



Department
for Education

Strategic school improvement fund: process evaluation of round one (summer 2017)

Research report by Aldaba

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Common terms

Academy: An academy is a state funded school in England which is directly funded by the Department for Education and independent of local authority control. Multi-academy trusts include a number of schools governed by a single trust and a single board of trustees.¹

Applicant: In the context of the Strategic School Improvement Fund, the organisation which submits the application, and which will receive and be accountable for, the grant funding, and achievement of the stated improvement outcomes. Applicants are accountable for quality assuring the providers and the overall provision. The applicant is a teaching school, a local authority, or a multi-academy trust.

Free school: Free schools are funded by the government but are not run by the local council. They have more control over how they do things. They cannot use academic selection processes like a grammar school. They are a type of academy.²

Maintained school: State school maintained or overseen by a local authority.³

Multi-academy trust: See 'academy'.

National College for Teaching and Leadership: Executive agency sponsored by the Department for Education which aims to improve academic standards by recruiting and developing a workforce to meet the needs of the school system, and to help schools to help each other to improve. It works towards developing a 0 to 18 education system which will allow new ways of working to support the best schools, headteachers, and teachers to lead improvements in the quality and training of all school staff.⁴

National leader of education: Strong school leaders who have experience of effectively supporting schools in challenging circumstances. They work alongside teaching schools and other system leaders to provide high quality support to those who need it most.⁵

¹ Gov.uk (2016), Convert to an academy: guide to schools, available at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/convert-to-an-academy-information-for-schools/1-before-you-apply> ; Gov.uk, Types of schools, available at <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school/academies> ; all hyperlinks in this report were accessed on 21 December 2017

² Gov.uk, Types of schools, available at <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school/free-schools>

³ New Schools Networks (2015), Comparison of different types of schools: a guide to schools in England, available at <http://www.newschoolsnetwork.org/sites/default/files/files/pdf/Differences%20across%20school%20types.pdf>

⁴ Gov.uk, National College for Teaching and Leadership, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/national-college-for-teaching-and-leadership>

⁵ Gov.uk (2017), National leaders of education: a guide for potential applicants, available at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-leaders-of-education-a-guide-for-potential-applicants>

Opportunity areas: Areas identified as most challenged when it comes to social mobility. Through funding from the Department for Education, they will see local partnerships formed with early years providers, schools, colleges, universities, businesses, charities and local authorities to ensure all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential.⁶

Pre-election restrictions: Specific restrictions apply to the activity of civil servants during the period of time immediately before elections or referendums. This is not regulated by statute, but governed by conventions based largely on the Civil Service Code. The terms ‘purdah’ or ‘period of sensitivity’ are also used.⁷

Provider: In the context of the Strategic School Improvement Fund, the organisation(s) that delivers the improvement activities set out in the application. Providers can be any organisation, such as a school, local authority, university or charity; however, it is the applicant’s responsibility to quality assure all provision.

Regional School Commissioners: Civil servants employed by the Department for Education who are accountable to the National Schools Commissioner and work with school leaders to take action in underperforming schools. Each of them is supported by a headteacher board, which are made up of experienced academy headteachers and other sector leaders. Their main responsibilities on behalf of the Secretary of State and the Department for Education include: taking action where academies and free schools are underperforming; intervening in academies where governance is inadequate; deciding on applications from local-authority-maintained schools to convert to academy status; and improving underperforming maintained schools by providing them with support from a strong sponsor. There are eight Regional School Commissioners: East of England and North-East London; East Midlands and the Humber; Lancashire and West Yorkshire; North of England; North-West London and South-Central England; South-East England and South London; South-West England; and West Midlands.⁸ In this report, references to ‘DfE regional offices’ include Regional School Commissioners’ offices.

Supported school: In the context of the Strategic School Improvement Fund, schools that are the recipients of improvement support funded through applications. The majority of these will meet one or more of the fund’s eligibility criteria.

⁶ Gov.uk (2016), Social mobility package unveiled by Education Secretary, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/social-mobility-package-unveiled-by-education-secretary>

⁷ House of Commons Library (2017), ‘Purdah’ before elections and referendums, available at <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN05262>

⁸ Gov.uk, Schools Commissioners Group: about us, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/schools-commissioners-group/about>

Teaching school: Centres of excellence that take on a more focused role that prioritises coordinating and delivering high quality school based initial teacher training; providing high quality school to school support to spread excellent practice, particularly to schools that need it most; and providing evidence based professional and leadership development for teachers and leaders across their network.⁹

Teaching Schools Council: It represents and acts as an ambassador for teaching schools. Its aims include to support system improvement by ensuring teaching schools play a full role in initial teacher education, leadership development, and school to school support, particularly in areas of highest disadvantage. Its national and regional network includes the North-West, North-East, Yorkshire and the Humber, West Midlands, East Midlands, East of England, London, South-West, and South-East. These are changing to align with Department for Education regions.¹⁰

⁹ Gov.uk (2016), Teaching schools and system leaders: get support for you and your school, available at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/system-leaders-who-they-are-and-what-they-do>

¹⁰ Teaching Schools Council, A self improving school-led system, available at <https://www.tscouncil.org.uk/about/>

Executive summary

The strategic fund

1. The £140 million Strategic School Improvement Fund ('the strategic fund') was announced by the Department for Education ('the department') in November 2016. It is a grant to support primary, secondary, middle, all through, alternative provision and special academies and maintained schools, and pupil referral units. It is intended to further build a school-led system, and aims to target resources at the schools most in need to improve school performance and pupil attainment; to help them use their resources most effectively, and to deliver more good school places.¹¹
2. Round one of the strategic fund opened on 21 April 2017, and closed for applications on 23 June 2017. Approximately 200 applications were submitted, with individual application values ranging between £100,000 and £500,000 for medium to long term improvement support starting and finishing sometime between September 2017 and March 2019.

How it was designed to work

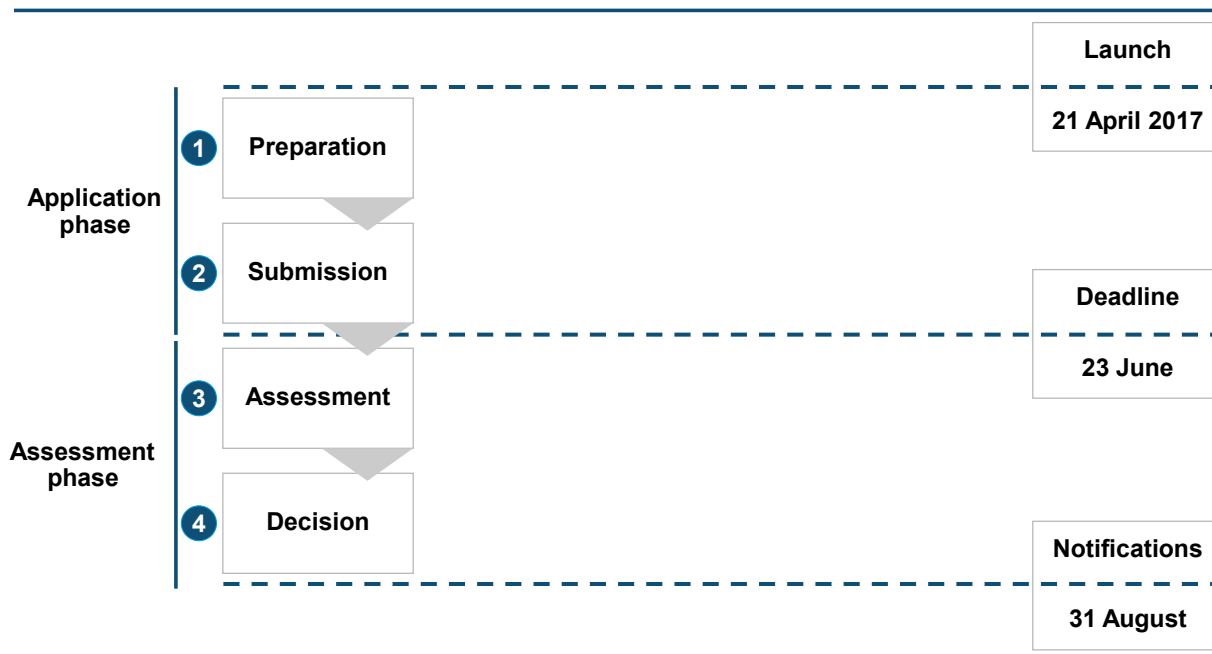
3. As shown in figure 1, below, the first step was for applicants to prepare their applications. Applicants could be designated teaching schools, multi-academy trusts, or local authorities. They were required to secure the collaboration of providers, such as teaching schools and national leaders of education, which in turn were required to support a minimum of four schools, also referred to as 'supported schools'.
4. The department invited teaching schools to notify the Teaching Schools Council, and multi-academy trusts to notify their DfE regional offices, of their intention to apply for the strategic fund. Applicants could use guidance provided by the Education Endowment Foundation on evidence-based interventions¹².
5. The second step was to submit the applications in time for the 23 June 2017 deadline. The third step was for the department to assess the applications. The assessment followed the guidance published on gov.uk, which is available in appendix 2.

¹¹ Gov.uk (2017), Guidance: Strategic School Improvement Fund, available at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/strategic-school-improvement-fund>

¹² This was guidance produced by the Education Endowment Foundation independently for the sector, which did not form an official part of the strategic fund; Education Endowment Foundation (2017), Using evidence in applications to the Strategic School Improvement Fund, available at https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Evaluation/Implementation/EEF_SSIF_guidance_May_2017.pdf

6. Finally, the fourth step was for the department to provide an Expert Investment Board with recommendations on funding and for this board to make final recommendations to ministers, with outcomes communicated to applicants by 31 August 2017.

Figure 1 Overview of process steps



Source: Aldaba analysis

The evaluation

7. The aim of this report is to evaluate the process followed by the department, the applicants, and other stakeholders as part of round one of applications to the strategic fund. The key aims of the evaluation, as set by the department, are to:
 - provide insight into how, and to what extent stakeholders worked together to agree on improvement needs for the area;
 - understand any barriers or challenges that stakeholders faced in working together, and how they overcame them;
 - identify what worked well and what was problematic;
 - understand the key information sources used to identify schools in need of support; and
 - identify any 'quick wins' for rounds two and three that can make the process less burdensome, and explore if and how these could be replicated in other areas.

Sources and methods

8. We undertook a review of documents relevant to the process, including the application assessment guidance produced internally by the department. Based on this review, we produced an interview questionnaire to obtain information on how the process worked in practice, and views on accountability, resources, and overall fitness for purpose. We interviewed 22 individuals across the department and the Teaching Schools Council.
9. Shortly after the application submission deadline of 23 June 2017, we invited all 197 applicants to answer a survey. Of these, 128 responded to the survey. In turn, of the 128 respondents, 111 completed all the questions. This resulted in a response rate of 56%.

Conclusions

10. It was the first time that the department and all the other stakeholders participated in a funding application process like this, particularly in relation to the levels of funding, and the number of organisations per application. The intention to further build a school-led system based on collaborations of networks of schools, rather than individual schools, was also new.
11. Whilst not formally designed as such, round one of the process worked as a pilot. This means that it was reasonable to expect certain limitations, although it was also reasonable to expect a successful delivery of the process as a whole.
12. The announcement of the general election to be held on 8 June 2017 triggered pre-election restrictions which inevitably had a negative impact on the process. The department was unable to undertake any regional activity which might unduly influence the outcome of the election. Certain planned activities could not go ahead, including 'roadshows' and wider communications to guide applicants as to what constituted good evidence based applications.
13. In addition, the department was not able to begin the process of using the sub-regional improvement boards for SSIF, that had been planned as a key element of identifying need and developing effective applications. However, in our expert view, the department will be missing an important opportunity if it assumes that pre-election restrictions were solely responsible for most of the limitations identified as part of this evaluation.
14. Round one contributed to turning the intention to further build a school-led system into a reality. We have evidence that applicants, providers, and supported schools collaborated. They perceived their collaborations as overall positive. This was also the

case, although to a lesser extent, in relation to the support that they received from the DfE regional and Teaching Schools Council offices.

15. Inevitably, there was variation across regions. Certain practices in certain regions, whilst not necessarily representative of the whole process, do raise important concerns in relation to the fairness and transparency with which funds were allocated as part of round one. These include certain applicants being in a better position to succeed as a result of receiving support or resources to prepare applications that other applicants did not know were available or how to access. See paragraph 100.
16. The assessments of the applications built on the right principles and processes. The department defined the application assessor roles to an acceptable level of detail, and provided these roles with adequate levels of support, including in terms of guidance and inputs from other staff available at the department. This may serve as a model for changes elsewhere in the process.
17. Two thirds of applicants responding to the survey agreed that it was easy to access sources of information to prepare the applications. Of those that did not, eligible schools was the area most commonly identified as being difficult to find information about.
18. In our expert view, overall, the process for round one demonstrated that all the building blocks are in place to keep improving and progressing towards a successful fulfilment of the stated aims of the strategic fund. However, the findings produced as part of this report cannot support the conclusion that the process for round one was entirely fit for purpose, and so we cannot be sure that resources were targeted at the schools most in need of improving school performance and pupil attainment.
19. Based on emerging early findings from the research, the department has already implemented changes in subsequent rounds which address some of the issues highlighted in this report., Recommendations on preparation and submission of applications
 - **Finding 1:** Based on the published application guidance, those applicants who chose not to notify either the DfE regional offices or the Teaching Schools Council offices were not necessarily aware of the level of support they were missing. This might have had implications in terms of fairness and transparency.
Recommendation 1: The application guidance published by the department could be more explicit as to how potential applicants should notify the DfE regional, and Teaching Schools Council offices of their intention to submit an application. An option might be to require compulsory notification to just one of the two organisations, to avoid unnecessary duplication.
 - **Finding 2:** The engagement of DfE regional offices in the application phase of the process was not wholly consistent.

Recommendation 2: The process could be clarified, and structured, including how the support from DfE regional offices differs from that of Teaching Schools Council representatives. Examples of clarifications include how to disseminate the existence of the strategic fund and application guidance; identify and communicate regional priorities based on analysis; support the production of applications; and broker the relationships between applicants, providers, and supported schools as part of specific applications.

- **Finding 3:** Sifting draft applications, including through formal expression of interest processes, did not happen everywhere, which raises concerns in relation to fairness and transparency. Applicants who were short-listed during sifting processes were in a better position to decide how to progress towards a final application, including in some cases receiving additional resource to prepare the final application.

Recommendation 3: The department could consider whether a formal expression of interest process should be introduced. In addition, the department could produce guidance for the Teaching Schools Council representatives to make decisions on how to allocate additional resource to applicants consistently across all regions.

- **Finding 4:** The role of regional and sub-regional stakeholders such as headteacher boards, maths hubs, and research schools was not part of the application guidance produced by the department.

Recommendation 4: Given the potential that these stakeholders have for contributing to the identification of needs and priorities, the department could consider the production of guidance on how they should get involved in the preparation of applications. This could be high-level guidance because the existence and level of maturity of these stakeholders vary considerably depending on the region.

- **Finding 5:** Whilst round one worked to a large extent as a pilot, the applicant survey revealed some practical changes, which would require detailed attention from the department.

Recommendation 5: These include more time to produce the applications; and improving the application form, its accompanying guidance, and online submission facility. The application form might also benefit from improving the applicants' ability to articulate the link between proposed interventions and expected outputs and outcomes, also referred to as 'theory of change'.

Recommendations on assessments and decisions

- **Finding 6:** Applicants did not have access to the full details of the application assessment criteria when they were preparing their applications. There are concerns this might have affected fairness and transparency.

Recommendation 6: The department could provide the full details of the application assessment criteria so that applicants can take them into consideration while preparing their applications.

- **Finding 7:** Drawing on the expertise of DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives is valuable in the assessment phase. However, if this is not done consistently and in a controlled manner, the department runs the risk of an inconsistent level of advice for the assessment process.

Recommendation 7: The department could consider how its DfE regional offices and Teaching Schools Council offices support the application and assessment phases of the process in a systematic, fair, and transparent way.

- **Finding 8:** The department chose an application assessment model that rested on individual application assessors, who drew on support from a wide range of stakeholders.

Recommendation 8: Whilst this did not come from interviews, in our expert view, the department could consider independent reviews of the same application by two or more assessors, and develop a process to address instances where the independent reviews result in inconsistent scores. This could be done on a sample basis, if double reviewing the entirety of the applications is not possible.

Recommendations on accountabilities, roles and responsibilities

- **Finding 9:** There are limited role descriptions, and accountability frameworks, specifically for the process.

Recommendation 9: The department could consider whether our recommendations around the design of the process, earlier in this report, coupled with the wider accountability frameworks currently in place, provide the evidence and processes it requires to hold those responsible to account for the success of the process.

- **Finding 10:** There are potential risks around conflicts of interest, particularly in relation to DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council offices during the assessments.

Recommendation 10: Whilst the department is clear that there are conflict of interest protocols in place for the strategic fund, the interviews suggest more clarity on roles and responsibilities would help. Similarly to the declarations of conflicts of interest required from applicants, the department could consider a similar requirement in relation to those involved in the assessments. This could include a record of the applications on which staff are sighted throughout the process, especially applications that are still in draft form prior to formal submission.¹³

- **Finding 11:** There are opportunities to improve levels of awareness and understanding around some key documents.

Recommendation 11: The department could consider options to improve staff's understanding of eligibility criteria for supported schools; application forms; and application assessment criteria, and guidance; including for example through presentations and training sessions. Seeing the process from the perspective of the applicant may be a useful way of approaching these activities.

- **Finding 12:** Given the volume of applications, relying on meetings, and email and telephone exchanges is unlikely to result in an effective information management system.

Recommendation 12: The department could consider the development of an information management system that facilitates the assessment of the submitted applications. The aim should be to add transparency to how each organisation,

¹³ The department has conflicts of interest protocols in place which apply to the strategic fund. It considers that these address recommendation 10.

including DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives, contribute to the process.¹⁴

20. Section 3 of this report provides additional changes recommended by the interviewees who participated in the research.

¹⁴ Only round one of the strategic fund is within the scope of this report. The department considers that it has taken actions to address the recommendations as part of round two, which took place from September 2017. This includes the introduction of sub-regional improvement boards.

Section 1: Introduction

Educational Excellence Everywhere

21. In March 2016, the white paper ‘Educational Excellence Everywhere’ set out the government’s plans to ensure that every child and young person can access world class provision, achieving to the best of his or her ability regardless of location, prior attainment and background. The white paper explained the importance of collaborations between schools of all types as part of clusters.¹⁵
22. The School-to-School Support Fund was first launched in 2014. The aim was for teaching schools, and national leaders of education to apply for grants of up to £20,000 to provide direct support to other schools to raise their standards, or coordinate and oversee high quality support to a number of schools, through a number of system leaders. The last round of funding applications closed in November 2016.¹⁶

The strategic fund

23. The £140 million Strategic School Improvement Fund (‘the strategic fund’) was announced by the Department for Education (‘the department’) in November 2016. It is a fund to support primary, secondary, middle, all through, alternative provision and special academies and maintained schools, and pupil referral units. It is intended to further build a school-led system, and aims to target resources at the schools most in need to improve school performance and pupil attainment; to help them use their resources most effectively, and to deliver more good school places.¹⁷
24. The aim of the strategic fund is to support school improvement activities such as leadership, governance, teaching methods and approaches, and financial health and efficiency. It is not intended to support activities already funded by the Department through other programmes.
25. Round one of the strategic fund opened on 21 April 2017, and closed for applications on 23 June 2017. The department communicated its decisions in August 2017. Approximately 200 applications were submitted, with individual

¹⁵ Department for Education (2016), Educational Excellence Everywhere, available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/508447/Educational_Exc_ellence_Everywhere.pdf

¹⁶ Gov.uk (2016), School to school support fund, available at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/school-to-school-support-fund>

¹⁷ Gov.uk (2017), Guidance: Strategic School Improvement Fund, available at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/strategic-school-improvement-fund>

application values ranging between £100,000 and £500,000 for medium to long term improvement support starting and finishing sometime between September 2017 and March 2019.

26. In addition to round one, the department intends to offer between two and three rounds of the strategic fund in 2017-18 and 2018-19, with the majority of funding committed, but not paid in advance of need, to proposals received in 2017-18.

The process evaluation

27. The aim of this report is to evaluate the process followed by the department, the applicants, and other stakeholders as part of the first round of applications to the strategic fund. The starting point for the evaluation is 21 April 2017, once the process, including application forms, had been signed off and published by the department. The finishing point is August 2017, once the department signed off, and communicated its funding decisions.
28. As a result, the focus of the evaluation is on the preparation and assessment of the applications for the first round of the strategic fund. The work prior to 21 April 2017, the actual delivery of the successful applications from September 2017 onwards, and subsequent rounds are out of scope.
29. The key aims of the evaluation, as set by the department, are to:
- provide insight into how, and to what extent stakeholders worked together to agree on improvement needs for the area;
 - understand any barriers or challenges that stakeholders faced in working together, and how they overcame them;
 - identify what worked well and what was problematic;
 - understand the key information sources used to identify schools in need of support; and
 - identify any 'quick wins' for rounds two and three that can make the process less burdensome, and explore if and how these could be replicated in other areas.
30. To clarify, the evaluation does not aim to review the merits of the policy underlying the strategic fund, including whether the amount of funding and eligibility criteria to participate are appropriate. Similarly, whether the assessments of specific applications, including decisions to award funding, were accurate is out of the scope of the evaluation.

