10 Questions to ask yourself before implementing an Innovation Support Programme

December 2023

Table of Contents

Introduction to this guide.

Infuse was an innovation and research programme designed to build skills and capacity for innovative future public services across the Cardiff Capital Region. The programme was built around opportunities to tackle real-life questions, driven by the biggest challenges faced by the region. From 2020-2023 we provided four consecutive cohorts of public servants with the skills, tools, confidence, and experience to drive innovation. We provided methods and mindsets for exploring challenges, being data enabled, and unlocking strategic procurement. The 120 Infuse Associates worked on projects directly related to the major challenges facing public services, particularly around our two themes of Accelerating Decarbonisation and Supportive Communities.

Infuse was supported by the European Social Fund through Welsh Government and was a collaboration between Cardiff University, Y Lab, Nesta, Cardiff Capital Region City Deal Office (CCR) and the ten local authorities that make up the region. Cardiff University's Y Lab was the public services innovation lab for Wales, initially a partnership between Cardiff University and Nesta.

The Infuse programme was run as an iteratively changing programme, utilising both an internal evaluation run by Y Lab and an external evaluation run by Miller Research. These two evaluations included semi-structured interviews with programme staff, Infuse Associates, and senior leaders from the local authorities.

During this time we have learned a lot about running innovation support programmes, particularly from the Infuse Associates and local authority senior leaders. We want to share that learning. In this guide we have distilled our learning into the answers to ten questions that we believe people should ask themselves if they are thinking of setting up a similar programme. This guide is likely to most useful at the design phase of an innovation support programme, but we encourage the reader to return to this guide at various points during the life of your innovation support programme.

Question 1. What does innovation mean to you?

When thinking about innovation you may think of something brand new, such as a new approach, a new tool or method, or a new process, things that haven't been done before. This indeed is innovation, but it doesn't stop there, innovation is also introducing something that has been used elsewhere but hasn't been tried in your department, organisation or sector.

Many Infuse Associates initially believed that innovation was inventing something completely new and was an intimidating concept, but by the end of the programme they had learned that innovation could be:

- Service delivery innovation: reimagining service delivery programmes to make them more effective, suitable and efficient.
- Data-enabled innovation: making the most of data to guide decisions and shape the services provided.
- User-centred and co-created innovation: collaborating with stakeholders, citizens, and service users to design, adapt, or evaluate the services offered.
- Digital innovation: developing digital services and using technology to enhance services, making them more effective, accessible and inclusive for people.

> "It doesn't always have to be new. It's maybe, you know, doing something that someone else has done, but you're not doing or taking something you're developing it and changing it a bit kind of thing. So that kind of collaborative or replication side of it a bit more than just that thought all we have to do something new for the sake of it".
> *- Infuse Associate*

- Policy innovation: developing, introducing or transforming rules and regulations to improve services, products and systems.
- Innovation with partners: collaborating with other organisations, institutions and sectors to share ideas, resources, and technical skills and knowledge to enhance service functions and performance.
- Innovation through experimentation: testing new ideas, services or approach, even on a small scale, is essential for innovation.

It's important to note that innovation isn't confined to any one department or to a particular scale. Innovation involves approaching challenges and opportunities with a mindset that embraces new ideas and methods. This mindset often leads to progress and success.

Question 2. Why are you doing this?

Organisations participating in the Infuse Programme had various reasons for their involvement, which senior leaders shared with us. These reasons included:

- Financial pressures and cost savings: all organisations reported both strained resources and demand that was high and increasing, so they all shared a need to transform and improve services to achieve efficiency.

- Enhancing services: there was a pressing need to strengthen the quality of services provided, especially in response to emerging and changing needs and unprecedented demand.
- Tackling the 'big issues': organisations felt a responsibility to do even more to address societal challenges like poverty, health and social care, and the climate crisis, prompting them to seek new collaborations and sharing innovative solutions.
- Democratic systems: a recognition that having citizens at the centre of governance structures and functions would lead to more effective and appropriate responses, but they needed support for greater coproduction, accessibility and inclusion in systems and processes.

> "Historically, authorities would be quite paternalistic and make decisions about what we with the lanyards and the professionals knew was best for our communities. And under statutory provisions, this is how we do things…A lot of that didn't work anymore and also because of the cuts, we weren't able to work as we'd worked before. The nature of what we did changed and so understanding innovation was about all of that. How to do the same or with less, or do it better. And that meant maybe doing things differently".
> *- Infuse Associate*

Infuse was able to encourage Associates to engage and demonstrate the mindsets, skills and tools needed to take an innovative approach and begin to address some of these driving factors.

