ANALYSIS

How should policy actors respond to buzzwords? Three ways to deal with policy ambiguity

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Introduction

Many policy buzzwords seem to catch fire then fizzle out before their value is clear in practice. These words or phrases become popular partly because they are pithy and sum up concisely a valuable proposal for changes to policy and policymaking. For example, we hear periodically that prevention is better than cure, that wicked policy problems require systems leadership or change, that we need to focus on place-based approaches, and that policy can be improved via co-produced and collaborative policy design (Cairney et al., 2024a, b). However, we hear less about the substantive impact of these phrases on policy and practice, prompting policy actors[1] to wonder how to make sense of them and if they will go anywhere. What is less clear is how policy actors themselves grapple with such 'hot-

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[1] We use 'policy actors' as a broad term to include the individuals or organisations who seek to influence, make, or deliver policy.

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cold' cyclical dynamics. Policy actors are all too aware of the fickle and ambiguous nature of 'buzzwords' which they experience in everyday practice (Boswell, 2023). How do, or could, they deal with ambiguous ideas, and to what effect? In that context, our contribution is to support Lasswell's (1956, 1971) call for mutual learning between the analysis of and for policy: by examining and reflecting on responses to buzzwords, we can learn from, and inform, policy and practice.

The buzzword cycle of enthusiasm and confusion has the same general cause: ambiguity. Equally, ambiguity generates choices and dilemmas for those required to respond, or ignore, the latest policy fad or fashion. The same buzzword can be interpreted in multiple ways and have a different meaning for different people, or the same solution may be implemented in different ways. Initially, ambiguity serves a helpful purpose, to help people coalesce around a broad aim. For example, who would *not* want to prevent problems, collaborate to design good solutions, or improve policymaking systems? Subsequently, it contributes to diminished enthusiasm and activity, as policy actors struggle to: translate a vague phrase or concept into widely understood and supported concrete objectives, make new objectives consistent with the core business of their organisations, and enjoy sustained political, policy, and public support and systemic capacity. While the ultimate outcomes of the transformed dynamic are beyond the scope of our thinking, we seek to understand the initial impetus for the cycle of activity that either generates repetitive gains or ends in status quo ante via inaction.

The hot-cold dynamic is highly familiar to people working in policy and practice. They recognise that 'the usual way of doing things' is not working and that ambitious change is required, but are often left waiting in vain for a sustained and tangible project to emerge, or are asked to take forward an initiative that few seem to understand. Therefore, a new agenda can seem self-evidently valuable to their advocates but dispiriting to other policy actors who have experienced repeated cycles of hot and cold activity and are unsure how to respond. Each time, a range of responses is reasonable, from energetic enthusiasm to gut-level scepticism, stoicism, or despair. Some are enthused, some confused, and some simply want to know what to do. Therefore, maintaining ambiguity becomes unhelpful for good faith policy actors.

How could policy actors engage with buzzword ambiguity in policymaking? We posit that policy actors' initial orientation and motivation is a good gauge of how their response will be structured, then shaping further outcomes through implementation. Of course, they could try to simply ignore what they consider to be the latest fad until the next one comes along. In a context of extreme policy churn, and the ever-present competition between ideas, they do not need to wait long (Diamond et al., 2024). However, some concepts become popular periodically, providing more incentive to make sense of them now in anticipation of their re-emergence later. Indeed, this recurrence and endurance of some words or phrases may reflect a more general reconsideration of policy problems and processes, such as to sum up a growing acceptance that 'wicked' problems and policymaking complexity require more long-term and collaborative whole-of-government or integrated approaches (Aoki et al., 2024; Cairney & Toomey, 2024; Rayner & Howlett, 2009; Trein et al., 2023). Or, a national central government may adopt a buzz phrase and expect subnational policy actors to take responsibility for its success. For instance, in our illustrative example of 'prevention is better than cure', the UK government set up Integrated Care Systems in England to foster health and local government collaboration and make progress on aims such as 'prevention'

(NHS Confederation, 2024). This illustrative case is an exemplar of situations in which ignoring buzz phrases is not an option and policy actors are seeking good ways to respond.

