Excellence Clusters: the first ten inspections

HMI 1732

E-publication

October 2003

Contents   page

Introduction

1.   Excellence Clusters are part of the Excellence in Cities programme. They are partnerships formed between groups of schools, their local education authority (LEA) and other organisations. The clusters serve pockets of deprivation outside large conurbations, for example one of the first clusters serves part of West Cumbria. Clusters are sometimes geographically spread but are linked because they serve communities with similar problems. Each cluster includes at least one core secondary school identified by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as having a history of underperformance or disadvantage and one good secondary school, often a beacon or leading edge school. Clusters usually include a number of partner primary schools. There is no limit to the size of a cluster: most have between 12 and 15 schools, but some have as few as 6 or as many as 20.

2.   The first 11 Excellence Clusters started in September 2001, and by September 2003 there were some 40, including a couple that were originally established as Education Action Zones (EAZs). By 2005, there will be a further 20 new Excellence Clusters and another 40 existing EAZs will become Excellence Clusters.

3.   Excellence Clusters are intended to tackle entrenched problems of underachievement and social exclusion. The overarching goals are to close the gap between standards in these disadvantaged areas and elsewhere, and to improve the quality of education, especially among the disadvantaged. Each cluster is expected to provide four learning strands:

- provision for gifted and talented pupils
- learning support units
- mentoring of pupils
- one of their own choice to meet the needs identified in the cluster (known as the tailored strand).

4.   The DfES provides detailed guidance for the general management and leadership of Excellence Clusters and for these four strands on its web site at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/excellence.

5.   Each cluster is managed by a non-statutory body, known as the Partnership, made up of headteachers of participating schools, the LEA and a member of the local EAZ, where there is one. This group forms the core membership of the partnership, but others may be invited to join as core members see fit. One of the headteachers usually acts as the chair of the partnership.

6.   Funding is provided to the partnership through the Standards Fund. In the financial year 2002-03, Excellence Clusters received about £140 for each pupil. The partnership decides on the allocation of resources and the planning and implementation of the programme. The intention is that the funding should be allocated so that it has the best chance of closing the gap in performance. In general, therefore, most of the funding should go to schools with the lowest standards.

7.   Compared with EAZs, Excellence Clusters employ few staff. Most have two or three, often part-time, employees who work as strand co-ordinators. Schools may also use Excellence Cluster funding to engage additional staff, for example as learning mentors or to lead learning support units.

8.   Partnerships are responsible for ensuring that they monitor and evaluate their work as a whole as well as the implementation and effect of the four separate strands. They are also required to make good use of this information to disseminate good practice or, where progress is unsatisfactory, to help decide on remedial action.

The inspection

9.   During autumn 2002 and spring 2003 Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) inspected 10 of the first round Excellence Clusters. They were: Coventry, Croydon, West Cumbria, Dewsbury and Batley, Portsmouth, Shepway, Skelmersdale, Tameside, Tilbury and Chadwell, and Walsall.

10.   At the time they were inspected, all of the clusters had been operating for at least one full year, and most had received confirmation of their funding at least six months before their inception.

11.   HMI assessed the effectiveness of each cluster by evaluating:

- the quality of its planning, ways of working and use of resources

- the quality of teaching and learning

- the productiveness of the partnerships the cluster had developed

- how well the cluster managed, monitored and evaluated its work.

12.   They also assessed the extent to which elements of each cluster's programmes:

- met or were likely to meet the objectives set by the cluster

- connected with and enhanced other improvement work, especially that aimed at raising standards in literacy, numeracy and information and communications technology

- contributed to raising standards and promoting social inclusion among the groups targeted

- were cost effective.

13.   Before each inspection HMI scrutinised the cluster's initial bid and planning documents, the most recent data about the performance of pupils in cluster schools and other documents provided by the cluster. They also invited each headteacher in the cluster to complete a questionnaire to assess the performance of the cluster on each of the evaluation criteria outlined above.

14.   During the inspection HMI held meetings with the chair and other members of the partnership, including LEA officers, and with strand leaders and other cluster staff. They visited a representative sample of schools in each cluster where they held meetings with headteachers, teachers, learning mentors and other staff employed using cluster funding. They also observed lessons and other learning activities, scrutinised pupils' work and talked with pupils, parents and other members of the community.

