they've gone. Parents know before they [the pupils] go that everything is planned out and the parents feel safety and security in that, which is essential. It is part of how we do things and I'm convinced it's the proper way to do things.

In addition to schools' efforts to engage parents' support, more detailed parental induction to the off-site components of programmes frequently occurred. Some providers made an effort to introduce parents to the location where their son or daughter would be and to the sort of things that would be learned there. For example, one area adviser for the Construction Industry Training Board's sponsorship of the NVQ in Building and Construction held parents' meetings during which the course was described and parents' expectations were discussed. Parents were invited to visit the course at the local college. This was greatly welcomed by parents who took up the offer. Another training organisation spoke about having to 'sell', to parents as well as to pupils, the idea of involvement in the scheme being a two-way contract. Again, parents were invited to visit the training workshops and to discuss their son or daughter's interests and aptitudes.

A number of other providers interviewed mentioned the value they placed on being able to meet and talk to pupils' parents. One voluntary sector provider worked with families as well as with pupils because there was an awareness that family support was vital in ensuring that potential long-term benefits of the programme, such as avoidance of involvement in crime, were realised. In another case, an education welfare officer, acting as the local coordinating agent, visited families and talked about the project, recognising that parental support and interest was an important indicator of a pupil's likely commitment. These visits also had the effect of raising the profile and the morale of the education welfare service.

6.7 Funding

Clearly, programme design had budgetary implications. The NFER questionnaire asked for details about costs incurred by schools and partner organisations. The responses indicated that estimating the costs incurred in offering an alternative curriculum programme was not always easy and was invariably context-specific.

Some schools stated that the programme incurred no additional cost – for example, one school explained that its programme costs were met within individual subject team budgets and not costed separately. Another explained that the LEA simply recovered the relevant proportion of the age-weighted pupil unit to pay for the days the pupil was in college. Other schools had the full cost of programmes met by external funding from, for example, the local training and enterprise council (TEC).

Table 6.1: Examples of estimated costs incurred by case study schools and funding sources

Aspect of provision	Estimated cost per annum	Source of funding to pay for it
Pine School		
fees to college provider	£3,500	school budget plus external source
liaison time (school staff)	£2,000	(local authority, local Compact and
transport	£450	Single Regeneration Budget)
materials	£100	
Rowan School		
school staff and admin	£13,500	school budget plus external source
fees to provider	£1,700	(Single Regeneration Budget via local
transport	£500	CCTE)
materials	£250	
Redwood Special School		
0.2 increased staffing	£5,500	school budget plus external sources
fees to college provider	£4,500	(DfEE Standards Fund Work
materials	£3,000	Related Learning; Careers service;
liaison time (school staff)	£1,000	Single Regeneration Budget via
transport	£200	local CCTE)
Oak School		
0.5 increased staffing	£12,000	school budget plus external sources
fees to provider	£750	(Careers service; European Regional
liaison time (school staff)	£700	Development Fund; European Social Fund)

The support of the governing body and of the senior management team was crucial in endorsing the decision to spend money on such programmes. Yet there were limits on what schools were able to pay – for example, unsubsidised college places were usually beyond a school's resources. Finding the right placements for young people could be expensive but many schools mentioned that some costs were met by goodwill from local partner organisations. Some colleges claimed no course fees and some employers did not charge for work experience, while others charged only nominal sums such as £10 per pupil. It is likely that some programmes could not have run without the contributions in cash and kind given on a goodwill basis by partner organisations.

The research identified the following budget items that needed resourcing:

- accreditation;
- administration costs;
- assessment;
- fees to course provider/s;
- fees to placement providers;
- increased staffing for planning, liaison and supervision;
- materials (for example, hard hats, boots, curriculum materials);
- pupil payment (where that was part of the programme's design)
- transport to and from off-site locations.

6.7.1 Funding sources

The research showed that the majority of schools providing information funded the alternative curriculum programme from the school budget supplemented by external sources of funding – mostly local, such as the local authority or the local Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), which was known as the Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise (CCTE) in some areas. Table 6.2 shows the different sources of funding for, and the frequency of their use, for the 82 schools describing their alternative curriculum programmes on the initial NFER questionnaire.

Table 6.2: Funding sources for alternative curriculum programmes

Source of funding	Frequency n=82 schools*
school sources	*school sources*
school budget	79
no school sources ticked	*19*
other	7
special fundraising	6
local sources	*local sources*
local authority	34
no local sources ticked	*33*
Training and Enterprise Council	23
education business partnership	12
careers service	11
local employer/s	11
other	7
local Compact	6
Probation Service	2
Police	2
national sources	*national sources*
no national sources ticked	*105*
Single Regeneration Budget Challenge Fund	10
Department for Education and Employment	9
other	5
European sources	*European sources*
no European sources ticked	*94*
European Social Fund	6
European Regional Development Fund	2
European Youthstart	2
other	1
voluntary agency	*voluntary agency*
no charitable source ticked	*95*
Trust or foundation	5
National Lottery Charities Board	2
other	1

Source: NFER questionnaire to schools in 14 LEAs

Multiple response question

* Schools could answer for one programme or for two different programmes

Those interviewed in the case study schools also raised a number of issues relating to the financial aspect of programmes. Not surprisingly, the availability of alternative curriculum programmes increased with the availability of funding. Yet in some cases, confusion occurred because there were a number of different sources of funding. It was suggested that

local coordination of funding would improve effectiveness by cutting down on the bureaucracy facing schools seeking external sources. Although some conditions attached to funding could be negotiated (for example, the type of pupils to be targeted), many funders required evidence that their money was contributing to improvements in student outcomes. As Chapter 8 suggests, however, measuring success was not necessarily straightforward. Investing in vulnerable young people is usually a long term initiative and rarely shows a quick return.

6.8 Summary of good practice points

On the basis of the evidence presented in Chapter 6, good practice involved:
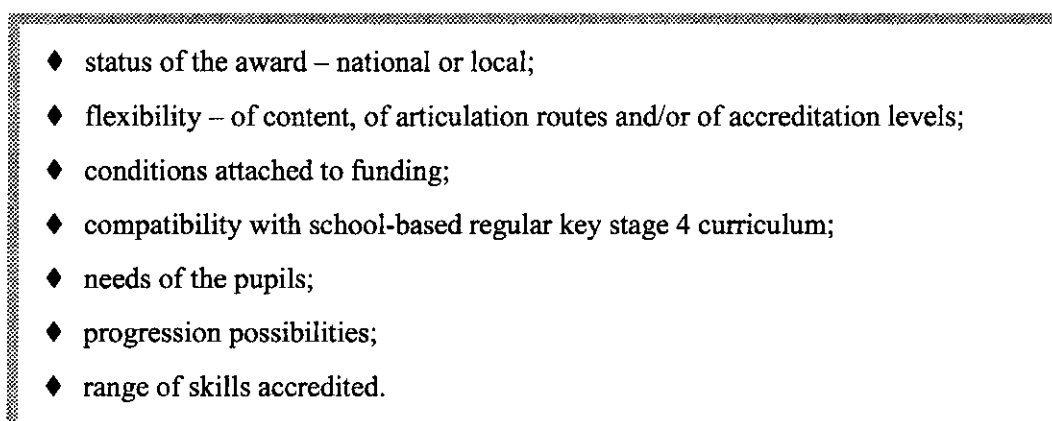
- consideration of opportunities to include leisure activities in alternative programmes to support pupils' transition to adult life;

- awareness that provision had to be made for a range of abilities, aptitudes and interests;

- a careful audit of the characteristics of different learning contexts and what each might offer to individual participating students;

- the contribution to programme design of a range of personnel from different agencies;

- identification of, and attention to, the social needs of participating students;

- attention to practical issues, such as transport, which supports student attendance;

- consideration of timetabling implications and arrangements for schoolwork missed;

- arrangements for the induction of students to the new learning context/ site;

- explicit connections between on-site and off-site teaching and learning;

- the engagement of parental support and involvement;

- planning of budgets and location of funding sources.

7. ENCOURAGING AND ACKNOWLEDGING ACHIEVEMENT

Most of those involved in the provision of alternative education at key stage 4 felt that there should be some acknowledgement of young people's achievement. The NFER research found that no single accreditation scheme was considered uniformly suitable for alternative programmes; rather, the emphasis was on finding accreditation suited to particular programmes and specific circumstances (see Figure 7.1). A wide variety of forms of accreditation were used across the schemes, ranging from external certification (GCSE, GNVQ, Certificate of Education) to internal awards (for example, a school-based certificate). Most programmes aimed for all young people to have some sort of nationally recognised accreditation, though there was recognition that they should not be exposed to another failure situation.

Figure 7.1: Factors taken into account in choosing type of accreditation

♦ status of the award – national or local;

♦ flexibility – of content, of articulation routes and/or of accreditation levels;

♦ conditions attached to funding;

♦ compatibility with school-based regular key stage 4 curriculum;

♦ needs of the pupils;

♦ progression possibilities;

♦ range of skills accredited.

7.1 National awards

7.1.1 GCSEs

Since one aim of many alternative curriculum programmes was to support young people into positive progression routes post-16, it is perhaps not surprising that GCSEs were chosen as at least part of an accreditation package for some participating pupils. It was satisfying for schools to see capable students 'back on track' and students, too, valued the mainstream success of GCSE certification – there was an almost tangible pride in the claim of one student who said, '*Now the highest mark I can get is a C, whereas before, it was about an E or F'*. There was an awareness that a GCSE certificate was expected by future employers or trainers: '*If they leave school without it, people want to know why'*.

