



Centre for the Evaluation of  
Complexity Across the Nexus

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## Evaluation, Policy & Complexity

**How to improve the evaluation of complex systems to better inform policy-making:** Learning from evaluating Defra's Reward & Recognition Fund  
Energy Evaluation Academy Webinar– June 26<sup>th</sup> 2019



# Presentation outline

- ✘ Aims of webinar
- ✘ What is CECAN?
- ✘ Research brief – introducing Defra's RRF
- ✘ Experience of evaluation
- ✘ Informing policy
- ✘ Understanding complexity
- ✘ Concluding insights
- ✘ Q&A and discussion

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# **AIMS OF WEBINAR**

# Aims of webinar: What will you gain from the session?

1. First to hear the research findings
2. Constructive dialogue, and a knowledge and practice exchange
  - Exploring: experience of evaluation, informing policy and understanding complexity
3. Find out about CECAN

## Aims of webinar

What do you expect to get out of this session?

**A  
PENNY  
FOR YOUR THOUGHTS**

**WHAT IS CECAN?**



# What is CECAN?

- ❖ A £3m UK research centre hosted by the [University of Surrey](#), bringing together experts to address some of the big issues in policy-making and evaluation
- ❖ CECAN pioneers, tests and promotes innovative evaluation approaches and methods across policy areas where food, energy, water and environment intersect

# Who is CECAN?

## Centre for the Evaluation of Complexity across the Nexus

❖ Funded by



❖ A network of expert partners:



# Why CECAN?

**‘Nexus’ issues - concerning the nature and interaction of *food, water, energy, climate and ecosystems* - are complex, with many diverse, interconnected factors involved. This presents a major challenge to policy-making because changing one factor can often have unexpected knock-on effects in seemingly unrelated areas. We need new ways to evaluate policy in these situations.**

[www.cecan.ac.uk](http://www.cecan.ac.uk)



# How will CECAN create impact?

✘ ...By influencing the practice of evaluation for the Nexus to make it fit for a complex world through...

## Leadership

- Publications e.g. EPPNs
- Connecting people (like in today's webinar)

## Case Studies with Partners/Funders

- Fully embedded e.g. work placement, PhD, fellowships
- Bridge building

## Translate or create a new method

- Method development

## Fellowships, Doctoral students

- Capacity building
- Bridge building



# How CECAN can add value for you?

- ❖ New tools and support for evidence-based policy-making
- ❖ Fresh approaches to appraisal and evaluation
- ❖ Embraces an 'open research' culture of knowledge exchange
- ❖ Events, publications, dialogues, co-designed case studies
- ❖ Intends to provide solutions not add to burdens
- ❖ Find out more via the [CECAN animation](#) and our [website](#)

