

Early Assessment Sifting Tool: user guidance

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Version 2

The Early Assessment Sifting Tool (EAST) supports an initial 'coarse screening' of a longlist of alternatives and options. The EAST is designed to quickly and robustly rule out alternatives and options, allowing for a more manageable subsequent multi-criteria analysis (MCA) exercise. The EAST also assists in documenting why decisions have been made.

The Early Assessment Sifting Tool (EAST) is recommended for use for coarse screening when there are a large number of alternatives or options to consider.

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More information

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Introduction

The Early Assessment Sifting Tool (EAST) is an optional tool to support an initial 'coarse screening' of a longlist of alternatives and options. The EAST is designed to quickly and robustly rule out alternatives and options that are non-starters, allowing for a more manageable subsequent [multi-criteria analysis](#) (MCA) exercise.

Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency designed the EAST to provide a consistent format for project teams assessing all transport-related alternatives and options. It assists with robust and transparent decision-making, while providing practitioners with flexibility on how they do this.

We have adapted the EAST from United Kingdom Department for Transport best practice and it aligns with NZ Treasury Better Business Case guidance.

In many cases, only high-level information will be available at the early stages of considering alternatives and options. The EAST is designed so that it can be applied without having to obtain detailed evidence, but with input from subject matter experts. They should use their judgement alongside evidence on the relative magnitudes of impacts to assess the alternative or option.

The EAST does not provide definitive answers about which are the best alternatives or options to be used in subsequent MCA. Applying critical thinking is important, especially when considering the right-sizing of possible solutions to a problem or opportunity.

Key considerations when undertaking coarse screening include:

- Alternatives and options need to address the root causes of the problems identified in the strategic case.
- Only alternatives and options with true fatal flaws should be discounted at this stage.
- Synergies and conflicts between alternatives and options should be considered if packaged together.
- Decisions and discussions from this coarse screening should feed into the assessment of the longlist of alternatives and options during the MCA process.

Benefits of using the EAST

The benefits of using the EAST are that the tool:

- provides a consistent approach to coarse screening to refine the initial list of alternatives and options in the optioneering (option-selection) process without having to obtain detailed evidence
- assists in getting to a manageable number of alternatives and options for more detailed assessment using MCA
- eliminates non-starters early on to ease the appraisal burden and avoid resources being spent unnecessarily
- identifies key uncertainties in the analysis and areas where further appraisal effort should focus
- helps document decisions made, providing a clear rationale for the rejection of alternatives/options.

When should the EAST be used?

The EAST is designed to assist with initial coarse screening to help confirm longlist options during the development of a land transport investment business case. The use of the EAST is recommended and is most useful when there are a large number of alternatives and options to consider (around eight or more alternatives or options). The EAST should only be used at the coarse screening stage as it is not a replacement for more detailed MCA or the [environmental screen](#).

EAST would not be appropriate to use when developing a single-stage business case lite (SSBC lite), as SSBC lite is tailored for projects with limited options.

Before conducting coarse screening

To enable the EAST to be applied as part of the optioneering process, there are several things you need to do first.

The strategic case

The strategic case is the cornerstone for successive business case phases, and it will become the first section of the programme business case (PBC) indicative business case (IBC) or single-stage business case (SSBC) document. The strategic case should clearly articulate the problem or opportunity, identify the benefits sought and set investment objectives.

Generate alternatives and options

After the strategic case has been created, a broad range of alternatives and options are generated using the [intervention hierarchy](#) and systems thinking (which considers how parts of the system relate to each other, for example land use and the transport system).

Do-minimum

Assessment involves examining different options or courses of action against a counterfactual or baseline: a do-minimum, which may include maintaining the status quo and should account for committed and funded transport activities. The 'do-minimum' must be defined before coarse screening is commenced. For more information about do-minimums, see the [Monetised benefits and costs manual](#).

Fatal flaws

A fatal flaw is a condition or circumstance that means the option will not be achieved or that a risk cannot be adequately mitigated, or it would be too detrimental to other outcomes to do so. Fatal flaw analysis involves a high bar. Options that are highly difficult but not fatally flawed should remain in the mix and be scored appropriately.

Many fatal flaws relate to aspects that are not consentable under the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA), where property cannot be acquired, or where unresolvable legal challenges may arise. Engineering complexity is rarely a fatal flaw, although natural hazard exposure may be. Financially expensive options in and of themselves should not be considered fatally flawed.

EAST coarse screening outputs

After the EAST has been used for coarse screening, documentation needs to be prepared and should include the following outputs.

Prior business case development

Summary of prior business case development, including:

- overview of project
- how previous spatial planning and strategic assessment outputs have been considered
- history of any past optioneering work
- discussion on the do-minimum
- discussion on investment objectives.

Methodology and approach

Summary of the EAST methodology and approach, including:

- description of agreed methodology for using the EAST
- description of departures from this guidance (if relevant)
- description of assumptions.

Completed EAST template

Documentation of key discussions and decisions made during coarse screening process, including synergies and conflicts between alternatives and options if packaged together.

The EAST template (Excel spreadsheet) and a video on the EAST are available [on our website](#).