Department
for Environment,
Food & Rural Affairs

Guidance on appraising enabling benefits in the economic case

A qualitative approach to capturing the strategic value of enabling activities

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Foreword

This framework has been developed by Defra’s Economic Appraisal and Strategy Team in the Office of the Chief Economist to improve how enabling benefits are reflected in economic appraisal. It responds to the challenge of quantifying or monetising key benefits of enabling activities such as technological agility, better data, cyber security and business continuity, which can be critical to the case for delivering transformational change across government departments.

The framework provides a practical and proportionate way to bring greater structure, consistency and transparency to decisions around enabling activities based on economic appraisal. By using common benefit areas, clear rating thresholds, and a simple visual summary, it helps analysts present a fuller account of value-for-money and gives decision-makers broader evidence on the strategic value of enabling investments.

This has been a collaborative piece of work, developed with economists, digital experts, operational researchers and other analysts from across government departments. I am very pleased to recommend its use as a helpful tool for strengthening appraisal and supporting better evidence-based decision-making.

This framework is intended to be a living document, and I would welcome feedback and suggestions for improvements that would make it even more useful for analysts and decision-makers going forward.

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Executive summary

The Economic Appraisal and Strategy Team (EAST) in the Office of the Chief Economist at Defra have developed a qualitative appraisal framework to address a key gap in existing guidance. Developed with experts from across government, the framework provides a systematic way to assess enabling benefits that cannot easily be quantified or monetised. These benefits, such as improved technology agility, resilience and data capability, are critical to delivering long-term value but are often underrepresented in economic cases.

This document presents the Defra Enabling Benefits Appraisal Framework, designed for use by teams within Defra and across government. The framework provides detailed guidance to help appraise enabling benefits, ensuring a consistent approach throughout the appraisal process.

Users are asked to follow the steps outlined in the 'How to apply the framework' section, making use of supporting information found in the annexes. This approach has been led by Defra and consulted on with experts across government, reflecting collective experience and insight. With contributions from:

- His Majesty's Treasury (HMT)
- Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), now the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade (DBIST)
- Home Office
- Ministry of Justice (MoJ)
- Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)
- National Health Service (NHS)
- His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC)
- Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)

The framework provides a structured and consistent approach for analysts to identify and rate enabling benefits using a standardised set of benefit areas and a clear rating scale. This enables teams to present a transparent summary of non-monetisable enabling benefits within the economic case, supported by a colour-coded visual indication for easy comparison across projects. The approach complements Green Book guidance and strengthens Value for Money assessments where monetisation is not feasible.

For any further questions or comment, you can contact Defra's Economic Appraisal and Strategy Team (EAST), the creators of this work, by contacting Defra's Office of the Chief Economist.

Background and rationale

Current appraisal guidance, including the HM Treasury Green Book and DSIT's Digital and Data Benefits Framework (published in 2026), provides robust methods for quantifying and monetising benefits.

However, these approaches do not cover enabling benefits that often underpin the success of digital and transformation programmes, including:

- technology agility
- improved data capability
- cyber security resilience
- business continuity

These benefits are frequently non-monetisable, yet they deliver significant strategic value by enabling future efficiencies, reducing systemic risks, and supporting long-term organisational resilience.

Without a structured way to capture these benefits, business cases risk underrepresenting the full value of enabling projects, leading to:

- incomplete Value for Money (VfM) assessments, as critical non-monetisable benefits are not properly represented
- inconsistent treatment across cases, making it difficult to compare enabling investments with projects with more easily monetisable benefits
- difficulties in comparing across different projects or programmes
- weaker evidence for decision-makers, potentially resulting in underinvestment in foundational capabilities

To address this gap, the Economic Appraisal and Strategy Team (EAST) in Defra's Office of the Chief Economist has led the development of a new qualitative appraisal framework. This work involved:

- engaging with economists, digital experts, analysts, and operational researchers across government to identify enabling benefits and prioritise these into tiers
- establishing a cross-government working group including representatives from 9 government organisations, including the Home Office, HM Treasury, and Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (now DBIST) to refine the approach
- reviewing existing literature and guidance to ensure alignment with best practice and latest techniques
- iterating multiple versions of the framework and enabling benefit categorisation based on feedback from stakeholders and the cross-government working group

Although initially developed to support the appraisal of IT enabling benefits within Defra's Digital, Data, Technology and Security (DDTS) group, this approach has wider applications across government, including areas such as property, shared services, and other departmental enablers where monetisation is not feasible. We encourage these further potential applications to be explored.