31. It is best practice to develop process evaluations on the basis of theories of change, which assess whether the logic linking the process and expected outcomes is sound. However, producing a theory of change is out of the scope of this report.

Sources and methods

32. We undertook a review of documents relevant to the process, including the application assessment guidance produced internally by the department. Based on this review, we produced an interview questionnaire to obtain information on how the process worked in practice, and views on accountability, resources, and overall fitness for purpose. We interviewed 22 individuals across the department and the Teaching Schools Council. Our findings in relation to application assessors cannot be taken to be representative of the whole population.
33. In this report, we summarise the themes identified through the interviews by using frequency references such as 'all', 'some', 'the majority' or 'a few interviewees'. However, given the qualitative nature, and small number of the interviews, these frequency references should be taken just as indications, rather than quantitative evidence. Quotes in inverted commas do not necessarily represent 'verbatim', word by word passages from the interviews.
34. Shortly after the application submission deadline of 23 June 2017, we invited all 197 applicants to participate in a survey. Of these, 128 responded to the survey. In turn, of the 128 respondents, 111 completed all the questions. This resulted in a complete response rate of 56%. Due to the anonymous nature of the survey, we were unable to establish whether the responses received are statistically representative of the whole population of applicants. **Appendix 1** provides further details of our sources and methods.

Pre-election and application submission facility

35. The process evaluation took place at the same time as the process itself. This meant that the facts and views included in this report were fresh in the memory of those who participated in the research. However, research participants did not have the benefit of hindsight when they provided the information.
36. There are two aspects of the process that attracted attention from research participants, and took up some of the limited time available to conduct the research:
 - The announcement of the general election for 8 June 2017 meant that communications from the department were constrained by pre-election restrictions. As a result, the department had to restrict some of the

communications that it had originally planned. Interviewees saw this as a major change in the plan which did not contribute positively to the process.

- The online facility that the department made available for applicants to submit their applications by the 23 June deadline suffered a number of technical difficulties, some of them arising only very shortly before the deadline, which resulted in applicants devoting some additional time to submitting the applications, and having to make rushed final decisions in terms of the information they chose to include in the applications.

37. If these two aspects had not been present so recently in the memory of research participants, there might have been greater opportunities to reflect, and share information on other aspects, which might be underrepresented, or not included in this report, simply because they were not drawn to our attention.

Expert judgement

38. Where we draw conclusions and recommendations based on our expert judgement, we make this explicit in the report so that it can be distinguished from the facts obtained directly from the sources of information.

Terminology note

39. We draw the reader's attention to the following terms, which look similar, but are different:

- Application guidance: instructions for applicants to prepare and submit the application forms, as provided in **appendix 2**.
- Application form: the form prepared and submitted by applicants, and assessed by assessors at the department, as provided in **appendix 3**.
- Application assessment guidance: the department's internal guidance for assessors to score the applications against the application assessment criteria.
- Eligibility criteria: the characteristics from which a school needs to meet at least one in order to become a supported school as part of an application, as described in **table 1**.

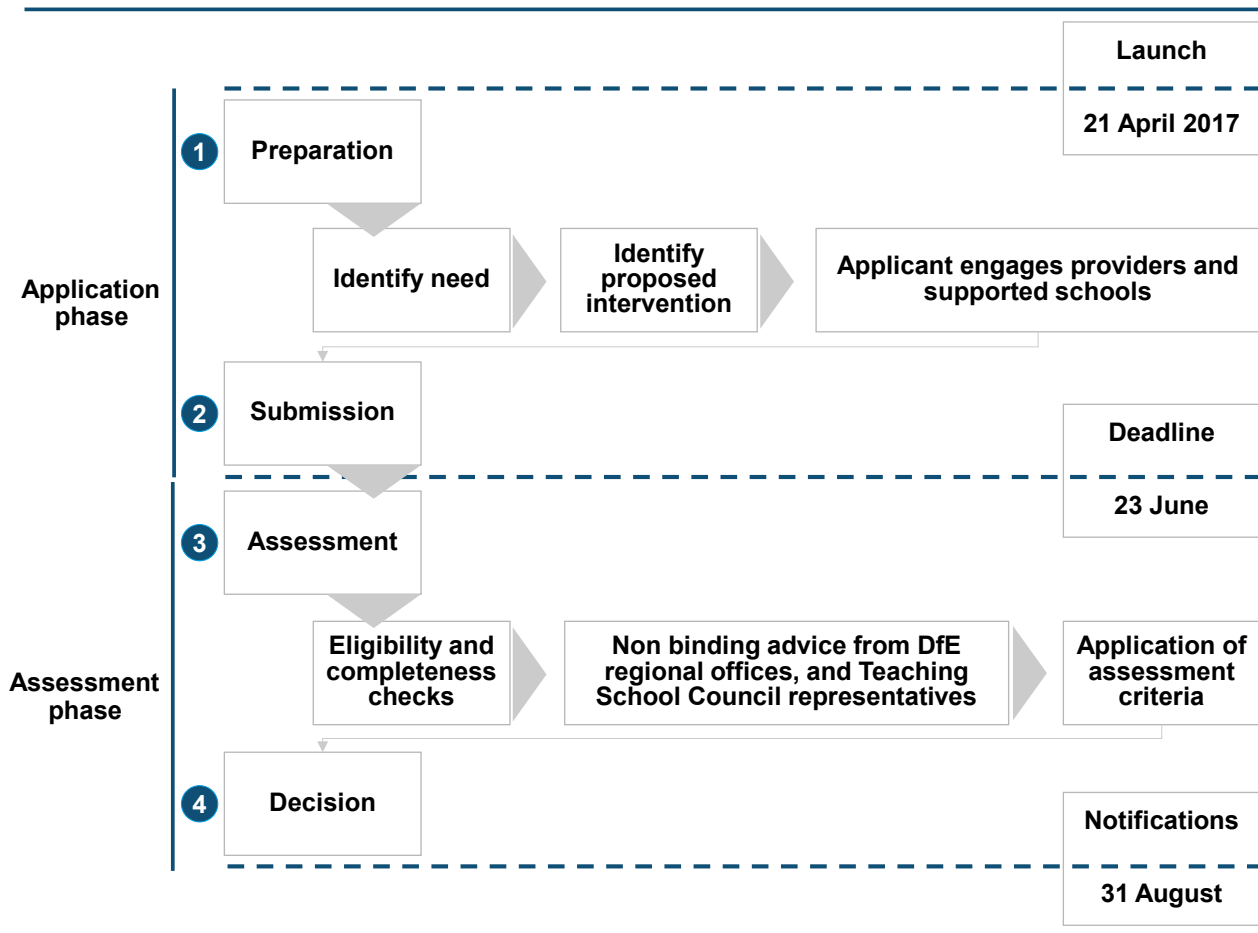
Section 2: How it was designed to work

40. The aim of this section is to describe how the process launched on 21 April 2017 was originally designed by the department. The information for this section came from our document review and interviews.

Overview

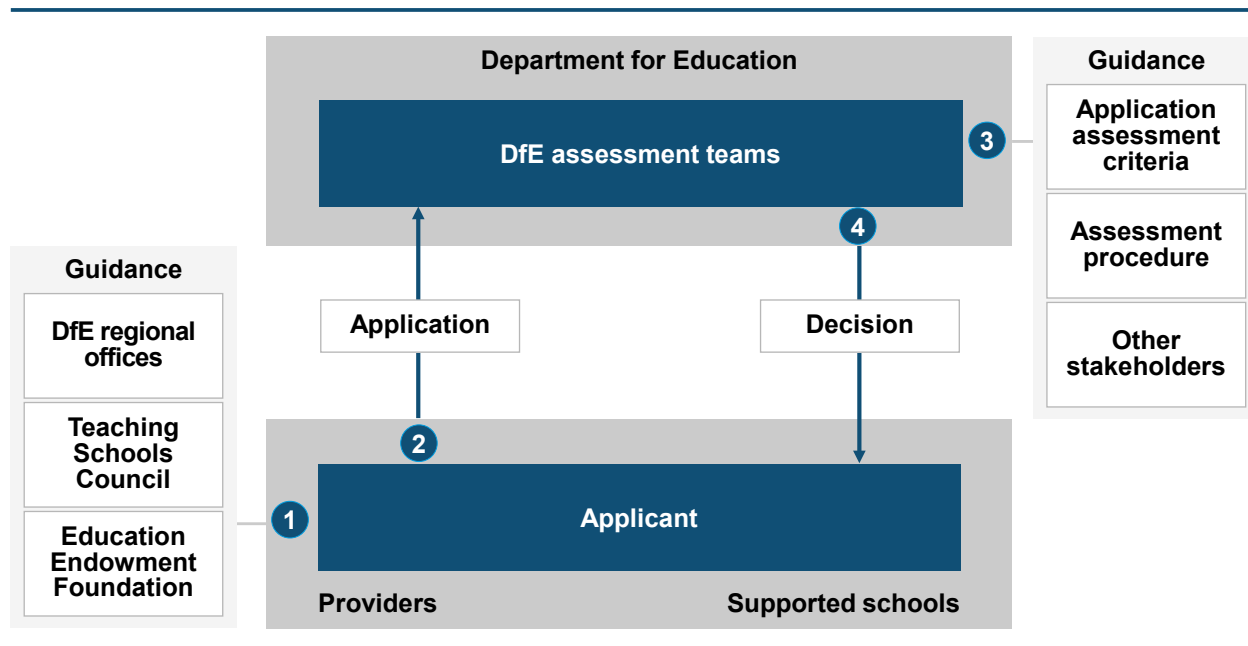
41. Figures 2 and 3, below, provide an overview of the process. They highlight the main steps and stakeholders, alongside the types of guidance and support on which they could draw to participate in the process. Later sections provide further details, beyond this initial overview.

Figure 2 Details of process steps



Source: Aldaba analysis

Figure 3 Process steps, key stakeholders, and guidance



Source: Aldaba analysis. Note: The only official guidance was that on gov.uk, also available in appendix 2. The Education Endowment Foundation guidance was independent and not part of the Strategic School Improvement Fund model.

42. The first step was for applicants to prepare their applications. Applicants could be designated teaching schools, multi-academy trusts, or local authorities. They were required to secure the collaboration of providers, such as teaching schools and national leaders of education, which in turn were required to support a minimum of four schools, also referred to as ‘supported schools’.
43. The department invited teaching schools to notify the Teaching Schools Council, and multi-academy trusts to notify their DfE regional offices, of their intention to apply for the strategic fund. Applicants could use guidance provided by the Education Endowment Foundation on evidence based interventions¹⁸.
44. The second step was to submit the applications in time for the 23 June 2017 deadline. The third step was for the department to assess the applications (‘the DfE assessment teams’). The assessment followed the guidance published on gov.uk, which is available in **appendix 2**, including support from internal teams at the

¹⁸ This was guidance produced by the Education Endowment Foundation independently for the sector, which did not form an official part of the strategic fund; Education Endowment Foundation (2017), Using evidence in applications to the Strategic School Improvement Fund, available at https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Evaluation/Implementation/EEF_SSIF_guidance_May_2017.pdf

department, such as the DfE regional offices; the Teaching Schools Council; and other stakeholders.

45. Finally, the fourth step was for the department to provide an Expert Investment Board with recommendations on funding and for this board to make final recommendations to ministers, with outcomes communicated to applicants by 31 August 2017.

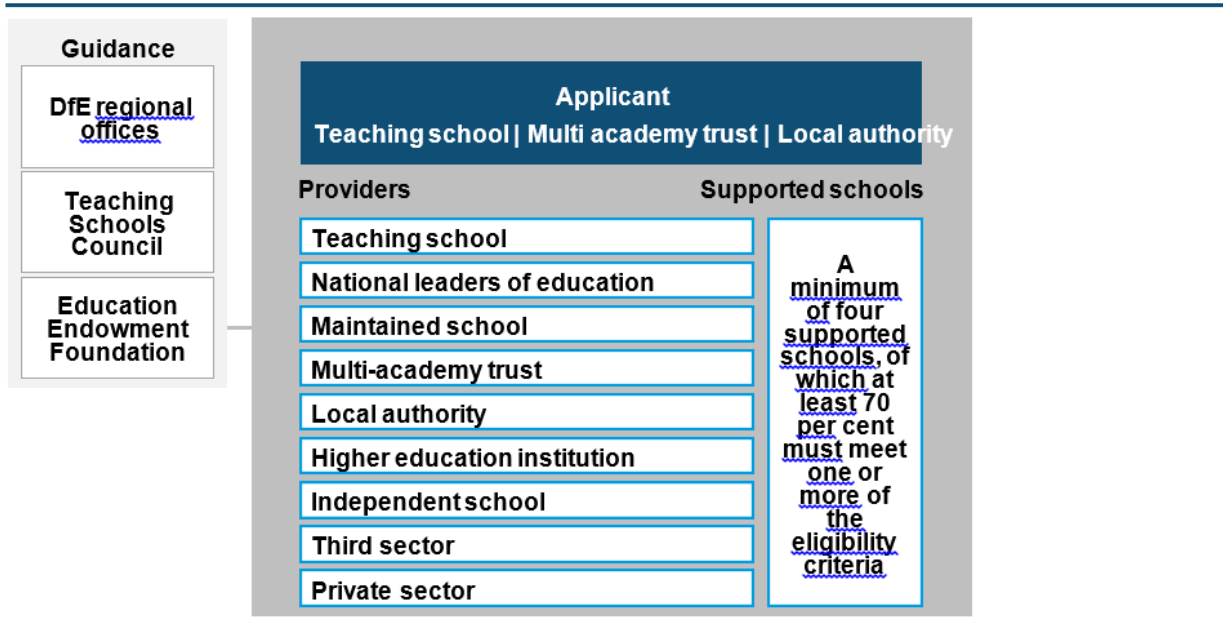
Application phase

46. Applicants could be designated teaching schools, multi-academy trusts, or local authorities. Applications were made available through the Strategic School Improvement Fund website. **Appendix 2** provides the application guidance, and **appendix 3** provides the application form as published on 21 April 2017.
47. The department stated that applications should:
 - address local improvement priorities to benefit multiple schools (minimum of four schools per application);
 - be of a scale and nature that brings about sustainable improvement in school standards and performance across an area, phase or group of schools;
 - be supported by evidence that demonstrates why proposed interventions are expected to drive up standards in schools; and
 - set out a clear rationale for why the improvement is necessary, and detail what activities will be undertaken by which providers, and the expected costs, outputs and outcomes.
48. Senior responsible officers in the applicant organisations ratified the applications. They needed to be in a position to commit their organisations to be accountable to the department for the correct use of the funding and delivery of the outcomes set out in the application.
49. **Figure 4**, below, shows the types of providers that applicants could involve in their proposed interventions. There was a requirement for providers to support a minimum of four schools, also referred to as ‘supported schools’, of which at least 70% had to meet one or more of the eligibility criteria set out in **table 1**, below.
50. Eligible schools were also those which were underperforming, in line with the schools causing concern guidance¹⁹, as well as schools at risk of doing so. Special schools might meet one or more of the criteria because they catered for pupils who

¹⁹ Gov.uk (2016), Schools causing concern, available at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/schools-causing-concern--2>

were working at lower key stage levels or making less rapid progress than their mainstream educated peers. Although such schools might not necessarily be at risk of underperforming, they were able to benefit from the strategic fund through applications which could include only other special schools or applications which included special and mainstream schools. Where applications were solely in support of special schools, there might be exceptions to the 70% threshold for schools meeting one or more of the eligibility criteria.

Figure 4 Application phase



Source: Aldaba analysis. Note: The only official guidance was that on gov.uk, also available in appendix 2. The Education Endowment Foundation guidance was independent and not part of the Strategic School Improvement Fund model.

Table 1 Eligibility criteria

Reference	Criteria
E1	Schools in opportunity areas
E2	Schools rated inadequate in latest inspection
E3	Schools that meet the coasting definition or schools that are below the floor standard based on their published data
E4	Schools rated requires improvement in 2 consecutive Ofsted inspections
E5	Schools received a warning notice over the past 3 years
E6	Schools not meeting the KS5 minimum standards
E7	Progress 8 score overall less than -0.25
E8	Schools meet both of these criteria: 1) There are more than 35 disadvantaged pupils in the school, and 2) Progress 8 score for disadvantaged pupils in the school is less than -0.25 overall
E9	Schools meet both of these criteria: 1) There are more than 35 disadvantaged pupils in the school, and 2) The gap between disadvantaged pupils and non-disadvantaged pupils nationally for Progress 8 scores is less than -0.25 (Please note these are negative numbers so a score that is less than -2.5 would, for example, be -3.5 or -5.5)
E10	Schools meet both of these criteria: 1) Less than 85% of pupils overall achieve expected standard in reading, writing and maths, and 2) At least one of the following is true: i) Reading progress is less than -2.5 , ii) Writing progress is less than -3.5, iii) Maths progress is less than -2.5
E11	Schools meet all of these criteria: 1) There are more than 10 disadvantaged pupils in the school, 2) Less than 85% of disadvantaged pupils in the school achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and maths, and 3) At least one of the following is true: i) Reading progress is less than -2.5, ii) Writing progress is less than -3.5, iii) Maths progress is less than -2.5
E12	Schools meet both of these criteria: 1) There are more than 10 disadvantaged pupils in the school, and 2) At least one of the following is true: i) The gap between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally for reading is less than -2.5, ii) The gap between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally for writing is less than -3.5, iii) The gap between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils nationally for maths is less than -2.5 (Please note these are negative numbers so a score that is less than -2.5 would, for example, be -3.5 or -5.5)
E13	KS5 academic progress score is between 0 and -0.5
E14	KS5 applied general progress score is between 0 and -0.75

Source: Gov.uk (2017), Strategic School Improvement Fund: eligibility criteria, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategic-school-improvement-fund-eligibility-criteria/strategic-school-improvement-fund-eligibility-criteria>

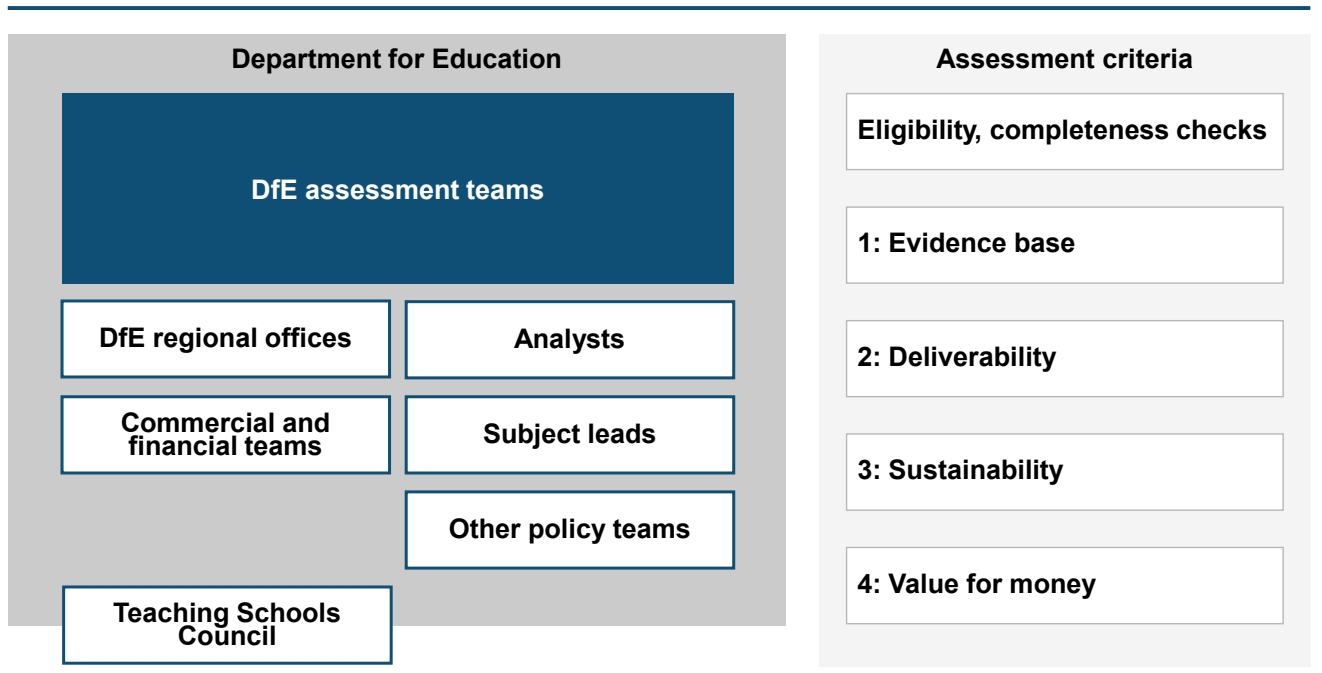
51. The department invited teaching schools to notify the Teaching Schools Council, and multi-academy trusts to notify their DfE regional offices, of their intention to apply for the strategic fund. This was with a view to avoiding duplications.
52. One of the resources available to applicants was guidance produced by the Education Endowment Foundation on evidence based interventions.²⁰ The main purpose of the Education Endowment Foundation guidance was to provide a framework, tools, and resources for applications to produce evidence informed applications. It is important to note that the department was unable to provide the planned roadshows and other external communications, including the development of sub-regional improvement boards because of the announcement of the general election which initiated a period of sensitivity.