We identify three common responses to these dilemmas. First, one policy actor with some kind of authority—such as a central government minister or agency—defines the aim clearly and gives detailed instructions for others to follow. This approach may seem pleasingly straightforward to its proponents, but can be a crude fix for complex issues that cut across multiple sectors and levels. Second, many actors tease out ambiguity by coming together to deliberate to produce a shared vision and agree next steps. This approach acknowledges the importance of establishing widespread buy-in, but in practice often fails to achieve meaningful progress or resolve underlying political tensions. Third, some actors live and work with ambiguity by 'getting on with it'. Here, any policy actor can use a fashionable idea to inspire progress or repackage existing work. This approach can maximise 'quick wins', but suffers from a lack of overall cohesion and the risk of co-option.

Instead of presenting a preference, hybrid or 'Goldilocks' (Andriani & McKelvey, 2011: 262) solution, we suggest that none of these responses resolves ambiguity fully. Rather, we emphasise the political science argument that reducing ambiguity is about exercising power to win arguments, allocate resources, and/ or cooperate in a meaningful way, not the result of consulting a dictionary (Zahariadias, 2003). Further, it is likely that, in large and complex policymaking systems, where responsibilities are spread across many levels or centres, all three approaches may be evident in practice. At any one time, some provide broad direction, some deliberate to tailor policy to new contexts, and some carry on regardless. Our contribution prompts questions about who defines buzzwords, how, and to what effect. For example, which actors would be part of any deliberative process to negotiate meaning, and to what extent actors have autonomy and resource to get on with action?

What is the real-world value of comparing these responses? We seek to provide practical lessons from policy theories to foster the policy sciences (Cairney & Weible, 2017; Weible & Cairney, 2021). By using the lens of buzzwords, we explain how actors in real-world policymaking contexts face ambiguity, then prompt debate on how to respond. Throughout, we use the example of 'prevention' to explain each response. We emphasise much-needed caution about expecting any of these reasonable-looking responses to ambiguity to resolve it. It is understandable that people *need* to just define an idea, work together to understand its meaning, or work it out in practice, but they also need to reflect on the gap between the ambitions associated with a vague idea and the constraints of policymaking reality in political systems. This reflection is essential to the pursuit of policymaking change via repetition: we seek to replace the idea of a cycle of enthusiasm and despair with a continuous process with modest but cumulative effects (Cianetti, 2024). Negotiating the ambiguity of buzzwords can foster meaningful progress in shared policy understandings.

Why might buzzwords catch fire then fizzle out? The role of ideas in policy and policymaking

A great deal has been written in policy studies about the buzzword phenomenon. Whether under the rubric of ideational travel, the rise and fall of agendas, the layering of new paradigms, the impacts of ambiguity, or the dynamics of discursive institutionalism, or many others besides there is a sprawling 'family' of approaches that drill into the politics of buzz-

words. In this section, our intention is not to review the full family in nuanced depth. Much has also been written about the nature of the familial relations between concepts, with family resemblances based around analytically important "evident commonalities" (Bowker & Leigh Star, 1999, p. 24), but there is also much to distinguish siblings. Here, our intention is to explain a distinct role for the 'buzzword' concept among the commonalities within this extended conceptual family then show how it aids new analysis of theory and practice.

The first advantage of focusing on buzzwords relates to temporality or the cyclical nature of ideas about better policymaking. 'Buzzword' centres the periodic waxing and waning of ideas. The orthodox explanation for this varying attention is that a major part of the success of an idea depends not on its intrinsic value, but how it relates to the dominant beliefs, institutions, or practices of potential audiences (Cairney, 2020: 189). If so, the fate of that idea is uncertain in complex policymaking systems, where attention lurches and enthusiasm wanes, and many different policymaking 'centres' become responsible for processing a rapidly churning agenda (Baumgartner et al., 2023; Cairney et al., 2019; Herweg et al., 2023). It might look like a policy actor is plucking an idea from thin air or elsewhere and expecting it to work here. However, such acts only begin the conversation, prompting other policy actors to relate the idea to current business and systemic capacity. The result can be rhetorical traction without meaningful translation, only for the idea to re-emerge anew sometime later and begin the cycle again.

The second reason is that 'buzzword' highlights the ambiguity that often accompanies these cycles. The appeal of buzzwords relates partly to their ambiguity, but the process of resolving ambiguity is not so simple. Vague ideas begin as appealing because they mean different things to different actors, allowing provisional buy-in across a system dealing with cross-sectoral and multi-level policy problems (Yanow, 1995; Zahariadis, 2016). This initial state does not last so easily, as actors exercise power and act in accordance with their interests and values in turning ambiguity into action, in a complex system out of anyone's control.

