Social work and innovation – an oxymoron?

Lisa Pattoni and **Alison Petch,** Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services, Glasgow, UK.

Abstract

Public services as a whole are facing their most serious challenges since the inception of the welfare state. Demand for support is set to increase dramatically, not only due to demographic changes, but also because of the failure to tackle the root causes of disadvantage and vulnerability (and associated) consequences. Against this backcloth, the Scottish Government has implemented a reform agenda with innovation and 'thinking differently' at its heart. However, the associated risks of introducing a new service or model of practice in social services are many and variable. At its worst, innovation has the potential to impact adversely upon the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in society; it may also turn out to be more costly, to have unintended consequences or to just not work. Accordingly, this avoidance of risk in social services has to some extent become synonymous with avoiding innovation. In this article, the authors ask, can social services embrace innovation or is this indeed a contradiction in terms.

'You put together two things that have not been put together before. And the world is changed. People may not notice it at the time, but that doesn't matter. The world is changed nonetheless.' Julian Barnes, *Levels of Life*

The International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work have recently agreed a new definition for social work:

'The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.' [IFSW, IASSW 2011]

While not wishing to be over preoccupied with semantics, the reference to the promotion of social change and development and to addressing life challenges is significant. Both these components would appear to demand elements of innovation; yet innovation and social work are often considered antithetical. This paper will draw on the experience of the Scottish-based Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS) and a range of examples to explore compatibility between innovation and the practice of social work.

IRISS is a small third sector organisation that works with the social services workforce across Scotland to enable positive outcomes for individuals who access support. Its focus is on embedding research, creativity and innovation; one of its three programmes is dedicated to innovation and improvement. The discussion below draws on the experience of this programme over the last five years and seeks to answer the question posed in the title of this article: can social work embrace innovation or are there particular demands that inhibit its achievement?

Innovation: a working definition

The drive of the Innovation and Improvement Programme is to support the workforce to realise their potential to make change happen with others. This is inherently challenging, as it requires a continuous process of learning in respect of interactions, support models and the shape of systems. Two working definitions have been adopted to guide the work of the programme.

Innovation implies a real change *in how work is done; using new knowledge, organisation or processes to develop changes in the ways people are supported. We believe that innovation can be new to sector, scale or place.*

Improvement involves incremental change *to develop support – constantly looking for better, more efficient and desirable ways to complete a task or process, but representing continuity with the past.*

A key role for the organisation is fostering the creation of conditions where new ideas and thinking can flourish, working from inside the system to build the capacity of practitioners,

people and communities to do things differently. This is not an end itself however; the focus must be on the achievement of outcomes with individuals and with their communities.

Innovation – a way of working

Working to innovate in social services, activity is underpinned by four key principles as outlined in Table One below.

FACILITATION	Encouraging positivity, open collaboration and mutually beneficial partnerships between service providers (practitioners), communities and individuals (both across organisations and within layers of the same organisation)
PERSON CENTRED	Ensuring the focus is always on the person
LEARNING	Encouraging a culture where people are open with their ideas, successes and failures to enable greater learning
CREATIVITY	Encouraging visual methods to be used as a complement to verbal communication to stimulate new creative thinking

These are pursued though a model of working that embraces four key elements (Table Two).

ENLIGHTEN	Finding, sharing and encouraging possible responses to issues facing social services by drawing on ideas and knowledge about what works elsewhere and testing new ideas
INFORM	Building evidence about innovation and creativity to improve the understanding and confidence of people in this sector
CONNECT	Providing creative, open spaces for people to come together to look differently at challenges facing the sector
SUPPORT	Developing projects to test ideas practically and to contribute to our understanding about how innovation and improvement can be sustained and scaled

A culture of innovation?

Public services as a whole are facing their most serious challenges since the inception of the welfare state. Demand for support is set to increase dramatically, not only due to demographic changes, but also because of the failure to tackle the root causes of disadvantage and vulnerability (and associated) consequences (Christie, 2011). Against this backcloth, the Scottish Government has implemented a reform agenda with innovation and 'thinking differently' at its heart.