Assessment phase

53. Several teams within the department were involved in developing and managing the application assessment process, with training being provided to all those responsible for undertaking application assessments ('application assessors'). See **Figure 5**, below, which includes the criteria used to assess the applications.

²⁰ This was guidance produced by the Education Endowment Foundation independently for the sector, which did not form an official part of the strategic fund; Education Endowment Foundation (2017), Using evidence in applications to the Strategic School Improvement Fund, available at https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Evaluation/Implementation/EEF_SSIF_guidance_May_2017.pdf

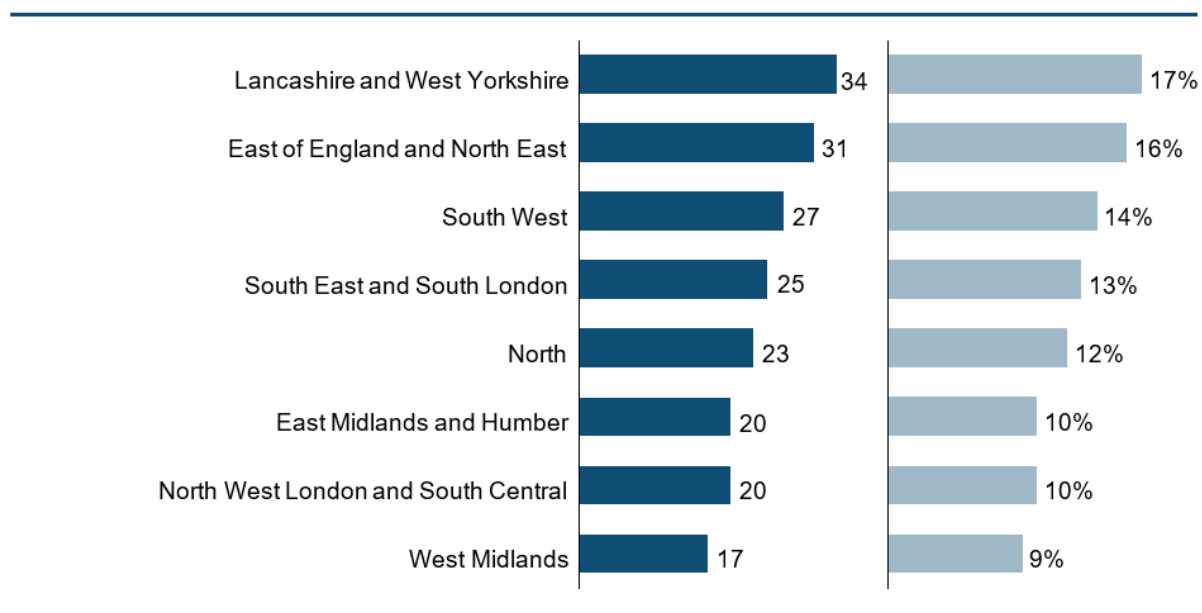
Figure 5 Assessment phase



Source: Aldaba analysis. Note: The Teaching Schools Council is not part of the department.

54. The DfE assessment teams were responsible for checking that the applicants met the eligibility criteria, the applications were complete, and the extent to which the interventions proposed in the applications received funding from other sources.
55. The DfE assessment teams drew on a wide range of internal support within the department, depending on the nature of the individual applications, including from the DfE regional offices; analysts; other policy teams; the commercial and financial teams; and subject leads within the department.
56. The deadline for submitting applications was 23 June 2017. Approximately 30 application assessors were involved in the process. Provisional scores were submitted for national moderation in late July, with final recommendations submitted for ministerial sign-off in early August 2017.
57. The department planned for 350 applications as part of round one of the strategic fund. **Figure 6**, below, sets out the number of actual applications received, which was 197 in total, broken down by region.

Figure 6 Round one applications, by region, absolute and percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of Department for Education data. Note: 197 applications received.

Sub-regional improvement boards

58. The department developed plans for its regional offices to use sub-regional improvement boards in each of their regions with a view to identifying and communicating local improvement priorities to potential applicants, diagnosing need, brokering support, and constructing evidence based proposals for funding. In some cases, the boards had already been set up previously.
59. Sub-regional improvement boards were also expected to review the proposals in their sub-regions and provide any local intelligence to inform the assessment process. Following this, the department would present recommendations to an Expert Investment Board which would make final recommendations about which proposals to put forward to ministers.
60. However, the announcement of the general election for 8 June 2017 meant that communications from the DfE regional offices were constrained by pre-election restrictions. As a result, the department was unable to undertake any of the previously planned regional activity which might unduly influence the outcome of the election, including through the sub-regional improvement boards. Other planned activities could not go ahead, such as 'roadshows' to guide applicants as to what constituted good, evidence based applications.

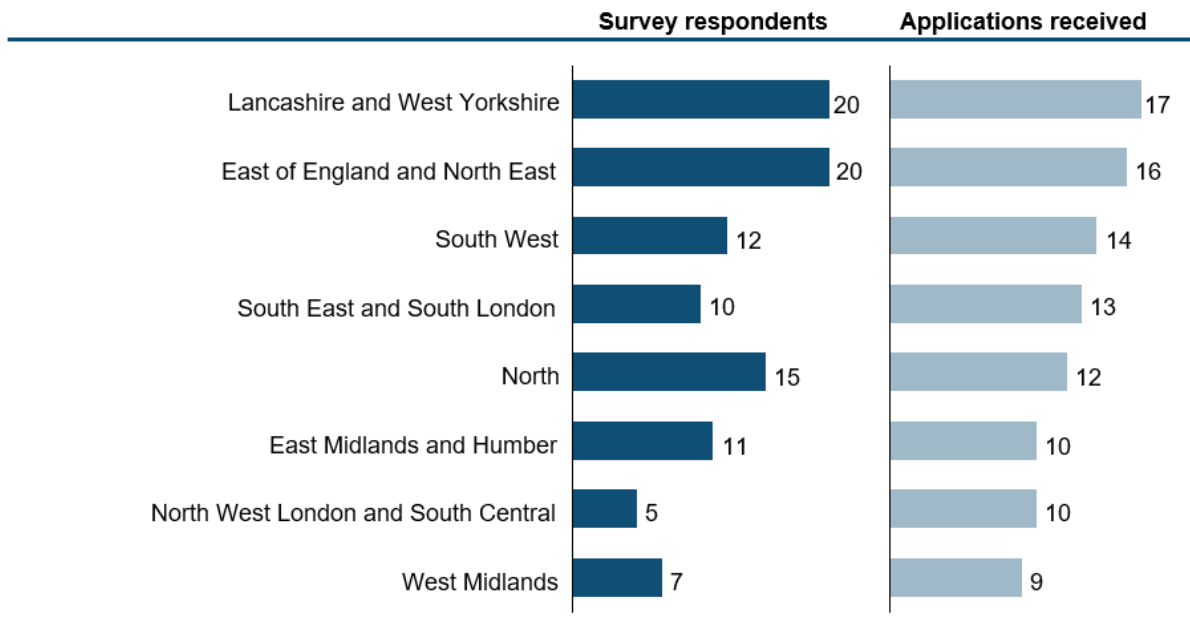
Emergency funding stream

61. The strategic fund included an emergency funding stream to provide whole school support for those schools in dire need of intensive, immediate help to address failure.
62. The department offered the emergency fund on a rolling basis. It was designed to make funding available at point of need against strict eligibility criteria. Between April and August 2017, the department processed nine applications to the emergency fund, with a further 12 applications being under consideration at the time of writing.
63. None of the individual members of staff interviewed as part of the evaluation had had direct experience of these types of applications. Only one of the respondents to our survey of applicants stated that they had submitted an application to the emergency funding stream. As a result, whilst the emergency funding stream was part of the original scope for the evaluation, we are unable to provide reliable findings on it. In our expert view, there might be opportunities for the department to work with stakeholders to raise awareness of the emergency funding stream.

Section 3: How it worked in practice

64. The aim of this section is to compare how the process was designed by the department, and how it worked in practice. This is with a view to assessing the extent to which the process worked well.
65. The information for this section came from interviews with 22 individuals across the department and the Teaching Schools Council.
66. DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives had only had experience of the application phase of the process by the time we interviewed them. As a result, their views on the later, assessment phase of the process were based on plans, rather than direct experience. Partly as a result of its small number, our findings from the interviews with application assessors cannot be taken to be representative of all assessors.
67. This section also builds on our survey of applicants. We invited all 197 applicants to answer a survey. Of these, 128 responded to the survey. In turn, of the 128 respondents, 111 completed all the questions. This results in a complete response rate of 56%. Our analysis of the complete responses excludes one respondent who had used the emergency funding strand. Therefore, our analysis is based on 110 respondents.
68. Due to the anonymous nature of the survey, we were unable to establish whether the responses received were statistically representative of the whole population of applicants. However, **figure 7**, below, does show that the regional distribution of survey respondents was consistent with that for actual applications received.

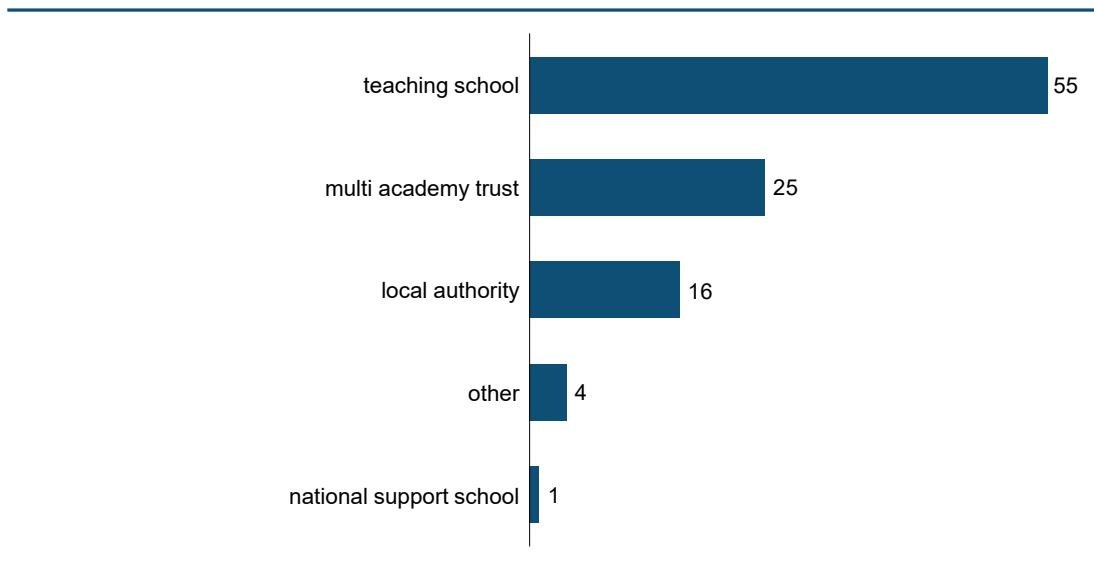
Figure 7 Location of survey respondents and applications received, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of Department for Education data, and applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents; 197 applications received.

69. As shown in **figure 8**, below, the majority of the survey respondents, or 55%, were teaching schools, followed by multi-academy trusts, and local authorities.

Figure 8 Types of applicant organisations responding to survey, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

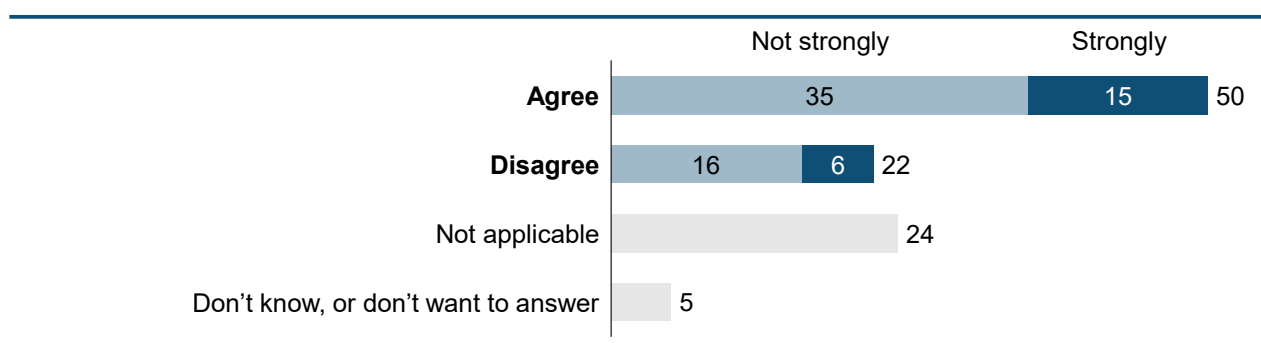
Process implementation

Steps 1 and 2: preparation and submission

Applicants: work with providers, supported schools, and other stakeholders

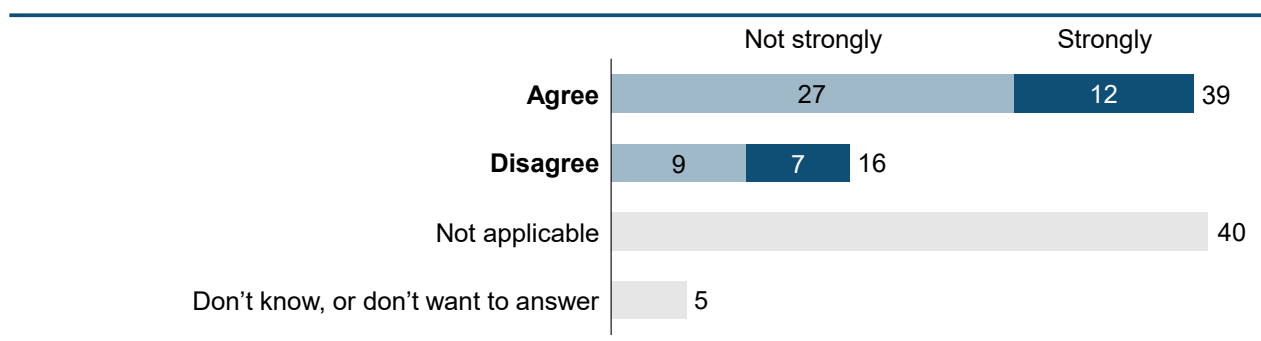
70. According to our survey, the number of provider organisations involved in the applications ranged between one and 22, with the average being six. The number of supported schools ranged between two and 380, with the average being 24. We note that the minimum requirement was four supported schools per application.
71. As shown in **figure 9**, and **figure 10**, below, where applicable, the involvement of Teaching Schools Council and DfE regional offices in the preparation of the applications was perceived by the majority of the respondents as useful, although some respondents disagreed.

Figure 9 The involvement of the Teaching Schools Council in the preparation of my application was useful, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

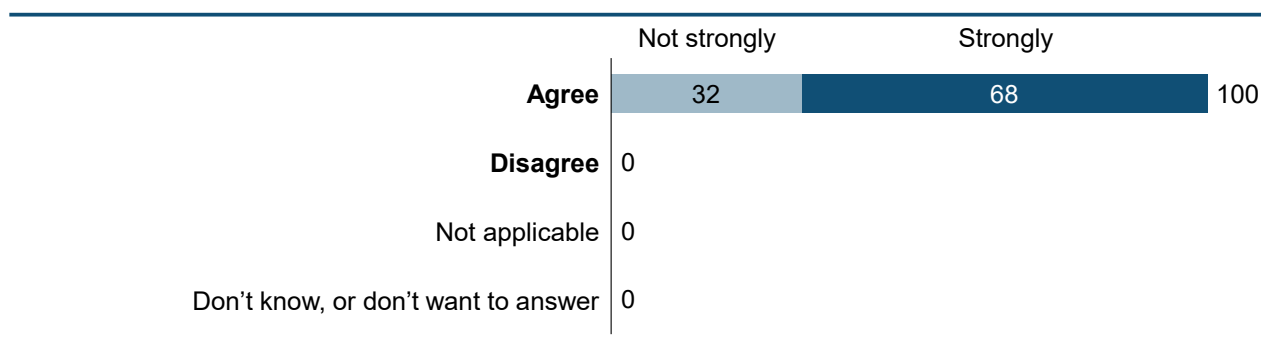
Figure 10 The involvement of the Regional School Commissioner in the preparation of my application was useful, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

72. **Figure 11**, below, shows that the relationship between applicant organisations, providers, and supported schools was perceived as overall positive, without any exception: 100% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that this was the case. In our expert view, this should be considered as an achievement which contributes to the ultimate purpose of the strategic fund.

Figure 11 The relationship between my organisation (as applicants); my providers; and my supported schools was overall positive during the preparation of the application, percentage

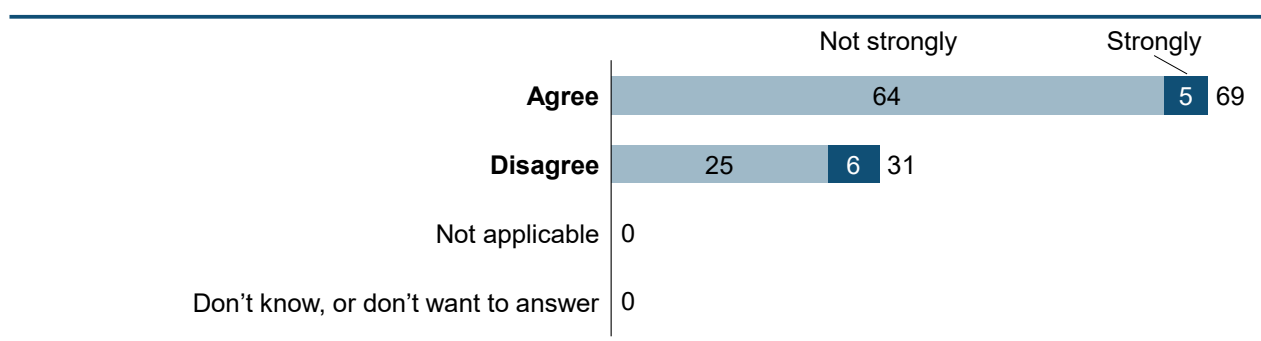


Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

Applicants: accessing and using information

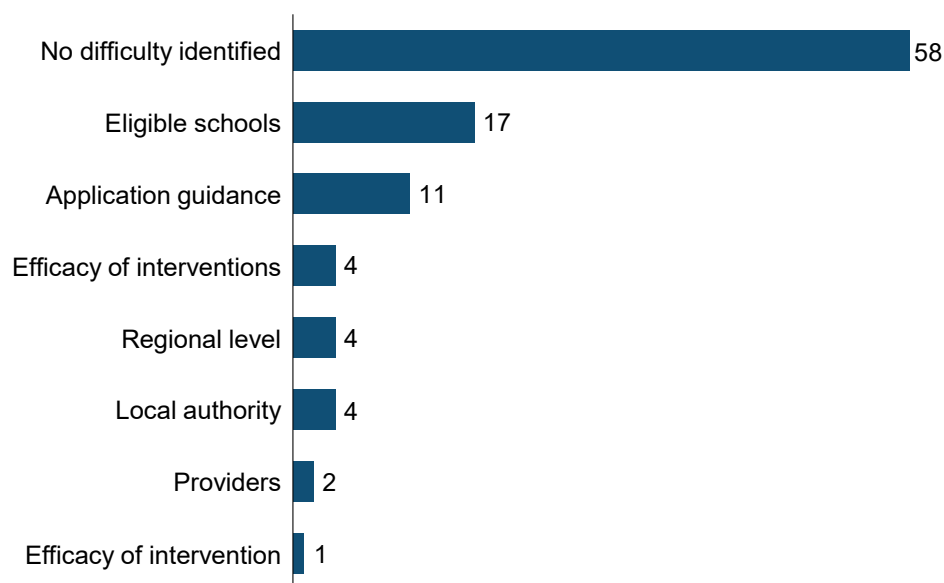
73. **Figure 12**, below, shows that the majority, or 69%, of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that finding sources of information to prepare the applications was easy. Consistently with this, **Figure 13**, below, shows that when asked about specific areas where they found difficulties in finding information while preparing the application, the majority of the respondents, or 58%, did not identify any particular difficulty. Some 17% of respondents identified eligible schools as a difficult area to find information on, and 11% did so in relation to the application guidance. Both aspects are discussed later in this report.

