CIPFA\

Maximising value for money: case studies on smarter public spending

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Executive summary

In an era of heightened public accountability, governments worldwide are intensifying efforts to ensure that public funds deliver maximum value. Value for money (VfM) assessments play a crucial role in achieving this goal by providing a structured approach to evaluating whether the benefits of a project justify its costs. This report examines how two UK public sector organisations – the London Borough of Redbridge and the Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) – have adopted VfM tools to improve decision making, resource allocation and project evaluation.

Key findings

1. **Structured VfM assessments improve decision making**

    Both case studies demonstrate that customised VfM frameworks enhance transparency, accountability and financial oversight.

2. **Challenges remain in integrating VfM tools with existing systems**

    Organisational resistance, reliance on traditional financial models and complex assessment criteria can hinder adoption.

3. **Capacity building is essential**

    Practitioners require training and technical support to use VfM tools effectively and interpret findings accurately.

4. **Broader adoption requires strategic leadership**

    Securing commitment from finance departments, senior leadership and policymakers is crucial for embedding VfM assessments into routine decision making.

Recommendations

1. **Simplify and enhance accessibility of VfM tools**

    Streamlining methodologies, improving guidance and integrating user-friendly benchmarking features can drive adoption.

2. **Strengthen alignment with existing financial processes**

    Ensuring VfM assessments complement standard business case requirements will facilitate wider acceptance.

3. **Invest in training and support**

   Public sector practitioners need ongoing capacity building to navigate complex evaluation frameworks and translate data into actionable insights.

4. **Encourage peer learning and case sharing**

   Sharing best practices and real-world examples across local authorities and public sector agencies can accelerate uptake and adaptation.

Governments worldwide are increasingly embedding VfM principles into policy and funding decisions. The experiences of Redbridge and Thames Valley VRU illustrate the potential of practitioner-friendly VfM tools to enhance public sector efficiency, accountability and strategic planning. Moving forward, broader adoption of VfM frameworks will require clearer guidance, leadership commitment and enhanced practitioner capacity, ensuring that public investments deliver maximum impact for society.

Introduction

Ensuring that public resources are allocated efficiently and effectively is a fundamental priority for governments worldwide. VfM assessments provide a structured approach to evaluating whether a project delivers optimal benefits relative to its costs, ensuring accountability and transparency in public spending.

The UK National Audit Office (NAO) defines VfM as "the optimal use of resources to achieve intended outcomes," emphasising the balance between economy, efficiency, effectiveness and equity (the four Es). While methods for assessing VfM are well established in economic and policy literature, applying them in real-world public sector settings presents significant challenges.

Many governments, including the UK, provide guidance on embedding VfM principles into policy decisions and funding processes (see **Value for money guidance in the UK**). Yet many public sector organisations – such as local authorities, police and crime commissioners and health and education agencies – often struggle to embed these principles into routine decision making due to capacity constraints, data limitations and complex assessment frameworks. To address such challenges, practitioner-facing tools have been developed to provide common evaluation frameworks, facilitate benchmarking and improve data collection processes.

This report examines two UK public sector bodies:

1. London Borough of Redbridge, which adopted the **GO Lab-CIPFA VfM Toolkit** to assess the impact and cost-effectiveness of its innovative digital delivery services.

2. Thames Valley VRU, which developed an innovative project life cycle framework that integrates impact evaluation with VfM assessment to enhance policy decision making.

The case studies were selected to highlight how VfM analysis can be adapted to different contexts. Redbridge's use of the VfM Toolkit demonstrates the model's practical application in local government, while Thames Valley VRU's life cycle framework represents an emerging approach to integrating VfM within multi-agency partnerships. Together the examples illustrate the diverse applications of VfM assessment within the evolving landscape of public financial management.

By examining real-world applications, this report highlights the benefits, challenges and lessons learned from implementing VfM frameworks.

Readers will gain an understanding of:

- how VfM tools enhance project accountability, efficiency and transparency
- the key considerations and challenges involved in designing and applying VfM models
- the impact of structured economic analysis on public sector project evaluation.

The report is presented as follows:

- **Chapters 2 and 3:** Case studies provide an in-depth assessment of the Redbridge and Thames Valley VRU use cases, exploring how each organisation developed and applied VfM tools.

- **Chapter 4:** Comparative analysis highlights key similarities, challenges and opportunities for refining VfM methodologies.

- **Chapter 5:** Implementation and sustainability examines barriers to adoption and offers recommendations for expanding the use of VfM frameworks across public sector institutions.

- **The conclusion** summarises key insights and outlines steps for embedding VfM principles into public sector governance.

By examining the case studies, this report provides practical guidance for policymakers, finance teams and public sector professionals on how to leverage VfM tools to improve resource allocation, enhance accountability and drive better outcomes in public service delivery.

Value for money guidance in the UK

In the UK, HM Treasury provides VfM guidance through the Green Book and Magenta Book, which set the standards for policy appraisal and evaluation.

The **Green Book** outlines best practices for appraising policies, programmes and projects, ensuring VfM delivery. It emphasises cost-benefit analysis, the consideration of social and environmental impacts and risk management strategies. This guidance is crucial in the planning and pre-implementation stages, helping decision makers assess the potential benefits, costs and uncertainties of proposed initiatives.

The **Magenta Book** complements this by providing a framework for policy evaluation, offering detailed guidance on designing evaluation strategies, collecting and analysing data, and using findings to inform future policymaking. Unlike the Green Book, which focuses on ex-ante appraisal, the Magenta Book is applied post-implementation, assessing effectiveness, outcomes and lessons learned.

Together these guidance frameworks ensure a rigorous, evidence-based approach to policymaking, covering the entire policy life cycle from development and implementation to review and refinement.

Case study 1:
London Borough of Redbridge

Background

The London Borough of Redbridge, located in north east Greater London, is a diverse and rapidly growing area. According to the 2021 Census, the population of Redbridge stands at 310,300, reflecting a 11.2% increase since 2011 – a growth rate higher than both the England (6.6%) and London (7.7%) averages. This expansion underscores Redbridge's role as a key hub for urban development and community transformation.

Figure 1: Population in Greater London and Redbridge borough (percentage change 2011–2021)

England & Wales ▲6.3%   London ▲7.7%
England ▲6.6%   Redbridge ▲11.2%

-2   -0.5   0.5   +2   +8   +16%
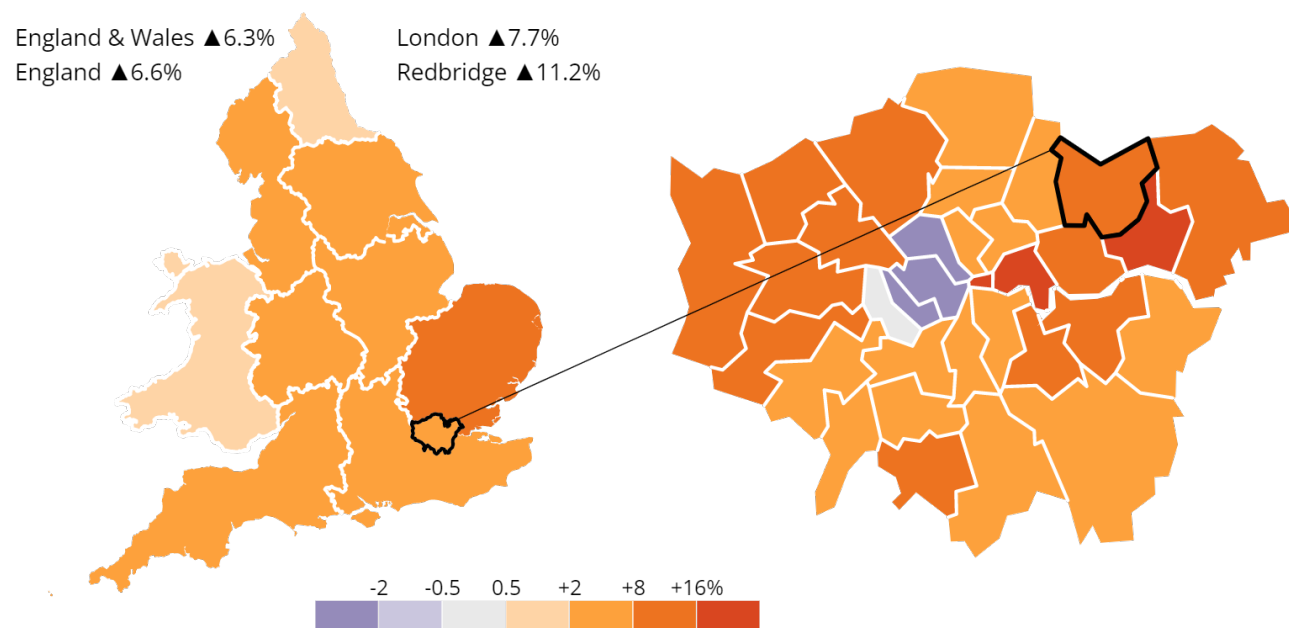
Source: **How life has changed in Redbridge: Census 2021** (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2023).

The borough is responsible for delivering essential public services, including education, housing, transportation, environmental health, waste collection and social services. Governance is overseen by elected councillors, who represent Redbridge's diverse communities and guide policy decisions to meet the needs of its residents.