However, the associated risks of introducing a new service or model of practice in social services are many and variable. At its worst, innovation has the potential to impact adversely upon the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in society; it may also turn out to be more costly, to

have unintended consequences or to just not work. Accordingly, this avoidance of risk in social services has to some extent become synonymous with avoiding innovation (Kemshall, 2002). Writers such as Munro (2011) argue that audit and regulation have heightened this fundamental tension within policy and practice. The blame culture that exists in the sector has contributed to a risk averse environment where practitioners are unwilling to try new approaches or think outside the box for fear that they will be reprimanded, publicly shamed, or indeed sacked, if mistakes are made (Petts et al, 2001).

Social workers operate within a high-volume, high-pressure, complex environment. Moreover it is clear that innovation will not flourish in an environment that clings to decisions based on what is 'safe', 'right' or 'already known'. Yet in social services, particularly working with statutory issues of child or adult safeguarding (as social workers do), such qualities may be perceived as having particular value, acting as further disincentive to innovation. Evidence shows that social workers are increasingly becoming singularly focused on crisis management and statutory requirements (Asquith et al, 2005), which take precedence over other types of engagement and include little scope for flexibility. This move away from more preventative, community-based work with people results in social workers finding it difficult to engage in activities that are outwith these statutory functions.

To understand the perspectives of those working in social services in Scotland, and whether or not a more innovative culture is possible within the sector, IRISS commissioned a survey that included exploration of attitudes, approaches, use and barriers to innovation (IRISS, 2010). Telephone interviews were conducted with a stratified sample of 300 respondents from different sectors and different responsibilities together with a small number of more in-depth discussions. The findings, interestingly, suggest high levels of support for innovation and improvement at that time. A large majority claimed that their organisation encouraged innovation and or improvement 'a lot' across the organisation as a whole (83%), and encouraged them to use innovative ideas or improvement in their job (79%). Only a minority claimed there was only 'a little' encouragement across the organisation (16%) or in their job (19%). A range of examples was offered: support to develop ideas; support from managers for new ideas and their application; engaging and developing services with users; encouragement from senior management for staff to develop innovation and improvement in their work; and an innovation and improvement strategy.

At organisational level, the two key barriers to innovation and improvement were finance (cited by 62% of respondents) and lack of time in the working week (61% of respondents). Smaller proportions cited political uncertainties, inhibiting organisational structures or lack of training; lack of support or encouragement from senior management did not appear to be a key barrier. At an individual level, lack of time was again prominent (53%) while the personal interests of individuals or organisations to maintain the status quo was highlighted by 53%. Smaller proportions referred to a lack of autonomy in work and a lack of training. At organisational level 149 respondents noted three or more barriers; 62 noted two barriers and 62 cited a single barrier. At the individual level these numbers were 55 (three or more barriers), 57 (two) and 108 (one barrier). The more in-depth interviews offered some useful insights:

> Sometimes people are resistant to change, you know, they've been doing something maybe for a few years and they're quite happy with it… they don't want to rock the boat if things are working. Other people are quite comfy with what's going on and don't see the need to

try something else, so sometimes that can take a bit of work… It's human nature really isn't it? There are ways round about it but you need to have the time to work with people, you know to start doing this, change isn't going to happen overnight, you need to make sure there's enough time to work with people to work their way through the change. (Operational Manager)

Evidence cited by Amabile (1996) states everyone is creative and able to innovate. The assertion is that creativity is a function of three main components: expertise, creative-thinking skills, and motivation. Crucially, the extent to which an individual is able to exercise these traits will likely depend on the organisational and sectorial context in which they reside. Amabile's work (substantiated by others, for example Kelley and Kelley, 2013) suggests that innovation will only flourish in organisational cultures that are characterized as having:

1. open channels of communication
2. a culture which is receptive to new ideas and challenge
3. trust and respect amongst colleagues as well as managers and staff
4. a willingness to take risks and tolerate failure
5. a willingness to take a longer term approach.

