# Research Reports

## Raising Educational Achievement in Areas of Multiple Disadvantage: Lessons from Lewisham & Rochdale

Research Report 51

New Deal for Communities

The National Evaluation

**Sheffield Hallam University**

# Raising Educational Achievement in Areas of Multiple Disadvantage: Lessons from Lewisham & Rochdale

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# Executive Summary

The single most common educational goal across all New Deal for Communities (NDC) partnerships is to raise the level of educational attainment. This report is based on case study visits to two NDC partnerships where a variety projects are in place. Different models of project delivery have been developed focusing on local need and community requirements.

In Rochdale (Heywood NDC) the work includes the Alternative Curriculum project, which brings vocational education courses to pupils in a number of local secondary schools. Primary school pupils are involved in a Language project, which seeks to raise levels of literacy and oracy.

In Lewisham (New Cross Gate NDC) a wide range of projects are underway including Deptford Truancy Challenge (a project to improve attendance among secondary pupils); Roots and Wings (using a mentor scheme to help secondary pupils see links between school and work); and the Deptford Advocacy project, which aims to address a variety of needs among secondary pupils and their families.

The projects have been especially **successful** in certain respects:

- Secondary pupils are showing greater commitment to school and beginning to view further education as a realistic aim
- One of the projects has ensured that some pupils at risk of permanent exclusion have secured successful work placements and completed their schooling
- Pupils attainments have risen overall

**Key factors** associated with successful initiatives are:

- Employing and engaging local people helps ensure that projects address local needs and are supported across the NDC area
- Involving families in solving the problems of their children helps avoid exclusions and builds bridges with the local schools; Personal contact with link workesr appears to have been especially successful
- Linking projects to qualifications, making sure that the young people leave with some tangible credentials: this raises the profile of the scheme and helps broaden the options available to the young people
- Linking in with already well-established projects, or using them as a model, can help improve the chances of success by learning from others' experiences

Some **barriers and problems** remain:

- NDC projects are generally linked to residence, which can result in problems where young people (who might otherwise benefit) are excluded because they do not live within the 'right' postcode
- Certain families are not reached, despite living in the right streets, in part because their specific needs are not being addressed: this may be a particular problem for some Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities
- Establishing projects in a 'top-down' fashion can result in less community involvement and commitment
- The bureaucratic hurdles faced by some organisations applying for funding seems to create more problems and delivery of urgently needed projects may be delayed indefinitely

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## Introduction

Every NDC partnership has included some form of provision aimed at improving standards of attainment among local school pupils at primary and/or secondary level. For this reason, our evaluation of the education theme in the NDC initiative has included a report focusing on 'raising achievement' for each of the last three years. This third detailed report on the issue arises from work in 2004/05.

The report focuses on fieldwork undertaken in two NDCs:

- Rochdale (Heywood NDC)
- Lewisham (New Cross Gate NDC)

The projects that are in progress vary in focus and size and have been running for different lengths of time, but all aim to raise achievement in local schools.

This report covers the following areas:

- The context in which the raising achievement projects have been established and the problems they are trying to address
- The nature of the interventions, in terms of their objectives and targeted beneficiaries
- The way in which the raising achievement projects have been delivered, in particular focusing on the different types of interventions that are offered and the assumptions behind them
- Current outcomes and impact of the projects (although these are limited given that the projects are in the early stages of development)
- Key lessons that have been learnt so far

## The Local Context

The development of projects to raise educational achievement in NDC areas is a major part of the partnerships' broader education strategies. Across various NDCs different projects address different issues and often have to be seen in the context of a wider set of interventions which, in turn, might aim to widen participation in further and higher education, help avoid school exclusions, or improve lifelong learning for the community. Many interventions also run hand-in-hand with specific youth programmes, some of which have been established under a different thematic heading, such as health or crime.

## Socio-economic Context

The socio-economic context in which the raising achievement projects have been developed is characteristic of NDC areas, with pronounced levels of disadvantage. A brief review of some key indicators gives a snap shot of some of the main issues.

**Table 1: Unemployment levels locally and nationally**

| Area | Unemployment |
|---|---|
| Heywood NDC in Rochdale | 4% (registered unemployed 2004 MORI) |
| New Cross Gate NDC in Lewisham | 5.9% |
| **National** | **3.1 (%)** |

Source: Partnership baseline information (nd)

Unemployment is high in all NDC areas.  Levels of educational achievement in the NDC areas are traditionally well below the national average.   In Heywood NDC in 2001 38% of pupils gained 5 A*-C grades at GCSE across the three Heywood High schools compared with 40% for the borough and 50% nationally.  In 2002 the figures were 38.6% in Heywood compared to 40% in the borough and 51.5% nationally.

In the New Cross Gate Deptford Green secondary school 42% of young people have been excluded at one time or another and 50% are eligible for free school meals.  The percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE level has risen from 41% in 2001 to 49% in 2004.

### Ethnic Diversity

The two areas differ substantially.  Heywood (Rochdale) is one of the least ethnically diverse of all the NDC partnerships: less than 2% of the population consider themselves of minority ethnic heritage.   In contrast, New Cross Gate (Lewisham) is one of the most diverse partnerships: here, just over half the population identify as 'white' (55%).   The partnership has one of the largest 'Black' populations in the NDC initiative (40% compared with 12% overall).  However in neither NDC are any raising achievement projects primarily focused on Black and Minority Ethnic pupils as a particular group with distinct needs.  This is a common finding across many NDC partnerships and gives cause for concern: as we have detailed in our specific reports on BME inclusion, there is now considerable evidence that ethnic inequalities of attainment will not close substantially unless dedicated projects are aimed at the specific needs of particular groups: for more detail see Rausch & Gillborn (2003) and Lall & Gillborn (2005).


# The Policy Context

Raising standards in education has continued to be the prime focus for national education policy throughout the life of the NDC initiative.  A concern with the particular problems faced by urban schools has been present throughout this period but has recently received even greater attention through the work of the London Challenge (DfES 2005a) which is seen as a means of identifying strategies that may have wider application in areas of economic disadvantage.

Overall, attainment of at least five higher grade passes in GCSE examinations has continued to rise for more than a decade.  However, this progress has not been shared equally.  A gender gap has become firmly established, with girls more likely to achieve this benchmark than boys: see figure 1.

