Single Assurance Framework (SAF)
Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

West Midlands Combined Authority

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Version Control Sheet

Version No.	Date	Author	Changes
v0.1	5 Nov. 2021	Karen Wright	Updated FAQs added.
V2.0	20 Jan. 2022	Karen Wright	Updated questions and link to the website.
V3.0	15 Jul 2022	Karen Wright	TfWM questions added. New e-mail address
V4.0	10 Oct 2022	Karen Wright	New diagrams
V5.0	05 Dec 2022	Karen Wright	Questions re Routes through SAF added

Contents

1   Purpose

This document contains the answers to Frequently Asked Questions. 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   Scope

The answers to the question support the Single Assurance Framework processes and guidance.

3   Policy review

This policy will be reviewed annually. It will be amended in response to changes in operational and legal requirements. Every effort will be made to ensure individual users are made aware of changes when they occur.

Advice and guidance regarding this policy can be obtained from the WMCA's Centre of Excellence – ProgrammeAssuranceandAppraisal@wmca.org.uk

4 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[1] 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 will incur a financial liability on WMCA.

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

4.1 Why is it needed?

The Single Assurance Framework is needed to ensure that the WMCA is compliant with:

- **Project Governance** – To meet the requirements of the Constitution
- **National Local Growth Assurance Framework Guidelines** – The National Local Growth Assurance 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 is the most effective and efficient way, meeting its Aims and Objectives
- **Monitoring & Evaluation Requirements** – Effective monitoring and evaluation is a government requirement as well as being necessary at a strategic level to help inform the political stages of the decision-making process.

4.2 What are the key principles of the SAF?

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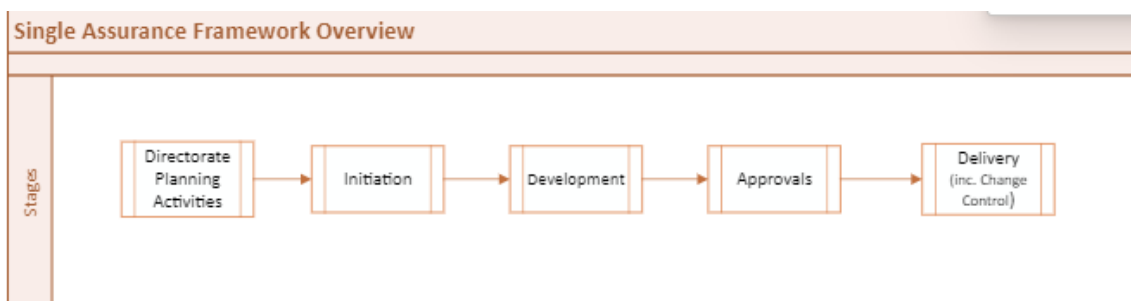
[1] For the purposes of this document, where the SAF refers to a "project" this relates to any activity or proposal that will incur a financial liability or commit WMCA resources that is not considered 'Business as Usual'

Initiation, Development & Approvals – The SAF is broken down into these three overarching processes with documentation and supporting guidance available to help with implementation

- **Directorate led –** Directorates are responsible for developing business cases and engaging SMEs and delivery organisations. They control the pace of project initiation and the development of proposals
- **Proportionate –** A proportionate approach is applied to development and approval of proposals, dependent upon their nature and complexity. At initiation, a **Route Development Tool** will propose the development and approval route to be followed by a project
- **Consistent and streamlined approach –** All projects will go through the SAF, regardless of their funding stream(s)
- **Aligned to HM Treasury 'Green Book'** – The SAF, and all supporting processes, are aligned to HM Treasury Green Book requirements; ensuring a consistent standard is applied to the development, appraisal and approval of Business Cases and ongoing monitoring of deliverables.

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

Programme Assurance and Appraisal team, (PA&A)

The Programme Assurance and Appraisal team will work collaboratively with the Directorates across the WMCA to ensure that all projects and funding follow the SAF and that it is applied proportionally and consistently. As experts in risk, assurance, project and performance management, they will work with Portfolios and project delivery partners to provide technical expertise, in addition to support and guidance to help navigate the new framework.

If you have any questions about the SAF implementation or the Finance & Business Hub/Programme Assurance & Appraisal Team: please contact
ProgrammeAssuranceandAppraisal@wmca.org.uk
All information relating to the SAF including templates, be found here: Intranet: Single Assurance Framework | WMCA Internet: www.wmca.org.uk/saf

4.4   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 that will be on the WMCA website Single Assurance Framework (wmca.org.uk)

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

4.5   How do I know what process to follow?

The SAF approvals process you take is dependent on the financial value of the total project as follows:
- The accountable Executive Director can approve proposals up to an accumulative spend of £1m [2]
- Proposals with an accumulative spend of £1m-£5m require sign off by WMCA Statutory Officers[3]
- Proposals with an accumulative spend of £5m-£20m require sign off by WMCA Investment Board
- Proposals with an accumulative spend of over £20m require sign off by WMCA Board

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[2] Any Investment Programme spend will also need the approval of the Investment Programme SRO
[3] A Risk & Investment Appraisal will accompany any Business Cases submitted for approval over £1m

4.6 I am applying for funding from a Central Government Department (e.g. DfT, DCMS, DfE) or other external body – do I need to use the SAF process?

