

Embedding transformation-focused evaluation in UK Government policymaking

Summary

- Ambition for supporting transformational and systemic change is increasingly visible across UK Government programmes, including the government's food strategy framework, the [Good Food Cycle](#). But this ambition is not reflected in corresponding policy evaluation, and current evaluation practices risk reinforcing superficial or marginal change rather than addressing underlying problems.
- [FixOurFood](#) research has identified principles and methods for transformation-focused evaluation (TFE) and demonstrated their application through action research with the [Food for the Future North Yorkshire](#) initiative. The research found that TFE requires a fundamental shift in how evaluation approaches system complexity, power, and purpose.
- Government evaluation bodies, including the [Policy Lab](#), [Evaluation Task Force](#), [Evaluation Services Unit](#), and [What Works Network](#), should support the understanding and application of TFE across government. The Good Food Cycle provides an opportunity to trial this application.

Description of the problem



Ambition for supporting transformational and systemic change is apparent in various UK Government programmes, including the [Good Food Cycle](#) food strategy framework for England (Defra, 2022). Such fundamental change is increasingly recognised as essential to overcome interlinked crises including climate change, biodiversity loss, poverty and social inequality (IPBES, 2025; Kenter et al., 2025; Moallemi et al., 2025).

But this transformational focus is not yet embedded in corresponding policy evaluation (e.g. in the evaluation of policy impact). Widely institutionalised conventional evaluation approaches risk perpetuating superficial and marginal forms of change that fail to tackle underlying problems (Buckton et al., 2025a; Buckton et al., 2025b; Chaplowe & Hejnowicz, 2021). This applies to the Government's [Policy Lab](#), [Evaluation Task Force](#), [Evaluation Services Unit](#), and [What Works Network](#), as well as wider cultures of evaluation in the civil service and particular departments such as Defra.

To date there has not been a comprehensive understanding of what transformation-focused evaluation (TFE) would entail, limiting its application.

Research Findings

Research by the [FixOurFood](#) programme applied a systematic scoping review of a large sample of academic and grey literature (>2300 documents), to identify principles and methods for TFE (Buckton et al., 2025a). An international team of expert evaluators critically assessed the findings. In addition, action research with the [Food for the Future North Yorkshire](#) initiative (Everson et al., 2025) put those principles and methods into practice, through co-design and application of a TFE approach for the initiative (Buckton et al., 2026).

The findings of this research show that:

- TFE requires fundamentally shifting conventional modes of evaluation – including their awareness of system complexity, power relations, and deeper purpose.
- There are twelve key principles for TFE (see Figure 1).
- There are many approaches, methods, frameworks and tools that can help put these principles into practice – from [Developmental Evaluation](#) and [Contribution Analysis](#) to [Ripple Effect Mapping](#) and [Signals of Transformational Change](#). These are described in the paper (Buckton et al., 2025a) and a forthcoming practice guide (Buckton et al., in prep.).
- A TFE framework must take into account evaluation questions, goals, and diverse forms of evidence and feedback, as well as integration with governance and decision-making (Buckton et al., 2026) (see Figure 2).
- TFE has enabled Food for the Future to become more agile, learning-oriented, and better able to understand its contributions to transformation (Buckton et al., 2026).

The TFE principles have already informed significant international and national processes, including the [IPBES Transformative Change Assessment](#) (IPBES, 2025), the [Citizen Advisory Council](#) of the Good Food Cycle, Chatham House's [Alliance of Champions for Food Systems Transformation project](#), and the [International Evaluation Academy](#)'s strategy development, amongst other contexts.

Policy Implications

1. UK Government evaluation bodies should apply transformation-focused evaluation in programmes that aim for transformational or systemic change. The [Policy Lab](#), [Evaluation Task Force](#), [Evaluation Services Unit](#), and [What Works Network](#) should incorporate TFE principles and methods into their guidance, commissioning frameworks, and capability-building offers. This would ensure that evaluations actively support rather than undermine transformational goals.