Redbridge's long-term strategy is outlined in **The Redbridge Plan 2022–2026**, which sets out four key priorities to address local challenges and enhance residents' quality of life:

1. **Safe and healthy:** improving community safety, public health and access to healthcare services.

2. **Homes and neighbourhoods:** tackling the housing crisis by increasing affordable housing and improving urban spaces.

3. **Jobs and skills:** boosting economic opportunities through skills development and employment support.

4. **Clean and green:** enhancing environmental sustainability through waste management, green space protection and climate action

This plan reflects the borough's commitment to creating a fairer, greener and healthier Redbridge, focusing on sustainable growth and improved public services.

Redbridge continues to experience significant demographic and economic shifts. The borough has a relatively high life expectancy – an estimated 80.3 years for men and 84.3 years for women. The average household income in Redbridge is approximately £31,000 compared to £44,300 in greater London (**Employee earnings in the UK: 2024** (ONS)).

Redbridge's financial priorities are reflected in its proposed 2024/25 total expenditure of £848.9m, which funds critical public services (Figure 2).[1] As the borough continues to grow, balancing economic development with sustainability and inclusivity remains a key challenge.

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1   Total expenditure is a budget measure defined as gross expenditure on general fund services. **Redbridge Council approves a balanced budget, protecting vital services, despite funding challenges** (2024).

Figure 2: Redbridge funding and core spending (£m)
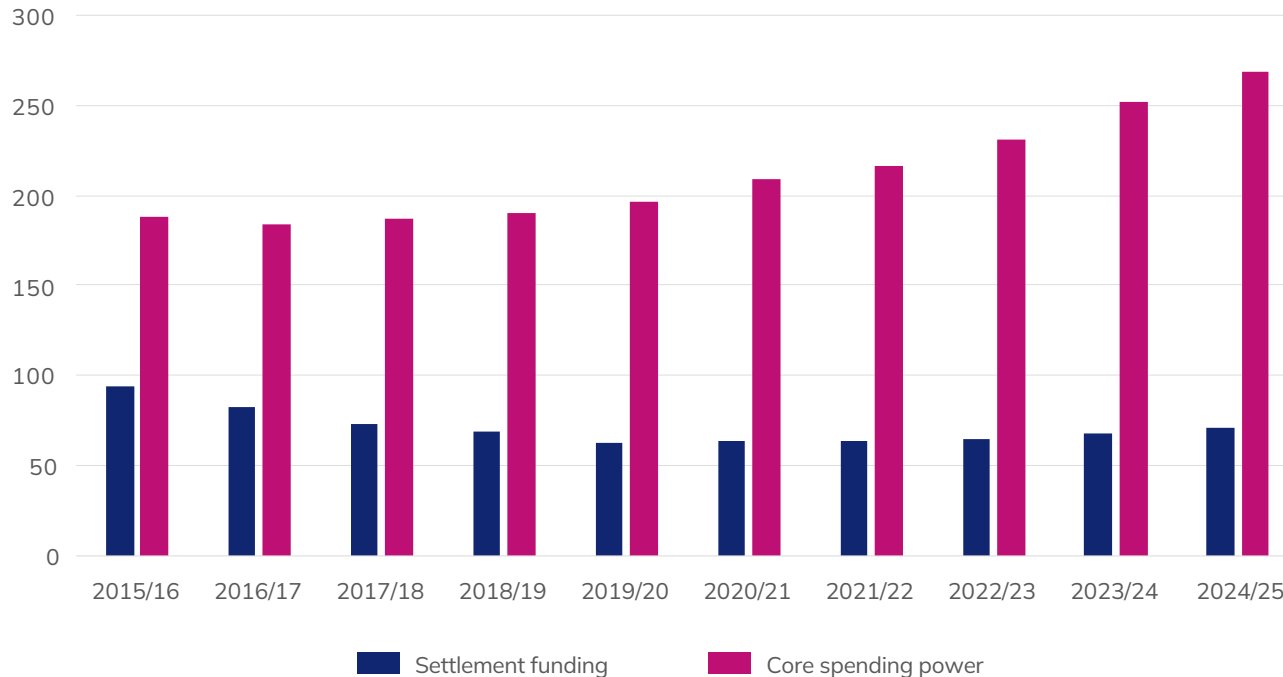
Source: **Core spending power table: final local government finance settlement 2024 to 2025** (GOV.UK).

By aligning policies with local data and national benchmarks, Redbridge aims to maintain its strong economic position while addressing the needs of a rapidly evolving population. Through strategic investment in infrastructure, public services and community wellbeing, the borough is working towards a resilient and inclusive future.

GO Lab-CIPFA Value for Money (VfM) Toolkit

Bridging theory and practice

CIPFA and the GO Lab have partnered to advance value creation in public finance, developing a value for money framework to improve the assessment of public expenditure. As part of this initiative, they created the **VfM Toolkit**, a practical resource for evaluating outcomes-based contracts (OBCs) and other results-driven initiatives. By comparing programme costs and benefits against alternative or 'do nothing' scenarios, the toolkit helps decision makers assess economic validity and long-term impact.

The VfM Toolkit is designed for practitioners, providing a **step-by-step guidance note** and a quantitative calculator based on the 4Es framework – efficiency, economy, effectiveness and equity. It emphasises the importance of considering long-term effects at the design and planning stages, ensuring that interventions focus on measurable outcomes and impacts. The toolkit enables clearer planning and evaluation, particularly when funding is tied to successful outcomes.

A key strength of the toolkit is its mixed methods approach. Users input known or estimated unit costs while supplementing gaps with qualitative insights to refine findings. While initially designed for social programmes, its flexibility allows for broader application across various service areas. Importantly, results are indicative rather than absolute, making the toolkit a valuable complement to other diagnostic methods that inform decision making.

To foster peer learning and continuous improvement, CIPFA and the GO Lab facilitate the **Value in Public Finance** peer learning group. This platform provides practitioners with access to recorded sessions such as *Measurement and Economic Validity* and *Public Value in VfM Assessments*, ensuring best practices are shared and applied effectively. Through these initiatives, the toolkit bridges theory, empirical evidence and policy implementation, strengthening accountability and impact in public spending.

Key features

The VfM Toolkit provides a structured, evidence-based approach to assessing the efficiency, effectiveness, economy and equity of public programmes. It enables users to evaluate a programme's costs, benefits and outcomes using both quantitative data and qualitative insights.

Core features:

- **Data-driven assessments:** uses structured data from annual budget returns, historical estimates and outcome pricing to evaluate value for money.

- **Benchmarking:** allows users to define relevant benchmarks or comparators to measure performance against alternatives.

- **Mixed methods approach:** balances quantitative and qualitative criteria, with user-defined weighting for flexibility.

The toolkit is structured around two key stages (Figure 3):

1. **Framework design:** establishes the analytical structure, defining VfM criteria and performance standards.

2. **Assessment:** applies the framework to evaluate programme performance using a mix of data and expert judgement.

## Figure 3: Stages in prospective VfM evaluation

Source: Shiva et al (2021).

Each stage includes sequential steps to guide users in gathering robust evidence and ensuring accurate evaluations:

- **Theory of change** defines how and why an intervention leads to desired outcomes and impacts (Figure 4).

- **VfM criteria and standards** identifies relevant assessment criteria, sets performance benchmarks and clarifies how success will be measured.

- **Evidence requirements** specifies the quantitative and qualitative evidence needed for a thorough evaluation.

- **Data collection** gathers information across all VfM dimensions, ensuring balance across the 4Es framework (efficiency, economy, effectiveness and equity).

- **Analysis and synthesis** examines each type of evidence separately before synthesising findings to form an overall judgement.

- **Reporting** documents findings in a structured VfM assessment report, providing a clear record for decision makers.

