



# EVALUATING LOCAL GROWTH PROJECTS

A 'how to' guide for local authorities to design and plan evaluations of UKSPF projects

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# 1 Summary

This guide is intended for local authorities that are interested in generating evidence-based learning about the processes, impacts and value for money of their local growth projects, particularly those delivered through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF). This guide aims to support those local authorities that are interested in planning their own evaluations of individual UKSPF projects.

The guide draws on learning from the design of the centrally managed [UK Shared Prosperity Fund intervention-level evaluation](#), tailored to the typical types of local growth projects seen across the country. The publication of this guide does **not** represent a change in the expectations of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) of local evaluation of UKSPF projects – which remains entirely optional and at the discretion of local authorities.

A six-step approach is offered to guide the reader through the process of planning and delivering an evaluation of a local growth project. Readers may wish to focus on the steps most relevant to them. The six steps are as follows:

- **Step 1: Define the project.** Clearly outline the project's goals, beneficiaries, scope, timing and stakeholders.
- **Step 2: Prepare a theory of change.** Articulate how the project is expected to work, the outcomes that are anticipated for different groups in the short and longer term, and what needs to be in place for those to be observed.
- **Step 3: Determine the evaluation questions.** Develop focused and prioritised questions to guide what is of interest to learn about and to generate evidence.
- **Step 4: Choose an appropriate evaluation method(s).** Assess and select the most suitable method, or combination of methods, to answer the evaluation questions.
- **Step 5: Identify appropriate data collection tools.** Decide what data is needed for the evaluation and how to collect it, prioritising making best use of existing data where available.
- **Step 6: Disseminate findings.** Plan how to share evaluation results to update stakeholders and inform future decisions.

A worked example is used to illustrate each of the above steps as applied to a real UKSPF project. **Annex A** contains two further worked examples in the same vein.

A checklist is provided in **Section 5** to help as a prompt for the various considerations and choices set out in this guide

## 1.1 How to use this guide

This guide is aimed particularly at **local authorities or delivery partners** that are beginning to plan the evaluation of one or more local growth projects within their UKSPF investment plan portfolio.

The guide can be read from end to end or readers may prefer to jump to the section most applicable to them. It contains the following sections:

- **Section 2** provides a general introduction to the evaluation of local growth projects, including a short description of the different types of evaluation and how common characteristics of local growth projects can influence the best choice of evaluation method.
- **Section 3** presents three notional UKSPF project examples which are used to illustrate each step in Section 4. There is one example for each of the three UKSPF priorities (Business Support; Communities and Place; and People and Skills). The Business Support example is used throughout the main document, with the other two examples provided in **Annex A**.
- **Section 4** outlines a six-step framework for evaluation design, from defining the project to disseminating findings. Each of the six steps is applied in the context of the Business Support project example from Section 3.

### **Additional resources:**

- **Annex A** includes two more worked examples covering steps 1-4 for the second and third examples. These can be used to help understand how the steps can be applied to other types of projects.

This guide is consistent with and draws on the best practice guidance of the HM Treasury Magenta Book.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-magenta-book>

## 2 Evaluation planning: key considerations

### Why evaluate?

Evaluation helps to generate evidence for local authorities and MHCLG to understand the extent to which projects are delivering their planned outcomes, for whom and under what conditions. Evaluating a project involves examining its goals and objectives, the processes through which it is implemented, the channels through which the project leads to changes in outcomes, the scale and nature of those outcomes, and impacts on the target population and broader community.

There are three main types of evaluation, each of which focuses on answering different types of questions about ‘what works’:

- **Process evaluation** aims to learn about the design, planning, implementation, management and monitoring of a project, and to understand what worked well and for whom.
- **Impact evaluation** focuses on understanding how the project has led to changes in key outcomes and the effect on different population groups.
- **Value-for-money (VfM) evaluation** explores the extent to which the project has made the best use of public resources by meeting strategic objectives and delivering local benefits.<sup>2</sup>

Evaluation can happen over multiple spatial scales, examining, for example, the impact of multiple projects in a single area or of a single programme in multiple areas. This guide focuses specifically on evaluation at the **intervention level** of specific projects in specific places: for example, a single project within a wider UKSPF investment plan.

### Evaluating local growth projects: what are the challenges?

The characteristics and operating contexts of local growth projects can vary significantly. These variations have implications for the choice of evaluation design. For example, they may affect the amount and types of data available, the skills and resources available to support the evaluation, the particular aspects of the project that local authorities want to learn about and the intended beneficiaries.

While each local growth project is different and sits within a unique local context, several common features have been identified that can determine which evaluation methods are most appropriate.<sup>3</sup> These features and their potential influences are described below, drawing on learnings from UKSPF projects analysed as part of the UKSPF intervention-level evaluation.

<sup>2</sup> A valuable reference for local authorities on some of the core requirements for a robust evaluation is HM Treasury’s Magenta Book (2020). This describes the types of evaluation (process, impact and VfM), the main evaluation approaches (theory-based and experimental) and the main stages of developing and undertaking an evaluation: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-magenta-book>

<sup>3</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65df3cf9cf7eb16adff57f51/UKSPF\\_project-level\\_evaluation\\_-\\_Feasibility\\_Report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65df3cf9cf7eb16adff57f51/UKSPF_project-level_evaluation_-_Feasibility_Report.pdf)

## 1. How early the evaluation is planned in relation to the project

The earlier that planning for an evaluation begins, the greater the range of evaluation options that are likely to be feasible.<sup>4</sup> For example, planning an evaluation alongside the initial design of a project provides an opportunity to identify at an early stage the data and information that it would be useful to collect and store. In practice, this may not be plausible or straightforward because of the pace at which the planning and design of the project often has to take place.

In the UKSPF context, some projects are continuations of existing initiatives that have been running for some time. In these cases, the evaluation may need to rely more heavily on existing secondary or administrative data sources that are collected independently of the evaluation, and the evaluation methods may be more limited than if it was feasible to collect new or targeted data.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The size of the project

As some projects focus on particular places, businesses or individuals that meet particular eligibility criteria, the number of potential participants (known as the 'sample') can, in some cases, be relatively small, perhaps between 50 and 100. Furthermore, it also may not be possible to collect data on all of the eligible participants/businesses in the sample, which could reduce the available volume of data even further.

Smaller projects can be robustly and proportionately evaluated, but the choice of feasible evaluation methods is likely to be limited to theory-based evaluation styles, as more quantitative evaluation methods generally require relatively large sample sizes to be able to reliably estimate the scale of impact of a project.

## 3. The nature and timing of delivery partners' contracts

Many local growth projects are delivered by local delivery partners rather than by the local authority directly. If the evaluation is designed after the delivery partners are commissioned, it can be challenging to gain the delivery partner's cooperation with the evaluation unless it is contractually mandated at the outset. Not having delivery partner buy-in for an evaluation can limit the ability to collect data on participant details, experiences and outcomes.

## 4. Whether and how projects involve vulnerable groups

In the context of the UKSPF, projects in the People and Skills and Business Support priorities are often aimed at addressing inequalities or supporting vulnerable groups. Designing evaluations of such projects may present ethical challenges and extra care is required to ensure that no inadvertent harm arises as a result of the evaluation activities. For example, this could include being mindful of the level of burden on participants for completing surveys or ensuring that safeguards are put in place in case

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<sup>4</sup> Evaluation options and methods are detailed in Section 4.4.

<sup>5</sup> Theory-based evaluations examine how and why a project had an impact by linking its outcomes to theories or ideas that explain those results.

the new project does not work out as intended. Abiding by ethical guidelines is paramount in all cases, as is ensuring that appropriate data protection requirements are adhered to.<sup>6,7</sup>

These observations and learning points from the UKSPF context are relevant to many local growth projects funded through other programmes. They have been used to inform the step-by-step approach in this guide.

