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Evaluation of the North Lanarkshire Curriculum Flexibility Project

October 2004



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Evaluation of the North Lanarkshire Curriculum Flexibility Project

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

This is a report of the evaluation of the North Lanarkshire Curriculum Flexibility Project conducted by the Quality in Education Centre, University of Strathclyde, as part of the national evaluation of projects supported through the Scottish Executive Education Department's Future Learning and Teaching Programme (FLaT). The evaluation was undertaken between November 2003 and May 2004.

The aims of the Curriculum Flexibility Project identified by North Lanarkshire are:

- to secure higher attainment in overall terms
- to provide pupils with improved choice and more appropriate provision within an eight-subject/course programme
- to develop consensus on the way forward with teachers, pupils and parents
- to facilitate curriculum planning in schools that is responsive to need and effective in delivering outcomes; to create time for activities that promote social competence, creativity and education for work
- to ensure the centrality of the principles for planning the delivery of the curriculum which lie at the heart of the authority's strategy, *Raising Achievement for All*
- to emphasise the school as a "learning community", with a firm emphasis on a positive and inclusive ethos.

2. AIMS OF THE EVALUATION

The aims of the evaluation were:

- to assess the overall impact of the guidance from the local authority on teachers, pupils and parents in the five named schools and identify what, if any, improvements it has made to attainment, attendance, patterns of pupils choice, school ethos and teaching environment
- to identify the methods employed by the local authority in managing the diversity of approaches within its schools and assessing the effectiveness of these methods
- to identify the approaches taken by the local authority in providing support and encouraging innovation in schools and assessing the effectiveness of these approaches
- to assess the local authority system for monitoring achievement of the project aims, and similarly the ability to be aware of problems with schools' ability to take forward the main ideas outlined in the guidance.

3. EVALUATION METHODS

The evaluation comprised three phases: Phase 1 involved collecting and analysing data at local authority level, while Phase 2 involved the collection and analysis of data from five case study schools and Phase 3 involved cross-analysis of Phase 1 and Phase 2 data. The evaluation used a range of qualitative and quantitative methods that included policy and document analysis, pupil, teacher and parent questionnaires, local authority personnel and teacher interviews and pupil focus groups. The five case study schools involved in the evaluation were selected by North Lanarkshire and presented a range of types of approach to curriculum flexibility and were at different stages in the implementation process.

The main focus of Phase 1 was the collection of the education authority policy and other relevant documents concerning curriculum flexibility (eg *Raising Achievement for All*, 1998 and *The Curriculum of the Secondary School: Guidance for Schools*, 2001). The documentation was analysed within the context of national guidance (eg *Curriculum Design for the Secondary Stages: Guidelines for Schools* [SCCC, 1999] and Circular 6/99: *Curriculum Design for the Secondary Stages* [SOEID, 1999]).

During Phase 2, interviews were conducted with the headteachers/members of the Senior Management Team in each of the 5 case study schools. Questionnaires were administered to all pupils in S2, S3 and S5 and their parents and all teachers in each of the five schools. The questionnaires were designed to gather information about what pupils, teachers and parents think about the range of subjects available in their school. A total of 1663 pupils, 130 teachers and 392 parents completed questionnaires.

Statistical data were collected from the education authority during Phase 3 of the project. This included data concerning pupil attainment, attendance and exclusion rates.

4. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Aim 1

To assess the overall impact of the guidance from the local authority on teachers, pupils and parents in the five named schools and identify what, if any, improvements it has made to attainment, attendance, patterns of pupils choice, school ethos and teaching environment

- The guidance from the local authority has had an impact on the curriculum structure in all five schools. The schools were able to implement changes within the framework of the guidance at their own pace and according to the needs of their pupils. Consequently, the extent of the impact of the guidance differed in the five schools.
- Improvements in the patterns of pupil choice are evident in all five schools. However, the results show that the two schools that have been involved in implementing curriculum flexibility over the longest period and have introduced the greatest number of alternative courses met with greater pupil, parent and teacher satisfaction than the other three schools.
- Pupils' satisfaction with subject choice generally declined from S2 to S3 to S5, with pupils in S5 being least satisfied with the choices available.
- The majority of pupils suggested that modern languages should be optional. However, they also indicated that they wanted greater choice in the languages on offer in school.
- Almost a quarter of all S5 pupils involved in the evaluation were dissatisfied with maths. Further investigation indicated that many thought that maths was too hard.

This is a surprising result as maths is not compulsory at S5 in two of the five schools and it is on offer at different levels of study. Further investigation is needed to understand the pupils' concerns with maths.

- The greatest change in the curriculum structure appears to have taken place at S3, with more alternative/vocational courses on offer and more freedom in subject choice. There has been an increase in the levels of study possible in S3 – S6 in all five schools, although the extent of the increase varies.
- The pupils in all five schools appear to take responsibility for making decisions regarding subject choice. The results show that parents are also influential. Consequently, it is important that pupils and their parents have appropriate information to ensure that informed choices are made.
- To ensure that an increase in subject choice and greater freedom to follow curricular strengths does not reduce breadth and balance, adequate counselling is necessary. The results indicate that the pupils did not regard the Careers Service to be adequate.
- There are a number of concurrent initiatives taking place at school and authority level that have similar aims to the Curriculum Flexibility Project. Therefore, it was not possible to make any direct or causal link between any improvements in attainment, attendance or school ethos and teaching environment and the Curriculum Flexibility Project.
- Schools should continue to be encouraged to seek new ways to identify and record attainment (as defined in the *Raising Achievement for All* report, North Lanarkshire, 1998).

Aim 2

To identify the methods employed by the local authority in managing the diversity of approaches within its schools and assessing the effectiveness of these methods

- The guidance provided a framework that on the one hand gave schools parameters to work to and, on the other hand, gave them freedom to introduce change according to their own needs and at their own pace. This led to gradual change in a small number of schools that allowed the authority to manage the diversity of approaches.
- The authority strategy of inviting volunteer schools to implement alternative/vocational courses allowed them to pilot and assess new ideas and approaches with a manageable number of schools in the initial stages. This approach appears to have been effective.
- The small number of schools involved at the outset of the project meant that the authority was able to offer them adequate physical and financial support, which might not have been possible if more schools had been involved.

Aim 3

To identify the approaches taken by the local authority in providing support and encouraging innovation in schools and assessing the effectiveness of these approaches

- The approaches taken to support and encourage innovation were consistent with the way the authority would work with schools on any initiative. They had not been developed specifically for the Curriculum Flexibility Project.
- A participative, consultative approach was taken by the authority, involving schools and headteachers in the development of the guidance. This meant that the schools generally felt a sense of ownership of the guidance and had a greater commitment to

implementing change. The schools did not feel that change had been forced on them. The headteachers described the changes as evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

- Support was offered for timetabling and for developing the infrastructure to run alternative/vocational courses on- and off-site. Financial support was provided in some cases to the schools to create the facilities necessary for vocational courses.
- The evidence indicates that headteachers and teachers were satisfied with the level of support that they received from Quality and Support Services personnel in the implementation of curriculum flexibility.
- The results showed that a number of different activities/initiatives were arranged by the authority to encourage and support innovation. These included headteacher/teacher meetings and conferences.
- Conferences and meetings were also arranged with pupils and parents.
- The positive comments from the schools indicated that the authority's approaches to provide support and encourage innovation were effective.

Aim 4

To assess the local authority system for monitoring achievement of the project aims, and similarly the ability to be aware of problems with schools' ability to take forward the main ideas outlined in the guidance.

- Both the local authority personnel and the headteachers indicated that monitoring the aims of the Curriculum Flexibility Project was difficult.
- There appeared to be no systematic processes at local authority or school level to specifically monitor all the aims of the Curriculum Flexibility Project.
- The evidence suggests that progress in implementing curriculum flexibility is included in the authority's regular review process and general contact with schools. This review process will give the authority an overview of progress in the development of curriculum flexibility in each school, but it is unlikely to result in detailed information regarding the impact of all the project aims.
- While there was no monitoring process to provide details of the achievement of the specific project aims, the evidence suggests that authority personnel were aware of the challenges that face schools in the development of curriculum flexibility. The authority was aware of the impact on staffing (eg surplus of modern language teachers), the need to develop facilities for vocational courses, the lack of expertise in schools to deliver vocational courses and the difficulties relating to using non GTC registered FE staff in school, the transport issues associated with sharing accommodation and the impact on class sizes when offering different levels of study. Local authority personnel indicated that steps were being taken to address some of these challenges.

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Phase 1

The main focus of Phase 1 was the collection of the education authority policy and other relevant documents concerning curriculum flexibility (eg *Raising Achievement for All*, 1998 and *The Curriculum of the Secondary School: Guidance for Schools*, 2001). The documentation was analysed within the context of national guidance (eg *Curriculum Design for the Secondary Stages: Guidelines for Schools* [SCCC, 1999] and Circular 6/99: *Curriculum Design for the Secondary Stages* [SOEID, 1999]). Policy documents and other relevant documentation were also collected from the five case study schools. The documentary analysis resulted in a set of key questions to ask school and local authority personnel during the interviews in Phase 2. The analysis also informed the design of the questionnaires. In particular, information provided by each school about subject choice enabled a section of the pupil questionnaire to be tailor-made according to the model operating in each school.

Phase 2

At the start of Phase 2, interviews were conducted with the headteachers along with, in some cases, a member of the Senior Management Team with responsibility for curriculum flexibility in each of the 5 case study schools. An interview schedule provided a framework for the semi-structured interviews. The main aim of the interviews was to identify the nature and the impact of the Curriculum Flexibility Project in each school. This contextual information was essential to the construction of the questionnaires. Specifically the interviews sought to:

- find out how and why the school got involved
- investigate the impact of education authority initiatives
- ascertain the nature of the flexible initiative(s) and find out which pupils and staff are involved
- explore how the initiatives are monitored, in particular, how attendance, assessment and attainment data are presently collected and monitored and how these can be used to demonstrate the effectiveness of the curriculum flexibility initiative
- ascertain the support provided by the education authority for the development of initiatives.

During Phase 2 questionnaires were administered to all pupils in S2, S3 and S5 and their parents and all teachers in each of the five schools. The questionnaires were designed to gather information about what pupils, teachers and parents think about the range of subjects available in their school. The information gathered in Phase 1 of the project indicated that the five schools involved in the evaluation offered different subjects and courses at S2, S3 and S5 stages. Consequently, the pupil questionnaires were divided into two sections. Section A and part of Section B were the same for all five schools. However, the questions in Section B about subjects that pupils are currently studying were tailor-made according to the subjects/courses on offer in each school. The format of Section A of the pupil questionnaire, the teacher questionnaire and the parent questionnaire was the same. The respondents were asked to indicate a level of agreement or disagreement with a statement, such as *I am able to choose the subjects I want to study*, first indicating how true they thought the statement was and, secondly, how important they thought it was. An example of the question format is presented in Appendix 1. The questionnaires included statements about attitudes to:

- school attendance
- schoolwork
- curriculum choice
- school ethos.

The pupil questionnaire contained 40 statements, while those for teachers and parents contained 64 and 44 respectively. Some of the statements were similar in all three questionnaires. For example, the pupil questionnaire asked them to respond to *I get to study subjects that will help me get a job*. The teacher questionnaire asked them to respond to *Pupils in this school get to study subjects that will help them get a job*. The parent questionnaire asked them to respond to *My child gets to study subjects that will help him/her get a job*.

The teacher questionnaire included additional questions concerning the learning and teaching environment in the school and awareness of national and local authority guidelines on the curriculum.

A total of 1663 pupils completed questionnaires. Table 1 sets out the number of questionnaires completed by pupils in each of the three year groups investigated in each school.

Table 1: Pupil questionnaires

<i>School</i>	<i>Year</i>						<i>Total</i>
	<i>S2</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>S3</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>S5</i>	<i>%</i>	
A	138	92	134	84	63	74	335
B	105	93	110	87	66	79	281
C	124	80	126	81	61	61	311
D	153	90	131	77	71	71	355
E	153	93	146	91	82	85	381
Total	673		647		343		1663

A total of 132 teachers completed questionnaires. Table 2 provides the number of teachers who completed questionnaires in each school.

Table 2: Teacher questionnaires

<i>School</i>	<i>Post</i>						<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
	<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Head of Dept</i>	<i>Depute/AHT</i>	<i>HT</i>	<i>Learning Support</i>	<i>Other</i>		
A	19	10	1			1	31	51
B	11	5	1	1	1		19	35
C	8	4	4				16	26
D	17	7	3		1		28	42
E	25	7	2	1	1	2	38	59
Total	78	33	11	2	3	3	132	

Parents of the pupils in each of the three year groups completed questionnaires. Where they had a child in more than one of the year groups being investigated, parents were asked to return only one questionnaire. A total of 392 parents returned questionnaires. Table 3 shows the number of questionnaires returned by parents in each school.

Table 3: Parent questionnaires

<i>School</i>	<i>Year</i>			<i>Total</i>	<i>%*</i>
	<i>S2</i>	<i>S3</i>	<i>S5</i>		
A	42	31	17	95	25
B	28	25	7	61	17
C	40	17	12	74	20
D	30	27	13	75	17
E	42	42	19	108	26
Total	182	142	68	392	

* **NB** The percentage return for parent questionnaires does not take account of the fact that although a questionnaire was sent out for every S2, S3 and S5 pupil, households with more than one child in these year groups were asked to complete only one return. The real percentage return is therefore considerably higher than the figure given in the table.

The data collected via the questionnaires were analysed using SPSS. Following the analysis of the questionnaire data, group interviews were carried out with a sample of pupils from S2, S3, and S5 in each school. In most cases, 8 pupils took part in each group interview. The purpose of the pupil interviews was to explore in detail key issues that had emerged from the analysis of the questionnaire, in particular the impact of the initiative (particularly with regard to subject choice).

Staff interviews were also conducted. Some staff interviews were group interviews and some teachers were interviewed individually, depending on what practical arrangements could be made to free teachers in each school. All staff interviewed were responsible for teaching the pupils involved in the pupil interview groups. The staff interviews explored the teachers' perceptions of the benefits of the initiatives for the pupils. Any challenges for the staff in implementing the initiatives were also explored.

The selection of pupils and staff for the interviews and focus groups was made by the school. A random selection of pupils in the three stages being investigated and a selection of the teachers (covering different posts of responsibility) who taught the S2, S3 and/or S5 pupils were requested for the interviews with the research team.

One-to-one interviews were also conducted with 4 personnel responsible for the initiative at education authority level (The Director of Education, Head of Quality and Support Services, Former Head of Quality and Support Services and a Quality Improvement Officer). The main aims of the interviews at local authority level were to find out what the rationale for the initiative was, to identify the steps taken to implement curriculum flexibility in the schools in North Lanarkshire, to find out how support was provided to the schools and to identify the mechanisms used to monitor the impact of the initiative.

Phase 3

Statistical data were collected from the education authority during the final phase of the project. This included data concerning pupil attainment, attendance and exclusion rates. Cross-analysis of all the data collected in each phase was then carried out in order to evaluate the model of implementation adopted by North Lanarkshire Council, including the impact of guidance from local authorities, methods employed by the local authority in managing the diverse approaches, support strategies and the system for monitoring achievement of the project aims.

4. FINDINGS

The findings from the evaluation of the North Lanarkshire Curriculum Flexibility Project are presented in seven sections:

- 4.1. Background to the Curriculum Flexibility Project in North Lanarkshire
- 4.2. Why and how the Curriculum Flexibility Project developed in each of the five case study schools
- 4.3. The models of implementation in the five schools
- 4.4. Stakeholders' reactions to curriculum flexibility
- 4.5. Impact of the project on attainment, attendance, exclusion, school ethos and teaching environment
- 4.6. Effectiveness of the local authority system for monitoring the achievement of the project aims
- 4.7. The methods employed by the local authority in managing the diverse approaches and the effectiveness of the mechanisms used to support and encourage innovation in schools.

The first section sets out the background to the initiative and draws on data collected during the interviews with key personnel from the education authority and from analysis of some of the key documents collected.

The second section explores why and how curriculum flexibility initiatives developed in the five case study schools. This section draws on the data collected during headteacher interviews and from analysis of the documents and papers collected from the schools.

Section three presents the implementation model for curriculum flexibility in each of the schools involved in the evaluation. In particular, this section discusses the impact of the project on improving pupil choice and meeting pupil needs. It draws on the data collected from school documentation, the pupil questionnaires and from the teacher interviews and pupil focus groups.

The fourth section identifies the key issues to emerge from the evaluation, drawing on the analysis of pupil, teacher and parent questionnaires and from the interview and focus groups conducted with staff and pupils. It discusses the reactions of all key stakeholders to the Curriculum Flexibility Project, including the perceived benefits and challenges.

The fifth section addresses the impact that the initiatives have had on improvements in relation to attainment, attendance, exclusion, school ethos and teaching environment. It draws on the statistical information provided by the education authority.

The effectiveness of the local authority system for monitoring the achievement of the project aims is examined in the sixth section. Data collected during the interviews with education authority personnel, headteachers and teachers support the discussion.

The final section addresses issues relating to how the local authority manages the diversity of approaches within the five case study schools and the methods they employ to support and encourage the curriculum flexibility initiatives in the schools. The effectiveness of these approaches is explored. This section draws on data collected during interviews with education authority personnel, headteachers and teachers. The discussion is supported by responses to some of the questions in the teacher questionnaire.

4.1 Background to the Curriculum Flexibility Project in North Lanarkshire

In August 2001, North Lanarkshire Council issued *The Curriculum of the Secondary School: Guidance for Schools*. The publication provided advice on aspects of the secondary curriculum and identified areas where the authority would support headteachers and school staff in developing alternative and innovative approaches to the structure of the secondary school curriculum. The guidance followed a major consultation exercise in North Lanarkshire on a number of issues relating to curriculum structures, which flowed from the publication of several national reports, circulars and documents, namely:

- *Curriculum Design for the Secondary Stages: Guidelines for Schools* (SCCC 1999)
- *Organising the Secondary School Curriculum: Principles into Practice* (SCCC, 1999)
- *Achievement for All* (HMI, 1998)
- *Achieving Success in S1/S2* (HMI, 1998)
- Higher Still documentation
- *Circular 6/99: Curriculum Design for the Secondary Stages* (SOEID, 1999).

The publication of *Curriculum Design for the Secondary Stages: Guidelines for Schools* (SCCC, 1999) was particularly significant as it established a framework of advice concerning the curriculum of the secondary school within which authorities and schools might operate. The Guidelines aimed 'to provide schools with clear, coherent guidance on the structuring of the learning experiences of young people in Scottish secondary schools while offering the necessary degree of flexibility to enable schools to take account of their individual circumstances' (SCCC, 1999, p2). They offered local authorities and schools the possibility of designing a curriculum more suited to the needs of their local community and individual pupils. Circular 6/99 (SOEID) supported the Guidelines, saying that they offered scope for flexibility and innovation while providing an appropriate framework for planning continuity and progression in pupils' learning and should be useful to schools in raising standards of attainment.

The guidance issued to schools in North Lanarkshire should be understood in the context of the authority's 'raising achievement for all' strategy. In 1998 a report was published by the Director entitled *Raising Achievement for All* (1998). It points out the prevalence of economic and social disadvantage in North Lanarkshire and the impact this has on the ability of young people and adults to reach their potential. Education is recognised as a way of breaking the cycle of disadvantage. The report states '*It is imperative that the department of education provides a curriculum and services which challenge and enable young people and adults to achieve whatever they are capable of achieving, irrespective of socio-economic background, gender, race or levels of ability or disability*' (RAfA, p2).

The report argues that there is a need for a radical look at the nature and basis of 'achievement', '*to arrive at a comprehensive definition of achievement which would do justice to the rights of diverse groups of young people and adults to develop their talents and abilities within an educational context*' (p3). It points to current research which suggests that qualities such as self-esteem, determination, 'stickability' and high aspirations are more likely to be positively associated with success than cognitive abilities. The report highlights a shift in thinking which suggests that achievement is influenced by the background and experience of the individual – '*irrespective of individual levels of ability, factors of group identity such as socio-economic background, gender, race, disability and so on will make a difference*' (p3). It suggests that different approaches must be taken with different 'groups' if North Lanarkshire is to support achievement for all effectively, and that the definition of 'achievement' adopted must extend beyond that which can be measured by traditional means. It concludes that 'achievement' must be recognised and supported over a wide range of activities and contexts. It says that the focus must be maintained on achievement as measured in national examinations but, at the same time, a new emphasis must be given to the development of self-esteem, motivation, determination, self-discipline and high aspirations. '*Opportunities*

must be found for learners to experience achievement and success, at whatever level and in whatever context is appropriate' (p5). The report suggests that personal and social development programmes, social and vocational skills courses, work experience and careers education should be viewed as contributing significantly to the raising of achievement.

Interviews were held with four key personnel at local authority level in North Lanarkshire in order to gather further information about the context for the Curriculum Flexibility Project. The views expressed in the *'Raising Achievement for All'* (1998) report were reinforced by the interviewees and it was clear from the discussions that the Curriculum Flexibility Project developed in order to explore ways to meet the needs of all young people, to raise achievement and provide a curriculum that is more relevant to their lives. When the four interviewees were asked why the education authority had encouraged schools to examine ways to develop greater curriculum flexibility, the responses indicated that there was a general feeling (*'education authority's, headteachers', parents' and pupils' view*) that the curriculum was too rigid and restrictive. Comments made during the interviews included: *'pupils pushed into boxes where they didn't fit', 'pupils not able to follow strengths'* and *'curriculum wholly inappropriate to levels of ability'*. The interviewees suggested that the rigidity of the curriculum impacted on achievement and on the behaviour and motivation of pupils – *'curriculum restrictions were barriers to raising achievement', 'underachievement caused by structural factors more than learning and teaching strategies', 'high exclusion rates', 'parent complaints about indiscipline'* and *'significant numbers of pupils under-enthused'*. Lack of pupil motivation and poor results in modern languages was also raised by all the interviewees as another indicator that the curriculum was forcing some pupils into studying a subject that they did not want to do and that was not appropriate for their level of ability.

The Standards in Scotland's Schools, etc. Act (2000) set out the requirement for local education authorities to seek ways to meet the individual needs of the young people being educated in their schools. The Act created a new statutory framework for school education that devolves responsibility to the local level for finding the best solutions for achieving improvement:

'... it shall be the duty of the authority to secure that the education is directed to the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the child or young person to their fullest potential.'

(Standards in Scotland's Schools, etc. Act, section 2, para 1)

A presentation by the Director of Education in North Lanarkshire concerning *The Curriculum of the Secondary Schools* identified the following concerns:

- The continuing lack of an overall coherence to curriculum provision
- The lack of progression in S1/S2 in particular
- The increased complexity of assessment and the overlap between the different stages
- The complexity of timetabling and other arrangements to support current curriculum structures
- The potential of further complexity introduced by allowing age and stage relaxation for some pupils
- The question of continuing appropriateness of Standard Grade assessment at the end of S4
- The lack of curriculum choice in S3/S4.

- The education authority and the schools have sought to address the concerns raised in a number of ways. The Curriculum Flexibility Project is only one initiative of a number taken by North Lanarkshire in an attempt to meet the needs of all pupils and to raise achievement (as defined in '*Raising Achievement for All*', 1998). Other initiatives include co-operative learning activities, outward bound courses, out of school hours learning and multiple intelligence activities. Some of the aims of these initiatives are the same as those of the Curriculum Flexibility Project (set out on page 1).

A national conference organised by North Lanarkshire in November 2003, entitled *Diversity makes a Difference*, raised the profile of curriculum flexibility in the authority. The conference looked at current models of diversifying within the comprehensive system. The keynote address was presented by the First Minister and he confirmed the importance of curriculum flexibility. He said, '*...we have introduced flexibility in the curriculum to give professionals in the classroom the scope to innovate and match teaching to the learning needs of the children in their class*' (Jack McConnell, *The Future of the Scottish Comprehensive System*, 3 November 2003). He emphasised that the modern comprehensive should be diverse, not uniform or standard, and should develop the potential of every child. He highlighted the importance of freeing up headteachers and schools to offer a range of options that allow pupils and their parents to choose the route to the future that is best for them. The Director of Education in North Lanarkshire also made a presentation concerning diversity in the comprehensive system, further underlining the need for schools to develop initiatives according to the needs of their own pupils. The conference included a series of workshops that were led by members of the Quality and Support Service and headteachers of schools in North Lanarkshire and presented examples of good practice in curriculum flexibility. The conference provided evidence of North Lanarkshire's commitment to the Curriculum Flexibility Project.

4.2 Why and how the Curriculum Flexibility Project developed in each of the five case study schools

Interviews were conducted with each of the headteachers in the five schools. In some cases other members of the management team joined the interview. The purpose of the interview was to understand why and how the Curriculum Flexibility Project had developed in each school and the context for any of the initiatives taken. The interview data was supplemented by information gathered from documents provided by the schools.

