

Should we spend a long time reflecting, or move forward quickly?

Should we look for 'disruptive ideas' or just adapt and improve?

Should we direct and drive innovations from the top, or empower others?

Should we encourage everyone to 'be creative' or be more focused?

Should we agree long-term objectives or evolve innovations step by step?

## KEY LEADERSHIP ACTIONS FOR INNOVATION

Should we encourage 'a thousand flowers to bloom' or prioritise areas for innovation?

Should we agree inspiring, bold, ambitious plans or be 'more realistic'?

Should we take major risks, or be more cautious?

Final report of the  
**Solace Innovation  
Research Project**

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# Executive summary

On behalf of Solace's Innovation and Commissioning Network, in 2015 the Accelerating Innovation in Local Government Research Project (AIIGRP) conducted new research into what senior managers might do to achieve more major innovations more quickly in their councils.

Twelve councils, including three district council partnerships, contributed to the research: Wigan, Oldham, Monmouthshire, South Tyneside, Bristol, Surrey, Staffordshire Moorlands and High Peak, Mid Suffolk and Babergh, East Hampshire and Havant.

In each council, or partnership, a range of senior and middle managers were interviewed individually, or in groups, to discover their perspectives on which leadership actions appeared to have the greatest impact on achieving innovations.

Nine case studies were produced describing the innovations the councils or partnerships were accomplishing, and the key leadership actions their managers identified as having the greatest impact on achieving these. These are available on the Solace website, along with the Interim Report produced for the Solace Summit 2015: <http://bit.ly/1OvJaEe>

This final report analyses the case study findings in more depth, and provides examples

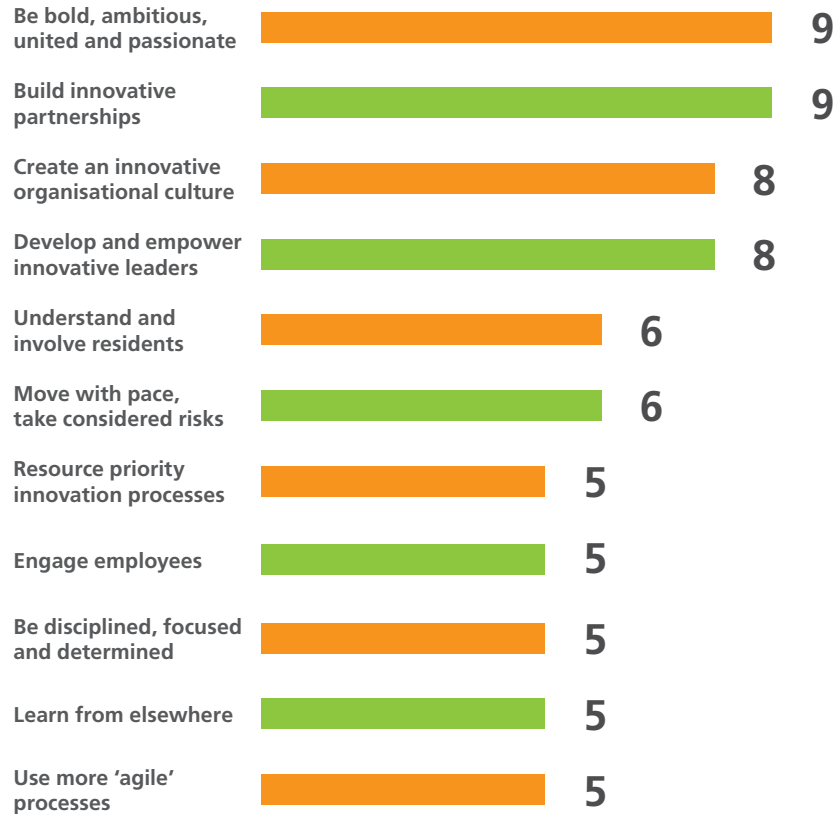
of the actions the political and managerial leaders were taking. It highlights variations between the approaches different authorities are adopting, and suggests areas where more attention might be needed.

## **Key Findings in the Case Study Councils**

In all the councils the politicians and senior managers were taking a multi-faceted approach to achieving more major innovations. Most identified around six key leadership actions that they felt were having the greatest impact on increasing the development and delivery of substantial innovations in their councils.

The chart on the next page provides an overall analysis of the leadership actions the managers pinpointed as the most important for innovation. It highlights the number of councils, or district council partnerships, taking each of the actions. More details about each of these leadership actions are set out in the report.

# Key leadership actions identified in case studies



There was a strong focus on the importance of bold, united, ambitious leadership, building innovative partnerships with other organisations, and creating the right organisational culture for innovation. The managers were upbeat and enthusiastic, excited about what they were doing and achieving. They were developing and empowering other innovative leaders, such as middle managers.

The findings suggest that politicians and senior managers in councils are becoming much more sophisticated, knowledgeable and confident about generating innovations. However, it is possible that in the leaders in the selected councils may be ahead of many others in their practices.

Additionally, in the majority of the councils the managers emphasised the importance of:

- Agreeing clear innovation priority areas and focusing on these
- Communicating convincingly with others about potential innovations, and involving them in development processes (e.g. with middle managers, employees, residents, service users, partners, local businesses)
- Developing more expertise around innovation
- Learning from other organisations more widely

In relatively few councils the managers also highlighted the importance of:

- Commissioning for innovation
- Maximising digital expertise
- Fostering cross council networks
- Recruiting staff with the right attitudes for innovation.

# Conclusions: Ten Key Leadership Actions

From this study, combined with other relevant studies discussed in the report, it appears that **ten key leadership actions** support innovation.

The research suggests that political and managerial leaders in local government might increase and accelerate significant innovations if they:

- Are clear, united and determined about the outcomes they want to achieve and their priority areas for innovation
- Are bold and ambitious, while understanding residents' concerns, learning from elsewhere, setting realistic objectives, and taking well-considered risks
- Engage with key partners in an open way, evolving innovations together
- Create an organisational culture that encourages creative approaches (particularly in the priority areas for innovation)
- Develop and empower other innovative leaders (e.g. middle managers)
- Invest time, resources and effort into developing their innovation priorities
- Convincingly communicate the reasons why their priority innovations are important (e.g. engage in dialogue with their managers, employees, partners, residents and other key stakeholders)
- Genuinely listen to, and involve, relevant others in developing innovations (e.g. managers, employees, residents, service users, partners, businesses)
- Track the development of their priority innovations (e.g. using programme and project management, or 'more agile' techniques, as appropriate)
- Persist for long enough to embed and scale up their priority innovations.

