

Report from the Financial Support Services Unit (FSSU) 2020

Introduction:

Under Department of Education & Skills Circular 02/2018, the Financial Support Service Unit introduced services to school management and personnel involved in the finance function of Community & Comprehensive schools in January 2018.



The Circular defined the objectives of the Unit as set out below:

1. Provision of advice and support to schools on financial governance matters including compliance with the requirements of this circular.
2. Development of templates for use by schools in relation to financial matters including a standardised national template for annual school accounts.
3. Acting as a central repository for receipt of annual school accounts prepared by an external accountant/auditor registered with a recognised accountancy body in the State.
4. Carrying out such audits as may be required.
5. Preparation of an annual report for the Department.
6. Liaison with the Department in relation to financial matters pertaining to schools.
7. Submission of financial information to the Charities Regulatory Authority (CRA) which will also satisfy the financial reporting obligations placed on schools by the Charities Act 2009.
8. Provision of statistical information to the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in relation to its requirements for financial information in respect of the school system.

1. Provision of advice and support to schools on financial governance matters including compliance with the requirements of the circular.

One of the most important aspects of the work of the Unit is to ensure that any person working in or with a school has a contact person in the Unit to provide answers to queries as they arise.

The Team answers queries through email, telephone, directly on site or through remote access. www.FSSU.ie provides information and documentation on all aspects of school's finances and issues specific to each school sector are clearly identifiable.

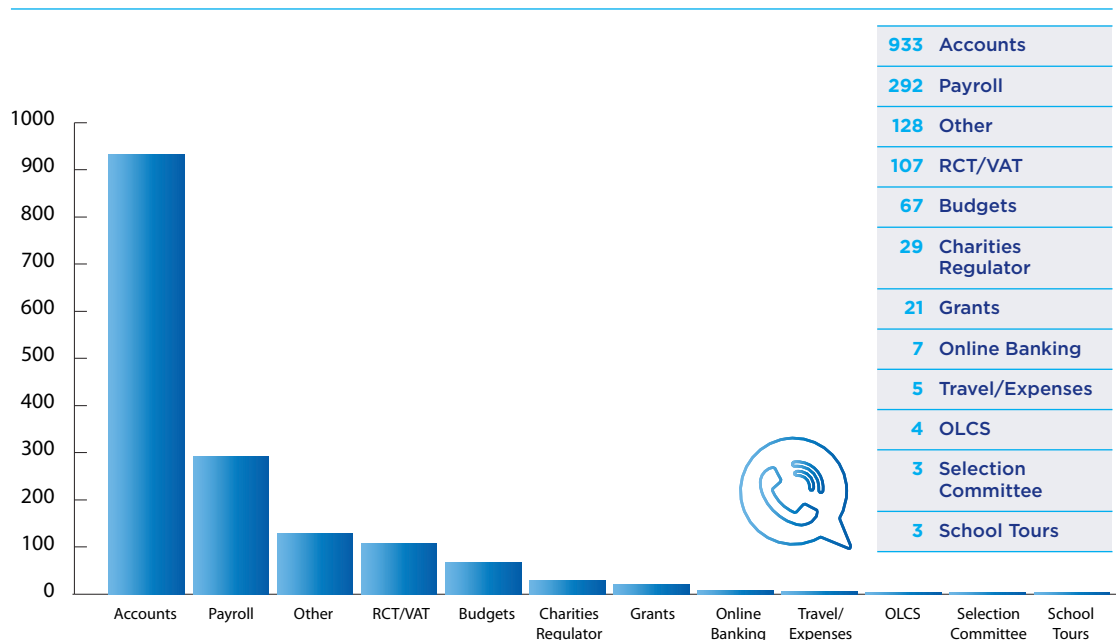
Below is a breakdown of the support the Unit has given to Community & Comprehensive schools over 2020:

Telephone Calls:

The FSSU received 1,599 telephone queries from Community and Comprehensive schools. The breakdown of calls received in 2020 is outlined opposite:

Queries	Number	Queries	Number
Payroll	292	Travel/Expenses	5
Accounts	933	Budgets	67
Selection Committee Payments	3	Grants	21
Other	128	OLCS	4
Charities Regulator	29	School Tours	3
RCT/VAT	107	Total	1,599
Online banking	7		

Phone Calls



Financial Guidelines:

