The Whitehall Innovation Hub: Innovation, Capabilities and Connectivity

Su Maddock

**Visiting Professor University of the West of England
Honorary Fellow, Manchester Business School,
University of Manchester**

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ABSTRACT

Government interventions are often expected to deliver innovation policies within unrealistic timeframes and their short shelf life is determined as much by elections as evidence. This is the story of one such intervention in the UK. Encouragingly, New Labour recognized public service innovation for the first time in 2008 and invested in a number of initiatives to support it, one of which was the Whitehall Innovation Hub (WIH).

The WIH's task was to persuade policy-makers of their role in public service innovation. Its strategy was to work with innovation champions andto stimulate innovation demand by persuading Whitehall leaders that innovation was a matter of responsiveness and collaboration rather than diktat. This approach was closely aligned to the Cabinet Secretary's desire for civil service transformation and was endorsed by the Department of Innovation and Skill's Permanent Secretary and Minister in 2008.

The account that follows demonstrates the significance of narratives about innovation and beliefs about how change can be implemented by administrations, which remain elitist and dominated by departmental fiefdoms. It also highlights the problems encountered by small(marginal) units within highly politicized environments. The Hub was neither inside nor outside of government, and its strategy was contested, although later accepted as pertinent once adopted by the Treasury and Cabinet Office.

In May 2010, the Coalition Government was elected and public innovation policy changed dramatically. Austerity and ideology led to policies that focused on public sector savings and business growth with marketization as the driver of service innovation. The government has lost interest in the role capabilities and human connectivity in service innovation and the 'science to business' model of knowledge innovation reinstated.

Key Words: Leadership, Public Innovation Policy, Practice and System Alignment

Origin

In 2007 the British government created the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) to stimulate innovation and a more integrated policy approach to skills, higher education and innovation. *Innovation Nation,* the DIUS White Paper on innovation, was published in 2008 and for the first time the British government innovation policy made reference to public sector innovation.

> *Innovation in public services will be essential to the UK's ability to meet the economic and social challenges in the 21st century. Education, health and transport provide the underpinning for all innovative activity. Demand is growing amongst public service users for more efficient service that are personalized to their needs* (DIUS, 2008).

Innovation Nation recognized the challenges of climate change, public health, ageing, etc. and demanded that those in policy-making become much more explorative and innovative in their problem-solving and initiate dialogue across government, the public sector and business sectors. The government accepted that it needed to stimulate innovation in all sectors and a demand for public service innovation within government. Innovation Nation recommended investment in intermediaries such as the Design Council and NESTA[1] and the Whitehall Innovation Hub. The WIH's role was to develop Whitehall's internal innovation capabilities and the demand for innovation side, while the role of the Design Council and NESTA would be to stimulate social innovation supply. Although the supply side of social innovation was strong, it lacked funding, government recognition and an infrastructure to sustain it. There was growing recognition that government policy-makers needed to be more concerned with innovation demand (Edler & Georghiou, 2007; Georghiou, 2007).

The WIH was situated within the Sunningdale Institute led by Professor Sue Richards as part of the National School of Government [NSG], formerly known as the Civil Service College. Su Maddock was seconded from Manchester Business School to be the WIH Director on the basis of her experience in public leadership, public service innovation and knowledge exchange. Initially, there were high expectations of the WIH and it was given high-level support. In spite of this its financial resources were limited to one year, later extended to 2010. DIUS, the WIH's sponsoring department and the government's department champion for innovation was also low in Whitehall status. The Design Council, WIH, NESTA and DIUS officials worked collaboratively in the first year, but when the public servants gained confidence in the public innovation agenda relationships changed and the Cabinet Office and Treasury took over a policy-defining role.