Figure 12 Accessing sources of information to prepare the application was easy, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

Figure 13 Areas where respondents found difficulties in finding information while preparing the applications, percentage

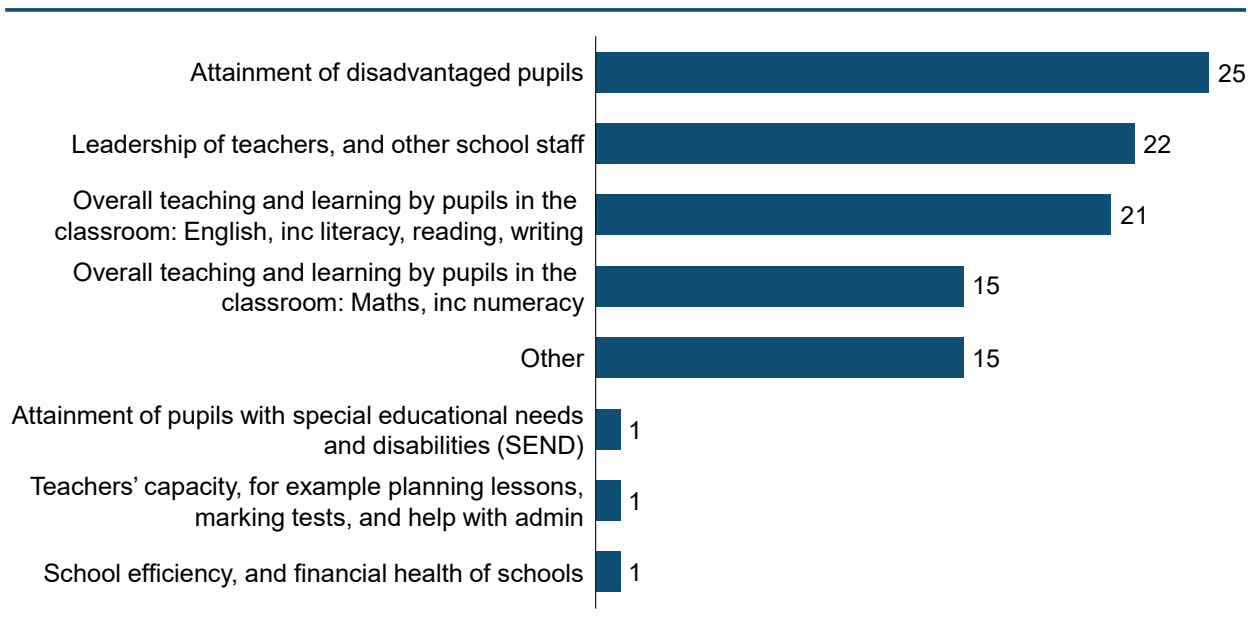


Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

74. **Figure 14**, below, shows the types of needs addressed by the respondents' applications. Attainment of disadvantaged pupils; leadership of teachers, and other school staff; and overall teaching and learning of English attracted around a quarter, or 25%, of the responses each. This was followed by 15% of the respondents, who identified maths teaching as the type of need addressed by their applications; and another 15% of the respondents, whose responses were classified as 'other'.²¹

²¹ These were mainly responses which did not follow the instruction to tick the answer option that best described the application, and chose to explain combinations of a number of options, or provided a description that did not allow us to identify a generic type.

Figure 14 Type of need addressed by the applications, percentage

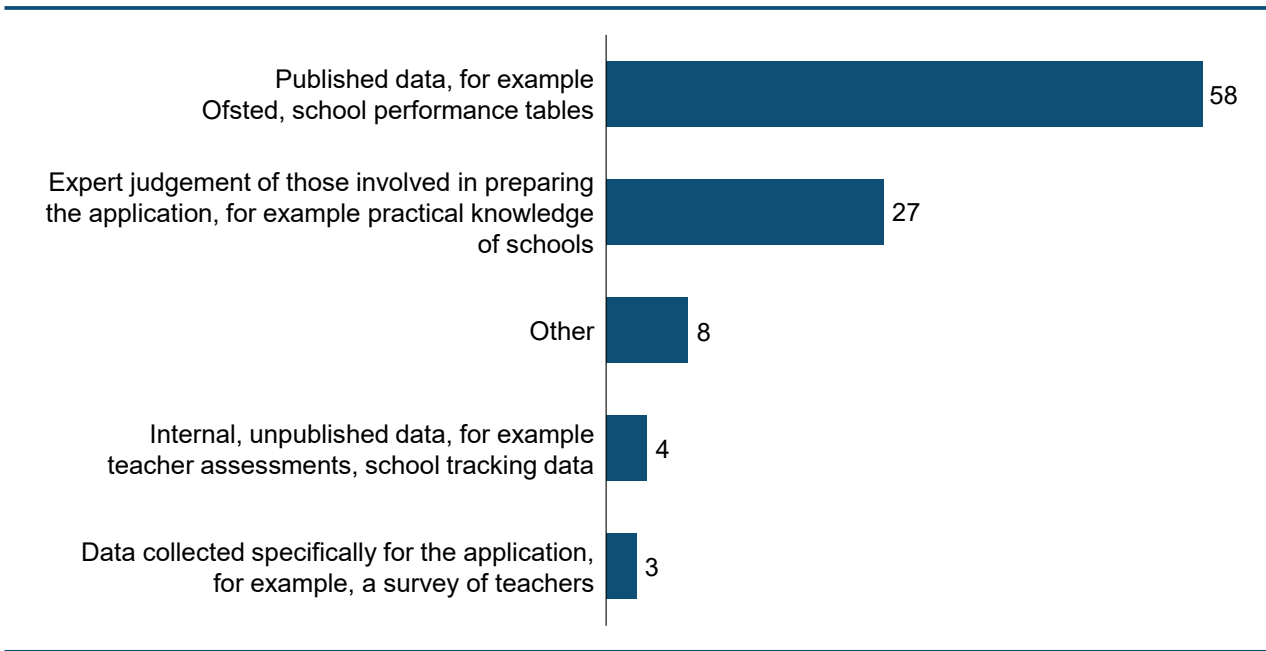


Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

75. To the question 'what is the main source of information that you used to assess need as part of your application?', 58% responded 'published data, for example, Ofsted, and school performance tables'. Around a quarter, or 27%, responded that they had used the expert judgement of those involved in preparing the application, for example practical knowledge of schools. See **figure 15**, below.²²

²² A minority, classified as 'other', did not follow the instruction to choose the main source. Most of them explained that they had used a combination of information sources.

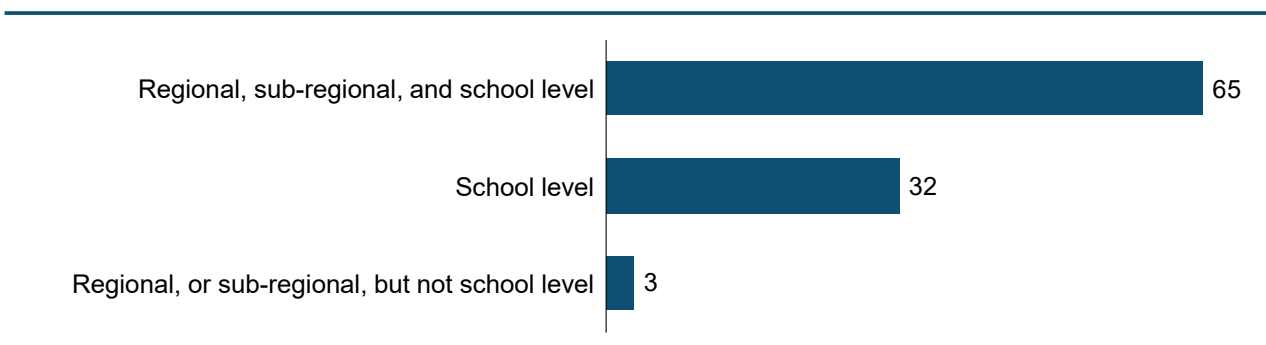
Figure 15 Main source of information used to assess need as part of the applications, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

76. The majority of the respondents, or 65%, had used a combination of regional, sub-regional, and school level information to assess need as part of their applications, with approximately a third, or 32%, using just school level information. See **figure 16**, below.

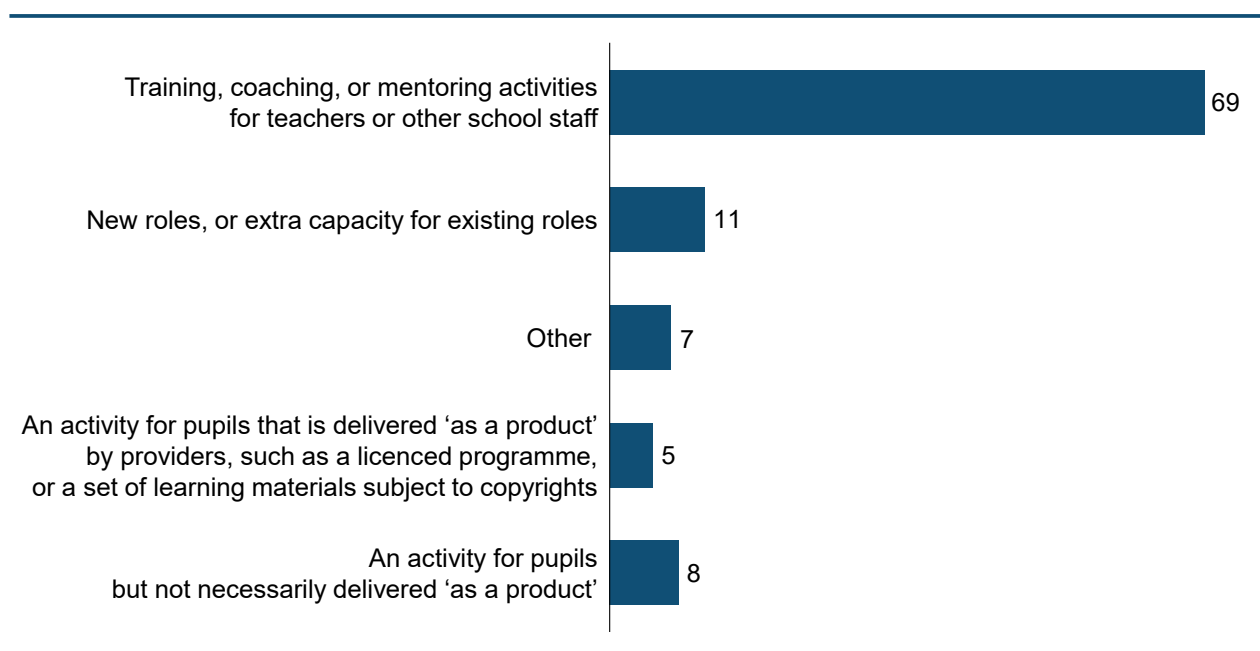
Figure 16 Level at which the information to assess need was pitched, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

77. As shown on figure 17, below, the majority, or 69%, of the interventions proposed in the applications were in relation to training, coaching, or mentoring activities for teachers or other school staff. Around 10% were for new roles, or extra capacity for existing roles.

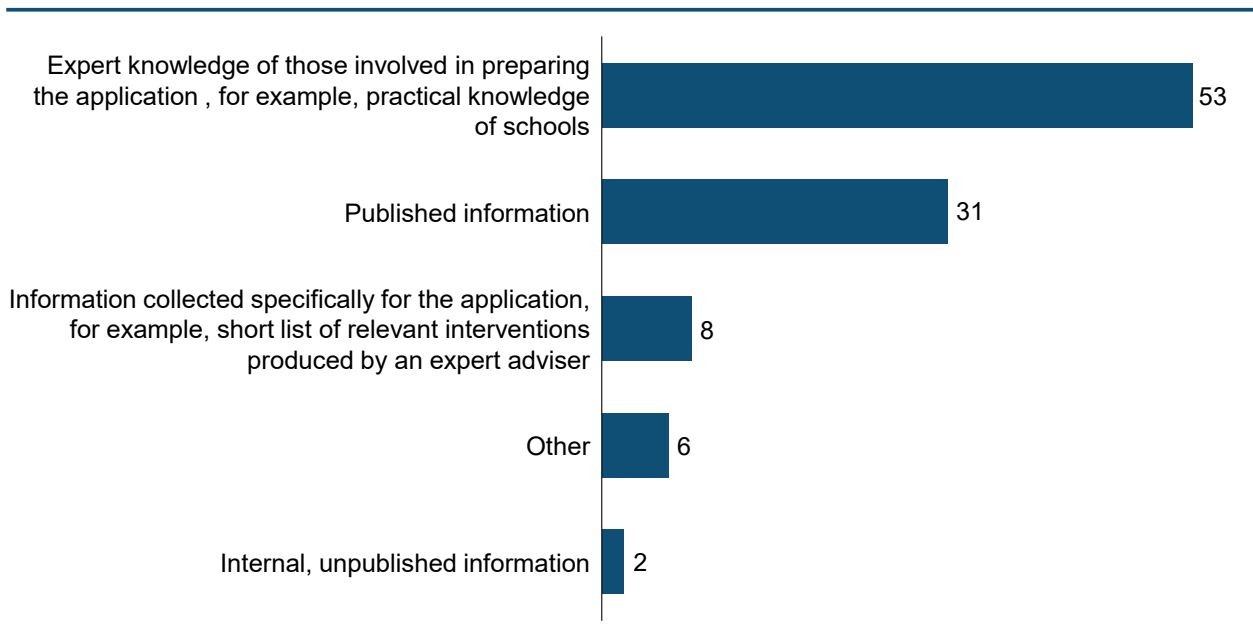
Figure 17 Type of intervention proposed to address need in the applications, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

78. To the question 'what is the main source of evidence that you used to choose the type of intervention that best addressed need as part of your application?', the majority, or 53%, responded that they had used the expert knowledge of those involved in preparing the application. Around a third, or 31%, had used published information. See **figure 18**, below.

Figure 18 Main source of evidence used to choose the type of intervention that best addressed need in the applications, percentage

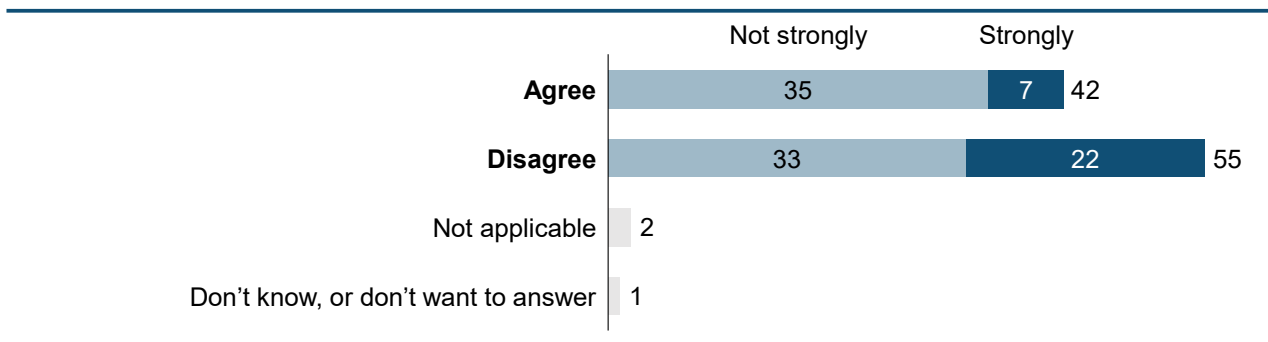


Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

Applicants: following the application guidance

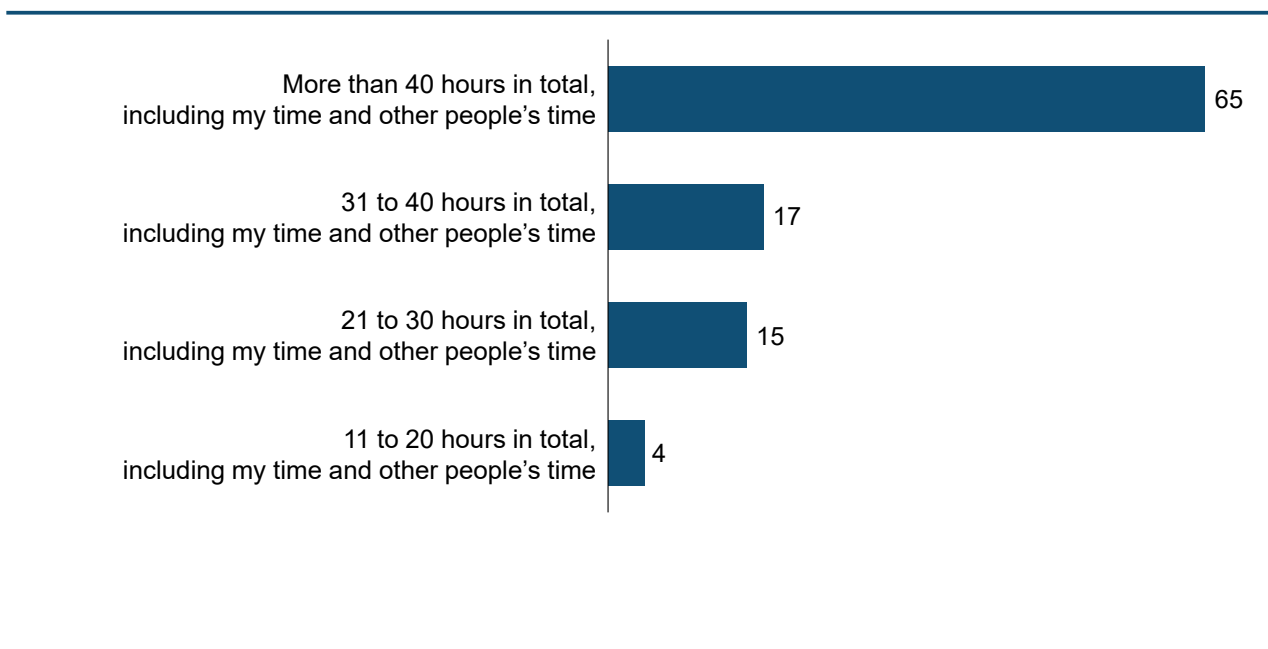
79. As shown in **figure 19**, below, the majority of the survey respondents, or 55%, disagreed or strongly disagreed that working with others, there was enough time available until the submission deadline to prepare the application. The majority of the respondents, or 65%, required more than 40 hours in total, working with others, to produce the application, with 17% requiring between 31 and 40 hours; and 15% requiring between 21 and 30 hours in total, as shown in **figure 20**, below. Opinions were divided, almost 50 to 50%, as to whether the actual time spent on preparing the applications was sufficient, as shown in **figure 21**, below.

Figure 19 Working with others, there was enough time available until the submission deadline to prepare the application, percentage



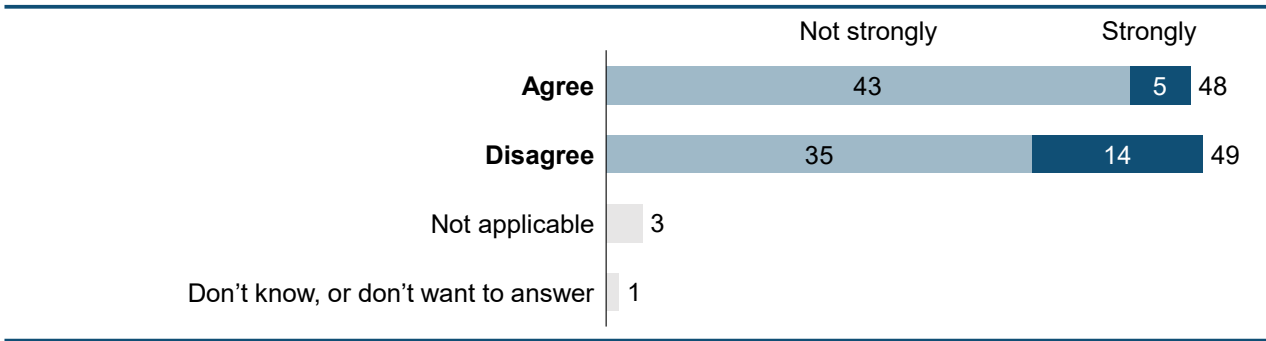
Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

Figure 20 Hours required to prepare applications, including everyone involved, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

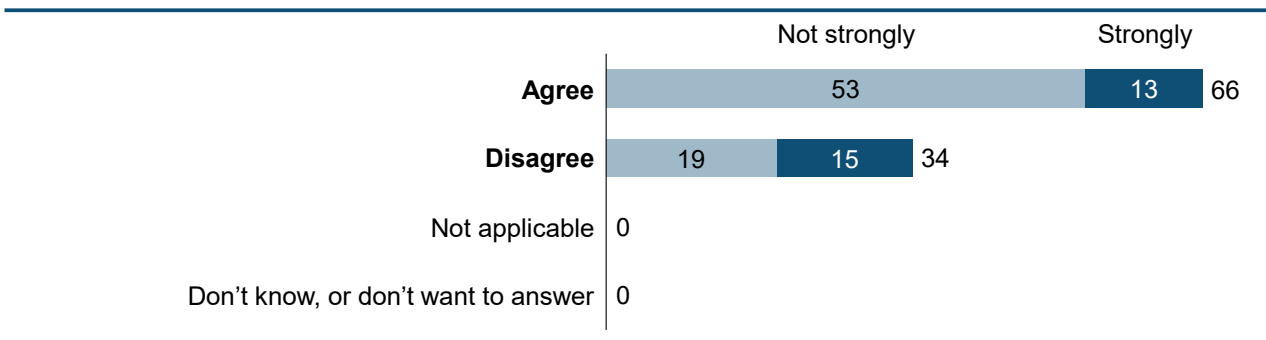
Figure 21 Those involved, including myself, were able to devote enough time to prepare the application, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

80. **Figure 22**, below, shows that the majority of the respondents, or 66%, thought that the application guidance was useful, although the remaining 34% did not. This is consistent with the finding on difficulties in accessing information reported earlier on in this report: 11% of the respondents identified application guidance as a difficult area to find information on.