IRISS exists in order to support and encourage this culture to grow within social services. The remainder of this paper will serve to highlight the methods adopted and the implications for social work practice and innovation.

The IRISS approach

1. A spirit of openness

Cultivating a supportive environment where it is 'safe' for practitioners to put their ideas forward, and to encourage organisations to be open to ideas, to others and to learning is a key role for IRISS. This approach aims to develop a culture that is confident with change and experimentation, and that pays attention to creativity by bringing together perspectives from across the sectors (private, voluntary and statutory) as well as those from different disciplines (eg criminal justice, community development, social work).

This 'open innovation' approach can be conceived of in two main ways (Chesbrough, 2003). **Working from the 'outside/in':** This is where an organisation makes greater use of external ideas, resources and practices in its own day-to-day work and development. This external approach, emphasising cross-sector networks and tapping into diverse networks, has been championed within the social services sector. There are, however, obvious implications of this approach in terms of embedding ideas in practice and supporting ownership of ideas from those who will be charged with implementation. Similarly, Hart and Sharma (2004) argue that an organisation's willingness to expand its radius of action and to engage with 'fringe stakeholders' is a critical factor in fostering the kind of imaginative disruption that allows social innovation to take place in this way.

Working from the inside/out: This is an approach where organisations are open with their own ideas, challenges and processes to enable others to share and learn. This means utilising the

talents and skills of those working internally to develop ideas and implement them. This limits innovation to a small number of people internally, which can bring challenges; however staff are likely to have ownership of the idea and subsequently the innovation may be more likely to be successful. This means developing the capacity within the organisation to continually engage and challenge assumptions and processes.

Mulgan (2007) suggests that the capacity to embrace both 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness' is the most favourable way to encourage and stimulate innovation. IRISS embraces these simultaneous processes, acting as an intermediary (or purveyor organisation) with the explicit design to make links between emerging ideas, changing needs and a range of different networks. For instance, the Knowledge Media programme uses open source software and code (see: WITTY app); the ideas that emerge from the Innovation and Improvement programme are available from an early stage of development for others to see, use and build upon (see: blogs documenting project progress); the Evidence Informed Practice programme shares knowledge and expertise in an accessible and early way (see: Research Unbound); creative commons licensing (more here) and an honesty about what has worked and what has not also underpin the work.

At times, however, this can be difficult for colleagues in social services to grasp. Mulgan (2007, p28) hints at a reason for this "*The public sector is often poor at innovation from within, and poor at learning from outside. It contains many innovative people but isn't good at harnessing their talents and imagination. It too rarely cultivates a plurality of alternatives and too often imposes ill-conceived innovations on the whole country.*"

IRISS approaches this problem pragmatically. The assertion is that knowledge and creativity are not resources in themselves but are simply 'potentials' generated by social relations. These tend to be particularly valuable if they are generated by unexpected encounters, surprising conversations or the collision of unrelated ideas (Johnson, 2011). Bringing what is known from other places and introducing new concepts and approaches to those attempting to find ways of innovating and finding imaginative responses can be a useful platform for creative thinking and innovation to emerge - the goal being for these different agencies to 'co-own' the ideas inherent within the innovation. Even if this innovation does not directly change social work practice, the impact of social work involvement on other practitioners is crucial.

2.Cherry-pick organisations that can embed ideas

Organisations that do not have statutory obligations to fulfil tend to be more ready to innovate. For example, the Social Assets in Action project at IRISS aimed to promote strengths-based approaches to support individuals using mental health services. The project brought together practitioners in statutory services, the voluntary sector and those with lived experience of mental health services to develop an understanding of the personal and community assets in one local area to promote positive wellbeing.

The evaluation of the project found that Personal Asset Mapping (PAM) allowed most practitioners to put their person-centred and recovery-focused intentions into practice; however good use of PAM requires a facilitative approach, which practitioners based in the public sector found harder than those in the third sector.

