



Using SSM to support & engage colleagues in times of organisational change

Personal reflections from an apprentice practitioner in the public sector

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SCiO Open Meeting

19th Jan 2025

Session objectives

- Share learnings & reflections from an apprentice practitioner attempting to use SSM & Systems approaches for practical value in times of change
- Share & gather insights into opportunities & challenges in using systems approaches in the public sector
- Invite collaboration to grow systems culture in the public sector, and across sector boundaries

I would really value your feedback, challenge & suggestions

Part 1 - My SSM journey with Bob

We'll (briefly!) cover:

- Situation & Context
- System of Interest
- Interventions
- Models & Insights
- **Value of SSM**
- Reflections

9/4/20XX



Natural England is the UK government's principal adviser on the natural environment in England. It is a **complex organisation** with many duties, operating under significant constraints

- **Vision:** Thriving Nature for People and Planet
- **Mission:** Building Partnerships for Nature's Recovery
- **A broad, complex remit with many interdependencies** with the ecological and political environment
 - Numerous Statutory duties
 - Major legislative commitments (e.g. "30 by 30")
 - New government missions including growth agenda; political realities and government constraints



It's January 2025

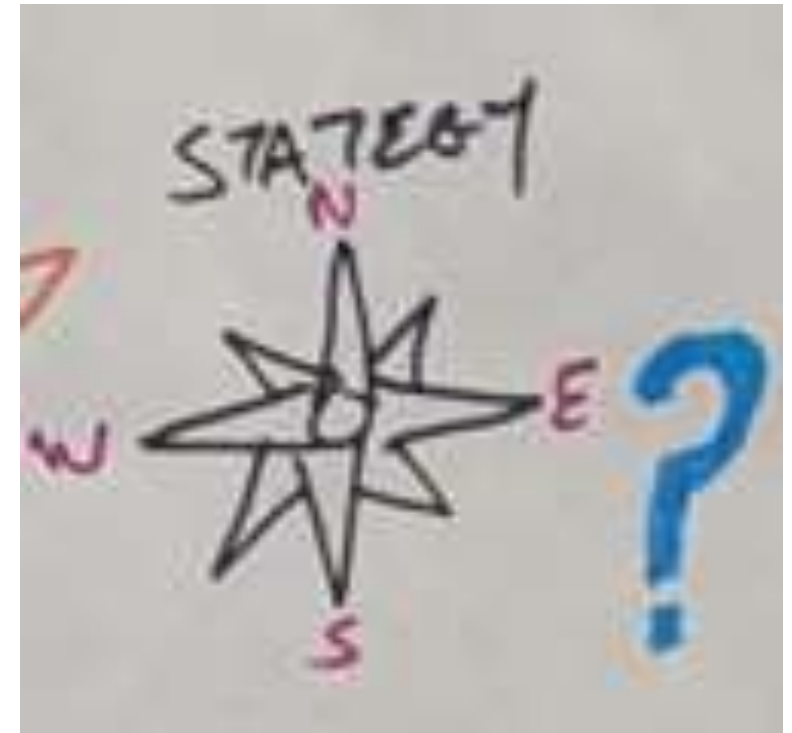
- Liechtenstein becomes the 37th country to legalize same-sex marriage
- 17-year-old English darts prodigy Luke Littler becomes the youngest-ever world champion
- Earliest evidence for a human transport vehicle uncovered (22,000 years old) at White Sands, New Mexico



NE is preparing to launch an **ambitious new strategy** to reshape how it delivers its statutory duties & new government priorities, and major **organisational reforms** to support the delivery of the strategy

These require:

- **Developing our risk appetite**
- Pursuing more **ambitious & risky objectives** to achieve Nature's Recovery at landscape scale
- **Prioritisation** - some things will need to stop. Decision makers need an effective and easy to use **risk-based decision-making framework**



Meet Bob

- **Organisational Risk Lead for a complex public sector environmental organisation**
- Working with his Director to rapidly design & implement **Risk Reforms**
- A really nice guy

Risk Lead - "Bob"



Bob's Director

Director Assurance &
Corporate Governance

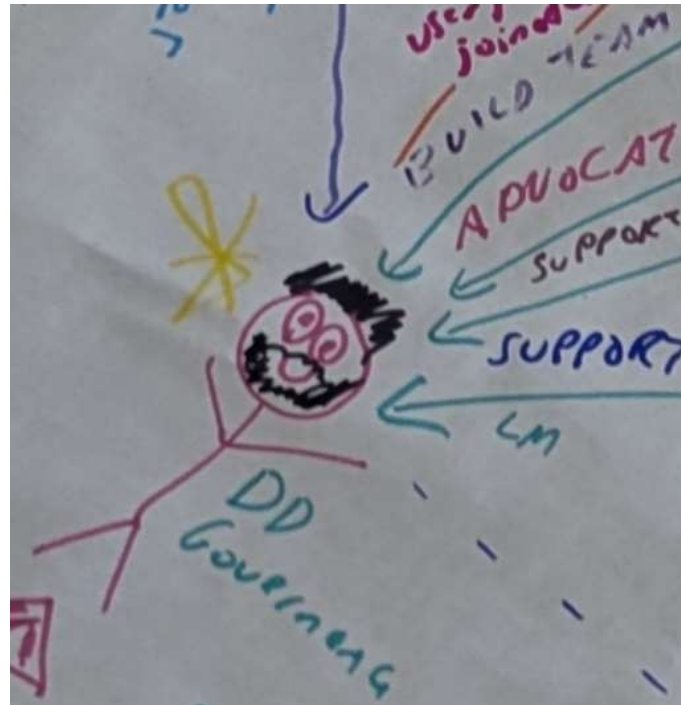


- Relatively new in post, leading a small team with **big challenges**
- **Strong vision** for Risk Reform, personally driving much of the work
- Seeking a Deputy to build team cohesion & drive improvements

Hi!

- New in post on a temporary promotion
- Governance enthusiast
- Me

Deputy Director Assurance & Corporate Governance

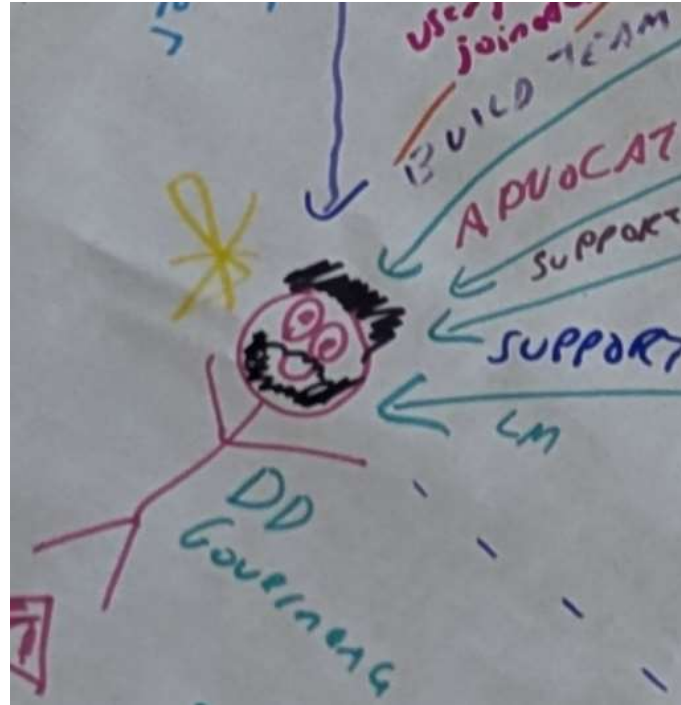


"Risk Crew" assemble!