**Figure 1: GCSE attainment by Gender, England & Wales, 1989 - 2004**
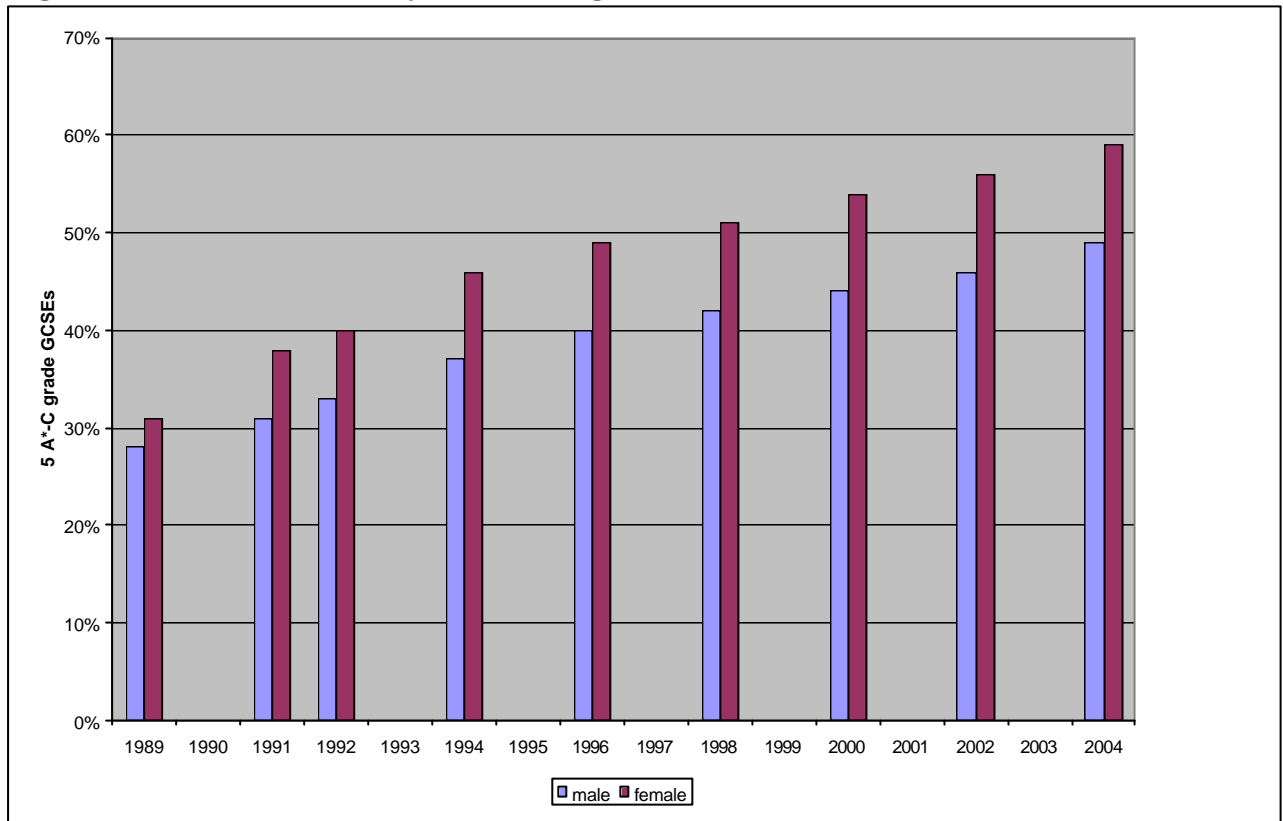


Source: adapted from DfES (2005b, table A)

Social class background is another factor that is closely associated with differences in attainment. Figures 2 and 3 shows the relative attainments of young people in relation to their social class background. The official categories were changed in 2000 and so it is not possible to chart differences for the entire period between 1989 and 2004. Nevertheless, it is clear that social class background remained strongly associated with differences in attainment at the age of 16: generally speaking, the better off a young person's household, the higher their educational attainments.

**Figure 2: GCSE attainment by Social Class, England & Wales, 1989 - 2000**
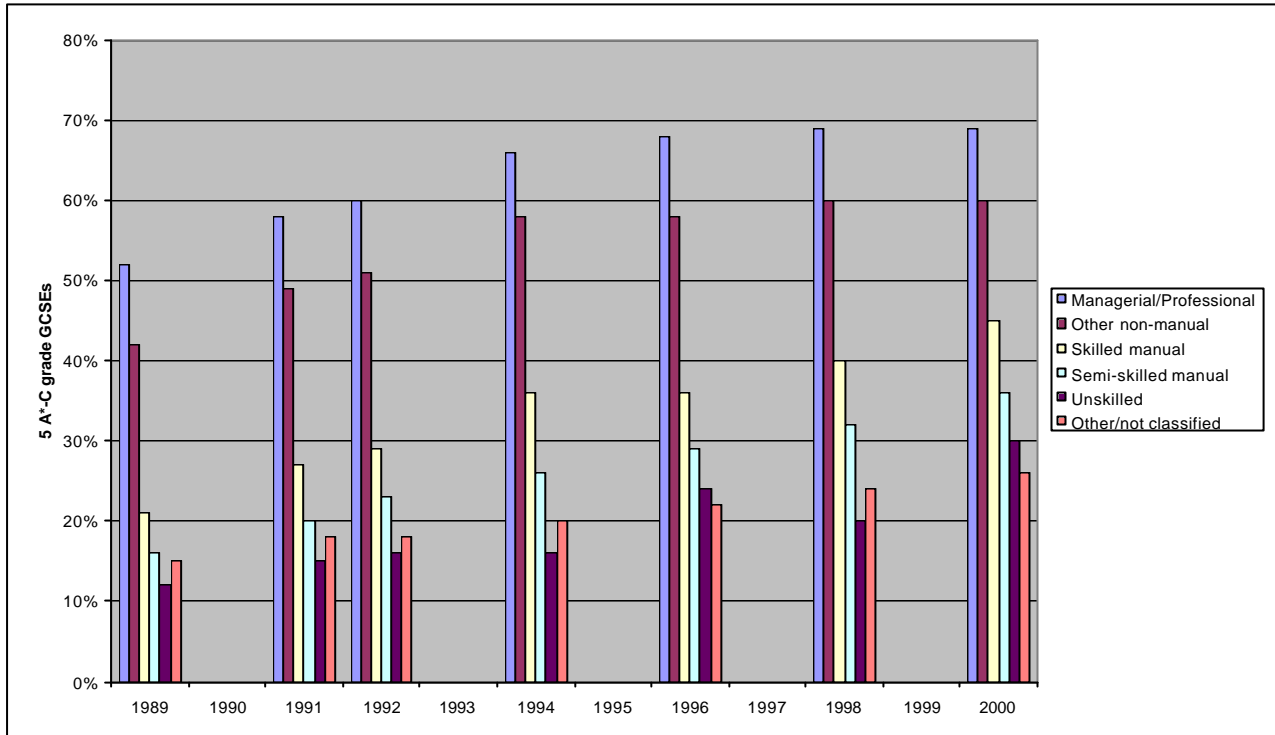


Source: DfES (2005b: table A)

