



research position paper



Growing and nurturing social innovation

Nancy Rogers

Introduction: why a position paper?

The DFC portfolio faces significant and complex challenges across all areas of policy and service delivery. Many of these are demand-driven, but they also relate to the effectiveness of our current approaches; social, community and economic change; and the emergence of new challenges and social issues. In some areas of our work it is clear that current responses are not working as well as they should and different or new approaches may be needed. In such a context, innovation becomes an imperative.

Innovation has emerged in recent years as a major concern and focus of government and industry across Australia as well as much of the western world. Nationally, the Rudd government is actively developing an innovation statement and approach; at the State level, innovation is a target area in the SA Strategic Plan. Whilst this is the first time government policy has so clearly focused on innovation as a topic in its own right, it is not, of course, a new concept and it is certainly not new in DFC. This department is, and always has been, an agency with a strong innovative record and capacity, driven by the need to adapt and change and facilitated by the commitment and talent of staff. However, the new focus creates both opportunities and challenges for this portfolio, specifically in relation to social innovation.

This Position Paper has been developed by the Research Unit in response to the growing focus on innovation. There are particular responsibilities which the Research Unit has in supporting and fostering innovation, as well as in maximising potential benefit. Research underpins all stages of the innovation cycle and particularly so in the case of social innovation. Social innovation is in effect action research: applying knowledge (including that gained from existing research); trialling, developing and evaluating; and generating new knowledge about what does or doesn't work and why. Innovation involves creativity and enterprise – but it also requires rigor and a systematic approach to problem analysis, knowledge application, assessment and knowledge generation. This paper therefore sets out the approach the Research Unit will take to support and foster innovation across the DFC portfolio, as well as assist in positioning

For more information:

Department for Families and
Communities
Business Affairs
Research Unit

research@dfc.sa.gov.au

ph: 08 8413 8176

www.dfc.sa.gov.au/research/

Social innovation... new ideas that work to meet pressing unmet needs... and improve people's lives.

DFC and the field of social innovation in the emerging innovation agenda.

The Paper draws on the work of major thinkers and researchers in social innovation as well as the pre-eminent document on Australian innovation and innovation policy (*Venturous Australia*, Cutler, 2008). It is not a comprehensive review of the innovation literature; it does not make recommendations about what should be done across DFC; and it does not propose structural or other solutions. Rather, it aims to provide an accessible, evidence-informed entry to this increasingly important field and to stimulate discussion within teams, business units, agencies and groups. It also aims to contribute to the development of common understandings across DFC on what social innovation actually is; the innovation process; and barriers and facilitators. It also sets out actions the Research Unit will undertake over the coming year in relation to innovation.

What is social innovation?

The simplest definition of innovation is 'good ideas, put into practice'. Social innovation has a particular focus: it is concerned with new ideas that work to meet pressing unmet needs in our community and improve people's lives (Mulgan 2007). That is, social innovation tackles pressing social problems or new social issues; and its focus is problem solving and experimentation to develop new services, models and approaches.

This widely accepted definition draws a distinction between social innovation and administrative or organisational improvements and efficiencies or incremental change. Social innovation is also not rolling out or replicating a program developed elsewhere. Administrative improvements, incremental changes and replicating existing innovations are all very important and should be a normative aspect of an organisation's operations. They are not, however, social innovation.

The traditional 'pipeline' model of innovation is one in which ideas are created in special places by special people ('researchers in white coats in laboratories') and then embedded into physical products which are engineered, manufactured and distributed (Cutler 2008). Few innovations actually work this way - and especially not in the social arena. Whilst research (and particularly university-based research) remains the starting point for many technical, scientific and medical innovations, social innovation is different. Service delivery settings

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and agencies have a more central role in this form of innovation - they are usually the initiators, leaders, developers, doers and funders. Social innovation is thus less dependent on research than other areas. Social innovation is also far more than 'research into practice' - a term which implies a linear approach, where ideas are developed by special people (researchers) in special places (universities) to be applied by policy makers and practitioners. Research can and should inform social innovation (the more evidence-informed a potential solution is, the more likely it is to work). But innovation also takes evidence and knowledge generated from multiple sources and applies it in a process that demands many other elements: problem solving, imagination, creativity, extensive knowledge of service delivery and context, the ability to turn ideas into reality and (often) change management.

