

How politicians can encourage innovation in councils

This summary of the ways politicians can encourage or stifle innovation is based on our recent research with council chief executives and frontline employees.

It complements and builds on the Local Councils' Innovation Framework, see: http://creativity.city.ac.uk/accelerating_local_govt_innov.html

This summary will be tested and refined in forthcoming research with leading council politicians.

SETTING THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT

What encourages innovation?

- Constructively challenging the status quo
- Bring fresh perspectives, from diverse experiences
- Identifying the priority areas for innovation
- Agreeing key outcomes to be achieved by priority innovations
- Promoting the importance of achieving priority innovations e.g. to local residents, local press, opposition politicians
- Listening and responding to people with ideas, criticisms and concerns

What stifles innovation?

- Having too many priority areas for innovations
- Being unclear about success criteria for innovations
- Cutting management capacity so severely there is no time for managers to explore and develop new ideas

SUPPORTING INNOVATION PROCESSES

What encourages innovation?

- Ensuring effective delivery mechanisms (e.g. creative, skilled, powerful, determined innovation project leaders; time & resources safeguarded)
- Giving innovation project leaders appropriate autonomy, scope & support
- Ensuring relevant service users, other residents, frontline employees, and key partners are involved in major innovation processes

What stifles innovation?

- Expecting managers to conduct major innovation processes on top of their day jobs
- Not giving managers time or scope to look for ideas externally
- Trying to personally control & manage every detail of innovation processes

SUPPORTING AT DIFFERENT STAGES IN INNOVATION PROCESSES

a) GENERATING CREATIVE IDEAS

What encourages innovation?

- Allowing project teams sufficient time to deeply understand the issues before demanding their ideas for possible solutions
- Encouraging & contributing to generating creative ideas
- Looking for potential merits in unusual ideas
- Seeking learning from elsewhere (e.g. other councils, other types of organisations, abroad)

What stifles innovation?

- Demanding action and results before the issues have been fully understood
- Dismissing unusual ideas too quickly
- Not listening to mavericks

b) SELECTING AND DEVELOPING THE MOST PROMISING IDEAS

What encourages innovation?

- Investing in small scale experiments to test the most promising ideas, then investing in larger experiments with the most successful ones
- Maximising learning from failures
- Protecting innovation processes from normal performance management expectations

What stifles innovation?

- Only selecting 'safe' ideas with considerable support
- Not allowing any well planned risk taking
- Looking for someone to blame when there is an intelligent failure

c) ENSURING DELIVERY

What encourages innovation?

- Continuing to proactively support innovation processes, despite barriers, problems, opposition & many failures, until success is achieved
- Promoting and spreading successful innovations

What stifles innovation?

- Stopping innovation processes because of opposition, barriers, problems and failures

We welcome your comments on what is most important, or what is missing from this summary of what politicians can do that encourages (or stifles) innovation in local councils. Please email these to: joan.munro@btopenworld.com