All five schools were invited to provide documentation regarding changes to their curriculum. The type and amount of documentation differed from school to school. Most of the schools provided minutes of meetings or internal memoranda tracking the process of discussing and implementing change, as well as examples of option choice sheets, whereas one school provided only key headings concerning the changes made and the issues under discussion. Therefore, the level of detail about why and how changes to the curriculum were made differs from school to school.

During the interview the headteacher and, where present, the other member of the senior management team were asked a number of questions concerning curriculum flexibility. The questions most relevant to this section of the report are: Why and how did the school become involved in the curriculum flexibility initiative? When did the process begin? How were pupils, staff and parents involved? And what has been the impact of the education authority initiatives? The answers to the questions were spontaneous and the level of detail provided differed.

The analysis of interview data and documents received from the schools is set out below. It shows that all five schools are making changes to the curriculum, although the extent of the changes varies, and that the guidance issued by the local authority has had an impact on the processes of change. All the interviewees provided a strong rationale for introducing a more flexible curriculum and suggested that the need for curricular change had been recognised in the schools prior to the publication of the local authority guidance in 2001. However, the headteachers indicated that the guidance had provided support for changes that were already being discussed by the senior management teams, and in some cases had provided the *'green light'* for action. In each school there is evidence that curricular change has taken place in an effort to meet the needs of pupils by offering them a greater choice of subjects and courses, to increase motivation for learning and to address some of the areas of underachievement, in particular modern languages. Appendix 3 contains a summary table showing aspects of curriculum flexibility in the five schools.

School A

School A is a non-denominational school with 747 pupils and 61 (FTE) teachers. The headteacher and the depute headteacher, who is responsible for timetabling, took part in the interview. The headteacher explained that when he took up post some 6 years ago the curriculum was very rigid, fragmented and outdated and the results in the lower school were very poor, particularly in English. He recognised that curricular change was required in order to provide greater flexibility and better meet the individual needs of the pupils and equip them with modern, marketable skills.

The first changes to the curriculum were introduced in the lower school. A lower school curriculum committee was formed, and over the last four years a complete review of the structure and balance of the curriculum at S1/S2 has taken place. The issues addressed include: overcrowding of the curriculum; fragmentation; coherence; and progression. The headteacher explained that the outcome of the curricular review led to the number of subjects studied at S1/S2 being reduced, the number of different teachers for S1/S2 pupils being reduced, 'taster' courses (such as economic awareness, Latin, German and computer

keyboard skills) being removed and core time in English, mathematics and social subjects being increased. According to the interviewees, one double period has been introduced for social subjects in S1 and a general strategy has been adopted to integrate ICT across all subjects. While Standard Grades are not on offer in S2 at present, this is under consideration.

The interviewees said that a considerable amount of time has been invested in primary/secondary liaison and cluster planning in an attempt to bridge P6 – S1 courses. They indicated that a common approach to reading and to teaching a modern language has been adopted. In addition, the introduction of 'SuccessMaker' in S1/S2 has been extended to P6/P7 pupils.

The changes introduced in the upper school curriculum were also outlined during the interview. For example, modern languages have been removed from the compulsory core. However, the headteacher pointed out that alternatives to modern languages have been carefully chosen and that pupils are targeted in order to encourage them to join other courses that are on offer. For example, some pupils are invited to join XL, On Track and SkillForce courses as alternatives to studying a modern language. However, from the documentation it was noted that French was the only language on offer and, in effect, remained compulsory for the majority of S3 pupils. Whether these courses should be offered as an open choice is currently under discussion in the school. The school documents further highlighted opportunities for greater choice through the introduction of business management and religious studies alongside history and geography; the ECDL and enterprise have also been introduced as alternatives to biology, chemistry, physics or science. Skill-based courses such as hospitality and craft and design have been introduced. Some Higher Still courses have replaced Standard Grades in S3/S4, for example, Intermediate biology and hospitality.

At S5/S6 Intermediate 1 and 2 courses were on offer in addition to Highers in most subjects. Skill-based courses such as craft skills, travel and tourism and college courses had been introduced. Alternatives to Higher Still English and mathematics are being explored.

The headteacher explained that many of the changes he referred to predated the publication of the North Lanarkshire guidelines to schools. However, he said that the process of curriculum change was given a boost by the education authority guidance. Committees and working groups were used to explore and manage the changes to the curricular structure and the headteacher remained in close contact with the Head of the Quality Support Service throughout the process of implementing changes to the curriculum. In addition, the headteacher said that pupils and parents were consulted about the proposed changes.

School B

School B is a non-denominational school with 638 pupils and 54.6 (FTE) teachers. The headteacher and the depute headteacher, who is responsible for timetabling, took part in the interview. The headteacher explained that the school was '*not a high attaining school*' and there was a need to find ways to address low attainment. There were a large number of 'no awards' in some subjects, eg modern languages. The interviewees indicated that they saw the eight modes as a straitjacket and that lack of flexibility led to discipline problems. There was recognition of the need to offer more vocationally oriented courses.

As in School A, the development of strategies to increase curriculum flexibility in School B predated the publication of the North Lanarkshire guidance issued to schools. The interviewees explained that the education authority's initiatives gave security to the school that curricular change would be supported and a clear incentive to move towards greater flexibility. They said that the guidance issued provided a '*safety blanket*' against HMIE.

The process began with discussion at senior management level and then with principal teachers. The headteacher explained that an iterative process informed the policy at school and education authority levels and that the involvement of schools and headteachers in ongoing discussion was helpful to that process. Discussions were held with the Head of Service throughout the implementation of change and the headteacher indicated that this support had been helpful.

The depute head, as a member of the senior management team and as timetabler, liaised closely with principal teachers concerning the implementation of a more flexible curriculum. He said that this was helpful in managing the process of change. In addition, he pointed out that it was important that some of the ideas for change came from the principal teachers, who recognised the *'misfit between the curriculum and pupils' abilities/motivation*'. The process of change was regarded as evolutionary and, according to the depute head, *'feels natural'*. He said *'the curriculum now fits the pupils, not the other way round'*.

The main changes included a reduction in the number of subjects pupils have to take in S3/S4. Although, for the majority of pupils, English, mathematics and a modern language remain compulsory, an essential skills course was introduced for identified pupils as an alternative to taking French or German. The school documentation explains that the essential skills course gives pupils some extra support with basic language and number skills. It says that the course also offers opportunities for developing competence in basic computing tasks as well as giving an introduction to using the Internet. Standard Grade science has been dropped as an option and replaced by individual science subjects (biology, physics and chemistry). All pupils must select at least one of the science subjects. However, they are available at different levels (Intermediate 1 and Access courses in biology and chemistry). In addition to the science subjects, national qualifications have been introduced in other subjects and some can be studied at Standard Grade, Intermediate 1, Intermediate 2, access 3 or access 2, depending on a pupil's results in S2.

A course option at S3/S4 entitled 'Social Subjects' is offered which covers basic skills in geography, history and modern studies. This course is offered as an alternative to single social subjects. As with the essential skills course, pupils are invited to select this option. Hospitality, practical craftwork and enterprise were added to the option choices to provide more vocationally based subjects.

Information about S5 choices was found in the documentation. In S5, English is the only compulsory subject. Those wishing to study mathematics take it in place of another subject choice. Languages, social subjects, accounts, health and food are merged into one column, which may limit choice, though the rationale is that *'languages have always struggled'*. There is an extra options column that, along with more traditional subjects such as art, ICT skills or 'an extra Higher subject', includes a range of non-traditional activities such as PE performance units, debating skills and peer tutoring. The headteacher explained that travel and tourism, delivered by the Business Studies Department, had also been added to the courses on offer.

Age and stage relaxation means that, in School B, Standard Grade English is offered to some pupils in S2. They sit the SQA examination at the end of S3 and progress into Intermediate 1 English in S4. Changes were also introduced at S5/S6 in order to provide pupils with the opportunity to study subjects at a level more appropriate to their ability. Where previously courses in S5/S6 had been offered at levels largely determined by the subject departments, taking little account of pupil choice or ability, staff were encouraged to increase the number of courses at intermediate level. The documentation provided by the depute headteacher indicated that the level of course provided would be determined by the number of pupils opting for certain levels, and that it would not be possible to run courses at all levels.

School C

School C is a non-denominational school with 757 pupils and 62 (FTE) teachers. It was one of the first schools in North Lanarkshire to explore ways to increase curriculum flexibility. The headteacher explained that the school had become involved in reviewing the curriculum through its participation in the Education Action Plan in 1999. He said that at that time the school data on attainment showed significant numbers of 'no awards' (in modern languages in particular) and a high number of exclusions. Differentiation in the curriculum was one of the areas identified for development as part of the Education Action Plan. This included:

- Modification of the national curricular guidelines for S3/S4 to provide a 7 modal curriculum
- Provision of extended essential skills course for targeted cohort in S3/S4 (to include partnerships with FE college, business and other agencies as appropriate)
- Introduction of Standard Grade at the end of S1
- Revision of class organisation in certain subjects in S2
- Introduction of Higher Still courses at the end of S3.

(School C Education Action Plan, 1999, p2)

Consequently, in School C discussions concerning changes to the 8 modal structure and a stronger focus on vocational education were underway prior to the publication of the local authority curriculum guidelines in 2001. However, according to the headteacher, the publication was important because it lent support to the changes that had already been proposed and provided reassurance that changes would be acceptable to HMIE. He said, *'the local authority document was crucial because it provided a platform for all schools, it encouraged good practice across the authority and provided protection from HMIE'*. The headteacher's comment regarding the importance of the North Lanarkshire guidance in providing protection from HMIE is similar to the comment made by the headteacher in School B. Both highlight the level of anxiety that headteachers and teachers experience regarding school inspections and their fear of moving too far from the national guidance on the curriculum. The interviewees' comments demonstrate the importance of concrete support in the form of written guidance in order to provide schools with the reassurance that alternatives to the curriculum, based on a sound rationale, will be acceptable.

The headteacher in School C explained that further changes were already underway, either in the process of being implemented or under discussion in school with principal teachers, staff, pupils and parents. He provided examples during the interview. Rotation of technical subjects and home economics classes was introduced in S1/2 so that pupils would have contact with fewer teachers each week. Resources were provided by the local authority to create a 'SuccessMaker' suite to support 5-14 English and mathematics. From the school documentation it was noted that the introduction of Standard Grades in S2 was under discussion but not yet implemented.

A review of the curriculum in the middle school was undertaken with a specific focus on areas that caused disaffection. Creative and aesthetic subjects and modern languages were identified as subjects that some pupils did not want to study. The review led to creative and aesthetic and technical subjects being offered in the elective column in the S3 option sheet. The headteacher indicated that from session 2004-2005 the opportunity to study a modern language will remain available to all, but it will no longer be compulsory.

From the documentation it is noted that biology, chemistry and physics are offered at Standard Grade and Intermediate 1, offering more choice in level for pupils, though all must study a science subject.

The documentation suggests that an essential skills course, which gives additional support in English and mathematics, is offered to S3 and S4 pupils in place of modern languages. The 'SuccessMaker' integrated learning package is an important component of the course.

Some pupils are invited to join an On Track Club, which is run in partnership with the Careers Service. The headteacher explained that the project is designed to help pupils improve their motivation and confidence and to develop the skills which are needed for transition from school to employment, training or college. In addition, a small group of pupils are invited to join a Skillforce Curriculum Project that involves working with former members of the Armed Forces with a specialisation in team building and personal motivation skills.

Vocationally based courses offering alternative curriculum experiences have been piloted in school by staff brought in from a local further education college to deliver the courses. Initially pupils were invited to join the vocational education activities, and this involved only a small number of pupils selected by guidance staff. A construction/auto engineering course and a beauty therapy/hairdressing course were delivered in specially constructed areas in school. During the pilot phase these courses were offered as an alternative to modern languages and social subjects. The local authority provided the resources to create a car bay and a beauty parlour. The pupils complete national qualification Intermediate 2 units in construction. The Construction Industry Training Board has supported the initiative, which adds importance to the course for the pupils.

Curriculum flexibility is extended to S5/6 level, with more subjects being offered at Intermediate 1 and 2 levels. For those not studying Higher English or mathematics there is a range of alternative practical courses of which they can choose one: PE, RE, photography, word processing, textiles and cake decoration. PE, photography, travel and tourism and technical subjects are available to all pupils and one can be chosen. Therefore, for those not taking Higher English or mathematics, there is the option of following two of these practical courses. Further flexibility is offered at S5 through the option of college courses and also the opportunity to start Spanish as a new language. The 2004 option choice booklet sets out a number of courses available at the FE college, eg call centre skills, caring, drama/dance and hospitality. The booklet says that pupils may opt to travel to the college on two afternoons to take one of the courses. Higher psychology is offered at S6 level. It takes place in school but is delivered by staff from the local FE college.

The curriculum flexibility initiatives have been included in the school development plan and in appropriate departmental plans. Staff, pupils and parents have been consulted regularly on the changes to the curriculum. Minutes of the School Board meetings indicated that they had also been consulted on curriculum development, as had the Pupil Council. Most recently, further consultation has taken place regarding extending the curriculum flexibility structure for S3/S4. In a memorandum (8/12/03) to principal teachers, the headteacher pointed out that statements from the First Minister, the Minister for Education and Young People and the Director of Education in North Lanarkshire again highlighted the fact that schools are no longer constrained by centrally defined curricular frameworks. The memorandum presents the senior management team's proposal for further change to S3/S4 option choices. The suggestion is that all pupils would be required to study English, mathematics, PSHE, RE and PE; thereafter they would choose six further courses of study. Vocational courses and Skillforce would, potentially, be available to all pupils. The memorandum concluded by saying *'It is hoped that by maximising pupil choice we can better meet the learning needs of all pupils, increase motivation and, in so doing, help raise achievement across the school'*. The headteacher received a number of responses to his memorandum and in the light of these amendments have been made. This provides an indication of the value of the consultation process.

As in Schools A and B, the headteacher indicated that he had been in close contact with personnel from the local authority throughout the process of implementing curriculum

flexibility. He had also provided inputs to national and local conferences, presenting the changes made in School C in an effort to raise attainment and better meet the needs of the pupils.

School D

School D is a non-denominational school with 837 pupils and 67.2 (FTE) teachers. The headteacher explained that when she took up post around 3 years ago she recognised the need to overhaul the curriculum. She said that the curriculum was fragmented with gaps in provision, eg modern studies was not offered. In addition to this the school performance statistics were low. She identified a '*misfit*' between subjects and pupils and a danger of compartmentalisation and/or labelling of pupils. She suggested that previous consultation on the curriculum had been too subject-based. The rationale for curricular flexibility provided by the headteacher in School D echoes many of the points raised by the headteachers in Schools A, B and C. There appears to be recognition of the need to shift from fitting pupils into subjects to seeking ways to provide a curriculum that is more accommodating of the needs of pupils.

The headteacher said that the North Lanarkshire guidance was very useful and provided a strong framework for pushing forward with school developments. The process of implementing changes to the curriculum began with discussions at senior management team level. This was followed by discussions at principal teacher and departmental level. The documentation received from the school indicates that the North Lanarkshire guidance was used extensively in discussions in principal teacher and senior management team meetings.

An extract from the school's Standards and Quality Report (working version) indicates that a full analysis of the curriculum has been carried out by staff and this has provided the basis for future development. The report says that efforts had been made to reduce fragmentation in the curriculum for S1/S2 and a new curriculum design for this stage had been agreed with the staff and with the help of the School Board. A phased plan for the implementation of the curriculum changes at S1/S2 was agreed and implemented in 2002–2003. Modern studies was brought into the curriculum, along with courses for ICT and personal and social development. History, geography and modern studies were offered in rotation. The headteacher explained during the interview that there is interest in the age and stage relaxation and that feasibility studies have been carried out, but no changes have been made yet due to reasons associated with staffing issues.

The school's Standards and Quality Report (working version) says that at S3/S4 three new options were introduced in 2001/2002 and that consultation with the pupils had informed the construction of option blocks. Links have been developed with the local further education college in order to provide 'call-centre' training for the pupils. The headteacher explained during the interview that other courses, such as the XL Club, were introduced as alternatives to social subjects for targeted groups of pupils. The school was planning to introduce college courses, such as construction (in 2004-05) and beauty therapy (in 2005-06). She said that there is now general loosening of the languages position in option choices through the offering of Latin in addition to French and German. It is also possible to start either French or German as a second modern language in S3. SuccessMaker, which concentrates on literacy and numeracy, is offered in place of languages for targeted pupils.

The documents supplied by the school indicate that, having chosen a language, a science and a social subject, the pupils then have a 'free choice' of 5 out of 16 subjects. This appears to allow a wide variety of combinations of subjects – allowing the possibility of studying 2 and even 3 sciences, though this is not recommended.

According to the headteacher the process of increasing flexibility in the curriculum has been evolutionary and she suggested that this is best approach. She believes that a lot of

changes in the staff have helped the process of change. She said that there is now an attempt to fit the curriculum to pupils rather than the converse. The headteacher indicated that the local authority has provided both personal support and resources to enable curricular flexibility. In particular, she said that the Head of Service had been very supportive throughout the process. She added that the HMIE stance on modes may have caused some headteachers to feel cautious about introducing greater flexibility in the curriculum and for this reason the guidance from the local authority had a positive impact on implementing change.

School E

School E is a denominational school with 876 pupils and 64.4 (FTE) teachers. At the time of the interview the headteacher had only just taken up his post. Consequently, he was joined by one of the assistant headteachers who was able to provide details about the introduction of curriculum flexibility. In addition, the documentation provided by the school tracked the implementation of curriculum change.

The interviewees said that the senior management team were aware that the school was not meeting the needs of all pupils. In addition, they said that there was a realisation that in modern languages some pupils had poor levels of motivation. The assistant headteacher explained, *'We had large classes and a lot of pupils did not want to be there'*. Added to this, the overall uptake in modern languages was low.

The rationale for curricular flexibility in School E was provided in a presentation delivered to the North Lanarkshire Council *Diversity makes a Difference* conference. The presentation indicated that there was a need to increase motivation, improve attainment and meet pupil needs. Once again this rationale summarises that provided by the headteachers in all the other schools involved in the evaluation of the Curriculum Flexibility Project. The presentation confirmed the views expressed by the interviewees in School E. It also suggested that the results in modern languages were poor and that there was low motivation and poor behaviour in language classes.

The interviewees both said that the publication of the North Lanarkshire guidance had been important. The assistant headteacher said, *'the guidance provided the initiative for us to look at providing more pupil choice and confirmed that language and science do not have to be compulsory'*. She added, *'If it hadn't been for the guidelines it wouldn't have happened'*. She explained that after the publication of the guidance they tried a 'dummy run' with the then S2 in order to find out what the impact of greater pupil choices might be – the numbers of pupils choosing alternatives, the implications for staffing, accommodation, etc. The subject choices were discussed by the senior management team and the wider staff were consulted. Principal teachers were asked to consider, along with the staff in their departments, 4 possible options for change to be implemented in session 2002-2003 with S3. Staff views were returned to the depute head who then tested the option choice form with pupils prior to a decision being taken about a new form for S2 pupils.

The view of the senior management team was that certain pupils did not have enough choice. The assistant headteacher said that some pupils wanted to take additional sciences and some drama and music, but this was not possible. After the consultation with staff, she said that the pupils were offered the possibility of taking 3 sciences, 3 social subjects and 3 business studies subjects. However, pupils were advised to think carefully about their choices in order to encourage them to select a balanced curriculum. Parents were consulted about the changes at a parents' evening about subject choice and the School Board were also consulted. The assistant head teacher said that when the choices were made there was little impact on the staffing situation because the number of pupils who selected unusual choices was small.

A School Circular issued in August 2003 outlines some general principles concerning S3/4 course choices. The circular emphasises the need for full consultation with pupils and parents and the importance of encouraging pupils to take a major part of the responsibility for subject selection. The document says that the main aim of guidance in S3/4 course choice is to enable pupils to make the best possible informed choice of subjects which:

- a) meets national guidelines and ensures a broad, balanced curriculum
- b) reflects the skills, personal preferences and aptitudes of pupils, in accord with parental wishes
- c) affords each pupil the opportunity to develop his/her talents in full
- d) ensures that each pupil is offered, in each subject area, a syllabus and a pace of learning which is appropriate to his/her ability.

These are important principles and the emphasis on enabling pupils to make informed choices is well placed. The provision of adequate information prior to subject choice becomes even more important when increasing numbers of alternatives are available.

One issue concerning curriculum flexibility mentioned in the minutes of a Board of Study meeting provided by School E was the possibility of allowing pupils to opt out of compulsory modern languages. *'It was suggested that certain pupils who struggle with English may be better served by opting out of compulsory modern languages to study other areas of the curriculum'* (minutes 19/11/01). A discussion concerning the benefits of an early start to Standard Grades was also reported in the same document. Pupils following Higher Still courses was discussed as a possibility. The minute reported that it was agreed that, *'What is best for the pupil should be our main concern'*. It was also agreed at this meeting that a trial open choice in certain modal areas for S2 pupils would be helpful.

The interviewees said that the S3/S4 curriculum review had taken place and that *'we feel we are meeting the needs'*. They explained that the modern languages department had been consulted and that modern languages would no longer be a core subject. The assistant head said that during the most recent S2 choice parents' evening they had surveyed the parents and a third agreed that modern languages should not be a core subject. The pupils were also surveyed and a third of them agreed with the parents' view.

The documentation from the school indicated that consideration was being given to addressing underachievement in S5/S6. The interviewees confirmed this. They also said that enterprise has been introduced across the curriculum. They explained that there is an enterprise co-ordinator and that 8 staff have been trained in 'Getting into Enterprise'. An Intermediate 1 and 2 enterprise course is now offered in S5.

The interviewees suggested that the staff did not perceive the changes to the curriculum as radical and they thought that the staff were willing to develop the curriculum. The headteacher said that the school does not have facilities for vocational education, although this is something that is under discussion, and that the local authority had indicated that resources may be available for the necessary facilities. An informal discussion about what developments could be made regarding the introduction of vocational education has taken place with the staff. Ideas have been proposed, such as setting up a 'call centre' and/or a café to promote hospitality skills.

Summary of key points for all 5 schools

- Low attainment, curriculum fragmentation and meeting pupil needs were the main reasons provided by headteachers for seeking to introduce greater curriculum flexibility.

- Curriculum flexibility had been discussed in each of the schools prior to the publication of the North Lanarkshire guidance in 2001. However, the headteachers indicated that the guidance provided the security to implement changes and the incentive for action.
- There is evidence that efforts have been made to greater and lesser extents in each of the five schools to increase curriculum flexibility. The greatest changes appear to have been made in the S3/S4 curriculum structure.
- Each school has sought to introduce alternative choices for some pupil groups – for example, courses such as XL, On Track or Skillforce as an alternative to modern languages.
- Some schools have introduced vocational courses such as beauty therapy and car mechanics, while in other schools this is still being discussed.
- Age and stage relaxation has been discussed in all five schools, but as yet has happened in only one school.
- Consultation has taken place in each school with staff, pupils and parents about curricular flexibility. It appears that changes have been gradual, with changes to option choices being tested out with invited groups and then in some cases opened up to all pupils.

4.3 The models of implementation in the five schools

As reported in section 4.2, each school developed approaches to implementing local authority guidance on curriculum flexibility, though several indicated that changes were already underway prior to the guidance being issued.

This section reports on the subjects that pupils say they are studying in the light of the measures reported by senior staff and evident in the school documents (section 4.2). It also reports on their views of the subjects and choices on offer.

In the pupil questionnaires, pupils were asked to indicate on lists (based on information provided by the schools) which subjects they were studying and at what level; they were asked if there was any subject they would prefer not to be studying and why. They were also asked if there was any subject they were not studying but would like to, and to give the reason why they were not able to study it. It should be noted that in responding to the question as to why they were not able to study a desired subject, the majority of pupils did not answer the question, but rather indicated why they would like to study the subject. As a result the number of 'valid' reasons provided was low.

The data from the pupil questionnaire is supplemented by views of pupils expressed during the focus groups.

School A

S2 (138 pupils)

In School A there is a common curriculum followed by all S2 pupils. This was clear from their responses to the question about which subjects they were studying – all pupils indicated that they were studying everything listed.

In response to the question about which subjects they would prefer not to be studying, 58% named French: 37 suggested it was because they did not like the subject, 18 thought it was irrelevant, 11 found it too difficult and 8 gave reasons associated with the teacher.

For other subjects only small numbers indicated that they would rather not study them; for example, 16 science, 14 geography, 11 history, 8 maths and 6 English. The most common reason given was that the subject was boring or they did not like it; the next most common reason related to the fact that they found the subject irrelevant – *'they didn't need to know about it'*; a number indicated that they found the subject too difficult and some indicated that they did not like the teachers. In the focus group with S2 pupils, mathematics and science were mentioned most frequently as subjects the pupils would prefer not to be studying. The main reason given by the pupils was *'it is too difficult'*. Geography, history and French were also mentioned as subjects they did not like and would like to drop. The main reason given in each case was that the subject was *'not needed'*.