**Figure 3: GCSE attainment by Social Class, England & Wales, 2000 - 2004**
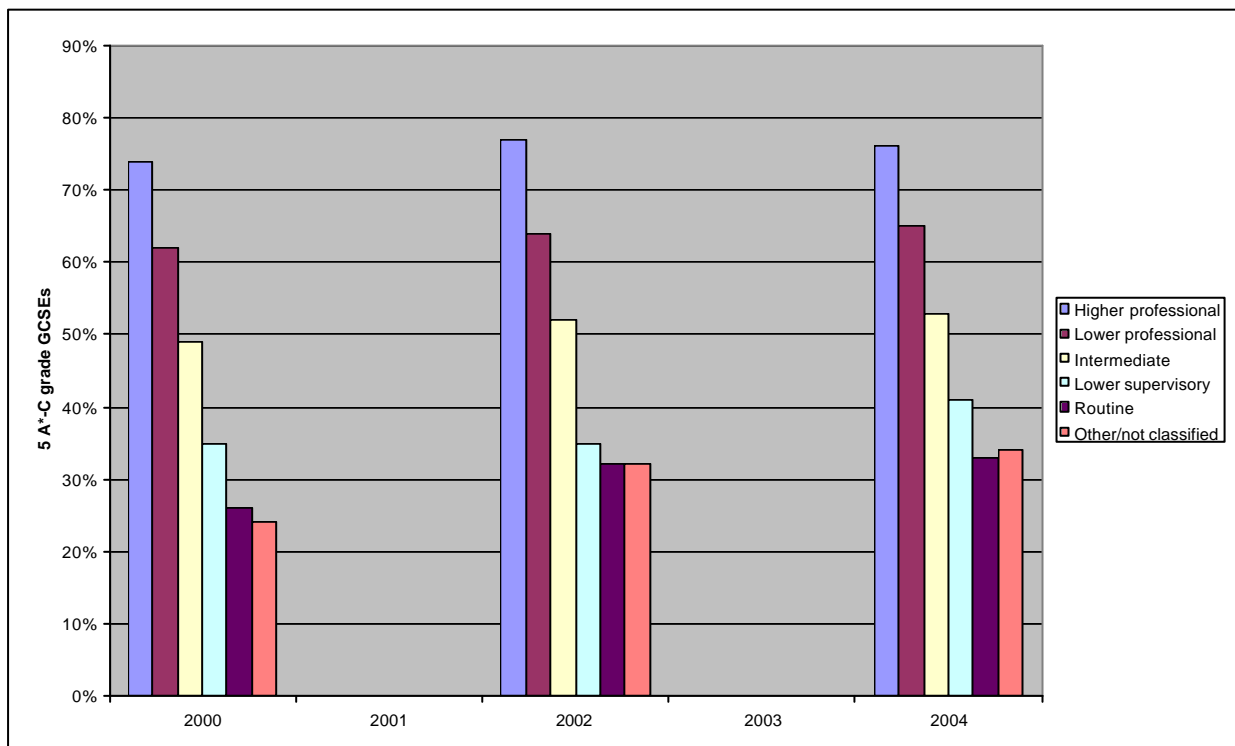


Source: DfES (2005b: table A)

It has been argued that one way of helping to address the persistent under-achievement of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds is to reform the education system in order to offer a clearer sense of progression and to broaden the range of activities and subjects on offer. In late 2004 a working group, chaired by the former Chief Inspector of Schools Mike Tomlinson, recommended far reaching changes to the structure of education between the ages

of 14 and 19 (Working Group on 14-19 Reform 2004).  In particular, the Tomlinson Report (as it was known) suggested reforming the system to remove the separate GCSE and 'A' level grades, replacing them with a new system of Diplomas that would show a clear progression but also include vocational subjects alongside academic ones.  The key point, in relation to social class inequalities, was an attempt to break down the traditional divide between academic subjects (which enjoy high status) and vocational subjects (which have lower status in the eyes of many employers and institutions of higher education).  Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are much more likely to enter vocational subjects.  In early 2005, however, the government rejected the suggestion of an overarching Diploma and announced that GCSEs and 'A' levels would be retained alongside a new Diploma that would offer greater status to vocational subjects while leaving unchanged the high status qualifications that are already well understood outside the education sector.

## Main Barriers to Raising Achievement as Seen Locally

Heywood, although located in Rochdale, is seen by its local residents as not belonging to the larger metropolitan area that surrounds it.  It is evident when talking to residents and agency staff that there is a sense of isolation amongst them. In addition, poverty brings with it multiple problems such as youths wandering the streets and high teenage pregnancy rates:

> *'Heywood is a very, very insular area, which even struggles to see itself as being a part of Rochdale.  Most of our children do not have many out of town experiences, they don't have first hand stimulating experiences other than that that is coming to the neighbourhood which is limited play, (…), an awful lot of television, (…) computer games culture, the level of parenting is a huge issue.  The teenage pregnancy Heywood has, I don't know where it stands now but I do know that 5 years ago it had the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe.'* (Heywood Head teacher 2)

The NDC area struggles, as detailed above, with high unemployment and the resulting poverty is a major issue:

> *'So…for every class of 10 kids you've got 3 of them …living in a household where nobody works so (…), it doesn't matter if they're accessing the wowiest (sic) most exciting curriculum that there ever was on earth, [the child is] still going back to poverty, so unless you tackle both sides of the equation you're not really going to make progress…'* (Heywood NDC Education Co-ordinator)

School and the quality of teaching and learning are particularly important as they serve as an anchor of stability for many children.

> *'And for some kids, you know school or projects like this is the only stability that they have in their life, so you've got to work with what they've got.'* (Heywood NDC AC learning mentor)

The oracy level, both spoken and written has been identified repeatedly as a problem by school staff and other agencies.  Once again, this is perceived as a direct consequence of local disavantage:

> *'The children don't have the experience that other children in other homes might have, they don't go out with the parents at the weekends, they don't have conversations with the parents, many of the children, unlike society today, many of the children play out on the streets all the time with their friends, and their peer group where they get their language from, they don't get it from adults.  So we needed some input when they come into school, they're so far behind …'*(Heywood Head teacher)

As in many other NDC areas parents also bring with them negative experiences of school (see Lall, Campbell & Gillborn 2004) and parental involvement in their children's education is often low.