A word of caution is needed, this work takes time and there are some further questions to ask yourself when considering implementing an innovation support programme:

- Is this solely a cost savings exercise and how quickly does that need to be realised? Genuine innovation takes time; quick reactive changes for savings don't often constitute true innovation. It requires thoughtful research and experimentation.
- Are you looking for new solutions to new problems or new solutions to old problems? Why are old solutions not working? Understanding why old solutions aren't working and the driving force behind the need for innovation is crucial for designing an effective support program.
- Have you clearly defined your problem? Is there consensus on why an innovation support programme is necessary? Consulting key stakeholders and analysing data about the problem is vital before you start.

In designing the program, consultations with public services were conducted to identify key issues. The program's content revolved around these issues, equipping associates with the necessary skills for innovation (in adaption, data, and procurement) while deepening their knowledge in specialised areas (accelerating decarbonisation and supportive communities).

Associates and Senior Leaders highlighted the importance of being clear in the programme's purpose and aims and having consensus around that from your senior leaders.

Question 3. Who is the programme for?

Infuse Associates came from all parts of their organisations, from a variety of departments and roles. Some people elected to take part in the programme while others were nominated by their colleagues. Associates were asked to leave any hierarchy 'at the door'. This created an exciting space that mixed diverse experiences, skills and knowledge.

We welcomed a diverse range of staff because each brings unique opportunities and strengths:

- Practitioners/Frontline staff: These are the people directly serving our communities. They hold precious insights into service experiences and (in)efficiencies, and they know the real challenges and opportunities in their work.
- Leaders: Supervisors, managers and senior leaders play a key role in making innovation happen, especially at a larger scale. They have experience of the practical factors that can support or hinder innovation, and they know the culture and capacity of their teams for change.
- Analysts and specialists: team members from areas like Policy, IT and HR, bring specialist insight into the systemic levers and structures needed to support innovation and drive change.

> "I think I've always been given quite a lot of freedom and in my roles as being seen as someone who gets things done and reaches that little bit to try something new. I've fine-tuned it and actually learned some proper tools rather than just sort of steaming ahead, from infuse".
> *- Infuse Associate*

Associates and Senior Leaders from across the programme shared some of their thoughts on the kind of mix needed for an innovation support programme:

> "I never thought of myself as an innovator, however I think I've brought some innovative practices into our team, just our immediate team. However, I feel like the difference with Infuse is that it really is giving me the confidence to maybe spread that a little bit wider, especially externally with collaborating with other teams in the departments and cross departmental work, it's definitely giving me the confidence to look at things differently and given me the confidence to do it as well."
> *- Infuse Associate*

- Rising Stars vs Blockers: do you focus on those that are already thinking differently and pushing the status quo and go with the willing, or do you focus on those that you know are resistant to change and attempt to shift their mindset by listening to their concerns? Often it is about balancing those keen to innovate with those more hesitant about change.
- Leadership programme by default: should you align this programme with leadership development in your organisation or is that a separate task? It is true that many of the skills that are required for an innovation mindset can lend themselves to being a good leader but is that necessary? Will that approach restrict innovation to certain areas of the business or staff at a certain level?

- Look outside the box: As one of the Infuse members states "not everyone can be a leader, but leaders can be found anywhere". When thinking about an issue that you want to address consider those from other departments, teams or organisations. Try and harness as many diverse views as possible and include colleagues with different skill-sets, knowledge and experiences to capture the unexpected.

The Infuse programme involved people with different roles, levels of seniority and motivations to engage with innovation. The benefits of being involved with the programme were uniting. Collaboration is at the heart of successful innovation and diversity often leads to creativity. Figuring out at the design stage who you need in your programme will allow you to communicate clearly and consistently across the organisation, and to tailor the delivery methods, content and resources needed.

Question 4. Who should you work with?

Collaboration is a key component to innovation and developing an innovation support programme is no different. Although your stakeholders may change depending on the challenge, there will be core places to look for partners:

- Internal partners: Look within your organisation. Who has the knowledge, capacity, and skills to contribute to the development of the innovation support programme? Who will be willing and able to contribute in a meaningful way? Will this cross over into other areas of the organisation that might not be obvious initially? Are there people or teams that have experience developing similar things before?

