People's lives as sources of innovation: the story of the Social Innovation Lab for Kent (SILK)

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Why set up a Social Innovation Lab?

KCC has a well-earned reputation for incubating and developing radical innovations in policy and practice. We strive to be an organisation that supports innovation – but more than that, an organisation that *demands* innovation from all of its staff.

We constantly seek to learn from other places about how we can value innovation and build it into the fabric of our organisation. We know that providing space for experimentation, and taking a pro-innovation approach to risk is essential. We try to treat initiatives and pilots from central government as opportunities to develop new thinking and demonstrate new forms of value. Indeed, for a long time now we have played a leading role in helping Whitehall shape its own thinking. For example, we were the first council to set up our own Public Service Board as a way of bringing together public services across local organisations, in order to improve outcomes for the people of Kent.

But supporting innovation has required more than obtaining freedoms and flexibilities from central government, useful though that can be. We seek to create and communicate an explicit mandate for all 42,000 of our staff to innovate. For example, we produced pledge cards for staff to carry around spelling out their role as innovators. We sponsored the Kent 'Year of Innovation' in 2007-8. This was a celebration of our successes, and featured a range of activities and events that happened across the county to spread good ideas and reinforce the permission we want to give people to follow their good ideas and develop new practice.

Visibly committing financial and human resources – making innovation someone's job – is as important as working hard to make it everyone's job. In 2006, we restructured to create the Strategic Development Unit, which was explicitly charged with formulating, capturing and developing innovations. We also have the Change Through Innovation team, whose task is to scan the horizon for emerging technologies and run prototyping projects to explore how KCC might make the most of these.

Since the beginning to 2007, we have started to pay more attention to an area of growing interest in the commercial as well as the public sector. Increasingly users – people, customers, citizens – are being recognised as crucial sources of innovation that often go un-noticed and under-used, particularly in the public sector. To underline just how rich a source of innovation we might be missing, an American academic found that 85% of innovations come from the frontline – those people using any number of the countless services we provide.

To try to unlock this tremendous resource of user insight and energy, we began in early 2007 to incubate our own Social Innovation Lab for Kent, or SILK. Our ambition was to create a Lab that did two things. First, it would run projects around some of our most intractable social problems, using a 'person-centred' approach and involving our citizens in the innovation process. Second, it would build the whole organisation's capacity to start with people, rather than existing services. This is easy to say, but the

journey to seeing services as users do, to getting out of institutional mindsets, is a long and hard one.

The remainder of this essay tells the story so far of SILK.

How we started

We knew that we needed to understand how to make a person-centred approach work specifically in the context of local government. Therefore we created a SILK prototype that tested our thinking in practice through two 'demonstration' projects. The first of these focused on families at risk in Kent, and the second on how people access information about social care, and the role of our online directory of providers in this.

We used these projects to test our hunches about what approaches and techniques might work: from a much deeper phase of insight gathering – using methods from the worlds of design, business and ethnography, to a more structured approach to ideas generation, to creating much more diverse teams for the projects, bringing in a range of perspectives, we learnt a tremendous amount from these practical prototypes of our new approach.

It's easy to run a great project once; it is far harder to do it again. Our prototyping phase therefore invested some time and money in capturing what we learnt from these projects – often through getting things wrong as well as getting things went right. Working with Engine, our design partners, we created a person centred project planning tool. This isn't a rigid methodology, but it does help staff to plan their projects, by taking them through the phases, and offering them a wide range of tools and methods they could use to gather insights, engage with people, and generate new ideas. We think this is unique in local government.

As well as the projects, the prototyping phase tested out ways of getting wider conversations going around the council about the importance and the potential of user-driven innovation. For example, we were the first council to host The Public Office[1] - a two day installation that used video ethnography and facilitated conversation – to bring over 100 of our senior managers together to reflect on the issues.

Outcomes so far

Inevitably, the impact of our early projects will take time to filter through. But the work with families has shaped both the strategic plan of our Children, Families and Education Directorate, and our determination to focus on the elimination of poverty and the development of resilience. A number of follow-up projects have resulted from this early work. The most developed of these is working with one of our Children's Centres in East Kent to redesign their services for fathers. Another is exploring how new technologies might reduce isolation and loneliness, in collaboration with the Digital Inclusion Team at CLG.