15.   At the end of each inspection HMI provided each partnership with a written summary of their main findings, a copy of which was sent to the DfES. This report is based on those summary findings.

Main findings

- Most of the Excellence Clusters inspected in this survey have made a positive start in only a short period of time. Clusters have been greatly helped by the relatively tight constraints set by the DfES and by the fact that decisions about the priorities and allocation of resources are directly in the hands of the headteachers of participating schools.

- However, the rate of change brought about by the clusters' activities is often too slow, especially when schools fail to appreciate the urgency with which they need to improve provision and outcomes.

- Some headteachers try to do too much of the cluster management themselves. The management is best where the cluster delegates the responsibility for managing the implementation of the work to an executive co-ordinator, for example to a well-qualified and experienced LEA officer or adviser, or to an independent consultant.

- Overall, the quality of education in schools in Excellence Clusters is improving, with a broader and richer range of opportunities open to disadvantaged pupils. Teachers find it easier to do their job in everyday lessons, and learning is more enjoyable.

- There are signs of improvements in pupils' attendance, behaviour, exclusions and attitudes to education especially among those pupils who have been targeted for support. Parents' attitudes to education are also improving. Clusters are also beginning to have a positive effect on raising attainment, but, after only a year, it is too early to expect widespread or substantial improvements in examination results.

- Relationships between cluster schools have improved significantly. Heads and teachers now have a better understanding of the issues facing colleagues in nearby schools. The best clusters have strong links with their LEA and are well supported by LEA officers and advisers.

- Partnerships give insufficient priority to completing preparatory work and appointing staff during the lead-in time before the launch, so the early months of the cluster are often less effective than they should be.

- Headteachers are not always clear what contribution they expect of the beacon or leading edge school in the cluster.

- Few clusters are good at monitoring and evaluating their work, either as a whole or in the various strands. The DfES requirement for an end-of-year review helped headteachers focus on evaluation, and clusters are beginning to use the findings to re-direct their resources more effectively.

❑ In all the clusters, the provision of learning mentors has had the greatest effect on raising standards, promoting educational inclusion, improving the range of provision, and developing better working relationships with others. Learning mentors have become a highly valued and important part of school provision.

❑ The level of provision of learning support units is generally good in Excellence Cluster schools, although not all of them are supported by cluster funding. The quality of that provision and effect of the work are good in a third of the clusters and at least satisfactory in the remainder. As a result of their work, the attendance and behaviour of targeted pupils are improving and exclusions are falling. Although unit costs are high, learning support units generally provide good value for money.

❑ There are variations between clusters, but the implementation and effect of the gifted and talented strand are broadly satisfactory. As yet, improved provision has broadened the range of learning opportunities for gifted pupils out of school hours, and done more for educational inclusion than it has for raising and maintaining high standards. The identification of gifted and talented pupils is generally good but cluster schools are not always careful to check that boys and girls and pupils from minority ethnic groups are represented with due regard to the proportions in the school. Although the identification of talented pupils is generally good, clusters have done little to extend their skills.

❑ The implementation and effect of the tailored strand are more variable than the other strands, sometimes because resources are spread too thinly. Where this strand is aimed at improving literacy skills there have been some noticeable improvements in speaking skills, but less so in reading and writing. Programmes aimed at engaging with troubled families and the community are often successful at breaking down barriers to learning, and improving parents' attitudes to education. The effect of programmes aimed at improving pupils' independence as learners, building self-esteem and raising aspirations is more mixed.

Overall quality of Excellence Cluster work

16.   With a couple of exceptions, Excellence Clusters have got off to a very positive start. Compared with EAZs, which were set up to perform a similar function, Excellence Clusters work within parameters which are tightly defined. Furthermore, the leadership and management of clusters are very much in the hands of the headteachers of participating schools. As a result, lines of communication are short and decisions can be implemented quickly. Only a limited part of the funding, sometimes too little, is spent on staffing costs to organise cluster work.

17.   The picture emerging from the inspection of these ten Excellence Clusters is that, overall, they are beginning to have an encouraging effect on raising attainment. In clusters such as Coventry, and Dewsbury and Batley, the work of learning mentors is having a positive effect and mentored pupils are doing much better in lessons. Elsewhere, for example in Croydon, improved provision for gifted and talented pupils has contributed to improvements in test scores of 14-year-old pupils. It is unrealistic, however, to expect widespread and dramatic changes in the performance of pupils or to see substantial improvements in the examination results of schools based on intervention over only a year.