In the case study councils and partnerships, many of the top teams of politicians and managers were taking most of these actions. It appeared that some might achieve even greater success if they adopted more of these actions.

Given that the councils selected for case studies appeared to be ahead of many others in achieving innovations, it is likely that other councils might benefit from taking more of these **ten key leadership** actions.

Based on the conclusions, the AILLGRP has developed a Local Councils' Innovation Framework, set out in appendix three or available on <https://goo.gl/fh647l>. Political and managerial leaders can use this Framework as a review tool to help them decide where they might take further action.

# INTRODUCTION

Given financial pressures, combined with growing demands in areas such as social care, more and more public service leaders are looking at how they might achieve more major radical innovations. Ideally they would like to develop innovations that address key local issues, and satisfy local residents and service users, while making substantial savings.

The Accelerating Innovation in Local Government Research Project (AIIIGRP) has been examining what political and managerial leaders in local government might do to achieve more major innovations more quickly.

Between 2011 and 2014, AIIIGRP conducted four studies on leadership and innovation in local government. Each looked at the perspectives of a different group of people: chief executives, frontline employees, political leaders, and middle managers. (For an analysis of the overall findings from these four studies see Munro, 2015).

There is no universally accepted definition of innovation. Essentially innovation is about implementing fresh, relevant ideas successfully. In the local government context, AIIIGRP defines innovations as: 'changes to services, or products, or ways of working, or organisational arrangement, or democratic approaches that are both:

- New to the council AND
- Deliver additional value for its residents, service users and/or local businesses.'

This new study was undertaken on behalf of Solace's Innovation and Commissioning Network. The research was carried out between July and December 2015.

Twelve councils were involved, including three district council partnerships: Wigan, Oldham, Monmouthshire, South Tyneside, Bristol, Surrey, Staffordshire Moorlands and High Peak, Mid Suffolk and Babergh, East Hampshire and Havant. They were selected because of their reputation for innovation, as well as to represent a range of different types of authorities, settings and political control.

In each council, or partnership, a range of senior and middle managers were interviewed individually, or in groups, to discover their perspectives on which leadership actions appeared to have the greatest impact on achieving innovations.

Nine case studies were produced describing the innovations the councils or partnerships were accomplishing, and the key leadership actions those interviewed identified as having

the greatest impact on achieving these. The case studies also outline the key skills and processes used to develop the innovations, and the main challenges the interviewees highlighted.

The case studies are available on the Solace website, along with the Interim Report produced for the Solace Summit 2015:

<http://bit.ly/1OvJaEe>

A summary of the innovations being achieved by each council or partnership is set out in Appendix 1.

This final report analyses the case study findings in more depth, and provides examples of the actions the political and managerial leaders are taking. It highlights variations between the approaches different authorities are taking, and suggests areas where more attention might be needed.

# KEY LEADERSHIP ACTIONS IN THE CASE STUDIES

Many academic and business studies suggest that leaders need to take a comprehensive strategic approach to achieving more major innovations in their organisations.

For example, De Jong et al (2015) find that: “Since innovation is a complex, company-wide endeavour, it requires a set of crosscutting practices to structure, organise and encourage it.” And Patterson et al (2009) conclude that: “Leadership capability, organisational culture, and organisational values are among the most important organisational factors and initiatives that enhance innovative working.”

In all the councils, the political and managerial leaders were taking a multi-faceted approach to achieving more major innovations.

Most identified around six key leadership actions that they felt were having the greatest impact on increasing the development and delivery of substantial innovations in their councils (see Appendix 2).

The chart below provides an overall analysis of the leadership actions the managers interviewed suggested as the most important in helping them to achieve or develop major innovations. It highlights the number of councils, or district council partnerships, taking each of the actions.

We discuss in more depth what we found in relation to each of leadership actions below.



## Be bold, ambitious, united and passionate

*"Incremental change has got us as far as we have got to, but now the real tsunami of demand is about to hit us and we are going to have to do something very very different going forward."*

**-David McNulty,  
Chief Executive, Surrey**

*"We address our challenges with confidence and an absolute determination to deliver the Council's long-term vision. Our confidence is due to the commitment and immensely positive attitudes of our staff, elected members and partners. By working collaboratively, with innovation as a centrepiece of our approach, we will continue to deliver generation changing plans for the residents of South Tyneside."*

**- Martin Swales,  
Chief Executive, South Tyneside**

Bason (2010), writing on leadership for public service innovation, sets out the importance of politicians: "formulating a vision that demands innovation"; investing in innovation capacity; and expecting managers to be innovators. He recommends that senior managers should complement this by: engaging managers in a dialogue about innovation; designing and implementing innovation strategies; as well as encouraging innovation.

In all the councils, the managers emphasised the critical importance of political and managerial leaders working together to achieve their agreed objectives and priorities. As Oldham's chief executive observed: "Leadership must be a collective endeavour. Whatever the challenge is, if we are all really signed up for it, we will make it happen."

Staffordshire Moorlands and High Peak' senior managers stressed the importance of strong political support for innovation. "Members are really up for change. We are given freedom, and expected to get on and achieve things." And: "Members don't try to micromanage. They focus on strategic issues. They are pragmatic, realistic and mature. They don't blame you when things go wrong."

Given the budget pressures on local councils, those interviewed were remarkably upbeat, positive and ambitious. Many appeared to almost relishing the new licence the financial crisis has provided to try doing things in fundamentally new ways.

Several councils had spent considerable time rethinking their objectives, given the major challenges they face. For example, in Havant councillors and staff spent many months in workshops working out their future ambitions. "We looked at what we wanted to have achieved by 2020, and what impact that would have had."

McKinsey's recent study of how companies achieve more major innovations suggests that leaders need to adopt eight "essential" practices to maximise innovation (De Jong et al, 2015). They found that the most important "essential attribute" was leaders agreeing a far reaching but realistic vision, then making it an explicit part of their future strategic plans to "solidify the importance of, and accountability for innovation".

Some managers underlined the importance of having a clear long-term vision. For example, in South Tyneside many managers emphasised the benefits of a "firm vision", setting out what they want to achieve in 20 years. And in East Hampshire and Havant a senior manager argued: "It's important to think long term, not just aim for quick wins. For example, improving educational standards can't be achieved in the short term."

Others described: "taking a more adaptive approach". For example, Oldham's chief executive explained: "The council is clear about its overall direction and purpose, but we don't have a model saying this is what we are going to be like in two years' time."

Surrey's chief executive cautioned that innovation proposals need to be robust. "You need to define what you can change, and what you can't, and not waste people's time in trying to do the impossible. You need passion and ideas, but you also need to work out whether something is operationally viable."



