



THE EVALUATION OF EXCELLENCE CLUSTERS:

Second Interim Report

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Excellence Clusters (EC) represent a development of the government's Excellence in Cities (EiC) policy initiative. The evaluation of the EC initiative is being undertaken by a consortium of researchers from the National Foundation of Educational Research (NFER), and the London School of Economics (LSE), who are also involved in the evaluation of EiC. It was intended from the outset that the evaluation of EC would inform, and be informed by, the findings from the EiC evaluation. The evaluation of EC has therefore sought to adapt, wherever possible, research instruments used in the evaluation of EiC, whilst at the same time allowing the uniqueness of the individual Clusters and the Cluster initiative to be demonstrated.

The evaluation has focused on the work of 11 Clusters: the first seven Excellence Clusters announced in October 2000 and the four Clusters announced in February 2001. All 11 Clusters began operation in September 2001.

1.2 Evaluation Activities 2002-2003

School visits

A programme of visits to individual Cluster schools began in May 2002. When the previous interim report (Schagen *et al.*, 2002) was compiled in June, eight schools in four Clusters had been visited, and a summary of the data collected was included in the report. Three other schools were visited later in the summer term, but school visits to the remaining Clusters took place in the autumn or early spring term, in conjunction with the visits to Cluster Chairs and Strand coordinators.

Cluster visits

All Cluster chairs had been interviewed face-to-face in the autumn term of 2001, soon after the Clusters began operation. The plan was to conduct follow-up interviews in the autumn 2002 term, in order to ascertain developments and progress made in the intervening year.¹ It was decided, in the light of our previous research, to also interview the Cluster strand coordinators, as they evidently played a very important role. It was decided therefore that all 11 Clusters would be visited in the autumn term by a researcher who would:

¹ Since some Clusters have a rotating Chair, the personnel interviewed were not in every case the same as in 2001.

- ♦ interview the current Cluster chair
- ♦ interview the strand coordinators
- ♦ visit two schools (one primary and one secondary) in Clusters where school visits had not already been undertaken.

However, when Clusters were contacted, a problem emerged in that six of the 11 Clusters were expecting an Ofsted inspection in November or December 2002. Concerns were raised about the demands potentially imposed on school staff by participation in the evaluation as well as an inspection; there were also queries about why both were necessary.

After negotiation, three of the six Clusters concerned agreed to accept a researcher visit in the autumn term; two asked us to wait until the inspection was over (visits therefore took place in January 2003), and one Cluster refused to allow a visit (although they did supply written information). It was agreed with the DfES that this report would be written in February, so that information from all Cluster visits could be included.

School survey

The first questionnaire survey of Cluster schools was undertaken at the beginning of 2002. The aim was to gain a picture of how the EC strategy is operating in individual schools, the impact on school processes, and senior management perceptions of the initiative. There were returns from 74 of the 111 primary schools (67 per cent) and 35 of the 55 secondary schools (64 per cent). All of the returned secondary questionnaires and 71 of the primary questionnaires were subject to statistical analysis (three questionnaires were returned too late to be included). There was a slightly higher response rate from schools in the highest achievement bands at key stages 1-3 and GCSE, and fewer returns from those schools in the lowest bands. There was also evidence of a higher response rate from secondary schools with the lowest proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM), and a lower response rate from schools with the highest proportion of FSM pupils.

A second survey is now being carried out; schools are being asked similar questions in order to facilitate assessment of progress made during the past year. Questionnaires were despatched in January, and by 10 March 67 primary questionnaires (62 per cent) and 27 secondary questionnaires (49 per cent) had been returned to NFER. One Cluster had indicated unwillingness to provide further written

information, following their Ofsted inspection. Schools from other Clusters which have not yet returned questionnaires are currently receiving telephone reminders.

When the survey period is over, the data will be entered and analysed. The findings will be reported in our next progress report, due in summer 2003.

1.3 Structure of the Report

As the school visits undertaken since July complete the series begun in May, it seemed best to provide an overall picture combining data collected before and after the last interim report. In this report, therefore, new data is incorporated into the existing framework, and it should not be necessary to make reference to the earlier document.²

As before, Chapter 2 provides contextual information on the specific issues and problems addressed by Cluster schools; it also examines key aspects of the overall management of the initiative. In Chapter 3, the four EC strands – Learning Mentors (LMs), Learning Support Units (LSUs), Gifted and Talented, and the Tailored Strand – are examined in depth, with attention given to key aspects of the management of individual strands, emerging issues and challenges, and the impact of EC. The fourth chapter looks at the cross-cutting themes of partnership and transition.

Chapter 5 discusses in detail the issues of Cluster funding. Chapter 6 is based on the interviews with Cluster chairs, and reports on the development and progress made in the year since the original interviews were undertaken. Chapter 7 presents our summary and conclusions.

² It should be noted that the survey data cited is from the first survey, carried out in early 2002. Data collected in the second survey has not yet been analysed.

2. CONTEXT AND MANAGEMENT

The first part of this chapter provides contextual information as a background for understanding the work of the individual schools within the 11 Clusters. A description is provided of the local areas in terms of the socio-economic problems faced and how these translate into specific issues and barriers to learning within the schools. This leads into a discussion of how the 23 schools came to be involved in the EC initiative.

The second part of the chapter examines key aspects of the overall management of the initiative within the schools. This section presents a discussion of the management structures established, staff awareness and involvement, the use of resources, the target-setting process, and the role played by the schools in the monitoring and evaluation of the initiative. The strand-focus of the initiative has led to the creation of specific management structures within individual strands. These are not considered in detail here where the emphasis is on providing an *overview* of initiative management. Specific details regarding the management of individual strands are discussed in the relevant strand sections.

2.1 Contextual Information

2.1.1 Characteristics of Local Areas

The EC initiative is part of the drive to raise standards in schools in areas of disadvantage. The 23 schools visited reported a variety of social and economic indices of deprivation in their local areas, including:

- ♦ the loss of traditional local industries and employers, resulting in high male unemployment and families experiencing long periods of unemployment (sometimes of more than one generation)
- ♦ considerable poverty, with a high number of recipients of income support and low incomes for those in work
- ♦ high rates of crime and drug addiction
- ♦ a high proportion of single-parent families
- ♦ high rates of teenage pregnancy
- ♦ low self-esteem, self-confidence and aspirations
- ♦ extremes of social mobility – either a high rate of mobility or none at all
- ♦ falling birth rates and the exodus of young families from local areas
- ♦ poor physical, mental and emotional health

- ♦ geographical and cultural isolation, resulting in inward-looking communities that are resistant to change
- ♦ inadequate local infra-structure including poor housing and schools.

Nearly all Clusters were located in areas with large ethnic minority populations. As well as traditional ethnic groups, these communities included recent refugees from areas such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Angola and Somalia and asylum seekers. However, one Cluster in particular had a very low ethnic minority population, creating local problems with racism and a general lack of multi-culturalism.

These local circumstances translated into specific problems and issues which needed to be addressed by the schools:

- ♦ Pupils were poorly or inadequately clothed and nourished and high numbers of children were entitled to clothing grants and to free school meals (FSM).
- ♦ Parents, pupils and sometimes teachers had low aspirations/expectations for/of pupils.
- ♦ Pupils arrived at school with poor skills (often because parents had poor skills themselves) and had a history of poor or non-achievement in school.
- ♦ Pupils had low self-esteem, poor self-confidence and were apathetic.
- ♦ Some pupils had behavioural and emotional problems (some refugee pupils, for example, had been traumatised by previous experiences abroad).
- ♦ There was often a lack of parental support. Parents' evenings were poorly attended and parents (some of whom were keen to help their children) were unable to support them in their education because of their own backgrounds and limited education. Within the home, there was a general lack of commitment to homework or no quiet space for homework available, nor any tradition of helping children with educational activities, e.g. hearing them read.
- ♦ There was a lot of pupil absence, which was often condoned by parents.
- ♦ Some schools had to deal with a highly mobile school population and high casual intake figures.
- ♦ Additional problems were caused by the fact that some pupils had English as an Additional Language (EAL). In some cases parents spoke no English and were keen to preserve their own cultures within the home and the local area.
- ♦ Children of mixed race were often very alienated as were white children living in areas with a high proportion of ethnic minorities.
- ♦ There was a lack of local role models for pupils to emulate.
- ♦ There was a high rate of pupil and parental disaffection with education, and a poor image of its value. In some areas, progress into further education (FE) and higher education (HE) institutions was not the norm and pupils with aspirations usually did not return to the local area once they had left.

- ♦ Schools experiencing falling rolls were faced with uncertain futures and were unable to attract and retain staff.

Despite these enormous problems and the fact that individual schools may have different socio-economic profiles within the same Cluster, the initiative was seen in a positive light as a way of addressing some of these issues, especially through the flexibility inherent in the Tailored Strand. It was mentioned in a previous EC report (Schagen *et al.*, 2001) that some Clusters had opted for a broad focus to enable schools to adapt the initiative to local needs. Later sections of this report indicate how the initiative has enabled schools to respond to particular local needs and issues.

2.1.2 Composition of Local Clusters

It was intended that individual Clusters be built around ‘core’ schools nominated by the DfES as having ‘*a history of under-performance and disadvantage*’. Clusters were built around these core schools, with different Clusters adopting different approaches within the limits of the funding available. Attempts were made to create ‘rational’ groups within the remit of the initiative, although schools did express concern about the nature of local Clusters and the inclusion/exclusion of particular schools. In terms of becoming involved in the initiative, it was clear that individual schools came via different routes, and had different motives for involvement.

A number of the schools in the sample were primary or secondary ‘core’ schools, others were those identified as high-performing schools; some of the primary schools in the sample had been invited to be part of the initiative as the main feeder schools for the secondary schools involved. It was clear, however, that some staff, including senior staff, did not know how their schools came to be involved in the initiative. In some cases this was due to the fact that staff were new to the school and the school was already part of a local Cluster when they arrived. In other cases, school staff were unsure how schools had been selected for inclusion.

Schools were generally positive about involvement in the initiative because the Cluster was addressing important local issues with which they were also concerned, because of good reports of the work of other local Clusters and of EiC, because of the funds, resources and personnel available, because partner schools were involved in the initiative and/or because they were keen to be at the forefront of the initiative rather than ‘in the wake’ of other schools. Some schools reportedly felt that they had little choice in the matter of whether to be involved either because they were core

schools or because they had been nominated by other schools in the Cluster, e.g. as main feeder schools.

There was a perception that the initiative was targeted at ‘failing’ schools, and/or schools in need or with problems. Some schools reported that they had been included because they were in special measures and/or had poor results. Some of the high-performing schools involved expressed concern at this perception of the initiative. One school with good National Curriculum test results was not sure why it had been included. It was reported that the previous headteacher was less than happy about belonging to the Cluster because of perceptions about the nature of the schools involved. In an effort to address such negative perceptions, other successful schools (in addition to those already identified) were invited to join the original group of Cluster schools. According to the headteacher of one of these successful schools, this was to encourage the view that the Cluster was a group of innovative schools working together to address long-standing barriers to learning in fresh ways. Another high-performing school was invited to be involved by the LEA and saw involvement in the initiative as a positive opportunity to regenerate links which had suffered because of competition.

2.2 Management of the Initiative

2.2.1 Management structures

In some cases, the EC initiative was able to build upon and extend management structures already in place as the result of previous, related initiatives. Where this was the case, schools clearly had a head start in terms of the development of management structures to support the EC initiative. For example, one school had management structures in place as a result of its involvement in the statutory Education Action Zones (EAZ) initiative. EC was able to build upon these structures and as a result it was difficult to separate out specific EC management structures. However, the initiative had enabled the school to extend its work for gifted and talented pupils and its Learning Mentor/support provision. Prior to EC, the school had established a number of developments in learning support, and through EC was able to add to this provision by recruiting four Learning Mentors (known in this school as Learning Support Teacher Assistants, or LSTAs) to work closely with teachers.

In some cases the implementation of EC led to re-consideration of existing structures. The creation of a Learning Support Unit in one school prompted a complete review of its guidance structures, previously known as Pastoral Care. The school had put in

place better structures for supporting the pupils which were felt to be wider and more far-reaching.

Other schools had established or adapted existing management structures with the emphasis on the four strands of the initiative by, for example, creating strand coordinators. Coordination of the initiative was facilitated by the fact that all headteachers were intimately involved in the individual Clusters at local level and often maintained an overview of developments in their own schools. This facilitated the development of a whole EC perspective rather than as an initiative of separate strands, and some schools were keen to promote this view of an integrated initiative. Links across the various strands were actively fostered in some schools. Some strands related more naturally than others and efforts were made to encourage connections. In one school for example, the LM and Tailored Strands were felt to be complementary, and coordinators shared a room and were able to discuss matters together and assist each other. The same school was considering Learning Mentor support for gifted and talented pupils.

In addition to developing coherence across EC strands, an important management challenge for Cluster schools is to pull together the variety of initiatives with which they are involved into a coherent whole. A number of headteachers reported that they were trying to encourage and facilitate this. For example, one reported that the Learning Mentor and the Connexions officer shared an office and were able to discuss issues and share good practice. In management terms it was felt by several headteachers that EC could provide a coherent framework for a diversity of related initiatives, thereby facilitating complementarity and coherence.

2.2.2 Staffing

Staffing the initiative

The EC initiative in the schools is characterised by the inclusion of the most senior staff in its management and coordination. The involvement of the senior management team (SMT) is regarded as important in giving the impetus and status the initiative needs to become established, as well as facilitating a comprehensive strategic overview at senior level – important in view of the fact that most schools do not have overall EC coordinators. The early days of the initiative, focussing on planning and preparation, were characterised by the involvement of headteachers. As the initiative has spread into the schools, most headteachers have retained overall responsibility for management and coordination. In a few cases, assistant or deputy headteachers have assumed or begun to share the role.

Other key roles, such as strand coordinators, are often (but not exclusively) held by senior members of staff, including headteachers, deputy/assistant headteachers, and/or heads of department. This was illustrated in one secondary school, where the headteacher took the lead for EC. A senior teacher had responsibility for gifted and talented pupils and worked with three teachers, who were each given a salary point from EC funding to coordinate gifted and talented work in specific subjects. Faculty heads had lead responsibility for gifted and talented teaching, although the school was trying to develop the idea of whole-school responsibility. The assistant headteacher had overall responsibility for LMs and learning support, and was also a trained counsellor, working part-time with pupils and families and supporting peer counselling. The deputy headteacher had oversight of the Tailored Strand and was in charge of developing coherence between the various initiatives in which the school was involved. (Of concern, however, is the fact that senior staff may find themselves managing several key areas within the EC initiative and/or other initiatives within the school. The question of workload and the sheer number of areas of work for which senior staff were responsible is clearly an issue in schools generally and one that is likely to impinge on the management of any new initiative, including EC.)

Appointments to the role of strand coordinator, whether senior staff or other school staff, often built upon the experience, responsibilities and/or interests of those concerned. In one school it was reported that the strand coordinators (for the Gifted and Talented, Learning Mentors, and Tailored Strands) *'fell into'* obvious roles. For example, the focus of the Tailored Strand was raising standards in literacy, so the key stage 1 and key stage 2 Literacy Managers were responsible for coordination. The Gifted and Talented coordinator was already doing work in this area, was interested in this work, and had the necessary time because she was a deputy headteacher. The other deputy headteacher was the SENCO and coordinator of the schools' Learning Mentors.

Some key staff had been specially appointed with EC funds. These include Learning Mentors and staff appointed to roles within the Tailored Strand. For example, in one Cluster an 'Attendance Officer' had been appointed to work with identified families on school liaison for all of the Cluster's primary schools.

Staff awareness of EC

Awareness of the initiative amongst staff in case-study schools was variable. For example, two headteachers reported that EC was a regular item on the agenda of staff meetings since the beginning and another reported that there was *'rarely a day'* when

EC activities were not discussed at staff briefings. In some schools, staff with key roles, such as strand coordinators, had given presentations to all or some staff. Three schools mentioned that efforts had been or were being made to incorporate the initiative into the School Development Plan rather than have it as a bolt-on feature.

In contrast, it was reported that staff in some schools were only very slightly aware of the EC initiative as such (although they might be actively involved in aspects of it). In one school it was felt that staff would not necessarily identify the initiatives in which they were involved as specifically 'Cluster' activities because activities now brought under the Clusters remit pre-dated the initiative. In another school, the headteacher described staff knowledge of the initiative as '*basic*'; the deputy headteacher described it as '*poor*' (as well as describing her own knowledge as '*mediocre*'). Staff had been told about the initiative on a '*need to know*' basis, i.e. if they had been involved in the identification of the gifted and talented cohort or had had feedback on pupils from the Learning Mentor. In this school and in another (where there was a low level of awareness below middle management), the headteachers were concerned not to overload staff with involvement in multiple initiatives and efforts were being made to integrate related initiatives. A small number of headteachers indicated that there might be varying levels of awareness or understanding of EC amongst the staff: one of these reported having been asked on the day of interview what EC was.

There were also reports that awareness of particular strands was variable. In many cases, staff were perhaps more likely to be aware of an individual strand, or even a combination of strands, than of EC as a whole.

Staff involvement in EC

The direct involvement of other school staff in the initiative was also variable. Some interviewees reported that **all** staff were involved in the initiative to some extent.

For example, there were reports of whole staff involvement in:

- ◆ Gifted and Tailored Strand INSET
- ◆ the development of Gifted and Talented schemes of work within their own departments
- ◆ supporting additional activities, especially those connected with the Gifted and Talented and Tailored Strands
- ◆ the identification of pupils for attention within one of the Strands
- ◆ working with LMs in their own classrooms

- ♦ re-integration of pupils from the LSU.

It was clear that whilst some strands involved all of the staff, others only involved particular groups of staff (e.g. pastoral teams, particular departments, or those involved with certain year groups) depending on the focus of the initiative in the Cluster/school. For example, three schools reported the close working of LMs with pastoral teams or with heads of year/year coordinators. Another reported that the focus of the Tailored Strand on science and IT involved the head of the science department and ICT staff in particular. Another reported that the focus of the initiative in the school was on the older pupils, and so involved staff working with these pupils more than other staff. The danger in these cases, as one headteacher described it, is that some staff may feel that EC does not concern or impact upon them. But there was also concern about 'initiative overload', and the spread of the initiative may be restricted by the headteacher to avoid over-burdening staff.

2.2.3 Resources

The resources of the EC initiative were welcomed for allowing schools to address local issues and problems and to allow them to develop areas of work that were felt to be valuable. Resources were largely seen in financial terms. Overwhelmingly, the availability of EC funds was cited as the main, or one of the main, benefits of involvement (even though some schools receive only small amounts). However, other 'resources', such as the support of LEA staff, staff training and time to meet and discuss issues with colleagues and for extra-curricular activities were also seen as valuable and were welcomed by the schools.

Where funds were delegated to schools, the headteacher or a member of the SMT was responsible for its use. In some schools, some or all of the funding for particular strands was further delegated to individual strand coordinators who were responsible for the day-to-day management of the funds. In other cases, funds were retained centrally, where, for example, the total amount of money received by the school was small.

Cluster funding was used by schools for a variety of purposes, principally staffing and responsibility points, resources and equipment (see Section 5.3). A number of interviewees made the point that LSUs are particularly expensive to run, and often the sum allocated was insufficient for the purpose.

There were other reports of shortfalls in budgets. In one Cluster, LM salaries were paid but not consumables: the schools were required to meet this cost between them. In other cases, schools were unable to provide adequate facilities for staff involved in the initiative. One LM reported working out of the boot of her car; there was no private area to hold discussions with pupils or parents, and she had resorted to using the photo-copying room or the empty staff room for this purpose. There were also reports of schools adding to the EC budget from their own school budgets.³

As well as concerns about current funding, the prospect of the end of Cluster funding was an overwhelming concern of those interviewed. The problem was exacerbated because there seemed to be no clear indication from the DfES about future funding, and different Clusters had different information about what, if anything, would be continued. Clusters saw the need to consider ‘exit strategies’ and how provision might be continued if funds were to be cut. There was particular concern about the security of staff, such as Learning Mentors who are currently employed with EC money on fixed-term contracts. Clarification was urgently needed to enable schools to make effective plans for the future.⁴

2.2.4 Target setting

Schools approached the setting of targets for the EC initiative in a number of ways. The methods adopted by schools included consultation of post-Ofsted action plans and discussion between the headteacher and the LEA. The general approach was to consider existing targets and add a little (usually one per cent). Some Chairs were critical of this ‘*flawed*’ approach, seeing it as necessary in order to gain funding, but not helpful. There was a danger that it would result in unrealistic targets, especially if those agreed with governors and the LEA were raised yet higher by the DfES.

Where headteachers commented on the targets that had been set, some felt that they were challenging, but attainable, and there were several reports of targets being met and even exceeded and new targets are being considered. However, there was a concern that for some schools, e.g. those in special measures, targets were simply too challenging and doubts were expressed about how realistic the targets were. One headteacher expressed concern about being pushed into setting unrealistic targets and (thereby) setting pupils up for failure. On the other hand, the headteacher of a high-performing school did not see how it could raise its target of pupils gaining five

³ This was also reported by some of the schools involved in the survey – see Section 5.3.

⁴ Clusters have now been informed that funding will continue until March 2006, subject to a successful three-year review in 2004.

grades A*-C at GCSE, when 100 per cent of its pupils were already achieving this. It was therefore aiming to increase the number of pupils achieving the highest grades. Another headteacher expressed concern about the mismatch between targets for different initiatives, for example, for statutory Education Action Zones (of which the school was part) and for EC. There was a concern to ensure that all targets were consistent, realistic and referenced to individual pupils and their prior attainment rather than to 'external' parameters.

Other targets were simply not seen as sensible. One teacher gave the example of exclusion targets.

You can say you will reduce exclusions by one but you are dealing with real situations and real pupils, so how can you be sure of achieving it? It is only ever used as a last resort anyway, so there is no way you can say to a child, 'We are not excluding you because of our targets.' We can only do our best.

This teacher felt that it was more valuable to regard targets as a statement of intent rather than a practical 'measurement' of what the schools were doing.

The concern was expressed that the assessment of the success of the initiative would be judged only in terms of its hard targets. One headteacher felt that this limited focus 'watered down' the 'spirit' of EC. Soft targets and outcomes were viewed as difficult to assess but nevertheless important. Conversely, some interviewees voiced the fear that meeting targets could have a negative result: it might be taken to imply that the school no longer needed special funding.

2.2.5 Monitoring and evaluation

For a number of the schools it was still early days as far as the processes of monitoring and evaluation were concerned.⁵ There were some reports of systems of checks and balances, especially with regard to how funding was used, the reporting and monitoring of activity and ensuring that action plans were being met, discussion of emerging roles, e.g. of Learning Mentors, and of liaison between staff within schools and between the schools and Cluster staff.⁶

The local monitoring and evaluation procedures developed so far have a variety of features with Clusters using different approaches:

⁵ In some cases, however, it was acknowledged that '*Monitoring and evaluation is not managed as effectively as it should be*'.

⁶ Monitoring and evaluation of individual Strands is discussed in the relevant sections of Chapter 3.

- ♦ An overall Cluster focus. One Cluster reported that the executive group had produced a common evaluation form and headteachers visited groups of schools to complete the evaluation forms. Another Cluster Chair reported that headteachers complete evaluations of EC progress in their schools that are discussed in subsequent partnership meetings.
- ♦ A Strand focus. One Cluster reported that this approach, being developed by Strand coordinators, involved looking at action plans and evaluating results.

However, some schools were developing (to a greater or lesser extent) an individual approach to monitoring and evaluation, particularly where there was concern to develop coherence amongst disparate initiatives, and/or where there were mechanisms already in place. One school had detailed procedures for evaluating the effectiveness of the initiative against specific strand targets. All pupils included in the Gifted and Talented Strand had their own set of targets arrived at through group interviews, and through individual interviews to identify individual targets. The interview included academic achievement, the books children had read, membership of school clubs and attendance at summer school. In the LSU each pupil had an individual educational plan which was monitored. The teacher in charge held formal review meetings with each child. The monitoring of children from outside the school was also undertaken. One school had a named governor with responsibility for monitoring and evaluation.

3. THE FOUR EC STRANDS

In this chapter, we report on the Clusters' experience to date with the four EC strands, based on the following sources of information:

- ♦ the school survey conducted early in 2002
- ♦ the interviews with Cluster chairs and strand coordinators, conducted mainly in the autumn term of 2002
- ♦ visits to a total of 23 Cluster schools (12 primary and 11 secondary).

It should be noted that the school visits took place over a considerable period of time (May 2002 to January 2003) and therefore some respondents were able to report on more developments than others.

There was considerable variation between Clusters in the way that strand coordinators were organised, and the amount of time they were given for their role. Being the coordinator of an individual strand was rarely a full-time post; more typically, it was half-time, and full-time employees combined it with other work in a number of ways. For example:

- ♦ some were coordinators of two related strands, e.g. Learning Mentors and LSUs; depending on the focus of the Tailored Strand, it could be linked with LMs or with Gifted and Talented
- ♦ some served as coordinator of one strand in two Clusters (where both were situated within a single LEA)
- ♦ some spent part of their time working at school level, and part as Cluster coordinator (e.g. an LM might have a 0.5 school caseload, and work 0.5 as link LM for the Cluster).