Although there was wide acknowledgement by teachers that the demands of the National Curriculum were not appropriate for all pupils (for example, those working within or below level 3 of the National Curriculum), there were attempts to be creative with the system – for example, dropping some GCSEs and concentrating on the core subjects of maths, English and science, though not everyone interviewed saw this as the best option if the young person would struggle with the syllabus. A deputy headteacher remarked that a low grade GCSE might not be valued as recognising achievement but, instead, seen as '*a certificate of being not particularly good at something*'. This summed up a general feeling that the existing system of recognising achievement in schools was narrow and academically biased. More than one school felt that alternative accreditation was an option which should apply to all: '*There is a whole range of pupils who would benefit from qualifications that are not academic in the traditional sense – it is unfair to dismiss them as non-achievers*'. '*Even some of the most able do not get on with the National Curriculum.*'

7.1.2 Other forms of national accreditation

Other accreditation routes, such as the NVQ, GNVQ and Diploma of Vocational Education (DVE), were popular for their more vocational emphasis. Of these, only GNVQs featured in school performance tables but all were familiar to employers and colleges, and the modules studied or work experience undertaken as part of a course could provide valuable links with the world of employment or further education post-16.

Even where the certificate was not known to particular communities, the accreditation of practical elements was highly regarded. One provider said of the NVQ, '*The school community's awareness of this is zilch, but that is not a factor, because the practical skills have status and recognition.*'

Nationally accepted accreditation which recognised basic skills at a level below GCSE (for example, City and Guilds' Number Power and Word Power) was used as a viable alternative for pupils for whom GCSE Maths and English were too daunting.

Also available on a national basis, and becoming more widely-recognised, were the non-examined modular awards, such as the OCR National Skills Profile, the NEAB Unit Awards, and the ASDAN Youth Awards. The latter was a particularly successful scheme from the pupils' perspective, but it also provided an example of the importance of local recognition for nationwide awards – one school chose not to use this route because the awarding body was not know to local parents ('*The ASDAN Youth Award is not sufficiently well-known to be valued...parents here might think the awards were from the [nearby] Asda supermarket!*')

National recognition, therefore, was an important factor in choice, and even where long-term accreditation was not appropriate, there were modular courses in use which would allow progression towards a more advanced qualification. Of the GNVQ Level 1 course, for instance, one college provider said, 'Once the young people have finished, they could branch

into mainstream level 2 or 3 – it is a slower route, but they could eventually get there'. Also valued were short-term, practical courses accredited by an organisation that had national standing in its own particular field, such as the St John Ambulance Association. All these forms of accreditation provided proof that the alternative curriculum programmes were working to externally imposed standards.

From the research, it seemed that, while alternative accreditation has expanded and embraced a wide range of skills, the GCSE still occupied centre stage in many schools' alternative provision – even if only in the sense that everything else was compared to it and it was recognised as 'the norm'. There was certainly a strongly felt need for greater scope to acknowledge young people's skills than that at present offered by the GCSE, particularly for those pupils participating in alternative programmes.

There was evidence from the NFER research that there was a considerable degree of enthusiasm for alternative forms of accreditation among those working with young people in alternative forms of provision. Data suggested that considerable thought was given to the most appropriate means of accreditation in some situations. However, it ought to be pointed out that, when inspecting alternative accreditation for students with learning difficulties in further education (many of the schemes mentioned were similar to those used at key stage 4), the inspectors found (FEFC, 1999) that some schemes were inappropriate, did not improve the quality of students' learning experiences, were of little significance, accredited skills that had little relevance to students' future lives, resulted in fragmented programmes, provided misleading information, had imprecise performance criteria and showed inconsistencies of demands across modules at the same level.

7.2 Local awards

There were a number of locally based and locally respected accreditation schemes available for young people participating in alternative programmes by way of either formal institutional awards or informal recognition of achievement.

Institutional awards ranged from work placement completion awards (which would be familiar to local employers) to colleges' own certificates (which might provide the basis for entry to post-16 courses).

There was a greater degree of recognition for those local awards that contributed to a larger system – for example, the Open College Network (OCN) or the Trident work placement scheme. For example, the successful completion of a Trident work placement was often acknowledged by a certificate from the employer, which, in turn, could provide an introduction to other local employers: 'It does not compare to GCSE,' one LEA provider commented, 'but it gives useful information [about the young person]'.

The Open College Network enabled locally developed courses to be endorsed. Although the OCN is not at present approved by the Department for Education and Employment as suitable for schools, many providers felt that it offered a level of accreditation that was very useful in enabling positive progression, albeit within a local area: *'It is endorsed by colleges and recognised by employers, who can use it to decipher progress, competence in key skills, and interest in vocational areas'.*

In-house certification, though it lacked external recognition, was seen as a useful progression route. Accreditation gained (sometimes a mixture of units and skills certificates) might, though insubstantial *per se*, lead to placement with an employer or college within the local area. Some colleges saw their provision as a 'taster' of what was available, young people being encouraged by in-house awards to attempt mainstream courses that they might previously have thought beyond them. A local charity pointed out that their scheme (which culminated in a variety of units, including an information technology and First Aid certificate) was *'recognised by employers, in the sense that they accept the young people [from the programme]'*. One careers service provider even spoke of promoting their award scheme locally to ensure success, *'We market it to employers, and the young people themselves market it by talking about it'.*

Parents and young people valued local alternatives that acknowledged what had been achieved, rather than labelled young people as failures. One father spoke of the wish for a straightforward certificate that *'employers can look at and know he is trained to do the job'*, while pupils were able to express enthusiasm that they were actually doing something connected with a long-term plan of their own.

Even where a certificate was not awarded, a young person's achievement could be included within his/her Record of Achievement (ROA) by way of a handwritten letter of appreciation from a mentor or a photographic record of a work placement or 'taster' course.

Providers who offered no accreditation were in a minority, of whom some simply did not recognise the acknowledgement they offered as sufficiently 'official' to be regarded as accreditation. One trainer, for example, cited 'nothing' when asked about forms of accreditation, but then added that all young people on the course received a letter for their ROA – a definite, if informal, acknowledgement of what had been achieved.

Others, despite the general strongly-felt need for alternative accreditation, were most definite that they did not want to offer any formal certification for the achievements made during young people's time with them. There were two reasons for this: they did not want to call upon academic skills which young people might not possess; and they wanted something radically different from the traditional system of which pupils had negative experience.

7.3 Factors affecting choice of accreditation

As well as the question of the level of recognition, other factors affected choice of accreditation, as Figure 7.1 showed.

7.3.1 Flexibility

Alternative accreditation schemes were valued if they were flexible. This had various dimensions. First, there was flexibility of content: a range of skills wider than those accommodated within the GCSE system and including vocational and/or life skills; presentation in manageable units; and opportunities for pupils to progress and be credited *at their own pace*. Again, ASDAN awards, the DVE and OCN qualifications fulfilled this role, although some providers opted for internal certificates, and one simplified requirements to a series of 'I can do' statements.

Second was the matter of access and the way that alternative accreditation could be added to, transferred, or perhaps even resumed after a break. Again, this was a strength of the modular awards: feedback and formal encouragement could be given along the way to the final certificate. One college provider said of the NVQ, *'The good thing about this is that [the NVQ] is a roll-on – roll-off qualification which can be picked up at any time in the future. Even if young people move from the area, it can be transferred and we could send the evidence on.'* Another cited the advantage of pupils being able to continue to make choices late into key stage 4 – for example, a one-year course could be decided upon in the summer before leaving school – and this, it was felt, *'took pressure off the focus on the two-year GCSE'*. The OCN and City & Guilds' DVE were referred to because of the flexibility offered – for example, both accommodated accreditation of prior learning.

Thirdly, flexibility with regard to accreditation was also welcomed. In some cases, schools could offer a menu of accreditation levels from which pupils chose what they were best able to achieve, the most able gaining a full award, while others collected units towards a qualification or an acknowledgement of their achievement for their ROA. This meant that a mixed-ability group could follow the same basic programme.

7.3.2 Conditions attached to funding

Some programmes were funded by agencies that expected pupils to achieve an award as part of the conditions attached to the grant. For example, the YMCA offered its own internal certificate on a course which it financed, but had declined the opportunity to incorporate a national qualification into the work experience programme because *'the whole programme would have to change to include theory and writing, which was what we hoped to avoid'*.

7.3.3 Compatibility

Timetable compatibility was necessarily an important consideration when choosing alternative courses, as schools still had the responsibility for maintaining their pupils' mainstream provision. Ease of integration was often a reason for choosing a particular course. Some schools developed existing courses so that they met the criteria required to gain recognition from an awarding body, simply placing on a formal basis the provision which they already offered. The ASDAN scheme was particularly suited to such requests; for example, Oak School explained that it would be *'more motivating to have the ASDAN accreditation for non-GCSE work'* and would *'present a more coherent package to the children and their parents'*. Similarly, Redwood Special School found that their own health and fitness curriculum *'fitted what was required [for the DVE] – it only needed minor developments and refinement'* to be recognised by the awarding body.

Among the courses that attracted such comments were NVQ, Trident schemes, DVE, and ASDAN. Although a recognised certificate was felt to add value to such courses, it was not always considered essential. Some providers offered in-house certificates.

7.3.4 Progression

Another important aspect of accreditation chosen for alternative schemes was that it should lead to opportunities post-16. Although motivating and rewarding disaffected young people were worthwhile aims in themselves, it was seen as vital that this support did not come to an end once they left school. For this reason, any qualification that provided an introduction to post-16 provision was valued. Sometimes a certificate might enhance school provision by offering an alternative route to college: one coordinator said of a local vocational award, *'if pupils can get a C or above in [the local award] and four Cs at GCSE, then they can get into college'*. Another spoke of the City & Guilds DVE programme: *'Everybody gets some form of nationally recognised accreditation carrying APL, and this is used by FE colleges in our area'*. One trainer spoke of Word Power, Number Power, ASDAN and OCR certificates as being *'all widely recognised by local employers and FE colleges'*, thus enabling young people to move into positive progression routes.