Successful innovation usually originates from people closely connected to an issue - people with a detailed knowledge of a problem, an understanding of what works and what has already been tried and also of service context, relationships and potential. This means innovation frequently occurs at a local level, drawing on the creativity and commitment of people trying to solve their everyday problems (Bacon 2008). However, innovation can also come from other sources, including organisational leaders and policy makers (especially in the case of major policy innovations).

Social innovation is also distinctive in its collaborative and interactive nature. It usually involves many different people, professions or agencies working and talking together in partnership. It also tends to be fostered, enabled, supported and spread by communication (Leadbeater 2006).

Why innovate?

Innovation is sometimes treated as a desirable luxury, something agencies might do when they have spare time or spare cash. In fact, it is essential: the most important condition for survival in a changing and challenging environment (Bacon 2008). We live in a community and age marked by rapid change - in patterns of demand, need, social attitudes, behaviour and social composition. This means government, policy and services must also change and adapt. Into the future we will increasingly be required to do things differently and respond to new complexities and challenges. Our old ways of working will not be enough. This makes innovation a necessity.

Innovation is also essential if DFC is to respond in the most

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cost-effective way to the complex needs within our community. Social innovation is concerned with developing new responses when current policy and service responses are inadequate or ineffectual, where there is unmet need and when new issues and challenges are emerging. The more pressing the challenges, the greater the need for innovation (Bacon 2008). Such a context is an everyday reality for this organisation.

Innovation also has other benefits. It can energise, empower and inspire staff; it contributes to a learning, vibrant organisational culture; it builds networks, partnerships and relationships; it promotes a sense of possibility and achievement; and it gives staff the opportunity to develop new skills and capacity. Innovation enables the generation and implementation of ideas from both the 'top down' and the 'bottom up'. This means innovation is open to all within an organisation.

Social innovation is thus one way to respond to the complex challenges which this portfolio faces. It is not, of course, the only way: incremental change and service improvement, or introducing a model or approach that has been developed and refined in another location, are both possible and important. Innovation is appropriate when there is a pressing need to act or to stay ahead of shifting demands, opportunities or pressures; and where the necessary solutions have not been developed elsewhere (Bacon 2008).

The limits of innovation

Innovators must demonstrate some caution, however. Innovation is not an end in itself – rather, its aim is to maximise social good. And just because an idea is new doesn't mean that it is good. Innovations are not inherently virtuous; they can fail and they can be damaging. Further, at any given time, the bulk of our department's work must be 'business as usual' – it is not necessary, nor would it be helpful or possible, to be constantly innovating.

We also need to be realistic about what social innovation can and can't deliver. Innovation is not a silver bullet solution for complex problems and it cannot deliver answers where none exist, or when significant social, funding, capacity or policy change is required. DFC works in very difficult terrain and generally we may be confident that if there were simple, easy solutions for the issues which confront our department, we would already be doing them.

It is also useful to remember that for every complex problem there are



Innovation is not a silver bullet solution for complex problems.

always simplistic, wrong answers. Simplistic solutions have no place in innovation. Successful innovation is built on high quality thinking and information, almost always generated by people deeply connected to a topic or issue.

The policy foundations for innovation

Innovation is now a major concern of government in South Australia, nationally and internationally, and there is a clear policy foundation to support an innovation commitment.

Fostering creativity and innovation is a major thrust of the SA Strategic Plan (Objective 4). The Social Inclusion Initiative and the Thinkers in Residence program have both sought to develop and foster innovation, with the residency of one Thinker, Geoff Mulgan, focused explicitly on social innovation. In response to his report, the SA Government is establishing the Australian Centre for Social Innovation, with a charge to develop 'effective remedies for key social issues'. \$6 million over three years has been committed (Rann, 2008). In February 2009 the Board of the new Centre was announced with Phillip Adams as inaugural chair.

The SA government innovation agenda is led by DFEEST, where initiatives include STI10 (a ten-year vision for science, technology and innovation in SA) and Constellation SA (to strengthen research collaborations and the interface between the research community and end-users) (Science and Innovation website 2008). The focus to date has been predominantly on the scientific and technological, with an emphasis on research-led innovation.

The Rudd government is also developing an explicit policy focus on innovation. In January 2008 a major Review of Innovation was commissioned by Senator Kim Carr, Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research. The resulting report – *Venturous Australia* - makes wide-spread recommendations aimed at promoting 'an innovative Australia'. The main focus of the report is scientific and technological innovation, university-led research and the role of business, with only limited consideration given to the social (although it is certainly acknowledged). However, the review presents excellent conceptual frameworks and models relating to innovation which are transferable to the social arena.

