



# Creating system conditions for ethical and effective innovation

Tools and materials for innovators and system leaders  
working with children, young people and families

[www.theinnovateproject.co.uk](http://www.theinnovateproject.co.uk)



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# The tools: What they are and who should use them

As part of The Innovate Project, twenty leaders, facilitators and researchers of ethical and effective innovation generously shared their insights and experiences of what it takes to bring about change in complex systems.

We asked these experts: *What helps and hinders innovation in your experience?*

*How do you create system conditions conducive to innovation?*

The three tools and supporting materials in this pack draw on their responses, and cover the roles of local leadership and practice, and partnerships and culture, as well as wider system conditions, such as funding, regulation, politics and the media.

These tools and materials are designed for use by leaders, practitioners and their partners who are innovating in their work with children, young people and families to:

- **Tool 1.** Explore current conditions in local systems to understand strengths and areas for development. **(Diamond 9)**
- **Tool 2.** Uncover wider system influences on innovation to help anticipate and manage their effects. **(Four Quadrants)**
- **Tool 3.** Plan priority areas of action to create local system conditions conducive to innovation. **(Roadmap)**

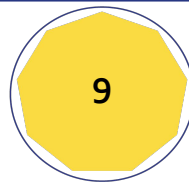
Each tool can be used by individuals or groups and is supported by notes to support facilitation.

Digital versions of the tools are available to [download here](#).

# System conditions for innovation: Enablers, Influences and Next Level Facilitators

The tools support individuals and groups to learn about three different kinds of system feature, which are important to consider when innovating in work with children, young people and families.

## Local system enablers

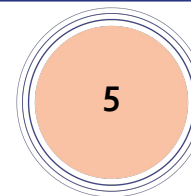


These nine features are foundational to ethical and effective innovation.

They act as facilitators when they are present in local systems and become barriers when they are absent:

1. A stable and capable team
2. Openness to new ideas and learning
3. Inspiring and consistent leadership
4. Trust and confidence
5. Effective partnerships
6. A strong case for innovation
7. A compelling, shared vision
8. Space and time for collaboration
9. Capability in learning and evaluation

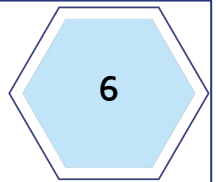
## Wider system influences



These five features exist in wider systems relevant to work with children, young people and families and exert influence over ethical and effective innovation locally, by:

- driving local innovation priorities and approaches; and
  - affecting culture and practice; how leaders and staff feel and go about their work with children, young people and families.
1. Politics and policy
  2. Regulation
  3. Funding
  4. Social work culture and practice
  5. The media

## Next level facilitators



These six features help to manage the effects of wider system influences and can prevent them becoming barriers to ethical and effective innovation.

We call these features 'next level' facilitators because they are required in addition to local system enablers. They are system capabilities and capacities that leaders need to invest in to create system conditions for innovation to flourish:

1. Shared identity: a story of place and purpose
2. Coproduction with children, young people and families
3. Sources of evidence and stories of progress and impact
4. Strategies for evaluating, managing and sharing risk
5. Skilled project management and change leadership
6. Buy in at all levels

Follow the [links in orange](#) to find summaries of these features later in this pack. Each summary draws on the insights and experiences of experts in innovation who work with children, young people and families and links to further research from [The Innovate Project](#).

# Tool 1: Diamond 9

## Exploring system conditions for innovation

# Tool 1: Exploring system conditions for innovation

## Diamond 9 (1 of 3)

This tool is designed to help you identify the strengths in your current system that are enablers for innovation. It will also help you to identify areas for development. Enablers that are absent can become barriers to innovation in a local system .

### About Diamond 9

Diamond 9 is a tool for sorting or prioritising amongst a range of features those that are most relevant and important. Here we are using the diamond to sort through the nine system features that are foundational for ethical and effective innovation to flourish.

Diamond 9 can be used by an individual as a tool for personal reflection and planning or by groups - a project or delivery team for example. One of the most interesting aspects of this activity is the way it reveals different perspectives and experiences within a shared context meaning that the process for agreeing where a feature appears on the diamond can be at least as powerful as the finished product.

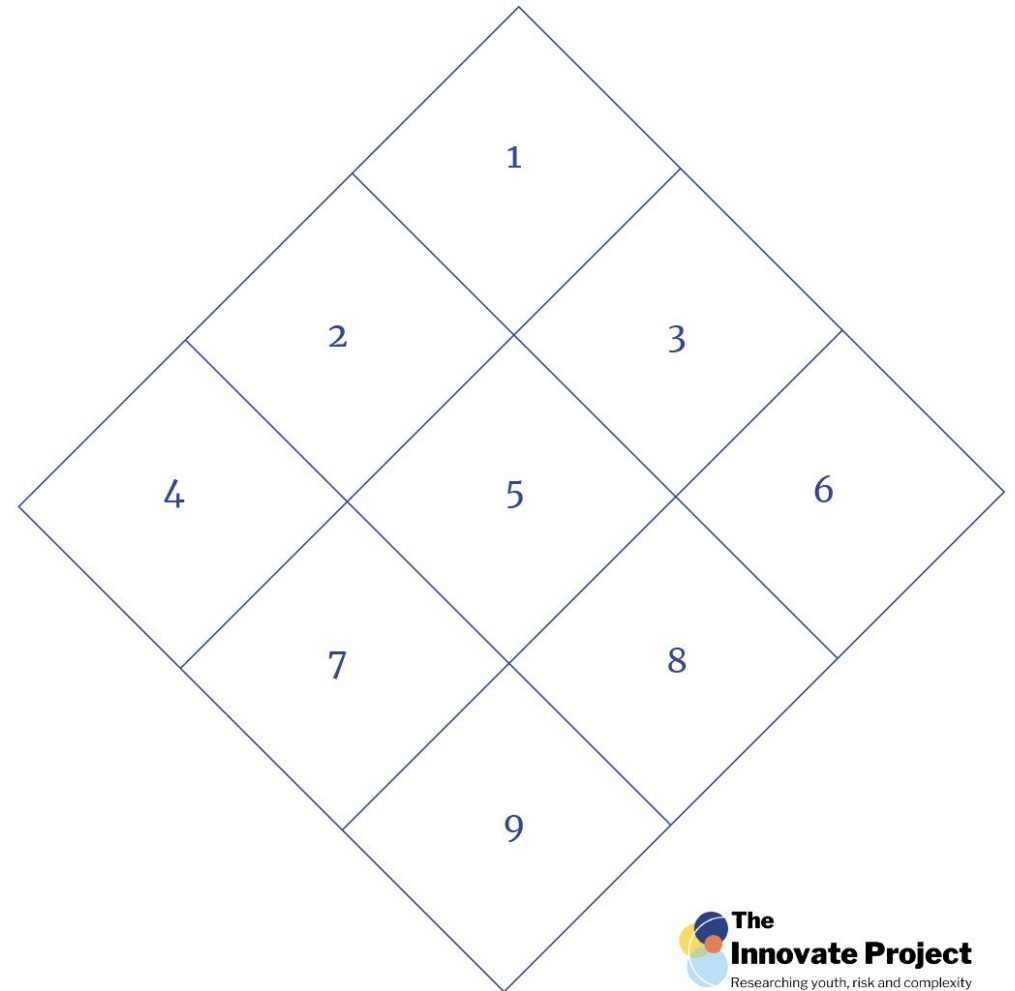
Where more than one group is completing the diamond at the same time, for instance in a workshop, the opportunity to compare and discuss differences between diamonds provides valuable learning for participants.

