

School Resource Management

Thought Leadership – Benchmarking

Producing benchmarking reports has become a staple of a school's financial monitoring, but it is worth a moment to consider what effects these reports are having, how they can be used to help improve a school, and what tools are out there in order to achieve this.

The DfE is well aware of the importance of benchmarking and has been producing tools to assist over the last couple of years – and importantly these are continually evolving. You will be aware of the self-assessment dashboard as it was recently made part of the annual SFVS for maintained schools and made into a compulsory annual report for academies, but it can also be used as part of your regular benchmarking report – doesn't just have to be once a year. It's a concise report that is easy to review and, since all schools are producing them it is very easy to compare your school's results with others. Furthermore, should an area for further investigating be identified by the self-assessment tool, further details on these areas will be available on the full government benchmarking website found at <https://schools-financial-benchmarking.service.gov.uk/>

But what can you do? With increased availability of information, more questions will be able to be raised, and that is a key part of the governor role when it comes to benchmarking. You are the school's critical friend. Sometimes there will be a good reason why your school spends more in a certain area and that is fine. But it is a good thing to question, for example, why are the school's leadership costs, or energy costs, or supply teaching costs, higher than average. The six most expensive words in education are 'it's always been done that way' and if the answer to any of your probing questions is that, then maybe there is room for improvement which, in these uncertain times, could free up resources for elsewhere.

Staffing costs account for the largest percentage of a school's overheads. To benchmark costs across a range of schools with a similar profile, should stimulate a debate. However, it would be good practice to have a benchmarking focus each year. To select a section of the staffing structure for benchmarking and to extend the range of information being considered. By working with the schools selected you could ascertain the number of staff included, types of contracts – grades, hours etc. – and the qualification of those staff. This would then be an inform any future plans for staffing review.

Likewise, with other overhead benchmarking reports. By working with a group of identified schools, you will be able to explore more information e.g. – Utility costs. Unit costs; Types of systems being used; Environmental impact? Upgrades applied etc.

Schools do not operate in a bubble, to share good practice across the sector will support the efficient application of resources. Best Value can be more than simply the cost of a service, effective use of Benchmarking should be utilised to assist in applying this principle.

Alison Elsmore

Secondary Academy Business Manager