



Department
for Environment,
Food & Rural Affairs

Evaluation Strategy for Defra

2026 to 2030

September 2026

We are responsible for improving and protecting the environment. We aim to grow a green economy and sustain thriving rural communities. We also support our world-leading food, farming and fishing industries.

Defra is a ministerial department, supported by 34 agencies and public bodies.



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Foreword

I am very pleased to introduce Defra's second evaluation strategy.

I see effective evaluation as critical to the delivery of Defra's Outcomes Framework and our vision of restoring nature, supporting growth and enhancing security. Evaluation enables us to learn faster about what is working well and where there are gaps in our delivery. At the same time, it provides us with the essential evidence on the impacts of our programmes.

As an economic, security and science department, we combine delivery with innovation to improve outcomes for the communities we serve and the environment. Evaluation evidence helps us understand the extent to which we are on the right track to achieve our outcomes and the difference we are making in citizens' and stakeholders' lives.

The reality of Defra's work is that some of our outcomes can take time to materialise. Our programmes influence, and in turn are influenced by, complex systems. That makes robust, proportionate evaluation even more important, so that we can be confident about value for money and be transparent about what we are learning.

I would like Defra to accelerate learning from evaluations and ensure we are always acting upon new findings. That means having a clear, well-designed evidence base and theory of change behind our policies and programmes which informs our thinking and actions. Our evaluation strategy gives us the basis to do exactly that.

Evaluation is a collective endeavour across the Defra Group. My senior leadership team and I will expect evaluation to be built in from the start and used through our governance and decision-making processes, so that better evidence consistently leads to better decisions. This evaluation strategy sets out the foundations by which we will achieve this.

Paul Kissack

Permanent Secretary

Executive summary

Defra's second evaluation strategy (2026 to 2030) sets out Defra's approach to strengthening evaluation practice, building on the foundations and achievements of the previous strategy (2022 to 2025). It outlines how Defra will enhance the quality, consistency, and use of evaluation evidence to support ministerial priorities, major programme delivery, and the new strategic outcomes.

The strategy reaffirms the crucial role of evaluation in delivering value-for-money, supporting policy design and programme delivery, strengthening accountability and learning. Evaluation provides evidence on what works, for whom, in what contexts and why, ensuring decisions are grounded in robust evidence and enabling continuous improvement across policies and programmes. These principles are embedded in HM Treasury's Green Book and Magenta Book and underpin requirements such as mandatory registration of evaluations in the Evaluation Registry.

Our vision

The strategy sets out 3 overarching pillars that guide Defra's evaluation ambition:

1. **To grow our capability** through upskilling our analytical community, and policy and project delivery professionals.
2. **To embed good quality evaluation design and evidence** across the full policy cycle and programme delivery.
3. **To embed a culture of learning** from evaluations by using evidence to continuously improve policy and programme delivery.

These pillars reflect refined objectives informed by updated theories of change and extensive engagement with teams across Defra and other government departments.

Progress to date

Significant progress has been made since the publication of our first strategy in 2022, including:

- strengthening evaluation governance
- improving evaluation plans for major programmes
- expanding the Evaluation Community of Practice (ECoP)
- establishing the Defra Theory of Change Champions
- introducing new Value-for-Money (VfM) evaluation guidance

Key challenges around delivering high quality evaluation evidence

Despite progress, some challenges remain, including:

- resource constraints and pressures across complex programmes
- barriers to implementing evaluation in fluid or innovative policy areas
- long timescales associated with environmental outcomes, complicated design and data availability and sharing.
- limited use of experimental and quasi-experimental approaches in current impact evaluations which impacts the quality of evaluation evidence.

These challenges have shaped the strategy's new priorities for the next 5 years.

Our focus for 2026 to 2030

The new strategy commits to:

- strengthening governance and mandating consistent use of Defra's evaluation plan templates and theory of change tools
- adopting more experimental and quasi-experimental approaches where appropriate and feasible
- expanding training through the evaluation academy, including mandatory modules using an evidence-based approach
- focusing Defra's Strategic Evaluation Team resources upon supporting high priority programmes through enhanced quality assurance and monitoring
- improving learning and knowledge sharing through bitesize sessions, evidence syntheses, and improved engagement with evaluation users as part of the evaluation community of practice
- embedding 'test and learn' approaches to support innovation and rapid feedback loops across programmes

Ambition and accountability

The implementation of the strategy will be supported by a new monitoring and implementation framework which will track progress against milestones, outcomes, and indicators for each pillar.

Defra's Strategic Evaluation Team will monitor that framework on behalf of the Director of Analysis. Defra aims to take an evidence-led, evaluative approach to its own work, ensuring that evaluation practice within the department reflects the quality and rigour expected of the wider ecosystem.

Introduction

Our second evaluation strategy sets out our direction of travel for the next 5 years (2026 to 2030). It builds on the successes of the previous strategy (2022 to 2025) and reflects on the lessons learnt during its implementation. It also highlights our proposed activities to ensure progress towards achieving our outcomes.

The strategy covers evaluation work from core Defra. Defra is a ministerial department supported by 34 agencies and public bodies. Two of our arm's length bodies (the Environment Agency and Natural England) will publish their own strategies later in 2026.

Defra Group vision

Our vision is about restoring nature, supporting growth, and enhancing security. As the steward of our natural resources, we strengthen the foundations of our economy and our national security. Defra is a growth department, a science department, and a department of national security and resilience.

Our strategic outcomes

Defra's strategic outcomes are:

- restoring Nature while supporting development
- reforming our water systems so it drives growth, protects consumers and enhances the environment
- backing British farming and food industry to boost production
- resetting trading relationships, including with the EU

Defra is also responsible for strengthening national security and resilience, the stewardship of critical national infrastructure and helping protect and restore critical global ecosystems.

Our vision and overarching objectives

This section summarises our vision and overarching goals for the strategy, and how it links with policy development and the delivery of our strategic outcomes.

The strategic role of evaluation in Defra

Defra's portfolio continues to grow. We are responsible for delivering some of government's critical infrastructure projects on flood resilience and national biosecurity alongside programmes on restoring nature and water reform. Our evaluation programme

of work is designed to support these enabling programmes as they contribute to the government's missions and ministerial priorities.

Our evaluation approach is designed to meet the 2 main purposes for carrying out an evaluation, as described in the HM Treasury [Magenta Book](#) and [Green Book](#): learning and accountability.

Why evaluation matters

Evaluation matters in Defra because it ensures that robust evidence underpins government spending decisions and policy design. As set out in the [Green Book](#), monitoring and evaluation should be built into the development of an intervention from the start following the Rationale, Objectives, Appraisal, Monitoring, Evaluation, Feedback ([ROAMEF](#)) cycle from The Green Book, which outlines the policy development process, to maintain a clear line of sight from rationale for a new policy to feedback loops.

Government departments are expected to undertake comprehensive, proportionate evaluations so that policies deliver value for money and improve people's lives. The Evaluation Task Force and HM Treasury have further strengthened these requirements through mandatory registration of all planned evaluations in the evaluation registry, including major programmes.

Defra requires all programmes over £10 million seeking investment committee approval to include a lead-analyst-signed evaluation plan, ensuring that high-value spending decisions are grounded in credible evaluation evidence. Defra's investment committee is a sub-committee of the executive committee.

Among its responsibilities is considering new project proposals submitted by senior responsible officers (SROs) against HMT Green Book appraisal and evaluation principles.

Evaluation serves 2 core purposes: learning and accountability. It helps determine whether policies or interventions should continue, expand, be modified or stopped, and is therefore key in supporting continuous improvement in public sector outcomes. Without evaluation, we cannot be confident that interventions are effective, efficient, or delivering benefits as intended. Evaluation therefore should be used iteratively, from the outset of policy design, so that the learning is influencing every stage of the policy cycle.