18.   There are signs of improvements in pupils' attendance, behaviour and attitudes to education among those pupils who have been targeted for support. Improvements in attendance are often hard won, and while the focus of attention is on one group of pupils there are sometimes dips in the attendance of others. Improvements in behaviour and attitudes to education are often the result of intervention by learning mentors, or through the work of learning support units, and by staff engaged as part of the tailored strand.

19.   Exclusion rates continue to fall in Excellence Clusters. However, there are schools where the effect of cluster initiatives is limited and where exclusion rates are rising because the issue has had insufficient priority.

20.   Excellence Cluster funding has opened up new and different opportunities for children, enriching the quality of their education. As a result of the work of learning mentors and learning support units, the behaviour of targeted pupils is better. Consequently, teachers find it easier to do their job in ordinary lessons and learning is more enjoyable. Many of the clusters are developing enrichment programmes for gifted and talented pupils, and as a result are beginning to raise the aspirations of their brightest pupils. In Shepway Excellence Cluster funding contributes to a programme that enables all the pupils at one school to benefit from a residential period in France. Here they develop their linguistic skills, a better understanding of French culture and a good range of social skills.

21.   Relationships between cluster schools have improved significantly. Headteachers meet together regularly and have a better understanding of the issues facing colleagues in nearby primary and secondary schools. Within the partnership,

headteachers are beginning to make decisions based on the best interests of improving education in the area, not just the priorities of their own schools. Similarly, there are good links between others, for example, among teachers responsible for co-ordinating provision for gifted and talented pupils, and among learning mentors.

22.   The effect is often most impressive where cluster funding is used to engage better with disadvantaged families. Often links with parents are developed as part of the learning mentor and tailored strands, and cluster funding is often used to complement that from other sources. In Dewsbury and Batley, for example, there are substantial improvements in attendance at parents' consultation evenings, while in Coventry some parents attend parenting workshops and also take part in observation sessions to see how their children are progressing in school.

23.   The picture, however, is not all rosy. With few exceptions, the rate of change is frequently too slow. Few of those responsible for leading clusters seem to appreciate that, as an intervention strategy, funding is provided so that it can make a difference and the sooner the better. Admittedly, these Excellence Clusters are still at an early stage, but there is often a reluctance to take a hard look at the effect of expenditure and to switch funding where there has been insufficient improvement.

24.   There are two clusters where progress is less than expected. Tilbury and Chadwell Cluster is facing severe difficulties. Two out of four of its secondary schools and one primary school are in special measures and due for closure. The issues facing this cluster are so great that it needs more support to help it meet its aims. The situation in Shepway is more mixed, but here there are weaknesses in the management of the cluster, its actions lack urgency and not all schools are working with equal vigour to meet the cluster's goals.

Leadership and management

25.   The leadership and management of most Excellence Clusters are broadly satisfactory with a few exceptions. The leadership and management in Coventry are very good, while in Tilbury and Chadwell, and in Shepway management is less than satisfactory.

26.   Most of those responsible for running these partnerships are headteachers of participating schools. They know the strengths and weaknesses of cluster schools, they understand the issues and constraints affecting them and they are directly interested in improving the education of their pupils. Whatever the history of co-operation in the area, cluster headteachers work together well and give their time freely to build the infrastructure necessary to make things work. They usually have a clear, shared vision of what they want to achieve.

27.   Those clusters that are doing well have strong partnerships with their LEAs. Many of these LEAs provided generous support to help headteachers prepare the initial bid. In these same LEAs, officers and advisers continue to provide constructive professional advice and useful administrative assistance and statistical analysis.

28.   Initial plans were usually well thought through and based on the good use of inspection evidence, examination results and other data. The rationale for the focus of the tailored strand was usually convincing.

29.   The allocation of funding is generally good. Clusters use various formulae to ensure that money goes to those schools that have most to do. These arrangements are well understood and generally accepted and agreed by all the headteachers.