Similarly, the work on how people access information about social care has had a catalytic force. The outcomes of that project are now part of the groundwork for a much bigger initiative to develop an online resource to help people plan their care in an era of Personal Budgets and Self-Directed Support. We are doing this important work in

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[1] http://www.thepublicoffice.org.uk/

collaboration with the South East Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership, the Young Foundation and Nesta.

But SILK was never intended to be just an internal consultancy. Its role in effecting culture change, in helping our staff to genuinely start with people and their lives, is as important as its project work. The staff that made up the team who worked on the families project reminded all of us how institutional barriers can stand in the way of 'seeing and hearing' our citizens. For example, the team imagined that many of these families' lives would effectively revolve around the public services they accessed. There was no real insight before the project into the importance of family and friendship networks, the desire to avoid many public services, and the impact of a very poor physical environment on accessing those services. It quickly became apparent that the public service assumptions about empowerment, independence and personalisation would need to be re-thought.

As this implies, we learnt during the SILK prototyping period that generating innovations from gaining a deeper understanding of people's lives is not easy work, particularly for government. Unlike the best commercial organisations, government does not have a strong skills-base in ways of gathering customer insight. It is often overly reliant on survey-based data and feedback from only those sections of the community who are the most articulate. This can be simultaneously superficial and misleading. Finding ways of complementing this mass information approach with one based on insight and deeper understanding is essential, but it takes hard work and commitment.

In this light, it is hardly a surprise that we believe that SILK's real potential will only really be delivered when this person-centred approach part of the mainstream 'way of doing things'. Work is now underway to embed SILK's methodology in the toolkit we are producing for our Comprehensive Engagement Strategy. We are also building on the early connections made between SILK and some of our staff development programmes, such as the Talent Management Programme and our Graduate Programme. SILK approaches need to become part of the core 'curriculum' for staff and for the management development courses we run.

The future

The future of SILK must rest in combining its ability to pull together multi-disciplinary teams to run focused projects on key social issues, with a programme of building capacity within KCC and our partners, so that SILK approaches become a way of doing the day job. A comment from one of the family project team members is a reminder of how SILK challenges current working cultures: 'we think we work on the ground here but this work reminds me that we don't always know what's really going on…'. Or another: 'we need to embed these principles into every area of our work'.

We learnt during the pilot that without some serious sponsorship from the top of the organisation, it is very hard to gain the purchase necessary to work in new ways. It is only with senior management sponsorship that the outcomes of SILK's projects can truly act as springboards for greater innovation.

As well as positive senior sponsorship, one of the most exciting aspects of SILK's development was the opportunity it presented us with to meet new people from beyond the world of local government. Traditionally, local government can be quite insular and poorly networked. Through SILK, however, we are making connections with social

innovators across the UK and indeed internationally. We are keen to continue this dialogue as there is tremendous richness in learning from others.

It's still early days for SILK, but from 2009 onwards, it will move into a more mainstream phase, with a small core team, and a budget that enables us to engage with a wide range of innovation and user insight experts from beyond local government. We think it's an important principle that SILK continues to attract funding from other sources too – in particular, we believe that teams or services wishing to run SILK projects invest as a sign of their commitment to engage and learn from the process.

The other question we are still working on is SILK's relationship to more formal governance. As a prototype, it was helpful to 'shield' SILK from too much scrutiny and performance measurement. However, as it becomes a mainstream part of the council, we will need to address the question of how it relates to our day-to-day business processes – financial planning, partnership working, priority setting – more explicitly.

It's not been a completely smooth path, but SILK in many ways bears testament to KCC's willingness to grab every opportunity we perceive with both hands. When we started to prototype SILK, we knew that there would be an ever-greater emphasis on customer focus and user engagement in the second round of Local Area Agreements and the new performance framework. We watched with interest as service design and innovation processes shot up Whitehall's agenda. We hope that what we've learnt here will help other innovation labs – both in councils and nationally – to avoid some of the 'noble mistakes' we made, as well as to take inspiration from what we have achieved so far.

Once firmly established, SILK will help KCC and its partners to meet the needs of Kent's residents in new ways. It will help us to plan for the future, and to provide the all-important 'rocket fuel' for innovation. In a world of ever-tightening budgets, rising expectations, and new challenges, this is not a luxury but a necessity.