> *"If I was doing more long-term work then there may be more scope to apply the tool"* and *"there is a disconnect between the values base (that asset mapping is founded on) and the way the local authority work these days. The voluntary sector is in a much stronger position to pursue this sort of therapeutic tool"* (Social worker, cited in Inglis, 2013).

> *'Given the timescales and nature of the work I do (often crisis based interventions) I would not have much scope to do things differently'* (Social worker, cited in Inglis, 2013).

This suggests that although practitioners noted how the approach supported them to get back to 'their roots', they felt unable to apply the process or use the tools within their tightly defined role. The important learning here was that social workers involved in the project were given time out from their statutory requirements in order to understand how things might be different, and to reflect on their practice and profession. Unfortunately, this was not sustainable in day-to-day practice, despite the improved outcomes that were delivered through the project.

This finding has wider implications for development of new practices - system and individual capacity for adaptive practice is an underpinning requirement, often not available to social workers. However, voluntary sector practitioners and people who are supported by services have noted the benefits of being able to work alongside social workers. The implication is that their understanding and endorsement of strengths-based practice has encouraged a common language and understanding to be adopted. This is useful in terms of embedding the innovation within the system overall.

3. Design thinking, focused on people

Svensson and Bengtsson (2010) argue that the first-hand knowledge people who access support have of their own problems makes them particularly suited to innovate (as they are able to be more specific). They can often also act as a catalyst for co-production, flagging up what has gone wrong and what needs to go better. Similarly, they are important for diffusing innovations because of their legitimacy amongst their peers. This is particularly important within a social services context, evidenced for example, in the power of peer-support.

Co-design is a particular aspect of the design thinking approach, used throughout IRISS projects. At its core, co-design is about working directly with people to find solutions that work in real life. It is a process that flattens hierarchical structures and encourages participation. The fundamental principle is about better understanding the strengths and needs of individuals, testing out new approaches with them in context so that outcomes can be supported and sustained. In this way, the approach is absolutely congruent with social work.

Although design tends to traditionally be thought of as a process that adds the shine or glamour at the end of a process, design thinking can be used at the front end of the innovation process, conducting research into services, reviewing what already exists, observing service interactions and listening to people who use and deliver services (Rhea, 2003). Similarly, design will often start not from existing states of being – but from desired outcomes. The approach stands back from problems as well as proposed solutions, with a view to reformulating them. Many service designers have a preference towards 'working from what could be' and promoting more radical innovation (Mager, 2009), particularly as they are likely to have a less thorough knowledge about the service area in which they are working.

That being said, IRISS has been exploring the use of design as a vehicle for encouraging an outcomes-focused approach to be more radical - starting with desired outcomes and working backwards to understand and challenge how existing services can support these outcomes. In working through this process, perceptions are challenged, change is stimulated, and new interactions, environments and interfaces are created, which can in turn alter or radically change current systems and cultures (Burns et al, 2006). In bringing a diverse population of people together using co-design it could be said that the focus of IRISS is on the empowerment end of social work practice.

For example, Pilotlight, an IRISS project exploring pathways to Self-Directed Support (SDS) uses design thinking to collaborate effectively with people who are supported by services and practitioners (www.pilotlight.iriss.org.uk). The project employed an iterative methodology where risks are managed (rather than eliminated) through prototyping. Engaging social work and other practitioners in this project was found to be an effective way to help them see the potential in SDS and promoted positive risk taking – both for those working practically in the co-design team, and for those working more strategically in the wider team.

Practitioners across the board were sceptical about this process at the beginning of the project; however, through involvement they were able to see how it built on the core values of social work and how the outcome was of practical use in their day-to-day work. Similarly, the group was able to see clearly how the end product(s) from the project were much more fit for purpose than if they had been developed by practitioners in isolation. Working in this way recognises that leadership is not vested in people solely through their authority or position; it involves sharing it with others, coming together on the basis of a shared ambition and working together towards a better future.