7.4 Take-up of accreditation possibilities

Despite the growth in accreditation on offer, and the feeling amongst teachers, pupils, parents and employers that this was very welcome, the NFER research found that take-up of opportunities varied.

7.4.1 Low take-up

Interviewees identified a number of reasons for low take-up of accreditation opportunities, including fear of failure, lack of basic skills, and suspicion of new forms of accreditation.

Example: Pupils' lack of confidence

One college pointed out that every one of their City & Guilds courses carried the opportunity for accreditation, but it was not compulsory, and so not all young people had taken it up. This was seen as understandable:

> the agenda (for students) is not necessarily about accreditation, it is more to do with having a positive experience and developing learning skills. .. Plus, they may not feel confident about the external exam set-up.
>
> FE college lecturer

Amongst the options offered to these particular students, though, was the chance to defer their exam for a year. This helped to overcome lack of confidence by showing that there was never a point of no return in their educational experience. Rather, learning could be a post-16, indeed a lifelong, process.

Example: Teachers' fear of pupils' experiencing another failure

One training agency, offering accreditation for pupils on the training component of their alternative programme through the OCN, found that schools were 'hesitant about putting pupils forward.... they don't want vulnerable young people to fail'.

To combat this negative perception, the local careers service had stepped in and offered to provide guidance and support to schools until they were confident that the standards expected were achievable by their pupils.

7.4.2 High take-up

In some schools, the alternative curriculum programme had resulted in all pupils being entered for a national qualification and, in some cases, GCSE entries had increased on account of increased motivation.

Redwood Special School was not alone in having all key stage 4 pupils gaining some form of nationally recognised accreditation. This was achieved in various stages: units towards the DVE, a full DVE, DVE plus credits towards GNVQ, and, for the most able, both DVE and GNVQ. It was considered particularly worthwhile because pupils could then go on to a higher level NVQ at college, post-16. As the headteacher pointed out, NVQ level 2 was equivalent to five GCSEs but the pupils would not have been able to achieve the latter along a conventional pathway.

An awareness of the range of accreditation on offer, combined with skill in matching pupil abilities to appropriate levels of entry, resulted in greater take-up of opportunities and more successful outcomes on which to build for the future.

There were of course some aspects of achievement which were difficult to measure and therefore accredit, such as improvements in self-esteem, maturity, responsibility, attitude and motivation – all these were hoped-for outcomes, but were difficult to measure.

Some key areas of schemes, then, were not yet open to accreditation, but there were signs among the newer award systems that this deficiency was being addressed and student-centred accreditation possibilities were therefore an area of growing potential.

7.4.3 Encouraging participation

Like all those singled out in any way in schools, there was a potential for pupils participating in alternative curriculum programmes to be stigmatised. The NFER research gave evidence about the reasons for, and ways of addressing, negative images of alternative programmes – see Figure 7.2.

Figure 7.2: Managing the image of the programme

Aspect	Potential for negative perception	Examples of counter-measures that created positive perception
limited numbers involved	Where the opportunity was only open to some pupils, programmes could be regarded as unfair and as not offering equal opportunities to all.	The programme was included in the standard list of optional subjects to be taken during key stage 4. Although places on the course were limited, all those interested had the chance to apply.
types of pupils involved	Where participating pupils were characterised as being badly behaved, having a history of truancy, being low achievers and/or having special educational needs: (i) the programmes themselves, as well as the pupils, could be stigmatised; (ii) the programmes could be perceived as an unfair reward and/or a waste of money – the implication being that such pupils did not deserve these programmes.	**To counter (i):** One approach was that the opportunity to take part was offered to pupils of all abilities who were interested or, successful, motivated pupils interested in the programme were specifically targeted in addition to the less successful ones. Another approach was that the school liaised closely with the external provider/s, monitoring and supporting pupils off-site. This indicated to all that these pupils were still 'owned' by the school. **To counter (ii):** Participation was dependent on an agreement ('bargain', 'contract') that required improved attendance, behaviour and work ethic in return for the opportunity. In addition, close liaison with partners and monitoring of pupils off-site showed that they were deemed worthy of the same educative concern as their peers.
curriculum content	Where the content was appreciably different from the 'norm' of National Curriculum subjects, programmes were sometimes regarded as not being worthy of comparable esteem.	Focusing on 'appropriateness for purpose', that is, a curriculum suited to pupils' needs, interests and aspirations. All pupils were offered guidance on selecting curricular options, which enabled vocational and pre-vocational components to be valued alongside academic options – all were seen as ways of moving towards different but desired futures.
accreditation	If learning was not recognised by the potential to gain a GCSE or GNVQ, it could be seen as being of less worth.	Acknowledgement of achievement through recognised alternative forms of accreditation (see Chapter 8). Public celebrations of success through awarding certificates, displaying work, articles in local newspaper etc.
learning context	Out-of-school learning contexts could: (i) make some teachers feel that the role of the school was being threatened by 'outsiders'; (ii) be seen as too adult and challenging for some young people.	**To counter (i):** Providers discussed with teachers the educative aims and purposes of the off-site learning, including how it related to school-based learning. **To counter (ii):** Young people were prepared for the new environment and inducted into it at an appropriate pace. A nominated adult took pastoral responsibility at each off-site location and liaised with the school.

Examples of how some of the case study schools approached this issue are given below. Critical to a positive reception of the programme in a school were the measures taken to ensure not only that the participating pupils felt 'owned' by the school, but also that the programme complemented or extended the school's regular curriculum offer at key stage 4.

Example: **'Satellite' programme offered as a privilege**

The school presented the programme as 'a privilege', something the school was doing for the pupils. The school hoped that this would counter any sense of stigma. In the interview extract given below, the head of Year 10 talks about one boy's failure to respond to the proffered privilege for fear of being 'different' (his negative perception was linked to the type of pupils on the programme) and another's enthusiastic reception of the opportunity (his positive views were linked to the opportunities offered by the new learning content and context). The extract also mentions a display of artwork done by pupils on the programme that was used to enhance the programme image (i.e. positive views linked to rewarding success).

Head of year: *He just refused to go. I arranged to come into school early. Unfortunately, there was an accident on my way to school, so [the programme coordinator] took him – we even took him to the college because he would not get the bus on his own to go to college, so [the programme coordinator] took him to college.*

Researcher: *Did you ever get a handle on what was the big block for him?*

Head of year: *He didn't want to do it – he just did not want to do it. He didn't want to be different to everybody else. We tried to put it across as a privilege – you know, 'This is something we are doing for you', so that they don't feel they've been victimised. And there is a lot of kudos, actually, within the year group, within the peer groups – 'Oh, I'm going to college!' 'I am going to do this today, I'm going to do that today, I've got this certificate.' On the top corridor, they did some artwork, poster work, and it's all been laminated and one of them won £35. You know? They are not special because of being on it; they are special because they are succeeding at it. Do you see the difference that I'm trying to say? There are, there's lots of pluses – but he just wouldn't go. He won't come to school now. We've given him another timetable.*

We've put somebody else, who we think will benefit, on to the course, and he loves it! [The programme coordinator] *phoned the Mum up and she's delighted, absolutely delighted and he goes all the time, he's good. It is calming him down. This particular boy is a very immature young boy. His answer to everything is to, sort of, you know, like a 5-year-old, to swear at a teacher, or hit a teacher, he's like that – but he's growing up a bit now because he's got to take responsibility to get from [school] to there and back, in time for his next lesson. He's got to interact on a more mature level with the people he's coming into contact with, so it's doing him a power of good, it really is. And of course, he thinks he's 'it' – it's wonderful.*

Head of Year 10, case study school

Example: Close ties with external partners reflects well on 'extension' programme

One further education college representative regularly went to participating schools' parents' evenings with a stand of photographs of pupils on the programme showing the range of activities undertaken. This was seen as a good way of raising the status of the programme: *'pupils and their parents get a kick out of this'*. That is, the photographs emphasised the programme's alternative learning content and contexts, which would be appropriate for some pupils, and also drew positive attention to the work done by participating pupils, thus awarding them status rather than stigma.

Example: Close links between regular and alternative curriculum reflect well on 'extension' programme

Although places on one programme were assigned according to the neediness of the pupils (most had emotional and behavioural difficulties, English as a second language and were economically and socially disadvantaged), to gain a place pupils had to prove they were prepared to work. They were expected to sit English, maths and science GCSEs and to follow individually-tailored programmes focused on vocational, personal and social, and constructive leisure activities. These activities were accredited through the National Youth Award Scheme to bronze, silver or gold level. The programme's alternative accreditation had been recognised locally by further education colleges and a growing number of employers through a 'progression accord' giving automatic entry to the next stage of learning once certain courses had been completed successfully. The emphasis on hard work and on accredited achievement had turned perceptions of the programme and its participants around from a negative to a positive image:

We used to be regarded as a youth club for pupils who couldn't be bothered: now we are respected and seen as a worthwhile alternative to the National Curriculum for pupils who find an academic curriculum irrelevant.