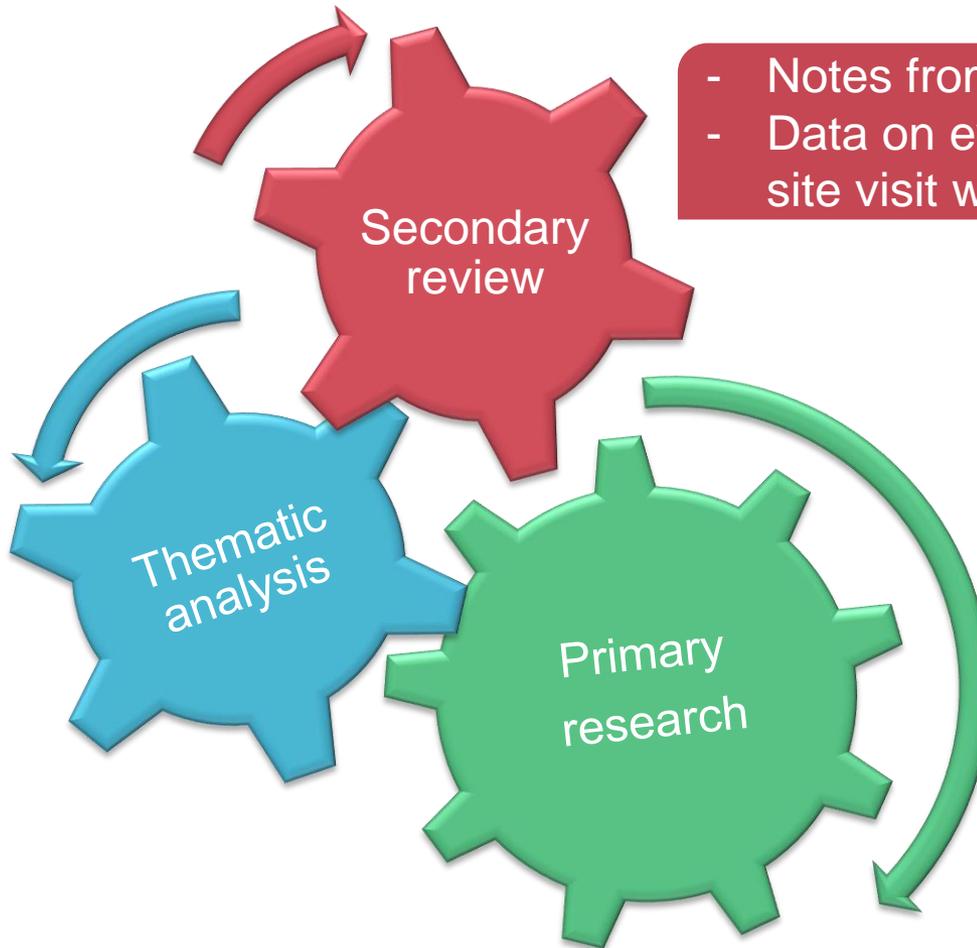


# RESEARCH BRIEF

# Research objectives

- ❖ To further explore evaluation experiences and challenges especially those encountered in Defra's Reward & Recognition Scheme (RRF);
- ❖ To unpack the relationship between evaluation and policy-making especially looking at the policy cycle; and
- ❖ To investigate how complexity is understood and how it could be useful in policymaking.

# Research method



- Notes from evaluation workshops
- Data on evaluation process from site visit write-ups of 31 schemes

- Ten practitioner interviews with RRF scheme managers or delivery contractors
- Ten policy stakeholder interviews with varied engagement in the RRF and varied policy backgrounds

# What is the RRF?

## Programme

- ✘ Reward and Recognition Scheme (RRF) launched in June 2011
- ✘ Up to £2 million from 2011 to 2014
- ✘ A support package for 31 schemes run by civil society organisations and local authorities
- ✘ Schemes focused on different: behaviours, geographical locations, reach, audiences, delivery mechanisms, engagement, material type, time frames, etc.
- ✘ All tested the impact of reward and recognition on increasing recycling and reuse (positive waste behaviours)
- ✘ A safe space to foster innovative schemes to inform best practice

## Evaluation

- ✘ A process and narrative evaluation using key impact indicators and case studies was carried out by Brook Lyndhurst – [published report](#)

# What about energy? Is this not too UK centric?

Feeling short changed?

Don't! You will feel richer by the end of the webinar! 😊



# EXPERIENCE OF EVALUATION

# Broad experience of evaluation

## Practitioner

- ❑ Need for black and white data on how schemes are working vs much messier practice
- ❑ Behaviour change takes a long time to embed, evaluation needed to show results sooner
- ❑ Sense of purpose - felt part of a nation-wide programme
- ❑ Onerous evaluation demands
- ❑ Worthwhile to show scheme effectiveness

## Policy stakeholder

- ❑ Evaluation key to good policy-making
- ❑ Clear evaluation objectives from the onset but need to be adaptive – an iterative process
- ❑ ‘Evaluation’ as a continuum of understanding the evidence; not an isolated, one-off activity
- ❑ Evaluation is both an external, accountability exercise and an internal, reflective dialogue of what works
- ❑ Policy isn’t driven by evaluation outcomes

