



Department for
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Evaluation Strategy for the Life Chances Fund

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This report sets out the evaluation strategy for the Life Chances Fund. It was authored by Dr Eleanor Carter of the Government Outcomes Lab (GO Lab) at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, assisted by Dr Clare FitzGerald, Dr Mehdi Shiva and Tanyah Hameed (GO Lab), with editorial oversight and contributions from Dr Janna Miletzki, Office for Civil Society at DCMS, and a contribution from Dr Lucy Loveless (ICF).

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EVALUATION STRATEGY FOR THE LIFE CHANCES FUND

Context

Traditional models of public service delivery are struggling to meaningfully address complex social issues such as homelessness, educational underachievement, reoffending and long-term unemployment. The persistent failure to tackle these issues leaves the needs of some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people unmet. Better ways of addressing these challenges would benefit society as a whole as well as the individuals themselves. Further, these issues are expensive for government to tackle and can be even more expensive if left unaddressed.

In the UK, Central Government has been testing new approaches for structuring and incentivising the provision of public services – including the use of Social Impact Bonds – to deliver improved social outcomes for citizens. This report provides an overview of the evaluation approach which has been developed to support learning around a series of Social Impact Bonds funded via the Life Chances Fund.

1.1 Background: Addressing complex social issues with Social Impact Bonds

Social Impact Bonds (SIBs), first pioneered in the UK from 2010, are a model for organising and delivering public services. By bringing together commissioners (often central or local government), service providers (usually from the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector) and investors (typically social or philanthropic), SIBs attempt to improve social outcomes for beneficiaries. In a recent report¹, the Government Outcomes Lab (GO Lab) synthesised the available evidence on UK SIBs. This identified three overarching logics or ‘theories of change’ by which SIBs have the potential to overcome entrenched public service challenges. SIBs attempt to do this by encouraging more collaboration across policy and delivery silos, urging prevention through early action, and fostering innovation by protecting service providers and commissioners from some degree of financial risk. As a form of outcomes-based commissioning, repayment to investors is predicated on achieving the pre-agreed outcomes. SIBs try and improve on more commonly applied commissioning approaches (such as in-house provision, grants to independent provider organisations or ‘fee for activity’ contracting) by providing upfront capital for delivery organisations, encouraging robust measurement of outcomes, and prioritising quality and efficiency in service delivery.

The UK is still the forerunner in the development of SIBs globally, with over 68 SIBs having been launched across policy areas of homelessness, reoffending, unemployment, youth disengagement, children’s social care and adoption, and health. Central Government has also adopted the use of ‘outcome funds’ as a catalyst for the adoption of outcomes-based contracts. Under this approach a government department (or multiple government

¹ Carter, E., FitzGerald, C., Dixon, R., Economy, C., Hameed, T., and Airoidi, M. (2018) *Building the tools for public services to secure better outcomes: Collaboration, Prevention, Innovation*, Government Outcomes Lab, University of Oxford, Blavatnik School of Government, p.9



departments) signals a commitment to pay for social outcomes and enables several impact bonds to be implemented simultaneously. The outcomes to be paid for may be highly specified, with specific maximum prices attached by the outcome fund administrator, as shown by the 'rate card' approach adopted by the Department for Work and Pensions in the Innovation Fund (10 SIBs) and Youth Engagement Fund (4 SIBs) and by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government in the Fair Chance Fund (7 SIBs). In other funds, such as the Social Outcomes Fund commissioned by the Cabinet Office, Central Government offers a contribution to 'top up' outcomes contracts developed by other outcomes funders (such as local authorities or health commissioners) thus pooling resources dedicated to paying for outcomes across multiple stakeholders. In SIBs supported by these funds, local project partners develop bespoke outcome specifications that are most suitable in their context.

The latest outcomes fund developed by Central Government, the Life Chances Fund (LCF), is an £80 million top-up for outcomes payments in SIBs commissioned by local governments in England and aimed at tackling complex social problems. These SIBs focus on six themes that were introduced across three application rounds: older people's services, healthy lives, early years, young people, drug and alcohol dependency, and children's services. There was also an 'innovation' theme which generated three projects focused on homelessness and housing-related support.