## Build innovative partnerships

*"We work in a much more 'system leader' type of way now. If you want to get partners into the room, sharing their resources, and sharing their skills, you have to work with them differently. Rather than controlling partnerships, we try and facilitate our work with others."*

**- Director, Bristol**

*"Spending time building relationships and trust with people in other organisations is very important. Partnerships are about people."*

**- Senior Manager, South Tyneside**

All the councils described the many major innovations they were achieving by working closely with their key public and private sector partners in new ways, to create new initiatives, and to develop better-integrated public services, with reduced budgets.

Monmouthshire has no corporate plan. Their corporate priorities are defined in a "Single Integrated Plan" produced with their key public sector partners.

Mid Suffolk and Babergh councils are heavily committed to the Suffolk Public Service Reform Programme, a cross-Suffolk partnership of councils and other public sector organisations. "The approach is well embedded and underpins the work going on across the county. The agenda is big and bold and depends on the commitment, enthusiasm and hard work of many people across the Suffolk system."

Many councils have set up successful joint ventures. For example, both South Tyneside and Staffordshire Moorlands and High Peak have joint ventures with housing associations that have successfully built affordable homes to sell. Others, such as Bristol and Surrey, are working closely with their local universities, developing innovative digital initiatives.

Havant is part of a five council commissioning partnership. "In the meetings with other councils we have been talking about what we are going to do differently, and how we are going to change. We don't want to commission historical services, services set in aspic. We don't want what we've got now."

Surrey is developing a pool of mid to senior level people with facilitation and coaching skills. These facilitators support partnerships in looking at "whole systems" together, as well as helping them to tackle unresolved conflicts that might block their efforts.

In several councils, the managers argued that they had achieved more in their partnerships by not agreeing an explicit vision at the outset. For example, in Staffordshire Moorlands and High Peak a senior manager explained: "We have taken it slowly. We have built the alliance incrementally. We made it up as we went along. We don't overpromise. If we had set out what we have achieved now as a vision, I don't think people would have signed up for it."

## Create an innovative organisational culture

*"Culture is crucial. We allow people to be the vocational public servants they want to be. We encourage exploration and curiosity. We try to give people confidence. Nothing is a daft idea. We work out whether it is doable."*

**- Paul Matthews,  
Chief Executive, Monmouthshire**

*"We try to work in a relaxed way to create the right atmosphere here so that people can feel free to contradict, to take risks, to make mistakes—as long as they are not catastrophic. It's important to empower people, give them space, to allow them to fail. It works."*

**- Senior Manager, South Tyneside**

Many studies discuss the importance of the "organisational culture" in either encouraging or discouraging innovation (e.g. Denham and Kaberon, 2012; Isaksen and Tidd, 2006).

In all but one council, the managers stressed the importance of creating an organisational culture that fostered innovation. (In the one that did not, the senior managers were taking controlled risks, and engaging employees.)

Many chief executives emphasised the importance of encouraging "innovation with a purpose", rather than random creativity. For example, Surrey's chief executive explained:

*"You keep bringing that organisational narrative back to what you are trying to achieve. You are not doing innovation because it is the next sexy thing, but because that is what you need to do to create public value, to serve the people of Surrey, especially the most vulnerable."*

Several chief executives talked about "reframing thinking". For example, Oldham's chief executive argued: "If you see the challenge as running street cleaning services, that's about producing a technical specification. If you see your challenge as being creating clean streets, then your task is completely different. How you frame the question at the beginning influences what you see. Your lens is really important."

East Hampshire and Havant councils have trained some staff to be "cultural change champions" as well as "undertaking cultural web exercises across the organisations, to understand our current culture, and to identify the blockers."

## Develop and empower innovative leaders

*"We have been very focused on developing the leadership skills of our middle managers. We recognise that the best ideas come from middle managers. They are in a better position to understand customers' needs."*

**- Senior Manager  
East Hampshire and Havant**

*"You need a different type of leader in local government now. It is not about just running services anymore. It is about a really solid understanding of local government and where it is going, coupled with an ability to see the bigger picture, to identify the change required, and being able to work with politicians and staff to deliver that change."*

**- Senior Manager  
South Tyneside**

Many studies stress the importance of fostering innovation by developing more

"creative leadership". As Mumford and Gibson (2011) conclude: "Effective leader performance is critical to the success of creative efforts".

Several studies suggest that middle managers are likely to be more successful in designing and implementing innovations than senior managers (e.g. Kanter, 1982/2004; Conway and Monks, 2011), because they better understand current operational issues, and can use their networks to get around barriers and constraints.

Almost all the councils emphasised the importance of investing in developing leadership skills, especially middle managers. However, the particular skills being developed, and the group of managers targeted, were different in different councils.

In Bristol, 100 third tier managers were

undertaking an 'Applied Programme in Service Improvement' to equip them to undertake fundamental service redesign.

Surrey has been developing managers who can operate across services and across organisations: "We are developing people who are confident in delivering core services, but who are also good in fluid networking situations, working across boundaries, working across disciplines, working in multi-stakeholder situations."

East Hampshire and Havant's new leadership competencies framework, which covers both political and managerial leaders, includes innovation and creativity. The senior management group have also found that it is particularly powerful to change the way senior and middle managers communicate, to encourage "different conversations". So, for example, managers now aim to challenge others' ideas constructively, in a manner that "corrects not kills" others' suggestions for potential innovations.

Many studies conclude that it is important to

involve middle managers in helping to design and develop major innovations from the beginning (e.g. Isaksen and Tidd, 2006). In our previous study with council middle managers many commented that senior managers needed to engage in "meaningful dialogue" and "quality conversations" with them about potential major innovations, rather than imposing ill thought through ideas from above (Munro and Biddle, 2013).

In South Tyneside senior managers were making a particular effort to inform and involve their middle managers. As one senior manager observed: "You mustn't neglect the middle and lower tiers of the organisation, you need to involve them in planning, developing and implementing innovations."

In Mid Suffolk and Babergh, middle managers were heavily involved in the member led "Transformation Enquiry Groups", contributing to planning the councils' future priorities.

## Understand and involve residents

*"We focus on what matters to the people of Oldham. We look at what we can do with our resources to address their priorities, which are not necessarily about traditional council services."*

**- Carolyn Wilkins**  
**Chief Executive, Oldham**

*"Our agenda is intimacy. We value our communities. We want to get close to them. We go out there and explore. We make sure we really understand issues."*

**- Paul Matthews**  
**Chief Executive, Monmouthshire**

Many studies on developing successful innovations suggest that leaders should start not with a bright idea but by deeply understanding the key underlying issues, including their potential customers' needs (e.g. Dougherty and Tolboom, 2008; Isaksen et al, 2011).