Not all coordinators had as much as a half-time allocation. One link LM had a 0.8 school caseload, and in another Cluster the coordinator for LMs and Gifted and Talented had a 0.2 allocation for each. The LSU strand had the least coordination; the number of schools involved was relatively small, and most functioned more or less independently (see further Section 3.2).

3.1 The Learning Mentor Strand

In our first progress report (Schagen *et al.*, 2001) we noted that the Learning Mentor Strand had generated by far the most enthusiasm from interviewees. At the time of

our first visits to Cluster Chairs (November 2001), some Learning Mentors were already in post, and their work was much appreciated. Other Clusters were still in the process of appointing LMs, but were eagerly anticipating the support that they would be able to provide from January 2002. We wished to find out whether their expectations had been realised.

According to the school survey, 31 out of 35 secondary schools had at least one LM funded by EC (and eight schools had LMs funded by other sources). Twenty-three schools had full-time LMs funded by EC, and 13 had part-time LMs funded by EC (five schools had both full-time and part-time staff). The majority of schools had one or two LMs funded by EC, but four schools had three and two schools had four. Just under half (16) of the schools reported that they had had staff with dedicated time for mentoring before Excellence Clusters; for the others, LMs were clearly a new experience.

Of the 71 primary schools, 51 schools had one LM (full-time or part-time) funded by EC, and ten had two. (Five schools had LMs funded by other sources.) Half of the LMs were full-time and half were part-time. Only ten of the primary schools had had staff with dedicated time for mentoring prior to the EC initiative.

Respondents were asked to indicate the background(s) of their LMs. Those most frequently mentioned for secondary schools were learning support/teaching assistants (mentioned by 18 schools), youth work (12 schools) and teaching (eight schools). Evidently the majority had a school background. This was also the case in primary schools, where 34 respondents reported ex-LSAs as mentors, compared with no more than nine reporting any other category. Earlier interviews with Cluster Chairs had suggested that previous school experience was desirable (despite fears that this might lead to LSAs applying and obtaining LM posts, resulting in a shortage of LSAs) because people from different backgrounds were often unprepared for the challenges of school life (and, in particular, dealing with difficult pupils).

Case-study schools reflected the survey pattern, in terms of the number and background of their LMs. Secondary schools had at least one full-time LM, and in several cases two. (One secondary school reported four LMs, but this may have been the total number in the school, rather than the number funded by EC.) Some primary schools had a full-time LM, but in most the role was part-time. In some cases an LM was shared between two or more Cluster primary schools, and (less commonly) an LM's time was divided between a secondary school and its main feeder primary.

Two interviewees stressed that their LMs were ‘term-time only’ appointments: one headteacher noted that the LM was involved in activities that went on in the summer holidays, and said she understood that this work was carried out ‘in lieu’, although she believed that the LM concerned *‘already works well beyond his hours’*.

Several of the LMs in case-study schools had previously worked as LSAs. Others had training and experience in related fields, such as youth and community work or nursery nursing; one had been an educational welfare officer (EWO) and one had worked in a special unit for those with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD). Interestingly, a few secondary LMs had a background in the primary sector.

In many cases, the LM had either worked in the school concerned, or had close links with it, before obtaining their current post. This had a number of advantages. It meant that the potential LM was familiar with the school and the children, and would be able to make an informed decision about whether it was the right post for them; conversely, school staff would be able to judge whether the candidate was suited to the post; if some of the children knew the LM personally, this would be an additional benefit.

3.1.1 Role of Learning Mentors

Reports from Clusters

Reports from Cluster strand coordinators (and Chairs) suggested that the deployment of LMs was left largely to individual schools. One coordinator said that her interpretation of the Cluster’s strategic plan was agreed and then disseminated through good practice guidelines. However, other coordinators said that schools could develop their own plans (based on the Cluster plan) to fit in with their own management structures. Hence, the models for deployment of LMs were developing in different ways in different schools. One Cluster was trying to ensure consistency, and another was considering setting up a working party to look at what was happening in schools.

According to one coordinator, *‘LMs are used creatively in some cases ... but one or two LMs are being used inappropriately ... Some are used as LSAs’*. Reports suggested that some LMs focused mainly on behaviour, but others not at all (it was noted that, in one secondary school, LMs’ work was focused on pupils who were on the C-D borderline in terms of GCSEs). Schools were said to generally follow the DfES guidelines in terms of caseload, but some individual schools exceeded the

recommended maximum; a coordinator also observed that, while the good practice guidance suggested 10-12 pupils, she expected Cluster LMs to deal with 20. Similarly, criteria for selection were said to be included in Cluster plans (as well as DfES guidelines), but referral systems nevertheless varied from school to school.

Reports from schools

Almost all of the secondary schools responding to the survey (30) said that their LMs did targeted work with individual pupils. In addition, 13 worked with specific groups and 12 offered drop-in access. Again, the primary pattern was similar, although drop-in access was less common (14 out of 61 schools).

In the case-study schools, the role of the LM was described in a variety of ways. The purpose of the LMs' deployment was clearly seen in terms of removing or overcoming barriers to learning (such phrases were frequently used) and addressing underachievement. However, schools had different views about the kind of action that was necessary to achieve those goals.

Targeted work with individual pupils was a common theme, although there was considerable variation in terms of the numbers mentored, the time allowed for mentoring and the criteria for selection of children to be mentored. Most LMs saw between five and ten pupils on a regular basis, although one primary LM was dealing with 17, and another had a maximum caseload of 20.

One-to-one sessions were usually held weekly, more frequently in special cases. In one school, however, children were withdrawn from classes to see the LM on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis, to suit individual needs. Usually pupils were mentored for a period of about six weeks, with a review at the end of the period. In one school:

It's a six-week package, targets are evaluated at the end. If they've reached their targets, they are signed off, but there is a 'light touch' follow-up. If they are not quite there, there may be a further period of mentoring. If they are not at all interested, we may write to parents.

However, a primary school reported that, although the period for mentoring was supposed to be six-eight weeks, it was 'difficult to exit' the pupils concerned. In another primary school, the LM regularly saw ten pupils, 'mainly on a long-term basis'.

One interviewee described the process of individual mentoring:

The LM works individually with pupils, taking them out of class every week for a one-to-one session, during which they have the opportunity to give their point of view of what they are doing at school. A general discussion is followed by an attempt to find out where they are having problems for each of their lessons. LM and pupil agree on a target or targets, between one and four per week, to be completed for the following week. Not all pupils have target sheets, the strategies depend on the individual child, what they like and work best with. The target can for example relate to homework completion or organisational problems, and the sheet will then be signed by a teacher. The aim is to set fewer, rather than more targets.

The content of the meetings might vary according to the particular focus adopted by the school. For example, if the emphasis was on children with emotional problems, the LM might spend less time talking about academic work.

In one secondary school, the children chosen were those with behavioural problems, who might be at risk of exclusion. (A primary school said that they had begun by targeting those at risk of exclusion, but in the light of their training, had decided that LMs should be involved at an earlier stage.) In another secondary school, the criterion was underachievement: children who had the potential to achieve five A*-C GCSE grades, but who were not achieving at that level, for whatever reason. In a primary school, children selected were those with low self-esteem and/or emotional problems. Interviewees in two other primary schools spoke in very general terms about children with 'problems' of almost any kind.

Some schools had established formal systems for referral, which might originate with class teachers but needed to be approved/agreed by senior managers. In one secondary school, where the emphasis was on tackling underachievement, there were referrals from heads of year, and pupils were identified by using tests. In two primary schools, decisions were based on less formal consultation with class teachers about which pupils might benefit from being mentored.

Although one-to-one sessions with identified children were seen as the core of the LMs' work, a range of other work was mentioned. Activities undertaken by some of the LMs included:

- ♦ support for children in the classroom, or in a special unit (not necessarily a Cluster LSU)

- ♦ ‘drop-in’ sessions, when LMs were available to any child that wished to come and talk to them
- ♦ checking attendance and following up children who regularly arrived late
- ♦ home visits to parents of mentees (and being available for parents to consult at school if required)
- ♦ group activities (e.g. small group circle time, sessions on anger management and self-esteem)
- ♦ organising/helping to run School Councils
- ♦ running Breakfast Clubs and Homework Clubs
- ♦ involvement in out-of-school-hours activities, e.g. lunchtime football matches, after-school Drama Club
- ♦ liaising with outside agencies (e.g. those dealing with drug/alcohol abuse, rape crisis)
- ♦ liaising with LMs in other schools about primary-secondary transfer.

Working with parents was frequently mentioned. In one primary school, the LM was said to have developed good relationships with parents, especially those who would normally be reluctant to come into school. Another interviewee observed:

*[The LMs’] role is to support children **and their families** [our emphasis] who are experiencing difficulties. Parents don’t like coming into school, but the LMs have time to deal with them in a personal, informal way. They have more flexibility. They build relationships with parents and become approachable.*

Other respondents made similar comments, and it was reported that one LM was planning to start a parenting group. In some Clusters where the Tailored Strand had a neighbourhood or family focus, the boundary between the work of the LM and the work of personnel involved in the Tailored Strand was sometimes blurred. This was certainly the case in a primary school where the roles of the LM and the neighbourhood enrichment officer (NEO) seemed to be almost interchangeable. In another primary school, the LM’s work in the first year had focused almost exclusively on raising attendance and ‘*bringing the parents on board*’; by the time of interview, that work had been judged largely successful, and so the LM was going to move on to a more ‘conventional’ role and provide mentoring for individual children.

There were strongly opposed views about whether LMs should work in the classroom. In-class support (for mentored children, vulnerable children or even children generally) was understood in some schools as a key part of the LM’s role. In other schools, however, LMs felt that their role needed to be clearly distinguished from that

of classroom assistants, and went into the classroom only in exceptional circumstances (instances mentioned were helping a child with a broken arm, and mediating on behalf of mentored pupils). One LM noted that: *'Learning assistants work in the classroom with children in groups, but I am assigned to individuals. It was made clear to me when I started the job that I would not be asked to work in the classroom'*.

Practice differed also in terms of the LM's involvement in behaviour management, and their link with the LSU (in schools where there was one). One LM believed that her availability *'takes pressure off the teacher... [the teacher] can remove the child and the LM can deal with the issue outside the classroom'*. Other interviewees felt that the LM should not be used in that way. Similarly, two LMs were closely involved in their schools' LSUs (see further Section 3.2) while others felt it best to preserve a distinction. In one secondary school, the LSU was for children who were in crisis or involved in child protection matters; *'The Learning Mentor works with those with lesser need, less urgency and shorter input needs'*.

In some Clusters, LMs were playing – or expected to play – a key role in primary-secondary transition (see further Section 4.2). In one case, an LM was 'shared' between a secondary school and a feeder primary, with obvious benefits for continuity. Other LMs – in primary and secondary schools – were given specific responsibility for transfer. Secondary LMs with a background in the primary sector were particularly useful in this respect. One was working closely with the Year 7 manager, going into primary schools on liaison work and helping with induction days. In another school, LMs carried out similar work; the school had a large number of feeder primaries, and there were few teacher visits, so the work of the LMs was valuable in this respect.

In one case, it had been arranged that a primary LM would pay regular visits to the local secondary school in the following term, and hold open surgeries for children from the primary feeder. They would see a familiar face, and be able to talk to the LM about any difficulties they were experiencing. The surgeries would be open to all children from the primary school, although the LM's current Year 6 mentees would be told about the visits to ensure that they had the opportunity of attending.

3.1.2 Training

Reports from Clusters

Some Cluster coordinators had attended the national training at Liverpool Hope University in company with other LMs from their Clusters (one described it as *'excellent, really good'*). Some said they would appreciate further training on subjects such as management issues (*'because the role involves challenging schools sometimes'*) and child protection. Others, however, said that they had had no training and did not need any, since they were already highly experienced in relevant areas.

As regards training for their colleagues, one coordinator noted that LMs appointed in April 2002 (after the national training attended by other LMs in the Cluster) would have to wait until early 2003 for their training; with new LMs taking up posts throughout the school year, it is difficult to see how this problem could be resolved.

Some coordinators expressed doubts about how much training (on a local level) they would be able to provide. In some cases, this was because they felt they lacked the relevant expertise, but more often it was due to lack of funding: nearly all funding for the LM strand was devolved to schools to pay salary costs,⁷ which meant there was no central budget for training, unless coordinators managed to 'claw it back' from the schools' allocation.

Although opportunities for formal training were in some cases limited, coordinators organised regular meetings (in some cases monthly, or every three weeks) for LMs in their Clusters. These meetings provided opportunities for LMs to discuss issues and share good practice; speakers might also be invited to talk on specialist topics (e.g. looked-after children). Primary and secondary LMs met sometimes separately, sometimes together; some LMs had formed 'clusters within Clusters' and met in smaller groups. Coordinators also fostered other forms of networking, such as a newsletter or workshops; in one Cluster, each LM had been given a mobile phone and a laptop computer to facilitate links.

Coordinators visited schools regularly to provide monitoring and support for LMs. One interviewee said that she gave support through a range of structures: ongoing professional development, training needs analysis, regular monitoring and reviewing

⁷ In one Cluster, funding for secondary school LMs went straight into the school budget, while funding for primary LMs was centrally controlled. (This may reflect the fact that primary LMs were sometimes shared between schools.) The coordinator for another Cluster reported that, although LM funding went direct to schools, it was insufficient to cover salaries, and therefore school budgets were used to supplement it. See further Section 5.3.

gaps. Once a term, she visited each LM for ‘supervisory mentoring’, to discuss what the LM had done and what they planned to do in future. She did crisis counselling if needed, and saw herself as an advocate for LMs to the partnership and vice versa.

Several coordinators reported that they had links with other Clusters, either because they were in the same LEA, or because they had undertaken the national training together and maintained contact, or because the other Cluster had provided some training for them (see Section 4.1.2).

Reports from schools

Nearly all of the case-study LMs who had been on the national training course reported (directly, or via their line managers) that they had found it very useful (the exceptions were highly experienced LMs for whom some elements of the training were ‘*too basic*’). One school, however, reported that ‘*training was fantastic, but too late*’. As a result, the LMs were ‘*starting blind*’, so their roles and responsibilities were vague: ‘*We didn’t pitch it right at first ... it was an experimental year*’. Similar views were expressed at two other schools, but at a third the LM said she thought ‘*it might have been better if the training had been later*’, after she had had time to settle into the role.

In most Clusters, the LMs met regularly (see above). The dividing line between formal training and general discussion/information exchange was not always clear, but it seemed that the meetings tended to serve both purposes. Some interviewees mentioned that local training or talks had been provided by representatives from other Clusters or EiC areas. Some LMs were working towards qualifications, and were given time to prepare their portfolios. One interviewee observed: ‘*They are largely involved in self-supported training. They have access to a pack of books and resources ... The Learning Mentors are very motivated*’.

Even if no formal training was involved, meeting with other LMs was perceived as useful for mutual support and sharing good practice. A primary LM described it as ‘*essential*’, because ‘*some have lots of experience*’; moreover, she wanted to be kept up to date with developments relating to national initiatives, in order to know what kind of impact it would have in her context.

3.1.3 Impact of Learning Mentors

Reports from Clusters

Coordinators reported that LMs were having a ‘significant’, ‘enormous’ or ‘massive’ impact on attendance, punctuality, social skills and learning. Behaviour and social skills had improved, and exclusions had been prevented: *‘The children are staying on in school, they are better focused and more engaged in learning.’* LMs were doing *‘all the things that heads did not get round to doing’*; they were freeing teachers from having to deal with issues that would disrupt the teaching and learning of other children.

LMs were also reported to be successful in increasing the involvement of parents in school life. One coordinator said that, in his school *‘there was a 100 per cent attendance at parents’ evening, because the Learning Mentor went knocking on doors’*. In another Cluster, the LMs held open coffee mornings for parents, looking at parenting skills and styles. They also undertook one-to-one sessions and home visits.

Although coordinators’ reports were overwhelmingly positive, some did express caveats. One said that the impact on pupils was *‘variable – It is making a difference in some schools, but not in enough schools’*. Another also described the impact on schools as variable: *‘Some teachers would rate it as successful. Others would not.’* It is not clear why some teachers would not rate the Learning Mentor Strand as successful.

Reports from schools

Interviewees were asked what their expectations of LMs had been, and whether these had been realised. This question was particularly relevant to those schools which had not previously had a member of staff in that kind of role. Although respondents found it difficult to identify a specific impact, most were very positive about the work of the LMs. They believed that their work would have a *‘massive impact’* in terms of raising attainment and self-esteem, improving attendance and avoiding exclusion.

Some claimed to have already seen evidence of these impacts:

The Learning Mentors’ work has an impact on improving the self-confidence and self-esteem of young people, and will have a positive impact on learning. It has improved attendance, self-confidence, self-esteem and self-awareness, and the school now has happier children. These children are now more positive about education and the school.

Others said that it was too early to say whether their expectations had been realised; they were however confident that the benefits described above would accrue. The Learning Mentor coordinator in a high-performing school observed:

The anticipated impact is an unknown. The [pupils] trust them as mediators. The mentors help them make decisions, they help them say 'How can we avoid trouble in the future?' They help them with strategies, to develop strategic ideas. The LMs have made themselves invaluable, I don't know what I would have done without them, or how we managed before...

In response to the question 'Have your expectations been realised?', the deputy headteacher of a primary school answered 'Very much so'. She commented:

It's hard as a class-based teacher to give emotional support. The impact [of the LM] is a lot of very small steps. But a lot of the children in my class go to [the LM], and they've come alive ... Everything is geared to higher percentages, but self-esteem and aspiration come before attainment ... Supporting children emotionally, through difficult periods, will have a positive effect on attainment.

The only partly dissenting voice came from a respondent who said that expectations had not been realised in the first year, but this was due to having two part-time mentors who were not always available at the school. With one full-time mentor now in post, she was anticipating a stronger impact.

3.1.4 Impact on mentees

Interviewees were asked whether there had been any positive or negative effects on pupils supported by the LMs. The LMs were clearly popular with most pupils. Two interviewees (from different Clusters) remarked that children who were not supported by an LM had asked if they could have one, 'so clearly those who are assigned LMs have given positive feedback'. A third interviewee observed that none of the mentored children had missed an appointment: 'they are all keen to go'. Moreover, one remarked that 'When the LMs are not in school, it's really noticeable. We are inundated with pupils wanting to know where they are'. It was reported that some pupils in one school had refused mentoring, but they were clearly exceptions to the general rule.

A number of interviewees reported that the LMs had had a positive effect on behaviour, attendance and self-esteem (although some added that the impact was hard to measure: it was visible but not quantifiable). Children were said to feel more settled and secure. They were more likely to be in school: one interviewee said that

two ‘school phobic’ pupils were attending regularly, while others mentioned children who had avoided exclusion because of the LM’s support:

There are some children now in school who would not be if it were not for the Learning Mentors and the LSU. Others would not last here without this support. The Learning Mentors have worked with about 40 children since the start. Some have gained qualifications and gone to college.

Improvement in emotional health was considered particularly difficult to judge; however, one teacher observed:

It’s a long-term thing, but there are obviously more smiles. One girl was very aggressive, never smiled, now she is laughing, joining in, generally more sociable.

Only one interviewee could suggest a possible negative impact of the LMs’ presence in schools: pupils could absent themselves from classes on the pretext of going to see the LM when they had no intention of doing so. However, other interviewees voiced a few concerns. One worried that pupils might become too attached to their LM. Similarly, one school reported instances of jealousy: children did not like it if others were given attention by ‘my Learning Mentor’. Another interviewee reported overhearing a parent (who had been contacted by the LM) complaining about the LM ‘sticking her nose into my business’. Finally, one headteacher noted the possibility that the work of the LMs could uncover previously undiscovered problems, which could lead to significant changes in pupils’ lives.

3.1.5 Impact on other pupils

In response to a question about the impact of LMs on other pupils (i.e. those not assigned a Learning Mentor), some interviewees said they were not aware of any such impact, perhaps because it was ‘early days’. Several interviewees made the point that other pupils were keen to have their own LM: ‘Some pupils are jealous of the relationship – there are more [pupils] who want mentors than there are [mentors] available.’ ‘Other children want to be involved. It is seen as something special, there is no stigma’.

The latter point was attributed by one school to the fact that they had

...deliberately targeted underachievers, including those predicted A-C. Quite a few of the first cohort came from the top or second sets – they were surprised because they had not been identified before, and some really

appreciated it. Some students are really stressed with coursework: if you get them to the stage of coping, others are impressed and ask for help.

Some interviewees expressed the view that, if disruptive pupils were removed from the classroom, and/or if the behaviour of mentored pupils subsequently improved, this would have an indirect beneficial impact on other pupils: *'There is less disruption in class as a result of the time pupils have spent with LMs'*. However, one interviewee added: *'The problem is, there are not enough LMs, which makes it difficult to have a huge impact'*.

The impact on other pupils depended to some extent on how the role of the LMs was understood. In one school, where the Cluster-funded LM was not distinguished from other 'learning support teaching assistants', it was observed that *'if LSTAs are working with [mentored] pupils in the classroom, they will not work exclusively with these pupils'*, and hence other pupils would get to know them and benefit from their work. Other interviewees made a similar point: *'Other children see [the LM] as a resource for them'*; *'They all recognise her and she helps other children in the classroom'*.

In some schools, the LM had established clubs which were open to all pupils, and for which there was heavy demand. Finally, in one primary school, there had been *'racist incidents'* in Year 6, but the LM had succeeded in resolving a lot of the differences.

3.1.6 Evaluation and monitoring

Reports from Clusters

According to strand coordinators, LMs were expected to provide quite a lot of monitoring information. Typically, they would be expected to record details of mentees on referral, during the programme and on exit from mentoring. This might include the perspectives of teachers and parents as well as the pupils themselves. They would also be asked to provide summary information on a regular (usually termly) basis, detailing the number of mentees they had dealt with, the reasons for mentoring, and so on. A number of coordinators had produced forms to be used for this purpose, but in some cases school forms were preferred, as reports had to be submitted (in the first instance) to the senior management of the individual school.

Reports from schools

Most interviewees reported that the work of the LMs was monitored at school and/or Cluster level. In the school where the Cluster-funded LM was a member of a wider

learning support team, there were team meetings (with the headteacher present); in other schools, where the LM had a more individual role, there were weekly meetings between the LM and his/her line manager, sometimes with the headteacher as well. In this way, the school's senior management would be kept up to date with the LM's work and could provide appropriate guidance as necessary.

Individual success stories were considered to be indicators of the success of the initiative. One LM reported that:

We carry out monitoring through progress reports to teachers. I personally check attendance records, truancy levels, absences. I liaise with the key stage managers. So far, two pupils have exited from the LM programme, with certificates.

An interviewee from another school in the same Cluster observed:

We look at pupil records as evidence and there is follow-through of pupils. Proof of the value [of the scheme] is in individual pupils – for example, some go from very poor attendance to almost one hundred per cent.

We noted above that most Clusters organised regular meetings for their Learning Mentors. In this context, some schools reported that the Cluster's lead LM, or LM coordinator, oversaw the work of individual LMs, perhaps coming into the school for observation, or for one-to-one meetings with the LM.

Evaluation was acknowledged to be difficult. It was hoped that LMs would have an impact on emotional health and self-esteem, but as some interviewees observed, these are difficult to quantify. Ultimately, schools hoped for an improvement in examination results, but clearly this would take time to realise (and even then, it would not be easy to attribute any gains directly to the work of the LMs). Not surprisingly, therefore, some schools said that they had not yet considered how to measure academic progress.

Monitoring, however, was clearly recognised as important, and most LMs were required to keep detailed records of their work and their mentees' progress. One interviewee mentioned a '*daily record-keeping file*', which included all the pupils dealt with by the LM, '*the reasons for their visit, their attitudes and the Learning Mentor's assessment of whether they have benefited from the input*'. Another school referred to '*in forms and out forms*', completed on a pupil's entry to and exit from the mentoring programme.

Finally, some LMs provided regular, perhaps termly, summary reports, either to the headteacher (who included it in a school report to the Cluster) or direct to the Cluster coordinator. In this way, *'good practice is shared and disseminated'*.

3.1.7 Perceptions of Learning Mentors

Reports from Cluster Chairs

When Cluster Chairs were first interviewed, in autumn 2001, they had high expectations of LMs, but little experience of their work (see Schagen *et al.*, 2001). One year on, what was their view of the Learning Mentor Strand?

On the whole, they were very positive. One Chair said that LMs were the Cluster's *'greatest strength'*; they had had a *'huge impact, especially on behaviour'*. Another asked *'Can I have ten more, please?'* and went on to describe LMs as *'one of the most powerful change agents I have ever seen.'* He believed that their impact would be seen in higher levels of attainment and improved GCSE results. Another Cluster reported that LMs were already having an impact on attainment, but although good National Curriculum test results were cited, it is not clear how these had been attributed to the work of the LMs.

A point made by some Chairs was that the role played by LMs varied somewhat from school to school (see Section 3.1.1). One Chair reported an issue regarding the deployment of primary LMs, and felt that further consideration needed to be given to their caseload and *modus operandi*. Secondary LMs had been appointed by individual schools, and each had a slightly different focus, depending on school needs: *'in one school they are working with able pupils who are underattaining, in another they are working with the disaffected, and in the two others they are working on turbulence'*. The Chair also felt that the role of the lead LM was underdeveloped, due to an initial lack of clarification; it was essentially an administrative role, and the lead LM was not seen as *'a lead professional'*.