### You will need (per team if in a workshop):

The Tool 1 PDF file printed on A3 light card  
The 9 Local System Enablers Summaries printed on A4 paper  
Scissors  
Glue stick or other adhesive

### Time

Individual - 20 - 30 mins  
Groups of up to 6 30 - 45 mins to complete the diamond plus 15 mins to reflect on the process (1 hr)  
Multiple groups as above plus up to 30 mins for groups to compare and discuss their diamonds (1.5 hr)



# Tool 1: Exploring system conditions for innovation

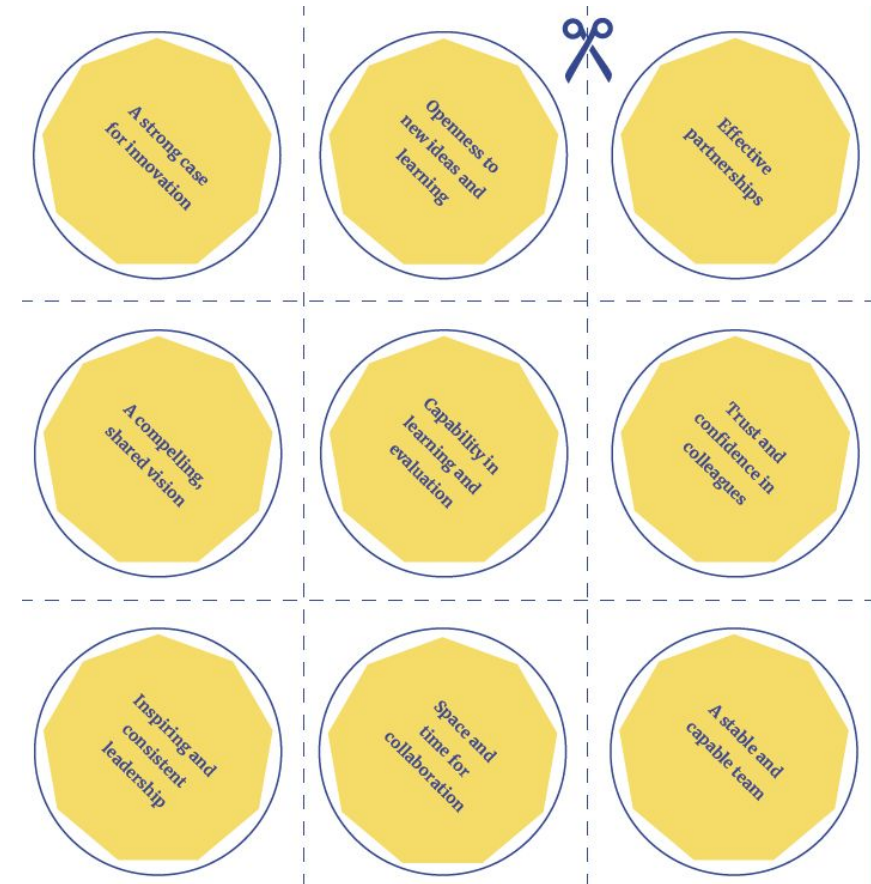
## Diamond 9 (2 of 3)

### Set up (NB 1 set per group of 6 people in a workshop)

- Download the Tool 1 PDF and print onto A3 light card
- Cut out the yellow Local System Enablers features and the blank features cards
- Print 1 set of Local System Enablers Summaries onto A4 paper
- Arrange your workshop space cabaret style for groups of 3-6 people per table

### The activity

1. Ask the groups to divide the Local System Enablers Summaries between them.
2. Allow a few minutes for each person to read the summaries they have (each person should have a max of 3 summaries). They are now the experts in 'their' features.
3. Ask the group to choose from amongst the features cards the strengths they perceive in their local system. They should refer to their group expert to understand how each feature enables innovation.
4. Consider if anything is missing. If the group identifies a system feature that is not on the cards, but that is relevant for innovation in their context, they can use a blank card to create a new system feature.
5. Taking the strengths they have identified ask the group to order these using the diamond. They should consider two factors: (i) the relative strengths of the features and (ii) their relevance to innovation in their context. By placing the features on the diamond with the strongest and most relevant at #1, the next at # 2 and so on, the diamond the group creates will start to tell a story of the features of their system that are conducive to innovation. These are the features that need care and attention, but may not be the main focus for work to create the right system conditions for innovation to flourish.



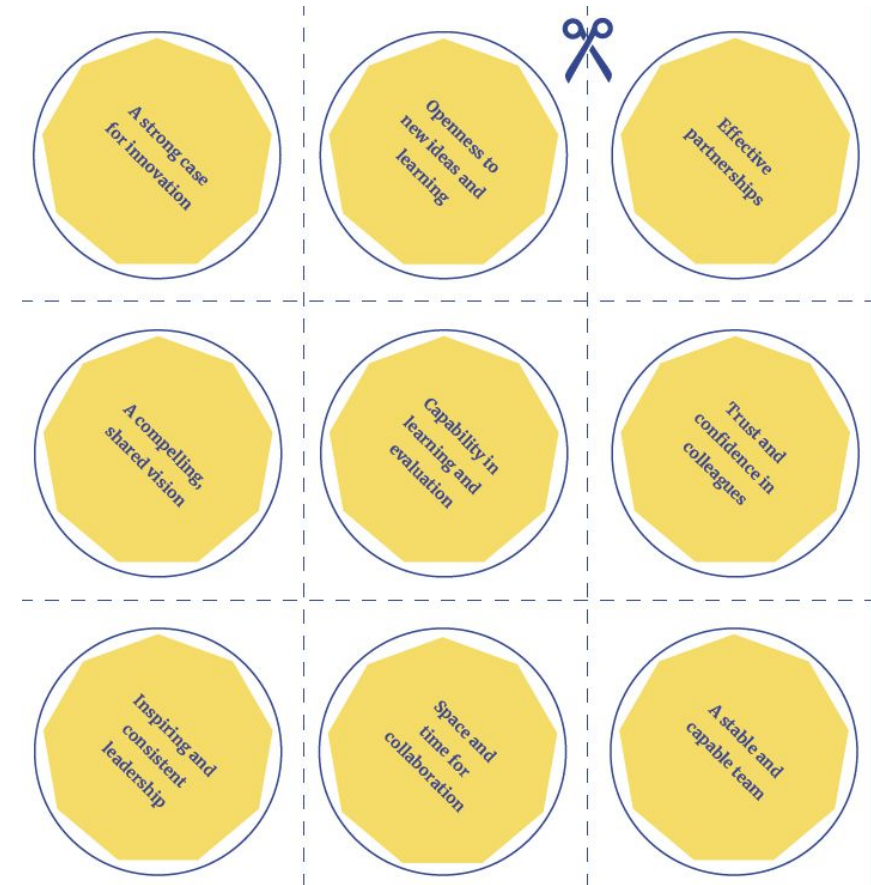


# Tool 1: Exploring system conditions for innovation

## Diamond 9 (3 of 3)

### The activity continued

- Next ask the group to revisit the features they did not identify as strengths in their system and use these to populate the bottom of the diamond with the weakest or worst feature at #9. By placing the features on the diamond with the weakest at #9, the next at # 8 and so on, the diamond will begin to reveal the features of their system that they need to focus on to create the right system conditions for innovation to flourish.
- When the group is happy with their diamond, ask them to stick down their features cards and 'step back' to review their diamond 9 as a whole. Offer some questions for reflection, for example:
  - What does this tell you about your readiness for innovation?
  - What might you need to do to capitalise on the strengths you have identified?
  - What areas for development might you prioritise? Where might you start?
  - Who else needs to be part of this discussion about local system enablers of innovation?
- In workshops with more than one group invite groups to share their top 3 and their bottom 3 and their rationale for their choices. Ideally, there will be time for groups to reflect on what they have heard from others and agree any changes to their diamond as a result.





# Tool 2: Four Quadrants

## Uncovering wider system influences

# Tool 2: Uncovering wider system influences

## Four quadrants (1 of 3)

This tool is designed to help individuals and groups anticipate the ways that wider system features are likely to influence innovation in your context to:

- drive local innovation priorities and approaches; and
- affect culture and practice, i.e. how leaders and staff feel and go about their work with children, young people and families.