The LCF aims to support people who face the most significant barriers to leading happy and productive lives by supporting the growth of locally developed SIBs. In addition, by increasing the number and scale of SIBs in England, LCF aspires to make it easier and quicker to set up future SIBs, and to build evidence on what works. The fund is administered by The National Lottery Community Fund (formerly known as the Big Lottery Fund) on behalf of the Department for Culture Media and Sport's Centre for Social Impact Bonds. Funding will be available for multi-year SIB projects as the LCF will run for nine years (from July 2016 to March 2025). Specifically, the LCF has the following objectives²:

- Increasing the number and scale of SIBs in England.
- Making it easier and quicker to set up a SIB than currently.
- Generating public sector efficiencies by delivering better outcomes and using this to understand how cashable savings are.
- Increasing social innovation and building a clear evidence base of what works
- Increasing the amount of capital available to a wider range of voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector providers to enable them to compete for public sector contracts.
- Providing better evidence of the effectiveness of the SIB mechanism and the savings that are being accrued.
- Growing the scale of the social investment market.

1.2 Evidence gaps in evaluations of Social Impact Bonds

² Cabinet Office (2016) Life Chances Fund: guidance. Accessible at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/life-chances-fund>



Although a series of SIB evaluations have been carried out previously, the existing evidence base remains partial. GO Lab undertook a rapid systematic review in 2017 and identified 33 empirical evaluations on UK SIBs. Most of these evaluations have focussed on the implementation or efficacy of specific interventions (i.e. the particular service funded by the SIB), though often without robust quantitative impact evaluation (Carter et al., 2018; see also Fox & Morris, 2019). A particular challenge in the evaluation of SIBs to date has been the identification of a relevant comparison against which to compare this new model for public service delivery. Policymakers, practitioners and researchers are keen to develop a more detailed understanding of the SIB model. A key contribution of the LCF evaluation is to clarify whether, where, and how SIBs add value when compared to more conventional public service provision. Robust evaluation can help us build on learning from past projects to improve future policy and practice. Evaluation is arguably even more important for SIBs, as this approach remains a relatively novel form of commissioning with broader implications for the use of outcomes-based approaches.

Through the proposed evaluation approach, research on the LCF SIBs will elicit a clear ‘theory of change’ to identify how these specific SIBs are expected to improve social outcomes compared with alternative ways of commissioning services. Furthermore, the evaluation aims to respond to current gaps in research by focusing specifically on SIBs as a tool for public service delivery and reform rather than centring only on the intervention effect. The ambition is to assess ‘the SIB effect’ – that is the influence of this commissioning model on social outcomes. In pursuing this research, the GO Lab and Centre for SIBs hope to offer crucial thought leadership in the outcomes-based-commissioning landscape.

Outcomes funds, including the LCF, also aim to stimulate the adoption of outcomes-based-commissioning more widely by supporting the development of more SIBs in England. Therefore, the LCF evaluation also presents an opportunity to test the extent to which the Fund has succeeded in growing the SIB market, reaching out to the most vulnerable people in society, and building an evidence base on SIBs.

This document outlines how GO Lab, ICF and local SIB projects, coordinated by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, aim to evaluate the Life Chances Fund. The report proceeds in three main sections:

- 1) Providing a brief overview of the full LCF evaluation strategy, including the work planned by ICF and GO Lab;
- 2) Describing the SIB mechanism evaluation strategy, to be led by the GO Lab, including research questions and methodology;
- 3) Outlining the timeline for key evaluation activities.



1. Overview of LCF evaluation strategy

The overall LCF evaluation is structured across three strands. These are summarised in Figure 1, and described below:

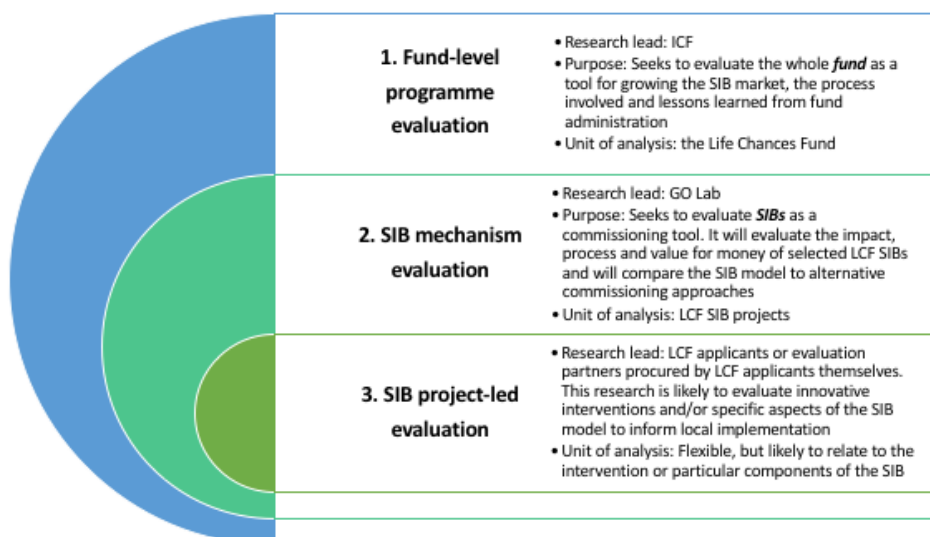


Figure 1: Overview of LCF evaluation strategy

- **Strand 1: Fund-level programme evaluation:** this seeks to evaluate the Life Chances Fund as an instrument for growing the SIB market, the process involved and lessons learned from fund administration. The programme level evaluation is being conducted by ICF.

- **Strand 2: SIB mechanism evaluation:** this seeks to evaluate SIBs as a commissioning tool. Strand 2 will investigate the impact, mechanism and value for money of LCF SIBs using a mixed-methods approach. It will compare the SIB model to alternative commissioning approaches with the aim of estimating the contribution that the SIB model has made to the observed impact. This strand of the evaluation is to be conducted by the GO Lab. The evaluation comprises a two-tier approach, involving both a 'primary' stream and a 'supplementary' stream (as described in Section 4.1.2). Structuring the research activity across the two streams will ensure an appropriate balance between developing an understanding of all LCF SIB projects and ensuring a sufficiently deep and rigorous engagement with those projects where a robust impact, process and value for money evaluation is viable.

- **Strand 3: SIB project-led evaluations:** the scope of these evaluations will be set by LCF applicants themselves. The research is likely to evaluate innovative interventions and/or specific aspects of the SIB model to inform local knowledge. Projects might, for example, use formative evaluation to understand what is working well or not so well and use this insight to



improve services. LCF projects retain responsibility for delivering and/or procuring evaluation partners for strand 3 evaluation activity. Guidance is available from the GO Lab team.

Strand 1: Fund-level programme evaluation

1.2 Methodology and Research Questions

The programme level evaluation aims to evaluate the LCF as an instrument for growing the SIB market, investigating how the Fund is working in practice from the perspective of national stakeholders, commissioners, providers and investors. The overall aims of the programme level evaluation are to:

- Identify what has worked well and less well with the implementation of the Fund and whether it is on track to achieve its aims and objectives and
- Investigate the role and impact that the LCF has had on the SIB market.

The evaluation started with a scoping phase principally focused on the development of a programme-level theory of change (ToC) logic model. This was developed through an iterative approach involving a review of LCF programme documentation; interviews with national stakeholders, a workshop with the Centre for SIBs (DCMS), Big Lottery Fund, and further consultation and refinement.

The main stage of the evaluation explores the implementation of the Fund from multiple perspectives, identifying enablers and barriers to establishing a SIB in order to generate learning for replicability. This is to be achieved through a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with programme stakeholders and LCF applicants, including those who have withdrawn their applications, were unsuccessful as well as successful in their application. The experiences of individual projects are also being explored in greater depth through qualitative case studies of successful SIBs across all six themes that were part of the three application rounds. These involve interviews with investors, intermediary organisations, commissioners and providers and seek to explore the SIB development process, early experience of implementation and any legacy effects for the different stakeholders.

Qualitative evidence from interviews and case studies along with aggregate data from Fund application forms will be analysed to explore the scale and nature of investments, additionality and market impact of the Fund. This is intended to complement the work undertaken in Strand 2 and 3.



2. Strand 2: SIB mechanism evaluation

2.1 Methodology and Research Questions

To conduct the SIB mechanism evaluation (defined as Strand 2 in Section 2), GO Lab are dividing evaluation work into two streams. This structure will ensure that balance between developing an evaluative understanding of all LCF SIB projects (since all LCF SIBS are incorporated in the 'Primary' evaluation stream) whilst providing a more detailed and rigorous engagement with a purposively selected 3 – 4 LCF SIB projects where a robust impact, process and value for money evaluation is viable (the 'Supplementary' evaluation stream).

