

WEST MIDLAND COMBINED AUTHORITY SINGLE ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK (SAF)

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's)



West Midlands
Combined Authority

VERSION CONTROL

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2.0	20-Jan-22	Karen Wright	Updated questions and link to the website
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4.0	10-Oct-22	Karen Wright	New diagrams
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1.0 PURPOSE

This document contains the answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). It will be updated as questions are raised or processes change. The document can be found here: Intranet: [Single Assurance Framework | WMCA](#) Internet: www.wmca.org.uk/saf

2.0 SCOPE

This document is useful for all business case authors and project/programme employees responsible for developing business cases using WMCA business case templates. These FAQs will help to ensure the requirements of HMT Green Book and the SAF are met.

3.0 FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

3.1 GENERAL PRINCIPLES

What do we mean by the ‘Single Assurance Framework’ or SAF?

The SAF is a set of systems, processes and protocols designed to provide WMCA with a consistent approach for appraisal, assurance, risk management and performance throughout the lifecycle of projects and programmes. The SAF sets out key processes for ensuring accountability, probity, transparency, and legal compliance and for ensuring value for money is achieved across its investments.

The SAF will be applied across the lifecycle of all projects and programmes that incur a financial liability on WMCA.

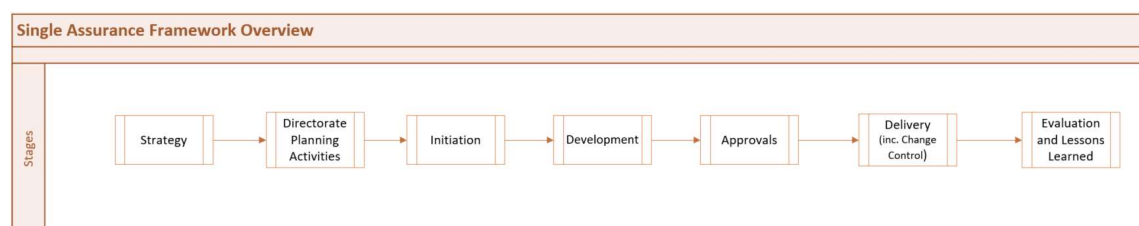
An overview of the SAF is provided in **Appendix 1**.

Why is SAF needed?

The SAF is needed to ensure that the WMCA is compliant with:

- **Project Governance** – To meet the requirements of the [WMCA Constitution](#)
- [English Devolution Accountability Framework](#) – Sets out Government’s requirement for Mayoral Combined Authorities to develop their own Local Assurance Framework. There is a requirement to update it annually.
- **Best Value for money** – ensuring that WMCA spend public money in the most effective and efficient way, meeting its Aims and Objectives
- **Monitoring & Evaluation** – Effective monitoring and evaluation is a government requirement for any funding WMCA receives. It helps inform decision-makers about how well we’re doing and whether we need to change our approach, based upon ongoing performance reporting. Implementing the SAF will enable a baseline of project/programme objectives and outcomes to be defined which will form the basis of ongoing performance monitoring, reporting and eventual evaluation of whether these have been met.

What are the overarching principles of the SAF?



- **Initiation, Development & Approvals** – The SAF incorporates these overarching processes, which are facilitated by the Finance and Business Hub directorate (Initiation), Programme Assurance & Appraisal Team (Development) and Legal & Governance Services (Approvals). The Guide to Corporate Governance provides a summary of these processes and how enabling services functions can support Project/Programme leads. To obtain a copy of the Guide to Corporate Governance contact governance.services@wmca.org.uk.

- **Directorate led** – Directorates are responsible for developing business cases and engaging SMEs and any external delivery organisations, e.g. LA's. They control the pace of project initiation and the development of business cases.
- **Proportionate** – A proportionate approach is applied to development and approval of business cases, dependent upon their nature and complexity. Project Leads should work with the Programme Assurance & Appraisal Team (Centre of Excellence) to agree an appropriate development route and indicative timescale through to approval
- **Consistent and streamlined approach** – All projects will go through the SAF, regardless of their funding stream(s) and value.
- **Aligned to HM Treasury 'Green Book'** – The SAF, and all supporting processes/documentation, are aligned to HM Treasury Green Book guidance; ensuring a consistent standard is applied to the development, appraisal and approval of Business Cases and ongoing monitoring of deliverables.