> *'Parents sometimes have negative experiences of school when they were younger and therefore it makes them afraid of coming in and wary of what we're doing. And sometimes they might think that we're having a go at parents when we're not, we want to try and involve them, but (…) if something goes wrong they're frightened of coming in to talk to us.'*
> (Heywood Head teacher)

The New Cross Gate (NCG) Area in Lewisham suffers from similar problems as Heywood, although being in Southeast London it does not seem to have the same isolation issues. With regard to the local community's involvement in education, however, there are some interesting parallels. This is especially the case when looking at parental qualifications. There is also a severe lack of childcare in the local area which compounds adults not being able to either work or access lifelong learning schemes:

> *'I mean for example, with essential skills a third of our residents have below average literacy and numeracy levels, (…) a third of them have no qualifications. (…) We're currently looking at the statistics for migrant population to likely to have ESOL needs, (…) in terms of childcare we have a ratio of (…) one childcare place to every 14 children under the age of 14.'* (NCG Education Co-ordinator)

Other problems such as poverty and institutionalised racism reinforce the vicious circle of poverty and disadvantage. As time goes on it gets harder to break the cycle and low attainment levels become the norm:

> *'…Deptford is a deprived area, but a lot of the time, I mean, I walk around and I do see, you know, why sometimes parents don't send their kids to school, or kids don't know how to get an education, because the cycle has repeated itself again. (…) So it's that cycle of poverty and, you know, institutionalised racism, and the language barrier, that does prevent a lot of people from achieving their attainment levels within school, and outside when they go to further education as well.'* (NCG project coordinator)

## Nature of the Interventions

The NDC-funded interventions aim to address some of the problems mentioned above. In both these NDCs, however, the projects are of relatively short duration (many are two year pilot studies) and focus on particular groups, not offering a holistic approach to raising achievement across all key stages nor necessarily interlinking with each other in a formal way. The projects are, therefore, generally new and still taking time to establish themselves.

### Rochdale (Heywood NDC)

Rochdale NDC's focus on raising achievement has been developed in the form of a number of short two to three year projects, two of which are being reviewed here. Both projects are very strong but suffer from the fact that they are only funded for two years. In addition, teaching assistants have been placed in 11 primary schools where the majority of NDC children are being educated and the NDC partnership will be working with others to develop extended school provision at a new primary school that is being built in the area.

The ***Alternative Curriculum project's*** main aims are to provide a vocational education for selected pupils from the 3 secondary schools in the area. It was originally established for a maximum of 30 pupils and for a duration of 4 terms. There currently are 28 pupils who are on

target to achieve some meaningful success. It is a combination of core curriculum subjects and vocationally based subjects, covering 3 types of awards: GCSEs, GNVQs and NVQs. There are 8 girls and 20 boys on the project. The clientele changed somewhat in the early stages, as there was a rapid of turnover of girls initially, some of whom decided to go back to school, as the programme did not suit them. The project offers a variety of vocational options including hair dressing, health and social care, art, joinery, bricklaying and catering. The project manager is an English teacher who fulfils their mandatory English requirements and they do maths on a Tuesday evening. It is a pilot entirely NDC-funded for two years, effectively only allowing one batch of pupils to take advantage of it.

The **Language project's** main aim is to raise the levels of listening and speaking skills within the Hayward Primary Schools by training and enabling teachers to develop those skills and to improve the language skills of their pupils. The main idea is to improve children's communication skills, including their ability to speak, to be able to have a breadth of vocabulary that allows them to access more of the curriculum, to be able to become better writers and better readers, to describe their thoughts and to be more organised in their learning.

> *'All the focus [in school] is on…reading and writing and nothing on listening and speaking, so [the project manager] developed this project to address the listening and speaking side of literacy … and she's basically developed a program of training for teachers in primary schools so that they can become better language teachers'* (Heywood NDC Education Co-ordinator)

The NDC funding pays for 6 training days (and their release costs) for one teacher and one classroom assistant from each school. The training days are every half term and the teachers had two visits - one to the resource centre where they watched the lessons and the activities being modelled, and one where the project team went into their individual schools to help them in their own environment. The teachers are also given support on an individual basis in terms of their role within their own school and they are asked to do some training within school (in terms of staff meetings and sharing and disseminating information). The project has been developed especially for the local schools by an educational psychologist who knows the schools and the area well.

> *'I decided that I wanted to put into practice the kind of, if you like the psychological perspective of training teachers, being in an ed. Psyc. I think it's important, I think we have a lot of things to say about training. So it was based fundamentally on principles which I believe in as a psychologist. So it was strongly developmental in focus, it was very inclusive in focus, the training was designed so that the ownership remained with the teachers because it was their problem not mine.'* (Heywood NDC Language project manager)

## Lewisham (New Cross Gate NDC)

New Cross Gate NDC has been focusing on essential skills and childcare in its education theme. Teachers, headteachers and governors were consulted in setting up projects that dealt with raising achievement and identified English of Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), literacy and numeracy as major issues:

> *'…outside of schools, ESOL is a huge problem for some people, lack of English (…) literacy and numeracy, not ICT so much but literacy and numeracy, low levels of those and the impact that that would have on families, in terms of being able to get in to decent employment, raising their income and also supporting children - their children's study at school.'* (NCG Education Co-ordinator)

Whilst the community was involved in identifying the needs at primary level, at secondary level the demand for schemes and projects was agency driven. At the local secondary school the

low achievement levels were thought to be linked to the high truancy rates and the lack of local role models. The three projects reviewed here try to address these issues. They are based at the secondary school and have the advantage of continuity by extending already established, successful schemes. However, as with many pupil support projects, it is difficult to establish a direct link between them and raised attainment at such an early stage.

