

From Data to Decisions

**A School Leader's Guide to Effective Integrated
Curriculum and Financial Planning (ICFP)**





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Introduction

Why ICFP Matters More Than Ever

School leaders face increasing pressure to balance educational excellence with financial sustainability. Rising costs, workforce challenges and increased accountability mean that financial planning can no longer happen in isolation.

Integrated Curriculum and Financial Planning (ICFP) brings curriculum, staffing and financial data together, helping schools make informed decisions that support both pupil outcomes and long-term sustainability.

In this guide you'll learn:

- ✓ What ICFP is and why it matters
- ✓ How accountability expectations are evolving
- ✓ How to use benchmarking and comparative data effectively
- ✓ How to identify efficiencies without compromising education
- ✓ How technology can support better planning and decision-making

“Staffing costs typically account for around **75–85% of school expenditure**, making workforce planning one of the most important drivers of financial sustainability.”



Understanding

Integrated Curriculum and Financial Planning (ICFP)

What is ICFP?

Integrated Curriculum and Financial Planning (ICFP) is a strategic approach that helps schools and trusts align educational priorities with financial sustainability.

At its core, ICFP recognises that curriculum decisions, staffing structures and budgets are intrinsically linked. Rather than viewing educational planning and financial planning as separate activities, ICFP brings them together to create a clearer picture of how resources are being used to deliver outcomes for pupils.

For most schools, staffing costs account for the largest proportion of expenditure. This means decisions about curriculum delivery, class structures, timetable models and workforce deployment can have a significant impact on both educational outcomes and financial health.

ICFP provides a framework that enables school leaders to understand those connections and make evidence-based decisions with greater confidence.

Why ICFP Matters

Schools today face increasing pressure to achieve more with limited resources.

Rising staffing costs, changing pupil demographics, recruitment challenges and tighter budgets have made long-term planning more important than ever.

ICFP helps schools and trusts answer some of the most important strategic questions:

- Is our curriculum financially sustainable?
- Are staffing levels aligned to pupil needs?
- How do we compare with similar schools?
- Can we demonstrate value for money while maintaining educational quality?

By bringing curriculum, workforce and financial information together, leaders can move beyond reactive budgeting and towards proactive decision-making.

The Benefits of ICFP

✓ Improved Financial Sustainability

Identify potential pressures early and plan for future challenges.

✓ Better Resource Allocation

Ensure resources are directed towards the areas that deliver the greatest impact.

✓ Evidence-Based Decision Making

Use robust data to support planning and justify decisions to stakeholders.

✓ Greater Strategic Alignment

Link financial decisions directly to school improvement priorities.

✓ Enhanced Accountability

Provide clear evidence for trustees, governors and external stakeholders.

Common Challenges Schools Face

While the principles of ICFP are straightforward, implementation can often be challenging.

Many schools have access to large amounts of data but turning that information into meaningful insights can be difficult.

Common barriers include:

- Data spread across multiple systems and spreadsheets
- Limited time for in-depth analysis
- Difficulty identifying suitable benchmarking groups
- Challenges linking curriculum decisions to financial impact
- Lack of confidence in interpreting complex datasets
- Manual processes that increase the risk of errors

Without the right tools and visibility, valuable data can remain underutilised, making it harder for leaders to identify opportunities, demonstrate value for money and plan effectively for the future.





The Changing Accountability Landscape

How Expectations Around ICFP are Evolving

Integrated Curriculum and Financial Planning (ICFP) is no longer viewed as simply a best-practice exercise.

Recent updates to the Academy Trust Handbook demonstrate a growing expectation that curriculum, workforce and financial planning should be considered together as part of effective trust governance.

The wording in section 2.13 of the Academy Trust Handbook has become noticeably stronger over time. In the 2025 edition, boards were “encouraged to take an integrated approach to curriculum and financial planning.” In the 2026 edition, this changed to “Boards should take an integrated approach to curriculum and financial planning in their schools.”