Figure 4: Augmented VfM theory of change
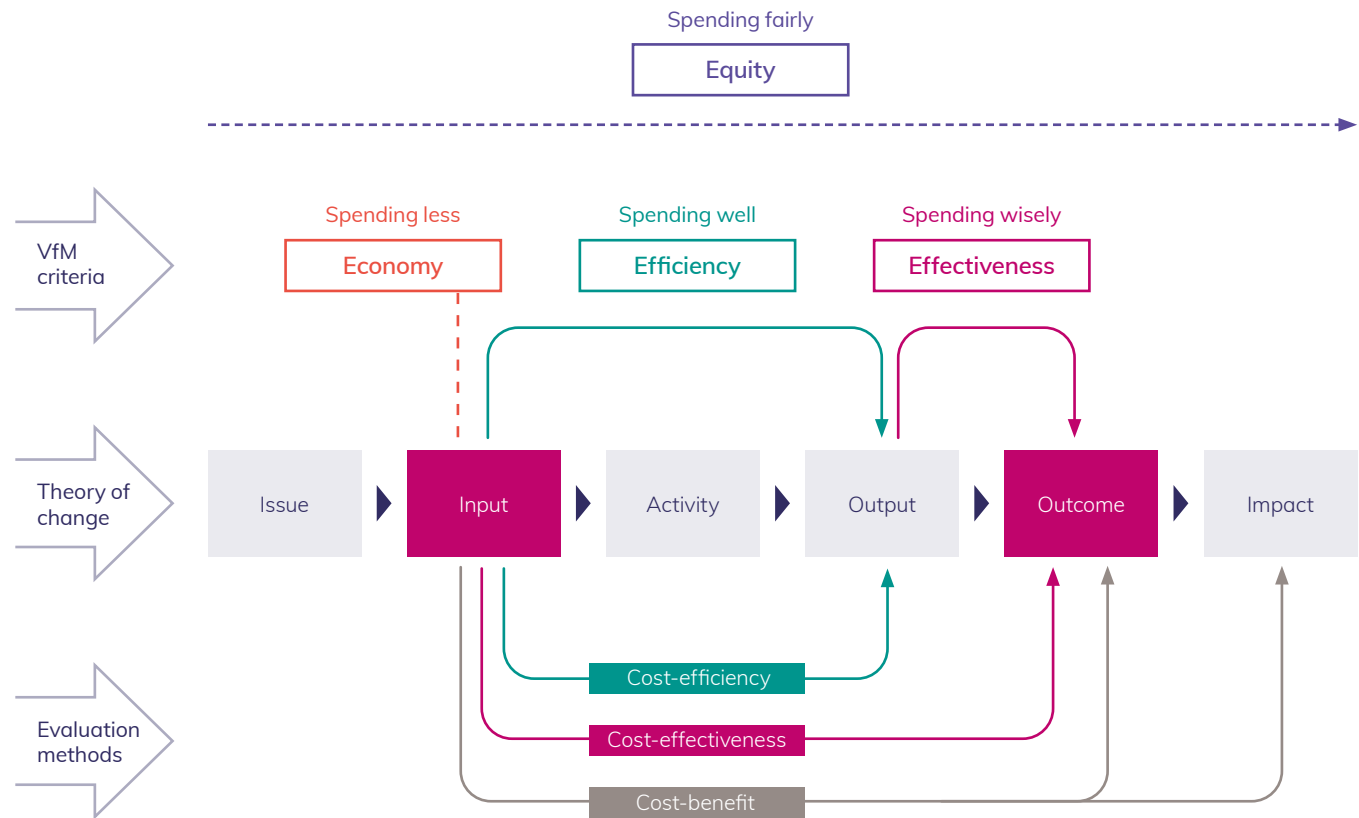
Source: Shiva et al (2021).

The VfM Toolkit is an Excel-based tool with five worksheet tabs designed for ease of use, and it does not require external data sharing (Table 1). It is free to access, and users are supported by a detailed guidance note and two instructional **video tutorials**. The second tutorial provides a step-by-step demonstration of the toolkit's quantitative calculator, helping users apply the framework in real-world scenarios.

By integrating structured evaluation steps, clear reporting and user-friendly tools, the VfM Toolkit helps public sector organisations make informed, data-driven decisions while ensuring accountability in resource allocation.

Table 1: Overview of VfM Toolkit structure

Worksheet	Purpose
Intro	Overview of the toolkit, its structure and how to use it.
Data checklist	Identifies the quantitative and qualitative data needed for analysis.
Quantitative calculator	Step-by-step tool for assessing inputs, outputs and outcomes using the 4Es framework.
Qualitative assessment	Self-assessment questionnaire evaluating programme assumptions, objectives, milestones and monitoring within the 4Es framework.
Social impact bonds estimates (optional)	Examines how impact bond funding affects internal rate of return (IRR) and return on investment (ROI) for private investors.
Summary	Provides a snapshot of projected value using key indicators and qualitative assessment scores. Includes benchmark comparisons when data has been provided.

Implementing the VfM Toolkit: strategy, impact and adoption

Strategic justification and implementation

Redbridge Council's digital delivery (DD) team leads digital transformation efforts, focusing on improving customer experiences across adult and children's social care, community services and other key areas. Unlike the IT department, which manages infrastructure, DD drives service enhancements through digital innovation.

Project timelines vary from six months to five years depending on complexity, available resources and financial planning. Budgets typically average £1m per project. Since launching the **Digital Programme** (2019) and **Core Programme** (2021), the DD team has spearheaded major initiatives requiring strong financial justification.

To meet the director of finance's request for ROI analysis, the DD team adopted the GO Lab-CIPFA VfM Toolkit. This framework, aligned with HM Treasury's Green Book, provides a structured evaluation process, strengthening investment decisions and financial accountability. The toolkit's credibility – bolstered by CIPFA's impartiality – secured senior leadership buy-in, including approval from the CEO, corporate directors

and the s151 officer. Their endorsement is crucial, as they oversee **a four-year corporate planning cycle**, ensuring all business activities align with strategic goals.

One key contributor within the DD team played a pivotal role in implementing the VfM Toolkit, organising data for the community programme, which includes highways, waste management and regulatory functions. Their efforts helped secure board and corporate steering group (CSG) approval, demonstrating the toolkit's effectiveness in aligning investments with corporate strategy and enhancing service delivery.

> "I was lead on building a case for change, which involved a number of transactional services. We decided to demonstrate the return on investment, or the value for the programmes, through the VFM Toolkit."

Evaluating impact and strengthening decision making

Redbridge Council has assessed 15 projects – including five in adult and children's social care and ten in communities – using the GO Lab-CIPFA VfM Toolkit. This shift from a focus on outputs to outcomes has improved how value delivery is understood across services.

Key insights from the evaluation process:

- **Constructive challenge**

  Finance teams reviewed and scrutinised data entered by programme leads, identifying gaps and refining assumptions to improve accuracy.

- **Data limitations**

  Variability in unit cost data, particularly for non-financial benefits, made it difficult to assess true value.

- **Capital funding considerations**

  Digital programmes require strong business cases to secure capital investment, highlighting the need for demonstrable long-term savings.

- **Project approval variability**

  While structured VfM proposals improved decision making in social care, measuring effectiveness and equity proved challenging for community projects.

- **Beyond financial savings**

  The toolkit quantified both cashable and non-cashable efficiencies, such as reallocating staff time to higher-value activities.
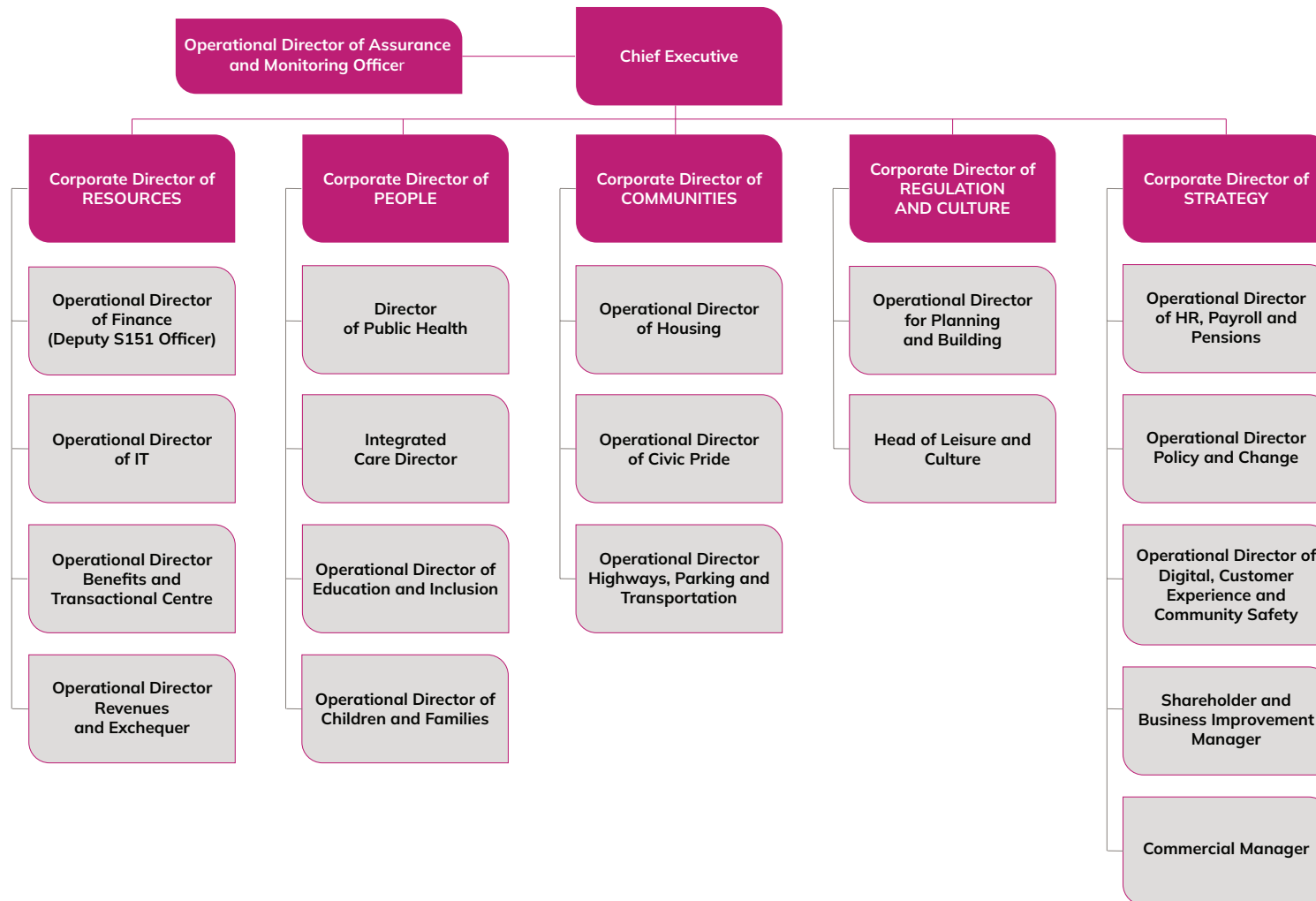
Initially, the VfM Toolkit was adopted to evaluate new and innovative projects, but it also proved effective in challenging existing practices. The framework highlighted non-cashable benefits that align with the corporate strategy, including:

- measurable outcomes that directly support the council's goals

- qualitative improvements such as enhanced staff satisfaction from more meaningful work

- the social impact and indirect benefits, which while not immediately financial could be translated into monetary terms.