By providing a structured, transparent method for assessing enabling benefits, this framework complements existing guidance, improves comparability across business cases, and strengthens the evidence base for strategic decision-making.

Objectives

The enabling benefits appraisal framework has been developed to achieve the following objectives:

- **provide a structured approach for assessing enabling benefits** that cannot be easily quantified or monetised, ensuring these benefits are appropriately reflected in business cases
- **complement existing guidance**: Align with HM Treasury's Green Book and DSIT's Digital and Data Benefits Framework (now DBIST), offering an additional tool for cases where traditional quantification and monetisation methods are insufficient
- **improve consistency and comparability**: Enable analysts to apply a standardised method for rating enabling benefits, supporting fair comparison across projects and programmes
- **strengthen Value for Money (VfM) assessments**: Ensure that strategic, non-financial benefits, such as technology agility, resilience and improved data capability, are captured in VfM narratives and decision-making
- **support evidence-based decision-making**: Provide decision-makers with a transparent summary of enabling benefits in business case appraisal, reducing the risk of underinvestment in foundational capabilities

When to use the framework

The Enabling Benefits Framework has been designed to help business cases of all levels. Whether this is adding further structure to well-developed large cases or capturing the qualitative aspects of smaller investments where data is unobtainable. The approach is recommended to be used when teams feel it is proportionate and helpful to their appraisal.

Overview of the approach

Benefit areas and tiers

The framework identifies 12 key enabling benefit areas, grouped into 3 tiers based on their relative strategic importance:

- **Tier 1**: high-impact benefits with high net social value (for example, technology integration, improved decision making, cyber security, business continuity)

- **Tier 2**: organisational resilience and people-focused benefits with medium net social value (for example, risk management, reputation, workforce experience)

- **Tier 3**: operational and capacity-building benefits with limited net social value (for example, asset optimisation, innovation, communication improvements)

Rating scale

Each benefit area is assessed using a six-point qualitative scale:

- not applicable
- minimal
- low
- moderate
- high
- very high

Detailed threshold descriptions for each rating are provided in Annex 1.

Impact versus scale lens

Ratings should consider both:

- impact (such as the depth of change within the benefit area)
- scale (such as the breadth of impact across teams, departments, or government) to comprehensively capture the enabling benefit area

Visual summary table

Analysts should present enabling benefit area ratings in a summary table in the economic case (see Table 3 example), enabling quick comparison across benefits and projects.

Development of the benefit areas and tiers

The benefit areas and tiering presented in this methodology were developed through a collaborative process. They reflect input from a cross-government working group of economists and digital experts and were refined through four workshops and multiple iterations with support from operational researchers in Defra. This approach ensures the framework is evidence-based, robust, and aligned with departmental and cross-government priorities.

The structure is intentionally prescriptive to support consistency in appraisal, and this approach is grounded in broad engagement rather than the judgment of a single team.

How to apply the framework in economic appraisal

Analysts should follow these steps when applying the methodology.

1) Identify relevant enabling benefits

Review the 12 enabling benefit areas (defined in Annex 2) and select those applicable to the project or programme.

2) Assess each enabling benefit

Use the rating thresholds in Annex 1 to assess each relevant enabling benefit area and assign a rating (not applicable to very high), considering both impact and scale.

For enabling benefit areas with no impact, a score of not applicable should be applied. Any negative impacts should be recorded as risks or costs in the appropriate section of the economic case.