While “should” does not currently represent a mandatory requirement, it signals a clear direction of travel. The expectation is increasingly that boards actively embed ICFP principles into their strategic decision-making processes rather than treating them as optional guidance.

For trusts, this means being able to demonstrate how curriculum decisions, staffing structures and financial planning are aligned to support both educational outcomes and long-term sustainability.

Moving Beyond Compliance

Alongside changes in guidance, the expectations placed on trust boards and executive leaders continue to evolve.

Boards are increasingly expected not only to monitor performance, but also to understand the factors driving it and provide assurance that decisions are supported by robust evidence. Financial sustainability, workforce planning and curriculum delivery are no longer viewed as separate discussions. They are interconnected strategic considerations that require a joined-up approach.

As a result, leaders are moving beyond reporting historical information and focusing more on how data is used to inform future decisions.

The Importance of Evidence

Today's accountability environment requires more than access to data. Boards, auditors and stakeholders increasingly expect a clear evidence trail demonstrating how decisions have been reached.

Trusts should be able to show:

- Why decisions were made
- What data informed those decisions
- Alternative options that were considered
- The expected impact and outcomes

This approach not only strengthens governance but also helps leaders demonstrate that resources are being deployed effectively, sustainably and in the best interests of pupils.

The Questions Boards Are Asking

As scrutiny of financial sustainability increases, trust boards are asking increasingly strategic questions:

- How do we know staffing levels are sustainable?
- Are resources aligned to strategic priorities?
- How do we compare to similar organisations?
- Can we evidence value for money?

Answering these questions with confidence requires more than isolated data points. It requires meaningful analysis, relevant benchmarking and a clear understanding of how curriculum, workforce and financial decisions influence one another.

“The shift from ‘encouraged’ to ‘should’ reflects a broader change across the sector. Having data is no longer enough. Trusts increasingly need to **demonstrate how data is being interpreted, challenged and translated into effective action.**”

Turning Data Into Insight

Why Benchmarking Matters

Every school and trust has access to an increasing volume of data. From staffing and curriculum metrics to financial performance and pupil numbers, leaders are rarely short of information.

The challenge isn't collecting data. The challenge is understanding what the data is telling you and how it compares to similar organisations.

Without context, even the most detailed dataset can be misleading. Is a staffing ratio high or low? Is curriculum spend in line with comparable schools? Are financial pressures unique to your organisation, or part of a broader sector trend?

Benchmarking helps answer these questions by providing a meaningful point of comparison.



Looking Beyond the Numbers

Benchmarking allows leaders to compare their school's performance against organisations with similar characteristics, helping to turn data into actionable insight.

By understanding how your school or trust compares to others facing similar challenges, you can:

- Identify areas of strong performance
- Highlight potential financial risks
- Understand staffing trends
- Review curriculum efficiency
- Support strategic planning and decision-making
- Provide evidence for board discussions

Most importantly, benchmarking helps leaders move from assumptions to evidence-based conclusions.

Why Like-for-Like Comparisons Matter

Not all schools face the same circumstances.

A meaningful comparison should account for factors that can significantly influence performance and financial outcomes, including:

1. **School Phase:** Primary, secondary and special schools each have unique curriculum and staffing requirements.
2. **Pupil Numbers:** Size can influence staffing structures, economies of scale and resource allocation.
3. **Local Context:** Regional factors, recruitment challenges and local demographics can all impact decision-making.
4. **SEND Provision:** Schools with higher levels of SEND provision may have different staffing and funding considerations.
5. **Trust Structure:** The operational needs of a single academy can differ significantly from those of a multi-academy trust.

Comparing against genuinely similar organisations creates much more valuable insight than relying solely on national averages.

What Benchmarking Can Reveal

Effective benchmarking can uncover opportunities that may otherwise remain hidden.

For example:

✓ Staffing Deployment

How do teacher contact ratios and support staff allocation compare?