By providing evidence on what works and what does not work, for whom, in what context and why, evaluation helps manage risks and uncertainties while generating insights for both current and future policy-making. All this should be done in an iterative way.

Evaluation also strengthens accountability and transparency by demonstrating the impacts and wider outcomes of government activity. The government sets out its spending plans every few years at spending reviews. These cover all the spending that can be planned in advance, making up about 40% of all public spending. Robust evaluation evidence is essential during these spending reviews, enabling departments like Defra to justify and secure funding for their programmes.

Our vision for evaluation

Our vision for evaluation consists of 3 pillars:

1. To grow our capability through upskilling our analytical community, and policy and project delivery professionals.
2. To embed good quality evaluation design and evidence across the full policy cycle and programme delivery.
3. To embed a culture of learning from evaluations by using evidence to continuously improve policy and programme delivery.

We have refined the wording for pillars 2 and 3 from the previous strategy. We are providing more details about these changes in the ‘focus of the new strategy’ section below.

As we begin our next phase of delivery, the strategy’s focus will be on the evaluations linked to ministerial priorities and Government Major Project Portfolio (GMPP) evaluations. It will also focus on using more experimental and quasi-experimental evaluation methods where feasible. Throughout we will make sure we learn from evaluations. The following sections explain how we will do this.

Evaluation in Defra

Defra’s Strategic Evaluation Team (SET) is responsible for building a strong evaluation culture across the department and stepping in to address gaps where needed. SET advocates for embedding evaluation into policymaking, programme delivery, and organisational processes to ensure decisions are informed by robust evidence. SET also manages Defra’s relationship with the Evaluation Task Force and attends the Cross-Government Evaluation Group (CGEG).

SET’s work includes building an overview of evaluation activity through monitoring and theory of change stocktakes, as well as commissioning cross-cutting research and guidance to strengthen evaluation evidence and capability. SET also focuses on developing internal expertise in designing and delivering evaluations, including innovative approaches, to enhance impact and learning.

SET is part of Defra’s Analysis and Insight Division. Defra’s Director of Analysis is responsible for maintaining analytical standards, including evaluation, and our directorate sits within the wider Science and Analysis group, ensuring alignment with Defra’s analytical and scientific priorities.

Defra follows a ‘hub and spoke’ model of analytical structure. Lead analysts supporting policy areas are responsible for sign off of evaluation plans in their areas. Whilst SET

leads on strategic work, most of the evaluation work is delivered by analysts, mainly social researchers, embedded in analytical teams in policy directorates.

Evaluation programme coverage and prioritisation

Our evaluation programme covers a wide and diverse envelop of high value programmes and policies: the [National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority \(NISTA\)](#) report for 2024 to 2025 included 11 GMPP programmes for Defra with a whole life cost of £37.8 billion, with projects such as the Farming and Countryside Programme, Floods Coastal Erosion Risk Management programme and the Collection and Packaging Reforms programme.

Alongside GMPP programmes, Defra delivers complex and innovative policies related to its outcomes such as [water sector reform](#), air quality, the [Environmental Improvement Plan](#) and [animal welfare strategy](#).

This evaluation strategy will prioritise projects directly linked to ministerial priorities and the GMPP portfolio. These projects fit the criteria of prioritising high quality, substantial evaluations as stated in the [Magenta Book](#). The criteria for 'priority' interventions that require substantial evaluations typically include:

- high profile policies
- high levels of uncertainty and risk including possible negative consequences
- high cost
- high learning potential.

Low priority interventions on other criteria can have a high potential for filling strategically important evidence gap. SET will provide dedicated support to these evaluations, through quality assurance, monitoring risks and progress and constructive challenge.

Evaluation registry

The Evaluation Registry is a public facing platform managed by the joint Cabinet Office-HM Treasury unit, the Evaluation Task Force (ETF), that gathers and organises information on planned, ongoing and complete evaluations. Listing upon the registry is mandatory for all government evaluations.

The registry aims to:

- bring together all government public policy evidence in a single, accessible location to better inform government planning and decision-making
- act as a single source of information on all the evaluation research currently planned or in progress across government to enable better identification of gaps in evaluation activity

- deliver higher levels of government transparency and accountability than ever before by requiring departments to publicly register evaluation plans and to publish evaluation findings

SET meets the requirements of the registry for Defra by completing quarterly compliance checks for ETF and internal compliance checks to ensure all eligible evaluations are uploaded on the registry on time and following the Government Social Research (GSR) publication protocol. SET has created its own guidance to advise colleagues on how and when to upload onto the registry.

As of the 24 June 2026, there are 124 evaluation entries published on the registry. This includes entries uploaded by ETF and Defra after 1 April 2024. Of these 124 evaluations, 80 are complete, 26 are ongoing and 18 are planned; regarding evaluation type, 95 are impact evaluations, 89 process and 49 VfM (figures add to more than 124 where a single evaluation entry consists of more than one evaluation type). Defra continues to be amongst the top best performing departments.

GSR publication protocol

Defra adheres to the [GSR publication protocol](#) by publishing all final reports from Defra funded research projects, including evaluation, on the Defra [science search](#) website. The public can view this website. Once published, the link gets added to the evaluation registry.

Links with the Government Social Research (GSR) Strategy

Our evaluation strategy adheres to the GSR standards and protocol. In this section we have outlined how our work links to the new [GSR Strategy for 2025 to 2030](#):

1: GSR will shape important decisions in government

The main premise of this goal is evaluation. Evaluation can be defined as the process of understanding ‘what works’ and the aim of evaluation in government is to ‘influence decisions through insight’ from evaluation and other evidence. Good-quality evidence should inform key decisions, including the spending review. In this process, the Treasury considers evaluation and other evidence when allocating public spending to departments.

2: GSR will better reflect and represent UK society

All research and evaluation in Defra aim to explore social and environmental issues that affect society. Defra and the GSR community in Defra are also committed to inclusive research to ensure that our outputs are representative of UK society.

3: GSR will be recognised as a community of expert researchers

This goal encompasses all 3 of our evaluation strategy pillars because building capability among evaluators, policy and project delivery professionals in Defra is vital to ensure we are producing robust, defensible evidence using robust methodologies such as

experimental and quasi-experimental designs, which this strategy prioritises. Another priority of this strategy is to build a culture of learning. This will be achieved by building on our evaluation community, including networks such as the Evaluation Community of Practice (ECoP) and Theory of Change (ToC) Champions. These are discussed further in the document.

4: GSR will champion safe, ethical, and appropriate artificial intelligence (AI) in research

AI is a priority for researchers and evaluators in this current time because it can offer vast innovation but can also be harmful. In Defra, we follow the GSR processes and guidance on using AI in our work particularly with contractors. We must embrace AI and the creative methodologies that may come with it, but we must ensure we have robust quality assurance in place. Considerations around the use of AI will be embedded within SET's templates and guidance to ensure we capitalise on its potential while maintaining integrity and transparency.

5: GSR will support multidisciplinary research

This relates to Pillar 1 in our strategy as upskilling the department in evaluation is a priority. However, this goal reminds us of the importance of interdisciplinary learning and the need to join up with colleagues from other analytical professions and disciplines. The evaluation academy modules will help facilitate this (further information on the academy is provided in the next section).

Links with benefits realisation

A benefit is defined by the Cabinet Office as “the measurable improvement resulting from an outcome perceived as an advantage by one or more stakeholders, which contributes towards one or more organisational objectives”. ([Guide for Effective Benefits Management in Major Projects](#)). For appraisal purposes, the Green Book omits the ‘contribution towards one or more organisational objectives’ from the definition of benefits as all social benefits are included in appraisals.

