![Coram – better chances for children since 1739]

INNOVATION IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES:

An insight report on needs for sector development

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Preface

By early 2020, before the pandemic transformed our world, the children's services sector was facing a set of key challenges to reach and support a growing number of children in need of help.

The National Audit Office report of January 2019[1] had highlighted the variability of response and sufficiency across the country to the growing demands placed upon children's services.

In May 2019, the *Timpson Review of School Exclusion*[2] identified discrepancies in the enforcement of exclusion depending on locality, policy and practice; as well as exploring the disproportionate presence of certain vulnerable groups among excluded populations, and how these children may be better supported to fulfil their academic potential.[3]

The ADCS articulated a significant resourcing shortfall in the face of growing SEND needs, and increasing demand on child protection and children in care services.[4]

Throughout the period, the Children's Commissioner's compelling reports on vulnerability[5] and stability and more recent detailed explorations of mental health provision for young people[6], the impact of the pandemic on those 'at risk'[7] and the state of the residential care system[8], indicate the further areas of urgent need.

The What Works Centre for Children's Social Care had begun its important work in driving further assessment of evidence-based opportunities for practice change, and the formation of regional adoption agencies was in full gear with a review of Social Care set to be commissioned before Covid-19 changed everything.

Since this time, there has been an acceleration and a deepening of the challenges faced by children in the face of school closures and disruption, despite the rapid modernisation and adaptation of services by all kinds of organisations and the massive response by government in the form of emergency support and Catch Up funding.

These identified issues have brought into sharp focus the pressing need for all parts of the sector to find ways to move beyond the barriers to achieve step changes — not just to improve incrementally and continuously in each area/service, nor even to reform and replicate but to disrupt the drivers and create transformational change by Innovation.

Following the investment (and completion) of the Social Care Innovation fund programme and as the Independent Review of Children's Social Care is seeking advice and evidence to inform its programme, a key question is "How well placed are we to achieve the kind of innovation we need?"

In order to attempt to answer this question, Coram-i has produced this short insight report to stimulate discussion and to call us to action.

Will you join the conversation?

Dr Carol Homden CBE

Introduction to the Innovation Survey

Why?

Between December 2020 and February 2021, Coram-i carried out the first National Innovation Survey for Children's Services.

The survey was designed to address a critical question: how well placed is the sector to innovate in order to find new solutions to the challenges we face?

It was distributed to all children's services departments and a range of organisations working with them, and completed by senior officers from across all parts of the sector (Directors of Children's Services and CEOs of charitable and private sector organisations).

Forty-one organisations submitted responses to sixteen questions aimed at understanding different approaches to innovation; the resources deployed to innovation; the barriers to innovation; as well as the most significant challenges facing the sector and where innovation could provide a solution.

The survey also asked for examples of innovations and a number of these were then followed up and are included as case studies within this report.

This is not and was not designed to be a comprehensive overview, but rather an examination of the appetite and preparedness leaders feel for the development task ahead of them. It enables us to examine together the means to build further capacity, capability, confidence and creativity at a critical juncture in our service to children.

Within and beyond the sector, we see the importance of innovation, driving change in an ever-changing world and constantly asking: how could we do this better? Innovation provides the potential for a different future and changes the ways we interact with the world as people and as consumers in our personal and daily life, from the smart phone we now depend on, to radically different ways we access goods and services. Progress happens through the process and mind-set of innovation.

Innovation can also enhance our working practices in children's social care — as it has in health and medicine — and improve outcomes for the communities we serve. It can range from simple improvements to radical innovations that fundamentally alter or disrupt. All are valid, and all are necessary if we are to deliver effective services in an ever growing landscape of demand and complexity.

The rationale for investing in active programmes of innovation is well illustrated through the examples of some household names from outside the sector. It was Nokia, not Apple, that invented the very first touch screen phone. Nokia had a working prototype but failed to commit the resources to commercialise the product. Apple, on the other hand, seized the opportunity, investing significantly to bring a commercial product to market, resulting in the arrival of the iPhone. This is considered a genuinely "game-changing" innovation that fundamentally altered the way we use phones, with Nokia left significantly behind. This begs the question: what game-changing innovations might we be failing to invest in?