# Evaluation journey

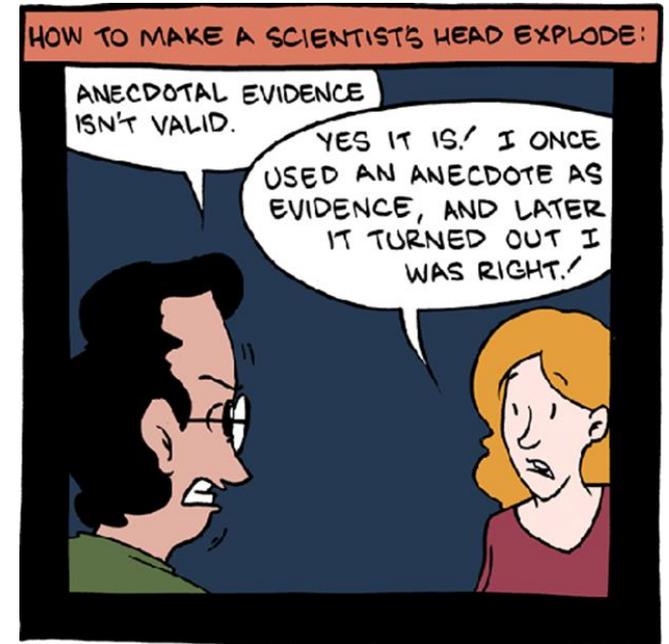
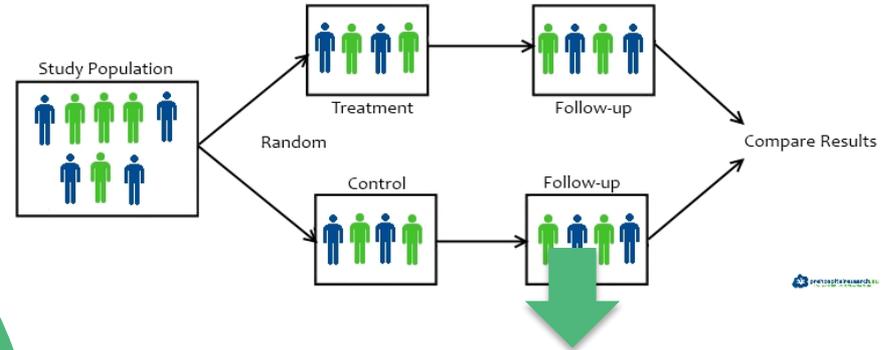


- ❖ Phases link up in theory but not in practice
- ❖ Self-contained phases but evaluation is/should be done continuously
- ❖ Expectation that design & planning happens in tendering process by research community rather than internally
- ❖ Different evaluation approaches for different Government departments/ agencies - ranging from locally-run, laissez-faire style to centrally managed, hands-on style

*“What we tend to do is produce a huge wish list of things we would like the evaluation to achieve...Everything else flows reasonably well except for the fact that we sometimes change our minds, so commissioning implementation etc. will broadly happen then in the way you would expect them to do within consultation. But I think the thing that’s really missing is that actually designing and thinking logically about what we really want before we actually commission it.”*

Policy stakeholder

# Practitioner evaluation challenges



# Policy stakeholder evaluation challenges

*A different perspective but similar issues...*

- ❖ Data – quality, availability and relevance
- ❖ Isolating impact of policy – many intervening factors at play
- ❖ Identifying control groups
- ❖ Limited techniques and methods at their disposal
- ❖ Lack of clear objectives
- ❖ Budgets
- ❖ Variety and diversity of projects
- ❖ Mismatch of skills and capacity for those carrying out evaluation

# The delivery-evaluation relationship



**'Tug of war'** – a tense but not polarised relationship with evaluation taking time, resources and energy away from delivery

**But more often a...**

**Complementary partnership** – where evaluation feeds into and is integrated in the project's delivery activities



# RRF Example: A special case?

- ❖ Practitioners felt part of a national call to action to pilot rewards and recognition in increasing recycling and reuse
- ❖ Rationale behind evaluation was a proof of concept of whether policy has or hasn't worked
- ❖ More hands-on, onerous and detailed compared to other funding streams
- ❖ A lot of intervening factors and background noise made attribution to scheme, let alone reward element difficult, if not impossible