Public policy in Australia is thus now explicitly supporting innovation. However, social innovation is still marginal in this process and

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the least developed area conceptually, structurally and policy-wise. In such an environment DFC has both permission and opportunities to pursue innovation and can also position itself to be on the front foot with concepts, ideas and directions.

The innovation lifecycle

Cutler (2008) has depicted the innovation process as consisting of three elements:

1. the origination of new knowledge and ideas (knowledge production)
2. deployment of an idea (knowledge application) and
3. the diffusion and adoption of applied knowledge and its adaptation in use (knowledge diffusion and absorption).

In relation to social innovation specifically, research has generally identified a lifecycle along the lines of:

1. identification of a need or issue, or the pressure to change
2. design and discovery
3. trialling and testing
4. assessment, application and diffusion.

These phases are outlined below.

Stage 1: Issue identification and pressure to change

Social innovation firstly needs a reason, a motivation. Social innovation must always be in response to need that is not being met and is most likely to happen when there is necessity and a powerful motive to drive and legitimise change. The recognition of an unmet need may be enough, but often a stronger drive is provided by acknowledgement of underperformance or the ineffectiveness or cost of existing strategies. Motivation for individuals 'at the coalface' is influenced by the day to day difficulties and challenges. However, motivation may be stifled if an organisation does not also recognise or support the case for change. Strong motivation not only legitimises action but can create an organisational willingness to take some risks (when the costs of inaction are likely to be greater than the costs of action, or 'nothing ventured, nothing gained') (Bacon 2008).

Stage 2: Design and discovery

The second stage of innovation is focused on the generation and development of ideas. Problem solving is at the heart of innovation and successful problem solving will draw on existing knowledge and

Problem-solving is at the heart of innovation.

information from a range of sources, applying creative and critical thinking to develop new ideas and approaches. In essence, this stage develops a 'theory of change' – what could be done, what might work and why.

Ideas are rarely totally new. More often social innovation combines and draws on existing knowledge and ideas which have been tried previously in another area. Or, it borrows ingredients and blends them together in new ways (Leadbeater 2006, Nutley 2002).

Successful design and discovery processes are usually highly collaborative, bringing together potential partners who have a stake in the solution or outcome. Social innovation often depends on multiple partners and cross-agency collaboration. Putting innovation into effect usually involves working across organisation, sectoral or disciplinary boundaries (Mulgan 2007). Partnership working can also embed a vision and shared commitment across multiple agencies to respond to needs. This collaborative element, involving people who need to be 'part of the solution', is another reason why successful innovations are often locally based (Bacon 2008).

Stage 3: Trialling and testing

The third stage in innovation is giving ideas concrete form, or turning them into action. Implementation is also a process of testing ideas and the 'theory of change' behind the innovation. Ideas will change and grow through the period of implementation; unintended consequences – both positive and negative – are likely to be identified, along with unforeseen difficulties. It is to be expected, then, that ideas and practices will be modified, developed, adapted and improved during this time.

Stage 4: Assessment, application and diffusion

The final stage includes the assessment of an innovation's success or otherwise; consolidation and application of learning; and the diffusion of derived knowledge. Decisions must be made about the ongoing future of the innovation: has it worked and is it likely to result in sustainable benefits over the long-term? Is it cost-effective, and able to be scaled up or adopted as common practice to replace existing services? Are resources available for ongoing application? Knowledge also needs to be diffused and spread to influence practice in other places. Further, assessment will usually lead to modifications based on learning from the trial or experimental phase.