3) Justify ratings using evidence

Provide project or programme evidence to support the rating of each enabling benefit area, ensuring transparency and reducing subjectivity in assessment.

4) Summarise assessment in a visual table

Complete the summary table (Table 1) with ratings for each enabling benefit area and apply the colour scale for visual clarity.

5) Integrate outputs into the economic case

Include the summary table and supporting narrative in the Benefits Appraisal section of the economic case. Make sure to reference the summary table and findings in the business case Value for Money narrative and as part of the economic appraisal summary.

Summary table: example output

When applied, the framework produces a summary table that clearly shows the expected enabling benefits for a project or programme. Table 1 uses a colour-coded rating system (not applicable to very high) to provide a quick visual reference for reviewers and decision-makers.

This approach has been designed for appraising the preferred option in a business case. Teams are encouraged to adapt the approach as required if they are looking to compare multiple options.

Table 1: Enabling benefits example summary table

Benefit area	Tier	Rating
Technology integration and agility	1	Very high
Better evidence or data or information	1	Minimal
Cyber security improvements	1	Low
Business continuity	1	High
Risk and compliance	2	Not applicable
Trust, reputation and sustainability	2	High
Customer experience and engagement	2	Low
People, workforce, and employee experience	2	High
Asset optimisation and scalability	3	Moderate
Operational improvements	3	Very high
Innovation and responsiveness	3	Moderate
Communication improvements	3	Minimal

- Tier 1: Integrating modern systems, harnessing data
- Tier 2: Risk management, credibility, prioritising people
- Tier 3: Enhancing capacity, streamlining operations

This table, tier headings, and supporting evidence narrative should be included in the Benefits Appraisal section of the economic case as well as referenced in the Value for Money narrative and Economic Appraisal Summary

Governance and robustness

The following principles should be followed when applying the enabling benefits appraisal framework to ensure consistency and credibility across appraisal:

- **evidence-based justification**: Each benefit area rating should be supported by a short narrative or evidence, referencing relevant project documentation or analysis to ensure assessment is grounded
- **alignment with scoring thresholds**: Analysts must refer to the detailed thresholds and examples in Annex 1 when assigning ratings to benefit areas
- **peer review and moderation**: Where possible, ratings should be reviewed by a second analyst or moderated within the department to reduce subjectivity and bias across projects
- **transparency in decision-making**: Any assumptions or interpretations made during enabling benefit rating should be documented to support transparency and assurance processes.

Worked example: Investment in improving cyber security

Programme context

This example describes an example business case to improve cyber security within a department. Out of support operating systems, databases, and applications can result in a department having to solely deal with outages, service failures, and cyber-attacks. Without regular maintenance spend, the vulnerability of services and out of support applications will increase over time. Investment in cyber security avoids widespread disruption to the department's services and policy progress.

The creation of the table below took a user approximately 10 to 15 minutes to review. The user reviewed each benefit area (using the definitions in Annex 1) with the leading analyst to decide on an initial rating. This would then be discussed across the programme team until a consensus is reached.

See text example below for more detail.

Table 1: Enabling benefits summary table - investment in improving cyber security

Benefit area	Tier	Rating
Technology integration and agility	1	Moderate
Better evidence or data or information	1	Low
Cyber security improvements	1	Very high
Business continuity	1	Very high
Risk and compliance	2	High
Trust, reputation and sustainability	2	High
Customer experience and engagement	2	Moderate
People, workforce, and employee experience	2	Moderate
Asset optimisation and scalability	3	High
Operational improvements	3	High
Innovation and responsiveness	3	Low
Communication improvements	3	Low

Ratings have been developed through discussions with subject matter experts and programme team members. Both impact and scale have been considered during workshops.

The programme has been shown to have several benefit areas rated as high or very high, particularly around Cyber Security Improvements and Business Continuity. This is because investing in areas such as treating legacy applications directly supports the security, resilience, and responsiveness of the department in combatting service failure and cyber-attacks. Furthermore, investment in treating legacy infrastructure will improve the department's resilience and protection against hostile state actors by reducing the vulnerability which is inherent in vulnerable applications.