30.   The initial guidance from the DfES was that clusters should avoid unnecessary expenditure on the appointment of a director. This was an understandable response to the over-burdening structures imposed on EAZs. A few clusters have appointed an executive co-ordinator, but most clusters rely on relatively junior strand co-ordinators to lead and manage the day-to-day work in the various strands. This often leaves a gap in the management of the cluster. Those responsible for leading and managing these clusters are busy headteachers and they have insufficient time to monitor the implementation and effect of their spending.

31.   This aspect of cluster management is better where the partnership is well supported by an executive co-ordinator, often an LEA officer or adviser, with specific responsibility for co-ordinating the cluster's work. In Croydon, for example, much of the progress chasing and analysis of data is carried out by a senior LEA adviser, but this is in addition to his existing responsibilities. An independent consultant, employed for about two days a week, does a similar job in Portsmouth. In Coventry, an experienced headteacher has been seconded by the LEA to support such initiatives and his contribution makes a substantial difference to the effectiveness of the cluster's leadership and management. A recurring message in these inspections is that it is too much to expect serving headteachers to do all this work themselves.

32.   Most clusters employ two or three strand co-ordinators to audit provision, prepare action plans, organise training, and disseminate good practice. The quality of this strand co-ordination varies, with no obvious pattern of good or poor practice. Many strand co-ordinators are engaged part-time, sometimes the pressure of other work hinders their ability to fulfil their cluster duties satisfactorily and line managers sometimes have insufficient time to monitor their work. Many strand co-ordinators are new to the role and the quality of their induction arrangements vary. They often struggle with competing demands for their time and some find it hard to adopt a strategic approach.

33.   Most of these cluster strand co-ordinators hold regular meetings for lead personnel in schools. These meetings provide good opportunities for school staff to develop shared policies, agree methods of working and hear about good practice locally and further afield. These networking meetings are an important part of the professional development provided by Excellence Clusters.

34.   In a few of the clusters the work of the strand co-ordinators is closely monitored, with regular weekly meetings to discuss the effect of work completed in the previous week, and to plan the coming week. This information is gathered systematically and then reported at termly partnership meetings.

35.   There are still some tensions in the way these partnerships operate. Inevitably it takes time to set up a cluster and appoint staff, but partnerships frequently allow lead-in time to slip away. As a result, in the first few months of the cluster's life not enough is achieved. Headteachers are not always clear what they expect of the beacon or leading edge school in the cluster. Where such schools are different in nature, for example where they are grammar, denominational or single-sex schools, there are frequently claims from other headteachers that they do not serve similar pupils and the methods they use are not necessarily relevant in other schools. Occasionally the headteachers of lead schools are reluctant to identify good practice in their own schools for fear of alienating their colleagues.

36.   Few partnerships monitor their work sufficiently well, and the quality of their evaluation arrangements varies, as a whole, and in relation to the individual strands. Monitoring of the overall progress of each cluster has been hindered because initial targets were not always based on pupil-level data. Instead, clusters were exhorted to meet targets based on simple percentage improvements across the board. This approach gave some headteachers a useful excuse for not treating target-setting seriously enough.

37.   Since their inception, most clusters have made noticeable improvements in important performance indicators, for example in the attendance and behaviour of targeted pupils. But partnerships recognise that their efforts are beginning to plateau and further improvement will be more difficult to achieve. The end-of-year review, required by the DfES, helped focus their evaluation and clusters are starting to use the findings to redirect their resources more effectively.

The four strands

38.   Many of the findings in the Ofsted survey report, *Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zones: management and impact*, HMI 1399, June 2003, apply equally to Excellence Clusters.

Provision for gifted and talented pupils

39.   The gifted and talented programme is designed to raise standards among the most able pupils by providing them with a higher level of challenge. Schools were asked to identify 5 to 10% of their pupils who would benefit from the programme and to use the funding to offer additional provision for them.

40.   Although there are variations between clusters, the implementation and effect of this strand are broadly satisfactory. As yet, improved provision for gifted pupils has widened the range of opportunities and done more for educational inclusion than it has for raising and maintaining high standards. There have been some improvements in test scores and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results, for example in test results at age 11 in Portsmouth and in results at age 14 in Croydon, but even here the improved performance is little better than might be expected, allowing for the additional funding. It is, however, still very early to expect widespread and significant improvements in results.