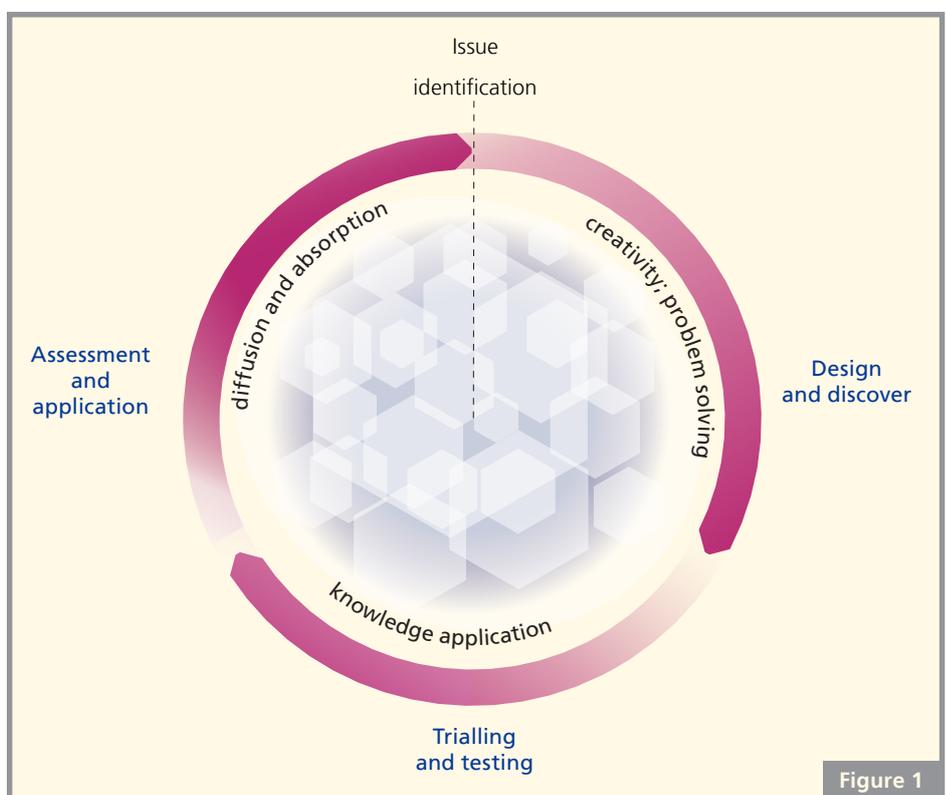
It is people who innovate, not organisations.

Innovations are most likely to be diffused rapidly when:

- They have a significant relative advantage over current alternatives
- They are consistent with past practice, current values and existing needs
- They can be readily understood and easily implemented
- The new ideas can be tried out at relatively low cost
- The use and benefits of the innovation are visible to others.
(Nutley et al 2002)

The above ideal model is, of course, over-simplified and in practice processes are usually less sequential and 'neat'. Time-frames for the cycle will also differ significantly – the results of some innovations may be very quickly observed whereas others, particularly in complex areas of policy, will require assessment over the long-term.

The innovation cycle is perhaps best understood as circular, rather than linear, or, 'a virtuous and open-ended cycle of learning and responsiveness to new challenges and possible solutions' (Cutler 2008 p. 17). This is depicted below.



Modified from Cutler 2008

Innovative individuals operate within a system, not a vacuum. Organisational context can facilitate or discourage innovation.

Fostering innovation

Innovation cannot be compelled, forced or mandated. Setting specific 'innovation targets' introduces the risk of innovating for innovation's sake, potentially fostering ill-conceived or inadequately developed ideas. Innovation can, however, be fostered and facilitated. What are the preconditions and elements that will promote social innovation in an organisation?

The innovation literature identifies two inter-related areas of investment for an organisation wishing to build its innovation capacity: namely, **workforce capability** and **organisational culture, structures and supports**. These are discussed below.

A focus on people

The most fundamental drivers of innovation are the skills, knowledge and attitudes of the workforce. Fundamentally it is people who innovate, not organisations - people and talent make innovation happen (Cutler 2008). Encouraging innovation requires a focus on human capital and talent development – building capability in the workforce. What are the elements to be fostered?

Charles Leadbeater (2006) argues that successful social innovators are good collaborators, adept problem solvers, open to ideas and willing to think afresh.

Independent critical thinking and creative problem solving are hallmarks, as is the creative energy to try new things. Innovation also requires knowledgeable people, skilled in their areas of the business; and people with the ability to turn ideas into action and 'see it through' (Bacon 2008).

Cutler (2008) also promotes the notion of 'T shaped professionals' – people who have a grounding in their own discipline but also sufficient knowledge and flexibility to embrace the insights of others.

People who are active, reflective and committed learners also support innovation. Staff who are keen to absorb, apply, and generate knowledge, as well as 'try things out' and learn in the process, are an enormous asset to an agency (Cutler 2008).

A focus on organisational context

Innovative individuals operate within a system, not a vacuum. Organisational context can facilitate or discourage innovation.

Collaboration and relationships of trust are... key features in... cultures which foster innovation.

Leadbeater (2006) argues that organisations should openly commit to innovation: it should be an overt aim, part of the story an organisation tells about itself. This means publicly valuing and supporting innovation and actively nurturing an organisational culture which fosters it. It also means demonstrating a commitment to innovation and investing in innovative capacity (Cutler 2008).