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<sup>6</sup> UCL's 'Your responsibilities throughout the research lifecycle' provides practical guidance on how researchers can protect the rights and welfare of those involved in evaluation throughout the lifecycle of the research (UCL 2023): <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/research/integrity/ucl-code-conduct-research/your-responsibilities/your-responsibilities-throughout-research-lifecycle>

<sup>7</sup> The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has published ethics guidance to aid the consideration of ethics issues throughout the duration of a project: <https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics-guidance/>

### 3 Local growth projects: illustrative examples

To illustrate the evaluation design steps covered in **Section 4**, this guide refers to three illustrative examples which are fictional but similar to typical UKSPF projects. An example is included for each of the three UKSPF priorities (Business Support (example 1), Communities and Place (example 2), and People and Skills (example 3)).<sup>8</sup>

**The first example (Business Support) will be referred to throughout each step in Section 4, with the other two examples contained in Annex A.**

#### Illustrative example 1: grants to small and medium-sized enterprise business owners

*This illustrative example project involves the local authority providing grants to eligible small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to support access to personalised business support services. Grant recipients can use their funds to identify and purchase the support that best meets their business needs.*

*To access the support, SMEs must complete a grant application in which businesses can select support from a broad menu of services and providers, including support for business financials, social media presence or people management. This application is sent to the local authority's grant office for review and the funds are released if the business meets the eligibility requirements. SMEs must complete and return monitoring information, which is collected and processed by the grant office to ensure that the funding is used as described in the grant application.*

*The project aims to promote the growth and productivity of local SMEs. The local authority would like to design an evaluation to understand whether the project has been delivered as intended, whether it has impacted business outcomes (e.g., turnover and productivity) and whether the funding provided to businesses has provided value for money.*

#### Illustrative example 2: refurbishment of a town centre library

*This illustrative example involves the local authority providing funding to refurbish an existing library in the centre of a small, coastal town (population of approximately 8,000). This project intends to transform the existing library into a vibrant community hub with a computer laboratory equipped for distance learning, a local history museum and a small café.*

*The project aims to provide the space for local people and visitors of all ages to meet and learn new digital skills. The local authority is interested in planning an evaluation to understand whether the library has impacted the digital skills, social connectivity and wellbeing of local residents and the satisfaction of residents and visitors to the area.*

<sup>8</sup> The examples were developed for the purposes of this guide based on the knowledge of projects generated while preparing the UKSPF project-level evaluation feasibility study. They are not actual projects.



### Illustrative example 3: helping sixth form and college leavers into employment with CV and interview training

*In this illustrative example, a local authority in an area with high levels of youth unemployment is providing funding to develop a programme to help equip sixth form and college leavers with the necessary interview skills and support to transition smoothly into the workforce. By providing specialised mentoring with comprehensive CV and interview training, the project aims to support young adults (aged 18-25) towards education or employment in the area.*

*The local authority is still in the process of designing this project and is interested in designing an evaluation to understand whether the programme is helping young people to apply for work. It also wants to understand the medium-to-long-term impacts of the programme, such as the movement of young people into apprenticeships or further education.*

The basic parameters of the three examples are as follows:

**Table 1** Characteristics of the examples

Example	Current status	Delivery partner	Eligibility	Expected # beneficiaries	£ (total)
Example 1	Ongoing	No	SMEs based in the local authority area	150 businesses	£1.2m
Example 2	Completed	Yes	All residents and visitors	750 visitors per year	£1.8m
Example 3	Not started	TBC	Students in their final year of school	2,500 students	£3.6m

Source: Frontier Economics

## 4 Evaluation design: the six key steps

This guide sets out a six-step framework for designing and implementing an evaluation. These six steps are then applied with reference to illustrative example 1 from **Section 3**. (provision of grants to SME business owners). The six-step approach is set out in Figure 1:

**Figure 1** Steps for designing an evaluation



Source: Frontier Economics

**Step 1: Define the project.** An important place to start is with a clear description of the project. This involves clearly outlining the goals and objectives of the project, who the intended beneficiaries are, the geographical location it will affect, the timing of delivery and operation, and who is involved in delivery.

**Step 2: Prepare a theory of change.** A theory of change provides a simplified explanation of how the project is expected to work. It shows how the elements that go into a project (inputs and activities) lead to outputs (tangible deliverables) and eventually outcomes (the changes or impacts that are anticipated).

**Step 3: Determine the evaluation questions.** Evaluation questions set the focus for what the evaluation will generate evidence on. These can then underpin what information or data needs to be collected to address them. They should be clearly written, focused and prioritised.

**Step 4: Choose an appropriate evaluation method(s).** There are several evaluation methods to choose from, each with its pros and cons, and sometimes several are brought together to fully address evaluation questions. Careful consideration is required to select the most appropriate method that will help to answer the evaluation questions defined in Step 3.

**Step 5: Identify appropriate data collection tools.** Determine what data is needed to answer the evaluation questions and the most appropriate method for collecting that data. This must first make best use of what is already available, before considering how best to address important gaps by collecting new data.

**Step 6: Disseminate findings.** Plan the dissemination of findings so that the results can inform future decisions and inform the design of future similar projects.

## 4.1 Define the project

The first step of any evaluation is to clearly define the project of interest. This should include consideration of:

- **The rationale:** the background to the project, what problem it is hoping to address, the key outcomes of interest, what the intended results are, and the context in which it is being delivered (such as its local economic geography);
- **The wider context in which the project will be delivered:** the existing policy setting, the groups the project will serve and the geographical areas it will deliver in, as well as the existing evidence base around this type of project;
- **The scale of the project:** the budget and resources allocated and the stage of implementation.
- **Details of the participants/users/beneficiaries:** who is eligible for the project, how they are recruited, what activities the project includes and how these activities are monitored;
- **Identification of stakeholders:** who they are, what they are interested in learning, how they will use the findings and their role in delivering the project;
- **The stability of the project:** whether and how the project is expected to change over the evaluation period in terms of participation, outcomes or delivery model; and
- **How external factors may influence the project:** geographic, social, political, economic and institutional factors.

## Define the project

### Illustrative example 1: provision of grants to SME business owners

**Wider context:** This local authority is situated in Wales. The project is a continuation of a business support service that has been available in the area for some time, funded through other sources that are no longer available. The support is available to any SME business owner based in Wales. As the service has evolved, this particular project has introduced more support options for business owners to access with their grants.

**Rationale:** The programme is designed to help boost the growth of local businesses by providing better-targeted support that is accessible and tailored to local businesses in the region. The local authority would like to evaluate how the funding is being delivered, what the funding is typically being used for, whether the fund is having an impact on business growth and the relative value for money of the different types of business support that grant recipients can access.

**Scale:** The project has £1.2m of funding from the local authority and has no additional funding. The project began in October 2023 and is expected to run until March 2025. The evaluation will be taking place between October 2024 and December 2026, and the local authority is expecting to appoint an evaluation partner.

**User pathway:** To access the support, SMEs in the local authority area must complete a grant application in which businesses can select support from a broad menu of services and providers, including support for business financials, social media presence and people management. This application is sent to the local authority's grant office for review and the funds are released if the business meets the eligibility requirements. SMEs must complete and return monitoring information, which is collected and processed by the grant office to ensure that the funding is used as described in the grant application.