Director Assurance &
Corporate Governance



Deputy Director Assurance &
Corporate Governance

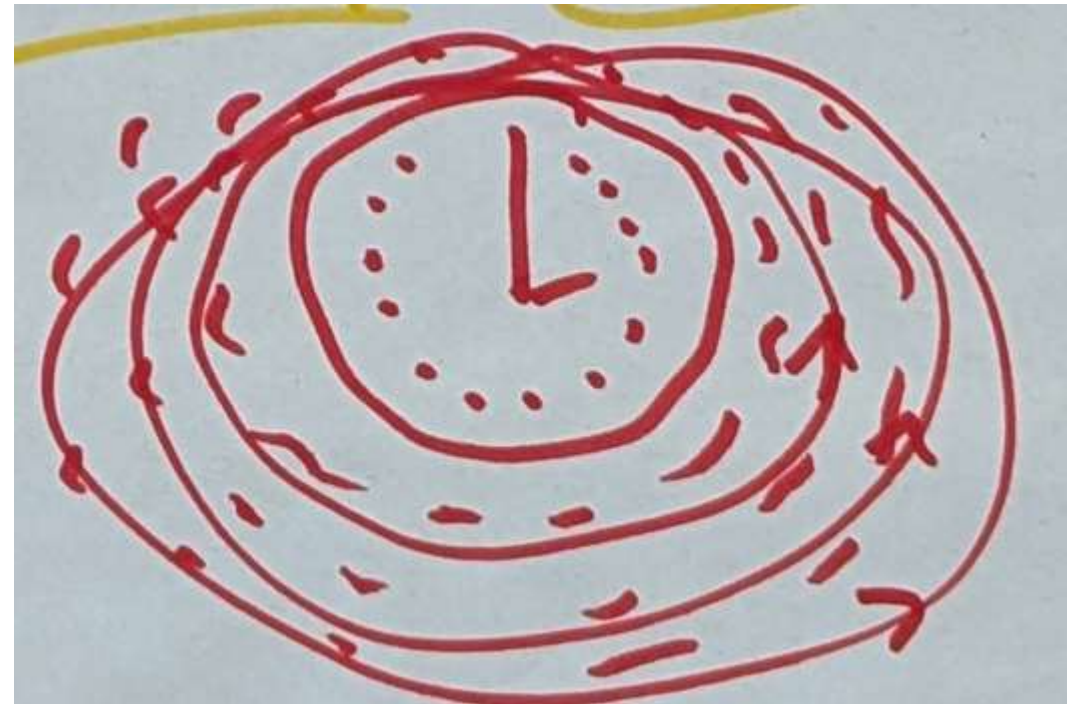


Risk Lead - "Bob"



It's Spring 2025

- Risk Crew is making good progress on reforms
- Team is becoming cohesive - "one team"
- Practitioner has just started a systems thinking apprenticeship & currently studying SSM **If only there was a "problematic situation" to work on...**



As part of concurrent organisational changes it was decided that NE will **reshape its risk function**

- Strong leadership desire to bring Risk into Strategy
- Decision to move risk work & risk lead ASAP
- New Deputy now leading Reshape of team



System of interest - supporting the transition of the risk lead (Bob) & their work, and their ability to succeed in delivering Risk Reforms following being team reshaped

- How to limit risks to Bob's **wellbeing**?
- What would be necessary for intended **risk reforms** to succeed?
- What are the most important considerations for the **future of organisational risk management**?



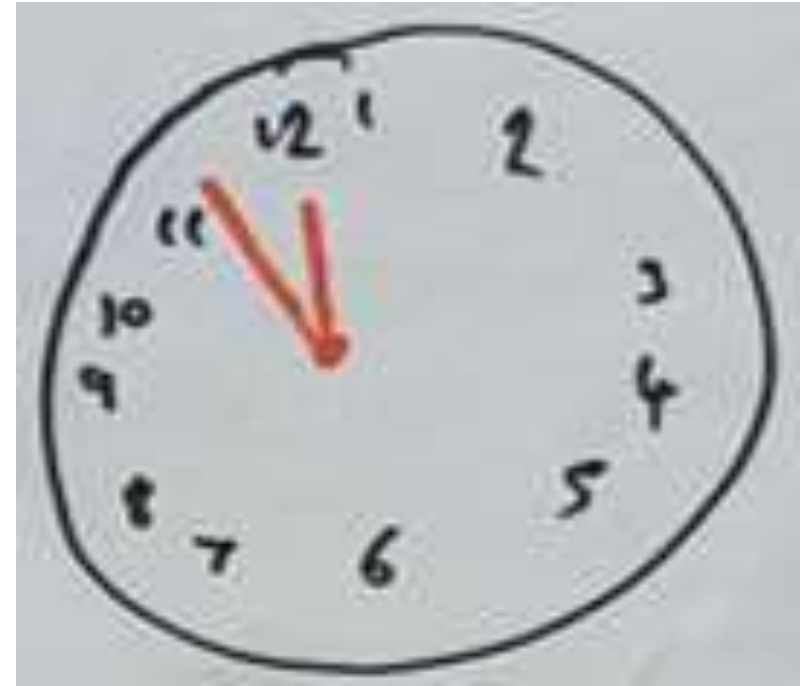
Soft Systems Methodology was chosen to explore this “problematic situation” within constraints

- A “**messy**” (human) situation with no agreed view or articulation of problem
- **Flexibility** of application & pragmatic focus - encouraged by Checkland to “jump in” & get started anyway
- ...SSM project due soon! (and don't know any other methodologies)



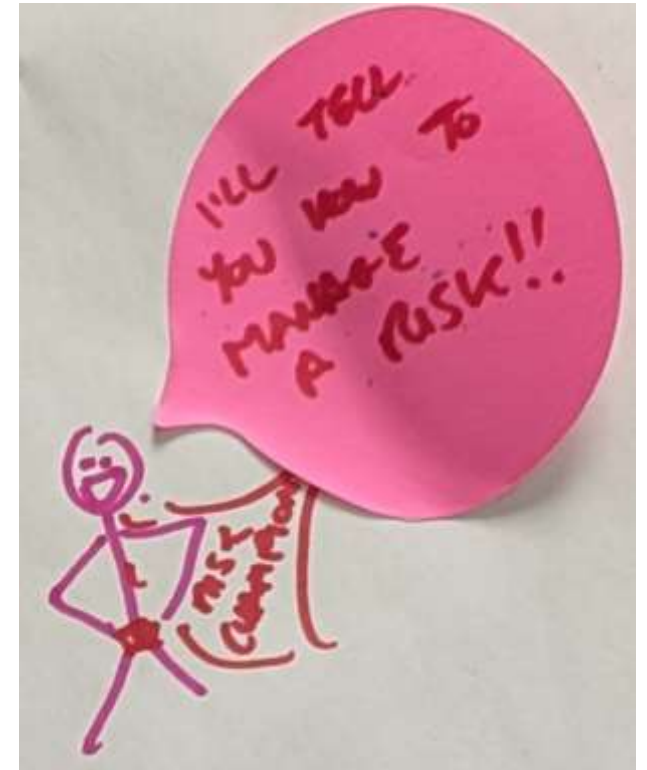
Key Constraints

- TIME
 - Tight deadline to enact changes
 - Need to deliver in-progress reforms during reshape
 - Limited capacity
- Limited access to decision makers ("owners")
- Limited expertise



Key Interventions

- Rich picture exercises with Risk Crew
- Development of PQRs & CATWOEs based on rich pictures
- CATWOE-informed interviews with relevant stakeholders at different levels including senior leaders