Tutor in charge, community college

Efforts to pre-empt or to counter negative views of the programme also helped to carry staff and other pupils along with the decision to offer the programmes. Although all the positive measures highlighted above affected this, the main key to teachers and other pupils accepting the programmes seemed to be an emphasis on all pupils following the curriculum that was most relevant to their transition plans. In this way, the 'alternative' programme/s could be seen as the option that was suited to those with particular interest, aspirations and aptitudes while the 'norm' of the academic GCSE/GNVQ route was relevant to those with other interests, aspirations and aptitudes. This positive approach always made a difference to negative attitudes but worked best within an inclusive school culture that valued difference, where pupil and staff concerns were listened to and where expectations of everyone were high.

7.5 Summary of good practice points

Research data indicated that the effective use of alternative accreditation was characterised by:

■ a good fit between the particular scheme and the needs and interests of students;

■ certification that was familiar to employers locally or was nationally recognised;

■ modular structure (could be added to at a later stage);

■ capacity to act as a basis for entry level courses;

■ opportunities for progression;

■ design which facilitated a student's success;

■ flexibility;

■ presentation of a positive image of the alternative curriculum.

8. EVALUATION, MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT OF OUTCOMES

The fact that many alternative curriculum programmes were in their infancy was strongly reflected in the ways in which they were monitored and evaluated. There was a great range of systems to accommodate the diversity represented by the programmes. Some of the salient issues, which in many cases schools were addressing for the first time, were: the spread of relevant information over a variety of locations (school, work placement, college); lack of any established, easily accessible and comparable databases of performance data; range of measures; and the necessity for criteria to be agreed and consistently applied across all those contributing to a particular programme. Furthermore, evaluation and monitoring had to be applied at both individual and group level. It is, thus, unsurprising that innovative approaches were being developed in response to the challenges of the situation.

The majority of schools returning the NFER questionnaire believed their programmes to have been evaluated.

8.1 Concerns expressed

During interviews, a number of concerns about the evaluation of the alternative curriculum programmes were raised:

*   when to monitor and evaluate (during the programme? at the end? later?);

*   how to assess some of the 'hard to measure' qualitative gains;

*   how to distinguish the particular effect of the programme from other factors which might have caused the pupil(s) to perceive education and training more positively.

The first two of these questions are discussed below. Evidence relating to the third issue is inevitably 'soft' but suggested that the programmes had been a contributory factor in gains made. For example, in two of the case study schools, NFER researchers interviewed a group of participating pupils and a group of similar, but non-participating pupils. In one of these schools, the researchers observed a marked difference in the verbal communication and social skills of the non-participating group compared to the participating group, with the latter far outperforming their peers – a difference also noted by the school:

I am convinced that the change is because they are doing Future Pathways [the name of the programme]. *I know you could always argue it was going to happen anyway, but I work so closely with them I am convinced it is a result of what they do on a Friday afternoon. It has really changed my relationship with the group. It is just remarkable, the change in them. Their self-confidence and social skills are amazing. It is as if a barrier has been removed in the classroom between the pupils and me as a teacher. It is a much more relaxed experience for both parties.*

(Year 10 class teacher)

In the other school, no such clear difference in communication and social skills was apparent but the non-participating peers were clear that, in their view, the programme had made a positive difference to their participating peers:

It's made them keen to work.

Yeah, that's because they are getting to do what they want to do.

Yeah, they're not being forced to do school work and stuff they don't want to do. And they're learning.

Excerpt from group discussion with non-participating pupils, Rowan School

Gathering the perceptions of young people participating and those close to them is a valuable source of data for the evaluation of alternative programmes.

8.2   Evidence collected

Table 8.1 shows that programme managers collected a range of both qualitative and quantitative data. (It should be noted that these were the data identified by schools – some partner organisations carried out evaluations of the component they provided and schools may not always have known exactly what information was collected by providers for that purpose).

Qualitative data (the views of the participating pupils and their peers, parents, teachers in school and tutors during the various off-site components) represented a measure of intangible gains, such as improvements in young people's self-esteem or confidence. Perceptions were often obtained verbally and through tick-box responses to a list of option statements on an evaluation form, for instance, or by written accounts (such as letters, reports, entries in Record of Achievement portfolios). Photographs were also used as supplementary evidence of young people's new-found ability to participate in a discussion, for example, or to undertake an activity for which confidence had previously been lacking. Some of the alternative ways of accrediting achievement (see Chapter 7) required schools to collect such data.

Table 8.1: Types of evidence collected for evaluations

Types of evidence collected	Frequency n=82 schools*
qualitative data	
participating pupils' views	72
providers' views	67
teachers' views	50
parents'/carers' views	33
other (i.e. validation visits, reports)	6
quantitative data	
attendance figures	64
certification gained	55
unit costs	27
other (i.e. exclusion figures; post-16 destination data)	2

Source: NFER questionnaire to schools in 14 LEAs

Multiple response question

* Schools could answer for one programme or for two different programmes

Quantitative data (the 'hard' evidence) collected included figures on attendance rates, attainment and post-16 destinations, and were sometimes required by partner organisations, in particular, those contributing funding (see Chapter 7). Improvements tended to be regarded as evidence of programme efficacy.

Programme effectiveness with regard to particular cohorts took place either in the short-term, at the end of the programme or shortly afterwards, and/or a longer time after the programme.

Example: A short term evaluation using qualitative data

the programme	A largely rural LEA responded to increasing numbers of schools reporting high numbers of 'disaffected' young people by establishing a programme of long-term work experience in collaboration with a range of local businesses and the local college. Individual packages were designed to suit the young person after discussions involving the young person, the parents, teachers, a member of the LEA's work experience team and an education welfare officer. The 'packages' included the core subjects (English, maths, science) and careers counselling but otherwise varied in length and content.

the evaluation	A panel was set up to evaluate the programme package for each young person. The panel consisted of school staff (the form tutor, the head of house and the deputy head) and representatives of the other agencies involved and the business people who had worked with the young person. The panel discussed the programme with the young person and deemed it a success if the young person felt that something positive had been gained from the experience and if the organisations involved felt pleased with how things had gone.

Longer-term evaluation focused on the effects of a programme on one cohort (i.e. following their progress after the end of the programme); and/or on the year-on-year outcomes of the programme itself.

For example, one case study school noted both a five-year pattern of year-on-year improvements in the number of participating pupils going on to further education college and rising exam results (i.e. longer-term evaluation of the programme itself), and the fact that the attendance levels of the latest cohort had been maintained after the programme had ended (i.e. evaluation of longer-term outcomes for the cohort).

Example: A longer term evaluation using quantitative and qualitative data

the programme	The LEA and the Training and Enterprise Council put in a successful joint bid for funding from the Single Regeneration Budget. As a result, all the authority's schools and units catering for 14-to 16-year-olds were given delegated money to set up a transition project appropriate to the priorities of the school and the needs of its pupils. The project was agreed through contracts issued by the TEC. A long-term evaluation was built in to the bid from the beginning.
the overall evaluation	The careers company seconded a small number of careers advisers to carry out the evaluation on a part-time basis. There were two strands: ♦ annual evaluation of experience of pupils on the programme – a different eight schools chosen each year; ♦ long-term tracking of one cohort of participants and non-participants, from leaving school in 1996 through to 2000. The use of a psychometric test was rejected in favour of tracking of post-16 destinations and then the ability to 'stick at it' (i.e. positive progression routes maintained over time).

evaluation at school level	(i) Redwood Special School: the careers company had tracked every year's cohort for the previous five years (only seven young people had been lost from this tracking system in that time) and had given the school a record of its pupils' post-16 destinations and subsequent pathways.
	(ii) Rowan Comprehensive School: in addition to information provided by the careers company showing pupils' post-16 destinations and subsequent pathways, the programme coordinator kept in touch with 'graduates' of the programme after they left school. This personal approach was helped by the fact that the coordinator had lived in the local area for over 20 years and offered an in-depth insight into the longer-term impact of the programme on the lives of the young people concerned.

8.3 Defining 'success'

One of the aims of the NFER research was to discover the success criteria used by those providing alternative programmes. Table 8.2 and Figure 8.1 set out the criteria used by schools and partner organisations respectively: it will be seen that there was broad agreement about what counted as markers of success. Of course, in many cases, the criteria for judging a programme a success were defined in relation to the aims originally set for it, as discussed below. (Programme aims are discussed in Chapter 5.)