*"So I think it actually was a benefit knowing that ...we were tying into other schemes and contributing into a much wider intelligence base."*  
Practitioner

*"There was a responsibility as part of the funding to also ensure that we were using that in a way that it was given to us and that we were giving something back for that. So I was very aware that it was there but not in a suffocating way."*  
Practitioner

# So what? Experience of evaluation

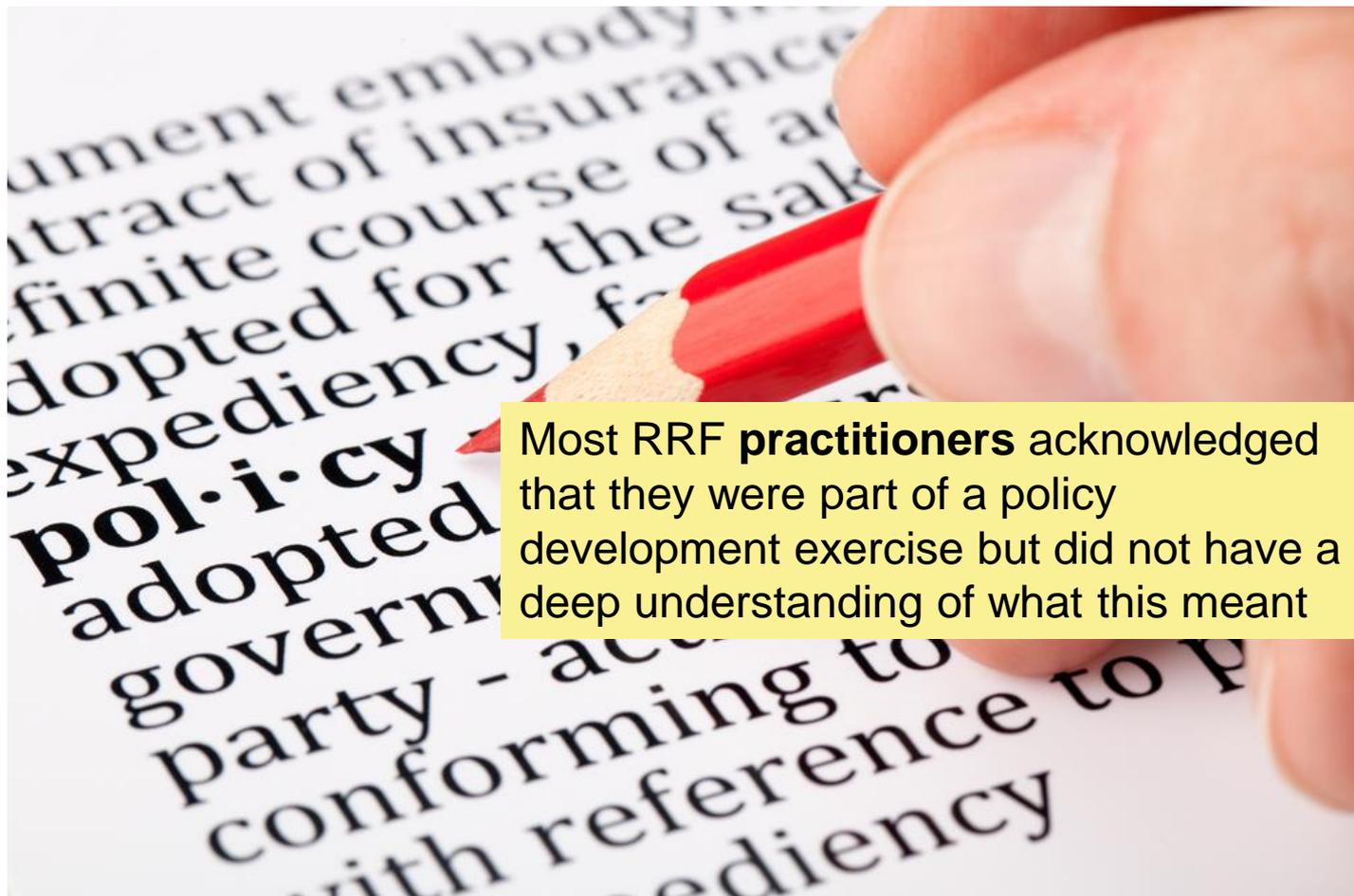
*Drawing from practice, how can these insights improve policy-making...*