Bohl and Wynn (2015) recommend starting not from existing services, but by discovering what outcomes citizens want. Many successful companies start their innovation processes by making sure they fully appreciate their target customers' aspirations and concerns. For example, Goretex join mountain walkers on expeditions, to observe what they do, looking for ideas for new products that might not have occurred to the potential customers themselves.

Six of the councils particularly emphasised the importance of appreciating their residents' key concerns and priorities. For example, Wigan has many ways of engaging with local residents. As part of implementing their overarching framework, "The Deal", they

organised a series of "have your say" sessions in neighbourhoods. Residents were invited to raise "hot topics", and to discuss how the community can work with the council to improve the area. The council has also employed 'ethnographic' techniques (learnt from their involvement in the NESTA/LGA Creative Councils Programme).

Bristol proactively looks for disruptive ideas from outside, including encouraging their residents to contribute fresh suggestions. As Max Wide, Strategic Director of Business Change explained: "Part of the mayor's role is to challenge the city, to try to come up with some of the answers to our issues. There is something fundamental about providing a platform for the city's creativity, rather than believing that we have all the answers." Bristol also conducts "real world" research with local residents in areas such as energy reduction, as well as training their managers in customer insight techniques, such as "guerrilla marketing".

In Oldham, as part of increasing recycling, council officers have been going door to door talking to residents individually.

Some councils, such as Monmouthshire and Wigan, are investing in community innovations that support the achievement of their corporate priorities. Others, including Oldham and East Hampshire and Havant, are supporting the development of community and voluntary organisation leadership.

Many studies of successful innovations recommend extensively involving customers in developing innovations--not just consulting them at the beginning or end of the process. For example, Bason (2010) advocates "co-creation" of innovations, working with "lead users". Few of the managers interviewed referred to actively involving service users or other residents throughout innovation processes.

## Move with pace, take considered risks

*"We talk about taking 'leaps of faith' and increasing our appetite for risk. As chief executive, my role is helping people to manage their uncertainty, to not be disempowered by uncertainty. We need people who are comfortable in functioning when they don't have all the answers."*

**- Charlie Adan, Chief Executive,  
Mid Suffolk and Babergh**

*"We didn't have a proper evidence base for setting up the Early Help offer but we believed it would work, so we went ahead with it. We were bloody minded. We were willing to jump off that cliff whether our parachute opened or not."*

**- Manager, Oldham**

Six councils emphasised the importance of moving forward with pace. For example, a Surrey manager recommended: "Don't spend ages thinking about things, worrying about things. Get people into the room. There is something about pace and attitude. You need enough people who want to do things."

Similarly, a South Tyneside manager commented: "Some councils have more pilots that British Airways. It's about setting out what you want to do, and getting on and doing it."

In Wigan, the chief executive tells managers: "If you believe it is the right thing to do, do it: don't talk about ideas forever, take action, and learn from it". In partnerships too, the senior management group in Wigan described moving forward with "coalitions of the willing" rather than waiting for all agencies to commit to an initiative.

Many chief executives described how their councils had reviewed their appetite for risk. For example, Monmouthshire's chief executive commented: "We can live with the risk of failure because doing nothing is the biggest risk of all."

However, Collins and Hansen's (2011) study of organisations that are successful over time, found that the most effective leaders were not more risk taking than their comparators. They "bounded, managed and avoided risks"; never taking a risk that could kill or seriously damage the organisation.

Several senior managers emphasised the need to carefully consider where and when to take major risks. For example, Oldham's chief executive commented: "We've done quite a lot of work on our appetite for risk to understand that as a driver. We haven't got much of an appetite for risk in children's safeguarding, but that doesn't mean we don't want to make changes in that area."

And one of Surrey's managers reflected: "There are some areas where it can feel harder to achieve innovation, given the range of partners, the legislation, regulation and inherent risk levels. For example around safeguarding. There are still great initiatives in these areas but the job of genuinely transforming the whole system feels more difficult in these conditions."

## Resource priority innovation processes

*"To innovate you have to invest."*

**- Director, East Hampshire and Havant**

*"We put our money where our mouth is."*

**- Donna Hall, Chief Executive, Wigan**

Many studies recommend that organisations need to earmark sufficient time and resources for developing major innovations (e.g. Amabile and Mueller, 2008; West and Richter, 2008).

Five councils highlighted the need to properly resource their key priority innovation processes, investing sufficient time and money for developing, delivering and scaling up innovations.

In Oldham, one of the managers leading a major innovation process commented: "We were given the remit to make the change, to really make a difference. We were empowered to have that space, time, thinking, researching, understanding the local community and the needs, working out what the opportunity might be. You don't get a lot of time to think normally."

East Hampshire and Havant are undertaking a staff review to create more capacity for innovation. "We are undertaking a management review to make sure that the resources that we have are capable of delivering the strategy. We will make the workforce more fluid and flexible. So when we want to deliver something new, we don't need to look for additional resources, or change people's job descriptions."

Surrey has created "the Shift Unit": a small team to support innovation. The unit's role has changed over time, as managers in the council, and in its key partners, have developed their understanding of how to innovate.

Bristol employs around 35 people in its Bristol Futures service. Their responsibilities include city-wide innovation (such as developing a "smart city" and "open data"); international work and sustainability. "It's an unusual grouping, but it works well. We have brought in income of more than 20 times the cost of the service."

## Engage employees

*“The biggest future transformation will be achieved by changing the way people work.”*

**- Donna Hall, Chief Executive, Wigan**

*“Innovation happens through people. We need people with the right mindset and the right behaviours. We aim to make sure everyone is connected to the purpose.”*

**- Paul Matthews,  
Chief Executive, Monmouthshire**

Many studies suggest that innovations are much more likely to be successful if staff proactively support their implementation. For example, McLeod and Clarke (2009) emphasize the importance of leaders communicating effectively with employees about their organisation’s purpose, and their place in achieving it, as well as involving and listening to employees, and displaying concern for their wellbeing. Waples et al (2011) suggest that a leadership vision can only achieve results when it has been developed with those it intends to influence, such as employees.

In our study with frontline employees in councils, the most important action they wanted senior managers to take was to communicate with them face to face about planned innovations (Munro, 2013). Many were frustrated with being kept informed only by indirect methods like email. They also wanted to be involved in developing innovations from the beginning, rather than being consulted towards the end of a process, in a tokenistic way.

Five councils, or partnerships, were making a huge effort to engage with their employees, and to encourage them to support the development of new services, and new ways of working.

