



Impact Case Study Series

Going the Distance: Improving University Access in Rural and Coastal Areas

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Research and Impact Series

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About the Author

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Contact Details

This is the first in a series of impact case studies which can all be found on our [website](#). If you would like to learn more about The Brilliant Club or have specific questions about this case study, please contact:

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About The Brilliant Club

The Brilliant Club exists to increase the number of pupils from under-represented backgrounds that progress to highly-selective universities. We do this by mobilising the PhD community to share its expertise with state schools. In pursuit of this mission, The Brilliant Club delivers two programmes:



The Scholars Programme recruits, trains and places doctoral and postdoctoral researchers in schools to deliver programmes of university-style tutorials, which are supplemented by two university trips.



Researchers in Schools recruits PhD graduates, places them as trainee teachers in schools and supports them to develop as excellent teachers and research leaders committed to closing the gap in attainment and university access.

Find out more about our work on our website at www.thebrilliantclub.org.

Executive Summary

This is the third in a series of impact case studies about wider thematic issues within widening participation. It presents the challenges for university access interventions in rural and coastal areas and describes how The Brilliant Club delivers its programmes across the UK. This case study is relevant for anyone interested in widening participation in rural and coastal areas, particularly regarding university access work that links schools and universities.

Fair access to higher education is a challenge everywhere but particularly so in rural and coastal areas

- Only 14% of pupils from low-income backgrounds in rural and coastal areas progress to university compared to 38% of pupils from low-income backgrounds in urban areas (Social Mobility Commission, 2017).
- Geographical isolation means that many educational and cultural experiences are difficult to access for pupils in rural and coastal schools, including trips to museums or to universities.
- Logistical challenges, including cost and time for transport, make it difficult for many organisations to deliver university access programmes outside of urban centres. The 'widening participation infrastructure' of London does not exist in other parts of the country (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018).

The Brilliant Club started in London, but has since grown to work with schools in all parts of the country

- Between 2013–14 and 2017–18, The Brilliant Club has increased the number of rural schools it partners with from 17 to 132 and the number of schools in social mobility cold spots from 12 to 114. The charity is currently present in 42 out of 65 English social mobility cold spots.
- The Brilliant Club can deliver the same programme in both rural and urban parts of the country: Pupils visit two highly-selective universities and produce a demanding final assignment, an experience that has the potential to both normalise university for pupils in rural and coastal areas and increase their academic self-confidence.

By mobilising the PhD community, The Brilliant Club can reach any non-selective state school in the country that wants to partner with it

- Through its Scholars Programme, the charity recruits, trains and places doctoral and postdoctoral researchers in schools to deliver programmes of university-style tutorials.
- PhD researchers are typically clustered in urban areas, but their passion for education combined with flexible working schedules mean that many are willing to travel to more rural parts of the country.

Reaching pupils in rural and coastal areas can be a true challenge and we continue to look for ways to increase our provision in these parts of the country. In this case study we share what we have learned so far and how we are becoming more strategic in our expansion.

The Geographical Divide in University Access

Geographical differences drive outcomes of under-represented pupils, but there is not a simple north-south divide, nor is low social mobility restricted to entire regions. Yet the Social Mobility Index produced by the Social Mobility Commission shows a clear pattern: "the new social mobility coldspots in our country are concentrated in remote rural or coastal areas and in former industrial areas." **38% of pupils from low-income backgrounds in urban areas progress to university compared to only 14% of their rural and coastal peers.**

These differences do not just occur in university progression but are pervasive in primary and secondary school education. London schools achieve the best outcomes for pupils on free school meals, even in districts with high deprivation, such as Tower Hamlets or Waltham Forest (SMC, 2017). **The attainment gap between Pupil Premium pupils and their peers, on the other hand, is particularly wide in rural areas and grows throughout secondary school** (Andrews et al., 2017).

Beyond diagnosing the challenges that pupils in rural and coastal areas face, it is important to understand why these differences exist and how under-represented pupils from areas such as Somerset, North Norfolk or Blackpool could have a fairer chance to determine their own future. A report by *Ambition School Leadership* (formerly Future Leaders Trust) sees three challenges for coastal schools: **geographical, economic and cultural isolation** (Future Leaders Trust, 2015). While pupils in rural and coastal areas often already have the aspiration to go to university, many lack knowledge about university and the academic self-confidence to make the choices that will allow them to progress.