✓ Financial Performance

Are there areas where expenditure differs significantly from peers?

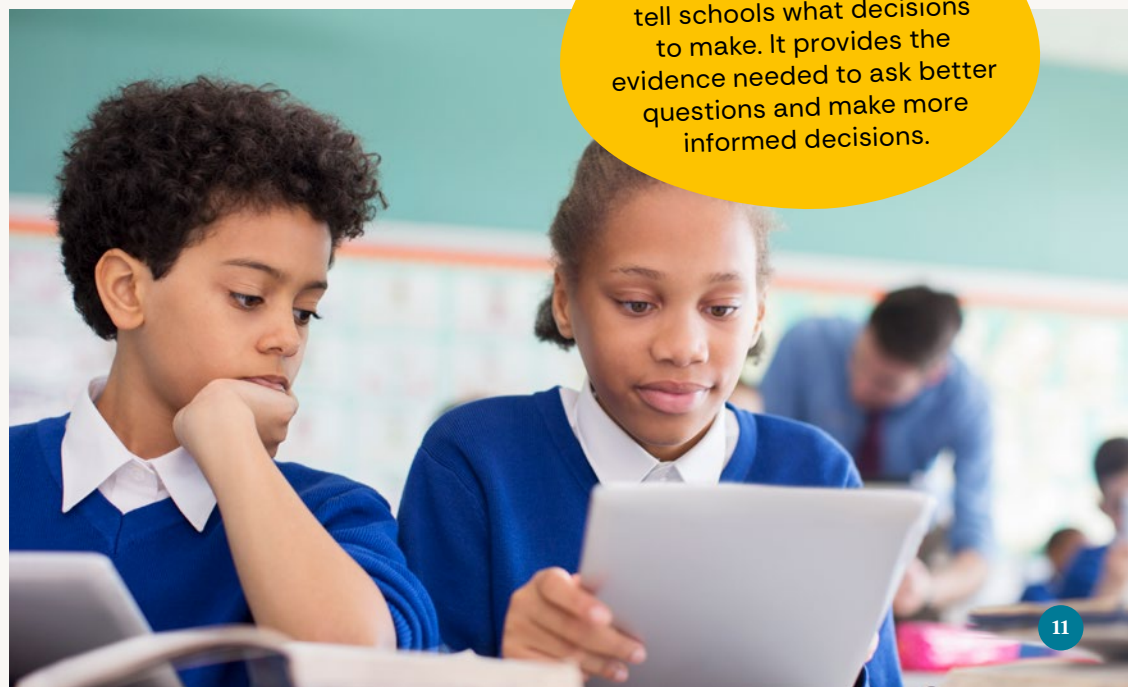
✓ Strategic Risk

Are emerging trends indicating future challenges for sustainability?

These insights provide leaders with a stronger foundation for planning, decision-making and governance discussions.

Key Takeaway

Benchmarking doesn't tell schools what decisions to make. It provides the evidence needed to ask better questions and make more informed decisions.



How SBS ICFP Supports Better Benchmarking

Access to data is only valuable if leaders can turn that information into meaningful action.

SBS ICFP brings together curriculum, workforce and financial data to help schools and trusts gain a deeper understanding of their performance and identify opportunities for improvement.



Book a
demo

Create More Meaningful Comparisons

Schools can filter benchmarking data using a range of criteria, including:

- ✓ Local Authority
- ✓ School phase
- ✓ Pupil numbers
- ✓ SEN percentage
- ✓ Additional school characteristics

This helps leaders build comparison groups that reflect their own circumstances, ensuring insights are relevant, practical and actionable.

Turn Data Into Decisions

SBS ICFP helps school and trust leaders move beyond reporting metrics and towards strategic action.