Yes, any proposal that incurs a financial liability on WMCA will need to follow the SAF process.

The Assurance Toolkit will ensure an integrated 'Three Lines of Defence' model is applied to WMCA activity.

4.7 I need to deliver a project quickly because it's a mayoral priority, or the funding stream demands a quick turnaround, 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 through the use of a Business Justification Case (making the Development phase a lot quicker). The Business Justification Case is a single Business Case that can be used for development of non-contentious schemes where there is an agreed/simple procurement route in place.

As the SAF embeds itself within WMCA, it is intended that good practice will be captured and shared. The Centre of Excellence are a source of develop valuable project management resource and guidance.

4.8 Communication of a Project Decision. When a project receives approval from an Executive Director (or Board), how is the decision cascaded?

The appraisal team send the decision to key stakeholders involved in the project; this will include the Exec Director, Delivery Lead, WMCA Finance Lead and WMCA Legal Lead to formulate the Funding Agreement (if applicable). Furthermore, a SAF Approvals Checklist is also in development which will accompany the approval decision notification. This checklist will outline any key observations and red risks raised during the approvals process (from Assurance and Appraisal to Panel/Board) that have not been resolved.

4.9 What happens to projects in delivery?

The Programme Assurance team will undertake 'Health Checks' of projects in delivery. Health Checks will be risk-based and planned throughout the year. Health Check key lines of enquiry are based upon HM Treasury Green Book, Association for Project Management and Infrastructure and Project Authority best practice. A report detailing any findings and recommendations will be produced by the Programme Assurance team and the focus of the process will be on helping the Project/Scheme to deliver a successful project and its objectives.

4.10 We are in the process of developing a new programme. What is the best SAF approach for project development and governance?

The SAF approach is a framework, and we will work with you as the Project/programme/scheme develops to determine a proportionate and flexible approach.

4.11 The process for applying for external funding (including bids) has recently changed – why is that and what do I have to do?

The amended External Funding Application Process has been updated to ensure that SLT are aware of and approve the application, taking into consideration its strategic fit, the annual business plan and the resources needed to deliver it. If it is an opportunity that doesn't meet a strategic objective, this will give SLT the chance to consider.

This will also help to ensure that the CA is safe and compliant with HM Treasury guidelines, as well as sharing best practice with other projects and Directorates and potentially to exploit cross directorate working.

The updated process also involves the Enabling Services earlier in the process, giving them the opportunity to advise on any legal, procurement, financial or Single Assurance Framework approaches needed. Funding Applications can take place any time in the project development process.

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

The WMCA-wide Activity Register, managed by the Centre of Excellence, will capture all WMCA project/programme/scheme information, across all Directorates/Portfolios together with key financial and project/programme/scheme information including SAF touchpoints (Assurance, Risk and Performance data).

The Activity Register will provide WMCA with oversight and data relating to SAF implementation and project performance. The Centre of Excellence will work with you to ensure the Activity Register remains accurate and a useful management tool.

The Activity register captures
- external funding secured to monitor those funds to ensure they are being spent in accordance to the funding agreement.
- internal funding projects/bids/programmes etc.
- Any other funding that has financial or reputational risk to WMCA.
- Project stage, i.e. Bid, Initiation, Business case development, delivery, so that Assurance and Appraisal teams can plan their level of support

4.13 What are the criteria for adding information to the Activity Register?

- Projects that have been initiated or are being developed
- Any fund 'bids' that are being developed to secure external funds to deliver projects
- All Capital Expenditure projects - there is no minimum value for it to be included on the Activity Register.
- Anything under £1m i.e. delegated authority of the Executive Director. To retain transparency, all activity including decisions, should be captured on the Activity Register.   This also includes devolved funding, where WMCA is an accountable body – usually capital expenditure.
- All WMCA funded projects should go through SAF, therefore, be included on the Activity Register.

4.14 Communications: When a project receives approval from an Executive Director (or Board), how is the decision cascaded?

The appraisal team send the decision to key stakeholders involved in the project; this will include the Exec Director, Delivery Lead, WMCA Finance Lead and WMCA Legal Lead to formulate the Funding Agreement (if applicable). Furthermore, a SAF Approvals Checklist is also in development which will accompany the approval decision notification. This checklist will outline any key observations and red risks raised during the approvals process (from Assurance and Appraisal to Panel/Board) that have not been resolved.

