



Summary of Magenta Book Updates - May 2026

Overview

A revised Magenta Book was published in May 2026. This document provides a short overview of the key updates and new annexes. The previous Magenta Book update was completed in 2020. The primary objective of this 2026 revision was to ensure that the guidance reflects new methodologies, best practices, and emerging issues in government evaluation. In addition to minor changes to the main book, six areas received substantive updates:

1. Value for Money
2. Test and Learn
3. The relationship between benefits management and evaluation
4. Transparency
5. Artificial Intelligence
6. Place-based evaluation

Value for Money (VfM)

- Updates focus on the definition and key principles of VfM evaluation, and methods beyond traditional Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) or Cost-Effectiveness Analysis (CEA).
- VfM is defined as a judgement on the best use of public resources, encompassing both monetisable and non-monetisable social benefits and costs.
- Key principles include embedding VfM plans from the outset, linking them with appraisal, using empirical data, and acknowledging challenges or limitations in the analysis.
- Guidance on methods beyond CBA/CEA is provided, such as cost-utility analysis (CUA), social return on investment (SROI), the 4Es framework, and rubric-based approaches.

Test and Learn (T&L)

- A new Annex provides specific content and guidance on how to apply T&L.
- T&L is positioned as a way of working which uses interactive cycles to adapt interventions and social research methods to assess them.
- Evaluation is an integral part of a T&L approach, and ensures we can more effectively understand problems, optimise solutions, and effectively measure the impacts of our activity.
- T&L allows teams to start small, test key elements in a real-world setting using evaluation tools, and adapt based on findings. Key features involve using multidisciplinary teams, testing assumptions, adapting as you go, and utilising a theory of change, with a combination of quantitative and qualitative evaluation approaches.



Evaluation Task Force

Benefits management and evaluation

- Updates focus on clarifying the complementary relationship between benefits management and evaluation.
- Benefits management is a project delivery discipline focused on defining, measuring, and realising desired benefits of an intervention or policy.
- Evaluation provides a systematic assessment of whether an intervention or policy worked. It determines attribution and additionality, and explores the 'how' and 'why' behind observed results, including wider and unintended consequences.
- Both disciplines should be planned early and implemented in a joined-up manner to maximise learning and ensure consistency.

Transparency

- Updates promote the proportionate use of pre-registration and Open Science principles.
- Additions to the main Magenta Book include expectations for transparency by default, including proportionate preregistration (such as using the Evaluation Task Force (ETF) Evaluation Registry).
- A new Annex covers the proportionate application of Open Science practices within a government context.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

- Updates focuses on ethics, transparency, and risks associated with using AI in evaluation.
- Emphasis is placed on transparency, accountability, and human oversight to mitigate biases. The use of AI should be transparently acknowledged, including communication of potential risks, limitations, and mitigations.
- Key risks include the 'black box' nature of AI, potential for biased data, probabilistic outputs affecting replicability, and a 'homogenising' effect. Personal or sensitive data should never be inputted into an AI system without explicit approval.
- Human evaluators are essential for designing methodologies, interpreting findings, quality assurance, and ensuring interpretation is robust.

Place-Based Evaluation

- Updates outline key considerations for the evaluation of place-based interventions.
- Place-based interventions are defined as groups of complementary projects working toward a common objective for a specific place.
- Evaluation should build on assessments of individual projects to collectively assess the achievement of place-based objectives. Relevant considerations include developing a place-based theory of change, defining spatial dimensions (including spillovers and displacement), place selection, and using retrospective evaluations to address evidence gaps.