**Relevant stakeholders:** Among others, the two stakeholder groups to consider are 1) the local authority policymakers, who will want to know whether the expected impacts have been realised in order to help guide future policies and resource allocation, and 2) the potential users, who will be interested to learn about the impacts of the programme on their business and others in the community and how to access the funding.

**Stability of the project:** The project is not expected to change over the course of the evaluation.

## 4.2 Prepare a theory of change

A theory of change is a clear narrative description that sets out what the project is, how it is going to bring about change, for whom and what the end result should look like (the project impact). To develop a theory of change, local authorities should consider what goes into the project (e.g., funding and resources) and the channels through which these inputs lead to the expected outputs and outcomes. An understanding of the evidence on similar projects can be used to inform the theory of change. Developing a theory of change involves consideration of five aspects of the project:

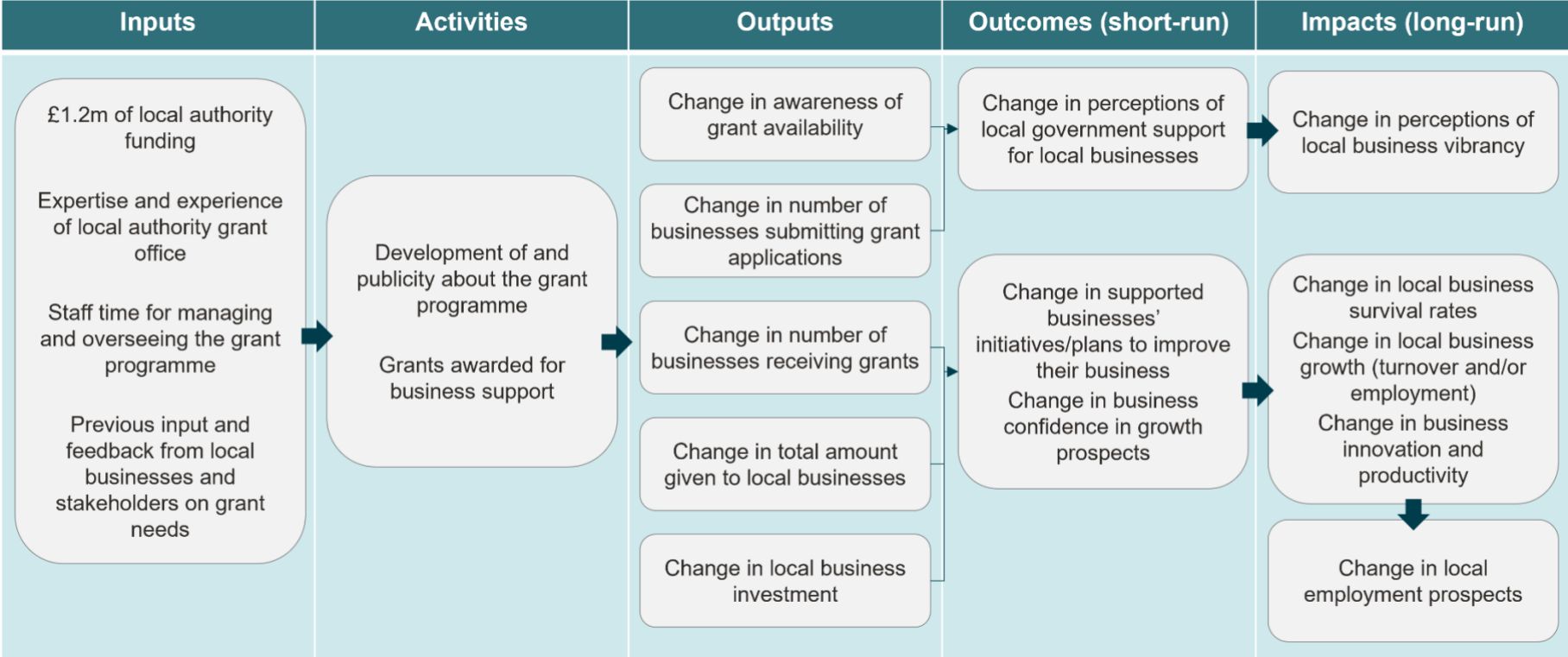
- Inputs: resources that go into the policy (e.g., time and money);
- Activities: those that are carried out using the inputs;
- Outputs: tangible deliverables that result directly from the activities;
- Outcomes: things that happen as a result of the outputs (usually short-/intermediate-run); and
- Impacts: Ultimate changes that happen as a result of the outcomes (usually long-run).

In addition, a theory of change should set out the assumptions that have been made, how contextual factors may affect these assumptions and any unintended consequences (e.g., displacement or substitution).<sup>9</sup> The theory of change is usually accompanied by a visual representation of the inputs and activities to desired outcomes. A theory of change for this illustrative example project is shown in Figure 2 on the next page.

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<sup>9</sup> Displacement occurs where a policy or programme inadvertently draws resources from existing activities (e.g., a new technology training centre may draw students from the other nearby technology training offerings). Substitution occurs when a policy or programme shifts behaviour from one activity to another (e.g., a new bicycle scheme may encourage people to use bicycles instead of the bus or cars).

**Figure 2 Theory of change diagram (illustrative example 1: provision of grants to SME business owners)**



Source: Frontier Economics

### 4.3 Determine the evaluation questions

To maximise learning from an evaluation, it is important for the evaluator to establish at an early stage the specific aspects of the project they want to learn about and generate evidence on. This can be articulated in evaluation questions that are clear, focused on the key areas of interest and prioritised. Example evaluation questions for illustrative example 1 (provision of grants to SME business owners) are provided below.

Evaluation questions should be proportionate and feasible – they should take account of the budget and resources allocated to the evaluation, and of how quickly evidence needs to be generated. It is also helpful to consider whether there are any activities or longer-term impacts that may fall outside the timeline available for the evaluation or that are not possible to explore. This could occur if data cannot be collected on a particular group of participants due to regulations or ethics, or where the chosen outcomes may take a long time to be observable.

The prioritised list of evaluation questions guides the type of evaluation approach to be considered.

**Process evaluation** questions consider:

- To what extent has the project been delivered as intended?
- To what extent has it reached the intended beneficiaries?
- What has worked well, and less well, for whom and why?
- What could be improved in terms of the design, set-up, delivery and monitoring of the project?
- To what extent have external factors impacted the delivery of the project and how?

**Impact evaluation** questions consider:

- What scale of impact has the project had on the anticipated outcomes?
- How do the outcomes of Project A compare to Project B?
- To what extent has the project resulted in better/worse outcomes for a particular group?

**Value for money** questions consider:

- Do the observed benefits of the project justify its costs?
- Is the project designed in the most efficient way to generate the observed benefits?

## Evaluation questions

### Illustrative example 1: provision of grants to SME business owners

The local authority is interested in generating evidence about the design and delivery of the project as well as its outcomes.

Questions about the **process** might include:

- To what extent has the grant programme received, processed and delivered grant applications?
- How have the grants been delivered? What has worked well, and less well, for whom and why?
- To what extent have businesses used their grants as described in the application?
- How have grants been used? What has worked well, and less well, for whom and why?
- How has this process been monitored? What has worked well, and less well, for whom and why?

Questions about the **impact** might include:

- To what extent has the grant programme led to changes in businesses' plans?
- To what extent has the grant programme led to a change in business survival rates?
- To what extent has the grant programme led to a change in business growth/innovation/productivity?

Questions about the **value for money** might include:

- To what extent has the programme met its strategic objective of boosting the growth of local businesses?
- To what extent are the benefits of the grants programme likely to outweigh the costs?

Some questions are likely to be of lower priority or outside the scope of the evaluation due to data requirements:

- To what extent has the grant programme led to changes in local employment prospects?
- To what extent has the grant programme led to changes in perceptions of local authority support and perceptions of local business vibrancy?