Resulting from Circulars issued by the Department, common queries raised by Clerical Officers, and/or FSSU information needed by schools, the Unit issues Financial Guidelines to support school personnel to implement required changes or operate day to day financial functions. Below are the Financial Guidelines issued by the Unit relevant to Community & Comprehensive schools:

Guidelines issued from January 2020-December 2020

29 – 2019/2020	Rolled-up Holiday Pay for Non-Teaching Staff
30 – 2019/2020	National Minimum Wage Increase
31 – 2019/2020	Grants payable to Community & Comprehensive Schools School year 2020/2021
32 – 2019/2020	Public Service Pension Increases
33 – 2019/2020	Payments to Members of Selection Committees
35 – 2019/2020	COVID-19 Refund Scheme
36 – 2019/2020	Update to COVID-19 Payments
38 – 2019/2020	Supporting Remote Working
39 – 2019/2020	Update to Payments to Employees over the COVID period
40 – 2019/2020	Review of Contracts for Service during the COVID-19 period
41 – 2019/2020	Sports Complexes: Internal Controls and Annual Accounts

Guidelines issued from January 2020-December 2020 cont'd

42 – 2019/2020	Revision of Application of additional increments awarded in relation to New Entrants under the Public Service Stability Agreement 2018 – 2020
43 – 2019/2020	Update on VAT Compensation Scheme for Charities
44 – 2019/2020	Calculated Grades Aides 2020
45 – 2019/2020	Appointment of An External Accountant/Auditor
46 – 2019/2020	Working from Home Tax Credit and Allowance
47 – 2019/2020	Parents' Association and Finance
48 – 2019/2020	COVID-19 operational supports for the full return to school
51 – 2019/2020	Guidance on PPE, Consumables and Equipment & Update on Coding for recording COVID-19 Grants
52 – 2019/2020	COVID-19 Additional Supervision Arrangements for the 2020/21 School Year
53 – 2019/2020	COVID-19 Arrangements for certain employees in the Free Education Scheme, employed using grant funding
01 – 2020/2021	Important Dates for the School Year 2020/2021
02 – 2020/2021	Update from the Revenue Commissioners, COVID-19 Payments - New Employment Wage Support Scheme
03 – 2020/2021	Financial Year-End 31st August 2020 on Surf Accounts
05 – 2020/2021	Update to FSSU Chart of Accounts (Revised version August 2020)
06 – 2020/2021	Annual VAT Return of Trading Details (RTD)
08 – 2020/2021	Preparation and Submission of Annual School Accounts for the Year 2019/2020
09 – 2020/2021	Revised salary rates applicable from 1st October 2020
11 – 2020/2021	Entering the budget on Surf for the year ended 31 August 2021
12 – 2020/2021	Payments to Members of Selection Committees
13 – 2020/2021	Supervision and Substitution payments to schools during the school year 2020/2021 & hourly rates of pay for Supervision and Substitution duties
14 – 2020/2021	Registration with the Charities Regulator and updating Board of Management Members details
15 – 2020/2021	Government Budget Summary 2021

School Visits:

The FSSU have visited 13 Community & Comprehensive schools. Due to COVID, onsite visits could not take place from March 2020. There have been 600 online visits conducted in 2020.

A small number of schools were visited at the request of the Department and the remaining schools were visited at the request of school management or Clerical Officers. The FSSU is available to help with the implementation of recommendations identified.

Training:

Unit personnel held seven Surf Accounts training sessions nationwide, followed by eleven webinar training sessions.

A webinar on the preparation of the annual accounts and essential issues pertaining to Finance Subcommittees was delivered to Boards of Management.

Three budget workshops including financial updates was organised, due to COVID two were held as webinars.

The FSSU held two webinars for external accountants covering an introduction to the Financial Support Services Unit, online submission of accounts and financial accounting issues specific to the school sector. 720 people attended the webinars.

2. Development of templates for use by schools in relation to financial matters including a standardised national template for annual school accounts.

Unit personnel have used information gathered from school visits and other interactions to develop a standardised template for annual financial reporting. This will ensure that school management is in compliance with Section 18 of the Education Act:

18.—(1) Except in the case of a school established or maintained by a vocational education committee, a board shall keep all proper and usual accounts and records of all monies received by it or expenditure of such monies incurred by it and shall ensure that in each year all such accounts are properly audited or certified in accordance with best accounting practice. (2) Accounts kept in pursuance of this section shall be made available by the school concerned for inspection by the Minister and by parents of students in the school, in so far as those accounts relate to monies provided in accordance with section 12.