Drivers of UK public innovation policy

A movement for social innovation gained momentum in the 2000sand intermediaries such as The Design Council, the Innovation Unit and Young Foundation became credible lobbyists and effective drivers for public service

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[1] NESTA, National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts became the vehicle for experimental public sector innovation research and development in 2008. www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/public_services.../coproduction.

innovation across government. Ministers became politically sensitive to publicity that public services were not improving fast enough and that Whitehall civil servants were too slow to recognize the potential of social innovation to public service reform. Cabinet members were persuaded that public service innovation was needed, and that the work of social intermediaries could be used as a model for public services by government departments. Geoff Mulgan, Director of the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, urged the government and the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) to invest in the government's innovation capacity in order to a stimulate demand for service innovation within government (Albury & Mulgan, 2003; Mulgan, 2007).

Mulgan and others were instrumental in developing the ideas within *Innovation Nation.* There was a growing recognition by many in social and public service innovation that the government's institutional practices and closed systems were hampering its receptivity to innovation in all sectors, but particularly to public service innovation. Even those leading innovation were promoting linear, top-down models and technical procurement that did little to challenge departmental practice and formalities. Senior civil servants tended to operate more like administrators rather than strategic leaders. To initiate an interest in public service innovation, the National School of Government organized a conference on public service innovation for civil servants where officials and social innovators could network. *Creating the Conditions for Innovation* (Maddock, 2008a) was published to stimulate the debate.

Sir Gus O'Donnell, Head of the Civil Service and Cabinet Secretary, who became known, as GOD was a strong advocate for change in government.[2] He recruited innovation champions into senior civil service posts and introduced departmental Capability Reviews. However, there was never a clear narrative from the Cabinet Office explaining why innovation and internal transformation were inter-dependent and most civil servants were uncertain what being *innovative* meant in practice.

Unsurprising, the Capability Reviews[3] demonstrated a lack of strategic leadership in almost all departments, little proactive leadership for transformation or for any incentives for innovative behaviour. The Capability Reviews revealed that civil servants tended to be risk averse and more concerned with compliance than innovation. Those officials, focused on specialist areas, tended to be isolated and did not think that they could determine public innovation. However, ministers had become advocates of public service innovation and demanded more innovative leadership from the Top 200 civil servants. Clearly, if Whitehall leaders were to embrace innovation, they needed to be aware of innovative solutions and free to network with those willing to collaborate in both the public sector and business (Maddock, 2002).

There was a clear separation between central and local government in the UK and many civil servants thought service innovation was nothing to do with them

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[2]Personal Communication 2009

[3]Capability Reviews of Individual Departments are confidential to the civil service- but the framework can be read in Cabinet Office, 2009.

and that public service innovation was the responsibility of local authorities, the police and health managers.

The WIH strategy

The author identified a gap in Whitehall experience and recommended that civil servants needed much more exposure to and contact with public service innovation. There was no official policy narrative that made explicit the role of government policy-makers in public service innovation implementation. Most tended to assume that the problems associated with service innovation was due to a lack of competence on the part of local service providers rather than central government policy frameworks and funding arrangements. A clear rationale for public service innovation that made sense of the connection between Whitehall policy challenges and locality services was required. The big challenge for the WIH was to persuade Whitehall policy-maker that the government machine and processes impacted on the capacities of service practitioners to mainstream service innovation and on their role in the commissioning and procurement of innovation.

The Whitehall Innovation Hub Strategy (Maddock, 2008b) evolved after conversations with its advisory group consisting of senior civil servants, consultants and local authority leaders. The strategy was closely aligned to the Cabinet Secretary's desire for internal transformation and political frustrations with Whitehall's inability to respond to social innovators calling for a more a responsive civil service. It was also based on the fact that those innovation champions that existed in departments tended to be isolated and that a critical mass of change-agents across government was needed.

Given the small size of the team it was decided that working alongside those few innovation champions in the senior civil service (SCS) was a priority because their leadership underpinned internal transformation, as was creating networks for those in middle grades. The WIH strategy was endorsed by both the Permanent Secretary of the funding dept DIUS and the DIUS Minister of State for Innovation in late 2008.