Six years ago senior managers in Surrey organised hundreds of “listening sessions” with employees. As the chief executive observed: “We asked people what’s it like to work here, why they had come to work in local government, and what mattered most to them. It was probably the most important thing we did.”

Staffordshire Moorland and High Peak senior managers make a huge effort to engage their employees. “We try to take the workforce with us, to explain why we are making changes. At every management level, communication has been key. The bin operative has got to know as much as a senior planner.”

Wigan was rated as ‘The Best Big Council To Work For’ by the Best Companies organisation. Wigan’s senior managers used the data from this employee engagement assessment to pinpoint where action was needed. The leader and the chief executive regularly meet groups of frontline staff to find out about their concerns and ideas, and then act on these.

East Hampshire and Havant have made considerable effort to inform and involve staff about innovations, in many different ways. For example: “From the beginning we involved staff in visits and discussions about setting up the joint venture with NORSE. The Unison representative and other members of staff, as well as politicians, came with us to visit NORSE. Every time there was a council report, staff were been invited along, and they were given a briefing from the portfolio holder the day afterwards.”

## Be disciplined, focused and determined

*“At the beginning we set out clear priorities: what’s important, the things to drive forward with, and those to let go and leave behind. Then focus, focus, focus. We always set clear timelines, keep our foot on the pedal and don’t allow things to drift. To back it all up, we have a robust performance management framework that drives delivery and excellence.”*

**- Simon Baker, Chief Executive,  
Staffordshire Moorlands District and  
High Peak Borough Councils**

*“We need to judge whether what we are doing is a good idea or a great idea, and be a bit discerning about not trying to do too much.”*

**- Charlie Adan, Chief Executive,  
Mid Suffolk and Babergh**

Many studies suggest the importance of deciding on the organisation’s innovation

priorities, rather than trying to innovate everywhere. For example a recent McKinsey’s study warns: “many companies run into difficulties less from a scarcity of new ideas than from a struggle to determine which ideas to support and scale” (De Jong et al, 2015).

Drucker (1999) strongly recommends that leaders should engage in “organisational abandonment” to free up the time and resources required before starting to develop innovations. In our previous studies, many middle managers and frontline employees commented that their councils had too many innovation priorities, or their leaders’ innovation priorities kept changing, so that they did not know where to focus their efforts (Munro, 2013; Munro and Biddle, 2014).

The leading managers interviewed in five councils, or partnerships, emphasised the importance of agreeing the key priority areas for innovation, and then taking a disciplined and focused approach to achieving these.

Many of those interviewed commented on the need to be realistic about how many major

innovations the organisation can work on at any one time. As one of Oldham’s managers recommended: “Don’t try to do everything at once.”

In Bristol, many managers commented on the significant way that the new City Director had moved the organisation forward by reducing the number of key corporate objectives, and by introducing a much more disciplined and determined approach to implementing these.

Major innovations tend to take a long time to implement. In South Tyneside, the managers described the way that their members maintained a strong commitment to the agreed key priorities. “Politicians are very reliable here. They are very supportive of development. They don’t make capacious decisions, and they don’t change tack. If they decide they want to do something they stick to it. That is really important for confidence. Partners and investors like that.”



## Learn from elsewhere

*"We seek to learn from elsewhere. We look at what others are doing, in other public service organisations, and in other sectors, from abroad, and from professional bodies. We recognise where things are working well elsewhere, so we don't reinvent the wheel, we adapt."*

**- Sandy Hopkins, Chief Executive, East Hampshire and Havant**

*"We've grown our international team from one half time person to three or four people. That gives us time to follow up on the international opportunities. The mayor is internationally focused, he's proud of the fact that he is the most travelled mayor in the UK."*

**- Senior Manager, Bristol**

Collins and Hansen (2011) found that the

most successful organisations over time are not the ones that pioneer the most innovations: they are the ones that implement them most effectively and at sufficient scale. Organisations that are first to develop an innovation often make many mistakes, expending resources on failed experiments.

Those that learn from other organisations' innovations usually save time and costs, as well as often improving the innovation.

Several councils highlighted the importance of finding out about successful innovations in other councils, and as well as from the private sector. As one council leader, interviewed for one of our previous studies, recommended: "councils should plagiarise with pride".

Many of Bristol's major innovations have been informed by learning from other countries.

The council has a European office in Brussels, and is part of a Rockefeller Foundation supported global network of "100 Resilient

Cities". An American company that helped lots of U.S. cities to become 'smart cities' is supporting the 'Bristol is Open' work and the council has partnered a Chinese city for 10 years.

Monmouthshire also has many international links. Wikipedia supported the development of "Monmouthpedia" to create the "world's first Wikipedia town" in Monmouth. As the chief executive commented: "We pick up ideas and support internationally – from the U.S., Australia, France Denmark, conferences, and tech companies. We've had fantastic support for example from New York City in building our volunteer programme. It's priceless."

## Use more 'agile' processes

*"If our aim is to develop initiatives and move forward on them collaboratively, the process doesn't necessarily have a beginning, middle and end, wham! You need a model that is based on a cycle of orientation, action, reflection, reorientation, action, reflection, reorientation. And that is more akin to the agile methodology."*

**- Charlie Adan, Chief Executive, Mid Suffolk and Babergh**

*"Programme management works on the premise that on day one you know what you are going to deliver. We know approximately the outcomes we want to achieve, and the trajectory, but we only plan for the next one or two steps."*

**- Senior Manager, Bristol**

Many studies highlight the fact that the most difficult part of innovation is not the generating of great creative ideas, it is implementing them successfully at sufficient scale (e.g. Govindarajan and Trimble, 2010; Bossidy et al, 2002).

Jones and Samlioni (in Lockwood, 2010) declare: "Ideas are a dime a dozen. What's more important is the execution: the alignment of the right ideas, the right team, the right development process, the right leadership, the right level of risk management, the right target, the right time to market and so on."

In our first study on leadership for innovation in local government (Munro 2012), many of the chief executives interviewed enthused about the difference programme and project management had made to their ability to turn great ideas into successful innovations. As one chief executive put it: "Innovative thinking is really really important in tackling big issues. But you have got to get it from the page into reality."

Some studies warn of the danger of innovations being killed off by the organisation's standard performance management tools (e.g. Govindarajan and Trimble, 2010). In this new research, several of the councils described the benefits of using "more agile" techniques to develop innovations.

For example, in Monmouthshire the council and local health services have successfully integrated their health and social care services without using a project management process. Instead the senior managers are: "taking a collegiate approach, with weekly meeting that drive the work forward. We are exploring, feeling our way forward, towards a clear goal."