Policy evaluation and benefits management are often conducted in parallel and can complement each other. For example, evaluation plans can support benefits realisation by establishing baseline indicators to identify whether benefits are being realised or not, conducting research into why the benefits are not being realised, and evidencing impact of benefits being realised through counterfactual methods.

However, the 2 processes are not interchangeable. Defra's ‘evaluation plan’ guidance makes it clear that impact evaluations are essential in showing the additional effect of the policy or programme as well as evidencing any unintended or negative effects.

Update on progress with first strategy

This section summarises the progress we have made during the last 3 years by each pillar. It also highlights our key successes and includes case studies that showcase the breadth of our work.

Summary of key successes

The majority of our GMPP projects have robust evaluation plans, reflecting the strength of our evaluation approach. Increasingly, business cases presented to the Investment Committee now include robust evaluation plans, supported by our efforts to build capability across the organisation. SET have launched a Theory of Change champions initiative, training 3 cohorts of champions to deliver bespoke support across Defra.

Defra have ETF-trained Academy staff that deliver the Evaluation Academy in Defra (explained in the next section), ensuring a strong foundation for evidence-based decision-making. The Evaluation Registry data demonstrates good coverage for Defra.

SET have also introduced updated [Value for Money \(VfM\) Evaluation guidance](#) which aims to build Defra-wide understanding on how to undertake robust and complexity appropriate VfM evaluation.

Pillar 1: To grow our capability through upskilling our analytical community, and policy and project delivery professionals

Training and community

We have expanded our vibrant evaluation community of practice (ECoP) which now includes over 117 members (as of 26 March 2026). As part of this community, SET host bi-monthly sessions and newsletters. SET have also trained 3 cohorts of Theory of Change (ToC) champions which form a group with a corporate responsibility to support Defra teams with theory of change development.

SET have also assessed evaluation capability needs and commissioned bespoke evaluation training to meet specific requirements of colleagues. As well as upskilling evaluators, SET also deliver tailored 'policy school' sessions on evaluation to policy colleagues as they play an important role in the policy evaluation process.

Guidance

As well as training, SET continues to produce and support the use of a variety of bespoke departmental evaluation guidance and templates. Most recently, SET have published new [Value for Money \(VfM\) evaluation guidance](#), which is designed to be an accessible and practical resource that encourages more robust VfM evaluation. The guide includes case study examples to support those undertaking VfM assessments and sets out best-practice approaches that can be tailored to the specific needs and context of individual evaluations.

Evaluation Academy

The Evaluation Academy was set up in 2023 by the ETF to address a skills shortage in response to a [National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee report \(National Audit Office 2021\)](#). It is a distinct, cost-effective, high-quality training programme that can be customised by departments. The academy comprises of 10 core modules which cover all the skills required to be an effective evaluator across government. Defra's Evaluation Academy Programme provides voluntary modules to support capability building and we currently have seven active trainers who deliver the modules across Defra Group.

The academy is complemented by practical evaluation surgeries that offer targeted advice and guidance. These activities collectively aim to strengthen evaluation practice and embed evidence-based decision-making throughout the organisation.

Case study: Theory of Change Champions Programme

Over the past 6 years, Defra's evaluation portfolio has expanded significantly, reflecting a stronger focus on evidence and learning. To deepen understanding of theories of change and embed their use across the department, the Strategic Evaluation Team (SET) launched the Theory of Change (ToC) Champions Programme in 2024.

Since then, 3 cohorts of volunteers have been trained resulting in 54 champions across Defra with the most recent cohort taking place in July 2025. One of the aims of the training programme is to increase the use of Defra's [ToC toolkit](#) and ensure its consistent use across Defra's policies, strategies and evaluations.

The toolkit was developed to meet Defra's needs and considers complexity: the programme provides live, online workshops that give Defra colleagues the skills and confidence to act as ToC Champion in their respective policy areas.

Volunteers gain the knowledge and support they need from SET through the workshops. In their champion role, they attend quarterly meetings and are encouraged to engage with each other through the Microsoft Teams channel.

By raising awareness of Defra's ToC toolkit and the champions network, the programme encourages teams to use ToC in their evaluations and other projects, supports more robust and proportionate evaluations, and reduces reliance on SET for direct ToC support. SET will continue evaluating the effect of the programme and adapt it as needed.

Pillar 2: To embed good quality evaluation design and evidence across the full policy cycle and programme delivery

Governance

SET has worked to improve evaluation governance, aiming to further embed evaluation into our processes and systems. Data from the Evaluation Registry demonstrates strong coverage across Defra, providing visibility and accountability for ongoing evaluations.

Since the start of 2021, SET has provided bespoke support to priority evaluations in Defra, by advising on appropriate methodologies, quality assuring theories of change, evaluation plans and reports and attending steering group meetings. SET also worked with ETF and the priority areas to help them overcome challenges. In addition, SET strengthened evaluation governance by quality assuring evaluation plans within business cases over £10 million and ensuring that they are signed off by lead analysts. The director of analysis also sits on the investment committee and provides analytical oversight. SET have also provided regular updates on major projects to the delivery committee to maintain transparency and oversight.

Quality and proportionate design

Most of our major projects have robust evaluation plans in place, reflecting the strength of our evaluation approach. The [NISTA](#) report for 2024 to 2025 showed that 9 out of 11 Defra major projects had an evaluation plan in place.

To improve quality assurance, SET have set up a voluntary ECoP quality assurance pool and introduced evaluation quality assurance guidance and a checklist, which teams can adopt to enhance the rigor of their evaluations.

These initiatives collectively aim to standardise practices and promote consistency across Defra, resulting in improved quality and proportionate design.

The 2 case studies below highlight the breadth of our evaluation approach and methodologies:

Case study: Food Systems Trials

The [SALIENT consortium](#) co-design and evaluate interventions that support healthier diets and reduce the environmental impacts of the food system, with work concluding in March 2026.

The programme has conducted ten real world trials using experimental and quasi-experimental methods such as randomised controlled trials. Trials have taken place in diverse settings including canteens, supermarkets, food banks and food delivery apps, testing interventions such as defaults, relative and absolute availability, healthy swaps, and price discounts. SALIENT is currently in the process of publishing academic findings and disseminating the results of trials across government.

A process evaluation of the trials programme has also been carried out to understand the impact of the interventions and how different stakeholders interact with them.

The findings of the trials will be used to inform policy development as part of Defra's food strategy, through specific policy briefings and dissemination events, and they can be assessed through [SALIENT's website](#).

Case study: Nature for Climate Fund Tree programme evaluation

The Nature for Climate (NCF) Tree Programme is a GMPP (Government Major Projects Portfolio) that ran between 2020 and 2025.

It aims to increase tree planting to support net zero targets through carbon sequestration, restore nature, improve water quality, air quality, generate flood mitigation and boost jobs. An independent evaluation of the NCF Tree Programme is being conducted over 3 stages to support and develop the approach to delivery to best ensure the programme's success.

The evaluation has applied a realist theory-based approach to explore what works, how, why, and under what conditions to inform evidence-based policy and delivery outcomes. It develops and tests programme theories through context-mechanism-outcome analysis, drawing on insight from quantitative and qualitative research exercises, such as surveys, interviews and focus groups with programme managers, deliver partners and grant applicants as well as documentary and secondary analysis.

For example, inadequate data, monitoring and reporting systems at the outset of the programme constrained learning; there has subsequently been improvement including resourcing for data science. To date, across the programme, the evaluation has found there has been limited leveraging of private finance. There are several initiatives being explored which need careful consideration.

The evaluation has reinforced the strength of pre-NCF evidence that the Woodland Creation Partnership approach of tailored 'handholding' is critical to the success of these tree grant mechanisms. In contrast the customer experience and processing speeds of the England woodland creation offer grant were found wanting; significant work has been undertaken to remedy both aspects (the final stage of the evaluation should be able to measure the success to date of that work).