The final reason is that 'buzzword' encapsulates what these dynamics can feel like to policy actors. In this context, 'buzzword' can have pejorative connotations but, we stress, not in a way that dismisses the intrinsic value of the underlying idea or agenda. Often the policymakers involved can be earnestly committed to a principle like prevention, integration or inclusion. Their cynicism is about the repeated cycles of enthusiasm and failure, and the difficulty in turning vague aspiration into meaningful action. 'Buzzword' captures this sense of being jaded and world-weary.

Beyond describing and explaining the underlying dynamics, public policy scholars have also sought to understand the normative implications for policymaking practice. Interpretations are mixed, and we explain three prominent accounts that represent this spectrum of perspective. One is a critical account of the waxing and waning of concepts as they lose their 'magic'. Pollitt and Hupe (2011) problematize the influence of powerful but vague new ideas that inflect practice (their examples are 'governance' and 'accountability'). They relate this 'magical' appeal of ideas to conceptual stretching, noting that attempts to reduce ambiguity may curtail this appeal. Further examples of buzzwords, like 'innovation' (McGann et al., 2018), 'sustainability' (Frantzeskaki et al., 2016), or 'co-production' (Durose et al., 2022) mask latent conflict or postpone much-needed debate, thus contributing to inertia (see also Radaelli, 2023 on 'better regulation').

Two is a more ambivalent account of the 'lifecycle' of ideas. Hirsch and Levin (1999) identify an initial emergence of excitement about the possibility of an idea to re-frame a challenge or open the opportunity for change. This new energy is quickly consumed by questions of how an idea may be defined or operationalised, prompting a proliferation of differing perspectives. Ideas then need to be 'tidied up' through typologising or categorising, to draw distinctions between ways to define aims or realise ambitions, but 'collapse' during unproductive processes to prove their validity. The remnants of a collapsed idea may then be rescued or revitalised in a different form to feed a future cycle.

Three is a more optimistic account of stoicism in the face of these cyclical dynamic in which 'buzzwords' become fashionable through use. Cornwall (2007: 47) describes them as:

> the catch-words that need to be sprinkled liberally in funding proposals and emblazoned on websites and promotional material… they are not only passwords to funding and influence; and they are more than the mere specialist jargon that is characteristic of any profession… buzzwords gain their purchase and power through their vague and euphemistic qualities, their capacity to embrace a multitude of meanings, and their normative resonance.

Some ideas worth keeping can achieve a 'buzz' before becoming a 'fuzz' if co-option and wide usage rids them of their radical potency (Cornwall, 2007: 48). If so, replacing or rehabilitating such ideas is 'to play the buzzword games on its own terms', by constantly putting forward ideas that 'speak of the hopes and dreams that never went away', such as justice, solidarity, and redistribution.

Our aim here has been to offer a stylized review of the sprawling family of scholarship in policy studies. Overall, these explanations help to make sense of the patterns by which buzzwords emerge, spread, decline, change or re-emerge over time, and to reflect on whether to see the hot-and-cold cycle as part of futile, dispiriting or generative action. Yet what they also show is that there has been relatively little emphasis on how policy actors themselves grapple with these familiar dynamics. Policy actors are all too aware of the fickle and ambiguous nature of 'buzzwords' which they experience in everyday practice (Boswell, 2023). The novel emphasis of this Research Note is to ask: How do, or could, they deal with ambiguous ideas, and to what effect?

The illustrative case of prevention, to exemplify a need to engage with buzzwords

Understanding practical responses is an iterative process: to use policy theory insights to guide the analysis of practice, and use insights from practice to inform our conceptual understanding of policy dynamics. To that end, we illuminate the buzzword dilemma with an example of dealing with the ambiguity of 'prevention' in health and social care governance in England. We use the word *example* intentionally: not to describe a full case study, but to present a short stylised account to exemplify a dilemma and response. The purpose is to provide what (Dryzek 2025) calls a 'clarifying function' for the analysis, to provide colour and context to our conceptual discussion. We have therefore chosen to 'box' discussion of the example below to signal its illustrative purpose.