2. Defra should use the [Good Food Cycle](#) as a live exemplar of transformation-focused evaluation. Given the strategy's ambition for food system transformation, Defra should coordinate a transformation-focused evaluation of the strategy. This would demonstrate how TFE can be applied in practice and generate valuable learning for Defra and other departments working on complex, cross-system challenges.

3. Government departments should draw on the [Food for the Future North Yorkshire](#) evaluation framework when designing evaluations for complex and transformation-oriented programmes. This framework (Figure 2) provides a practical example of how TFE could be implemented in a holistic way.



TWELVE PRINCIPLES FOR TRANSFORMATION-FOCUSED EVALUATION

COMPLEXITY PRINCIPLES	1	Complex Systems Principle	Treat evaluands as nested systems with complex interactions	Evaluators should treat an evaluated system as having complex, interdependent relations with the surrounding systems it is nested within and interacts with during transformation processes.
	2	Context Principle	Recognise that evaluands are unique and need context-adapted evaluation	Evaluators should recognise that every evaluand and its context, culture and transformation have unique characteristics, necessitating context-adapted rather than one-size-fits-all evaluation approaches.
	3	Detective Principle	Be a mixed-methods detective in an uncertain, multi-reality and hard-to-control world	Given the uncertainty about causality, lack of control and pluralist lived realities in complex systems change, evaluators should draw on multiple, mixed methods to improve understanding about transformations and how interventions contribute to them.
	4	Developmental Principle	Remain agile and developmental	Evaluators should avoid treating evaluands as static, and instead recognise the dynamic, unsettled nature of transformations and therefore the need for continual reflection, feedback, experimentation, adaptation and development.
	5	Foresight Principle	Include foresight alongside retrospective evidence	Evaluators should become future-sensitive, using and evaluating information from futures and foresight methods alongside evidence from the past and present to guide transformative action.
POWER PRINCIPLES	6	Justice Principle	Promote justice in power relations, rights, and use of knowledge	Evaluators should promote justice as a key component of transformations, including through addressing power inequalities, upholding human and non-human rights, decolonising evaluation, and honoring diverse and marginalised perspectives.
	7	Power Shift Principle	Shift power towards evaluation users and blur the evaluator-evaluand dichotomy	Evaluators should aim to be guides rather than directors or controllers of transformation-focused evaluations: these should be genuinely participatory and empowering for evaluation users, allowing them to take greater ownership, leadership and responsibility of evaluations.
	8	Autonomous Evaluation Principle	Support autonomous evaluation practice	Evaluators should resist evaluations dictated by interests maintaining the unsustainable status quo, and instead support stronger professionalisation and autonomy of evaluation practice, including freedom to adopt stronger ethical and critical stances in support of transformation.
	9	Partnerships Principle	Cultivate mutualistic partnerships of knowledge and action	Evaluators should cultivate mutualistic partnerships of knowledge generation and sharing when working together towards transformations. They should also encourage and evaluate alignment and cooperation of different transformation efforts.
PURPOSE PRINCIPLES	10	Values Principle	Surface, question and uphold values	Evaluators should work with evaluands to surface and reflexively question the underlying values at play in transformation processes, and ensure that transformational values are upheld.
	11	Learning Principle	Develop evaluation cultures centred around ongoing learning	Evaluators should develop evaluation cultures centred around ongoing learning during transformation processes, rather than driven by accountability requirements for showing positive results, and fear of failure.
	12	Transformation Principle	Focus on evaluating and supporting systemic transformations towards regenerative futures	Evaluators should facilitate systemic transformation towards regenerative futures, remembering the urgency for global transformation, and therefore focus on evaluating transformations and integrate transformational principles across different facets of evaluations.

Figure 1. Twelve principles for transformation-focused evaluation.
Adapted from Buckton et al. (2025a).