> "Cooperation with other people and being able to integrate your plans, but I think definitely being part of INFUSE has afforded me the opportunity to be bold with new decisions. It's the networks that they've built across that six months both internally and externally. It's solidified the need to collaborate with others. Again, it's collaborating with people that they wouldn't necessarily have done before."
> *- Infuse Associate*

- External partners: Consider your close working partners. Could they coproduce the programme with you? Is participation in the programme restricted to your own employees, or could it be richer if you open the invitation to your partners, such as your contracted and commissioned providers?
- Regional collaboration: Are there neighbouring local authorities, health boards or other institutions that are facing similar challenges? Would they be open to working together? Do you need a cross regional approach to be successful? Can you justify not working collaboratively on a regional level to tackle universal and shared issues?
- External experts: Do you need specialists and experts for this programme? Is there knowledge missing internally that's crucial for the program's design or delivery development? Look to the academics, policy makers, industry experts and commercial bodies for potential collaborations.

Associates told us that effective collaboration was incredibly impactful when it happened, but some felt there should have been more collaboration, believing it leads to innovation on a larger and more impactful scale.

Question 5. How do you collaborate effectively together?

Collaboration that shares resources can be lead to innovation on a larger scale and an acceleration of results. Yet, getting to a point of effective collaboration can be tricky. During the Infuse programme, associates utilised several principles and practices to foster meaningful collaboration:

- Bringing diverse collaborators together: Identify the key stakeholders that are likely to have direct involvement and responsibility for the design, implementation and evaluation of the work and bring them into the team…then look wider. Look outside of the obvious people and consider those with diverse and even divergent experiences, skills and views. The more diverse the team the more creative and varied the ideas.

> "I think certainly throughout the pandemic, the organisation's felt a little insular in the way its approached things. We were, perhaps, less collaborative, less outward seeking than, perhaps, we'd been prior to the pandemic. So, certainly when this opportunity came available, became available to us, it seemed like the right thing to do. I certainly, on a personal level, I consider having access to networks and strong relationships to be kind of fundamental in terms of solving any problems."
>
> *- Local Authority Senior Leader*

- Clarify the purpose and roles: Once you have your team assembled gain consensus about the purpose of the team, the roles and responsibilities of each member and ensure that everyone is clear and in agreement about expectations. Agree the communication methods that will be used and ensure that there are clear plans in place to provide clarity around the pace of work and results.
- Resource the work: Identify what resources will be needed and negotiate access. Consider how you might use technology, data and other assets to support the collaboration. Be pragmatic and progressive – sharing resources is likely to strengthen the relationship between collaborators and ensure that there is equal investment into the successful outcome of the work.
- Learn, iterate and adapt: Ensure that there are mechanisms in place for continuous feedback and reflection. Be open and eager to discuss the ongoing challenges and successes of the programme. Be brave and flexible enough to adapt or change the programme if needed, but remember that sometimes the most important thing is to hold your nerve and change nothing. Iteration is an integral part of innovation, and there is no failure if you learn from what went wrong.

But successful collaboration goes beyond these practical steps, to the more intangible aspects of relational working. The best planned programmes can still be derailed by fundamental differences in priorities, attitudes, and approaches. Here's what helped Infuse Associates and delivery team members:

- Put your egos aside: Approach the collaboration with humility and openness to learn from each other. You don't always need to be the expert in the room.

- Celebrate your organisation: Share the assets and strengths of your organisation. Learn from the successes and identify the levers and methods used to achieve aims in past projects.
- Understand organisational cultures: Be honest about the culture of your organisation – name the things that may get in the way of progress.
- Be transparent: Be consistently open, honest and transparent about the work. This is integral to building trust – the foundation of collaboration. Be tolerant of differences and conflicting views and ensure that communication is always open and respectful.

These four principles are just a few of the many ways to develop strong bonds to support collaboration. Build a coalition of people with the will and the way to make things happen. Sometimes a few strong cross organisational relationships are enough to circumnavigate even the trickiest environments.

Question 6. What are the essential skills that your programme will need to develop?

Associates on Infuse developed a wide range of skills and competencies, but there are some core innovation skills that organisations will have to promote, develop and nurture:

- Communication skills: Clear, effective, and persuasive communication is essential to share learning, explain ideas and generate buy-in. A range of communication skills and styles is need to collaborate with diverse audiences.
- Critical thinking: The ability to think critically and be curious is key to innovation. Skills in research, analysis and evaluating evidence will help in understanding problems, identifying solutions and measuring impact.