One interviewee emphasised that DD programmes are financed through long-term capital investment funds, requiring strong business cases to secure approval. The governance review process mandates a formal business case submission before the project is presented to the corporate performance group or steering group for initial approval (Figure 5). Final decisions rest with cabinet, with funding typically granted based on expected savings.

> "The process remains consistent, where a business case is produced along with the financials, whether through a VfM model or another format as finance may require."

Figure 5: Redbridge Council management structure

Operational Director of Assurance and Monitoring Officer — Chief Executive

Corporate Director of RESOURCES
- Operational Director of Finance (Deputy S151 Officer)
- Operational Director of IT
- Operational Director Benefits and Transactional Centre
- Operational Director Revenues and Exchequer

Corporate Director of PEOPLE
- Director of Public Health
- Integrated Care Director
- Operational Director of Education and Inclusion
- Operational Director of Children and Families

Corporate Director of COMMUNITIES
- Operational Director of Housing
- Operational Director of Civic Pride
- Operational Director Highways, Parking and Transportation

Corporate Director of REGULATION AND CULTURE
- Operational Director for Planning and Building
- Head of Leisure and Culture

Corporate Director of STRATEGY
- Operational Director of HR, Payroll and Pensions
- Operational Director Policy and Change
- Operational Director of Digital, Customer Experience and Community Safety
- Shareholder and Business Improvement Manager
- Commercial Manager

Source: **Council Management Structure** (Feb 2025).

According to the Redbridge team, the VfM Toolkit provided four key benefits:

1. **Efficiency gains** identified £170,000 in potential savings across two assessed programmes.

2. **Effectiveness measurement** provided ROI insights, demonstrating the value of investment.

3. **Strategic alignment** ensured projects aligned with the corporate plan, with most achieving 60% or higher alignment.[2]

4. **Comprehensive analysis** assessed projects from multiple perspectives, supporting outcome-driven public sector initiatives.

While the toolkit provided a valuable structure, certain challenges emerged:

- **Complexity in measuring effectiveness and equity**
  These aspects were difficult to quantify, impacting project approvals.

- **Limited long-term ROI functionality**
  The toolkit's quantitative calculator effectively summarised key data but lacked features for assessing extended ROI horizons.

Despite these limitations, the Redbridge team found the toolkit useful for calculating efficiencies linked to project outcomes. They also explored non-cashable savings, analysing factors such as volumes, processing times and staff salaries alongside non-financial benefits like system rationalisation. This helped identify cost-saving opportunities such as automating application reviews, while balancing long-term objectives with immediate financial efficiencies.

When the findings were presented to corporate directors, they recognised the value of the VfM Toolkit but expressed concerns about its complexity. To enhance its effectiveness, they emphasised the need for clearer guidance on minimum data requirements to ensure consistency in assessments. Additionally, improving quality assurance measures would help address incomplete datasets, enhancing the reliability and accuracy of evaluations.

By addressing these challenges, the toolkit has the potential to further strengthen decision making, enhance financial accountability and support more strategic resource allocation in public sector projects.

Enhancing usability and expanding adoption

While the DD team values the VfM Toolkit for its structured and objective approach, there are no immediate plans for wider adoption across the organisation. Expanding its use would require leadership from the finance team, but their commitment remains uncertain, as they may prefer more established assessment models such as the **Green Book's five-case model**. Additionally, the council's reliance on pre-defined templates for savings and ROI projections limits the toolkit's integration into existing processes.

A key challenge identified was the complexity of the effectiveness and equity metrics, which were not fully understood. This made it difficult for the DD team to explain these sections to directors and other departments. However, the summary tab was widely appreciated for consolidating key insights beyond monetary savings, offering a broader perspective on project benefits.

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2   This figure was obtained from the equity section of the VfM Toolkit, where Redbridge used its corporate priorities as outcomes.

Another issue was the complexity of certain formulas within the Excel model. Users found some calculations unclear, and additional guidance, clearer signposting and a more streamlined process would significantly improve accessibility, particularly for those less familiar with VfM assessments.

Additionally, the toolkit lacks an easy way to benchmark project outcomes against a business-as-usual scenario. The Redbridge team had to calculate these comparisons separately, highlighting the need for built-in scenario planning with high, low and central forecasts to strengthen business cases.

Real-world examples would also support broader adoption. External use cases from other local authorities could serve as comparators, offering practical insights into how the toolkit has been applied successfully. Redbridge noted that resources such as blog posts, case studies and instructional videos tailored to councils would help bridge this gap and encourage uptake.

The social impact bond (SIB) tab was another area of concern. Many local authorities do not use SIBs, and the section was found to be difficult to navigate. Making this feature more intuitive and explicitly optional would improve its relevance. Additionally, while the toolkit's terminology aligns with UK Green Book guidance, refining its language to include widely recognised financial terms like net present value (NPV) and 'variable costs' would make it more accessible to practitioners.

For the VfM Toolkit to achieve broader adoption, Redbridge recommends several improvements: simplification, clearer guidance and built-in scenario analysis. Aligning the toolkit's language with standard financial models and incorporating practical case studies would further enhance usability, accessibility and overall impact.

Next steps

The digital delivery team sees opportunities for further training and broader adoption of the VfM Toolkit, but its long-term success hinges on buy-in from the finance department. Without their leadership and commitment, the toolkit's impact will remain limited.

A major barrier to wider implementation is the council's reliance on pre-approved business case templates, endorsed by senior finance officials and governance bodies such as the cabinet and corporate steering group. Even when the toolkit is used in early project planning, its findings must eventually be reformatted to fit these established templates, creating an additional layer of work.

While adapting the toolkit to better align with team needs is an option, it would still require significant effort. Business cases must follow the Green Book framework, meaning that despite the toolkit's benefits, it does not substantially reduce workload since compliance with existing approval processes remains mandatory. Moving forward, integrating the VfM Toolkit into the council's standard financial evaluation processes will be key to ensuring its long-term viability and impact.

# Case study 2: Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit

Background

The Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) is one of 20 partnerships established in 2018 by the Home Office to implement its **Serious Violence Strategy**. Covering Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, **Thames Valley Police** serve a population of 2.5 million. With 67.1 recorded criminal offences per 1,000 people in the year ending September 2024, crime rates in the area remain lower than the South East regional average (74.3) and significantly below England (87.0).[3]

The VRU operates as a multi-agency partnership, bringing together policing, local authority community safety teams, children's services, social care, prisons, probation, education, youth offending services and the voluntary and community sector. Its primary mission is to reduce violent crime, particularly among young people in public spaces, by fostering a coordinated, system-wide response.

Initially funded by the Home Office, the Thames Valley VRU secured a **three-year funding agreement in 2022/23** and have received £7m over this period. The unit collaborates with nine place-based serious violence reduction partnerships, each led by local authorities and including representatives from communities and the voluntary sector (Figure 6). These cover the whole Thames Valley region and nine upper-tier local authority geographies.

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3   **Crime in England and Wales: Police force area data tables** (ONS, 2025).