- ❖ Creating a wider sense of purpose in an evaluation can help nurture buy-in
- ❖ If evaluation is planned, resourced and budgeted into the scheme from the onset, the relationship between project delivery and evaluation need not be a tense 'tug of war'
- ❖ Acknowledgement that practitioners and policy stakeholders experience similar evaluation challenges
- ❖ Evaluation needs to be an integrative, continuous process not a one-off standalone activity or a series of self-contained steps
- ❖ In the field of environment both scheme/service delivery and policy development happen in a 'messy' context with many intervening factors at play, this makes attribution difficult



**INFORMING POLICY**

# Practitioners & policy development



Most RRF **practitioners** acknowledged that they were part of a policy development exercise but did not have a deep understanding of what this meant

# Evaluation & policy – not a perfect match

- ❖ Different speeds – working to two distinct tempos
  - Fast paced, dynamic, quick turnaround of policymaking versus the analytical, detailed, long timeframe of evaluations
- ❖ Evaluators/analysts need to feel comfortable with ‘good enough’ and ‘impact at this point in time’
- ❖ Policy stakeholders need to feel comfortable with the risk that end conclusions may be different
- ❖ Given the new regulatory regime with post-implementation reviews and future policy reform, evaluation is more important



*"Just in the example of Reward and Recognition by the time that evaluation was done, signed off and published it wasn't really on anyone's agenda anymore, it wasn't topical, it took too long to do the evaluation but it needed that long because you have to pilot it, you have to evaluate it, you had to write it up. So it is a big dilemma."*

Policy stakeholder

# Familiarity with policy cycle

- ❖ High levels of familiarity
- ❖ Mainly applied to new policies
- ❖ A discursive, process tool
- ❖ Justification of Department's work
- ❖ Don't 'use' it, it just 'is' – part of standard operating procedure
- ❖ Good in theory, not in practice
- ❖ Wheel makes it look cyclical, but it effectively describes a linear process



Source: Defra (undated) Inside Defra: How Defra works? p. 11  
<http://www.larpnet.com/downloads/insidedefra.pdf>

*“Although it goes round in a circle, it is still essentially describing a nice neat linear process which doesn't exist in the real world. I think, also, it doesn't demonstrate how evidence is used throughout that cycle.”*