Models Developed & Key Insights

A complex
picture with
many
viewpoints

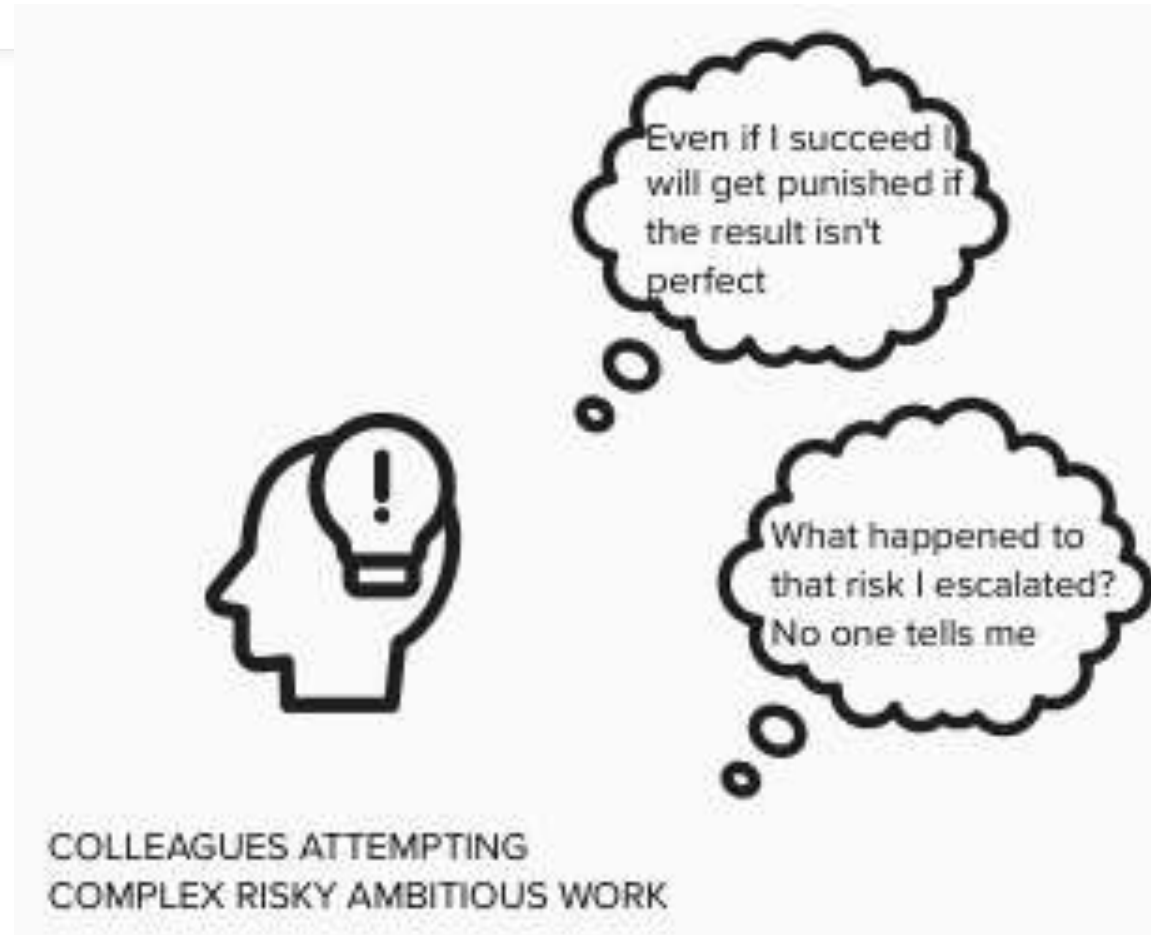
Adapting to government-driven change is one of our biggest challenges



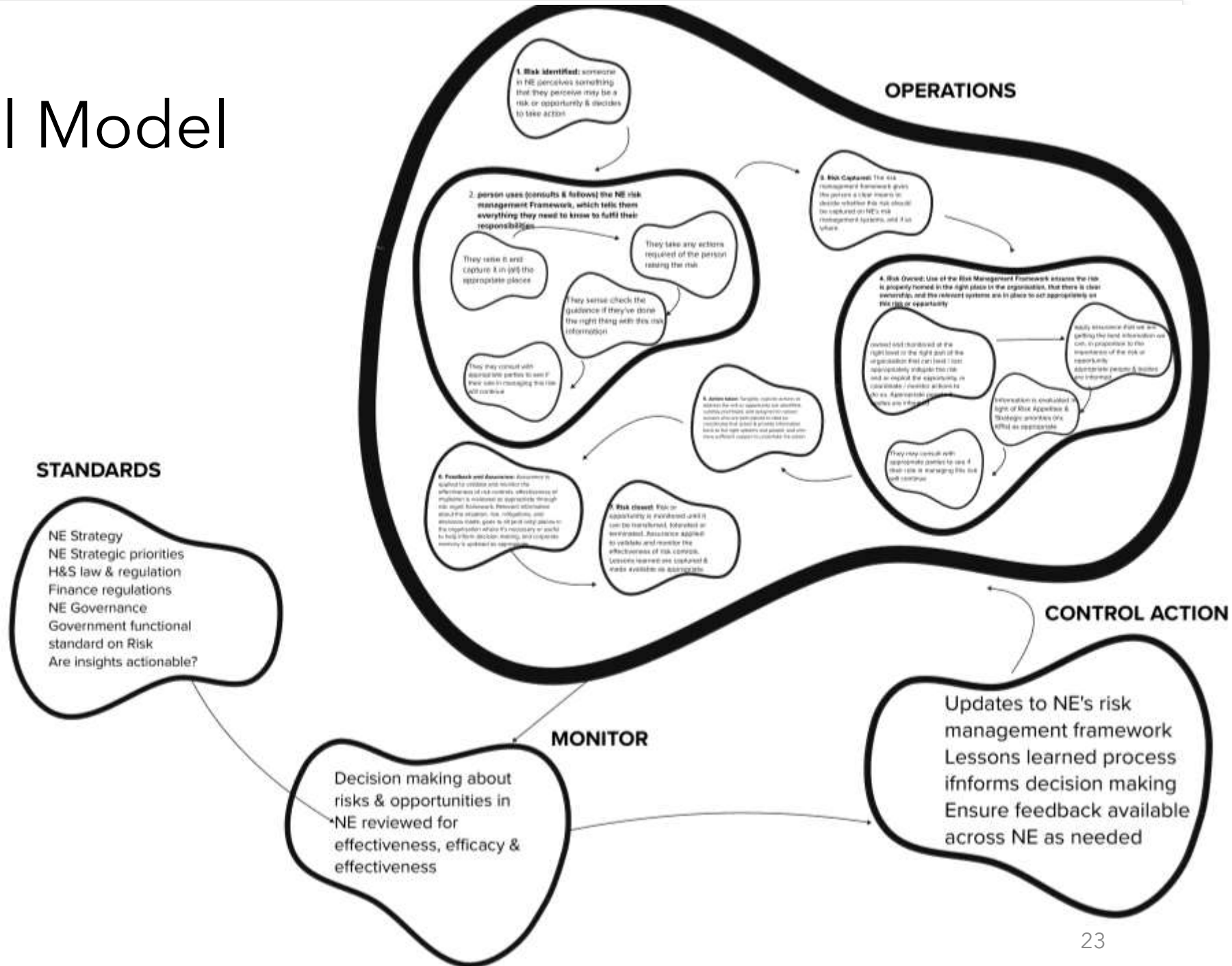
Executive have too much information, not enough actionable insights



Colleagues need clarity, support, feedback



Conceptual Model (v3)





Key insights from Analysis

CULTURE

CONSISTENCY

USER FOCUS

At all levels **culture was identified as the vital enabler** for risk reform and success in delivering our outcomes

- Leaders want risk framework to drive decision making at all levels. Necessary cultural change requires strong visible leadership from the top down
 - Honest reporting of bad news - “risk & opportunity”
 - Build trust & a “culture of curiosity”
 - Prioritise psychological safety

CULTURE

**leadership,
curiosity,
psychological
safety**

Ensure **joined-up & consistent risk reporting** to enable local action aligned to strategic priorities

- Stronger triage - tangible action that can be taken to address the risks
- Clear ownership; consistency in processes
- Single source for risk information to reduce duplication and enable consistency of decision making

**CONSISTENCY
& JOIN UP**

**triage,
ownership,
standardisation**

Need to **consider user journey, feedback loops**, and ensure that shared criteria represent genuine shared understanding

- Create feedback loop from management decisions back down to operational level - what decision was made and why?
- Risk appetite must represent genuine shared understanding
- Redesign guidance from the ground up - e.g. decision trees, clear case studies. Show information flow, make it easy to see your role.