Figure 6: Thames Valley VRU operating model

Source: **Our operating model and governance** (Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit).
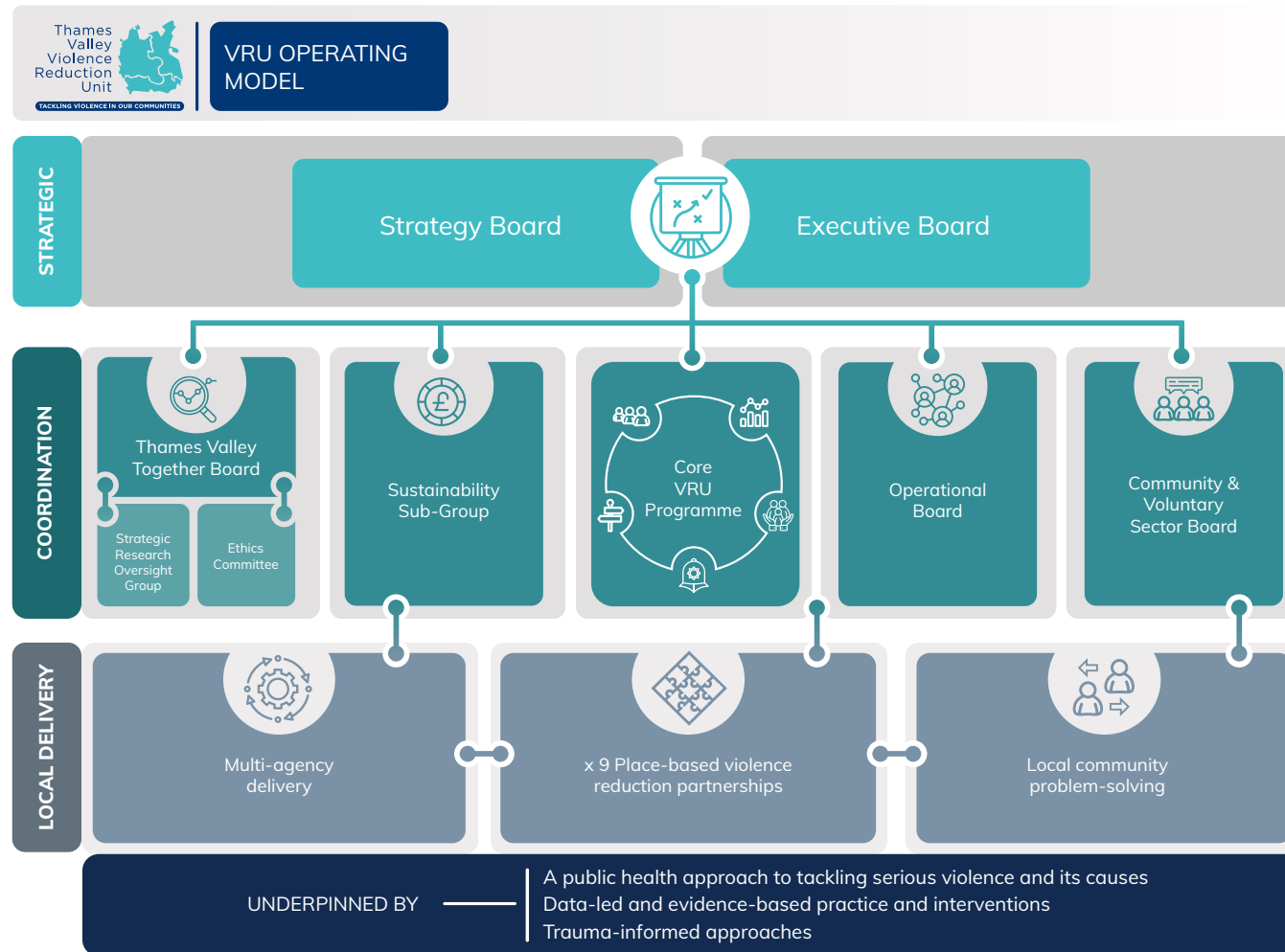
VRU core principles:

1. **Public health approach**, tackling serious violence by addressing root causes.

2. **Data-led and evidence-based**, using research and shared learning to drive interventions.

3. **Trauma-informed practices**, embedding approaches that recognise the impact of trauma.

According to the most recent VRU national evaluation report, while VRUs showed no statistically significant impact on hospital admissions for sharp object injuries or homicides, they did contribute to a notable reduction in recorded non-injury violent offences. Since funding began, an estimated 136,000 violence without injury offences (243 per 100,000 people) have been prevented in VRU-funded areas. This reduction translates into an estimated £4.10 return for every £1 invested in serious violence prevention efforts, combining VRU and Grip funding.[4]

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4 **Violence Reduction Units evaluation report (year ending March 2023)** (GOV.UK).

# Value for money life cycle approach: overview

Development and key principles

Public sector projects, including those led by police forces, often face a critical gap between implementation and empirical evaluation. The urgency to act quickly means that projects are frequently launched without thorough planning, and their effectiveness is assessed only after completion, if at all. As a result, VfM assessments rarely connect the cost of an intervention to its social impact in monetary terms. Without control groups or baseline measurements, it becomes difficult to determine whether an intervention truly benefits those it targets compared to those who do not receive it.

A Thames Valley VRU interviewee highlighted this challenge using a hypothetical example: a custody navigator programme is funded with £6,000 to support individuals in custody blocks. Initially, the provider estimates that they can serve three people. However, as weeks pass and demand increases, the original plan proves inadequate, disrupting delivery and highlighting the flaws in planning without proper baseline assessments. This issue aligns with a **2013 UK NAO survey of departmental chief analysts**, which identified tight timelines as the most significant barrier to high-quality evaluations (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Key barriers to better quality and use of evaluation

For each of the following factors, please indicate whether this is a barrier in using ex-post cost-effectiveness evidence in your department (responses from 'Frequent' and 'Sometimes' evaluators).
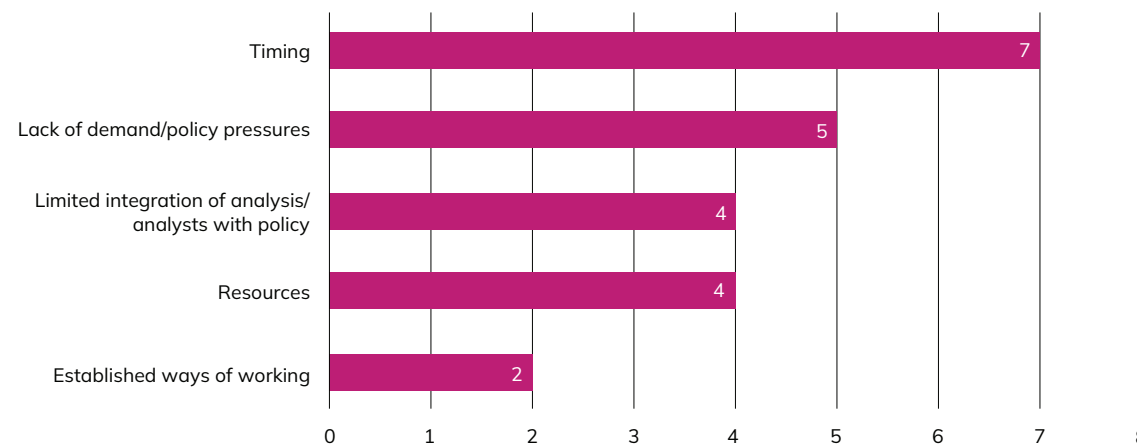
Source: **UK National Audit Office** (2013).

The absence of pre-intervention assessments makes it difficult to measure an intervention's true impact and costs. Without understanding prior conditions or potential negative outcomes faced by the target group, valuable insights into value for money are lost. The interviewee linked this to the fast-paced nature of funding applications, which are often drafted based on broad assumptions and approved without time for proper planning. Once funding is granted, projects must be implemented quickly, leaving little room for revising initial plans.

This lack of rigorous evaluation leads to several recurring problems:

- ineffective interventions going unnoticed until it is too late
- overlapping efforts that address the same issue inefficiently
- rushed implementation
- inadequate resource allocation.

Even post-project evaluations remain rare. A **2021 NAO report** found that only 8% of government spending on major projects (£35bn of £432bn total) had robust evaluation plans in place in 2019. Of 16 government departments surveyed, only six had a single evaluation strategy, and just four could provide an estimate of their total spending on evaluation activities.

To address these challenges, the Thames Valley VRU developed the value for money life cycle approach.[5]

Designed to integrate impact evaluation with VfM assessments, the framework is built on five key principles:

1. **Robust evidence must guide resource allocation**, ensuring funding is directed toward the most effective interventions.

2. **Piloting projects helps prevent wasted resources** and avoids the risks of ineffective strategies.

3. **Baseline measurements and thorough planning save time and effort later**, improving long-term project success.

4. **Evaluation must be considered from the start**, as poorly planned trials lead to inadequate assessments.

5. **Experiments should be replicable in real-world conditions**, prioritising practical, scalable solutions over controlled but impractical studies.

Although tight funding timelines remain a major challenge, the VRU team acknowledges that it is unrealistic to expect funders to overhaul their requirements. Instead they believe that presenting stronger baseline assessments within funding

proposals can set a higher standard, fostering competition and encouraging better evaluation practices across the sector.

From research to impact

The value for money life cycle approach provides a structured pipeline for transforming research ideas into actionable projects. It follows a staged process, passing through five key approval gates to ensure rigorous evaluation and value assessment (Figure 8). Each phase strengthens the project's foundation from initial concept to implementation.

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5   Olphin T (2023) *Research Project Life Cycle: A Structured Approach to Conducting Research in the Public Sector,* Reading: Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit.