No benefit categories are deemed as not applicable. As such, we conclude that this programme will have wide ranging enabling benefits of significant impact, in addition to the cost avoidance benefits already articulated in this business case, both within the department and beyond.

Worked example: Investment in developing a new data platform

Programme context

This example relates to a strategic investment to improve the quality, consistency and accessibility of a data within a department. The project aims to strengthen the department's ability to support policy development, delivery and decision-making across a range of strategic and environmental priorities.

Economic case benefits appraisal narrative

Defra's Enabling Benefits Appraisal Framework has been applied to this business case to appraise the level of enabling benefits the programme expects to deliver, in addition to the benefits outlined above. The ratings shown in table 3 have been determined through discussions with the programme team, ensuring an informed and holistic assessment.

Table 2: Enabling benefits summary table - Investment in developing a new data platform

Benefit area	Tier	Rating
Technology integration and agility	1	Moderate
Better evidence or data or information	1	High
Cyber security improvements	1	Not applicable
Business continuity	1	Not applicable
Risk and compliance	2	Moderate
Trust, reputation and sustainability	2	High
Customer experience and engagement	2	Low
People, workforce, and employee experience	2	Low
Asset optimisation and scalability	3	Moderate
Operational improvements	3	Low
Innovation and responsiveness	3	Moderate
Communication improvements	3	Not applicable

The programme demonstrates a mix of moderate and high enabling benefits:

- technology integration and agility (moderate): The programme will improve AI-readiness by standardising and collating environmental data, which in turn supports better integration across systems and enhances future adaptability
- better evidence (high): The creation of models hosted on this data platform will significantly improve both the quality and accessibility of consistent data, enabling

more robust analysis within the department and across other government departments as data sharing expands

- risk and compliance (moderate): The programme will reduce risks, fraud, and error rates that could otherwise disrupt business-as-usual operations, whilst also supporting better land strategy and grant allocation and improving adherence to cross-government regulations

- trust, reputation and sustainability (high): The programme will enable accurate policy targeting and reduce fraud and error, which strengthens the department's reputation and builds trust in the reliability of its data

- customer experience and engagement and people, workforce and employee experience (low): Improvements stem from fewer manual tasks for staff and customers, resulting in some productivity gains. Although these impacts are significant enough to realise monetised benefits for the preferred option, their scope is limited to teams working with specific data rather than more broadly across other bodies or wider government, which underpins the 'low' rating

- asset optimisation (moderate): The programme will consolidate siloed datasets, improve wider data access, and enhance efficiency, while also expanding the department's preparedness for AI adoption

- operational improvements (low): Benefits are limited to better resource allocation and reduced duplication of manual activities, which reduces the overall operational impact

- innovation and responsiveness (moderate): The programme will improve decision-making for both technical and non-technical users through better data access and will enable innovation and AI adoption by collating datasets and streamlining processes

Overall, the programme delivers a modest range of enabling benefits, but its impact on evidence quality, trust, and sustainability is significant and will provide meaningful value across the department and for major customer groups.

Annex 1: Enabling benefit rating thresholds

When assessing a project or programme’s enabling benefits, analysts should consider 2 dimensions to determine the final rating:

- **impact**: How significant is the improvement within the benefit area?
- **scale**: How widely does the benefit apply (team, department, cross-government)?

These dimensions provide a conceptual framework to help teams justify their ratings and ensure consistency in appraisal. For example:

- a benefit with high impact but limited scale (for example, critical improvement for one high-risk system) might score moderate or high
- a benefit with moderate impact but wide scale (for example, small efficiency gains across all teams) might score moderate

Analysts should use the thresholds in table 4 alongside this analytical lens, and their subject specific expertise, to select the most appropriate rating, providing evidence in the economic case to support their conclusions.