Table 8.2: Criteria used by schools to judge effectiveness of programmes

Criterion	Frequency n=82 schools*
improved attendance (includes improved punctuality)	48
personal/psychological improvements (includes improved motivation, interest, attitudes, participation, self-esteem)	33
accreditation/certification gained; exam results	27
positive progression route	24
improved academic/other skills	20
positive qualitative data (e.g. views of pupils, teachers, tutors)	15
improved behaviour	14
completion (e.g. of course/placement/training taster)	14
miscellaneous (details in text)	13
no response	9
reduced exclusion rate	5

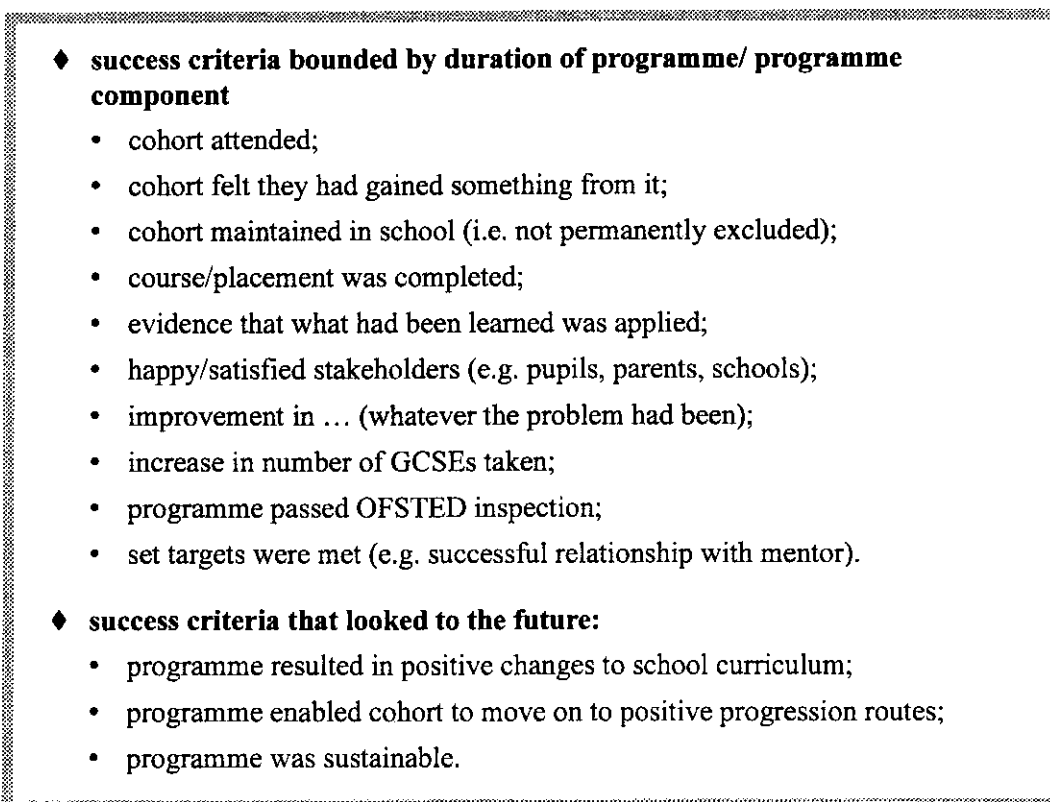Source: NFER questionnaire to schools in 14 LEAs
Multiple response question
* Schools could answer for one programme or for two different programmes

The 'miscellaneous' category in Table 8.2 covered responses given only by one respondent. Mostly these were rather cryptic and, without further detail, it was sometimes difficult to decide exactly what was meant. Such responses included:

- relationship with community partners;

- involvement of community;

- activities followed outside prescribed hours;

- the number of young women who use the service;

- existence of waiting list for programme.

From the telephone interviews with partner organsiations, it became clear that success criteria could also be considered in terms of whether they were bounded by the duration of the programme/programme component, or whether they looked to the future (see Figure 8.1).

Figure 8.1: Range of criteria used by partner organisations to judge effectiveness of programme (or of one programme component)

◆ **success criteria bounded by duration of programme/ programme component**

- cohort attended;

- cohort felt they had gained something from it;

- cohort maintained in school (i.e. not permanently excluded);

- course/placement was completed;

- evidence that what had been learned was applied;

- happy/satisfied stakeholders (e.g. pupils, parents, schools);

- improvement in ... (whatever the problem had been);

- increase in number of GCSEs taken;

- programme passed OFSTED inspection;

- set targets were met (e.g. successful relationship with mentor).

◆ **success criteria that looked to the future:**

- programme resulted in positive changes to school curriculum;

- programme enabled cohort to move on to positive progression routes;

- programme was sustainable.

Source: NFER telephone interviews with partner organisations

In addition, partner organisations often welcomed schemes as providing valuable development opportunities for their own staff, as extending the pool of potential trainees, and enhancing local awareness of the company. Interviews revealed that providers usually relied on mentors to give information about the way in which the programme was progressing and relied on 'gut feelings' and impressions; the provider allocating three full-time members of staff to monitor provision and progress was unique.

8.3.1 Points of comparison

As Table 8.3 shows, like schools, the partner organisations most often judged success or failure with reference to the aims set for the programme as a whole, or for its component parts. This seems a reasonable approach to take but highlights the importance of first ensuring that these aims set an acceptable and measurable standard and, as such, were translated into targets. For example, many programmes aimed to improve attendance at school but few quantified this or produced measurable or time-limited targets.

A 'soft' approach to evaluation was often rooted in an awareness of the low starting point of the pupils involved and the knowledge that, without the programme, the situation was likely to have worsened, perhaps ending in 'disappearance' from the school system through prolonged truancy. This approach meant that one standard against which programmes were evaluated was 'any improvement is better than none'. For example, an interviewee from a further education college refused to evaluate success in comparison with any given standard, explaining that, *'we don't have a cut-off point. We give everyone a chance and treat them equally. We don't like labels.'* Although understandable, this could mean that evaluation was unrealistically positive when participants were compared to their peers. As one interviewee said: *'These kids can improve 100 per cent - but they are still the bottom of the heap.'* A manager from a training company said that if educational outcomes of [the specific] programme were only 50 or 60 per cent of what was targeted, then serious consideration would be given to regarding the programme as a failure, but admitted that she would give a second chance to almost any programme so long as some progress had been evident in the young people, and there was a chance of learning from the experience to make improvements in the programme itself for a later cohort.

Table 8.3: In judging effectiveness, to what did partner organisations compare the programme/programme component?

Judged effectiveness in comparison to	Frequency n = 63 partner organisations
aims of programme (or programme component)	39
pupils' previous educational experiences	20
not sure	8
other (details in text)	6
education offered by mainstream schools	5
education offered by other providers of programmes or programme components	4

Source: NFER telephone interviews with partner organisations

Multiple response question

Some people interviewed during the NFER research argued that it was wrong to make comparisons between the programmes, or their component parts, and anything other than the programme's own aims because, first, each

programme was unique and the number of variables enormous and, secondly, the programme component offered a clean slate to the pupils participating and the focus was on their achievements during the programme.

The analysis of hard data was sometimes impossible because of the design of existing databases (the difficulty of 'flagging' certain pupils, for example), but the situation was improving with a greater national emphasis on tracking (see, for example, Lifetime Careers, 1999).

Table 8.4: The degree to which partner organisations compared outcomes to local or national targets or GCSE results

Were outcomes achieved by young people compared to:	Frequency n = 54* partner organisations		
	yes	no	don't know
local targets for education/training?	13	32	9
national targets for education/training?	11	33	10
local average results for GCSE/GNVQ? *(n = 53)	8	37	8
national average results for GCSE/GNVQ? *(n = 53)	8	37	8

Source: NFER telephone interviews with partner organisations
Multiple response question

As Table 8.4 indicates, although improved accreditation and exam results were aims of a number of programmes, it was rare for these 'hard data' programme outcomes to be used to measure achievement against local or national targets for education/training, or against local or national average GCSE/GNVQ results. Again, it was far more common to use internal benchmarks – referencing either to previous experiences of failure or to projected results (based on expectations before the intervention of the programme). There are issues here regarding progression routes: if outcomes are relative to the cohort – rather than the local or national situation – young people may be seriously disadvantaged in competitive situations, or it may be that they are done a disservice if they are not challenged to set their sights higher in order to have some leverage in the world.

Difficulties regarding establishing a currency for comparison, by way of assessment measure and accreditation used (see Chapter 7), added to the overall problems .

8.3.2 Analysing costs and benefits

One way of evaluating a programme was by considering whether or not the benefits arising from it were worth the money invested in it. Views on this issue were mainly collected via a postal questionnaire sent to partner organisation interviewees, who, in the researchers' view, might be in a position to answer questions about costs and benefits. Sixty-three such questionnaires were sent out but only 26 were returned. The issue was also brought up in some school case study interviews and in some telephone

interviews with partner organisations but, in these cases, the issue was not specifically included in the interview schedules.

A number of those taking part in the NFER research made the point that it is not easy to calculate, even in the most straightforward terms, whether costs incurred have been offset by benefits arising. Nevertheless, 21 respondents from the 26 partner organisations that returned the postal questionnaire answered an open question about their views of whether the benefits of the programme/programme component was worth the cost involved. Of these, only three regarded it as not being an effective use of money.

Overall, the data indicated that:

schools perceived costs as worthwhile when programmes were:

- high quality, satisfying all the stakeholders;
- helpful to disruptive/disaffected young people;
- integrated into (and thus improving) the school's key stage 4 provision, and:

partner organisations perceived costs worthwhile if programmes:

- would become self-sustaining in time;
- were successful and thus enhanced the reputation of the funder;
- improved young people's ability to make informed choices and therefore improved staying-on rates at colleges and training agencies;
- helped the young people to access positive progression routes;
- provided excellent human resource development for the staff of businesses incurring the costs;
- made a small profit for (some) providers.

Providers also considered the financial implications of not providing programmes. For example, an educational psychologist, working with pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties, argued that offering an alternative curriculum programme at key stage 4 (after one-to-one support sessions in Year 9) was a better use of money than investing time and money in the process of statutory assessment for a statement of special educational needs. Many expressed the view that it was better to invest in such programmes to keep young people in mainstream education, training or employment than to pay for the immediate and longer-term costs of an exclusion or long-term truancy from school:

> *Currently, our provision for pre-16 students falls within our standard curriculum offered. Course fees are met by a transfer of funds from LEA to college. In many cases, the use of the funds available for pre-16 students in this way makes the difference between students learning in their final year* [of compulsory education] *or 'kicking their heels'.*

> FE college respondent

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The [specific programme] *offers students the opportunity of gaining and practising skills and techniques which will enable them to maintain a place in full-time, mainstream education. The cost per capita is £271.60, whereas the cost of an excluded pupil to the authority is £1,500 – 2,000.*

Youth work respondent

The view expressed was that if the programmes succeeded in producing socially included young people, their cost would be offset by a lifetime of contributions to society through employment, taxes, and other markers of citizenship. If no supportive programmes were put in place, the cost to society of a life of unemployment and poverty, with its attendant possibilities for crime, teenage pregnancy, single-parenthood, and ill-health, would be potentially huge. (For an investigation of the high cost of exclusion from school, see Parsons and Castle, 1999.)