The Unit has also developed templates for use internally by schools for monitoring monthly income and expenditure versus budgeted figures. Full training on all templates is available. The computerised accounts package, Surf Accounts, enables all monthly and year end required reporting to be facilitated easily from the system. A standardised national template for the submission to the FSSU of annual school accounts, prepared by an external accountant/auditor registered with a prescribed accountancy body in the state, has been developed. The national template is the standardised method for accountants/auditors to prepare annual school accounts in accordance with the requirements of Section 18 of the Education Act, 1998. Full training has been provided by the Unit to all external accountants working with schools.

A standard template report for use when providing summary financial information to parents is also available as part of the standardised national template for annual school accounts.

3. Acting as a central repository for receipt of annual school accounts prepared by an external accountant/auditor registered with a recognised accountancy body in the State.

It is the responsibility of the Board of Management to ensure financial accounts are submitted to the FSSU by its external accountant/auditor. This satisfies the requirement under Section 18 of the Education Act 1998 for schools to make available their accounts for inspection by the Minister.

The date for submission of the annual accounts to the FSSU remains 28th February following the end of the financial year. The Unit has issued guidance to school management in relation to the appointment of an external accountant. The accounts submitted will give school management and the Department assurance as to all monies coming into and going out of the school. The accounts package will ensure that the accounts are prepared in the format required for submission to the FSSU.

Boards of Management of Community and Comprehensive schools will be required to submit accounts to the FSSU in respect of the 2019/20 school year by February 28th, 2021 and annually thereafter in the prescribed format and by the relevant deadline. All school personnel involved in the preparation of school finances will be fully trained and supported on an ongoing basis to ensure this compliance.

4. Carrying out such audits as may be required.

Where requested by the Department, the Unit has carried out specific audits in schools and reported on findings to the Department and the Board of Management.

5. Preparation of an annual report for the Department.

The Unit will submit a report annually to the Department outlining all activities across the Community & Comprehensive, primary and voluntary secondary sectors.

6. Liaison with the Department in relation to financial matters pertaining to schools.

Where issues relating to school finance arise, the Unit communicates with the Department. For example, the Unit liaises with the Department in relation to developments from the Revenue Commissioners and the Charities Regulator.

7. Submission of financial information to the Charities Regulatory Authority (CRA) which will also satisfy the financial reporting obligations placed on schools by the Charities Act 2009.

Use of the new accounts package will allow external accountants to submit the required financial data to the Unit in a format that will allow the Unit to in turn extract the relevant information legally required by the CRA.

8. Provision of statistical information to the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in relation to its requirements for financial information in respect of the school system.

Use of the new accounts package will allow external accountants to submit the required financial data to the Unit in a format that will allow the Unit to in turn extract the relevant information legally required by the CSO.

Developments for 2020/2021:

1. Continued support and training on Surf Accounts

All schools in the Community & Comprehensive sector are now using Surf Accounts.

The package was selected as it can provide the required internal and external reports that have been approved by the Department to ensure good financial governance and transparency for the Board of Management and the Department. Full training is consistently offered to all those dealing with school's accounts on an online basis to groups or on an individual basis. This is the minimum training that will be offered, training will always be available as required. Surf personnel and FSSU personnel will provide full support for the use of this package on an ongoing basis.

2. Budgeting for school finances

The FSSU has developed a template for development of school budgets. As part of the new reporting requirements, it is possible for the Board of Management to review the actual income and expenditure versus budgeted figures on a monthly basis. The template fulfils budgeting requirements of the Department. Training on the budget template for 2021/2022 will be available in March 2021 via webinar and will be open to all school personnel and management involved in school finances.

The level of engagement from Community & Comprehensive schools has increased substantially and Unit personnel are seeing the progress that is being made in financial governance. We continue to endeavour to provide a positive experience for everyone who looks for advice and support. We appreciate the continued support and engagement from the ACCS which has greatly helped in supporting school personnel through these compliance changes.

3. Integrated payroll package

The FSSU is currently working with Surf accounts in order to develop an integrated payroll package that will reduce the amount of time taken to process and post payroll entries.

**Louise McNamara,
Director, Financial Support Services Unit,
January 2021.**