USER FOCUS

**clarity,
guidance,
simplicity**

Value of SSM

**challenging
conversations**

catharsis

ease of use

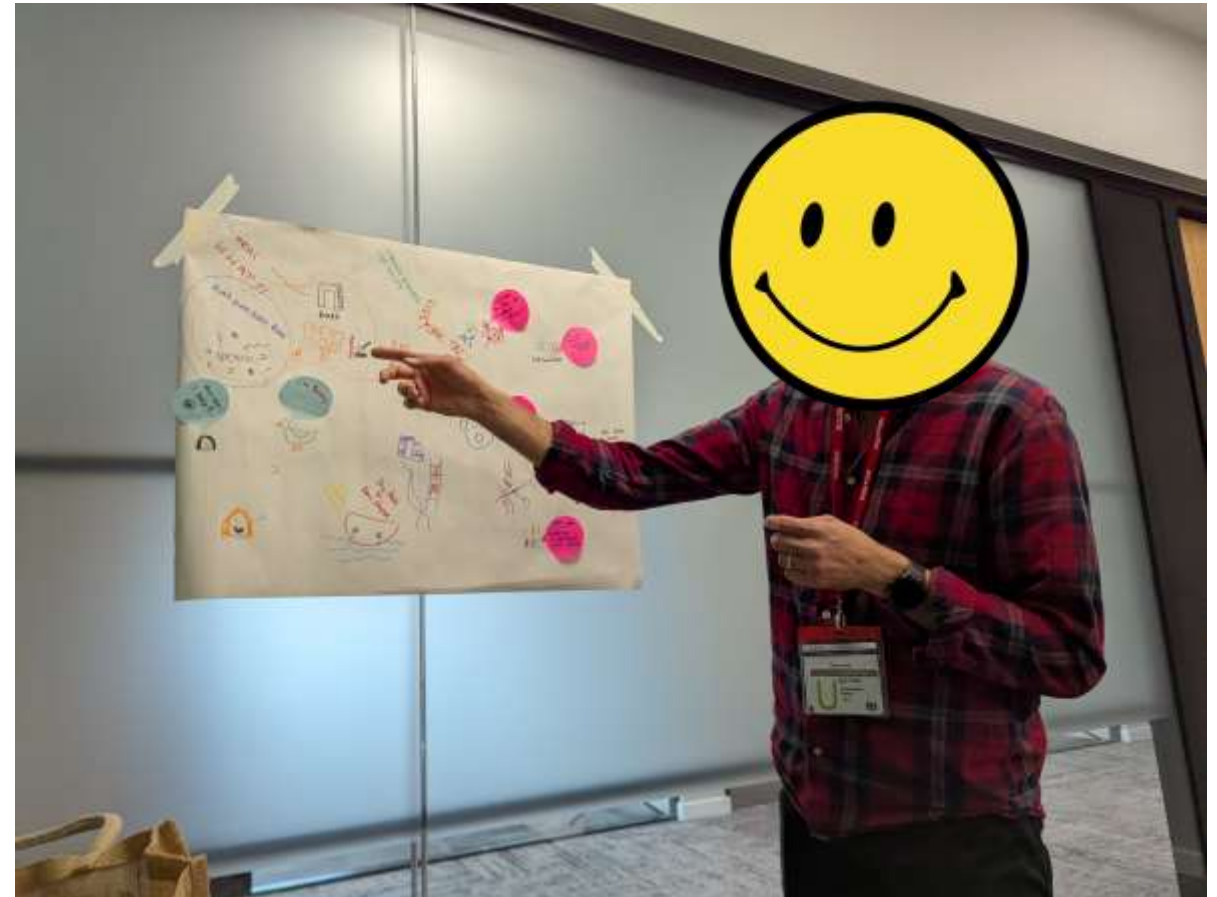
SSM created an opportunity for honest conversation with leaders about challenging topics & “elephants in the room”

- Leaders spoke about the fear some colleagues seem to feel about reporting honestly - they understand & want to help
 - “Pretty Pictures”
 - Fear of blame
 - Perceptions of risk appetite

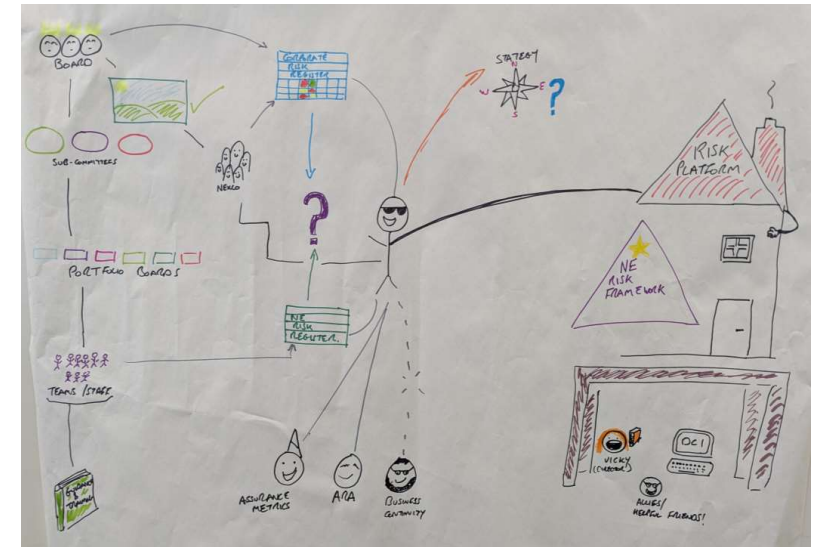
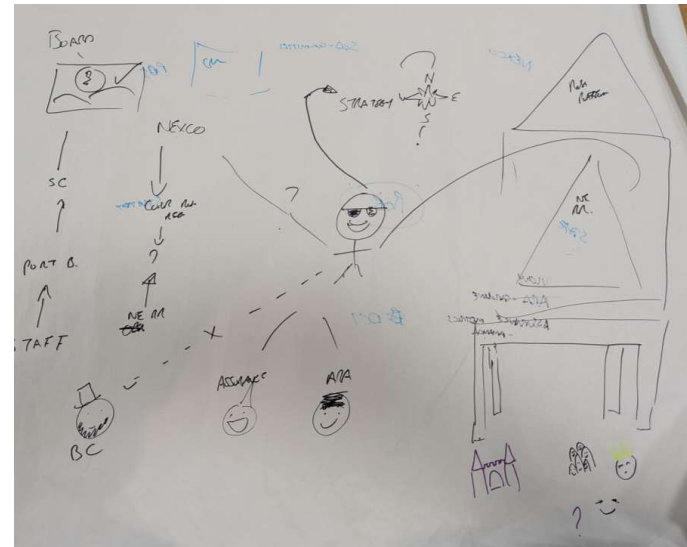
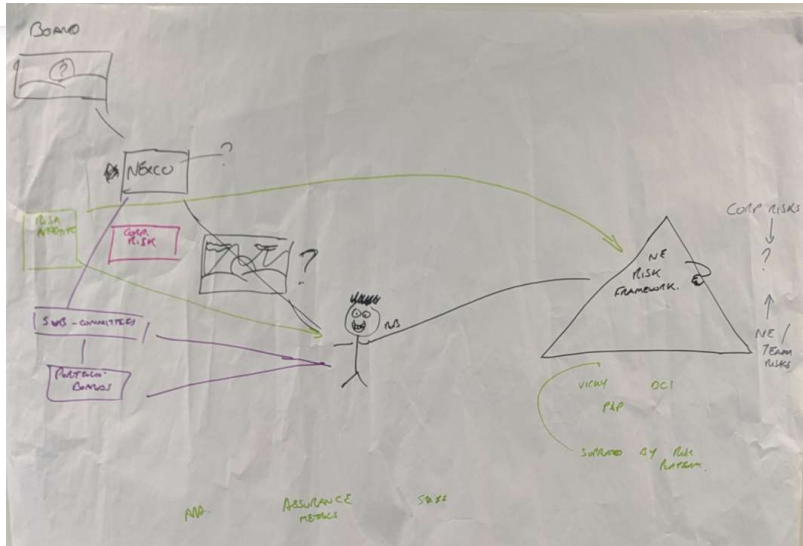