WIH Activities 2008 – 2010

The Hub created opportunities for the top 200 civil servants to develop and exchange strategies for internal transformation.[4] These discussions were stimulated by academics and business and focused on how they could motivate staff and drive internal change to meet the policy challenges that government was facing. Its activities focused on building leadership capabilities and creating a narrative that challenged the linear, pipeline model of innovation and provided a rationale for transforming government and the leadership role in this process. The WIH produced *thought-pieces* for the civil service leadership such as *The WIH Strategy: Leading Innovation: Change you can believe in* (Maddock, 2009), *Place Based Innovation: Recovery Begins with Hope (*Maddock & Robinson, 2010), and briefings to stimulate debate across Whitehall and within the Hub's Networks.

A problem solving attitude was key to the WIH approach, because it grounded innovation in the problems that civil servants faced, rather than presenting them with innovation packages that appeared to create more 'work' than stimulate creativity. Importantly, the team recognized that the early stages of innovation are based on the energy and collaboration of others. The WIH's Networks included: -

- A senior civil service network chaired by the DIUS Permanent Secretary. This provided a space for informal conversations on change and innovation tactics and strategies where contested views on innovation flow could be aired.

- A Blues Skies Group for innovation champions in social innovation intermediaries, social entrepreneurs and private companies as well as in the senior civil service.

- A Community of Practice for Directors and Deputy Directors, including National School of Government staff to share ideas and problem solving innovation practice.

- A Vertical Exchange Network that introduced transformative local public service to central government policy-makers in order to forge understanding between policy-makers and local providers. Local leaders were keen to connect to policy-makers because they felt many were ignorant of what they were doing to improve services in their localities. *Place Based Innovation* provided a perspective for the network and preceded the government's *Total Place project (HM Treasury 2009).*

At the same time the WIH started to develop innovation capabilities through:

- Top 200 events on leadership and public innovation to stimulate the most senior of civil servants and galvanize more active strategic leadership through contact with international innovation champions such as the Danish Mind Lab and the Finnish Innovation Centre, SITRA.

- Departmental surgeries focused on problematic public service policy areas such as 'reoffending rates' etc. These encouraged inquiry and engagement with a wider range of stakeholders and generated more ambitious solutions among those who attended. These surgeries provided policy-leaders with the opportunity to explore how innovative solutions could help them tackle pressing and challenging policies. At the time 'innovation' was viewed as additional work rather than a problem-solving tool.

During 2008-2010 there were on-going tensions regarding implementation

1. Scaling-up or mainstreaming innovation

Throughout the 2000s public service improvements had been made in education and health, but radical service innovation was rarely embedded in mainstream practice. The policy-makers' tendency to ignore the wider public system and isolate policy from service practice resulted in their being slow to recognize implementation problems. As politicians became more dependent on ratings, targets, and changing agendas as levers for change resentment among public sector staff increased, which in turn undermined local service innovation. The result was too many unintended consequences and an erosion of the very relationships that underpin public service innovation (Kay 2009).

Former governments did not manage to develop a public service innovation policy-framework with local authorities or public service agencies fast enough. In general, there was a lack of knowledge exchange between government and the wider public sector. The introduction of the Public Service Agreements[5] did reconnect departmental policy makers and service practitioners in problem solving. A lack of interest in the realities of practice had resulted in a poverty of understanding about how to incentivize service innovation and its implementation. By 2009 there was a growing awareness that innovation diffusion depended on the involvement of both staff and users. The Cabinet Office '*Putting the Front Line First*' was the first document to endorse the role of front-line staff engagement in service innovation. Previously the Labour government had criticized front-line staff as responsible for service inflexibility.

> "*How could government drive public service innovation across the country when it is dependent on the involvement of service users and staff?*"

Once the relationship between citizens and front-line staff was recognized as key to mainstreaming more responsive practice (in services) then the policy interest in 'behavior-change' grew as a driver for public service innovation within the Cabinet Office, as did the appetite for 'Nudge theory' and in co-designed solutions.[6]

2. Valuing diversity versus the post code lottery

Politicians wanted services to be responsive to individual needs but they also wanted them to be equitable in terms of delivery across the country. Service '*fairness*' was interpreted to mean the provision of the '*same services*' throughout England and Wales. Government ministers were afraid to endorse local diversity because the national press was very quick to turn any 'local service failure' into a reason to attack Ministers. The government felt that they had to counter the '*post-code lottery*'. They faced a dilemma whether to reward the innovation in its diversity or to create national service frameworks for all service agencies that could be a barrier to innovation. The Labour government never really worked out how to tackle inequalities and promote service innovation within one policy framework.