Policy stakeholder

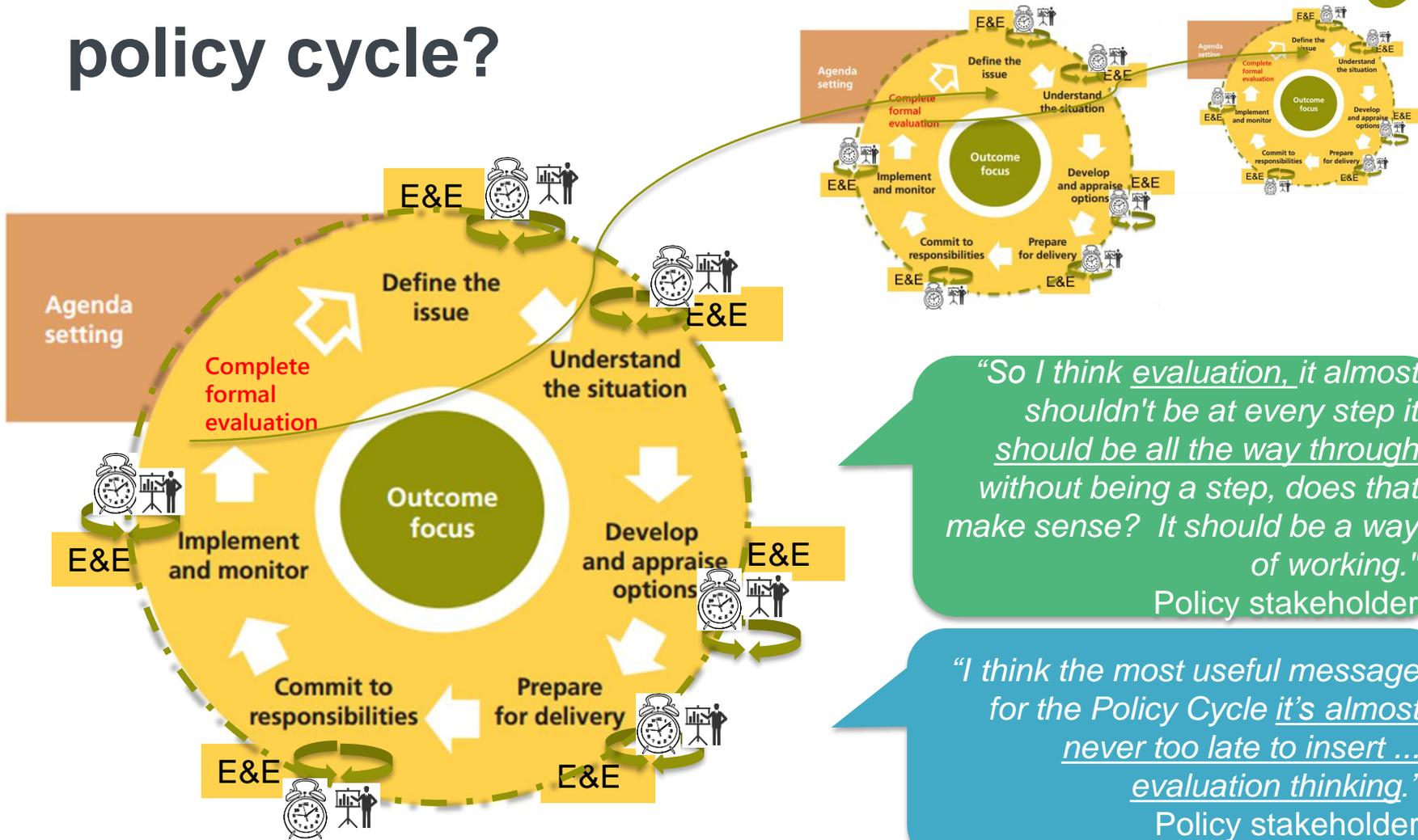
*“I think it's just how things are done I don't think people even think consciously 'oh no, I'm going to start using the policy [cycle]' if you see what I mean? That is just business as usual.”*

Policy stakeholder

*“An ideal model that never actually happens in practice.”*

Policy stakeholder

# How does/should evaluation fit into the policy cycle?



## Key

E&E = Evidence gathering & preparation for evaluation



= Timely input



Policy makers working with analysts

# Challenges for embedding evaluation into the policy cycle

Policies not being 'evaluable'

Interrelated systems

Lack of time

Policy changing over time

Tempo mismatch

Working culture

Senior management buy-in

Political will

Other more common challenges:  
Capacity and capabilities  
Data  
Resources and costs

# RRF Example: Impact on policy

*The results and process of the RRF led to impact on...*

## ❖ Social research:

- Funding of action-based research projects
- Useful insight on how to set-up schemes
- Rich learning documented and shared amongst analysts

## ❖ Policy

- Informs current thinking on levers of behaviour change
- Used in different policy circles across waste streams
- Rewards not considered as a measure to increase recycling

## ❖ On the ground practice

- Report made available to other schemes
- Dissuaded some local areas to take up rewards
- A few practitioners felt RRF left a legacy in their local communities, overall jury is still out