Why is prevention a good clarifying example? Preventing problems before they occur, rather than dealing with the profound negative consequences afterwards, is a self-evidently sensible idea that nearly every policy actor can buy into. However, the compelling logic in theory has proven hard to make sense of in practice over a remarkably long period of time. Internationally, this ambiguity has plagued global public health efforts to translate broad aims into concrete commitments and substantive policy instruments (Cairney et al., 2022). Further, in our illustrative UK context, successive pre- and post-war central governments have used and reused the idea that 'prevention is better than cure' across multiple policy sectors (Billis, 1981). Cairney and St. Denny (2020) describe cycles of enthusiasm then despair in which policymakers use the idiom as the title of a new speech or strategy, generate attention for a new approach to policy and policymaking, then struggle to maintain progress. This cycle is most frequent in the health sector. Given escalating capacity pressures on healthcare systems, there is a compelling case to keep people healthy, in work, and out of acute, expensive and labour-intensive health services. Yet, concrete action and investment has continued to lag far behind the rhetoric. A key reason is that preventive health is woolly, covering everything from high state intervention to address the fundamental 'social determinants' of health to merely exhorting populations to change their 'lifestyles'.

Our specific focus is on the latest efforts to rekindle enthusiasm for prevention during the recent reform of English health governance, which we have witnessed directly during engagement with policy actors. These reforms combine formal ways to integrate health and social care organisations—known as Integrated Care Systems, or ICSs—and encourage them to prioritise prevention, backed by reviews warning about the consequences of business as usual (e.g. see NHS England, 2014; Hewitt, 2023). Once again, many powerful actors and organisations are affirming their support for the idea of preventive health across England.

Our stylised account draws on insights from eight focus groups that Boswell and Cairney convened with 61 policy actors involved across different ICSs (in cooperation with the NHS Confederation). In the focus groups, we asked participants to reflect on their experiences and perceptions of trying to promote prevention, with a focus on 'whether this time feels any different'. We use their reflections on dealing with ambiguity to illuminate our claims (for further background, see NHS Confederation, 2024 or Cairney et al., 2025).

Three practical responses to buzzword ambiguity

Buzzwords generate a dilemma for policy actors who need to act in the face of high uncertainty and ambiguity (Zahariadis, 2003). Our conceptual framework, summarised in Table 1, distinguishes between three potential practical responses that policy actors may make to buzzword ambiguity (building on work by Durose et al., 2022; Durose & Lowndes, 2021):

1. *Define*. The main aim is to clarify through instruction and prescription by an authoritative policymaker. Here, ambiguity is to be 'worked out' or minimised.
2. *Deliberate*. The main aim is to work together to reflect and generate shared meaning. Here, ambiguity is to be 'worked through' or navigated.
3. *Do*. The main aim is to get on with the day job to generate meaning in use. Here, ambiguity is to be 'worked with' or accommodated.

Table 1 Three responses to buzzwords

Response	Strategy	Aim	Perspective on ambiguity	Implications for practice	
				Strengths/ pros	Weaknesses/ cons
Define	Instruction	Meaning through prescription	To be 'worked out' (minimised)	Offers simplicity, certainty, lends credibility Aids communication Supports transparency and replicability Enables measurement, which may aid take up	Necessary but not sufficient condition; sometimes not even necessary for adoption Hastens 'demise' of buzzword e.g. if ossifies meaning 'Top down' centralised approach; not tailored Sets an impossible bar that results in stalemate or inaction
Deliberate	Reflection	Shared meaning	To be 'worked through' (navigated)	Builds buy-in, legitimacy Aligns with well-used approaches of 'muddling through' Tailoring to local contingencies and contexts, and knowledges Buys time in a context of uncertainty or contestation	Faces difficulties in a context of resource constraint Fails to achieve meaningful progress or resolve underlying political tensions Exacerbates cynicism Represents a deceptive form of 'inaction'
Do	Action	Meaning through use	To be 'worked with' (accommodated)	Offers potential for 'quick wins' and/or wide adoption Could generate more grounded definition based on practice Allows actors to advance related agendas	Lacks overall cohesion Risks of co-optation, lack of significant change as idea used to rebrand existing activities 'Hollows out' or depoliticises the distinctive meaning of an idea

Response one: define

The first option is for an authoritative policymaker to reduce ambiguity through definition. There may be multiple ways to interpret a buzzword, but here only one interpretation—such as from a government department, regulator, or professional body—would count. Strong impulses towards this definitional approach reflect the benefits of clarity, to establish a policy's rationale and intended benefits and to assign responsibility for its delivery. It can be tough for, say, national central government policymakers to get on board with something if they are not clear what it is, how it could help them, or what the wider implications are. It is also difficult for subcentral organisations to act with confidence or authority without clarity and direction. Subsequently, clarity could aid in the transparency of decisions or priorities,

replicability of a policy idea, ability to communicate it effectively after adoption, monitoring and measurement, quality assessment, and effective operationalisation.