In response to the question about subjects they would like to study but are currently not studying, the 3 main areas raised by S2 pupils in School A were: languages (45 mentions/33%); ICT subjects (22 mentions/16%) and arts and creative subjects, mainly drama (24/17% mentions).

In respect to languages, it would appear that some pupils do want to learn languages but not necessarily French, which is the only language on offer in S2. This was supported by pupils in the focus group who specifically mentioned that they would like to be able to study Spanish. Pupils were interested in computing but this was not on offer in their year; they

thought it would be useful to increase their skills as it would help them later in their careers. Drama is not on offer in the school. Many of the pupils who indicated that they would like to take drama said that they thought it would be fun and a means of building confidence. The pupils in the focus group also named drama as a subject they would like. They said that they would like more opportunities to study outside school in order to gain experience of life outside school.

S3 (134 pupils)

Pupil responses to the question about which subjects they were taking reflect the reported introduction of Intermediate 1 courses in biology and hospitality. Business management and religious studies had been introduced into the social subjects column to allow for greater choice and the responses suggest that the pupils have chosen freely across that wider range of subjects. Twelve pupils reported taking the ECDL and 14 reported taking enterprise education, both of which were offered as alternatives within the science column. Sixteen indicated they were taking part in the XL Club and 17 were participating in Skillforce.

No discontent was noted at all in respect of the following subjects: religious studies, enterprise, XL Club, Skillforce, craft and design and home economics/hospitality. In most other subjects only a small number suggested that they would rather not study the subject. However, higher levels of dissatisfaction were noted for: French (57/54%); business management (11/29%); and administration (11/24%). Once again, the majority of reasons given were dislike of the subject, or that *'it was boring'*. Eleven suggested that French was something they did not need to know and 9 suggested reasons associated with the teacher. All the pupils in the S3 focus group, with the exception of one, said that they would rather not be studying French. The following three main reasons were given by the pupils: *'don't like the subject'*; *'forced into doing it'*; and *'too hard'*.

With respect to subjects they would like to study but are not able to, the most frequently mentioned areas of study were languages (31 mentions/23% of year group), science (20 mentions/15%) and arts and creative subjects – including drama, music and art (15 mentions/11%). Half of those showing an interest in languages said either that the language they wanted was not on offer in the school (usually Spanish) or simply that they had not had a choice and would like a language other than French. Fewer valid reasons were given for science and arts and creative subjects, but a small number suggested that their science preference did not fit into the timetable/column choices. Fitting subjects into column choices was also an issue for some wanting to study creative subjects, as they said they had already chosen another subject. Drama is not on offer in the school and therefore unavailable for pupils to choose.

When asked if there were any subjects that they would like to take, half the pupils in the S3 focus groups mentioned a language. Latin, German and Spanish were mentioned. Drama, psychology, car mechanics and first aid were also mentioned as subjects/courses that the pupils would like to take but are unavailable in School A. The pupils said that the way the columns were arranged meant that in some cases it was difficult to pick their choices. These pupils were referring to an inability to take 3 sciences or to take history and geography.

S5 (63 pupils)

The responses to the question about which subjects they were studying show that, although the group sizes are small, students are studying across a range of subjects and levels, with the introduction of specific activities to provide alternatives to the traditional curriculum, such as practical craft skills, travel and tourism and courses taken at a local FE college, such as electrical installation.

Mathematics is the only subject that a considerable number say they would prefer not to study (16 pupils/26%). Half of those suggested it was because they did not need the subject; for the others it was mainly that they did not like it. Mathematics was also mentioned by the S5 pupils interviewed in the focus group as a subject that they would prefer not to study, as were English and French.

The pupils' responses in the questionnaire showed they had interest in a wide range of other subjects (but in small numbers) including science, social subjects, art and creative subjects (music and art) and technical subjects (home economics, graphic communication and fashion and textiles). The reasons they gave for not studying these subjects were that they could not fit the subject into their column choices; the subject was not on offer in the school, (for example politics, modern studies and sports science); and 3 indicated that as they had not studied the subject before, they could not take it up in fifth year (biology and music). The majority of the pupils in the focus group referred to languages when asked if there was any subject that they would like to study, in particular, Spanish and German. In addition, drama and driving lessons were mentioned as courses S5 pupils would like to take.

School B

S2 (104 pupils)

The main change for S2 pupils had been the introduction of Standard Grade English in S2 and this was reflected in the pupils' responses, with 27% of the year group indicating they were studying English at Standard Grade level. The pupils in the S2 focus group confirmed that it was possible to start Standard Grade English in S2. French and German are taught, with over 80% of the year group taking French, reflecting the language studied in primary school.

The highest levels of dissatisfaction are expressed in the following subjects: 12 out of 19 pupils (63%) indicated that they disliked German; 45 out of 85 pupils (53%) indicated that they disliked French; and 57 out of 104 pupils (55%) indicated that they disliked religious education (RE). The reasons are predominantly similar to reasons given by pupils in School A – the subject is not interesting, not liked, or irrelevant. A larger number of the pupils who said they would rather not take RE (19 out of 57) suggested it was irrelevant. The subjects mentioned by the S2 pupils who took part in the focus group confirmed the responses given in the questionnaire. German, French and RE were identified in spontaneous responses to the question 'Are there any subjects you would prefer not to study?' The reason most frequently given regarding French was *'there is no need for it'* and, in the case of RE, *'no point in doing it'*.

Few of the S2 pupils in School B indicated that there were subjects they would like but are currently not studying. Of those who did respond, the two most frequently mentioned were languages (14/13% of year group) and vocational or work-related subjects (12/11% of year group). Interest in languages was for some that were not on offer in the school, or just wider choice. The interest in vocational subjects was split between 'hair and beauty' and 'motor car related activities' (repairing or driving). Once again the pupils in the focus group spontaneously confirmed the responses provided in the questionnaires concerning the provision of a broader choices in languages. They indicated that they would like to take Spanish or Italian. The possibility of taking Gaelic was also mentioned.

The pupils in the focus group suggested that only English, mathematics and one science should be compulsory – all other subjects should be selected by choice. The pupils had just undertaken an exercise to select subject choices for S3 and they indicated that the way that the subjects were arranged in columns in the 'choice sheet' made it difficult to pick a subject in some columns. One pupil felt strongly that the columns were arranged to suit the structure

of the school timetable and not the pupils' choices. She said that the school '*should work with you rather than against you*'.

The pupils in the focus group suggested that more practical subjects should be on offer and that classes such as kickboxing or self defence should be taught in school. They also said that they would like to have more outward bound classes available.

S3 (111 pupils)

Pupil responses to which subjects they were studying indicated a spread across the different qualifications levels, though the majority are studying at Standard Grade level.

There was no dissatisfaction expressed at all in relation to enterprise, hospitality (practical cookery) and practical craft skills, suggesting that these are meeting the interests of those taking them. Only small numbers indicated that they would prefer not to study the majority of other subjects.

The main source of dissatisfaction was French, with 26 out of 76 (34%) pupils saying they would rather not study it. The main reasons were lack of interest in the subject or that they did not need to know it. Nine out of the 46 pupils (20%) studying chemistry said they would rather not study it, with more than half suggesting that they found the subject too difficult. The majority of the pupils in the S3 focus group said that they did not wish to be studying the language they were taking, naming either French or German. The reason given was that they '*didn't need it*'. One pupil suggested that the study of Spanish would be more relevant as '*more people go on holiday to Spain*'.

The most frequently mentioned subject area that pupils would like to be studying, but weren't, was technical subjects, such as craft and design, fashion and textiles and graphic communication (16 mentions/14% of year group). Few valid reasons were given to indicate why they were not able to take these subjects at present, but a small number of pupils mentioned that they could not fit them into their timetable. The next most frequently mentioned subject area was arts and creative subjects, with 14 mentions (13%), including music, drama and art. Reasons given were that the subject was not available in S3, not on offer in the school, or, more often, was not possible because of the column choices. Fourteen also mentioned that they would like vocational subjects – for example, cake decorating, hairdressing, joinery, motor mechanics and hospitality. A further 14 suggested that they would like more sports – mainly PE studies, but also self-defence/martial arts. Twelve pupils (11% of year group) mentioned that they would like to study an additional science subject, with three indicating they could not do this because of column choices.

The focus group responses confirmed the findings from the questionnaires. The pupils said that they would like the opportunity to study vocational subjects such as hairdressing, beauty therapy, hospitality, engineering or car mechanics. They indicated that more choice should be available in PE with activities that would be possible to continue once they leave school, eg golf, badminton, athletics, rugby and football. The pupils also said that communication skills should have more emphasis in school to improve pupils' ability to take part in discussion, put forward their point of view, etc.

S5 (66 pupils)

The responses from pupils about which subjects they are studying suggest that a number of subjects appear to be running with very small groups (eg geography, RMPS, accounts and music). This suggests a willingness to make a variety of subjects available to give pupils wider choice, rather than not run classes because of insufficient numbers. It would appear that no pupils were studying languages.

All subjects attracted no or very few indications that pupils would rather not study them. Mathematics had the highest number of mentions (12 out of 40 students/30%), with reasons being spread across dislike for the subject, the difficulty of the subject and its lack of relevance. These responses might seem surprising given that mathematics was being offered at 3 levels and had not been compulsory. Three of the eight pupils in the S5 focus group also said that mathematics was the subject that they would prefer not to be taking. The reason they gave was that it was too hard. They also pointed out that in some cases it was necessary to take subjects that they did not want because of the way the subjects were grouped in the columns on the choice sheet. One pupil summed up the views of the group saying, *'you have to take what was available to you'*.

In response to the item in the questionnaire about subjects not being studied but which they would like to study, the most frequently mentioned subjects by S5 pupils at School B were: arts and creative subjects (20 mentions/30% of year group); languages (11 mentions/17%) and technical subjects (11 mentions/17%). In arts and creative subjects, pupils were interested in particular in drama and music, with 4 pupils saying they would like media studies. The main reasons given for not studying the desired subject were that it didn't fit into their timetable, was not available in their year, or that it was not on offer in the school. Pupils were interested in French, Spanish, German and Italian and the reasons given for not being able to study languages were: the subject is not available in S5; it didn't fit into timetable; there are not enough teachers or there are not enough pupils to make it a viable option. With respect to technical subjects, pupils were interested in craft and design, food and textiles and graphic communication. Their reasons again related to not being able to fit the subject into the column choices, restrictions on class size and, in the case of fashion and textiles, not enough students. This perhaps emphasises the problem of trying to give a wider choice by offering more subjects and then some pupils are disappointed because of insufficient demand.

The pupils in the focus group said that they would like to study psychology, drama, Spanish, media studies and human biology. The reasons given as to why they were unable to study these subjects were in accord with the reasons given in the questionnaire responses. They included *'lack of teachers'*, *'lack of facilities'* and *'too small a school'*. The pupils appeared to recognise the challenges of staffing subjects where few pupils had chosen the subject but appeared willing to travel to another school or a local FE college to take the subject.

School C

S2 (124 pupils)

The pupils in S2 follow a common curriculum with a choice between French and German, with over 60% of the year group indicating they were studying German. French, German and religious studies were the only subjects that a considerable number of pupils indicated that they would prefer not to study (French 13/27%; German 25/33% and religious studies 24/20%). The pupils said that the subject was uninteresting and irrelevant. The S2 pupil focus group confirmed the results of the questionnaire. One pupil said she would prefer not to be studying German; the other six pupils in the group said that they would prefer not to study RE.

Most frequently mentioned as being desirable, but not currently available, were vocationally related subjects, with 17 out of 124 (14%) pupils mentioning these. Most pupils were interested in beauty therapy because they thought it would be fun or, as one put it, *'I like experimenting on looks'*. The others indicated that they were interested in joinery and electrical work. It is possible that interest in these subjects is raised in School C because they are offered to some pupils in S3. Three of the pupils in the S2 focus group said that they would like more choice concerning modern languages – Spanish was particularly mentioned. Two pupils in the group said they would like to have more opportunities to

choose computer-related subjects. Three pupils indicated that all the subjects they wanted to take were on offer to them in school C.

S3 (125 pupils)

The pupil responses to what subjects they were studying indicate that most were studying Standard Grades but that in mathematics, biology and physics considerable numbers were also studying at Intermediate 1, with a smaller number studying maths at access 3 level. The courses offered as part of the alternative curriculum were taken by quite large groups: beauty therapy – 24; construction – 20; hospitality – 15; Skillforce – 23.

The following subjects elicited no negative responses: craft and design, drama, graphic communication, social education, beauty therapy, construction, hospitality and Skillforce. This would suggest in particular that the pupils selected for the vocational courses were content with this choice. The majority of the other subjects attracted only a few dissatisfied comments.

As with the other schools and year groups, the highest level of discontent was in languages: French (16/62 – 26%) and German (14/62 – 23%). Again the main reason given was dislike for the subject. The responses from the pupils in the S3 focus group indicated that mathematics and RE were the two subjects they would prefer not to be studying. Mathematics was mentioned by four pupils and RE by three of the group.

The area of study that attracted most mentions of being desirable but not available was vocational and work-related subjects, with 31 mentions (25% of the year group). This might suggest that many pupils were attracted by what some of their fellow pupils were already doing. Only a small number of valid reasons were given for not being able to do a particular subject, but these included: it could not be fitted into the column choices; there were not enough places in the class; or they had been advised 'not to take it'. The S3 focus group confirmed the results of the questionnaire. Vocational subjects were mentioned most often as those the pupils would like to study but are currently not able to take.

In School C the S3 pupils were also interested in technical subjects and arts and creative subjects including, in particular, craft and design, drama, music and photography. Again few valid reasons were given but there were indications that they had been limited by the column choices.

S5 (62 pupils)

The responses to the question about which subjects pupils are studying show a range of levels across the compulsory subjects of English and mathematics covering Higher, Intermediate 1 and Intermediate 2, with the non-Higher English and mathematics pupils selecting a wide range of the additional, alternative courses on offer. It would also appear that a significant number (16 out of 62/26%) have chosen to take up a college course in place of languages and other subjects, while only a few have opted for Spanish as a new subject.

Out of the 32 subjects on the list, 18 received no negative comments, including most of the additional practical courses. For the other subjects no more than 2 or 3 pupils expressed discontent. This suggests that students were by and large satisfied with the range of subjects and choices they had. English and mathematics attracted the highest number of comments (10/16% and 11/18% respectively). For some, the subjects were seen as too difficult, although for 4 they were described as too easy. For the majority, however, it was because they did not find the subject interesting or relevant. The S5 focus group responses confirmed the results of the questionnaire. English and mathematics were mentioned most frequently as the subjects they would prefer not to be studying.

The subject area most frequently seen as desirable but not available to them was arts and creative subjects, covering art, drama, music and photography (14 out of 62 pupils/23%). The most common reason was because it did not fit in with their subject choices. In the focus group 2 pupils said they would like to have the opportunity to study music, 2 said they would like to be able to take human biology and 1 said she would like to take Spanish. Overall the pupils suggested that there were too many compulsory subjects, particularly at Standard Grade level. More choice at S3 has been introduced since the cohort of pupils in this focus group made decisions about Standard Grades.

School D

S2 (153 pupils)

In school D the pupils follow a common curriculum in S2 and this was evident from their responses to the question about which subjects they study.

Modern languages, with 35 (24%) mentions, were most likely to be named by pupils as something they would prefer not to study. The main reason given was dislike for the subject, but 10 indicated they thought they did not need it and so it was not relevant to them. A small number (5) said they thought it was too difficult. However, as in other schools, the most frequently mentioned desirable subject not being studied was a language – but a different one from that currently on offer.

Drama and music were noted by 29 (19%) and 26 (17%) pupils respectively as the subjects they would prefer not to study, mainly because they did not enjoy them or found them irrelevant. The pupils in the S2 focus group did not refer to languages when they were asked which subject they would prefer not to study. The majority said mathematics because it was *'too hard'* or *'boring'*. Religious studies was also mentioned as a subject that the pupils would like to drop. The reason given was that *'it is not helpful to you'*.

Apart from languages, few S2 pupils in School D suggested alternative subjects. The focus group pupils confirmed the responses given in the questionnaires regarding languages. The pupils said that they would like to study Spanish or Italian but it was not possible for them to do so.

The pupils in the focus group also said that they thought that Standard Grade work should begin earlier and that they would get through more work if they were put in credit classes sooner. They said that in some cases the work in S2 was not challenging. One pupil said that he found no difference between the level of work at S1 and S2. He added that *'some of the work in primary school was harder – mathematics was more challenging'*.

S3 (131 pupils)

Pupil responses as to which subjects they are studying indicate that, although there is a choice between Latin and French, the majority are studying French (74% of the year group). A small number have chosen to pursue German as a new language. The headteacher explained that there would normally be a choice of French, German or Latin, with the option of starting French or German as a second language. However, this particular year group had all studied French in primary school and so had continued with French in S1 and S2. Amongst the 'free choice' courses, art and design, computing, craft and design and PE studies appear to be popular with the pupils.

The subjects that attracted no negative comments were: German, XL, craft and design, home economics and PE studies, with only small numbers indicating that they would prefer not to study most other subjects. Religious studies attracted the highest proportion of dissatisfied comments (10/36 or 28%). Most of the reasons given were that they did not find the subject interesting, though one did comment that the subject '*was not what I thought it would be*'. French attracted the next highest proportion of pupils expressing discontent – 23/103 or 22%). The subject was considered either boring or too hard. A slightly smaller number of art and design students (13/63 or 21%) were also dissatisfied, though more suggested that it was because they found the subject difficult. In the S3 focus group chemistry was mentioned most often as the subject that the pupils felt unhappy about. They said that it was '*too difficult*', suggesting that the level of work was too difficult for this particular group of pupils.

The area mentioned most frequently by pupils as one that they were not studying, but would like to, was art and creative subjects, with 32 (24% of year group) mentions. The majority mentioned drama, followed by music. Many of the reasons given were why they would like these subjects, mainly that they were 'fun and enjoyable'. Ten did, however, indicate that they were not able to study these subjects because they did not fit in with their other choices. The pupils in the focus group said that it was not possible to take vocational subjects and that they would like courses such as hairdressing and car mechanics to be on offer.

S5 (71 pupils)

The results from the questionnaire regarding the subjects studied indicate that national qualifications were on offer across most subjects, mainly at Higher and Intermediate 2, but with Intermediate 1 in some subjects (notably mathematics and English). The pupil responses suggest a wide range of subjects on offer, with small groups in many of the subjects.

Very few negative comments were made by the students about the subjects they were studying. However, almost one-fifth (14/71) named English as a subject they would rather not study. Their reasons ranged across lack of interest in the subject, it was too easy, it was too difficult, they don't need to it, it isn't a requirement for a planned course, and they didn't want to do it but had to. The S5 focus group confirmed the pupils' dislike of English. Four out of the six pupils interviewed, when asked if there were any subjects they disliked, said English. They said that it was '*boring*', '*a lot of reading and writing*' and '*it should be more interactive*'.

Nineteen pupils (26%) suggested that they would like to be able to study drama, music or art but were not currently doing so. The main reason given was that they could not fit it into their timetable, although three pupils mentioned not having prior experience or qualifications, for example Standard Grade music, or drama had not been done in S2 and so could not be taken later. Fourteen were interested in languages, this time stating that the languages they wanted were not on offer in the school, there was no teacher and, for one of the languages on offer in the school (Latin) there had not been sufficient pupils wanting to do it. The languages not on offer in the school were Spanish, Italian and Gaelic. Three mentioned they could not fit a language in along with their other subjects. The focus group pupils indicated that they thought that Spanish should be on offer in the school. They also raised the point that it was not possible to take some of the subjects that they wanted because the timetable would not allow it or insufficient people selected it to make it a viable class.

The focus group pupils also said that they felt that there was little progress made in S1 and S2 but then there was a big jump between Standard Grade and Higher work. They suggested that Standard Grade work should begin earlier and Highers should be done over 4th and 5th years.

School E

S2 (153 pupils)

The S2 pupils in school E followed a core curriculum with a choice between French and Spanish, with 60% of the respondents studying French.

The subjects most likely to attract expressions of discontent were: French (28/92 or 30%); maths (42/153 or 28%); home economics (28/137 or 20%) and Spanish (13/65 or 20%). The most common reasons given were dislike of the subject or not finding it interesting, though 10 of the home economics pupils indicated that they thought it was something they did not need to know about. Spanish, French and geography were mentioned most frequently as subjects that the pupils in the focus group would prefer not to study.

ICT/computing and vocational/work-related subjects were the areas mentioned most often by S2 pupils in school E as being topics they would like to study but were not doing so. Computing/IT/ICT was mentioned by 29 pupils (19%) and vocational subjects were named by 28 (18%). Few reasons were given as to why they were not able to study them, though in respect of computing one did note that it was not on offer in S2. Most of the reasons given were related to the point that it would be useful for developing skills and *'it will be needed for any job in the future'*.

A wide range of vocational subjects was mentioned, including: hairdressing, beauty therapy, childcare or 'looking after babies', plumbing, electrics and car maintenance. The pupils gave no valid reasons for not doing these, but it is evident from school documents that School E does not offer such courses.

The focus group responses were again in line with the questionnaire results. Computing, business management, graphics communication and childcare were mentioned by the S2 focus group as subjects they would like to take.

S3 (146 pupils)

Pupils' responses to the question about which subjects they are studying show that the majority were studying for Standard Grades in all subjects. A small number of pupils reported that they were studying at Intermediate 1 and 2 in English, mathematics and science subjects. There is a choice between French and Spanish, with 38% of the year group indicating they are studying French and 28% studying Spanish. The results appear to suggest that about a third of the year group have chosen not to study languages. This is in line with the pupil survey conducted by the school. A third of pupils in the survey indicated that they would prefer not to take a language.

Home economics, drama and music were the only subjects that did not attract negative views. The subjects that higher proportions of pupils named as being ones they would prefer not to study were: Spanish (21/41 or 51%), French (14/54 or 26%) and history (10/44 or 23%). Once again the majority of reasons given were that the subject was not interesting or irrelevant in some way, though 6 indicated that they found Spanish too difficult. Although fewer of the year group were studying languages, there were still quite high levels of discontent.

French was only mentioned by 2 out of the 8 pupils in the S3 focus group, whereas biology was mentioned by 6 of the group as the subject they would prefer not to study. The reasons given most frequently were that the subject was not what they thought it would be or that there was a big difference in the work in S3 compared with S2.

The subject areas mentioned most frequently as being wanted but not currently studied were arts and creative subjects (31/21%) and vocational and work-related subjects (28/19%). The creative subjects included dancing, art, music and drama. The most commonly given reason was that the subject could not be fitted in to the column choices (11 mentions) or that it was not available in the school (dancing).

The S3 responses were similar to the responses regarding vocational subjects provided in the questionnaire by S2 pupils. Few valid reasons for not being able to study them were given, but 6 indicated that they were not studying child care/child development, which was on offer in S3, because it was *'not at academic level – only foundation or intermediate'*. The pupils indicated that other vocational subjects are not on offer in the school.

A smaller number (15/10%) were keen to have more sports with greater variety including, in particular, swimming, self-defence and outdoor education.

The S3 focus group confirmed that the pupils would like more vocational courses to be on offer. Car mechanics, hairdressing and plumbing were all mentioned as courses that pupils in the group would have liked to have the opportunity to take. They also said that they would like more practical classes and more opportunities to learn outside of school.

S5 (82 pupils)

The pupil responses about which subjects they study show that all subjects are offered at a number of levels, but predominantly at Higher and Intermediate 2. Pupils appear to be choosing social subjects and sciences in preference to other subjects. Few are studying languages. Other subjects are running with relatively small groups, apart from art and design (18 pupils) and music (14 pupils).

With such small groups it is difficult to give appropriate weight to negative comments, but overall few expressions of dissatisfaction were given. English and mathematics attracted the most comments, but still relatively small in number – English (15/81 or 18%) and mathematics (12/81 or 15%). For both subjects, in more than half the cases, the reason given was that students were finding the subject too hard. In the S5 focus group, 3 out of 6 pupils said that they would prefer not to take English because they found it too hard.

Suggestions for subjects they would like to study were likewise small in number. The two main areas to attract interest were arts and creative subjects and social subjects. In the creative field, 12/82 (15%) named music (6), art (4), drama (1) and media studies (1). The reason given as to why they were not studying the subject they mentioned mostly related to timetable issues and/or the 2 subjects appearing in the same column.

In relation to social subjects, 13/82 (13%) named history, geography and modern studies as subjects they would like to take, again mainly indicating that timetabling made it difficult to select certain combinations.

Similarly, the S5 the focus group mentioned that some pupils would like to take drama and music, but it was not possible because of the way the columns were arranged on the choice sheet. The pupils also indicated that some classes do not run because there are too few pupils opting to take the subject.

The impact of the models of curriculum flexibility on improving pupil choice and meeting their needs

Section 4.2 reported on the approaches by schools to introducing curriculum flexibility and Section 4.3 has explored in some detail pupils' responses to the subject choices available to them in each school at each of the 3 stages chosen for the evaluation and that is important as the pupils can only respond in the light of their own contexts. This discussion identifies issues that have a degree of commonality across those contexts and provides an overview of the range of subjects on offer, the degree of flexibility that has been introduced and the pupils' preferences.