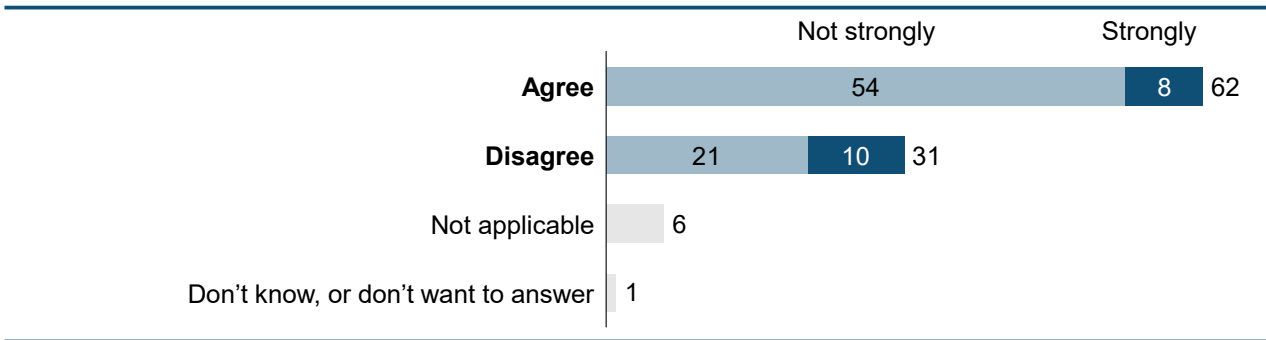
Figure 22 The guidance published alongside the application form was useful, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

81. The majority of the respondents, or 62%, agreed or strongly agreed that the assessment criteria to select the successful applications were clear and transparent, with 31% disagreeing, or strongly disagreeing. See **figure 23**, below.

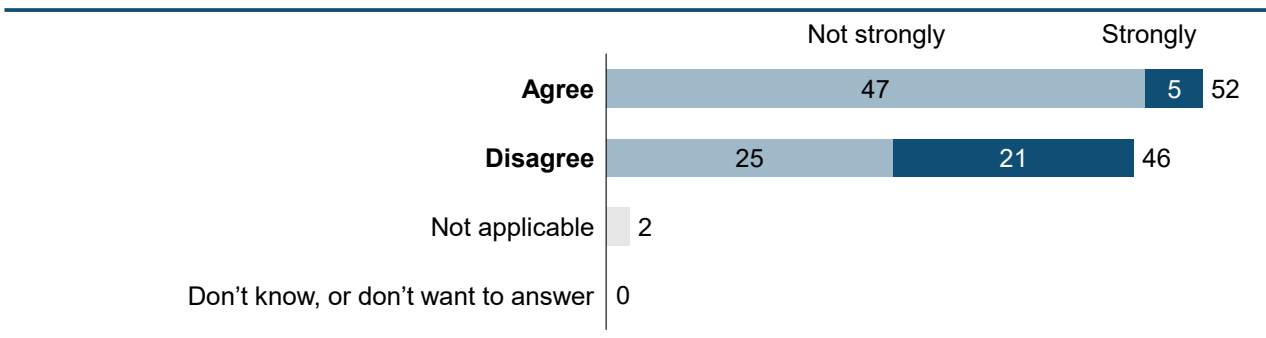
Figure 23 The assessment criteria to select the successful applications were clear and transparent, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

82. Opinions on whether the application form was what would be expected considering its purpose, and the level of funding available, were divided, with 52% agreeing, or strongly agreeing, and 46% disagreeing, or strongly disagreeing. See **figure 24**, below.

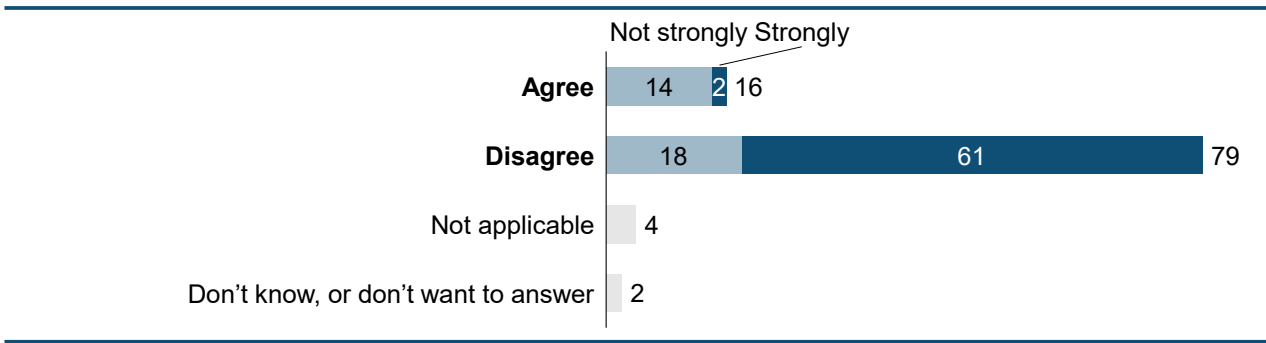
Figure 24 The application form was what I would expect considering its purpose, and the level of funding available, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

83. As shown in **figure 25**, below, the majority, or 79% of the respondents, disagreed or strongly disagreed that the website, and system to submit the application, worked well. We referred to this as the 'application submission facility' elsewhere in the report.

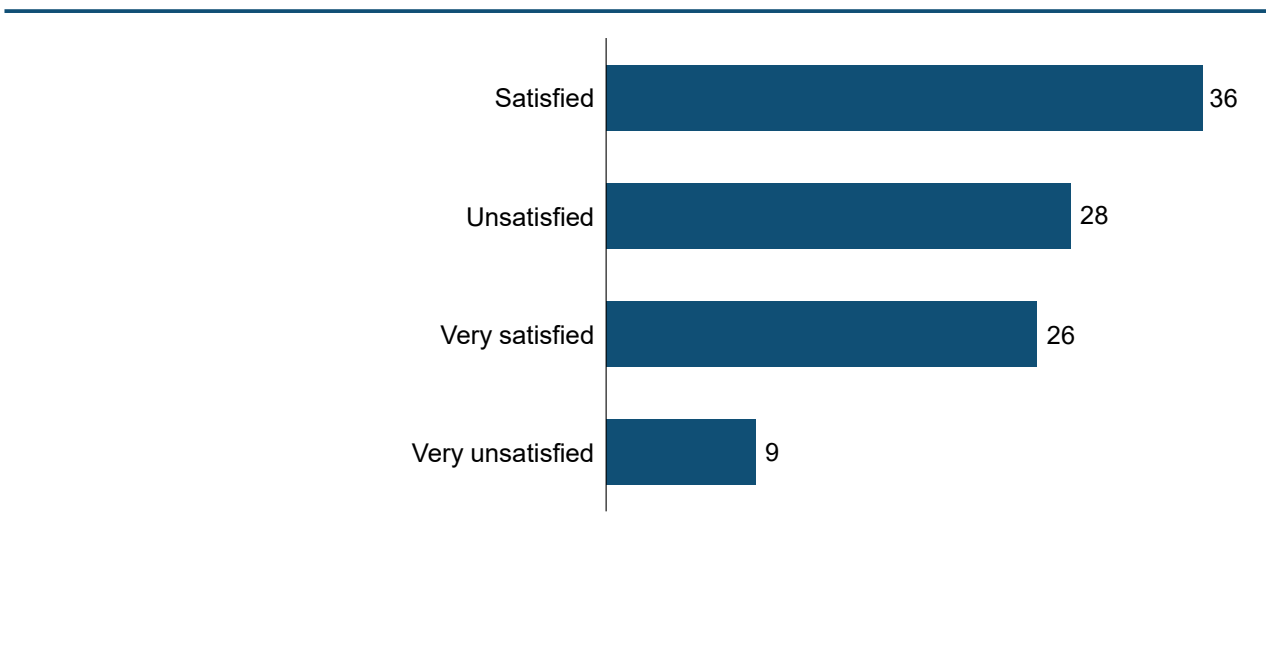
Figure 25 The website, and system to submit the application, worked well, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

84. Around 48% of the respondents raised a query or complaint with the department. Of these, the majority, or 62%, were satisfied or very satisfied, with the remaining 37%, being unsatisfied or very unsatisfied. See **figure 26**, below.

Figure 26 Levels of satisfaction with queries or complaints raised with the department, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 52 survey respondents who raised a query or complaint.

DfE regional offices: pre-election restrictions

85. Based on the information we received through the interviews, the participation of the DfE regional offices in steps 1 and 2 of the process was designed to be strategic. The focus was on using analysis to identify local improvement priorities, and diagnose need; and coordinating the work of all regional stakeholders at a relatively

high level as the 23 June 2017 deadline approached. The ultimate aim was to ensure best quality, evidence based applications. In contrast, the detailed work around clarifying aspects of the application guidance, and supporting the preparation of specific applications was for the Teaching Schools Council representatives to take forward.

86. Department activity related to the process was affected by the announcement of the general election for 8 June 2017. As a result of pre-election restrictions, the DfE regional offices were not allowed to share information with Teaching Schools Council representatives, and other stakeholders, as they would have normally done. In particular, they were not allowed to share any analysis of information on the needs and priorities in their regions.
87. The department cancelled its plans in relation to the sub-regional improvement boards before officially launching the strategic fund on 21 April 2017. These boards had been designed to provide a structure to the involvement of the DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives. Not all the members of the DfE regional offices that we interviewed were able to confirm whether these plans had been totally cancelled in terms of round one. Some of them took the original plans for the regional, and sub-regional group improvement boards as a reference to guide their work during the application phase of the process.

DfE regional offices: variation

88. The unexpected nature of the general election announcement, the generic nature of pre-election restrictions, and the cancellation of the sub-regional improvement boards, all meant that the actual involvement of the DfE regional offices in the process varied depending on the region.
89. Almost without exception, the interviewed members of the DfE regional offices felt that it was for them to help identify local improvement priorities, and diagnose need; and coordinate the work of all regional stakeholders at a relatively high level.
90. However, members of the DfE regional offices did not feel they had sufficient guidance from elsewhere at the department on how to undertake their activities. Disengaging completely from the application phase of the process did not feel appropriate, while getting involved in detailed conversations around specific draft applications seemed in breach of pre-election restrictions.
91. There were a few examples where members of the DfE regional offices, while maintaining pre-election restrictions in the forefront of their mind, became involved in advisory roles in relation to ideas that applicants were considering for their applications, including whether these ideas were in line with the purpose of the strategic fund. This was typically done in collaboration with Teaching Schools Council representatives, and on occasions took the shape of joint meetings attended by the DfE regional offices, Teaching Schools Council representatives,

and other sub-regional roles. Only potential applicants that had made themselves known to either the DfE regional offices, or the Teaching Schools Council offices, were within the scope of this work.

92. Other examples of how some of the DfE regional offices got involved in the application phase of the process include:
- Briefing sessions, meetings and letters to make potential applicants aware of the strategic fund, typically jointly with Teaching Schools Council representatives.
 - Sharing analyses produced by the DfE regional offices and tailored to the requirements of the strategic fund.
 - Identifying short lists of priorities for regions and sub-regions, in dialogue with other stakeholders such as local authorities, teaching schools, and multi-academy trusts; examples of priorities include literacy skills for specific groups of pupils, or maths for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities.
 - Participation in sifting, one by one, expressions of interest submitted to the Teaching Schools Council representatives by potential applicants prior to the 23 June 2017 deadline set by the department, in response to informal feedback suggesting that too many applications, of not necessarily the required quality, were being prepared in the region.
 - No involvement at all, just being kept informed of progress at a high level by Teaching Schools Council representatives.
93. The interviewed members of the DfE regional offices shared a common concern around the quality of the applications. This was partly as a result of not having been able to provide consistent support to all potential applicants, which in turn was partly the result of the lack of clarity around how they were expected to participate in the process.

Teaching Schools Council: regional realignment

94. In contrast with the DfE regional offices, the way in which the Teaching Schools Council representatives worked in practice was more operational and detailed, including brokering support and contributing to the development of specific applications. This was both in the early days of the process to raise awareness of the strategic fund, and clarify the application guidance, and close to the 23 June 2017 deadline, as applications were being finalised.
95. Similarly to the DfE regional offices, the ultimate aim was for the Teaching Schools Council representatives to ensure good quality, evidence based applications. This included suggestions for applicants to reconsider the submission of those

applications that might not meet the required quality standards by the 23 June 2017 deadline.

96. In most regions, the Teaching Schools Council representatives involved their sub-regional leads in the distribution of information and coordination of their advisory role. A few interviewees mentioned that the structures around the Teaching Schools Council representatives were relatively new in their regions, and so they did not have the level of experience that might have been required to participate in the process.
97. In addition, the boundaries of the Teaching Schools Council regions were in the process of being realigned with Regional School Commissioner boundaries when the process took place. Some interviewees recognised that they had found it more difficult to support the geographical areas that had become part of their responsibilities for the first time after the realignment.

Teaching Schools Council: variation

98. Some of the Teaching Schools Council representatives that we interviewed mentioned meetings and telephone conversations with stakeholders to identify regional priorities, and specific schools that could benefit from the strategic fund. We heard a few examples where the representatives identified duplication, and invited the relevant organisations to consider one single joint application, rather than separate overlapping applications. A few representatives noticed that schools that had been identified as eligible and priorities were not part of any draft application. Representatives approached these schools to make them aware of the opportunity.
99. We heard some representatives say that engaging with the application form was part of their role, particularly in relation to explaining to applicants how they should fill it in. In contrast, other representatives told us that engaging with the application form was beyond their responsibilities, and something for the applicants to deal with independently. The majority of the representatives had been sighted on some, or the totality of the draft applications from the applicants that had made themselves known to them prior to the 23 June 2017 deadline.
100. There was one example of expressions of interest, prior to the 23 June 2017 deadline set by the department²³. The outcome of the expression of interest process was a short list of applications which received additional support, including payments to free up capacity in the applicant organisations, and purchase services from bid writing coaches. All Teaching Schools Council offices received an increase in their regional delivery grant to allow them to set up infrastructure to support delivery of the strategic fund in the regions. Each Teaching Schools Council office

²³ The 'expression of interest' process was not endorsed or supported by the department.

was able to use this in the way they felt best. Purchasing bid writing services was specifically not within the scope set by the department for infrastructure building and was not authorised spend.

101. Other examples of how the Teaching Schools Council representatives got involved in the application phase of the process include:

- Meetings and phone calls with a range of sub-regional groups, such as headteacher boards, maths hubs, and research schools.
- Sending letters to teaching schools, including hyperlinks to the guidance published by the department.
- A relatively formal helpline service managed by Teaching Schools Council advisers specifically trained to provide support in relation to the process.
- Presentations on how to fill in each specific section of the application form.
- Sharing analyses, regional priorities, and summary information packs produced by the DfE regional offices, and other stakeholders; in one case, the local authority was identified as the source of information to identify priorities.
- Developing region specific principles to guide the preparation of applications, for example, 'in this region, each school gives and receives support'.

102. The wide range of practices among Teaching Schools Council representatives was recognised by the interviewees as a source of inconsistencies, which is likely to translate into different success rates across regions.

Teaching Schools Council: work with the DfE regional offices

103. Overall, the relationship between Teaching Schools Council representatives, and the DfE regional offices was positive. Most interviewees recognised that both organisations worked together to deal with the restrictions associated with the pre-election period.

104. Some interviewees expressed concerns about the overlap between Teaching Schools Council representatives, and the DfE regional offices. There was an example where a representative was unclear as to whether approaching local authorities to raise awareness of the existence of the strategic fund was for them to do, or alternatively something that only the DfE regional offices could do.

105. Despite the heavy involvement of Teaching Schools Council representatives in the process, some interviewees took some distance, and stressed that they did not own the process, beyond their responsibility over the sub-regional groups within the Teaching Schools Council structure. As one interviewee put it, 'Teaching Schools Council reps were there to step in for the DfE regional offices, but the whole process was owned by the Department for Education'.

Education Endowment Foundation

106. Some of the interviewed members of the DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives acknowledged the existence of the Education Endowment Foundation guidance. A few described it as valuable. They said it had played a key role in the meetings and dissemination activities led by Teaching Schools Council representatives.
107. Beyond levels of awareness, the contribution of this piece of guidance to the process must be seen in the wider context of how applicants identified effective interventions. The perception of the interviewed members of the DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives was that the identification of effective interventions had been done based on the expert judgement of those involved in the application phase, rather than any detailed engagement with information sources. The findings from the survey of applicants reported earlier on in this report support this view.

Recommendations on preparation and submission of applications

108. In our expert view, the way in which steps 1 and 2 worked in practice highlights opportunities to improve the process, some of which could have been anticipated by the department when planning for round one, irrespective of pre-election restrictions, and should be taken into consideration for future rounds.²⁴

- **Finding 1:** Based on the published application guidance, those applicants who chose not to notify either the DfE regional offices, or the Teaching Schools Council offices were not necessarily aware of the level of support they were giving up. This might have had implications in terms of fairness and transparency.

Recommendation 1: The application guidance published by the department could be more explicit as to how potential applicants should notify the DfE regional, and Teaching Schools Council offices of their intention to submit an application. An option might be to require compulsory notification to just one of the two organisations, to avoid unnecessary duplication.

- **Finding 2:** The engagement of DfE regional offices in the application phase of the process was not wholly consistent.

Recommendation 2: The process could be clarified, and structured, including how the support from DfE regional offices differs from that of Teaching Schools

²⁴ Only round one of the strategic fund is within the scope of this report. The department considers that it has taken actions to address the recommendations as part of round two, which took place from September 2017. This includes the introduction of sub-regional improvement boards.

Council representatives. Examples of clarifications include how to disseminate the existence of the strategic fund, and application guidance; identify and communicate regional priorities based on analysis; support the production of applications; and broker the relationships between applicants, providers, and supported schools as part of specific applications.

- **Finding 3:** Sifting draft applications, including through formal expression of interest processes, did not happen everywhere, which raises concerns in relation to fairness and transparency. Applicants who were shortlisted during sifting processes were in a better position to decide how to progress towards a final application, including in some cases receiving additional resource to prepare the final application.

Recommendation 3: The department could consider whether a formal expression of interest process should be introduced. In addition, the department could produce guidance for the Teaching Schools Council representatives to make decisions on how to allocate additional resource to applicants consistently across all regions.

- **Finding 4:** The role of regional and sub-regional stakeholders such as headteacher boards, maths hubs, and research schools was not part of the application guidance produced by the department.

Recommendation 4: Given the potential that these stakeholders have for contributing to the identification of needs and priorities, the department could consider the production of guidance on how they should get involved in the preparation of applications. This should be high level guidance because the existence and level of maturity of these stakeholders vary considerably depending on the region.

- **Finding 5:** Whilst round one worked to a large extent as a pilot, the applicant survey revealed some practical changes which would require detailed attention from the department.

Recommendation 5: These include more time to produce the applications; and improving the application form, its accompanying guidance, and online submission facility. As explained later on in this report, the application form might also benefit from improving the applicants' ability to articulate the link between proposed interventions and expected outputs and outcomes, also referred to as 'theory of change'.

Steps 3 and 4: assessments and decisions

DfE regional offices

109. All the members of the DfE regional offices that we interviewed were aware that they would have an advisory role in the assessment of the applications after the 23 June 2017 deadline. This was non binding advice to the DfE assessment teams.
110. In some instances, the DfE regional offices agreed well in advance a process to review the submitted applications, and share their advice with the application assessors from the DfE assessment teams, including meetings, and guidelines to undertake the review tasks. However, most interviewees from the DfE regional offices expressed concerns about the expectations placed on them during the assessment phase of the process. Most of them were expecting further instructions at the time when we interviewed them. As one interviewee put it, 'we will need to play it by ear'.
111. Before the assessment training took place some members of the DfE regional offices were not as clear as others about the application assessment phase and their role in it. These interviews were undertaken before the assessment training had taken place so we are unable to say if their understanding changed.
112. One interviewee explained that the level of involvement of the DfE regional offices was expected to be light: 'We will spend two hours reviewing all of the submitted applications from our region, whereas the DfE assessment teams will probably spend two hours on each individual submitted application'.
113. There was confusion around the role of Teaching Schools Council representatives. Some members of the DfE regional offices thought that the representatives²⁵ would be taking the lead at a regional level during the assessment phase, whereas others identified the DfE assessment teams as the main and only driver of the process.
114. A few interviewees in the DfE regional offices stressed that their involvement in the assessments and decisions was one of the strengths of the process, in particular in comparison to similar funds in the past, like the School to School Support fund, which had not paid sufficient regard to regional expertise.