Primary Evaluation

GO Lab's primary evaluation is based at the SIB project level and will provide descriptive information on all SIBs which are successfully established through the LCF. The primary research question is:

What are the characteristics of SIB projects funded through the LCF and to what degree are they successful in achieving specified social outcomes?

The primary evaluation will utilise information collected as part of the LCF administration process. As part of LCF administration, an online data platform has been established to collect detailed application forms and ongoing reporting information from LCF SIBs. This management information will capture detail at the SIB project level including: the stakeholders involved in the project and their roles in the SIB; operating geographies; the intended characteristics of service users and referral pathways; the targeted 'social outcomes' that the SIB seeks to improve; project costs; social investment value; anticipated and achieved performance against prescribed outcomes.

In addition to this management information, the GO Lab will be using a longitudinal survey to gather responses from representatives of each LCF SIB project at three time periods: during project mobilisation, service delivery, and after project completion. Respondents to the survey include multiple individual respondents from key stakeholder organisations such as commissioners and providers. Survey questions will investigate specific aspects of projects' set-up and implementation experiences. Respondents will also be asked to provide information on the technical and relational aspects of SIBs (e.g. contract types, frequency of engagement with other stakeholders). The primary evaluation will incorporate the perspectives of investors via focus group conversations since there is only a small number of active investors in the UK SIB market. Each of the investor representatives is involved in several LCF projects and repeatedly conducting surveys for multiple LCF projects simultaneously is unlikely to capture meaningful information and may be unduly burdensome for investor respondents.



Data gathered from both the survey and the data platform will be used to build descriptive statistics and gain a high-level understanding of the SIB model adopted by each LCF project. Analysis across all LCF SIBs may begin to identify common characteristics associated with successful or less successful achievement of social outcomes.

Supplementary Evaluation

The supplementary evaluation will provide highly detailed longitudinal studies which combine multiple research methods to investigate a small number of selected SIB projects. It is expected that three or four of the LCF SIBs projects will act as hosts to these detailed studies and in each site a bespoke research approach will be developed collaboratively with local project partners. The overarching research question guiding this stream of work is:

Did the Social Impact Bond make a difference to the outcomes achieved, compared to alternative commissioning approaches?

And, following from this:

Through what mechanisms do specific aspects of the SIB mechanism contribute to these impacts?

These questions respond directly to the research gap identified in the GO Lab's rapid review of UK SIB evaluations, namely, that research to date has not empirically assessed the relative benefits or disbenefits of SIBs when compared to alternative approaches for organising and incentivising the delivery of public services. In this, it is appropriate to consider SIBs as one approach – among several – available to those commissioning services. Alternative commissioning forms include in-house public sector provision, grant funding, fee-for-service contracts (where independent delivery organisations are paid on the basis of providing a specified service or intervention) or payment-by-results in the absence of an independent social investor.

The supplementary evaluation in each site will be underpinned by three elements, each responding to a sub-question, with a linked methodological approach. The research under each of these sub-questions will run in parallel with findings and reflections used to inform other elements.

A. Impact Evaluation

Here the research aims to provide an assessment of whether the SIB commissioning approach made a difference to the social outcomes achieved.

The research question is:

What is the impact of services commissioned by a SIB on targeted social outcomes, compared to the outcomes achieved under an alternative commissioning approach?



Methodologically, impact evaluation seeks to demonstrate that intended results follow from programme activities whether directly or indirectly. To date, impact evaluation has been dominated by a narrow range of mainly experimental and statistical methods and designs. However, there is an increasing acknowledgement that a 'broader range' of methods can bring valuable insights by offering different understandings of causal inference – being able to justify links between cause and effect (Stern et al., 2012). Cartwright and Munro (2010: 265) note that experimental (often termed 'counterfactual') methods are able to answer the question 'did it work here?' but not 'will it work for us (elsewhere)?'. For the second question – which will be key for policy makers considering broader applications – 'we need theory to judge which factors have stable capacities (to promote the outcome, and how) and to hypothesize when they are worth implementing'.

