

Make It Count project

Developing an evidence-informed evaluation toolkit

Delivered by Victoria Christodoulides, Konstantinous Roussos and Susan McPherson from the University of Essex alongside Ben Mann, Faith Oluyole and Emma Farrow at Essex County Council

A partnership of



University of Essex



Essex County Council

Why This Project Matters

Current evaluation approaches can make it difficult to capture the full impact of VCSE and community work, particularly around relational, preventative, and long-term change. This can create challenges in evidencing meaningful outcomes and demonstrating impact across complex systems.

Emerging themes from early literature scoping and stakeholder engagement

There is substantial variation in outcomes, outcome areas and instruments, making comparison across studies and programmes extremely difficult (Ashe et al., 2024)

Much of the current evidence base is small-scale and short-term (Spanos et al., 2025)

“Soft outcomes” such as wellbeing, confidence, and belonging are widely used but inconsistently defined and measured (Ashe et al., 2024)

Key outcomes often include belonging, confidence, feeling supported, meaning, and purpose (Spanos et al., 2025). These outcomes are often relational and context-dependent, making them more difficult to capture using standard approaches.

What We're Trying to Do

Develop a practical, evidence-informed toolkit to support VCSE organisations, commissioners, and public health teams to better evidence meaningful impact in complex systems.



Project Timeline

A phased, iterative approach grounded in stakeholder input and real-world testing

01

Evidence & System Mapping (Months 1–7)

Stakeholder engagement across ECC and VCSE, combined with a scoping and grey literature review, will map existing evaluation approaches, identify gaps, to build a clearer understanding of current approaches, gaps, and system needs

02

Framework Development & Co-Design (Months 8–12)

Drawing on evidence and stakeholder consultation, we will co-design an outcomes framework and toolkit structure, integrating validated measures and practice-based approaches to ensure relevance, usability, and alignment with real-world delivery.

03

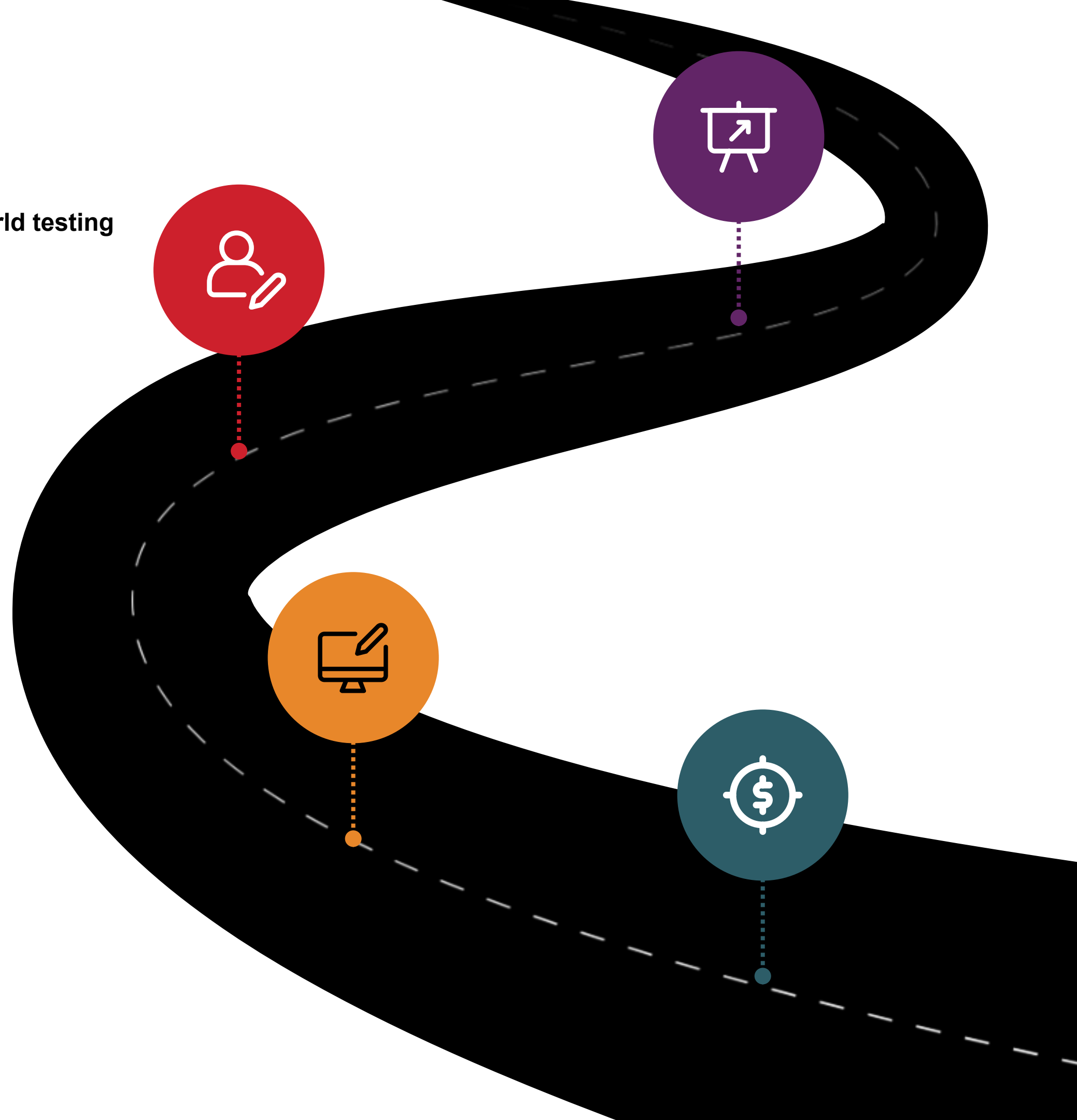
Pilot Implementation & Practice-Based Testing (Months 13–21)

The toolkit will be implemented across pilot sites to assess feasibility, usability, and acceptability in practice. Feedback will inform iterative refinement, ensuring the toolkit meaningfully captures outcomes, including complex and relational change.

04

Scaling, Outputs & Future Pathways (Months 21–24)

We will finalise the toolkit, develop recommendations for wider adoption, and produce academic and practice outputs. This phase will also identify pathways for future formal validation and long-term system integration.



Opportunities to get involved



■ Steering Group from June 2026

Purpose:

- Provide strategic guidance, challenge, and system insight throughout the project

Potential involvement:

- Quarterly meetings
- Reviewing progress and direction
- Supporting system alignment

Likely participants:

- Commissioners, individuals who understand the evaluation process (could include data collection and evaluation) system leaders, strategic partners



■ Design & Development from 2027

Purpose:

- Help shape the toolkit structure, language, and outcome areas

Potential involvement:

- Workshops
- Feedback sessions
- Reviewing draft approaches
- Identifying priorities and challenges

Likely participants:

- VCSE organisations, practitioners, community stakeholders, individuals involved in evaluation, data collection, or outcomes reporting as part of their role

■ Testing & Implementation from 2027

Purpose:

- Support pilot testing of the toolkit in real-world settings

Potential involvement:

- Trialling toolkit approaches
- Sharing feedback and learning
- Identifying practical challenges
- Reflecting on usability and feasibility

Likely participants:

- VCSE organisations, practitioners, community stakeholders, individuals involved in evaluation, data collection, or outcomes reporting as part of their role

Stakeholders may contribute across multiple stages of the project.

Interested in learning more?

If you would like to learn more about the *Make It Count* project or discuss potential involvement, please contact:

Dr Victoria Christodoulides
University of Essex
vc26288@essex.ac.uk

