



Department
for Education

School Resource Management tools: formative evaluation

Research report

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Background

In 2018 the Department for Education published 'Supporting excellent school resource management: strategy'. This set out the Department's commitment to helping schools improve outcomes for pupils by making every pound count and getting the best value from their resources. This strategy underpins the School Resource Management (SRM) Portfolio of support from the department. The SRM Portfolio is a suite of tools which aims to help schools and trusts save money on day-to-day costs¹.

In September 2021, BMG were commissioned to conduct independent qualitative research to evaluate the use and impact as a result of engaging with this suite of tools: namely the Schools Financial Benchmarking (hereafter referred to as the SFB), the View My Financial Insights tool (hereafter referred to as the VMFI), and the Integrated Curriculum and Financial Planning training course and accompanying resources (hereafter referred to as ICFP).

The specific research objectives for this qualitative project were:

- What specific decisions and actions have schools and academy trusts taken because of their use of either of the two financial benchmarking tools or ICFP training?
- What is the broad balance of costs and benefits of these indirect support strands?
- What have those decisions and actions led to?
- Including the estimated impact on school or academy trust expenditure?
- What are best-case scenario impacts on expenditure of using the two indirect support strands?
- Are there ways to improve or maximise the contribution of each strand to school or academy trust expenditure?

Common acronyms used throughout the report are:

ICFP: Integrated Curriculum and Financial Planning

VMFI: View My Financial Insights

SFB: Schools Financial Benchmarking

MAT: Multi Academy Trust

SAT: Single Academy Trust

LA Maintained: Local Authority Maintained

SLT: Senior Leadership Team

¹ School Resource Management – gov.uk. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/schools-financial-health-and-efficiency>

SMT: Senior Management Team
DfE: Department for Education
SRM: School Resource Management

Methodology

Recruitment and sample composition

School Business Professionals were contacted by DfE staff and asked if they would be willing to take part in the research. Those who expressed interest were contacted by BMG, and an interview time and date was arranged. A total of 55 interviews were completed between the 14th October – 12th November 2021, each lasting between 20 to 30 minutes. 40 interviews were completed with those who had either used the VMFI, SFB, or both; 15 were completed with those who had attended the ICFP training.

Quotas were applied based on the phase of the school setting (Primary, Secondary, Mixed), size if in a MAT (Small, Medium, or Large²), and whether the schools were LA maintained, or part of a SAT or a MAT. This was to ensure representation of a diverse school and academy trust system, and to reflect the project's budget. Tables 1.1 and 1.2 illustrate this (shown below):

Table 1: VFMI and SFB sample composition

Composition	Count
Primary LA	7
Primary SAT/Small MAT	5
Primary Medium/Large MAT	8
Secondary LA	3
Secondary SAT/Small MAT	1
Secondary Medium/Large MAT	3
Mixed Small MAT	1
Mixed Medium/Large MAT	10
Special	2
Total	40

² Small MAT, 2-4 schools; Medium MAT, 5-10 schools, Large MAT, 11+ schools

Table 2: ICFP sample composition

Composition	Count
Primary Small MAT	2
Primary Medium/Large MAT	4
Secondary Small MAT	2
Secondary Medium/Large MAT	3
Mixed Small MAT	1
Mixed Medium/Large MAT	3
Total	15

Researchers endeavoured to speak with a variety of job roles, though no quotas were applied to job roles. This is because some respondents were undertaking multiple roles, and others, while their job titles reflected one role, in actuality they were conducting another. Therefore, patterns between different job roles are difficult to evidence, and are only noted in the report where the patterns are directly attributed to role. Respondents within the following positions were spoken to:

- School Business Manager
- Academy Business Manager
- Chief Financial Officer
- Governor
- Chief Operating Officer
- Chief Executive Officer
- Finance Director
- Chair
- Head of Finance
- Premises Manager
- Federations Business Manager
- Finance Team Manager
- Deputy Head
- School Finance Manager
- Senior Accountant

- Schools Financial Advisor
- School Finance Support Lead

Research design

Format and Topic Guide

A topic guide for the discussions was designed in conjunction with the Department for Education and is appended to this report in the appendix. The guide was broadly consistent across all groups (those working in LAs, MATs, or SATs), with some differences incorporated so conversations were relevant. The guide is split into three evaluative sections: SFB, VMFI, and the ICFP training. Each participant was asked about their involvement with just one of these tools. LA maintained schools were not asked about their use of the VMFI tool as this has not been available to them as long as it has been for academy trusts; LAs have been using it since March 2020 as part of a planned rollout of the tool, so it was considered that the long-term impact would not yet be evidenced.

The discussion structure was loosely split into five parts: introduction of the topic and respondent background; the impact of the tool (including specific actions taken as a result); other tools used; suggested improvements; and any final thoughts.

All interviews were conducted by an experienced qualitative researcher. Interviews were held over the phone, via Microsoft Teams, or using Google Meets. Interviews lasted between 20-30 minutes.

Confidentiality

At the beginning of each interview, respondents were assured that all information provided would be treated in the strictest confidence; that BMG would not identify any individuals or disclose the personal details of those who took part; and that views stated would not be attributable to individuals. BMG's independence and impartiality from the Department for Education was also reiterated, to ensure confidence amongst participants when sharing their views.

Respondents were informed that the discussion would (with participants' consent) be audio-recorded, that the files would be stored securely at BMG Research and would not be made available to anyone outside of BMG, and that they would be securely destroyed on completion of this project. They were informed that quotes from the discussions may be used in the research report; these quotes have been incorporated through this report to illustrate the range of findings and bring the participants' voice to the forefront of the research.

Analysis and reporting

Data analysis

A grounded theory approach was used for the analysis of the data meaning that all themes and findings that are reported against the key areas of interest have emerged 'organically' through the research rather than through hypothesis testing, thus making the overall findings more robust and grounded in the experiences and views of respondents.

To achieve this, once the interviews were completed and transcribed, they were analyzed using a thematic framework. First, the key themes and topics arising from the interviews were identified through the topic guide and an initial review of a selection of transcripts. Each of the key themes and topics were then translated to a column heading in an Excel grid, with each row within the grid representing an individual. Researchers analyzed each transcript by extracting relevant data from the interview and summarizing it in the appropriate cell within the grid. Verbatim quotations were included alongside the summaries where possible. Interview data was gridded at an individual level to enable disaggregation and aggregation of the data for different types of schools (MATs, SATs, and LA maintained schools) and, where possible, job roles and budget-setting responsibilities.

Note on the interpretation of qualitative research and data

A research interview is a short and informal conversation held with a variety of members of a particular audience and led (moderated) by a professional researcher. Each interview is conducted with carefully recruited people (respondents) who are brought together for a predetermined amount of time to discuss a particular subject nominated by the client.

In-depth interviews can provide understanding of what people think, need, want, and care about, and can explore the reasons behind these views. The researcher guides the participant through a series of topics (agreed beforehand with the client), but in a less structured way than with a quantitative (survey) questionnaire.

Findings may emerge from conversations which the researcher and client had not previously considered; these can be identified and explored. It is the moderator's job to ensure that all the client's questions are answered and that every respondent has an opportunity to express their point of view.

It should be remembered that participants may hold views that are based on incorrect information. It is the moderator's role to explore and report participants' perceptions, not necessarily to correct any misunderstanding or incorrect perceptions.

When interpreting the findings from in-depth interviews, it is important to note that they are not based on quantitative statistical evidence. Where quantifying language is used throughout the report, such as referring to groups such as ‘a majority, a minority, many, or few,’ it should not be assumed that these groups hold any statistical significance, given the low number of respondents who took part in the research.

Reporting Structure

This report analyses the impacts of the VFMI tool, the SFB site and the ICFP training and its associated resources. Throughout the report, SFB and VMFI findings have been grouped together and are referred to as the ‘benchmarking tools.’ Unless otherwise stated it should be assumed that findings outlined refer to both of these tools; where differences occur between them this is noted in the main body of the text. The findings for the benchmarking tools have been grouped because most users who had used VMFI had also used the SFB, and vice versa; respondents who had used both found it difficult to cognitively separate the impacts the tools had had on their role.

This report is split into two core sections: the first outlining the findings relating to SFB and VMFI, and the second relating to ICFP.

Key Findings – Benchmarking tools (SFB and VMFI)

Both tools were useful for the majority of users; they help to identify outliers and provide a good starting point for further interrogation, both by reaffirming and contradicting current knowledge bases. Staff gained a holistic view of their performance, and the tools prompted more detailed investigations, saving time, and illustrating data in a visual way.

After interacting with the benchmarking tools, respondents' subsequent actions can be broken down into three categories, with actions and impacts arising from each. Respondents either investigated data further, communicated findings with colleagues, or did not take any further actions. See images below for an outline of the three decision-making categories identified in the research.

The most common behaviour after engaging with the sites was to take no decisions or further actions. The reasons to not implement findings varied. Some did not take action due to the sites affirming their current correct practice and reiterating their strong financial performance, others lacked time or agency to impact findings, and some did not understand the potential for the tools, citing inaccurate limitations.

Many respondents took an action to further investigate benchmarking data presented after interacting with the tools. If information found during further investigations was already known, it then helped to reaffirm thinking, adding to confidence. Where it was not, respondents could use the tools to understand why. This aspect of the tools, allowing users to challenge their thinking, was particularly valuable.

Another action was to communicate findings with colleagues and stakeholders within their schools and academy trusts. The benchmarking information facilitated data sharing. Discussions took place across all levels, from informal talks to governors' meetings, and were thought to be more productive, as information is well presented and illustrative. Conversations too resulted in a more confident and informed workforce.

Further investigations and communicating findings from the tools have helped to identify both long- and short-term savings. The most common long-term savings related to staffing and restructuring, where short-term savings were often due to procurement and tendering arrangements. Many users are able to quantify these savings relatively accurately, showing a direct benefit of using the tools.

Of those who note limitations of the tools – lack of standardisation of data and a reporting lag – much of this is due to a misunderstanding of how the sites display the data. Negative perceptions of the tools, particularly the SFB, were mostly due to a lack of understanding of how to use the data, and how it is collated. This suggests more communication and education around how to use the tool could be beneficial.

