

Council Leaders’ Key Actions for Innovation

Create the climate for innovation

- Encourage creativity
- Invite external challenges
- Proactively look for fresh ideas, internally and externally
- Take vital, calculated risks
- Experiment, fail quickly and learn from failures
- Celebrate achievements

Agree clear long-term ambitions for innovation

- Agree clear, long-term strategic objectives
- Deeply understand residents’ concerns and the key future challenges
- Select the priority areas for major innovations
- Ensure proposed major innovations are well considered and attainable

Lead for innovation

- Build a united political and managerial leadership approach to innovation
- Convincingly communicate the need for priority innovations to residents, employees and partners
- Listen to others’ ideas, comments and concerns
- Work cross council and with key partners
- Move forward boldly, with pace and determination

Ensure priority innovations are delivered

- Devote sufficient time, resources and expertise to priority innovations
- Provide space and licence to test new approaches
- Involve key stakeholders, eg residents, employees, partners, businesses
- Monitor progress closely
- Persist, persist, persist

These key actions were identified from research on politicians and innovation, conducted in partnership with the Local Government Association (LGA).

The quotes overleaf are from the leading politicians interviewed.

Creating the climate for innovation

“It is not about taking risks, it is about whether you think the thing you are doing is right. If you are absolutely convinced that what you are doing is right, then you have to mitigate the risks.”

“You need space to think. With all of the challenges coming at you, the danger is that you make bad decisions because you have not taken any time to think creatively about how you are going to get away from this.”

“One of the things that the financial climate has done is to give politicians more freedom to take risks. because people understand that if we just do business as usual, or try to salami slice away at the budget, councils will fall over financially.”

“Make sure that people are talking to other councils. Make sure that cross fertilisation is going on. And it doesn't happen unless you encourage it.”

“One of the things that I am really interested in is how we use technology to take the strain, to do things differently.”

“We encourage the officers, if you have got an idea, we need to hear about it. We always look for the positives. We say, we like this, but this needs changing.”

“We want to get across to officers that councillors want innovation, want to do things in a new way.”

“External challenge is good: challenge from residents and local businesses. You need to get people from all backgrounds, saying: ‘why do you do it like this?’ or ‘why do you do it at all?’”

Do you:

- encourage creativity?
- invite external challenges?
- proactively look for fresh ideas, internally and externally?
- take vital, calculated risks?
- experiment, fail quickly and learn from failures?
- celebrate achievements?

“We have a 20-year plan, as to what kind of communities we want. It is alive and breathing, and it runs through everything we do. You can see a golden thread from our living ambitions, our strategy, through the five goals, through all our projects and processes.”

“You need a picture of the future. Where the finances of the country and local government are going.”

“There is no point in attempting to innovate, if you have no idea what your vision is.”

“We are examining each department, asking: ‘Do we still need to do it? If we need to do it, is the way we are currently doing it the best way to do it?’”

“The first conversation has to be with your community about: ‘what do we want this place to look like?’ Then you can build a set of priorities. Then you can innovate to get to that point.”

“You could have a really bright idea, that in practical application could be really successful. But, given diminishing resources, is it actually a priority for you?”

“No major FOOTSIE company wouldn’t have a 10 year plan. It allows you to think about things in a different way.”

“Our innovations need to relate back to our priorities.”

Agreeing clear long-term ambitions for innovation

Do you:

- agree clear, long-term strategic objectives?
- deeply understand residents’ concerns and the key future challenges?
- select the priority areas for major innovations?
- ensure proposed major innovations are well considered and attainable?

“You can’t do everything at once. You have to understand the capability of your organisation for change.”

“You have to take people with you. And if you can’t take people in your own group, or your own council, then you are not going to take the public with you.”

“Be brave and confident about what you are doing. If you are timid about some of these changes they won’t happen.”

“Councils are in the best place ever to have a conversation with their communities, and say: ‘we have no money. We are going to try to protect public services. We are going to try all of these things, and they are new, we haven’t done them before. You might not like some of it, and you might like some of it, but at least we are trying to do something, rather than putting up the white flag and saying we give up.’”