SSM was **experienced as adding significant value** by the key “victim” in our system of interest

- "I appreciated having the space to speak openly ... being able to be open & honest"
- *"THAT'S HOW IT FEELS!"*
- "recommendations are really valuable"

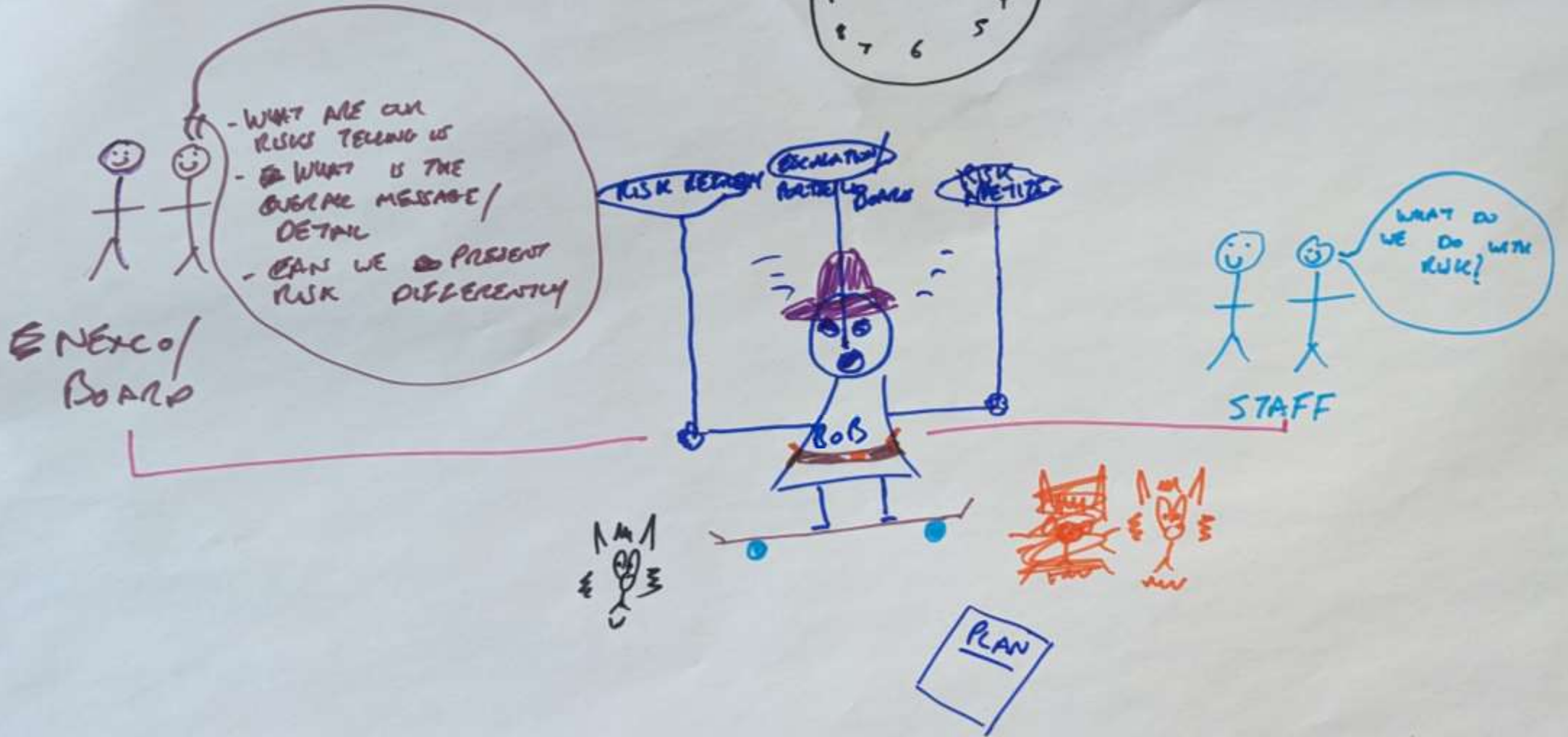


Iteration, ITERATION, ITERATION



"at first I found the rich pictures tricky but then "ah I see it now, I see how this works""