Figure 1 – Benchmarking Tools. Decision 1: Further investigate benchmarking data

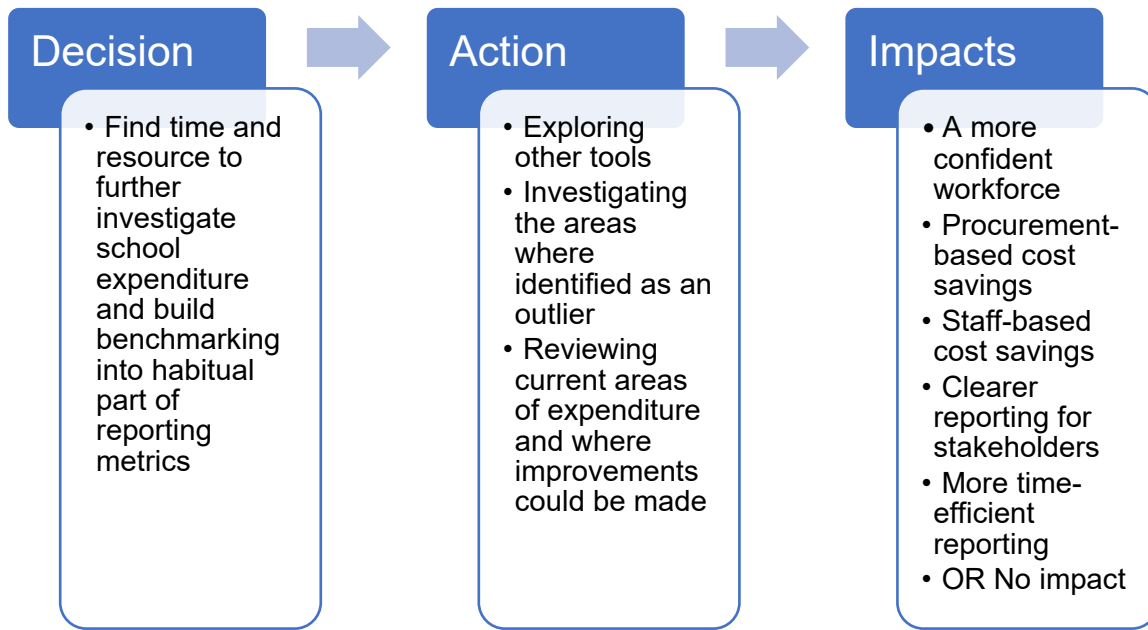


Figure 2 – Benchmarking Tools. Decision 2: Communication findings with colleagues

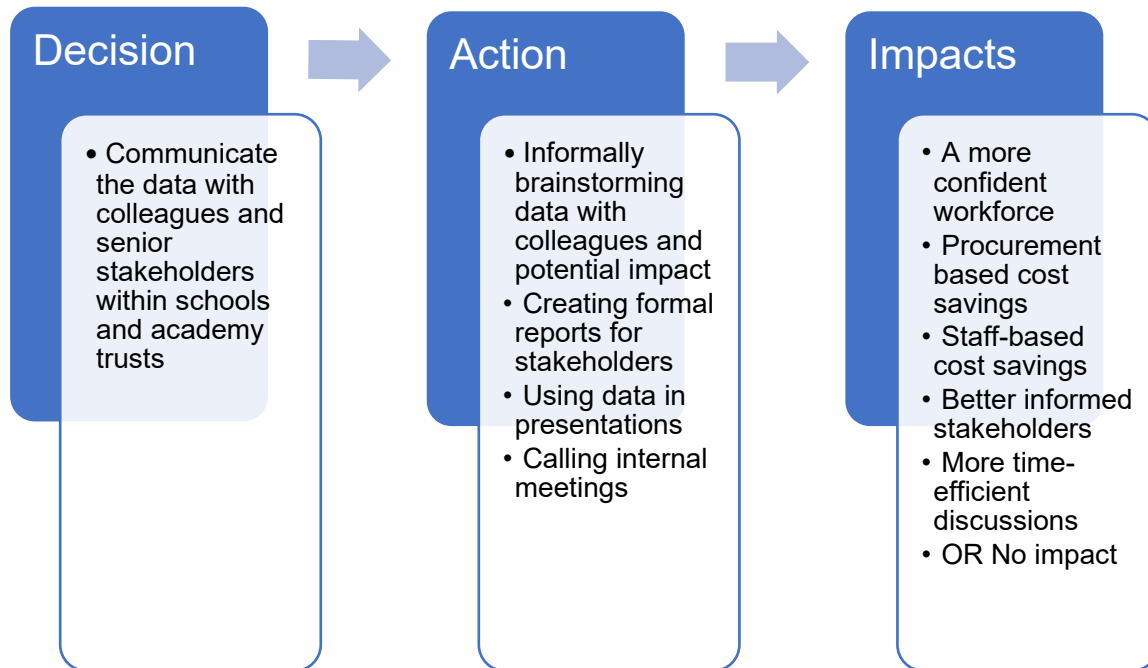
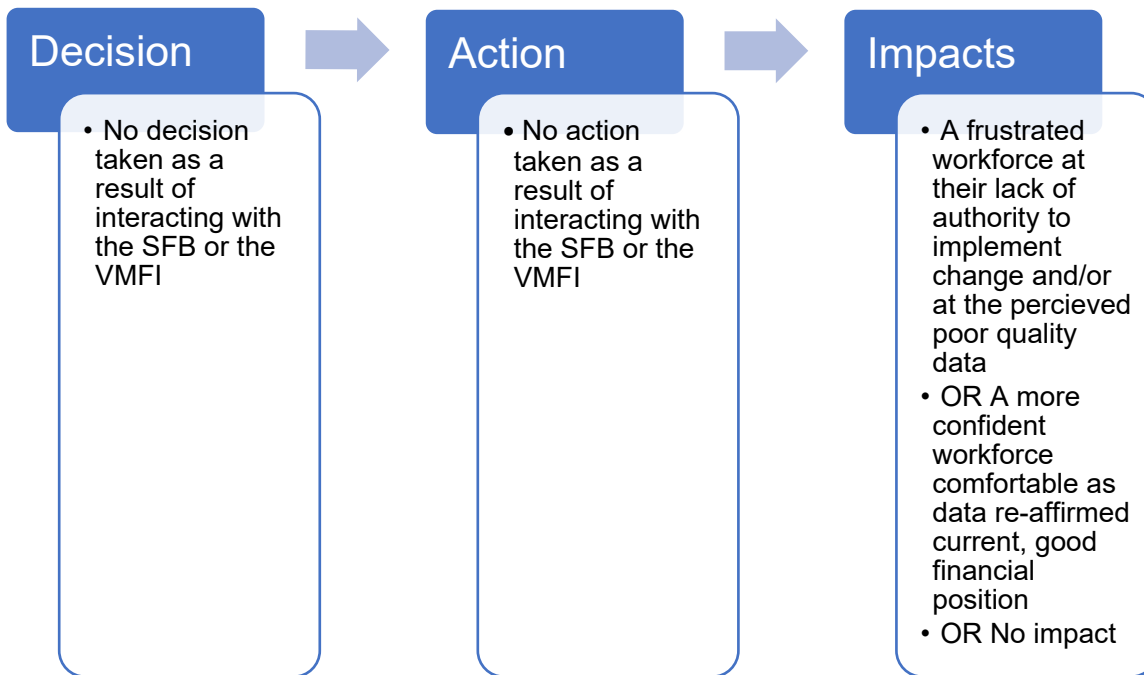


Figure 3 – Benchmarking Tools. Decision 3: No decision taken



Key Findings – ICFP

The principle of ICFP was well received by those who attended the training and found it formed a comprehensive and holistic overview. All attendees agreed that the principles of ICFP are beneficial, and most were keen to learn more about it and try to see how they could implement the principles in their school settings, if they were not already doing so.

As with the benchmarking tools, a common behaviour after attending the ICFP training, however, was to take no further decisions or actions. This was either:

- Positive, as those who had attended had reaffirmed current positive practice, found the information helped to reaffirm their thinking and instead acted as a 'refresher' course, increasing confidence that what they were already implementing was correct.
- Or negative, whereby those who had attended had identified positive savings but had no authority to implement them. This group said that headteachers and academic staff were more able to action information over finance staff.

Others took the decision to communicate their learnings with colleagues which led to increased confidence and more productive conversations. As with benchmarking tools, the ICFP training led to better informed and more efficient decisions and conversations, through using the data to illustrate points made and savings identified, with attendees who had used the workbook by phase and the presentation provided speaking positively on their impact.

Others chose to further investigate the principles of ICFP. This was particularly notable for those who had not had a lot of exposure to ICFP and who had attended to learn more: they found the course prompted them to find out more information and identify how it could be beneficial for them.

The training was considered most appropriate to help with long-term strategic planning. Of those who had used the tools provided after attending the training, the workbook (by phase) was considered to be the most useful for strategic decision-making and used the information to stress-test future decisions. This was particularly useful for those with larger budgets and more complex integrated finances, such as MATs.

In line with this, potential savings identified were predominantly long-term; most attendees were yet to see a direct financial impact. Though large potential savings could be identified, this primarily related to long-term staffing changes and restructures. For example, many had decided not to replace staff but were waiting for long-term organic savings through staff resignations, rather than making involuntary redundancies.