For strategic decision-making, defining concepts is part of the need to provide an evidence-informed and normative rationale for adoption. Measurement and monitoring typically work well when there are clear boundaries about what a thing is, and how we know it when we see it. Likewise, achieving clarity can avoid storing up trouble for later, in case it becomes apparent that people have 'bought in' to different versions of the word. In each case, clarity offers the comfort of certainty.

Yet, simple definition does not settle the matter. It can help to spur initial action and head off obvious misalignments, but not ward off issues of implementation. Rather, such a centralized process risks overly simplifying a concept and neglecting local contexts. Attempts to anticipate and resolve tensions between centralized clarity and decentralized flexibility help to identify a classic trade-off that will not be resolved via definition alone. Too prescriptive a definition can prompt rigid application and— inadvertently—a buzzword's decline when neat and tidy conceptual boundaries fail to accommodate messy realities and complexities faced by implementers. Too neat a definition might work against more widespread adoption: an initially broad idea connects to values people hold dear, or to a vision they already support, suggesting that people can see themselves in the idea if they are able to self-define it. If so, attempts at authoritative definition may prompt the splintering of the idea into different camps rather than consolidation.

Claims that clarity ought to precede implementation are weakened when many such attempts at definition actually come later, when a buzzword has taken off to the extent that some actors seek clarity on what they are doing in its name. This sequence creates additional problems of post-hoc rationalisation, where hastily concocted rationales are produced after the event to assist ongoing action (for example, to aid civil servants when making a business case for innovative approaches already in good currency). Such sequencing issues are also exacerbated by competing claims over who might be the most authoritative body to adjudicate on such matters.

Box 1: defining prevention

Across our participants, those engaged in operational and administrative roles within the new ICS structures particularly welcome the definition of preventive health put forward under Chris Whitty as Chief Medical Officer. This definition disaggregates prevention into three distinct levels: primary prevention (preventing disease before it occurs), secondary prevention (preventing disease progression through early detection and intervention), and tertiary prevention (preventing hospital readmission through effective disease and disability management) (Whitty et al., 2023). The CMO's definition proves useful for practice for two reasons. One is that it lends credibility. Against a background of evidence-based medicine, an official definition from a respected authority helps to explain and justify investment in a shift from tertiary to secondary prevention. Two is that it offers a formal framework. Administrators tasked with overseeing and managing ICS budgets use the distinct levels as a heuristic to track spending and measure effectiveness.

> However, others engaged in more strategic leadership roles are less enamoured with the definition. Some argue that it reinforces support towards secondary prevention (which received the most definitional attention) at the expense of the more radical potential of primary prevention (which remains ambiguous). The worry is that the veneer provided by a formal definition disguises more business-as-usual. One ICS leader explained:
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> *I find NHS colleagues can over focus on the need to have an absolute definition of something before we're allowed to move on to the next step of anything... Sometimes that can be the reason for not doing anything.*
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> A few further on the periphery of ICSs—in frontline roles in primary care of voluntary services—even wanted to dispense with prevention altogether, and replace it with more precise wording that they felt better captured their true aims and intentions. One primary care specialist summed this up: "I just hate this word prevention."

Response two: deliberate

The second option is deliberation, involving a wide range of actors committed to working out collectively the meaning and concrete implications of an idea. The deliberative model does not privilege the interpretations of those at the centre of any policymaking system. Instead, it aims to surface the relevant beliefs and experiences of all important actors engaged across a system, in the hopes of reaching a shared understanding.

The strengths of deliberating to resolve ambiguity are well-theorised (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003). This approach taps into the collective wisdom of actors across the system to help smooth the interpretation and implementation of new policy ideas into practice. New (or rehashed) ideas are pitched into a context of complex needs, historical legacies, and competing demands across levels and sectors. Processes of deliberation can work with this rich tapestry of institutional memory, professional expertise and lived experience to build a shared definition that can be more robust to the contingencies of everyday practice. Deliberation offers the comfort of buy-in.