There is strong concordance across the literature on the characteristics of organisations which foster innovation. *Such organisations free their staff to think and experiment and actively encourage creativity and the development and exchange of ideas.* They encourage critical thinking and build opportunities to explore ideas, discuss and debate. *They empower their staff and give them appropriate freedom to act and innovate within their own spheres.* Creative energy and the capacity to act are nurtured.

Conversely, a conformist, authoritarian, command-and-control culture, where people fear punishment, blame or 'failure', and where staff do not feel they have the power to make decisions over their own patch, is a distinct barrier to innovation.

Collaboration and relationships of trust are also key features in organisational cultures which foster innovation (Bacon 2008, Leadbeater 2006, Mulgan 2007). Social innovation is always highly interactive and collaborative relationships and partnerships are key elements in both the development and implementation of ideas (Mulgan 2007). Social innovation is rarely stimulated by people sitting alone at their desk – complex social problems are likely to be solved only through intense and open collaboration between many participants.

Innovative organisations invest in their channels and processes of communication and knowledge management. Innovation rests on communication, access to knowledge and information flow. Use of knowledge, as well as knowledge production, occurs at all stages of the innovation cycle (Cutler 2008). The development of good new ideas is supported by access to existing stores of knowledge – held in people, as well as in more traditional stores of research and literature. Further, knowledge generated through innovation should be communicated across the organisation and beyond. Innovation has limited value if the new program or response is confined to a small local area and benefits and learnings are not diffused or more widely applied. Communication and information flow also serve to connect and energise the whole system (Cutler 2008).

Innovation rests on communication, access to knowledge and information flow.

Innovations are experiments.

Innovative organisations are also learning organisations, with the capacity to absorb and incorporate new knowledge. Innovation always generates valuable knowledge, regardless of the success or otherwise of the innovation. Reflective learning should be supported and knowledge systematically identified, documented and shared.

Innovation will be fostered where organisations:

- are openly committed to and support innovation
- accumulate and generate knowledge and ideas and have strong communication channels through which these may be shared and developed
- are staffed by creative, thoughtful, knowledgeable and skilled people who are equipped, motivated, encouraged and freed to think about adopting or doing something new.

Experimentation and risk

Innovation is inherently risky. Innovations are experiments – trying something out to see if it works, or if it works better or more efficiently than current responses. Some experiments will be successful, but many will not.

The public sector has an obligation to support and practice innovation and to cultivate new models, policies and services. But it also has an obligation to be cautious about innovation and to take steps to minimise the inevitable risks (Mulgan 2007). Innovations may not work or they may waste money and resources. In the worst possible scenario they may place people at risk or cause actual harm.

An innovative organisation must have a commitment to experimentation and a willingness to ‘try things out’, knowing that some ideas will be successful but many will not. There must, therefore, be a tolerance for failure – or, indeed, the recognition that all experimentation is about learning and knowledge development, and there is as much to be learnt in ‘failure’ as in success.

There must also be acknowledgement that innovations are seldom (if ever) launched fully formed and perfect. The process of innovation inevitably includes trial and error, learning, modification, adjustment

Successful innovation... requires good thinking, hard, conceptual work and excellent skills.

and development. Expectations of innovations must be realistic, with a long-term view and an understanding of the very real challenges inherent in implementation.

Risk, however, must and should be minimised. Mulgan (2007) has argued that innovation tends to be easier when:

- The worst case risks can be contained
- There is evident failure in existing models
- Users have choices (to choose either a mainstream service or the alternative innovation)
- Expectations are carefully managed (including at the political level).

Discernment and care also minimises risk. Successful innovation is not just coming up with a good idea and trying it out. It requires good thinking, hard, conceptual work and excellent skills. The more evidence-based and well-thought out an idea is, the more likely it is to be successful. Further, the environment in which implementation is to occur should also be conducive to success (adequate resources, support, permissions, partnerships, accord etc). Simplistic solutions, based on poor research or little knowledge, are high risk. So are innovations in an environment which does not provide the necessary support or resources or where the agreement of key partners is lacking.

Risk management

- Risks should be articulated, assessed and managed, with mitigation strategies in place
- Only quality ideas with a clear possibility of success should be trialled
- Implementators should have the competence, capacity and resources needed to succeed
- Retain the capacity to adapt or withdraw as results emerge
- Seek endorsement and support from key stakeholders
- Manage expectations

Social innovation has always been a feature of DFC (and its forebears) and will continue to occur, regardless of whether or not specific strategies are taken to foster it.