Figure 4 – ICPP. Decision 1: Further investigate the potential for ICFP

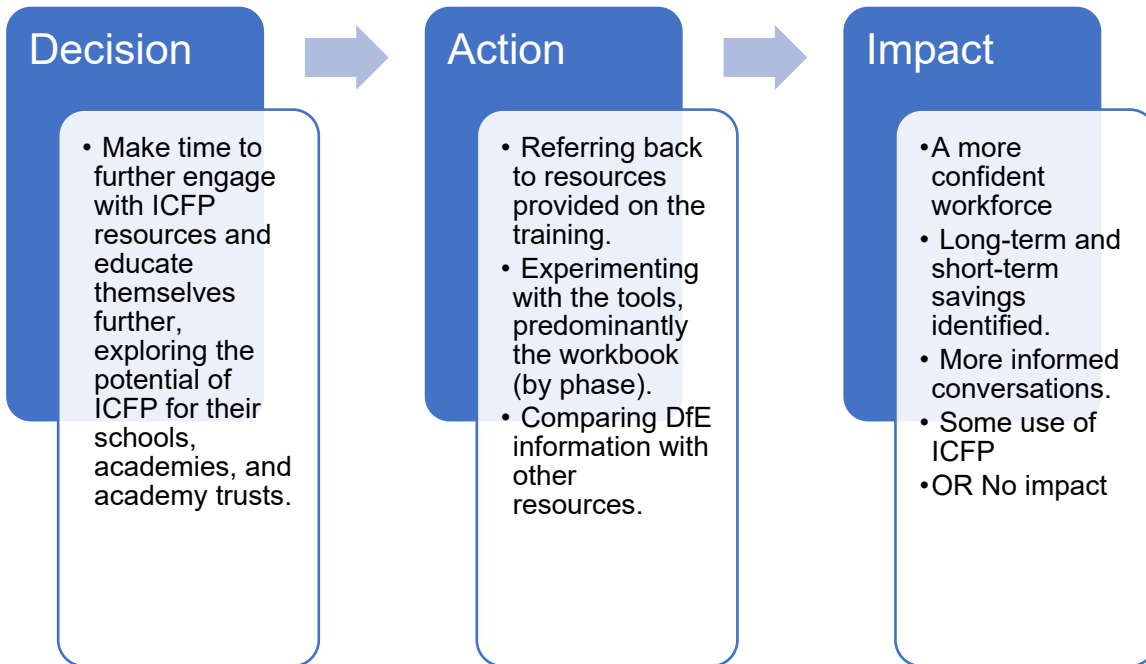


Figure 5 – ICFP. Decision 2: Communication ICFP information with colleagues

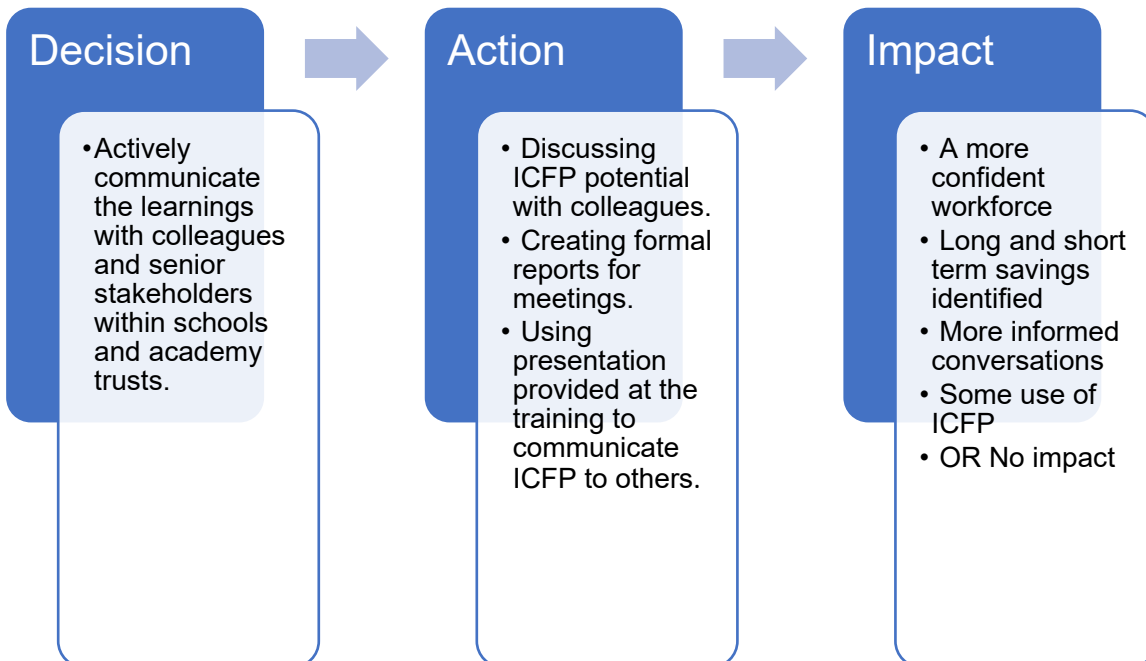
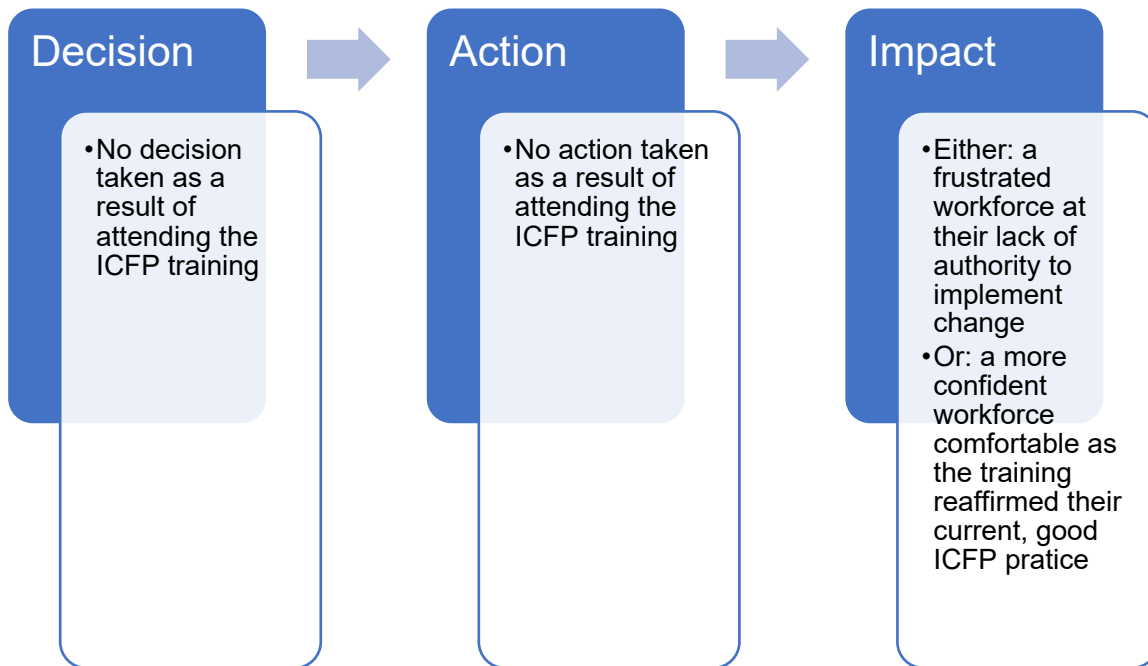


Figure 6 – ICFP. Decision 3: No decision taken



Detailed Findings: Benchmarking Tools

Initial motivations for using the tools

Benchmarking and comparison purposes

The majority of respondents cited that the primary reason for using the VMFI or SFB tools was to benchmark their finances with other, similar, schools. In fact, benchmarking was the more commonly cited reason for using these tools. Most who had used it in this way were looking for potential areas for improvements with their schools across a range of measures, most commonly staffing and procurement, as these were areas with the biggest expenditure, and therefore where the largest impacts could be had.

We use it [SFB] primarily for staffing costs, which is about 80% of our overall budget, so we get the most information and use out of that. –
Finance director, Primary MAT

For those working in larger MATs, an additional benefit for using the tools was internal comparisons. Some of those interviewed mentioned it was not possible to directly compare their expenditure within their own MAT as their schools were not directly comparable, and so used the tools to look at how one of their schools compared to another school with similar characteristics. Region was the most common characteristic cited, with rural schools wanting to compare to other rural schools, and some mentioning that London schools were only really comparable to other London schools. However, for less conventional schools (e.g., large primaries or academies with ages 5 through to 14) these tools were also valuable to find and compare with other schools with those characteristics.

I use it [SFB] to compare schools to national schools, and others with similar characteristics. I can then use it to make a point to our leadership team and explore why there may be differences. –
Finance Director, Small Primary MAT

Conversely, two respondents mentioned that it was an incredibly useful tool to use within their MAT, and they were able to compare each of their schools' finances. The benefit of using it within one MAT was that there was certainty that the data was directly comparable, as it had been documented consistently.

If you're in a trust that has similar schools, it's [SFB] incredibly powerful and useful to compare across your own trust, because you know exactly how that data has been diced and spliced, what's been included and what hasn't. – *CEO, Mixed MAT*

During the research we also spoke with two Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools; they too were only likely to compare themselves to other SEN academies, and so used the benchmarking tools to do this.

Informing budget setting, savings, and investments

The most popular time to use the tools was during budget setting, where many respondents would pull reports using the benchmarking tools to inform further investigations and illustrate where the budget needed attention. For some, at this stage they already had some inclinations of where they may have been over or underspending and used these tools as validation before tweaking their existing budget.

We use it [VMFI] a couple of times a year when we're budget setting. It gives us a bit of an overview, we wanted to use it to work out why we were spending over or under in various areas, such as whether or not this is because our children have different needs than other schools. - *CFO, Large Primary MAT*

Others have used the tools to ascertain what their expenditure should be for certain areas, and identify where they could make savings, or where they could potentially be investing further. Again, these investigations were usually held at the budget-setting time of year and used to facilitate budget management, rather than being investigated on an ongoing basis.

The comparison tool [SFB] really helped with the investigation process. It was very helpful with interrogation and asking questions. – *School Business Manager, Large Mixed MAT*

For both these groups, using red, amber, and green (RAG) colours to indicate comparatively high, or low, expenditure was mentioned as being particularly useful for a quick, snapshot of where the budget needed attention, highlighting areas for their own investigations.

Others had used the tool to compare with aspirational schools, identifying those that were highlighted on the benchmarking system as being particularly well-managed and well run, and digging deeper into why this was. This information then helped them to make more strategic budgeting decisions going forward, by analysing and understanding what has worked for other, comparable schools. Only one respondent, however, mentioned planning to reach out to other schools to directly discuss their positive performance.

With the financial benchmarking [SFB] one of the things I've done is comparing with aspirational schools. Using the demographic, you can then go in and then pick out a selection of schools which are achieving more than you are, with a very similar demographic and

size. And so that gives you aspirational schools to look at which I think is really useful. – *CFO, Small Mixed MAT*

Last, and a more common motivation amongst those working in traditionally financial roles, such as School Business Managers, Finance Managers, or CFOs, was to use the tools to confirm information already known. Those working in these roles would use the tools more often throughout the year in order to reiterate and confirm prior knowledge; their use was more about fact-checking, than exploratory investigation. These groups were more likely to have been using the tools for a long period of time, and they had become one of several resources used in their day-to-day role.

It [VMFI] doesn't tell us much we didn't know before, but it succinctly brings it all together. - *Business Manager, Primary MAT*

We were able to see [on VMFI] that one of our school's senior leadership is costing us a lot, and the other schools are subsidising that really. We already knew this, but it's good to have it confirmed. – *CFO, Small Primary MAT*

Reporting and informing constructive conversations

Constructively, it was generally agreed that both tools pull information together in a user-friendly way that is easy to share with trustees and boards. This was considered particularly valuable during reporting phases, where school finance teams would be tasked with translating complex financial data for their more academic colleagues, governors, and stakeholders. The user-friendly nature and visuals incorporated in the tools were particularly useful for facilitating conversations at this level, and concisely illustrating actions to be taken, and reasons why.