Where possible the LCF evaluation will adopt a mixed methods approach. The research will pursue a quantitative quasi-experimental methodology to assess the magnitude of effects associated with the SIB whilst also using theory-based and case-based methods to investigate 'contributory causes'. The commissioning approach can be conceived as a complex intervention and therefore is expected to 'work' as part of a causal package in combination with other 'helping factors' such as stakeholder behaviour, related programmes and policies, institutional capacities, cultural factors or socio-economic trends. Qualitative methodologies will be adopted to unpick these causal packages.

A quantitative assessment of whether the SIB approach caused a particular outcome to occur requires both a measure of the outcome of interest and a means of estimating what would have happened without the SIB, using a comparison group.

In order to quantitatively assess the impact of a project, a robust empirical impact evaluation needs to fulfil the following criteria:

- **A means of estimating the 'counterfactual'**³. For the SIB mechanism analysis this means that standardised data must be available for a comparable, non-SIB commissioned service in addition to outcome data relating to the SIB;
- **Sufficient numbers of programme participants to achieve statistical power.** The power of a given study relates to its ability to detect substantive effects in the midst of random fluctuations ("noise"). Power is a numerical quantity – it is defined as the probability that if the true effect is of a given size, then the design will detect it with a given level of confidence, or at a given "significance level" (HM Government, 2011, p. 109). Ensuring that studies are sufficiently powered is important, since if the results of the evaluation are not "statistically significant", simply speaking, no meaningful conclusions can be drawn. Power depends both on the size of the effect on the outcome relative to the natural variation in that outcome and on the number of

³ The counterfactual is "A conditional statement of how the people in a program would have fared if the program had never been implemented, which is used to understand the causal impact of the programme" (p. Glennerster and Takavarasha, 2013: 444)



observations.⁴ All else equal, SIB study sites with larger numbers of programme participants are more likely to offer statistical power.

- **Clear, routinised data collection processes amongst delivery teams.** In order to develop statistical analysis it will be important that the evaluation team have access to detailed management information at a granular level. Ideally, anonymised programme participant information will be used;
- **Enthusiastic commitment from those involved in delivering the SIB.** Since the impact (and economic) evaluation will require data relating to multiple years of SIB implementation it is crucial that there is longstanding 'buy-in' to the evaluation from the SIB stakeholders themselves.

The GO Lab are working with LCF SIB projects to identify whether these criteria are in place. In selecting projects to participate as supplementary evaluation sites, preferred projects are those that fulfil the criteria for a mixed-method approach, including both quantitative and qualitative assessments of impact. The quantitative estimate of SIB benefits from this evaluation stage will provide a foundation for the economic analysis (described in section C).

Should there be an insufficient number of projects that fulfil these criteria, research efforts will prioritise those LCF projects that offer access to an appropriate comparison service (i.e. a similar programme or intervention which has been implemented under a non-SIB commissioning approach).

LCF SIB projects which appear to offer viable evaluation opportunities are being invited to collaboratively develop detailed supplementary research plans.

B. Process Evaluation

Process evaluation will be used to understand the implementation experience of the selected SIBs, by building theories of change and logic models. This will answer the question:

"Through what mechanisms do SIBs operate?"

The process evaluation will be used to develop an understanding of the processes by which each SIB project has been implemented and delivered and identify factors that have helped or hindered its effectiveness. This element of the evaluation will be used to generate a detailed description of the interaction of the SIB with front-line service delivery to understand what interventions are made in the service, which 'functions' are performed by each stakeholder within the SIB structure (e.g. performance management, reporting, auditing), and how services are experienced by the participants and those who deliver them.

⁴ As a rule of thumb, it would be expected that SIBs capable of supporting a quantitative impact evaluation will have at least 500 programme participants. See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/220542/magenta_book_combined.pdf



The LCF process evaluations may respond to sub-questions such as:

1. How did the structure of the SIB affect service delivery?
2. What challenges do commissioners face when implementing a SIB and how does this compare with other non-SIB structures?
3. Do commissioners experience wider benefits compared to non-SIB approaches?

C. Economic Analysis

The supplementary evaluation will use economic analysis to investigate the effectiveness of the SIB projects. All economic evaluations have a common structure which involves the measurement of inputs (costs) and outcomes (benefits) to assess whether the intervention is 'value for money'. Value for money implies either a desire to achieve a predetermined objective at least cost or a desire to maximise the benefit, tangible and intangible, with a limited amount of resources. The guiding research question is:

"do the benefits of SIB approach outweigh the costs?"