The COVID-19 pandemic has cemented the case for embracing innovation as we work around the complexities facing health and social care. Technology offers us the change to radically re-think remote services, as illustrated by a project between Microsoft and Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust to employ HoloLens technology in daily ward rounds. This has proved invaluable, allowing teams to continue to provide high-quality comprehensive care whilst minimising health risks to staff and patients.

Innovation — whether it be through technology or through reworking existing structures and processes — can equally be deployed to achieve step changes in how children's services are delivered and to whom. The Department for Education's Children's Social Care Innovation Programme was an important catalyst for enabling incremental innovation in practice and important new approaches, from Pause and Frontline to the No Wrong Door and Mockingbird models.

Private sector innovations — such as the use of virtual reality in social work — give us an example of more radical, game-changing innovation, particularly clear when looking at its impact on perpetrators of domestic violence or placement stability in foster care as well as staff training and development.

The case for innovation is compelling. It is an integral part of the successful evolution of services for children and families and can clearly play a significant role in addressing an evident need.

Preparing Men for Change: Domestic Violence Perpetrators Programme

Redbridge Council has explored how radical immersive technology can be deployed to tackle domestic violence. As part of an existing programme aiming to reduce reoffending and invoke behaviour change, virtual reality technology was used with a cohort of male domestic violence perpetrators to help them to understand the impact their violent and aggressive behaviour was having on their families. The sessions were based on a collection of films taken from the point of view of a child experiencing domestic violence towards a family member, starting in the womb and into childhood. These VR films have previously been successfully used with social work teams for training purposes, and with adoptive and foster parents to build empathy for children who may come into care. Now this innovative programme has been pivoted towards a new stakeholder group. One Redbridge perpetrator claimed that being part of this trial was 'soul touching' and suggested that it had 'definitely changed the way I behave'.

This feedback indicates the potential transformative impact such technology could have in sowing the seeds for reformed behaviour and positive changes to family life, as we seek to address and stem rising rates of domestic violence.

"…we can't stand still because the needs of children and families are constantly evolving — in nature, number and in complexity. Constantly asking "is there a better way" is very much the Redbridge mantra and we instil that curiosity within the team so they feel empowered and encouraged to try out their ideas in a safe, supportive setting. Innovation is an essential ingredient for high performing services"

Adrian Loades
Corporate Director of People
London Borough of Redbridge

How are we doing?

This snapshot survey provides us with a fresh insight into how well we are currently doing and what we need to do to find the innovations which will transform the future.

Survey Findings

Who responded:
Forty one responses were submitted by local authorities, independent fostering agencies, voluntary adoption agencies and charities. Note: clearly some organisations fall into more than one category, so organisations were asked to identify themselves based on the service they represented.

Types of organisation

The split by organisation is shown below:

2% | 32% | 12% | 32% | 22%
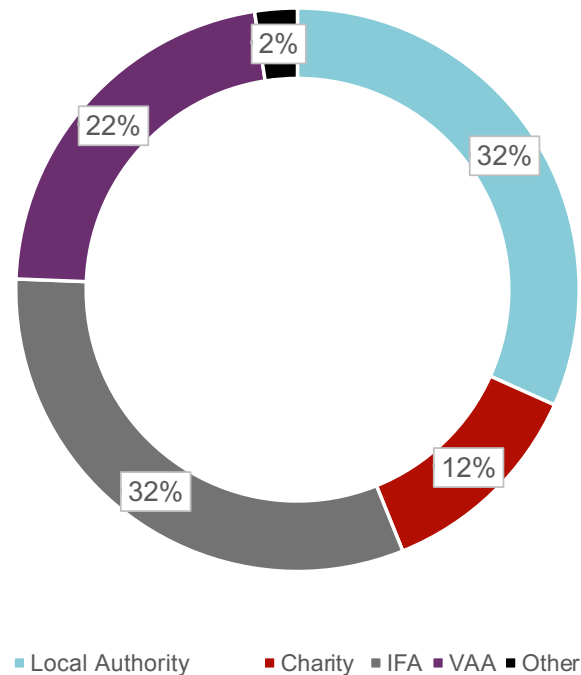
■ Local Authority　　■ Charity　■ IFA　■ VAA　■ Other

What do we mean by innovation?