Table 3: Enabling benefit rating thresholds for Tier 1 (integrating modern systems, harnessing data)

Enabling benefit	Minimal benefit	Low benefit	Moderate benefit	High benefit	Very high benefit
Technology integration and agility	Minimal effect on operations, service delivery, or resilience.	Slight improvements in process alignment with limited stakeholder benefit.	Enhances operational efficiency and responsiveness across teams.	Significantly improves service quality and coordination more widely across the department including agile responses to policy, users, and the market.	Enables seamless, cross-cutting service delivery across government, with major public and operational benefits. Fully adaptive systems that ensure resilience and responsiveness
Better evidence or data or information	Small improvements to internal team evidence base	Some improvements to departmental evidence accumulation or information. Impacting teams' ability to produce improved levels of analysis	Improvements to departmental evidence accumulation or information. Significant improvements to analysis in areas with direct ministerial engagement.	Critical improvements to information which impacts across government departments and facilitates improved analysis.	Critical improvements to data gathering which improves customer facing, national services to a significant extent.
Cyber security improvements	No meaningful improvement in security position or stakeholder trust.	Reduces minor risks with limited operational or reputational benefit.	Strengthens defences, reducing likelihood of moderate incidents.	Significantly enhances trust, continuity, and protection of public assets.	Transforms organisational resilience, protecting critical services and public confidence at departmental or cross-government scale.

Enabling benefit	Minimal benefit	Low benefit	Moderate benefit	High benefit	Very high benefit
Business continuity	Minimal impact on business functioning. Contained within specific teams, avoiding small scale disruption.	Some impact on improving departmental stability. Enabling internal functioning, avoiding disruption.	Important improvements to enable BAU business functioning.	Significant investment in business usual areas which enable basic functioning of the department. Without which would result in delays and disruption to core government objectives	Vital and essential improvements directly addressing the highest profile business areas. Without which would cause widespread national/international disruption.

Table 4: Enabling benefit rating thresholds for Tier 2 (risk management, credibility, prioritising people)

Enabling benefit	Minimal benefit	Low benefit	Moderate benefit	High benefit	Very high benefit
Risk and compliance	Minimal impact on reducing departmental risks, enables adherence to BAU regulation with minimal consequences if not met. Contained within specific teams	Some impact on reducing departmental risk. Enabling internal functioning with reduced risk of service failure.	Reduction in risks which would potentially harm BAU departmental functioning. Adheres to wider cross-government regulations	Significant risk reduction in areas which are government strategic priorities. Such as critical applications and public facing services. Enables adherence to high importance regulation.	Vital and essential improvements directly addressing the most high-profile services. Failure could lead to national or international major incidents. Enables adherence to international regulation, or extreme high-priority government objectives.
Trust, reputation and sustainability	Limited to reputation protection within the specific teams. Avoiding potential damage to inner working relationships	Some wider impact on reputation, including damaging senior and ministerial trust. Some improvements to compliance of sustainability objectives and regulation, across teams.	Small scale avoidance of public reputation damage. Improvements to compliance of departmental sustainability objectives and regulation	High level avoidance of public reputation damage due to service failure, misallocation of resources. Press engagement likely required. Significant improvements to national sustainability objectives	Avoiding significant and permanent damage to public reputation. Widespread coverage and consistent engagement required for long periods of time. Major improvements in key areas of sustainability objectives improvements.

Enabling benefit	Minimal benefit	Low benefit	Moderate benefit	High benefit	Very high benefit
Customer experience and engagement	Small improvements to customer service, streamlining but largely not noticeable.	Improvements to customer service, streamlining and small-scale improvements. Noticed by a specific portion of the customer base.	Modest improvements to customer service, streamlining. Noticed by a majority of a customer base.	Streamlining and large-scale improvements to customer service. Noticed by all customers across the spectrum.	Major improvements to customer service, streamlining and widespread reform and improvements. High level engagement with the media, significant amounts of discussion nationally.
People, workforce, and employee experience	Little or no effect on employee morale, retention, culture, or diversity.	Slight improvements in employee satisfaction, team cohesion, and diversity with limited strategic value.	Improves employee engagement and reduces burnout, supporting better outcomes.	Drives workforce motivation and alignment with organisational goals on culture improvements, cohesion, and diversity.	Creates a thriving, diverse, and cohesive workforce that delivers high-impact services and supports strategic transformation.