Another Chair similarly noted that LMs' role and deployment needed clarification. He cited one school where the LM was being used as a classroom assistant to provide cover, which is *'obviously not how they [LMs] are intended to be used'*. He noted that *'headteachers have different views on the role of Learning Mentors'* which could cause particular difficulties for LMs who worked in more than one school. Contracts also varied across the Cluster, and there were safety issues regarding home visits to parents.

Despite the acknowledgement of issues which required clarification or consistency, Cluster Chairs were very positive. They were keen that Learning Mentors should be able to continue their work when Cluster funding came to an end; one reported that the LEA and Connexions had already agreed to ensure that this would happen.

Reports from schools

Overall, it seems that the high expectations of LMs had been fulfilled. There had been some uncertainty at first, particularly in those schools where the role was unfamiliar, and staff were not clear what could and could not be expected. Misunderstandings had to be corrected: for example, in one school, *'some staff got the wrong end of the stick'* and thought the LM was someone to whom they could send misbehaving pupils. The interviewee perceived a need to set up meetings between teachers and LMs to clarify their role.

In another school, there had been initial difficulties in integrating the LM, and some resistance from teachers, while in a third school, *'there was a bit of resentment at first'*, because the LM did not have to do any teaching, *'but now staff know what she is doing, they have accepted her'*. This was perhaps due to the fact that the LM concerned *'had a well-organised start – she was quiet, finding things out, not gung ho'*. She had *'got the trust of the kids'*, and this was also true of other LMs in the case-study schools.

In other case-study schools, interviewees told a similar story. The idea of a Learning Mentor was new to many, but once they came to understand what the role entailed, they were enthusiastic about the benefits. Consequently, LMs were now *'very well thought of among the staff'*; *'fully integrated into the life of the school and highly regarded'*.

It was also reported that the parents of mentored children had (with exceptions, perhaps) been *'pretty good about it'*. One mother was said to be *'really happy'*, because her daughter, who had been bullied, now had someone she could go and talk to when this happened. The interviewee added *'Teachers don't have the time'*. This sums up the overall impression of LMs' work – they were able to do things which were recognised as important, but which teachers simply did not have time for.

Interviewees were in no doubt that the work of LMs was valuable, even if the impact was difficult to measure. Although the idea was new, it *'has been a great addition and benefit'*. This is illustrated clearly by the fact that several schools mentioned that

they would like to have more LMs, were perhaps considering how they could create additional posts, and certainly intended to maintain their existing complement, if at all possible, when the EC funding had come to an end.

3.2 The Learning Support Unit Strand

The original intention of EC was that each Cluster would have a number of learning support units (LSUs), located in what partnerships agreed to be the most appropriate schools. Survey respondents were therefore asked whether they had an LSU on site, or whether they had access to an LSU. Of the 35 secondary schools, 18 said that they had an LSU on site, and only one that they had access to an LSU elsewhere. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the proportion of primary schools with an available LSU was much lower: only five of the 71 had one on site, and a further seven had access. This means that a large majority of primary schools, and nearly half of the secondary schools, were without access to an LSU; evidently the concept of sharing LSUs between Cluster schools had not materialised.

Schools were asked whether, before Clusters, they had a unit where pupils who needed particularly intensive support could spend some of their time. Nineteen of the secondary schools said that they did, including the large majority of those with an LSU on site. This suggests that, in most cases, the Cluster LSUs were developed from existing provision. Interestingly, five of the schools which reported they had no LSU, nor access to an LSU, said that they had specialist provision pre-Clusters. As it seems unlikely that this provision would have ended, it suggests that some schools had units similar to LSUs, but not classified as such (this was confirmed by the case-study visits – see further below). Of the 12 primary schools with an LSU on site, or access to an LSU, only one reported having a specialist unit pre-Clusters.

Strand coordinators

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the LSU strand did not have the same level of coordination as the other strands. In none of the 11 case-study Clusters was there a member of staff designated exclusively as LSU coordinator; either the role was combined with that of LM coordinator (with emphasis more on the latter), or an LSU manager was designated coordinator but was mainly concerned with his or her own LSU.

This reflects the fact that most LSUs functioned more or less independently. As one interviewee said, while the LM strand was based on Cluster policy, LSU policies were

more school-based. Another interviewee similarly observed that *'Schools tend to be islands – there's not much cross-fertilisation'*. Hence, in only one Cluster was the lack of coordination seen as a matter of concern (although in this case it was deeply felt); other interviewees did not seem to feel that it was necessary, or even particularly desirable. One LSU coordinator freely admitted that she was not sufficiently aware of what was happening in the schools concerned.

Cluster interviewees confirmed that LSUs catered mainly for pupils from the school where they were based. One said *'Other schools make some use of them, but it has been patchy'*. Another said that the LSUs in his Cluster were *'functioning relatively well'*, but did not have any shared facilities.

It was also noted that, contrary to guidelines, some LMs were closely integrated into the work of the LSUs (see also Section 3.1.1).

Other concerns raised by coordinators were the lack of clarity about their own role and status, and the fact that LSU staff were on fixed-term contracts, when longer-term funding was needed to ensure continuity and security.

Case-study LSUs

Of the 23 schools visited, nine (eight secondary schools and one primary school) had LSUs on site. The only school which reported having access to an LSU was a high-performing school, and the headteacher commented that he had never used the LSU, and did not anticipate using it: *'The level of difficulty our [pupils] have would not justify sending them there'*. Other schools said that they did not have access to an LSU, even though there were LSUs within their Clusters.

There was evidently some uncertainty about the definition and the funding of LSUs. As noted in the recently-published Good Practice Guidelines (DfES, 2002c), many schools have avoided the term 'unit' and use an alternative name for their LSU ('Success Centre' and 'School Improvement Centre' were among the names used in Clusters visited). One of the schools which said they had no LSU did have a 'pastoral support unit', while another had a 'nurture assessment unit'; from the brief descriptions given, both sounded similar in function and purpose to our understanding of an LSU. The headteacher of one of these schools said that she was not keen on LSUs, referring to them as *'sin bins'*; this negative perception of LSUs indicates that their purpose is not fully understood.

Interviewees were asked when their LSUs were established. While most gave dates in 2001 or 2002 (consistent with the creation of the Cluster), three said that their LSU had been in existence for three years or longer. Obviously, then, the original funding must have come from another source (the Single Regeneration Budget was explicitly mentioned in one case). This is consistent with the policy of some Clusters *'to establish a learning support unit in each high school where one does not already exist, and to enhance staffing and develop the work in units where they do exist'* (Tameside Excellence Cluster Plan).

All of the secondary LSUs were mainly or exclusively for pupils at the schools where they were situated; this confirms the picture based on reports of other interviewees, that LSUs are rarely shared. Some LSU managers were surprised to be asked whether students from other schools had access; one stated that *'It's not a PRU [Pupil Referral Unit]'*. Some schools said they did not have space to accommodate other students (*'We could fill every space two or three times over'*), while in one case at least it was not necessary to share because all six secondary schools in the Cluster had an LSU.

Two interviewees mentioned the possibility of catering for Year 6 children from feeder schools, but this was an idea for the future, not something that was currently occurring. A third interviewee said that her school worked with three feeder schools *'who all have access to the LSU and have made use of it'*. However, her subsequent comments suggested that the primary schools' use of the LSU did not mean that they sent individual pupils there. This was confirmed by the Cluster coordinator, who explained that primary schools agreed a sum of money to help finance the LSUs, but the latter were used to aid transition and did not have a role in behaviour management.

The primary LSU was the only example of a shared LSU; the deputy head stated that it was used by three schools as well as her own. *'There is a high take-up. People have heard about the good practice here and realise that we could help. Word gets around.'* However, given the lack of physical space in the room that served as an LSU, scope for accommodating pupils from other schools was clearly limited.

3.2.1 Staffing

Cluster schools with LSUs on site were asked to complete a section of the questionnaire relating to staffing and funding (funding is discussed in Section 5.3.3). Most LSUs had one teacher, though a few had more (the maximum was three). In terms of support staff, the numbers varied from 0.5 to four, although the majority of secondary LSUs had one, and a few did not answer the question, suggesting that they

functioned without any support staff. Schools were asked whether staffing the LSU had proved difficult, not very difficult, or not at all difficult. Four of the five primary LSUs, but only four of the 18 secondary LSUs, had found it difficult.

Six of the nine case-study LSU managers were external appointments (although two had been appointed when the LSUs were established, prior to Cluster funding). The other three had other roles within their schools, and retained some responsibilities in addition to running the LSUs.

Most units had one or two additional teachers, and one or more LSAs. However, one manager had only one colleague who spent *'an hour a day as and when'* in the LSU, and provided relief at lunchtimes. The primary LSU was staffed by the deputy head (in part of whose office it was situated) and the Learning Mentor. Most of the staff were based full-time in the LSU, but some (particularly those in smaller units) shared their time between the LSU and the main school.

Case-study LSUs acknowledged the critical importance of having the right staff, but generally seemed to think that they had succeeded in this respect. However, lack of non-contact time could be an issue, particularly in cases where the LSU manager was the only qualified teacher in the Unit. Accommodation was a more serious problem in some cases: one interviewee said that the only room with sufficient space was not ideally situated, while the primary LSU was situated in one part of the deputy head's office, and the number of children who could attend was therefore very limited.

Training

One LSU manager had had two days training: one day was described as *'a waste of time'*, while the other was *'excellent ... It consolidated what we were already doing'*. The other LSU managers had not had any specific training. Most had considerable relevant experience, and therefore felt that training was not essential; however, some interviewees said they would have appreciated training on related topics such as anger management, counselling and team teaching.⁸

Similarly, support staff had undergone standard LSA training, but not usually training relating specifically to their role within the LSU. One interviewee noted that, although the LSU staff were all very experienced, they would benefit from further training. Another LSU manager said that her team would like further training in

⁸ Some Cluster interviewees commented on the lack of national training for LSU staff.

behaviour management and child protection: *'It would make the team more efficient and flexible'*.

One interviewee was planning training for other members of staff (not just those working within the LSU), in order to raise awareness. The LSU manager had budgeted for the training, but observed that *'Staff cover is an issue for training activities'*. Another interviewee noted the particular difficulties of releasing a member of LSU staff for training.

3.2.2 Attendance at LSUs

Schools with an LSU on site, or with access to an LSU, were asked how many pupils in each year group had attended the LSU during the autumn 2001 term. For secondary schools, the numbers ranged from 0 to 20, with a mean between 5 and 6 in each of Years 7, 8 and 9 and around three in Years 10 and 11. The most common pattern of attendance was for 7-12 weeks, but short periods (2-5 days and 2-6 weeks) were also frequent. Four schools said that pupils most commonly attended part-time, two full-time and nine for a combination of part-time and full-time.

In primary schools, the numbers attending LSUs were smaller: a range of 0 to 10, and an average of two pupils in Years 5 and 6, even lower numbers in Years 3 and 4. Very few schools responded to the questions about patterns of attendance, which suggests that those completing the questionnaire knew little about the operation of the LSUs.

In three of the case-study secondary schools, the LSUs catered for the full 11-16 age range; the others mainly or exclusively for key stage 3. At one school, there was alternative, separate provision for key stage 4 students; another held the view that *'By Year 10, it is too late to do anything useful with pupils'*. Similarly, a third school made Year 7 their priority, *'so we can nip problems in the bud'*.⁹ The primary LSU catered mainly for children in Years 5 and 6, although they took some pupils from Years 3 and 4.

Pupils were referred mainly because of behavioural issues: *'Some of their behaviour is very challenging'*. However, one interviewee said that they used *'a range of criteria'*, and another mentioned attendance and learning problems, as well as behaviour.

⁹ Two Cluster Chairs expressed similar views; one observed that LSU policy was *'try to catch pupils early'*, because it was not realistic to expect them to deal with those at real risk of exclusion.

Pupils would be identified initially by teachers, and referred to the LSU usually via the school management system (usually heads of year). Two schools had established a *'very structured procedure'* for referral, which in one case involved summary sheets completed by teachers and panel meetings involving senior members of staff. At the other school:

A computer system has been set up to administer the referral process, which goes through a number of formal stages, or steps, before pupils are accepted. It works like this. If a pupil is [behaving] so bad [in class], they have an 'on-call'. One member of staff goes to the room and takes them out. You can negotiate pupils back into the room, but sometimes not. So pupils go somewhere to calm down, near the office. They get a red 'on call' slip written, which goes to the deputy head, who makes referrals to the unit. If they accumulate enough points, the next stage is the parents are asked to come in, then they are given one day out, then governors are consulted and finally exclusion. The aim of this staged process is to give the pupils lots of opportunities to go back and get it right. It operates on an accumulation of points. Pupils get put on different sorts of report, green report, then yellow, then red. The green report is the first suspicion that things are going wrong. On yellow, they report to the head of year, on red to a senior member of staff. Then they get referred to the LSU.

The interviewee went on to say, however, that this process was due to be changed, with the aim of identifying potential pupils at an earlier stage: *'We are getting better at identifying the children who might benefit from coming to the LSU ... we are aiming to access more pupils, to be more pro-active ... our problem is, we are not doing enough, there are too few pupils being reached'*. Another LSU manager, asked whether the Unit catered for children with the most serious problems, or *'the ones you think you can do something with'*, said that it was *'a mixture of both'*.

Some interviewees mentioned *'crisis'* or *'instant'* referral, as an alternative to the normal procedures when circumstances required. In the primary LSU, the class teacher simply contacted the deputy head and completed a referral form.

There were very different policies regarding the length of time that students spent in the LSU, but all were influenced by the need to achieve successful reintegration into mainstream classes. Because of this, some LSUs would not admit any children full-time, while others insisted on a short initial period of full-time attendance, after which those students who were ready would be *'drip-fed'* back into mainstream. In some cases the typical length of stay was longer: *'half a term in the Unit and half a term to be reintegrated'*; *'two terms – but the biggest problem has been reintegration, so sometimes pupils stay longer than this'*. Another LSU also had a maximum period of

two terms, but there was concern that students might enjoy being there and not wish to return to regular classes.

The primary LSU was evidently used to a greater degree as a place to send children who had been temporarily excluded from the classroom due to poor behaviour. Consequently, the time spent there varied from 10-15 minutes to full-time attendance, and *'sometimes there are individual stays of about half a day'*.

Interviewees were unanimous in declaring the importance of flexibility – attendance at the LSU had to be tailored to the needs of the individual child. This could determine the length of stay, the pattern of attendance, and the level of support. Re-integration also would be carefully managed; children might be readmitted to mainstream classes for particular subjects, for parts of lessons (if an hour was deemed too long, the student might attend the first 20 minutes), or for whole lessons with support from LSU staff:

We ask them, 'Let's see which lessons you can go back to, where are things going right?', then we draw up a timetable ... the pupils are supported back into lessons with LSAs and LMs. There are, however, finite resources, so we try to guarantee that pupils will be supported in at least their first three lessons. The re-entry process gets harder as they go back into more lessons, but hopefully the time spent in the LSU has an effect, their self-esteem is raised, their achievements ... we encourage their subject teachers to find out what they have done, some members of staff now come to the LSU to see what their pupils are doing.

3.2.3 The LSU curriculum

Interviewees were asked whether pupils followed the same curriculum as in normal classes. In most cases, the intention was to follow the curriculum as far as possible; teachers would provide work in the relevant subject areas, and the LSU team would follow each child's normal timetable, as far as possible. If the child was experiencing particularly difficulty in a certain subject area, additional help would be provided. On the other hand, one interviewee noted that work could sometimes be completed more quickly on a one-to-one basis than in a classroom, so there might be time left over, which could provide an opportunity to play games and chat. In another LSU, regular work was covered in the morning, and the afternoons were devoted to non-National Curriculum subjects such as art and cookery.

Some of the LSUs which attempted to cover the mainstream curriculum nevertheless spent time on 'life skills' activities (otherwise '*it is a constant battle*'), or on certain aspects of behaviour, such as anger management, cooperation and self-esteem.

Two LSU managers stated categorically that they did **not** attempt to follow the mainstream curriculum. One provided an example of a timetable which included mathematics, ICT, English, humanities, languages and an enhanced PSHE 'package' including life skills. The resulting curriculum would seem not dissimilar from that in LSUs which followed mainstream lessons but with additional work on life skills or behaviour management.

The other LSU had a rather more radical approach:

The same curriculum is not followed. It is not possible, we tried to do this but it can't be done and the LSU would then be a school. So in the morning we have lessons, then at mid-day Options, followed by lunch break with the pupils' tutor group, then lessons in the last period. We concentrate in the LSU on English, maths, sciences and therapeutic activity, with bits for bullying, any particular difficulties etc.

The LSU manager regretted that not enough was done in terms of therapy, and noted that input formerly obtained from the LEA's Behaviour Support Service was no longer available. He felt that, in the LSU:

Period five in the school day needs to be addressing behaviour with strategies like Circle Time, making videos, anger management, dealing with issues such as bullying etc., which should be done daily.

Interviewees were asked if they used any strategies or methods to specifically address problem behaviour. One referred to '*lots of ongoing one-to-one work*', another that '*methods are tailored to individual children*', but might include social skills, anger management and conflict resolution. Three LSU managers said that pupils were involved in drawing up their own behaviour plans and targets. One stressed: '*The young people need to form a relationship with someone in the Unit ... they are then monitored and evaluated through personal contact*'. Two interviewees mentioned behaviour therapy, particularly looking at the 'positives', which the young people were said to enjoy.

3.2.4 Impact of the LSUs

Reports from Clusters

According to strand coordinators, LSUs were experiencing varying degrees of success. They could identify some that appeared to be highly effective, and others that were ‘struggling’. In one Cluster, the three LSUs had set targets to reduce exclusions, but while one had succeeded in halving the number of fixed-term exclusions, the others had experienced an increase, which was attributed by the coordinator to differences in the ‘*quality of provision*’ (the Cluster Chair thought that one of the LSUs was not working so well because it was ‘*seen as a sin bin*’).

The Chair of a different Cluster said that the strand had not had a ‘*profound impact*’ because they had already had LSUs, funded by a Home Office unit, prior to the establishment of the Cluster. However, he felt that the two primary LSUs were much more innovative, and also very successful. ‘*They are good at raising standards throughout the school. They have cut exclusions dramatically.*’ Two primary schools which had accessed the LSUs were now intending to set up their own.

Reports from schools

One interviewee said that, because of the LSU, pupils had come to school who otherwise (she believed) would have truanted. Moreover, ‘*They do more work in the Unit – surprise themselves about how much work there is in their books. They get more personal attention, which helps them work*’. Others similarly thought that attendance at the LSU would ‘*improve their ability to learn and their ability to be taught*’, which would ‘*help to raise achievement across the board*’.

There was a strong consensus that attendance at the LSU would help to solve behaviour problems, and therefore reduce the number of permanent exclusions, and improve the quality of learning for pupils generally:

If you identify, say, 20 pupils with behaviour problems, you can construct a framework for them to be addressed, and arrange strategies to modify their behaviour. If you can change them just a little bit, then this will have an effect on the others. A small change can affect many.

It was also suggested that the LSU might contribute to improvement in teaching and learning throughout the school. One interviewee commented:

There is a lot of good practice goes on in the Unit. Teachers from mainstream are being timetabled into the unit to teach certain classes, and they will be picking up some of the methods used.

Few interviewees believed that there were any disadvantages in having an LSU on site. One expressed concern about *'the wanderers'* who drop in to the LSU and disrupt lessons: *'Sometimes it is too accessible'*. Another reported that some pupils went to the Unit when they should have been in class, because they preferred it there. LSU staff found this a problem, as they wished to maintain a welcoming environment, but realised that the children needed to be in lessons. The only other concern was maintaining an appropriate balance between the needs of the LSU children and other pupils: *'We try very hard with some extremely disruptive and disturbed children. Sometimes we try hard with them to the detriment of others'*.

3.2.5 Monitoring and evaluation

It was noted that it was difficult to measure the impact of an LSU, since it aims to deal with emotional difficulties and issues such as self-esteem which are not easily quantifiable. Further, it would take time for any impact to be realised.¹⁰ Individual attainment and attendance was monitored, usually linked to the school's own procedures, but, as one interviewee observed, *'the main evaluation tool is to see if [the pupils] meet the targets'*.

One LSU manager systematically recorded attendance, 'on-calls' and exclusion information before, during and after each child's time in the Unit. She wanted to explore the recording and monitoring processes used in other LSUs, because she was keen to develop this area further.

Another interviewee said that she had to fill in evaluation forms for the Cluster coordinator, but this was unusual; in most case, LSU managers reported to the headteacher or SMT of their own school.

3.3 The Gifted and Talented Strand

This section focuses on the Gifted and Talented Strand. In particular, the following issues are discussed:

- ◆ the coordination of the Gifted and Talented Strand
- ◆ identification of gifted and talented pupils
- ◆ provision for the gifted and talented
- ◆ staff training and networking

¹⁰ An LSU strand coordinator said that they were looking at exclusion and attendance statistics because they were not yet able to use test scores to track pupils.

- ◆ monitoring and evaluation of the Gifted and Talented Strand
- ◆ issues and challenges related to the Gifted and Talented Strand
- ◆ the effect of the Gifted and Talented Strand on pupils.

3.3.1 Coordinating the Gifted and Talented Strand

In this section, the coordination of the Gifted and Talented Strand at Cluster level is discussed, which includes the perspectives of eight Gifted and Talented Cluster Strand Coordinators, who represent ten Clusters (two of the coordinators were each responsible for the Gifted and Talented Strand in two different Clusters). The perspectives of school-level coordinators and responsible teachers on in-school coordination are also included in this section.

Cluster-level coordination of the Gifted and Talented Strand

Five of the eight Strand Coordinators were appointed from the outset of the Cluster initiative, whereas the other three were appointed in January 2002, some four months after the initiative was established. Three interviewees were previously LEA-level coordinators for Gifted and Talented, and three others were in-school coordinators, and so all six were experienced in this field. The two remaining coordinators had an interest in Gifted and Talented, yet not extensive experience (one was a primary school literacy coordinator, and the other was responsible for school improvement within an LEA).

All eight coordinators had similar views on their roles: primarily, ‘coordination’ of strand activities ‘*to ensure consistency across all schools*’. Words used to describe the role of the Gifted and Talented Strand Coordinator included ‘facilitate’, ‘support’ and ‘advise’. Coordinators saw that it was their role to monitor progress against Cluster plans and targets, and address any gaps. They delivered INSET to coordinators in schools, and organised more informal meetings for the purpose of networking and discussion. One coordinator stressed that, in particular, the role involved helping teachers with teaching and learning: provision for the gifted and talented in class, rather than simply through enrichment activities which are ‘*added on*’. This particular coordinator commented that different schools have different expectations of her role, which can cause problems. Some schools see her as an ‘*events coordinator*’, particularly secondary schools which had established gifted and talented coordinators and therefore did not feel the need for the same level of ongoing support as primary schools. She commented, ‘*It is not just about arranging trips out for gifted and talented pupils*’.

The time allocated for the role of strand coordinator varied. Two coordinators were in full-time posts, whereas the time assigned to five other coordinators ranged from one day to three days a week.¹¹ The five who said they did not work full-time indicated that they could easily spend more time on the role than was allocated. Four of the eight coordinators said they reported to the Cluster partnership, and were line managed by the Cluster Chair (or Cluster Coordinator/Director where such a person existed). The other four were line managed by LEA personnel, including a head of professional development and school improvement (who was also the LEA officer for Excellence Clusters), a head of 14-19 education, a chief adviser on curriculum standards and a policy coordinator.

In-school coordination of the Gifted and Talented Strand

Of the 71 primary schools included in the questionnaire survey, 61 had a responsible teacher for gifted and talented pupils, and all 35 secondary schools had a coordinator for pupils identified as gifted and talented. In primary schools, an average of 15 per cent of the responsible teachers' time was designated for work relating to gifted and talented pupils. In secondary schools, gifted and talented coordinators had been designated an average of 12 per cent of their time for such work. The majority of responsible teachers and coordinators held other specific posts of responsibility; only nine teachers in primary schools and eight in secondary schools did not hold such posts. In primary schools, teachers responsible for the Gifted and Talented Strand were most often subject coordinators/managers or senior teachers, whereas gifted and talented coordinators in secondary schools were most frequently heads of department.

In primary and secondary schools, the majority of responsible teachers/coordinators were appointed in September 2001, although some were appointed earlier, and others later. It was evident from interviews in schools, that where they were appointed later, some of the work in relation to the Gifted and Talented Strand was still in its early stages of development.

Interviews with gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators revealed that the majority had been 'recruited' internally for the role because of their previous backgrounds and experience, or had volunteered because of their own personal interest. However, one secondary coordinator felt the role had been '*thrust upon*' him because of his PE background; a number of students were talented in this area. Moreover, in one secondary school, the gifted and talented coordinator had been given the role for more pragmatic reasons. The original coordinator had '*left the*

¹¹ The remaining coordinator did not comment on her time allocations.

school under a cloud', which meant the school faced staffing problems. The SENCO, who had been involved in the coordination of the Learning Mentor Strand, was asked to take responsibility for the Gifted and Talented Strand because she was aware of the Cluster initiative and how it operated. The person responsible for the Learning Support Unit took on the responsibility for the Learning Mentors, and the SENCO was then available to take over the Gifted and Talented Strand. It was of course more usual for the SENCO to work with *'the bottom end'*, so the possibility of working with *'the top end'* was *'refreshing'*. Similarly, in another secondary school, the coordinator used to be the SENCO and had *'no background with able students'*, but felt that *'in some ways the remit is similar'*.