The definition of innovation as "the pursuit and exploitation of new ideas" is drawn from the *London Business School* who state that innovation takes place at three levels: Sustaining, Incremental and Game-changing or radical Innovation. Each of these is important in the life cycle of an organisation, product or service.

Sustaining Innovation is the ongoing process of adaptation to an existing product or service by teams to maintain its relevance and hone its benefit.

Incremental Innovation is the process of product or service improvement, which requires reform of the approach and greater levels of change to process and performance.

Game-changing or radical innovation creates an entirely different solution to the problem; Henry Ford did not create the faster horses, but invented the motor car instead.

What levels of innovation does your organisation currenty operate at?

All organisations identified that they engage in innovation at some level, but far fewer operated at the level of game-changing or radical innovation.

- Sustaining
- Incremental
- Game-changing or radical
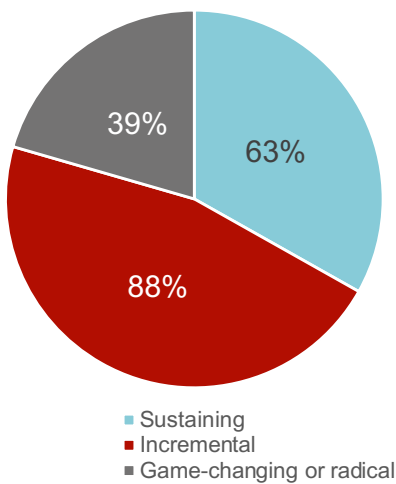
Types of innovation engaged in by organisation type (expressed as % of responses per category)

- Sustaining Innovation
- Incremental Innovation
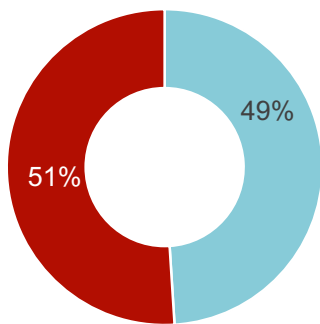- Game-changing or Radical innovation
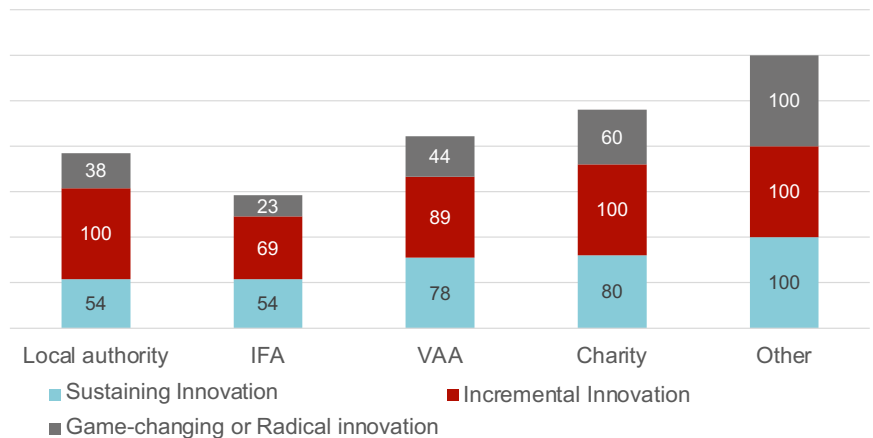
CASE STUDY 2

Salford City Council

"Salford City Council has a strategic director of Transformation with a directorate including HR, IT, policy and strategy and legal services reporting to the CEO. Within directorates and under Exec leadership we innovate and link with the transformation team supported by a squad approach. Resources also sit in the children's directorate with a head of service lead for innovation and a joint commissioning approach with Salford CCG that results in joint needs assessments and commissioning investment to deliver transformation"

Resources to Innovate: The majority of local authorities and charities have dedicated innovation resources, while the majority of IFAs and VAAs do not.