## 4.4 Choose the evaluation methods

The evaluation questions chosen in step 3 influence the type of evaluation methods needed, with different methods required to address process, impact and VfM questions respectively.

### Process evaluation

Process evaluation aims and objectives typically focus on assessing three distinct themes:

- **Set-up and delivery:** participant engagement, recruitment and application, and the extent to which the project's delivery model was the most effective choice for achieving its desired outcomes;
- **Monitoring:** effectiveness of oversight and reporting procedures, participants' experiences of the project and the extent to which real-world delivery aligned with what was planned in terms of spend and activities; and
- **Management:** robustness of local project management and due diligence, overall underspend/overspend and why this happened.

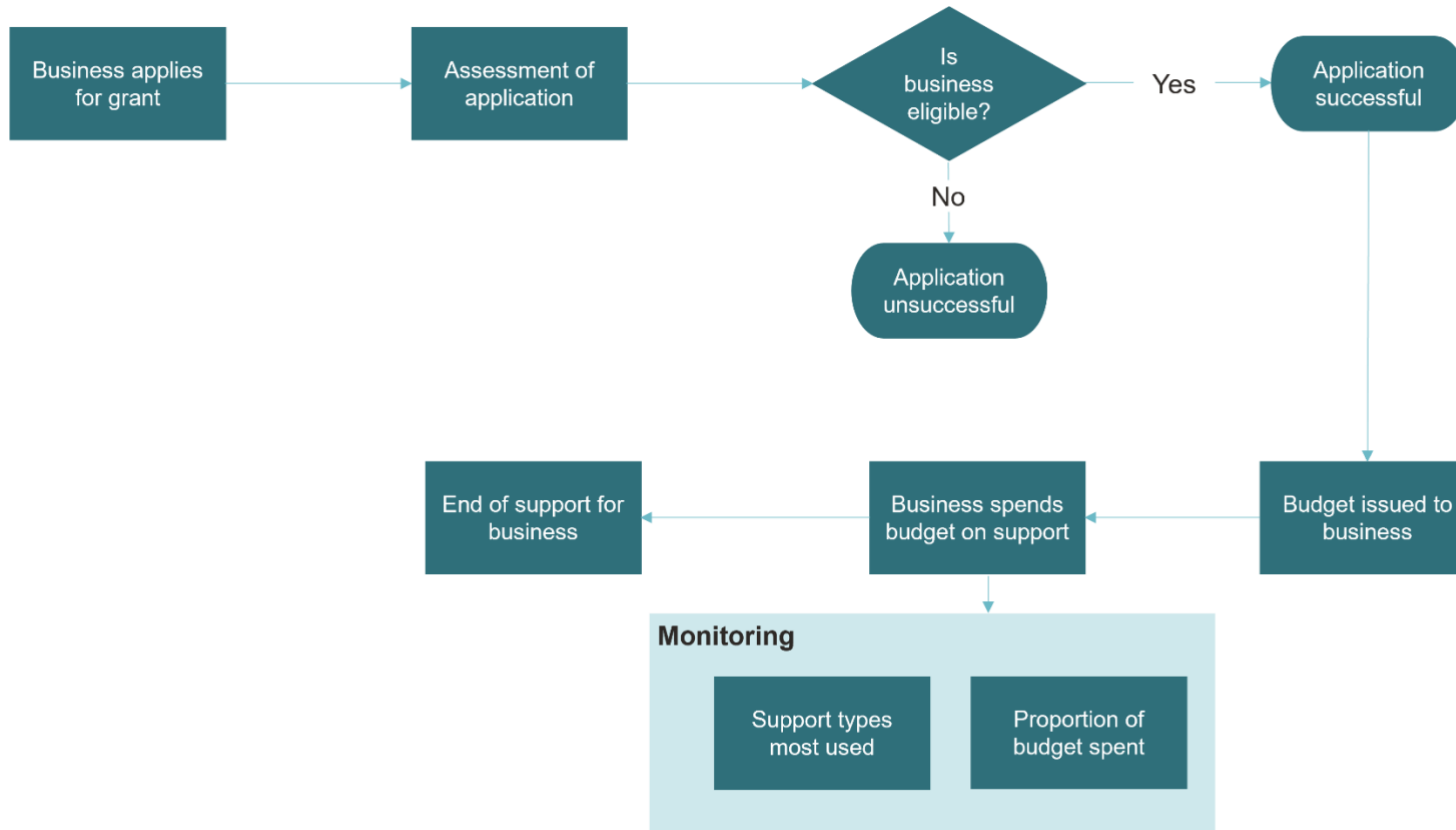
Evaluation frameworks for each theme applied to illustrative example 1 can be found in **Tables 2-4 below**.

### Process maps

Process maps summarise the key steps needed to deliver the project. Process mapping helps to identify which 'links in the chain' the process evaluation should interrogate further and serves as a point of comparison between how the project should have been delivered and how it was delivered when applying the process evaluation frameworks set out in **Tables 2-4**.

A process map showing a linear process where all eligible applicants receive the business grant has been developed for illustrative example 1 in Figure 3 below. The spending of this grant is then monitored until all of the budget is spent or the support programme comes to an end.

Figure 3 Process map (illustrative example 1: provision of grants to SME business owners)



Source: BMG Research

**Table 2** Example process evaluation framework: set-up and delivery

<b>Evaluation question</b>	<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Data sources</b>
How was the suite of options available to businesses to spend their budget on developed? Was this process effective? Was it possible to provide all the options needed?	Evidence that the local authority followed a systematic process to develop the suite of options. Comparison of early plans with the final options offered to businesses.	In-depth interviews with the local authority team responsible for planning and delivery. Analysis of early plans.
How effective have communication activities for the project been?	Evidence that businesses were aware of the support programme and the eligibility criteria. Evidence of the number of applicable businesses reached by communications.	In-depth interviews with the local authority team responsible for communications. Survey of supported and unsupported businesses.
To what extent has the project reached the number and type of businesses intended?	Evidence that the number and types of businesses receiving the grant are in line with programme plans. Evidence that sufficient activity has taken place to reach eligible businesses.	Analysis of internal data on business types offered support and not offered support. In-depth interviews with the local authority team responsible for the delivery. Survey of supported and unsupported businesses.
How effective has the application process been?	Evidence that the application process is seen to be easy to understand and easy to access. Number of reported issues with the application process.	Survey of supported and unsupported businesses. In-depth interviews with the local authority team responsible for delivery.
How effective has the information provided to applicants been?	Evidence of an understanding of the project by applicants.	Survey of supported and unsupported businesses In-depth interviews with the local authority team responsible for the delivery.
How well has the process of evaluating applications and the eligibility of businesses gone?	Evidence that the process has been smooth, with no major disruptions or need to be repeated. Comparison of expectations with reality.	In-depth interviews with the local authority team responsible for the delivery.

Source: *BMG Research*

**Table 3** Example process evaluation framework: monitoring

<b>Evaluation question</b>	<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Data sources</b>
What data related to monitoring is being collected and how effective is this in providing the information needed?	Evidence that sufficient data is being collected and allows for any course correction needed.	Analysis of monitoring data. In-depth interviews with the local authority team responsible for monitoring and delivery.
To what extent are the personalised budgets being spent fully by businesses? What are the reasons for any underspend?	Evidence that budgets are being spent as expected and the proportion of budgets expected is being spent.	Analysis of monitoring data. In-depth interviews with the local authority team. Survey of supported businesses.
To what extent are budgets being spent as expected by businesses?	Evidence that budgets are being spent on applicable support and are in line with expectations.	Analysis of monitoring data. In-depth interviews with the local authority team.
Are businesses raising queries or having issues? How are these handled by the local authority?	Evidence that any queries or issues are quickly and satisfactorily resolved.	Analysis of internal data on queries. In-depth interviews with the local authority team. Survey of supported businesses.