Poor transport links make it less likely for teachers to relocate or commute and more difficult for pupils to travel. Hartlepool is only 30 minutes from Durham University by car; however, there is no direct train route and the bus takes 1 hour and 30 minutes. This has both a time and cost implication for schools and pupils who want to travel. The **interaction between economic deprivation and geographical isolation** negatively influences university choices, even for high-attaining pupils. In 2016, The Social Mobility Commission found that "high-attaining youngsters from low-income families only travel an average of 71km to attend university, whereas their more affluent peers travel on average 110km." Pupils in rural and coastal areas, who are less likely to grow up in proximity to highly-selective universities, are less likely to "translate high attainment into a high-yield degree by travelling to one of the UK's more prestigious institutions" (SMC, 2016). In a more recent analysis, Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) also find that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to leave home and attend a distant university than their peers.

Although pupils in rural and coastal areas would particularly benefit from university access interventions, reaching them can be difficult. Much public and philanthropic funding goes to urban areas, where it is generally more cost effective to reach larger groups of pupils than in more dispersed parts of the country (IntoUniversity, 2015). Reaching rural pupils in contrast comes with many logistical challenges, not least the cost of transportation. Yet several organisations have invested in recent years to spread their provision into rural areas, including [Teach First](#), [The Access Project](#), [IntoUniversity](#) and the [National Collaborative Outreach Programme \(NCOP\)](#), which aims to increase university access for disadvantaged pupils and targets geographical areas "where the HE participation of young people is both low and much lower than expected based on GCSE-level attainment." The online mentoring platform [Brightside](#), together with [HEFCE](#) use the internet to [connect mentors and pupils in rural and coastal areas](#).

The remainder of this case study describes how The Brilliant Club has expanded its provision to work with under-represented pupils in rural and coastal parts of Britain.

Reaching Pupils in Rural and Coastal Schools

The Brilliant Club's mission is not defined by geography; the charity will work with any non-selective state school where there is a need. Yet, the ability to reach schools in any part of the country via its network of PhD tutors puts it in a unique position to deliver programmes in rural and coastal areas. The first Scholars Programme tutorials took place in London Academy, Edgware, in 2011, and the charity maintains a strong presence in London. However, over the past six years The Brilliant Club has grown significantly, based on a simple, scalable and sustainable programme model that has allowed expansion to different parts of the country. The charity is now present in all English regions as well as Scotland and Wales, with offices in London, Birmingham, Leeds and Cardiff.

In 2016/17, The Brilliant Club worked with more than 11,000 pupils from 629 schools across the country, including Wales and Scotland. Based on the [rural/urban classification by the Office for National Statistics](#), the charity has consistently and significantly increased its partnerships with schools in English local authority districts classified as rural, from 17 in 2013-14 to 132 in 2017-18.¹ In 2017/18, we are expecting to reach more than 2,300 pupils in these areas via The Scholars Programme.

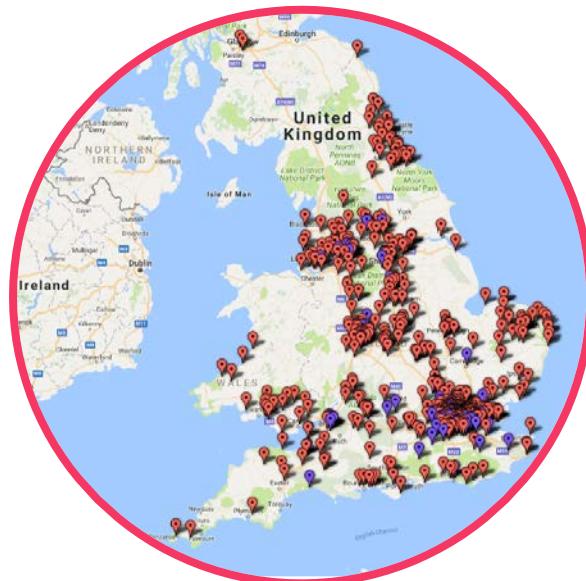


Figure 1: The map shows schools that partnered with The Brilliant Club in 2016/17 via **The Scholars Programme** (red) and **Researchers in Schools** (purple)