Figure 8: Value for money life cycle
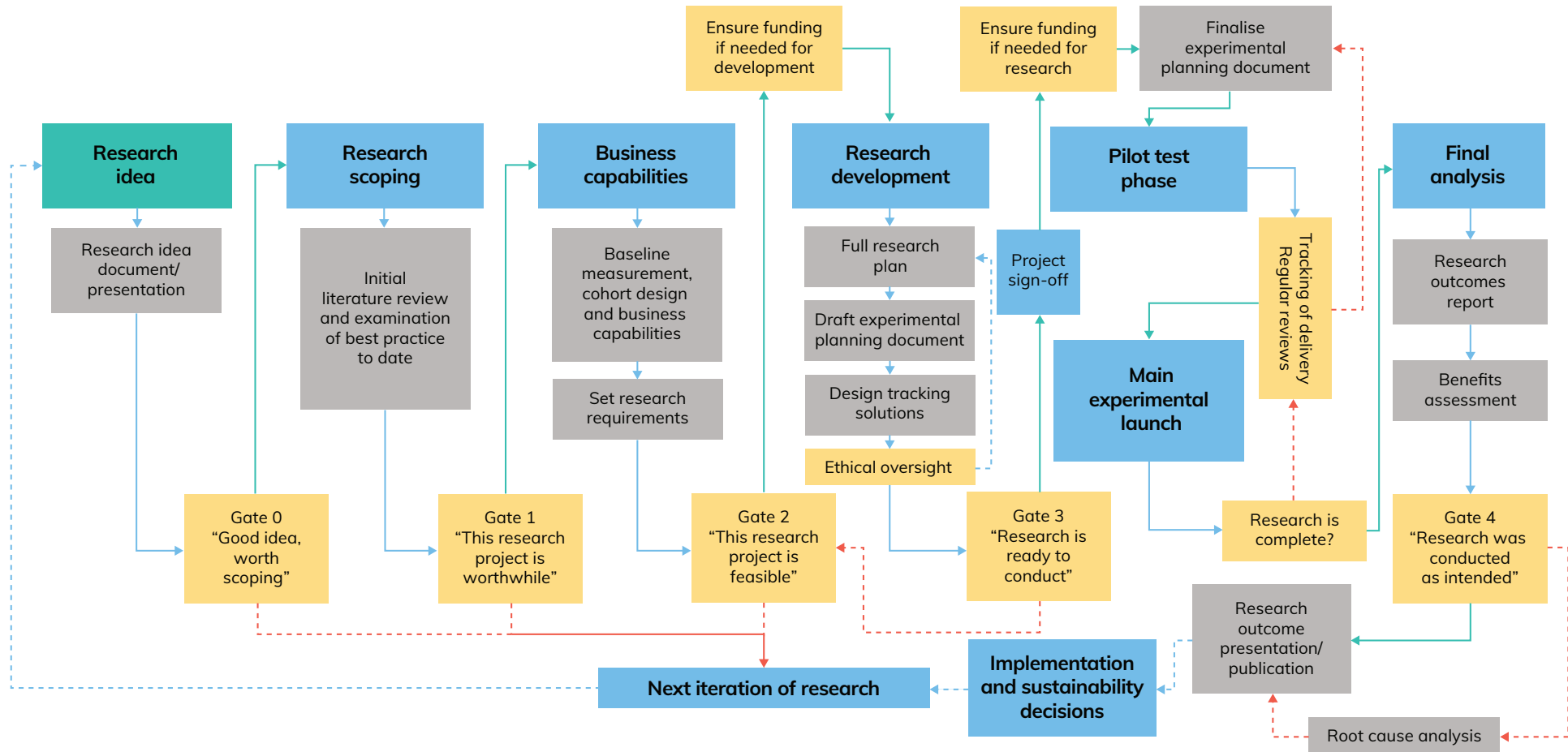
Source: Olphin T (2023).

Research idea (Gate 0: Initial feasibility check)

The process begins with an idea based on assumptions about how an intervention could address a social issue. The idea is documented and presented to the internal team for review. If deemed promising, it moves through **Gate 0**, confirming that it is worth further exploration.

Research scoping (Gate 1: Evidence review)

At this stage, the team gathers existing evidence and best practices, conducting an initial literature review. This research informs whether the intervention is viable based on prior findings. If the evidence supports further development, the project moves through **Gate 1**, validating that the research is worth pursuing.

Business capabilities (Gate 2: Feasibility assessment)

This phase evaluates whether the project can be practically implemented. It involves baseline surveys, defining the target cohort and assessing the necessary resources and operational capacity. Research requirements are set, ensuring the project is well structured. If feasible, it advances through **Gate 2**.

If external funding is required, this is the critical stage for securing it. A compelling funding application – incorporating the research idea, supporting evidence and feasibility assessment – is developed to attract research grants or alternative financing.

Research development (Gate 3: Project readiness)

Here the full research plan is created, including experimental design, tracking solutions and ethical oversight. The project ensures all conditions are met for a successful pilot. Before moving forward, it must pass **Gate 3**, which verifies that the research is ready to be conducted. If it fails, feasibility must be reassessed before proceeding.

Pilot testing and evaluation

With the research plan finalised, the intervention is piloted. A randomly selected group receives the intervention (treatment group) while another does not (control group), allowing for a comparative impact analysis. Delivery is closely monitored through regular reviews to ensure proper implementation.

Final analysis (Gate 4: Research validation)

Once the pilot concludes, results are analysed in a comprehensive research outcomes report, which assesses the intervention's impact and benefits. If the project meets its intended objectives, it moves through **Gate 4**. If issues arise, a root cause analysis is conducted to refine the approach for future iterations.

After validation, findings are summarised, presented internally and prepared for publication to contribute to sector-wide learning.
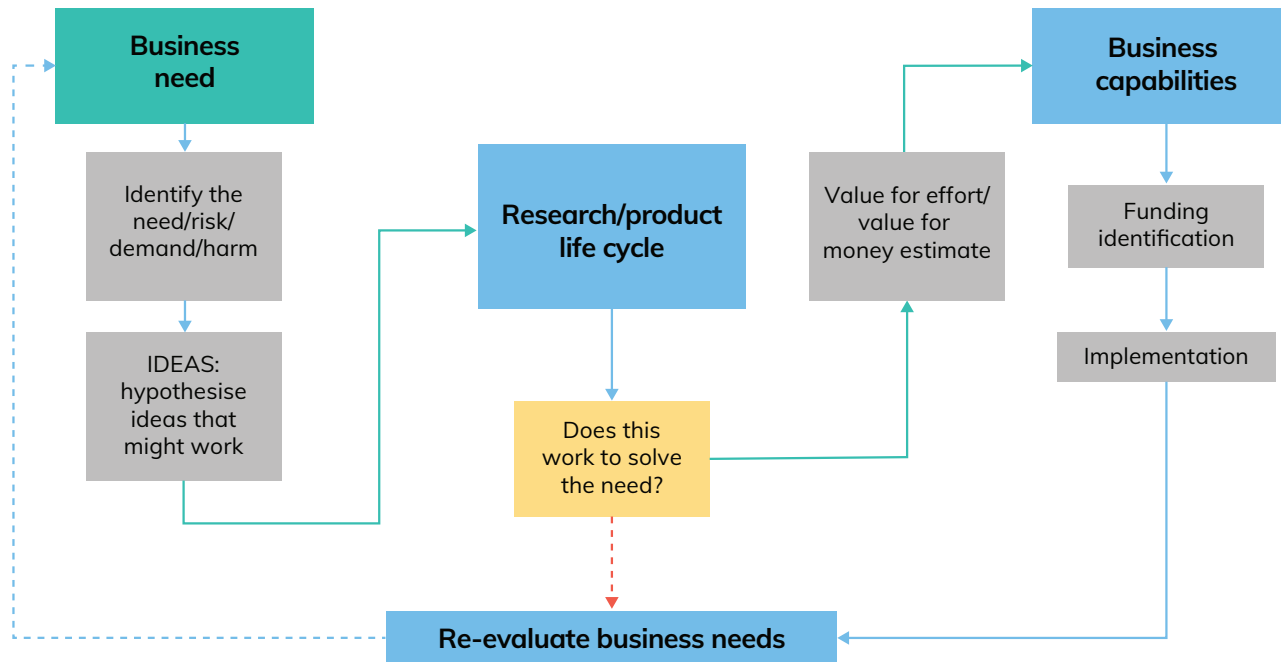
Implementation and scaling

Based on the results, a decision is made on whether to scale up, refine or discontinue the intervention. If successful and sustainable, the project is expanded with continuous monitoring to ensure it maintains its effectiveness. If results are inconclusive or require further refinement, additional research iterations may be conducted.

The value for money life cycle approach aligns with standard business practices, integrating research into decision making. It builds upon an initial business need assessment, identifying potential interventions, estimating their expected impact and ensuring rigorous value for money evaluation before full-scale implementation (Figure 9).

This structured, evidence-driven approach ensures that funding and resources are allocated to the most effective interventions, preventing waste and improving long-term outcomes.

Figure 9: Value for money life cycle approach integration into business flow

Source: Olphin T (2023).

Value for money life cycle approach: implementation

Adoption and cross-sector interest

The Thames Valley VRU began adopting the value for money life cycle approach in 2022/23, starting with the recruitment of a specialist and a comprehensive review of ongoing projects through this framework. Since then, the approach has been systematically integrated into operations, with key milestones including:

- **Autumn 2022:** life cycle approach formally incorporated into the VRU; review and adaptation of all VRU projects.

- **April 2023:** Launch of the third version of the Hotspot Policing project under the life cycle approach (**the first version was released in November 2021**); participation in the **Value in Public Finance** peer learning group.

- **May/June 2023:** Presentations to the Operational Board (project deliverers), Sports and Inclusion Board and Strategy Board (where key decision makers – including leaders from the Ambulance Trust, Social Services, Education, Fire Service and Police – formally endorsed the model).

- **July 2023:** National data conference presentation for VRUs.

Several Thames Valley VRU initiatives are now undergoing evaluation and progressing through Gate 2, where their feasibility will be determined. Among these is **Operation Paramount**, launched in 2021, which uses HM Prisons and Probation Service data to identify and support children with incarcerated parents, working primarily with the charity Children Heard and Seen. This innovative approach aims to address risk factors and provide timely support to vulnerable families, helping to prevent future crime and improve overall wellbeing.