Money matters

DFC operates in a very tight fiscal context in which there is very limited access to new resources to support innovation. What does this mean for our innovative potential? How can innovation be funded and supported?

There are two views in the innovation literature on the importance of funding. Some recommend establishment of innovation funds or setting aside dedicated resources to support innovation (for example Mulgan 2007). There is no doubt that new resources can fuel and energise different responses and ideas and create the potential to do something different.

However, extra resources do not automatically result in innovation. It has also been argued that access to funding is not essential for innovation and can sometimes reduce the pressure to innovate, result in 'more of the same' and in fact prop up failing services and structures (Bacon 2008).

Innovation grants are particularly problematic in the community services. Such grants are by their very nature time-limited and recurrent resources must be found to support an ongoing program. Much time, energy, enthusiasm and goodwill can be wasted on trials when programs in which people have invested many hopes and hard work end. This is particularly problematic in direct service delivery, where local innovators may not understand government budgetary processes or the likelihood of attracting ongoing funding and where expectations of funding success may be unrealistic. Further, short term funding has implications for clients as well as staff: it can be very difficult to withdraw a service after a trial stage, especially if these expectations have not been managed from the start.

A grant-based system to support innovation also creates the danger of innovation being a small, added-on-extra response, whilst the vast majority of business carries on 'as usual' and unchanged. The aim is for innovation to be mainstreamed and scaled up, replacing existing practices. For this to occur innovations will need to demonstrate better cost-effectiveness than existing practices. However, this is easier said than done and additional resources are likely to be required at least for the trialling and testing processes.

Innovation is both a responsibility and an opportunity spread across an organisation.

Generally, in innovation money matters and must be found – either from existing resources or new ones (Bacon 2008). Agencies must find ways to invest in innovation, but carefully so as to maximise success and sustainability and not set people and programs up to fail.

Supporting social innovation in DFC

DFC is already an organisation where social innovation happens. Social innovation has always been a feature of this agency (and its forebears) and will continue to occur, regardless of whether or not specific strategies are taken to foster it. DFC is privileged to be staffed by many people with a strong personal commitment to their work, extensive skills and knowledge and the desire to make a difference, address need and facilitate change. It is also at the forefront of the pressure to address unmet social need and respond to change – conditions which create the necessary drive and motivation. However, there are clearly many things we can do to support and facilitate innovation as well as the capture and transfer of knowledge.

It is not the purpose of this paper or the role of the Research Unit to develop recommendations about innovation in DFC or propose a structural or funding solution. Pragmatically, there are unlikely to be resources to support a structural model (for example the creation of an 'Innovation Unit') or dedicated innovation funds. Further, research does not necessarily suggest that such an approach is necessary or even desirable. Innovation is both a responsibility and an opportunity spread across an organisation and every executive, business unit, manager and team, as well as individuals, can facilitate and support it. That aside, specific areas in DFC can have particular responsibilities in relation to innovation – and this paper gives specific consideration to the role of the Research Unit.

Innovation will happen in different ways, in different places, for different reasons. It can't be overly managed or completely coordinated; there will always be an element of the chaotic and inspirational about it. Innovation proposals may come from 'top down', from leadership, or 'bottom up' from local teams and work groups. Every business unit and work group can facilitate and nurture innovation. They should also be able to recognise and name innovation when it emerges and know 'what to do with it' – have the capacity to assess, make decisions about, manage and support innovation, as well as maximise resulting learning and benefit.

With this in mind, the following section proposes questions which

Every business unit and work group can facilitate and nurture innovation.

might be considered, at different levels and locations across the organisation, with regards to innovation. These are not an exhaustive checklist. They simply aim to stimulate thinking and awareness of some of the issues to be considered and thought through.

Considering the precursors to innovation

Investing in workforce capability

- What are the strengths or natural endowments in our workforce that we can build on?
- How do we employ for, develop and nurture workforce capability?
- Do our recruitment processes identify and allow for potential innovators?

In our workforce we need

- Good collaborators
- Adept problem solvers
- Openness to ideas
- Willingness to think afresh
- Independent critical thinkers
- Creative energy
- Solid knowledge base and expertise
- Ability to turn ideas into action

Investing in organisational context

- What can be done, across DFC and within individual business units, divisions and teams, to promote the organisational conditions that foster innovation?
- How do we rate on these currently? What can we affect and change?
- Are there opportunities and support for the generation of new ideas, thinking differently and reflective learning?