One of the projects visited is the **Deptford Truancy Challenge**. It is based at a secondary school and aims to get young people into school and to make education accessible to them. It is a project that supports young people and families who are facing difficulties. The project officer works with the whole family not just with the young person. It is currently funded by the NDC but has been running for a few years already on separate funding:

> *'We want everyone to be in school 90% of the time or plus but it is okay if they are there 95%. Overall at the moment for year 7 and 8 it is much higher – but on an overall it is about 92% for half the school….and we work across 4 years for year 7 to 11 (…) Most of our work is holistic and for the families - when we talk about the young person being in school, basically our aim is to re-educate the family and help them to help us to keep their children in school.'* (NCG, Attendance Officer)

The project tries to address the reasons why the child is not coming to school and to complement teachers' work. In a way the project aims to be a bridge between teachers and parents.

> *'… it was the gap of really dealing with the issues of the child not coming to school, with the gap, and although obviously teachers would wish to do all that, but don't have the time to do all that kind of work...'* (NCG, Attendance Officer)

The **Roots and Wings** project focuses on providing role model support to the secondary school pupils at Deptford Green secondary school by brokering partnerships between city companies and secondary schools across Greenwich and Lewisham. Deptford is only one of the schools benefiting from the project. The pupils are matched up with a mentor in year 9 and the hope is that the relationship will continue throughout the rest of their education and possibly beyond. The project was set up ten years ago to bridge the gap between the public sector and the private sector, bringing partners together by working towards the same kind of ethos in a mentoring programme. The project does not focus on the pupils who are academically gifted, but has an intake of anyone who it is felt might benefit from a mentor. The project is being delivered by a limited private company with charitable status. In Deptford 70 pairs of mentors and mentees have been set up, of which 25 have to be from the NDC area.

The **Deptford Advocacy Project** is a secondary school support project that provides young people and their families with an holistic support and advice service for their multiple needs. The project officers help families and young people by providing them with one-to-one support on a daily/weekly basis, plus some group work support. There are also lunch time activity clubs as well as home visits for families. Current foci are self esteem issues, anger control and a 'buddy scheme' that helps with transition into year 9. This builds on the work done by the Truancy Challenge project, addressing some of the problems that might lead to truancy. It also helps those who are at risk of exclusion. The project aims to pick up young people and their families with multiple needs who will not benefit from targeted help in a single area alone. In this sense it aims to be a 'one stop shop' for those who need help. It is part funded by the NDC.

## Aims and Objectives

A key aim of all the schemes is to raise achievement (at various Key Stages) by giving the pupils solid foundations to learn upon, increase their confidence, and involve parents in their learning.

The **alternative curriculum project** is based on the fact that GCSE results across the three local schools are lower than the national average. The primary aim of the project was to challenge disaffection.

*'The students who are on the project, all of them are potentially school failures rather than achievers, they're the kind of students who would have voted with their feet and stayed off school in numbers, the kind of students who would have challenged authority and been excluded, some of them would have been permanently excluded (…) they are, amongst the most challenging of young people from their schools...'* (Heywood NDC AC project manager)

The project was, however, not designed only for those at risk of failure or permanent exclusion, and whilst addressing the high truancy/low attendance figures particularly at key stage 4, it offers more practical experience which also addresses the skills shortages in the area (identified through NDC baseline research). Schools were worried about the truanting pupils' low attainment and the effect it might have on their general results. Participants believe that the two-pronged approach of training and academic learning has helped address both the truancy, the achievement/self esteem issues in one go:

*'…some of them would have left school with absolutely nothing, because some of them would have been excluded, some of them would have left school with a very, very low variety of GCSEs at low grades and a small minority of them would have achieved the A or B or C in one or two subjects. But I think the real achievement for these students is holding on to a work placement, holding on to their placement in college, doing things that they wouldn't have done at school, turning in every day and achieving every day. Some students, a few students, have managed to hold on to the same work experience placement that they had right at the beginning, which again is a massive achievement - it's a wonderful achievement.'* (Heywood NDC AC Project Manager)

The **language project** mainly focuses on training teachers to both include more speaking and listening into their teaching and to raise standards of language development. This includes helping them assess and identify problems at an early stage. The general focus here, whilst being on achievement, is not simply on improving the schools' statistics in the published league tables, but on the development of the child:

*'We have to follow league tables and stats and we are under pressure from the authorities - because our results are under the national average. However, the successful child is one who has confidence of social skills and has independent learning skills.'* (Heywood Headteacher)

School inspections, and the experiences of local headteachers, have consistently identified the need to improve speaking and listening levels. The chief objective of the project is to meet this particular rising need of pupils and schools:

*'…every year with headteachers I have an annual review of our service and we talk about things going on in school and every single one of those meetings, the level of children's language crops up as a major barrier to improving literacy. It's also implicated in terms of their kind of social and emotional development as well and their behaviour. (…) And that's across all the schools, although they're quite a mixed catchment. I mean schools like this are very much in an area of deprivation, but even schools that have quite a, quite*

*a middle class catchment were also identifying language as being something that they were increasingly concerned about, the levels of entry, they felt were deteriorating over time.'* (Heywood NDC Language project manager)

Under-performance at key stage two (the end of primary school) and the dip at key stage three (mid way through secondary school) have been identified as key problems in NCG. In part this is directly related to attendance problems. Some groups of pupils are worse than others and the **truancy challenge project** aims to re-educate whole families about the value of school and learning:

*'White girls are the worst. And they will actually spend a great deal of time at home, wanting to be with Mum or wanting to, or not wanting to look after the siblings but doing that. You normally find one of the biggest problems is just family history, we talk to the Mums and Dads and they didn't have good experiences of school, so of course their fears are being put onto their children, and their children are like "Oh I don't want to go to school, I've got a tummy ache" and its about re-educating. Or a lot of our families, they've come from primary schools where no work has been done, and providing they give primary schools a note every week, having a week off for a tooth ache is normal.'* (NCG, Attendance Officer)

This is compounded by families that have problems with drugs and violence, where more targeted support has to be given. The objective of the **advocacy project** is to break the cycle of young people becoming adults themselves with difficulties/crises and to enable young people to make direct choices about their own lives as well as allowing parents and families to have access to the right support if and when needed. This, it is hoped, will raise young people's awareness, attainment levels and self-esteem. The **Roots and Wings project** aims to provide external role models and support to those who will benefit from having their self confidence and self esteem boosted. It hopes to raise aspirations towards academic achievement and help to value their education. Again this project tackles disaffection but in a different way, and for a different set of pupils, than the other two projects described above.

# Beneficiaries

Across all NDCs many projects adopt a broad and inclusive approach but some aim to target specific groups who currently underachieve, such as white working class boys, African Caribbean boys, and those for whom English is an Additional Language. Various projects single out specific age groups or Key Stage cohorts for the intervention. In Heywood the alternative curriculum project focuses on year 10 pupils and the language project on year 1 and 2 pupils. These are seen as key times in a child's education. In NCG pupils of all ages at primary and secondary schools are targeted: our evaluation focused on the projects based at the secondary school.