Teaching Schools Council

115. The views we heard from Teaching Schools Council representatives were similar to those from the DfE regional offices in terms of lack of clarity in relation to the application assessments and decisions within the process. Most Teaching Schools

²⁵ The department notes that Teaching Schools Council representatives had no input into the assessment process, including scoring the bids.

Council representatives were certain that they would get involved in the assessment process through invitations from the DfE assessment teams.

116. One representative had advised the applicants in their region to include a statement in their applications saying that their application had been reviewed by the representative, who was happy to provide further details to the DfE assessment teams during the assessment phase. In another case, the representative was expecting to see all the applications from their region, including summaries with key facts and figures, the next working day after the application submission deadline of 23 June 2017. Upon review of early drafts of this report, the department considered these two cases to be misunderstandings. Another representative was unsure as to whether they would be asked to participate in the assessments. It is important to note that all representatives were interviewed before the assessment process training took place.
117. Some Teaching Schools Council representatives looked to DfE regional offices to take the lead at regional level during the assessment phase. However, as previously stated, the opposite was true in some cases.
118. A few representatives felt confused about the School to School Support fund boards, which were still in place, and might become involved in the assessment phase of the process, even though they were originally set up to support a different fund.

Application assessors: their work, as planned

119. The department chose an assessment model that rested on individual application assessors. The expectation was for individual application assessors within the DfE assessment team to make judgements as to the support required from other stakeholders, including from within the department, to apply the assessment criteria to individual applications and produce assessment scores. Provisional assessment scores by assessors underwent scrutiny at regional and national moderation sessions attended by assessors, and senior managers at the department.
120. In June and July 2017, approximately 30 application assessors were involved in the process. The lead assessors took responsibility for coordinating a team of typically three to six assessors in each region.
121. All of the application assessors, including lead assessors, attended a half day training session organised in late June 2017. The training session included presentations on the application assessment criteria, and guidance, and a practical exercise based on assessing one mock application.
122. At the interviews conducted as part of this report, assessors explained that the department's plan was to start by performing the eligibility checks immediately after the application submission deadline of 23 June 2017. The DfE assessment teams

drew on a wide range of internal support within the department, depending on the nature of the individual applications, including from the DfE regional offices; analysts; other policy teams; the commercial and financial teams; and subject leads within the department.

123. Some assessors reported being confused as to what the involvement of the Education Endowment Foundation would be. Some stated that the Education Endowment Foundation had already screened all the applications and identified those that would benefit from the foundation's involvement prior to assessors receiving the applications. This was because the applications had a strong evidence base which would require the foundation's expertise to be assessed. In addition, other assessors explained that they had the option to involve the Education Endowment Foundation out of their own initiative as they developed the assessments.
124. The actual role of the Education Endowment Foundation was to review summaries of all applications and select those where they felt they were able to add value to the assessment process through a more detailed assessment of the evidence base, and for application assessors to call upon the Education Endowment Foundation for specific input on applications which cited the Education Endowment Foundation's evidence based approaches.

Application assessors: their work, in practice

125. Typically, each assessor took responsibility for assessing between six and 12 applications. In practice, the sequence of events was much more fluid than originally planned. This was mainly due to the specific nature of the applications. For example, some of the eligibility checks were still in progress when the assessors started their assessments due to unanticipated complexities in the way that the applications provided some of the information.
126. Most of the application assessors that we interviewed mentioned that the support from the department's analysts was helpful, but not necessarily timely, since some of their advice arrived shortly before scores were due for submission to national moderation. Again, this was due to some extra time required to review specific aspects of just some of the applications. Provisional scores were submitted for national moderation in late July, with final recommendations submitted for ministerial sign-off in early August 2017.

Application assessors: application forms and application assessment guidance

127. At the interviews, a few application assessors pointed out that the application form did not allow sufficient space for applicants to articulate the link between need, proposed intervention, and expected outputs and outcomes, which they considered to be an important limitation of the application forms. This is also referred to as

'theory of change'. In addition, the fact that applicants did not have access to the application assessment criteria in full at the time they prepared the applications made some assessors think that the process had been flawed.

128. A few application assessors praised the department's internal application assessment guidance for its comprehensive character and clear signposting to experts within the department who could help with specific aspects of the application assessments. However, most assessors found it difficult to apply the assessment guidance to the applications. The structure of both documents was not entirely consistent. In particular:

- The application form included a question on scalability of proposed interventions which was not specifically scored as part of the application assessment guidance.
- The assessment criterion around value for money was difficult because the application assessment guidance used proportions of requested budget as a reference, for example, 'percentage of total budget allocated to administrative support', however this information was not always explicit on the applications, and when it was, there was no agreement among assessors as to what proportions represented better value for money.

129. Another piece of feedback was that the application assessment guidance was not specific enough as to how much investigation was required from assessors. For example, one application assessor identified an issue by doing online research which should have been identified as part of the eligibility checks, but had not been so. This application assessor said that doing additional online research on all aspects of the applications was not what was expected of them, and indeed not possible within the time and resource available.

Application assessors: work with the DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council

130. The way in which lead assessors and assessors worked within each region varied. The DfE regional, and Teaching Schools Council offices were involved in all cases. This was mostly through meetings where assessors received feedback on the alignment between applications and regional priorities, and the applicants' capacity to deliver.

131. None of the assessors that we interviewed had had access to any draft applications prior to their formal submission by the 23 June 2017 deadline. On one occasion, the interviewee described a series of meetings with the DfE regional teams prior to the submission deadline to discuss the potential number of applications that would be received, and views on applicants that would be able to produce stronger and weaker applications, including their capacity to deliver.

132. Whilst lists of regional priorities had not been made available to applicants in most cases due to pre-election restrictions, they were made available to application assessors. All assessors compared the needs identified as part of the applications with the relevant regional priorities before producing assessment scores.
133. The application assessors that we interviewed echoed concerns by other interviewees in terms of variation across regions. They acknowledged that regional intelligence, and in particular the applicants' understanding of the regional priorities, varied greatly depending on the region. Where regional intelligence and priorities had been communicated to applicants, this was more likely to result in successful applications.
134. Whilst the department is clear that the Teaching Schools Council had no input into final scoring of bids, it was reported that in one case, some tension arose between the application assessors, the DfE regional offices, and the Teaching Schools Council representatives in relation to the assessments. There appeared to be lack of clarity as to who should have the final word in terms of scoring²⁶. This tension was addressed by assessors confirming that they were to take the lead while acknowledging the feedback received from the two offices, and keeping them updated on progress.

Recommendations on assessments and decisions

135. In our expert view, the way in which steps 3 and 4 worked in practice highlights opportunities to improve the process. Pre-election restrictions did not affect these activities. In particular, we make the recommendations below.²⁷ Note the numbering of findings follows on from the previous section on earlier steps of the process.

- **Finding 6:** Applicants did not have access to the full details of the application assessment criteria when they were preparing their applications. There are concerns this might have affected fairness and transparency.

Recommendation 6: The department could provide the full details of the application assessment criteria so that applicants can take them into consideration while preparing their applications.

- **Finding 7:** Drawing on the expertise of DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives is valuable in the assessment phase. However,

²⁶ It is important to note that Teaching Schools Council representatives had no input into the assessment process, including scoring the bids.

²⁷ Only round one of the strategic fund is within the scope of this report. The department considers that it has taken actions to address the recommendations as part of round two, which took place from September 2017. This includes the introduction of sub-regional improvement boards.

if this is not done consistently and in a controlled manner, the department runs the risk of an inconsistent level of advice for the assessment process.

Recommendation 7: The department could consider how its DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council support the application and assessment phases of the process in a systematic, fair, and transparent way.

- **Finding 8:** The department chose an application assessment model that rested on individual application assessors, who drew on support from a wide range of stakeholders.

Recommendation 8: Whilst this did not come from interviews, in our expert view, the department could consider independent reviews of the same application by two or more assessors, and develop a process to address instances where the independent reviews result in inconsistent scores. This could be done on a sample basis, if double reviewing the entirety of the applications is not possible.

Accountability, roles, and responsibilities: all four steps

DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council

136. All DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives stated that they had the right level of experience to participate in the process, including previous experience participating in similar fund application processes. Overall, they saw their roles, and responsibilities in relation to the process as embedded in the structures of their respective organisations. For example, Teaching Schools Council representatives normally oversee the work of Teaching Schools Council sub-regional leads within their regions. This was also the case in relation to the process under evaluation.
137. The department did not produce individual role descriptions, or wider accountability frameworks, specifically for the DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives. The implication of this is that the department will not be able to assess the extent to which the intended responsibilities have been met.
138. The majority of the interviewees considered their participation in the process as central to their role. As one of them put it, 'funds like this are the main reason why we are here!' As a result, the wider accountability frameworks that the department has in place might suffice in relation to the strategic fund. However, these wider accountability frameworks are out of the scope of the process evaluation. Therefore, we are unable to comment on whether they will suffice in relation to the accountability levels required by the process under evaluation.

Application assessors

139. Application assessors, and lead assessors received role descriptions in writing. These may serve as a model for other roles in the process.
140. The application assessment guidance provided clear timelines and procedures as to who should be consulted by assessors, depending on the nature of the applications. This included staff within the department and external stakeholders. There were also indications on the circumstances in which the assessors should escalate queries to more senior colleagues.
141. Through the interviews, we did not become aware of any concern around the way in which the roles and responsibilities of the application assessors had been designed and communicated. The training in late June was perceived as useful by all the application assessors. The concerns expressed by application assessors rather related to other aspects of the process, as explained elsewhere in this report.

Conflicts of interest

142. Through our interviews, we became aware of areas in the process where conflicts of interest may arise. These areas include:
 - A teaching school acts as an applicant, and a member of its staff is a Teaching Schools Council representative, or sub-regional lead. These roles may have access to knowledge that is not accessible to other teaching schools, so they may be in a better position to produce good quality applications.
 - DfE regional offices provide advice in relation to specific draft applications, and then become involved in the assessment of those applications once submitted.
143. We prompted interviewees to provide their views on conflicts of interest. A few interviewees corroborated the areas highlighted above as issues that may pose risks in relation to transparency and fairness. The majority considered that potential conflicts of interest were well understood and actively managed in each circumstance.
144. In the case of the members of the DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives, the majority stressed that they were not making the final decision, and therefore their roles should not be giving place to conflicts of interest. In our expert view, this does not necessarily rule out risks relating to conflicts of interest.
145. A few of the application assessors that we interviewed were aware that conflicts of interest had been made explicit and addressed prior to meetings between themselves and the DfE regional, and Teaching Schools Council offices in relation to the assessment of applications.

Reporting lines, and information methods

DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council

146. The process used a combination of meetings, presentations, phone calls, and emails to share information. Most of the exchanges built on practices that predated the process, such as regular team meetings to discuss workload and priorities. Through our interviews, we were unable to identify distinctive reporting lines that conform to a consistent model.
147. The majority of the members of the DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives had limited exposure to the application forms. In addition, their understanding of the application assessment criteria was limited, and often confused with the eligibility criteria for supported schools. One interviewee recognised this as a weakness in their performance: 'This is probably where I should have started'.
148. In contrast, another interviewee had an in-depth knowledge of the application form because they had prepared presentations for potential applicants in their region, including specific modules for each section within the application form. However, the majority of the interviewees felt that direct involvement with the application forms, and the application assessment criteria was not required considering their role.
149. As previously mentioned, there was no dedicated information management system to facilitate the input of the DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives into the assessment phase of the process.
150. All of the interviewees were happy with the way in which reporting lines, and information methods worked. As previously mentioned, a greater level of detail in the guidance available was necessary, and the pre-election period was responsible for certain restrictions. Existing accountability frameworks might meet the requirements in relation to reporting lines, and information methods, however these are out of scope in this report.

Application assessors

151. Typically, each application assessor took responsibility for assessing between six and 12 applications. The assessments were gradually developed as part of a set of spreadsheets on Microsoft SharePoint which included scores against each assessment criterion, and accompanying narrative. Lead assessors were responsible for checking the progress of the spreadsheets, ensuring consistency across assessors, and making the scores available for national moderation. One interviewee mentioned that there are alternatives in the market to spreadsheets which could be more cost efficient in the future.

152. Assessors stayed in touch with each other regularly within each region. This could be through phone calls scheduled daily, or informal conversations, as required. As one interviewee put it: 'All conversations were quite ad hoc. But that is fine. It all worked in the end'. There was one case where all the meeting notes were recorded centrally, and stayed available to the assessors.

Recommendations on accountabilities, roles and responsibilities

153. In our expert view, the way in which accountabilities, roles and responsibilities worked as part of round one highlights opportunities to improve the process. In particular, we make the recommendations below.²⁸ Note the numbering follows on from the previous section in the report.

- **Finding 9:** There are limited role descriptions, and accountability frameworks, specifically for the process.

Recommendation 9: The department could consider whether our recommendations around the design of the process, earlier in this report, coupled with the wider accountability frameworks currently in place, provide the evidence and processes it requires to hold those responsible to account for the success of the process.

- **Finding 10:** There are potential risks around conflicts of interest, particularly in relation to DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council offices during the assessments.

Recommendation 10: Whilst the department is clear that there are conflict of interest protocols in place for the strategic fund, the interviews suggest more clarity on roles and responsibilities would help. Similarly to the declarations of conflicts of interest required from applicants, the department could consider a similar requirement in relation to those involved in the assessments. This could include a record of the applications on which staff are sighted throughout the process, especially applications that are still in draft form prior to formal submission.²⁹

- **Finding 11:** There are opportunities to improve levels of awareness and understanding around some key documents.

²⁸ Only round one of the strategic fund is within the scope of this report. The department considers that it has taken actions to address the recommendations as part of round two, which took place from September 2017. This includes the introduction of sub-regional improvement boards.

²⁹ The department has conflicts of interest protocols in place which apply to the strategic fund. It considers that these address recommendation 10.

Recommendation 11: The department could consider options to improve staff's understanding of eligibility criteria for supported schools; application forms; and application assessment criteria, and guidance; including for example through presentations and training sessions. Seeing the process from the perspective of the applicant may be a useful way of approaching these activities.

- **Finding 12:** Given the volume of applications, relying on meetings, and email and telephone exchanges is unlikely to result in an effective information management system.

Recommendation 12: The department could consider the development of an information management system that facilitates the assessment of the submitted applications. The aim should be to add transparency to how each organisation, including DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives, contribute to the process.

Resources

Steps 1 and 2: preparation and submission

154. Interviews suggested that in DfE regional teams there were typically two members of staff devoting roughly three days per week to the process, as well as administrative support. In the case of Teaching Schools Council representatives, the amount of time that they devoted to the application process was similar: typically one to three days a week in each of the eight regions. The main difference with respect to the DfE regional offices is that this was matched by the sub-regional teaching school leads. A typical region can have four to six sub-regional teaching school leads. In some cases, instead of sub-regional teaching school leads, the representatives were supported by one to three advisers who devoted a similar amount of time to the process.
155. In addition, there was administrative support available from the Teaching Schools Council office to those involved in the process. In some cases, the administrative support amounted to five days a week, this is, one full time equivalent, during May and June 2017.
156. The assessment phase of the process had not started when we interviewed the members of the DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives. As a result, we cannot provide estimates of the time they devoted to the assessment phase of the process.
157. Both members of the DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives felt that the level of resource they had had available had been

adequate, although many said that they had to work extra time to participate in the process. Only a few said that they had left aside some of their other responsibilities as a result of participating in the process. For example, in one case, a Teaching Schools Council representative had missed three meetings in relation to next school year's planning as a result of participating in the process.

158. The National College for Teaching and Leadership provided additional funds for Teaching Schools Council representative teams to participate in the process. This was used by Teaching Schools Council offices for activities including dissemination when the strategic fund was first launched, and additional resource for applicants who were short listed following sifting, and expression of interest processes. We requested details of these additional funds to the department. However, the department felt that, as the amount of money was the same for all regions, there was little merit in considering this as a possible differentiating factor in terms of the process evaluation.

Steps 3 and 4: assessments and decisions

159. Most application assessors worked full time on the assessments for three to four weeks. This results in an average of approximately two days' worth of work per application. One exception was one interviewee who quoted half a day per application as an estimate. Most described the time and resources available to do their work as adequate. Apart from some minor coordination challenges around the scoring spreadsheets, they found the amount of available time to be adequate.
160. However, this was not necessarily the case of the lead assessor role, which in addition to assessing some applications, had to coordinate the work of the assessors within their region, and stay in regular contact with other lead assessors, and senior managers responsible for national moderation. As the number of applications increases in future rounds, interviewees were concerned that some capacity issues might arise.

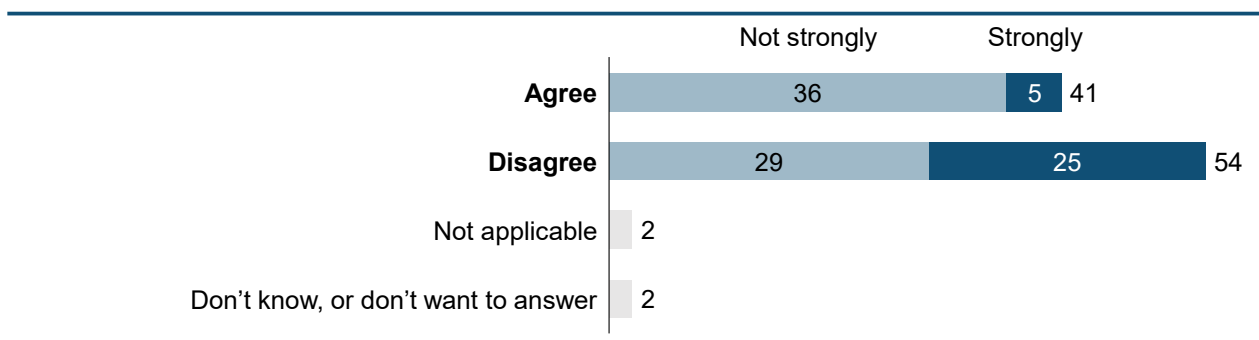
Fitness for purpose

161. Overall, interviewed members of the DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives felt that the process was in line with the purpose of the strategic fund. However, this opinion was qualified in some cases by saying that the process worked mainly as a pilot for later rounds, and lessons should be learned once the process was complete by the end of August 2017.
162. Application assessors were of similar views. Most relied on the national moderation process to address any potential inconsistency or errors in their application assessments. One assessor explained how assessors from certain regions had

gained a reputation for being particularly tough when applying the application assessment guidance, which might result in regional differences in relation to success rates.

163. The main strengths identified by the DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives were in relation to the inclusive nature of the application process, including wide networks of local stakeholders; and the relatively high level of funding available to each individual application, compared to previous funds. “It is like a hub, rather than a quick fix”. Some interviewees stressed the positive attitudes of those involved in the process, particularly because they worked together to achieve results. One interviewee felt that this fund had recognised that the expertise required to improve schools resides with many different stakeholders, something which previous funds had failed to recognise.
164. As shown in **figure 27**, below, the majority, or 54%, of the applicants who responded to our survey disagreed or strongly disagreed that the application process was fit for the purpose of allocating the available funding. Some 41% agreed or strongly agreed.

Figure 27 Overall, the application process was fit for the purpose of allocating the available funding, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

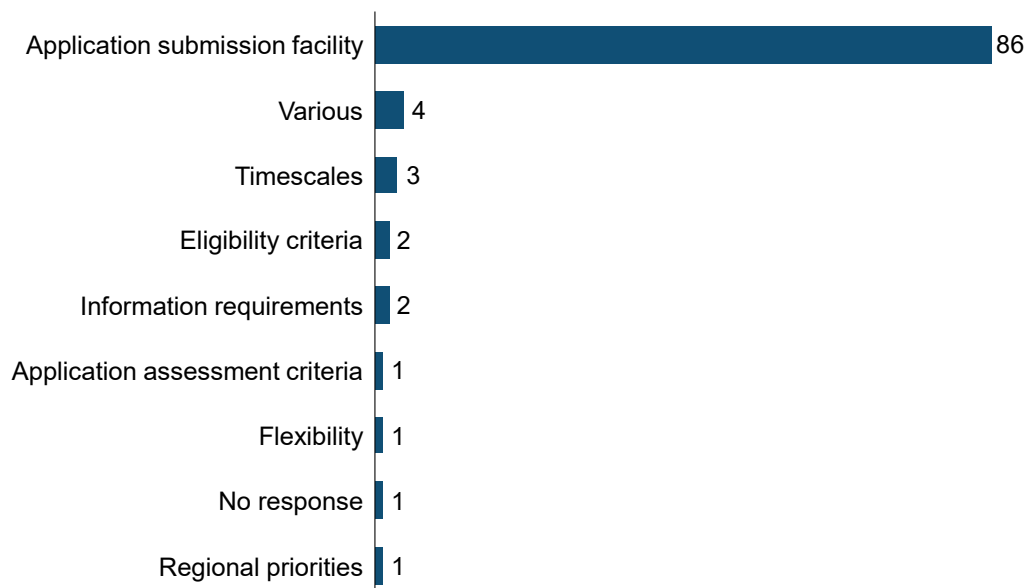
165. We do not have comparable findings from other similar application processes to establish the extent to which this opinion reflects actual limitations in the process under evaluation. It would be unrealistic to expect totally satisfactory feedback from survey respondents who have just completed and submitted a time consuming application. However, our recommendation to the department is to consider significant changes in future rounds of the strategic fund in response to the information shared through the applicant survey.