This promise depends on effective support to enable meaningful deliberation. Historically, an ad hoc discursive process has often prevailed, with those at the centre convening unsystematic processes of consultation, dialogue and engagement with policymakers from other levels and sectors of government, stakeholders in the third and private sectors, and—much more occasionally—service users and affected citizens. Recent decades have seen efforts to organise these moments of deliberation, with the rise of a host of process-based buzzwords that promise to offer the right framework and conditions to make collective work possible (in other words, buzzwords to describe addressing other buzzwords). A range of 'co' words has emerged—including co-production, collaboration, co-creation, and co-design (Williams et al., 2020: 2–3)—alongside a cottage industry within government, think tanks and the consulting sector (Collier & Levitsky, 1997). There has been a rise of 'deliberative practitioners' armed with usually low- and occasionally high-tech tools to create an environment in which to elicit reflections from a diversity of policy actors, work through conflicts and misunderstandings, and reach consensus or compromise (Forester, 2013).

However, experience reveals that deliberation—whether ad hoc or systematic—is seldom a panacea for the challenges of achieving shared buy-in to turn a vague idea into concrete initiatives. Initially, there is a risk of—at least accusations of—navel-gazing. Many processes of deliberation occur as one-offs amid busy diaries and heavy work demands. For those involved, they can be a welcome or pleasant break from the everyday grind, but often fail to 'go anywhere'. At times, it is hard not to interpret high-level calls for deliberation as an intentional form of what McConnell and t'Hart (2019) call 'policy inaction'—appearing to tackle a thorny issue without having to actually do anything difficult or controversial (see, for example, Boswell and Corbett 2015). There are real-world limits to resourcing deliberation enough to deliver on the promise of resolving conflicts and misunderstanding. Further, there are pervasive power dynamics that cannot be resolved simply by agreeing to deliberate (Wolf and van Dooren 2021). For example, there is a risk of a chilling effect when the power relationships that exist outside of deliberative moments constrain actors, such as when local or third sector/non-profit actors—whose jobs are dependent on funding from central government—may not feel able to express their views frankly. Finally there is a risk of inflaming latent conflicts. Many of the ideas that wax and wane in policymaking circles entail 'turf wars' across jurisdictions and sectors, and processes of deliberation can inadvertently inflame bureaucratic battles.

The upshot can be cynicism rather than consensus. Prior experience of cycles of enthusiasm and frustration around shiny new ideas can leave actors sceptical about the value of further deliberation, especially if they see them as part of 'talking shops' that reinforce rather than challenge the usual bureaucratic politics (Boswell, 2016).

Box 2: Deliberating about prevention

A broad cross section of policy actors from our sample see value in deliberating first to make sense of prevention together. The shift in England to a new governance architecture has invited reflection and discussion on the future of the prevention agenda. A small minority of 'system leaders' in charge of managing ICSs have used the transition as an opportunity to schedule more mindful forms of dialogue and discussion. Others further on the periphery of ICSs also reflect positively on how deliberation can establish a sense of collective buy-in for shared goals and expectations. One voluntary sector representative explained:

> *I think if we want to overcome some of the political dimensions, we really need to have a stronger focus on how we work with our local residents and communities to work through some of this really, really challenging and difficult decision-making.*

Yet, for ICS leaders especially, the optimism has fallen away as formal commitments and strategies have confronted the reality of squeezed budgets and capacity pressures. With both healthcare bodies and local authorities under severe financial pressure, good intentions expressed in moments of deliberation have not been followed through with action. Indeed, the positive sense of collective buy-in has given way to the reality of inertia, turf wars, and grey areas over resourcing and responsibility. Away from those in strategic leadership positions, especially among those in more operational roles within ICSs and local authorities, many confess to feeling confused and annoyed, seeking more certainty on what to do than deliberation on vague intentions. One confided with a sense of deep frustration: "Just tell me what to do!"