The VfM component of the evaluation employs an Oxford Policy Management 5E's approach to assessing the value for investment of the programme. This approach assesses the value delivered by the programme across multiple areas (economy, efficiency, effectiveness, cost-effectiveness and equity) to broadly and comprehensively understand the effectiveness of the programme and to what extent and in which areas the programme is delivering good value for money. The interim VfM report was published in 2025 and is being followed up with a fuller analysis as part of the final stage of the evaluation in summer 2026.

Stage 1 and 2, as well as the interim VfM report have been published on the Evaluation Registry and Science Search and are feeding into the future Trees Action Plan as well as the next stage of delivery for the NCF Tree Programme which will run between 2026 and 2030. You can find the: [Nature for Climate Tree Programme Evaluation - Evaluation Registry](#) on GOV.UK.

Pillar 3: To embed a culture of learning from evaluations by using evidence to continuously improve policy and programme delivery

ECOP

Our well-established evaluation community delivers bi-monthly sessions and is a key vessel for dissemination and showcasing of best practice, learning and case studies, which promotes collaborative learning across Defra.

Delivery committee

SET has worked closely with the Portfolio Office to ensure that regular delivery committee meetings include evaluation updates, strengthening the link between evidence and decision-making. SET also produced an evidence review for the delivery committee titled drawing together recommendations from recent evaluations, as well as those from other work carried out by project delivery colleagues.

Steering groups

As part of this pillar, SET have recommended that teams establish evaluation steering groups for policies, programs, and strategies to ensure evaluation evidence is shared systematically.

Case study: ODA Programme Evaluation

Defra is strengthening its approach to Official Development Assistance (ODA) learning at both portfolio and cross-government levels. The ODA Hub is working with programme teams to identify changes needed to improve learning, including linking programmes and suppliers working on similar themes and exploring rapid insights through AI. A new workstream on cross-portfolio learning will convene colleagues and partners to share experiences, initially focusing on priority themes such as the shift from global to local interventions, livelihoods-based approaches to reducing poverty in conservation, and mobilising nature finance.

Alongside this, Defra, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero have co-developed the International Climate Finance (ICF) Portfolio Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Programme.

This will consolidate learning from past investments since 2016 and generate evidence for future priorities, including natural capital, value for money, innovative ODA delivery, and regional insights. Implementation begins in 2026, with learning outputs expected from 2027 onwards.

Several major evaluations are underway across Defra's ODA portfolio. For example, The Global Centre on Biodiversity for Climate evaluation is testing casual pathways for scaling interventions and improving research commissioning. The Biodiversity Challenge Funds interim evaluation, due in 2026, will assess long-term impacts on poverty and conservation at project and portfolio levels. Partner-led evaluations of the Nature Positive Economy

programme informed the decision to extend the programme after it was found to be successful.

The Ocean Community Empowerment and Nature (OCEAN) Interim (Phase One) evaluation addressed programme design and delivery and identified evidence of adaptive learning, including strengthened Gender, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) integration. It also highlighted the need for greater strategic focus ahead of future rounds and further work to ensure GEDSI commitments translate into more meaningful outcomes.

Finally, the Blue Planet Fund portfolio evaluation is examining process, impact, and value for money across its programmes, and is designed to improve understanding of the coherence, sustainability, and collective potential of the programming in aggregate. The evaluation is complemented by a learning strand, designed to improve knowledge exchange and inform improvements in the design, delivery and ultimately impact of marine development programmes run by HMG and amongst delivery partners. As part of Defra's ODA evaluation strategy,

Defra is working with implementing partners such as United Nations Environment Programme and World Economic Forum to strengthen the quality and utility of evaluations commissioned and ensure evaluation evidence is used to improve programme implementation. This leadership in evaluation is underpinned through development of an evaluation standards quality framework and application of evaluation governance principles.

Focus of the new strategy

Following the development of the first strategy, SET created a team Theory of Change to map out the activities, outcomes, and capabilities required, aligning these with the ETF strategy and prioritising strong stakeholder engagement. SET assessed the progress achieved for each pillar of the strategy and identified areas of improvement, alongside the successes highlighted in the previous chapter.

Challenges and areas for improvement

Through our ongoing engagement with teams and analysis of internal data sources, SET identified priority areas where more progress is needed. We know that other departments and organisations face similar challenges, including resource constraints and the difficulty of evaluating complex, evolving policies that require agile and innovative approaches. In addition, a lot of our environmental outcomes will not be realised for several years, which presents challenges around data collection and availability, as well as choosing a durable and robust evaluation design. In the following section we outline the changes we've made to our theory of change and previous objectives, to reflect these challenges and ensure that the new strategy will focus on the areas in which we need to make more progress. In summary, our new strategy will focus on increasing the use of experimental and quasi-

experimental evaluation methods, where this is feasible, and strengthening learning from evaluations to drive continuous improvement.