Does your organisation have a dedicated internal innovation resource?
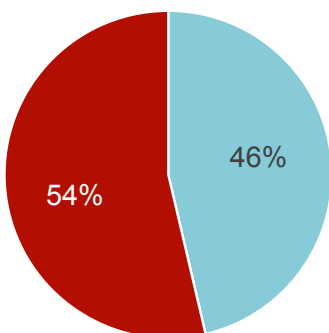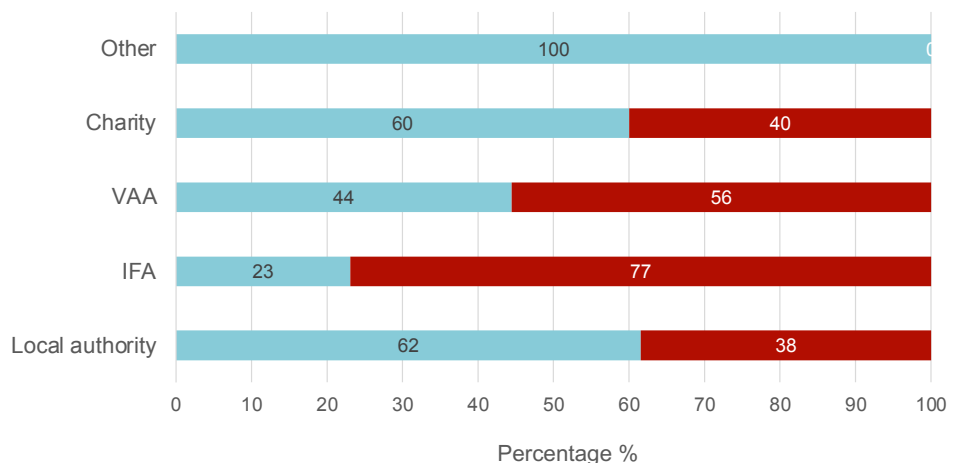

- Yes
- No

Percentage %
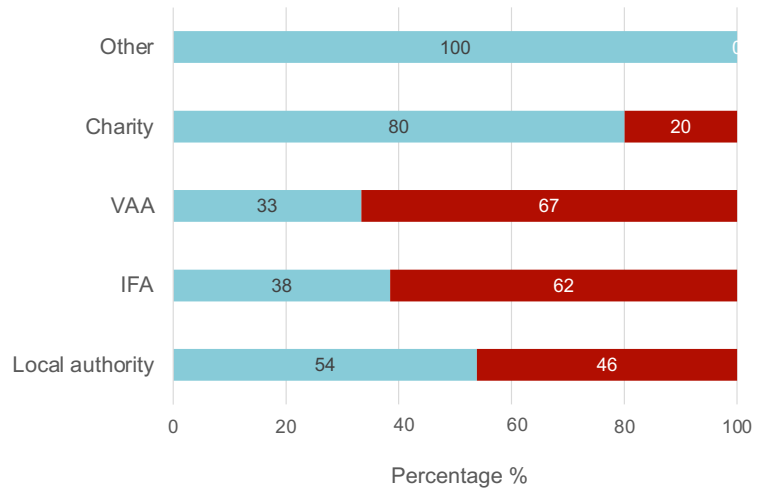
Investment in game-changing innovation:

> Almost 3 times as many local authorities invest in radical innovation as do their IFA counterparts.

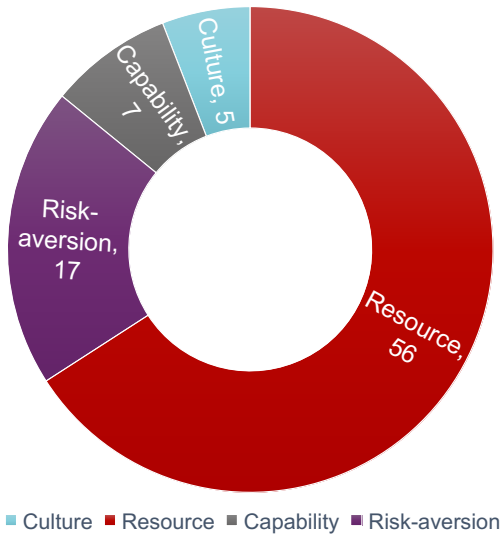Does your organisation invest in game-changing innovation?