4.15 What is the Process for preparing business cases from SOC* onwards?
More complex projects will go through SOC-OBC-FBC*, but it isn't a linear approach – work with COE to find the best approach for your project. It is an iterative process dependant on the complexity (Proportionate and Flexible)

4.16 What do DfT retained teams require as well as our internal approach?

Process yet to be confirmed, by DfT. WMCA Business Cases are HM Treasury compliant, and the TAG standard will be part of that process. WMCA provide the assurance process to review the internal risks and will share the appraisals with DfT.

4.17 What are the financial thresholds for the approvals approach? Is it WMCA budget or total budget?

The threshold is how much funding is being asked for from the CA, not the total project costs. It might be that Investment Board might want confirmation that the remaining funding is available. An appraisal is not only about the funding, it's also the risk profile. The Appraisal will review risk and include it its report to Investment Panel/Board.

The governance structure is the approved process for how decisions will be made in WMCA. The business case submissions are made to the relevant authority level. Executive Directors less than £1m, Statutory Officers up to £5m. Investment Board £5-20m and WMCA Board £20m+.

4.18 What are the timelines for projects approvals?

Meeting dates with submission of papers are set by Governance, and programme Assurance and Appraisal can be flexible within that framework

The key dates can be found on the 'Drumbeat' document stored on the Single Assurance Framework intranet/internet site.

4.19 Where does the Business Costs Ratio fit in?

For any financial questions, please contact Ian Monks – Senior Major Programmes Accountant. Further guidance will be issued from the Finance team soon.

4.20 How does SAF fit in with TAG and other Benefits work?

SAF focusses on risks and mitigation for internal consumption, rather than a technical review of the business case. DfT have deemed it appropriate to manage CRSTS funding,

4.21 How does the External Funding link to SAF? What is the External Funding Register?

The External Funding Register is an extraction of the Directorate Activity Registers run by the Centre of Excellence. They will also advise on the appropriate Business Case route.

4.22 When should a business case be produced when bidding for funding? (i.e. should they wait to start the Business Case until the bid is successful?)

In most circumstances the requirements of a bid to government will comprise that needed to complete a Strategic Outline Business Case. Doing this will have several benefits, such as, enabling the project team to get senior management support, build a robust case for the need of the bid and the case for change.

4.23 Where do Programme Business Cases fit in?

A programme business case consists of multiple projects and is often over a longer period of time than a single project. A programme business case will have multiple outcomes that the outputs of individual projects contribute to.

4.24 Is it necessary to write a Business Case for low value projects e.g. if a Feasibility study for £50,000 at SOC?

It would be appropriate when considering a feasibility study to develop a Strategic Outline Case. This would highlight the potential options and the strategic fit to the organisation. Allowing senior leaders to make an informed decision on the project's costs and benefits to the CA.

4.25 How is the Business Case 'route' decided?

The business case route is indicative of the risk and size of the intervention. Where there are multiple interventions this could result in a programme.

4.26 Do Project Managers populate the Cover Report?
Yes, the Project Managers populate the cover report.

4.27 Who completes the SME's feedback and the declaration in the new business case templates on which SMEs have had input/oversight?
The project manager should populate this too.

4.28 Due to 'political' or contentiousness, Housing projects can go to Investment Board and Panel, whilst the financial value doesn't dictate it.
Governance are reviewing the need to go to Investment Panel. As HPR are now in SAF, the value of the project will align with the Approval levels.

4.29 Appendix 1: The Single Assurance Framework

Initiation

Business Planning	Develop Annual Plan → Add to Directorate Plans
Project Sponsor	Submit Plans for Projects/Schemes → Develop PID → Update Activity Register → External Funding Process
Executive Director	Feedback/More information — Approve PID
Centre of Excellence	Approved · External Funding Application Register
Senior Leadership Team	Review External Funding Application Register
Delivery Team	Development of Business Case

West Midlands Combined Authority

SAF Development Phase

Directorate

Add new project to the Directorate Activity Register → Is Project ready to be developed? → **No** → No action until ready to develop

Yes

Centre of Excellence

Agree timelines for development and approval

Provide timeline to approval

Project Manager

Contact CoE to provide details of project/scheme

Engage with Legal, Finance and Procurement teams → Develop and Submit Business Case → Revise / Submit Business Case → Respond to Risk and Investment Appraisal report

Assurance

Meet with CoE to agree correct Business Case and Observation Report timelines

Business Case Maturity Assessment

Assurance Observation Report

Executive Director

Endorse Business Case to proceed to approval

Appraisal

Meet with CoE to agree Appraisal Report and approval timelines

Complete Risk and Investment Appraisal report

Approvals Process