Figure 1: Defra Evaluation Strategy 2026 to 2030 updated theory of change

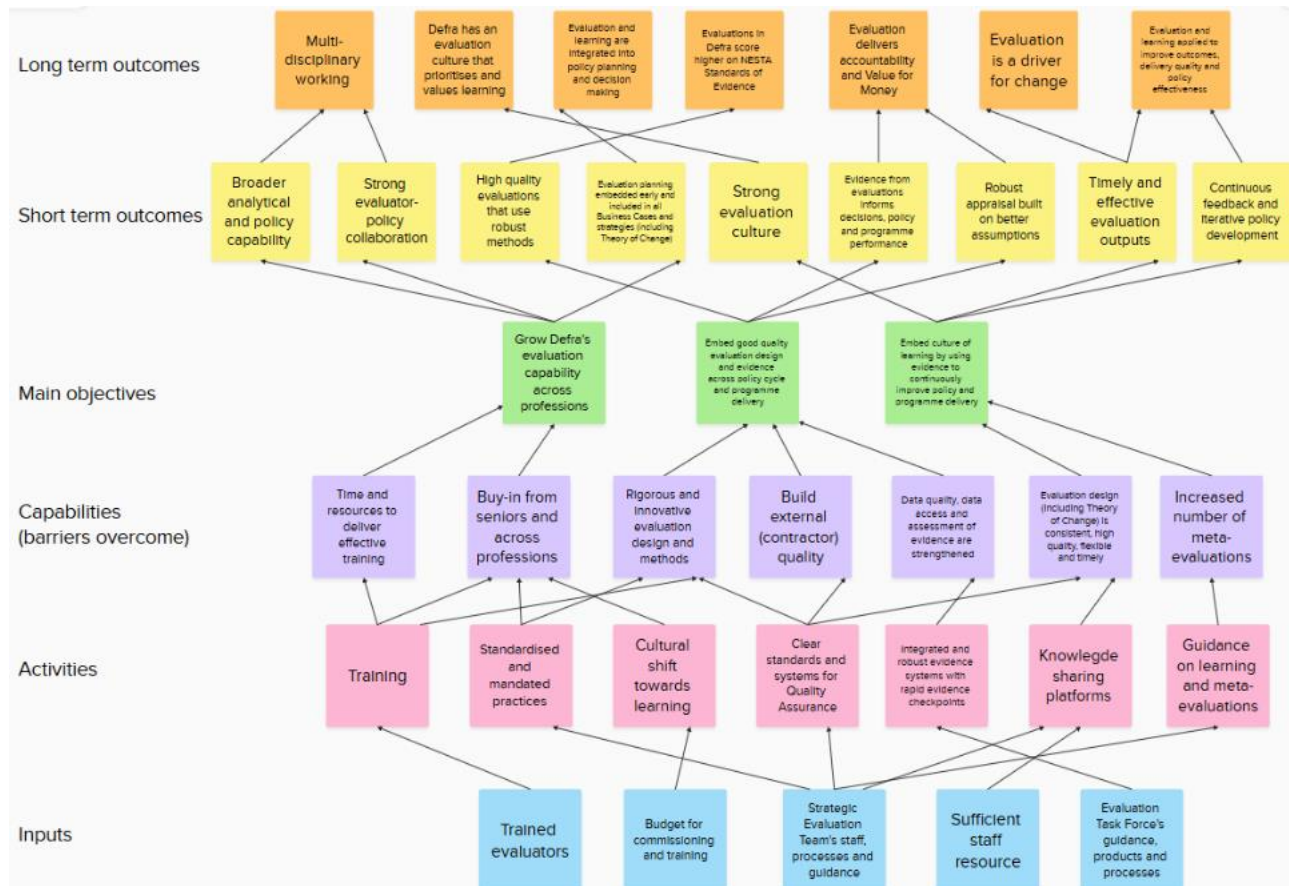


Figure 1 is an illustration of a theory of change, with arrows depicting the causal links from the strategy's inputs to outcomes. At the bottom, the inputs (for example, sufficient staff resource) lead up to the activities (for example, knowledge sharing platforms) which lead up to the capabilities, which are barriers overcome (for example, evaluation design is consistent, high quality, flexible and timely), needed to achieve the objectives. The objectives are the pillars (for example, embed a culture of learning by using evidence to continuously improve). These leads up to the short-term outcomes that will be realised (for example, timely and effective evaluation outputs), and then up to the long-term outcomes (for example, evaluation is a driver for change). The content of the theory of change is described in more detail in the next section and throughout the document.

Changes to the wording of our objectives (Pillars)

Pillar 1 (to grow our capability through upskilling our analytical community, and policy and project delivery professionals) remains unchanged from the previous strategy. SET made small changes to Pillars 2 and 3 because of ToC workshops with evaluation colleagues.

Pillar 2

New wording: to embed good quality evaluation design and evidence across the full policy cycle and programme delivery

Previous pillar: To embed robust and proportionate evaluation in policy design and portfolio delivery through use of evidenced theories of change and good evaluation design.

This change reflects our desire to:

- a. ingrain evaluation design and evidence into Defra's work
- b. the importance of good quality design as reflected by the higher end of [NESTA Standards of Evidence](#).

Our aim is to achieve an increase in experimental and quasi-experimental (QED) methods, where appropriate, accompanied by robust, ethical research that aligns with GSR standards.

Pillar 3

New wording: to embed a culture of learning from evaluations by using evidence to continuously improve policy and programme delivery

Previous pillar: To foster a culture of learning from evaluations, through regular monitoring and feedback from research and evaluation evidence. This will inform policy development and operational delivery; and ultimately have a real impact on policy making.

This change captures our ambition to embed a culture of evaluation and evidence-informed learning across Defra. It reflects a shift towards shared behaviours and practices that define 'how we do things here', where evaluation becomes the norm. By routinely using evidence to inform decisions and create feedback loops, we will enable Defra to continuously improve the impact of its work.

Proposed new activities and capabilities to achieve our objectives

To achieve our objectives, we propose the following activities for each pillar:

Pillar 1 - Training and community activities

SET will continue training and community building activities such as ECoP, Policy School and Theory of Change Champions which enable SET to upskill more colleagues in the department. In addition, there will be upcoming ETF evaluation training for policy professionals. Our ECoP sessions are designed to showcase the work of teams. We will continue to invite evaluation experts from other government departments, universities and ETF to share insights on evaluation methodologies.

Pillar 1 - Guidance

SET will also continue to update and develop our central guidance and offer evaluation surgeries to teams that would like them. For major projects we will develop bespoke guidance, based on the GMPP evaluation review action plan.

Pillar 1 - Evaluation Academy

SET plan to expand the coverage of our Evaluation Academy training so that it is mandatory for every social researcher and colleagues working on evaluation projects, as well as mandating certain modules to certain groups, for example, the introduction module to all lead analysts. This will ensure that evaluation capability is embedded across Defra.

The academy will be mandated to certain groups using a data-driven approach. This is an ambitious option designed to meet our upskilling goals at scale. However, SET acknowledge the risk that some individuals who do not require training may be mandated to complete it, which could be resource intensive. To mitigate this risk, SET will use a targeted approach based on an ETF-designed capability survey sent to all target groups. This survey would provide evidence of departmental capability and help identify skills gaps. Conducting the survey before and after training would also allow us to evaluate Defra's approach. This method ensures training is directed to those who need it most.

Pillar 2 - Governance

SET will continue to strengthen evaluation governance and identify opportunities to optimise existing processes. SET will mandate the use of Defra's templates for evaluation plans and the Theory of Change (ToC) toolkit. This will include a quality assurance checklist for scoping and designing evaluations, as well as for reviewing interim and final evaluation reports, with questions on the application of experimental and quasi-experimental methods to improve rigor.

To strengthen the link between appraisals and evaluation, SET have started including prompts in Defra's business case template guidance, asking practitioners to draw on evaluation evidence when conducting an economic appraisal. This includes asking practitioners to consult the evaluation registry for evidence and engage social researchers including SET at the appraisal stage.

Pillar 2 - Quality and proportionate design

To ensure quality, SET will develop a system to monitor the quality and delivery of priority and GMPP evaluations from their scoping stage through to completion. Analysis of the Evaluation Registry data shows that most impact evaluations currently rely on theory-based approaches, with limited use of experimental or quasi-experimental designs. SET will support the adoption of counterfactuals where this is feasible and proportionate, including within an overarching theory-based approach or in conjunction with other evaluation approaches. SET will continue advocating for an early engagement with policy teams before the policy designs are finalised through the Defra policy school.

Pillar 3- Sharing learning

SET recognises there are gaps in learning and knowledge sharing and therefore developed a bespoke Theory of Change for this pillar, which recommends a new programme of work. To address these gaps, we will be piloting a series of evaluation learning bite-sized sessions to make learning more accessible and engaging. In addition, we will work with our strategic monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) suppliers to produce evidence syntheses and reports that are easy to digest, ensuring that insights are actionable and widely understood.

Enhanced knowledge-sharing platforms and collaborative learning opportunities will be a key focus, delivered through ECoP and dedicated events.

Pillar 3 - Organisational culture shift

We will establish standardised and integrated systems for evidence management, evaluation practices, and quality assurance to improve consistency across the organisation.

To embed learning more deeply, we will promote an organisational culture shift that fosters a safe environment for failure and innovation, including 'test and learn' approaches which is expanded on below. We will also explore incentives for learning and achieving outcomes to reinforce the importance of evidence-based decision-making.

Pillar 3 - 'Test and learn'

Drawing on the experience of our teams that are using 'test and learn' approaches to policy development and programme implementation, we will encourage a greater use of iterative development of policies and programmes, enabling teams to examine critical assumptions early on and often through rapid learning cycles. The following case study from our Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMs) illustrates how a 'test and learn' approach may work in practice:

Case study: Environmental Land Management Schemes

Following the UK's exit from the EU and the shift away from the Common Agricultural Policy, Defra's new Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes were developed and iteratively improved through real-world testing, rapid learning, and early evaluation.

ELM Tests and Trials, involving nearly 3,000 land managers, assessed feasibility, user experience, and the suitability of scheme components for future rollout. They identified which design features were workable and highlighted areas needing further development. The Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) and Landscape Recovery (LR) schemes were piloted and then rolled out with intensive evaluation throughout.

The SFI pilot involved around 800 land managers, and tested scheme mechanics and farmer engagement in live delivery. It showed the need to simplify the scheme, leading to unbundled actions, simpler rules and aims-based actions. These changes were

incorporated into the 2023 SFI offer and contributed to rapid uptake across England's farmed landscape.