Source: BMG Research

**Table 4** Example process evaluation framework: management

<b>Evaluation question</b>	<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Data sources</b>
Is the programme on budget? If not, what are the reasons for any underspend or overspend?	Evidence that the programme is on budget.	Analysis of financial budgets and current spend. In-depth interviews with the local authority team.
To what extent is due diligence taking place? Who is responsible for this due diligence and what have been the outcomes?	Evidence of systematic processes to make decisions and documentation of these processes. Evidence that checks have been carried out on businesses before the support has been offered.	In-depth interviews with the local authority team.
To what extent is the programme building on learnings from previous programmes and projects?	Evidence that learnings from previous projects have been carried forward and acted upon.	In-depth interviews with the local authority team.

Evaluation question	Indicators	Data sources
How effective is the programme management?	Evidence that processes are in place to manage the programme and that these processes are working well.	In-depth interviews with the local authority team. Survey of supported businesses.

Source: BMG Research

## Impact evaluation

Impact evaluations can be grouped into three types:

- **Theory-based evaluation:** examines how and why a project had an impact by linking its outcomes to theories or ideas that explain those results.
- **Experimental evaluation:** involves randomly allocating individuals or units into two groups – a ‘treatment’ group that receives the project and a ‘comparison’ group that does not. The outcomes of these two groups are then compared and any differences are attributable to the project.
- **Quasi-experimental evaluation:** also compares the outcomes of a treatment and control group, but unlike for an experimental evaluation, these groups are **not** randomly selected.

In general, experimental methods (such as randomised controlled trials) produce the most robust estimations of a project’s impact but have the most stringent requirements in terms of data availability, sample sizes and the construction of the control and treatment groups. Conversely, theory-based evaluations are more flexible and can be applied in more complex contexts but are less effective at concretely quantifying the impact of a project.

When deciding on the most appropriate method, the evaluator should consider other important factors in addition to the evaluation questions. These include:

- The context of the project;
- The type and quality of data collected;
- The ability to randomise participants to either treatment or control;
- The expected size of the effect (if the expected effect size is small, this is harder to identify using experimental methods);
- Data availability; and
- Whether a comparison group (a ‘counterfactual’) can be identified to estimate what would have happened if the project had not gone ahead.

**Table 5** describes a variety of experimental, quasi-experimental and theory-based evaluation methods and the kinds of contexts in which they can be useful. More details on these methods and further alternative approaches can be found in the [Magenta Book Annex A](#).

**Table 5** Choosing the appropriate impact evaluation method

Common examples	Definition	Type of questions answered	When to consider	Data requirements
<b>Theory-based methods</b>				
Realist evaluation	Aims to find out <i>what works, for whom, and under what circumstances</i> by developing and testing theories about how the project led to outcomes given the specific context.			
Contribution analysis	Seeks to understand whether it is reasonable to believe the project has contributed to observed outcomes, based on the evidence and other factors that may have contributed.	<u>Whether</u> the project led to a change in the anticipated outcome, <u>for whom</u> and under <u>what circumstances</u> .	When it is not possible to compare project recipients with non-recipients e.g., due to data limitations.  When outcomes are long-term or unobservable in the data.	Can use a variety of data sources ranging from interviews, surveys and secondary data to administrative data.
Qualitative comparative analysis	Used to compare evidence from multiple case studies to identify common characteristics associated with observed outcomes.			

Common examples	Definition	Type of questions answered	When to consider	Data requirements
<b>Experimental methods</b>				
Randomised controlled trials (RCTs)	Use the random assignment of individuals/recipients to a group that receives the project or to a group that does not. The outcomes of these groups are then compared to determine the impact of the project.	To quantify <u>the size of impact</u> a project had on an anticipated outcome.	When participants can be assigned randomly to receive the project (or not). Requires adherence to strict RCT protocols to ensure robustness.	Requires robust quantitative data e.g., from surveys or administrative data.
<b>Quasi-experimental methods</b>				
Difference-in-differences (DiD)	Uses data collected over time to compare the trend of a group that received the project to a similar group that did not receive the project.	To quantify <u>the size of impact</u> a project had on an anticipated outcome.	When there is a group that received the project and a similar (comparison) group that did not.	Requires robust quantitative data e.g., from surveys or administrative data.
Regression discontinuity design (RDD)	Requires access to the project to be based on a clear cut-off and compares those just above this cut-off to those just below.			

Source: *Frontier Economics*

## Choice of impact evaluation method

### Illustrative example 1: provision of grants to SME business owners

Illustrative example 1 would be suitable for a **quasi-experimental evaluation** because:

- Although the programme has already begun, there are good secondary data sources that already exist which measure outcomes of interest from before the project started (such as business turnover and productivity); and
- The evaluation is expected to run for two years after the end of the funding, which will allow for the capture and evaluation of data that has long delays on its reporting.

To calculate the impact, the evaluators could use a DiD approach, which is a type of quasi-experimental design. To run this evaluation, they would need:

- A treatment group: businesses that received a business grant;
- A comparison group: a similar group of businesses to be identifiable in an existing data set that did not receive a business grant; and
- Outcome data for both groups for a period prior to the grant starting (e.g., for 2021-2022) and for the period after completion (2025-2026).

The evaluators could use additional statistical methods to improve the comparability of the treatment and comparison group, known as 'matching' or 'synthetic control'.<sup>10</sup>

## Value-for-money evaluation

Value-for-money (VfM) evaluation, as described in the Green Book Guidance on Value for Money (HMT, 2022),<sup>11</sup> is a way of assessing and comparing the best use of public resources to deliver policy objectives. It can be used by local authorities as a way to assess whether their investment was used effectively or to compare the VfM of two different projects. For a project to have good VfM, it needs to have achieved two aims: first, it must have achieved the strategic goals it was intended to achieve locally and, second, it must provide social benefits that exceed the costs required to fund it.

There are several ways to evaluate whether a project meets the two criteria. An overview of these methods is provided in **Table 6** below.

<sup>10</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e96cab9d3bf7f412b2264b1/HMT\\_Magenta\\_Book.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e96cab9d3bf7f412b2264b1/HMT_Magenta_Book.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62443d2c8fa8f5277b365ad7/Green\\_Book\\_supplementary\\_guidance\\_-\\_Value\\_for\\_Money.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62443d2c8fa8f5277b365ad7/Green_Book_supplementary_guidance_-_Value_for_Money.pdf) [Accessed 18/03/2024]



**Table 6** Common VfM analysis methods

<b>Name</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>What it assesses</b>
Cost-benefit analysis (CBA)	Compares the total costs of a project with the total benefits it generates, assigning monetary values to both costs and benefits where possible and qualitatively assessing them (based on evidence) where not.	Builds a list of the benefits (and costs) of a project, which can be used to determine whether the strategic goals were achieved. It also helps to determine whether benefits exceed costs.
Break-even analysis	Given the cost of the project, it examines the minimum impact needed to have occurred as a result of the project for the monetised benefits to outweigh the cost.  Requires benefits to be monetised but does not require identification of effect sizes.	Helps to understand the magnitude of benefits required to cover costs.
Cost-effectiveness analysis	Compares the costs of achieving a specific outcome or benefit across different projects or approaches.  Does not require the monetisation of impacts.	Provides evidence on the costs required to achieve a particular outcome.