41.   Most clusters have a co-ordinator to lead this strand. Clusters often find it hard to recruit suitably qualified and experienced personnel to take what is sometimes a part-time appointment, usually on a short-term contract. Where cluster co-ordination is best it is often because this strand is led by an experienced consultant who holds regular meetings for school co-ordinators, quickly commands their respect, provides good-quality training and works alongside teachers to model good practice.

42.   The great majority of clusters provided school co-ordinators with good-quality training by Oxford Brookes University. Primary teachers found this very helpful, but secondary co-ordinators were not so convinced. Co-ordinators in secondary schools often find it hard to make time to engage with large numbers of teachers and build on the wide range of experience and expertise they encounter.

43.   The identification of gifted and talented pupils is generally good. Cluster schools use an increasing range of data and some have developed well-prepared subject-specific criteria to help them identify able pupils and those who have the potential but are underperforming. Information about individual pupils is often checked with other teachers' recommendations. In the best schools, teachers ask for and make use of recommendations from parents, pupils, mentors and from other agencies, such as educational psychologists. Cluster schools are not always careful to check that gifted and talented boys and girls, and pupils from minority ethnic groups are represented with due regard to the proportions in the school.

44.   Most of the clusters and many individual schools have organised useful enrichment activities for gifted pupils, and these have had a considerable effect on raising pupils' aspirations and increased their involvement in out-of-hours learning. For example, participation in outward-bound schemes has developed self-confidence and team working, while various programmes have helped improve public-speaking and debating skills.

45.   Secondary pupils appreciate the extra support, particularly links with and visits to higher and further education institutions. They feel that these activities help them with their revision and career choices. There are clusters where gifted and talented pupils from different schools, including those aged 10 and 11, would benefit from more opportunities to work with one another.

46.   Only a few cluster schools prepare pupils for early examination entry. Schools are rightly cautious about such acceleration because they are not clear what to provide for successful pupils once they have passed their GCSE examinations. To stretch a group of talented art pupils one cluster school made arrangements for 17 Year 10 pupils to study photography at a local college after school hours. The pupils all gained at least a grade C at GCSE and the experience also helped develop their language skills, by introducing them to a broader range of descriptive vocabulary, and improved their self-esteem.

47.   In part, the lack of improvement in attainment reflects the limited effect of this strand on teaching in everyday lessons. Cluster training for teachers in thinking skills and preferred styles of learning is only slowly affecting classroom practice. In primary schools, where teachers have often been better than their secondary colleagues at recognising the need to vary the demands they make on pupils of different abilities, there is a tendency for cluster schools to establish withdrawal groups. While these give pupils good opportunities to work in different ways and make more rapid progress, there is the risk that pupils see this as unrelated to ordinary school work. Furthermore, these pupils are not given the opportunity to develop the social skills required when working with others who are less able. In a few secondary schools teachers are developing a broader range of teaching strategies to stretch gifted pupils, to give them more varied and demanding work.

48.   Although the identification of talented pupils is generally good, few clusters have well-planned provision to extend their levels of expertise. There are heartening examples of individual teachers who go out of their way to ensure that talented pupils receive high-quality coaching and attend sports events, drama festivals and other such activities, but these are the exception.

49.   In clusters where this strand is weak, networking is often inadequate and money is often spent on extra resources to meet general departmental priorities rather than being focused on improving provision for identified pupils. There are also problems in establishing a programme for gifted and talented pupils in some cluster schools where teachers are philosophically opposed to the identification of and provision for such pupils.

Learning mentors

50.   Of all the strands, the provision of learning mentors has had the greatest effect on raising standards, promoting educational inclusion, improving the range of provision and developing better working relationships with others. Learning mentors have become an important part of school provision and are highly valued by teaching colleagues in primary and secondary schools alike, and by parents and pupils, especially those they support directly.

51.   As in other Excellence in Cities areas, good learning mentors in Excellence Clusters are enthusiastic about working with young people; they are sympathetic listeners and inspire the trust of pupils, who realise they are firm but fair. Good mentors are well organised and trained for the job and are fully aware of how their work fits into the school's pastoral system. Mentors engage quickly with pupils and provide the flexible support that is needed. They often develop strong links with partner schools so that pupils are closely monitored when they move from primary to secondary schools in the cluster. Mentors frequently develop strong, productive links with parents, and with educational professionals and other agencies.