With access to tailored benchmarking insights, organisations can:

- ✓ Explore opportunities for efficiency
- ✓ Compare 16 expenditure and curriculum metrics
- ✓ Strengthen financial planning
- ✓ Support board reporting and governance
- ✓ Build evidence-based plans for the future

From Insights to Action

When curriculum, workforce and financial data are viewed together, leaders gain a clearer understanding of how decisions in one area impact another.

This joined-up approach helps schools and trusts make informed decisions that support both educational outcomes and long-term financial sustainability.

Identifying Savings Without Compromising Outcomes

The goal of ICFP is not simply to reduce expenditure. It is to ensure resources are deployed in the most effective way possible, supporting both educational outcomes and long-term financial sustainability.

By bringing curriculum, workforce and financial data together, school and trust leaders can gain a clearer understanding of performance, identify potential efficiencies and make more informed decisions with confidence.

Financial Health Ratings Based on 16 Key Metrics

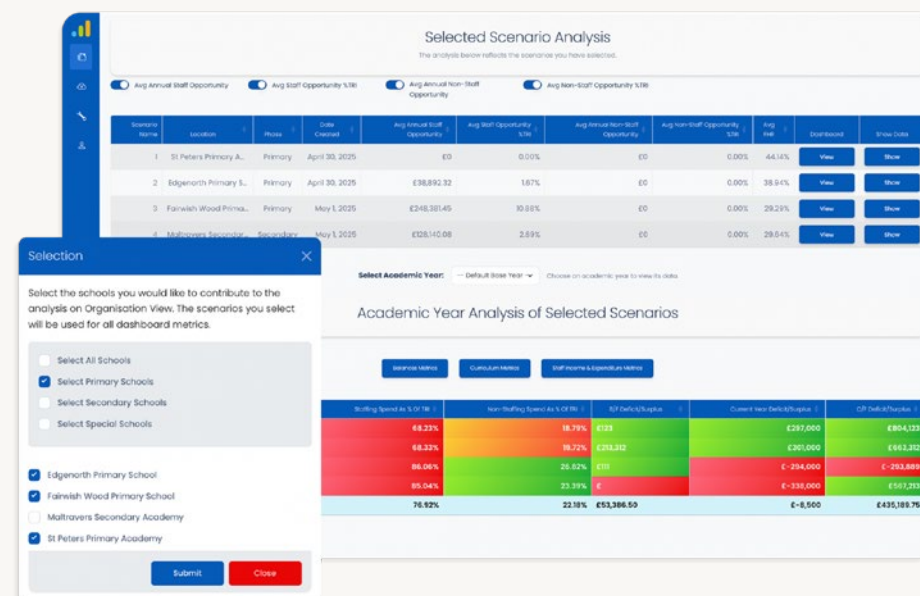
Every school within your trust receives an instant Financial Health Rating based on 16 key performance indicators, including staffing costs, resource allocation and budget efficiency.

Per Lesson Cost Information	
Actual:	3129.3
Benchmark:	2912.5
Saving:	£0
Rating:	Green
Impact on FHR:	+8.58%
Trend:	Increase
Priority:	Low

Curriculum metrics 2021/22				
6 metrics analysed				
Metric	Actual	Metric Average	Potential Saving	Rating
Average Teacher Cost →	56,597.52	65,182.48	£0	Red Low
Pupil Teacher Ratio →	86.90	10.33	£0	Red Low
Pupil Adult Ratio →	49.82	11	£0	Red Low
Teacher Contact Ratio →	0.82	0.79	£0	Amber Low
Per Lesson Cost →	2,774.35	2,912.50	£0	Green
Average Class Size →	105.74	28	£0	Red Low

Expenditure metrics 2021/22				
10 metrics analysed				
Metric	Actual	Metric Average	Potential Saving	Rating
Total Staff TRB →	70.57%	75.18%	£0	Amber Low
Non Staff TRB →	19.32%	24.82%	£0	Amber Low
Teaching Staff TRB →	54.88%	50.58%	£172,334.20	Amber High
Supply Staff TRB →	0.88%	2.59%	£0	Red Low
CSS TRB →	9.28%	16.17%	£0	Red Low
NCSS TRB →	6.71%	10.07%	£0	Red Low
Energy TRB →	2.55%	2.34%	£0	Green
SLT TRB →	10.00%	10.75%	£0	Green
TSLR TRB →	1.10%	1%	£0	Green
Management TRB →	11.18%	11.75%	£0	Green

“The most effective savings are not found through cost-cutting alone. They are identified through a deeper understanding of how curriculum, workforce and financial decisions interact across the organisation.”