What Constitutes a SAF Project?

Projects and Programmes which follow the SAF are funded by external sources such as devolution deals and bid awards from Central Government; for example, the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) and the Investment Programme where the WMCA is the accountable body.

SAF is applicable for projects/programmes where the beneficiaries are the wider population of the West Midlands. Internal projects, driving organisation-wide improvements and projects where the beneficiaries are internal to the Combined Authority do not need to go through the SAF.

The SAF provides an independent, out of directorate review of draft business cases, helping to improve their maturity against HMT Green Book guidance, and informs decision-makers of ongoing project/programme risks through its Risk and Investment Appraisal process.

Programmes and Projects that are required to be SAF compliant will address one or more of WMCA Aims 1 to 5 ([WMCA Aims and Objectives](#))

Who do I go to for support or with any queries regarding SAF?

The Programme Assurance and Appraisal team will work collaboratively with delivery directorates to ensure that effective, proportionate and consistent implementation of the SAF. As experts in risk, assurance and project management, the team will work with directorates and project leads to provide technical expertise, support and guidance.

If you have any questions about the SAF or the Finance & Business Hub/Programme Assurance & Appraisal Team please contact: ProgrammeAssuranceandAppraisal@wmca.org.uk

This email is regularly monitored, and messages will be signposted to the appropriate team ensuring a timely response.

All information relating to the SAF including business case templates and guidance and information about the Change Control process, can be found here: Intranet: [Single Assurance Framework | WMCA](#) Internet: [Single Assurance Framework \(wmca.org.uk\)](http://Single Assurance Framework (wmca.org.uk))

A suite of training courses is also available on Learning Pool that you can access [here](#). Some of this training is mandatory for all employees.

I'm not internal to the WMCA, how will I access the information I need?

When you start to work with your usual contacts at the WMCA, they will be able to explain the process to you and direct you to the appropriate templates and guidance that will be on the WMCA website [Single Assurance Framework \(wmca.org.uk\)](http://Single Assurance Framework (wmca.org.uk))

If any external delivery partners have any questions about the SAF and how it will impact their project(s), please contact ProgrammeAssuranceandAppraisal@wmca.org.uk

How is SAF applied to projects in delivery?

- **Health Checks:**

The Programme Assurance team implements an annual programme of risk-based 'Health Checks' of projects/programmes in delivery. The team will use a tool to complete Health Checks which incorporates key lines of enquiry based upon HM Treasury Green Book, Association for Project Management and Infrastructure and Project Authority best practice.

Prior to a Health Check, its scope and terms of reference will be agreed with the project/programme lead and following a Health Check a report detailing any findings and recommendations will be produced. The focus of any Health Check is to assess the likelihood of successful delivery, based on evidence collected through a desk-top review of documentation and meetings with key project/programme stakeholders.

Their focus is on helping to drive continuous improvement. Further information can be found [here](#)

- **Change Control:**

If your project or programme changes in scope, costs increase/decrease or expected timescales are unlikely to be met, contact the Centre of Excellence in the Programme Assurance & Appraisal team and raise a [Change Request Form](#) (use this [link](#) if you are an external project lead). This process applies to all Projects/programmes, even if they started before the introduction of SAF.

Ongoing performance monitoring and reporting should highlight key exceptions and where the Change Control Process should be applied.

For further information regarding the Change Control process, there is a Training Module available to WMCA employees called [Approvals and Change Controls](#) on Learning Pool.

What is the WMCA Activity Register, and how is it used?

The WMCA-wide Activity Register, managed by the Centre of Excellence, captures project/programme information, across all Directorates that summarises key SAF touch points.

The Activity Register provides WMCA with oversight and data relating to SAF implementation and project performance. The Centre of Excellence engages with each directorate to ensure all activity is reflected and the WMCA Activity Register remains accurate and a tool to manage resources and provide useful insight for senior leaders and decision-making bodies.

The Activity register captures:

- Internal/external funding secured
- Project stage and relevant documentation
- SAF stages and outputs including:
 - Business Case assessment results and analysis
 - Programme Assurance Observations Report key findings and recommendations
 - Programme Investment Appraisal ongoing risks and recommendations
 - Health Check results and recommendations
 - Change Request data

Management Information collated by the team forms the basis of ongoing reporting to directorate leadership teams, Executive Board and Assurance, Risk & Compliance Committee.