At S2 the main concerns across the schools had been to reduce fragmentation and the number of teachers with whom pupils had contact. This had led to a reduction in the number of subjects and, in some cases, removing 'taster' courses that had been offered in preparation for choice at the next stage. This was primarily to increase time in the core subjects of maths and English. Schools were also trying to establish the minimum number of hours for a subject per week, which had led to the rotation of subjects like history and geography, and technical and home economics. The other main issue was the introduction of standard grade in S2, which in all schools was still being discussed. Only one school had introduced Standard Grade English in S2.

In respect to subjects on offer across the 5 schools, at S2 there is greater commonality than at S3 and S5, although there is a core of subjects on offer across all schools at both those levels. Beyond that core, there is some diversity even in subjects that are considered part of the traditional curriculum. However, there is considerable diversity in areas being developed as an alternative curriculum where schools have their unique offerings.

For example, in S2 all schools offer English, mathematics, science, geography, history, French, technical, home economics, art, PE, music and RE. Beyond that core, variations are that, in addition to French, 2 schools offer German and 1 offers Spanish. The only other variations are that 4 schools offer modern studies, 3 schools offer ICT and 2 offer drama. It is expected that pupils will follow all the subjects offered in S2. With respect to the relaxing of age and stage regulations, only one school had introduced Standard Grades in mathematics and one other had introduced it in English. Therefore, for S2 pupils taking part in this study there was limited flexibility in level or choice of subject. However, as indicated above, this had not been a major emphasis in S2 developments.

In S3 and S5 English, mathematics, administration, art and design, biology, chemistry, craft and design, history, music, PE and physics are taught in all 5 schools. Other subjects that form part of the 'traditional' curriculum were on offer in some, but not all, schools. For example, geography and home economics are available in 4 of the schools; modern studies and drama are available in only 3 schools. When looking at the 'alternative' curriculum, special initiatives such as Skillforce and essential skills courses are offered in 2 of the schools; beauty therapy is on offer in 2 schools. Otherwise schools have developed unique courses such as cake decorating, child development, photography, textiles, practical cookery and parent craft. Practical craft skills are offered in only one school at S3 but in 4 schools at S5. In S3, only English and mathematics are taken by all pupils. In S5 it is only English that is compulsory in all 5 schools, with maths being compulsory in 3 of them. Therefore, while schools are seeking to offer alternatives, pupil choice is limited to what their school is able to offer, either in-house or in collaboration with the local Further Education college(s).

As the results show, there is little flexibility for pupils in S2. One of the main challenges identified by the schools is increasing flexibility in the choices made by pupils at the end of S2 for their studies during S3 and S4. The issues are the extent to which national qualifications have been introduced in addition to Standard Grades to allow study of subjects

at levels appropriate to the needs of the pupils; creating greater freedom of choice across non-compulsory subject areas; whether or not a modern language should be compulsory; and the offering of alternatives to the traditional curriculum.

The schools are in the process of planning the introduction of national qualifications at S3 and S4, with some more advanced than others. Science subjects and mathematics are the ones most likely to be on offer. It appears that there is still some progress to be made in offering a wider range of level of study at this stage.

Schools have tackled the issue of freer choice across subjects in a variety of ways: for example, by merging the 'creative and aesthetic' and 'technical' columns and allowing freer choice within that so, for example, pupils who are not 'artistic' are not forced to choose an creative subject. Other approaches have been to give a wider choice across the columns, to introduce duplicate columns (allowing, for example, the study of 2 sciences, 2 social subjects, 2 or more creative subjects, 2 or more technical subjects, 2 languages) and to introduce an extended options column.

In all schools except one, a modern language was compulsory for the majority of pupils. The 4 where it is compulsory were offering alternatives to selected pupils, while considering extending those options to other pupils on a more open basis. The diversity of alternatives to the traditional curriculum has been noted above and, while the introduction of changes is ongoing, at S3 level it is still fairly restricted and in the main only for selected pupils.

At S5 the focus appears to be on offering subjects across a range of national qualification levels, and all the schools were offering more than one level in most subjects. A limiting factor in pupil choice appears to be forming large enough groups in some subjects to make them viable. However, schools do appear willing to manage small groups to allow greater choice. Some schools were also developing opportunities for pupils to attend college to study a wider range of vocational courses.

Pupils' preferences were explored within these varying contexts. They were asked to indicate which of the subjects they were already studying that they would prefer not to study and if there were subjects they would like to study but were not currently doing so.

The responses showed that there were pockets of discontent that might have local explanations: for example, three cases of religious education being disliked by considerable numbers of pupils in the year group, mainly on account of perceived lack of relevance. Or dissatisfaction might be stage-related: for example, there was greater discontent with mathematics in S5 (21% of pupils across all schools), due mainly to the students' view of the difficulty of the subject. Business management in S3 (31%) and modern studies in S5 (27%) were also disliked.

Subjects that attracted almost no negative responses (0<5% of students studying them) at all stages and in all schools where they were offered were craft and design, home economics and all subjects offered as part of the alternative curriculum.

A recurring theme, particularly in S2 and S3, was the dissatisfaction with languages. At S2 all pupils studied a language – French, German, Spanish or Latin depending on what their particular school offered, although the majority studied French. Overall 37% of the year group said they would rather not study the language. At S3, 86% of the year group were studying languages, with 31% being discontent. French was the predominant language, with 33% saying they would prefer not to study it; 18% of those studying German did not like it and 51% of those studying Spanish; only 26 pupils reported studying Latin, with 15% dissatisfied. By S5 the numbers are low: only 53 pupils in total (16% of the year group) reporting studying a language, again mostly French, with 9% reporting discontent.

Languages, however, was one of the most frequently requested alternatives, suggested by 15% of the S2 year group, 11% of S3 and 14% of S5. The explanations were mainly that they would like more choice and would like to study a language different from the one they were currently studying. These figures suggest that while languages appear to be the most unpopular subject and there are some pupils who would rather not do them at all, for a sub-group there is a desire to study languages but not the ones on offer. It would not appear to be a simple process to solve this by adding additional languages, because where pupils had no choice but French their suggestions were that they would like Spanish; on the other hand, where Spanish was on offer, many of the pupils were still discontent. This is clearly a matter for ongoing investigation.

Considerable numbers of pupils indicated other subject areas they would like to study but which were currently not available to them. The most frequently mentioned areas were arts and creative subjects (230/14% of the whole sample) and vocational and work-related subjects (156/9% of the whole sample). A smaller number suggested sports and physical activity-related subjects: mainly PE studies, but also self-defence, martial arts, extreme sports and outdoor education (94/6% of the whole sample).

Arts and creative subjects included mainly art, drama and music, but also dancing and media studies. More pupils mentioned these subjects at S3 (16% of the year group) and S5 (20%) than at S2 (9%). In S2 the main subject was drama and this was not on offer in 3 of the schools. For the others, 18% indicated that the subject was not available in their year or not on offer in the school. However, 43% of reasons given were that the subject could not be fitted in to the timetable or it was not possible to choose it along with the other choices they had made.

Vocational and work-related subjects were nominated by pupils in schools where such alternatives were on offer and also where they were not on offer. They were more likely to be named by pupils in S2 and S3 (9% and 12% respectively) than by those in S5 (4% of year group). The majority of pupils mentioning these subjects did not explain why they were not able to study them, but rather why they wanted to do them. Valid explanations covered such points as the subjects are not available in the school or in their year; there were not enough places in the class; they had been advised not to take the subject; or it did not fit into their timetable.

Interest in sports activities was mainly in S3 and S5, with 8% and 5% of the year groups making suggestions. As with vocational subjects, many gave explanations as to why they would like to study the subjects rather than reasons why they were not currently able to do so, but 44% of the valid reasons given related to timetable and column choice issues.

Summary

- Flexibility of subject choice is not an issue addressed at S2; rather the focus is on developing a less fragmented curricular experience for the pupils. Standard Grades had been introduced at S2 in one school in one subject, with others still discussing it.
- National qualifications were being introduced gradually at S3, with some schools having made more progress than others. There is a wider range of subjects and levels on offer at S5 in all schools.
- At S3 and S5 there is a core of common subjects in all schools, with variations in some subjects that would be seen as part of traditional curriculum. There is great diversity in the alternative curriculum, with unique programmes developing. Pupil choices are restricted by what a particular school can offer, either in-house or in collaboration with local FE college(s).
- Alternatives to the traditional curriculum in S3 were mainly for targeted pupils.
- High levels of discontent (>20%): the most unpopular subjects are languages, with a sub-group who, while discontent, do want to study languages, but different ones from those they are studying. However, the languages they would like to study are often disliked by pupils taking them in other schools. This requires further investigation. (All pupils in S2 study languages; 86% of S3; but only 16% of S5.) There are other small pockets of discontent, eg RE in some schools and year groups, and mathematics, business management and modern studies in S5.
- Little discontent (0<5%): craft and design; home economics and all alternative curriculum subjects.
- Levels of discontent of between 6% and 20% were recorded for the remaining subjects.
- Apart from languages, the subjects most desired but not available were: arts and creative subjects; vocational subjects; sports and activity-related subjects.
- The most common valid reasons for not being able to study desired subjects were: not being able to fit them into timetable or restrictions of column choices (30%); and subjects not being available in the school (21%); or in the year (19%).

4.4 Stakeholders' reactions to curriculum flexibility

The results presented in this section are based on the questionnaires completed by: pupils in years 2, 3 and 5 in each of the schools; their parents and carers; and teachers in the schools. The data collected in the questionnaires have been analysed using a number of statistical tests. The results of these statistical tests are presented for each of the key stakeholders. Information on the questionnaires – the topics they cover and the return rates for each respondent group – can be found on pages 4 and 5.

Views of the pupils

The pupil questionnaires included sets of questions covering topics such as subject choice, teaching and learning styles and school ethos, and school and year group comparisons on each of these constructs were carried out.

Subject choice

Ten of the individual questions in the pupil questionnaire related specifically to issues of subject choice and subject relevance, and pupil responses on each of these questions were summed to give separate 'true' and 'importance' scores for each pupil. In addition a 'shortfall of expectation', or 'gap', score was calculated by subtracting the score on the 'true' scale from that on the 'importance' scale. This difference or gap between the pupil's perception of reality and the importance they ascribe to it has been shown in other studies (eg McCall *et al*, 2001) to be an important indicator of the extent to which a school is meeting the aspirations of its client group, in this case the pupils, with higher scores on this variable indicating that there is a greater mismatch between what the pupil considers to be appropriate and what is being delivered.

The questionnaire asked the pupils to think about their most recent choices when answering questions about subject choices. Therefore, for S2 pupils this was a recent event, whilst for S3 and S5 pupils they would have been thinking back to choices they had made in the previous year.

The following table summarises the overall results for each of the schools.

Table 4: Pupil views on subject choice

	<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Subject choice: 'True' scale	A	331	33.29
	B	271	32.95
	C	303	32.67
	D	332	31.99
	E	366	32.82
	Total	1603	32.74
Subject choice: 'Importance' scale	A	328	36.10
	B	270	36.69
	C	298	35.72
	D	322	35.92
	E	361	36.07
	Total	1579	36.08
Subject choice gap	A	328	2.80
	B	269	3.76
	C	297	3.04
	D	313	3.92
	E	361	3.21
	Total	1568	3.33

School D has the lowest score on the True scale, indicating that pupils in this school were least satisfied with their subject choices, while those in School A, with the highest score, were the most satisfied. However, the differences between the schools regarding subject choice are relatively small. On the level of importance that the pupils attached to subject choice, the response range between the schools is even smaller. In terms of expectation shortfall, or gap, the scores range from 2.80 (School A) to 3.92 (School D). This indicates that pupils in School A have the least mismatch between what they consider to be appropriate and what is being delivered.

In order to extract more information from these results and to examine the outcomes within each of the year groups, the data were subjected to a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) in which the independent variables were the school and the year group. The results of these analyses indicate that:

- The level of satisfaction with subject choice declines from S2 to S3 to S5 across all of the schools
- There is rather more variability in the scores on the Importance scale across the year groups, although they are all relatively high
- The expectation shortfall or gap between the Importance scale and the True scale increases in all schools from S2 to S3 to S5 and, with the exception of School D, almost doubles between S2 and S5. This indicates that there is an increasing mismatch between what the pupils consider to be appropriate and what is being delivered as they move from S2 to S5
- The ANOVA results indicate that there are highly significant differences on each of the scales between the schools and year groups, and post-hoc examination of the data indicates that:

- a. For pupils in S2, those in school D have significantly lower scores on the True scale than those in Schools A and C. There are no significant differences on the Importance scale between any of the schools, but the Expectation Shortfall is significantly higher in school D than in Schools A and C. It thus appears that School D, as far as the S2 pupils are concerned, is the least successful in meeting pupil expectations concerning subject choice.
- b. For pupils in S3, those in School C have significantly lower scores on the True scale than those in Schools A, B and D. On the importance scale School B has significantly higher scores than Schools C and D, but none of the scores on the Expectation Shortfall scale is significantly different.
- c. For pupils in S5, those in School C have significantly greater scores on the true scale than those in Schools A and B, and those in School E are also significantly greater than in School B. On the Importance scale the School A scores are higher than those in Schools C and E, but on the Expectation Shortfall scale the only significant difference is that the score for School C is significantly lower than that for School B, suggesting that School C meets the expectations of its 5th year pupils better in terms of subject choice than School B – a result which is consistent with the documentation available from the two schools.

Teaching and Learning

Eleven of the items in the questionnaire were related to aspects of teaching and learning and to relationships with teachers. In a similar fashion to that used for the questions on subject choice, True, Importance and Gap scales were created to represent the views of the pupils on this construct. Table 5 presents the scores for each of the schools on these variables.

Table 5: Pupil views on teaching and learning

	<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
T & L: 'True' scale	A	326	35.68
	B	278	35.44
	C	305	33.43
	D	340	33.85
	E	369	34.50
	Total	1618	34.56
T & L: 'Importance' scale	A	325	37.62
	B	271	38.17
	C	301	36.51
	D	320	37.26
	E	362	37.44
	Total	1579	37.39
T & L gap	A	325	1.95
	B	271	2.72
	C	300	3.11
	D	312	3.34
	E	361	2.92
	Total	1569	2.80

On the True scale for teaching and learning, the mean scores in Table 5 range from School C at 33.4 to School A at 35.7, and on the Importance scale from School C at 36.5 to School B at 38.2. The Gap scale shows a proportionately wider range of responses, with School A having the smallest Gap score (1.95) and School D the highest (3.34). This indicates that in School A there is the least mismatch between what the pupils consider to be appropriate and what is being delivered.

Detailed analyses indicate that for the teaching and learning scores there is rather more variability across the five schools than in subject choice:

- In going from S2 to S3 to S5, the mean scores for teaching and learning on the True scale decrease in Schools A, B, D and E, although in a number of cases the differences are small. In School C there is a dip in the scores of S3 in comparison to both S2 and S5. This indicates that S3 pupils in School C appear to be least satisfied regarding teaching and learning compared to S2 and S5 in that school.
- The Importance scale is relatively stable across each of the schools and each of the year groups, although again there is a small dip in the S3 group for School C.
- The Expectation Shortfall or Gap scores for teaching and learning show a fairly regular increase from S2 to S3 to S5, although here again the S3 pupils in School C show some differences. This indicates that generally the pupils in all five schools consider there is a growing mismatch between what they think should be delivered and what is delivered as they move up the school.
- The ANOVA results for the three teaching and learning scales indicate that there are highly significant differences on each of the scales between schools and year groups, and post-hoc examination of the data indicates that:
 - a. For pupils in S2, those in School A report significantly higher scores on the True scale than those in Schools C, D and E. There are no significant differences on the Importance scale. On the Expectation Shortfall or Gap scale School B has significantly lower scores than Schools D and E. This means that the S2 pupils in School B have the best match between their experiences and their expectations of teaching and learning.
 - b. S3 pupils in School C have significantly lower scores on the True scale than pupils in all of the other schools and on the Importance scale they have lower scores than those in Schools A and B. On the Gap scale School B has higher scores than Schools A and E. This means that, in contrast to the results for S2, the S3 pupils in School B appear less satisfied with their experiences of teaching and learning.
 - c. For pupils in S5 there are no significant differences on any of the scales.

Ethos

Four of the questionnaire items related to aspects of school ethos and, as before, the responses of pupils to each of these questions were summed to provide an ethos score for the True, Importance and Gap scales respectively. Table 6 provides a summary of the results for each school on each scale.

Table 6: Pupil views on ethos

	<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Ethos: 'True' scale	A	333	9.83
	B	278	10.03
	C	308	8.95
	D	342	9.21
	E	374	9.36
	Total	1635	9.46
Ethos: 'Importance' scale	A	332	13.14
	B	275	13.08
	C	307	12.46
	D	322	12.87
	E	371	12.80
	Total	1607	12.87
Ethos gap	A	332	3.29
	B	274	3.05
	C	306	3.52
	D	317	3.58
	E	369	3.41
	Total	1598	3.38

On the True scale for ethos, the scores range from School C with a value of 8.95 to School B with 10.03. On the Importance scale all of the values are relatively high and the range is restricted, having a low of 12.46 for School C and a high of 13.14 for School A. The Gap scores are also rather closely clustered, ranging from 3.05 to 3.58.

Detailed analyses indicate that for the ethos scales:

- There is a tendency for the scores on the True and Importance scales to decline from S2 to S3 to S5, although in the case of School C there is a marked dip in the scores for the S3 group and in School D the scores on the True scale show a slight increase in the case of the older pupils.
- The detailed ANOVA results indicate that:
 - a. For pupils in S2, there are significant differences in the mean scores on the True scale, with pupils in School D having lower scores than those in Schools A, B and E. On the Importance scale there are no significant differences and on the Expectation Shortfall or Gap scale School D has higher scores than Schools A and B.
 - b. For pupils in S3, School C has significantly lower scores than each of the other schools on the True scale and lower scores than Schools A, B and D on the Importance scale. There are, however, no significant differences between schools on the Expectation Shortfall or Gap scale.
 - c. For pupils in S5 the only significant difference is on the True scale, on which School C scores higher than School A.

Summary of pupil views on subject choice, teaching and learning and ethos

- In relation to *subject choice*, the level of pupil satisfaction declines from S2 to S3 to S5. In other words, S5 pupils are less likely to perceive the questions contributing to this factor as being true. The gap between the importance attributed to these aspects and pupils' perceptions of their being true also increases from S2 to S3 to S5. Overall, pupils in school A and C have the lowest shortfall in expectations, indicating that in these schools the subject choices are meeting their expectations.
- The level of satisfaction with *teaching and learning* also declines in 4 of the schools from S2 to S3 to S5, although the differences are small. In the fifth school (school C) there is a dip at S3, with S5 satisfaction being higher than S3. The gap between the importance attributed to aspects contributing to the teaching and learning factor and the pupils' perceptions of their being true also increases from S2 to S3 to S5. Overall, pupils in school B have the lowest shortfall in expectation. There are fewer differences between schools at each stage than for subject choice.
- The level of satisfaction with, and importance attributed to, *ethos* declines from S2 to S3 to S5 in 4 of the schools. In the fifth school (school C), as with teaching and learning, there is a dip at S3. The only case of a notable gap between the importance and the reality of ethos is for S2 pupils in school D. Overall, pupils in school B have the lowest shortfall in expectation, indicating the pupils' satisfaction with the ethos in the school.

Views of the pupils on what influenced their choices

Pupils' views were also sought with regard to what were the most important influences when they were making their subject choices. One of the objectives of curriculum flexibility is to encourage the pupils to take responsibility for, and ownership of, their choices. Therefore the extent to which they feel they are responsible for the choices they make is important. The questionnaire asked pupils to indicate, by ticking on a list, what had influenced them in their choice of subjects.

In the first instance, they could tick as many options as they liked; the second part of the question asked them to tick only the two most important influences. The options they could choose from were: *myself, parents or carers, teachers, friends, university or college requirements, the Careers Service, and other*. A number of S2 pupils in one school indicated that they had not yet made any choices (30 – 1.8% of sample; 4.5% of S2 pupils).

While the free choice led to higher proportions of pupils selecting each item than when required to choose 2 items, the only difference in rank ordering of the overall responses was that, when asked to tick 2 items, university/college requirements became more important than the influence of friends. On the free choice these 2 items had been chosen almost equally. For the purposes of reporting on results it has been decided to focus on the 'forced' choices, as they represent the factors picked as being most important in influencing subject choice.

Importance of influences at different stages

Eight-five percent of pupils overall indicated that they themselves had been the main influence in choosing their subjects, with a higher proportion (93%) of S5 pupils choosing this option. Parents were the next most important influence, though this declined as the pupils progressed to senior years: around 55% overall, but declining from 62% in S2 to 45% in S5. Fifteen percent of pupils indicated that teachers were influential in their choices, with this remaining fairly consistent across the three stages (15.5% in S2, 14.7% in S3 and

14.3% in S5). University/college entry requirements or friends are the next two most important influences, with the importance of entry requirements for further education increasing for pupils higher up the school (from 8% in S2 to 30% in S5) and the influence of friends generally declining by S5 (from 10% in S2 to about 6% in S5). The Careers Service was considered to be the least important influence. These results are illustrated in charts 1 and 2. (See also Table 19 in Appendix 2.)

Chart 1: Influence on subject choice (whole sample = 1663)

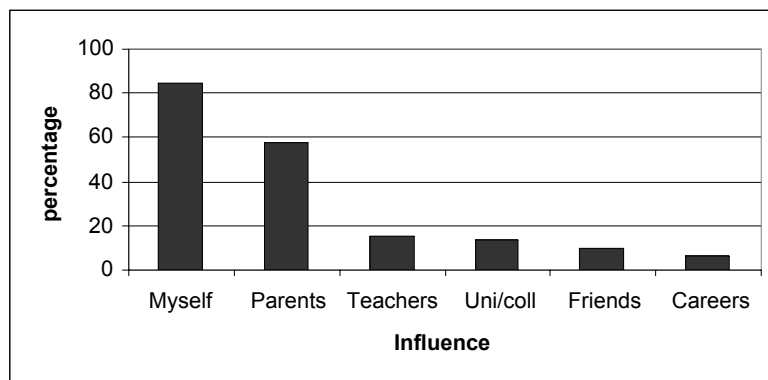
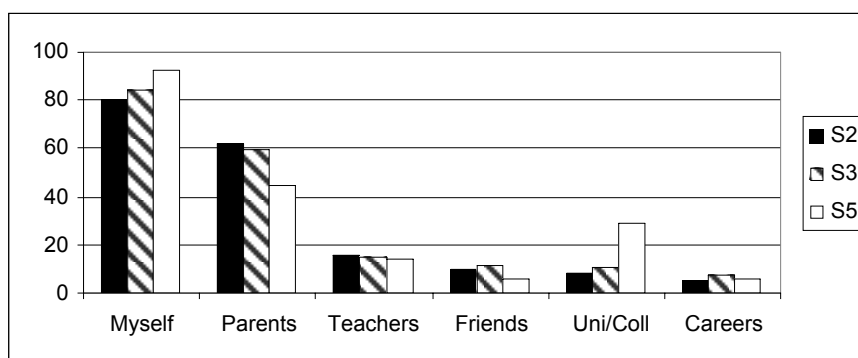


Chart 2: Influence on subject choice across stages (whole sample)



There was the possibility of indicating other influences and 140 pupils did this, with 120 giving meaningful examples of other influences. The largest proportion of these responses (50/41%) related to other family members, including ‘the whole family’, sisters and brothers, cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents. The next most frequently mentioned other influence was future job, career or studies (29/24%). A further 22 (18%) indicated a range of school-related influences, eg guidance teachers, subjects they were good at or enjoyed, subjects that were available and previous exam results. A small number (13/11%) indicated that they had been influenced by TV programmes, documentaries or other media, eg books and magazines.

Gender and the importance of influences

Gender is a factor that may determine which influences are important. The data was analysed using a chi-square test to compare the actual count with the expected count if the distribution had been random based on total number of boys and girls. Where it is likely that gender is a key factor in determining differences, this has been noted as significant in the text.

For the sample as a whole, a slightly higher proportion of boys than girls selected self as being one of the most important influences, with this gap widening to a significant level at S5. Also, a higher proportion of boys than girls rated parents as being influential; this remained consistent across the 3 stages with only the difference at S2 being significant.

A higher proportion of girls than boys at all stages indicated that teachers and university/college requirements were important in influencing their subject choices, though overall these were two less important influences. In respect to teachers, the gender difference is significant only at S2, while the influence of university/college requirements was significant at all three stages. The gap at S5 on the influence of requirements for further studies is particularly notable. Girls were much more likely than boys to take account of requirements for further study when making subject choices.

There was little difference between boys and girls when indicating the importance of friends in influencing choices. Although only a small percentage overall rated the Careers Service as important, slightly more boys than girls did this at all stages although the difference was not significant.