Figures

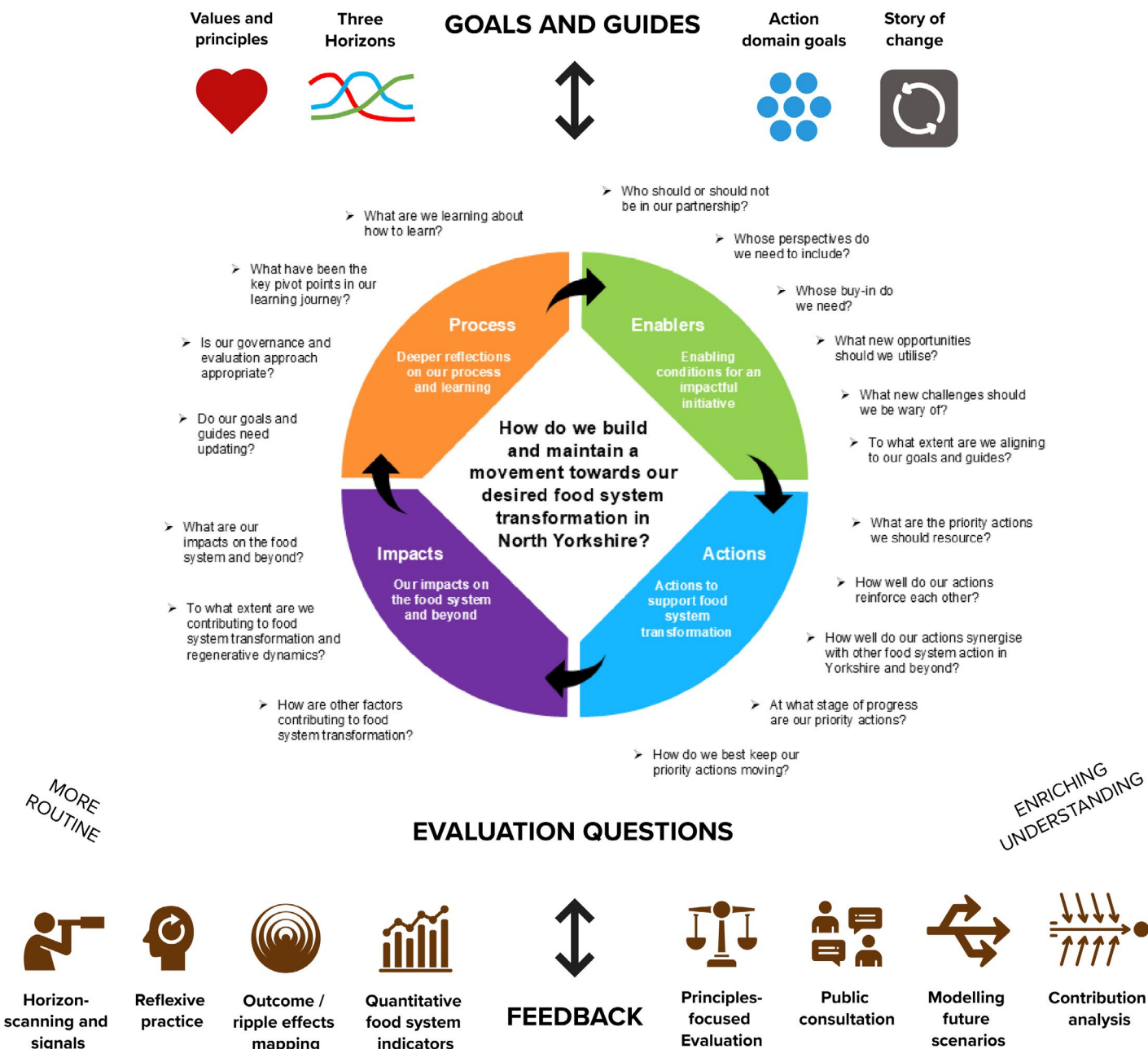


Figure 2. Part of the [Food for the Future North Yorkshire](#) transformation-focused evaluation framework (Buckton et al., 2026). The framework includes the goals and guides that anchor and steer the initiative’s evaluation activity and action more generally (guiding values and principles, findings from an extensive [Three Horizons](#) foresight process, the goals of seven mutually reinforcing ‘action domains’ where priority actions are focused, and the initiative’s story or theory of change). The framework centres around the initiative’s core evaluation questions that indicate purpose and intent. The framework also includes the varied forms of feedback, evidence-gathering and sense-making that helps the initiative to answer its evaluation questions.

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FixOurFood

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