> "But the other important part was just connecting that back down into something tangible, the project, whatever it was, so it's to the point that if you don't apply the skills quickly, and you don't continue to apply the skills and the tools and techniques, they don't disappear, but the light goes quite quickly. Or the battery starts to fade…"
> *- Local Authority Senior Leader*

- Creative thinking: Diverse ideas and ways of seeing or understanding problems is also key to innovation. Some of the most important new ideas come from thinking outside the box and being brave enough to be radical.
- Adaptability: Being open to change and allowing practices to evolve will enable staff to think and act independently and be open to doing things differently. Embracing new tools, systems and cultures will speed up the innovation process, particularly for experimentation and implementation.
- Technological literacy: Becoming comfortable with technology, leveraging and managing data, and showcasing digital literacy skills are vital. These abilities ensure better decisions, enable digital accessibility, enhance efficiency, and encourage the adoption of new technologies.

These are just some of the skills needed to be able to embrace an innovation mindset. It may be that some of these skills are already being developed within your organisation and could be easily absorbed into an innovation support programme. It may be that you need to collaborate with partners and experts to develop these from scratch. You can map your existing training and CPD courses to identify areas for potential duplication so you can streamline your offerings.

Question 7. How will you know your Innovation Support Programme is working?

This question depends on what the programme is aiming to achieve and what you define as success. We recommend developing a theory of change to provide clarity and consensus on the purpose of the programme, and how you think it will achieve its objectives. Unlike other training courses with KPIs and standardised measures, an Innovation Support Programme is more complex to evaluate. Qualitative feedback and responses are much more likely to yield meaningful insights into the progress and impact of the programme. There are some mechanisms that can support this:

- Learning loops: Establish a number of different feedback mechanisms like regular meetings, qualitative surveys, or focus groups. The key is acting on feedback, leading to adaptation and.
- Reflective practice: Encourage a culture where staff feel safe to critically reflect on their work and program involvement. Support them to make changes. This could be integrated into supervision meetings, logged in journals, or discussed within teams or groups.

> "But yeah, I think nearly all of them in very different ways, have grown, they've grown in confidence is a big part of it I think, but they come equipped as well, because they've got the toolbox to refer to, and the stuff that they've captured from Infuse. And they've got the support networks, not just internally, but the peer networks, the alumni, is actually really important."
> *- Local Authority Senior Leader*

- Reverse Mentoring: Create the time and space for programme participants to share their experiences, ideas and insights with senior leaders. This supports relational working internally and gives both people an insight into the role and reality of the other. It can circumnavigate slower bureaucracy and address power inequalities.

These are just some of the ways that insights could be gathered. While there might be qualitative factors to track, it's essential to avoid fixating on targets at the expense of the actual work. Place value on what counts, and work with the people designing and delivering the programme to develop learning loops that suit your organisation.

Question 8. What happens if something fails?

Innovation is trying something new so naturally there will be times where something doesn't necessarily work out as planned. Failure is something that traditionally has been taboo for public services and even more so during difficult economic times. However, to embrace innovation it is essential that we start to redefine failure as a learning opportunity.

Associates and programme delivery members shared some ways in which failure was framed to encourage innovation and learning:

- Adopt a culture of learning: Changing the language and responses to failure are essential in shifting mindsets and attitudes towards a learning culture. Rather than viewing something that didn't work as a failure, instead see it as an opportunity to learn. Identify what worked well and build on that, while learning from the things that didn't go so well. 'Black box thinking' is a way to explore and understand what happened after a learning experience, rather than sweep it under the rug and create shame and blame.
- It is safe to fail: Normalising and sharing failure will encourage staff to feel safe to share their challenges and experiences when things don't go well and potentially give you time to learn, respond and iterate. Create a shared understanding of what constitutes failure and ensure that there is clarity around expectations and consequences. Staff must feel safe enough to fail before the start of their innovation process.
- Transparency: Ensure that there is transparency and consistency around failure across the organisation. This has to be demonstrated by leaders and support given to foster a safe environment in order to encourage innovation. Record the progress of innovation, including the failures, and share the original plans, the setbacks, successes, learning and iteration from that with the wider organisation. This will promote a learning culture, brave practice and integrity.

> "Innovation for me is about a radical or substantial shift towards something more positive, something that that has greater value…quite often there's an element of failure within that to get to where you need to be. When you think about innovation you do think of something shiny in a box kind of thing, this brand-new thing, but I think the reality is probably a bit more mundane in a sense. It's the everyday kind of doing it and processes and way we work that we can radically shift to something better."
>
> *- Infuse Associate*

There were four iterations of the Infuse programme. Capturing real time learning and insights enabled us to make the right, evidence-informed changes between iterations. Embracing challenges as opportunities for learning and adaptation resulted in a program that successfully achieved its aims. The ability to learn from setbacks strengthened and improved the experience for Associates.