52.   In schools where learning mentors are having the greatest effect, the attendance and behaviour of targeted pupils are improving and exclusions are falling. In cluster primary schools their work is having a positive effect on pupils' progress, especially in English and mathematics. In secondary schools the most noticeable effect of learning mentors is with previously disaffected pupils. Where mentoring is going well, mentored pupils arrive for lessons better prepared for work. They are more thoughtful about their actions and recognise and avoid situations where they are likely to get into trouble. When faced with work they do not understand they more readily ask the teacher or other adults for help. In Coventry, where mentoring is good, the effect of learning mentors is greatest with new pupils and their families, particularly asylum seekers and refugees.

53.   Pupils often say they are proud to be mentored and like the individual attention they receive. Those who are benefiting most understand that the relationship with their mentor is a two-way process and that they must accept responsibility for their own work. Pupils particularly like the way that mentors treat them in an adult fashion.

54.   The best learning mentors are those who use their initiative well, and many do more than is expected of them. They often make good links with other strand leaders so that cluster provision appears seamless. They help set up breakfast, lunchtime and after-school clubs to enrich and support pupils' learning. They gain and maintain the parents' trust and help break down communication barriers, and sometimes encourage parents to continue their own education.

55.   Clusters have few problems recruiting suitable personnel as learning mentors. They come with wide-ranging experience and qualifications. Some have a background in teaching or youth work, experience of social work or of raising their own children. Most of the clusters used Liverpool John Moores University to provide mentors with initial training and this was well received. The training covered many relevant issues but sometimes took insufficient account of mentors' previous experience.

56.   The organisation, management and effect of learning mentors are variable, but usually better where there are regular opportunities for mentors from different schools to meet, share examples of good practice and discuss how they can do better. Similarly, provision in individual schools is often better where all learning support and inclusion work is managed by one person, often at a senior level.

57.   Most clusters have developed good referral procedures and sometimes include opportunities for self-referral. In the best clusters all the schools have agreed and use the same procedures and ensure teachers are well informed about the mentor's role. These schools set realistic and achievable targets, monitor pupils well and record-keeping and exit procedures are good.

58.   Headteachers recognise the value of learning mentors' work and several use funds from other sources to increase the level of provision. Likewise, some schools immediately outside cluster boundaries, having seen the benefits of mentoring, are beginning to introduce mentors using money from various sources.

59.   Although, overall, the introduction of mentoring is going well, there are aspects of mentors' work that could be improved. First, arrangements often vary from school to school within the same cluster so pupils are expected to learn a different system when they transfer to another school. Second, the monitoring and evaluation of this strand, as with the others, are often inadequate. As a result, some senior managers fail to spot recurring issues or patterns of referral. Third, those mentors who were engaged late and missed the initial training programme often have to wait a long time to attend suitable training. Finally, exit strategies for pupils are not always clearly defined at the outset.

Learning support units

60.   Learning support units are school-based centres designed to support pupils whose attitudes to learning are poor, whose behaviour often causes concern and who may attend irregularly. It is for the schools to determine how learning support units are organised, following a broad set of principles issued by the DfES. Pupils are referred to the unit, where they work with dedicated staff for a planned period of time at learning more productively and improving attitudes and behaviour. In Excellence Clusters learning support units work mainly with pupils aged 11 to 14.

61.   Excellence Clusters have made a positive start with the introduction of learning support units. Provision and effect were good in a third of the clusters and at

least satisfactory in the remainder. Overall, the attendance and behaviour of targeted pupils are improving and exclusions are falling. Although unit costs are higher than they are for pupils in ordinary lessons, expenditure is significantly lower than it would be for provision out of school, so these learning support units generally provide good value for money.

62.   Before Excellence Clusters were formed, some of the secondary schools already had their own learning support units. Some receive cluster money for their unit. A number that had no such provision have used funds from other sources to create one. As a result, the level of provision in cluster secondary schools is generally good. There are very few Excellence Cluster learning support units in primary schools because there is little demand for them. A few clusters arrange for primary aged pupils to attend nearby secondary school learning support units if necessary. Such arrangements provide an efficient and flexible level of support.