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[5]Public Service Agreements introduced by the Treasury.
[6] A version of Nudge Theory by Thaler & Sunstein became central to the Cabinet Office's thinking

There was always a fear that the differences between locally determined innovations would undermine national standards and 'fairness' across the country. In reality, public services already varied and there was a post-code lottery. However, it is the institutionalized nature of services and commissioning frameworks that hamper innovation not national service frameworks.

3. Place as a Local Eco-system for Innovation

During this time many local authorities across Britain had radically transformed themselves, improved their services, become much more responsive to communities and developed partnerships and inter-agency working. Unfortunately most central government officials were unaware of these changes and continued to undervalue local government and its leaders. To remedy this, Sir Gus O'Donnell frequently asked local authority chief executives to speak at national conferences to galvanize government transformation. At the time, creating connectivity between transformative leaders and senior civil servants appeared a priority. The WIH's most effective networks encouraged creative exchange between innovative local executives and their equivalents in central government departments. The Vertical Network was the WIH's most effective and innovative network, stimulating exchange and connections across the public system and generations policy developments in the WIH publication '*Place Based Innovation' (Maddock & Robinson 2010)*

The Treasury has a special role in UK government. It has status and control over budgets and how to spend them – treasury officials are more aware of the complexity of wider public systems. They are inducted into corporate thinking and their strategic role in government. When Chancellor, Gordon Brown raised the Treasury's confidence in its strategic and corporate role in public sector reform through the introduction of Public Service Agreements, specific innovations such as *Invest to Save* and later *Total Place* which resulted in all Whitehall departments becoming aware of the role of local government in financial and service innovation. Treasury officials could see that central government funding could be used more imaginatively to drive public service innovation if pooled and it incentivized inter-agency working. The government introduced *Total Place* in 2009 to encourage locality innovation and pooled resources to generate financial savings.[7] It was piloted in nineteen local sites in cities across England to analyze locality government funding streams, stimulate local, inter-agency collaboration and sustain solutions to entrenched local problems of care, crime, early years etc and provide a challenging new narrative for public financial budgeting in a city or place.

To those in decentralized countries the fact that local and central government should be closely connected may seem obvious, but in the UK an initiative such as *Total Place* was necessary to alert civil servants to their role in the wider public sector. *Total Place* probably had more impact on central government than it did on localities, partly because it required high-level inter-departmental meetings where senior civil servants agreed public funding streams and discussed funding impact on localities and local services. Like many government innovations, *Total Place* was successful because it was led by the most powerful of Whitehall

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[7] The Total Place Programme chaired by Sir Michael Bichard an innovation champion and ex-local authority chief executive and former permanent secretary.

departments (the Treasury) and was sustained by its chair, a challenging ex-civil servant committed to public sector reform.

Impact

The WIH was one of a group of social innovation intermediaries that had an impact on innovation policy, particularly in terms of shifting from the *'science to business linear'* model to a *'viral'* model that conceived of public service innovation as a journey. The Hub defined innovation as an *'emergent'* process dependent on collaboration, co-design and more responsive government. It challenged government assumptions about their institutional role as separate and distinct from public services and introduced the role of leaders as critical change agents able to create an alignment between *agency and institution*.