Leaders can quickly identify areas of strength and potential concern, then drill down into individual metrics to understand the factors driving performance.

BENEFITS

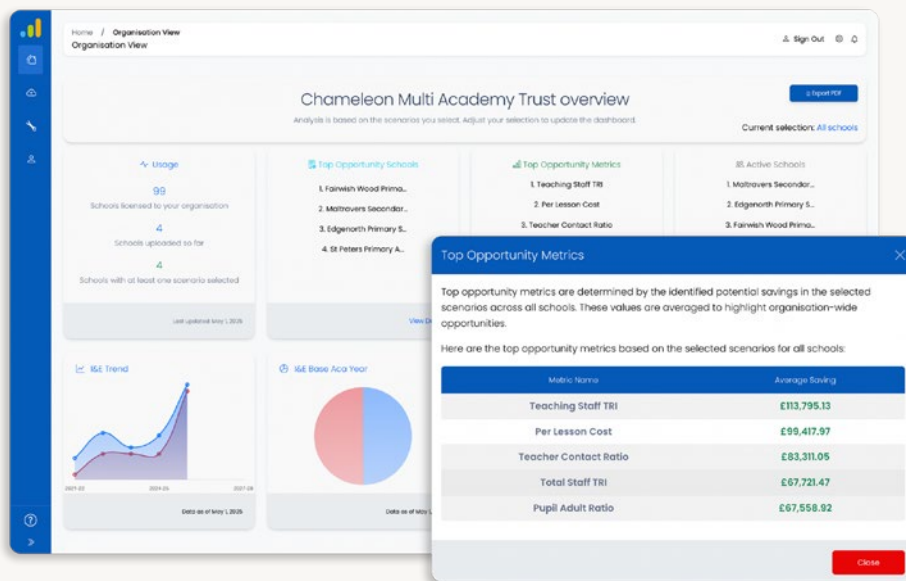
- ✓ Instant visibility across all schools
- ✓ Consistent assessment framework
- ✓ Early identification of emerging risks
- ✓ Clear visual indicators for improvement opportunities

Prioritising Saving Opportunities

Finding savings can be challenging, particularly when balancing financial pressures with educational priorities.

SBS ICFP helps identify and prioritise opportunities based on potential impact, enabling leaders to focus on the areas most likely to deliver meaningful efficiencies.

Rather than searching through multiple reports and datasets, users are presented with clear recommendations that support evidence-based decision-making.