In one secondary school, the gifted and talented funding had been used to expand staff responsibility for provision for gifted and talented pupils: three coordinators had been appointed internally to coordinate provision within three specific subjects (RE, PE and art).

It was not unusual for the person responsible for the Gifted and Talented Strand to be a senior teacher or member of the school senior management team, indicating the status of the strand. However, in one secondary school, the headteacher took on the role simply because there had been no response to an internal advertisement.

In all of the schools visited, organising and managing the Gifted and Talented Strand was not the only responsibility held by responsible teachers/coordinators, which often meant added pressure. It was common for non-contact time to be given, although not enough, and responsible teachers/coordinators often worked in their own time. As one said, *'I should get about half a day a week, but it is just impossible'*. However, many personal gains were identified by those who had taken on the role, including professional development (13 mentioned gaining salary points) and the personal satisfaction associated with seeing pupils motivated by the opportunities given to them. Comments included:

It is refreshing to be bombarded by bright buttons who are dead keen...

The kids think it is wonderful that I am responsible for them doing extra things...it is good for my ego.

I have gained personal satisfaction...seeing their faces and reactions...we make them feel special.

A number of responsible teachers/coordinators talked about their role adding status to their position in school, and about the personal challenges that went with it.

The role of gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators included the following:

- ♦ identification of gifted and talented pupils
- ♦ interviewing identified pupils (with staff) and discussing possible provision
- ♦ devising curriculum plans and school policy on gifted and talented provision
- ♦ raising staff awareness of the Gifted and Talented Strand, identified pupils, provision for gifted and talented pupils, and cluster targets (awareness was often raised during staff meetings or '*mini-Inset*', arranged by responsible teachers/coordinators)
- ♦ supporting teaching and learning in class (including, in one case, '*trying to unpack the experience of the more able in each subject*')
- ♦ monitoring progress against targets.

It should be noted that, for two responsible teachers/coordinators, the role was either not clear or not what they had expected, although they did not elaborate. Moreover, the responsible teacher in one primary school was dissatisfied with the level of support offered by the gifted and talented coordinator for the whole Cluster. In the interviewee's opinion, the role of the Cluster coordinator did not appear to have been clearly defined. She commented, '*There is no support from outside*', and as a result felt '*disheartened*'. It should also be noted that gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators did not always teach gifted and talented pupils, rather some were simply responsible for devising policy for others to put into practice in school/class. As one commented, '*I see myself as the organiser, the overseer, the implementer*'.

3.3.2 Identification of gifted and talented pupils

Table 3.1 illustrates the average percentage of gifted and talented pupils in each year group (the information was gathered in the 2002 questionnaire survey). Years 5 and 6 had the highest proportion of gifted and talented pupils, with one in eight pupils being identified as such.¹²

¹² This could be because the DfES guidelines state that the Gifted and Talented Strand in primary schools is particularly for Years 5 and 6.

Table 3.1 The average percentage of gifted and talented pupils in schools

Year Group	Average percentage of gifted and talented pupils
PRIMARY	
3	8
4	8
5	12
6	13
SECONDARY	
7	10
8	11
9	10
10	11
11	9
12	9
13	10

Interviews with key staff in Cluster schools, namely the gifted and talented responsible teacher/coordinator, allowed for exploration of how pupils were identified as gifted or talented. Following DfES guidance, schools had aimed to select the top ten per cent of pupils to be on the gifted and talented register: seven per cent (two thirds) gifted and three per cent (one third) talented. However, in some cases (as indicated by Table 3.1), more than the top ten per cent of pupils were identified as gifted and talented, *‘as it is difficult to cut it off’*. In addition, one school coordinator who was interviewed commented that they had a ‘reserve list’ (or ‘shadow cohort’) of gifted and talented pupils in case anyone left school, and these pupils were included in provision. Another coordinator described provision as *‘inclusive’* as they *‘didn’t want to single out children for special attention’*.

Gifted pupils were identified by analysing test results, such as cognitive aptitude tests (CATs) and end of key stage assessment results. In one school, pupils entered early for GCSEs were identified as gifted. Recommendations from heads of department, heads of year and subject teachers were also given, as were recommendations by parents and peers in some cases, which helped in *‘recognising a spark in someone not evident from results’*. In addition, secondary schools sought information from their feeder primary schools about who should be identified, although this sometimes took too long (one coordinator said, *‘we are still waiting to hear from some schools’*). Talented pupils were identified following teacher, parent, and in some cases peer, recommendations. In some cases, it was considered more difficult to identify talented pupils. For instance, there was no after-school provision or music lessons in one school, which made it difficult to spot musical talent.

In one school, the coordinator was thinking about giving pupils the opportunity of nominating themselves. In another two schools, gifted and talented pupils had not yet been identified at the time of the interview: one coordinator was still receiving training on how to identify such pupils and the other was still devising policy (both schools were visited in the summer term 2002, and thus the identification may since have taken place).

In a number of schools, responsible teachers/coordinators had delivered internal INSET for staff on how to identify gifted and talented pupils.

When gifted and talented pupils had been identified, responsible teachers/coordinators were careful to 'balance' the gender, free school meals eligibility and ethnic mix. However, this was considered quite difficult by some. For instance:

The gender balance is pretty stable, but ethnic minorities vary wildly from year group to year group. Having to make sure the gender and ethnic groups are represented means that within the cohort we don't necessarily have the proven performers.

This particular coordinator had stuck to LEA guidelines on identification of gifted and talented pupils, but did not think that all schools did this: *'It makes it harder for the school to look good, having to make sure the gender and ethnic groups are represented'*.

3.3.3 Provision for the Gifted and Talented

Sixteen of the 23 schools visited had made no provision for gifted and talented pupils prior to involvement in the Cluster initiative. As one coordinator stated, *'It was a very new idea...we started from nothingness'*. Only two schools commented that they had made some provision for gifted and talented pupils prior to the Cluster initiative, although neither had a formal policy, rather they simply organised *'add-on or enrichment projects'*, such as summer school activities for pupils who were talented artists. It was unclear whether the remaining five schools had made any provision for gifted and talented pupils prior to involvement in Clusters.

Since being involved in the Cluster initiative, a substantial amount of time had been spent identifying pupils as gifted and talented, which meant it was still *'early days'* in terms of provision. One school was in a *'slight limbo period'* between the identification of pupils and provision, but considered this preferable to *'rushing through the implementation of the programme'*. In another two schools, the

responsible teachers/coordinators were still identifying gifted and talented pupils, and so it was too early to talk about provision (see Section 3.3.2).

In other schools, a range of activities had taken place by the time of interview. Eleven schools had offered a mixture of in-class provision and 'add-on' enrichment activities, although most had started with 'add-ons' and acknowledged that more could be done in class. Regarding in-class provision, some schools had reviewed and extended lesson plans and schemes of work to cater for gifted and talented pupils in lessons (particularly the core subjects for gifted pupils, and music, art and PE for talented pupils). For instance, one primary school had focused on a literacy and numeracy project for gifted pupils in Year 6, which had replaced timetabled lessons. A secondary school had provided talented pupils with the opportunity to take PE GCSE exams early, in Year 9: they could then take a coaching qualification in Year 11.

Another secondary school ran 'immersion projects' for gifted and talented pupils. For instance, pupils in Years 7 to 9 and Year 6 (from the local primary feeder school) were involved in a cross-curricular ICT project, which involved them spending a week off timetable designing a child's mobile telephone. The project was run on the Internet, so pupils could continue with their work at home. The timetable for the week was flexible, in that pupils could stay late if desired. They did not have to wear school uniform, *'which made them feel special'*. The project was thought to have been valuable in terms of raising self-esteem, which was one of the aims, and was going to be replicated in other curriculum areas, such as history and art.

Other descriptions of in-class provision were vague. For instance, one responsible teacher for gifted and talented said *'In classroom planning, teachers are aware of who are the gifted and talented pupils and they plan accordingly'*.

Unusually, four schools had started by focusing solely on providing for the gifted and talented in class, within the curriculum, rather than offering 'add-ons'. One such school had been concentrating on *'changing the diet that every kid gets'*, by focusing on schemes of work and medium-term planning: *'every kid gets it'*. In the coordinators' view, there had been a noticeable change in teaching and learning across the school. Similarly, in another school, the coordinator had looked for *'opportunities within lessons for higher-order thinking'*. She had focused on certain subjects and lessons, such as mathematics and languages, and was soon moving on to provision in science.

Five schools had simply arranged ‘add-on’ activities in and out of school, such as coaching for talented pupils, trips out of school, summer school events and talent shows. However, they recognised the importance of embedding provision for gifted and talented pupils in the curriculum, and planned to explore how to do so in the near future. Provision for pupils in class was considered ‘*a real issue*’ (‘*they are not being stretched in class*’). This was clearly an area where in-school coordinators (and teachers) needed additional support. Difficulties faced in providing for gifted and talented pupils are discussed further in Section 3.3.6.

It should be noted that, due to the time constraints of the gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators, provision was not always as widespread as they would have liked. Other difficulties faced by responsible teachers/coordinators are discussed in Section 3.3.6.

3.3.4 Training and networking for staff

This section includes feedback from Cluster Strand Coordinators and from in-school coordinators.

Training and networking for Cluster-level Strand coordinators

Seven of the eight Gifted and Talented Cluster-level Strand Coordinators had been on the Oxford Brookes training course. All seven were positive about the training and the outcomes, but two made comments about accreditation. One was sceptical about accreditation initially, but in the end felt that the assignments had made her read around the subject to a greater extent than she would otherwise have done. The other coordinator criticised the accreditation for being ‘*too theoretical*’, although had found the training useful in general. The eighth Strand Coordinator had thought about going on the training but did not attend due to time pressures. This person had an ‘interest’ in gifted and talented prior to taking on the role of Strand Coordinator, and thus felt there was no need to go on the training.

The Strand Coordinators tended to network with other Cluster Gifted and Talented Coordinators, usually via e-mail and telephone, but also during occasional conferences/meetings. They had met during the national training and had exchanged contact details, which had proved useful. A number of coordinators said they were working together to organise a conference for new Cluster coordinators. A few coordinators said they had developed links with local Excellence in Cities (EiC) coordinators, to share ideas and resources.

Training and networking for school-level coordinators

Nineteen of the 23 gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators had attended the national training course (the other four had received local training within their LEAs). There were mixed feelings about the national training, with 12 individuals being quite critical about certain aspects of the course. One of the main objections was that coordinators were unaware initially that the course was going to be accredited, and thought this was unnecessary and felt *'patronised'*. As one coordinator commented, *'The pressure to complete an assignment was entirely inappropriate'*. Another criticism was that although the course had been valuable in terms of gaining knowledge and understanding (particularly in relation to identifying gifted and talented pupils), it failed to offer enough practical suggestions in terms of classroom activities: *'How do you really provide for the gifted in the classroom...how do you stimulate and stretch these children?'*

Two coordinators criticised the timing of the training, suggesting it came too late, which meant schools represented had already started implementing the strand but were at different stages, which made training *'a bit bitty'*. One of these coordinators stressed, *'it was like putting the cart before the horse'*. The course coverage was also criticised by some for being quite basic in some respects and for not adopting an appropriate approach: *'It was very basic, and a lot of it was "Now discuss what you think", and people haven't got time for that'*. In contrast, some aspects of the course were considered *'too deep'* and removed from the practical focus of what was helpful in the classroom.

However, it should be noted that seven of the 19 responsible teachers/coordinators who had attended the training were positive about it, and some described it as *'excellent'*.

Four responsible teachers/coordinators said there had been subject-specific training organised by their LEA, which some school staff had attended. In another case, a deputy head had received LEA training on gifted and talented in order to *'introduce the initiative'* to staff. Otherwise, there had been little training for staff, apart from the person with overall responsibility for the strand. It should be noted, however, that most gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators had organised INSET or more informal feedback sessions for other staff based on their own formal training.

The general consensus among responsible teachers/coordinators was that networking with others was more informative than formal training. Exchanging ideas and real

experiences was considered to be of value. However, even though meetings for coordinators were arranged at a Cluster level, it was not always easy for them to attend every one due to other pressures. Strand coordinators made sure that if individuals could not attend meetings they were sent minutes. As an alternative, one Cluster had organised 'Mail Base Links' (an e-mail forum) for gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators. This meant that ideas could be exchanged quickly without having to find time to meet. A coordinator in another Cluster had benefited greatly from liaison with a more successful school in the Cluster: *'The [] school has been brilliant...in an advisory role they have been useful'*.

Cluster Strand Coordinators promote networking between staff from different schools, although this is usually confined to responsible teachers and coordinators. Four Strand Coordinators arranged regular meetings that are split between the phases, and only one of those arranged less frequent cross-phase meetings. Some school-level responsible teachers/coordinators felt they would benefit from such cross-phase networks, but the Strand Coordinators concerned saw the needs of primary and secondary schools as very different. By contrast, the three other Strand Coordinators arranged regular meetings for all coordinators (primary and secondary) because *'transition is such a big issue'*.

3.3.5 Monitoring and evaluation of the Gifted and Talented Strand

Monitoring and evaluating the progress of the Gifted and Talented Strand usually comes under the remit of the Cluster Strand Coordinators, guided by Cluster Chairs/partnership executive groups. However, in one Cluster, the role of the Gifted and Talented Coordinator regarding monitoring and evaluation required clarification, as LEA advisers were responsible for local evaluation of the Strand. Moreover, it was clear from re-visit interviews with Cluster Chairs that monitoring and evaluation of the initiative in general was *'underdeveloped'* in some cases, including monitoring and evaluation of the Gifted and Talented Strand. Some Chairs had difficulty in understanding how the *'measurable impact'* of the strand could be monitored. As one Chair said, *'It is difficult to prove impact of a change in learning styles'*.

Most Cluster-level Strand Coordinators saw monitoring and evaluation as part of their role, although one saw this as the responsibility of school-level coordinators. Three of the eight strand coordinators had not put monitoring or evaluation strategies in place at the time of interview. Their comments included, *'we are deciding what data to collect'*, *'there is nothing to monitor yet'*, and *'it is the next big push'*. The remainder had made a start by monitoring progress of pupils against targets and action

plans. One coordinator stressed that *'there is a culture of monitoring in primary schools that does not exist in secondary schools...I want to build on a culture that doesn't exist in schools'*. This coordinator felt that schools needed particular help and support with monitoring and evaluation (see below).

Responsible teachers/coordinators in schools were asked whether they had their own procedures for monitoring and evaluating the work with gifted and talented pupils. As provision for gifted and talented was in its early stages in some cases, monitoring and evaluation was *'in its infancy'*. For instance, one school coordinator had *'discussed it recently and we are seeking more official systems'*, another was *'addressing it in 2003'*, and another coordinator reported that it was too early to monitor. A number of responsible teachers/coordinators mentioned that they were supporting Cluster-level Strand Coordinators in their role as 'monitors', by tracking pupils' progress against targets and/or action plans, although strategies were often vague. There was some mention of tracking attainment (looking at National Curriculum test and GCSE results): two coordinators mentioned value-added analysis, although they commented that it would be almost two years before an impact on GCSE results could be identified. Those responsible for the Gifted and Talented Strand in schools relied to some extent on discussions with colleagues as an approach to monitoring progress. One had carried out an audit of activity in each department, with the help of subject teachers. Responsible teachers/coordinators thought it was most important to *'try to keep things simple and not too time-consuming'*. It appeared that schools needed further support with monitoring and evaluation.

3.3.6 Issues and challenges related to the Gifted and Talented Strand

In this section, the issues and challenges in relation to the Gifted and Talented Strand are considered. Firstly, the Cluster-level issues and challenges mentioned by Cluster Chairs and Strand Coordinators are presented, and secondly, the perspectives of the school-level responsible teachers/coordinators are summarised.

Cluster-level challenges

The following challenges associated with the Gifted and Talented Strand were mentioned by Cluster Chairs and Strand Coordinators:

- ♦ **School commitment.** Five strand coordinators reported that they had found it difficult to secure the commitment of schools. For instance, one coordinator felt a sense of *'frustration due to the reality in schools'*, and had to accept that schools have *'more pressing issues to face'*. Other priorities prevented school-level coordinators attending meetings or training, or accommodating meetings with the

Cluster strand coordinator. As one Cluster Chair commented, *'you can't force people to do things, but can only hope for professionalism'*.

- ♦ **Teaching and learning.** There was a general feeling that schools needed support with teaching and learning, and embedding provision within the curriculum, rather than simply offering add-on activities. This was seen as a staff training issue, particularly in relation to classroom provision for the gifted. However, one strand coordinator reported that school staff had been reluctant to have direct support in class, as they felt they were being inspected. A Cluster Chair felt that there was a need *'to help all teachers to develop higher-order skills into their delivery'*. Another Cluster Chair commented that Ofsted had picked up that there was *'a lot of confused thinking about it in the classroom'*. In a different Cluster, the Chair said, *'we need to move from events to implementation in schemes of work'*. It was perceived that teachers found it difficult to differentiate in class.
- ♦ **Lack of clarity and direction regarding roles.** Two coordinators mentioned that they required clarification on what should be their responsibilities, and what should remain at the discretion of individual schools. For instance, one coordinator found it difficult to monitor expenditure, as schools were not keeping accurate records, and sought clarification on who had overall responsibility for this.
- ♦ **Measuring impact.** Some interviewees thought it was difficult to measure the impact of the Strand, particularly the impact of a change in teaching and learning styles.

School-level challenges

The following issues and challenges in relation to the Gifted and Talented Strand were identified by responsible teachers/coordinators in schools:

- ♦ **Time.** All of the responsible teachers/coordinators in case-study schools had other responsibilities within schools, which meant they had other commitments. Some coordinators were concerned about their workload, and stressed that this could have a negative impact on the progress of the Gifted and Talented Strand. In one primary school, for instance, the responsible teacher had sole responsibility for identification of gifted and talented pupils, developing activities for the gifted and talented and for delivering them, as well as being the deputy headteacher and assessment coordinator. She said, *'There is only one of me'*. Another coordinator stressed, *'The time demands for the gifted and talented coordinator are much greater than anyone anticipated'*. Many coordinators reported that they were working in their own time.
- ♦ **Starting from scratch.** In the majority of schools, there had been no provision for gifted and talented pupils prior to the Cluster initiative. A general concern was *'how to make it an integral part of what children do, rather than a bolt-on extra'*. Revising schemes of work and lesson plans was a considerable challenge in schools with no previous provision. However, the importance of provision being embedded in the curriculum was appreciated, and it was being addressed by schools. This was raised as an issue by Cluster-level coordinators (see above).

- ♦ **Raising the profile of gifted and talented.** Although the Cluster initiative was helping to raise the profile of gifted and talented pupils, a number of responsible teachers/coordinators felt that there was still a culture in school of concentrating on learning support.
- ♦ **Motivation of staff.** Coordinators in schools were facing problems gaining motivation and commitment from their colleagues. This was perceived to be partly because *'they have so many other things to do'*, and partly because some staff saw the strand as *'elitist'*. One coordinator stressed, *'I cannot get the teaching staff to where I would like them to be'*.
- ♦ **Provision for talented pupils.** One coordinator expressed concern about how to provide for talented pupils. Identifying talented pupils had not been a problem, but *'knowing where to get the provision and how to organise it...knowing the contacts'* had proved difficult. The Cluster coordinator for the Gifted and Talented Strand had provided advice or support.
- ♦ **Stimulating gifted pupils in the classroom.** It was evident that the national training for gifted and talented responsible teachers/coordinators had not provided enough examples of practical activities to use in the classroom, which would stimulate and motivate gifted pupils. As one gifted and talented responsible teacher commented, *'There is a need for basic training for teachers on how to stimulate and stretch these children'*.

Some coordinators also suggested that the Gifted and Talented Strand could have a negative effect on some pupils. However, many positive benefits for pupils were also identified. The effect of the strand on pupils is discussed in the following section.

3.3.7 The effect of the Gifted and Talented Strand

Cluster-level and school-level coordinators were asked their views on the effects of the Gifted and Talented Strand. However, it should be noted that a few individuals did not wish to comment on the effect of the Strand until outcomes had been measured more clearly, or because they thought it was difficult to measure certain impacts: *'how can you measure enjoyment, enthusiasm and even smiles?'* (see monitoring and evaluation discussion in Section 3.3.5 above). The views of those who did respond are discussed below.

Positive effect on gifted and talented pupils

The general consensus was that pupils identified as Gifted or Talented were motivated and enthused. Comments included:

In terms of attitudes and aspirations, it has been an outstanding success.

The change in them has been clearly visible, in that they have improved motivation, simply because they have been singled out this way.

You can definitely see children being stretched at the top end.

If you make them realise they have a talent and make them feel special, it will spill out into the academic performance.

Gifted and talented pupils were thought to enjoy and appreciate the opportunities that had been given to them: *'It makes them feel special...their faces light up'*. This was particularly the case with talented pupils who perhaps lacked academic ability, but were being praised for other talents. Being identified as gifted or talented had *'boosted self-esteem'* as pupils are *'recognised and valued for what they do well...they appreciate provision and feel a sense of self-worth'*.

Negative effects on gifted and talented pupils

Some responsible teachers/coordinators were slightly concerned that being identified as gifted or talented could make pupils feel pressured. For instance, parental and staff expectations of them were raised. Some coordinators also mentioned that they were worried about the 'boffin' or 'swot' labels that might be attached to gifted and talented pupils by others, which might *'ruin street credibility'* and de-motivate gifted and talented pupils. Some said that there was no evidence of this, and that other pupils were pleased to see their peers do well. However, to avoid these problems in case they arose, some schools decided not to publicise the names of gifted and talented pupils. In fact, in some cases, gifted and talented pupils were not themselves aware that they had been identified as such. Where they were identified, one school coordinator was concerned that they were *'arrogant at times'*.

Impact on other pupils

A number of coordinators thought that the positive attitudes of the gifted and talented pupils had spread throughout the rest of the school: *'It will up their [other pupils'] aspirations'*. Moreover, changes in provision were thought to have benefited everyone: *'Changes in classroom practice for the gifted and talented has affected everyone beneficially...it raises expectations'*. Provision was often described as *'inclusive'*, and as one coordinator commented, *'the whole school has experienced something'*. There was some concern that a number of pupils were at the top but had not quite made it onto the gifted and talented register, which could make them feel excluded and de-motivate them. As one coordinator stressed, *'One or two feel they have been unjustifiably excluded'*. In contrast, in one school, the desire to be on the register had motivated pupils.

Impact on schools and the wider community

Strand coordinators felt the Gifted and Talented Strand was beginning to have an impact on schools overall. In their view, schools were starting to see improvements and were working towards targets. In general, *'it has raised awareness of this group of youngsters who have an entitlement to a different curriculum'*. However, although it had raised awareness of the need to provide for these young people, there was still a lot of work to do, according to strand coordinators. For instance, *'it will not happen overnight. Teachers need to change if we want it to be deep-rooted, not just a bolt-on'*. On a more positive note, schools were thought to be working together to build good practice, and in some cases improved relationships between primary and secondary schools had developed.

It was difficult for interviewees to assess the effect of the Strand on parents and the wider community. Schools had different approaches to informing parents: some would know their child was on the register, whereas others would not. Where parents were informed, they had reacted positively.

3.4 The Tailored Strand

This section considers the Tailored Strand of EC. It differs from the other EC strands as it allows Clusters a considerable amount of scope in determining its focus, given that it is intended to meet specific local needs and circumstances. As might therefore be expected, the work being undertaken is very diverse. Where possible, statistical information collected from the school survey questionnaire is used to complement that obtained, by interview, at the 23 case-study schools, with the Tailored Strand Coordinators and the follow-up interviews with Cluster Chairs.

In order to provide an indication of the scope of the strand, the first two parts of the section provide information on the focus of the strand and the activities undertaken within individual schools. The other parts of the section examine key aspects of the management of the strand, including staffing involvement and training, the implementation issues that have emerged to date, and how the work within the strand is being monitored and evaluated. The section concludes with an examination of perceptions of the success of the strand so far.

3.4.1 The focus of the Tailored Strand

The school survey questionnaire sought evidence on the focus of the Tailored Strand within the primary and secondary schools involved in the 11 Clusters. Respondents

were able to list up to three separate activities. These were grouped according to several broad categories to aid analysis and discussion. Table 3.3 provides details of the statistical data obtained for both the primary and the secondary schools responding.

Table 3.3 Focus of the Tailored Strand

Focus of activity	Primary Schools	Secondary Schools
Curriculum/teaching and learning focus	29	22
Parents/family focus	19	9
Subject-specific focus	18	2
Cultural focus	11	6
Community focus	10	6
Other	22	3
None at present	3	-
No response/uncodeable	1	1
N =	71	35

A multiple response question.

For primary and secondary schools, ‘curriculum/teaching and learning’ was the most popular choice for the focus of the Tailored Strand (29 of the 71 primary schools and 22 of the 35 secondary schools). This category was distinct from that which had a subject-specific focus. It included, for example, the development of thinking and independent learning skills, improving curriculum provision through the development of curriculum enrichment activities, the provision of additional examination courses, the development of on-line learning, and the removal or reduction of specific barriers to learning. Because of its important impact on learning, the management of transition was also included in this category and is examined in detail in Section 4.2.

‘Parents/family focus’ was the second most popular choice for the focus of the Tailored Strand for both primary (19) and secondary (9) schools. Activities were designed to increase parental involvement in, and support of, the child’s learning. Along with the raising of parental awareness, specific attention was directed towards the provision of workshops and other programmes for parents and families, and the development of family partnerships.