It's [VMFI] mostly about stimulating discussions and seeing if we can beat comparators. – *CFO, Large Mixed MAT*

I'm really glad that I was introduced to it [SFB] because it's given me more input, impact, and support of decisions that are being made within the leadership team. It's given me a bit more leverage. – *Deputy Head, SEN school, Small MAT*

Satisfying a curiosity

Last, there were some participants who noted that they had used the tools out of sheer curiosity but had not had a cause or reason to action them. Many of these users had been recommended the tools by friends or colleagues working in education, indicating that the VMFI and SFB both enjoy a high net promoter score within the sector. Another

driver for the tools generating a lot of curiosity amongst interviewees was the marketing and advertisement the DfE had done for the tools. Some mentioned having seen DfE communications about the tools for some time, and so wanted to experience them in order to ascertain whether or not they would work for their particular academies.

Our MAT is really very wealthy and always running at a surplus, so it was just more of an interest really, to see what differences were flagged up. We also have our own benchmarking within the MAT, so I wanted to see if it [SFB] matched what we were finding. – *Finance Director, Large Mixed MAT*

The DfE promoted it [VMFI] a lot, so that made us look into it. – *School Business Manager, Secondary SAT*

Two respondents mentioned using the SFB simply to try to illustrate to others that they had a basic understanding of school resource management. One respondent had used the tools to ‘*show off in school governors’ meetings*’ and had not had cause to use it for any other reason; this reiterates that the tools are user-friendly and can be used by those without financial acumen to understand school finances.

How SFB and VMFI are being used

To provide an indication of variance between schools

The most common positive perception of both the SFB and VMFI tools were that they provided a good overarching and top-line indication of variance between schools. Of those who had used the tools for this purpose, most saw them as good complementary tools: something they used alongside other internal metrics to benchmark and set budgets within their schools or academy trusts.

I wouldn't use it [SFB] as a standalone. I would use it to support decisions combined with our own knowledge of what we do. – *Head of Finance, Medium Mixed MAT*

Most saw the tools as useful to get comparative data and identify causes of financial difficulties. It also helped some to reaffirm that their problems were not unique to their school, leading to increased confidence that they were not alone in their issues. The schools filter was noted by some respondents as being particularly useful in helping with this reassurance, especially amongst those without other directly comparable schools within their portfolios.

It [SFB] also shows you that you're not alone; other schools are facing the same issues. – *School Business Manager, LA Primary*

What I liked about the VMFI is you can change your benchmark groups, which makes it quite useful in terms of understanding what those variances might be saying and why. – *CFO, Medium Mixed MAT*

Both tools are seen as a good starting point, and something that tends to spark ideas, rather than answering specific questions they may have. Where expectations amongst respondents matched the realities of the tools, users were broadly positive about the information provided and how useful the tools could be for them and their school or academy trust.

One of the best available tools out there [SFB]. – *CFO, Small Mixed MAT*

To allow schools and academy trusts to challenge or reaffirm thinking, increasing confidence

Further, when using the tools as a top-line indicator of school financial performance, many respondents raised that the information signposted to the user which specific areas or expenditures to challenge, and which specific areas were performing well.

If this information was already on their radar, it then helped to reaffirm thinking, adding to confidence amongst school leaders. Where it was not on their radar, they were then able to conduct further investigations to understand why, and where they could improve. This aspect of the tools, allowing users to challenge their thinking, was particularly valuable, especially amongst those working in SATs or smaller MATs and may not have a large team of finance individuals to brainstorm or discuss results with.

I really value it [SFB]. When I think I'm on the right track, it's almost like an external person's coming in and saying, 'Look at this, look at that', and challenging you to delve deeper. It's a really good support tool. – *Head of Finance, Large Mixed MAT*

The comparisons [VMFI] with other schools were predominantly useful to encourage us to be more efficient and to look for best value. – *CFO, Medium Mixed MAT*

This led to users feeling generally better informed and confident about decisions being made. The information, too, led to more productive conversations in schools, and comparisons highlighted in conversation were kept more relevant. Similarly, some mentioned that this information would be very useful to someone new to the sector and would provide a quick benchmarking and understanding of what good financial performance looks like.

Overall, I've had a really good experience with it [SFB]. After I started engaging with it, I felt more confident in my understanding of not just the figures for this specific primary that I work with, but the overall picture of what makes up the sort of spending and finances around primary education. - *Governor, Primary LA*

To easily access and digest information

The usability of the tools were positively noted by a small majority of respondents, who were complimentary of the layout and navigation, commenting that they was very easy to use. The updates that both tools had gone through recently had been noticed, with users who had engaged with both the VMFI and SFB prior to these updates spontaneously mentioning how much better and easier the tools were to use than beforehand. Of those,

many had shared this news with colleagues and some interviewees were revisiting the tools.

It's just myself and my deputy here, we both use different sites for different things, and we both came to each other and said 'wow, you need to see this.' It's [VMFI] so much better than it used to be. – *School Business Manager, Large Mixed MAT*

After the SFB updates DfE released within the last six months, I find it more intuitive to use. It's now more beneficial than it was previously. It's becoming a much more integral tool that we can use to help support schools. – *Finance Team Manager, Primary LA*

In particular, the flexibility, dashboard, and filter functions were commented on as being particularly helpful. The recent integration of the self-assessment dashboard was mentioned by one as being a very helpful addition which had aided in simplifying the site, and reducing the time spent finding necessary information. Overall, the sites were described as having a good level of detail, a good user interface, and with clear signposting throughout the site by a small majority of participants interviewed.

What has been developed [on the SFB] over the last couple of years has helped enormously by providing the information needed to have structured discussions to help support schools, particularly those that are challenged in terms of their financial sustainability. – *School Finance Support Lead, All-through LA*

Last, a couple of respondents mentioned that the reporting function on both the sites had led to their boards engaging well with the information provided; it had helped them to communicate the information quickly and efficiently.

I like that it's [VMFI] quite visual. It's helpful for me, but also for governors and trustees to see the data clearly. – *CFO, Medium Mixed MAT*

Resulting decisions and actions taken after using the SFB and VMFI

Conduct further investigations

A common claimed decision made after engaging with the benchmarking tools was simply to continue to engage with the information provided. Generally, the benchmarking was thought to provide enough 'food for thought' for respondents, prompting them to continue investigations.

Both tools were useful comparatives for the majority of users; they helped to identify outliers and provided a good starting point for further interrogation, both by reaffirming and contradicting their current knowledge base. Staff gained a holistic view of their performance, and the tools prompted them to ask more detailed questions on different areas of schooling.

We look at where we're in the red and then delve into it [on SFB]. It gets our minds ticking over budget setting and why we're spending so much in certain areas, and we drill down into that as part of our budget setting processes. - *Head of finance, Large Mixed MAT*

It [SFB] led to us questioning the reason as to why we had certain variations. For example, where we were overspending on premises costs, we could look into that and see that we were higher because we had fewer students, and we know that we can't change these fixed costs, so it helped us to understand that. It really helped with the investigation process. – *School Business Manager, Large Mixed MAT*

The actions taken after making the decision to further investigate differed depending on the level of interest, ability to implement findings (i.e., authority within the role) and the amount of time each respondent had available to them. Some respondents did note that their investigations were much more pronounced during their annual review and budget setting periods.

We use the SFB data for strategic discussions when we're having those top-level chats, such as during budget setting of completing SFVS. – *School Business Manager, Primary LA*

Though many did express a desire to conduct further investigations, awareness of other DfE tools was low amongst respondents, with very few able to mention other benchmarking or financial aid tools when queried. However, most users who had used

VMFI had also used the SFB, and those who had used the SFB were likely to have at least heard of VMFI. ICFP respondents too had mostly engaged with SFB, suggesting that this tool is the most commonly used amongst school business leaders.

Communicate findings with colleagues and decision makers

Users of both tools expressed that the information had helped them to communicate complex finances to colleagues and decision-makers within their school. Many had made the decision to do so after engaging with the information on the sites.

SFB helped staff to evidence their case to senior staff, including directors, and boards and trustees, and how what they were proposing would provide value for money. In other cases, the tool showcased how changes were necessary and encouraged those with decision making authority to think differently, and the tool has been valuable in framing those conversations.

Equally, users of VMFI particularly liked that the tool was visual; it helped to steer conversations with boards or trustees, who are not necessarily familiar with financial data, and enabled information to be presented clearly. One interviewee specifically cited the visuals that VMFI provides as helpful to ignite conversations, and to pull together information in a user-friendly way that is easy to share with trustees.

It's useful to have the data [from VMFI] for the narrative, and to give this to trustees. We can use it to illustrate to them why we're doing certain things. - *CFO, Small Primary MAT*

I think that's good from a board and a trust point of view that we can take that report [from VMFI] and print it off and show them the comparators, which I think is a really useful way of being able to share key information. I think it does give you an opportunity to think 'where are we?' - *CEO, Small Primary MAT*

Respondents who had used both of these tools also reported having pulled information from the sites and using the templates to present their finances and comparative finances in formal reporting. One respondent mentioned having to prepare a formal report due to the school being in special measures and communicated the SFB data formally to illustrate what had to change.

To be able to get that message across with the aid of some pretty clear and irreproachable data [from the SFB] was very useful indeed. – *Governor, Primary SAT*

Others had communicated the information less formally, either just by passing on knowledge of their existence to others, or through bringing in small statistics or figures to illustrate larger points made in meetings.

No decisions or actions taken

The most common behaviour after engaging with the sites, was to take no decisions or further actions at all. The reasons to not implement findings varied, from the positive to the less positive. These include:

Benchmarking tools reaffirmed current knowledge; no further actions necessary

Though most users of both tools were unable to detail any specific actions taken as a result of the tool, they did allude to it validating what they already knew and reaffirmed current decisions or ways of working.

We haven't made any tangible decisions because we're always forward planning anyway, but it [VMFI] helps to compare and support our thinking. – *School Business Manager, Secondary SAT*

Benchmarking information not relevant to the role of respondent

Others did not take any further actions because they did not feel that the information was relevant to their roles, and therefore they had no authority or decision-making responsibilities to be able to implement any findings. The information they found was useful and interesting to them, but not actionable. Therefore, they made the decision not to communicate the information, nor to investigate findings further.

I've looked at it and thought 'ok, this is quite handy, what am I supposed to do with this now?', so I took it [SFB] to the governor's meeting to show off a bit, but no one has done anything with it. I don't think anyone really knew how. – *Governor, Primary LA*

Respondents lack time to action information but plan to when they have capacity

Others had made the decision to action the findings after briefly reading over the sites, and 'dipping their toes in', but had not yet found the time or resource to take that decision any further. One respondent mentioned that they would set time aside during budget planning, but it was not an ongoing priority for them, as they were time stretched in their current role.