These data are presented in charts 3 to 6. (See also Table 20 in Appendix 2.)

Chart 3: Influences on choice by gender: whole sample

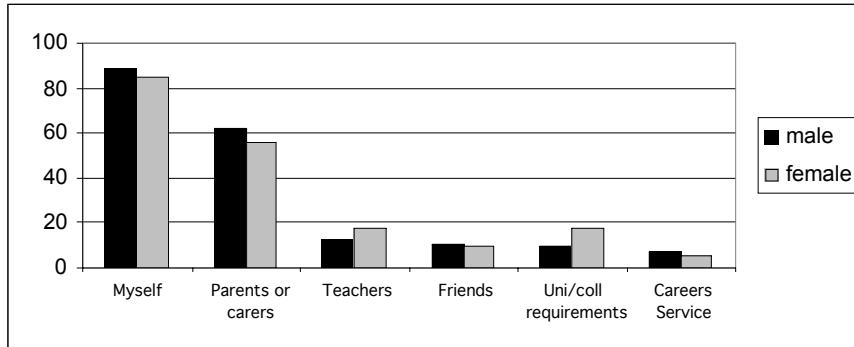


Chart 4: Influences on choice by gender (S2)

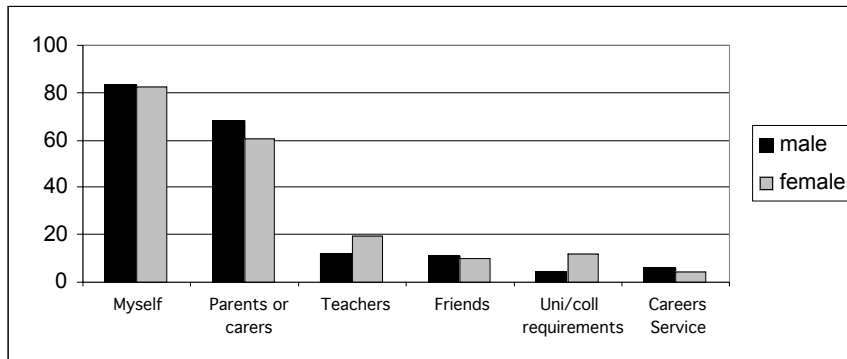


Chart 5: Influences on choice by gender (S3)

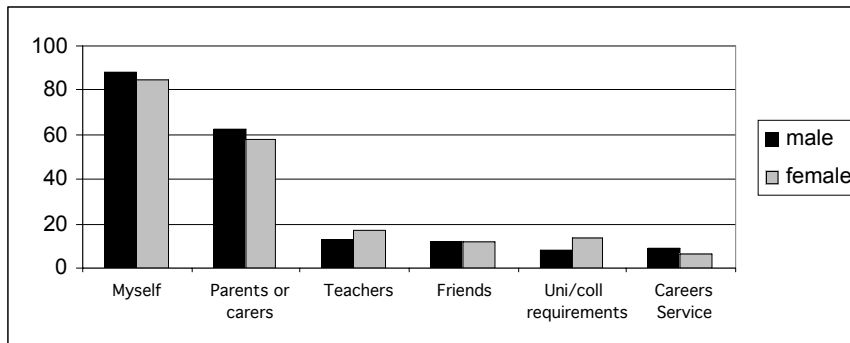
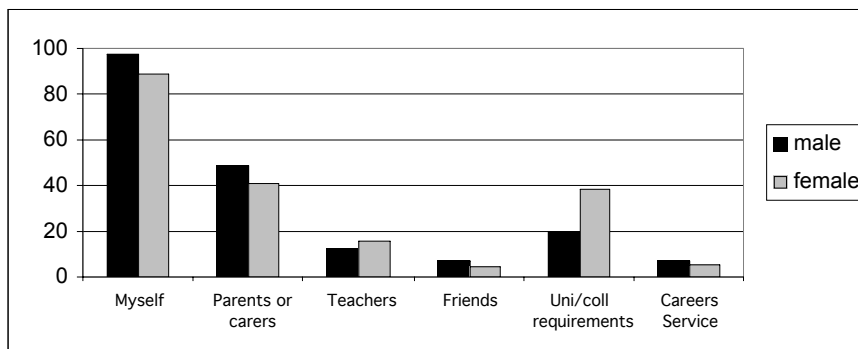


Chart 6: Influences on choice by gender (S5)

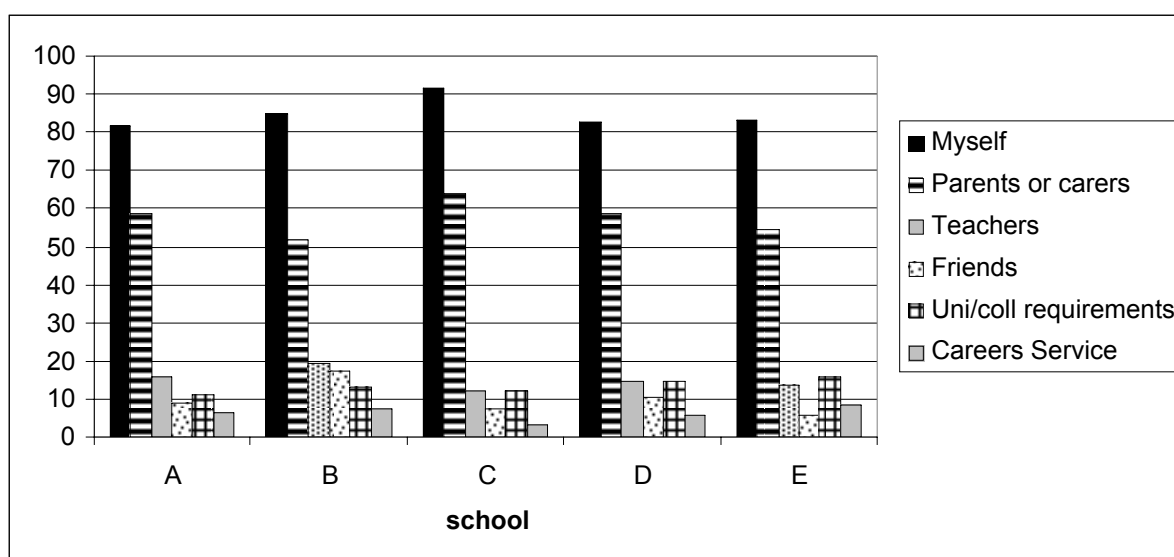


Importance of influences by school

The data were analysed to investigate whether pupils in each school varied in their views as to which were the most important influences. The responses are illustrated in Chart 7. (See also Table 21 in Appendix 2.)

Considering the schools as a whole, a significantly greater number of pupils in school C selected self as being important than might be expected. Pupils in school C also attributed a higher level of importance than other schools to parental influence, while the responses from schools B and E were lower than might have been expected. Pupils in school B gave higher importance to the influence of friends, while for those in school E this was relatively unimportant. There was no notable difference between schools on the importance given to the influence of teachers, university/college requirements or the careers service.

Chart 7: Influences on subject choice by school



It was noted in relation to the overall sample that stage and gender had an impact on which influences were considered important. It is therefore necessary to consider the extent to which school differences are to do with stage and gender. While over the whole sample there is a slight bias to females, with School C in particular having a much higher proportion of girls, in 2 schools (A and D) there were more boys than girls. As this may have influenced differences in the findings noted above, data were therefore separated for boys and girls at each stage. The data were again analysed using the chi-square test.

The differences noted above were attributable mainly to the responses of the S2 year groups. The importance of self in school C was significantly higher for the S2 group, but not for the other two stages. This appears to be because girls in S2 in school C were more likely to rate self as being important than girls in other schools.

Similarly, the differences noted on the influence of parents was significant for the S2 groups only, and in this case it would appear to be because a greater number of boys in school C and a smaller number in school E considered parental influence to be important.

However, with respect to the influence of friends, in school B the importance given to this was higher than expected in both S2 and S3, while in school E it was lower than expected in both S2 and S3. There was little difference between boys and girls in S2, but in S3 it would appear that it was the boys in school B who accorded greater importance to their peers.

In addition to the differences noted at a whole-school level, there were significant differences in the S2 cohort's responses to the importance of teachers. This is explained by the school B pupils according teachers a higher level of importance than expected and school C a lower level of importance. This would appear mainly to be a difference in the girls' responses.

Summary

General and stages

- Self and parents were by far the two most important influences in subject choice at all stages and for both boys and girls, with 85% overall nominating self and 55% nominating parents.
- The careers service was considered the least important influence, named by 6% of respondents.
- The importance of self increased from S2 to S5, while the influence of parents declined.
- The importance of university/college entry requirements was greater for S5 pupils.

Gender

- More boys than girls selected 'self' as important at all stages; this difference was statistically significant at S5.
- More boys than girls selected 'parents' as important at all stages; this difference was statistically significant at S2.
- More girls than boys selected 'teachers' as important at all stages; this difference was statistically significant at S2.
- More girls than boys selected 'university/college entry requirements' as being important at all stages; the difference was statistically significant at all stages.

Schools

- The main differences between schools were on the importance given to self, parents and friends as influences.
- There was no notable difference between schools on the importance given to teachers, university/college requirements or the careers service.
- The main differences between schools appear to be due mainly to S2 pupils, sometimes because of differences in girls' responses and sometimes boys' responses. For example, more girls in S2 in school C were likely to rate self as important than girls in other schools; more boys in school C and fewer boys in school E were likely to choose parents as being important; more importance was given to friends in school B at S2 and S3 but less importance in school E.

Views of the parents

The questionnaire issued to parents was similar in format to that used with pupils, and a number of the questions were identical so that similar scales could be constructed and comparisons drawn with responses provided by pupils and, indeed, by staff. In addition, the Parent Questionnaire had a number of questions designed to tap aspects of the relationships between parents and school and views on communication and school-home contacts, etc. In presenting the results a similar approach is adopted to that used for the pupil views.

Subject choice

The Parent Questionnaire included 14 questions that covered issues of subject choice and these were summed to provide True, Importance and Gap scales, as before. Table 7 presents a summary of the data for these variables.

Table 7: Parent views on subject choice

	<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Subject Choice: 'True' scale	A	80	45.64
	B	53	43.00
	C	67	48.22
	D	67	43.75
	E	97	44.97
	Total	364	45.20
Subject Choice: 'Importance' scale	A	80	50.59
	B	54	50.44
	C	65	49.80
	D	66	50.56
	E	90	50.37
	Total	355	50.36
Subject Choice gap	A	78	5.00
	B	51	7.33
	C	65	1.65
	D	65	6.83
	E	89	5.63
	Total	348	5.22

Examination of Table 7 indicates that on the True scale scores range from a low of 43.00 for School B to a high of 48.22 for School C. On the Importance scale all of the scores are uniformly high, clustering around the 50 points mark, but on the Gap scale there is a relatively wide dispersion of scores, from a low of 1.65 for School C to a high of 7.33 for School B.

Carrying out an ANOVA on the data does indeed indicate that there are significant differences between parental views on the True and Expectation Shortfall or Gap scales, but not on the Importance scale. The parents in School C have significantly higher scores on the True scale than those in Schools B, D and E, and on the Gap scale the parents in School C have significantly lower scores than each of the other schools.

On the basis of the above results, it would appear that parents in all the schools regard subject choice as important. However, School C is more successful in meeting the expectation of its parents regarding subject choice than the other four schools.

Teaching and learning

The Parent Questionnaire had 9 questions that elicited views on various aspects of teaching and learning, and the responses to these questions were again summed to provide scales as before. The results are given in Table 8.

Table 8: Parent views on teaching and learning

	<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
<i>T & L: 'True' scale</i>	A	89	30.35
	B	61	29.57
	C	70	31.67
	D	70	28.36
	E	103	30.62
	Total	393	30.18
<i>T & L: 'Importance' scale</i>	A	87	33.17
	B	59	33.12
	C	69	32.80
	D	67	33.45
	E	99	33.17
	Total	381	33.14
<i>T & L gap</i>	A	87	2.86
	B	59	3.53
	C	68	1.07
	D	67	5.07
	E	98	2.68
	Total	379	2.99

On the True scale the mean response levels run from a low of 29.57 for School B to a high of 31.36 for School C. The scores on the Importance scale are uniformly high but the Gap scales have a wide spread of scores, ranging from a low of 1.07 for School C to a high of 5.07 for School D.

The results of an ANOVA do indicate that there are significant differences between the parent groups on the True and Gap scales but not on the Importance scale. Post-hoc analyses demonstrate that on the True scale School D has significantly lower scores than Schools C and E, and on the Gap scale School D scores significantly more highly than Schools A, C and E and School B more highly than C.

On the basis of the above results it would appear that all the parents surveyed attach importance to factors relating to teaching and learning. However, School D and, to a lesser extent, School B, are less successful in meeting the expectations of parents in respect of aspects of teaching and learning than the other schools.

Ethos

The Parent Questionnaire had 3 questions covering ethos, and these were scored as before. Table 9 provides a summary of the results.

Table 9: Parent views on ethos

	School	N	Mean
Ethos: 'True' scale	A	91	12.23
	B	62	12.05
	C	70	12.63
	D	71	11.25
	E	107	12.13
	Total	401	12.07
Ethos: 'Importance' scale	A	89	14.74
	B	60	14.63
	C	71	14.42
	D	71	14.63
	E	102	14.65
	Total	393	14.62
Ethos gap	A	89	2.55
	B	60	2.60
	C	70	1.79
	D	70	3.41
	E	102	2.56
	Total	391	2.58

The results in Table 9 indicate that on the True scale scores range from a low of 11.25 for School D to a high of 12.63 for School C. Once again the scores on the Importance scale are uniformly high, but those on the Gap scale show a relatively wide spread, with a low of 1.79 for School C and a high of 3.41 for School D.

Examination of the ANOVA results indicates that although there are significant differences between the groups on both the True and Gap scales, these are attributable to only two schools, with School C having a higher score than School D on the True scale and a lower score on the Gap scale. There is little difference in the scores in the other schools. The results show that, in the view of the parents, School C provides a better ethos for its pupils than School D.

Communication between parents and schools

Three of the questions in the Parent Questionnaire covered communication issues, and these were summed as before to provide the three scales. Table 10 provides a summary of the data.

Table 10: Parent views on consultation

	<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Consultation: 'True' scale	A	86	10.06
	B	55	9.05
	C	70	10.49
	D	69	9.52
	E	103	10.04
	Total	383	9.89
Consultation: 'Importance' scale	A	83	10.96
	B	59	10.93
	C	69	10.93
	D	69	11.16
	E	99	11.03
	Total	379	11.01
Consultation gap	A	83	0.81
	B	54	1.76
	C	69	0.43
	D	69	1.64
	E	99	1.04
	Total	374	1.09

In Table 10 the scores on the True scale range from a low of 9.05 for School B to a high of 10.49 for School C. The Importance scale scores are again uniformly high, but on the Gap scale there is a relatively wide spread of scores, from a low of 0.43 for School C to a high of 1.76 for School B.

The ANOVA results indicate that there are significant differences between the groups on the True and Gap scales, but not on the Importance scale. Post-hoc analyses show that School B scores significantly lower on the True scale than Schools A, C and D and also that School D scores lower than School C. On the Expectation Shortfall or Gap scale, School B has a significantly higher score than Schools A and C, and School D a higher score than School C. This indicates that the parents appear to be more satisfied with the communication provided by Schools A and C.

Summary of parental views

In a similar fashion to the data provided by pupils, the parents who responded to the questionnaire survey demonstrated:

- variability across the schools in terms of the True scale on subject choice, learning and teaching, ethos and communication between parents and school
- few differences in scores on the Importance scales, with all respondents giving strongly positive responses
- differences across schools in the Expectation Shortfall or Gap scores that were, in the main, consistent with the views expressed by pupils, with Gap scores highest for Schools B and D. In the case of communication between schools and parents, the results also seem to be consistent with the detailed documentation on arrangements for meetings with parents to discuss subject choices made available by the five schools. The parents in School C appear to be most satisfied with the level of communication between parents and the school.

Views of the teachers

The questionnaire issued to teachers contained a number of questions similar to those in the Pupil and Parent Questionnaires. Teachers' views on subject choice, learning and teaching and ethos are presented first, and then more specific teacher-related issues are considered. It should be noted that in some cases the sample sizes are relatively small and caution should therefore be exercised in examining the results, although to some extent the statistical techniques employed take sample size into account.

Subject choice

In the Teacher Questionnaire 13 items covered the topic of subject choice, and responses to these questions were summed as before to give three scales. Table 11 summarises the results for each of these scales.

Table 11: Teacher views on subject choice

	<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Subject Choice: 'True' scale	A	28	39.68
	B	19	40.05
	C	13	46.00
	D	21	39.38
	E	33	41.55
	Total	114	40.95
Subject Choice: 'Importance' scale	A	28	45.29
	B	19	46.47
	C	13	46.54
	D	21	45.00
	E	33	46.12
	Total	114	45.82
Subject Choice gap	A	28	5.61
	B	19	6.42
	C	13	0.54
	D	21	5.62
	E	33	4.58
	Total	114	4.87

On the True scale scores range from a low of 39.38 for School D to a high of 46.00 for School C. There are smaller differences on the Importance scale, but relatively high differences on the Gap scale, with scores ranging from a low of 0.54 for School C to a high of 6.42 for School B.

The ANOVA indicates that there are significant differences between the scores on the True scale and the Gap scale, but not on the Importance scale. Post-hoc analyses show that teachers in School C have significantly higher scores on the True scale than those in each of the other schools, and significantly lower scores on the Gap scale than teachers in Schools A, B and D.

Overall, as far as the teachers are concerned, School C better meets the needs of its pupils with respect to subject choice, and this would seem to be consonant with the wide range of curriculum choice available in this school as outlined in Section 4.3 above.

Teaching and learning

The Teacher Questionnaire had 12 questions covering aspects of teaching and learning and these were summed to give scores on the three scales. The summary results are given in Table 12.

Table 12: Teacher views on teaching and learning

	<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
<i>T & L: 'True' scale</i>	A	27	37.63
	B	18	39.28
	C	16	39.19
	D	23	34.91
	E	36	40.14
	Total	120	38.32
<i>T & L: 'Importance' scale</i>	A	27	44.33
	B	18	44.83
	C	16	45.44
	D	26	43.23
	E	35	44.37
	Total	122	44.33
<i>T & L gap</i>	A	26	6.73
	B	17	5.53
	C	16	6.25
	D	23	8.22
	E	34	4.03
	Total	116	5.99

The scores on the True scale range from 34.91 for School D to 40.14 for School E. The Importance scale scores are again uniformly high, but the Gap scales score show more spread, ranging from 4.03 for School E to 8.22 for School D.

The ANOVA results indicate that on the Importance scale the scores for School D are significantly lower than for Schools B, C and E. In addition, the Gap score for School D is significantly higher than for School E. Thus those teachers completing the questionnaire in School D are rather less positive about the nature of teaching and learning in that school than the teachers in Schools B, C and E. In addition, there is greater expectation shortfall between the importance ascribed to teaching and learning and its delivery for the teachers in School E.

Ethos

Four of the questions in the Teacher Questionnaire were considered to cover aspects of school ethos and the responses to these questions were summed to provide three ethos scales. The results are summarised in Table 13.

Table 13: Teacher views on ethos

	<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
<i>Ethos: 'True' scale</i>	A	30	11.00
	B	17	12.12
	C	15	11.87
	D	27	11.15
	E	38	11.79
	<i>Total</i>	127	11.52
<i>Ethos: 'Importance' scale</i>	A	29	14.41
	B	18	14.56
	C	16	14.75
	D	28	14.43
	E	37	14.49
	<i>Total</i>	128	14.50
<i>Ethos gap</i>	A	29	3.41
	B	17	2.47
	C	15	2.87
	D	27	3.22
	E	37	2.70
	<i>Total</i>	125	2.97

On the True scale the scores range from 11.00 for School A to 12.12 for School B. On the Importance scale the scores are again uniformly high, and on the Gap scale the range is from 2.47 for School B to 3.41 for School A. The ANOVA results indicate that the only significant difference is on the True scale, where School B scores more highly than School A. Thus the teachers in School B rate their ethos more highly than those in School A.

Teacher views on other issues

Items 41 to 60 in the Teacher Questionnaire covered a range of topics considered to be of particular relevance to the teachers in these 5 schools and attempted to ascertain their views on such diverse issues as communication within the school, decision-making processes and the relevance of local and national curriculum guidelines. Although it is possible to examine the responses to each of these questions on an individual basis (and there are some clear differences between schools when this is done), it was felt to be more appropriate to examine the response patterns to see if there were clusters of questions that might provide more meaningful and more stable scores. Accordingly, the responses to questions 41 to 60 were subjected to a factor analysis, the results of which, after Varimax rotation, suggested that there were 6 identifiably separate factors in the data. These factors were labelled (based on an inspection of the questions which contribute to them) as:

- involvement in decision making and management
- subject choices available to pupils
- relevance of curriculum
- planning and team teaching
- knowledge of curriculum guidelines
- usefulness of curriculum guidelines.

The scores of the teachers from each of the schools on these factors were then compared, using ANOVA as before.

The first factor, which loads on 12 of the questions, is clearly linked to teacher involvement in decision making at school level and related management issues and the overall results are given in Table 14.

Table 14: Involvement in decision making and management

	<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Management: 'True' scale	A	25	26.44
	B	18	29.78
	C	12	34.58
	D	25	25.64
	E	33	31.48
	Total	113	29.13
Management: 'Importance' scale	A	27	40.26
	B	17	40.59
	C	12	40.67
	D	25	40.08
	E	34	39.53
	Total	115	40.10
Management gap	A	25	13.64
	B	16	9.63
	C	12	6.08
	D	25	14.44
	E	33	8.03
	Total	111	10.76

The ANOVA indicates that there are significant differences between the schools on the True and Gap scales, but not on the Importance scale. The post-hoc analyses indicate that Schools C and E have significantly higher scores on the True scale than Schools A and D, and lower scores on the Gap scale. This finding is consistent with the documentation available from each of the schools and with the feedback from discussions in the schools with senior and other staff. In the data from both Schools C and E there is clear evidence of extended consultation and developmental processes at work.

The second factor in this group of questions appears to relate to the range of subject choices available to pupils, and 7 of the questions load on this factor. Table 15 gives the summary data for each school.

Table 15: Teacher views on subject choice available to pupils

	<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Subject choice: 'True' scale	A	30	18.50
	B	15	19.00
	C	13	21.69
	D	23	18.09
	E	35	19.89
	Total	116	19.26
Subject choice: 'Importance' scale	A	29	20.41
	B	16	20.81
	C	13	21.31
	D	23	20.91
	E	31	21.45
	Total	112	20.96
Subject choice: gap	A	29	1.93
	B	15	1.87
	C	13	0.38
	D	22	2.73
	E	31	1.61
	Total	110	1.72

On the True scale scores range from a low of 18.09 for School D to a high of 21.69 for School C. The scores on the Importance scale are all relatively high and have only a small spread, whereas those on the Gap scale range from a low of -0.38 for School C (suggesting that the school is exceeding expectations) to a high of 2.73 for School D. The ANOVA results indicate that there are significant differences between the schools on the True scale and that School C has higher scores than schools A, B and D. On the Gap scale School C has a significantly lower score than School D. Again these findings are consonant with those obtained from the Pupil and Parent Questionnaires, from the analysis of the documentation provided by the schools and from the discussions held with both staff and pupils. The highest level of satisfaction in relation to subject choice is in School C.

On factor 3, which appears to relate to the relevance of the curriculum, there are four questions and the summary data are given in Table 16.

Table 16: Relevance of curriculum

	<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Curriculum relevance: 'True' scale	A	27	11.33
	B	19	11.79
	C	13	14.46
	D	23	11.13
	E	36	12.50
	Total	118	12.07
Curriculum relevance: 'Importance' scale	A	27	14.67
	B	19	14.42
	C	13	14.77
	D	25	14.64
	E	35	14.66
	Total	119	14.63
Curriculum relevance: gap	A	27	3.33
	B	19	2.63
	C	13	0.31
	D	23	3.48
	E	35	2.09
	Total	117	2.54

On the True scale there are significant differences between the scores of teachers in School C and each of the other schools. There are no significant differences on the Importance scale, but on the Gap scale School C has a lower score than Schools A, B and D. Again these findings are consistent with the other data that have demonstrated the wide range of curriculum provision, both vocational and non-vocational, offered in School C in recent years. This appears to suggest that the teachers in School C regard the curriculum to be more relevant to the needs of their pupils.

On factor 4, which relates to issues such as planning and team teaching, there are three questions that have high loadings and the results are given in Table 17.

Table 17: Planning and team teaching

	<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Planning: 'True' scale	A	30	9.07
	B	19	9.21
	C	15	9.80
	D	27	8.07
	E	38	9.50
	Total	129	9.09
Planning: 'Importance' scale	A	31	10.87
	B	19	10.89
	C	14	11.07
	D	28	10.68
	E	38	10.87
	Total	130	10.85
Planning: gap	A	30	1.77
	B	19	1.68
	C	14	1.14
	D	27	2.59
	E	38	1.37
	Total	128	1.74

The ANOVA results indicate that there are significant differences between the schools on the True scale, with Schools C and E scoring more highly than School D. There are no differences on the Importance scale, but on the Gap scale Schools C and E have lower scores than School D. Again these results are consistent with the findings from other data sources and with the results for Factor 1 in the questionnaire relating to involvement in the decision-making process.