The LR pilot supported 22 projects to design and develop plans for implementing long-term landscape scale management changes to drive habitat restoration and environmental improvements. Process evaluation has been in place throughout and has informed a process of iterative scheme design and delivery adaptation, resulting in provision of guidance and support to potential projects considering submitting an application. The application window was also lengthened to afford more time for projects to put together applications.

The schemes remain in a period of iteration and our evaluators are helping policy teams understand the extent to which changes result in intended outcomes, while in parallel enabling long-term impact evaluation.

SET will continue showcasing the work of teams that use these approaches through our ECoP sessions and newsletters.

Pillar 3 - Guidance

SET will provide guidance on learning and meta-evaluation, including tailored communication of findings to different audiences. This will build on existing Evaluation Academy modules that cover these areas. Meta-evaluation is another key area in which we would like to build organisational capability, as this will help evidence how evaluation work has improved policy and delivery in Defra. SET will work to encourage evaluation colleagues to use meta-evaluation methodologies to enhance our learning.

Monitoring our progress and implementation of the strategy

SET will establish a robust monitoring framework to track progress and ensure effective implementation of the strategy. This will include regular reporting against key milestones and outcomes mentioned in this strategy by compiling metrics and indicators to measure progress, using the theories of change for each pillar. SET will maintain transparency and continuously refine the approach to deliver on the strategy's core objectives.

Annexes

Figure 2: Pillar 1 theory of change

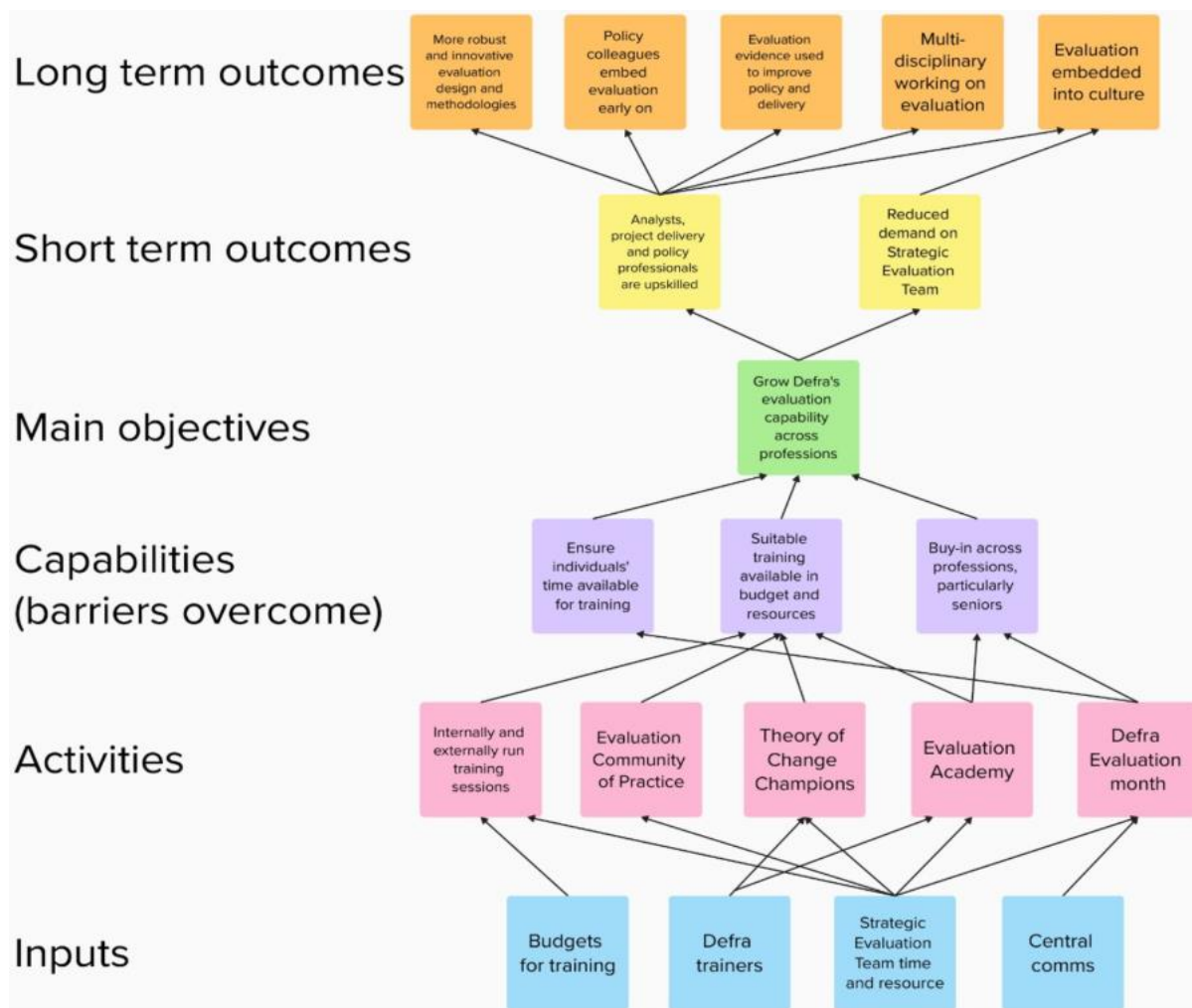


Figure 2 is an illustration of a theory of change, with arrows depicting the causal links from pillar 1's inputs to outcomes. At the bottom, the inputs (for example, Defra trainers) lead up to the activities (for example, theory of change champions) which lead up to the capabilities, which are barriers overcome (for example, suitable training available in budget and resources), needed to achieve the objective. The objective is the pillar (grow Defra's evaluation capability). This leads up to the short-term outcomes that will be realised (for example, reduced demand on SET), and then up to the long-term outcomes (for example, evaluation embedded into culture). The content of the theory of change is described in more detail in the pillar 1 section.