Section 3: How it could work better

166. As shown in **figure 28**, below, the majority of the applicants who responded to our survey, or 86%, identified the application submission facility as the main change that the department should make for future rounds of the strategic fund. Some of the changes identified by applicants, quoted directly from the survey responses, include:

- ‘Give a longer period. Provide the workshops to support bidding, don't cancel them.’
- ‘Be consistent in each region about the role of Regional School Commissioner.’
- ‘As a busy [school job title], I need to be able to fit this kind of work in around the day to day running of my organisation. When applying I would like to be able to write / save / edit on the form over a period of days, not in one 'live' sitting. I would also like to be able to go forwards and backwards, without information being wiped. Also, a clearer word count.’
- ‘All problems could have been solved with a Save and Close facility.’
- ‘Provide an application form that can be saved as you progress, make clear on all boxes the number of characters that can be entered (e.g. the box under the list of schools in receipt of support), enable a print out of the actual form at the end of submission.’
- ‘Have only one funding breakdown table to avoid complicated duplication.’
- ‘Clear success criteria. More guidance about expectations of breakdown of how funding should be spent. What was the expectation? I would rather bid for a specific amount allocated and work back from that.’
- ‘Ensure online form does not delete information if you go back; ensure Word document does not confuse e.g. Action Plan section KPI column 1000 characters/actually 1000 per milestone - challenge when making submission; ensure drop boxes enable all criteria to be identified - eligibility criteria/additional schools form.’
- ‘It would also be useful if the regional / national database automatically identified the number of criteria met based on the URN as this would save a huge amount of time.’
- ‘A single, central portal where ALL parties can go to view the schools that meet the criteria for support. This should include the specific criteria that they meet and information about their assessment data at ALL appropriate levels: EYFS GLD, Phonics, KS1, KS2. In addition there should be clearly available comparison data between authorities.’

Figure 28 Main change recommended by applicants for future rounds of the fund, percentage



Source: Aldaba analysis of applicant survey. Note: 110 survey respondents.

167. The main weakness identified by interviewed members of the DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives was in relation to regional inconsistencies, which were likely to translate into different application success rates. This was partly, but not totally, as a result of pre-election restrictions. Interviewees suggested further work from the department to ensure consistency.
168. Many interviewees expressed reservations around fairness, particularly in relation to the final decisions being balanced across regions. One interviewee said that 'larger players will dominate, and the smaller ones will be squeezed out'. This was in reference to how larger and more experienced applicants had worked within time constraints to prepare the applications, and the need for applicants to make decisions quickly based on their experience.
169. A few interviewees stated that if sub-regional group improvement boards had gone ahead as originally planned, this would have addressed some of the weaknesses identified in the process. Other individual views include:
- One interviewee was particularly concerned that the process, the available timescales, and the word limits in the application form were not in line with the scale of the strategic fund, which was generous compared to previous funds. This could limit the ability of the strategic fund to meet its purpose.
 - Another interviewee was clear that the process was not designed to identify the schools most in need of support. This is because the process lacked the required level of systemization, and consistency.

- In contrast, another interviewee praised the strategic fund for being open to those schools that are at risk of underperformance, not just those which have been proven to underperform.
- Another interviewee felt that applicants were just responding to the strategic fund as they had been doing for years, so no real difference compared to previous funds: personal relationships matter more than the stated purpose of successive funds.

170. Interviewed members of the DfE regional offices, and Teaching Schools Council representatives suggested the following changes for future rounds:

- To align fund rounds with the availability of information; this is to avoid the risk that, for example, round 2 draws on the same information for 2016-17 as round one.
- To begin using sub-regional improvement boards for the purposes of SSIF as planned. To consider a new formal assessment layer at regional level before proceeding to formal assessment by the DfE assessment teams, including clear roles and responsibilities, and guidelines; this may include sifting out some of the weakest applications.
- To introduce a regional quota, so that each region knows roughly how many bids are likely to be successful, and can discourage those that are unlikely to be successful to avoid wasting efforts.
- To improve information sharing practices within the regions, including timely analysis on which applicants can build when preparing their applications.
- To publish the names of the eligible schools, as opposed to just the criteria and expect regional stakeholder to identify them.
- To strengthen the link between the applications and the wider improvement plans for specific schools. This is to manage the risk that the strategic fund contributes to improving a particular aspect, say, numeracy, but fails to make a difference to the school as a whole.
- To publicise the emergency funding strand more widely, because as part of round one there was lack of awareness, and very limited use of it.
- To increase word limits in the application form and solve technical issues around the online submission, including being able to complete the form in separate sessions.

171. There were also views expressed by a few interviewees around the process not allowing sufficient involvement from multi-academy trusts, or special schools, although other contrasting views emphasised that all types of learning providers were welcome to participate.

172. Application assessors identified the following changes for future rounds:

- To introduce automated eligibility checks for schools, so that applicants are certain about which ones can be included in the applications, and as a result the checks once the department receives the applications are no longer required.
- To build into the application submission facility an option to select the school reference number, as opposed to relying on applicants typing them, which may result in errors.
- To ensure the alignment between the application form, and the department's internal application assessment guidance.

Conclusions

173. It was the first time that the department and all the other stakeholders participated in a funding application process like this, particularly in relation to the levels of funding, and number of organisations per application. The intention to further build a school-led system based on collaborations of networks of schools, rather than individual schools, was also new.
174. Whilst not formally designed as such, round one of the process worked as a pilot. This means that it was reasonable to expect certain limitations, although it was also reasonable to expect a successful delivery of the process as a whole.
175. The announcement of the general election for 8 June 2017 triggered pre-election restrictions which inevitably had a negative impact on the process. The department was unable to undertake any regional activity which might unduly influence the outcome of the election. Certain planned activities could not go ahead, including 'roadshows' and wider communications to guide applicants as to what constituted good, evidence based applications.
176. In addition, the department was not able to begin the process of pulling together sub-regional improvement boards which had been planned as a key element of identifying need and developing effective applications. However, in our expert view, the department will be missing an important opportunity if it assumes that pre-election restrictions were solely responsible for most of the limitations identified as part of this evaluation.
177. Round one contributed to turning the intention to further build a school-led system into a reality. We have evidence that applicants, providers, and supported schools collaborated. They perceived their collaborations as overall positive. This was also the case, although to a lesser extent, in relation to the support that they received from the DfE regional, and Teaching Schools Council offices.
178. Inevitably, there was variation across regions. Certain practices in certain regions, whilst not necessarily representative of the whole process, do raise important concerns in relation to the fairness and transparency with which funds were allocated as part of round one. These include certain applicants being in a better position to succeed as a result of receiving support or resources to prepare applications which other applicants did not know were available or how to access. See paragraph 100.
179. The assessments of applications built on the right principles and processes. The department defined the application assessor roles to an acceptable level of detail, and provided these roles with adequate levels of support, including in terms of guidance and inputs from other staff available at the department. This may serve as a model for changes elsewhere in the process.

180. Two thirds of applicants responding to the survey agreed that it was easy to access sources of information to prepare the applications. Of those that did not, eligible schools was the area most commonly identified as being difficult to find information about.
181. In our expert view, overall, the process for round one demonstrated that all the building blocks are in place to keep improving and progressing towards a successful fulfilment of the stated aims of the strategic fund. However, the findings produced as part of this report cannot support the conclusion that the process for round one was entirely fit for purpose, and so we cannot be sure that resources were targeted at the schools most in need of improving school performance and pupil attainment.
182. Based on emerging early findings from the research, the department implemented changes to address some of the issues highlighted in this report for rounds two and three, and intends to further consider the findings and recommendations for further rounds.

Appendix 1: Methods

Document review

183. We undertook a review of over 20 documents relevant to the process. This included the application assessment guidance produced internally by the department, templates to capture regional priorities, and internal departmental notes to support the work around specific assessment criteria.

Interviews

184. Based on the document review, we produced an interview questionnaire to obtain information on how the process worked in practice, and views on accountability, resources, and overall fitness for purpose. The interview questionnaire is available in **appendix 4**.

185. We interviewed 22 individuals across the department and the Teaching Schools Council. Our findings in relation to application assessors cannot be taken to be representative of the whole population.

186. Each interview took approximately one hour. We took 'non verbatim' notes and recorded the interviews digitally, where informed consent was provided for us to do so.

187. We summarised the interview notes as part of the drafting tasks for this report. To do this, we used frequency references such as 'all', 'some', 'the majority' or 'a few interviewees'. However, given the qualitative nature, and small number of the interviews, these frequency references should be taken just as indications, rather than quantitative evidence. Quotes in inverted commas do not necessarily represent 'verbatim', word by word passages from the interviews.

Survey

188. We invited all 197 applicants to answer a survey. Of these, 128 responded to the survey. In turn, of the 128 respondents, 111 completed all the questions. This gives a complete response rate of 56%. Our analysis of the complete responses excludes one respondent who had used the emergency funding strand. Therefore, our analysis is based on 110 respondents.

189. A number of questions were open ended, or included an 'other, please specify' option. We coded these answers manually. Where coded answers represented sufficient numbers, we created answer categories. Where we considered that the

answer categories were similar to previously existing ones, we added them together.

Draft review

190. The department reviewed drafts of this report. The 22 interviewees did not review the drafts.
191. We considered the review comments, and incorporated amendments as we judged appropriate. Our priority was to maintain an independent and objective view based on the information collected for this report.

Appendix 2: Application guidance

Downloaded from <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/strategic-school-improvement-fund> on 22/06/17

Strategic School Improvement Fund

From: National College for Teaching and Leadership

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/national-college-for-teaching-andleadership>)

Published: 24 March 2017

Last updated: 21 April 2017, see all updates

Funding for eligible schools for a range of school improvement activities.

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Overview

The £140 million Strategic School Improvement Fund is a grant to support primary, secondary, middle, all-through, alternative provision and special academies and maintained schools, and pupil referral units. It is intended to further build a school-led system, and aims to target resources at the schools most in need to improve school performance and pupil attainment; to help them use their resources most effectively, and to deliver more good school places.

The fund will support a broad range of school improvement activities including, but not limited to, improving leadership, governance, teaching methods and approaches, and financial health and efficiency. The fund will support medium- to long-term sustainable activities across groups of schools with a preference towards school-led provision, that is, support provided by schools, for schools.

The Strategic School Improvement Fund is not intended to support specific projects or activities already funded through other Department for Education programmes. These will include those focused on curriculum enhancement, opportunity areas, Northern Powerhouse, national professional qualifications, initial teacher training (ITT) recruitment, Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund, academy conversion activities or improvements in school buildings or infrastructure.

Teaching schools, multi-academy trusts and local authorities will submit to the Department for Education applications for funding on behalf of the sector to address local improvement priorities across groups of schools. To ensure that support reaches those schools which need it most, and in the most effective way, we expect that, in shaping these applications, regional schools

commissioners, multi-academy trusts, local authorities, the Teaching Schools Council, and diocesan representatives will work collaboratively with schools to bring together their local intelligence to identify shared improvement priorities.

To avoid duplication, we encourage teaching schools to make their Teaching Schools Council regional lead aware of their intention to submit an application(s). Similarly, we encourage multiacademy trusts to make their regional schools commissioner aware of their intention to apply.

Each application must support a minimum of 4 schools, of which at least 70% must meet one or more of the eligibility criteria

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategic-school-improvementfund-eligibility-criteria>). Eligible schools will be those which are currently underperforming (in line with the schools causing concern guidance

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/schools-causingconcern--2>), as well as schools at risk of doing so. Where applications are solely in support of special schools,

there may be exceptions to the 70% threshold. For such applications, applicants should contact ssif.enquiries@education.gov.uk in advance of submitting their application.

Applications will need to be supported by evidence that demonstrates why proposed interventions are expected to drive up standards in schools. They will need to set out a clear rationale for why the improvement is necessary, and detail what activities will be undertaken by which providers, and the expected costs, outputs and outcomes.

We expect schools, in particular teaching schools, national support schools, and multi-academy trusts to provide the majority of improvement support; however, applicants are at liberty to use a range of providers and will be responsible for securing and quality assuring all provision.

Applications will be assessed against the criteria detailed below and the Department for Education will also refer to local intelligence to inform its decision-making on priorities.

If there is an urgent need for more bespoke support, there is provision to apply for emergency funding (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/strategic-school-improvement-fund-emergency-funding>) to support an individual school in difficulty.

Apply

Applicants should complete and submit the online application form

(https://nctl.custhelp.com/ci/documents/detail/2/SSIF1_P1). This link will take you to the application form login page. If you don't already have an account with the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL), you'll need to register for one.

The deadline for receipt of applications for this round of funding is midday on Friday 23 June 2017.

We expect to inform applicants of the outcome of their applications in August, and for initial grant payments to be made when schools return from the summer holiday in September.

There will be further funding rounds in autumn 2017 and spring 2018, with the next application deadline in September 2017.

On the application form you will find separate guidance on how to fill in the online form; a link to the eligibility criteria; and a downloadable version of the application form for you to draft your application.

All applications must be submitted using the online form. We will not accept applications sent by email.

Who can apply

To apply for the Strategic School Improvement Fund, you should be a designated teaching school, a multi-academy trust, or a local authority.

Multi-academy trusts can apply to support their own schools, but only when they are also supporting at least one school not in their trust in the same application.

Applications will need to be ratified by a senior responsible officer in the applicant organisation. We ask that applicants name this individual on the application form, and that they are in a position to commit their organisation to be accountable to the Department for Education for the correct use of the funding and delivery of the outcomes set out in the application, as well as complying with the terms and conditions of the grant funding agreement (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/grantfunding-agreement-terms-and-conditions>). We require applications to be ratified by:

- the headteacher – if you are a teaching school
- the director, assistant director, or equivalent, of children’s services – if you are a local authority, or
- the chief executive officer/accounting officer – if you are a multi-academy trust

In submitting an application, you are confirming your commitment to undertake delivery of the improvement activities, to provide evidence of impact. All parties – applicant, providers and supported schools – must have given their express approval to the application and its provisions prior to submission.

We may seek or draw on further information on applicants and providers in order to confirm their capacity to carry out the activities required for the successful delivery of an application.

Schools eligible to receive support

All primary, secondary, middle, all-through, alternative provision and special academies and maintained schools, and pupil referral units in England that meet at least one of the eligibility criteria (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategic-school-improvement-fund-eligibility-criteria>) qualify for support, with the exception of:

- solely 16+ provision institutions (that is, those which are not part of a secondary school)
- local authority nurseries
- secure units
- schools subject to academy orders (unless exceptional circumstances apply)
- schools which are open but proposed to close

Each application must include at least 4 supported schools, and at least 70% of the supported schools in each application must meet at least one of the eligibility criteria set out in the main eligibility criteria (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategic-school-improvement-fund-eligibilitycriteria>) for the fund. This will allow for applications which include schools which do not meet any of the main eligibility criteria, but are identified by local intelligence as being at risk of decline.

A number of special schools may meet one or more of the criteria because they cater for pupils who are working at lower key stage levels or making less rapid progress than their mainstream educated peers. Although such schools may not necessarily be at risk of underperforming, it is important that special schools are able to benefit from the support of the Strategic School Improvement Fund. They will be able to do so either through applications which include only other special schools or applications which include special and mainstream schools. Where applications are solely in support of special schools, there may be exceptions to the 70% threshold for schools meeting one or more of the eligibility criteria.

If you have any questions about eligibility, prior to submitting your application please contact ssif.enquiries@education.gov.uk.

Funding available per application

There is no set amount of funding per application; however, each application must include a minimum of 4 supported schools. Individual application values will typically be in the range of £100,000 to £500,000 and will support multiple schools to address shared improvement priorities. We are particularly interested in receiving higher value applications that use evidence-led approaches to address improvement priorities across a large number of schools in a locality.

What we will fund

Applications must:

- address local improvement priorities to benefit multiple schools (minimum of 4 schools per application)
- be of a scale and nature that brings about sustainable improvement in school standards and performance across an area, phase or group of schools
- be supported by evidence that demonstrates why proposed interventions are expected to drive up standards in schools
- set out a clear rationale for why the improvement is necessary, and detail what activities will be undertaken by which providers, and the expected costs, outputs and outcomes

Applications may include innovative ideas and approaches to school improvement; however, such applications will still require an evidence base to support why and how they are expected to be successful.

The types of activities that we will fund include, but are not limited to, those which:

- deliver improvements in overall teaching, learning and leadership.
- increase teachers' capacity, to enable them to focus on their teaching and undertake effective evidence-based professional development. This could include support to review and remove unnecessary workload, in line with the recommendations of the 3 independent reports on marking, planning and resources and data management (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-teachers-workload>).
- are specifically focused on raising the attainment of pupils with SEND; in particular proposals which focus on identifying SEND, putting in place effective interventions, commissioning specialist support, parental involvement, transitions, minimising exclusion and preparation for adulthood.
- have a clear impact on the efficiency of schools, to support improved financial health and improved pupil outcomes. This could include sharing of specialist staffing across schools or the creation of new collaborative procurement arrangements, for example.
- improve specifically the performance of a school in relation to its disadvantaged pupils.
- include targeted interventions to improve governance.

Activities which are not eligible for this fund include:

- academy conversion activities that are expected to be paid for through other funds such as, but not limited to, the sponsored academies pre-opening grant or the regional academy growth fund (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/regional-academy-growth-fund>)
- any projects which are already being, or planned to be, paid for through opportunity area or Northern Powerhouse funding
- projects supported by other Department for Education funding such as national professional qualifications, ITT recruitment, or Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund • improvements in school buildings or infrastructure

Applications will be for medium- to long-term improvement support which will start and finish sometime within the period September 2017 to March 2019. All interventions must finish by March 2019 at the latest.

Organisations that can deliver the improvement support

We expect teaching schools and national leaders of education in particular to play a major role in delivering the funded support interventions.

Some applicants may also wish to draw on the expertise and specialisms of other proven school improvement/school-to-school support providers such as, but not limited to, maintained schools, multi-academy trusts, local authorities, higher education institutions, independent schools, charities and not-for-profit organisations as well as private sector providers. Applicants must be of sound financial health and be able to demonstrate how they plan on using their funding efficiently.

The applicant will be accountable for quality assuring all provision and ensuring providers have the capacity and capability to deliver the activity such that it delivers the desired outcomes.

Application process

1. Submitting the application – teaching school/local authority/multi-academy trust (the applicant) submits an application for funding. In submitting an application, the applicant is agreeing to the Department for Education grant funding agreement terms and conditions (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/grant-funding-agreement-terms-and-conditions>).
2. Eligibility and completeness checks – on receipt of applications, we will undertake checks to ensure that the applicant has completed all required fields in the application form, and that the application meets the requirements of the fund.
3. Assessment of applications – the national Expert Investment Board will assess all applications and make recommendations on funding awards.
4. Grant payment made – if the application is successful, we will pay the first instalment of the grant to the applicant and establish a payment and monitoring schedule for further payments to be released (payment will be dependent on achievement of milestones set out in the application).
5. Delivery of activity – the applicant will manage delivery of the activity outlined in the application.
6. Monitoring, evaluation and reporting – the applicant will monitor progress of delivery and achievement of outcomes, and will report to us as required to release further grant payments. Applicants will be required to participate as required by the Department for Education in any formal evaluation of the fund and/or the associated processes.

Assessment criteria:

The Expert Investment Board will assess the extent to which applications demonstrate:

- An evidence-based programme of work
- How clear is the logic and evidence of how and why the intervention will work?
- The scale and scope of the forecast impact on achieving improved outcomes for children.
- Deliverability
- How robust is the action plan? How clear are the baseline measures and outcomes? Has the applicant identified the main risks, and how robust are the mitigations to these? Does the application evidence sufficient capacity, and capability that the activity can be delivered? Is there a good approach to quality assurance of provision?
- Sustainability
- Does the application provide a clear plan as to how interventions will develop a foundation for sustainable improvement, for example, by improving practices and behaviours?
- Value for money
- Are the costs clearly set out? Is there evidence that the applicant has taken steps to secure value for money?