Source: *Frontier Economics*

Methods such as CBA require the identification of effect sizes (from the impact evaluation) and the conversion of these into monetary values. For this analysis, standard and credible measures for assigning monetary values to the costs and benefits of a project should be used.<sup>12,13</sup> These monetary values are then compared to the costs of the project to see if it provides good value. An example VfM evaluation for illustrative example 1 is shown below.

<sup>12</sup> If a benefit of illustrative example 1 was 'improved efficiency', measured as employee time saved, this benefit could be monetised by multiplying the number of hours saved by the employee's hourly salary.

<sup>13</sup> Additional guidance on the valuation of costs and benefits is available in the HM Treasury Green Book (2022). [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/623d99f5e90e075f14254676/Green\\_Book\\_2022.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/623d99f5e90e075f14254676/Green_Book_2022.pdf)

**VfM evaluation****Illustrative example 1: provision of grants to SME business owners**

The local authority is interested in understanding whether the grants have provided value for money. The evaluator needs to determine whether the funding has achieved its strategic goals and whether the benefits have exceeded the total cost of the business support. This can be done in four steps:

1. Collect a list of the outputs and outcomes achieved as a result of the business support funding – in the case of the UKSPF this will already be happening to support wider monitoring activities;
2. Compare this list to the expected contributions to the firm's strategic objectives, as set out in the grant application. If there is sufficient evidence that the goals have been achieved, then the project has achieved its strategic goals;
3. Convert the identified benefits (positive outcomes) into monetary values (e.g., using the impact sizes found in the impact evaluation); and
4. Compare the sum of the benefits with the total cost of the business support (total grant plus any co-funding).

If the project achieves its strategic goals and displays positive net benefits (total benefits minus total costs) in the year following the project, it is considered to have delivered value for money.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> HMT's Green Book (2022) suggests that appraisal periods should cover the period during which significant costs and benefits occur. Future costs and benefits require discounting to give a net present value.  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-green-book-appraisal-and-evaluation-in-central-government/the-green-book-2020>

## 4.5 Identify appropriate data collection tools

Where feasible, evaluators should prioritise the use of existing administrative or monitoring data (such as UKSPF six-monthly reporting) or other readily available data over collecting bespoke data, as it is typically more cost effective and often more comprehensive in terms of coverage. However, additional new data collection may be necessary to examine specific questions or aspects of the project not captured by routine data collection efforts.

Both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods have their roles in an evaluation, each suited to different aspects of understanding a project's impact. The evaluation's objectives should guide the choice of data collection method, the specific questions it seeks to answer and the practical considerations of implementing the method within the constraints of the evaluation's resources and timeline.<sup>15</sup>

### Principles of data collection

Local authorities and researchers have a responsibility to ensure that the data collection methods and processes they follow are accurate, reliable, proportionate and ethical.<sup>16</sup> Adhering to some basic principles will help to ensure that data quality is preserved. Data collection methods should:

1. **Accurately measure the intended outcome(s) of interest.** This requires the careful development of survey questions and interview guides to ensure consistent and valid results;
2. **Be transparent about the data they are collecting and who they are collecting from,** to build confidence in the reliability of results. This includes informing participants about how their data will be collected, stored and processed;
3. **Be proportionate to the scope, objectives and complexities of the evaluation** and not place undue burden on stakeholders. This means focusing on collecting data that is essential for addressing the evaluation questions to minimise the burden on participants; and
4. **Ensure that they consider the relevant ethical requirements** such as informed consent for data collection and maintaining anonymity and confidentiality. This includes completing the necessary ethical assessments and data protection impact assessments along with other aspects of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) compliance such as privacy notices.

<sup>15</sup> For further details and examples, see the Handbook of Data Collection Tools (Reisman et al., 2007).  
<https://www.orsimpact.com/directory/a-handbook-of-data-collection-tools.htm>

<sup>16</sup> HMT's Magenta Book sets out criteria where larger-scale evaluations may be proportionate, namely: high profile policies; high levels of uncertainty/risk (including possible negative consequences); high cost (if evaluating a pilot, the full cost of rolling out the policy should be considered); and high learning potential (low priority projects on other criteria can have a high potential for filling strategically important evidence gap) (HMT, 2020, p.16).

**Table 7** suggests some potential data sources and their advantages and disadvantages:

**Table 7**      **Types of data sources**

<b>Data type</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages</b>
Administrative and monitoring data	Data collected for the project's operation or other organisational purposes.	Bespoke to the project. Usually good coverage.	May not align with evaluation questions.
Existing large-scale survey data	Data collected over a long term and of large scale. Examples include the Labour Force Survey or Annual Business Survey.	Insights across several years. Wide variety of options.	Access can be restricted. May have low coverage for local projects. Often includes reporting lags.
New data specifically collected (primary data collection)	Bespoke data collection such as surveys or interviews.	Tailored to the evaluation questions. Can fill gaps in other data sources.	Significant resource requirements. Must follow strict ethical and data protection standards.
Commercial or novel datasets (e.g., footfall data, mobile data, social media data, etc.)	A rich source of real-time information on user behaviours and responses.	Real-time and unique insights. Can provide detailed outputs. Large sample sizes.	Complex to analyse. May not be representative. Can be costly to access.

Source: *Frontier Economics*

**Choice of data sources****Illustrative example 1: provision of grants to SME business owners**

This table shows the different types of data that would be used for the Business Grants example across the process, impact and value for money evaluations.

<b>Evaluation</b>	<b>Process</b>	<b>Impact</b>	<b>Value for money</b>
Application and monitoring data	✓ Business type Business turnover No. of employees Grant use Grant value	✓ Business type Business turnover No. of employees Grant use Grant value	✓ Business type Business turnover No. of employees Grant use Grant value Firm objectives
Secondary data from external sources	✗	✓ Data available from the IDBR <sup>17</sup> e.g.: Business turnover Business productivity No. of employees	✓ Data available from the IDBR e.g.: Business turnover Business productivity No. of employees
Quantitative primary data collection (surveys)	✓ Survey of applicants, including successful and unsuccessful	✗	✗
Qualitative primary data collection (in-depth interviews)	✓ In-depth interviews with local authority staff responsible for design, delivery and monitoring	✗	✗

<sup>17</sup> Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR) data includes data on UK businesses on a range of business outcomes, including business size, turnover, number of employees and industry classification.

## 4.6 Disseminate findings

The value of an evaluation can only be fully realised if the results and findings are clear and transparent, relevant and useable for future local policy design and decision-making.

The box below shows an example dissemination plan for the Business Grants example. This local authority has identified three key stakeholders – local authority policymakers, local business support delivery partners and the general public. (In some cases there may be more groups to consider – for example, academics, third-sector organisations or local political stakeholders).

### Types of evaluation findings

While the final evaluation report holds significant value on its own, it is likely to be too technical or too extensive for all stakeholders. The best dissemination plans consider a variety of evaluation findings, from executive summaries, which quickly share the most important findings, to seminars, which allow the inclusion of additional details on the project and the evaluation and analysis plans.

<b>Dissemination plan</b>			
<b>Illustrative example 1: provision of grants to SME business owners</b>			
<b>Who to reach</b>	<b>With what information</b>	<b>When</b>	<b>For what purpose</b>
Local authority policymakers	Summaries highlighting key outcomes, the impact on local development and policy recommendations.	Updates and early findings to be provided at strategic milestones throughout the project. Plus a final summary, shared before the final report.	To support evidence-based policy-making and efficient allocation of resources.
Local business support delivery partner	Detailed findings on the programme's strengths and weaknesses and recommendations.	Report to be shared before publishing the final draft to gather insights.	To refine the programme and inform future design.
General public and business groups	Accessible summaries of the overall outcome and contributions of the project.	After the publication of the final report.	To share the key findings, increase engagement with local authority initiatives and promote transparency in the use of funds.