A number of councils were choosing between traditional project management and more agile techniques, depending on the nature of the project. For example, to meet the external funder's tight deadlines, Bristol was using project management to set up its new energy company, while using agile techniques in more exploratory areas, such as their work with partners.

In some councils, manager were frustrated about the need to set out very detailed business cases for potential innovations. They felt they wasted considerable time researching proposals that were not selected for development. Others, such as Staffordshire Moorlands and High Peak, require a 'lighter touch approach' to business cases at the initial stages, with an increasing need to provide more detail as the project progresses.

# CHALLENGES AND OTHER LEARNING

Many studies on public sector innovation dwell extensively on the many barriers faced by public bodies trying to introduce new ideas (e.g. Koch and Hauknes, 2005; Mulgan, 2007; Borins, 2002; Light, 1998). These include public accountability, bureaucracy, silos, turf wars, operating in a political environment, and the difficulties of dealing with multiple stakeholders.

Most of the barriers referred to above were mentioned in a least one council, but the particular challenges highlighted varied from council to council. None of the managers interviewed appeared to believe the challenges they faced were insurmountable: they were just part of the context, requiring great determination to overcome them.

Externally, the challenges most often mentioned were legal restrictions, unhelpful changes in Government policy, and inconsistency between different Government departments' policies that "pulled apart" local attempts to join up public services. Many also observed that public sector compliance regulations and regulators' cautious or out of date approaches held back innovation. Some discussed the way that the press could adversely affected councils' appetite for risk.

When asked about their major internal constraints, many of those interviewed cited the lack of sufficient capacity to develop all the major innovations they would ideally like to implement.

Some referred to the problem of people having too many ideas with potential, and the difficulty of selecting the best ones to focus on. Others mentioned that it could be a struggle to persuade everyone to change their practices, particularly professional staff.

Interviewees were also asked if they had other important learning to suggest to other councils. The recommendations offered were very varied. Several chief executive suggested that it was better to "develop ideas under the radar" until you had proved their worth, and a number of others recommended "finding and making the most of people who will be a force for good".

# COMMENTS ON THE FINDINGS

In the case study councils, the political and managerial leaders appeared to be taking a much more comprehensive strategic approach to innovation than most of the local government leaders involved in our previous studies.

There was a strong focus on the importance of bold, united, ambitious leadership, building innovative partnerships with other organisations, and creating the right organisational culture for innovation.

The managers were upbeat and enthusiastic, excited about what they were doing and achieving. They were developing and empowering other innovative leaders, such as middle managers.

The findings suggest that politicians and senior managers in councils are becoming much more sophisticated, knowledgeable and confident about generating innovations. (However, it is possible that in the leaders in the selected councils may be ahead of many others in their practices.)

## Leadership actions that more councils might take

Some apparently effective leadership actions were being taken in the majority of the case study councils, but not all of them. These were:

### Agreeing clear innovation priority areas and focussing on these

In some councils, political leaders and senior managers might benefit from identifying more clearly where:

- Services are running well, and only minor improvements are required
- Performance needs to be improved, including by learning from elsewhere
- Services have little impact, or are low priority, and should be stopped
- The critical areas for major innovations to focus on and invest in to deliver the council and public services of the future.

### Involving others in developing innovations

Higgs and Rowland (2011) find that the most effective leadership approach to achieving major changes appears to be “doing change with people rather than doing change to them”. Some of the councils were expending a huge amount of effort in communicating with, and involving others in developing innovations.

In a few of the councils, it appeared that senior managers might be more successful if they put more effort into discussing potential innovations with their middle managers, employees, local residents, providers, local businesses, partners and other key stakeholders.

### Developing more expertise in innovation

Many successful companies have invested in developing their innovation expertise. For example, Intuit trained 65 members of their staff as “Innovation Catalysts”(Martin, 2011).

Several of the councils had developed considerable expertise around innovation. For example, Wigan and Monmouthshire had both learnt a great deal from being part of the NESTA/LGA Creative Councils Programme. Several councils, such as Surrey, had developed their own innovation processes.

It appeared that some of the councils might benefit from learning more about innovation techniques.

### Learning from other organisations more widely

Many of the managers mentioned learning from elsewhere. However, it appeared that more could do this, particularly looking for support and ideas worldwide.

## Areas that might need more leadership attention

Only a minority of interviewees highlighted some potentially important leadership actions:

### **Commissioning for innovation**

Many of the councils were setting up joint ventures, or were working in partnership with private sector companies, or were setting up their own private sector companies. However, very few referred to commissioning for innovation.

### **Maximising digital expertise**

Some interviewees mentioned having digital strategies, but only a minority, such as Bristol, and Surrey, highlighted the importance of making the most of the opportunities that digital provides.

### **Fostering cross council networks**

In Surrey developing better collaborative working across the council is a key leadership priority. However very few senior managers in other councils referred to taking deliberate actions to foster better cross council working on innovations.

### **Recruiting staff with the right attitudes for innovation**

Only a few interviewees, such as South Tyneside and Wigan, mentioned the importance of recruiting staff with the right attitudes for innovation.

# CONCLUSION

There is probably not one simple set of actions that senior managers and politicians in local government can take that will guarantee that they achieve more major innovations more quickly.

Local areas differ, and an organisation's history and culture affect what is possible. Politicians' ambitions and their appetite for taking risks are critical. What is perceived to be a radical disruptive proposal in one council, may be seen as a simple common sense approach in another.

Councils with a more stable political administration are likely to find it easier to make more long-term commitments, and to take more significant risks. In some council areas, residents may be more likely to support initiatives to develop innovations than in others.

Political and managerial leaders in councils that are in a position to be bolder need to be the trailblazers for experimentation. Other councils can then learn from their experiences, and make a better case for change locally, using the evidence of success elsewhere.

Leadership actions for innovation may also be different depending on the type and scale of innovation being planned. Walker's (2008) survey-based study of English local government concludes that different conditions appear to foster different types of innovations. He suggests that innovations within particular services flourish when management is devolved, but that cross-organisational innovations benefit from a more formal tightly managed approach.

Judgement is necessary in some key areas. Different councils will draw different conclusions, depending on their local circumstances. For example:

- How far ahead should they plan, given most major innovations take years to implement, yet many aspects of the strategic context are highly uncertain?

- How long should they reflect for, and how much evidence do they need, before pressing ahead with implementing a major innovation?
- Should they be extremely precise about what they want to achieve, or might they be more successful if they adjust their ambitions as they experiment and learn, towards a less clear cut outcome?
- Should they try to develop something completely new, or are they more likely to succeed by adapting and developing ideas pioneered elsewhere?
- Is their normal performance management system capable of overseeing the development of innovations, or do they need to employ more flexible methods to track their progress?