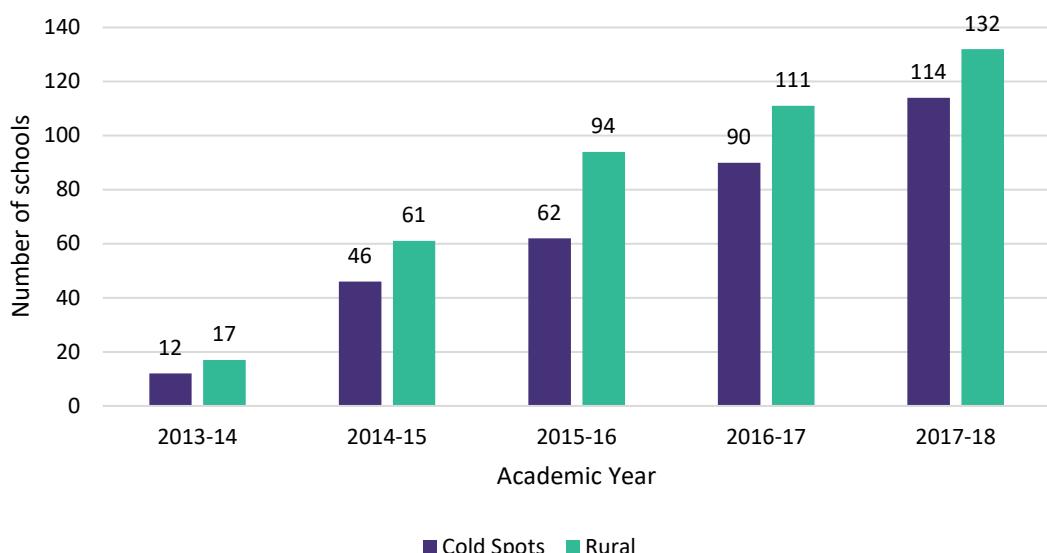


Figure 2: The number of schools in local authority districts classified as rural or cold spot partnering with The Brilliant Club to run The Scholars Programme from 2013-14 to 2017-18.

¹ This includes local authority districts classified by ONS as 'Mainly Rural (rural including hub towns >=80%)', 'Largely Rural (rural including hub towns 50-79%)' and 'Urban with Significant Rural (rural including hub towns 26-49%)'.

Using the Social Mobility Index of 2017, which is the basis of the Social Mobility Commission's 2017 State of the Nation Report, The Brilliant Club has furthermore tracked the charity's presence and provision in social mobility cold spots – the 20% lowest performing local authority districts in terms of social mobility. Figure 2 displays the growth of The Scholars Programme in rural local authority districts and social mobility cold spots.²

Four Challenges

Broadly speaking, we see four big challenges for university access interventions in rural and coastal areas.

1. The school challenge: Creating opportunities for pupils in rural and coastal schools

The logistical challenge for rural and coastal schools in offering university access or cultural opportunities is two-fold: organising individual school trips to universities or museums takes more time and is more expensive than for urban schools. At the same time, schools struggle to access programmes run by universities or the third sector, which have a higher concentration in urban areas. As Donnelly and Gamsu (2018, p.23) state, "there is a stark contrast between the widening participation and outreach apparatus (both university and third-sector provided) that exists in London and what is present in ... culturally and economically deprived communities."

What this challenge means in practise can be exemplified by what it takes for a London school compared to a school outside of London to use the opportunity of free visits to the Supreme Court in London. A London school can use free transport offered to schools by TfL in order to travel to the Supreme Court. Due to the location of the school, the visit can be run during the school day and does not require either an evening meal or overnight accommodation; pupils can leave the school at 9am and return by 4pm. By comparison, a school in a difficult to reach location outside of London will have to pay for coach or train travel for pupils as well as overnight accommodation. The multiple-day trip requires more experienced members of staff and staff being out of school for multiple days, causing a great impact on the school timetable and lessons. Although the visit to a cultural destination might in itself be free, the cost to schools in arranging the logistics of these visits varies hugely.

With its national network of PhD tutors and university partnerships, The Brilliant Club can partner with urban and rural schools alike, delivering the same experience for pupils across the country at one uniform cost regardless of school location. By liaising with schools directly, schools can have a considerable say in how The Scholars Programme is implemented within their context. This ranges from scheduling, to number of pupils, and pupil selection. Smaller schools in rural and coastal areas with lower budgets and with variable intakes of pupils eligible for free school meals have the flexibility to sign up a small number of pupils and do not have to commit for longer than a term. This allows schools to join the programme with only 12 pupils from one key stage and then gradually build from there. Smaller primary schools can team up for a combined placement.