What are the criteria for adding information to directorate Activity Registers?

The Centre of Excellence will work with directorates and advise project leads on how and when to update their Activity Registers. General principles for inclusion are detailed below:

- SAF projects/programmes that have been initiated or are being developed (where WMCA are the accountable body).
- Any bids for external funding that are being progressed.

NB there is no minimum value for an item to be included on the register.

Is there a library of good practice examples for reference?

A library of good practice examples is being collated by the Centre of Excellence which they will signpost you to as appropriate. If you do need to develop a business case, it is important to contact the team (via programmeassuranceandappraisal@wmca.org.uk) as soon as possible. We will be able to provide support and guidance specific to your queries.

3.2 APPLYING FOR EXTERNAL FUNDING

I am applying for funding from a Central Government Department (e.g. DfT, DCMS, DfE) or other external body – how and when should I use the SAF process?

When you bid/apply for external funding this should be detailed on the External Funding Register. Your directorate will engage with the Centre of Excellence regularly to ensure this information is kept up to date.

The Centre of Excellence will advise you of the appropriate next steps and development route through the SAF.

What is the process for applying for external funding (including bids) and what do I have to do?

The External Funding Application Process has been updated to ensure Executive Board oversight and approval of all external funding applications, taking into consideration strategic fit, the annual business plan priorities and the resources needed for delivery.

The External Funding Application Process provides WMCA-wide oversight of all applications and highlights any opportunities for cross directorate working.

The process involves key enabling services subject matter experts, giving them the opportunity to advise on any associated legal, procurement, financial or Single Assurance Framework considerations.

Funding applications can occur at any time during a project/programme's lifecycle. If you know timelines are pressured, especially specific deadlines for project delivery, contact the Centre of Excellence in the Programme Assurance & Appraisal Team who will work with you to agree an appropriate approach for ensuring SAF compliance.

Once a decision to proceed has been received, contact the Centre of Excellence to advise you on the appropriate Business Case and timeline. Details of the external funding application process can be found within the Guide to Corporate Governance. To obtain a copy of the Guide to Corporate Governance contact governance.services@wmca.org.uk.

When should a business case be developed when bidding for external funding? (i.e. should I wait to until the bid application has been approved to start writing a business case?)

The availability of funding is only one element of a business case (this information is contained within the Financial Case). A business case can be developed if funding hasn't been secured and directorates should develop business cases based upon their overarching strategies, aims and objectives and local needs.

Each government department tends to have a different process for accessing funding, which isn't helpful so there isn't a consistent approach that can be applied across WMCA. Sometimes availability of funding will have an extremely short window, meaning the ability to plan effectively isn't always available.

Where funding has been bid for but has not yet been secured/confirmed, this should be detailed within the business case and decision-makers will make an informed decision on whether to approve that business case, considering the funding shortfall risk.

The Centre of Excellence will work with you to agree an appropriate approach and timing for developing a business case.

3.3 DEVELOPING THE BUSINESS CASE

How is the Business Case development 'route' decided?

The business case development route is determined by a project's risk profile, size and type of intervention needed. The Business Case development 'route' dictates the Business Case Templates to be used.

Detailed below is a list of available WMCA business case templates:

- Strategic Outline Case (SOC) – Sets the strategic case for a project and make the case for change.
- Outline Business Case (OBC) – Sets the outline arrangements for delivery of the project and examines the available options to meet the agreed objectives. At this stage a preferred option is selected based upon options analysis and which option provides the best value for money.
- Full Business Case (FBC) – makes the deal and confirms full and final costs of the chosen solution. Management arrangements and strategies are in place to deliver the preferred way forward.
- Programme Business Case (PBC) – where a collection of projects have similar objectives or contribute to shared objectives and will be delivered as a coherent programme of activity.
- Project Case - Single-stage Business Case only to be used where the project is associated with a Programme Business Case (generally up to a value of £5m).
- Business Justification Case (BJC) – single-stage business case used for projects of small value, are not novel or contentious, and where the procurement route is known.

The Centre of Excellence will work with you to agree the most appropriate development route for your project/programme.

Who needs to input into the Development of a Business Case?