Rather than comparing the costs of a programme with those of other options for young people (for example, exclusion, long-term truancy, statementing for special educational needs), some people compared the benefits arising from the chosen programme with those likely to have arisen from other possible programmes. For example, one school argued that it was better to pay for a programme that was integrated into the school's key stage 4 provision (thus offering both short- and long-term benefits to the school), than to opt for one that was merely 'bolted on' (offering only short-term benefits to the school).

Or again, for example, some colleges considered that it was better to 'in-fill' pupils on existing courses, rather than run such courses with lower numbers, because they found that a good proportion of such 'in-fill' students both progressed to a full-time place at the college on leaving school, and had high staying-on rates.

A minority of those taking part in the NFER research believed that the programme/programme component they were discussing was not an effective use of the money spent. In these few cases, reasons given for this view related to failings in the quality of the programme offered, including the following:

- the approach was uncoordinated (it was suggested that coherent funding enabling a range of providers to participate, plus a planned strategy for induction, monitoring and evaluation would have offered improved opportunity to the young people and a more effective use of money spent);

- there were no qualified staff, experienced in working with challenging behaviour (it was suggested that it would have been more effective to have increased unit costs to cover the cost of employing such staff);

- counselling had not been included in the costing or design of the programme but was found to be necessary to meet the needs of the young people – without it, the programme could not meet its aims;

- the programme was inflexible because of other constraints within the curriculum and timetable, thus reducing the effectiveness of the money invested (nevertheless, the provision was felt to be worthwhile).

In one case study school, a teacher expressed the view that mismatching pupils with programmes/programme components could result in money being 'wasted':

> *You do feel sometimes that it's such a shame – there are so many resources and the children just don't want to know. You know, they are wasting our money because they are not going or, if they are there, they are disruptive, you know. It's a learning thing, though, isn't it? You take out the ones that aren't going to do it and replace them with people who are going to benefit from it, which is what is starting to happen, now.*
>
> Head of year, Oak School

No-one taking part in the research argued that a cost – benefit analysis was inappropriate: social benefits and any advance in young people's engagement in society were desirable *per se*. However, commitment to this vision does not preclude a comparison of routes to realising it.

A small number of respondents argued that programmes/programme components were put in place for reasons that made evaluation in economic terms irrelevant. In essence, this is an argument that says that a value judgement has to be made about the quality of life we, as a society, want for our young people (and for those with whom our young people come into contact). In this sense, it could be argued that it is *always* better to invest in interventions that will engage young people in mainstream society rather than allowing them to become socially excluded. By this reckoning, it would not matter if the true cost of an alternative curriculum programme was greater *per capita* than the cost of an exclusion from school or even of longer-term social exclusion: the real issue would be which option was more desirable, given the sort of inclusive society we want to create and foster. On the other hand, it would still be valid to make an economic case for one programme, rather than another, being a more effective use of money in meeting agreed socially inclusive aims.

8.3.3 'Failure'

Not all programmes were operating under optimal circumstances and, inevitably, not all programmes were effective in turning around the attitudes and behaviour of all participating pupils. In these cases, a degree of failure to be effective in meeting the needs of young people was recognised where:

- some pupils did not attend the programme;
- some pupils were not interested by the programme;
- some pupils continued to be disruptive;
- the benefits gained did not translate into the school context;
- the programme failed to teach the vocational skills promised.

The main reason underlying the signs of failures listed above was placing pupils on programmes that did not match their interests or aptitudes and that were not relevant to their aspirations for their future – all factors central to effective practice.

8.4 Outcomes

8.4.1 For individual pupils

When asked about tangible outcomes for young people participating in alternative curriculum programmes, adults interviewed during the course of the NFER research (teachers, tutors, providers, parents, other professionals) cited many examples of individual triumphs and of the way that the lives of individual young people had been turned round by involvement in the scheme. In all cases, the salient feature was that a greater range of life chances had been made available to the young person concerned, largely because his/her attention had been focused on what s/he could do within an environment which was prepared to meet such young people at least half-way and show that it had room for them. For example:

- pupils' attitudes towards core curriculum subjects and key skills changed once they saw for themselves the relevance of these subjects to the world of work in which they were interested (for example, a young man became motivated to take maths lessons once he had realised the importance of measurement for joinery).

- Pupils' energy was redirected from behaviours associated with disaffection (truancy, disruption of lessons) into positive engagement in practical activities in an environment which had no part in their previous failures.

- Pupils were given time and space to reconsider negative attitudes towards education, training and/or employment that they had previously held either through peer pressure, through family background or from repeated failure at school. In a fresh environment and with support, these attitudes often became more positive.

- Pupils' self-regard was enhanced by trust being invested in them to go off-site to college or industrial placements: they were able to cast off the labels (often 'troublemaker' or 'low ability') which had accrued to them, for whatever reason, at school.

Some of the young people interviewed merely said that they felt more confident, enjoyed the programme, got more work done, produced higher quality work, or learnt more. Others were able to articulate quite clearly what difference the programme had made:

It helps me to organise my deadlines for coursework and for homework. It's helping me to prioritise ... It has made me take homework more seriously, I think. I didn't really used to do it or I left it to the last minute. Now I know how to sort out my time.

(Pupil, Ash School)

I wanted to get into the Merchant Navy but I know now if my GCSE grades aren't good enough, then I can fall back on this [NVQ in Building and Construction], *do bricklaying or something.*

(Pupil, Alder School)

Case study data showed that a successful programme could address a clutch of difficulties – some of which were related. For example, a pupil's interest would be engaged, so s/he would attend more regularly, so s/he would achieve more, be praised more, gain confidence and so on. Parents, in particular, made the point that the programmes had given their children the opportunity to display talents that had remained hidden at school. This is, of course, nothing new: the research literature has many examples of pupils who are competent beyond their years at home yet present in the classroom as ineffective. Some non-attenders are, in fact, running the family home and caring for siblings when their parents are either ill or lack the skills to do this themselves.

For all the young people for whom the programme had been an appropriate intervention at key stage 4, what had been a series of failures became a series of successes. In the process, the anti-social or undesirable behaviour disappeared. Verbal abuse ceased once they felt that they were respected in the new work place; their attendance improved once they enjoyed what they were doing; they began to achieve more once they were more motivated, confident and learning a new skill which did not have connotations of what had been demanded in the classroom; and they thought positively about their future once progression routes were opened up to them.

The previous chapters of this report have given cogent evidence that 'the process' needed meticulous and informed planning at partnership, institutional, group and individual levels. While successes must be celebrated, it must nonetheless be remembered that the participating pupils were amongst the most vulnerable of young people, often members of several groups that are in danger of social exclusion. The point was made in Chapter 1 that experience has shown that the issues surrounding disaffection are often so complex that one single agency cannot address them on its own. Some of the programmes studied in the course of the NFER research did not reach all pupils; not all the anecdotes and examples of young people represented success stories. For example, some young people still 'could not be bothered' to attend off-site provision even though the programme had fostered their interest in a particular career; some preferred to stay and home and occupy themselves with the television. Analysis of the data suggested that failures seemed to result from either flaws in the programme design and presentation or from the strength of the cultural context (which was, perhaps, characterised by a high level of inter-generational unemployment, or high level of involvement in 'black market' activities, or lack of parental support for institutionalised education/training). In some complex cases, it is difficult to unravel the causes of 'failure'. In the following extract from a young person's interview, it would seem that neither adolescent concerns about being the odd one out (only girl in an all-male group), nor identification of interests, nor the strength of peer or local culture had been sufficiently addressed:

> *I thought it was alright but we were separated into two groups and I was the only girl in one of the groups that ever used to turn up. After a while I stopped going too and just went home when it*

> *was time to go to college ... they make us do things we don't really*
> *want to do – like engineering: not everyone want to do engineering.*
> *I would prefer if it I could do more girls' stuff ... painting and*
> *decorating is for boys.* [The girls] *just want to do childcare.*
>
> (Female pupil, Oak School)

Other evidence suggested that 'going home' during school hours may well have been condoned by the adults within that home. Here, it may have been that it had not been possible to engage parents' interest or that no attempt had been made to do this. Another extract illustrates similar difficulties:

> *I used to go to Beauty* [taster course] *but I've stopped going now.*
> *It was dead boring ... they didn't do the things I was expecting ...*
> *I expected to cut people's hair and stuff ... I can go back and do*
> *the next lot* [taster] *if I want to but I don't ... the teachers didn't*
> *want me to do another course* [a different taster] *so Mam just told*
> *me to go home after my dinner* [ie not to go to college in the
> afternoon] *.. Mam wasn't that keen on me going anyway.*
>
> (Female pupil, Pine School)

8.4.2 Outcomes for schools

Schools claimed that alternative curriculum schemes resulted in:

- improvements in public accountability measures (attendance, exclusion, public examinations);

- a more positive school ethos;

- curriculum development – especially by way of curriculum breadth;

- staff development;

- more positive external image.

Staff development is particularly significant in that it is likely to have an impact on the school as a whole. Staff gained skills in forging relationships with pupils presenting with difficult behaviour, and in extending the scope of differentiation (of the curriculum, assessment and accreditation).

8.4.3 Outcomes for other agencies

Partner organisations indicated that they enjoyed an enhanced reputation in the community, considered that they had put something back into the community and had improved links with the community.