1



2

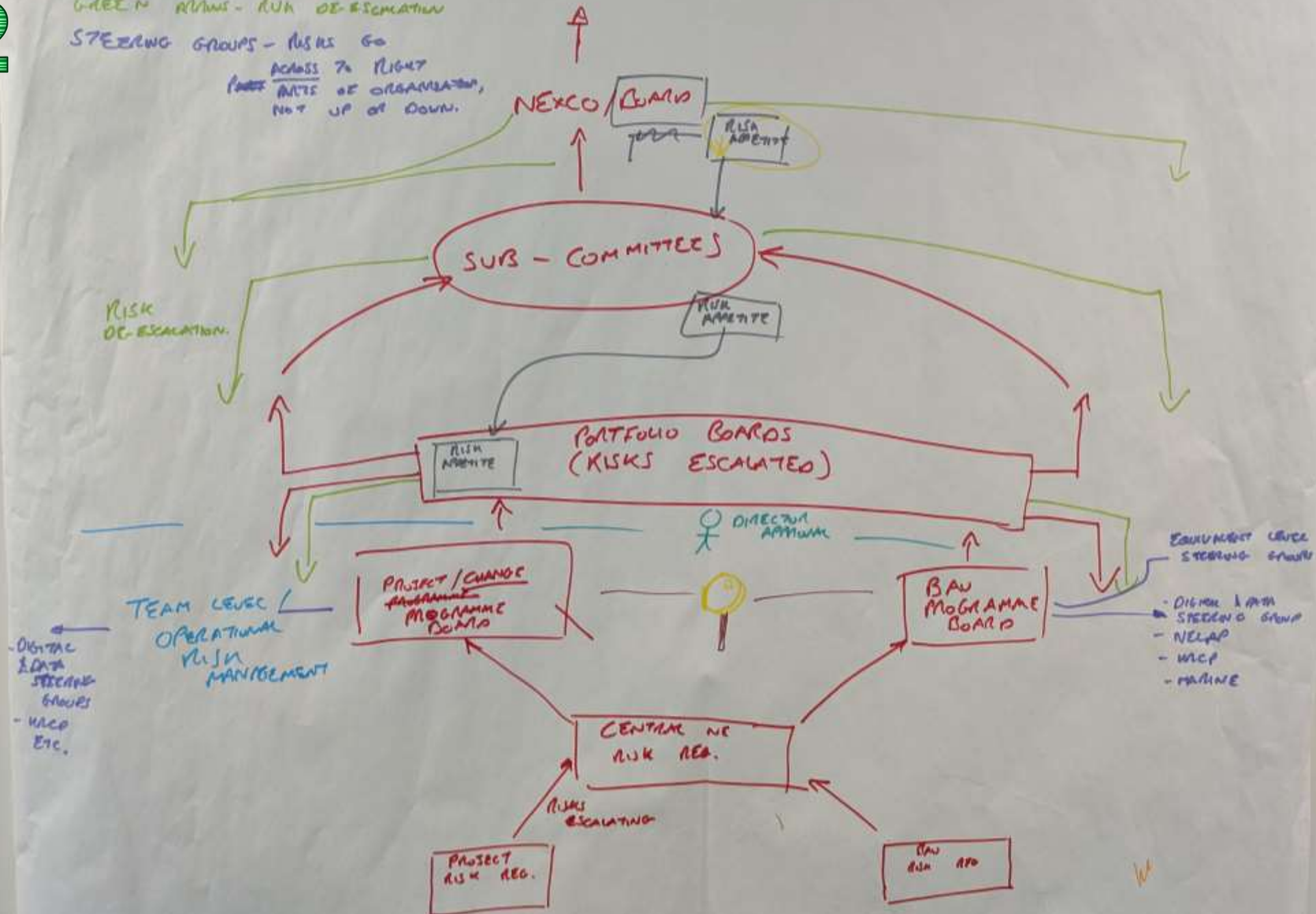
RED ARROWS - RISK ESCALATION

GREEN ARROWS - RISK DE-ESCALATION

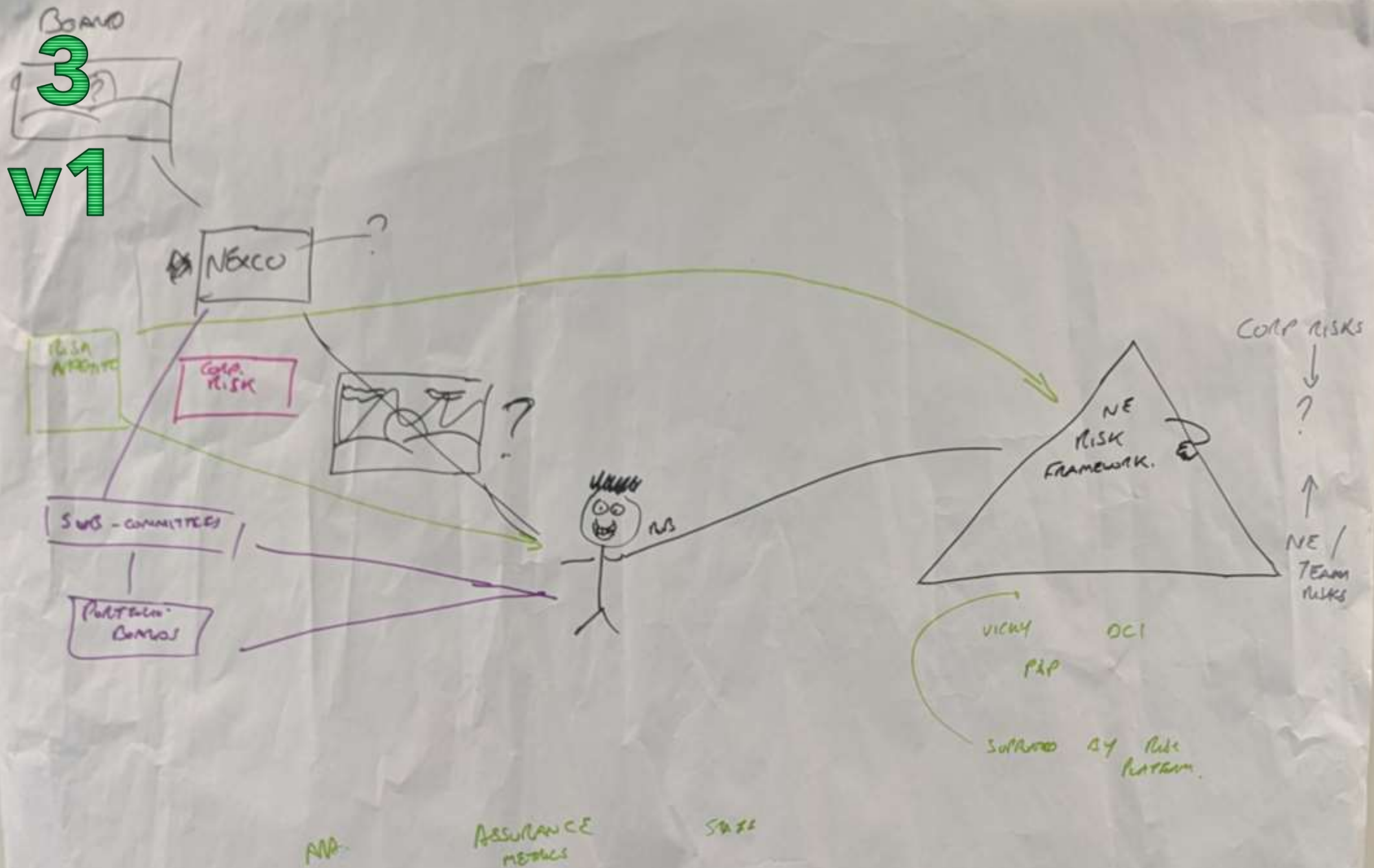
STEERING GROUPS - RISKS GO

ACROSS TO RIGHT
PARTS OF ORGANIZATION,
NOT UP OR DOWN.