- Yes
- No

Percentage %

Barriers to Innovation

Greatest barriers to innovation

Culture, 5
Capability, 7
Risk-aversion, 17
Resource, 56

- Culture ■ Resource ■ Capability ■ Risk-aversion

The primary barrier identified by all organisation types was resources to innovate, with qualitative responses indicating that this is both in terms of finance and people.
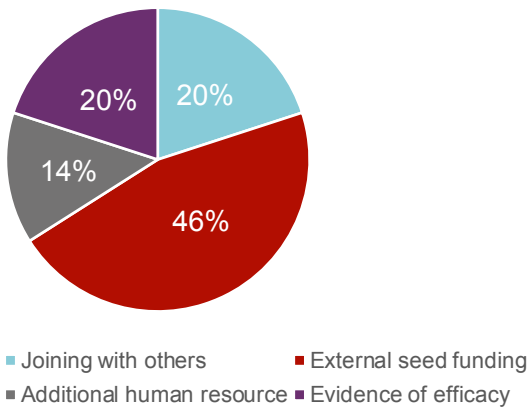
Capability is also seen as a significant barrier and again the qualitative responses echoed this finding.

Risk aversion was reported in both the qualitative and quantitative data with the political / electoral cycle and highly regulated nature of the sector being cited.

Importantly, however, organisational culture is not seen as a barrier to innovation.

Seed funding, Evidence and Joining with others are the biggest factors influencing more radical innovation

What would encourage your service to invest in radical innovation?

20%
20%
14%
46%

- Joining with others ■ External seed funding
- Additional human resource ■ Evidence of efficacy

Factors Influencing Investment in
Radical Innovation by Organisation Type

Other	100
Charity	25 / 38 / 13 / 24
VAA	17 / 58 / 8 / 17
IFA	25 / 50 / 17 / 7
Local authority	8 / 46 / 15 / 31

Percentage %
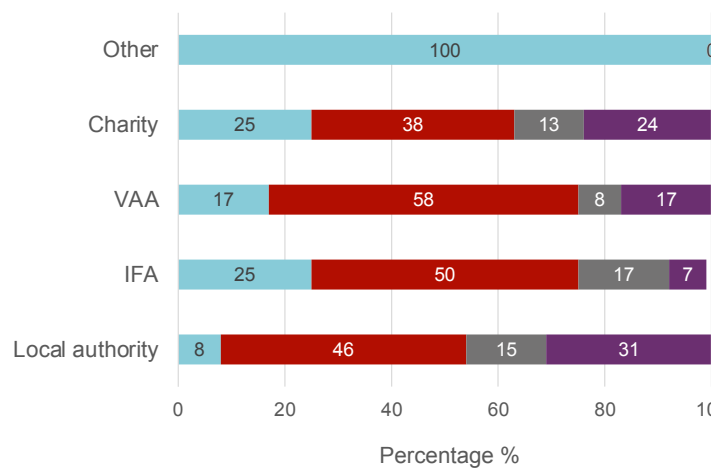
Note: respondents were asked to select factors encouraging radical innovation out of a choice of three factors: 'Joining with others', 'External seed funding', 'Additional human resource' or 'Other'. Evidence of efficacy was subsequently added as a new category for the purposes of this report as many who selected 'Other' referred to a need for evidence before committing to radical innovation.