2. The mobilisation challenge: Getting people to deliver university access interventions in rural and coastal areas

² Numbers for 2017-18 are based on confirmed provision at the beginning of February 2018 and may slightly change.

One of the challenges for organisations who start in London and aim to move into other areas is that it can be difficult to find people who are sufficiently mobile to deliver programmes in places that are hard to reach.

Through strong relationships with partner universities, The Scholars Programme can mobilise a community of committed PhD tutors who are able to work in all regions of the UK, including in rural and coastal areas. Last year, the number of PhD researchers who have shared their expertise with state schools via The Scholars Programme reached 1,000. PhD researchers are typically clustered in urban areas, but their passion for education, combined with flexible working schedules mean that many are willing to travel to more rural parts of the country. Tutors have been known to make a 300-mile round trip from their homes to deliver weekly tutorials. Partnerships cover these travel costs and make The Scholars Programme a sustainable and scalable model. In addition to their mobility and passion for fair access, PhD researchers crucially have a deep expertise in their subject, and they can act as role models to pupils for research and study skills. Furthermore, the charity offers PhD researchers a mission they can buy into, as well as valuable teaching training and experience.

"I feel so much more confident about my skills as a teacher and, mostly, as a marker. I think that the training has massively improved my teaching skills. This experience at The Brilliant Club has widened my career aspirations and made me wonder about a possible future not only in teaching, but also in education policy or education design and delivery of educational Programmes."

Brilliant Club PhD Tutor, following Training Weekend in February 2018

3. The third sector challenge: Scaling a programme to national reach is difficult and comes with threats to programme quality

Many third sector organisations start out in London but find it difficult to grow to a scale that allows them to deliver their programmes to rural and coastal areas. Models that work in urban settings are frequently more expensive to implement elsewhere given the increased logistical challenges, such as travel time and costs. With growth also comes a threat to programme quality. Standards that can be established with a small team are more difficult to guarantee as they expand, and it is hard to deliver consistent high-quality programmes on a national scale.

The Brilliant Club's business model allows the charity to pay PhD tutors to professionally implement a consistent programme across the country. Tutor pay per placement has risen to £500 and travel costs are covered in addition to this, insuring that tutors who incur higher travel costs are equally remunerated.

From the beginning, The Brilliant Club has identified the process of matching and placing PhD tutors for The Scholars Programme – as well as Researchers in Schools participants – with schools as one of the key parts of its quality assurance model. The charity's five year strategy, [The Path to Outcomes](#), defines logistics as a key feature to a commitment of collaboration with schools, universities, and partners across the education system. This is embedded through internal

training, investment in CRM software, pro forma documentation for each programme component, and fully staffed university trips. Programme Officers manage programme logistics for schools and prepare and support PhD tutors both at training weekends and throughout their placements. The charity's Research and Impact Department produces tailored termly impact reports for each school about the academic progress their pupils made throughout the programme, allowing schools to evidence impact of their Pupil Premium spending.

4. The university challenge: On their own, universities can only build strong local connections with a few selected geographical areas of need

Rural and coastal schools are often a long way from universities which makes it more difficult for institutions to build strong local networks for outreach work. The economics of university outreach mean that it can be more cost-effective to reach a high number of pupils in one urban centre than the same number of pupils across a range of dispersed areas. Many universities have developed intensive local outreach and widening participation initiatives in a geographical area of need, such as [Insight Peterborough](#) by the University of Cambridge, but it would be unrealistic for a single university to create such partnerships on a national scale. By partnering with The Brilliant Club, universities can access the charity's nationwide network of over 600 schools, including 132 schools in local authority districts classified as rural and 114 schools in social mobility cold spots.

Thirty partner universities currently work with the charity to recruit PhD tutors and to deliver university trips. Twenty of those are full partnerships, in which highly-selective universities host launch and graduation trips for pupils on The Scholars Programme. As for schools, flexibility in the programme also allows smaller universities to take part at a lower cost through the Researcher Development Programme. This gives universities access to The Brilliant Club's proven model for mobilising and training PhD researchers to work effectively with state school pupils. In this way, The Scholars Programme reaches PhD researchers outside the big urban universities who can travel to coastal and rural schools. Training equips PhD researchers to deliver accessible and engaging courses based on their own research. In offering this training to partner universities, The Brilliant Club supports them to meet their researchers' needs, while at the same time working towards the charity mission to mobilise the PhD community. The partnership model also works for the Open University, one of the charity's first partners, whose PhD students live across the country.