LEAs referred to the same public accountability measures as schools did (attendance, exclusion and public examinations), to reduced referrals with regard to special educational needs, to curriculum improvements in schools (especially by way of greater understanding about teaching and learning) and to enhanced staff morale as disaffection was addressed.

8.5 Conclusion

Overall, there was cogent evidence that the 'freeing up' of the curriculum at key stage 4 was welcomed by schools and generated developments which had a wide range of perceived positive outcomes (see Figure 8.2). However, it is salutary to remember that these positive outcomes for the young people were only achieved through a substantial degree not only of planning in different locations and at different stages, but also of support – for example, one-to-one counselling and mentoring, or practical help (for example, with transport) or encouragement and celebration of success. In the literature, there is telling evidence that young people – particularly those who are most vulnerable and have the least personal resources on which to call – can regress rapidly once they leave the particular supportive environment that has fostered their progress. It is thus critical that the transition of young people who have thrived under the conditions of alternative programmes at key stage 4 is well managed so that their progression remains positive. This may present severe challenges both in terms of resources and imaginative constructions of support arrangements. But unless these challenges are addressed, all that these alternative programmes will have done will be to have postponed these young people's social exclusion. That, surely, is too great a risk to take.

Figure 8.2: Composite summary of perceived positive outcomes

For the young people	For their schools	For others
Improvements in:	**Improvements in:**	*For families:*
personal qualities	*public accountability measures*	– improved quality of relationship with son/ daughter;
– self-esteem;	– attendance;	– reduced worry/tension at home;
– self-confidence;	– exclusions (reduced);	– sense of pride/relief at son or daughter's success.
– sense of achievement;	– qualifications gained;	
– happiness;	– positive progression rates (i.e. into education, training or employment).	*For local communities:*
– responsibility;		– some evidence of reduced involvement in crime/ drugs;
– maturity;	*tenor/ethos of the school*	– reduction in number of socially excluded local young people;
– attitude/motivation.	– pupil-pupil interactions;	
	– teacher-pupil interactions;	
social skills	– behaviour referrals (reduced);	– community based learning;
– interaction with others;	– staff's sense of being supported;	– better relationships between schools and communities.
– quality of relationships;	– staff's positive attitudes towards pupils concerned;	
– ability to mix with wider range of people.	– staff awareness of pupil aspirations;	
life skills	– teacher motivation;	
– independent travel;	– the aspirations of other pupils;	
– punctuality;	– celebration of achievements.	
– handling money.		

For the young people	For their schools	For others
Improvements in:	**Improvements in:**	*For providers:*
school work	*curriculum offered*	– raised local profile;
– work ethic;	– the breadth of curriculum;	– increased local awareness of what they offered;
– ability to prioritise/meet deadlines;	– support, including careers guidance.	– increased awareness of local needs;
– completion of set work;	*staff development*	– greater numbers of suitable applicants for the
– understanding relevance of academic subjects;	– (e.g. new curriculum developments; interacting	st-16 opportunities;
– completion of courses;	with teenagers; minimising conflict).	– improved 'staying-on' rates (in education,
– number of GCSEs attempted.	*image in the community*	training, employment);
knowledge/practical skills	– public relations;	– engagement of staff interest by offering
– in a range of academic and vocational areas.	– working relationship with other organisations.	variation from usual routines;
employability skills		– increased motivation in staff from success with
accreditation gained		pupils;
– in a range of academic and vocational areas.		– (in some cases) financial gain;
progression routes		– development of inter-agency partnerships;
– awareness of post-16 opportunities;		– improved working relationships with
– application to/places gained in further education colleges;		schools.
– prospects of/promises of apprenticeships or of work.		

(Grateful acknowledgement to Jill Barrow, Wirral LEA, for her constuctive comments on an earlier draft of this Figure)

8.6 Summary of good practice points

The evidence presented in Chapter 8 suggests that evaluation, monitoring and assessment of outcomes benefits from consideration being given to the following points.

■ Although it is probably impossible to prove that gains made by young people who have participated in an alternative curriculum programme have arisen as a result of the programme, rather than because of an array of other factors, it is worth collecting evidence that could show that the programme had been at least a contributory factor in such improvements. Comparisons of participants and similar non-participants can be made, for example, and views of participants, their parents and peers can be gathered.

■ Consider when evaluation is appropriate. At the end of the programme only? Or also at some later date? The latter allows the longer-term impact of the programme to be assessed.

■ Evaluation evidence may be qualitative or quantitative in form. Qualitative data allows 'hard to measure' gains to be included in any evaluation but funders and others also look for statistical information detailing, for example, improvements in levels of attendance, attainment, etc.

■ Make sure that all 'stakeholders' agree on the criteria for judging the programme/programme component a success. Consider setting specific performance indicators related to the aims and objectives set out at the start (rather than accepting any improvement at all as evidence of success).

■ Use the lessons learned from the evaluation of gains made by one cohort on a programme to inform the continued development and refinement of the programme itself so that later cohorts may benefit from others' experiences.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1.

The NFER research project

The NFER project, 'Alternative Educational Provision at Key Stage 4', was commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA) as part of their Research in Education programme.

The research team's working definition of 'alternative educational provision' was provision that catered for at least some key stage 4 pupils, engaging them in something other than full-time study for GCSEs/GNVQ and involving external intervention. The main focus of the research was on pupils who were still on the roll of a mainstream or special school or, in some cases, a pupil referral unit. (Another LGA sponsored project at the NFER was simultaneously investigating good practice in providing for pupils who had been permanently excluded (Kinder *et al.*, 2000).)

Relevant issues in the policy context at the time of the research included:

* work-related learning (during the life of the project, new regulations came into force, allowing schools to disapply young people from up to two of three national curriculum subjects (modern foreign language, science, design and technology);

* social inclusion (during the research, the DfEE produced new guidelines making direct reference to alternative curriculum programmes for some pupils at key stage 4);

* the review of the National Curriculum and development of Curriculum 2000, which was scrutinising arrangements at key stage 4;

* emphasis on basic and key skills;

* support for schools to access a wider range of qualifications below the level of GCSE/GNVQ Part 1.

Aims and research questions

The project aims fell into four categories (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994):

* **descriptive** – to identify the form and nature of what existed;

* **diagnostic** – to examine the reasons for, or causes of, what existed;

* **evaluative** – to appraise the effectiveness of what was going on;

* **strategic** – to identify good practice and to make recommendations about the policy and action necessary to support and develop it.

Data collection: research methods

Data were collected from 14 LEAs selected from the 11 Government Office Regions to represent different geographical areas and the range of authority types. The research team wished to focus on provision available to young people in areas, rather than examine the range of provision available to individual schools, on the grounds that, as many alternative schemes for 14-to 16-year olds are provided by multi-agency consortia, boundaries need to be as wide as possible to take in the geographical parameters of all the relevant agencies, many of which are not coterminous. Thus, where the sample picked up small authorities (usually new authorities), it was sometimes necessary to select a cluster of LEAs in order to ensure that a thorough picture of the local area was gained.

The decision to opt for full coverage of a small number of selected LEAs enabled the research to look at issues of coordination, strategic planning and coherence within a given area.

The data were collected in three phases and by three methods over two academic years (1997/98 and 1998/99):

* a postal survey of schools in selected LEAs (summer term, 1998);

* a programme of telephone interviews with partner organisations (autumn term, 1998);

* a series of school case studies (spring term, 1999).

Phase 1: The school questionnaire

A postal questionnaire was sent to schools within the sample of LEAs. The range of schools in the sample included mainstream secondary, special schools catering for moderate learning difficulties (MLD) and emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) and pupil referral units (PRUs).

The decision to target this initial phase of the project at schools was made from experience and knowledge from previous NFER research that much alternative provision is provided on an *ad hoc* basis and LEAs do not necessarily have a complete view of all that is on offer within their schools.

In order to secure an agreed definition of 'alternative educational provision' the NFER team requested schools to complete the questionnaire only if their provision fulfilled all of the following criteria:

* it catered for some key stage 4 pupils – for example, those with a history of poor attendance and those perceived as disruptive or disaffected;

* it engaged pupils in activities other than full-time study for GCSE/ GNVQs; and

* the provision involved external intervention.

The information requested from the schools included:

- details of the scheme – focus, nature of external involvement, length;
- the target group(s);
- aims and objectives;
- funding arrangements;
- mechanisms for evaluation – data collected to evaluate, criteria used to judge effectiveness;
- information about the external agencies involved.

The schools surveyed were given the opportunity to describe in detail one or two separate programmes that were running; there was also space to list further schemes if appropriate.

In addition to this, a small amount of qualitative data was derived from an open-ended 'additional comments' question at the end of the school questionnaire.

366 questionnaires were sent out and 198 (54 per cent) were returned:

- 104 had no schemes fitting the definition;
- 17 had in-school schemes with no external involvement;
- 6 planned to have schemes that would fit the definition;
- 82 had schemes fitting the criteria.

Phase 2: The telephone interviews

Schools were asked to name representatives from the organisations collaborating with them in the provision of alternative curriculum programmes. The range of organisations involved and the varied level and nature of that involvement, suggested that further information should be sought by a semi-structured telephone interview rather than a questionnaire. In total, 90 organisations were contacted and 75 telephone interviews were carried out. These sought information about:

- involvement (for example, funding, facilities, staffing);
- effective/problematic partnerships with schools and other organisations involved;
- the organisation's aims for the scheme and for the young people involved;
- the monitoring and evaluation of the scheme and its outcomes;
- characteristics of effective practice.