No, not at the moment, lack of time. I'd love to [use VMFI more]. But we're up against it constantly. So, it's having the capacity to be able to do so. – *Academy Business Manager, Medium Primary MAT*

Some respondents are unsure of how to action information

Some interviewees also felt that there could be better support from the DfE to help staff understand how to utilise the SFB to its full capacity, as some staff are unsure of what they should be looking for, or how to interpret the figures correctly³. This would help to ensure schools are using the data efficiently and facilitate a universal understanding. Some respondents expressed that more information on what to do with the data would be beneficial. For example, if a school has identified that they are overspending in a certain area, they would like to know what the best approach is to deal with this.

Some do not believe that the data is standardised enough at the point of collection to use for direct comparisons

A minority flagged that consistency issues in data collection processes will flow through into the tools, creating a level of doubt on the veracity of the information provided. Amongst this group, there was a perception that the data reported by schools was not standardised, likely stemming from differences between schools choosing where to aggregate costs to when they prepare data returns. As a result of the limitations in data collection, some respondents mentioned that the comparisons they were running with other schools through using the tools were complementary and informative, rather than being the only chosen source of information.

I'm a very strong advocate of having a single code instruction, standardised across schools across the country. This should be a nationally recognised thing, then it would improve the data. At the moment you're not comparing apples with apples [on VMFI]. –
School Business Manager, Large Mixed MAT

The product [SFB] could be even better if there were an active and open dialogue between the number crunchers and the sector itself...I would like more confidence that everybody's working to the same definitions because of this golden rule of benchmarking: 'Are you comparing like with like?' – *Governor, Primary SAT*

To combat this, many agreed that all schools should be given stringent training and guidance on standardisation and how to use this when submitting their data. This highlights how issues with data collection at present is leading to

³ N.B.A. DfE are already currently undertaking knowledge building activity and have held a number of events to support the sector in understanding how to effectively use these services.

some electing not to use the tools⁴, rather than a limitation of the tools themselves.

Data reporting timeline limits what can be published and thus used

Linked specifically to SFB, some respondents reported issues with the timeliness of the data available online from both tools; there is a perception of a delay, so for some schools their financial circumstances can be different to what was previously reported. As such, there are challenges in encouraging schools to use SFB, because they consider the data to be out of date, and therefore they believe they are not comparing like with like.

SFB is much better than it used to be, however it's a struggle to encourage schools to use it because they consider it out of date - they have already made huge changes to their spending compared to what's listed on SFB, so they are not comparing like with like. –
Senior Accountant, All-through LA

Users of VMFI also felt the timeliness of the data being updated was problematic as they were looking at historic data, but this appeared to be less acute in comparison with SFB⁵.

It's helpful to look back, but the data is old [VMFI]. We're looking at the past, not the present. - *School Business manager, Secondary SAT*

There are some misunderstandings on the breakdown of data

Another aspect of the tools, more notably the SFB than the VMFI, was a perception amongst some users that the data was too high-level for them to use. For example, some noted that the data in SFB covered total staff figures, premises figures, etc., but with no contextualisation of what has fed into this reporting. As with the standardisation, however, information and guidance is available on both sites illustrating the breakdown of costs; this suggests the guidance is not well-known amongst respondents and more communications highlighting the breakdown of costs could be beneficial to tackle this.

⁴ N.B.A. Currently these stringent guidelines do exist, and it is mandatory for schools to report their financial data to the DfE. The department then uploads the data prior to publication, suggesting this process of data validation is not widely known by users

⁵ N.B.A. this may be due to the VMFI updates as data is now published within 4-5 weeks of submission; data publication used to take several months, so user perceptions may still be thinking of previous timeframes.

Estimated impact the SFB and VMFI have had on expenditure, time, and resource

Identified long-term savings

Positively, many feel that both SFB and VMFI will be useful in the future and have already identified areas where it might be possible to save or reinvest money.

I think it [VMFI] will in the future [be useful], most definitely. Because it allows you to start drilling into areas and questioning why some are red while others are green or amber - *CEO, Small Primary MAT*

It is recognised that some things are difficult to take immediate action on, such as staffing and subsequent restructuring, which is consistent with the limited number of direct actions that have currently been taken as a result of the tools. That being said, some interviewees stated that the two benchmarking resources have supported their decision in not making immediate like-for-like replacements, for example, and instead will look at restructuring. Predominantly, the majority of these long-term savings came from staffing and restructuring costs.

For example:

- A Large Primary MAT saved the equivalent of a £40,000 salary through merging the nursery and primary nurse positions after using the SFB; the same academy trust also made the decision to only hire temporary staff to replace leavers prior to offering a permanent contract, giving them time to test if the position is financially viable.
- A Small Mixed MAT identified a saving of around £200,000 after using the SFB through a long-term restructuring plan.
- A Primary SAT expected to save between £100,000 - £120,000 through not replacing staff once they decide to leave; they could not attribute direct savings to either the VMFI or SFB but had used both to make this decision.

We expect to save about £100k across the MAT, this would mostly come from staffing, but we expect it to happen organically. Where staff leave, for example, we would not automatically replace them, or look to recruit a more junior member of staff. Other areas would be contractual, so we'll look at this when our current contracts come to an end [through using SFB and VMFI]. – *Head of Finance, Medium Secondary MAT*

It's still in negotiation, but it wouldn't have been questioned previously if it wasn't for knowledge of these tools [VMFI and SFB] - we would have just had a vacancy and refilled it with the same job role. –
Deputy Head, SEN Small Mixed MAT

Another core area identified by some respondents for long-term savings was in admin and support costs, with Teaching Assistants mentioned by three respondents. SFB was more prominent at allowing these savings to be noticed and actioned, over VMFI. These savings weren't considered to be as substantial as academic staffing and restructuring costs, potential long-term savings here include:

- A Primary LA mentioned changes to the school administration structure resulting in a saving of £12,000 - £13,000 a year, amounting to about 20% of their annual admin budget (after using SFB).
- Another Primary LA identified a saving of about £110,000 through reducing Teaching Assistant staff (after using SFB).
- A Large Mixed MAT helped identify that a caretaker on the premises was being paid over market rate, resulting in a forecasted £5,000-£10,000 saving (after using SFB).
- An all-through LA identified a potential saving of £100,000 after identifying a significant overspend on Teaching Assistants.

At that time, it [SFB] did reduce our costs quite significantly, because we reduced our roles by 12 TAs - a saving of about £110,000. –
School Business Manager, Primary LA

A few respondents were unable to quantify their estimated savings, but rather noted that the tools had been invaluable for them over the course of their careers and had helped them to save hundreds of thousands of pounds.

If you take all three tools together [SFB, VMFI, ICFP], using these they have saved around £900,000 on a £17 million budget over two years, and a lot of that will have been down to those tools. – *COO, Large Mixed MAT*

Two respondents using SFB noted that they were not looking to save money at the moment and found that the benchmarking site helped instead to reiterate why they were overspending in certain areas.

We're not really looking to save at the moment, it's not really as simple as that. For example, one of our schools have too many TAs,

but it's also got a lot of special needs kids, so some benchmarking [via SFB] is not relevant. – *Finance Director, Medium Primary MAT*

Identified short-term savings

Where short term savings has been identified, this was usually due to changes in procurement and tendering arrangements. Both VMFI and SFB were useful in identifying areas of overspend, resulting in many finance respondents reviewing their procurement processes, and renewing their contracts with catering or energy companies.

For example:

- A Medium Primary MAT estimated an £11,000 saving this financial year through tendering a new caterer (using VMFI).
- A Large Primary MAT estimated to have saved around £20,000 on catering (VMFI).
- A respondent (Large Mixed MAT) described how the tool had resulted in them harmonising their energy contracts at a trust level, striking a better deal than having separate contracts across the schools, as was done previously (VMFI).
- A Medium Secondary MAT had saved about £10,000 over the previous financial year on small things, such as IT expenditure and bills (SFB).
- Another Large Mixed MAT had saved on utility bills, estimating a dip in 15%-20% after switching their supplier (SFB).
- A Large Mixed MAT estimated to have saved a six-figure sum over the past three years due to changing their energy supplier as a result of using the VMFI.

The SFB had also helped to identify more miscellaneous short-term savings:

We noticed we were spending a lot on resources that we didn't seem to have [via SFB]. So, we did some investigations and found these resources hiding in subscriptions and things like that. We managed to cancel a lot of those. – *CFO, Small Mixed MAT*

Time and resource savings

A common and strongly held view amongst the majority of participants was that both the benchmarking tools had helped to save a lot of time and school resource. By bringing information together in one place, they have cut out the need to gather information from multiple sources manually. Additionally, the tools have enabled information to be contextualised with a narrative as to why certain figures are higher or lower, which again puts less strain on resources.

It's [VMFI] saved time for us, without a doubt. Something we do every year in the budget is benchmarking, and this allows us to have all the information, rather than going to look for it. VMFI is one of the best tools that you can use for this. – *CFO, Large Primary MAT*

Users were also spending less time collating information themselves and making manual comparisons, owing to the tools pulling all of this information together in one place. Whilst most could not quantify this time saving, of the minority who could estimate, they cited between 2-5 days as the time they had, or would potentially, save on data collection, entry, and dissemination per school year. Consistent with this, some users commented that they wouldn't be able to collect the same volume of data that's available on the benchmarking sites, as it would be too time intensive.

It [SFB] is very helpful to be able to see data as an overview - 'at a glance'. Within 10 minutes, you can look at some quite meaningful information. Whereas if you had to drill down into individual schools and get their budget information to do some comparison, it's going to take a lot longer to do that. - *Finance Manager, All-through LA*

If we were to try to gather it ourselves, I just think it probably wouldn't get done. Knowing that it's there available for us from information that we produce and send on to the DfE anyway is great [on the SFB]. – *Governor, Primary SAT*

Additionally, both of the tools were thought to mitigate previous 'finger-in-the-air' reporting. Previously, finance staff may have estimated their income and expenditure and how this compares with other schools. Now, time is saved in the long-term, as these staff members are not having to redo their reporting if their estimations turn out to be incorrect.

Last, a few respondents mentioned that the tools helped to save time by better informing staff meetings, allowing for faster decision-making due to quicker comprehension by all authoritative bodies.