# So what? Informing policy

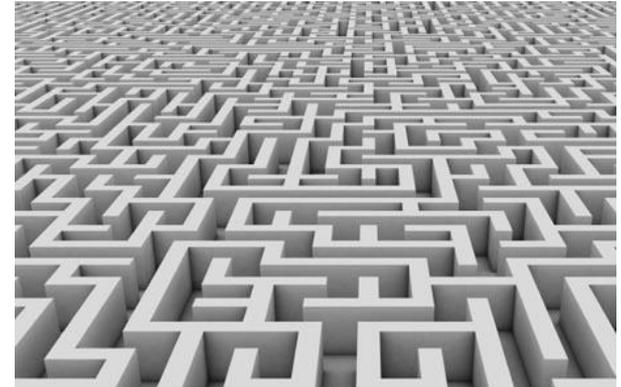
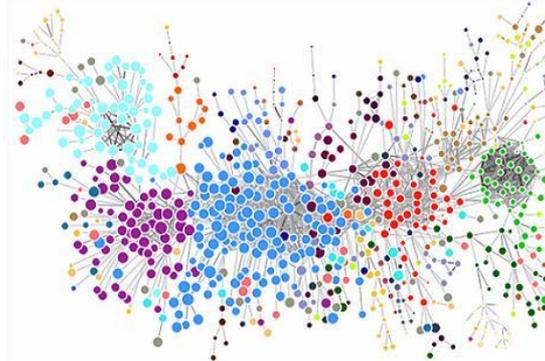
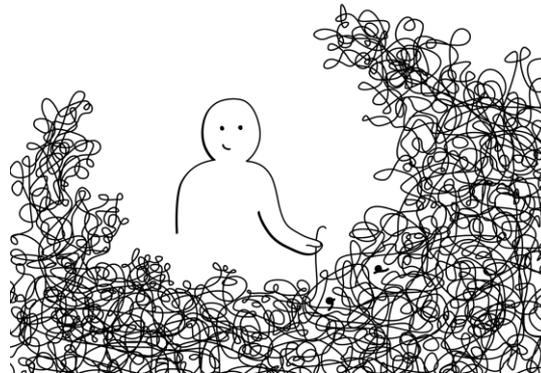
*How can evaluation be better integrated into policy-making...*

- ❖ Acknowledge the time scale disparity and work with ‘good enough’ and ‘at the time’ insight
- ❖ Closer collaboration between policy makers and analysts
- ❖ Ensure policy cycle is an actual a way of working
- ❖ Evaluation to form part of initial thinking
- ❖ ‘Preparing for evaluation’ to feed into each phase – not an additional burden
- ❖ Evaluation cannot delay or derail policy development, needs to complement it



# **UNDERSTANDING COMPLEXITY**

# Defining complexity



# Defining complexity in the RRF

## Practitioner

- ❑ If policy issue is complex, evaluation doesn't have to be
- ❑ Understanding behaviour change always complex
- ❑ Lack of transferability or replicability of a scheme an indicator of complexity
- ❑ Background noise makes it hard to isolate impact
- ❑ New, innovative areas
- ❑ Controversial policy/ issue
- ❑ Unintended benefits/ consequences

## Policy stakeholder

- ❑ Different impact across the same audience
- ❑ Challenge is complicated, while the system with its intervening factors, interactions and trade-offs is complex
- ❑ Simple concept – 'rewarding people' but context is complex
- ❑ Cannot visualise impact when it comes to waste
- ❑ Complicate vs complex – around predictability, lack of control (esp. of externalities)

# RRF Example: What makes it complex?

*" I think it is complex because it involves a diffusion of different people in different situations with different motivations and different needs facing different physical barriers, motivational barriers, financial barriers or situations maybe better than financial barriers. So having a policy that influences all of those people to do the same thing in the same way to the same extent is obviously unachievable and therefore there must be complexity in the policy solution to that problem."*

Policy stakeholder

*"But also you're dealing with quite complex systems where there's lots of interactions, there's lots of trade offs and things like that that can be quite challenging. And also you're dealing with complex human behaviours."*

Policy stakeholder

*"Comparing different schemes it's very difficult to transfer a scheme from one area to another in those terms. Sometimes communities can vary wildly from area to area so you might find your trial area works very well but if you transfer that even to a community that's next to it ,it might be very difficult to replicate the results.."*