Terms and conditions of grant funding

Please ensure you have read and understood the Department for Education grant funding agreement terms and conditions (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/grant-funding-agreementterms-and-conditions>). In applying for the Strategic School Improvement Fund (including emergency funding) you will be agreeing to the Department for Education grant funding agreement terms and conditions.

The applicant will also be required to sign and return a grant offer letter. In the event of an application being successful, the Department for Education will send this to the applicant. This will set out the specific grant conditions, monitoring arrangements and payment details. It will also include a certificate of expenditure (annex G) which applicants are required to submit on an annual basis.

For applicants who already receive grant funding from the Department for Education, for example, teaching schools, the Strategic School Improvement Fund should be clearly identified and included as part of a single certificate of expenditure return.

If you are a teaching school you will need to ensure you have submitted your certificate of expenditure (annex G) return for the last financial year. If you have not yet submitted this, you will need to get this back to us before funding is paid.

Roles and responsibilities

Below are the roles and responsibilities we expect of organisations who wish to draw down support from the fund.

The supported school(s)

Schools that are the recipients of improvement support funded through applications. The majority of these will meet one or more of the fund's eligibility criteria.

The applicant

The organisation which submits the application, and which will receive and be accountable for, the grant funding, and achievement of the stated improvement outcomes. Applicants are accountable for quality assuring the providers and the overall provision. The applicant must be a teaching school, a local authority, or a multi-academy trust.

The provider

The organisation(s) that delivers the improvement activities set out in the application. Providers can be any organisation, such as a school, local authority, university or charity; however, it is the applicant's responsibility to quality assure all provision.

Other funds available

Alongside the Strategic School Improvement Fund, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has committed to invest up to £20 million over the next 2 years to further evaluate and disseminate evidence-based programmes and approaches detailed included in a selection of larger-scale applications.

The Strategic School Improvement Fund will sit alongside a wide range of other Department for Education funding streams aimed at school improvement including:

- from September, a £50 million a year fund for local authorities to continue to broker and monitor school improvement for low-performing maintained schools
- the Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/teaching-and-leadershipinnovation-fund>), which is a 3-year investment worth up to £75 million that will support high-quality professional development for teachers and school leaders in areas of the country that need it most

- the £72 million investment for the 12 opportunity areas (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/education-secretary-announces-6-new-opportunity-areas>) - over the next 3 financial years. Opportunity areas will see local partnerships formed with early years providers, schools, colleges, universities, businesses, charities and local authorities, to ensure that all children and young people have the opportunity to reach their full potential. Opportunity areas will also get priority access to the Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund.

Contact

If you have any queries, questions or comments, please contact us.

Strategic School Improvement Fund

Emailssif.enquiries@education.gov.uk

From: National College for Teaching and Leadership

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/national-college-for-teaching-and-leadership>)

Appendix 3: Application form

Application for Strategic School Improvement Fund

Before you start:

We advise that you fill in this form offline in a Word Document first as there is no save and return functionality.

DfE will not accept applications sent through by email. All applications must be made through the online portal linked to from the gov.uk page.

You can find [instructions on how to fill in this form linked to on the online application screen](#). This document includes some example answers that may help.

Applicant's organisation details

1. What type of organisation are you:

Teaching School:
Multi-Academy Trust:
Local Authority:
Other: (If other please specify below)
Click or tap here to enter text.

2. If you are a Teaching School, what is your URN?

Click or tap here to enter text.

Please ensure you enter this correctly as this will be used to obtain the details of your school. If you do not know the URN you can search for it on the [Edubase website](#).

3. If you are a Multi-Academy Trust, what is your Companies House Number?

Click or tap here to enter text.

4. If you are a Local Authority, what is your LA code?

Click or tap here to enter text.

5. Where are you located?

Local authority name: Click or tap here to enter text.
RSC Region: Click or tap here to enter text.

Applicant's contact details

6. Please give us the name and contact details (email and telephone number) for a single point of contact to correspond with.

Click or tap here to enter text.

This person will need to email any supporting documents required to us separate to this form. They will also need to be contactable over the summer in case of further information being required.

Senior Responsible Officer

Application for Strategic School Improvement Fund

7. Please confirm the name, position and contact details for the Senior Responsible Office for this application:

Click or tap here to enter text.

*This named individual must be in a position to be able to commit your organisation to be accountable for this application. This means for schools the person submitting this application must be the Head Teacher; for MATs this must be the CEO/**accounting officer**; for LAs this must be either the Director or the Assistant Director for Children's Services.*

8. Bank account details of the applicant to be paid

This information is required to make payment of the grant for the activities stated in the application if successful.

Even if you have already registered your bank account details with DfE, you will still need to fill them in here.

Please note that the bank details you specify here need to be those for the account you would like funding to be paid into. Other bank details you have previously submitted will not be changed by this application.

Organisation name:	
Address:	
Post Code:	
Telephone no:	
Remittance E-mail address	

Account name:	
Bank/Building Society Name:	
Bank Address:	
Bank Postcode:	
Sort code:	

Application for Strategic School Improvement Fund

Account no:	
Roll number:	

Provider details:

You will need to have secured the provider(s) of support before submitting your application. Please list the name and type of every provider organisation used in the delivery of this application.

Provider organisation name: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Type of organisation:

- Teaching School
- National Support School
- School
- Local Authority
- Multi-Academy Trust
- Private sector organisation
- Third sector organisation
- Other

Provider organisation name: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Type of organisation:

- Teaching School
- National Support School
- School
- Local Authority
- Multi-Academy Trust
- Private sector organisation
- Third sector organisation
- Other

Provider organisation name: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Type of organisation:

- Teaching School
- National Support School
- School
- Local Authority
- Multi-Academy Trust
- Private sector organisation
- Third sector organisation
- Other

Application for Strategic School Improvement Fund

Provider organisation name:

Click or tap here to enter text.

Type of organisation:

Teaching School
National Support School
School
Local Authority
Multi-Academy Trust
Private sector organisation
Third sector organisation
Other

Provider organisation name:

Click or tap here to enter text.

Type of organisation:

Teaching School
National Support School
School
Local Authority
Multi-Academy Trust
Private sector organisation
Third sector organisation
Other

Provider organisation name:

Click or tap here to enter text.

Type of organisation:

Teaching School
National Support School
School
Local Authority
Multi-Academy Trust
Private sector organisation
Third sector organisation
Other

Application for Strategic School Improvement Fund

Provider organisation name:

Click or tap here to enter text.

Type of organisation:

- Teaching School
- National Support School
- School
- Local Authority
- Multi-Academy Trust
- Private sector organisation
- Third sector organisation
- Other

Provider organisation name:

Click or tap here to enter text.

Type of organisation:

- Teaching School
- National Support School
- School
- Local Authority
- Multi-Academy Trust
- Private sector organisation
- Third sector organisation
- Other

Application for Strategic School Improvement Fund

Details of application

Overview

1. Title (short title for your project): [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

2. Brief summary of your application: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
(max. 1,000 characters)

Financials

3. How much funding for this application are you seeking (£)? (We expect the average application to be for between £100,000 - £500,000, but there are no set limits) [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

4. What funding, if any, for this activity are you intending to secure from other sources, and how much? [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

5. Are you, or any other entity that is party to this application in receipt of, or have applied for, other sources of funding for the same activity (if so, what, and where does it originate)? [YES](#) [NO](#)
[Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

6. How have you ensured value for money? (max 1,500 characters)

Project Costs

- We expect the 'Application Development Cost' to be no more than 20% of the total cost of the application. Application Development Costs are the costs incurred in writing this application. These could include the resource used in securing providers, and administrative time spent building the application and seeking the relevant approvals.
- Please write up all of the associated costs for each term of delivery for your proposed activity. The sum of the total spend here will need to match the total funding requested in question 3 of the financials section.

7. Please indicate the estimated level of spend per term

Project Costs	Application Development Cost	Please indicate the estimated level of spend per term					Total spend
		£ Term 1	£ Term 2	£ Term 3	£ Term 4	£ Term 5	
		Autumn 2017	Spring 2018	Summer 2018	Autumn 2018	Spring 2019	
Delivery							
Administration							

Application for Strategic School Improvement Fund

Term 2 – Spring 2018				
Term 3 – Summer 2018				
Term 4 – Autumn 2018				
Term 5 – Spring 2019				

Application for Strategic School Improvement Fund

Programme of Work

Please outline your proposed programme

In all of your answers below, please include any assumptions, risks/barriers to success, and supporting evidence.

1. **Issue (max 1,500 characters)** *What is the issue that this intervention is aiming to solve? What are you trying to change and who will benefit? What baseline measures do you intend to improve?*
2. **Output (max 1,500 characters)** *What are the planned activities and what evidence supports these as being likely to succeed? Who will deliver what and how will they be managed (please feel free to refer to your timeline in the previous section)?*
3. **Short-term Outcomes (max 1,500 characters)** *What practices, skills, behaviours, knowledge, and of whom, do you intend to change in the short term as a result of the activities described in the output section?*
4. **Long-term Outcomes (max 1,500 characters)** *What longer term outcomes are you intending to achieve in relation to the baseline measures in your rationale, and when will they be realised? What evidence will you gather to show that the outcomes have been achieved?*
5. **Monitoring (max 1,500 characters)** *How will you monitor the impact of the activity? What data and/or evidence will you collect to show that you are making progress towards the short and long-term outcomes? What sources of evidence will you use to show that changes have been made?*
6. **Risks/Barriers to success (max 1,500 characters)** *What are the biggest risks to success and how will these be mitigated?*
7. **Sustainability (max 1,500 characters)** *In what ways do the activities in this application ensure that the desired improvements will be sustained following completion of the programme?*
8. **Scalability (max 1,500 characters)** *If the proposed programme outlined in this application were to be funded, what do you think are possible ways that the proposed intervention could be taken to scale?*
9. **Capacity and capability (max 1,500 characters)** *Please state how you and your providers (identified earlier in this application) are suited to delivering this programme of work. We are particularly looking for evidence of previous successful delivery of activities of a similar scale and theme.*

Application for Strategic School Improvement Fund

Summary information

1. Which key stage(s) are you targeting:

You can select multiple entries

N.b. Early Years and KS5 / 16-18 activities are not supported by this Fund unless they are in schools deemed as Primary, Secondary, or All-through

- Early Years Foundation Stage
- KS1
- KS2
- KS3
- KS4
- KS5

2. Which theme(s) best describe your application:

You can select multiple entries

- Developing independent thinking*
 - Literacy*
 - Numeracy*
 - Science*
 - Parental engagement*
 - Language development*
 - Pupil engagement and behaviour*
 - Feedback and monitoring pupil progress*
 - School organisation*
 - Staff development*
 - Character*
 - Enrichment*
 - Other (if not listed, please write theme below)*
- Click or tap here to enter text.

3. How many pupils do you expect to directly benefit from this application?

- 1-200
- 201-500
- 501-1,000
- 1,001-2,000
- 2,001 – 4,000
- 4,001+

Application for Strategic School Improvement Fund

Declaration of Interests

DfE requires that the applicant and the provider(s) offering services funded by this application declare any conflicts of interest they have with organisations party to this application.

The Department for Education defines a conflict of interest as *'a situation in which someone in a position of trust either within the Department, or from a future or existing contractor, has competing professional or personal interests that may have the potential to distort competition. Such competing interests can make it difficult to fulfil his or her duties impartially.'*

In deciding which interests to disclose, those affected by this declaration should ask whether, in the opinion of a fair-minded and informed observer, the interest would suggest a real possibility of bias.

If you declare an interest, we will take a decision on how these will be managed.

Could the personal interests of any party to this application or those of family members or friends be deemed to benefit from this application should it be funded?	Y/N	If you have declared a conflict, please provide details	If you have declared a conflict, please explain how this will be managed
What other interests do you wish to disclose?		If you have declared any conflicts, please provide details:	If you have declared any conflicts, please explain how these will be managed:

Grant Funding Agreement

On applying for this fund, you are agreeing to be held to the terms and conditions of the DfE's Grant Funding Agreement ([click here to view](#)).

Are you content with your application?

DfE will not accept applications sent through by email. All applications must be made through the online portal linked to from the gov.uk page.

Appendix 4: Interview questionnaire

Introduction

- Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. The aim of the research is to evaluate the process to apply for, and allocate the funding available as part of the Strategic School Improvement Fund. You have been invited to this interview because you have been actively involved in round one of the fund. We would like to know your views on how the process has worked, and suggestions to improve future rounds.
- The information that you provide during the interview will remain confidential. We may need to disclose the information to third parties in the event that it relates to safeguarding considerations, or becomes subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Our report will use the information that you provide during the interview at an aggregate level, without associating any piece of information to your name.
- You may answer 'don't know' or 'prefer not to answer', as you wish.

Informed consent

1. Are you happy to proceed with the interview?

Interviewee background

2. What is your professional background?
3. When did you join your current organisation?
4. How long have you had your current job title?

Process design

5. In your own words, what is the purpose of the Strategic School Innovation Fund?
6. How do you see the key steps in the process to produce, assess, and make decisions on funding applications? Prompt: You can include parts of the process you are not directly involved in.
7. What is your role in the process?
8. On how many occasions, or for how long, have you put your role into practice?
9. Have you participated in similar processes before? Prompt: This includes project management experience as part of public funding exercises.
10. What type of support do you have to fulfil your role in the process? Prompt: examples include guidance documents, advice from colleagues, and regular meetings.
11. How did you engage with the application form for the fund?

12. Does the application form collect the information required to meet the purpose of the fund?
13. What is your opinion of the action plan section of the application?
14. What is your opinion of the programme of work section of the application?

Accountability, roles, and responsibilities

15. What are the boundaries of your responsibilities? Prompt: for example, where do you make decisions building on other colleagues' work, and where do you prepare certain information for other colleagues to take over from you?
16. Who do you report to, and who reports to you?
17. How do you report to others, and how do others report to you? Prompt: for example, email communication, regular reports, meetings.
18. How have you engaged with the criteria to assess the applications?
19. What is your opinion of the way in which assessment criteria have been applied?
20. If other people doing your same role had been in your situations, would they have made the same decisions?
21. In your opinion, is your role as part of the process in line with your background and experience?

Accountability, roles and responsibilities (in the case of those involved in applications)

22. How would you describe the relation between applicants, providers, and supported schools, as part of the application preparation phase?
23. Did applicants and providers work together to identify needs, and develop the application accordingly?
24. What information sources did you use to develop the applications?
25. How did you choose the interventions that met the needs in your local area?
26. Did you use the guidance produced by the Education Endowment Foundation?

Resources

27. Thinking about yourself, and colleagues who perform the same role as you in the process, how would you describe the amount of people available?
28. Did you have enough time to fulfil your responsibilities as part of the process?
29. Did you have to stop meeting any other of your usual responsibilities in order to participate in the process?

30. What about the amount and type of equipment available to perform your role in the process, including computers, information technology (IT) systems, and software applications?
31. What about sharing information and knowledge, including receiving the right type of information at the right time?

Resources (in the case of those involved in applications)

32. How would you describe the resources available to develop the applications?

Fitness for purpose

33. Did the process meet the ultimate purpose of the fund?
34. What were the strengths of the process?
35. What were the weaknesses?
36. What could be improved next time the process is run? Prompt: process design, accountabilities, roles, responsibilities, resources.

Appendix 5: Survey questionnaire

Strategic School Improvement Fund - round 1

Informed consent

Welcome. This survey is about round 1 of the Strategic School Improvement Fund, which required submissions of applications by 23 June 2017, and the continuous development of the Emergency School Improvement Fund. You have been invited to participate because you have submitted an application to the fund. We would like to know your views on how the application process has worked, and suggestions to improve future rounds.

The information that you provide as part of this survey will remain confidential and stored securely. We may need to disclose the information to third parties in the event that it relates to safeguarding considerations, or becomes subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Our report will use the information that you provide at an aggregate level. No individual person or organisation will be identifiable in the report.

Please respond thinking of how the application process actually worked for you, and leave aside what you think the expectations were. Your answers will have no bearing on the assessment of your application.

Before you start, please check you have 8 minutes to answer the survey. You will not be able to have a break and pick it up where you left it.

* 1. Are you happy to participate in this survey?

Yes

No

Strategic School Improvement Fund - round 1

About you

* 2. What type of organisation are you currently part of? Please tick the answer that best describes your organisation in relation to the application to the fund

- teaching school
- multi-academy trust
- local authority
- diocese
- national support school
- other

* 3. Where is your organisation based?

- East of England and North-East London
- East Midlands and the Humber
- Lancashire and West Yorkshire
- North of England
- North-West London and South-Central England
- South-East England and South London
- South West England
- West Midlands

* 4. For which strand of funding did you apply? If you applied for both, please tick just one answer, and think of that one application when answering the rest of the questions.

- Strategic
- Emergency

Strategic School Improvement Fund - round 1

Emergency fund

* 5. What led you to decide that the emergency strand was the best option, as opposed to the strategic strand? Please tick the answer that best describes the main reason why you chose the emergency strand

- Ofsted related considerations
- Visit from local authority
- New head teacher, or senior management team at school
- Other (please specify)

Strategic School Improvement Fund - round 1

Your application

* 6. How many provider organisations did you include in your application? A provider is the organisation(s) that delivers the improvement activities set out in the application

Please enter the correct number

* 7. How many supported schools did you include in your application? A supported school is a school(s) that is the recipient of improvement support funded through applications

Please enter the correct number

* 8. What type of need does your application address? Please tick the answer that best describes the main type of need

- Overall teaching and learning by pupils in the classroom: English, including literacy, reading, writing
- Overall teaching and learning by pupils in the classroom: Maths, including numeracy
- Overall teaching and learning by pupils in the classroom: subjects other than English or Maths
- Attainment of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- Attainment of disadvantaged pupils
- Leadership of teachers, and other school staff
- Teachers' capacity, for example planning lessons, marking tests, and help with admin
- School efficiency, and financial health of schools
- Other (please specify)

* 9. What is the main source of information that you used to assess need as part of your application? Please tick the answer that best describes the main source of information.

- Internal, unpublished data, for example teacher assessments, school tracking data
- Published data, for example, Ofsted, school performance tables
- Expert judgement of those involved in preparing the application, for example practical knowledge of schools
- Data collected specifically for the application, for example, a survey of teachers
- Other (please specify)

* 10. At what level was the information to assess need pitched?

- School level
- Regional, or sub-regional, but not school level
- Regional, sub-regional, and school level

* 11. What type of intervention does your application propose to address need? Please tick the answer that best describes the main type of intervention.

- New roles, or extra capacity for existing roles
- An activity for pupils that is delivered 'as a product' by providers, such as a licenced programme, or a set of learning materials
- subject to copyrights An activity for pupils, but not necessarily delivered 'as a product'
- Training, coaching, or mentoring activities for teachers or other school staff
- Other (please specify)

* 12. What is the main source of evidence that you used to choose the type of intervention that best addressed need as part of your application? Please tick the answer that best describes the main source of evidence

- Internal, unpublished information
- Published information
- Expert knowledge of those involved in preparing the application, for example, practical knowledge of schools
- Information collected specifically for the application, for example, short list of relevant interventions produced by an expert adviser
- Other (please specify)

* 13. How many hours were required to prepare your application? Please provide a high-level estimate for the total of your time, and also the time of others involved, including filling in the form, meetings, phone-calls, and informal conversations since launch day on 21 April 2017.

- Less than 10 hours in total, including my time and other people's time
- 11 to 20 hours in total, including my time and other people's time
- 21 to 30 hours in total, including my time and other people's time
- 31 to 40 hours in total, including my time and other people's time
- More than 40 hours in total, including my time and other people's time
- Don't know, or prefer not to answer

* 14. What is your opinion in relation to the following statements? Please tick the answer that best describes your opinion

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable	Don't know, or don't want to answer
The involvement of the Teaching School Council in the preparation of my application was useful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The involvement of the Regional School Commissioner in the preparation of my application was useful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The relationship between my organisation (as applicants); my providers; and my supported schools was overall positive during the preparation of the application	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The guidance published alongside the application form was useful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Accessing sources of information to prepare the application was easy	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The application form was what I would expect considering its purpose, and the level of funding available	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The website, and system to submit the application, worked well	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The assessment criteria to select the successful applications were clear and transparent	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Working with others, there was enough time available until the submission deadline to prepare the application	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Those involved, including myself, were able to devote enough time to prepare the application	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overall, the application process was fit for the purpose of allocating the available funding	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 15. In no more than 100 words, please explain in which areas you had the most difficulty in accessing information in support of your proposed intervention.

* 16. Did you raise a query or complaint to SSIF.enquiries@education.gov.uk ?

Yes

No

Strategic School Improvement Fund - round 1

Queries and complaints

* 17. How satisfied were you with the way that query or complaint was handled?

Very satisfied

Satisfied

Unsatisfied

Very unsatisfied

Strategic School Improvement Fund - round 1

Future rounds

* 18. In no more than 100 words, what is the main change you would recommend for future rounds? Please note this is in relation to the process in place to produce and submit applications, rather than the fund itself, or the level of funding available

Strategic School Improvement Fund - round 1

Thank you

This is the end of the survey. We are grateful for your time and valuable answers.



Department
for Education

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