The dominant issues going into 2021

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally skewed the picture over the past 12 months and many qualitative responses referenced a range of Covid impacts: from causing organisational uncertainty in the case of some charities, to the rise in domestic violence at a societal level.
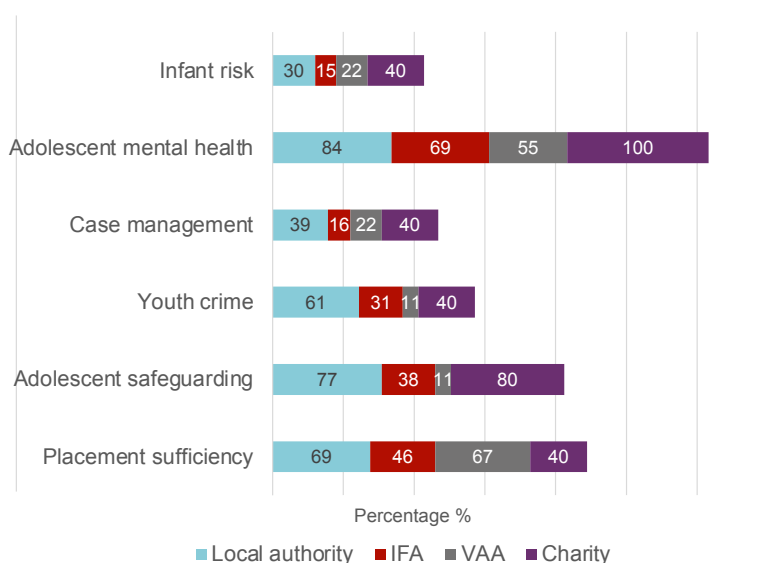
COVID-19 has also been a barrier to organisational capacity and capability, creating workforce issues, both in terms of staff illness and the ability to reach families and children.

A wide range of issues were reported in the qualitative data including: issues of widening disparity (race and poverty); foster carers withdrawing (due to Covid) hampering the challenge to secure placements, and a range of funding issues.

Highest Priorities by Organisation

Organisation	Placement sufficiency	Adolescent safeguarding	Youth crime	Case management	Adolescent mental health	Infant risk
Charity	40	80	40	40	100	40
VAA	67	11	11	22	55	22
IFA	46	38	31	16	69	15
Local authority	69	77	61	39	84	30

Percentage %

- Placement sufficiency
- Adolescent safeguarding
- Youth crime
- Case management
- Adolescent mental health
- Infant risk

Highest Priority Challenges

Challenge	Local authority	IFA	VAA	Charity
Infant risk	30	15	22	40
Adolescent mental health	84	69	55	100
Case management	39	16	22	40
Youth crime	61	31	11	40
Adolescent safeguarding	77	38	11	80
Placement sufficiency	69	46	67	40

Percentage %

- Local authority
- IFA
- VAA
- Charity

Overall adolescent mental health is the highest ranking (i.e. biggest) issue, closely followed by placement sufficiency and adolescent safeguarding. However, youth crime and adolescent safeguarding can arguably be conflated as they are often seen as two sides of the same coin; this then becomes the dominant issue. The fact that a range of issues pertaining to adolescents are amongst the top challenges is a finding in and of itself.

Discussion

These findings give us much cause to celebrate as we recognise the great commitment to- and breadth of- innovation across the sector. Of particular importance is the finding that almost every organisation that responded reported being engaged in some level of innovation.

COVID-19 has undoubtedly served to catalyse innovation in the way services are being delivered; a good example of which is the way many have migrated their services onto a digital platform during the pandemic.

Necessity may be the mother of such invention or migration but we can see from our survey that 61% of organisations do not invest in, nor feel able to operate at, a game-changing level of innovation.

This is a significant gap given that the growth in demand and complexity is almost certainly not proportionately matched by increased resources – the implication being that without radical innovation, levels of service will not be able to be sustained.

Arguably the absence of radical innovation in the majority of organisations surveyed might be expected, since the level of investment needed and the intolerance of failure in such a highly regulated and risk averse sector are found to be barriers for most. In the case of local authorities these account for over 75% of the "barriers to radical innovation".

Furthermore, we can see from both the qualitative responses and the quantitative data that the need to work with others and the need for specialist innovation "capability" confound the ability of organisations – particularly local authorities – to embark on programmes of radical innovation.

Where there is a "fix" for these issues based on existing evidence, we can see signs of innovation being enabled, such as in the case of the widely reported **Social Work in Schools** project (Case study 3). If successful, this may be a game-changer in terms of early intervention and prevention provided that a model of sustainable resourcing – beyond the pilot funding allocated – is available.