Figure 3: Pillar 2 theory of change

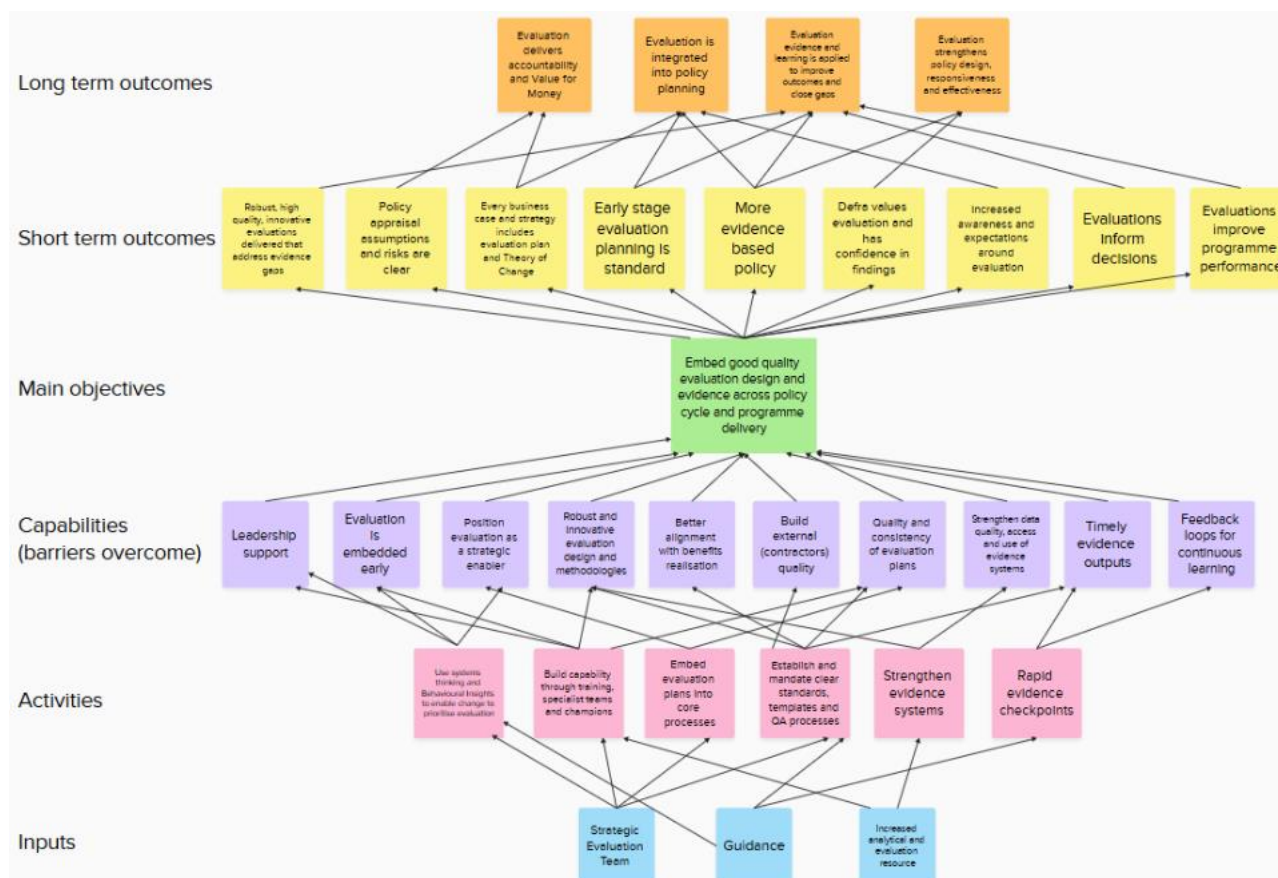


Figure 3 is an illustration of a theory of change, with arrows depicting the causal links from pillar 2's inputs to outcomes. At the bottom, the inputs (for example, guidance) lead up to the activities (for example, rapid evidence checkpoints) which lead up to the capabilities, which are barriers overcome (for example, feedback loops for continuous learning) needed to achieve the objective. The objective is the pillar (embed good quality evaluation design and evidence across policy and delivery). This leads up to the short-term outcomes that will be realised (for example, more evidence-based policy), and then up to the long-term outcomes (for example, evaluation is integrated into policy planning). The content of the theory of change is described in more detail in the pillar 2 section.

Figure 4: Pillar 3 theory of change

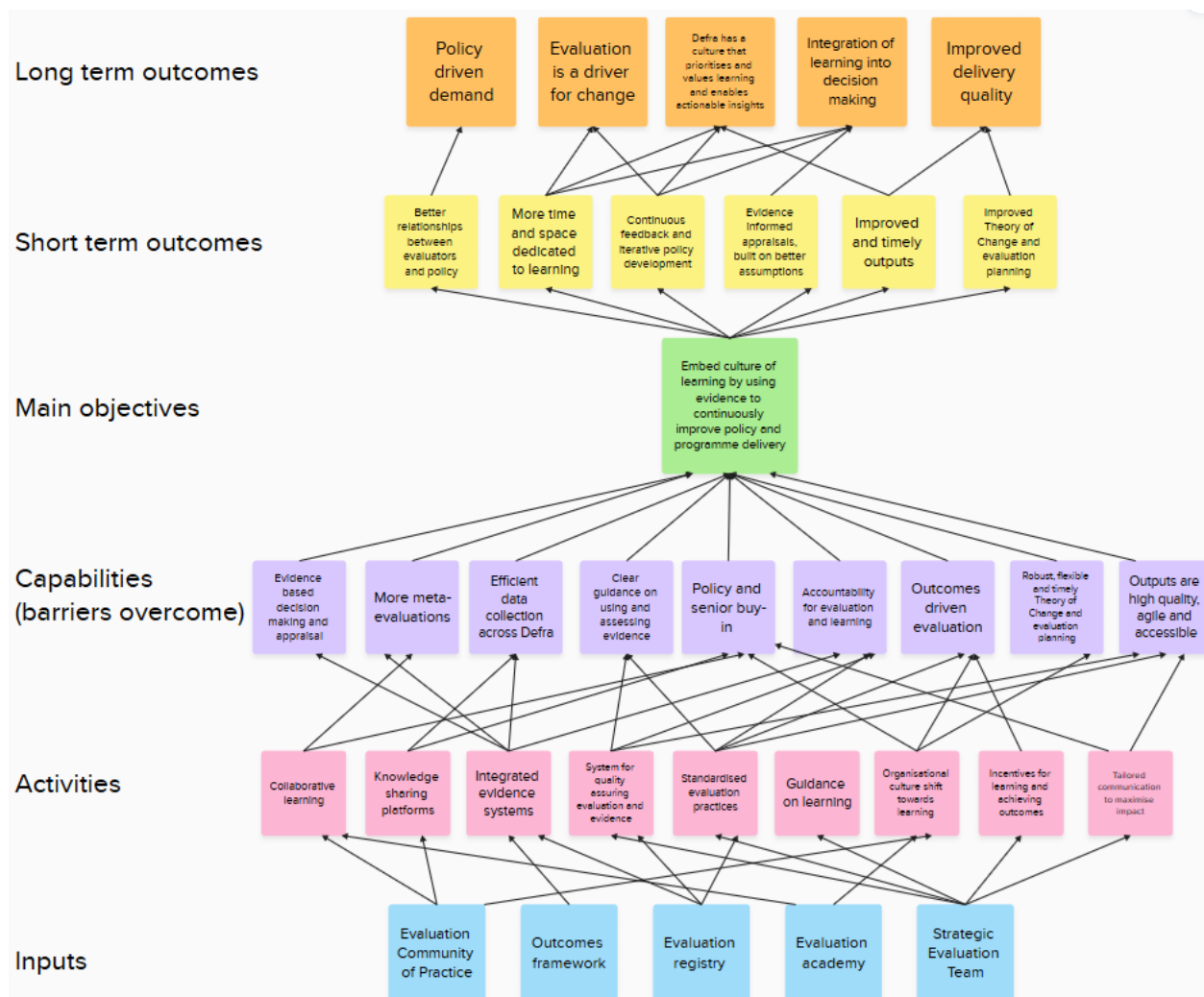


Figure 4 is an illustration of a theory of change, with arrows depicting the causal links from pillar 3's inputs to outcomes. At the bottom, the inputs (for example, outcomes framework) lead up to the activities (for example, integrated evidence systems) which lead up to the capabilities, which are barriers overcome (for example, efficient data collection across Defra) needed to achieve the objective. The objective is the pillar (embed culture of learning by using evidence to continuously improve). This leads up to the short-term outcomes that will be realised (for example, improved and timely outputs), and then up to the long-term outcomes (for example, improved delivery quality). The content of the theory of change is described in more detail in the pillar 3 section.

Monitoring - mapping outcomes and metrics

Long Term Outcome: Multi-disciplinary working to achieve the strategy's objectives

Indicators: These will include the Annual Evaluators Survey, starting in 2026, to assess whether we are achieving strategy outcomes. The survey will ask evaluators about collaborating with other professions and perceptions of whether multi-disciplinary working has enhanced the evidence base. The Evaluation Academy Capability before and after quiz will show whether capability has improved across professions. Additionally, Defra's

central analytical team conducts an annual skills survey, to which SET have added a question on evaluation training needs, indicating analytical evaluation capability.

Long Term Outcome: Defra Has an Evaluation Culture that Prioritises and Values Learning

Indicators: The Annual Evaluators Survey will explore attitudes, awareness, and confidence regarding evaluation. Capability indicators will also demonstrate confidence and time allocated to evaluation skills learning. Learning from evaluations can be monitored through ECoP meeting attendance and engagement on the Teams channel.