Types of evaluation findings could include:

- Interim and final evaluation reports;
- One-page summaries;
- Presentations at conferences and seminars;
- Webinars;
- Workshops with frontline teams;
- News articles or blog posts;
- Infographics;
- Social media posts; and
- Academic publications.

### Openness and transparency

Although the primary users of evaluation findings may not always require in-depth methodological details, providing such information through technical annexes, detailed data tables and peer review feedback is crucial for ensuring transparency. It caters to those who seek a deeper understanding of how conclusions are reached.

To encourage transparency, evaluation findings should clearly outline what was included in the evaluation scope and the limitations of the evaluation. This clarity makes it easier for decision-makers to understand the relevance of the evaluation outcomes for their context and to understand where the gaps exist within the existing evidence. Limitations that it is helpful to consider include:

- Whether sample sizes are sufficiently large to identify an impact;
- Whether the data collected is accurate and complete;
- The extent to which study attrition changes the representativeness of the study group; and
- Whether there were any errors in how outcomes were measured.

Report findings should also be clear about the quality assurance checks that they have gone through. Clarity of these processes gives the study credibility and helps to assure stakeholders that the findings are robust. Common quality assurance includes:

- Advisory boards consisting of stakeholders and experts to review the evaluation design, methodology and report findings;
- Data quality checks – procedures to check the accuracy and completeness of data collected; and
- Peer review of the final output by experts not involved in the evaluation but who have experience in the subject matter and can critique the methodology and reliability of findings.

## 5 Evaluation checklist

<b>1. Define the project</b>	<b>4. Choose the evaluation methods</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Define the project, why it is needed and what it aims to do.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Consider evaluation methods and how well they answer the evaluation questions.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agree the budget and resources for the project.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Consult often and carefully with delivery organisations and frontline staff.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Explore the setting for the project and identify any factors that may influence it.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Decide whether a comparison group is needed and feasible.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Research similar projects: what results were found, and how were the contexts similar/different?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Work with stakeholders and the evaluation team (if applicable) to agree on the evaluation approach.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Identify and engage with stakeholders.	<b>5. Identify appropriate data collection tools</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Define the target group and any eligibility criteria.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Decide whether existing data sources are sufficient to answer evaluation questions.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Decide on the budget and timeframe for evaluation.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Decide if your own data collection is feasible and proportionate.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Consider whether additional capabilities are required (e.g., in-house or external evaluation teams).	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If collecting own data (e.g., survey or interview data) decide on the timeline for data collection – consider collecting baseline data where feasible.
<b>2. Prepare a theory of change</b>	<b>6. Disseminate findings</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Articulate how the project will lead to the expected results (e.g., through a clear theory of change).	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Assess the most appropriate communication method for each stakeholder.
<b>3. Determine the evaluation questions</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Decide on a timeline for the creation and dissemination of each piece of communication.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Decide what the evaluation hopes to learn about and articulate the specific evaluation questions.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agree on the outcomes to be measured and assess possible data sources.	



## Annex A - additional project examples

This annex sets out two further worked examples in addition to the Business Grants example outlined in the main body of the paper. Further context for each of the example projects can be found in **Section 3**. These examples follow the same framework for steps 1-4 as set out for the Business Grants example in the main body of the paper.

### A.1 Illustrative example 2: refurbishment of a town centre library

#### Step 1: Define the project

**Wider context:** The town is located in a coastal part of the northeast of England. The area has experienced a general decline since the reduction of mining activities in the region meaning that it has high levels of deprivation, and a high proportion of the local population is above 60 years old. The options for further or adult learning in the area are very limited and many people have to travel long distances to access learning services.

**Rationale:** The library refurbishment project was designed to help boost local growth by improving local opportunities and making the town a nicer place to live and visit. Therefore, the local authority is interested in evaluating the digital skills, social connectivity and wellbeing of local residents and the satisfaction of residents and visitors to the area.

**Scale:** The project was allocated £1.8m of funding from the local authority and had an additional £0.5m of funding from alternative sources. The project began in January 2023 and completed in October 2023. The evaluation was being conducted by the local authority between October 2023 and April 2024 with a limited budget.

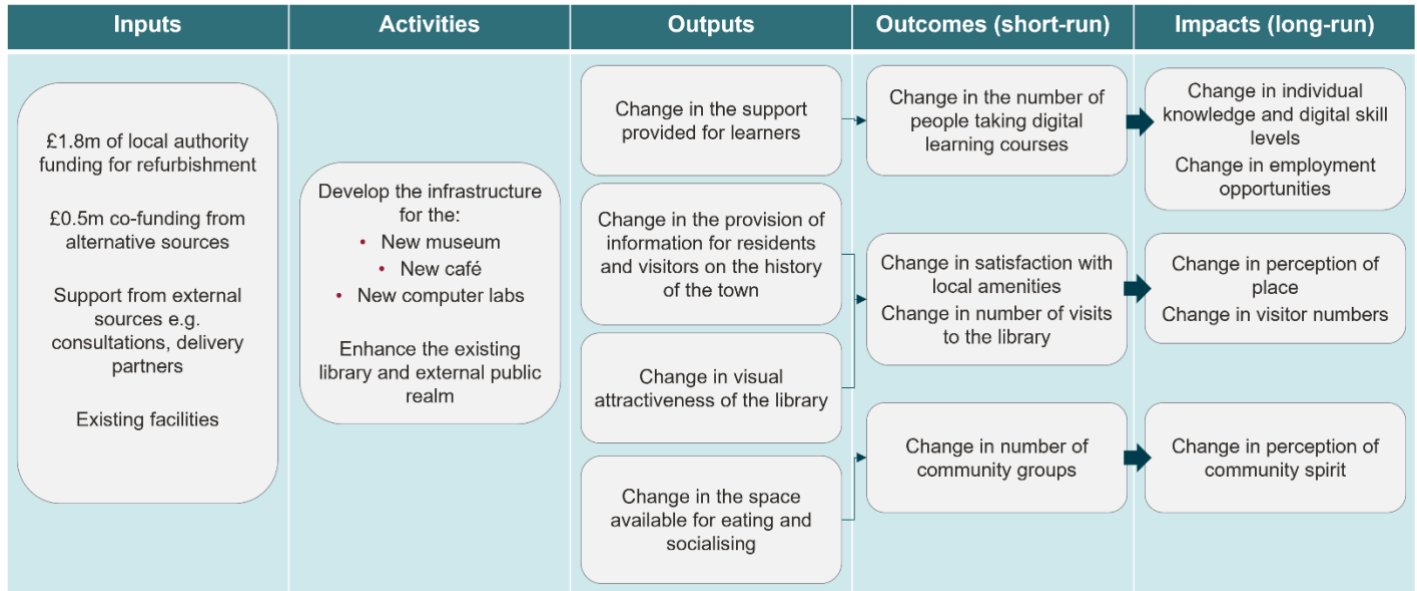
**User pathway:** The facilities in the library are open for use by any residents or visitors to the area free of charge whether they wish to read a book in the library, book a space in the computer lab, grab a coffee with friends in the café or visit the museum to learn about the mining history of the town.

**Relevant stakeholders:** Among others, the two main stakeholder groups to be considered are 1) the local authority policymakers, who will want to know whether the expected impacts were realised in order to help guide future policies and resource allocation, and 2) the potential users, who will be interested to learn about the new facilities available to them and how these have led to improvements in their town.