CASE STUDY 3

Social Workers in Schools: An example of potentially game-changing innovation

The What Works Centre for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) is trialling a project across multiple local authorities which seeks to explore the extent to which placing social workers in secondary schools can promote safeguarding and provide a better service to children and families, whilst reducing overall demand. The study is a collaborative project between two units at Cardiff University and the Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences based at the University of Oxford. The preliminary pilot indeed evidenced a promising impact of this new method, with a decline in child in need and child protection work. This broader trial is looking to explore whether such positive outcomes are sustained when applied to a larger trial group, which involves 21 local authorities and 300 schools. The metrics of the project are defined as fewer referrals to children's social care, fewer Section 17 or Section 47 investigations and, more broadly, better educational outcomes.

Participating authorities receive funding for a maximum of eight social workers and a team manager. Social workers are assigned their own secondary schools and are expected to assimilate as a member of school staff, whilst simultaneously working with feeder primary schools. The remit of their job covers statutory social work, but the cases they manage are based within the school. In addition, social workers will look to promote and embed understanding of safeguarding and child protection among school staff. An independent evaluator will evaluate the impact of placing social workers within schools compared to the control group schools who do not have a social worker in-situ.

One of the organisations taking part, Gateshead Council, has suggested the project is benefitting the community, with social workers able to provide continued support, despite school closures, to vulnerable children through home visits and targeted interventions. In Gateshead, early indications show that the project has stimulated more positive relationships between children, families and social workers. Whilst the project is in its infancy, it has the potential to transform the way social workers interact with vulnerable children and demonstrates the value of approaching innovation through collaboration between multiple expert partners.

Regarding the question of investment in innovation, an interesting finding is the difference between the independent sector and local authorities — why is it that 2.5 times as many local authorities and charities invest in radical innovation as do their counterparts in the independent fostering sector?

One explanation might be the extent to which IFAs feel the need to innovate; given supply and demand dynamics are heavily stacked towards demand, one could argue that there is simply no business case for investing in improving services. Or perhaps there are financial imperatives that drive a more short-term horizon. Certainly for the commercial sub-sector of IFA suppliers where merger and acquisition activity is frenetic, generating a healthy balance sheet and EBITDA in the short term is likely to dominate decision making by senior executives over and above re-investment of profits into innovation for longer-term gain.

The recent LGA report[9] into profit making by independent children's services providers cites profits of £265m against income of £1.54b for the 20 largest providers combined. If just 5% of that profit was ring-fenced and reinvested back into the sector expressly for the purposes of supporting radical innovation, that would provide a £13m "ventures fund" to unblock the barriers to innovation and enable local authorities and others to create and implement the solutions they are clearly capable of developing.

According to Pervaiz K.Ahmed, lecturer in Innovation Management at the University of Bradford, organisational culture is critical to the achievement of innovation and it is a key finding that culture is not seen as a barrier to innovation by the vast majority of respondents.[10]

This is significant because organisational culture is arguably more challenging to "fix" than other barriers cited, often being more resistant to change and requiring the attention of the whole organisation. It is to the credit of responding leaders across children's services that their organisation's culture is considered an enabler to innovation.

The highest priority issues are relatively similar across the different organisations: adolescent mental health, adolescent safeguarding, youth crime and placement stability. It is clear that the issues facing adolescents are not unconnected but are rather a set of inter-related and confounding factors, all of which amount to a very challenging picture for this age group. Set against a year of COVID-19, lockdown isolation, postponed exams and home schooling, the imperative to actively intervene and support our adolescents over the coming months and years is unquestionable.