A project lead is responsible for engaging with all Enabling Services subject matter experts (including Procurement and Finance Business Partners and Legal Leads) during the development of a business case and evidence of this engagement must be cited. This engagement should happen before a business case is submitted to the Programme Assurance & Appraisal team, at the start of the Concept or Initiation stage.

The Commercial Case within a business case will capture the procurement strategy/approach to be taken for a particular project; the Procurement Business Partner should inform this element of a business case.

The Financial Case within a business case captures financial information to demonstrate the affordability of the project; the Finance Business Partner/Accountant should inform this element of a business case.

The Legal Team are responsible for developing any Grant funding agreements necessary and should be engaged as soon as possible to ensure this work can be completed to meet any delivery deadline date requirements etc.

The Guide to Corporate Governance captures all Enabling Services' inputs and outputs into the lifecycle of a business case and project. There is a training module available to WMCA employees dedicated to this Guide, which includes detailed roles and responsibilities, which can be accessed on [Learning Pool](#).

If your Project/Programme has specific people resource or ICT requirements you are recommended to contact your [HR Business Partner](#) and the [Digital and Data](#) team as soon as possible. To obtain a copy of the Guide to Corporate Governance contact governance.services@wmca.org.uk.

Who completes the Subject Matter Expert (SME) feedback and table in the new business case templates to demonstrate SMEs have had input/oversight?

The project lead is responsible for ensuring each SME has been engaged and made an appropriate input into the development of business cases. **NB** if input is not applicable from a SME, then this should be clearly stated.

I need to deliver a project quickly because it's a mayoral priority, or the funding source demands a quick turnaround/delivery, how can I achieve this?

Whilst the SAF ensures appropriate and proper controls are in place and adequate assurance is undertaken for any WMCA spend, it also allows for decisions to be expedited, where appropriate.

Dependent upon the nature and complexity of the proposal, the project development phase can be streamlined using a Business Justification Case (making the Development phase a lot quicker). The Business Justification Case is a single stage Business Case that can be used for development of non-contentious schemes where there is an agreed/established procurement route in place.

If you are faced with this scenario, your first point of contact should be the Centre of Excellence team within Programme Assurance & Appraisal. They will work with you to agree an appropriate route through the SAF to approval.

What is the Process for preparing business cases from SOC* onwards?

A standard development route for government funded projects (as defined in HM Treasury Green Book) is to develop a *Strategic Outline Case (SOC), Outline Business Case (OBC) and Full Business Case (FBC).

The Centre of Excellence will advise on the most appropriate and proportionate development route for your project. A specific training module has been developed for WMCA employees called 'Single Assurance Framework - Routes and Business Cases' on [Learning Pool](#).

What is a Benefits Costs Ratio and why is it important?

An important element of any business case is demonstrating that public funds are being used appropriately and the most cost effective, value for money option is being progressed.

Within the Economic Case of a business case the project lead will be asked to analyse available options and calculate a Benefits Cost Ratio to help determine the preferred option that provides the best value for money.

[Business Case guidance](#) is available to help you determine the benefits cost ratio, and additional support is also available from your Finance Business Partner, Accountant and M&E lead.

How does SAF fit in with Transport Analysis Guidance (TAG) and other Benefits work?

The SAF ensures that HM Treasury guidance regarding the development of effective business cases is implemented to support better decision-making. Each business case will include a requirement to develop an Economic Case (to demonstrate how options have been analysed and value for money has been calculated to ensure the best option is selected).

For transport schemes, government Transport Analysis Guidance (TAG) is available and used by project leads to develop the Economic Case of a business case.

When would a Programme Business Case be needed?

A programme business case (PBC) is developed when there are multiple projects to be delivered, often over a longer period than a single project. Each project will contribute to overarching programme outcomes. Projects associated with a programme will each develop business cases at an appropriate time, to demonstrate how they are contributing to the overarching programme.

Each project development route should be agreed with the Centre of Excellence and all project business cases will go through the SAF. The benefits of developing a PBC are that it will be easier to demonstrate the strategic case and management case of each project as this information will already be articulated within the PBC.

Is it necessary to write a Business Case for low value projects e.g., if funding has been made available to undertake a feasibility study for £50,000?

In this scenario it would be appropriate, when considering a feasibility study, to develop a Strategic Outline Case (SOC). The purpose of a SOC is to demonstrate the strategic fit of a project and to start exploring options.