The WIH's strategy was distinctive at the time because it focused on developing the capacities of civil servants and their ability to become more responsive as policy-makers and public commissioners. It challenged the hegemony of the 'science to business pipeline' model of knowledge exchange and introduced a 'capabilities and connectivity' strategy based on the notion of a 'viral mode' model of innovation. The model was contested by those uncomfortable with less controllable innovation journeys and who preferred technological solutions to the unpredictability of people's relationships and collaboration. As the institutional barriers to public service innovation became clearer so did the significance of government leadership capacities as the drivers of institutional change. As the Hub had focused on the softer levers of cultural and institutional transformation change its work became categorized as 'personal development' rather than as a strategy for innovation policy based on 'capabilities and connectivity'. However, it was later recognized by commentators as innovative: -

> " *The Whitehall Innovation Hub contributed new thinking to the public service innovation agenda… recognizing that leadership plays a critical nurturing role eliminating disincentives and creating a culture for welcomes innovation"* (Hambleton and Howard, 2012).

It was difficult for a small unit to be effective after it lost its key sponsors and when Whitehall internal politics sought to criticize its strategy on the basis '*of being HR rather than innovation policy*'. The aim was to shift the senior mindset on the nature of innovation flow and to persuade civil servants that they had a role in creating environments conductive to a more 'viral', engaged and wider system approach.

The Positioning of the WIH

The WIH was neither '*in'* nor '*out'* of Whitehall, but located within the National School of Government.[8] The Hub was introduced at a time when service innovation exploration and thought leadership was welcome. WIH was a small team set up to stimulate an awareness of public service innovation in Whitehall. The

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[8]The National School of Government was previously known as the Civil Service College and was the governments training and development college for the UK civil service closed on March 31st 2012.

Director was initially protected by a supportive Minister and Permanent Secretary and was free to argue for open practice and challenge existing models. Quite soon this changed. In year one, the combined team of the Design Council[9], NESTA[10] and the WIH was a strong voice within relevant departments, but gradually this changed as the innovation agenda became more important and intermediary voices became less welcome. The argument for public service innovation had been won. However, the more challenging problem of implementation and changing government practices was much harder.

There was a struggle in Whitehall as to which department owned innovation policy: BIS, the Cabinet Office or the Treasury. Much of the thought leadership produced by the Hub was first contested but then incorporated into Cabinet Office documents. There was an emotional cost to constant assessment of Whitehall politics and manoeuvering inside Whitehall had diminishing returns. The original ministerial sponsor changed posts after DIUS had become BIS and both the Cabinet Office and Treasury increasingly assumed authority over innovation policy. In 2009, DIUS and the Dept for Business, Regulation and Reform (BERR) had merged to form Dept of Business Skills and Innovation (BIS) and public service innovation had shot up the political agenda. BIS expanded its own capacity to spread innovation and recruited staff to develop an internal team to develop one product to promote across government.

By 2010 both BIS and NSG were under new leadership under pressure themselves to demonstrate their competence as agencies with responsibility for developing civil servants. Developing innovation capabilities was reframed as a matter of competence that could be acquired through a corporate core programme that would turn unresponsive civil servants into entrepreneurs overnight. There was also a struggle in Whitehall as to which department owned innovation policy, BIS, the Cabinet Office or the Treasury. Innovation strategy had become the Cabinet Office's responsibility and specific interventions such as 'Nudge' and 'Co-designed Solutions' were presented as packages that could be marketed across government as solutions. The NSG itself was under threat and closed on March 31st 2010.

The Hub had a window of roughly eighteen months to argue for new thinking and practice. Its authority declined when civil servants in the departments with innovation policy responsibilities began to assume that they could implement public service innovation through technical instruments and skills training without transforming government practices and thinking at all.

Learning

What really makes a difference to those developing innovative social solutions is access to public commissioners and connective environments. As so often, it is smaller enterprises driven by social values that seek innovative solutions that are invisible to those in government and large companies. Intermediaries such as the WIH are usually more adept at forging the connections between innovative

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[9] The Design Council became active in 'service innovation design' around 2007 and was successful in persuading politicians and policy-makers to depart from top-down directives to designing new services with service users.

service providers and larger government agencies. The change in government is not for them to become a substitute for public service innovation providers but to become more aware of their needs and to develop commissioning and procurement that is capable of being open enough to the diversity and journeys of social and service innovation.