In tackling disaffected teenagers, the alternative curriculum project allows those pupils who were at risk of dropping out to complete their education.

*'So the starting point really was GCSEs, the gap between the national and the Heywood average is about 17%, so that's the starting point but also it was about transition (into post 16) and the gap between the national and the Heywood average …and that's about 10% and it's on a downward spiral. The proportion of kids that are going in to full time education is getting smaller and smaller… in Heywood, so it was really to address, to do something about those two indicators.'* (Heywood NDC Education Co-ordinator)

Parents are relieved as they worry what their children will do without any qualifications. A few spoke about the siblings who had not completed their education: they were positive about their children's involvement in this pilot:

*'Thank God for that, cos he weren't staying at school.'* (Parent, Rochdale)

As a local headteacher put it:

*'I think that the parent put it in a nutshell when she came to me at that presentation evening and said this is my third of three sons who's been in this - her other two sons haven't completed their secondary education, they both ended up in trouble with the police. They've left school with nothing, and the $3^{rd}$ one is there and is going to achieve and she said "Why wasn't this there for my other two?" …'* (Headteacher, Rochdale)

In some cases children assessed as having special needs draw particular benefit:

*'My sons got dyspraxia, so he doesn't understand language, it's not reading and writing it's the language that he can't understand, and he wasn't getting on at school, it was getting to the stage where his behaviour was being affected in school. So he was getting warnings about his behaviour, which is a chain reaction about the dyspraxia that he's got because he was being frustrated by the level of work that he had to do, so when he went on this course and they've eliminated all the subjects that are irrelevant, totally irrelevant to everyday living.'* (Parent, Rochdale)

The project has also helped those at risk of permanent exclusion:

*[a construction company] 'took two of our students, one of them was a lad - as I said, was on his final warning - and that has completely and totally turned him around. (…) he's gone from an unresponsive, very, very difficult, argumentative young man, to someone who's (…) He's still difficult, don't get me wrong, you know, there's no magic wand you can wave over these young people. He's still a very difficult young man but he has settled to the project, he's working harder; the company are talking about a modern apprenticeship for him.'* (Heywood NDC AC project manager)

Schools greatly benefit from both projects. With regard to the alternative curriculum project, pupils who were not expected to gain any formal qualifications are now aiming to get a variety of GCSE, NVQ and GNVQ qualifications, which in turn boosts the schools' performance statistics and sense of confidence:

*'The schools that have been involved in the alternative curriculum will benefit in two ways, the kids that are left behind will do better because they're less distracted [by] what's going on and the kids that have accessed the project have already, some of them have already got qualifications and these were kids that were going to leave school with nothing, so the schools results will be much better.'* (Heywood NDC Education Coordinator)

The Language project benefits the teachers who get trained, the wider school community who share in the new good practice, and the pupils who, at an early age, learn to express themselves and expand their vocabulary. Teachers also learn to identify problems:

*'the aim is to work with teachers to highlight their awareness of language needs.'* (Heywood NDC language teacher trainer)

The NCG projects aim to help holistically those who have a multitude of problems, the effects of which are evident in low achievement and absenteeism. The beneficiaries include not only the young people but also their families and, in the long run, the schools as the issue of truancy and disaffection is being addressed:

*'…there were specific criteria to go to those different agencies, but our one doesn't have specific criteria. We are aiming at supporting everybody, and if we can't help someone,*

*then we know somebody who can. And that's kind of like our motto, you know, if we can't help them, we know somebody who can. So we're making sure that they get the support, and that it's the support that's needed.'* (NCG Project Co-ordinator)

The mentoring project is especially successful with very shy pupils and those who find it hard to develop a relationship with their peer group.

*'…He was so quiet three years ago when he came onto the programme, he wouldn't say a word to anybody, and that was really the reason why he came on the programme. He didn't have any peer group, or very little (…). And he's just really blossomed and he's able to stand up in front of an audience of professionals and deliver a positive (…) speech.'* (NCG Programme manager)


## Delivery

Delivery varies from partnership to partnership. Many projects are delivered through the schools, some jointly with other organisations or with the help of the LEA. Often already established projects have their funding extended or are expanded to give targeted intervention to the NDC area specifically. As in all NDCs, the strength of the local networks ensures effective delivery of the various projects.

### Working with local organisations

The involvement of the local college means that the facilities for the pupils on the project are greatly increased. It also gives individual schools ideas on what provision they might want to offer and the logistics needed for this to be successful.

*'I think it's been a success because the off site providers have been able to offer facilities that we couldn't, particularly in respect of, lets say construction for example, hair dressing and also tuition'.* (Headteacher, Rochdale)

Good local partners can facilitate delivery and mainstreaming in the long run. When NDC funding ceases there is a chance that successful projects will be continued and alternative streams of funding will be sought by the delivering organisation.

*'We've got Lewisham College, we've got Crossways Academy, we've got Goldsmiths College, we've got Lewisham Early Years, Lewisham Youth Service, Lewisham Probation Service…This process that I've been setting up is about (…) its all built on partnerships instead of being the other way round and, its very much a process of facilitation (…) the project designs are just very easy to develop and partners are already on board and, you know, the match funding and the sustainability of it, the mainstreaming element of it, is much easier…'* (NCG Education Co-ordinator)

### Addressing the needs of the pupils

The Project manager's relationship with the pupils and parents is key to the efficient delivery and success of a project. In Heywood he is an English teacher with 30 years' experience with 11 to 16 year olds. Consequently he is good at managing their behaviour and the parents speak highly of him. He delivers the English at GCSE level and another teacher delivers the maths lessons.

*'They think it's fantastic, they've noticed differences in their kids, the kids are now talking about "when I go to college", you know, "when I leave school and I go to college…" and*

*they're all on a pathway, so the parents are really pleased with how it's all panned out and they've realised what a brilliant opportunity it is...'* (Heywood NDC Education Co-ordinator)

## Working with parents

Some education work in disadvantaged areas falls into the trap of viewing parents and families as part of the problem rather than potential partners in the solution. By engaging parents and families, projects can extend their influence in a virtuous circle where the support continues beyond the school gate, leading to benefits across the family, and further extending the support. The processes are varied and can be very difficult, but an essential first step is believing that the family can help rather than hinder.