Another partnership project includes the Schools Navigators, launched in 2022 by the charity SOFEA in Milton Keynes. The aim of this pilot is to support young people at risk of school exclusion through weekly mentoring sessions that improve self-esteem, behaviour and engagement with education. A **recent randomised control trial (RCT) evaluation** (2024) found that treatment schools had a 17.5% lower suspension rate than control schools, both in the terms following mentoring eligibility and overall. Work has also just been completed on a rapid evidence review of 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET) to in **'education, employment or training' (EET) mentoring**.

While the health, education and law enforcement sectors have shown strong interest in the life cycle approach, widespread adoption remains limited.

The key to broader uptake lies in demonstrating measurable successes, which the VRU expects to achieve upon completing its initial trials in 2025.

Beyond the VRU, adoption is gaining momentum in other areas. The Police and Crime Commissioner's Office is incorporating the approach into its strategic planning, indicating a shift toward regional acceptance. Additionally, the VRU's ability to conduct cross-sector trials in social services and education enhances its credibility, making it more appealing beyond policing. Success in these trials could drive a unified operational model across diverse sectors.

Research-oriented dialogue has been instrumental in promoting the life cycle approach, particularly among other VRUs. Many units have shown interest but are waiting for Thames Valley's results before adopting the methodology. Some, like Leicestershire VRU, have proactively created dedicated research positions to support evidence-based decision making.

If the Home Office formally endorses the approach, it could become the standard framework for all VRUs. Interest extends beyond violence reduction, with organisations like **Street Games** exploring its application in sports interventions. Rather than imposing the methodology, the VRU aims to position it as a valuable tool that enhances efficiency, accelerates

outcomes, and improves funding prospects. Locally, Thames Valley is actively working with partner agencies to encourage its use as a best practice standard for new initiatives.

With growing support, ongoing trials and potential national endorsement, the life cycle approach is poised to transform how public sector interventions are designed, evaluated and scaled for impact.

Insights from implementation

One of the key projects piloting the life cycle approach is **Focused Deterrence**. Launched by the Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership in February 2023, the intervention targets under-25s who habitually carry knives or have committed violent or sexual offences. Deterrence through a combination of swift enforcement and support services is how the programme aims to reduce reoffending and harm.

As this approach to violence reduction was first developed in the USA, testing focused deterrence in the UK presented an exciting opportunity to generate new, high-quality evidence on its effectiveness. As no prior randomised trials existed, a scoping exercise led by the Thames Valley VRU defined the project's cohort size and ensured a structured approach. Discussions with practitioners helped resolve disagreements over

participant selection, leading to a consensus on the most effective strategy.

As the intervention progressed, the RCT design was refined through multiple stakeholder meetings, with the life cycle approach serving as a critical framework for structuring discussions and guiding decision making. This collaborative approach supported an alignment on key methodologies, ensuring the experiment's feasibility.

Key findings from the evaluation after twelve months of delivery include:

- **A significant reduction in crime harm:** a 54% overall reduction in crime harm among participants.

- **A reduction in knife-related offences:** a 40% decrease in knife-related crimes committed by participants.

- **Lower violent crime rates:** a 28% reduction in violent crimes committed and a 29% reduction in violent or sexual crimes.

- **Decreased victimisation:** a 36% reduction in victimisation from violent crimes.[6]

The intervention was found to have significantly reduced knife and violent crime, especially among younger participants. Its success highlights the potential for wider adoption, emphasising personalised support and fair enforcement. Scaling it up could enhance community safety and lower criminal justice costs.

Feedback from practitioners on the life cycle approach has been overwhelmingly positive. Many professionals, including social care experts and senior decision makers, acknowledged the need for change and appreciated the methodology's clarity and practicality. While these endorsements were often made in large public forums, where opinions may be influenced by group dynamics, there had been no direct opposition or calls for significant revisions. The team found such a uniform response unexpected, given the diverse audience, which included senior Home Office officials and service leaders.

Beyond verbal support, the rigorous and transparent nature of the life cycle approach has fostered open and honest discussions with experienced professionals, particularly in social care. These dialogues frequently expose the lack of empirical evidence underpinning existing practices – a realisation that, while not immediately altering procedures, signals a shift towards evidence-based decision making. This growing awareness lays the groundwork for broader acceptance of the life cycle approach across multiple sectors, positioning it as a model for future interventions.

Challenges and lessons learned

Implementing the life cycle approach presents challenges, particularly in adapting evidence-based practices to different contexts and addressing data limitations. An example is the **Hotspot Policing project** conducted by Thames Valley VRU, which was designed based on successful models from the United States.

Hotspot policing involves deploying officers to strategically selected high-crime areas to deter criminal activity. In this experiment, randomly assigned small areas in Thames Valley were designated to receive increased police presence. While the intervention resulted in a 7.5% reduction in crime, the findings were not statistically significant due to the low overall crime levels in the UK compared to the US. The lower crime rates in these areas reduced the statistical power of the study, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions.

To address this limitation, the VRU continues to analyse results every three months and plans to expand the study to increase the sample size and strengthen the statistical validity of the findings. While stakeholders recognise hotspot policing as a promising strategy, they also acknowledge concerns about potential bias – specifically, the risk of disproportionately targeting poorer communities, where crime rates tend to be higher.

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6   **Innovative youth violence intervention shows significant impact in reducing offending and harm – Focused Deterrence evaluation published** (Thames Valley Violence Prevention Partnership, 2024).

This case highlights the broader challenge of applying international research to local contexts. Moving forward, the VRU must refine its methodology, data collection and analysis strategies to ensure that interventions are both evidence-based and contextually relevant.

Next steps

The next phase for the value for money life cycle approach is to integrate it into a unit cost calculator, allowing the Thames Valley VRU to quantify the financial impact of interventions more effectively. Unlike general cost estimators such as the Home Office's crime-related expense reports, this tool will go further by mapping interventions to cost savings across multiple agencies. By translating case reductions into financial terms, the VRU aims to provide compelling evidence to influence resource allocation decisions.

This initiative requires detailed mapping of service connections and associated costs across different agencies. It builds on the life cycle approach, analysing who is involved, what actions are taken, the time involved, and the broader societal costs incurred. By linking intervention outcomes to financial savings – including spillover effects on policing, healthcare and social services – the VRU will create a comprehensive value-mapping system.

For instance, if a RCT finds that a social care intervention reduces knife crime by 10%, this reduction represents savings on police resources, holding cell maintenance and legal proceedings. Without clear cost analyses, such efficiencies often go unnoticed, limiting their influence on policy and funding decisions. Demonstrating these financial benefits is crucial for the VRU's long-term sustainability, ensuring that decision makers recognise the economic as well as social value of interventions.

Currently, the VRU is reflecting on how this data-driven model can be implemented more widely. Although funding is important, there is an acute awareness of the need to develop specialised expertise, strong leadership and the ability to ask the right questions across the sector. With a diverse portfolio of RCT evaluations either underway or completed, the VRU team are well positioned to communicate what works (and what doesn't) to a broader regional and national audience.

Strengthening cost analysis for sustainable impact

The value for money life cycle approach was developed out of necessity rather than dedicated funding, providing much-needed structure to project management. While the strategy is currently supported through 2025, the Thames Valley VRU stresses the importance of a coordinated, cross-agency commitment to evidence gathering and research. The challenge lies in balancing delivery with evaluation, an area where the VRU's policy research expertise is particularly valuable.

For long-term sustainability and funding, the VRU must prove the cost-effectiveness of its RCT evaluation method. The partnership estimates an annual operational cost of £400,000–500,000. This covers the tracking, project management, research leadership and evaluation across multiple counties in Thames Valley. Ultimately, the success of this model relies on inter-agency collaboration, with the VRU serving as a facilitator and guide rather than a sole operator.

By identifying higher impact intervention and diversion approaches, the Thames Valley VRU contributes to a 'what works' culture of public value. The rigorous design and evaluation of RCTs has supported critical, joined-up thinking. As the team further refines the life cycle approach, they are working with interested parties to ensure that data-driven decision making becomes a standard practice across public sector agencies.

Comparative analysis

A complementary framework: integrating the VfM Toolkit and life cycle approach

The VfM Toolkit and the life cycle approach serve distinct but complementary purposes. The toolkit prioritises ease of use and prospective assessment, assuming that some data is already available for evaluation. In contrast, the life cycle approach emphasises impact evaluation, ensuring the right data is collected to accurately assess value for money.

Their perspectives also differ: the VfM Toolkit evaluates individual projects, while the life cycle approach is designed to integrate multiple projects, particularly when linked to the unit cost calculator.

Despite these differences, the two frameworks can be effectively combined. The life cycle approach generates impact evaluation data, which can then be used as an input for cost-effectiveness analysis in the VfM Toolkit. By using the VfM Toolkit after pilot interventions, decision makers can leverage robust, evidence-based insights to refine funding strategies and optimise resource allocation.

Table 2 summarises how Redbridge Borough Council and Thames Valley VRU implement these frameworks in practice. It outlines key differences in assessment approach, alignment with UK guidance, challenges faced and methodological tools used, illustrating how each organisation navigates VfM evaluation within its unique operational context.

