

# Maximising impact from evaluations in complex policy areas

A CECAN Evaluation and Policy Practice Note for policy analysts and evaluators



Evaluations are only useful if they influence and improve future policymaking, so how can this impact best be achieved? This note draws on the findings of a research fellowship within Defra's policy evaluation team conducted between February 2015–February 2016, which looked at impactful evaluations. It presents some key messages about evaluation design, process and communication for successful impact in complex policy areas around the nexus.

## What is the most effective way of planning complex policy evaluation?

Evaluation planning is most effective if it:

- Is an integral element of the initial policy planning rather than an afterthought.
- Brings together key actors and stakeholders
- Is recognised as an important element by those involved.
- Has a project manager who can stay with the process throughout.
- Involves a clear and detailed brief to ensure clarity during any staff changes
- Ensures risk management procedures are in place to cover, for example, staff changes, sickness, or problems with data collection
- Takes account of the resources (including staff skills and time) available.
- Allows sufficient time for completion and reporting.
- Includes communication and dissemination plans.



### **Who needs to be involved in the evaluation?**

Evaluation works best with the close collaboration of committed people who are open to different ways of thinking, including:

- A project manager in the policy team who is committed to the evaluation process and has interpersonal skills to build team enthusiasm for evaluation.
- Policy team members who bring relevant expertise and enthusiasm to the process.
- Internal analysts, including those who have social science expertise.

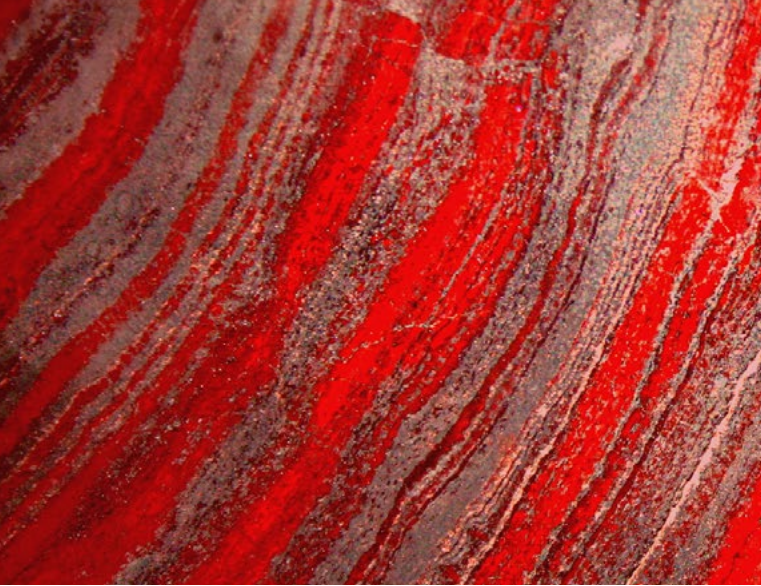
Where appropriate:

- Experienced external evaluation consultants with good interpersonal and communication skills.
- Key stakeholders to contribute to the research design in order to ensure it meets their needs.
- Field workers and data collectors in order to ensure consistency and quality of the data.
- Stakeholders who will be implementing, helping to deliver or who will be affected by the policy to provide their perspective and expertise.

### **What elements does a successful evaluation design include?**

A successful design for an evaluation will generally:

- Begin with a clear aim and success criteria defined early on.
- Be explicit about why the evaluation is needed, who will be using it and how.
- Use a logic process/logic model to identify appropriate methods which are fit for purpose, rather than assume a certain method is intrinsically superior.
- Cover the whole process of implementing the policy – not only outcomes but how these were achieved.
- Be flexible enough to accommodate complexity while retaining clarity of aim.
- Aim to capture information at the most effective point(s) in time.
- Be open to different approaches to economic analysis, including qualitative as well as quantitative techniques.
- Draw on in depth case studies where appropriate to highlight important contextual factors.
- Be appropriate for integrating and building upon the work of the organisation and its wider stakeholder network.



### What processes can help while the evaluation is carried out?

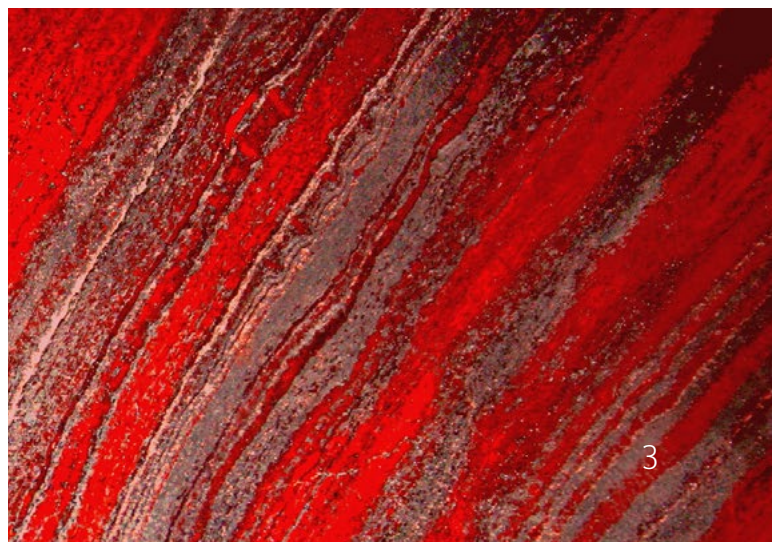
Ideally, during the evaluation process:

- Explicit efforts are made to build relationships of trust between all key partners and stakeholders, with resources and time factored in for this. Face to face meetings are important for this at the beginning.
- Project managers are in regular contact with evaluators through personal meetings and communications.
- Interim reports are provided which are detailed enough to flag any early issues or problems to be resolved.
- Where appropriate, feedback mechanisms are in place between the evaluators and other stakeholders.
- A balance is maintained between collaboration and independence.
- Risk management is actively maintained – this helps to flag issues early on.

### What will happen once the report has been completed?

The work involved in evaluation and reporting can only be cost effective if it is communicated effectively, appropriate action ensues and any transferable lessons about the process are disseminated beyond the immediate policy area. In order to ensure effective outcomes it helps to:

- Write dissemination plans into the design from the outset and factor in resources for drawing on the expertise of the consultants in designing and carrying these out.
- Plan to disseminate widely both internally and further afield as appropriate.
- Tailor the messages and media for different audiences.
- Highlight interesting, important and engaging findings to build enthusiasm.
- Use a flexible approach and seize communication opportunities.
- Integrate the communication with other initiatives to build value and impact.
- Have plans in place for communicating where things didn't work and gaining valuable learning from this information.
- Build connections with other policy leads who want to apply the lessons in their own areas.





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The Centre for the Evaluation of Complexity Across the Nexus (CECAN) is a £3m national research centre hosted by the University of Surrey, which brings together a unique coalition of experts to address some of the greatest issues in policy making and evaluation.

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