*'I've never yet just worked with the child, its always the family and very often the parents agree with me that their little girl has not got period pains every day, has not got a tummy ache every day, you know, but don't know how to deal with it, don't know how to say "'Well actually, you've got to go to school". Sometimes its just plain common sense, and sometimes, the fact that I'll ring, "Oh that bloody woman's on the phone again - get to school", its as simple as that sometimes. And sometimes its much more complicated …'* (NCG Attendance officer)

Outcomes and Impact
It is never easy to measure a project's impact on attainment because of the numerous other factors that also play a part. Participants will be able to offer a more informed view once the pupils' GCSE results are known but, even then, there will be no perfect measure of the value added by the Alternative Curriculum project. Nevertheless, participants already feel that some positive gains are apparent, especially with regard to the improved social skills and the fact that those who might not have remained in school are now well on their way to gaining one or more nationally recognised qualifications:

*'…I've already talked about the social inclusion, the fact that these kids have grown in terms of their independence, their social flexibility, their social sophistication, still a long way to go but they are showing signs of developing that, their ambition…all of those are factors in terms of confidence and those are equally achievement, harder to measure but they are there.'* (Rochdale LEA school improvement manager)

Parents are also witnessing changes and see that their children have more self-confidence and are more enthusiastic about learning and the environment they learn in.

*'He's quite cocky now, thinks he's a man now since he left school, he's out working with men so it's made him grow up that little bit more. He hasn't got time for a lot of his friends now because they're acting like children, and he's hanging with men, like 2 days a week so…you know.'* (Parent Rochdale)

The local community and parents came out in force to celebrate the end of the first year of the Alternative Curriculum Project and to show their support.

*'We had a presentation evening before we finished for the summer, where we had 87% of students and parents turning out, a school would tear your right arm off for those kind of figures. I catered for about 40-60 people, I thought that would be a good turn out: I actually had 127 people turned up, including employers, the chair of education, members of the NDC.'* (Heywood NDC, Alternative Curriculum Project Manager)

With regard to the language project, data was collected to establish a baseline from which raised standards could be measured. In June 2003, before the project started there was data on a sample of year 1 children that looked at their vocabulary and their ability to retell a story. This was used as a comparison group. In September 2003 the same information was collected

from the newly incoming year 1 group, another 132, and again in June 2004 the same information was collected. 117 pupils out of the original 132 were still in the class. It is difficult to make judgements about statistical significance based on such relatively small sample sizes; nonetheless, the team are confident that they are having a positive impact:

*'What we found was we had a significant effect size in everything apart from one measure, which was vocabulary September 2003 to the same group to 2004, their vocabulary was improved but not statistically significantly. To every other measure when we compared them in terms of information, when we compared the control to Hayward Language project we got effect sizes of 0.39, 0.45, 0.53 so significant across the board.'* (Heywood NDC Language Project Manager)

The project has impacted on the social skills of the children as well, helping them to solve conflict and manage their behaviour. This is especially evident at key stage 2 in the classroom as well as on the playground. According to the Headteacher, the new good practice amongst teachers has raised interest between colleagues and helped with professional development, creating a greater sense of community amongst the teachers.

*'This has been such a development for me because it's moved me on as a teacher, it's changed my teaching, my strategies, (…) and I've wanted it to do that. And I've also had the enjoyment of seeing children get better because of, I do believe they've got better because of it and I'm excited to do it again...'* (Heywood, teacher2)

*'…what's been set up for us is some opportunity to get together on an evening in our own time, so we occasionally, in fact at the end of last term it was almost every fortnight, but we're meeting together as a team, so those people who want to continue it.'* (Heywood, teacher1)

## What Works

Many of the aspects which make these projects work have already been identified in previous reports. This shows that there are some key elements that improve the chances of success regardless of location or the problems being addressed.

**Employing and engaging local people** who are available to help, and understand the local situation, can make a big difference. The Alternative Curriculum project manager has worked at a local school and is currently seconded. As a result of his local knowledge, he is trusted by parents and schools alike. The learning mentor on the same project has also developed close bonds with the parents, so that often she is their first port of call when they need help.

*'Oh yeah, I have parents phoning me, my work phone is never switched off, you know, 24 hours a day 7 days a week, parents contact us constantly. Well there's varying issues (…) we've got a very good link with our parents, so if they have a problem, they'd phone me (…) before I think they'd phone a lot of other people.'* (Heywood NDC AC Learning Mentor)

The same applies for the projects in NCG, where the attendance officers are not seen in the same light as teachers and are used as a direct link with the school:

*'[parents] know they can come in at any time and talk to us and they do, you'll always get parents coming into chat, the kids know that, the kids know that we have a good relationship with their parents but we don't let things slide, we follow things through...'* (NCG Attendance Officer)

**Involving families** and addressing their problems holistically has also led to projects being well adopted by the local community. This is especially the case when projects build bridges between parents and schools.

> *'…the school needs to do more involving families, parents, in their child's education. Not when they've done bad. You know, coming in for meetings. But also, you know, encouraging parents to come- encouraging grandparents, encouraging other members of the family to come in and see what the young people are doing.'* (NCG Project Co-ordinator)

In both Rochdale and Lewisham **already well-established projects** have either been used as models for new projects or have been funded by the NDC to continue their already successful provision. For example, a work sure programme that had been piloted in Sheffield served as a model for the Heywood alternative curriculum programme. In NCG the funding went to projects that were already in place and had shown that they could deliver.

Linking projects to **recognised qualifications,** and mixing academic and vocational courses, has proven successful. The project ensures that academic qualifications are maintained so that pupils retain the option to continue their education if they wish whilst giving them work experience.

> *'…the GNVQ IT will deliver the equivalent of 4 As-C, (…) knowing these students and knowing the teachers who had them at school, and talking to those teachers, I don't believe any one of these students would have achieved 4 GCSEs, at A-C none of them (…) I think that the most that they would have ended up with would one or two GCSEs at A-C if they were lucky enough to make it through to the end of school. So to think that the majority of them are going to end up with the equivalent of 4 GCSEs A-C…'* (Heywood NDC AC Project Manager)

**Regular monitoring**, and making sure that the projects actually deliver what they promise, has been a key ingredient. The local community needs to know that the resources are being well utilised and projects remain responsive:

> *'… there now is a system were projects are asked to come to the educational theme-group to report back and people can question them (…) so there is actually a quarterly report coming back to the system and I think that, that is keeping the projects on their toes'.* (NCG, Deputy HT)

The Heywood language project also benefited from an internal evaluation where datasets were analysed and compared against a local comparison group. In this way the project is attempting to identity quantitative measures that go beyond the usual qualitative feedback and bring an added level of rigour to the process (see Stothard 2004)


## Problems Encountered/Barriers to be Overcome

As with some previous projects that we have examined, there was a problem where the boundaries of the NDC partnership seemed to place an artificial limit on who can/cannot take part in NDC-funded work. Clearly, this is a key issue for area-based initiatives but some degree of flexibility seems to be required if people are not to be left with a feeling that they are subject to a form of ***postcode lottery***. The Alternative Curriculum project in Heywood, for example, specifically targeted NDC residents and this caused some problems as pupils who would have benefited from the provision were unable to attend if they did not live in the NDC area.