The fifth factor loads on 6 questions relating to curriculum guidance issued locally or nationally, and the scores for each school are given in Table 18.

Table 18: Teacher knowledge of curriculum guidelines

	<i>School</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Guidelines: 'True' scale	A	30	18.27
	B	16	19.25
	C	13	21.00
	D	24	17.38
	E	36	19.19
	Total	119	18.80
Guidelines: 'Importance' scale	A	31	21.29
	B	16	21.81
	C	13	21.69
	D	24	21.38
	E	36	21.75
	Total	120	21.56
Guidelines: gap	A	30	3.13
	B	15	2.47
	C	13	0.69
	D	23	3.74
	E	36	2.56
	Total	117	2.72

On the True scale School C scores more highly than Schools A and D. There are no significant differences on the Importance scale, but on the Gap scale School C has a lower score than Schools A and D. This finding, on the knowledge of guidelines, again seems to be consistent with management initiatives carried out within the school over a period of time and which are clear from the documentation provided by the school and from discussions with staff.

On the remaining factor, the usefulness of curriculum guidelines, only two questions load and there are no significant differences between the schools on any of the scales, indicating that the teachers in all 5 schools find the curriculum guidance useful.

Summary

- With respect to the factors of subject choice, teaching and learning and ethos, teachers in all schools were in agreement that these were highly important, but there were differences between schools on the extent to which they were perceived to be true.
- Teachers in School C perceived only a small gap between the importance and the reality of the aspects contributing to *subject choice*, suggesting that they feel the school is well able to meet pupils' needs in this respect. Teachers in all schools recorded shortfalls between the importance and reality of aspects of teaching and learning, and this was particularly noticeable in school D. Teachers in school B were more likely to agree that the aspects contributing to *ethos* were a reality than in other schools.
- Additional factors were analysed from the teacher questionnaire: involvement in decision making and management, relevance of the curriculum, planning and team teaching, knowledge of curriculum guidelines and usefulness of curriculum guidelines. In all schools teachers were in agreement that these factors are important. In general the gap between importance and reality across all of these factors was smallest for School C and, to a lesser extent, School E.
- The results of this part of the study also appear to highlight the requirement for curriculum change to:
 - be undertaken as a whole-school activity
 - take place over an extended period of time
 - have clear developmental stages built in to the planning process
 - be offered clear leadership by the senior management team
 - be supported by wider education authority and national initiatives.

4.5 Impact of the project on attainment, attendance, exclusion, school ethos and teaching environment

In the discussions held with education authority staff, senior staff and others in schools, when the question was posed as to how the outcomes of the curriculum flexibility initiatives should be judged, there was considerable agreement in terms of the responses given. Almost all stressed that among the outcomes that should be examined were: attainment; attitudinal factors as indicated by absence and exclusion rates, staying on rates and a general improvement in the overall ethos of the school. The respondents also noted, however, that it should not be assumed that there would necessarily be direct and causal linkages between the introduction of the more flexible curriculum and these outcome measures. They pointed out that there were many concurrent activities taking place at both school and authority level, and indeed nationally, for example, new national qualifications, which might also affect the outcomes.

Nonetheless, as part of the project it was decided to examine the data sets held by the authority to ascertain if any patterns could be discerned that might be related to the changes taking place at school level. In this section we report and comment on a number of possible outcome variables, including: attainment; absence rates; exclusion rates; and ethos indicators.

Attainment

The authority collects information annually on pupil success in terms of the National Priorities for attainment. Examination of the 5 – 14 data for the years 2000 to 2003 indicate that in four out of the five schools there has been an improvement in performance at level E by the end of S2.

The percentage of pupils who achieved Level E or better by the end of S2 in reading, writing and mathematics increased in 2003 compared to 2000 in Schools A, B, and E. In School C the percentage of pupils who achieved Level E or better by the end of S2 in reading and mathematics increased in 2003 compared to 2000 and the results in writing remained fairly stable over the period. In School D the results dropped for reading, writing and mathematics.

Examination of the data for the years 2001 to 2003 indicates that, for the authority schools as a whole, performance in S4 at 5+ passes at SCQF Level 3 or better has been increasing slightly over successive years and that performance at SCQF level 4 or better showed a marked increase in 2002 over 2001 and a somewhat smaller increase in 2003. For the five schools in this study the picture is rather more variable:

School A: at SCQF level 3 or better, performance shows an increase in 2002 over 2001 followed by a slight decrease in 2003; at Level 4 or better, the pattern is one of steady increases in successive years.

School B: at SCQF level 3 or better, the performance in 2002 is similar to that in 2001 but there is an increase in 2003; at Level 4 or better, performance increased in 2002 over 2001 and then declined a little.

School C: at SCQF level 3 or better, performance appears to decline slightly from 2001 to 2002 to 2003, and performance at SCQF level 4 or better shows a high point in 2002 in comparison to both 2001 and 2003.

School D: at SCQF level 3 or better, performance in 2002 is higher than in either 2001 or 2003; at Level 4 or better, performance is relatively stable over these three years.

School E: at SCQF level 3 or better, performance is relatively stable over the three years and at the highest level of the five schools; at level 4 or better, performance in 2002 is higher than in either 2001 or 2003.

There is no clear pattern in the attainment outcomes of the S4 cohort on SCQF measures, and many of the small changes are within the error estimates expected for schools on these types of measures. If the effects of changes in provision at school level on attainment outcome measures are to be fully understood, then more fine-grained longitudinal analyses of the data will be necessary and this should take account of the changes in structure made to accommodate the new national qualifications. The monitoring of outcomes should ideally be carried out for successive cohorts and use baseline measures in order to get estimates of the value-added effects attributable to different initiatives.

Absence rates

The authority provided tables of the absence rates for each of the schools and for all schools in the authority for the years 1999 to 2003. Examination of the data led to the following conclusions:

1. For the authority and the five schools in the study, absence rates increase from S1 to S5, with a peak in absence occurring in S4/5
2. Of the five schools in the study, School E had the lowest overall absence rate and this was consistently below the norm for the authority
3. The highest absence rates appeared in S4 for Schools A, C, D and E and in S5 for School B
4. For all 5 schools there is an overall improvement in attendance rates from 1999 – 2003 for S4 and S5 pupils, and this parallels the improvement in attendance in the authority as a whole. However, attendance rates for S3 pupils improved from 1999 – 2003 only in Schools A, D and E.

From the data it is impossible to establish causal linkages between the changes in the curriculum and absence rates, although in the interviews with teachers changes in absence rates were often cited as a positive outcome of the initiative. Further, more refined, data collection may in future allow such linkages to be established, but improvement in school attendance is likely to be the result of numerous factors, only one of which is curriculum-related. It should also be noted that attendance rates across the authority improved during the period 1999 – 2003.

Exclusions from school

In a similar fashion it might be argued that if schools are providing a more varied and more appropriate set of curriculum offerings, then pupil behaviour should be improved and the use of sanctions such as exclusions decreased. The data on exclusions provided by the education authority for the period 2000 to 2004 demonstrate the very volatile nature of such figures when they are considered at school level. Thus for the years 2000/01 to 2003/04 the number of exclusions fell from 3168 to 2405, with reductions occurring in each year and a dramatic fall between 2001/02 and 2002/03.

At the level of the five schools in the study the picture is a very mixed one, eg in School A the figures for successive years are 104, 88, 63 and 75 – a reasonably stable and improving picture, whereas in School B (102, 110, 115 and 130) there is also a reasonably stable but worsening scenario. In School C the figures are even more varied, being 311, 234, 186 and 213; and a broadly similar picture occurs in School D with 119, 172, 141 and 151 exclusions

in successive years. School E has very much lower figures than the others, having only 41, 42, 35 and 47 exclusions in each of the years. Detailed figures on exclusion are available for each of the year groups in each school, but the overall picture of variability remains the same.

As in the case of absence from school, exclusion is probably the outcome of many factors to which the pupil is exposed and it is therefore unlikely that simple causal linkages between curriculum flexibility and exclusion from school are going to be found. Exclusions are likely to be related to a range of school, personal and societal factors.

Ethos and teaching environment

In the interviews with teachers and, to a lesser extent, with pupils, comments were made that the ethos of the school would be positively affected by the successful introduction of curriculum flexibility and the more appropriate matching of pupils to courses. In Section 4.4 the views of pupils, parents and staff on questions considered to provide indicators of ethos have been reported and a number of inter-school differences discussed. Unfortunately, since there are no baseline measures for ethos and teaching environment, it is not possible to say whether these differences are related to curriculum flexibility being introduced in the five schools or to other factors. As with attainment and other indicators, it will be necessary to estimate ethos on a number of occasions in order to check on changes over time.

Summary

- There is a general improvement in absence rates from 1999 – 2003 for the 5 schools included in this evaluation. This is consistent with an improvement in absence rates across the authority.
- There is no clear pattern of change in exclusion rates. It is difficult to link curriculum flexibility with exclusion.
- Without baseline data it is not possible to assess the overall impact of curriculum flexibility on ethos and teaching environment.

4.6 Effectiveness of the local authority system for monitoring the achievement of the project aims

The effectiveness of the local authority system for monitoring the achievement of the project aims is discussed in this section. The aims of the North Lanarkshire Curriculum Flexibility Project are set out in section 4.1 of this report. However, because they are central to the discussion in this section they are repeated below. The aims are:

- to secure higher attainment in overall terms
- to provide pupils with improved choice and more appropriate provision within an eight-subject/course programme
- to develop consensus on the way forward with teachers, pupils and parents
- to facilitate curriculum planning in schools that is responsive to need and effective in delivering outcomes; to create time for activities that promote social competence, creativity and education for work
- to ensure the centrality of the principles for planning the delivery of the curriculum which lie at the heart of the authority's strategy *Raising Achievement for All*
- to emphasise the school as a "learning community", with a firm emphasis on a positive and inclusive ethos.

The discussion draws mainly on data collected during the interviews with education authority personnel, headteachers and teachers. This data is supplemented by the analysis of documentation and statistics received from the schools and the local authority's Quality and Support Services. All those interviewed were asked what monitoring and evaluation processes were being used to check the impact of the initiative. In relation to this main question, the interviewees were further probed regarding what indicators were being used to measure impact on eg attainment, attendance, behaviour, exclusions and ethos. In addition, they were asked how much monitoring was done at school level and how much at local authority level. Headteachers were asked if the local authority had provided support for monitoring and evaluating curriculum flexibility.

From the documentary analysis and interviews with local authority personnel, it was clear from the outset that the Curriculum Flexibility Project is only one of several initiatives underway in North Lanarkshire. In response to the main question regarding monitoring the achievement of the aims of the initiative, the Director of Education said, '*It is difficult to separate out the impact of one initiative from the range of others taking place*'. He pointed out that curriculum flexibility fits with all other education authority initiatives.

The *Raising Achievement for All* report says, '*As part of the authority's commitment to Best Value, the education department's Quality Framework provided a coherent approach to monitoring and evaluating this policy. The Quality Development Service will play a key role in supporting schools and other agencies in evaluating the success of the strategy* (North Lanarkshire Education Department, 1998, p24).

However, when the Head of Quality and Support Services was interviewed, his response to monitoring the achievement of the aims of the Curriculum Flexibility Project was, '*We are bad at that. Monitoring is difficult.*' It appears that there are no systematic processes in place at local authority level or school level specifically to monitor the achievement of all the aims of the Curriculum Flexibility Project.

Although there is no separate or systematic process for monitoring the project aims, information relevant to some of the aims is collected. Both the Director and the Head of Service explained that the monitoring of the impact of the project on achievement was carried out via processes in school and local authority collection of data. The data collected was a mixture of quantitative data (attainment, attendance, exclusions) and qualitative reports from headteachers concerning behaviour, school ethos and pupil, teacher and parent

satisfaction. The mechanism for the collection of information from schools was a combination of regular formal data collection (mainly quantitative) and more irregular informal collection of data (mainly qualitative). The headteacher in School B confirmed that *'there is a combination of school-level and education authority indicators being used...'* to monitor the impact of curriculum flexibility.

The headteachers in the five schools explained that information concerning attainment, attendance and exclusion rates is passed to the local authority and that it was best placed to provide data for the evaluation. Section 4.5 presented an analysis of the data received from the authority and explained that it was not possible to make direct and causal linkages between the introduction of curriculum flexibility and any changes in the outcome measures.

Specific data collected by the local authority on 5-14, Standard Grade, Higher and National Qualifications were discussed with the local authority personnel interviewed. The Director said that analysis of the 5-14 data provided evidence of the impact of policies and initiatives flowing from them. He indicated that there have been major changes in attainment levels. He said, *'The 5-14 data analysis is above the national average in Scotland'*. While he recognised that this change in results could not be attributed only to changes in the structure of the curriculum, he suggested that all initiatives made a contribution. One headteacher said, *'All the soft and hard indicators suggest that improvements have taken place, eg maths at the end of S1 equivalent to previous S2 in 5-14 performance. All 5-14 results are highly positive'*, but he also acknowledged that the changes could not easily be attributed to one initiative.

The Head of Service said that it was a year too early to link the impact of the Curriculum Flexibility Project to attainment in Standard Grade examinations. He said that consideration of Standard Grade and other examination results in the light of the initiative was something he saw as the next step in the process. However, with increasing numbers of pupils taking alternatives to Standard Grade and Higher examinations, a broader range of results will have to be investigated for impact. In addition, new ways will have to be explored to accredit pupils' attainment in non-traditional courses/subjects.

When asked specifically about the indicators being used to monitor attainment, attendance, exclusion etc, all local authority personnel interviewed referred to school self-evaluation processes using the HMIE quality indicators in *How good is our school?* and to schools' Standards and Quality reports. The Director said that the reports would contain information on attainment, attendance, exclusion, etc. However, he agreed that, due to the range of initiatives in the authority, the impact of the Curriculum Flexibility Project could not be identified as the sole cause of any changes.

The *Raising Achievement for All* report points out, *'It will be important to use existing quality indicators used in schools, related for example to How Good is Our School? to evaluate the success of policy in qualitative terms. It is likely, however, that specific evaluative measures will have to be developed in relation to assessing other indicators of achievement related to this policy, such as the growth of self-esteem, self-motivation, confidence, the ability to learn independently, high aspirations and so on'* (North Lanarkshire Education Department, 1998, p24). In the case of the Curriculum Flexibility Project, it appears that more specific measures are necessary in order to monitor some of the key aspects of the project, such as the impact of alternative curriculum courses and vocational education on attainment, attendance, confidence, the teaching and learning environment, etc.

The majority of headteachers who were interviewed confirmed that they monitored the achievement of the project largely through the collection of qualitative information from the senior management team and the principal teachers. Several headteachers mentioned reports from their staff of having had to deal with fewer behavioural problems because pupils were more motivated to study the subjects/course on offer. Comments made by the headteacher in School C echo those made by several headteachers interviewed. He said, *'Senior staff have fewer behavioural problems to deal with and fewer pupils are out of class'*.

Most teachers also cited changes in motivation and behaviour. For example, a teacher in School B said, *'There are improvements in performance and behaviour'*, when asked about the impact of the project during the interview. Similarly, a teacher in school C said, *'Pupil behaviour has improved and there are smoother running classes'*. However, there is no concrete evidence to link these observations to the introduction of curriculum flexibility.

Headteachers and teachers acknowledged that it was difficult to monitor the impact of the Curriculum Flexibility Project because of other initiatives going on at the same time and because of the lack of effective tools to measure the impact of raised confidence, self-esteem, etc through greater choice on attainment, attendance, behaviour, etc. The headteacher in School C, when asked about the indicators being used to monitor the achievement of the aims of the Curriculum Flexibility Project, said, *'That is the most difficult question so far'*. Although it has to be expected that schools will always have a wide range of initiatives underway which make it difficult draw conclusions about the cause of any changes in attainment, etc, the comments made by the headteachers and teachers suggest that there is a need to attempt to develop a more effective means of monitoring the success of the Curriculum Flexibility Project. It is suggested that different mechanisms should be tested by the authority and by the schools. For example, schools should be encouraged to collect more baseline data before new initiatives are introduced and to use case study approaches that monitor the progress of specific groups of pupils who are following alternative curriculum options or vocational education courses.

The Director explained that curriculum flexibility is a regular item on the agenda for the termly meetings between members of the Directorate and headteachers. At these meetings headteachers provide information *'about where they are'*. This refers to where they are in terms of providing pupils with improved choice and more appropriate provision within an eight-subject/course programme. The Head of Service confirmed this, as did several of the headteachers. The Director said that flexibility and vocational education are key themes at the secondary headteachers' conference in June each year. The headteachers are able to provide feedback to the Directorate during and after the conference.

The Director suggested that the national conference organised by North Lanarkshire concerning diversity in the secondary school provided information from schools about initiatives taken in curriculum flexibility and the impact it was having on attainment and meeting the needs of young people. Headteachers from three of the schools involved in the project evaluation had made presentations at the conference that outlined the changes made and impact that they had to date.

The Head of Service explained that there is regular contact between the headteachers and the Quality and Support Service. Schools work with Quality Improvement Officers and proposals for change are discussed. He added that monitoring the achievement of aims of curriculum flexibility is part of the general review process. He said, *'A member of the Directorate meets with the senior management team in each school once a year about achievement'*. He suggested that the impact of curriculum flexibility would inevitably form part of the discussion. The interview with the headteacher in School B provided evidence that curriculum flexibility was discussed during his review interview. He said, *'It [curriculum flexibility] is part of the regular review process in North Lanarkshire ...'*

The former Head of Quality and Support Services explained that it was possible for the local authority to monitor two of the Curriculum Flexibility Project aims (improved pupil choice and more appropriate provision within an eight-subject/course programme and creation of time for activities that promote social competence, creativity and education for work) by reviewing each school's timetable on a triennial basis. He said this would enable them to monitor progress in providing more choice for pupils. The guidance document says, '*...schools will be invited to submit their curriculum/timetable structure to the department for review on a triennial basis, commencing in June 2002*' (North Lanarkshire, 2001). However, it is unclear if this timetable review has been carried out as a separate exercise or if the analysis of timetables forms part of the general review process with schools in North Lanarkshire.

There is evidence, from both the documentary analysis and the interview data, to suggest that the local authority is successful in monitoring the views of headteachers and some parents. Regular contact and exchanges of information take place between the Quality and Support Service and the schools. During all the interviews with local authority personnel, reference was made to various consultations that had taken place with headteachers, teachers, pupils and parents. In some cases this is direct contact between the local authority and teacher, parent and pupil groups, or the authority is provided with information concerning consultation exercises carried out in school. The four local authority personnel interviewed referred to direct contact with parents and pupils. The authority holds a parents' conference every year and it also gathers parents' views through a parent consultative group that includes members of the School Boards. The former Head of Service explained that the authority had held a pupil conference and had engaged in structured consultation with each year group. The information gained from this series of consultations is likely to contribute to the local authority's ability to monitor the third project aim concerning the development of consensus on the way forward with teachers, pupils and parents.

It appears from analysis of the interview data that the local authority is aware of the challenges that schools face in taking forward the main ideas outlined in the curriculum flexibility guidance document. During the interviews with local authority personnel, a number of issues were raised that may hinder the development of curriculum flexibility in schools. For example, both the Director and the Head of Service referred to monitoring the impact of the Curriculum Flexibility Project on staffing levels in schools. They indicated that there were 9 surplus teachers, 5 of whom were modern languages teachers. They suggested that this surplus had arisen largely due to the curriculum flexibility initiative. The authority is also aware that GTC regulations hinder the use of non-registered FE staff to deliver vocational courses in school. Furthermore, they are aware that the lack of appropriate facilities in school to implement vocational courses may constrain offering pupils greater subject/course choice and that allowing pupils to take the courses at a college is not a straightforward solution.

Summary

- There appear to be no systematic processes in place at local authority level or school level specifically to monitor the achievement of all the aims of the Curriculum Flexibility Project.
- Local authority personnel and schools indicated that monitoring the achievement of project aims is difficult because a number of other initiatives share similar aims.
- The local authority includes discussion of curriculum flexibility in its regular review process and general contact with schools.
- The guidance document suggests that schools will be invited to take part in a triennial timetable review. This review process would allow the local authority to monitor the schools' progress in improving pupil choice and more appropriate provision within an eight-subject/course programme. It would also allow the authority to monitor the schools' progress in creating time for activities that promote social competence, creativity and education for work. However, it is not clear if the timetable review is conducted as a separate exercise or if it forms part of the general review process conducted by the authority.
- Analysis of school and departmental development plans and Standards and Quality reports by the authority would also provide indicators of schools' progress in improving pupil choice and offering a range of alternatives to meet pupil needs.
- Evidence suggests that the local authority has a series of mechanisms in place to monitor the third project aim concerning the development of consensus on the way forward with teachers, pupils and parents. The data collected in the questionnaires and interviews suggest that these mechanisms are effective.
- Local authority personnel are aware of challenges that face schools in the development of curriculum flexibility, eg challenges relating to staffing issues, facilities to deliver vocational education and the development of effective ways to monitor the impact of curriculum flexibility on pupil attainment (as defined in the guidance document).

4.7 Assessment of the methods employed by the local authority in managing the diverse approaches and the effectiveness of the mechanisms used to support and encourage innovation in schools

This section addresses issues relating to how the local authority manages the diversity of approaches within the five case study schools and the methods it employs to support and encourage the initiatives taken in curriculum flexibility in the schools. It draws on data collected during the interviews with headteachers, teachers and education authority personnel. It is supported by data gathered via the teacher questionnaires.

The analysis of the way the education authority manages the diversity of approaches and the methods used to support and encourage innovation are discussed together in this section because in the North Lanarkshire context the strategies applied in both cases are closely linked.

Local authority personnel said that the strategies used to support and encourage schools in the Curriculum Flexibility Project were consistent with the way they would work with schools on any initiative. They had not been developed specifically for this project. The *Raising Achievement for All* report (North Lanarkshire, 1998) makes clear that the local authority strategy sets out to provide a policy framework that allows schools to develop according to their own needs. Consequently, responsibility for progressing curriculum flexibility is devolved to schools, and this enables schools to find solutions that are relevant to the needs of their pupils and their own context. Schools also have responsibility devolved to them to develop other initiatives.

The national conference organised by the education authority in November 2003, entitled *Diversity makes a Difference*, underlined the authority's view that curriculum flexibility contributes to its overall policy of providing all pupils with an education that enables them to develop to their fullest potential. The message from the conference appeared to be that schools could and should be different. When interviewed, the Director of Education said, '*We recognise that individual schools have individual needs. The main approach is to enable schools to develop ideas as much as possible at school level*'. He added, '*We aim to provide schools with a flexible framework with broad principles, not detailed prescription*'. The headteachers interviewed all appeared to welcome the opportunity to seek local solutions within a policy framework. One of them said, '*The local authority's 'one cap does not fit all' policy was inspirational*'.

Both the current and former Head of Quality and Support Services said that schools are best placed to identify the areas that cause the greatest challenge for them and they should be empowered to develop curriculum flexibility according to their own priorities. Both interviewees emphasised that the education authority's leadership role is to provide a framework for schools and to work with headteachers to support and encourage them to develop innovative solutions according to the needs of their own school.

The publication of *The Curriculum of the Secondary School – Guidance for Schools* (2001) provided the authority with a means to encourage schools to develop ideas and at the same time to manage diversity. On the one hand, it made recommendations giving schools a structure to work within, and on the other hand it invited schools to consider areas for development that may require further investigation. The interviews conducted with the headteachers and teachers indicated that the document had indeed been used to initiate discussion in school. The purpose of the document is outlined in its introductory section. It says, '*...the purpose of this paper is to provide advice to schools on aspects of the secondary curriculum and to identify areas where the authority will support headteachers and school staff in developing alternative approaches, including areas which will require further investigation and development*'.

The guidance document pointed out that, in making use of flexibility, schools must be mindful that:

- *The main focus of change is the need to secure higher attainment in overall terms*
- *The intention is to provide the vast majority of pupils with improved choice and more appropriate provision within an eight-subject/course programme*
- *Schools must continue to work towards qualifications approved for use with young people of compulsory school age*
- *Pupils and parents should be informed of the progression implications of their choices as well as the benefits.*

(North Lanarkshire, 2001, p9)

These points reminded schools of the need to have a sound rationale for any changes to the curriculum and that pupils and parents should be kept informed. It also set the development of curriculum flexibility within the overall context of raising attainment and made clear that schools should continue to work towards approved qualifications. However, at the same time the guidance document gave schools the opportunity to develop innovative approaches to the curriculum. It said,

'The opportunity is now present for the development of innovative approaches to the curriculum which embrace, for example, elements of the following:

- *Developing education for work, citizenship and enterprise programmes using local resources and opportunities such as college partnerships, education business partnerships, the Careers Service and community organisations*
- *Facilitating alternatives to exclusion initiatives (eg On Track/XL Clubs)*
- *Enhancing out of school learning opportunities*
- *Enhancing the vocational potential of the curriculum by linking courses and aligning timetables to deliver community based learning opportunities.'*

(North Lanarkshire, 2001, p10)

This gave schools the 'green light' to look for alternatives, in the first instance for a small number of pupils. A set of questions in the teachers' questionnaire concerned the helpfulness of the local guidance on curriculum flexibility. As reported in Section 4.4, the results show that the teachers in all five schools regarded the guidance as important and had found it helpful. These views were confirmed in the teacher interviews.