4. Add weight by using the evidence base

Evidence from IRISS projects over the past five years suggests that social workers tend to be more comfortable working from 'what is', as it represents continuity with the past and implies less risk if something goes wrong. This incremental change helps to mitigate against some of the blame culture that exists (Petts et al, 2001), as it links in with the evidence and contributes to an environment where practitioners may be more willing to try out an adaptation to an existing approach.

IRISS has a unique configuration of activities for a social work organisation. Working alongside the Innovation and Improvement Programme is a second programme focusing on Evidence-informed Practice (and a third addressing Knowledge Media). This has generated extended debate – and an internship funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council - on the relationships between innovation and evidence in the context of Scotland's social services (Pennachia, 2013). IRISS, in line with sibling knowledge broker organisations, has adopted a definition of evidence in the social services that embraces three core elements: knowledge derived from research study; practitioner wisdom – often described as tacit knowledge; and the lived experience of people who access support and unpaid family carers.

One argument would be that innovation, by definition, cannot be evidence-based – to innovate is to explore the unknown and therefore precludes an existing body of knowledge. This linear view would suggest innovation and evidence are considered to be polar opposites, an argument

manifest in radical and transformational innovation. An alternative view, increasingly favoured by IRISS for the social services, is non-linear, with innovation and evidence woven together in a model best viewed as an interactive and reflective learning process. This weaving of innovation and evidence involves a 'remix' of ideas, ideas that have been copied, transformed and combined (Ferguson, 2011). Within this approach, 'copying', 'combining' and 'transforming' are defined as follows (Mootee, 2009):

- Copying 'something', but implementing it in a new context, which means it will need to change to become contextually relevant.
- Combining two or more 'things', and implementing them in an existing, or new, context.
- Transforming 'something' is generally referred to as radical change, which typically challenges existing cultural systems and norms.

This interpretation calls on different types of evidence to inform and focus the innovation process; it sits easily with approaches of service design (Stickdorn and Schneider, 2010) and co-production (Needham, 2012). The role of IRISS then becomes about facilitating change and in particular addressing the gaps in knowing how to put evidence or ideas into practice (rather than solely knowing what works, why and for whom). Explicitly, this means supporting the change process by sharing knowledge and expertise about how to effectively establish new ways of working.

For example, Relationships Matter is a service design project created to raise awareness of the current evidence base on how relationships are positively supported during times of transition in the lives of young people. This project will go a step further, with project activity characterised by the development and trial of innovative methods and approaches, building on what is already known but moving into the unknown, trying things out where there are no guarantees of success.

Key elements

Transforming services and cultures is hard. Organisations and individuals from across the social services are coming together to find new responses to the difficulties facing the sector by radically changing their approaches. In truth, IRISS has hardly even scratched the surface of disrupting the sector – that is not the role. Instead, the role involves working together with people and practitioners and the wider communities to consider what it is that is wanted and needed. It becomes about identifying what doesn't work and should therefore be stopped, so that attention and energy can be focused on designing a more effective society.

The report from the Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services (Christie, 2011) brings to the fore the need for new ways of working. It argues that *"irrespective of the current economic challenges, a radical change in the design and delivery of public services is necessary to tackle the deep-rooted social problems that persist in communities across the country"*.

To date, IRISS has supported those inside the sector looking out, searching for new ways to respond to dilemmas, and then supporting those outside looking in, nurturing people to grasp ideas and give them a place to grow. The social work role in all of this is pivotal. Social workers are often the gatekeepers to accessing a wider range of opportunities within neighbourhoods and communities. Working with this influential group, supporting them to take time out of their

responsibilities, providing spaces for reflection, and encouraging them to become emerging leaders alongside people who access support, is a key area of focus.