Long Term Outcome: Evaluation and Learning Are Integrated into Policy Planning and Decision Making

Indicators: SET will monitor the presence of learning elements in evaluation plans and outputs. SET will also track robust evaluation plans in business cases and strategies, especially during spending review periods. Regarding Theories of Change (ToCs), data from the ToC Users Survey aims to capture how ToCs are utilised across Defra and the extent to which Defra's ToC toolkit is being implemented, with plans to rerun the survey in future. Where evaluations report into formal governance boards, this ensures progress is scrutinised and key learning is captured. Internal datasets gather information about whether evaluations have informed policy via formal boards and led to changes in policy or programmes. Evaluation reporting for the delivery committee also captures whether GMPP programme evaluations are influencing delivery.

Long Term Outcome: Evaluations in Defra Score Higher on NESTA Standards of Evidence

Indicators: SET will assign a quality score to evaluation plans for priority and GMPP evaluations. SET will compare spending review bids for quality of evaluation plans and evidence, focusing on the NESTA score, with the SR 2025 bids, starting from the next spending review.

Long Term Outcome: Evaluation Delivers Accountability and Value for Money

Indicators: SET will monitor the number of Value for Money (VfM) evaluations and their findings. SET will also check for learning sections in evaluation plans and outputs. Robustness of evidence for the spending review and other reviews will be monitored for accountability. The Annual Evaluators Survey will inquire about barriers to publishing evaluations and any issues regarding output quality, especially with external contractors. The survey will also ask whether evaluation has informed decisions, policies, or programme delivery.

Long Term Outcome: Evaluation Is a Driver for Change

Indicators: The Annual Evaluators Survey will ask about timeliness, effectiveness, and quality of outputs, as well as engagement with evaluation, particularly with other

professions such as policy. Evaluation registry compliance checks will provide data on evaluations being published on time and the number of published evaluations.

Long Term Outcome: Evaluation and Learning Applied to Improve Outcomes, Delivery Quality, and Policy Effectiveness

Indicators: The Annual Evaluators Survey and the evaluation registry will provide data on timely and effective outputs. The survey will collect data on perceptions of engagement with evaluation and evidence being used to inform policy development and programme delivery. SET will also monitor the use of test and learn approaches and pilots, using the registry and team engagement.

Glossary

Analysis and Insights Division (AID)

Defra's division responsible for analytical standards, including appraisal, evaluation, social research, and modelling

Animal Plant Health and Welfare (APHW)

Defra's programme focused on improving health and welfare standards for animals and plants

Arms-Length Bodies (ALBs)

Organisations that operate independently but are sponsored by a government department, such as Defra

Benefit

The measurable improvement resulting from an outcome perceived as an advantage by one or more stakeholders, which contributes towards one or more organisational objectives

Biodiversity Challenge Funds (BCFs)

UK government grants aimed at conserving biodiversity and supporting sustainable development through various initiatives

Blue Planet Fund

The UK's £500 million programme supporting developing countries to protect the marine environment and reduce poverty.

Cross Government Evaluation Group (CGEG)

CGEG is a cross-departmental, cross-disciplinary group, with representation from most major departments. The aim of CGEG is to improve the supply of, stimulate demand for, and encourage the use of, good quality evaluation evidence in government. The purpose of this is to improve policy development, delivery and accountability across government.

Defra

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Delivery Committee

A sub-committee of the Defra Board responsible for steering the organisation toward its intended outcomes. It focuses on how goals will be achieved, oversees key operational performance, monitors major risks, removes organisational barriers to delivery, and makes strategic decisions about priorities, sequencing and pace.

Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ)

UK government department responsible for UK energy security, protecting billpayers and reaching net zero.

Evaluation and Trial Advice Panel (ETAP)

ETAP brings together top UK evaluation and experimentation experts to provide free evaluation advice to civil servants, local government and What Works Centres.

Evaluation Audit

A systematic review of evaluation activities across Defra to assess coverage, quality, and compliance

Evaluation Community of Practise (ECoP)

ECoP is managed by the Strategic Evaluation Team (SET) and aims to spotlight and share innovative methods and best practise for evaluation. It provides an open space for discussion around the challenges evaluators face and potential solutions to address them

Evaluation Registry

The Evaluation Registry is a service owned by the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury [Evaluation Task Force](#) (opens in new tab). This is where planned, ongoing and complete government evaluations from all departments and the Scottish Government are registered.

Evaluation Task Force (ETF)

The ETF is a joint unit of the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury in the UK, established to ensure that evidence and evaluation are central to government spending decisions

Experimental methods

Evaluation approaches that use controlled trials (e.g., Randomised Controlled Trials) to establish causal relationships

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)

UK government department responsible for foreign policy and international development

Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP)

The portfolio of the government's largest, complex, innovative, risky and ambitious projects that have been agreed by the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation

Authority, HM Treasury and departments and are delivering the government's main policy initiatives.

Green Book

The Green Book is the government guidance on options appraisal and evaluation and supports proper consideration of the costs, benefits, and trade-offs of alternative options for delivering policy objectives

GSR (Government Social Research) Publication Protocol

Guidance for publishing social research outputs in government, ensuring transparency and quality

International Climate Finance (ICF)

The financial resources provided by developed countries to support developing countries in addressing climate change

Magenta Book

The Magenta Book provides guidance on evaluation in government: its scoping, design, conduct, use and dissemination as well as capabilities required of government evaluators

Meta-Evaluation

An evaluation of evaluations, reviewing multiple studies to assess overall quality and synthesis findings

Monitoring Evaluation Learning (MEL)

Systematic approach used by organisations to track progress, assess outcomes, and derive lessons from their projects, ultimately enhancing effectiveness and impact

Nature for Climate Fund (NCF)

A program supported by the UK government aimed at tackling climate change and boosting biodiversity, focusing on projects that enhance woodland cover and restore peatland

Official Development Assistance (ODA)

Government aid designed to promote economic development and welfare in developing countries

Office of the Chief Economist (OCE)

Defra's internal central economics team responsible for economic appraisal and guidance

Other Government Departments (OGDs)

Government departments outside of Defra

Policy School

The Defra Policy School is a programme that seeks to support the development of people with the talent and drive to reach the very highest levels of the Civil Service Policy Profession. It is a week-long programme aimed predominantly at Grades 6 and 7.

Portfolio Office

The function within the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs that oversees the management of projects and programmes. It provides central coordination, supports effective delivery, and manages the Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP), which covers major initiatives designed to improve the environment and support rural communities.

Priority Outcomes

Defra's strategic goals, including cleaner air and water, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, flood resilience, and sustainable agriculture and food systems

Process Evaluation

An evaluation method that examines how an intervention was implemented and how stakeholders engaged

Quality Assurance (QA)

Processes and templates used to ensure evaluation plans and reports meet required standards

Quasi-Experimental Methods (QED)

Evaluation designs that approximate experimental conditions without full randomisation, often using statistical techniques to control for bias

ROAMEF Cycle

A framework used in policy development and evaluation:

- Rationale
- Objective
- Appraisal
- Monitoring
- Evaluation
- Feedback

Strategic Evaluation Team (SET)

Defra's central team responsible for leading the evaluation strategy, supporting teams, and building robust and proportionate evaluation for policy delivery

Theory-Based Approaches

Evaluation methods that assess how and why a policy or programme works by testing its underlying theory of change

Theory of Change (ToC)

A Structured approach that maps out how and why a policy or programme is expected to achieve its intended outcomes

Theory of Change Champions Programme

A programme that trains Defra colleagues in ToC through live, online workshops where volunteers gain knowledge and support, they need, which improves the quality and effectiveness of theories of change across the department

Value-for-Money (VfM)

An assessment of whether resources are being used efficiently and effectively to achieve desired outcomes

Wellbeing Appraisal

A method for assessing the impact of policies on individuals and societal wellbeing