Response three: do

The third option is to act regardless of ambiguity. Policymakers and practitioners may feel that they need to simply 'get on with it' and work out the relevance and meaning of a new policy idea during their own practice (described by Hill and Hupe (2007) as an 'action imperative' for those on the frontline). Many are faced with a new or re-discovered idea, which is not defined clearly via an authoritative actor or collective deliberation, and still need to do something. There are many connected reasons for acting despite ambiguity, including: a perceived lack of time or opportunity to clarify, given the context of high demand and resource constraint; fatigue in engaging with yet another new idea to the extent that they don't think such engagement is worthwhile; and, a tendency to be fuelled by more important or visceral motivators for action, such as to challenge social and economic inequalities or respond to crises in public services (to which new ideas *might* contribute).

This response may be seen as an inevitable, and indeed desirable, way to make a new idea meaningful. Academics, activists, policymakers, practitioners may all use or engage with an idea in different ways. Then, the meaning of an idea unfolds in use, as different actors imbue the buzzword with different meanings at different places and times, and help it gain momentum and credibility via regular usage. The definitions that emerge via abductive iteration between theory and practice could have the advantages of being grounded in experience and structured via the concept. While a defining response to ambiguity serves to narrow its meaning and impose an unhelpful and false universalism (Schaffer, 2015), here the approach is to expand its meaning through lived practice (Durose et al., 2022). Further, by paying attention to how an idea is used in practice, we open up a valuable critical perspective, such as on the power relations that an idea assumes or entrenches. Hence, an analytically stronger definition may emerge organically.

On the other hand, we should not assume that an idea is fully realised and worked out through practice. This assumption could be interpreted normatively, to suggest that through practice we are able to generate inspiring stories of bringing an abstract policy idea to life in a 'marketplace of ideas'. Yet, in a challenging policy environment characterised by complexity, urgent demand, fatigue and resource constraint, policymakers and practitioners may simply be working pragmatically: adopting a new idea because it has currency and using it to legitimate or justify existing actions. Some policy actors will see the launch of a new policy proposal as an opportunity to 're-brand' their existing activity to protect fragile gains in the system for marginalised beneficiaries, or to maintain activity for the benefit of its providers.

While such approaches might protect services or resources for some groups, this activity may also exacerbate a tendency for buzzwords to becoming hollow and meaningless, losing their value or potency. Often, in practice, the radical potential of an idea is lost, and it is used to legitimate and sustain the status quo, leaving 'feelgood' but 'depoliticised' ideas (Cornwall, 2007). Here again we see a pernicious form of apparent 'action' disguising what is really 'policy inaction' (see McConnel and 'tHart 2019) on the underlying and challenging issue. Indeed, some bad faith actors have learned that they can build their careers on worthy sounding but empty phrases, entering organisations with the promise of innovation and moving on before being held to account. Without clarity or deliberation, how can such bad faith practices be identified from policy and practice routines?

> **Box 3: Doing prevention**
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> A cross-section among those in strategic or operational roles, as well as engaged on the frontlines of primary care and voluntary services—just want to crack on with the work of prevention in ICSs. For the most part, they believe in the value of greater investment in preventive health, but are experienced actors who have been through the hot-and-cold cycle of enthusiasm several times before. As savvy actors, keen to avoid the uncertainty and inertia associated with defining and deliberating, they set about nimbly using the available levers within new governance arrangements to promote preventive health. This action often happens in quiet, piecemeal, routine ways that fall well short of their ideal vision of prevention.
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> Yet, there is a rival perspective especially among the more senior leaders in strategic positions that points to risks of mission drift and co-option in eschewing open reflection and just embracing the action imperative. These risks have become acute since most health and local government bodies have come under increasing financial strain. The concern here is that even stealthy forms of 'doing' preventive health have become much harder to resource and justify. These leaders even complain about cynical bureaucratic exercises whereby existing activities are re-interpreted as 'preventive' simply to meet targets (such as by using the language only to seek 'cashable savings'). One summed up pithily how these external realities had the effect of greatly squeezing the interpretation of what might count as prevention: 'If it's not cash-saving, it's just not happening'.

Discussion and conclusion: implications for theory and practice

We began with a perennial puzzle in the study and practice of public policy: how 'buzzwords' seem to catch fire then fizzle. Given repeated hot-cold cycles, how *should* and *do* policy actors respond to new or rehashed policy ideas? Our strategy for tackling the puzzle has been to look to, and reflect on, practice. We have sought to explore how policy actors grapple with buzzwords in their everyday work. We highlight the following implications for theory and practice.