63.   The day-to-day management of learning support units is usually good. Compared with earlier inspection findings (see *Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zones: management and impact*), teachers in Excellence Cluster schools are better informed about the purpose and scope of learning support units. Entry and exit arrangements are generally well established. Teachers are more closely involved in the identification of pupils who would benefit from unit support and know how this provision complements other support arrangements.

64.   Curricular provision in learning support units is also improving. As well as working on behaviour improvement, the main focus is on developing pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. In the past, pupils in learning support units have sometimes been given insufficient support to help them keep pace with work in subjects such as science and design and technology, yet these are often the very subjects where their behaviour is worst. Clusters tackle these issues in a variety of ways. In West Cumbria, for example, pupils follow mainstream lessons as far as possible and while they are in the unit the teaching focuses on anger management, language and emotional development and problem-solving skills. In some other clusters subject specialists teach in the learning support units to provide pupils with good-quality tuition across the curriculum. There are, however, still schools in some clusters where, while in the learning support unit, pupils are expected to tackle work in some subjects with inadequate specialist teaching.

65.   Learning support unit staff are generally good at establishing constructive links with parents and through these contacts they help parents to gain a better understanding of their child's and the school's needs. In the best learning support units parents are closely involved in setting and reviewing targets for improvement and are well informed about their child's progress. Links with others within and outside the school are mainly good. Most unit staff work closely with the school's special needs co-ordinator, and frequently with educational welfare officers, psychologists and other education providers, for example, local pupil referral units.

66.   When pupils are told that they will be taught in the learning support unit they are not always keen to participate because they recognise they will have to change

their ways. As part of their introduction to the unit they are usually expected to agree on the improvements they will make. After a short time in the unit most pupils realise the value of working on improving their behaviour and attitudes to work. While they are in the unit there are few opportunities for pupils to misbehave because they are usually under close adult supervision but some find it hard to readjust to teachers' expectations and class routines when they return to ordinary lessons. Most cluster schools have effective arrangements for tracking the performance of pupils when they return to mainstream schooling and gradually reduce support as the need diminishes.

67.   There are aspects of provision that need to be improved. First, co-ordination at cluster level varies too much, sometimes because there is nobody to co-ordinate provision and as a result unit staff do not have regular opportunities to meet and share good practice. Second, there is insufficient training directed at the professional development of unit staff. Third, there are times when, between identification and the provision of support, other more pressing cases occur. These schools need to be more flexible and use resources where they will have the greatest effect. Fourth, targets for improvement are sometimes too general, so staff, parents and pupils are not always clear about what needs to be tackled and how to do this. Finally, as with other strands, the monitoring and evaluation of learning support units by senior managers in schools and at cluster level are often inadequate.

Tailored strand

68.   Each cluster is entitled to allocate resources to fund one initiative of its own choosing, but the implementation and effect of this tailored strand are more variable than the other strands. In part this is because some clusters are working on two or three programmes for their tailored strand, so the effort and resources are dissipated and the effect is often minimal. Even where a cluster is working on only one initiative it often takes longer to establish the scope and purpose of this strand.

69.   Croydon Excellence Cluster decided, with DfES agreement, to defer the introduction of its tailored strand for a year and to give priority to its other work, so HMI did not inspect their tailored strand. The inspection in Portsmouth did not cover the tailored strand in cluster secondary schools.

70.   Work on the tailored strand is going well in Coventry, Dewsbury and Batley, and West Cumbria and in primary schools in Portsmouth. However, except in Coventry, there is as yet little evidence of any marked improvement in standards. The implementation and effect of the tailored strand are unsatisfactory in Tameside and in Tilbury and Chadwell, and broadly satisfactory in other clusters.

71.   Although the tailored strand is different in each cluster there are a number of common themes. Most focus on improving teaching and learning, and often supplement existing initiatives such as the national literacy and numeracy strategies. Where the tailored strand is directly aimed at improving pupils' language and literacy skills there have been noticeable improvements in speaking skills, but less so in

reading and writing. There is often a strong emphasis on engaging further with families and the community. These programmes are often successful at breaking down barriers to learning, and improving parents' entrenched, and sometimes previously antagonistic, attitudes to schools and education. Other common threads are those of improving pupils' independence as learners, building self-esteem and raising aspirations, but with these the results are more mixed.