The research will derive an estimate of benefits from the impact evaluation (part A) and supplementary evaluation sites will be supported to develop a comprehensive set of cost information.

Where an appropriate non-SIB comparator (the 'counterfactual') has been identified (in part A) this will be used to support cost effectiveness analysis. This technique compares the 'cost per consequence' of two or more interventions, where the consequences are measured by "natural" units (for example, additional time in employment or stable accommodation for people who were previously homeless). This approach will enable the relative value of different commissioning strategies to be compared where they are designed to deliver the same or similar outcomes.

The evaluation will also investigate the merits of developing 'Cost Benefit Analysis' for selected SIBs. This technique tends to make greater assumptions than CEA but is able to compare the cost of a programme with the benefit incurred, where the benefit is measured by monetary units. This approach adopts a broad societal perspective as it seeks to include all costs and all benefits.



The economic analysis seeks to respond to the following questions:

1. Is the SIB approach cost-effective? i.e. How does the price paid per outcome within the SIB compare to alternative commissioning approaches?
2. Is the SIB approach more efficient in addressing social issues compared to alternative commissioning approaches?
3. How do the costs of administrating SIBs compare to more conventional commissioning approaches?
4. How do the tangible and intangible benefits of SIBs compare to more conventional commissioning approaches?

3. Strand 3: Project-Led evaluations

SIB projects which have been awarded LCF funding are also encouraged to develop local evaluation and learning work packages. Projects outline their evaluation plans when applying and setting up their projects. Local projects are pursuing a range of bespoke research questions and draw on a range of methods. While the responsibility for this strand lies with the individual SIBs projects, GO Lab provides LCF applicants with support through written technical guidance; events, such as workshops and webinars; advice surgeries; and a monthly newsletter. Specific guidance has been provided on refining evaluation questions and evaluation methodologies. The GO Lab also offers support in defining and measuring outcomes.

4. Timeline for Deliverables

The multi-strand LCF evaluation will result in a series of reports and learning outputs. For each strand, key outputs will include interim and final reports. For Strand 1, we expect to publish

- the interim report in summer 2019, and
- the final report in summer 2020.

We will then expect outputs from Strand 2 - the primary and the supplementary evaluation streams. Since the development and implementation timelines of LCF SIB projects are themselves somewhat unpredictable, the precise timing of activities are not yet fixed. In addition to formal reports, which are anticipated to be published, the evaluation team will produce bespoke, digestible resources for practitioners and national policymakers including blog posts, presentations and policy memos.

5. Main Organisations Involved

The Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS)

- a. The **Centre for Social Impact Bonds (C4SIBs)**, part of the Office for Civil Society (OCS) at DCMS, is leading on the Life Chances Fund. The team provides expert guidance on developing social impact bonds (SIBs), shares information on outcomes-based commissioning and supports the growth of the social investment sector. C4SIBs is part



of the wider Government Inclusive Economy Unit (GIEU), which is focused on growing the social investment market, and using social investment as a force for social change.

- b. The in-house **Analytical Team** of the **Office for Civil Society (OCSAT)** is providing analytical support and guidance to OCS policy areas. As a part of this work, OSCAT is leading on the strategy, analytical design and coordination of the Life Chances Fund evaluation.

The Government Outcomes Lab (GO Lab) is a new centre of academic excellence for innovative government commissioning. It aims to deepen the understanding of outcomes-based commissioning and provide independent support, data and evidence on what works, and what doesn't. The GO Lab is funded as part of a five-year partnership between the Blavatnik School of Government at Oxford University and the government.

The National Lottery Community Fund (previously Big Lottery Fund) are the fund administrator for the LCF, and manage the £80m on behalf of HMG. They are responsible for managing the fund day-to-day, partnering with the Department for Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS) for some processes. This includes managing applications to the fund, funding grants and managing finances. The external partner act as the main point of contact for the fund, and engage DCMS and others as necessary.

ICF is a global consulting and technology services provider, conducting the fund level evaluation of the Life Chances Fund. Since 1969 government and commercial clients have worked with ICF to overcome their toughest challenges on issues that matter profoundly to their success.

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