The WIH experience demonstrates that: -

- Small innovation intermediaries need high-level sponsorship to be effective.
- Intermediaries become invisible once policy-makers adopt their approaches.
- Central government tends to lag behind public services in terms of internal transformation.
- Centralized government tends to be unhelpful to local innovation strategies.
- Short-term interventions to transform internal cultures are unrealistic.
- Logical-technical thinking among policy-makers is a cognitive barrier to policy-makers ability to be collaborative and forge new frameworks for innovation policy and practice.
- There is a tension between government policies for specific service innovation and the policies required to support place-based innovation for communities rather than specific services.

A positive step change in national innovation policy would be an endorsement of locally determined innovation strategies. A national innovation strategy that endorsed localism would support those local leaders who are forging connectivity between sectors and between government commissioners and smaller innovative, social enterprise.

The Future

Post Margaret Thatcher in 1997 a series of Labour governments endorsed public service innovation and introduced public service innovation to British Government Innovation Policy. However, what was an advance in innovation policy was hampered by an over-controlling attitude to how to mainstream service innovation across services, particularly in health and education. A highly instrumental, top-down approach to implementation ran counter to creating the trust required for public sector staff's engagement with the innovation process. Some public services were improved but examples of service innovation were difficult to diffuse or '*take to scale'*. By 2010 many policy-makers had realized that government needed to change if the public sector was to be responsive to new ideas and procure more innovative services (Kay 2009). But policy makers were too slow to recognize that innovation requires a web of relationships, specific capabilities and local conditions conducive to service innovation. This was in spite of the fact that policy makers advocate the need for enterprise parks and ecosystems for private sector business innovation. In terms of systemic innovation, *Total Place* did inject some whole system thinking, cross government working and joint practice across localities. Innovation pilots were funded because they were easier to measure when holistic service innovation, capacities and connectivity would have been a better investment. There was too little investment in knowledge exchange for public service innovation and funding remained fragmented and delivered through many departments.

However, systematizing government support for public service innovation swiftly ended with a change of government. The Coalition Government was elected in May 2010. New ministers initially endorsed personal service innovation as a way of tackling problems such as offending, mental health, and long-term unemployment through co-designed services (largely) delivered by private sector companies and a splattering of social enterprise. The financial crisis resulted in the Coalition Government's main objective being to reduce public sector expenditure and marketization that would transfer risk from the taxpayer to the private sector. The BIS agenda has reverted to innovation being a vehicle for growth and efficiency in the private sector and rarely mentions public service innovation.

The government rarely mentioned public service innovation except in relation to the *Big Society* and *Localism* agendas that provide some endorsement for social innovation but at the expense of local government and undermined by the loss of local funding, regional development agencies and innovation finances previously allocated to innovation. The current government appears uninterested in its own leadership role in public governance, appearing to believe the market and marketization will solve the problems. This would appear to be a mistake given that public service innovations require innovative governance to sustain them, irrespective of the sector providing them.

The experience of the WIH is that irrespective of the type of enterprise that delivers innovative services, more open and good governance is required to ensure that those smaller innovative entrepreneurs and enterprises struggling to deliver solutions to massive social problems have access to government and public sector commissioners. Good governance must surely be more than endorsing *marketization.* A public governance framework should be responsive to both public Wellbeing and business innovation and involve investment in public infrastructure, people's capabilities and mechanisms for connectivity between people as well as digitally.

About the Author:

Su Maddock is Visiting Professor at the University of the West of England and Honorary Fellow in Manchester Business School. She was formerly Director of the Whitehall Innovation Hub. Convinced that creative exchange underpins innovation, she is currently working with local leaders on local innovation strategies and knowledge exchange. Dr. Maddock has extensive experience in the public sector, government, social enterprise and the creative industries, and was a television presenter earlier in her career. She continues to broker opportunities for those seeking to build bridges and transform public services and governance and to socialize business.

A Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts, an Associate of the Eden Project Trust and a Board Member of the African Centre for Local Government Improvement.

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