Table 5: Enabling benefit rating thresholds for Tier 3 (enhancing capacity, streamlining operations)

Enabling benefit	Minimal benefit	Low benefit	Moderate benefit	High benefit	Very high benefit
Asset optimisation and scalability	Enables limited or niche service delivery with no broader implications.	Supports minor growth with minimal effect on operations or stakeholders.	Allows moderate expansion, improving service access and efficiency.	Enables broad service delivery improvements, supporting departmental strategic goals.	Transforms reach and capacity across government, significantly benefiting the public and dependent programmes.
Operational improvements	Minimal impact on operational resilience. Contained within specific teams, avoiding small scale disruption.	Some impact on improving operational resilience. Enabling internal functioning, avoiding disruption.	Important improvements to enable BAU business functioning and improved response times to failure.	Significant investment in BAU to improve response times, flexibility, and resource to critical areas.	Significant investment in BAU to improve response times, flexibility, and resource to the highest priority national areas.
Innovation and responsiveness	Small improvements to enabling innovation within teams	Improvements to enabling innovation across teams within a department	Improvements to enabling innovation across a department, leading to changes in standard processes or decision making	Improvements to enabling innovation across departments	Improvements to enabling innovation across departments, changing top-level decision-making processes, or impacting government objectives

Enabling benefit	Minimal benefit	Low benefit	Moderate benefit	High benefit	Very high benefit
Communication improvements	Minimal or isolated communication improvements with no broader team or departmental implications.	Some enhancements to internal departmental communication with minimal effect on operations and external stakeholder engagement.	Improvements to communication around critical decision-making with impacts beyond the department - such as service access and coordination	Significant improvements to communication infrastructure and services which directly impact top-level decision-making across departments.	Critical improvements to national and international communication capacity, significantly benefiting cross government coordination and public engagement in exceptional circumstances.

Annex 2: Definitions of enabling benefits

Table 6: Definitions of enabling benefits

Enabling benefit	Description
Technology integration and agility	The department’s ability to adopt and adapt to new technologies quickly. Improving service delivery and enabling digital transformation.
Better evidence or data or information	Improved data quality and access empower informed policy decisions and allows the department to monitor outcomes.
Cyber security improvements	Strengthens the protection of sensitive government data, applications, and services. It reduces vulnerabilities, ensures compliance with regulations, and builds public trust in digital services.
Business continuity	Ensures that critical government functions can continue during disruptions. This may include contingency planning, disaster recovery, and resilience strategies.
Risk and compliance	Supports the identification, assessment, and mitigation of risks while ensuring adherence to legal, regulatory, and policy frameworks.
Trust, reputation and sustainability	Enhances public confidence in the department’s operations and long-term viability. Sustainability includes the department's contribution to environmental objectives.
Customer experience and engagement	Improves how the public interact with government services. This may include user-friendly digital platforms, responsive communication, and inclusive service design that meets diverse needs.
People, workforce, and employee experience	Focuses on staff wellbeing, skills development, workplace culture, diversity, and team morale.
Asset optimisation and scalability	Maximises the use of physical and digital assets (for example, buildings, IT infrastructure) and ensures systems can scale to meet growing or changing demands efficiently.
Operational improvements	Streamlines processes, reduces waste, and enhances productivity leading to faster service delivery, higher value for money, and better resource allocation.
Innovation and responsiveness	Encourages experimentation and rapid adaptation to emerging challenges or opportunities, supporting proactive policy development and agile service design.
Communication improvements	Enhancements in communication systems, processes, or infrastructure that enable more effective, timely, and strategic exchange of information, supporting top-level decision-making and coordination.