- Do our decision making and accountability structures empower and permit innovation?
- How adequate are our existing communication systems for supporting and encouraging innovation? What are our mechanisms for sharing and debating ideas and news, for diffusion and spread? What will work best?

As an organisation we should

- Publicly value and support innovation
- Demonstrate a commitment to innovation
- Encourage staff to think, experiment and exchange ideas
- Create opportunities for debate and discussion
- Value creativity
- Empower staff to act
- Decentralise decision making
- Encourage diversity of opinion
- Maintain a non-blaming, just culture
- Value collaboration
- Invest in communication
- Invest in knowledge
- Encourage reflective learning
- Document and share knowledge

Supporting the innovation process

Assessing proposals – to support or not to support

- What is the driver or need which the innovation is designed to address? How strong or urgent is it?
- Is the proposal actually a social innovation (as compared to business or administrative improvement, or a replication)? Is it a new idea designed to meet a pressing social need?
- Is it well thought through and evidence informed?

- Why is it likely to work? What is the logic, reasoning and evidence?
- What are the resource implications (staffing, cash, in-kind)? Where will these come from?
- Are there any political, ethical or legislative barriers that must be considered? Is specific advice required to make this judgement?
- Do we have the capacity to do it – including the right people? Will people see it through?
- Are the key partners on-board?
- What are the risks? How might these be mitigated and minimised?
- What is likely to happen at the end of the trial? What is the likelihood and potential for the innovation to be embedded and sustained? Where could the resources come from?
- What expectations might be created amongst the community, staff and partners? How can this be managed?
- Where does decision making and sign-off sit for this proposal? Who needs to know about it?

Trialling and testing

- What are the challenges and issues that might arise in the trial? How can these be managed?
- What kind of monitoring and accountability mechanisms need to be in place?
- How will you know if the innovation is successful? What outcomes and impacts are looked for? Will these be of the type and scale that allows them to be identified and assessed?
- How can information be collected from the start of the trial in order to assess effectiveness and (comparative) outcome?
- How long will the trial period take? How long until we know if it's working?
- What if something goes wrong?
- What support will the site need during the trial? How will this be provided?

Assessing and diffusing

- Has the innovation demonstrated a relative advantage or cost-effectiveness over existing models?

Three new directions:

1. improving dissemination and use of research

2. building capacity to evaluate and assess innovation

3. capture and share knowledge from innovations.

- Has it worked? Why or why not? What are the essential elements that make it work?
- What modifications need to be made? Can it be improved?
- What will happen next? Will it continue? Are resources available for ongoing application or extension?
- Is it able to be scaled-up or adopted as common practice to replace existing services?
- How complex is it? Can it be readily understood and implemented elsewhere?
- Is it compatible with current policy and service delivery?
- What knowledge has been generated? What are the implications?
- How can the new knowledge be documented and shared to influence practice and investment in other places?
- What are the policy and process implications?

Actions from the Research Unit

The Research Unit leads and coordinates DFC effort in research. Our aims include:

1. building and developing the evidence base which informs DFC's work
2. effective dissemination of knowledge generated through research
3. the increased uptake of research knowledge in both policy and practice across DFC.

The Unit acts as the 'front door' and first point of contact for external researchers; provides expert advice and assistance to departmental staff and others; undertakes and manages key projects on behalf of the portfolio and leads processes to develop research priorities and allocate research expenditure.

In 2009 the Research Unit will adopt three new directions which line up with to the innovation agenda, namely to:

- Improve the dissemination of, access to and use of research information across DFC
- Develop resources and other strategies to build the capacity of work groups to assess, reflect on, document and evaluate new initiatives
- Document and diffuse knowledge generated by departmental innovations.



These directions will support all stages of the innovation cycle. They will:

- improve access to existing research knowledge to assist in evidence-informed problem solving in innovation formulation
- assist in establishing evaluative models and approaches which capture information about impact and processes through the period of trialling and testing
- support and facilitate knowledge generation and diffusion during the final stages of the process.