*'…there were some kids who would have really, really benefited from it but they couldn't go on it because they don't live in our area. (…) "can I do it with my friend?" Well, no because your friend doesn't live in the NDC area so…so that's how we kind of whittled down the people to go on it.'* (Heywood NDC Education Co-ordinator)

The same problem is faced by the NCG NDC:

*'The problem is you see, this is a small area, and we can only work with the pupils in their area. I mean, I think its slightly short sighted in the sense that lots of our kids at school, if they're not in school, they're roaming the NDC streets, there is a problem with drugs in the area, there is a problem with alcohol and stuff, and the more kids we keep in school, or find alternative provision for, they're not wandering the local area, but its not seen that way. We have to, I have to prove that 28 pupils are in NDC.'* (NCG Attendance Officer)

Once again, we wish to stress that those delivering the projects are caught within something of a Catch 22 situation: on one hand they must work within the limits of the NDC funding, and so they must prioritize NDC residents; on the other hand, however, there are times when greater flexibility would allow them to be more sensitive in working with young people who (whilst resident elsewhere) spend a good deal of time in the NDC area and/or with NDC residents. It would seem sensible to build in a greater degree of flexibility in the conduct of future programmes of this kind.

**Some families are not reached**, despite their needs and despite living in the right catchment area. In part this is the case because of there being no specifically targeted provision; the reasons for this lack of engagement have not been analysed by either the school nor the NDC. This is especially the case with BME groups in NCG:

*'…there's a relatively high percentage of Vietnamese families in the area, (…) but very often they don't access services. Now that could be because lack of information getting to them, it could be cultural issues, it could be a variety of issues.'* (NDC, Lewisham Extended schools services manager)

Parental involvement in the language project proved difficult. In part this is linked to the fact that the project was developed in a **'top-down'** manner, not involving the local community in the setting up of the idea.

*'…the parental workshops were an attempt to involve the local community and they weren't a success, and so this year we're thinking about different ways that we can reach out to parents, but this project was fundamentally about saying to schools that it's, you do want parents to be able to improve their language skills and you want parents to be able to improve their children's language skills.'* (Heywood NDC Language project manager)

When the **local community** is involved *listening* to their needs is not the only responsibility of the NDC partnership. Clearly *explaining* the NDC mandate and objectives can help prevent community disillusionment and future problems. However, 'bottom-up' initiatives need to be encouraged and agency directives need to be kept at a minimum.

*'There are often misunderstandings between what the community feels about what the NDC ought to be doing and what the NDC can do. One of the big issues for example is in Secondary admissions… and the perception that people are not getting into schools of their choices.'* (NCG NDC, Deputy Head)

NDC organisation, planning and delivery have been an issue in New Cross Gate. The length of time it has taken to get projects under way seems to have been a major problem, faced by many but not all NDCs, and this is intensified where local expectations are unrealistically high:

*'[the local community] were having expectations that this NDC was going to be a magic wand that would solve all the problems overnight and I would have focused much more on indicating and talking to people about the fact that - yes it is a big resource, but actually you don't start turning things around for the first two to three years. Even if you start putting in big projects it takes time for those projects to have an effect.'* (NCG, Deputy HT)

In part the difficulties experienced at NCG NDC could be due to the various strands working in isolation, and the lack of cooperation between themes such as health and education and worklessness, that would complement each other. Some agencies have found it difficult to access funding for projects, due to what is perceived as unnecessary **bureaucracy**:

*'…I've had conversations with other colleagues that have said, its very difficult to get through the process for the NDC, for example, if you're a group that's applied for funding, it's a very complex process that you have to go through: one that I myself have tried a few times (…) we have a service that we can offer to the NDC schools if they want to fund it, we could provide the expertise and the support and guidance for it but the barriers have been there and that hasn't happened as such.'* (NDC, Lewisham Extended schools services manager)

## Conclusions

Raising standards of achievement is the key priority for policy makers and practitioners across the education sector. In this report we have considered a wide range of approaches adopted in two NDC partnerships. Heywood NDC (in Rochdale) has been involved with an Alternative Curriculum project that focuses on vocational education with secondary age pupils. Primary school pupils are involved in a Language project that aims to raise levels of literacy and oracy. New Cross Gate NDC (in Lewisham) has worked with a wide range of projects including Deptford Truancy Challenge (a project to improve attendance among secondary pupils); Roots and Wings (using a mentor scheme to help secondary pupils see links between school and work); and the Deptford Advocacy project, which aims to address a variety of needs among secondary pupils and their families.

The projects have been especially **successful** in certain respects:

- secondary pupils are showing greater commitment to school and beginning to view further education as a realistic aim
- some pupils at risk of permanent exclusion have secured successful work placements and completed their schooling
- pupils attainments have risen overall, especially through a range of GNVQ and GCSE options

**Key factors** associated with successful initiatives are:

- employing and engaging local people helps ensure that projects address local needs and are supported across the NDC area
- involving families in solving the problems of their children helps avoid exclusions and builds bridges with the local schools
- linking projects to qualifications, making sure that the young people leave with some tangible credentials: this raises the profile of the scheme and helps broaden the options available to the young people
- linking in with already well-established projects, or using them as a model, can help improve the chances of success by learning from others' experiences

Some **barriers and problems** remain:

- NDC projects are generally linked to residence, which can result in problems where young people (who might otherwise benefit) are excluded because they do not live within the 'right' postcode
- certain families are not reached, despite living in the right streets, in part because their specific needs are not being addressed: this may be a particular problem for some Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities
- establishing projects in a 'top-down' fashion can result in less community involvement and commitment
- the bureaucratic hurdles faced by some organisations applying for funding seems to create more problems and delivery of urgently needed projects may be delayed indefinitely

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