“You will leap to a ‘eureka’ moment, and you will assume that everyone has understood it with you. You have got to take them through the same process. And that takes time.”

Leading for innovation

“Councillors should spend time with the staff doing the actual delivery. You find out far more about what is going on and the challenges.”

“You need to be radical and to get on and do new things. That is what is needed at the moment.”

Do you:

- build a united political and managerial leadership approach to innovation?
- convincingly communicate the need for priority innovations to residents, employees and partners?
- listen to others’ ideas, comments and concerns?
- work cross council and with key partners?
- move forward boldly, with pace and determination?

Ensuring priority innovations are delivered

“There is no point in having ideas if you can’t deliver them, because you get egg on your face. We do what we know we can deliver. We have big ideas, but ones that are actually achievable.”

“You need a clearly defined goal, but be prepared to change the way you get there.”

“Even when it gets rocky, you have to have the resolve, because you firmly believe what you are doing is right.”

“Innovating is something that doesn’t happen quickly. Our innovation has taken 20 years. There is something to be said for that little valued virtue of constancy.”

“You need to road test it first, to learn what works and what doesn’t.”

“The secret is to recognise quite quickly when it is not going well.”

“You need to involve employees’ representatives from the beginning.”

Do you:

- devote sufficient time, resources and expertise to priority innovations?
- provide space and license to test new approaches?
- involve key stakeholders, eg residents, employees, partners, businesses?
- monitor progress closely?
- persist, persist, persist?

Innovation in local government definition

Innovations are 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 businesses.

Innovations are often ideas adapted from elsewhere, that are new to the council. They can be quite small, or they can be major, radical and game changing.

Key findings from Research on Politicians and Innovation

The Accelerating Innovation in Local Government Research Project, in partnership with the Local Government Association (LGA), has been examining how local politicians might encourage innovation to flourish in their councils. The quotes in this leaflet are from the leading politicians interviewed.

The research found that the leading politicians interviewed were taking many of the actions that help to foster innovation. However, very **few were taking a fully comprehensive, strategic approach to achieving more innovation.**

The most important areas for further action were for leading politicians to ensure that their councils:

- agree the priority areas for future innovations
- devote sufficient time and resources to developing the priority innovations
- genuinely involve frontline employees, and local residents, in developing the priority innovations
- closely track progress on developing the priority innovations
- persist intelligently, despite many barriers, until the priority innovations are achieved.

The 'Key Actions for Innovation' summary aims to provide politicians, individually, or as a group, with a checklist they can use to review whether there are further actions they might take to achieve more major innovations.

The findings from this research support and complement the findings from recent research undertaken with chief executives and front line employees. The previous research was used to develop the Local Councils' Innovation Framework, a similar review tool, designed for chief executives.

Further information

For more information about this research, see:

<http://tinyurl.com/councilinnovation> or contact: joan.munro@btopenworld.com

For details of the LGA/NESTA Creative Councils programme join the Creative Councils' Knowledge Hub group

<https://knowledgehub.local.gov.uk/group/creativecouncils> or visit NESTA's website:

<http://tinyurl.com/nestacouncils>

Council Leaders Interviewed

James Alexander, Leader, City of York Council

Peter Fleming, Leader, Sevenoaks District Council, and Chair, LGA Improvement and Innovation Board

Sarah Hayward, Leader, London Borough of Camden

David Hodge, Leader, Surrey County Council

Alan Kerr, Deputy Leader, South Tyneside Council

Tony McDermott, ex-Leader and current Chair of Scrutiny, Halton Council, and member, LGA Improvement and Innovation Board

Teresa O'Neill, Leader, London Borough of Bexley, and member, LGA Improvement and Innovation Board

Professor Doctor Wolfgang Schuster, Ex-Mayor, Stuttgart, Germany; President, Council of European Municipalities and Regions; Director, Institute for Sustainable City Development

Doreen Stephenson, Leader, East Lindsey District Council

Martin Tett, Leader, Buckinghamshire County Council

Peter Thornton, Leader, South Lakeland District Council

Michael White, Leader, London Borough of Havering

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