72.   Tackling the difficulties created by pupil mobility is another common theme. In Coventry, where levels of transience are high, the tailored strand focuses on improving the transfer of pupils between schools, whether at the usual transfer stage at age 7 and 11, or when pupils of all ages arrive at the beginning or part-way through the academic year. All Coventry Cluster schools have audited existing provision and the great majority have improved their procedures for supporting late entrants. Assessment information is used well to support and review the progress of pupils with learning difficulties, those who speak English as an additional language and those with emotional or behavioural problems. This support is well integrated with other provision in school and with that provided by external agencies. Some schools use innovative methods of involving parents. For example, they invite the parents of pupils with special needs to coffee mornings to meet staff, offer visits to observe lessons and provide workshops on parenting skills. In Coventry the tailored strand is going well and funding has been used effectively.

73.   Dewsbury and Batley Cluster has taken a different but equally effective approach. They employ nine neighbourhood enrichment officers to work with families. These officers are developing strong partnerships with parents, especially those who in the past have done little to support their child's education. They help parents support their child with homework and encourage them to participate in further education themselves. As a result of this work there has been a marked improvement in attendance at parents evening in all schools. These neighbourhood enrichment officers have a good understanding of the support parents need and the expectations schools have of parents. Each officer is allocated a geographical area, rather than to a school so they work with the same families. This is particularly effective when siblings attend different schools because they are still supported by the same officer. They liaise effectively with learning mentors and gifted and talented co-ordinators to identify families that would most benefit from support. This work builds successfully on that of other agencies.

74.   There are a number of other positive features that emerge from work on the tailored strand. As with other strands, this has helped improve networking among teachers. Those involved in the work are eager to share ideas, they work hard and are keen to see the initiative succeed. The tailored strand is proving good for morale.

75.   There are more issues that need to be improved in relation to this strand than the others. Even where this strand is going well cluster partnerships find it the most difficult to introduce. Teachers and headteachers find it hard to establish the systems and structures necessary to achieve the goals they identify and set for themselves. Co-ordination, at cluster and school level, is often weak and sometimes lacking, as is the professional development teachers need to put good intentions into

practice. As with all the other strands, monitoring and evaluation are often unsatisfactory.

Conclusions and recommendations

76.   Excellence Clusters are settling in well, and beginning to make a difference to pupils' education and life chances. The effect is felt not just by those who are the direct recipients of support, such as those who are mentored or who attend learning support units, but also by others in their classes who are able to work more productively because targeted pupils are better behaved and lessons are disrupted less frequently.

77.   Most headteachers know what extra support their schools need and cluster funding helps them provide it, but it is too much to expect these same headteachers to co-ordinate the daily work of the cluster, to manage and monitor the everyday work of strand co-ordinators, and to analyse the data to demonstrate the effect of their decisions. Clusters need to be co-ordinated by an experienced and respected executive with sufficient time to do the job well.

78.   Most of these clusters had a generous lead-in time before their launch, but key decisions and appointments that should be have been made during this time were often delayed. As a result, during the first few months of the clusters' existence partnerships were trying to catch up. In future, new clusters should make full use of the lead-in time they have before their official start-up date.

79.   The evaluation of cluster work is improving. Headteachers recognise that early improvements were relatively easy to achieve and that further improvement will be more difficult. However, they are still reluctant to make uncomfortable decisions to redirect resources. Partnerships need to recognise that cluster funding should be channelled to where it will have the greatest effect.

80.   The best-managed cluster partnerships are beginning to recognise that their roles could and should go beyond leading and managing a series of intervention programmes. As yet few recognise that they are well placed to take a strong lead in the strategic management of education and allied services in the area. For example, few partnerships have discussed what other provision schools in the cluster should make for pupils at the point of exclusion.

81.   Those involved in implementing the gifted and talented strand need to focus more on improving the teaching and learning of pupils in their everyday lessons, and should develop better strategies for supporting and challenging talented pupils.

82.   The tailored strand needs strong leadership, well-defined goals and a clearly articulated implementation strategy, so that everyone knows where they are going and what is expected of them. School co-ordinators, teachers and other adults involved in the tailored strand need high-quality training to prepare them for the work, and regular opportunities to meet, review progress and share good practice.