BENEFITS

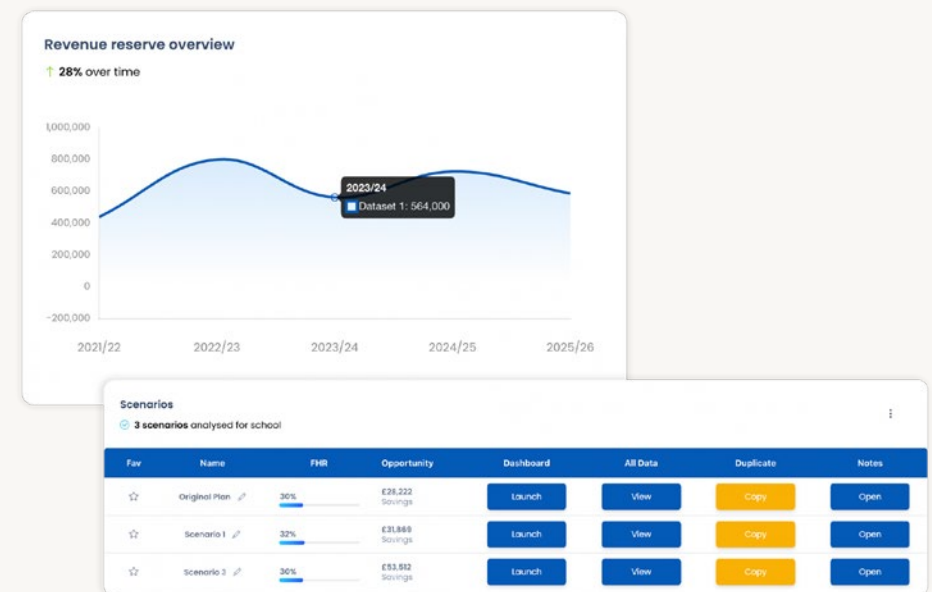
- ✓ Focus on the highest-impact opportunities
- ✓ Reduce time spent analysing data
- ✓ Support strategic rather than reactive decision-making
- ✓ Protect educational outcomes while improving efficiency

Multi-Year Feasibility Analysis and Trends

Effective planning requires more than understanding today's position. Leaders need confidence in the decisions they make for the future.

Multi-year feasibility analysis enables trusts to model different scenarios across individual schools and compare the long-term impact of strategic decisions.

Users can save key scenarios, compare options and extend their view across previous and future years, providing a comprehensive five-year picture of organisational performance.



BENEFITS

- ✓ Model future financial scenarios
- ✓ Understand the impact of strategic decisions
- ✓ Compare planning assumptions with confidence
- ✓ Support long-term sustainability planning

Bringing Financial Planning and ICFP Together

A More Connected Approach to Planning

Integrated Curriculum and Financial Planning is most effective when curriculum, workforce and financial data work together.

By connecting these planning processes, trusts can gain a clearer view of how decisions in one area influence outcomes in another, helping leaders make more informed decisions with greater confidence.

This creates opportunities to:

- ✓ Improve planning accuracy
- ✓ Reduce manual administration
- ✓ Strengthen financial forecasting
- ✓ Increase confidence in reporting
- ✓ Support evidence-based decision-making

SBS Financial Planner + SBS ICFP

SBS ICFP works alongside SBS Financial Planner to help schools and trusts create a more joined-up approach to strategic planning.

By reducing duplication and removing the need to manually transfer data between systems, leaders can focus less on administration and more on understanding the impact of their decisions.

Whether reviewing staffing structures, modelling future scenarios or preparing reports for trustees, connected planning helps ensure decisions are based on accurate, up-to-date information.

About SBS

School Business Services (SBS) is one of the UK's leading providers of education support services, helping schools and trusts navigate financial, operational and strategic challenges with confidence. Combining sector expertise with innovative technology, SBS delivers solutions that support stronger governance, improved efficiency and long-term sustainability.

Our services include SBS Financial Planner and SBS ICFP, Internal Scrutiny, Finance Support, MIS & ICT support and procurement. They are designed to help education leaders make evidence-based decisions and maximise the impact of every pound spent.

With a proven track record of supporting schools and trusts across the UK, SBS empowers leaders to focus on what matters most: delivering outstanding outcomes for pupils



Build Confidence in Every Decision

SBS ICFP helps schools and trusts turn data into action by bringing together curriculum, workforce and financial planning in one place.

- ✓ Benchmark against 20,000+ schools
- ✓ Monitor financial health across 16 key metrics
- ✓ Identify prioritised saving opportunities
- ✓ Model future scenarios with confidence
- ✓ Support evidence-based governance
- ✓ Strengthen long-term financial sustainability

Book a personalised demonstration to discover how SBS ICFP can help you use your data effectively.

[Get in touch >](#)

Ready to see SBS ICFP in action?

Book a personalised demonstration

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