Practitioner

*"The evaluation doesn't need to be complex at all if you actually know what your goals are. Complex projects are always going to be around, we are never going to simplify it, but it is [about] how you develop your evaluation protocols."*

Practitioner

# A closer look at complexity: the nuances

- ✘ Contextual specificity, attribution difficulties and background noise resonated well
- ✘ Perspective of complexity – evaluation, policy, issue, scheme concept, etc.
- ✘ A question of framing – an issue is complex but a policy or evaluation doesn't have to be complex
- ✘ Interrelated systems make causality difficult
- ✘ Need to look beyond the intended outcomes

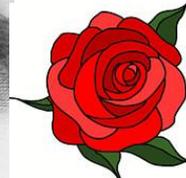
# Complexity: what's in a name?

- ❖ 'Complex' issues not necessarily formally recognised as such
- ❖ Term not considered off-putting or negative but some said 'complex' label may deter pursuit of certain policies
- ❖ Any assessment of complexity needs to be integrated in existing appraisal mechanisms and framed as an opportunity

What's in a name? That which we  
call a rose by any other name  
would smell as sweet.

*William Shakespeare*

www.thequotes.in



 **cecan**

# Complexity & evaluation methods

- ✘ Does/ should complexity affect the type of evaluation carried out?
  - 2 No; 5 Yes; 3 Don't know
- ✘ Some appreciation that complexity precludes certain evaluation methods
- ✘ Complexity not the only issue – can't lose sight of the bigger picture
- ✘ Not helpful to cluster policies under different headings or techniques

*“Yes it might be that for the particular complexity that it's just not possible to use one of those research designs...If you've got an area where you've just got a lot of different policies working then actually measuring the precise impact that each one has had rather than understanding the cumulative impact can be quite tricky.”*

Policy stakeholder

*“I think that's why CECAN was set up, isn't it, in the sense that we recognise that actually our ability to evaluate these sorts of things is not particularly great, and I think that we are hoping for insights into how to do it better. So no I don't think it is, I think it is recognised as an issue, but I don't think that currently we are particularly good at doing it.”*

Policy stakeholder

*“I don't agree with the “What works” centres, I think they are fundamentally flawed because even if you can do a really robust RCT type evaluation all that will tell you is it worked in that context at that particular time, delivered in that particular way, and we know from our experience that you don't have to deviate very much from the delivery model to get a completely different result.”*

Policy stakeholder

# So what? Understanding complexity

*How can understanding complexity better inform evaluation and policy-making...*

- ❖ Complexity can be that common trait across policy issues that have governance issues, that are interrelated, for which impacts are difficult to measure and attribute
- ❖ Context, attribution and background noise were aspects that resonated well with interviews when discussing complexity
- ❖ Label of 'complexity' isn't that important but framing is – an opportunity
- ❖ Acknowledging complexity overtly and, perhaps, formally can help with evaluation and thus improving policy-making
- ❖ Any assessment of a policy's complexity has to be integrated in existing appraisal mechanisms, no appetite for another process

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# CONCLUDING INSIGHTS

# Concluding remarks

- ❖ Evaluation needs to be an integrative, continuous process not a one-off exercise at the end or a series of self-contained steps – a way of working
- ❖ Acknowledge the time scale disparity between policy and evaluation, use ‘good enough’ and ‘at the time’ insight and embed ‘preparing for evaluation’ especially in initial policy design phase
- ❖ Recognising complexity explicitly can better equip policy stakeholders and practitioners with the ‘smart’ evaluation approaches
- ❖ **CECAN can help further all three points...**

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# **Q&A AND DISCUSSION**



**KEEP  
CALM  
IT'S  
YOUR  
TURN NOW**

# Questions to discuss

- ❖ *EVALUATION: How can your own experience of evaluation and its challenges help improve policy-making? What is your experience of evaluation? Does it chime with the research insights?*
- ❖ *POLICY: How can evaluation be better integrated into policy-making? What is your experience of evaluation informing or not informing policy? Does it chime with the research insights?*
- ❖ *COMPLEXITY: What is your understanding and experience of complexity? Does it chime with the research insights?*

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