It's [VMFI] good for having conversations with trustees and can save time by speeding along these processes. It acts as a good, visual tool for them. – *CFO, Small, Primary MAT*

Helped reaffirm knowledge and increase confidence amongst school leaders

An increase in confidence as current knowledge is reaffirmed or expanded is a secondary impact of using the benchmarking tools. Though not as prominent as notified

savings, those using the tools did allude to an increased confidence when discussing school finances, as a result of the benchmarking. This increased confidence was driven by acknowledgement that they are now better informed due to having a good oversight of spending.

It's [SFB] definitely made me more confident to speak about the costs comparable across the country. It influences my role in decision making and what I put across to SLT, but I couldn't say if it has changed the end result. – *School Business Manager, Primary LA*

This too was true of those who had not made any decisions after using the VMFI or SFB tools. Though they acknowledged that the information had not had an impact on their school spending, it was inferred that this was only because the information helped to validate the decisions they had already made. For these respondents, the tools are seen more of a 'sense check', or a 'safety net', and they refer to them regularly to help them maintain a confidence in their current decisions and reporting systems.

It [VMFI] helps us validate and ask the right questions. For example, we overspend on educational resources because we see it as an investment, so this helps us to explain that. – *School Business Manager, Secondary SAT*

The tool [VMFI] doesn't lead to cost saving per se, because we already have a very robust reporting system. If it flagged something we'd look into it, but this usually comes out naturally of our reporting system. – *CFO, Small Primary MAT*

Detailed Findings: ICFP training and accompanying resources

Initial motivations for attending the ICFP training

Informing understanding and implementation of ICFP

For those attending the training, core motivations fell into two, equally distributed groups: those who were very familiar with ICFP and wanted to either expand or reaffirm their knowledge; and those who were not familiar with ICFP and wanted to learn about it with a common end-goal of implementing it into their schools or academies.

Amongst those unfamiliar with ICFP, most interviewees attended the training simply to learn more about it, how to implement it, and to generate better ways of working. The majority felt it would be relevant to their roles and wanted to learn and develop new skills. A few respondents noted that ICFP was a 'buzz word' in the industry, and so felt that they needed to attend in order to keep up with colleagues and other schools and professionals working in education.

ICFP has been the buzzword, so we wanted to implement it. We didn't really know what it was all about, but we knew we wanted to implement it, especially if it was something the DfE were recommending. – *Academy Business Manager, Medium Primary MAT*

For those already familiar with ICFP, attendance on the course was intended to be a refresher for those who had used ICFP, and a reaffirmation they were following processes correctly. One respondent had created their own ICFP tool and wanted to attend in order to compare this with the DfE one and ascertain whether theirs was working well. Others wanted to check their internally designed system to determine if there was anything that could be done differently, or if they could improve any areas.

We've been using ICFP for a while but were a bit unsure of the data, so just wanted to make sure we were using the tools in the right way. – *CFO, Small Primary MAT*

Whilst there were no notable differences in motivation to join the training across school type, some had implemented ICFP in primaries within their MAT and wanted to learn how to do this in secondaries, and vice versa.

Facilitating conversations with colleagues and stakeholders

A secondary motivation for a few respondents was to learn how to ‘*speak the language*’ of academics working in their schools or academy trusts. Amongst this group, there was a belief that teachers and headteachers do not necessarily understand that the budget informs what the curriculum can incorporate, and so attended the training to try to gain the skills needed to communicate this to others. These attendees had hoped that the information would facilitate conversations with these other colleagues and bridge the knowledge gap between curriculum teams and finance teams.

We thought it would be useful for us to have a third body to help in discussions between finance and curriculum. – *Head of finance, Medium Secondary MAT*

Career development and accessing free training

Last, there were a few respondents who had attended the training, either because their managers had requested that they do or, as managers, they had decided to go on the training themselves to understand whether or not it would be worth them sending their subordinates on the course.

The Finance Director of our MAT recommended I attend, so I went. I opted into it though, to understand a bit more about my budgeting responsibilities. – *School business manager, Large Primary MAT*

The fact that the training was free was also a core motivator for many, and there was an underlying implication that those who attended would not have done so if they had been required to pay for it.

Well, it was a free course in an area I wanted to develop, so I thought ‘why not?’ – *Head of Finance, Large Mixed MAT*

How learnings from the ICFP training and accompanying resources are being used

To provide a holistic introduction for those less informed about ICFP

Most attendees described the training as useful and informative, with clear and actionable content.

However, for some who had not done any sort of integrated financial planning before, the information was found a little complex. One respondent mentioned that they had had to do prior research before taking the course, which helped them immensely in keeping up with the content.

I taught myself a lot beforehand and needed this background knowledge to understand it before attending. – *Head of Finance, Large Mixed MAT*

This did not detract from the information provided for most respondents, however, as there was a general understanding that information provided had to cater to different audiences, and most respondents expressed an interest and responsibility for conducting further research if they had not followed the course content. For others, the content and information conveyed was useful and informative.

The training was great, the people there were all on my level, and asking sensible questions. There was real appetite amongst business managers there to bring a level of expertise and accounting in. – *School Business Manager, Large Mixed MAT*

To reaffirm current processes and provide a helpful refresher to habitual users

Interviewees who attended the ICFP training and had already had an introduction to the principles felt that it reaffirmed current knowledge, and acted as a 'refresher', consistent with initial motivations for signing up. Several interviewees also stated that it reinforced current practices and gave them greater confidence in their day-to-day role by knowing they were implementing things correctly.

It was comforting to know that we weren't missing anything or doing anything wrong. It's good to be reassured. And it was good to know that all the problems we have are the same as everyone else's. – *Chair, Medium Primary MAT*

Despite some staff reportedly using the tool prior to the training, some felt that attending the training helped them to save time through increasing their confidence with the tool, thus allowing them to implement things quicker.

In respect of time saving, it wasn't a brand-new tool for us, so it didn't save too much time, but I do now use it much quicker as I know what I'm doing because of the training and feel more confident with it. -
CFO, Small Primary MAT

To help embed ICFP in schools

The resources provided alongside the training were considered useful for embedding principles. In particular, some respondents mentioned that the presentation included helped them to communicate with other colleagues and increase communication on the importance of integrated planning within their schools. Similarly, it was useful to have a 'third body' in discussions between finance and curriculum, to help to mediate discussions and reiterate that financial planning is necessary to enable a better, stronger curriculum. One respondent described the training as helping to bridge the gap of understanding between the academic and business leaders within their academy trust.

It helped school business managers familiarise themselves with the language and emphasise that the content is worthy of their time and attention, hopefully it means that they don't resent me for making them do it, as they've learnt it's worth it! – *CFO, Small Secondary MAT*

It was very good to get a holistic idea [of ICFP] and let me understand what other colleagues may be thinking, which I hope will increase communication. – *School Business Manager, Large Mixed MAT*

For two respondents who had had the time to implement the findings themselves, the resources provided were found useful in helping them to develop their own ICFP model.

Resulting decisions and actions taken after attending the ICFP training

Conduct further investigations

Of the majority of the respondents who found the course to be useful and engaging for them, most expressed a decision to further investigate, with the intent of implementing, ICFP in their schools. Many had used the resources provided during the training and were using them on an ongoing basis for reference purposes.

I've got the resources from the training right here on my desk! –
School Business Manager, Large Mixed MAT

The most popular tools used after the training was the workbook (by phase) for budget setting and the information provided at the procurement training around best practice in going out to tender. The technical guide and the presentation had also been widely referred to, but with mixed reviews. Other popular tools used to feed into further research by those who attended the ICFP training were the ISBL spreadsheet, and SRMA training (provided by ISBL). In fact, the majority of respondents who took part in ICFP training were actively engaged in researching ICFP via ISBL resources at the time of research.

Part of further investigations for one Medium Secondary MAT resulted in them experimenting with other ICFP tools, and consulting with an ICFP specialist creating their own model.

Communicate information with colleagues

As with the benchmarking tools, the visual information provided during the ICFP training encouraged attendees to communicate with colleagues about their budget setting. On completing the course, attendees expressed an interest in sharing learnings with colleagues with the overall intent to eventually action them.

Of those who had shared the information with others, they felt it had helped improve communication within their schools, and thought it was useful for framing internal discussions and feeding into longer term strategies and decision making. As an example, one interviewee thought the tool was particularly useful in explaining to colleagues why they are recommending the budgeting and financing that they are, and that it brings tangible and visual information to decision makers. The online visuals of the tool were particularly helpful in this instance.

It's been more helpful for presenting our points of view, because you can say until you're blue in the face that you haven't got enough

money. This helps put it into a better context and explains the how. – *School Business Manager, Large Mixed MAT*

This was particularly important when communicating formally with SLT and decision-making staff members, as the information provided helped many to get their points across. Incorporating the visual learnings from the training when sharing information with others was a clear action taken from the training, and an effective one.

It's been very difficult to get the teaching leadership staff to engage with it. They don't use the tools on a regular basis and come from a different background, so it works as an evidential tool. – *CFO, Mixed Small MAT*

No decisions or actions taken

As with the benchmarking tools, a common action after attending the ICFP training was not to engage further with ICFP. Reasons for no further actions or decisions to be taken include:

Already implementing ICFP in schools; training reaffirmed good practice

For some attendees, one core reason that no further actions were taken was because they had already implemented ICFP and were reassured by the training that their models were working well for them.

It didn't help us to make any decisions, but it did ensure that we were already doing the right thing, and that they'd made the right choices. It was better than the consultant we used for ICFP because the online visuals helped. – *School Business Manager, Large Primary MAT*

No decisions were made off the back of anything. It didn't inform any change of direction or encourage us to do new things at all. But that's mostly because we were already doing it all anyway. – *Chair, Medium Primary MAT*

However, one criticism raised by some who were already implementing good ICFP in their schools was that they left slightly disappointed with the training. This was not necessarily because of the content of the course – which they largely agreed was correct and informative – but more because of the advertising of the course. The training was sold as a 'deep dive' into ICFP, but those already implementing it did not believe it to be very detailed.

It was quite high level and not really all that in-depth, which I wasn't expecting as I think they called it a deep dive into ICFP. But it was the right level for my colleagues as an introduction. – *CFO, Small Mixed MAT*

Lack of agency in current role to implement information from the training

However, and in line with the benchmarking tools, there were some who noted that no further actions or decisions were taken due to a lack of agency when decision-making. A lot of decisions depend on leadership within school structures, and those who are not in these strategic conversations feel unable to input. One respondent mentioned feeling frustrated at leaving the training having identified many areas of where money could be saved but feeling powerless to do anything about this. Others spoke of their frustrations over a lack of influence within their schools, despite being the budget holder, and thought the training course could be improved by supporting business managers to get stakeholder buy in.