There is not one best way to resolve ambiguity. We identify three distinct approaches to resolving ambiguity: defining, deliberating and doing. Ambiguity is respectively 'worked out' and minimised, 'worked through' and navigated, or 'worked with' and accommodated. By laying out the options in practice, their underlying perspectives and associated toolkits, and the various strengths and weaknesses of each, we help scholars and practitioners make better sense of the patterns that recur across different buzzwords and in different settings and sectors.

The performance of these approaches takes place in a continuous cycle of action. We identify the messy and recursive dynamics of buzzword use in policy and practice. No strategy—be it defining, deliberating, or doing—is likely to fully and finally resolve the meaning of any given buzzword. Nor is any one strategy typically pursued in isolation. Instead, we start to see that different actors pursue different strategies, at different times, in different settings, all with a view to enable change in some form or another while managing the every-

day demands of policy work. The ambiguity of buzzwords is something to be negotiated and navigated throughout the policymaking process and political contestation.

It is crucial to note that this continuous orientation without final resolution need not lead to fatalism. Constant negotiation and navigation may not resolve in crystal clear clarity, but it can result in meaningful progress that prompts tangible action. Indeed, continuous contestation may also help to keep an issue high on the policy agenda. For example, in our illustrative case, participants reflected that the discussion on prevention had moved on substantially from older iterations. The cumulative impact of multiple efforts to define, deliberate and do prevention had left the legacy of some broadly shared assumptions and understandings, and a narrower frame of reference for the tracking of spending or the yardsticks of evaluation in everyday policy work. Analysts have made similar observations about this cumulative value across a wider spectrum of ambiguous policy buzzwords (Cairney et al., 2024a, b; Cianetti, 2024).

Our new heuristic and broader orientation to policymaking buzzwords opens new agendas for theory and practice. Our analysis has been intentionally broad-brushed, and our example intended to illustrate the dynamics we discuss more vividly. However, there is much left to unpack. First, not all buzzwords are equally ambiguous or even expressed in the same level of abstraction. For example, prevention is situated in a range of ambiguity, from remarkably fuzzy government commitments to a whole-of-government approach which can mean everything and therefore nothing, to more specific buzzwords such as 'choice' that leave less room for manoeuvre. Further, some buzzwords also connect to more abstract process aims, such as to foster 'systems leadership', in which conceptual ambiguity may remain—despite the best efforts of scholars and practitioners—because the ambition lacks any means to coordinate discussion and action (Cairney & Toomey, 2025). In that context, does the degree of underlying ambiguity impact on which mix of defining, deliberating and doing might work best?

Second, not all buzzwords are equally novel. Some, like prevention, keep coming back in cycles, some mutate into different formulations (e.g. from holistic governance to systems thinking), and others appear initially as alien new concepts before gaining quick acceptance (such as behavioural insights). Does the degree of familiarity, and the accumulation of experience over cycles, impact on the optimum mix of strategies?

Third, different jurisdictional contexts are more or less welcoming to different approaches to navigating ambiguity, such as if prevention in England requires explicit definitional groundwork for credibility, compared to devolved territorial governments more committed rhetorically to deliberative policy styles (Connell et al., 2022).

Fourth, we expect these dynamics to vary by sector. While 'prevention' tends to be situated at a domestic level, in which there is at least one relatively clear centre of formal authority, aims such as environmental policy integration extend to supranational arenas in which there are multiple centres and no obvious way to produce binding clarity on all actors (indeed, an ambiguous high-level strategy is a feature of initiatives such as EPI—Trein et al., 2023).

In that context, we provide a launching pad for further conceptual reflection, practical experimentation, and empirical investigation, ultimately pushing the agenda on policy buzzwords beyond a fixation on cycles of frustration, and towards a deeper understanding of the iterative dynamics of navigation and negotiation. As such, the aim is to not to impose rigid analysis of ambiguity resolution, but to prompt questions associated with each category: (1)

to what extent can an actor or organisation define the aim for others to follow; (2) which actors would be part of any deliberative process to negotiate meaning; and (3) which actors have the autonomy and resources to get on with it? By asking these three broad questions, we turn vague aspirations for clarity into ambitions that can be illuminated with systematic research to establish the connection between the spread of popular ideas and the power and politics to determine their meaning and effect.

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