The Head of Service explained that the guidance document issued to schools was developed through close consultation with headteachers. Two of the headteachers interviewed confirmed that they had been involved in developing the guidance. The Head of Service said, *'Our policy development is grounded in reality. The local authority's strategy is for policy to arise out of consultation'*. Local authority personnel said that they sought to develop a climate of trust and respect between the authority and the schools in order to tap into the best of thinking. They said that their aim was to open up thinking and encourage headteachers to come forward with their own ideas.

The Director of Education explained that there is not the same need or impetus for seeking alternative curriculum solutions in all the schools in the authority. He said that schools could develop at their own pace, according to their own dynamics. He indicated that initially the Directorate encouraged volunteer schools to come forward. This enabled the authority and the schools to pilot alternative curricula where a specific need for change had been identified, eg poor results, low motivation, poor attendance, high rates of exclusion. By using a small number of schools in the initial stages, the local authority could allow each school to take its own pathway and changes could be developed in an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary way. Local authority personnel said this strategy resulted in *'champions of curriculum flexibility'*, and these champions were then able to share good practice with their colleagues at headteachers' meetings and at the national conferences organised by the

authority. In this way the local authority sought *'to model to all schools the successes of some schools'*.

The strategy adopted by North Lanarkshire Council of enabling grassroots development within a framework of local authority guidance appears to be effective. The majority of headteachers and teachers interviewed spoke positively about schools being able to initiate ideas within a framework that gives clarity concerning policy direction. The interviewees at school level confirmed the supportive role played by members of the Quality and Support Services.

The strategy of gradual change according to the needs and dynamics of the school was also welcomed by the headteachers and teachers interviewed. This appeared to give relevancy to the changes and was more likely to command support from teachers, pupils and parents. In addition, the strategy to ensure ongoing consultation with teachers, pupils and parents was also welcomed as it reassured schools that policy decisions were made with knowledge of the reality of the school context.

Parallel to the development of the guidance document for schools, local authority personnel were exploring possible alternative courses and developing partnerships with local FE colleges. The Quality Improvement Officer who was interviewed explained that he had been responsible for some of the *'leg work to find out about alternative courses'*. He said that he explored opportunities that could be developed beyond the present curriculum model and *'identified things that schools might be interested in'*. A number of alternatives were identified in conjunction with the FE colleges: eg ECDL; construction; hairdressing; sport and community leadership; digital animation; enterprise; and call centre training. He said that he worked with college staff to identify coherent groups of units that S3 could take in construction/hairdressing/beauty therapy.

The investigative role played by the Quality Improvement Officer indicates that, while the local authority wished schools to volunteer into vocational education alternatives, some of the ground work was being done for them in order to identify possible alternatives and develop the infrastructure to enable them to happen. The range of options explored also indicated that the local authority wished to provide a wide range of alternatives and signal that vocational courses should not be on offer only for the less able. The Director pointed out that vocational courses should also be offered at the highest level, eg digital technology.

As schools came forward expressing an interest in developing vocational alternatives, financial support was provided by the authority to develop the necessary facilities. For example, in School C a car bay and a beauty parlour were built. It is likely that the strategy of allowing schools to come forward with proposals when they identified the need eased the financial management of the development of diversity. Adapting existing accommodation and providing new facilities for vocational education has huge financial implications for an authority. It appears that the local authority were able to provide the necessary financial support for the schools involved in this evaluation as they are small in number at this stage. It may be that greater emphasis will need to be put on sharing facilities between schools if the number of schools wishing to develop vocational education increases.

The Quality Improvement Officer and two of the headteachers interviewed said that sharing facilities and/or using college facilities is problematic. The logistics of transporting pupils to other venues such as local FE colleges requires careful planning and consideration. For one of the schools involved in this evaluation, its geographical location does not make it easy for pupils to travel to alternative sites. Local authority personnel are aware of these difficulties. The provision of the facilities required to develop vocational education is an issue that they will continue to explore. One of the local authority interviewees said, *'A limitation has been in achieving physical changes in school accommodation'*. However, it is not only a question of facilities: the expertise to deliver vocational courses is not available within the school.

College staff are being used to deliver some of the courses, but the issue of using FE staff who are not registered with the GTC has been raised. The former Head of Service said, *'Barriers between school and college need to be replaced with a more permeable interface'*. The local authority will have to continue to support schools in finding solutions to these challenges.

Local authority personnel were also aware of the implications that curriculum change has for staffing, particularly in modern languages and science. The Head of Service explained that they wish to support language teachers and have appointed 4 development officers to develop languages in the primary school. He said that they have also seconded a member of staff to the authority to support primary science. These appointments should signal to teachers that the local authority is exploring ways to support them in the change process.

The Head of Service explained that ongoing support is provided as part of the general system of support and encouragement that is provided by the authority. He explained that he and other members of the Quality and Support Services make regular visits to schools. He said that he visits schools and *'walks and talks with headteachers in order to see what the issues are'*. He emphasised that curriculum change should be driven by the schools themselves via the headteacher and the departments. He said that headteachers should feel empowered, and in turn the teachers should feel empowered, to identify issues that need to be resolved and put forward their own ideas for change. This strategy is clearly designed to encourage schools to take ownership of the development of curriculum flexibility.

Curriculum flexibility has implications for timetabling and support has been provided for timetabling by the Quality and Support Services. The authority recognises that *'the quality of timetable construction is central to the effective delivery of the curricular aims of the school'* (North Lanarkshire, 2001, p11). The former Head of Service indicated that, where necessary, schools have been supported by a timetabling consultant. The deputy headteacher in one of the schools confirmed that this was the case and said he had welcomed the specialist support provided. This type of support is essential in order to ensure that curriculum flexibility is not constrained by the timetabling arrangements in a school.

The headteachers interviewed spoke positively about the local authority's awareness of the implications of curriculum change, such as the impact on staffing and facilities. The regular communication system between schools and the local authority appears to allow an effective two-way exchange of information. Few negative comments were made about strategies employed by the authority to develop curriculum flexibility during any of the interviews conducted in schools. This suggests that these strategies were effective.

When asked about strategies to encourage innovation, the Head of Service said that many of the authority's regular support services were linked to this. However, he highlighted some specific activities. He said that the authority have sought to attract world leaders in learning and teaching to their headteacher conferences in order to *'enthuse and energise'* staff. The aim is to stimulate innovation by providing headteachers and teachers with access to the latest thinking on teaching and learning. He also pointed out that at any of the regular headteacher meetings curriculum flexibility is always on the agenda and headteachers are able to share and test ideas with each other. Two of the headteachers confirmed the value of the conferences and regular meetings with authority personnel for the development of new ideas. The strategy of attracting leading experts in the field indicates the value that the authority places on giving headteachers and teachers the opportunity to access the latest thinking and encouraging the development of new ideas.

It is important to note that the mechanisms that are in place to support and encourage the Curriculum Flexibility Project in North Lanarkshire have not been developed specifically for the project. Curriculum flexibility and the way it has been managed, supported and

encouraged is part of the wider policy of raising achievement and meeting the needs of individual pupils. The development of curriculum flexibility has happened in an evolutionary way over a long period with regular consultation with headteachers, teachers, pupils and parents. The reports from the schools visited suggest that it has not been viewed as a radical development because it has developed gradually according to the needs identified in individual schools. The wider North Lanarkshire policy context and the systems that they have in place to support and encourage innovation would have to be taken into account if other local authorities wished to develop greater curriculum flexibility.

Summary

- The guidance issued by North Lanarkshire provided a framework for the implementation of curriculum flexibility. Within the framework the schools were able to develop initiatives according to the needs of their pupils.
- The authority invited volunteer schools to come forward with ideas for curriculum flexibility. This allowed schools to make changes according to their specific needs and at a pace that was relevant to them. Gradual change with regular consultation appears to have enabled the authority to manage the diversity of approaches in the schools.
- The headteachers of the volunteer schools were able to act as champions for curriculum flexibility and were encouraged to share good practice with their peers.
- The Quality and Support Services explored possible alternative curricula and the requirements for the development of vocational courses. Partnerships with local FE colleges were built to enable college staff to deliver courses in school and in some cases for pupils to undertake vocational courses in college. This indicates the authority's role in developing the infrastructure to enable schools to deliver a range of alternative curriculum options.
- Financial support was provided by the authority for facilities to deliver vocational education in some of the schools.
- The approach adopted of encouraging developments in a limited number of schools permitted the authority to provide support, both human and financial, that would not have been possible if all schools in the authority had been involved.
- Schools, headteachers and teachers were supported and encouraged to develop curriculum flexibility in a range of ways that are consistent with usual practice in the authority.

5. DISCUSSION OF KEY ISSUES

Impact of the guidance on increased pupil choice

Prior to the publication of the North Lanarkshire guidance, headteachers in the five schools had recognised that the curriculum did not serve the needs of all their pupils. In each school discussions had taken place concerning aspects of the curriculum structure that caused concern. The headteachers said that the curriculum was too rigid and restrictive and suggested that it was impacting on the attainment, motivation levels and behaviour of some pupils. In some cases pupils were being forced to take subjects that they did not wish to take and were beyond their level of ability. Some of the discussions about introducing a more flexible curriculum had taken place only at senior management team level, while in other schools discussions were also at departmental level.

In two of the schools, discussions had led to some changes in the curriculum being implemented prior to 2001. The headteachers in these two schools had worked closely with the Quality and Support Service and had been involved in the development of the authority guidance. A major consultation exercise on a number of issues relating to curriculum structure had taken place in 1998 and the guidance document was informed by the responses coming from schools (pupils and teachers) and from parents. Against this background of identified need for change and widespread consultation prior to publication in 2001, the guidance issued by North Lanarkshire appeared to be positively received in all five schools. The schools used the document to promote wider and more specific discussion of curriculum structures or to initiate change.

The evidence collected suggests that the guidance acted as a 'green light' for change in the five schools. This evaluation detailed the impact on pupil choice in sections 4.3 and 4.4. The authority aimed to provide a framework for schools that was not prescriptive. Schools were given the freedom to introduce curriculum change at a pace that suited them and according to the needs of their pupils. The schools appeared to model the authority's consultation processes with teachers, pupils and parents and its strategy of gradual introduction of curriculum flexibility. They introduced changes according to the areas of concern identified in school. Consequently, the guidance has impacted on the curriculum in the five schools in different ways.

The evaluation gathered information about the structure of the curriculum and patterns of pupil choice in S2, S3 and S5. The stage where the greatest commonality of impact of the guidance is evident is S2. In line with the major recommendations contained in the guidance document, the focus of change in S2 across the schools was to reduce fragmentation and the number of teachers with whom pupils had contact. This was effected by decreasing the number of subjects and, in some cases, removing 'taster' courses that had been offered in preparation for choice at the next stage, thereby increasing time in the core subjects of maths and English. The schools were also trying to establish the minimum number of hours for a subject per week, which led to the rotation of subjects such as history and geography, and technical and home economics.

The guidance recommends that there should be a stronger focus on cluster group planning. The results of this evaluation suggest that the schools have been discussing the development of closer links between primary and secondary curricula. One of the headteachers said that cluster group planning had been a particular focus in his school. This included contributing to primary modern languages and introducing 'Successmaker' in P6/P7 and S1/S2. Overall, however, there was limited evidence of cluster group planning on the curricular structure.

On the whole, as outlined in Section 4.3, the same core of subjects is on offer at S2 in the five schools, with only minor variations. The relaxing of age and stage regulations was under discussion in the schools to allow the early introduction of Standard Grade in some subjects in S2. However, the results show that only one school has introduced Standard Grade in English. Therefore, for S2 pupils taking part in this study, there was limited flexibility in level or subject choice. The recommendations in the North Lanarkshire guidance make it clear that at S1/S2 flexibility should be deployed to consolidate the core curriculum rather than to introduce other subjects. The results suggest that the schools have followed the guidance. Although the section on age and stage relaxation in the guidance document says, '*Schools are encouraged to secure maximum advantage for all pupils from the relaxation of age and stage restrictions*' (North Lanarkshire, 2001), it focuses mainly on the potential to introduce Higher Still units rather than the early introduction of Standard Grades. The findings indicate that the main focus in the schools has been on implementing different levels of study in S3 to S6, with limited change, as yet, in the levels of study on offer at the S2 stage.

Most of the pupils, and some of the teachers and parents, suggest that greater change in the structure of the curriculum at S1/S2 is needed. Teachers' and parents' comments included concerns about some pupils 'marking time' in S2. One of the S2 pupil focus groups indicated that they found some of the work in primary school more challenging than the work in S1/S2. Generally there was concern about lack of progression for some pupils. The opportunity to undertake more challenging levels of study should be available for pupils who complete 5-14 work before the end of S2.

The guidance appears to have had the greatest impact at S3/S4 level. In S3 the results of the evaluation indicate greater diversity in approaches to curriculum flexibility. All five schools have made amendments to the 8 modal structure in order to give pupils greater choice of subjects. Although some of the changes introduced in some of the schools have meant that alternatives are open to all pupils, in other cases increased choice has been possible only for small numbers of pupils, and only by invitation.

There is a common core of subjects in all schools at S3, with some variations among subjects that are regarded as part of the traditional curriculum. On the whole, the schools follow the parameters set out in the guidance and continue to require all pupils to study English, mathematics, RE, PE and PSE. The guidance suggests that all pupils should study no fewer than 2 of the remaining 4 modal areas. As explained in Section 4.3, individual schools have tested different option structures to create more choice. Maintaining the principles of breadth and balance, and at the same time allowing greater freedom of choice, is challenging. Some pupils, teachers and parents commented on the impact on breadth and balance of selecting 3 sciences or 3 creative and aesthetic subjects. Greater flexibility will allow pupils to follow their strengths, but may limit career choices unless given careful consideration. The need for counselling at the time of option choice was emphasised, in S3 in particular, by some of the pupils in the focus groups and by some of the teachers interviewed. A document received from one of the schools emphasised the importance of enabling pupils to make *informed* choices. This is a key point. Several of the pupil focus group discussions indicated that better support from the Careers Service was needed in order to ensure that choices made did not restrict eligibility for further and higher education or employment options. It is important that appropriate mechanisms for counselling pupils about option choices develop alongside increased curriculum flexibility.

In an effort to improve pupil motivation and behaviour, the schools have all sought to make some subjects, notably modern languages, non-compulsory. Questionnaire responses and focus group discussions indicated that many pupils did not wish to take the modern language they were studying. The majority of the pupils interviewed thought that the study of a modern language should be optional. At the time of the data collection, only one school had removed modern languages from the compulsory core, although in the other schools alternatives were available for some pupils. From the documentation received it is clear that

at least one other school is planning to make modern languages optional in the next academic session.

The evidence gathered from the pupil questionnaires and focus groups suggests that pupil views about modern languages are not straightforward. When they were asked if there were any subjects that they wished to study that they were not currently studying, a modern language was frequently mentioned. This tended to be a language that was not available in their school, usually Spanish. However, in the school where Spanish was offered, it received negative comments from pupils. It appears that pupils would generally like a wider range of modern languages available in their school in order to give them more choice. This would be challenging both for staffing and timetabling. It is suggested that pupil views about modern languages need a separate investigation to find an appropriate balance between less compulsion to take a modern language on the one hand and the provision of a greater choice of languages on the other.

While the pupils expressed the greatest discontent with modern languages, there were other subjects that received negative comments. For example, RE and mathematics, both of which form part of the compulsory core, were highlighted as subjects that some pupils in some schools and year groups did not wish to take. Local explanations may account for the dislike of some subjects. However, discontent was expressed with mathematics in S5 in all five schools and by 21% of all S5 pupils included in the study. The reasons for this were investigated further in the S5 focus groups. The feedback indicated that many of the pupils found the subject *'too hard'* or *'not relevant'*. These comments are surprising, considering that most of the schools have moved to offer a range of levels of study at S5 and that mathematics is not compulsory in two of the schools. The reasons for this level of discontent in mathematics at S5 require further investigation.

The results suggest that the five schools are gradually introducing Higher Still courses at S3. However, a wider range of levels is on offer at S5 in all schools. This has enabled the schools to introduce greater flexibility in the S3 – S5 curriculum. The documentation received from the schools indicates that they are continuing to expand the range of levels of study in an increasing number of subjects. This has impacted on the size of classes. Some schools have been able to accommodate smaller classes studying at different levels, particularly at S5. However, in other schools some subjects did not run at a particular level if the class size was not viable. The impact of increased flexibility on timetabling, staffing and teaching and learning strategies should be explored in order to find solutions that enable schools to offer pupils the opportunity to study a subject at a level appropriate to their ability.

The questionnaire results and the focus group data indicate that the most common reason pupils gave for not being able to study a subject they wished to take was the restrictions of the option choices. The schools are at different stages of making changes to open up their option choices. However, the pupil responses indicate that they would like to see greater flexibility in the option choices available at present. Comments such as *'the timetable should be arranged to serve the pupils'* and *'the curriculum should fit the pupils, not the other way round'* were made by both pupils and teachers. The evidence suggests that changes are gradually being made to increase curriculum flexibility. However, it appears that for some pupils the pace of change is not fast enough and they still feel the curriculum structure restricts the choices available to them, particularly at S3.

The North Lanarkshire guidance document indicates that schools now have the opportunity to develop innovative alternative courses relevant to the needs of their pupils. The results suggest that there is great diversity in the alternative options on offer in the five schools. Some of the schools have already developed a wide range of alternatives. Essential Skills and Skillforce are on offer in two schools, and On Track and XL Clubs are also available in two schools. These courses have a strong emphasis on the development of core skills such as literacy, numeracy, problem solving, IT and working with others. In addition, some

schools have already moved to introduce vocationally oriented courses. In the first instance this was for small groups of invited pupils. However, one school, which has created a car bay and beauty salon on its site, has moved to open up the choice of vocational courses to all pupils, although in reality the number of places available for each course will inevitably be limited by the facilities and staff available.

The guidance suggests that vocational options may combine in-house and off-site provision. This is indeed what the schools offering vocational courses have attempted to do. Strong partnerships with some of the local FE colleges are in place. However, it appears that provision of vocational courses, both on- and off-site, has been challenging. Schools lack the expertise and the facilities to offer vocational options. FE staff have come into some of the schools to deliver courses where facilities are available, but the issue of non GTC registered staff teaching pupils in school has been raised and this will require to be addressed. The geographical location of one of the schools does not make travel to an FE college easy, and some of the other schools also mentioned the logistical challenge of transporting pupils to college to undertake some of their studies.

Enhancing the vocational potential of the curriculum for pupils has been popular. The alternative courses introduced attracted almost no negative comments from the pupils. Further work is needed to address the challenges associated with opening up the option of vocational courses to a greater number of pupils in more schools. In particular, more emphasis should be placed on exploring the possibilities offered through area curriculum planning. Few references were made to area planning during interviews with headteachers, and only a small number of pupils referred to studying jointly with pupils from other schools or moving to study on a different site. One pupil in one school mentioned the possibility of studying higher psychology at a local FE college. Another pupil from another school mentioned the possibility of studying electrical installation in a different FE college. However, it appears that area curriculum planning had not impacted in any significant way in the schools.

Stakeholders' views

A series of statistical tests were used to investigate further the impact of the guidance from the local authority on pupils, teachers and parents. The stakeholders' views were sought about subject choice, teaching and learning and ethos. The results of the analysis show that the impact differs in the five schools and in the different year groups for some aspects. In relation to subject choice, the level of pupil satisfaction declines from S2 to S3 to S5: in other words, the S5 pupils appear to be least satisfied with the subject choices available. The majority of S5 pupils also indicated that the subject choices available to them did not match their expectations. However, the extent of dissatisfaction with subject choices was different across the five schools. The findings suggest that the two schools that have been involved in the curriculum flexibility initiative for the longest period of time meet their pupils' expectations to a greater extent than the other three schools.

Overall, the pupils' level of satisfaction with teaching and learning and with ethos also declines from S2 to S3 to S5, with the exception of one school where there is a dip at S3, with S5 satisfaction being higher than S3. The overall decline in satisfaction with factors related to teaching and learning and ethos as pupils progress up the school requires further investigation in order to identify the cause of this general pattern across the schools. The dip in satisfaction in one of the schools at S3 level requires local investigation.

One of the objectives of curriculum flexibility is to encourage pupils to take responsibility for, and give them ownership of, their choices. The National Curriculum Guidelines (SCCC, 1999) say, '*It is essential that young people develop the capability to act autonomously in pursuit of their own needs and purposes ...*' (p9). Therefore, the extent to which pupils feel

they are responsible for the choices they make is important. In both the questionnaire and the focus groups pupils were asked what had influenced their choice of subjects.

The results show that 'self' and 'parents' were by far the two most important influences in making subject choices at all stages for both boys and girls. As perhaps would be expected, the importance of 'self' increased from S2 to S5, while the influence of parents declined. The importance of university and college entry requirements was also greater for S5 pupils. The Careers Service was considered the least important influence by respondents. The influences in making subject choices were probed further in the pupil focus groups to explore some of the reasons that lay behind the survey results. In particular, the pupils were asked about the influence of the Careers Service. The pupils in the majority of focus groups suggested that the Careers Service was of least influence because the Careers Officer was generally only available at very limited times, if at all, in school.

Gender differences were explored in relation to influences on subject choice and it was found that more boys than girls selected 'self' as important at all stages. More boys than girls also selected 'parents' as important at all stages. However, more girls than boys selected 'teachers' as important at all stages and more girls than boys selected 'university or college entry requirements' as being important at all stages.

These results appear to indicate that pupils are taking responsibility for making decisions about the subjects and courses they wish to study. The findings also provide indicators of who the pupils are most likely to seek assistance from when making their choices. The reported high levels of parental influence give added importance to parents' evenings designed to inform parents about the subject choice process. If parents are to be in a position to help their sons/daughters in making *informed* choices, they will require the necessary information in order to give appropriate support. Boys may need to be targeted to encourage them to take account of university or college entry requirements in order to ensure that they do not restrict their career options by the subject choices they make.

The analysis of parents' views on subject choice, teaching and learning, ethos and communication between parents and schools indicated that parents in all five schools thought these factors important. However, there was variability across the schools concerning parents' levels of satisfaction. The school in which the parents were most satisfied was one of the schools where the highest level of pupil satisfaction was noted. The school offered a wide range of alternative courses, had introduced vocational courses and had been developing curriculum flexibility over a long period. The teachers in the school suggested that the curriculum structure was well able to meet pupils' needs, particularly regarding subject choice.

The models of curriculum flexibility in each school and the stakeholders' views appear to point to the requirement for curriculum change to: be undertaken as a whole school activity; take place over an extended period of time; have clear developmental stages built in to the planning process; be offered clear leadership by the senior management team; and be supported by wider education authority and national initiatives.

Impact on attainment, attendance, ethos and teaching environment

Local authority personnel, headteachers and teachers were asked how the outcomes of the curriculum flexibility initiatives should be judged. Almost all stressed that among the outcomes which should be examined were: attainment; attitudinal factors as indicated by absence and exclusion rates, staying on rates and a general improvement in the overall ethos of the school. However, the majority of the interviewees said that it should not be assumed that there would necessarily be direct and causal linkages between the introduction of the more flexible curriculum and these outcome measures. They highlighted the many concurrent activities taking place at both school and authority level, and indeed nationally, which might also affect the outcomes. In addition, several of the interviewees suggested that it was too soon to measure impact as significant changes, such as the introduction of alternative courses, had not had time to take effect across the stages with significant numbers of pupils.

The headteachers explained that data concerning attainment, absence and exclusion rates are collected by the local authority. Consequently, statistical data for the five schools was obtained directly from the local authority. Analysis of the data for the authority as a whole shows that there has been an increase in performance in the 5-14 results, a slight increase in performance at S4 and an overall improvement in absence and exclusion rates. However, the picture for the five schools included in this evaluation is more variable.

As Section 4.5 explained, four out of the five schools showed improvement in the number of pupils achieving level E or better by the end of S2 over the period 2000 – 2003 but there is no clear pattern in the attainment outcomes in the national qualifications at S4 from 2001 - 2003. More targeted longitudinal analysis would be required in order to assess any impact of the Curriculum Flexibility Project on attainment.