The DfE really needs to raise the profile of ICFP in schools. If business managers aren't on the SLT, then they have no real say in how they save money. ICFP is the way forward, but the DfE needs to address the fact that business managers aren't included in strategic conversations. – *School Business Manager, Large Mixed MAT*

If you're not in SLT you get no insight into strategic and financial planning, so there's not a lot I can do, despite having full ownership of the budget. I see money wasted all the time, but I can't do anything about it because I don't have any seniority. – *School Business Manager, Large Mixed MAT*

The most common suggestion cited for how to improve the ICFP training and accompanying resources was that it should be tailored to a wider audience, including headteachers and trustees, so that all members of the SLT have buy-in, thus leveraging the position of finance teams. While this finding was prevalent, it was more likely to be reported by those working in standalone finance teams within MATs, as there appears to be fewer opportunities to speak directly with academic staff for those working within these settings⁶.

⁶ ⁶ N.B.A. This is currently how the ICFP training is run, suggesting that the communication between those working in separate functions within schools and MATs is acting as a barrier, rather than the design of the course itself.

Estimated impact the ICFP training has had on expenditure, time, and resource

Identified long-term savings

Most interviewees found the principles outlined during the ICFP training useful for better overall management of budgets and expenditure, and some long-term benefits and savings were identified as a result of this.

For some respondents the training came after they had already completed their financial planning or budget setting for the year, and so the tool was not applicable for them at that time but did see its value in the future. With that in mind, it is perhaps unsurprising that many couldn't describe any specific savings as a result of the training, alluding to the idea that the ICFP is seen as a long-term cost savings tool, as opposed to a quick solution.

As with the benchmarking tools, the majority of potential long-term savings noted referred to staffing and restructuring savings, with most savings expected to happen organically through natural staff changes. The training and resources provided had helped to reframe staffing decisions and allowed for a more holistic view of the best balance of staff and experience within schools. One interviewee who worked within a Medium Secondary MAT felt that the training would have longer term impacts in relation to savings on recruitment and training of staff, as they will redeploy and retrain existing staff. Similarly, another interviewee mentioned they had used the tool to look at their budget, and subsequently made the decision not to replace staff, and another Small Mixed MAT had used it to inform an upcoming restructure which is estimated to save £350k.

For example, I'm aware that we've got some teachers leaving. We've got a teacher who is from Sunderland and she's moving back at the end of the academic year, so we're already looking at what's the cost? What's the replacement need? Have we got enough students to actually warrant replacing that teacher full time? It's looking at all of that from the ICFP point of view. – *School Business Manager, Large mixed MAT*

In line with this, the training and resources provided were useful in helping to show where efficiencies could be made which did not focus on the specific staff member, but the position as a whole. Demonstrating this, a secondary medium MAT described the creation of an ICFP modelling tool which had been key in driving strategy and decision making within the school, and encouraged them to think about existing staffing, rather than 'emotional decisions' when thinking about what is best for the school. This has the impact of aiding the best decisions related to staffing by desensitising information.

Another noted that the tool had helped to monitor the balance of need between experienced and more expensive staff, with less experienced and therefore cheaper teachers; by comparing cost and need in this way, decisions were much easier to make when it came to the restructuring of staffing.

We've made our own ICFP modelling tool, and this has helped to drive strategy and decision making by not thinking about existing staffing, and therefore not making emotional decisions when thinking about what's best for the schools. – *Head of Finance, Medium Secondary MAT*

We can use it to help the head ensure she has the right resources. She struggles to disassociate people with hours, and the ICFP tool helps make sure we have the right resources. – *CFO, Small Mixed MAT*

A few attendees had used the tool to look into their teacher-pupil contact ratios and while they had not yet actioned this, some noted they would keep the information in mind when planning future recruitment drives.

As well as long-term staffing savings, some respondents noted that the use of ICFP in their forecasting had become habitual. They predicted that by using the tool they would be able to stress-test future financial decisions. While it was not possible to quantify this as a long-term saving, it was inferred that by being able to model future decisions it would be possible to avoid making poor financial choices which could lead to detrimental change within their schools.

We will use it continuously to make sure that our projections are looking realistic. - *CFO, Small Primary MAT*

We use it to stress test. It's a good early warning sign that your budget might be about to go awry. I've used it to build into my budget setting, I always start there. – *CFO, Small Mixed MAT*

Last, some planned to use it more habitually, with one Small Secondary MAT commenting that ICFP is now a required part of their annual review of their five-year plan.

Identified short-term savings

ICFP had also been useful to analyse the proportion of expenditure across different categories (though only amongst a minority of interviewees) and identify short term

savings. These short-term savings spanned procurement, staffing, and curriculum planning costs.

For example:

- One respondent (Large Primary MAT) cited significant savings on their energy supplier as a direct result of using the procurement guide offered on ICFP.
- A Small Mixed MAT used the tool to plan timetabling and identify that the school had a full-time staff member for a part time role, saving £30,000.
- Another (Small Mixed MAT) changed their curriculum to teach the same one across the whole year group, whereas it had previously been split into two.
- One (Medium Primary MAT) made an estimated saving of £40,000 by asking one of their deputies to teach, rather than an employing another member of staff, after noting that other schools with similar pupil numbers saved staffing costs by having teaching deputy heads.
- One respondent (SEN, Large Mixed MAT) noted that they had saved on catering through merging the contract across the MAT, rather than having one contract per school.

We saved money on our energy supplier; I can't remember how much but our CFO was very happy so it must have been a significant saving. This came about as a direct result of the procurement course offered on the ICFP. – *Premises Manager, Large Primary MAT*

Saved time by facilitating and informing internal discussions on ICFP

Encouragingly, the training appeared to go some way in bridging a gap between finance and curriculum planning, acting as a 'third body' in discussions which has helped to mediate discussions and reiterate that differences are necessary, which was a pressure point for some schools:

We have a financial planner and a curriculum planner and never the twain shall meet! It's very frustrating because the curriculum will tell us that they've agreed a reading scheme and it's £500 a month, and we won't have that in the budget. - *School Business Manager, Large Mixed MAT*

The workbook (by phase) resource in particular was mentioned as helping Senior Leadership Teams (SLT) to understand how small changes in the curriculum can have big financial impacts. Similarly, this resource had helped another team to show that staff working across finance divisions are indeed aware of, and do understand, the importance

of the curriculum when financial planning. In line with this, the resource also helped to save time in some instances through more fluid communication.

It gave us a grown-up way to communicate with teaching staff, showing that things like estate or IT costs are important in the long run. We can't teach if we don't have buildings, for example! It's bringing all these things to the fore and in reasonable proportion, as well as analysing the curriculum. - *CFO, Small Secondary MAT*

Education is paramount, that's the most important thing, but we have to be able to fund it. So, there will always be a battle between finance and curriculum [teams]. This has helped us to communicate that financial stability is needed to provide the best environment for education. - *Head of Finance, Medium Secondary MAT*

This was consistent with their motivation for initially signing up to the training, which was to understand the impacts of financial planning on the curriculum.

Increased confidence through reaffirming correct use of ICFP in schools

As with the benchmarking tools, the ICFP training helped to reiterate to those who were already implementing ICFP in their schools and academy trusts that they were doing this correctly. For these respondents, though this impact was not financial, nor did it save on time or resource, it helped to increase confidence and gravitas with other members of staff when explaining what they had implemented.

It was comforting to know that we weren't missing anything or doing anything wrong. It's good to be reassured. And it was good to know that all the problems we have are the same as everyone else's. – *Chair, Medium Primary MAT*

The point of the training, for us, was to give context to what was already being done. – *CFO, Small Secondary MAT*

Conclusion – Benchmarking tools (VMFI and SFB)

The information the VMFI and SFB provided to schools and academy trusts was positively received by a majority of respondents, and both sites had had a quantifiable impact on many the schools and academy trusts who took part in the research. This quantifiable impact was varied, but ranged from small financial and time savings, to large, significant financial savings spanning many years.

The data used on the sites was not always, however, used independently to inform decisions, but rather formed an integral part to a suite of tools which schools and academy trusts used. Resulting from this, some respondents noted that the quantifiable impact could not always be directly attributed to the only the tools, though a few respondents did. While many often used the SFB and VMFI sites with each other, respondents also used a range of other metrics to evaluate where efficiencies could be made, from bodies such as the ISBL to their own, internal reporting and comparison metrics. Most attributed this need to use other sites to a perception that some of the data collected prior to being uploaded onto the sites was not standardised. While this is not a limitation of the tools itself, it does suggest that further communication around how to collate and report data could increase confidence in using the tools.

The VMFI and SFB both encouraged action from some respondents, which ranged from 'passive' activity, such reading and digesting information, to more 'active' reactions whereby information was shared, downloaded, discussed, and used to inform strategy. The visualisation and usability of the sites in particular were attributed as reasons for further actions taken after engaging with them. Amongst those who did not take any 'active' action after engaging with the sites, this was largely due to the information reaffirming positive good practice and financial health within their settings. Therefore, though some could not quantify impact, this was not necessarily a negative.

In conclusion, this research has highlighted that the benchmarking tools have helped many to make significant savings to their school budgets. With further communication to combat misunderstanding of how to use the tools, as well as more stringent training on how to collate and report data, they have the potential to help make significantly more savings.

Conclusion – ICFP Training

The principle of ICFP was well received by attendants, and it was an uncontested belief that the integrated nature of financial and academic planning was beneficial for schools and academy trusts. This benefit was seen by many who had begun to implement and experiment with ICFP. For those who had not previously used ICFP in their schools, the tools and resources used were not yet widely used, however, so any directly quantifiable impact was currently estimations for long-term savings. These estimations were significant, suggesting the ICFP training has the potential to contribute to significant schools' savings across the country.

The impact of ICFP was largely around staffing and long-term saving, and the training and accompanying tools had helped to remove emotion from restructuring and staffing decisions. Though many schools had not chosen to make immediate redundancies once identifying savings, instead preferring to save through organic staff turnover, this again highlights that significant future savings can be expected.

Though the majority of those who attended the training did not take immediate affirmative action on completion, of those who did take an action, this was mostly linked to reporting, information sharing, and seeking further information elsewhere. The workbook (by phase) was noted as the most popular tool to help with these three actions, as the information was visual, shareable, and customisable. More informed conversations and better planning was the result of this tool.

In conclusion, the ICFP training was a positive way to introduce ICFP training to make, and to reaffirm ICFP to others who were already aware. It is likely that the training and accompanying tools has already led to savings around the country, but research suggests that more long-term savings can be expected as a direct result of the training courses.