From this study, combined with other relevant studies, it appears that **ten key leadership actions** support innovation.

The research suggests that political and managerial leaders in local government might increase and accelerate significant innovations if they:

- Are clear, united and determined about the outcomes they want to achieve and their priority areas for innovation
  - Are bold and ambitious, while understanding residents' concerns, learning from elsewhere, setting realistic objectives, and taking well considered risks
  - Engage with key partners in an open way, evolving innovations together
  - Create an organisational culture that encourages creative approaches (particularly in the priority areas for innovation)
- Develop and empower other innovative leaders (e.g. middle managers)
  - Invest time, resources and effort into developing their innovation priorities
  - Convincingly communicate the reasons why their priority innovations are important (e.g. engage in dialogue with their managers, employees, partners, residents and other key stakeholders)
  - Genuinely listen to, and involve, relevant others in developing innovations (e.g. managers, employees, residents, service users, partners, businesses)
  - Track the development of their priority innovations (e.g. using programme and project management, or 'more agile' techniques, as appropriate)
  - Persist for long enough to embed and scale up their priority innovations.

Many of the leaders in the case study councils, and district council partnerships, were taking most of these actions. It appeared that some might achieve even greater success if they adopt more of these actions.

Given that the councils selected for case studies appeared to be ahead of many others in achieving innovations, it is likely that other councils might benefit from taking more of these ten key leadership actions.

To assist councils in reviewing the leadership actions they are taking to encourage innovation, AILGRP have created a **Local Councils' Innovation Framework**. Political and managerial leaders can use the questions in the Framework, individually or together, to consider what more they might do to achieve more innovations in their council.

The full Framework is set out in Appendix Three, and is also available here:

<https://goo.gl/fh647l>



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# APPENDIX ONE

## Innovations being developed by the case study councils

### COUNTY COUNCILS

#### Monmouthshire

- Integrating frontline services for older people with the Health Service
- Remodelling dementia support
- Putting clients in direct contact with professionals, not through a contact centre
- Growing services through income generation
- Building community leadership
- Remodelling rather than closing valued locally accessible services
- Making the most of digital
- Training apprentices shared across employers

#### Surrey

- Public service transformation, such as using restorative justice to reduce reoffending and integrating emergency

services

- Sharing functions with other councils, saving millions
- Maximising the use of digital, including pooling customer data and creating technology enabled care
- Setting up an adult services trading company
- Co-designing care services with children, young people and families
- Highways innovations, including thinking longer term, and investing in prevention

### METROPOLITAN COUNCILS

#### Bristol

- Developing a 'smart city', providing open data and a platform for invention
- Creating 'Bristol Learning City'
- Doing 'real world' research with residents and partners
- Setting up an UK-wide energy company

- Reducing the city's carbon footprint
- Taking fresh approaches in adult and children's services
- Designing seven core digital processes

#### Oldham

- Reducing residents' cost of living and helping them to avoid debts
- Setting up a council owned company to provide home care
- Investing in early intervention
- Changing residents' behaviour around rubbish and recycling
- Reducing the cost of adult social care packages
- Reducing costs by bringing functions together
- Employing super foster carers

### **South Tyneside**

- Integrating housing management, street cleaning and grounds maintenance
- Setting up a joint venture to build affordable homes to sell
- Involving the wider workforce in promoting healthy living
- Integrating health and social care
- Reducing the number of children coming into care
- Offering people with learning difficulties better choices
- Using telecare with different groups of people
- Creating a 'new sort of library', a home for the 'North East Written Word'

### **Wigan**

- Explicitly setting out what the council will do and what residents should contribute in 'The Deal'
- Developing bespoke solutions for people with complex needs--such as people who abuse drugs and alcohol

- Taking an 'asset-based' approach in adult services--saving costs and improving outcomes by building on people's strengths and interests, and connecting them to community resources
- Investing to develop community activities that address key social issues
- Identifying and addressing children's problems sooner
- Promoting women's equality

### **DISTRICT COUNCILS**

#### **East Hampshire and Havant**

- Developing a five council commissioning partnership
- Opening a 'Public Service Plaza' in a 'Public Service Village'
- Personalising online council services
- Developing affordable, secure and low carbon local energy
- Developing joint ventures and other innovative partnerships
- Changing financial processes and investing more boldly

### **Mid Suffolk and Babergh**

In a Suffolk-wide public sector partnership developing:

- A Suffolk-wide Medium Term Financial Strategy
- A whole system approach to insight and intelligence across Suffolk
- Growth and economic development
- Health, well-being and social care integration
- Waste management
- Locality working and community development

In addition, Mid Suffolk and Babergh councils themselves are developing a number of innovations including:

- Using a tailored approach to leadership development
- Investing in a new future business model

- Generating new forms of income, including through borrowing
- Investing reserves in a different way
- Introducing a new 'performance conversation' approach, rather than annual appraisals

### **Staffordshire Moorlands and High Peak**

- Agreeing a strategic alliance between the two councils – saving more than £3 million a year in revenue costs
- Building affordable homes for sale through a joint venture
- Supporting local businesses
- Developing the four main local towns
- Equipping all members with computer tablets
- Creating a virtual team to deal with environmental crimes

# APPENDIX TWO

## Leadership actions being taken by the case study councils

### COUNTY COUNCILS

#### Monmouthshire

- Creating the right organisational culture
- Developing the right leadership attributes
- Ambitious, united political and managerial leadership
- Really listening to local residents
- Looking widely for ideas and help
- Engaging and supporting staff
- Taking well considered risks and learning from failures
- Devolving responsibilities

#### Surrey

- Focusing on purpose and outcomes, not services
- Leading for innovation at the top

- Developing the right culture

- Making collaboration the norm

- Fostering cross council networks

- Engaging employees

### METROPOLITAN COUNCILS

#### Bristol

- Encouraging, institutionalising and resourcing innovation

- Actively looking for disruptive ideas from outside

- A unified leadership, with a single change programme

- Moving forward with pace, despite uncertainty

- Working differently with partners

- Learning from other countries and other sectors

#### Oldham

- Reframing thinking—particularly getting leaders to rethink what the challenge is, and the purpose of the service

- Building a united leadership approach

- Working with partners in new ways

- Resourcing the innovation processes

- Rethinking the approach to risk

- Being determined to succeed

### **South Tyneside**

- A clear long term vision and priorities
- Passionate and determined leaders
- A corporate approach
- Developing an organisational culture for innovation
- Recruiting and retaining the right people
- Respectful partnerships, building relationships and trust
- Moving forward at pace