These features are often beyond the control of local leaders and staff and, unmitigated, can pose a serious threat to innovation.

### About the four quadrants

Four quadrants tools are useful for connecting different but related factors and exploring their relative effects in context.

This four quadrants tool first asks you to consider how important from your point of view each of the wider system features might be in your context. How much media scrutiny does work with children and young people attract for instance? And how 'hands-on' are your local elected members? The wider system features play out very differently in different places and sectors.

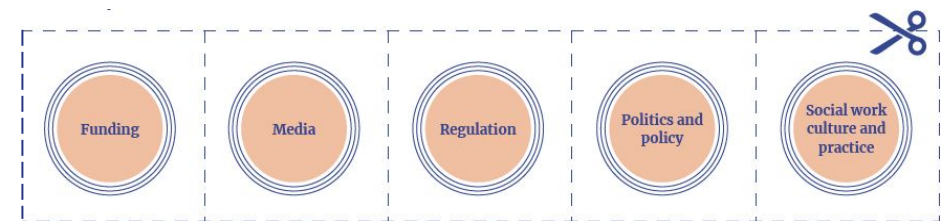
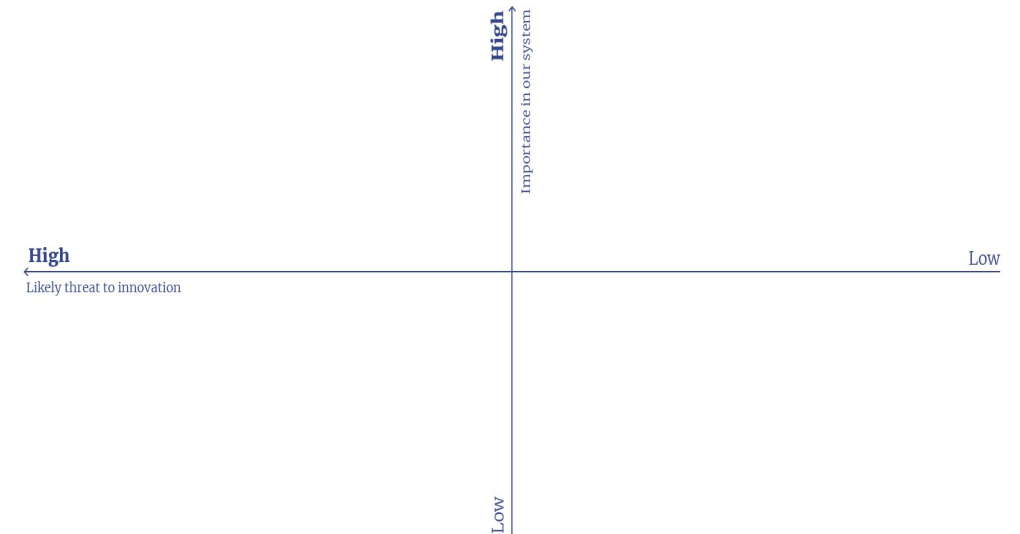
However, it is perfectly possible that a wider system influence might be hugely important locally and yet hardly affect your innovation at all. For instance where a grant has been made, constrained funding may remain a general problem without being a direct threat to your innovation.

### You will need (per team if in a workshop):

- The Tool 2 PDF file printed on A3 light card
- The 5 Wider System Influences and 6 Next Level Facilitators printed on A4 paper
- Scissors
- Glue stick or other adhesive

### Time

- Individual - 15 - 25 mins
- Groups of up to 6 30 mins to complete the activity plus 15 mins to reflect on the process (45 mins)
- Multiple groups as above plus up to 15 mins for groups to compare and discuss their quadrants (1 hr)



# Tool 2: Uncovering wider system influences

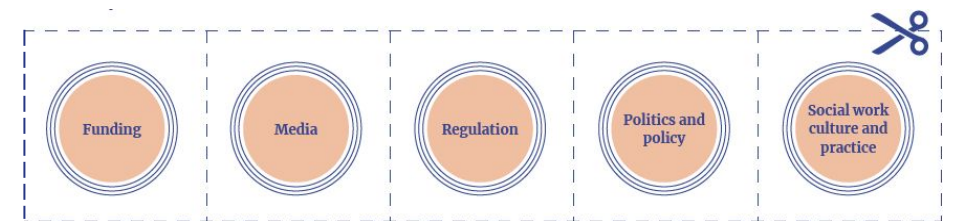
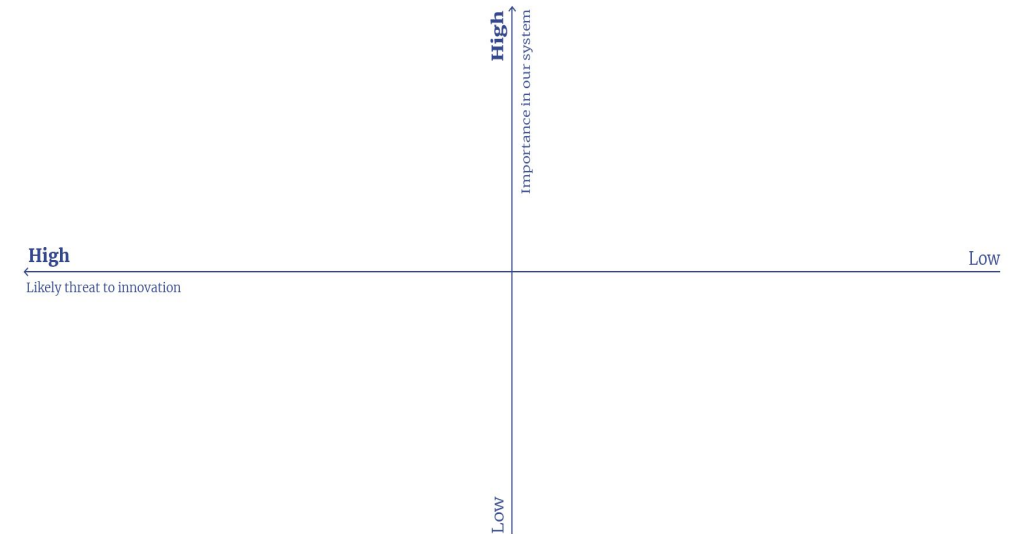
## Four quadrants (2 of 3)

### Set up (NB 1 set per group of 6 people in a workshop)

- Download the Tool 2 PDF and print onto A3 light card
- Cut out the orange Wider System Influences and the blue Next Level Facilitators cards
- Print 1 set each of the Wider System Influences and the Next Level Facilitators Summaries onto A4 paper
- Arrange your workshop space cabaret style for groups of 3-6 people per table

### The activity

1. Ask the groups to divide the 5 Wider System Influences Summaries between them. Allow a few minutes for each person to read the summary they have. They are now the experts in 'their' influence.
2. Ask the group to spread out at the Wider System Influences cards. They should refer to their expert to understand the implication of each for innovation.
3. Consider if anything is missing. If the group identifies an influence that is not on the cards, but that is relevant for innovation in their context, they can use a blank card to create a new system feature.
4. Taking each of the influences in turn, ask the group to place these on the quadrant, choosing the position that best reflects the importance in their system (high/low) and the threat it poses to innovation (high/low). A picture will emerge that indicates the wider system influences that are relevant both to their system in general and to their system conditions for innovation in particular.