The outcomes of this feasibility study (outlined in the SOC) can then be used to develop an Outline Business Case (OBC), where options are analysed for value for money and a preferred option is selected.

There is no minimum value for a SAF Project business case.

Contact the Centre of Excellence who will advise on the appropriate Business Case development route that will be proportionate to the value, complexity and risk profile of the project.

3.4 APPROVING BUSINESS CASES

How do I know what approvals process to follow?

The SAF approvals process you take is dependent on the financial value of the business case as follows:

- The accountable Executive Director can approve proposals up to £1m
- Business Cases valued £1m-£5m require approval by WMCA Directorate Designated Sign Off Meetings.
- Business Cases valued £5m-£20m require approval by WMCA Investment Board (and prior oversight by Investment Committee)
- Business Cases valued over £20m require approval by WMCA Board (and prior oversight by Investment Committee)

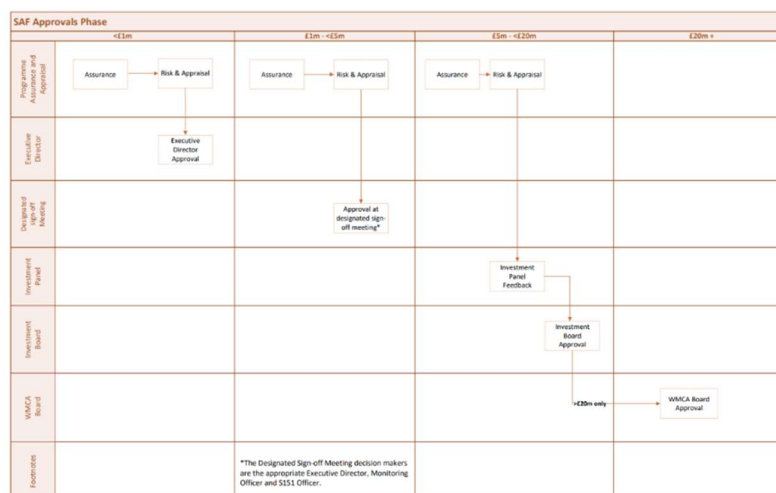
Any business cases valued over £1m require public notification of 28 days before the planned decision date.

For support on the appropriate approvals route and use of Modern.Gov, contact the Governance Services team on governance.services@wmca.org.uk.

Are financial approval thresholds based on individual business case values or total project/programme values?

The financial approval thresholds relate to the **value of each business case** developed (not the total project value). A business case should detail what funding has been secured and is yet to be secured and if there is more than one funding source, how much funding is being requested from WMCA.

Detailed below is a summary of current approval thresholds and associated decision-making forum:



What are the timelines for project/programme approvals?

The Governance Services team manages the SAF approvals process, including scheduling decision-making board meetings and agreeing/communicating report submission deadline dates.

When you engage with the Centre of Excellence, prior to submitting your business case into the SAF process, they will work with you to agree a development route including timescales for approval to the relevant approvals forum.

Do Project Managers populate the Board/Cover Report?

Yes, the Project lead is responsible for completing cover and Board reports. They are simple summaries of business cases that should be completed with input from key stakeholders (Programme Assurance & Appraisal, Finance, Inclusive Growth, Procurement, Legal, Equalities).

Where an external delivery partner is delivering a project, the lead should work with their WMCA directorate to complete the reports and submit them into Modern.Gov.

A Board Report is completed for all projects over £5 million and a simpler Cover Report is completed for all projects Between £1 million and £5 million.

It is a requirement for all Board and Cover Reports to be uploaded onto Modern.Gov the WMCA electronic Governance platform.

For more information, contact Governance Services on governance.services@wmca.org.uk

How are decisions communicated regarding business cases that are submitted through SAF?

This will depend upon the value of the business case:

Decisions under £1m – a decision notification will be sent to the business case author from the Programme Appraisal team via email. This can then be cascaded to any appropriate key stakeholders.

Decisions over £1m – Governance Services manage decision notifications for items over £1m. These will also be recorded on internet [here](#)

Project leads may be required to attend decision-making forum to provide a brief overview of their project and answer any queries decision-makers may have.

APPENDIX 1: THE SINGLE ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK

