
Meeting: Schools Forum
Date: 28 September 2009
Subject: Position Statement on Central Bedfordshire Council FMSiS Assessments & Benchmarking Data
Report of: Audit Manager- Internal Audit
Summary: To update the Schools Forum on the current position with regards to schools that have passed the FMSiS and further actions taken since the last Schools Forum meeting.

Contact Officer: Roger Willoughby, Audit Manager – Internal Audit
Public/Exempt: Public
Wards Affected: All
Function of: Council
Reason for urgency (if appropriate)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. To discuss and comment on the position statement and agreed actions from last Schools Forum.**

Background

1. The Forum was presented with a position statement in June 2009 on the progress of the Authority in assessing schools against the Financial Management Standard in Schools (FMSiS). Since then, further assessments have been completed and actions agreed with the Forum in June 2009 have been implemented, namely an attempt to benchmark against other authorities to ascertain the relative position of the pass rate for schools in Central Bedfordshire in relation to the rest of the country, and the 'scheduling' of assessments of schools scheduled for 2009-10.

Current position

2. The summary table below indicates the current status of Central Bedfordshire Council's schools in terms of passing the FMSiS. Assessments are completed by Internal Audit and Schools Finance staff. Please note that Northfields Technology College is now an Academy and no longer subject to FMSiS compliance, hence the number of schools has been reduced from 139 to 138.

	Status at 10.9.09	As percentage of schools programmed for assessment	Status at 29.6.09 (previous update)	Comments
Pass	57	53%	46	This includes schools that have previously failed
Fail	19	18%	17	Due for reassessment in 2009-10
Assessments in progress	32	29%	46	This includes schools that have previously failed
Total assessments completed or in progress (pre- 2009-10)	108	100%	109	
Schools due for assessment in 2009-10	30		30	
Total CBC Schools	138		139	This excludes 2009-10 reassessments

3. Overall 14 assessments have been fully completed since the last update to the Schools Forum, and a further 12 are substantially complete (these are identified as 'Awaiting Review' or 'Conditional Pass' in the attached Appendix A). This means that only 21 'in progress' assessments have still to be completed, and these can now be progressed with the start of the new school term.

Current Approach to Assessments

4. In the context of the progress reported above, it is also worth mentioning that the 'two- stage' assessment approach currently utilised by Central Bedfordshire has evolved as a result of the poor quality of evidence provided by some schools and the absence of any funding for the reassessment of schools which do not meet the Standard. In essence this means that, without compromising the Standard required of schools, every attempt is made to give schools the opportunity to meet the Standard at the first attempt. Many are given opportunities to submit further evidence, clarify existing evidence and implement processes which are not already in place and this can delay the completion of the assessments by up to several weeks. In addition, the poor quality of evidence provided in some cases, and a failure to cross reference the evidence thoroughly, often leads to assessments taking longer than the 4 day budget.
5. Further FMSiS training has been arranged for schools and updated guidance on the Central Bedfordshire Council Schools Finance website has been made available. It is hoped that these mechanisms will help schools provide a better quality portfolio of evidence and facilitate the completion of the assessments within the required 4 day budget.

Schedule for 2009-10

6. The 2009-10 schedule of assessments includes a further 30 schools that have yet to be assessed. Further to discussions at the last Schools Forum in June 2009, we have attempted to schedule these assessments to try to avoid a bottleneck at the end of the financial year, when traditionally most schools

have submitted their evidence for assessment. To date we have confirmed submission dates in writing with 50 of the 57 schools due to be assessed in 2009-10 (this includes the 30 schools noted in the table above, plus 12 schools that have not submitted evidence previously and a further 7 schools that have recently been assessed and failed, and 8 Upper Schools due for reassessment). The remainder are in the process of being contacted at the start of the Autumn Term 2009 and scheduled as far as possible.

7. Of those schools with whom a submission date has been agreed, 17 have confirmed that they will not be in a position to be assessed before the end of March 2010. The other schools have agreed submission deadlines ranging from the Autumn Term half term break (end October 2009) to 31 March 2010.

Benchmarking against other Local Authorities

8. There is no recognised national forum at which local authorities discuss and compare their approach to FMSiS. However, the Assistant Director (Audit & Risk) and Audit Manager attended a Home Counties Chief Internal Auditor Group (HCCIAG) on 15 July which was dedicated to discussion of various aspects of FMSiS. Many of the 25 or so authorities that attended had provided the HCCIAG with the data from the CFO Assurance Statement at 31/3/09 including the number of schools meeting the Standard. The forum identified primarily that these authorities have adopted diverse approaches to completing the schedule of schools to be assessed, depending on:
 - the mechanisms of assurance required by the LA's Section 151 Officer
 - the number of schools under the LA's jurisdiction
 - the resources available
 - the existing schedule of financial audits of schools.
9. These variables mean that comparison of pass/ fail rates are very difficult. Some authorities reported a 'pass' rate of close to 100%, but in many cases this includes schools that are considered to have met the Standard without external assessment, and in some cases relies on self assessments combined with other assurance mechanisms. One authority reported a 'pass' rate of close to zero, and again this is likely to be due to the LA's approach rather than a wholesale failure on the part of their schools to meet the Standard.

Summary and Conclusions

- Substantial progress has been made against the current backlog since the previous update to the Schools Forum; 14 assessments have been finalised and a further 12 substantially completed.
- Training for schools has been arranged with regards to the FMSiS assessment criteria and the evidence required. This supplements previous enhancements to the guidance to schools on the CBC Schools Finance website.

- The majority of schools scheduled for assessment during 2009-10 have been notified in writing of their scheduled submission date following discussions with the Headteacher.
- A 'high level' benchmarking exercise has been completed, and the exercise has highlighted the need for Central Bedfordshire to evaluate its current approach to the assessment process in consultation with the Director of Corporate Resources and the Director of Children, Families and Learning within the framework of the factors listed above.

Appendices:

Appendix A - Schedule of Central Bedfordshire Council Schools and FMSiS Status