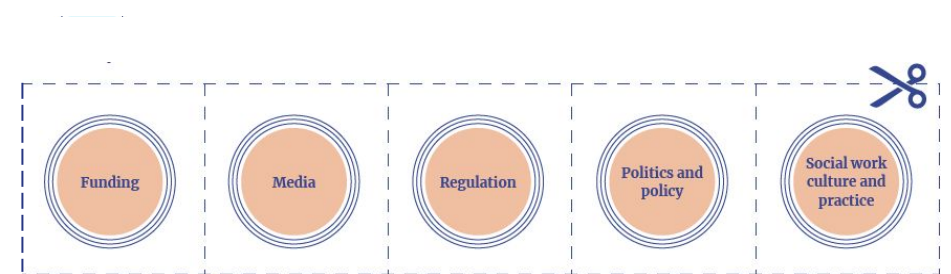
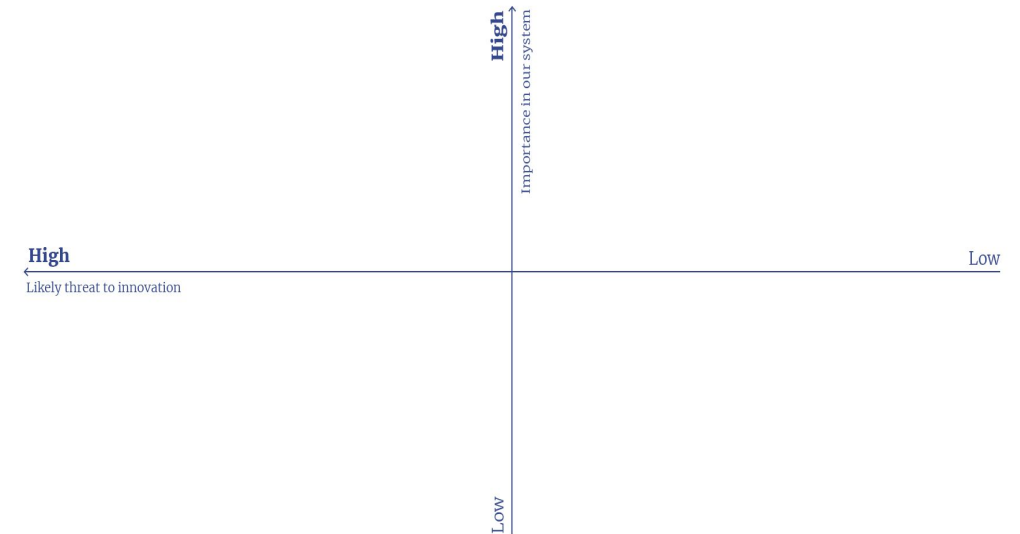


# Tool 2: Uncovering wider system influences

## Four quadrants (3 of 3)

### The activity continued

1. Next ask the group to divide the 6 Next Level Facilitators Summaries between them. Allow a few minutes for each person to read the summary they have. They are now the experts in 'their' facilitator.
2. Ask the group to identify a next level facilitator that will help them to tackle each of the influences they have identified as high importance and/or high threat on their quadrant. Note that each next level facilitator has the potential to mitigate more than one wider system influence.
3. When the group is happy with their quadrants, ask them to stick down their influences and facilitator cards. Offer some questions for reflection, for example:
  - What does this suggest your priorities might be in planning your first or next steps?
  - What would be the highest value investments you might make to develop your team's skills and capabilities?
  - Who else needs to be part of discussions about wider system influences and next level facilitators?
4. In workshops with more than one group invite groups to share their quadrants. Ideally, there will be time for groups to reflect on what they have heard from others and agree any changes to their quadrants as a result.



# Tool 3: Roadmapping

## Planning priority areas for action

# Tool 3: Priority areas for action to create system conditions for innovation to thrive

## Roadmap (1 of 3)

This tool is designed to help individuals and groups to develop a plan for making their system more conducive to ethical and effective innovation. It builds from:

- Tool 1, which identified priority areas for development in the 9 foundational Local System Enablers; and from
- Tool 2, which indicated the Next Level Facilitators that could help local leaders to manage the Wider System Influences that might otherwise threaten innovation in their context.

### About the roadmap

Roadmapping is a technique for agreeing and describing the steps and stages on a journey that will take you from where you are now to where you want to get to. Roadmapping supports you to consider related factors such as relative priority, sequencing and dependency amongst all the activities required to help you make progress towards your destination.

This roadmap uses the Stages of Innovation Framework, developed as part of The Innovate Project, to describe the purpose and outcome of six different stages on an innovation journey. This adds another factor to consider when developing your roadmap since different stages in the framework might suggest different priorities. For instance while a strong case for innovation is important throughout all six stages it is most important in the mobilising, integrating and growing stages, when the need to bring people on board is most urgent.

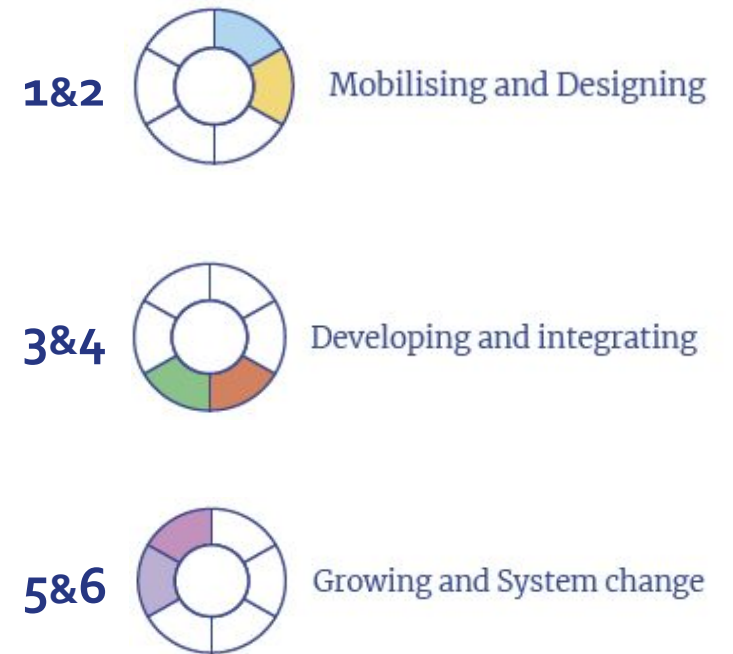
Whereas facilitating tools 1 and 2, involves surfacing diverse perspectives and experiences, the roadmapping tool is about building consensus around the best strategy for your context, as the basis for a widely owned plan of action to create local system conditions for innovation to thrive.

### You will need:

The Tool 3 PDF file printed on A3 light card  
A roll of brown paper or lining paper  
Marker pens  
Scissors  
Blue or white tack.  
Glue stick or other adhesive

### Time

Individual - 45 mins  
Group of 5- 8 60 - 90 mins to complete the activity  
You will find it helpful to revisit and update your roadmap over time.



# Tool 3: Priority areas for action to create system conditions for innovation to thrive

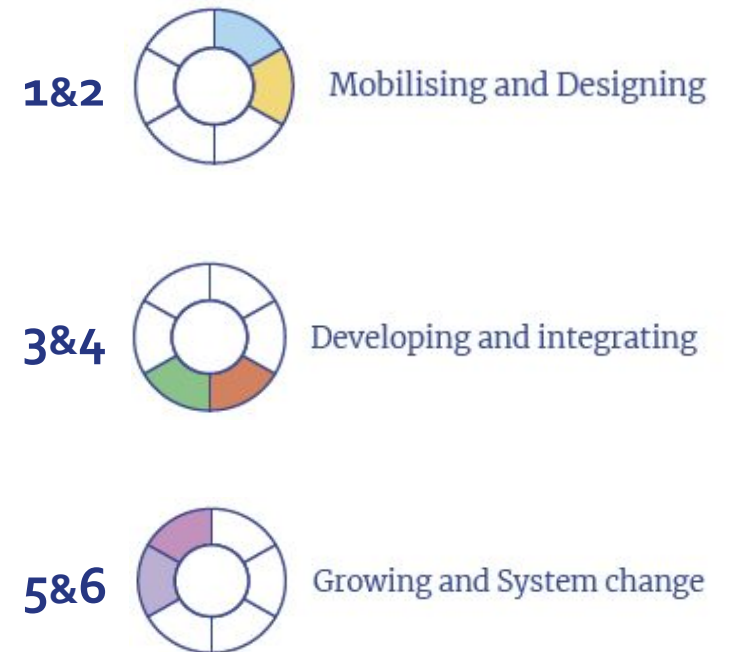
## Roadmap (2 of 3)

### Set up

- Download the Tool 3 PDF and print onto A3 light card. You will need multiple sets of the system features cards
- Cut out the yellow Local System Enablers, orange Wider System Influences and the blue Next Level Facilitators cards. Note that there are 3 different sizes of system features cards
- Print 1 set of the system feature summaries onto A4 paper
- Print 1 copy of the Stages of Innovation Framework
- Find a wall or window where you can stick up a 1.5 - 2m length of brown or lining paper. This is where you will set out a timeline for your roadmap.

### The activity

1. Agree a timeframe for your roadmap that makes sense for your innovation and divide your timeline up accordingly. If your timeframe is one year then your whole timeline might be divided into quarters or months. If your timeline is longer you might use months or quarters for the first couple of years and then move to six month intervals for year 3 onwards. Mark known major events that might affect your innovation such as local or national elections, budget decision moments, the introduction of new policy or regulations for instance.
2. Next consider the Stages of Innovation. Note that you can start your roadmap at any of the six stages in the Framework. Remember that you are roadmapping system conditions *not* your innovation. So if you are already in the developing or integrating stage then your roadmap should begin with consideration of the system conditions for that stage. In other words you don't need start at the beginning - unless that's where you are. Similarly, your roadmap does not need to cover all six stages. If you just want to roadmap for mobilising and designing that's completely fine. Note the relevant stages on your timeline on a 'best guess' basis for now i.e. when do you expect to begin the design stage or to move from developing to integrating? Use the Framework document to help you decide.
3. Spread out the system features cards. Size indicates energy - the bigger the card the more energy you are committing to investing in that system feature. Choose a card and using bluetack or similar (so you can move things around) place the card on the roadmap where you think you should begin. You can start with any system feature at any point in your roadmap and build out from there. If you have completed the Diamond 9 and/or a Four Quadrants tool, the priorities you identified will give you a brilliant starting point for your roadmap.





# Tool 3: Priority areas for action to create system conditions for innovation to thrive

## Roadmap (3 of 3)

### The activity continued

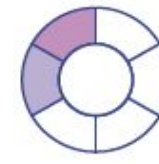
1. Continue to build out your roadmap noticing connections between system features and making sure these are sequenced or grouped in a way that makes sense to you. For instance making a strong case for innovation often goes hand in hand with developing a shared and compelling vision. Having sources of evidence and great stories of progress and impact may depend on finding or growing capability in learning and evaluation. Refer to the system features summaries to help make these connections and agree your priorities. Use marker pens to indicate connections and dependencies on your roadmap.
2. It is almost impossible to imagine that any of the system features will appear just once on your roadmap. You might plan a big push on coproduction in the designing stage, for example, but need to come back to it as you take your innovation to scale in the growing stage. Place a card on your timeline at each moment when a feature needs attention, using the different sizes to indicate the relative energy that you expect to invest. In the coproduction example you might place the biggest card in the designing stage and 2 or 3 medium cards thereafter.
3. When your roadmap looks like it is beginning to take shape, take a step back and follow the story that it tells about the work you need to do to create the system conditions you need for innovation to thrive. Consider:
  - Desirability - will stakeholders think your plan will work and want to follow it?
  - Feasibility - do you have the skills and permissions Who else might you need to engage in this discussion?
  - Viability - do you have the time and resources you need to complete the work your roadmap describes?
4. When you are happy with your road map, stick the cards in place. Your roadmap will become a helpful resource to refer back to as your innovation progresses, and you will almost certainly need to update it at key moments in the future.



Mobilising and Designing



Developing and integrating



Growing and System change

# Digital versions of the tools

Each of the three tools is available to download in digital format from canva, which is a free-to-use graphic design tool.

Follow these links:

[Tool 1: Exploring system conditions for innovation \(Diamond 9\)](#)

[Tool 2: Uncovering wider system influences \(Four Quadrants\)](#)

[Tool 3: Priority areas for action \(Roadmapping\)](#)

Here are some tips for opening and saving the tools.

1. When you open the link you will see a screen saying 'A template created by Innovation Unit was shared with you, start designing now'. Click on '**Use template for new design**'
2. When you open the template, there will be a side bar on the left. Please close it by clicking on the arrow on the right hand side of the panel. You won't need this for this template.
3. To use the template, click and drag the shapes to where you would like to place them on the PDF page.
4. To save your work first **drag and select your page and all the shapes you have added, and want to include in your download**. You can discard unused elements from your PDF by doing this
5. Right click, and select '**Download selection**' On the right hand side you will have some options. We suggest you choose:
  - [File type:](#) PDF Print
  - Tick 'Flatten PDF'
  - [Colour profile:](#) RGB
  - Click Download

The purpose and instructions for each digital tool are the same as for the paper-based versions (minus all the the preparation).

Some adaptation for groups may be required, for instance using a projector and screen with one 'operator' following their group's directions. Alternatively each participant might complete their own version and then discuss similarities and differences in their group.

# System Features Summaries 1

## Local System Enablers

Headlines from the expert interviews

# A stable and capable team

Staff in children's social care systems often feel overstretched, especially where there are long term absences and hard-to-fill vacancies. The rapid turnover and high cost of agency staff can add to a generalised sense of instability and insecurity in teams. Understandably, all of this makes it less certain that leaders and staff will welcome innovation and change into already turbulent situations.

It is essential that the views of staff are heard and taken seriously, and factored into planning and processes for innovation. Not only do staff have their finger on the cultural pulse of their teams, they often also hold strong and well-informed ideas about what will work for them. Their engagement with something new - or their rejection of it - can make or break an innovation project or implementation plan.

Identifying a consistent team to develop, test and implement an innovation, and investing in their confidence and capability to grow and adapt its features for their context can help staff to see the innovation as 'theirs'; part of the fabric of their workplace and a solution to at least some of their shared problems.

Building a new team around an innovation can also be helpful. Exploring new ideas and learning new approaches lowers barriers between staff as they develop their practice and grow in confidence together.

A really practical thing to consider when putting a team together is that the need to travel even short distances introduces an additional time and cost burden to collaboration, so co-locating a team and/or supporting online and hybrid working will make a huge difference.



**Key takeaway:** *Innovation flourishes when it is owned by a consistent team of deeply engaged staff.*

**Reflective question:** *How will you identify and engage a team to lead innovation in your context? What will you look for?*

# Openness to new ideas and learning

At face value, an 'offer' or 'opportunity' to innovate - to encounter new ideas and develop or learn new approaches - sounds too good for anyone to turn down.

Yet plenty of leaders and staff avoid or actively resist learning like this, and can reject even well-evidenced innovations.

While their reasons can be hard to understand at first, exploring resistance will almost certainly improve the chances that innovation will flourish.

Resistance can be a matter of perception. Often people offering resistance are looking for reassurance, recognition and respect, especially where a case for innovation calls into question years of hard work and service.

Others might be enthusiastic about an innovation but extremely time poor, leading to concerns that they will become overwhelmed and blamed for failure.

Procedure and practice can be very established and routinised and feel natural - the way we do things here. Leaders and staff may feel they know their communities well and can struggle to see the benefit of change for the people they serve.

Resistance can become even more entrenched when an innovation has been developed elsewhere and local autonomy feels under threat.



**Key takeaway:** *Noticing and exploring resistance to innovation helps understand what it will take for it to flourish.*

**Reflective question:** *What opportunities exist in your context for leaders and staff to raise questions and offer constructive challenge?*

# Inspiring and consistent leadership

Leadership is one of the most important local system enablers, and in places where innovation is flourishing leadership, it is a feature that staff frequently point to to explain their success.

The winning formula seems to be a combination of

- dynamic and inspiring senior leadership - creating a positive authorising environment (providing permission, autonomy, resource), comprising leaders who stick around, are visible and get involved; and
- distributed leadership where staff throughout the system are empowered to lead.

Consistency of messaging by leaders is essential for staff to feel confident to innovate. They need to feel that their leaders have 'got their backs' and that the additional time and energy they are investing in innovation is seen, valued and will make a difference.

In places where there is high turnover of leaders, there is a risk that new people coming into roles, especially when they are new to the organisation, are more likely to want to introduce their own innovation than to continue to support one they did not initiate.

An innovation that is widely owned and well evidenced will be more resilient in these circumstances, and we see this working where leaders focus on convening staff to codesign the overall vision for innovation, as well as supporting them to collaborate on the specifics of new ideas and practice.



**Key takeaway:** *'Hero' leadership from a dynamic individual may be important to get things started but distributed leadership makes innovation more likely to flourish over time.*

**Reflective question:** *What succession plans might you need to ensure innovation will continue if key leaders leave?*

# Trust and confidence

Trust, used in different ways, is a word often heard in connection with innovation:

- As a precondition -

Staff need to trust that leaders initiating innovation will stay the course, meaning that their investment of time and energy will be worthwhile. They also need to trust colleagues in their team; to believe that they have the necessary skills and commitment for their innovation to succeed. Interestingly innovation can also grow trust. Learning together in processes where everyone is new and no one is 'the expert' removes barriers and encourages deep connection.

- As a criterion for engagement -

Staff are more likely to buy into an innovation if they trust the person who is presenting it. Trust like this comes through recognition (*this person is like me - in a similar role for instance, or from the same place*), or through reputation (*this person is known to me through their previous work*).

- As a test for an innovation -

Successful implementation requires that staff trust that the innovation works. Relatable stories and compelling data are helpful for building trust in the innovation. Who tells these stories and shares these data matters too.

- As a leadership practice -

Leadership of innovation requires leaders to give scope and freedom to staff to experiment with new practice in their context. Leaders need to trust staff to take good decisions in innovation processes.



**Key takeaway:** *Trust can be grown over time through innovation processes.*

**Reflective question:** *What are the features of your innovation that you might emphasise, to grow the trust needed for innovation to flourish?*



# Effective partnerships

Often innovation in work with children, young people and families requires collaboration across organisational and sector boundaries and long-standing partnerships between statutory and voluntary services; education and health; social care and youth justice will exist in most places.

Some partnerships are 'skin deep' i.e. they exist only at the level of formal engagements on boards or in strategic agreements and plans, without the underpinning relationships that form around aligned values and shared goals. Partnerships like this are unlikely to prove effective in enabling innovation to flourish. It is the partnerships that are held between people who know and trust one another that create the conditions for innovation to flourish.

Even where partnership working is well established, innovation asks new questions of existing relationships. Can staff from different organisations design new systems and practices together? What does that look like in their different contexts? Is fidelity a realistic expectation? Can risk be meaningfully shared? Can resources - time; people; money - be pooled? What governance and decision making arrangements will satisfy the different regulatory frameworks that organisations are accountable to?

It is unreasonable to expect that partners will be able to answer - or even anticipate - every question like this from the outset. However being explicit about the likelihood of shifts in relationships and in ways of working is essential if the local system is to be an enabler of, and not a barrier to, innovation.



**Key takeaway:** *Innovation can - and needs to - deepen partnerships to enable collaboration across boundaries.*

**Reflective question:** *What are the characteristics and benefits of partnerships that go beyond structural engagement in your context?*

# A strong case for innovation

Engaging staff and others in innovation requires a compelling case that explains why the status quo is no longer acceptable.

Data and stories from children, young people and families - and from staff too - about what could be better, now and in the future, can be curated and shared to make a strong case for change that engages hearts as well as minds.

A strong case is one that is:

- Focused on outcomes for children, young people and families.
- Easily communicated and understood.
- Clear and specific about what's not currently working and why.

The need to prevent newly identified harms, to reduce demand and/or costs in the system, or to reduce social workers' workloads have all proven to be helpful in building a strong case for innovation.

Even where there is a strong case for *change*, serious consideration should be given to whether innovation as the means to achieving change, rather than service improvement, is the right response.

A strong case for innovation, as opposed to improvement, can usually be made when a radical shift in outcomes for children and families is required, which existing systems and practice cannot achieve. Or where new challenges and a gap in existing provision have been identified.



**Key takeaway:** *Innovators need to engage hearts and minds by convincing colleagues that radical shifts in outcomes cannot be achieved with existing practice.*

**Reflective question:** *How might you uncover and share the profound effects of gaps in current practice and provision for children and young people, without undermining staff confidence?*

# A compelling, shared vision

In the absence of a vision for a different kind of future, the complexity and the pull of process and procedure in work with children young people and families can make it seem as though there is an established way of doing things and that just doing those things better is the end goal.

At other times there is simply too much to do, and fire fighting in the here and now can consume all the energy a team needs if they are to make progress on their plans for change.

Similarly, a decision to innovate engages teams in complex processes, generating a huge array of learning and options, which can be hard to make sense of. How to choose which questions or activities to pursue can feel baffling.

Taking a step back to agree together a shared purpose and a compelling vision for how children's lives will be different creates an anchor or a safe place to go back to, when the business of innovation or the day-to-day threaten to overwhelm. A compelling, shared vision is a reminder of why innovation is important, and how ambitious and hungry for change everyone feels when they're not so under pressure. It makes explicit what's being 'traded off' or deferred if there's a decision to be made about how time is best spent.

Ideally, agreeing a compelling vision will happen at the outset, but it's never too late to get started. Key to success is the extent to which teams, partners and children, young people and families can take a role. One person's vision is a good starting point; what makes it compelling is the number of people who share it and are working towards it.



**Key takeaway:** *A compelling vision that is widely shared is important for direction setting and for staying the course when life gets in the way.*

**Reflective question:** *Who owns the vision for the future of work with children, young people and families in your context?*

# Space and time for collaboration

It's difficult (and frankly unwise) to attempt innovation without collaboration but it is often the case that collaboration itself and what's required for it to be effective is overlooked.

Collaboration across organisational or sectoral boundaries and between people with diverse backgrounds and perspectives are the most rewarding and the most challenging kinds of collaboration. Both are hugely beneficial. They widen the pool of insights, ideas and experiences in ways that are essential for innovation to flourish.

Without a strong rationale and suitable protocols, collaboration can feel like a chore or extra work, meaning it is the first thing that is jettisoned when time is short and lives get busy. Staff need to see the value in collaboration and may also need support to do it well.

One way to assign value to collaboration in the minds of staff is to establish it as a democratic principle akin to *nothing about us without us*. Another is to agree it as a design principle or quality criterion in the innovation process.

Assigning resource to value collaboration - and make it possible - for instance identifying a specific, regular time, providing facilitation or creating an inspiring physical space are all helpful. Requiring staff to figure all this out for themselves, on top of their 'day jobs' is not.



**Key takeaway:** *Collaboration should be adequately resourced, planned and facilitated.*

**Reflective question:** *Who are the people who need to work and learn together for innovation to flourish in your context?*

# Capability in learning and evaluation

At its heart innovation is a learning process in which new and diverse perspectives on purpose and outcomes call into question existing practice and approaches, and where new ideas are developed, tested and evaluated in context and in real time. Facilitating innovation involves facilitating learning.

A wide range of data and evidence, both qualitative and quantitative are essential to successful learning as part of innovation. Evidence from research and practice elsewhere are useful alongside insights from children, young people, families, and staff; population and trend data complement ethnographic approaches and so on.

The skills (and time and resource) needed to gather, analyse and synthesise diverse data like these exist in some local authorities and providers, although many find that a partnership with academic or research organisations is helpful.

Scaling an innovation through staff development and training is also a learning process that requires facilitation. Well designed learning opportunities that offer staff the chance to collaborate, ask questions, experiment, discuss ideas and reflect are more likely to successfully embed an innovation than more traditional presentation/transmission based trainings.

Learning processes that work well in the sector include: action learning, coaching and communities of practice. In addition to being effective models for adult learning more generally, these approaches work because they follow the grain of professional practice in social care in that they are also human-centered and relational.



**Key takeaway:** *Learning, which features throughout innovation processes, should be experiential, collaborative and evidence informed.*

**Reflective question:** *How might you locate and engage with learning and evaluation expertise in your organisation? Alternatively, where might you find a brilliant learning partner?*

# System Features Summaries 2

## Wider System Influences

Headlines from the expert interviews

# Politics and Policy

Beyond the day-to-day of work with children, young people and families there exists a 'bigger picture' of politics and social policy that informs decisions, culture and practice locally in ways that influence innovation.

Austerity and cuts in public spending for example place a premium on reducing demand and costs, which act as both a driver for innovation in the search for efficiency, and as a constraint on innovation if capacity in local authorities becomes stretched, for instance when posts are removed or vacancies remain unfilled.

An appointment of a new minister or Secretary of State in a relevant role often signals a change in direction, since careers of ambitious politicians are built on eye-catching new policies rather than consistent implementation of the previous incumbent's. Funding closely tracks such shifts meaning that unfinished work can become vulnerable unless it can be repackaged and repurposed to respond to new priorities.

Electoral cycles significantly compress the length of time available to innovate, resulting in a mismatch between how long it actually takes to bring about change and how long the Government feels able to wait before being able to point to the impact of their policies and public spending.

Everyone in the sector feels stretched including staff in Whitehall. Capacity for Civil Servants to design policy and programmes is limited and so there's always more that could and should be done for which there simply isn't the time or money. This can feel frustrating for local leaders and staff who see priorities for their children, young people and families that differ from those being driven from Westminster.



**Key takeaway:** *Innovation does not take place in a vacuum. The backdrop of national politics and policymaking plays strongly into local ambition and priorities.*

**Reflective question:** *How do innovation priorities in your context align with broader narratives surrounding work with children, young people and families?*



# Regulation

Innovations in practice, while necessary and helpful, are unlikely to bring about the kind of wholesale system change, which leaders and staff say are necessary. To achieve system change, innovations in legal and regulatory frameworks are also required.

However leaders and staff see regulation, and Ofsted inspection in particular, as barriers to, rather than enablers of, or amenable to, innovation.

Ofsted inspections have a disruptive effect on innovation in localities; innovation can stall or go 'under the radar' in anticipation of or reaction to inspection.

Negative judgements that dent the confidence of leaders and staff have a chilling effect on innovation, making even small changes feel risky, even when the need for change is clear and explicit.

Some innovations challenge legal and regulatory frameworks. For example where several providers collaborate to provide care, inspection of a single institution cannot reveal the full extent or quality of help being provided.



**Key takeaway:** *Legal and regulatory frameworks, which govern work with children, young people and families can restrict the scope of innovation and are themselves resistant to change.*

**Reflective question:** *What messages do staff receive about inspection and other regulation in your context?*

# Funding

Discrete funding is not a prerequisite for innovation, however against a backdrop of increasing demand and costs, most local authorities and providers struggle to carve out the time for leaders and staff to take part in innovation processes without it, meaning the link between funding and innovation is strong.

Funding for innovation from central Government follows national policy priorities and comes with expectations around improved outcomes for specific cohorts of children and young people and/or (usually and) demand reduction and cost savings. This incentivises particular kinds of innovation and can bend local priorities as authorities and providers work to attract the necessary funding to move their systems and practice forward.

Innovations that prove effective can become a source of income for authorities and providers through traded services and consultancy arrangements, creating a kind of market in the sector. Some are better placed to take advantage of this - larger authorities and VCSE organisations for instance - and smaller ones can struggle. Packages and approaches that have been proven elsewhere are attractive, since they appear to hold out the promise of a faster and more certain route to impact.

Whereas funding for developing or implementing innovations are made available, funds to support changing system conditions and embedding change across systems are not. This can make it hard for even proven innovations to sustain and scale without additional resources.



**Key takeaway:** *Funding in the form of programmes, grants and incentives shapes innovation in work with children, young people and families.*

**Reflective question:** *What would be your priorities for innovation if you could find funding independent from central Government? What are your local needs?*

# Social Work Culture and Practice

Although role diversity is on the increase in the children's social care workforce, most of the professionals working with children, young people and families in the sector are social workers or social work qualified. So it is perhaps unsurprising that features of social work culture and practice should exert such a strong influence over systems and ways of working in ways that affect innovation.

Three features are especially influential:

Social work practice varies across the sector, and the institutions where social workers train is a significant factor in their ways of working. Combined with high levels of autonomy, staff mobility and use of agencies, it can be hard to engage social workers in innovating new, shared systems and practice with others.

Collaborating in multidisciplinary teams is often a feature of innovation. In most circumstances social workers will take a case management approach and expect to assume the lead and to have the final say in any big decisions relating to children and young people in their care. This can create tensions in teams like this, where other professionals may want to try different approaches.

Like many other public servants, social workers are caught up in a culture of busy-ness, where bureaucracy can crowd out other activities. Presenteeism - being seen to be busy and to be engaged in decision making - seems to be important. This can make it difficult for social workers to let go some activities and instead prioritise time for learning and reflection in collaboration with others - all essential for innovation to flourish.



**Key takeaway:** *Social work culture and practice can be a barrier to collaboration with other professionals.*

**Reflective question:** *Where are the examples of effective cross sector collaboration involving social workers and other professionals in your context?*

# Media

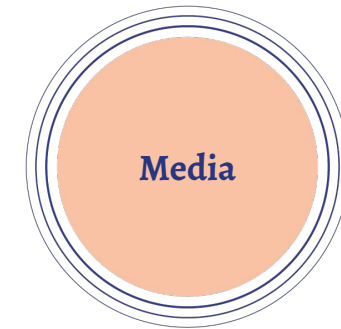
Most of the time, work with children, young people and families goes unnoticed by the media and the general public. But when things go wrong, media scrutiny can be intense and unrelenting for those at the centre of a serious case, in particular when the worst happens and a child dies.

Instances where leaders and staff have been hounded by the press in these circumstances are well documented. As well as the trauma of the case itself, people lose their livelihoods, and some have had to leave their homes and communities. Social workers in particular point to how harshly they are portrayed in the media, compared to a doctor who loses a patient. Both are doing their job to the best of their abilities however social workers feel they attract far more negative attention and blame.

Individual, collective and institutional memories about the impact of media attention are long. Years can go by and the effects of a child death and its aftermath remain part of the history of work with children, young people and families, in the place where the incident happened and far beyond.

In many ways this is wholly appropriate. Systems should and do learn from tragedy. But the effect that these hugely important but relatively infrequent events have on culture and practice relevant to innovation - in particular around risk - are notable.

This can mean that even where there is a strong case for innovation, for instance where systems and practice are self evidently not fit for purpose, leaders and staff are understandably defensive, fearful and risk averse, and can be slow to engage, or even actively resist innovation.



**Key takeaway:** *Media coverage of serious cases leaves leaders and staff feeling blamed and risk averse for many years after a tragedy. It becomes part of their local story.*

**Reflective question:** *What positive stories might leaders and staff tell in your context about the role of innovation in work with children, young people and families in changing lives?*

# System Features Summaries 3

## Next Level Facilitators

Headlines from the expert interviews

# Shared identity: A story of place and purpose

Innovation doesn't happen in a vacuum; places are never a blank sheet of paper onto which new practices and approaches can be written. Instead there's a history of new ideas that have been tried - some of which will have succeeded and others failed - and a landscape of ongoing projects and programmes that reflect the priorities and interests of sector leaders locally and nationally.

Add to this already rich mix the connections and relationships between staff and the organisations they work in, and the strengths, needs and ambitions of individuals, families and communities, and a complex picture emerges of many and varied forces at work in places, some aligned, some in tension.

Innovation flourishes in places where there is a narrative that helps to make sense of this complexity; a coherent story of the kind of place it is now and where it is heading; the hopes and dreams that leaders and staff share with and for children and young people; and how what they're doing and learning will help them get there.

Innovation flourishes when it fits into this story; when the contribution an innovation makes to a shared story of place and purpose is clear.

Telling and retelling this story is an essential part of creating a compelling case for change and an inspiring vision that can win hearts and minds and secure consistent engagement.



**Key takeaway:** *Innovation flourishes when it contributes to a shared story of 'the kind of place this is' that is characterised by ambition and hope for the future.*

**Reflective question:** *What is your shared story of place and purpose and who is telling it?*

# Coproduction with children, young people and families

Overwhelmingly, when innovators work and learn in meaningful ways with children, young people and families they find that the value that codesign and coproduction bring repays many times over the investment of time and energy, because:

- Coproduction with children, young people and families reminds leaders and staff of the core purpose of their work, which can become obscured over time by bureaucracy and systems.
- Assumptions and complacency - “we know our families” - are frequently challenged by new perspectives and fresh insights about what children and young people want and are capable of.
- They are consistently ‘amazed’ by the commitment that children and young people bring to making their contribution count and by the quality and level of detail with which they engage in innovation processes.
- Evidence generated through work with children and young people is compelling - it complements and adds value to other data and is often more effective at changing hearts and minds. Evidence about what isn’t working seems to be especially powerful as part of a case for change.
- Innovative practice and approaches coproduced with children, young people and families work better and result in better outcomes.

Coproduction goes beyond asking children, young people and families for their views and feedback (although this is better than nothing). It requires acting upon their input and reflecting with them on what happens as a result.

Leaders and staff in places where innovation flourishes recognise the value - and the challenges - of coproduction, and invest creativity and energy in developing new ways to engage young people that reflect their strengths and interests.



**Key takeaway:** *The benefits of coproduction far outweigh the challenges. It is a key feature of places where innovation is flourishing.*

**Reflective question:** *Who are the children and young people you might work with to strengthen your innovation?*



# Sources of evidence and stories of progress and impact

Doing new things in new ways, though exciting, limits the amount of evidence from the past that can be called upon to reassure people that outcomes will improve as the result of an innovation.

Similarly, traditional evaluation methods and measures that rely on indicators unlikely to change until some way into a child or young person's future, cannot provide reassurance that new practices and approaches will 'work', in timeframes that are compatible with e.g. funding rounds or electoral cycles.

This can lead to challenges of 'no evidence', which leaves innovation vulnerable.

On the other hand, innovation processes offer up many opportunities to gather and analyse evidence of different kinds - in fact this is a core feature of disciplined innovation. Evidence is collected through:

- Ethnographic approaches that generate user insight, journeys and personas
- Observations from prototyping and testing
- Codesign and coproduction with staff and with children, young people and families
- Feedback evaluating desirability, feasibility and viability

In places where innovation flourishes, leaders and staff regularly collect and share different forms of evidence like this, widely and in real time, to create an emerging story of progress and impact that helps people to feel confident and reassured that things are heading in the right direction.



**Key takeaway:** *Distilling and sharing insights from innovation processes in real time creates opportunities to engage and reassure stakeholders.*

**Reflective question:** *Who are the storytellers in your innovation team? Who is able to capture and share what is being learned in the different stages?*

# Strategies for evaluating, managing and sharing risk

Risk goes hand in hand with innovation in most contexts. Innovators say they 'take risks' when they try something new. Usually they simply mean that they are unsure about what will happen, which can make some people feel uncomfortable, even if they are also intrigued or excited.

For others, this kind of risk-taking is more serious. Simply agreeing that innovation is a good thing can feel like an admission that their existing practice isn't good enough. This can be hard to accept and admit in a context where failure can have terrible consequences.

In work with children and young people, where there already exists a live and explicit focus on risk of harm, the kind of risks normally associated with innovation - will it work? - add a layer of complexity that can feel overwhelming.

Places where innovation flourishes take this sense of increased or exacerbated risk seriously, creating spaces and protocols for open conversations about risk, supported with tools and frameworks.

Focusing on evaluating risk also creates opportunities to notice that innovation is rarely more risky than existing practice, but it can feel that way because it is unfamiliar. Home visits are a good example of this. Visiting a child or young person in their home doesn't make them safer, but deciding not to make a visit and doing something new instead can feel more risky (even though it isn't), because it is unknown.



**Key takeaway:** *In a sector where risk of harm is a constant preoccupation, trying something new can feel very risky even where there is no actual increased risk.*

**Reflective question:** *What tools and frameworks exist in your context that could be adapted for leaders and staff to use to surface concerns about risks associated with innovation?*

# Skilled project management and change leadership

Leading and managing change requires different skills and mindsets from leading 'business as usual'. Being open to new ideas and opportunities, and creating an environment in which staff are excited and confident to try new practices and approaches are important.

Equally important are project management skills and mindsets. In places where innovation flourishes, disciplined project management is a discrete role with protected time carved out for one or more people to drive and coordinate innovation, making sure that things are moving forward and that time and other resources are available when and where they are needed.

In some places the project management role is assigned to a member of staff, who understands the context and the requirement well. With additional training and support to learn the skills and tools of project management, this can be an effective model, although noting that it does remove a valuable staff member from direct work with children and young people.

What matters is that time to lead the innovation is protected. In places where staff or leaders attempt to develop an innovation at the margins of their existing work, time for the innovation is continually under pressure and is often sacrificed when issues inevitably arise in the day-to-day.

As an innovation moves from development into implementation and scaling, skilled project management becomes even more critical to its success, for example to plan training and to reconfigure organisational features like team structures and budgets, where these are required.



**Key takeaway:** *Protected time to lead and manage innovation is critical. Who takes on this role is less important than ensuring they have the time, resources and permissions they need to be successful.*

**Reflective question:** *In your context would you prefer to hire someone in to manage your innovation or to second a member of staff to undertake this role?*

# Buy in at all levels

In places where innovation flourishes leaders and staff often report a sense of belonging and being part of something bigger than themselves; part of a movement and/or somewhere that is 'on the move'.

A sense of momentum and movement building is important when thinking about buy in. It encourages and enables people to make an emotional connection to innovation and its outcomes, and to imagine and work towards their role in its success.

This is as true - and as important - for senior leaders, including politicians, as it is for operational leaders and staff.

Buy in from senior leaders secures their commitment to innovation, which they demonstrate by taking an active role and investing the necessary resources. Whereas buy in from staff creates energy, ideas, insight and operational capacity.

There is a link between buy in and the extent to which leaders and staff recognise and prioritise the problem that an innovation sets out to solve or the new opportunity it sets out to create. Anything perceived as a 'nice to have' is likely to be dismissed as extra work and unlikely to find the necessary support.

Multiple opportunities for staff to take part in innovation, supported by a shared language and processes - an innovation culture - all help to secure a sense of inclusiveness and belonging and make innovation feel locally owned and relevant for everyone.



**Key takeaway:** *Engaging leaders and staff in innovation creates a sense of belonging and momentum, which are important for securing and sustaining commitment.*

**Reflective question:** *Who are your stakeholders and what are the different approaches you will use to engage them?*