The rankings of the remaining categories for the two sectors varied. Activities with a subject-specific focus, for example, literacy, were chosen as the focus of the Tailored

Strand by 18 primary schools. However, in the secondary sector, only two schools had opted for a subject-specific focus.

In the secondary sector, the ‘cultural’ and ‘community’ categories ranked equal third (each was the focus of the Tailored Strand in six schools). Through the cultural focus there was a concern to address aspects of cultural deprivation and to develop pupil awareness of other cultures. The community category included the building of civic pride, addressing community change and turbulence, the identification and support of community needs, and the work of EC-appointed ‘Community Development Workers’.

In the primary schools, the ‘other’ category was very diverse and included a focus on attendance and punctuality issues, addressing pupil mobility and transience, and a range of pupil issues such as poor self-esteem and confidence, disaffection, and attitudes towards learning.

3.4.2 Tailored Strand activities

In order to gain some indication of the progress of the Tailored Strand within individual schools, the school survey questionnaire asked respondents to describe up to three activities carried out thus far. As before, these were grouped into broad categories. Table 3.4 provides details of the statistical data obtained for the responding primary and the secondary schools.

Table 3.4 Activities undertaken as part of the Tailored Strand

Activity	Primary Schools	Secondary Schools
Preparatory work	34	15
Parents/family	20	6
Curriculum/Teaching and learning	18	16
Administration	5	1
Community	2	1
Other	16	9
None/little	13	2
No response/uncodeable	4	2
N =	71	35

A multiple response question.

It is perhaps to be expected that in the early stages of the initiative the emphasis will be on activities that might be described as ‘preparatory’. This category included such

activities as reviews of current provision, planning activities such as the establishment of working groups, allocation of funds and the setting up of facilities, the appointment and training of staff, and the identification of pupil cohorts for specific activities. This was the highest-ranked category in the primary sector, mentioned by 34 primary schools, and the second highest in the secondary sector, mentioned by 15 schools.

In the secondary schools, the highest-ranked category, mentioned by 16 schools, was 'curriculum/teaching and learning'. This was less of a focus in the primary schools (mentioned by 18 schools). Specific activities reported included a variety of curriculum enrichment activities, such as theatre and arts visits and artists in residence, the development of thinking, learning, problem-solving and study skills, promoting independent learning, and involvement in specific programmes such as the 'Comenius' project and IQEA (Improving the Quality of Education for All).

Six of the 23 case-study schools visited reported an emphasis within the Tailored Strand on the curriculum/teaching and learning. One school reported that the Cluster had adopted a broad focus on teaching and learning to enable individual schools to tackle different issues. The Cluster Coordinator was exploring accelerated learning including 'brain gym'. This had been tried at the school to see if it helped to '*calm down*' children after lunch. It was reported that an unexpected benefit of this had been helping lower ability pupils with their writing, in particular those who had problems with 'b' and 'd' reversal. The development of thinking skills, including accelerated learning, was also one of the focuses of the Tailored Strand in three of the other schools visited.

Another school was focusing attention on speaking and listening. This was tied in very closely with the School Development Plan: speaking and listening run through all of the subject plans and had been identified as a whole-school issue on the grounds that '*poor language skills underpin everything.*' A speaking and listening 'playground' had been designed and was in the process of being developed. This was for use by the whole school but with a specific focus on key stage 1. This was a resource-based playground with activities to stimulate speaking and listening, to build vocabulary and to develop pupils' social skills. It was intended that specific lessons would be carried out in the playground.

A secondary school in another Cluster was promoting activities intended to engage students in 'forward-looking' approaches to learning including independent learning and the development of online study opportunities. In this Cluster all the secondary

schools had adopted the same theme and the Strand was also working towards all schools achieving specialist school status.

A focus on 'parents/family' activities was a key feature of primary school work, mentioned by 20 schools; in the secondary schools there was slightly less of a focus on activities in this category (six schools).

Seven of the schools visited had parents/families activities as at least one aspect of their Tailored Strand. In one primary school the aim was to further develop relations with families in order to minimise the effect of extended visits overseas, which had in the past resulted in pupils being '*traumatised*' by the culture shifts. In two Clusters, posts had been created to further develop links between home and school, which took a number of different forms. In one of the visited schools, for example, one of the activities included a programme developed to encourage parents to work with their Year 1 children and obtain NVQ accreditation. In another it was reported that a range of courses had been developed for parents and that other activities had taken place to increase the number of parents engaging with the school.

The 'other' category in Table 3.4 covered a wide range of activities including: attendance; the development of pupil opportunities within local businesses; involvement in the Eco-school initiative; the production of a school newspaper; after-school clubs; public speaking events and foreign trips. These accounted for a significant proportion of primary and secondary school activities. Two of the schools visited reported activities relating to their close links to the European mainland, including student exchange programmes, work experience abroad, participation in the European Schools parliament, and educational and sport-related visits. One of the schools had set up video-conferencing to communicate with other schools on a French-speaking programme. This will also be available to the local community for use in adult learning and by local businesses.

The goal of improving attendance was often one of the aims of parent-focused Tailored Strands. One coordinator remarked that the parent-based theme had been chosen to combat parents' '*disengagement*' from education which led to poor (pupil) attendance. It was also a goal of one school where the Cluster theme was 'Missing Out' which addresses issues such as attendance, exclusion and '*turbulence*'. (The latter refers to a situation whereby the turnover of pupils in a school is significantly higher than normal because of factors such as deprivation or significant numbers of refugees/asylum seekers in the school. The reason for turbulence may, however, vary

from school to school.) As part of this Strand, concentrated work was centred on those children with a pattern of poor attendance and their parents, in order to raise attendance levels. There was a similar theme in a primary school in another Cluster. Here the focus was on ‘transient’ children (i.e. those who moved schools frequently) and the Tailored Strand took the form of a range of activities undertaken in order to break down the barriers to learning for such children. These included: peer support; the development of child profiles (by collecting information about individual children); early assessment; the tracking of progress; and the use of a home-school diary.

Several schools had cultural enrichment as part of the strand focus. In one secondary school, curricular and extra-curricular activities in the Arts had taken place. These included school productions such as a musical to be performed at the Edinburgh Festival, foreign trips, poetry days and performers coming into the school. Two other schools in another Cluster reported that enrichment activities (such as school trips, visits and speakers coming into the school) were helping to compensate for pupils’ lack of experience in these areas because they came from ‘poor homes’, had cultural differences or had these two background factors in combination.

One of the Clusters had included community relations and civic pride within its Tailored Strand. The activities initiated included a project whereby pupil representatives from each of the Cluster schools worked together to raise the profile of their community. Schools already reported success arising from a widely disseminated poster campaign which had received much positive publicity.

The particular focus of the Tailored Strand within a Cluster often involved close links with other strands particularly the Gifted and Talented and the Learning Mentor strands. In one Cluster, for example, where the focus was on teaching and learning, the Gifted and Talented Strand and the Tailored Strand combined to provide immersion projects for gifted and talented pupils. In another Cluster where the Tailored Strand focus was on ‘Missing Out’ (described earlier in this section), part of the Tailored Strand involved enhanced provision for LMs to provide a screening and induction programme for new entrants. In a third example, where the theme of the Tailored Strand was ‘*engaging parents*’, a team of outreach workers had been employed to work with parents to raise expectations. It was reported that in this Cluster the Tailored and LM strands complemented each other, as the LMs supported pupils while the outreach workers ‘*supported parents in supporting pupils*’.

When the first round of school interviews took place (summer 2002) the initiative was still in its early stages and very little, if any, work had been carried out in some of the schools on the Tailored Strand. In one primary school visited, for example, this reflected the situation at Cluster level where the Cluster Coordinator had not been in post very long and was concentrating on the Gifted and Talented Strand. Money for the Tailored Strand had been vired to create a base for the school's Learning Mentors.

Progress was obviously more advanced in the schools interviewed somewhat later (autumn/winter 2002) but in one of these schools, due to the slow start, the Strand was still described as '*a bit developmental*' and in another Cluster the Strand in primary schools did not commence until September 2002 because of the need to recruit staff.

In some instances, the activities promoted as part of the Tailored Strand were built upon or extended existing activities. One school reported the involvement of all staff in a programme focussing on a teaching and learning initiative (IQEA), which is a theme of the Tailored Strand of EC. This programme has been operational for some time and pre-dates EC. It is seen to have had a very important impact in the school and permeates all of its work. It was envisaged that EC would complement this initiative but would not change it. Another school reported that a pre-existing scheme to help tackle the problem of children spending excessive time overseas to visit their relatives, had been enhanced by its inclusion in the Tailored Strand. Another school noted that Cluster funding had proved '*invaluable*' in facilitating additional activities that formed part of a pre-existing programme in the school.

It is important to note that, where schools are building upon existing work, it may prove difficult to disentangle the **specific effects** of the Cluster initiative.

3.4.3 Staff involvement and training

The scope of staff involvement in the Tailored Strand varied from school to school and depended on the particular focus of the work of the strand. Staff with particular responsibilities were involved in the programme, as appropriate. These included staff with responsibilities for teaching and learning support (such as Learning Mentors, Learning Support Assistants and Teaching Assistants), those with responsibility for particular key stages, members of senior management, heads of year, the staff of particular subject departments, and classroom teachers. In some instances specific appointments, such as 'attendance officers' or 'neighbourhood enrichment officers', had been made using EC funds to support the work of the Tailored Strand and it was reported that in some cases training had been provided by the Educational Social

Work service. In other cases, staff funded from other sources (youth workers for example) contributed to the work of the Strand. In several cases where the Tailored Strand had an overarching theme such as teaching and learning, it was reported that all staff were involved. However, not surprisingly, it appeared that staff involvement was more extensive in some programmes that had a history pre-dating the EC initiative. In some cases the initiative had extended staff involvement in these pre-existing initiatives and/or had served to formalise arrangements.

In many cases there had been no training in relation to the Tailored Strand. Some schools did not feel that any specific training was needed as staff were already well trained in the relevant areas. In other cases it was not considered necessary because of the focus of the Tailored Strand. Nevertheless, the availability of funds for training was seen as valuable, although there was some concern about the availability and quality of the training available to support the work of the Strand. The training that had occurred was related to the specific activities undertaken and varied from school to school.

The same pattern was repeated in respect of training for the Tailored Strand Coordinators. Only a minority had received any training and, where it had been received, it had been of a specialised nature and closely related to one or more elements of the Tailored Strand. Only one Strand Coordinator, who had not received training, felt that some training would have been beneficial but it appeared that nothing suitable had been identified.

3.4.4 Implementation issues

Some schools reported that there had been no problems in the implementation of the Tailored Strand but for others it was still early days and they felt they had not yet encountered any significant problems. Where problems had been experienced, these centred around organisational issues such as finding time, encouraging staff to try new approaches, and liaison with other schools.

- ♦ Time, or the lack of it, was the main problem commented upon during the visits to schools. In some cases the problem was caused by the fact that those with involvement in the Tailored Strand had other, often multiple, responsibilities elsewhere. Where staff have taken up roles within the Tailored Strand because of their expertise and other responsibilities, this is perhaps to be expected. One school reported that there were *'too many demands on staff'* and this made it difficult for staff to find time to plan and coordinate strand activities. In this school there was concern to develop and coordinate activities across key stages, and both key stage 1 and 2 coordinators were involved in the initiative. The key stage 2 coordinator was the 'coaching' initiative coordinator, and a classroom

teacher. The fact that the two coordinators could not meet was felt to be a hindrance to their effectiveness (and presumably to the effectiveness of the strand overall). A further school faced another, but different, time-associated problem, namely, to find sufficient space in pupils' timetables to fit in the cultural enrichment activities that were the focus of the Tailored Strand.

- ♦ The need to develop staff confidence to try new approaches was commented upon in visits to two schools. Both had teaching and learning as the focus of their strand. The headteacher in one of the schools commented: *'You are really asking teachers to shift their practice and to think in a different way'*. In the other school, the assistant headteacher interviewed felt that the 'fear of failure' was an obstacle and considered that there was a need to encourage staff to take risks. In another school, with a broadly based focus on the Arts, it was felt that staff had been *'a bit slow in coming forward with ideas'*.
- ♦ In another school where a new post had been created to further the links with parents, the initial problem had been *'acceptance of the new member of staff by teachers who felt that their role was being undermined'* but it was reported that this problem had since been overcome.
- ♦ One school commented on the problems of liaising with other schools within the local Cluster. This was felt to be due to the involvement of both selective and non-selective schools. The headteacher commented that: *'The day to day organisation is fine. But where there are selective and non-selective schools, it is hard to mix and match. In terms of individual programmes, the school can simply get on with it.'*

3.4.5 Monitoring and evaluation

Reflecting the situation within the initiative as a whole, evaluation and monitoring procedures for the Tailored Strand were generally not very well developed. Eight of the visited schools reported the existence of some form of evaluation and monitoring. These varied considerably. In several cases the initiatives had been brought under the auspices of the EC Tailored Strand but pre-dated it. In others, the systems had developed in response to the Tailored Strand. One school focusing on speaking and listening in key stages 1 and 2, had developed a system in specific response to the Tailored Strand. For the purpose of key stage 1 monitoring, there was a system which involved taking a baseline in Year 1 in aspects of speaking and listening (for example, vocabulary progress and expression). This was monitored and assessed termly by the class teacher, and the results were passed on to the key stage 1 coordinator, and then on to the SMT. They had never formally assessed in this way before, but because of the extra emphasis resulting from Cluster money they will do so in the future. As far as key stage 2 monitoring was concerned, there was a practical assessment in drama and one main element of monitoring every five weeks. Next year the school intends to look more closely at progress across the whole curriculum, rather than just drama.

Another school visited used a combination of procedures. In this school the Tailored Strand focused on family outreach and Learning Mentors, with specific reference to the transition from key stage 2 to key stage 3. Baseline assessments of pupils were carried out and target sheets produced which were used to monitor and evaluate pupils' performance by the pastoral team. The coordinator supervised and worked in partnership with the LM, and also carried out family outreach. In addition, the coordinator was responsible for termly evaluation of the Learning Mentors and reported to the deputy head on progress, strategies, provision and training.

3.4.6 The success of the Tailored Strand

Finally, in this section the success of the Tailored Strand is considered. The evidence from the first EC Progress Report (Schagen *et al.*, 2001) suggested that the Tailored Strand was seen in a very positive light because it allowed Clusters/schools to focus on local areas of need. Whilst the Tailored Strand is still in some cases in its early stages of development in the individual schools and its impact remains to be seen, the statistical evidence from the school survey questionnaires was overwhelmingly positive. In response to a question about how far the Tailored Strand would meet the needs of the school, only one primary school and two secondary schools indicated that the Strand would not meet the needs of the school, or was not applicable. The most common response from primary (23) and secondary (13) schools was that the Tailored Strand would have a significant impact on the school or that it was very much needed. A smaller number of schools said that it was too early to make definitive judgements, or that the success of the Tailored Strand would depend on certain conditions. Specific impacts reported or anticipated included the following:

- ◆ will raise awareness amongst parents and increase parental involvement/support
- ◆ provides resources/support for the school
- ◆ promotes pupil self-esteem
- ◆ will have a positive impact on the effects of cultural isolation/will provide cultural enrichment
- ◆ will have a positive impact on the whole school or the whole curriculum
- ◆ will promote involvement in the local community.

This very positive picture was borne out by the headteachers interviewed in the 23 case-study schools and by the Chairs of the Clusters in the follow-up interviews with them. One of the latter felt that the Tailored Strand in his school, which focused on developing a parental partnership, had been particularly successful and had been *'instrumental in raising performance in GCSEs and improving relations with the*

Asian community in the area'. He felt that it was the very nature of the Tailored Strand that had made it so positive for his school and commented:

It is no accident that the most successful of the strands has been the Tailored Strand, because that is the one we chose and believed would work best, and we were right.

Another Chair in a Cluster where curriculum enrichment was the theme of the Tailored Strand said that '*some wonderful stuff [was] happening*' while a third simply referred to the Tailored Strand as '*brilliant*'.

Specific benefits mentioned in the visits to schools included those relating to the additional resources, which one school felt had allowed for a more structured approach and '*made our wish list come true*'. In another two schools, the additional funds were used to expand existing projects including the extension, in one case, to all pupils in the school. Other reported benefits in schools included improved pupil self-esteem, providing cultural enrichment activities to all children, improved home-school relations, an increase in the involvement of parents generally and raising the status of Tailored Strand-focussed activities within the school. Schools reporting no impact as yet, nevertheless anticipated that the strand would be '*very successful*' in meeting the needs of the school.

4. ISSUES

4.1 Partnerships: Collaboration and Competition

The philosophy underlining the Excellence Clusters initiative is the raising of standards by encouraging cooperation between schools. When asked in the questionnaire survey to comment on the benefits of being involved in the Cluster initiative, 'liaising with other schools and sharing good practice' was one of the most frequent responses given by primary schools (18) and secondary schools (13). Headteachers in the case-study schools also identified collaboration as one of the most important advantages of the initiative.

In this section we focus on the different forms of collaboration and its corollary, competition between schools that emerged from the interviews with headteachers in the 23 case-study schools, with Strand Coordinators and in the follow-up interviews with Cluster Chairs.

The key themes are:

- ♦ pre-existing links
- ♦ new links
- ♦ collaboration between similar and dissimilar schools
- ♦ time constraints associated with collaborative ventures
- ♦ collaboration and potential negative consequences
- ♦ communication between schools
- ♦ collaboration and innovation.

In the subsequent sections each of these are discussed; it should be noted, however, that these themes are not mutually exclusive and there is, inevitably, a degree of overlap between them.

4.1.1 Pre-existing links

The headteachers and other staff (involved in the EC Strands) who were interviewed identified a number of links between schools. In some cases these predated Excellence Clusters. Some links had developed as a result of other government initiatives, for example, the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) or Statutory Education Action Zones. In others, the links were more local or the roots

were less obvious, and in some cases had been built up on the basis of personal contact.

One boys' secondary school had close links with other secondary schools in the area under the former TVEI initiative. Once this ended there *'was some drifting. This coincided with the new, competitive market in education'*. The headteacher reported links with a nearby girls' school which pre-dated the EC initiative; they were reported to be historical and included joint timetabling with the sixth form of the girls school, joint drama productions and joint visits and exchanges. The head noted that the EC initiative had provided the opportunity to *'regenerate'* some of those links.

The Gifted and Talented Coordinator at the same school also remarked on the partnerships that existed with the former TVEI schools. He noted that when grant-maintained status was introduced these partnerships broke down. In relation to cooperation within the Gifted and Talented Strand, the Coordinator noted that in the Cluster, which included selective schools, it was *'easier to collaborate on the talented side with other schools than on the gifted or academic side'*. On a positive note, the Gifted and Talented Coordinator reported that:

Excellence [Clusters] has enabled the school to re-establish links between schools in the area, which had reduced...and these links will lead to development and co-operation.

The headteacher of a secondary school in another Cluster and within a Statutory EAZ had not formed or developed strong links with other schools in the Cluster. In this case, most of the established links were with the schools in the Statutory EAZ (although two of the EAZ schools were also in the Excellence Cluster). The headteacher believed that, when the EAZ formally ended, a new Cluster might be formed that would involve the existing EAZ schools and possibly some additional secondary schools.

In one of the case-study schools, the Cluster had been overlaid onto an existing pyramid structure where there was already a culture of working together.

Another headteacher of a primary school in the same Cluster had recently been appointed, and retained close personal links with schools outside the Cluster as a result of her former role as a deputy headteacher in the same LEA. She saw the Excellence Cluster as offering new opportunities to develop links with schools in similar circumstances to her new school.

4.1.2 New links

The Cluster initiative had clearly engendered a wide range of new links between schools and this was seen as one of its major benefits. One primary headteacher, for example, reported that all primary headteachers in the Cluster had formed a ‘network’ and that they also met regularly with secondary schools in the Cluster. Another headteacher noted that the Cluster had brought cross-phase schools together and commented: *‘There is already a greater understanding between secondary and primary heads and a greater respect’*. In one primary school the headteacher reported that all schools in the Cluster had built on the principles of partnership and formed links, and it was noted that Cluster meetings were held at a different school each time.

Links with LEA schools outside the Cluster

In a number of Clusters it was also reported that attempts had been made to involve other schools within the same LEA but outside the Cluster. In one Cluster it was noted that considerable effort had been made to share good practice across all schools in the LEA. In this case, training was offered to non-Cluster schools and they were also involved in gifted and talented activities.¹³

In another Cluster, an agreement had been made with six schools outside of the Cluster for LMs to work with them, funded by Single Regeneration Budget money and line-managed by the Cluster’s link Learning Mentor. In a third Cluster which consisted of secondary schools only, attempts had been made to involve primary schools *‘as much as possible, for example, [by] liaising with Year 6 for the Gifted and Talented Strand’*. In two Clusters it was also reported that conferences for schools across the LEA were to be held in order to share Cluster ideas and practice and in a further Cluster a website was being established to share good practice.

Links with other Clusters

Most Cluster Chairs reported that links had been formed with other Clusters, often their closest neighbours, although other more wide-ranging links were also reported. One Cluster Chair commented: *‘There is a great willingness to share ideas’*.

The most extensive links between different Clusters were reported to have developed at the level of the individual Strands and particularly involving the Learning Mentor and Gifted and Talented Strands. An LM Strand Coordinator reported that he had developed and was continuing to develop links at a number of different levels. These included a continuing link with LMs who had taken part in the same national training

¹³ It was made clear in the interview that these activities did not involve the use of Cluster funding.

programme, and with LMs at a regional level (facilitated by the National Mentoring Network and funded by the DfES). In addition, he reported that he was also looking at the possibility of introducing 'e-buddies' so that LMs could contact others and share ideas with them. Other LM Strand Coordinators also reported similar ongoing links with those they trained with and at a regional level, whilst links with neighbouring Clusters were commonly mentioned during the interviews.

One Gifted and Talented Strand Coordinator, who was in one of the first Clusters to be announced (October 2000), reported that Gifted and Talented Strand Coordinators in these Clusters had formed a group and continued to meet. One of their activities had been to arrange a course for the Gifted and Talented Coordinators in the next set of Clusters (announced in February 2001) and she hoped that they, in turn, would help to cascade training in the same way.

Two Gifted and Talented Strand Coordinators in the second group of Clusters to be announced (see above) reported that this cascading of training was indeed taking place and that a one-day conference, funded by the DfES, was being set up in order that their expertise and experience could be shared with new Gifted and Talented Coordinators.

Links between Strand Coordinators in Excellence Clusters and those in EiC areas were also reported, particularly where there were EiC areas located fairly nearby.

4.1.3 The role of the 'more successful' school

Many of the Cluster schools are in difficult circumstances, facing broadly comparable challenges. Partnerships therefore tended to involve links with similar schools. Some of these links predated the formation of the Clusters; for example, in one Cluster it was reported that Church and community schools formed separate groupings. A secondary headteacher noted that the main advantage of EC was working with schools in similar circumstances, which was helping to '*develop practical solutions to long-term strategic development*'. In another Cluster, a primary headteacher noted that, as all schools were within the same catchment area and were serving the same kinds of children, it provided useful comparisons.

However, the DfES guidelines recommend the inclusion of 'more successful' schools, which may be Beacon schools, specialist schools, or schools with particularly good examination results. In our first report (Schagen *et al.*, 2001), we noted that there was some questioning of the role that these '*good*' schools might play; and (given their

often very different circumstances) how far good practice could be effectively transferred.

In the follow-up interviews with the Chairs of the Clusters the role of the 'more successful' school within the Cluster was addressed and it appeared that initial scepticism about this aspect of EC remained in a number of cases. Where responses were made, the comments tended to be negative as indicated below in the views of three Cluster Chairs:

All members of the Cluster thought 'the more successful school' was a mistake. In their view, the school chosen had never faced the same problems as them.

There is a tension re: 'the more successful schools': the heads [names of schools] are not sure what they can contribute, because they are in different circumstances.

The 'more successful schools' had not worked so naturally with the other schools because ... [they] do not share the same problems.

Other issues raised revolved around the lack of clarity about the role of the more successful school (expressed by one Chair) and specific problems concerning the geographical location of the nominated schools (mentioned by two Clusters). One Cluster Chair reported that one Beacon school was located 15 miles away and had 'never attended a meeting'.

However, three Clusters Chairs presented a more positive view of the role of the 'more successful' school, although in one instance this was not without reservations. In one of these, the current Chair (the chair rotates on an annual basis) was also the headteacher of one of the two 'more successful' schools in the Cluster. He noted that both of these schools saw the Cluster as an opportunity 'to share expertise in a sensitive way by acting as a resource' and also saw the Cluster as important for their own self-learning. He gave an example of this approach from his own school, which had 'loaned' a mathematics teacher to a school experiencing staffing difficulties. He doubted whether the other headteacher would have approached him with a request for such help if it had not been for the links that had been forged via the Cluster.

Another Cluster Chair felt that the role of the Beacon school had become 'more established' particularly in the sharing of ideas, involvement in the Tailored Strand and in cross-phase continuity. In one Cluster, the Chair noted some of the interesting activities that the 'more successful' school was able to share with the rest of the

Cluster, notably an initiative on ‘thinking skills’ and the school’s use of mentors to boost pupil achievement. However, it was also felt that this school was not a ‘*practical*’ model for other schools in the Cluster because it was so different from the others in terms of its levels of achievement and characteristics of the pupil intake.