**Stability of the project:** The project was not expected to change over the course of the evaluation.

## Step 2: Prepare a theory of change

Figure 4 Theory of change diagram (illustrative example 2)



Source: Frontier Economics

## Step 3: Determine the evaluation questions

As the evaluation was to occur right after the project ended, it is unlikely that long-term impacts would have been measurable in the data. In order to answer some evaluation questions, shorter-term impacts should have been observed and used to infer what was likely to follow in the longer term.

The prioritised list of evaluation questions would have included:

- To what extent has the library refurbishment project led to changes in enrolment in digital learning courses in the town?
- To what extent has the library refurbishment project led to changes in the number of visits to the library and the satisfaction with local amenities?
- To what extent has the library refurbishment project led to changes in the number of community groups in the town?

## Step 4: Choose the evaluation methods

A theory-based evaluation would have been a suitable option for the library refurbishment project because:

1. To be answered, some evaluation questions (especially those related to satisfaction and community information) would have required primary data collection and, as the project had already been completed, it would not have been possible to collect a pre-completion 'baseline' for comparison.

2. The unique nature of the programme and local contexts would have made it difficult to identify a suitable comparison town (or group of towns), which would have been required for other impact methods. In addition, the requirement to collect primary data in comparison areas could have quickly increased the cost of the evaluation.

To best answer the evaluation questions, the local authority could have chosen contribution analysis as the evaluation method. Although this method would not have provided an exact estimate of the impact of the library, it would have been able to explore the links between the different facilities (the café, the computer lab, the museum and the library) and the outcomes, for example to explore whether the café had led to a change in the number of community groups.

## A.2 Illustrative example 3: helping sixth form and college leavers into employment with CV and interview training

### Step 1: Define the project

**Wider context:** A local authority, situated in the Midlands, has high levels of youth inactivity, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The local authority is in the process of developing a programme to be deployed in all sixth forms and colleges across the local authority area.

**Rationale:** The programme aims to give young people the necessary interview skills and support to transition smoothly into the workforce. The local authority would like to understand whether the new programme is successful in supporting young people into work and to explore any mid-to-longer-term impacts of the programme.

**Scale:** The project has secured £3.6m of funding for the design, implementation and evaluation of the programme. It is currently in the design phase and is due to be rolled out from September 2024. The programme is expected to be rolled out in three stages to allow for ongoing learning and improvement. The local authority is interested in running a robust evaluation and is expecting to appoint an evaluation partner.

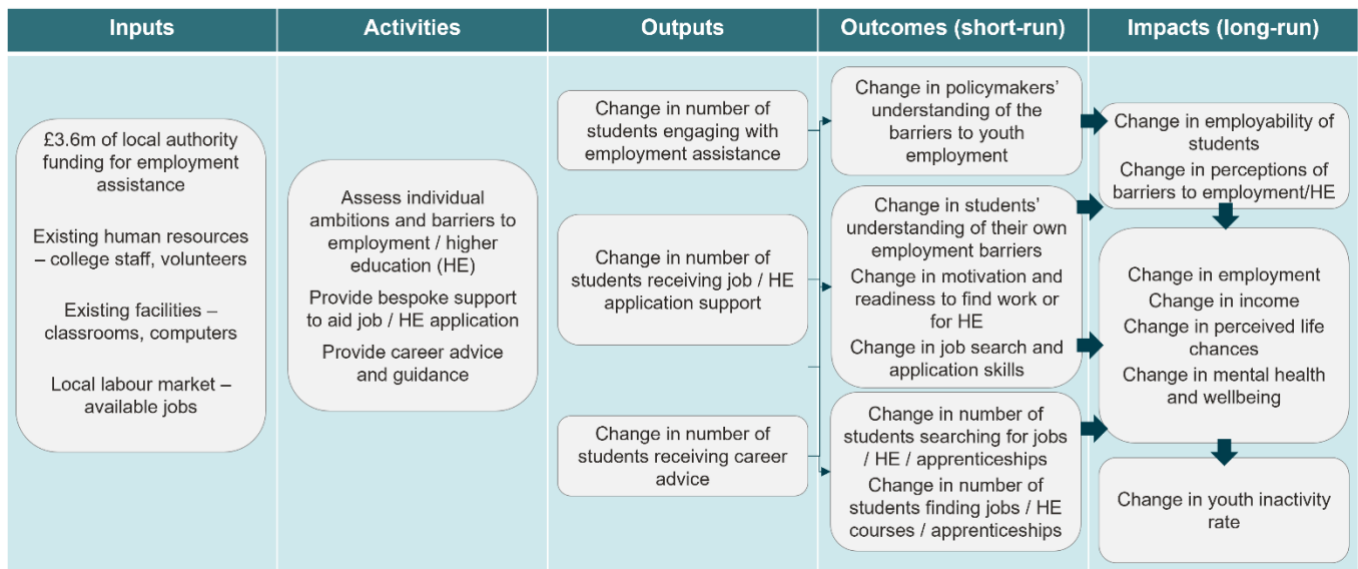
**User pathway:** The new programme will be incorporated into the timetables of all final-year students in participating schools and colleges such that once a fortnight, students will meet with a career mentor, in small groups, to discuss career ambitions, receive feedback and advice on CV and cover letter writing and practice interview questions.

**Relevant stakeholders:** Among others, the main stakeholder groups to be considered are 1) the local authority policymakers, who will want to know whether the expected impacts have been realised to help guide the future rollout of the programme and resource allocation, 2) the schools and colleges, who will be interested to hear the progress in other schools and colleges and the plans for rollout or changes in their own school, and 3) students and potential users, who will be interested to learn about the new activities available to them and the effects of the project.

**Stability of the project:** The local authority will use the learnings from the earlier rollout stages to make adjustments and improve the programme for future stages.

## Step 2: Prepare a theory of change

Figure 5 Theory of change diagram (illustrative example 3)



Source: Frontier Economics

## Step 3: Determine the evaluation questions

The local authority is interested in learning about:

1. (Primary evaluation question): To what extent has the employment assistance programme led to a change in youth employment?
2. (Secondary evaluation question): To what extent has the employment assistance programme led to changes in the number of applications to jobs, higher education and apprenticeships?

Additional questions that may be of interest:

- To what extent has the employment assistance programme led to changes in:
  - Policymakers' understanding of the barriers to youth employment?
  - Students' understanding of their own employment barriers?
  - Motivation and readiness of students to find work or go into higher education?
  - Overall employment / income / perceived life chances / mental health and wellbeing?

How were the employment assistance sessions delivered? What has worked well, and less well, for whom and why?

## Step 4: Choose the evaluation methods

The employment assistance programme would be suitable for an experimental impact evaluation because:

- The local authority is interested in robust evaluation and the programme is expected to last for many years;
- The programme is still in development, which would allow for the inclusion of experimental components, such as randomising which schools receive the new assistance; and
- The programme is expected to be rolled out over several years to all state-provision colleges and sixth forms in the local authority (~80 in total), providing a natural opportunity to randomise which schools receive the assistance each year.

This stepped rollout over three years will result in:

**Table 8**      **Employment assistance rollout**

	<b>Cohort 1</b>	<b>Cohort 2</b>	<b>Cohort 3</b>
Group 1 (25 schools/colleges)	Control	Treated	Treated
Group 2 (25 schools/colleges)	Control	Control	Treated
Group 3 (30 schools/colleges)	Control	Control	Control

Source: *Frontier Economics*

The evaluators could then compare the outcomes of each treated cohort with the outcomes of earlier untreated cohorts of the same group of schools and with untreated cohorts in comparison schools.

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