Preface

Like many people, I drifted into nudge. In the 2000s, I was working on measures to encourage citizens to participate in politics and civic life. As someone interested in how to improve public policy outcomes, I had become intrigued about how to encourage citizens to do a wider range of acts for collective benefit. I wanted to motivate them with messages and acts of persuasion to overcome constraints on collective action (see John et al. 2011). In short, I discovered myself doing behavioural public policy at the same time as Thaler and Sunstein's (2008) book on nudge came out. I found the ideas and language of the behavioural sciences very helpful as I developed a research programme, especially as I was using randomised controlled trials, which is the method of choice for testing behavioural interventions.

I had of course long been aware of the strides of behavioural economics. I recall going to hear Danny Kahneman give a keynote lecture to the American Political Science Association in 1999. I had also worked with David Halpern on a project on social capital at the end of the 1990s. Anybody who talks to David cannot fail to be aware of his wide interest in the interactions between government policy and policy outcomes, which first manifested itself with his advocacy of the social capital agenda and then of behavioural insights. I kept in touch with David as he developed the behaviour change agenda in central govern- ment, and he has inspired me.

I also discovered that people working in public agencies found the skills I had developed in designing trials to be very useful in redesigning their policies. Some of these interventions were carried out with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) in its early days; latterly I worked with local authorities and other public agencies on their own behavioural insights. I became curious about the growing official interest in testing behavioural ideas with experiments, and I wondered how a culture of experimentation and behavioural redesign could be integrated into the standard operating procedures of public bureaucracies. I also became aware that I was one of the very few political scientists working on behavioural public policy. I had all the skills of the nudger and experimenter, but I saw the interventions much more in their political

context. As a result, I wanted to understand how behavioural public policy could be useful to those who practised it. I was curious to find out why politicians are attracted to nudge and what bureaucrats value in the research and policy agenda. In short, I found that I had developed an interest in the politics of behavioural public policy and the factors that affected its diffusion and implementation. I believe that behaviour change reforms can only work effectively when considered as part of a wider system of institutions and interests, which involves understanding the mechanisms of accountability, citizen reactions, and private advantage. Nudging needs to operate within the current set of political constraints and opportunities, and these choices are best understood within a framework familiar to those who study political science and public policy. I developed many of these ideas while designing trials for behavioural public policy interventions and in thinking through their implications as I dealt day-to-day with bureaucrats and politicians. Doing behavioural public policy has inspired this book.