Although the interviews with case-study schools did not specifically address the role of the ‘more successful school’ within the Cluster, several headteachers described their experience of working with schools in different circumstances from their own. This provided evidence that, in some cases at least, initial doubts had been overcome and positive relationships established between schools in different circumstances.

A secondary school in an area of ‘huge deprivation’ had established links with a more successful school within the Cluster. In this case, the Gifted and Talented Coordinator had developed close links with the more successful school and this had proved ‘*very useful*’. In the same Cluster, a primary headteacher commented on the benefit of children being involved with schools of different types, including more successful schools: ‘*We are building relationships and often get together to share good practice*’.

In one of the case-study primary schools, in an area of high social deprivation, there had been initial difficulties in establishing collaborative arrangements with a primary school with a contrasting intake. This headteacher felt that the relationship between the two schools was a ‘*bit prickly*’ to start with and that the other headteacher was ‘*embarrassed*’. However, the relationship had settled down well and the schools were now networking on equal terms. There was evidence in some other Clusters also of a growing realisation that collaboration brought benefits to all involved, and that all schools (core schools as well as more successful schools) had something to contribute to the process.

4.1.4 Time constraints

The amount of time required to carry out effective collaboration was identified as a major problem particularly in the schools that faced the most difficult challenges. Many staff had multiple jobs in schools. For example, in one secondary school, the Gifted and Talented Coordinator was also a member of the management body of the school, the key stage 3 strategy manager and the out-of-hours coordinator. In this school, due to historically falling rolls, now significantly reduced, the school has been ‘*running a significantly reduced senior management team*’ and had only one deputy headteacher.

In another secondary school, time pressures were reported as one of the disadvantages of collaborative working:

Staffing and [teacher] retention is also a particular problem which makes the issue of staff release – and those activities associated with the initiative – problematic.

Those involved with the initiative were all ‘*key players*’ in the school and the school could not do without them even if finance was available to release them periodically. The same interviewee noted that ‘*partnerships between schools are difficult because of day-to-day pressures*’.

The Gifted and Talented Coordinator in another secondary school considered that time pressures had prevented her actively liaising with other schools – other than at the Cluster meeting. A similar problem was raised by the LM and LSU Coordinator who found it difficult to visit schools because of the problem of finding suitable cover. It seemed that even though money was available, supply cover was not.

The Learning Mentor in a primary school in the same Cluster drew attention to the lack of time ‘*at their level*’ for LMs to meet their counterparts and liaise informally; it was not always possible for them to attend Strand meetings. The responsible teacher for gifted and talented pupils, in the same school, considered that there was a need for another level of collaboration between Gifted and Talented Coordinators, namely, *across* Clusters not just *within* them. However, there was little opportunity to do this. The national training, she felt, had offered this opportunity as two Clusters attended the same course. However, they did not mix together and worked in their separate Cluster groups, so the opportunity was missed.

It is interesting to contrast the lack of time reported by school staff for liaison with colleagues, both within the Cluster and beyond it, with the extensive liaison reported by some of the Strand Coordinators (see Section 4.1.2). The pressures on staff in schools, often with multiple responsibilities, appears to be a considerable impediment to successful liaison.

4.1.5 Collaboration and potential negative consequences

Notwithstanding the difficulties with collaboration, the headteacher of a high-performing school indicated that he wanted ‘*to avoid competition with other schools*’. Examples of strategies included possibly advising students who wished to do GNVQs to go to other schools in the area, and if students from other schools wanted to do A-

levels they might be advised to come to the high-performing school: *'On our particular role, we have taken the lead on [the Gifted and Talented Strand].'*

The headteacher of a lower-performing school in the Cluster reported that the advantages of collaborative working outweighed the disadvantages. He also noted though: *'There may be a fear in some schools of losing children'* to high-performing schools, although this was not a concern at this particular school.

A majority of the Cluster Chairs reported some degree of resentment or resistance to the Cluster from schools within the LEA that were outside of the Cluster. However, some of this was considered unreasonable. This issue was also raised by some headteachers in the interviews with case-study schools. A primary school headteacher, for example, saw resistance by schools outside the Cluster as one of the main challenges of the initiative for the schools involved. She said that schools outside the Cluster saw the same schools continually being involved in new initiatives (her school was involved in eight such initiatives) and resented it. She felt more needed to be done to explain why her school and similar schools were selected and, in particular, to stress that this was due to the acute problems they faced.

However, in several instances the Chairs of Cluster felt that some other schools should have been included in the Cluster because they shared the characteristics of schools within the Cluster. Comments included the following:

There are poor schools outside of the Cluster: it is silly.

[Name of LEA] is in a desperate state; [the Cluster] could have benefited from including all schools.

One Chair noted that he would have liked to have included more schools within the Cluster but would have needed extra funds to do so. Similarly, a Chair who had involved a large number of schools in the Cluster, wished that he had not as the funding was spread too thinly between schools.

4.1.6 Communication between schools

Communication between schools was reported to be the *'biggest benefit'* by a headteacher of a secondary school. Links were now reported to be *'very strong'* and dialogue was said to be not just at the level of the headteachers:

Although we have always talked to each other, we worked separately. Dialogue goes way beyond the Excellence Agenda.

The same positive comments about improved communication were made by a secondary headteacher in a different Cluster, who met once with a term with another headteacher to talk about strategic developments and to share good practice. The two schools had a joint senior leadership group, which was reported to be ‘*a spin-off*’ of the EC initiative. A primary headteacher in the same Cluster concurred with this view. She felt ‘*communication of the middle ground*’ was particularly useful, and schools were now using electronic communication more, so that they were less reliant on meetings. She felt that the Cluster offered ‘*wonderful swapover opportunities*’.

4.1.7 Collaboration and innovation

Collaboration, by sharing good practice in teaching and learning and by offering opportunities for innovation, both inside and outside the classroom, was highlighted by many headteachers.

One secondary school headteacher stressed the wide-ranging benefits of collaboration in teaching and learning.

Excellence [Clusters] has radically altered the way we teach and learn, for example, in the sharing of good practice, in awareness and in the engagement and sharing of ideas, which have led to improved classroom practice. And the fact we are developing into a collaborative learning community which will help to address social issues ... It's been a terrific idea, because it involves a number of schools all working together – other initiatives have been focused on single schools.

Similar views were expressed by the headteacher of a secondary school in another Cluster. He noted that the advantages of collaborative working lay in the opportunity for innovation and learning new or different perspectives. The headteacher felt that the EAZ – and also the Cluster – had enabled the school to take on a specific issue, such as attendance, and ‘*deal with it at its source*’. He gave as an example the fact that some Year 7 students had come from primary schools with poor attendance ‘*which can be tackled through partnerships*’.

The headteacher of a primary school in the same Cluster considered that the main benefit of Excellence Clusters was the collaborative element. In particular, it allowed the sharing of knowledge about other schools, as well as the sharing of ideas and theories. In addition, it helped in benchmarking and ‘*not just in the official sense*’. For example, in looking at attendance across schools (part of their Tailored Strand) it helped schools to share knowledge by looking at how some schools with a similar catchment area and similar children managed to achieve better attendance than others.

In a further Cluster, collaboration was taking place between a primary school and a more successful secondary school. An interesting approach to achieve higher levels of literacy was utilised as part of the Tailored Strand – a book of poetry of ‘*high quality*’ had been produced. Not only did the publication enhance individual pupils’ self-esteem but it had ‘*raised the status of literacy in the school*’.

4.2 Transition

It was evident from the evaluation of Excellence Clusters that some schools were concerned about a decline in the achievement and attainment of pupils in Year 7, and suspected that ‘emotional difficulties’ faced during transition from primary to secondary school were contributory. The questionnaire sent to Cluster schools sought information on transfer arrangements. Subsequently, interviews with Cluster staff allowed for a more detailed exploration of whether the Cluster initiative had helped schools to promote primary-secondary continuity and progression to a greater extent than previously. The findings from both the questionnaire and face-to-face interviews are discussed in this section.

4.2.1 Transfer arrangements

The findings from the questionnaire survey show that pupils from any one primary school transfer to, on average, seven secondary schools at the end of Year 6. Regarding secondary schools, an average of 19 primary or middle schools were represented among their intake in September 2001.

Of the 71 primary schools that responded to the survey, 60 had special arrangements in place to facilitate the transfer of pupils from primary to secondary school. Of the 35 secondary schools responding, 31 had special transfer arrangements in place. Most primary schools (59) and secondary schools (30) had arranged taster/induction days for pupils. A similar number had arranged staff visits between schools. Fifty-five primary schools had arranged for their pupils to visit the secondary schools they would transfer to, in order for them to familiarise themselves with the environment. Primary schools were involved in cross-phase projects (29) and cross-phase working groups (16). Of the secondary schools included in the survey, 25 had been involved in collaborative cross-phase activities with primary schools. Nineteen secondary schools had organised summer holiday projects for primary school pupils. Other special transfer arrangements included primary schools sending examples of pupils’ work to secondary schools and secondary schools’ Learning Mentors visiting primary schools to support specific pupils.

Visits to Clusters confirmed that such transfer arrangements were in place, but also allowed for an exploration of whether being involved in the Cluster initiative had any effect on continuity and progression from primary to secondary school, as discussed below.

4.2.2 Impact on cross-phase continuity and progression

Interviewees were asked whether they expected the Cluster initiative to strengthen primary-secondary continuity and progression.

Cluster Chairs thought that involvement in the Cluster had had a positive impact on liaison between schools and, in turn, cross-phase continuity and progression. As one Chair commented, *'it has fostered closer links between primary and secondary schools'*. When one Chair (a secondary school headteacher) was asked if the Cluster had helped cross-phase progression, he responded *'definitely...it has given us the opportunity to work with the primary schools in a way we probably wouldn't have done'*.

Interviewees in schools felt that being involved in the Cluster had made it easier to liaise with other schools. In a number of cases, LMs were working cross-phase (see Section 3.1.1) and/or information on gifted and talented pupils was being passed from primary schools to secondary schools in the Cluster, which was having an impact on the transition of pupils. Otherwise, increased liaison between primary and secondary schools appeared to be mostly informal, and the Cluster initiative was not expected to have much of an impact on transition in the majority of Clusters (either because arrangements were already in place and/or because the Cluster was focusing on other activities). Moreover, not all of the schools that pupils transferred to or from were necessarily included in a Cluster, meaning that the increased opportunity for liaison only applied to some schools. However, two Clusters were the exception, as the issue of transition was a particular focus of the Tailored Strand.

In one of these Clusters, a primary and a secondary school were visited, although the secondary school was not the one to which the primary school children would transfer. Both schools were very positive about the effect the initiative had on transfer arrangements, suggesting that the Cluster initiative was having an impact on transition across the whole Cluster.

The Tailored Strand coordinator in the primary school suggested that the funding had allowed for *'a more formal, structured transition programme to be put in place'*.

Links with the secondary school to which almost all pupils transferred (also in the Cluster) pre-existed the Cluster initiative, although these arrangements were enhanced by the Tailored Strand. Previously, teachers from the secondary school visited the primary school for one day at the end of the summer term to meet Year 6 pupils. The pupils would then spend a day at the secondary school getting to know the staff and the environment: *'It was informal and there was no budget for it'*. Concerned about a decline in attainment in Year 7, the school valued the opportunity to formalise the arrangements by using Cluster funding.

With the funding, the school had developed a formal start-up programme involving cross-phase projects. In particular, pupils with SEN and language difficulties in Year 6 start a specific programme in primary school after their key stage 2 tests, and then continue it in Year 7. Staff from the secondary school will also spend more time in the primary school teaching pupils in Year 6. As this was the first year that the programme was being implemented, the impact could not yet be detected, although the general perception was that *'we have bridged a gap for the children...without the extra money it would be more hit and miss'*. Liaison with the schools to which the remaining children transfer was *'still based on individual cases'*, but as the numbers were so small it was not considered a problem.

For the secondary school in this Cluster, transition was *'a major issue'*. The Tailored Strand coordinator suggested that *'pupils are not adjusting at all well in Year 7'*. Prior to the Cluster initiative, the school had organised a Saturday club for their main primary feeders (which are all in the Cluster) and also induction days for all feeder schools. However, Cluster funding allowed them to spend time focusing on transfer issues in more depth. The coordinator spent time talking to primary headteachers about what they considered to be the main issues for pupils when they transfer. It was concluded that pupils found it difficult to adjust to having more than one class teacher and to the different style of environment.

In response to these concerns, two primary-style classrooms were developed in the secondary school using Cluster funding: a primary school practitioner was recruited to work in one classroom and a Year 7 teacher in the other, and both were furnished in a similar way to primary classrooms. Pupils were being selected for the classes at the time of the interview: Learning Mentors in the feeder primary schools were used to *'gather evidence'* about potential pupils. Pupils from any of the school's primary feeders could have the opportunity to benefit from the primary classrooms, not just pupils in Cluster schools. As the first cohort of pupils had yet to experience the classrooms, the coordinator could not comment on impact, although he hoped that

‘pupils will benefit in terms of improvements in their attendance and fewer incidents in class...and the quality of teaching will be high’. He hoped for *‘smoother transfer in general’*.

In the other Cluster, *‘it was agreed that transition was the focus [of the Tailored Strand] and so we set up a working party to develop an action plan’*. A primary and a secondary school were visited in this Cluster, although, again, the secondary school was not the one to which the primary school pupils would transfer. In the primary school, the focus was on induction of new pupils, internal transitions from key stage 1 to key stage 2, and on transfer to secondary school. Various activities had taken place, including peer support, home visits, and discussion conferences. In addition, SENCOs from primary and secondary schools were developing links. It was early days for the primary school, but the Tailored Strand Coordinator hoped it would have an impact on primary-secondary continuity and progression.

In the secondary school, the focus was on developing relationships with families and Learning Mentor support for pupils and parents during transition from key stage 2 to key stage 3 (primary to secondary transfer) and from key stage 3 to key stage 4. Activities included anger management counselling and parental skills courses, all with the aim of aiding smooth transition.

Both of the Clusters that focused on transition for the Tailored Strand expected that the Cluster initiative would have a positive impact on transition, continuity and progression. Both had used Tailored Strand funds to finance their new arrangements. It should be borne in mind, however, that schools in other Clusters that had not used Tailored Strand funding in this way reported less of an impact on transition.

5. THE FUNDING OF CLUSTERS

This chapter examines the financing of the EC programme in the first 11 Cluster areas. It focuses in particular on how funds are allocated to and used by participating schools, for the four strands. The following sections focus on:

- ♦ the allocation of funds to Clusters
- ♦ the allocation of funds within Clusters, and the allocation of resources for the individual strands
- ♦ the use of EC resources at school level for each strand.

5.1 The Allocation of Funds to Excellence Clusters

The financing of the EC programme is via the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Standards Fund; as in the EiC programme, funds are distributed to schools via their LEA. Unlike the EiC partnerships, which include all secondary schools in EiC LEAs, Clusters comprise only selected secondary and primary¹⁴ schools. DfES guidelines specify that *'schools will be targeted with a history of under-performance and disadvantage'* (DfES, 2002a) and further explain that DfES will nominate these 'core' schools around which the Clusters are to be formed. Clusters must include *'at least one other, more successful, local school'* (DfES, 2002a) and it is up to the LEA and the Excellence Cluster partnership to put forward these *'more successful'* and any other schools.

5.1.1 Allocation of Excellence Cluster funds to LEAs

It follows from the explanation above that the size of the Clusters may vary considerably. There is no limit on the number of schools that can participate in the Cluster, though the available funding is capped and the number of schools involved in the Cluster did not influence the overall allocation at the outset. However, they are now funded on a per-pupil basis. Clusters not including primary schools are not eligible for the primary school elements of the funding.¹⁵ It is interesting to note that of the 11 Clusters discussed in this report, only one partnership decided not to include primary schools. The number of schools (both primary and secondary) per Cluster range from six to 19, the mean being 15. The average number of primary schools is ten, with a range from zero to 17; whilst the average number of secondary schools involved is five, ranging from three to seven (Schagen *et al.*, 2001).

¹⁴ The inclusion of primary schools in the Clusters was encouraged by the DfES but not compulsory.

¹⁵ The amount made available by the DfES for primary schools was based on the assumption that Clusters include approximately eight primary schools.

The number of schools involved in individual Clusters was clearly important, regardless of actual pupil numbers, as it determined how far EC resources had to stretch across schools. Table 1 gives total allocations for a full academic year (2002-03) for seven Clusters¹⁶ and plots these against the number of primary and secondary schools in the Cluster.

Table 5.1 Excellence Cluster allocations and number of Cluster schools

Cluster	Total Excellence Cluster allocation (2002-03)	Number of secondary schools	Number of primary schools	Total
Walsall	£1,307,000	7	10	17
Portsmouth	£1,130,500	3	17	20 (18)*
Coventry	£1,040,000	5	9	14
Croydon	£960,500	7	7	14
Shepway	£950,500	6	0	6
Tameside	£917,000	6	13	19
W Cumbria	£771,000	3	15	18

Source: DfES, 2002b

* One of the secondary and one of the primary schools are considered 'other' members and, apart from a minimal G&T allocation to the secondary school, are not in receipt of Excellence Cluster money. This in effect reduces the number of Cluster schools receiving funding to two secondaries and 16 primaries.

The table above shows that there is no clear relationship between the overall funds allocated to Clusters and the number of schools the Cluster decided to include. For example, Shepway, which was allocated a slightly larger amount of funding than Tameside, includes six secondary schools in its Cluster and no primary schools, while Tameside involves six secondary schools as well as 13 primary schools. Portsmouth includes three secondary and 17 primary schools in its Cluster¹⁷, West Cumbria also includes three secondary schools and a large number of primaries (15), though West Cumbria receives £359,500 less funding a year than Portsmouth.

¹⁶ For the remaining four Clusters: Dewsbury/Batley and Huddersfield (Kirklees LEA) and East and West Lancashire (Lancashire LEA), Standards Fund allocations are only available on an LEA basis and it is not possible to conclusively determine the total allocations going to each Cluster from the Cluster plans.

¹⁷ Although one secondary and one primary school are not in receipt of significant funding from the Excellence Cluster programme.

5.2 The Allocation of Funds within Excellence Clusters

This section focuses on the allocation of funding within Clusters for the four strands. To illustrate some of the LEA-level allocation decisions, we have examined more closely their EC funding arrangements. The information presented is taken from Cluster plans provided by Cluster Partnerships to the DfES. EC funding available to the LEAs is broken down into three component parts by the DfES: funding for Learning Mentors and Learning Support Units; funding for Gifted and Talented programmes; and funding for Tailored programmes. Virements from one strand to another or between primary and secondary phases are not allowed, though this does not apply to the LM and LSU Strands as they are considered one funding stream.¹⁸ According to DfES guidelines, not all Cluster schools were expected to participate in all four strands, although it was anticipated that all schools catering for Year 5 to Year 11 would take part in the Gifted and Talented Strand.

Before discussing each of the four strands in turn, it is worth briefly considering some of the issues related to the allocation of resources for the funding of central coordination and administration costs.

5.2.1 Central coordination and administration

The funding of central coordination and administration for the EC programme emerged as an important issue for Cluster Chairs and LEA personnel when interviewed in the autumn term of 2001 (Schagen *et al.*, 2001). Coordination was felt to be important in terms of maintaining a strategic overview and ensuring that the burden on individual schools was not too great.

EC funds can however be used for *individual* Strand coordinators and indeed all Clusters make some provision for these. All 11 Clusters planned to ‘top-slice’ or ‘centrally-retain’ some Gifted and Talented funds (commonly between ten and 15 per cent of the overall Gifted and Talented allocation). These funds were intended to cover expenses such as coordinator salaries (including on-costs), secretarial support, monitoring and evaluation, ‘development money’, support and networking facilities and coordinator resources. For the other strands the picture that emerged from the Cluster plans was less uniform. Six of the 11 Clusters planned to centrally retain funds as part of the Tailored Strand initiative (up to 15 per cent of the overall strand allocation) to pay for coordinator time, to fund joint activities, travel, administrative

¹⁸ Exceptions can also be made for projects that include both primary and secondary Cluster members, e.g. combined Learning Mentor provision, which can be joint funded.

costs or for contingency purposes. Only three Clusters planned to retain funds centrally for the Learning Mentor/LSU Strand, covering coordinator, Lead and Link Learning Mentor¹⁹ costs.

5.2.2 Allocation of resources for the Individual Strands

Gifted and Talented Strand

Our analysis of Cluster plans revealed different models of resource allocation to schools as part of the Gifted and Talented Strand. The main models for primary schools are shown in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 Allocation of resources to Gifted and Talented Strand for Primary Schools

Model	Number of Excellence Clusters
Flat rate plus varying element	7
Pupil numbers only	2
N	9

Ten of the 11 Cluster plans provided information on allocation criteria but one Cluster does not include primary schools.

As can be seen, seven out of the nine Clusters for which information was available and which involved primary schools, employed a flat-rate element to allocate Gifted and Talented funds to schools. The varying element was reported to be pupil numbers in three Clusters and pupil numbers weighted by known eligibility for free school meals (FSM) in two Clusters.²⁰ In two Clusters, pupil numbers alone were used to allocate resources.

A slightly different picture emerged in relation to the allocation of resources to secondary schools as shown in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3 Allocation of resources to Gifted and Talented Strand for Secondary Schools

Model	Number of Excellence Clusters
Flat rate plus varying element	7
Pupil numbers only	2
Pupil numbers weighted by FSM	1
N	10

Ten of the 11 Cluster plans provided information on allocation criteria.

¹⁹ Lead or Link LMs refers to Learning Mentors with a Cluster-wide coordinating role.

²⁰ The other two Clusters did not specify the criteria used.

Ten Clusters provided information on allocation criteria and seven of these employed a flat-rate element. The varying element alongside the flat-rate allocation was pupil numbers in four of the seven Clusters and FSM eligibility in one Cluster.²¹ Two Clusters allocated funds solely on the basis of pupil numbers and one Cluster used pupil numbers weighted by free school meal eligibility.

In the six Clusters that used a flat-rate element (and where data was available), this amounted to an average 54 per cent of devolved Gifted and Talented funding (ranging from 39 per cent to 74 per cent). The use of flat-rate elements in the allocation of Gifted and Talented resources was also found in relation to Excellence in Cities (Noden *et al.*, 2001).

Learning Mentors

It is important to note that Clusters are not required to extend the Learning Mentor Strand into all schools: eight of the 11 Clusters included all Cluster schools in this strand, while three used some form of needs assessment or audit of existing support to identify which schools were to have access to Cluster-funded Learning Mentors.

In the three Clusters which did not include all schools, one decided to ‘trade off’ Learning Mentors against Learning Support Units. Thus secondary schools with an LSU were not included in the Learning Mentor Strand and one Cluster did not include primary schools with low levels of need.²²

When examining the allocation criteria used by Clusters to determine the distribution of Learning Mentor resources, four different models can be identified. Table 5.4 gives details for primary schools.

Table 5.4 Allocation formulae for Learning Mentors for Primary Schools

Model	Number of Excellence Clusters
Learning Mentor pools	4
Multi-faceted formula	3
Equal number of LMs	2
Formula including minimum LM allocation	1
N	10

One of the Clusters does not include primary schools.

²¹ Two of the Clusters did not specify their criteria.

²² For the third Cluster it was not apparent from the Cluster plan why one of the secondary schools was not included in the Learning Mentor Strand.

In four Clusters, Learning Mentors were ‘pooled’ or shared between a number of schools. One Cluster, for example, organised its primary schools into three ‘mini-clusters’ of between four and six schools sharing LMs, whilst another allocated two LMs to each group of one secondary school and two partner primary schools.

Three of the Clusters allocated LM resources to primary schools using composite multi-faceted formulae: these included ‘needs’ factors such as FSM eligibility, gender, attainment, proportion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN), number of pupils with emotional and behaviour difficulties and unauthorised absence.

Two Clusters allocated the same number of Learning Mentors to each primary school taking part in the strand. Finally, one Cluster decided on a minimum or baseline provision for all primary schools and allocated any additional Learning Mentors according to need (using a composite measure incorporating a series of ‘need’ factors).

A similar range of models was found in the allocation of Learning Mentor resources to secondary schools, as shown in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5 Allocation formulae for Learning Mentors for Secondary Schools

Model	Number of Excellence Clusters
Equal number of LMs	4
Multi-faceted formula	3
Learning Mentor pools	2
Formula including minimum LM allocation	2
N	11

Four of the 11 Clusters assigned the same number of LMs to each of the Cluster schools.²³ As in the case of primary schools, three of the Clusters allocated secondary Learning Mentor resources using multi-faceted formulae. Only two Clusters ‘pooled’ LMs; in both these cases Learning Mentors were shared between secondary schools and their partner primary schools (not between secondary schools). Finally, in two Clusters a minimum allocation to each secondary school was determined and additional LMs were allocated according to need, using formulae.

²³ One of the Clusters made a distinction between secondary schools with an LSU on site and those without – schools with an LSU got 1.5 Learning Mentors, those without got one Learning Mentor.

It is interesting to point out that the number of Learning Mentors allocated to schools varied widely from Cluster to Cluster. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the number of schools included in each Cluster varied widely (see Table 1). For example, one Cluster funded four Learning Mentors to be shared between four secondary and seven primary schools, another Cluster allocated 4.5 LMs to each of two secondary schools (the third secondary school in the Cluster was not included in the LM strand).