In relation to the absence rates in the five schools there is a similar pattern of improvement to that noted across the authority in general. This improvement in absence rates from 1999 – 2003 is particularly evident at the S5 stage. There are many factors that influence absence rates and it is not possible to establish any causal link between curriculum flexibility and improved absence rates. However, changes in attendance rates were often cited by teachers during the interviews as a positive outcome of the initiative. Further research is necessary in order to confirm the teachers' views.

One of the reasons for the introduction of curriculum flexibility suggested by the headteachers and teachers related to offering courses that were more relevant and interesting in an effort to improve the motivation and behaviour of specific groups of pupils. An expected consequence of improved pupil behaviour and motivation could be a reduction in the number of exclusions. However, the five schools in this study do not show a consistent pattern of decline in exclusion rates. As in the case of absence from school, exclusion is likely to be related to a range of school, personal and societal factors. It is not possible to link the Curriculum Flexibility Project to any changes in exclusion rates.

The absence of any baseline data meant that it was not possible to assess the impact of the Curriculum Flexibility Project on ethos and the teaching environment. Schools are now collecting data to measure improvement in relation to the five national priorities and it is expected that this will include the collection of data that relates to school ethos and to the teaching environment.

In conclusion, and as suggested by the majority of interviewees, it was not possible to identify causal links between any improvements noted in the statistical data collected from the authority and the Curriculum Flexibility Project. This underlines the difficulty of monitoring the aims of a single project that contributes to an overarching policy that drives a number of initiatives concerning raising achievement. Schools are sites of ongoing change and the

continuous endeavour to meet a wide variety of pupil needs inevitably means that many initiatives will take place at the same time. Therefore, data needs to be collected concerning the wide range of factors that could impact on any changes in attainment, attendance and exclusion. A case study approach would be necessary to examine, unpick and gain an insight into the inter-relationships between such factors.

The analysis of the qualitative data collected during the headteacher and teacher interviews in each school suggest that the interviewees believe that there is a link between the Curriculum Flexibility Project and improved behaviour, motivation, absence and exclusion rates. A pattern of positive comments emerged from their individual testimonies. The teachers reported having to deal with fewer incidents of poor behaviour. Several headteachers cited fewer parental complaints about general disruptive behaviour in the classrooms. Although the interviewees accepted that a combination of several initiatives could be responsible for the observed improvements, many indicated that improved subject choice and the availability of more levels of study meant that more pupils were more likely to achieve success and undertake activities they were interested in and enjoyed. The lack of any negative comments about the alternative courses on offer in the pupil questionnaires and the positive comments made during the pupil focus groups confirmed that the pupils were satisfied with, and enjoyed, the number of alternatives available to them.

Curriculum Design for the Secondary Stages: Guidelines for Schools (SCCC, 1999) says that 'Young people are more likely to be motivated to learn in schools and classrooms which have developed a wide range of strategies for the celebration of achievement' (p10). The findings of this evaluation suggest that the five schools are exploring new ways to reward pupil improvement in a variety of areas. For example, the pupils in one school explained that they received points for good behaviour and attendance. These points were added together over a period and when a particular goal was achieved the pupils were rewarded with a trip to the cinema or a trip to a fun park. Ways of accrediting the alternative curriculum are being explored, as well as ways of rewarding small steps of attainment. The recording of pupil attainment using a wider variety of means other than national examination results is in keeping with the authority's broader definition of attainment as set out in the *Raising Achievement for All* report (North Lanarkshire, 1998). Schools should be encouraged to continue to identify a broader range of quality indicators to reflect the knowledge and skills attained via alternative courses. Flexible curriculum approaches that aim to meet individual pupil needs require assessment strategies that are designed to reflect individual attainment. The introduction of personal learning plans offers the opportunity for each pupil to create their own portfolio of attainment using a variety of evidence relevant to the subjects/courses being studied.

Monitoring the impact of the curriculum flexibility project

Local authority personnel and headteachers were asked about mechanisms that are in place to monitor the achievement of the aims of the Curriculum Flexibility Project. All those interviewed indicated that monitoring the impact of the project is a difficult task, not least because a number of other initiatives share similar aims. There appeared to be no systematic processes at local authority level or school level to specifically monitor the achievement of all the aims of the Curriculum Flexibility Project. However, local authority personnel explained that some aspects of the project are monitored through the usual monitoring systems that are in place for quality assurance purposes. For example, they claimed that discussion of curriculum flexibility is included in their regular review process and general contact with schools. The headteachers interviewed confirmed that changes to the curriculum are included in their annual review with the local authority. This review process will undoubtedly give the authority an overview of progress in the development of curriculum flexibility in each school but, as it is part of a wider discussion of school issues, it is unlikely to result in detailed information regarding the impact of the project aims.

The analysis of the results suggests that the invitation in the guidance document to schools to submit their curriculum/timetable structure to the authority for review on a triennial basis would enable the local authority to monitor the schools' progress in improving pupil choice and more appropriate provision within an eight-subject/course programme. A review of the timetables would also allow the authority to monitor the schools' progress in creating time for activities that promote social competence, creativity and education for work. It is expected that analysis of school and departmental development plans and Standards and Quality Reports will also provide indicators of schools' progress in improving pupil choice and offering a range of alternatives to meet pupil needs.

The evidence collected suggests that the local authority has mechanisms in place to monitor the development of consensus on the way forward with teachers, pupils and parents. A series of consultation exercises has been undertaken to ensure a two-way exchange of information and views. Specific events, such as parent and pupil conferences, have been organised by the authority to allow a variety of stakeholders' views to be presented. The data collected in the questionnaires and interviews suggest that stakeholders regard these mechanisms to be effective.

It appears that regular communication with the schools means that local authority personnel are aware of the challenges that face schools in the development of curriculum flexibility, eg challenges relating to staffing issues, facilities to deliver vocational education and the development of effective ways to monitor the impact of curriculum flexibility on pupil attainment (as defined in the guidance document). The local authority personnel highlighted the challenges during their interviews and provided information about the steps being taken to deal with some of the issues.

It is acknowledged that monitoring the achievement of all the aims of the Curriculum Flexibility Project is difficult because of the overlap with other initiatives taking place in the authority. Nevertheless, it is suggested that schools should be encouraged to explore ways to improve the level of monitoring in order to identify any educational gains that stem from the introduction of curriculum flexibility. This should include the collection of more detailed baseline data from a sample of pupil groups when changes are introduced. Regular and systematic data collection using an appropriate mix of qualitative and quantitative data can be a daunting task. The guidance issued by North Lanarkshire says, '*The importance of ongoing evaluation and periodic review cannot be sufficiently emphasised if assurances are to be offered that every pupil derives optimum benefit from the school curriculum*' (North Lanarkshire, 2001, p5). Large amounts of data are already collected in schools and it is recommended that schools should be given support to help them use the data they already have to greater effect and to identify what further data need to be collected at what points, using a system that is robust, efficient and useful for a range of purposes and for a variety of stakeholders.

Approaches taken by the local authority to support and encourage innovation

The findings suggest that the schools, headteachers and teachers were supported and encouraged to develop curriculum flexibility in a range of ways that are consistent with usual practice in the authority.

It appears that the guidance issued by North Lanarkshire was welcomed by the staff interviewed in the five schools and that it provided a framework for the implementation of curriculum flexibility. Within the framework responsibility was devolved to schools and this enabled them to find solutions that were relevant to the needs of their pupils and their own context. The guidance document gave schools the parameters for the implementation of curriculum flexibility, it reminded them of the need to have a sound rationale for any changes made to the curriculum and to ensure proper consultation, but it also gave them the freedom to introduce changes that were appropriate for their pupils. Those interviewed appeared to

welcome the opportunity to seek local solutions within the security of a policy framework. The local authority personnel highlighted their strategy of policy development grounded in reality and the evidence collected suggests that several headteachers were involved in the development of the guidance on the secondary school curriculum.

The local authority strategy of inviting volunteer schools to come forward with ideas for curriculum flexibility appeared to be effective. It allowed schools to make changes according to their own needs and at a pace that was relevant to them. The headteachers and the teachers were able to propose ideas, which appeared to give those interviewed a sense of ownership of, and a commitment to, the changes being made. The headteachers of the volunteer schools were able to act as champions for curriculum flexibility and were encouraged to share good practice with their peers.

Gradual change with regular consultation and exchange of ideas appears to have enabled the authority to manage the diversity of approaches in the schools. It was able to monitor the piloting of alternative curricula in schools where poor results, low motivation, poor attendance and high exclusion rates signalled that change was needed. By using a small number of schools in the initial stages, the authority was able to give each school the opportunity to take its own pathway and progress changes in an evolutionary way. The phasing of curriculum flexibility according to the needs of individual schools also meant that the authority was able to provide the necessary physical and financial resources to the schools. If a greater number of schools in the authority had been involved it might not have been possible to provide the level of support that was available to the small number of volunteer schools. The headteachers in the schools involved in the early development of curriculum flexibility are now able to offer support to colleagues in other schools who are embarking on change, supplementing the support available from authority personnel.

The participative, consultative approach to implementing change taken by the authority appears to have been modelled by the five schools. The documentation collected suggests that, in general, teachers, pupils and parents have been consulted. New curriculum structures have been discussed and models have been tested and reviewed. This approach is likely to contribute to fostering a shared sense of responsibility for the development of curriculum flexibility and is less likely to be met with resistance.

The analysis of the interview data suggested that the Quality and Support Services worked on developing the infrastructure for the introduction of alternative courses in parallel with the development of the guidance document. Possible alternative curricula and the requirements for the development of vocational education were explored at authority level. Partnerships with local FE colleges were built to enable college staff to deliver courses in school and in some cases for pupils to undertake courses in college. The authority's role in developing the infrastructure to enable schools to deliver a range of alternative curriculum options was welcomed by the headteachers in the five schools. It was possible for changes to be implemented in some of the schools in conjunction with the publication of the policy document because much of the groundwork had already been carried out by the authority.

The methods used to support and encourage innovation in schools in relation to curriculum flexibility are also consistent with usual practice in the authority. On the whole, they have not been developed specifically to promote the Curriculum Flexibility Project. While some specific support was provided for timetabling to ensure that changes were not restricted by timetable arrangements, and for the development of alternative curricula as outlined above, most of the support and encouragement strategies identified during this evaluation form part of the wider policy of raising achievement and meeting the needs of individual pupils. Regular meetings and conferences are arranged by the authorities in order to provide a platform for the exchange of information and to provide opportunities to test new ideas amongst peers. The strategy of inviting high profile speakers to conferences highlights the importance that the authority places on the development of new ideas in learning and

teaching. This suggests that the authority places importance on both pupils' and teachers' learning. The wider North Lanarkshire policy context and the systems that they have in place to support and encourage innovation would have to be taken into account if other local authorities wish to adopt a similar model of implementation for curriculum flexibility.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions are drawn from the range of data collected (local authority and school documentation, local authority personnel and headteacher interviews, teacher and pupil group interviews, pupil, teacher and parent questionnaires and local authority statistical data on attainment, attendance and exclusion). The main source(s) of evidence on which each particular conclusion is based is/are indicated in brackets after each point.

Aim 1

To assess the overall impact of the guidance from the local authority on teachers, pupils and parents in the five named schools and identify what, if any, improvements it has made to attainment, attendance, patterns of pupils choice, school ethos and teaching environment

- The guidance from the local authority has had an impact on the curriculum structure in all five schools. The schools were able to implement changes within the framework of the guidance at their own pace and according to the needs of their pupils. Consequently, the extent of the impact of the guidance differed in the five schools. *(School documentation, pupil and teacher questionnaires, headteacher, teacher and pupil interviews)*
- Improvements in the patterns of pupil choice are evident in all five schools. However, the results show that the two schools that have been involved in implementing curriculum flexibility over the longest period and have introduced the greatest number of alternative courses met with greater pupil, parent and teacher satisfaction than the other three schools. *(School documentation, pupil, teacher and parent questionnaires)*
- Pupils' satisfaction with subject choice generally declined from S2 to S3 to S5, with pupils in S5 being least satisfied with the choices available. *(Pupil questionnaire and pupil interviews)*
- The majority of pupils suggested that modern languages should be optional. However, they also indicated that they wanted greater choice in the languages on offer in school. *(Pupil questionnaire and pupil interviews)*
- Almost a quarter of all S5 pupils involved in the evaluation were dissatisfied with maths. Further investigation indicated that many thought that maths was too hard. This is a surprising result as maths is not compulsory at S5 in two of the five schools and it is on offer at different levels of study. Further investigation is needed to understand the pupils' concerns with maths. *(Pupil questionnaire and pupil interviews)*
- The greatest change in the curriculum structure appears to have taken place at S3, with more alternative/vocational courses on offer and more freedom in subject choice. There has been an increase in the levels of study possible in S3 – S6 in all five schools, although the extent of the increase varies. *(School documentation, pupil and teacher questionnaires, headteacher, teacher and pupil interviews)*
- The pupils in all five schools appear to take responsibility for making decisions regarding subject choice. The results show that parents are also influential. Consequently, it is important that pupils and their parents have appropriate information to ensure that informed choices are made. *(Pupil questionnaire, pupil interviews)*

- To ensure that an increase in subject choice and greater freedom to follow curricular strengths does not reduce breadth and balance, adequate counselling is necessary. The results indicate that the pupils did not regard the Careers Service to be adequate.
(Pupil questionnaire, pupil interviews)
- There are a number of concurrent initiatives taking place at school and authority level that have similar aims to the Curriculum Flexibility Project. Therefore, it was not possible to make any direct or causal link between any improvements in attainment, attendance or school ethos and teaching environment and the Curriculum Flexibility Project.
(Local authority documentation, interviews with local authority personnel, headteachers and teachers)
- Schools should continue to be encouraged to seek new ways to identify and record attainment (as defined in the *Raising Achievement for All* report, North Lanarkshire, 1998).
(Local authority statistical data, interviews with local authority personnel, headteachers and teachers)

Aim 2

To identify the methods employed by the local authority in managing the diversity of approaches within its schools and assessing the effectiveness of these methods

- The guidance provided a framework that on the one hand gave schools parameters to work to and, on the other hand, gave them freedom to introduce change according to their own needs and at their own pace. This led to gradual change in a small number of schools that allowed the authority to manage the diversity of approaches.
(Local authority and school documentation, interviews with local authority personnel and headteachers)
- The authority strategy of inviting volunteer schools to implement alternative/vocational courses allowed them to pilot and assess new ideas and approaches with a manageable number of schools in the initial stages. This approach appears to have been effective.
(Interviews with local authority personnel and headteachers)
- The small number of schools involved at the outset of the project meant that the authority was able to offer them adequate physical and financial support, which might not have been possible if more schools had been involved.
(Interviews with local authority personnel and headteachers)

Aim 3

To identify the approaches taken by the local authority in providing support and encouraging innovation in schools and assessing the effectiveness of these approaches

- The approaches taken to support and encourage innovation were consistent with the way the authority would work with schools on any initiative. They had not been developed specifically for the Curriculum Flexibility Project.
(Interviews with local authority personnel and headteachers)
- A participative, consultative approach was taken by the authority, involving schools and headteachers in the development of the guidance. This meant that the schools generally felt a sense of ownership of the guidance and had a greater commitment to implementing change. The schools did not feel that change had been forced on

them. The headteachers described the changes as evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

(Interviews with local authority personnel and headteachers)

- Support was offered for timetabling and for developing the infrastructure to run alternative/vocational courses on- and off-site. Financial support was provided in some cases to the schools to create the facilities necessary for vocational courses.
(Interviews with local authority personnel and headteachers)
- The evidence indicates that headteachers and teachers were satisfied with the level of support that they received from Quality and Support Services personnel in the implementation of curriculum flexibility.
(Interviews with headteachers and teachers, teacher questionnaires)
- The results showed that a number of different activities/initiatives were arranged by the authority to encourage and support innovation. These included headteacher/teacher meetings and conferences.
(Interviews with local authority personnel and headteachers)
- Conferences and meetings were also arranged with pupils and parents.
(Interviews with local authority personnel, headteachers and pupils)
- The positive comments from the schools indicated that the authority's approaches to provide support and encourage innovation were effective.
(Interviews with headteachers and teachers, teacher questionnaires)

Aim 4

To assess the local authority system for monitoring achievement of the project aims, and similarly the ability to be aware of problems with schools' ability to take forward the main ideas outlined in the guidance.

- Both the local authority personnel and the headteachers indicated that monitoring the aims of the Curriculum Flexibility Project was difficult.
(Interviews with local authority personnel and headteachers)
- There appeared to be no systematic processes at local authority or school level to specifically monitor all the aims of the Curriculum Flexibility Project.
(Interviews with local authority personnel, headteachers and teachers)
- The evidence suggests that progress in implementing curriculum flexibility is included in the authority's regular review process and general contact with schools. This review process will give the authority an overview of progress in the development of curriculum flexibility in each school, but it is unlikely to result in detailed information regarding the impact of all the project aims.
(Interviews with local authority personnel and headteachers)
- While there was no monitoring process to provide details of the achievement of the specific project aims, the evidence suggests that authority personnel were aware of the challenges that face schools in the development of curriculum flexibility. The authority was aware of the impact on staffing (eg surplus of modern language teachers), the need to develop facilities for vocational courses, the lack of expertise in schools to deliver vocational courses and the difficulties relating to using non GTC registered FE staff in school, the transport issues associated with sharing accommodation and the impact on class sizes when offering different levels of study. Local authority personnel indicated that steps were being taken to address some of these challenges.
(Interviews with local authority personnel)

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Appendix 1: Sample pupil questionnaire item

(28) The school offers a good range of subjects			
<input type="checkbox"/>	True		Very important <input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Mostly true		Important <input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Hardly true		Not very important <input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Not true		Not important <input type="checkbox"/>

Appendix 2

Table 19: Influences on subject choice by stage (whole sample)

Influence	All (1663)	S2 (673)	S3 (647)	S5 (343)
Myself	84.5	80.5	84.4	92.7
Parents or carers	57.4	62.0	59.5	44.6
Teachers	14.9	15.5	14.7	14.3
University/college requirements	13.3	9.8	11.4	5.8
Friends	9.6	8.0	10.5	29.2
Careers Service	6.3	5.1	7.6	6.1

Table 20: Influences on subject choice by gender and stage

Influence	All		S2		S3		S5	
	m (764) %	f (836) %	m (302) %	f (341) %	m (298) %	f (318) %	m (164) %	f (177) %
Myself	88.4	84.7	83.4	82.4	88.3	84.9	97.6	88.7
Parents or carers	61.8	55.5	67.9	60.7	62.8	58.2	48.8	40.7
Teachers	12.2	17.8	11.9	19.6	12.4	17.0	12.2	15.8
Friends	10.2	9.4	10.6	10.0	11.4	11.9	7.3	4.0
University/college requirements	9.3	17.8	4.3	11.7	8.4	13.2	20.1	37.9
Careers Service	7.2	5.1	6.0	4.1	8.7	6.0	6.7	5.6

Table 21: Influences on subject choice – whole school responses

Influence	A (335) %	B (281) %	C (311) %	D (355) %	E (381) %
Myself	81.5	84.7	91.6	82.5	83.2
Parents or carers	58.8	51.6	63.7	58.6	54.3
Teachers	15.8	19.2	12.2	14.6	13.4
Friends	9.0	17.1	7.1	10.4	6.0
University/college requirements	11.0	13.2	11.9	14.4	15.7
Careers Service	6.3	7.1	3.2	5.9	8.4

Appendix 3: Aspects of flexibility and provision (for cohorts in survey)

S2	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
Introduction of S grade	No; being discussed	English	No; being discussed	No; being discussed	No; being discussed
Language	French only	French or German depending on what learned in primary school	French or German	French or German depending on what learned in primary school	French or Spanish

S3	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
Introduction of national qualifications	Biology and hospitality	English, maths, biology, chemistry, social subjects, fashion & textiles, hospitality (practical cookery)	Biology, physics and maths	Mathematics (Access 3)	English, mathematics, biology, chemistry and physics at Intermediate
English and mathematics	Compulsory	Compulsory	Compulsory	Compulsory	Compulsory
Languages and choice	Compulsory except by invitation. French only. Alternative of xL and Skillforce by invitation.	Compulsory except by invitation. French or German – follow on from S2. Alternative of Essential Skills for selected pupils.	Compulsory except by invitation. French or German – follow on from S2. Alternative of Essential skills or vocational subjects.	Compulsory except by invitation. French or German, with opportunity to start French or German as a second modern language, or Latin. Alternative of Successmaker	Not compulsory. Choice of French or Spanish or starting a new language (French or Spanish), or taking another subject. Possibility of doing 2 languages.
Sciences and choice	Biology, chemistry, physics, science. Two sciences possible. Alternative of Enterprise and ECDL - open to all pupils.	Biology, chemistry, physics. All do one; two possible.	Biology, chemistry, physics. All do one; two possible.	Biology, chemistry, physics, science. All do one; 2 or 3 possible (but not advised).	Biology, chemistry, physics. All do one; 2 or 3 possible.
Social subjects and choice	History, geography, business management, religious studies. All do one.	History, geography, modern studies. All do one, except those invited to do 'Social Subjects'.	History, geography, modern studies, religious studies. All do one, except those invited to do Essential skills.	Classical studies, history, geography, religious studies and xL. If they chose xL they must also name another subject – so in reality, xL is by selection.	History, geography, modern studies. All choose one. Two and three possible.

S3 continued	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
Other subjects	Technical and creative columns combined but choices checked to ensure breadth.	Three columns with a duplicates column to avoid elimination of subjects because of choice in another column	Technical and creative columns combined.	'Free choice' of 5 out of 16 subjects allowing for arts, technical, vocational and repeats from other columns.	Three from five columns that cover creative and technical and also repeat social subjects, sciences and languages.
Alternative curriculum	ECDL and Enterprise in place of science (open choice); xL and Skillforce instead of languages by invitation.	Essential skills by invitation; Social Subjects by invitation; hospitality (practical cookery), practical craft skills and enterprise by open choice.	Alternative to languages of Essential Skills or vocational subjects: beauty therapy, construction, hospitality, auto-engineering. Essential Skills instead of social subjects by invitation. Skillforce in elective column.	Successmaker instead of languages, by invitation. xL club instead of social subjects – selected pupils. Call centre training with college by open choice.	Child development and SVS – listed in 'creative' column.

S5	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
National qualifications	Most subjects	Most subjects	Most subjects	Most subjects	All subjects
English	Compulsory	Compulsory	Compulsory	Compulsory	Compulsory
Maths	Compulsory	Not compulsory	Compulsory	Not compulsory	Compulsory
<p>Note: in sections which follow the information is based on both school supplied data and responses from questionnaires. The basis of choice is not always clear so the data reported relate to what is being studied and the number of pupils who report studying the subjects. This gives an indication of the 'strength' of the subject groupings within the schools. NB: these numbers are from pupil responses on the questionnaire; actual numbers in the school are likely to be higher.</p>					
Languages	French (12) and Latin (5)	Merged with social subjects in choices; seem to disappear.	French (3) German (2) – or college course instead of languages and others. Spanish as new subject (5) – in place of social subjects and others.	French (12) German (4) Russian (0) Latin (0)	French (6) Spanish (4)
Sciences	Biology (16) chemistry (13) physics (13)	Biology (23) chemistry (9) physics (7)	Biology (7) chemistry (7) physics (12)	Biology (25) chemistry (25) physics (23)	Biology (33) chemistry (26) physics (20)
Social subjects	Geography (5) history (6) RMPS (8)	History (14) geography (3) modern studies (18) RMPS (5)	History (2) geography (5) modern studies (17) (or Spanish as new language)	History (4) geography (10) classical studies (5)	History (26) geography (29) modern studies (9)

S5 continued	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
Other subjects	Highest numbers in Info systems (23), admin (15), art & design (15), craft & design (15) and music (16). Rest <10	Highest numbers in admin (22), information systems (16) and PE (15) art & design (14), craft & design (12). Smaller groups for music, hospitality (practical cookery or creative cake production), and travel and tourism (<10)	Highest numbers in admin (20), graphic communication (14) and music (14). Smaller groups for accounting, craft & design, drama, health and food, hospitality, info systems and most of alternative subjects. (<10).	Highest numbers in art & design (24) and computing (22). Smaller groups for accounts, admin, business management, craft and design, drama, graphic communication, music and alternative subjects. (<10)	Highest numbers in art & design (18); admin (11); all other subjects < 10.
Alternative curriculum – what is on offer	<p>'Skill-based' courses: paired reading; practical craft skills; travel and tourism; enterprise.</p> <p>College courses (eg, auto-engineering, electrical engineering, construction, care in the community, beauty therapy, sport and leisure).</p>	PE performance units; debating skills; peer tutoring; hospitality (practical cookery or creative cake production), travel and tourism.	<p>For those not doing higher English or Maths: PE, RE, photography, WP, textiles & cake decoration.</p> <p>For all to choose from: PE, photography, travel & tourism, technical.</p> <p>College courses (eg, caring, call centre skills, drama/dance, hospitality) instead of one column that included languages and other subjects.</p>	Practical craft skills, travel and tourism and technological studies.	Hospitality, parentcraft, practical craft skills and enterprise.