Furthermore, the transitional nature of adolescence as a unique phase in development (i.e. the journey from childhood to adulthood) and the grave and lasting consequences of an unsuccessful adolescence, combined with the multiple and extreme challenges facing this important sector of society, merits a bespoke and attuned response. The needs and solutions for a 13 year old differ in every dimension from the needs of a young infant. *Perhaps the time has come for an "Adolescents' Commissioner" to champion the needs and progress of our tweens and teens?*

We often think of technology as synonymous with innovation: given that technology is the domain of young people, so should innovation become the hallmark of our endeavours for adolescents. Technology is the "go to" means of communication, organisation, entertainment, shopping, and remote meet-ups. It is the primary source of help and advice for young people, and the channel through which role models are sought out and followed (whether these are negative or positive influences on a young person's life). Amazon, Facebook, Instagram and Google combined know more about the way vulnerable young people are living and the risks they are taking than any youth offending service or social care records can possibly reveal.

£265m

It is clear that digital disruption has already happened for vulnerable adolescents. And those that seek to exploit and abuse them have pivoted their business models, distribution channels and marketing methods to meet the needs of their target audience with great success.

In this area we need to ask whether statutory or independent providers are keeping pace. In order to stand a chance of redressing the balance, and overtaking perpetrators, the public sector (and all of those whose aim is to keep young people safe) need to apply the same – and better – digital disruption techniques, drawing on the best of new technology and embedding it within professional practice. One promising example of the way technology and professional practice can be blended to achieve positive outcomes in relation to youth crime is the **Axis Project** (Case study 4)

Hillingdon Council's Axis Project: An example of game-changing innovation

Hillingdon Council have developed the Axis Project to steer young people away from a path of exploitation and criminality. The Axis analytics software compiles, triangulates and analyses information generated by multi-agency partners, community groups and the public in order to highlight at risk young people. Safeguarding teams, including the police, are then afforded a comprehensive oversight of key trends, themes, locations and associations which they can utilise to efficiently and effectively target their interventions to dismantle exploitative networks and protect young people. A monthly Axis bulletin also tracks developments related to adolescent safeguarding, informing partners of new exploitation methods to look out for.

Axis Case Workers are mobilised to work with at risk young people and their families, and set them on a positive trajectory away from a world of criminality. The project has already proved successful: between April 2019-March 2020 full interventions were undertaken with 114 young people, and 80% of young people supported are no longer classified as at risk of exploitation and criminality or requiring monitoring by safeguarding agencies. Axis has been widely commended, and was awarded a prize for 'Innovation in Children's Services' in the Municipal Journal Awards. The Axis project offers a way to provide effective guidance to a vulnerable adolescent cohort, who require our focus now more than ever before.

How to bring about Sustainable Change

Many verbatim responses to the survey highlighted the potential tension between the need to use evidence-based approaches and the need to innovate.

By definition, innovation is the preserve of the novel — seeking out new approaches and making them work in practice either within the current structures and channels or by creating new ones.

As the examples cited demonstrate, innovation can be informed by relevant evidence-based indicators that give us confidence that the approach we are testing stands a good chance of succeeding. Then the challenge we face is whether that evidence from pilots leads to change in a sustainable business model, with the necessary investment to move from the way we have always done things, given that a new type of organisation may be required.

Radical innovation for sustainable change may rather be achieved by "leaps of imagination"; challenging the incremental approach of demonstrating a concrete evidence base for investing resources by building new channels, thereby thrusting public funders in particular into the unknown.

Where this is the case, risks can potentially be diminished to acceptable levels by joining together with others to share the risk and by using external resources and capability to fund and deliver. This would enable business as usual to remain undistracted and undiluted during development and to utilise new channels for realising the goal.

A Call to Action

In practice, the most effective way to sustainable change is through a combination of both evidence-based approaches as well as outstanding innovations. And when we succeed in bringing together these vital ingredients, the benefits to our communities will follow.

As the Harvard Center for the Developing Child has made clear, "the central question before us is not *whether* strategic risk-taking and fresh thinking are important prerequisites to breakthrough impacts for children and families facing adversity. The more compelling questions are: *How* can we make that happen? *What* will it take to reduce the barriers? *How* can we increase the incentives? *How* can we come together across multiple sectors and work collaboratively with families and communities to learn from both failure and success? . . .

"The possibility for substantial progress in our ability to dramatically improve the life prospects of all young children is real. The time to aim higher is now."[11]

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