Learning Support Units

Our exploration of the Cluster plans shows that Learning Support Unit provision across primary schools varied markedly from LSU provision in secondary schools. Table 5.6 shows the provision in primary schools.

Table 5.6 Provision of Learning Support Units in Primary Schools

Model	Number of Excellence Clusters
No Primary LSU	7
Shared Primary LSU	3
N	10

One of the Clusters does not include primary schools.

As can be seen, seven of the ten Excellence Clusters which include primary schools had not made any provision for primary LSUs. In those Clusters where it had been decided not to set up primary LSUs, it was planned to use the resources to fund additional Learning Mentors. The three Clusters that made provision for Primary LSUs all intended to share the Units with other primary schools.

Table 5.7 shows the planned provision of LSUs in secondary schools and as can be seen, provision was made by all Clusters.

Table 5.7 Provision of Learning Support Units in Secondary Schools

Model	Number of Excellence Clusters
LSU in every school	5
Non-shared LSU in selected schools	4
Shared LSU in selected school	2
N	11

In five Clusters, LSUs were to be established in every secondary school.²⁴ The other Clusters planned to set up Units in selected secondary schools. In four of these, LSUs were to serve the host school only, while in the other two, LSUs were to be shared. All six Clusters which established LSUs in selected secondary schools took into account ‘needs’ criteria to determine which schools were to have Units on site. These criteria included: levels of fixed-term and permanent exclusions, attendance, attainment, known FSM eligibility and number of boys, as well as space availability considerations.

Information on funding allocations for individual LSUs was available in nine of the 11 Cluster plans. Perhaps unsurprisingly, all nine reported using either a flat rate or a substantial flat rate element. Regarding the actual costs of running an LSU, the nine Cluster plans that included money allocations gave figures ranging from £35,000 to £66,700 per unit, per year²⁵ with a mean of £49,800.

Tailored Strand

The Tailored Strand is the element of the Excellence Cluster programme which offers the greatest amount of flexibility to Clusters. Individual Clusters decided on the focus and also on the activities carried out under the Tailored Strand. They could also choose to make Tailored Strand funding available ‘*to supplement funds available for the three core strands*’ (DfES, 2002a). None of the Clusters chose this option and all decided on their own focus areas and activities.²⁶ Each of the 11 Clusters also decided to include all schools in the Tailored Strand, though the focus was not necessarily the same in each school.²⁷ Only one of the Clusters reported a different Tailored Strand focus for the primary and secondary element: primary schools focused on improving attitudes to learning by targeting parents/carers, while the secondary schools in the Cluster focused on strategies promoting independent learning. As there were no other distinctions between the primary and secondary schools, the following section reports on the Tailored Strand overall.

²⁴ However, it should not be assumed that these were all to be funded by EC. In some Clusters there were existing LSUs, funded from alternative sources, and the Cluster plan was to establish new LSUs elsewhere, so that there was one in every secondary school.

²⁵ Figures are rounded to the nearest £100 and refer to full academic year (2002/03).

²⁶ One of the Clusters did not implement the Tailored Strand until the second year of the programme and vired first-year funds into the other strands. Another Cluster top-sliced 10% of its secondary Tailored Strand allocation to be used to support G&T activities in non-Cluster feeder primaries.

²⁷ For example, in one Cluster, all schools were expected to take part in a Tailored Strand activity called ‘Thinking Skills’; the other Tailored Strand activity, which focused on developing links with parents, was optional.

Clusters chose between one and three separate foci. In three Clusters there was one focal area, in seven there were two and in one there were three focal areas. These 20 different focal areas can be grouped into seven broad areas as shown in Table 5.8.²⁸

Table 5.8 Focus of the Tailored Strand

Areas of focus	Number of Tailored Strand areas
Teaching & learning	8
Working with parents/carers	4
Cultural enrichment	3
Mobility/turbulence	2
Attendance	1
Transition	1
European Dimension	1
N	11

Clusters could have more than one focus.

Eight of the 20 focus areas for the Tailored Strand can broadly be described as focusing on teaching and learning; this could mean implementing strategies to improve pupils' linguistic abilities, promoting independent learning, focusing on literacy or improving teaching through in-service training (INSET). Four Tailored Strand areas aimed to address negative attitudes to education by working with parents and carers. In one case, this involved employing 'Neighbourhood Enrichment Officers' to work with both families and schools. The provision of cultural enrichment opportunities was the focus of three Tailored Strand areas. Two Tailored Strand focus areas were concerned with minimising the effects of pupil mobility or turbulence. Attendance and transition were each the focus in one Cluster. Another Cluster developed an area called the 'European Dimension' which aimed to improve schools' links with the European mainland: this was considered important due to the geographic location of the Cluster.

An examination of the funding allocations for the Tailored Strand identified three distinct models, presented in Table 5.9.

²⁸ Compare with Table 3.3 in Section 3.4, which shows the focus of the Tailored Strand according to schools which responded to the survey.

Table 5.9 Allocation formulae for the Tailored Strand

Model	Number of Excellence Clusters
Block/flat rate allocations	4
Formulae directly related to Tailored Strand activity	4
Formulae with substantial ‘deprivation’ element	3
N	11

Four of the Clusters used block allocations to distribute funding to schools. This was in the form of a combination of flat rates, depending on the Tailored Strand activities the school participates in.

The other seven Clusters all used sliding-scale formulae to allocate Tailored Strand funds. These can be further subdivided. Formulae that directly related to the Tailored Strand activity in question were used by four of the Clusters. An example of this was to use non-attendance figures in combination with pupil numbers to allocate funds to a tailored activity aimed at improving attendance. Another example was of a strand activity focusing on improving teaching which used a 50 per cent flat-rate formula and allocated the other 50 per cent according to schools’ rankings in the Ofsted Quality of Education grades.²⁹ Three Clusters used formulae incorporating a substantial ‘deprivation’ element. For example, a Tailored activity aimed at extending pupils’ cultural awareness allocated funding according to numbers on roll weighted by the number of pupils known to be eligible for FSM. In another case, funds for a ‘Thinking Skills’ Tailored Strand involved allocation of resources to schools using a formula based on numbers on roll, known FSM eligibility and attainment measured by key stage 2 and key stage 3 results.

5.3 Use of Excellence Cluster Resources at School Level

Survey schools were asked how they had used resources allocated for each of the four EC Strands. Respondents were also asked whether, as a result of funding for each strand, resources had been ‘freed’ to be spent elsewhere in the school and, on the other hand, whether resources from the main school budget had supplemented Cluster funding.

²⁹ These are taken from the LEA profile and use rankings from 1 = very good, to 7 = substantial improvement required; schools with lower ratings were allocated more money.

5.3.1 Gifted and Talented Strand

We asked what percentage of funds allocated through the Gifted and Talented Strand had been budgeted to be spent on a range of items such as additional management points, salaries, in-service training and teaching materials. A total of 47 primary schools and 26 secondary schools provided usable information; their responses are illustrated in Table 5.10.

Table 5.10 The distribution of Gifted and Talented funds

Allocation of funding	Average percentage of G&T funds allocated in <i>primary</i> schools	Average percentage of G&T funds allocated in <i>secondary</i> schools
Teachers salaries or supply cover	42	17
Salary points to the responsible teacher/coordinator	24	25
Teaching materials	11	21
Out-of-school activities	11	16
INSET	9	13
Other	3	8
N	47	26

The Ns in the table refer to the number of respondents who provided a complete breakdown of expenditure.

As can be seen, the most striking difference between primary and secondary schools related to the average proportion of Gifted and Talented funding spent on teachers' salaries or supply cover: 42 per cent across the primary schools versus 17 per cent for the secondary schools. Salary points to responsible teachers (in primary schools) and coordinators (in secondary schools) accounted for about a quarter of Gifted and Talented funds. The average proportion of funds budgeted by schools to be spent on specialist teaching materials was twice as much for secondary as for primary schools.

We also examined the sum of the mean proportion of Gifted and Talented funding spent on salaries and staff development (teacher salaries, supply cover, salary points and INSET) compared with the proportion of expenditure directly related to pupils (specialist teaching materials and out-of-school activities). The differences between primary and secondary schools was marked. Overall, staff-related expenditure in primary schools accounted for 75 per cent of funding, compared with 55 per cent in secondary schools. Pupil-related expenditure amounted to 22 per cent in primary schools compared with 37 per cent in secondary schools. It may be that economies of

scale in the secondary sector result in a higher proportion of Gifted and Talented funding being spent directly on pupils.

Across both primary and secondary schools, a high proportion of funding had been delegated to the responsible teachers and coordinators for Gifted and Talented pupils: an average of 60 per cent of primary schools' budgets and 63 per cent of secondary schools' budgets.

Headteachers were asked whether the resources from the Gifted and Talented Strand had enabled resources to be freed to be spent elsewhere. Eight of the 71 primary school respondents reported that Gifted and Talented funding had freed up other resources, while 53 stated that no resources had been freed up (ten respondents did not answer this question). In secondary schools, three of the 35 respondents reported resources had been freed and 30 reported they had not (two did not reply).³⁰

Similarly, only a minority of schools reported using resources from the main school budget to assist with funding the Gifted and Talented Strand – eight primary schools and five secondary schools.³¹

5.3.2 Learning Mentors

In the 2002 survey, respondents were asked what percentage of funds allocated through the Learning Mentor Strand had been budgeted for salaries, training and other items in 2001-02. Their responses are shown in Table 5.11.

³⁰ For those schools which reported resources having been released as a result of G&T funds, the mean amount for primary schools was £5,200 (range £500 to £30,000 – rounded to the nearest £100) and for secondary schools £5,700 (£2,000 to £12,000).

³¹ Forty-nine primary schools reported no resources from the main school budget had been used to assist with the G&T Strand and 14 did not provide details. Twenty-five secondary schools reported no resources from the main school budget had been used to assist with the G&T Strand and five did not provide details. Seven primary schools and five secondary schools provided details of the amounts that were used to assist the G&T Strand. For primary schools the average was £1,300 (range: £400 to £5,000) and for secondary schools the average was £3,600 (range: £500 to £8,700).

Table 5.11 Expenditure of Learning Mentor funds (2001-02)

Expenditure	Mean percentage of LM funds	Mean percentage of LM funds
	Primary schools	Secondary schools
	%	%
Salaries or supply cover	84	76
Training	6	13
Other*	11	11
N	42	24

Percentages may not always sum to 100 because of rounding.

Only schools where percentages add up to 100 are included.

** Such as setting up expenses, resources/learning materials, travel, etc.*

In both primary and secondary schools, most of the funding was reported to be budgeted for salaries or supply cover.

As a result of the Learning Mentor Strand, six primary schools and two secondary schools reported that resources had been freed to be spent elsewhere in the school.³² The average sum was £3,400 for primary schools (range £200 to £12,220) and £10,000 for secondary schools (£6,000 in one case and £14,000 in the other).

A fairly high proportion of respondents, particularly in the secondary sector, reported that resources from the main school budget had been used to assist with the funding of Learning Mentors: 13 out of 71 primary schools and 12 out of 35 secondary schools.³³ For the 11 primary and 11 secondary schools that provided details, the mean amount of money used to supplement the Learning Mentor Strand was around £4,400 for primary and £5,100 for secondary schools (ranging from £100 to £15,000 and £800 to £14,000 respectively). This reflects the fact that schools were very positive about the work of LMs and prepared to consider funding them themselves if necessary (see Section 3.1.7).

5.3.3 Learning Support Units

In the 2002 survey, five primary schools and 18 secondary schools had a Learning Support Unit on site (see Section 3.2). These schools were asked what percentage of funds allocated through the Learning Support Unit Strand had been budgeted to be spent on a range of items such as salaries, capital expenditure and ICT hardware. Four primary schools and 13 secondary schools provided usable information. The

³² Fifty-seven primary schools reported that no resources had been freed and eight did not provide information. Thirty-one secondary schools reported that no resources had been freed and two did not provide information.

³³ Forty-five primary schools reported that they had not used other resources to supplement the LM Strand and 13 did not provide information. Seventeen secondary schools reported that they had not used other resources to supplement the LM Strand and six did not provide information.

four primary schools reported budgeting almost all their LSU funds on salary and supply cover. The responses for the secondary schools are given in Table 5.12.

Table 5.12 Expenditure of LSU funds (2001-02)

Expenditure	Mean percentage of LSU funds secondary schools %
Salaries or supply cover	78
Capital expenditure (not ICT)	7
ICT hardware	6
Specialist teaching materials	5
Behaviour management training	4
Other	1
N	13

Percentages do not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Only schools where percentages add up to 100 are included.

None of the primary and secondary schools with LSUs on site reported that the LSU had freed up resources to be spent elsewhere in the school. However, a high proportion of schools with an LSU on site reported that other resources had been used to assist with funding the LSU: three of the five primary schools and 11 of the 18 secondary schools said they had supplemented the LSU funds. For the 11 secondary schools that provided information on the actual amounts, the average was £34,400, ranging from £45 to £100,000.³⁴ This fairly high mean level of ‘additional’ funding used to supplement the LSU Strand points to the resource-intensity of setting up and running LSUs. The fact that schools are using other funds to supplement the LSU Strand could also imply that the initiative was felt to be worthwhile by the schools, as was found with EiC.

5.3.4 Tailored Strand

As the Tailored Strand is designed to give individual LEAs the freedom to decide their own focus, we could not ask a question on how the funds were divided between different budget headings in a general questionnaire. However, we were still interested in whether the Tailored Strand ‘freed up’ resources or whether other resources were used to supplement it.

³⁴ The average across the three primary schools was £13,000 (range: £2,000 to £31,000).

Thirteen primary schools and four secondary schools stated that as a result of the Tailored Strand resources had been freed to be spent elsewhere in the school.³⁵ The 12 primary schools that provided details reported average amounts of £1,700 (range £400 to £5,600); for the three secondary schools, the average was £4,000 (range £1,000 to £8,000).

Only a minority of schools, nine primary and four secondary,³⁶ reported supplementing the Tailored Strand with other school resources. The mean amounts, provided by six primary and the four secondary schools were £5,000 (range: £200 to £22,000) for the primary and £13,500 (range: £3,000 to £20,000) for the secondary schools.

³⁵ Forty-eight primary schools reported that no resources had been freed and ten did not provide details; 27 secondary schools reported no resources had been freed and four did not provide details.

³⁶ Fifty primary schools reported that they had not used other resources to supplement the Tailored Strand and 12 did not provide information. Twenty-four secondary schools reported that they had not supplemented the Tailored Strand and seven did not provide information.

6. DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESS

This purpose of this chapter is to consider developments and progress in Clusters in the year following the first interviews with Cluster Chairs in autumn 2001 (Schagen *et al.*, 2001). The focus is on the Clusters as a whole rather than on individual schools within the Clusters. A total of 12 follow-up interviews were carried out (between October 2002 and January 2003) in ten Clusters. Ten interviewees occupied the post of Chair or joint Chair and were all headteachers of Cluster schools. One interviewee was a Cluster Director who was an ex-headteacher of a Cluster school, and the final interviewee was an LEA officer with a key role in the initiative.

6.1 Composition of Clusters

6.1.1 Structure of Clusters

There does not seem to have been any significant changes in Cluster composition in terms of schools involved, although changes in school personnel (especially senior staff) were felt to have had an impact on the progress of the initiative within these schools. In one area, another Cluster will be created as a result of the ending of the local, statutory EAZ. Several schools from the existing Cluster may be lost to the new arrangement, thus reducing the number of schools in the original group. Concern was expressed about the '*destabilising*' effect this will have on the existing Cluster and '*uneasiness about how this is being played out.*' A point of particular concern was the lack of involvement of the existing Cluster in the discussions between the DfES and the LEA about the new arrangements.

It is also possible that the introduction of a 'leadership incentive grant' will influence Clusters by requiring schools to work together to an even greater extent. The grant, which promotes collaboration across schools, includes all Excellence in Cities (EiC) and EC areas as well as schools with less than 30 per cent of pupils achieving five grades A*-C at GCSE. Schools will each receive £125,000 each year for three years and schools not already within a Cluster will be required to develop a similar grouping. It seems likely that there will be an impact of this initiative on existing Cluster arrangements.

The changing fortunes of schools in Clusters are also likely to have an effect on other schools in the initiative. For example, one interviewee reported that a Cluster school had recently entered Special Measures, which was likely to have an effect on the

whole Cluster especially in terms of meeting Cluster targets, as well as affecting the implementation of the local partnership plan in this school.

Concerns remain about the size of some of the Clusters, and some interviewees believed that they may have too many schools involved. The fact that some schools were included and others were not remains an issue, and is leading Clusters to consider how they might include other local schools in Cluster activities, or how they might best disseminate information (see Section 6.2.2 for a more detailed discussion).

6.1.2 Collaboration between schools

Within Clusters

The initiative was welcomed for the opportunity it provided for the fostering of closer relationships and understanding between schools. Despite the expression of some initial concerns, e.g. about the number of meetings and of how schools of different phases would work together in practice, there were many positive reports regarding the development of the Clusters over the last year and of schools working well together.

There were reports of improved cooperation and collaboration between Cluster schools, in general, with more joint activities, the sharing of ideas, staff and resources, improved understanding between schools, and improved communication. One headteacher felt that there was increasing commitment and '*positivity*' towards the Cluster amongst the schools involved. He saw the proposal of a joint training day for all Cluster schools as indicative of the development of a Cluster 'identity'.

There were reports of improvements in the relations between same-phase schools and across phases. Commenting on a group of same-phase schools, one interviewee observed that they worked more closely as a group of schools, and not just in relation to EC. As a Cluster, the schools involved in the initiative had considered the extending of teaching and learning practices beyond the Gifted and Talented programme and the management of behaviour issues.

Mention was also made of improvements in relationships between secondary and primary schools and a greater understanding of each other's work. One interviewee remarked, '*we have come together more*'. There were more joint activities and '*joined-up thinking*'. Schools were working together and sharing resources and staff.

Concerns about the role of the ‘more successful’ school have persisted, and there remains confusion as to the role these schools should or might adopt within the individual Clusters. However, there were some examples of the positive contributions made by these schools to the overall work of local Clusters (see further Section 4.1.3). Clearly, the role of these schools continues to be one that is being explored as the initiative progresses and as the Cluster schools develop in their relationships with each other.

Collaboration between Clusters

As Clusters have become established, there are reports of cross-Cluster links. In some cases, this is fostered by the fact that some local authorities have more than one Cluster. In these instances, the sharing of central staff facilitated the development of links and the sharing of good practice. There were also shared training events and joint activities such as monitoring and evaluation.

Some Cluster Chairs, however, reported links with other Clusters further afield. Some of these links are with newly established Clusters where the ‘older’ Clusters have been able to offer advice and help, for example, by providing input into training programmes or by hosting visits. Mention was made of a good practice fair held in London to encourage the development of between-Cluster links.

Some Clusters reported no direct or formal links with other Clusters. In other cases, strand coordinators have made contact and forged relevant links; for example, one Cluster Chair reported involvement in a regional Gifted and Talented network.

Collaboration with Non-Cluster Schools

According to Cluster Chairs (see Section 4.1.5), there was still some resentment from schools in Cluster areas but not included in the Clusters. Interviewees from Cluster schools understood these concerns, and regretted that – due to limitations of funding – neighbouring schools could not always be included. Some were keen to disseminate the work of the Clusters beyond the local partnerships. Examples of strategies adopted to promote collaboration and share good practice include:

- ♦ establishing a Cluster website to share good practice with other schools
- ♦ liaison between Cluster secondary schools and non-Cluster feeder primary schools
- ♦ spin-offs for other local schools from ‘local learning groups’
- ♦ visits to Cluster schools and presentations about the work of the Cluster to interested parties

- ♦ offering Learning Support Unit training to non-Cluster schools
- ♦ involving other schools in Cluster-organised activities, e.g. a Secondary Leadership Conference
- ♦ the expansion of Cluster staff, e.g. Learning Mentors, into non-Cluster schools.

Clusters are, therefore, considering a range of methods for disseminating good practice developed under the remit of the initiative. A view was expressed, however, that the DfES did not seem to have a dissemination strategy in mind; one interviewee commented that he would like to see the DfES facilitate the identification and sharing of Cluster good practice with other schools.

6.1.3 Partners

LEA

Several interviewees indicated that the LEA has continued to play an important role in the work of individual Clusters especially in ‘facilitating’ the work of the Cluster on a day-to-day basis, in providing training, in monitoring and evaluation, and in helping Clusters and individual schools in the target-setting process. LEA personnel were also often involved in the initiative as overall Strand coordinators.

One of the key personnel interviewed was a LEA officer who discussed in some detail his role and the broader role of the LEA. His role in ‘facilitating the Cluster’, included responsibility for finances. (In this Cluster a small amount of funding was retained centrally for the payment of the Gifted and Talented coordinator, and for training.) He convened meetings of the Cluster’s executive group (the decision-making group consisting of himself, the Cluster Chair, a small number of Clusters and another LEA representative that met half termly), and meetings of the full partnership (used for strategy and ratification and generally held termly). He often shared the responsibilities of the Cluster Chair because of the headteacher’s other commitments. The LEA itself had recently undertaken a ‘huge’ monitoring and evaluation exercise, which involved visits by a team of LEA inspectors to all of the schools in the Cluster and examination of all EC strands. Data was collected through interviews and observation and some data analysis carried out. A report of the findings had been prepared and local follow-up work begun.

In LEAs with more than one Cluster, there continued to be sharing of staff across Clusters facilitating the sharing of expertise, experience and good practice.

Other Partners/Links with Other Initiatives

It was recognised at an early stage in the initiative that the work of the local Clusters complements that of other local agencies, such as Connexions, the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), EAZs, and SureStart. There was a general commitment to establishing and developing links in an effort to develop a coherent approach to the tackling of local issues, such as disaffection, social deprivation and inclusion, and to prevent duplication of effort. However, the further development of these local links was very variable. For example, one interviewee felt that links with the local EAZ and with SRB would not be relevant for the local Cluster. Interviewees who did see the relevance of links with other organisations sometimes expressed concern that these links were poorly developed.

On the other hand, there were instances of effective and useful links within some Clusters. For example, one Cluster was utilising links with Pathfinder and the local EAZ. Links with local Adult Education providers had helped in funding some of the activities for the Tailored Strand and links with other organisations were pursued wherever they were relevant. An interviewee from another Cluster reported involvement with Connexions, the local EAZ and Community Education groups, which were all represented in the partnership. The director of the local EAZ was described as being particularly helpful.

Another interviewee went so far as to say that the impact of EC would depend upon multi-agency working. This particular Cluster had benefited from links with local businesses, which had provided work experience places for pupils. There were also close links with local learning groups focusing on collaborative working, and links to Social Services, the police and activities funded by the Children's Fund.

6.2 Management

6.2.1 Management structures

As the initiative has progressed there has been some honing of management structures. In addition to meetings of the full partnership (the headteachers of participating schools), smaller executive management groups have been created. These groups variously comprise representatives of headteachers, Cluster Strand coordinators, and LEA personnel. These executive groups have various roles including the discussion of progress and current initiatives and projects. Some groups also have a monitoring and evaluation role. Other groups meeting regularly included

those relating to individual strands, involving school and Cluster Strand coordinators, and in some instances, representatives from schools' senior management teams.

Full partnership meetings occur regularly, but generally less frequently than executive group meetings, to discuss what is happening in the initiative or the individual Strands, to ratify decisions of executive groups and to develop future plans

6.2.2 Funding

The allocation of funds to individual Cluster schools (as outlined in Cluster plans) is discussed in detail in Section 5.2. Interviewees indicated that there had been few substantial changes in funding arrangements beyond some 'tweaking' to reflect changed school circumstances and some re-allocation of resources where need was pressing. There was some evidence of virement of funds between different phases and between individual Cluster strands in response to developments within the initiative over the last year. For example, the decision in one Cluster not to put a Learning Support Unit into a local primary school released £50,000. This was divided among ten primary schools, and the funds used to employ Learning Mentors. In another instance, funds were transferred from secondary to primary schools to fund LMs. In the same Cluster there had also been virement between schools to facilitate the development of an LSU.

Whilst there are hopes for some embedding of provision into the normal running of the schools, continued funding for certain aspects of the initiative was seen as crucial if they are to be maintained or developed. A number of Cluster Chairs voiced concern about what would happen when and if Cluster funding ends. There was a lot of uncertainty and different Clusters appear to have *'been told'* different things. One reported that the Cluster had been informed that it would be continued for a further three years, another informed that LM funding would continue, and another that funding might continue if targets were met. Another was *'assuming'* that funding would continue. Others were hoping for clarification from the DfES *'as soon as possible'*, so that *'exit strategies'* could be considered if required. There was a particular concern for staff employed with EC funds, such as Learning Mentors, but also concern about what would happen to additional activities, funding for LSUs, and school collaboration.³⁷

³⁷ Since the interviews took place, a letter has been sent to LEAs and Cluster Chairs informing them that funding will continue until March 2006, subject to a successful three-year review in 2004.

6.2.3 Staffing the Initiative

Role of Cluster Chair/Director

Cluster Chairs were nominated or volunteering headteachers. Eight Chairs were headteachers of Cluster secondary schools; in another Cluster a secondary head and a primary head were joint Chairs. There has been substantial continuity of staff holding this key position; in only two Clusters had the Chair 'rotated' (other Clusters had planned to do this but decided against).