The evidence from IRISS over the past four years highlights the need for the following elements to be in place in order to support social-work driven innovation:

Leadership

Social work involvement is pivotal for ideas to be embedded in practice across the sector. However this requires significant confident leadership and the readiness of social workers to be proactive within their own spheres of influence.   For this to be achieved, organisational cultures need to be developed which devolve authority to those who work on the front line and which engender flexibility. Within flexibility lies an inherent responsibility, which many social workers may find liberating, and which requires leadership that acknowledges complexity and tolerates uncertainty (Patterson, 2011).

Cross-sectoral working

There is evidence that supports the notion that the dynamics created by working together generate fresh perspectives on causes and responses, while the growth of trust and confidence coupled with a greater spread of skills encourages innovation and openness.

The move towards integrated health and social care led by recent legislation in Scotland is a unique opportunity to learn and question from the practices, energies and ideas from those with (often) dramatically different methodologies and ideologies. This is a move which favours looking up and out for inspiration, rather than looking down and within one's own organisational boundaries and roles. Working in this way requires commitment, energy, relationships and structures that are agile and focused on the outcomes that people want in their lives. Social workers perform a valuable role in this new integrated world – by keeping the focus on the needs of people who access support, and appreciating the importance of improving the experiences of each individual.

Build on the ideas of others

For social workers being caught between the conflicting expectations of risk enablement and risk aversion, IRISS ascribes to the theory of blending (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002). This suggests that notions and elements from diverse scenarios are combined subconsciously to generate new ideas and concepts. The theory of blending is comforting for social work practice as it is closely linked to incremental change.

Combining existing ideas to create a new idea often mimics natural selection: it results in a hybrid which, if successful, is stronger and more resistant. The power of combining ideas is demonstrated by Ferguson (2011) who shows that creativity 'happens by applying ordinary tools and thought to existing materials' and that 'everything we make is a remake of existing creations, our lives, and the lives of others'. Mulgan also argues that drawing on a range of inputs external to an individual's usual area of work helps generate ideas. The process of creating ideas (ideation) can be made easier by using social design tools that specify easily taken steps which will help generate more radical ideas (Mulgan, 2014). Neutral facilitators in the form of 'expert novices' such as service designers can provide the conditions for a unifying environment.

Make   time

Time is a precious resource and repeatedly managers and front line staff describe workload pressures, which leave no space for reflection. Time for creativity and innovation are needed as social services undergo change. This time is required in order to develop relationships, to work together with people who access support and to test things out in practice, learn from what works and adapt.

Conclusion

As an organisation, IRISS seeks to model the innovation it encourages in others. A range of initiatives has been introduced to foster creative thinking and the generation of new ideas. An advert was placed for a creative-in-residence, inviting applicants to tell us how they would work with us. The individual appointed, from a background in advertising and copywriting in the commercial and public sectors, has supported more precise and creative thinking about the focus of projects, the 'who, what, what'. Similarly, IRISS has also hosted a practitioner-in-residence to help better understand the day-to-day realities of delivering social services. 'Creative Quarter' (cq.iriss.org.uk) has been a flagship project which has included 'Creative Bites', 40 people sharing their thoughts and ideas on a monthly basis to inspire creativity, and Arts with Impact, a variety of innovative spaces for practitioners from different disciplines and sectors to come together with artists to develop ideas for service improvement. Artistic interventions provide a new environment for people to explore their identity, skills and abilities and to build their resilience. By doing this, the arts have the power to support people to develop new skills, improve relationships and to show them a new sense of themselves. A further element of Creative Quarter was the provision in a small town of a seed fund of £10,000 for people who use services, carers and the wider community with ideas for a new business start-up or to test innovative ideas in an existing small business. Clear from the start was that failure was acceptable (see IRISS On… Failure); learning important.

The title of this contribution posed a challenge: can social services embrace innovation or is this indeed a contradiction in terms. The argument presented above seeks to demonstrate that, despite the challenges, innovation can indeed be achieved; moreover in order to support the objective of achieving good outcomes for the individual it should be considered essential rather than optional.

Acknowledgments

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