"The Brilliant Club helped me realise that universities aren't scary or unavailable...I now trust myself to be able to try harder things."

Key Stage 4 pupil, Dereham Neatherd (Norfolk) –
The Scholars Programme, Spring 2016-17

"I am from an underrepresented background, so this is very close to my heart. I want to encourage students to aspire and consider university as something that is for people like them."

Case Study: The Scholars Programme in Norfolk

As an example, we zoom in on the work of The Scholars Programme with rural and coastal schools in Norfolk. Several districts in Norfolk were classified as social mobility cold spots by the [Social Mobility Commission](#) in November 2017: North Norfolk, Great Yarmouth, Breckland, Norwich and King's Lynn and West Norfolk. Norwich is one of the government's twelve [Opportunity Areas](#).

In 2016/17, The Scholars Programme worked with 417 pupils across 26 schools in Norfolk. The charity selected, trained and placed 19 PhD tutors to work with these schools. 52% of the pupils are from low participation areas (quintiles one and two) according to the POLAR4 classification.

Stalham High School is located in North Norfolk, where only 12% of free school meal pupils enter higher education, and less than 4% progress to a highly-selective university (SMC, 2017). Chris Hole is the Inspire Coordinator at the school, a position where he works with pupils across all abilities and all year groups. He has been leading on the partnership between Stalham High School and The Brilliant Club since 2015/16. He describes the challenge of his job as this:

"University for our students seems very far away. Many pupils have no parental history of higher education... As a small secondary school in a rural area, running trips and getting speakers is more complex for us, simply because of matters of distance."

Chris considers The Scholars Programme as "the flag ship" of a series of interventions that the school offers to support and inspire their pupils. Having run The Scholars Programme for more than two years now, pupils are keen to take part and programme alumni become role models in the school. Bespoke termly impact reports allow the school to review evidence of pupils' performance on the programme and compare pupil attainment against regional and national averages.

Pupil Targeting

Schools choose pupils they think can best benefit from the programme, but they have to commit to the charity's pupil targeting criteria which in the past stated that schools need to sign up at least 33% of pupils who are or at a previous point have been eligible for free school meals (Ever6FSM). With regional expansion, the charity has learned that causes of under-representation can vary in different parts of the country. The new targeting criteria stipulate that schools must sign up at least 55% pupils who meet one or more of three measures: Pupil Premium, no parental history of higher education and postcode deprivation³. For Stalham High School, Chris Hole says, "the basket measure approach reflects a truer picture of disadvantage than a mere focus on free school meals."



Norfolk schools with Scholars Programme placements in 2016/17 and 2017/18

³ Postcode deprivation is operationalised as pupils who live in the bottom two quintiles of the Income Deprivation Affection Children Index (IDACI)

Parental Engagement and Student Finance

Each school in The Scholars Programme takes part in two trips to highly-selective universities; a launch trip at the beginning and a graduation event for pupils who have successfully completed the programme. These trips are organised and delivered in collaboration with university Widening Participation departments. To engage parents in the programme, The Brilliant Club, schools and universities are happy to put in the additional effort to host graduation trips on Saturdays. In 2016-17, more than 1,200 parents and carers took part in their children's graduations. 97% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement "I think that my child is capable of studying at a highly-selective university when they are older" and 90% for the statement "I plan to speak with my child more about university after this trip" (n=1207).

Stalham High School see the particular value of this type of parental engagement in rural areas:

"Student finance is a major worry for our pupils and parents. The Graduation Trips, where parents are invited, have helped parents who have not attended university themselves to learn about student finance and other aspects of higher education. Parents absolutely love The Brilliant Club." (Chris Hole)

Online Engagement

Engagement between PhD tutors and pupils is not restricted to the seven tutorials for which tutors visit the school. Between weekly tutorials and throughout the final assignment phase pupils can communicate with their tutor as well as with other pupils on their course.

"Our rural location means that resources, such as libraries, are often far away. Our pupils are quite dependent and experienced using the internet to find information. The VLE that The Brilliant Club offers for pupils on the programme to communicate with PhD tutors outside of tutorials is therefore a great help for our pupils." (Chris Hole)

PhD Tutor Perspective

The Brilliant Club's ability to reach pupils in rural and coastal areas depends on the commitment of its PhD tutors who have been known to make a 300-mile round trip from their homes to deliver weekly tutorials.