Question 9. What support will be needed for those going through the programme?

The support that Associates reported needing was wide ranging and varied to some extent based on their organisational culture, role and responsibilities. There were some common themes and mechanisms used to support Associates during and post Infuse:

- Reverse Mentoring: This was an integral element of the programme. Senior leaders allocated time to meet regularly with Associates to discuss their experiences on the programme. This was felt to be incredibly impactful by both Associates and Senior Leaders. The benefits for the Senior Leaders included hearing how effective the programme was, hearing about the challenges and opportunities identified within the organisation by the Associates, and hearing about new skills, tools and solutions that they may not have encountered otherwise that could benefit their organisation. Likewise, Associates benefitted from feedback and input from their leaders, the potential to circumnavigate barriers and navigate networks, and grew in confidence.

> "With my project my reverse mentee said "I think you should present this to our SLT" and that wouldn't have happened ordinarily with any other project. I wouldn't even have thought I really could request to do that. But I think because it's branded through Infuse automatically there's an open mind there. The leadership team are really supportive of Infuse and that was really helpful. But since then, with other projects it would definitely give me the confidence to go higher and present to who needs to hear it and bash down that door a little bit more as well."
> *- Infuse Associate*

- Peer Support Groups: During the programme Associates had the support of each other for two days a week over a six-month period. Many of the Associates established Infuse groups within their own organisations. This was felt to provide an opportunity for people with similar mindsets and skills to share ideas, challenges and updates about their work, developing the legacy of Infuse. Some organisations utilised these groups to develop 'think tanks' to which they could bring emerging problems and benefit from the skills, knowledge and ability of the members. Those Associates from organisations with fewer colleagues taking part in Infuse, often reported feeling somewhat isolated and frustrated at the pace of innovation once the programme had ended. The peer groups provided motivation, support and encouragement to continue to innovate long after the programme had ended.

- A supportive culture: Organisations that provide a safe and supportive culture were more likely to be able to innovate at ease and pace. The permission to be brave, creative and to take risks all contributed to staff feeling supported to raise issues, develop ideas and implement change. As the saying goes 'culture eats strategy for breakfast'.

Deciding and designing what support is available to staff through an innovation support programme will depend on the resources available, organisational culture and commitment to the programme.

Question 10. Are you ready?

And finally, some points to reflect on as you consider whether you ready to design and deliver an innovation support programme:

- Mindset: How open are you to challenge and change? Are you ready to be told by staff members what isn't working and needs to be improved? Are you able to respond to this

feedback with action? Are you curious and open to new ways of doing things and to be radical at times? Being committed and consistent in applying an innovation mindset will accelerate the pace, scale and success of the programme.

> "The organisation lent itself, not just lent itself, but actively encouraged people to be let's say not risk taking, that's probably the wrong word, but make a decision. Do something. You know it was very permissive society, very permissive culture, and so you're encouraged to do something, and then if it doesn't work, you know, let's work out why it didn't work, and we'll try something else. It's very much not a blame culture. It's very, very supportive."
>
> *- Infuse Associate*

- Permission: For colleagues to feel confident as innovators, they need permission to take risks, to make decisions and be responsive. In your organisation how much power do staff have to try something new? How would they get permission to do something new and how long would it take? Are there ways to restructure or prioritise decision making to enable innovators to circumnavigate unnecessary bureaucracy and work more responsively?

- Governance: As one of the Infuse Associates shared "often organisations want to be 21st century innovators but have 1970's style governance structures". How do your governance structures and systems enable or block innovation? What works and how do you build on that, and what gets in the way and could you reimagine? Infuse saw innovation happen even in the face of cumbersome and challenging systems so that should not prevent the work from happening. However, in organisations that fostered risk taking, curiosity and diversity, we saw that the scale, pace and impact of innovation could be much more significant than in those where the aspirations, governance and culture were misaligned.

What should I do next?

If you would like to know more about the Infuse programme, we encourage you to visit the Infuse [website](#), and read both the [Infuse Handbook](#) and the [Infuse Case Studies](#).

For more information, feel free to contact the Owen Wilce, Infuse Programme Manager at Monmouthshire County Council (OwenWilce@monmouthshire.gov.uk), or Professor James Lewis, Director of Y Lab (lewisj78@cardiff.ac.uk).