The interconnections were diverse between the 82 schools, roughly 68 programmes and 75 partner organisations. A number of schools could have pupils involved with one programme and one programme could involve a number of partner organisations, some of which could also be working

with other schools and other programmes. Because of this web of relationships, it proved impossible to be conclusive about *exactly* how many different programmes the research covered.

Mindful that respondents would probably need access to files and documentation in order to provide information about the cost of programmes, those organisations that indicated a financial involvement were sent a cost questionnaire, asking for information about costs incurred and recipients' views on cost effectiveness. Although 63 were sent out, only 26 were returned.

Phase 3: The case studies

The case study phase of the project consisted of face-to-face interviews with school staff, pupils and parents in eight schools, across seven LEAs. The schools were selected to represent a range of programmes, inter-area coordination, partner organisations and forms of accreditation.

Interviews with teachers covered:

- the selection of the programme – how the focus was identified;
- criteria for selection of the young people;
- expectations/awareness of the programme – what the young people would gain, involvement of parents;
- guidance and support – how pupil need was identified;
- professional implications – demands on teachers, experiences of the programme;
- implications for the school;
- evaluation;
- implications for the future of the scheme.

Interviews with pupils and parents concentrated on their perceptions of the scheme and the way in which it met their interests, needs and preferences. In total, the project team interviewed:

- 49 pupils on alternative curriculum programmes;
- 3 former pupils who were 'graduates' of one alternative curriculum programme;
- 8 pupils (one group of four in each of two schools) who were not on an alternative curriculum programme but had similar needs to pupils who were on it;
- 15 parents of pupils on programmes;
- 3 parents of 'graduates' of programmes;
- 26 teachers, including senior managers, programme coordinators, pastoral staff and classroom teachers.

Appendix 2.

The statutory key stage 4 curriculum

Section 351 of the Education Act 1996 (GB. Statutes, 1996) requires schools to offer a 'balanced and broadly based curriculum' which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and prepares them for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life.

At the start of the NFER research project, the key stage 4 curriculum normally included:

- the three **core subjects** (English, maths, science);

- the **foundation subjects** (design and technology, a modern foreign language, Welsh in English-speaking Welsh schools, information technology, and physical education);

- **sex education** and **religious education** (parents could choose not to let their child study these subjects);

- **a variety of additional subjects** (for example, history, geography, art, music, Latin, business studies);

- **work-related learning** (for example, work experience, careers guidance and enterprise activities) which aimed to prepare all key stage 4 pupils to manage the post-16 transition to further education, training or employment.

In addition, schools could adapt and disapply the National Curriculum for particular pupils for specific reasons. For example, Section 362 of the Education Act 1996 enabled disapplication in order that development work or experiments could be carried out. Pupils with statements of special educational needs could be excluded from part or all of the National Curriculum, dependent upon the specifications within their statement (Section 364), and temporary exceptions for individual pupils were permitted for a fixed period not exceeding six months (Section 365).

During the life of the NFER research project, further flexibility was introduced to the statutory key stage 4 curriculum. From September 1998, opportunities to promote work-related learning were widened (G.B. Statutory Instruments, 1998). Schools were permitted to disapply three National Curriculum subjects at key stage 4, in order to give students the opportunity to make wider use of vocational experiences. For individual students, schools were able to set aside two National Curriculum subjects from science, design and technology or a modern foreign language.

Disapplication from the designated National Curriculum subjects was rigorously controlled by the requirement to comply with the following facilitating conditions*:

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- **consultation** with the pupil and his/her parent(s)/carer(s) prior to the decision to disapply;

- a **careers guidance interview** prior to starting the work-related learning programme;

- the development of an **individual curriculum plan** including targets for learning;

- an **induction programme** to support the pupil as s/he started the new programme;

- a nominated **mentor**, whose responsibilities included involvement in the preparation of the curriculum plan and in the induction programme, supporting and developing the pupils' skills, and attending statutory meetings;

- a **meeting at least every six months** for the duration of the programme, attended by the pupils, his/her parent(s)/carer(s), the representative of the school, a representative of the programme and the mentor;

- appropriate **timetabling**;

- arrangements for the **monitoring,** and subsequent **reporting** to the pupil, of attendance, progress and achievements through the work-related programme.

*Summarised from:
GREAT BRITAIN. STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS (1998). *Education, England and Wales. Education (National Curriculum) (Exceptions at Key Stage 4) Regulations 1998* (SI2021). London: The Stationery Office.

Appendix 3.

Examples of work-related curriculum programmes

ASH SCHOOL	
During Year 11 (age 15-16), a small number of pupils were selected by school staff with pastoral responsibilities. The main criterion was that these pupils, despite previous support, were still coming to the attention of staff. The school accessed alternative curriculum provision for them through an education welfare officer who coordinated the provision across all the schools in one area of the local education authority.	
out of school	They attended a local **further education college** for two days a week. There they joined a group of pupils from other schools to study **car mechanics, basic skills and key skills**. They were divided into two sets based on ability.
in school	Each of the pupils studied for **GCSEs** in the subjects they liked best. They were all encouraged to study the three core subjects of English, maths and science but each dropped other subjects that they did not enjoy and/or were not doing well in.

OAK SCHOOL	
At the end of Year 9 (age 14), about 20 pupils, selected by school staff with discipline and pastoral responsibilities, were selected for the Alternative Curriculum Programme. The main criterion was a history of poor attendance. The school organised the programme by contacting local providers directly.	
out of school	Pupils spent two half days out of school as a distinct group. The first part of the programme involved them all going to the local **further education college** for four short courses in **information technology, painting and decorating, jewellery and joinery**. For the second part of the course, they all went to a local **marine engineering training organisation** where they studied another four short courses. During the second year of the programme, the plan was for them each to identify a job in which they were interested – the school would then arrange, for each individual, a long term work placement with a suitable employer.
school	These pupils were taught as a distinct group for GCSE English, maths and science. During the remainder of the timetable, they joined into 'normal' classes in the other subjects of their choice.

ROWAN SCHOOL
At various points during key stage 4, pupils were identified who were thought by school pastoral staff to be unlikely to remain in school until the end of Year 11 without extra incentives. An individual programme was designed for each one, based on individual interests, aptitudes and aspirations. The school, like all the others in that local authority, obtained funding for the programme from the local Training and Enterprise Council. Some placements were organised through a central agency: others were set up by the school contacting known and possible providers directly.

out of school	Individual pupils did different things in different places. For example, the four pupils interviewed did the following: Matthew worked in a small **garage** dealing in **car tyres and exhausts** two days a week; Louise worked two days a week as a **trainee care assistant** in a **home for elderly people with dementia**; Mark spent two days a week **assisting the technician** on an agricultural studies course in the **local agricultural college** and one day a week working for **countryside services** at the **local reservoir**; Luke worked on a **farm** for 2 days a week
in school	All the pupils studied **GCSE** English, maths and science. In addition, they chose other subjects that they enjoyed. They could choose from **GCSE or GNVQ** courses.

ALDER SCHOOL
At the end of Year 9 (age14), pupils' choices for key stage 4 included going part time over two years to the local further education college to study for an NVQ in Building and Construction. Pastoral staff at the school encouraged some pupils and dissuaded others but the selected pupils were all interested in that vocational area. The school gained access to the college course through the local representative of the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB). The CITB also provided funding.

out of school	Over two years, the selected pupils went as a group for half a day to the **local college** to study for an **NVQ** in **Building and Construction**. They did two hours of practical work and one hour of theory in, for example, **carpentry, bricklaying, plastering, health and safety, plumbing, painting and decorating.**
in school	All did **GCSE** English, maths and science, plus their choice of **other GCSE or GNVQ** subjects. In addition, as a group, they did 50 minutes of follow-up written work for the **NVQ**.

SYCAMORE SCHOOL

In the March of Year 9, a selected group of pupils with special educational needs were offered basic skill options in literacy, numeracy and Ready for Work (a pack produced by the careers service with funding from the local TEC, via the LEA) as part of their key stage 4 options.

out of school	The pupils took part in **extended work experience**, after sessions with a specialist careers adviser for pupils with special needs. For example, Don worked in the **local parks department** one day a week.
in school	All the pupils studied maths, English and science at **Certificate of Education** level; some also sat **GCSEs** in these subjects. In addition, they chose another two subjects. During their support options, they learned enhanced literacy and numeracy skills, working towards **Numberpower** and **Wordpower**. They were also given supplementary guidance in writing personal action plans and completing their Record of Achievement.

REDWOOD SPECIAL SCHOOL

All Year 10 pupils spent part of the week in college, following link courses in science, catering and personal care. In addition, they each went on extended work experience. These placements were arranged with the help of the local Trident representatives and two careers advisers. The school, like all the others in that local authority, obtained funding for the programme from the local Training and Enterprise Council.

out of school	The pupils went as a group to the local **FE college** two days a week, where they studied courses that were jointly planned and delivered by school and college staff. The courses were chosen by staff to include a range of topics that between them would interest all the pupils. The topics included textiles, catering, personal care, plumbing, CAD/CAM, science. Individually, the pupils took part in extended work experience, which took place in the spring term. For example, the young people interviewed had arranged to work in one of the following: a **shop, a garden centre, a children's nursery, a garage** specialising in tyres and exhausts, a **restaurant**.
in school	The key stage 4 curriculum was organised as a series of independent topics that covered the requirements of the National Curriculum and key skills but also allowed pupils to gain recognised accreditation at the level appropriate to each. This could be units towards the **Diploma of Vocational Education (DVE)**, the full DVE, DVE plus units towards **GNVQ Foundation in Health and Social Care**, full DVE and full GNVQ Foundation.