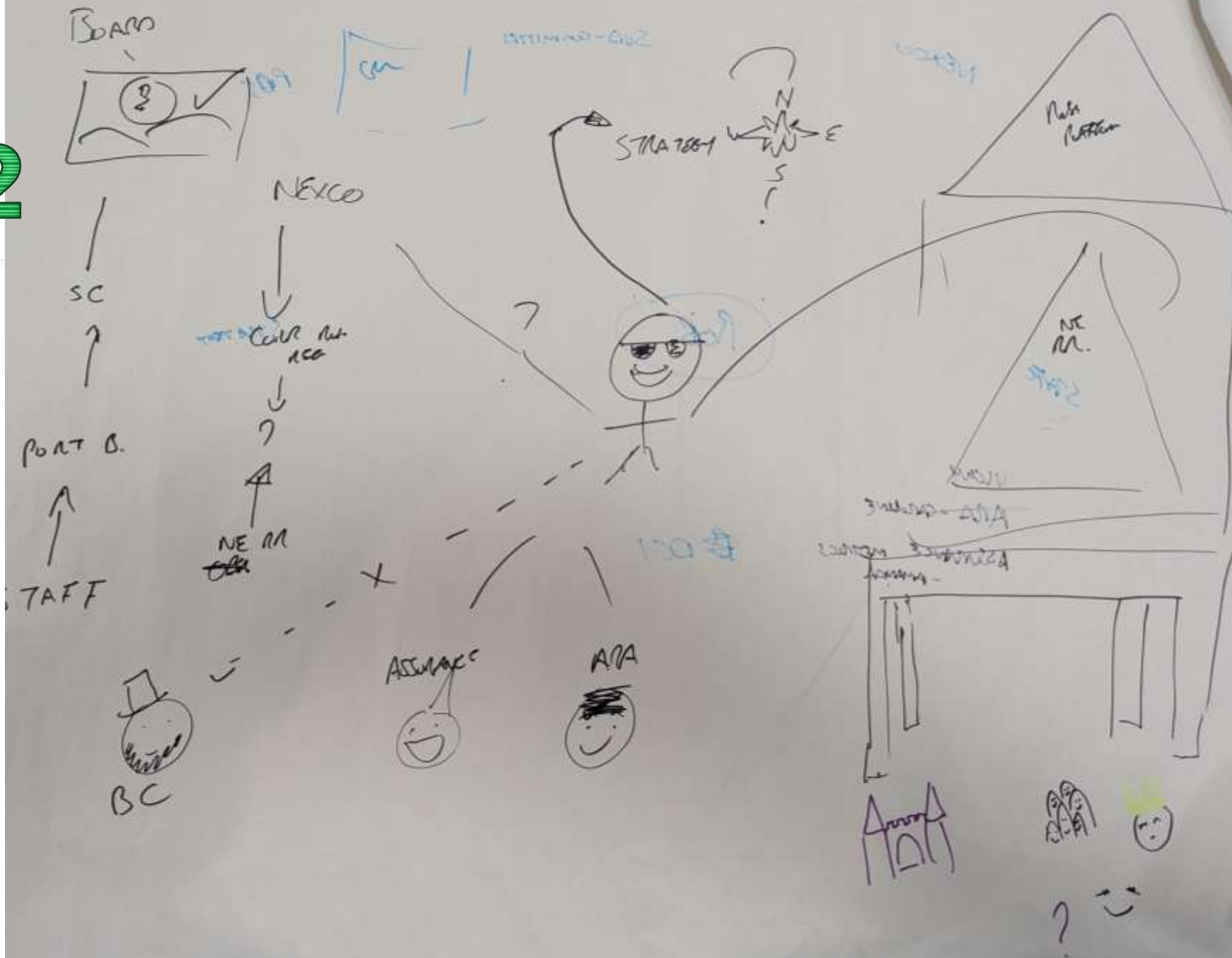
DEFRA FICO



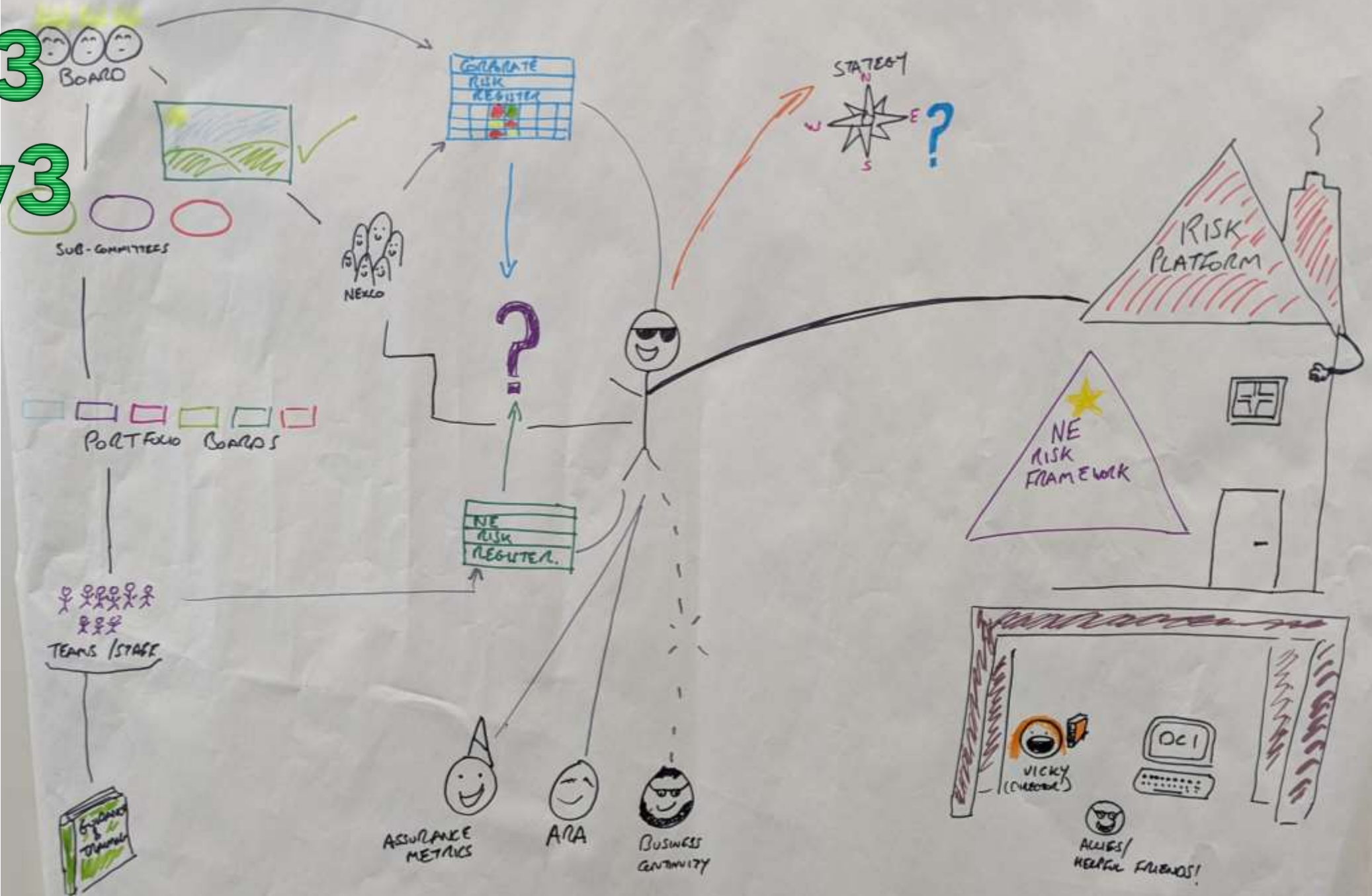
3
v1



3
v2



3
v3



4





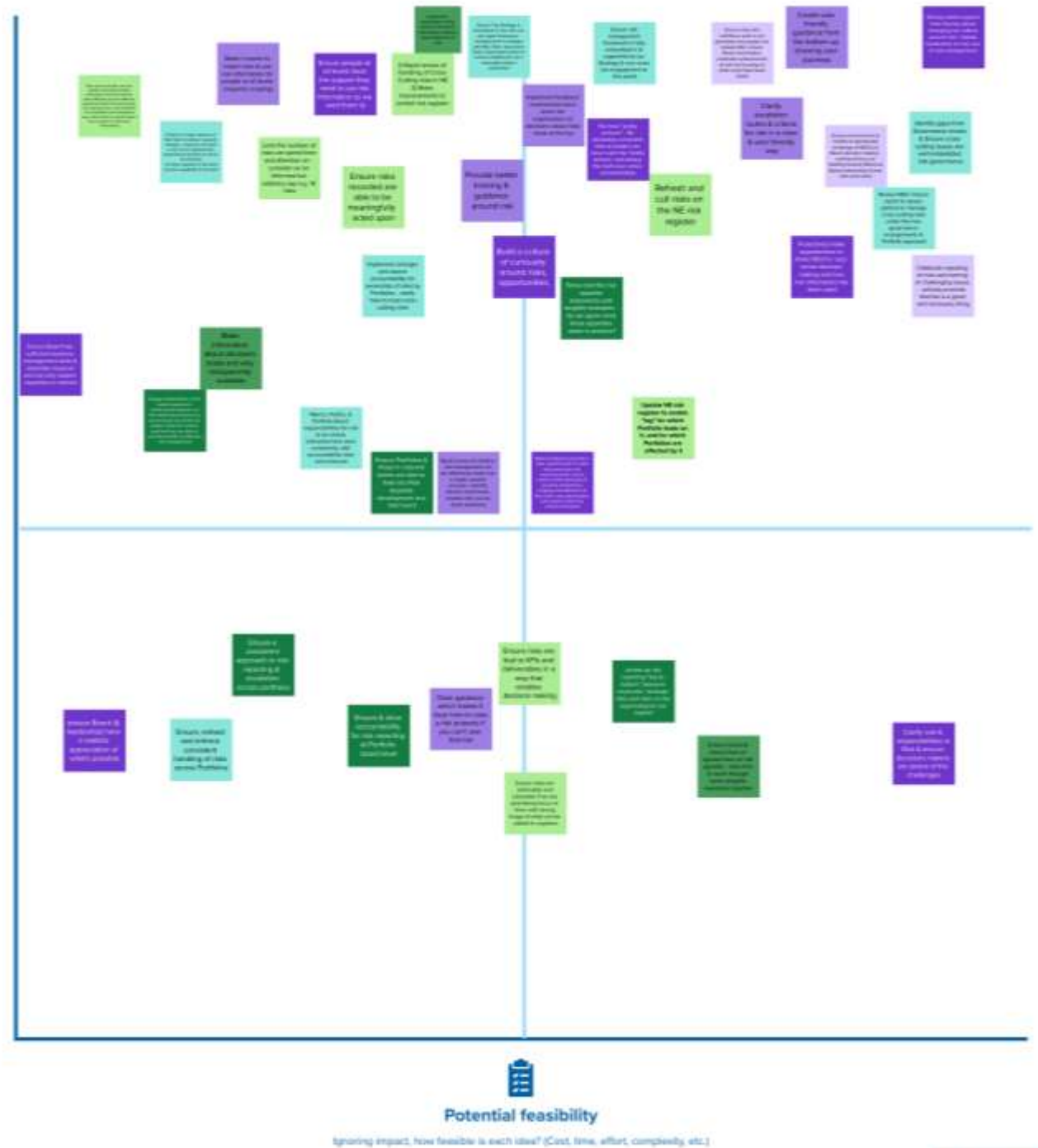
Reflections following this work



Too much information

Impact vs feasibility matrix for recommendations

Impact
Ignoring feasibility, how impactful (desirable) would it be to implement each idea?