Appendix I: Topic Guide

Introduction and briefing (2 minutes)

Introduction:

- Moderator to introduce themselves and BMG Research
- Thank them for agreeing to take part in an interview about their thoughts and experiences on a number of services offered by the Department for Education.
- There are no right or wrong answers
- You don't have to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable answering

Purpose of the discussion: The Department for Education has commissioned BMG research to speak with schools and academy trusts in England, to understand the actions, behavioural change (if any) and (if possible) the impact on financial decision making and savings made by specific DfE School Resource Management services and tools. The conversations will be used to help understand the impacts of these. This will then be integrated into a full research report and shared with the Department for Education.

Length: The interview should take approximately 15 - 20 minutes to complete.

Confidentiality: All information you provide will be treated confidentially. We will not identify any individuals or share the personal details of those who took part. I am independent. Your responses are strictly confidential which is required by the Market Research Society.

- Views stated are not linked to individuals and the more open and honest you can be the better.
- We may use some of the things you say in our reports, but we won't reveal who said them. This is in line with the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.

Recording: we would like to audio-record the discussion for the purposes of accurately capturing all the information you share with us. The audio will be used for analysis purposes only and will not be shared with anyone outside of BMG research.

Background and introduction (1-2 minutes)

We're going to talk mostly about the School Resource Management Resources available today...

- I have that you work in an [INSERT SCHOOL TYPE], is that correct?
- Please could you tell me a little bit about your current role within it?
 - Probe: e.g., SBM for a school within the MAT, centralised function, CFO for trust, etc.
- And what are your day-to-day responsibilities? [Probe: financial decision-making responsibilities]

- And could you tell me whether you've used the:
- School Financial Benchmarking site (SFB) N.B.A. Ask all
 - View My Financial Insights site (VMFI) N.B.A. Only ask if in MAT or SAT
 - ICFP training courses N.B.A. Only ask if in MAT

SFB: Impact of SFB tool (10-12 minutes)

[ASK MATs, SATs, and LA schools]

PART 1: ASK ONLY IF HAVE USED SCHOOL FINANCIAL BENCHMARKING (SFB) SITE

- Overall, how would you describe your experience(s) of using the SFB site?
- And how useful to you/your school/trust were the comparisons with other schools? Why/why not?
- What made you decide to use the SFB tool?
 - Which specific scenario(s)
 - How many times a year/how often is it used?

- How did the SFB site help with decision making?
 - Probes: strategic discussions at either SLT or Governing Body (if an LA maintained school) or Board of Trustees (if a MAT or SAT)
 - Longer term strategic planning
 - Challenge financial planning/ inform budget setting
 - Identify areas for potential efficiency savings
 - Identify ways to better allocate resource
 - Contact other schools to discuss their actions of interest

- What actions did you/your school take as a result of these decisions?
 - Probes: change of suppliers, redeployment of workforce
 - Probe: Do you plan to take any further actions this school year? Which?

- Overall, how useful, or influential would you say this resource has been to your school (or trust level) decision making and actions taken? What makes you say this?

- Did the SFB helped you to identify any savings?
 - If yes, how much, roughly, have you saved? If unsure, probe (e.g., £100s, £1,000s)
 - And how much do you think you will save? Probe on financial forecasting
 - In what area(s) of school/trust operations did it/will it help you to save money?

- Have you managed to save any time or resource through using this tool? For example, has it saved time by providing data you would otherwise have had to find yourself?
 - How much time has it saved you/your organisation? (e.g., admin)
 - How much resource has it saved you/your organisation? (e.g., redeployment of staff)
 - How much money has it saved you/your organisation?

- What would you say the key things learnt from the SFB tool are?
- And how do you think the SFB site could be improved?
- Would you recommend this tool to others? Why/why not?

PART 1b: ASK ONLY IF HAVE NOT USED SCHOOL FINANCIAL BENCHMARKING (SFB) SITE

You said you have never used the SFB...

- Have you looked at the SFB site?
 - [If yes] Why did you not use the information provided?

VMFI: Impact of VMFI tool (10-12 minutes)

PART 2: ASK ONLY IF HAVE USED VIEW MY FINANCIAL INSIGHTS (VMFI)

[for MATs and SATs only, NOT LA maintained schools]

- Overall, how would you describe your experience(s) of using the VMFI site?
- And how useful to you/your school/trust were the comparisons with other schools? Why/why not?
- What made you decide to use the VMFI tool?
 - Which specific scenario(s)
 - How many times a year/how often is it used?
- How did the SFB site help with decision making? Probes:
 - Strategic discussions at either SLT or Governing Body (if an LA maintained school) or Board of Trustees (if a MAT or SAT)
 - Longer term strategic planning
 - Challenge financial planning/ inform budget setting
 - Identify areas for potential efficiency savings
 - Identify ways to better allocate resource
 - Contact other schools to discuss their actions of interest
- What actions did you/your school take as a result of these decisions?
 - Probes: change of suppliers, redeployment of workforce
 - Probe: Do you plan to take any further actions this school year? Which?
- What other impacts has the information available through the VMFI tool have? Probe: managing workforce/ workload/ curriculum planning/ data planning etc.?
- Has the VMFI data helped you to identify any savings? If so, how much have you/could you save on... *Probe on financial forecasting, identified vs realised savings*
 - Non-staff spend
 - Staff spend
 - Recurring costs
 - Non-recurring costs
 - Procurement cost changes
- Have you managed to save any time or resource through using this tool? For example, has it saved time by providing data you would otherwise have had to find yourself?
 - How much time has it saved you/your organisation?
 - How much resource has it saved you/your organisation?
 - How much money has it saved you/your organisation?
- What would you say the key things learnt from the VMFI tool are?
- And how do you think the VMFI site could be improved?

- Would you recommend this tool to others? Why/why not?

PART 2b: ASK ONLY IF HAVE NOT USED VIEW MY FINANCIAL INSIGHTS (VMFI) SITE

You said you have never used the VMFI site...

- Have you ever looked at the VMFI site?
 - [If yes] Why did you not use the information provided?
 - Why did it not help you to make decisions for your school/trust?

PART 3: ASK EITHER THE VMFI AND SFB SITES

- Have you used [VMFI and/or SFB] alongside any other Department resources to make these decisions?
- What other tools and data sources do you use to support your financial decision making?
 - How do they compare with the DfE tools?
- After using the [VMFI and/or SFB], did you look for any other DfE resources? Which?

ICFP SECTION: Impact of ICFP training and tools (10-12 minutes)

[ASK both parts of this section on training and tools if the interviewee attended or viewed online at least one of the ICFP training sessions]

[ASK only the part on ICFP tools if they didn't attend an ICFP session or watch it online and are content to answer questions on the use of the ICFP tools DfE has made available as they have used them]

Part 1: ASK IF ATTENDED ICFP TRAINING

- Why did you choose to attend the ICFP training? (either in person, or the online videos of the training sessions on gov.uk pages)
 - When did you make the decision to attend?
- Overall, how would you describe your experience of the training?
 - Did it meet your expectations? Why/ why not?
 - What are the main benefits you found from using the training?
 - Any limitations? Aspects you would have liked covered

I would like to talk to you now briefly about how you have used the principles taught in the training...

- How did the ICFP training help with decision making? Probes:
 - Strategic discussions at Board of Trustees (if a MAT)
 - Longer term strategic planning
 - Challenge financial planning/ inform budget setting
 - Identify areas for potential efficiency savings
 - Identify ways to better allocate resource
 - Contact other schools to discuss their actions of interest
 - Change in curriculum planning
 - Integration of your [MAT] financial and curriculum plans

- Did the training helped you to identify any savings?
 - If yes, where did you manage to identify/make these savings?
 - If yes, how much, roughly, have you saved/ could you save? Probe realised vs. actual
 - If unsure, probe for bandings

- What other impacts has the training provided had? For example, has it saved time by providing information you would otherwise have had to find yourself?
 - How much time has it saved you/your organisation?
 - How much resource has it saved you/your organisation?
 - How much money has it saved you/your organisation?

- Do you revisit materials from the training? How often, and what for?

- Have you been on any other training courses offered similar to this?
 - If yes: how does this one compare to others you have used?

- Did the short course encourage you to use other Department resources? Which ones?
 - Did these additional resources help you to make savings? Where, and how much?

Part 2: ASK IF USED ICFP TOOLS FROM DfE

- Which of the following DfE produced ICFP tools have you personally used?
Interviewer to capture if any others have been used
 - Basic principles of ICFP presentation
 - Workbook (by phase)

- Technical guide
 - The Pioneer Academy Trust tools (for primaries)
 - Could you take me through which scenario(s) have you used [INSERT TOOL USED]?
 - What would you say the main benefits have been from using [INSERT TOOL USED]?
 - Have you used them to integrate your [SAT's / MAT's / LA's] financial and curriculum plans? Probe which tool specifically
- Could you give me an example of when you have used this tool to inform a financial decision?
 - Probe: staff management, resource allocation, budget setting etc.
 - Overall, how would you describe your experience of the available ICFP tools on gov.uk?
 - Are there any limitations to using [INSERT ABOVE TOOL]?
 - And are there any limitations with using the package of ICFP tools available in general?

PART 3: ASK ALL ICFP RESPONDENTS

- How could the Department's support for schools and trusts to conduct good ICFP be improved?

Wrap up (2 minutes)

- Is there anything else you would like to add?
- Thank and close

Appendix II: Statement of terms

Compliance with International Standards

BMG complies with the International Standard for Quality Management Systems requirements (ISO 9001:2015) and the International Standard for Market, opinion, and social research service requirements (ISO 20252:2012) and The International Standard for Information Security Management (ISO 27001:2013).

Interpretation and publication of results

The interpretation of the results as reported in this document pertain to the research problem and are supported by the empirical findings of this research project and, where applicable, by other data. These interpretations and recommendations are based on empirical findings and are distinguishable from personal views and opinions.

BMG will not publish any part of these results without the written and informed consent of the client.

Ethical practice

BMG promotes ethical practice in research: We conduct our work responsibly and considering the legal and moral codes of society.

We have a responsibility to maintain high scientific standards in the methods employed in the collection and dissemination of data, in the impartial assessment and dissemination of findings and in the maintenance of standards commensurate with professional integrity.

We recognise we have a duty of care to all those undertaking and participating in research and strive to protect subjects from undue harm arising as a consequence of their participation in research. This requires that subjects' participation should be as fully informed as possible and no group should be disadvantaged by routinely being excluded from consideration. Both agency and client shall take all adequate steps to ensure that the identity of each respondent participating in the research is protected.



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