Table 2: Case study comparison

Category	Redbridge Council	Thames Valley VRU
VfM assessment approach	• Conducted project by project, focusing on individual cost-effectiveness. • Uses pre-approved business case templates for VfM evaluation. • Primarily applies the GO Lab – CIPFA **VfM Toolkit.**	• Conducted project by project but aims to integrate cross-sector cost analysis. • Uses the **life cycle approach** to link impact evaluation with financial assessment. • Plans to develop a unit cost calculator for more precise VfM mapping.
Alignment with UK guidance	• **Green Book** compliant, emphasising traditional financial analysis and ROI assessments. • Focuses on standardised project evaluation templates approved by senior finance teams.	• **Magenta Book** aligned, emphasising impact evaluation and experimental design. • Integrates public health principles into its approach and consistent with UK best practices for evaluating social interventions.
Key challenges	• Limited unit cost data for robust VfM analysis. • Difficulty in comparing projects due to variations in scope and impact. • Expert capacity constraints for conducting detailed evaluations.	• Short evaluation timeframes limiting statistical significance. • Challenges in adapting international evidence to local UK contexts. • Stakeholder buy-in required for broader adoption of the life cycle approach.

Scaling adoption: lessons and strategies for peer learning

The Thames Valley VRU, as a multi-agency partnership, has the potential to embed the life cycle approach across its member organisations, promoting wider adoption beyond violence reduction initiatives. In contrast, the VfM Toolkit was designed for flexible use by local authorities, allowing them to adapt it to their specific needs. However, both frameworks currently face limited adoption, which may depend on stronger internal support, demonstrated benefits and published case studies to encourage uptake by similar organisations.

In Redbridge, peer learning has been minimal, with the DD team primarily working with their finance business partners rather than engaging with other local authorities. While plans are in place to monitor projects and develop a benefits realisation plan, success hinges on securing the finance team's backing for broader implementation of the VfM Toolkit.

The VRU team promotes the life cycle approach through conferences and direct engagement with local

partners and other VRUs. However, a key barrier to adoption is the need for research expertise to oversee its implementation. Many agencies lack dedicated researchers, instead relying on managers from other teams, which may limit the framework's effectiveness.

Expanding adoption could be accelerated through external support from organisations like CIPFA or GO Lab, especially if a strong evidence base is established. The Thames Valley VRU team sees value in packaging the life cycle approach into a structured, user-friendly format with clear guidelines. While current documentation is information rich, making it more accessible and actionable could help drive adoption across a broader range of public sector organisations.

Building practitioner confidence: overcoming barriers to implementation

Practitioners view both the VfM Toolkit and the life cycle approach as valuable frameworks for organisational learning and strategic refinement. By encouraging structured reflection, both tools help reassess theories of change, identify gaps in data availability, and strengthen monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices. However, their reception and perceived utility vary based on their design, ease of use and alignment with existing institutional processes.

The VfM Toolkit has been particularly well received due to its user-friendly interface and practical application. Practitioners appreciate its accessibility, allowing them to perform financial assessments without requiring extensive research expertise. Additionally, the model's association with CIPFA and the University of Oxford has enhanced its credibility, making it easier to gain internal buy-in for project evaluations. Some practitioners highlight that this backing is particularly useful when presenting findings to finance teams and senior leadership, reinforcing the toolkit's role in internal validation.

The life cycle approach, while seen as a rigorous and evidence-driven framework, faces greater adoption challenges due to its methodological complexity and the need for specialist research knowledge. Many agencies lack dedicated evaluation teams, making it difficult to fully implement the approach without additional capacity. However, where it has been applied – such as in the Focused Deterrence project and Hotspot Policing pilot – it has been instrumental in structuring evaluations and fostering cross-sector discussions. Practitioners acknowledge its potential for system-wide integration, particularly when paired with a unit cost calculator that links impact assessments to financial savings.

Despite the positive feedback, both frameworks require wider adoption to demonstrate their effectiveness across diverse organisational contexts. Currently, their use remains largely within the early adopter phase, with uptake dependent on factors such as internal advocacy, senior leadership support and evidence of tangible benefits. The next section explores the sustainability of bespoke models, highlighting key factors that could influence their long-term integration into public sector decision making.

Implementation and sustainability

For organisations lacking the resources to conduct full-scale Green Book business case analyses, VfM tools offer a pragmatic and adaptable alternative. However, their long-term success depends on their ease of use, credibility, regulatory alignment and widespread adoption. While bespoke models streamline VfM assessments, they still require time, expertise, reliable data sources and clear comparators to ensure meaningful evaluations.

Key factors for long-term impact

- **Ease of use**

  Simplicity drives adoption. Bespoke models must minimise complexity while maintaining robust cost-benefit analysis to be effective for organisations with limited resources.

- **Credibility**

  Adoption is often linked to trust in the model's source. Endorsements from CIPFA, the Home Office or the University of Oxford enhance legitimacy, reassuring decision makers.

- **Regulatory incentives**

  Performance auditing bodies can encourage use. As highlighted by Norway's Auditor General's Office, VfM models can serve as effective communication tools between regulators and organisations, aligning public spending with accountability standards.

- **Wider adoption and knowledge sharing**

  To drive uptake, organisations need accessible guidance and case studies that demonstrate real-world impact, allowing peers to benchmark their own VfM assessments.

Recommendations for long-term viability

- **Institutional buy-in, especially from finance teams**

  VfM models must align with finance departments, as they are the primary stakeholders engaging with these assessments. The methodology should use clear, finance-friendly language to ensure usability in budgeting and decision making.

- **Publication and transparency**

  Publicly sharing VfM analysis results validates the approach, builds credibility, and attracts feedback from the broader evaluation community. Case studies demonstrating quantifiable cost savings and effectiveness will encourage adoption across sectors.

- **Building a peer learning network**

  A community of users fosters collaboration, shared learning and best practice refinement. Engagement platforms like **HM Treasury's Green Book newsletter** and the **Value in Public Finance** peer learning group co-hosted by CIPFA and GO Lab can support ongoing dialogue and knowledge exchange.

- **Continuous improvement based on feedback**

  Regular updates informed by user experience and evolving policy needs will keep VfM models relevant, accurate and adaptable. Iterative refinements ensure these models remain practical and impactful over time.

By focusing on usability, credibility, regulatory alignment and peer learning, bespoke VfM models can transition from early adoption to mainstream implementation. Ensuring finance teams' engagement, transparent reporting and ongoing refinements will drive sustainable, evidence-based decision making across the public sector.

Conclusion

This report demonstrates the critical role of VfM assessments in enhancing decision making, accountability and resource allocation across public organisations. Through two case studies – the London Borough of Redbridge and the Thames Valley VRU – we have explored how different VfM frameworks support evidence-based policymaking and improve financial oversight.

The Redbridge Borough Council case highlighted the GO Lab-CIPFA VfM Toolkit, a structured yet flexible framework that helped evaluate project costs and benefits, align initiatives with corporate objectives, and quantify both financial and non-financial outcomes. The framework's accessibility and credibility, supported by CIPFA and the University of Oxford, made it a valuable tool for internal validation. However, wider adoption depends on finance team buy-in, ongoing refinement and practical integration into existing business case templates.

In contrast, the Thames Valley VRU case study focused on the VfM life cycle approach, which integrates impact evaluation with financial assessment. This method helps address challenges in baseline measurements, project planning and intervention efficacy, providing a structured framework for assessing long-term cost-effectiveness. While its rigour and system-wide application make it a powerful tool, adoption challenges remain – particularly the need for research expertise and organisational capacity to implement it effectively.

Both approaches challenge traditional financial assessments by introducing multi-dimensional analysis, data-driven insights and structured evaluation frameworks. While they offer clear benefits – efficiency savings, transparency and informed decision-making – practitioners identified key barriers, including data limitations, methodological complexity and the need for clearer guidance on implementation.

For VfM frameworks to be widely adopted, organisations must:

- **improve usability and accessibility**, ensuring tools are intuitive and require minimal additional resources

- **strengthen alignment with established financial frameworks** such as HM Treasury's Green Book and Magenta Book to integrate VfM assessments into standard policy and budgeting processes

- **encourage knowledge sharing and peer learning,** allowing practitioners to exchange best practices and refine methodologies based on real-world applications

- **ensure continuous evaluation and adaptation**, refining models based on practical feedback to maintain their relevance in a dynamic public sector landscape.

VfM assessments are not just about financial scrutiny – they are powerful tools for driving strategic transformation. By enabling public organisations to optimise resource allocation, maximise impact and improve service delivery, they help ensure that public funds are used effectively to deliver meaningful outcomes. Their continued refinement and integration will be key to building a more transparent, accountable and efficient public sector.

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Acknowledgements

About CIPFA

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) is a UK-based international accountancy membership and standard-setting body. We are the only such body globally dedicated to public financial management.

CIPFA believes that improving public services is the key to changing lives for the better and that good public financial management is central to achieving this ambition. Our educational and advisory services support our members, students and other public finance professionals throughout their careers – helping them add value to their teams and the organisations for which they work. Through the Institute's work, we help ensure public money is raised and spent with the highest degree of openness.

CIPFA and GO Lab co-host the **Value in Public Finance** peer learning group.

About GO Lab

The Government Outcomes Lab (GO Lab) is a research and policy centre based in the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford. It was created as a partnership between the School and the UK government and is funded by a range of organisations. Using qualitative, quantitative and economic analysis, it investigates how governments partner with the private and social sectors to improve social outcomes.

GO Lab hosts an online global knowledge hub and data collaborative and has an expansive programme of engagement and capacity building to disseminate insights and allow the wider community to share experiences with one another.

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