One Cluster had created the new role of Cluster Director which subsumed the role of Chair. The role itself included organising and chairing meetings, maintaining contact with other headteachers, disseminating information, attending other important Cluster meetings, for example, representing the Cluster in meetings with the DfES.

The lack of a funded central Cluster coordinator was a concern frequently expressed in the first round of interviews (see Schagen *et al.*, 2001). In 2001/02 some partnerships top-sliced funds to pay for a central coordinator, as this was deemed essential to the effective management of the Cluster. One Cluster subsequently secured extra funding to appoint a Cluster Director (in September 2002); the appointee is an ex-headteacher of a Cluster school and is funded for two days per week. In addition to subsuming the role of Cluster Chair, the role also subsumes that taken originally by an LEA officer who can no longer be involved to such a great extent because of promotion. The Director is part of the executive management group; his role involves monitoring the initiative, coordinating meetings, offering advice, maintaining contact with all Cluster schools and keeping them informed of developments. He reported some uncertainty about his own '*power*' in relation to the executive group.

Recruitment and Retention

Progress within two Clusters in particular had suffered because they had been unable to recruit and/or retain staff in key positions within the initiative. At the time of interview one Cluster Chair reported that there was no overall Tailored Strand coordinator for the primary phase, and no link or coordinating Learning Mentor. Being able to share key personnel with another Cluster in the same LEA was an advantage and the Cluster shared its Gifted and Talented coordinator in this way.

The Chair of the other Cluster felt that the lack of staff in key positions within the schools had had a detrimental effect on the initiative: some schools had made little progress because of recruitment and retention difficulties.

6.2.4 Target setting

Progress with regard to the attainment of original Cluster targets was variable. It was reported that some schools had met their Cluster targets, but that others were struggling. It was, however, regarded as inevitable that some schools would do better than other schools, or in relation to particular strands. The process of evaluation and monitoring and target setting were closely linked: evaluation and monitoring fed into the target setting process and targets were used to assess progress. Following monitoring and evaluation exercises there had been some re-consideration and re-setting of targets.

A number of issues in connection with the setting and achieving targets have persisted from last year.

Achieving Targets. A number of Chairs reported that achieving targets was seen as a particular challenge particularly for schools who may try to meet targets but have other priorities (for example, those in Serious Weaknesses or Special Measures). There was concern that individual school performance would affect overall Cluster success or failure in meeting targets and concern was expressed about the effect on funding of failing to meet targets.³⁸

The Target-Setting Process. In terms of setting targets there were varying views. Some felt they should be ‘aspirational’ with a strong element of challenge (or they are not ambitious enough) and that they should be a driving force on the road to effective school operation. Others questioned the principle of certain targets, the method of target setting and/or the issue of setting targets altogether. One Chair put the issue succinctly:

Personally, the whole idea of targets is ‘way off target’. It makes no difference to the teacher in the classroom. There is no such thing as aspirational targets. People are constantly trying to improve now. Everybody knows what they need to do, which is to improve attainment across the board. Things like the early entry target; there is a lot of doubt among experienced teachers about the merits of that in the first place.

This raises the issue of target ownership and the fact that schools may not be particularly committed to targets they do not support or feel that they cannot achieve (see further Section 2.2.4).

³⁸ It was also thought that **meeting** targets might have a negative impact on funding – see Section 2.2.4.

Shifting Targets. Concern was also expressed about shifting government policy in relation to targets. The issue of exclusions was raised in this context, and some questioned whether previous targets remained appropriate, in the light of changes in government policy related to reducing exclusions.

6.2.5 Monitoring and evaluation

The value of monitoring and evaluation was recognised in highlighting development, indicating where progress is being made, setting new targets and re-considering resource allocation. Processes for the monitoring and evaluation of EC were emerging. It was felt that recent evaluations by Ofsted, and in some cases by LEAs, had played an important role in focusing attention on the issue. Views on progress in this area were evenly split. Some Clusters reported that they were satisfied with progress to date; others felt it was an area that needed further consideration and development. For example, in one Cluster it was reported that data collection itself was not a problem, but that making effective use of it needed to be considered more carefully.

Monitoring and evaluation systems being developed tend to be Cluster-based or Strand-based, although some schools are using a more individual approach (see Section 2.2.5).

LEAs have played an important role in local monitoring and evaluation and are seen as valuable in providing an overview of developments. One LEA has recently undertaken a detailed evaluation of all local Cluster schools (see Section 6.1.3). In LEAs with more than one Cluster, there is discussion of cross-Cluster evaluation and monitoring. The recent Ofsted inspections will provide valuable feedback to Cluster schools, although some Clusters have put their own local evaluations 'on hold' because Clusters are reluctant to go ahead with local action plans until Ofsted reports become available.

6.3 Implementation and Impact

6.3.1 Implementation of the initiative

Interviewees were asked to judge whether all schools in the individual Clusters were at the same stage with regard to the implementation of partnership plans. The overwhelming opinion was that they were not. Factors cited as having an impact on the rate of implementation of partnership plans included:

- ♦ the degree of commitment to, and involvement of, staff in the initiative (headteachers, in particular, were seen as key change agents)
- ♦ problems caused by changes in school personnel
- ♦ the pressure of being a school in special measures
- ♦ the pressure of other initiatives within the school
- ♦ fundamental variations in school management and organisation and *'the way things are done'*.

It was also apparent that some Strands were further ahead in some schools than in others, and that some had had particular challenges to address. Progress within the four individual strands is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

6.3.2 Impact of the initiative

In commenting on the impact of the initiative over the last year, most interviewees mentioned particular Strands. Of these, the LM and Tailored Strands were seen as having had the greatest immediate impact. The LSU and Gifted and Talented strands have had more problems and success so far might best be described as patchy.

Taken as a whole, the initiative has led to some important changes in the schools including:

- ♦ improvement in pupil academic performance, behaviour, attendance and self-esteem
- ♦ changes in teaching and learning practices; schools and teachers are being persuaded to view children as individuals and focus on their particular needs and 'personalise' or 'customise' their approach, which has led to the development of alternative provision
- ♦ the provision of enrichment activities had enabled more children to succeed and provided opportunities to celebrate pupil achievements
- ♦ a greater awareness of the socio-economic barriers and other barriers to learning in the local area.

Many Cluster schools are part of local communities experiencing socio-economic problems. Much of the work of the Tailored Strand has a focus on the local community and much of the work of the Learning Mentors has had an impact on addressing those barriers to learning beyond schools.

There has clearly been an impact in terms of the breaking down of barriers between schools and the local community. It was felt that local communities were more aware

of how schools operate and of the good work going on in the schools. This has had a very positive impact in leading to renewed respect for the work of the schools and in the value of education. It was also reported that the initiative had been instrumental in making links with local businesses to good effect.

In real terms, Clusters reported an increase in parental involvement in schools, especially those parents who might not be used to being in school because of their own past bad educational experiences.

The hopes for the future were for an even greater openness of schools, with greater contact and trust with the local community, growing optimism within the local communities, and moves towards what one Chair described as a ‘can-do’ local culture. It was also hoped that the raising of expectations and esteem would have positive impact on care of the community environment, e.g. in terms of reduction of litter.

6.3.3 Benefits

Despite some initial concerns, there were reports that the schools involved were very positive about the initiative. Particular benefits of involvement were:

- ♦ bringing schools together to work in cooperation and in collaboration and share a common vision. It was felt to be useful for schools to share ideas, experiences and good practice.
- ♦ providing the funds to allow a professional dialogue about practice. One interviewee felt that the initiative had revived the concept of ‘*informed professional judgement*’.
- ♦ funding that had allowed schools to try new things and think about things in different ways.
- ♦ the encouragement of a flexible approach to local issues and problems.

6.3.4 Challenges for the future

The challenges of specific Strands of the initiative have already been considered (see Chapter 3). The purpose here is to consider the challenges for the EC initiative as a whole. Those mentioned by the interviewees could be grouped into three main areas:

The Attainment of Targets. Several Clusters mentioned that the attainment of targets was a major challenge. It was felt that targets needed to be realistic in the first place and that there was a need to show real improvement against the targets set and

build upon this. There was some concern expressed about assessing the additionality provided by EC.

The Support of the Local Community. Many Cluster schools are located in areas of disadvantage with local cultures that may not be supportive of education. For some Clusters, the main challenge continues to be to enlist the support of local communities/parents in the work of the schools in the effort to address deep-seated local problems. Even schools within the same Cluster may face different challenges in this respect. Addressing this issue may involve raising parental ambitions, encouraging good behaviour amongst pupils, and/or improving motivation. A lot of the work of the Tailored Strand has a focus on these issues.

Impact on Classroom Practice. A number of those interviewed felt that it was very important that the initiative should make an impact on teaching and learning practices on a daily basis rather than just focus entirely on special events. The need to embed provision is seen as a key issue. There were reports that this was happening in some cases but it remains a concern for many other Clusters.

Sustainability was also perceived as a crucial issue when interviews were conducted, but concerns will have been lessened by the DfES's confirmation that funding is to continue until 2006.

7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents a summary of the key findings from this stage of the evaluation of the EC initiative. An overview of each of the four EC strands is given, followed by a discussion of cross-strand issues, and Cluster funding. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key points and issues arising from the development of Clusters over the past year, and a note of plans for the next stage of the evaluation.

7.1 Summary of the Four Excellence Cluster Strands

The key findings in relation to Learning Mentors, Learning Support Units, the Gifted and Talented Strand and the Tailored Strand are discussed in turn in the following sections.

7.1.1 The Learning Mentor Strand

The Learning Mentor Strand had generated by far the most enthusiasm from interviewees. The main role of LMs was to target individual pupils, although in some cases they also offered drop-in services, supported pupils in the classroom and visited the parents of mentees. They also played an important role in transition.

Across the Clusters, they focused on behaviour issues and reducing exclusions, increasing attendance, and helping pupils to achieve qualifications. The general consensus among interviewees was that LMs had the time to give support over and above that which class teachers could provide, including emotional support at difficult times. It was clear that mentees were positive about their LMs and had conveyed this to other pupils, to the point that they too were asking if they could have access to a Learning Mentor.

There were reports of initial uncertainty within schools about the role of the LMs, but by the latter stages of fieldwork it seemed that these were being resolved. However, across some Clusters it appeared that there was a lack of clarity and consistency in the deployment of LMs. A few Chairs expressed concern that, in certain schools, LMs were being used in ways that they considered inappropriate (in some cases, effectively as LSAs).

On the whole, it appeared that the high expectations of the Learning Mentor Strand had been fulfilled, and LMs were regarded as a great benefit to the schools concerned; several interviewees mentioned that they would like to create additional posts if

possible, and were considering how they could maintain their existing complement when EC funding came to an end. Schools, Cluster Chairs and strand coordinators were near unanimous in their view that LMs had had a strong positive impact on attendance, punctuality, social skills and learning, although there was doubt that the impact of their work could be easily measured (as discussed below in Section 7.2.3).

7.1.2 The Learning Support Unit Strand

A greater proportion of secondary schools than primary schools had an LSU on site. In fact, a large number of schools were without access to an LSU. It was evident that most LSUs were not being shared; some Clusters had an LSU in every secondary school, so sharing was not necessary, while LSUs in other Clusters felt unable to accommodate pupils from other schools. To a great extent, LSUs functioned independently, and this Strand had less coordination than the other three.

There appeared to be some confusion about what an LSU was: some schools referred to alternative units on site that sounded similar to LSUs, yet they criticised LSUs for being '*sin bins*'. This suggests a need for clarification of the purpose of LSUs across Clusters.

Most LSUs had been developed from existing provision. The number of pupils attending was greater in secondary schools than primary schools, although in secondary schools a greater number of pupils attended in Years 7 to 9 than higher up the school. The view was often expressed that problems needed to be dealt with at an early stage, and key stage 4 was considered too late.

Nine of the case-study schools (eight secondary and one primary) had LSUs on site. Pupils were most often referred to the LSUs for challenging behaviour. Referral procedures varied, but tended to operate via the school management system (usually heads of year). The needs of the individual child could determine length of stay, pattern of attendance and level of support.

Most LSUs intended to follow the curriculum where possible, but also allowed time for social skills and behaviour management. The impact of the LSU was considered difficult to measure (as discussed below in Section 7.2.3), but coordinators reported varying degrees of success. There was a strong consensus among school-based interviewees that attendance at LSUs would help to solve behaviour problems, and therefore reduce the number of permanent exclusions, and improve the quality of learning for pupils generally.

7.1.3 The Gifted and Talented Strand

When the 2002 survey was administered, progress in relation to the Gifted and Talented Strand was limited; in fact, ten primary schools were still without a responsible teacher. A considerable amount of time had been spent identifying gifted and talented pupils, and thus some schools were in a '*limbo period*' between identification of pupils and provision.

Two case-study schools were still in this position, but most were offering a range of different activities, including out-of-hours activities (often referred to as 'add-on' activities), off-timetable immersion projects, and in some cases activities embedded in the curriculum. All schools recognised the importance of the latter, although in some cases such provision had not yet been put in place. While most schools had started by offering extra-curricular activities, four schools had taken the opposite approach and were focusing specifically on classroom provision rather than additional extras.

Gifted and talented coordinators/responsible teachers reported gaining personal satisfaction from their role, resulting from seeing pupils' motivation increase. Moreover, the rise in aspirations of gifted and talented pupils was thought to have had a knock-on effect with other pupils. In some cases, other pupils had been involved in gifted and talented activities, not just those on the gifted and talented register. However, some coordinators reported a lack of commitment in schools, due to teachers' heavy workloads and conflicting priorities; in some cases, the Gifted and Talented Strand was still perceived as elitist.

The general consensus was that pupils identified as Gifted and Talented were motivated and enthused, although a few interviewees voiced concerns about possible negative impacts. Similarly, the majority of interviewees felt that Gifted and Talented provision had benefited pupils not identified as such, although one or two were worried about pupils feeling excluded.

7.1.4 The Tailored Strand

Schools were extremely positive about the opportunity provided by the Tailored Strand to address the particular needs and circumstances of their own school. They were involved in a diverse and rich range of activities. It is perhaps to be expected that work in relation to the curriculum/teaching and learning was a popular choice for the focus of the Tailored Strand. However, specific activities relating to the school's wider involvement with parents, families and with the local community and in its role as a provider of cultural enrichment were also a feature of the Strand.

The particular focus of the Tailored Strand within a Cluster often involved close links with other Strands, particularly Gifted and Talented and Learning Mentors. In some instances, the work being carried out within the Tailored Strand had been boosted by the fact that it had been able to build upon and extend existing initiatives.

When the survey (early 2002) and the first school visits (summer term 2002) were carried out, the initiative was still very much in its infancy and the success of the Strand in terms of meeting the needs and expectations of schools remained to be realised. Progress was more advanced in schools visited later (autumn/winter 2002), but even then, the Strand was sometimes said to be in a developmental stage.

7.2 Cross-strand Issues

Certain key issues emerged from the evaluation of the EC initiative. These were management, training, monitoring and evaluation, partnerships and primary-secondary transition. These issues are each discussed in turn in the following sections.

7.2.1 Management of the initiative in schools

Reflecting the structure of the initiative as presented to them, the case-study schools had established management structures within the individual EC Strands. It was commonplace for example, for schools to appoint individual strand coordinators to oversee the work within the schools and to liaise with other strand coordinators in other Cluster schools and with those with strand responsibility at Cluster level.

In some cases, schools were able to build upon pre-existing management structures; in other cases, they found it necessary to put new arrangements in place. The initiative had clearly spread within schools from the initial involvement of the headteachers, to a wider range of staff. Some appointments to specific EC posts had been made from within the schools; other staff, for example, Learning Mentors, were employed with EC funds.

It was still the case, however, that senior staff tend to hold key positions within the EC initiative. This helps to give the initiative the necessary status and impetus for it to succeed, as well as facilitating a comprehensive strategic overview at senior level, which is important, because most schools do not have overall EC coordinators.

Appointments to the role of strand coordinator usually reflected the experience, responsibilities and/or interests of those concerned. Other staff might be involved in individual Strands, for example by liaising with the LM, or developing schemes of work for gifted and talented pupils. However, the degree of awareness of *the Clusters initiative* among other staff was variable; they would, of course, know that the school had a Learning Mentor, or an LSU, but would not necessarily associate these with EC.

Most Cluster funding was delegated to schools, and a member of the SMT was usually responsible for its use, although some of the funding for individual strands might be further delegated to the strand coordinators. It was used for a variety of purposes, principally staffing and responsibility points, resources and equipment.

Targets were usually set by adding a little to existing targets, but some Chairs were critical of this approach, believing that the resulting targets would be unrealistic. There was a concern to ensure that all targets should be consistent, realistic, and referenced to individual pupils.

7.2.2 Training

There were mixed feelings among interviewees about the standard and usefulness of the national training provided in relation to the EC strands. The national training for Learning Mentors was thought to have been extremely useful, although some thought it was provided too late. Strand coordinators were divided: some had undertaken the national training, and would have welcomed more, while others felt that training was unnecessary, because they already had relevant experience. Some coordinators expressed doubts about providing local training, because funding was devolved to schools and nothing was left to pay training expenses.

No training was provided specifically for LSU staff, although some had undertaken training courses which were relevant to their work. Some LSU managers thought that staff would benefit from further training in areas such as behaviour management and child protection.

There were mixed feelings about the national training for gifted and talented coordinators/responsible teachers. Coordinators/responsible teachers resented the fact that the course was being accredited, and felt patronised by this. The additional work that the accreditation required had caused workload problems. Interviewees also said that they would have welcomed practical examples of how to provide for gifted and talented pupils in the classroom.

The fact that the Tailored Strand enables schools to focus on their specific needs meant that activities varied considerably both across and within Clusters. A generic training course would not, therefore, be appropriate for the Tailored Strand. Although funding for training was considered valuable, schools were having to seek out specific training appropriate to the focus of their own Tailored Strand, which did not always prove easy. However, in some cases there was not a perceived need for training, as the staff involved in the strand already had the necessary skills and experience.

The general opinion amongst interviewees was that networking was more useful than formal training. Face-to-face liaison to share experiences and good practice was favoured, although time did not always allow for this to take place as frequently as would have been liked. One Cluster had set up an e-mail forum so that more immediate liaison could take place. Networking was considered '*essential*' in order to keep up-to-date with developments on a Cluster or national basis.

7.2.3 Monitoring and evaluation

For a number of Clusters, and schools, procedures for monitoring and evaluation were still in an early stage of development. Some Clusters had developed common evaluation forms which were distributed to schools, while in others evaluation was organised on an individual strand basis. Some schools were developing an individual approach, often based on mechanisms already in place.

There was considerable doubt among interviewees that the impact of certain Cluster activities could be evaluated at all. For instance, the impact of the Learning Mentors or attendance at an LSU was thought to be '*visible but not quantifiable*', given that the focus was often on emotional well-being. Anecdotal evidence indicated an impact on attendance, behaviour and attainment, although the impact was difficult to measure.

Moreover, much of the Cluster work undertaken was based on what was already in place in schools, which made it difficult to assess the specific impact that the Cluster initiative had had. For example, it would be difficult to measure the impact of an additional Learning Mentor (funded by Cluster finances) if a school already had Learning Mentors in post prior to involvement in the initiative.

7.2.4 Partnerships

One of the main aims of the Cluster initiative is to enhance relationships between schools. When asked in the questionnaire survey to identify the main advantages of being involved in the Cluster initiatives, the benefit of building partnerships with

other schools (resulting in improved communication) was one of the most frequent responses given by secondary and primary schools. Some schools suggested that the initiative had provided them with the opportunity to regenerate links with schools that had previously existed but dwindled. But the Cluster initiative had also engendered a wide range of new links between schools, leading to greater mutual understanding and collaboration.

Some Clusters aimed to share good practice with local schools not included in the Cluster itself. There were also links between Clusters that were geographically close (and in some cases shared a Strand Coordinator) or those that had undertaken training together.

There were evidently some continuing doubts and uncertainty about the role of the 'more successful' school, but there was also evidence of more positive developments. In some cases at least, it appeared that initial doubts had been overcome and good relationships established between schools in different circumstances; there were also signs of a growing realisation that collaboration brought benefits to all concerned, and that all schools had something to contribute to the process.

7.2.5 Primary-secondary transition

The majority of schools included in the evaluation (in both the survey and case-study visits) had transfer arrangements in place to varying degrees, including taster/induction days for pupils, cross-phase projects and staff visits to feeder or receiving schools.

Cluster Chairs and staff in case-study schools thought that Cluster membership promoted liaison between schools, which in turn would foster cross-phase continuity and progression. In a number of Clusters, work on individual Strands was intended to have an impact on transition: some LMs were working cross-phase, information about gifted and talented pupils was being circulated, and in one Cluster the secondary LSUs were being used to aid transition, though it is not clear exactly how.

In two Clusters, transition was the focus of the Tailored Strand. One Cluster appeared to be further ahead than the other, and was implementing a structured transition programme, which comprised a range of activities, including secondary staff teaching in primary schools, and the creation of two primary-style classrooms in a secondary school. As might be expected, interviewees in these two Clusters anticipated a

greater impact on transition than those in other Clusters, where liaison remained largely informal.

7.3 Funding

The funding for the Excellence Cluster programme reaches schools through the Standards Fund via their LEAs. Unlike the EiC programme, Excellence Clusters only operate in selected schools and it is for the LEA and the partnership to decide which schools to include in the Cluster. There is no limit on the number of schools that can participate, though the available funding is capped and the size of the Cluster did not influence the overall allocation at the outset. However, they are now funded on a per-pupil basis. An examination of the overall funds allocated to individual Clusters showed no clear relationship with the number of schools included.

At a Cluster level, different models were used to allocate funds for each of the four strands. Our analysis of Cluster plans revealed that the dominant model for the Gifted and Talented Strand across both primary and secondary schools, was based on a flat-rate element.³⁹ For the Learning Mentor Strand, the most common method of allocating funding to primary schools was to share or 'pool' mentors, while for secondary schools, the most common method was to allocate an equal number of LMs to each secondary school. LSU provision across primary schools was very limited and most Clusters decided not to include primary schools in the strand. All Clusters decided to make provision for LSUs in secondary schools, and funding for these was commonly allocated using a flat-rate approach. Funding for the Tailored Strand was allocated in three different ways: through flat rates, formulae using indicators directly related to the Tailored Strand activity, and formulae incorporating a substantial 'deprivation' element.

Within schools, the largest proportion of funds for the three core strands (Gifted and Talented, LM and LSU) was reported to be used for staff salaries. Only a minority of schools reported that Cluster funding had freed resources to be spent elsewhere in the school. However, slightly more schools reported that the Tailored Strand had freed resources compared with the other three strands, though the amounts were small. A fairly high proportion of schools, particular in the secondary sector, reported that resources from the main school budget had been used to assist with the funding of Learning Mentors. This confirms the qualitative evidence that the LM Strand was felt

³⁹ Together with a varying element, usually pupil numbers or pupil numbers weighted by known FSM eligibility.

to be worthwhile. The amount of money used to supplement Excellence Clusters was greatest for the LSU Strand. Schools using their own money to supplement the strand could again indicate that the initiative was perceived as worthwhile, but it also points to the resource-intensity of the LSU Strand.

7.4 Development and Progress

This section summarises the key points in relation to the development and progress of Clusters during 2001-02, and the issues to which these have given rise and which remain to be addressed.

Progress, Development and Impact: Across the Clusters, there were very positive reports of the development and impact of work of the LMs and of that being carried out as part of the Tailored Strand. There were reports of local successes with regard to the Gifted and Talented and LSU Strands but progress, development and impact has been patchy. The recruitment and retention of key EC personnel and other school staff have had an effect on progress and impact in some Clusters, as have the changing fortunes of schools.

Monitoring and Evaluation: There is evidence of progress with regard to the establishment of monitoring and evaluation procedures in some of the Clusters. However, this is an issue that remains to be addressed in other Clusters.

Target Attainment: There were reports of success in achieving Cluster targets. Some concern was expressed about whether the particular targets set were realistic, but the attainment of targets, nevertheless, is seen as one of the major challenges of the initiative.

Collaboration between Schools: The co-operation and collaboration of the schools involved in the initiative has been a key feature of development and is seen as one of the greatest successes. Professional dialogue and the sharing of experiences and expertise across and within school phases has been facilitated. However, the role of the high-performing schools involved in the local Clusters is one that needs further consideration and development.

Partnerships and Links: LEAs have remained closely involved in the work of local Clusters in a variety of roles. This is widely valued. However, links with other local partners/initiatives are in most cases underdeveloped. In the interests of coherence and comprehensive coverage these links need to be pursued further.

Dissemination: The dissemination of EC experience, expertise and good practice is an important way of spreading the impact of the initiative more widely and some Clusters are undertaking dissemination work. How this might be effectively carried out needs to be considered and whether a national or local strategy is most appropriate.

It appears that much of the work begun under the auspices of the EC initiative is not yet so well embedded in school practice that it can continue without additional funding. When the interviews were conducted, the situation regarding the future funding of the EC initiative was unclear and creating concern about the possible need for exit strategies; the recent clarification with regard to future funding should enable Clusters to plan more effectively over the coming months.

7.5 The Next Stage of the Evaluation

Data collected during the second survey will be coded, entered and analysed. It will be reported in a progress report due in July 2003. Meanwhile, we will continue the strand studies by undertaking further visits to Cluster schools. In the autumn term, we will carry out the third and final interviews with Cluster Chairs, and then prepare the final report of the evaluation.

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