### **Wigan**

- A clear political vision and priorities
- Authenticity and passion
- A bias for action
- Employee engagement
- Working with and through partners
- Resourcing the development of innovations
- Engaging with the community

### **DISTRICT COUNCILS**

#### **East Hampshire and Havant**

- Being clear about long-term objectives and priorities
- Developing a culture of innovation
- Supporting intelligent risk taking
- Resourcing innovation
- Motivating staff for innovation
- Moving with pace

#### **Mid Suffolk and Babergh**

- Investing time in planning the future creatively
- Making a collaborative and corporate approach central
- Encouraging people to think differently
- A focus on what is best for outcomes, communities and place
- Moving forward, embracing uncertainty
- Bringing in external expertise in a timely way

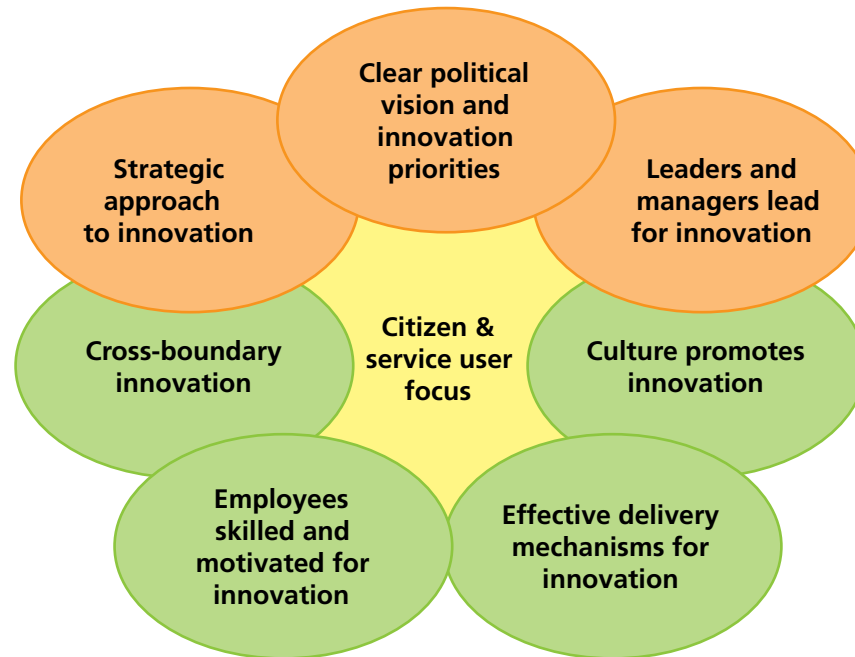
### **Staffordshire Moorlands and High Peak**

- Developing a positive, enabling, united top team
- Taking an incremental approach to innovation
- Focusing on the agreed priorities
- Making a huge effort to engage staff
- Being determined to make things work, including taking controlled risks
- Establishing strong partnerships, including with local communities

# APPENDIX THREE

## The Local Councils' Innovation Framework

Councils can use this Framework to review what more they might do to foster innovative working, as part of transforming their authority.



### Central Focus

Are citizens' and service users' priorities and aspirations central to the council's approach to innovation?

### Key Drivers

Are the council's political vision, and its priority areas for innovation, clear?

Are leaders and managers leading for innovation?

Is the council taking a strategic approach to innovation?

### Key Enablers

Does the council's organisational culture promote innovation?

Are cross-boundary approaches generating significant innovations?

Are employees motivated and skilled for innovation?

Does the council have effective, disciplined, delivery mechanisms for innovations?

**Are citizens' and service users' priorities and aspirations central to the council's approach to innovation?**

For example, in the innovation priority areas, could the council do more to:

- Understand service users' aspirations, needs and priorities more deeply?
- Develop innovations with service users, and other local residents, to get their support, and to help to change their expectations and behaviours?
- Unlock and develop more capacity for innovation within local communities?

**Are the council's political vision, and its priority areas for innovation, clear?**

For example:

- Is the vision ambitious and inspiring, but attainable, in the unfolding strategic context?
- Have politicians agreed the innovation priority areas in the medium and long-term?
- Are politicians prepared for experimentation, considered risk taking and necessary failures?

**Are leaders and managers leading for innovation?**

For example, are leaders and managers:

- Bold, ambitious, passionate, forward-looking and united?
- Focusing enough time and effort on innovation?
- Convincing communicators, personally selling the need for innovation?
- Involving all key stakeholders, including middle managers, in discussing critical future issues, and plans for innovations?
- Listening and responding to feedback, including from critics and mavericks?
- Devolving decision-making appropriately?
- Moving forward at a brisk, but sustainable, pace, despite uncertainties?
- Disciplined, focused and determined, persisting until innovations are delivered?

**Is the council taking a strategic approach to innovation?**

For example, does the council have:

- Sufficient resources and time devoted to innovations?
- Clear plans and accountability for innovations, and effective project leaders?
- Innovation processes being given sufficient freedom to experiment?
- The flexibility to seize new opportunities, and to adapt when experiments fail?
- Sufficient digital expertise?



### **Does the council's organisational culture promote innovation?**

For example, is innovation promoted through:

- Leaders' and managers' everyday behaviours, practices and stories?
- Values, norms and working practices?
- Safeguarding time for reflection and creative thinking?
- Healthy debates, that challenge and test accepted assumptions?
- Pro-actively looking elsewhere for fresh and 'disruptive' ideas, from other councils, other organisations (including those in other countries)?
- Inviting external challenges?
- Celebrating innovations?

### **Are cross-boundary approaches generating significant innovations?**

For example, is the council successfully delivering innovations through:

- Working across its internal service divisions?
- Dynamic partnerships with external organisations?
- Its commissioning and contract management arrangements?

### **Are the council's employees motivated and skilled for innovation?**

For example, does the council:

- Have enough employees with the attitudes and skills to deliver innovations?
- Encourage employees to develop better ways of doing things?
- Involve frontline employees in innovation processes?
- Respond to employees' concerns about innovations?
- Deal with job losses or role changes fairly?

### **Does the council have effective, disciplined, delivery mechanisms for innovations?**

For example, does the council have:

- Effective ways of tracking and delivering innovations? (E.g. does it use programme and project management or agile processes, as appropriate?)
- Sufficient innovation expertise to support the delivery of major innovations?
- A straightforward approach to evaluating and learning from successful and unsuccessful innovations?

#### **Sources of additional information**

Presentations on leadership for innovation in local government: <http://www.slideshare.net/joanmunro>

NESTA Innovation Skills Bank: <http://www.nesta.org.uk/develop-your-skills>

Design Council service redesign process: <http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/news-opinion/design-process-whatdouble-diamond>