Olena Palko is one of the 19 PhD tutors who worked for The Scholars Programme in Norfolk in 2016-17. While studying for a PhD in East European History of the 20th Century at the University of East Anglia, she has delivered tutorials in six different schools in Norfolk, ranging from Jane Austen College in Norwich to Litcham School in Breckland and Cliff Park Ormiston Academy in Great Yarmouth. Travelling to these schools was at times a challenge: Using public transport it took up to two hours to reach some of the schools, and some buses in the area only operate during commuting hours.

"What motivated me to put in the extra effort to travel was the feeling of appreciation that I got from the school."

Olena's tutorials cover English history, the French revolution and "On the Cultural Front: Arts and Power in Revolutionary Russia". She found that the pupils in the more rural schools in which she taught her tutorials were more engaged and appreciated her working with them.

"What I realised working with younger pupils is that they can be even more curious when they are young and in rural areas. Pupils are bright and curious, but they don't have the access they need."

Conclusions and lessons learned

The Brilliant Club's mission is not defined by geography; the charity will work in any school where there is a need. Yet, the ability to reach schools in any part of the country via its network of PhD tutors puts the charity in a unique position to deliver programmes in rural and coastal areas.

"The Brilliant Club has given me more confidence in writing essays...
I would like to study Music at Cambridge University"

Key Stage 3 pupil, Alderman Peel High School (Norfolk) – The Scholars Programme, Summer 2016-17

The table below summarises the key challenges The Brilliant Club has addressed in expanding our work in rural and coastal areas, and the lessons we have learned.

Table 1. Key challenges of The Brilliant Club's work in rural and coastal areas and the lessons we have learned.

Challenges	Why is it a challenge?	The Brilliant Club's response	Lessons learned and next steps
Efficiently matching PhD tutors with isolated schools	PhD researchers are spread around the country, but for some schools the closest university is still a two-hour journey away.	The charity reimburses PhD tutors' travel costs to ensure no tutor is disadvantaged for taking on a rural placement and has developed expertise in matching tutors with schools across the country. Programme Officers help tutors plan their journeys.	We are reviewing the option to partner with a car sharing service to assist tutors to travel to schools.
Meeting targeting criteria can be a challenge for rural schools	As a mission-focused charity we want to reach the pupils that benefit most from our programmes. Yet we need to balance this with the needs of the schools we work with.	Switching from 33% Ever6FSM to 55% basket measure (Pupil Premium or no parental history of HE or IDACI bottom two quintiles) allows schools in different parts of the country to choose measures of under-representation that are appropriate to their socio-geographic context.	Feedback from schools has been positive. Over the next years, we will continue to review our targeting practice to ensure we reach pupils across different regions who can benefit from our programmes most.

Involving parents	Parental engagement and involvement with schools is recognised as a key factor in pupils' achievement and likelihood of progressing to higher education.	In rural and coastal areas with many families without history of higher education, The Brilliant Club is an opportunity for schools to engage parents about university. Scholars Programme graduations trips often take place on Saturdays or weeknight evenings. It was the first time to visit a university for 42% of parents that joined their children for Scholars Programme graduation trips in 2016/17.	Parental engagement is an ongoing challenge, especially where the distances to university trips are significant. Offering school-based parent launches enables parents to access further information locally. The Brilliant Club is continuing to work with partner schools on what we can provide to further support parental engagement.
Small schools in rural areas may have fewer resources to commit to a long-term partnership	In many ways it is logistically easier to work with big urban schools who can commit to signing up many pupils for a year or longer.	Smaller schools in rural and coastal areas with lower budgets and with variable intakes of pupils eligible for free school meals have the flexibility to sign up a small number of pupils and do not have to commit for longer than a term. Smaller primary schools can team up for a combined placement.	The Brilliant Club has partnered with funders to establish regional offices and expand into areas of need.
Identifying schools in areas that can benefit most from our programmes	Many schools hear about The Brilliant Club by word of mouth. We are more likely to get contacted by schools in well-connected hot spots and those that are generally in good positions to create opportunities for their pupils.	The charity's targeting is set at pupil level; we will work with any non-selective state school that is willing to meet our pupil targeting criteria. At the same time, we have purposefully expanded our provision in rural and coastal areas, for example, through local authorities, multi-academy trusts and other networks of schools	Moving forward we will become more strategic in our expansion by using geographical indicators such as the Social Mobility Index and the ONS Urban/Rural classification.

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