Potential feasibility
Ignoring impact, how feasible is each idea? (Cost, time, effort, complexity, etc.)

Many of the recommendations came directly from the interviews & rich picture themselves, rather the comparison of conceptual model & reality



**Framing with leaders
was key**

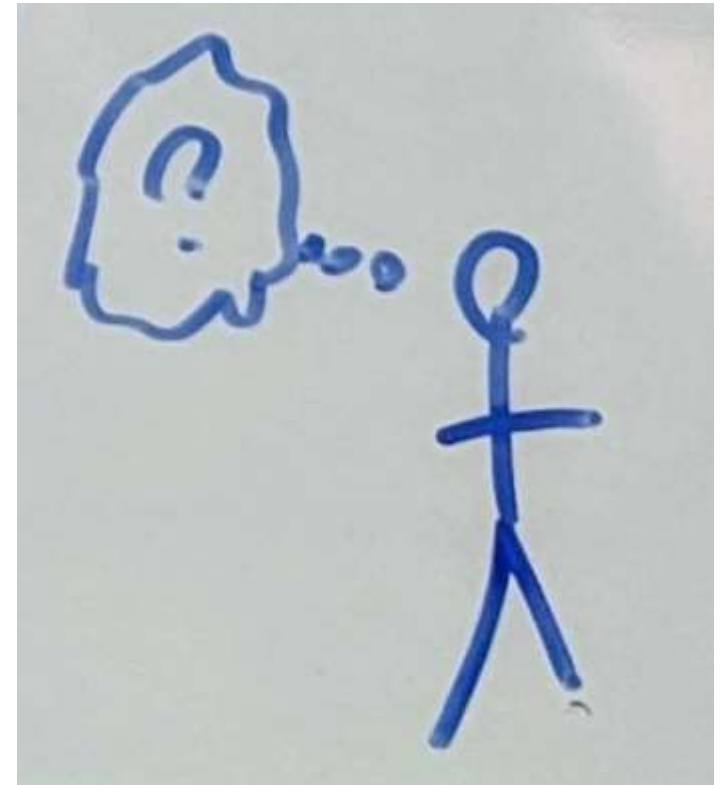
**Focus on Risk value
for strategy was key
for buy-in** – including
for further use of
systems thinking

Would a Critical
Systems approach be
feasible?



SSM allowed rapid delivery of value even in the hands of a ~novice

- Ability to apply methods and tools loosely - and change order and focus to suit needs - enabled very rapid progress under significant constraints
- Ability to learn WITH the team & take stakeholders on the journey while learning
- SSM exercises helped our team **rapidly develop our own feasible & desirable proposal** during team restructure which was then successfully implemented



January 2026 - Practitioner reflections

- Limited ability for insights and recommendations to influence risk reform in practice following reshape
 - Boundaries of areas of formal responsibility not easy to traverse
 - Competing organisational priorities
 - More upfront work to ensure buy-in from decision makers who would later stand over Risk may have helped recommendations to be adopted
- Value to Bob and other "victims" was meaningful to those persons and to practitioner
- Increased practitioner confidence to experiment through having to act and improvise rapidly within constraints, and buy-in from key stakeholders for value of such exercises

Part 2 - Using and sharing systems approaches with colleagues in the public sector in times of change

We'll (briefly!) cover:

- Rich Picture Examples
- Reflections
- Further work
- Future prospects for systems thinking in the public sector



Using rich pictures to engage colleagues in times of change

- **Joining new team leadership team**
- Sparking insights into each other's work and perspective - changing how we see relationships in our work
- Introducing & building buy-in for further use of systems tools





Using rich pictures to engage colleagues in times of change

- **Restructure of A&CG team**
- Personal pictures of as-is, team rich picture mapping of required connections (many!)
- Helped team successfully influence design of reshape
- Key to success: snacks



Using rich pictures to engage colleagues in times of change

- **Newly reshaped legal & governance team first F2F**
- Whole team in small groups
- Experimental and loose approach to generate conversation, catharsis, & build connections
- Key to success: Leadership messaging & support of honest exploration of challenges - safe space



Using rich pictures to engage colleagues in times of change

- The **Omni-Table!**
- Gave participants choice - huge enthusiasm for one giant picture
- Physical engagement supported conversational engagement
- Key to success: lean in to the looseness, follow the energy



Reflections on using rich pictures to engage colleagues in times of change

- Acknowledgement: rich pictures are the easy bit!
- Loose & flexible approach focused on generating engagement, energy & conversation – good feedback
- Successful in building interest and buy-in – further invitations to engage colleagues on systems

...but...

- mixed results in making real practical use of outputs afterwards.
- No capacity to take outputs forward into more proper SSM analysis
- Loose approach under constraints led to large variation in how much outputs matched an ~ideal / "proper" rich picture

Reflections on using Systems approaches to improve governance in the public sector

- Many of the challenges raised in our "problematic situations" result from the nature of and constraints within government and public sector - widely acknowledged, but near impossible to address effectively for an individual organisation
 - Public sector systems are often based on historical contingency, linear thinking, and political requirements / expediency, creating an environment which by default can be inhospitable to systems thinking approaches
 - When issues or opportunities are identified the organisation is likely v constrained in range of responses - assuming correct & useful analysis, often insufficient to effect change
 - While public sector constraints & systemic challenges seem very specific, colleagues report similar effects echoed in private sector

Reflections on using Systems approaches to improve governance in the public sector

- Individuals and teams can engage with systems approaches, conversations and "aha" moments can generate real change - but getting "the system" to take these on board to change how decisions are made & systems designed v challenging
 - Colleague (and especially leader) capacity is so stretched that finding time to engage on a different conceptual framework is v challenging
 - engaging w/ plain (or business / organisational) English, with a concise message that clearly speaks to known org. priorities is key

Further work

- **In-depth governance diagnosis using VSM**
 - Valuable insights - significant recognition by decision makers of issues diagnosed
 - This work has informed initial scope for a Governance Alignment Project to address systemic issues and embed adaptability in future organisational governance change
 - Next project “crossing the streams” to include elements of CSH & SSM with deeper VSM diagnosis

Further work

- **Working with Target Operating Model team** to engage decision makers and colleagues using VSM to inform design and implementation of major organisational change
 - Engaging decision makers using VSM framing to inform decision makers on implementation of transition to Service-based approach
 - Sharing VSM with wider team & org using nature as means of “telling the story” - highly resonant and generating enthusiasm for approach
 - Submission with TOM project leads to 2026 SCiO Conference: Systems Thinking and Systems Practice, Hull 🙌

Further work

- **Working to launch "systems thinking club"** to help grow a systems thinking culture & enable NE to adopt and benefit from systems approaches... v0.1:
 - Create conditions for systems mindset
 - Share learning with colleagues
 - Use systems approaches to co-design
 - Catalyse emergent opportunities from apprentice cohort
 - "permeable membrane" with DEFRA Group colleagues
 - Collaborate across boundaries
 - Work towards cultural change from bottom-up

My question for you:

- **How (else) can we create conditions for systems thinking to be adopted in the public sector, and what is required of us now to achieve this in future?**
 - In a system built & designed on generations of linear thinking
 - In an inherently short-term political system where decisions are driven by election cycles
 - When complexity and nuance are unwelcome in the national conversation
 - With command and control, compliance governance mindset
 - When decision makers often have ~no time to engage with new ways of thinking given demands of the present



Thank you!

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I would love your...

feedback

suggestions

connection