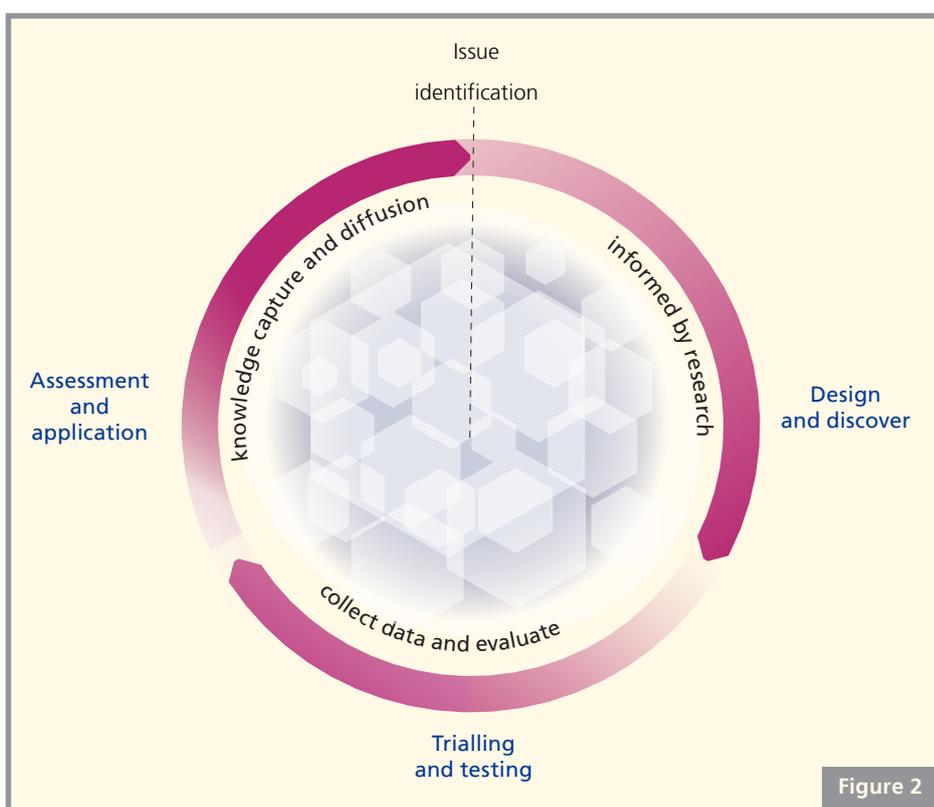


Figure 2

Modified from Cutler 2008

Specifically, in 2009 the Research Unit will:

- Develop and implement a [Research Communications Strategy](#) to improve staff access to and use of information from the latest and best research
- Develop an [Evaluation Tool-Kit](#) to assist innovators establish a robust evaluative framework to underpin their initiative (identifying the right questions to ask and how to answer them)

Resources

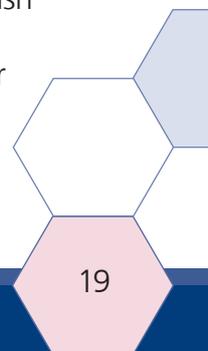
Advice

Information

Link new knowledge

Documentation

Dissemination



Writing up innovation experiences is essential for diffusion and 'spread'.

- Provide consultancy and expert advice for people planning or conducting the assessment and evaluation of innovations
- Undertake the evaluation and assessment of selected key high priority innovations
- Identify, document and disseminate knowledge generated by key innovation
- Support staff and workgroups to identify and document knowledge
- Link workgroups with key researchers to enable an action-research and practice-led research focus.

The Unit will thus provide services which are available to all social innovations across the portfolio – resources, advice and information.

More intensive and direct support will be available to selected projects. The Research Unit is well positioned to assist during design, trial and assessment phases of the innovation cycle, given the Unit's access to research and researchers, capacity for critical analysis and specific technical knowledge. In some cases, this will take the form of conducting or managing a formal evaluation process.

The Research Unit, in conjunction with Departmental leadership, will also select a number of promising innovations as case studies for a deeper analysis – what was tried, what worked, why or why not? What are the potential applications of this model and knowledge?

Documenting or writing up innovation experiences helps identify what has been learned. It is also essential for diffusion and 'spread'. The Research Unit will therefore work with staff groups to support reflective learning and knowledge documentation. This may often be as a mentor, rather than the 'writer'. Alternatively, we can assist groups link with key researchers who may act as mentors or advisors to the innovation and documentation process.

The Unit, in conjunction with others across DFC, will also develop strategies to assist in the dissemination of knowledge. This might include, for example, an annual publication which draws together and discusses case studies, or periodic papers or information sheets.



Is there an existing or planned project in your area which fits the criteria for social innovation?

Contact the Research Unit:

- to let us know about it, or
- if you want any assistance

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