

## Innovation can be used to renew the foundations of public legitimacy and build new kinds of public services

*Jesper Christiansen* argues that innovation is capable of driving a much needed renewal in the delivery of public services. He suggests that innovation efforts are directed at the practice of public policy itself through a new set of principles, delineated in this article.



Whether you are a politician, civil servant, frontline worker or any other kind of decision maker taking active part in public governance you are frequently reminded of the current state of 'crisis'. One prominent side-effect of this persistent emphasis on crisis has been the rise of the public innovation agenda. Innovation, in this sense, takes on an almost magical character as a direct answer to the crisis itself. This notion is not only problematic in terms of the immediate pressure on public employees to innovate, but it also manages the expectations to the processes and outcomes of public innovation in very unproductive ways.

In the discussion paper published by MindLab and Nesta "[Innovation in policy](#)", Laura Bunt and I try to address this misrecognition as well as seeing it as concept capable of driving much needed explorative and creative processes in public governance. Innovation is not an end or an answer to challenges in itself. Rather, it should be applied as a way of coping with problems with no tangible or, at best, quite complex solutions.

Whether the crisis is perceived to be economic, financial, demographic, environmental, social or even democratic, it seems to imply a 'failure of agency' among public institutions and organisations. Not only in terms of putting the existing and known modes of dealing with present circumstances into question, but by involving a failure to act sufficiently to understand, handle and change its implications. But failure of agency is not an option of the public state; decisions have to be made despite acting in a context of overwhelming pressure, complexity and uncertainty.

So in dealing with increasing unemployment rates, entrenched inequalities, changing social needs and a significant economic pressure on public budgets, we are not only experiencing severe constraints in existing welfare models. It also poses serious questions regarding the adequacy of welfare services bound within 20th century models. You can point to a health system dominated by acute hospitals based on static formalism, prisons designed largely to contain and not prevent crime, or social care services increasingly stretched to provide standardised care to individuals and families with cross-cutting and complex needs.

In this sense, these examples represent a movement in Western societies, perhaps long underway, that has called for radically new ways of organising public service systems to deal with problems that might have been present all along. Crisis is, in this light, merely a mobilizing metaphor: are our public institutions, our ways of exercising authority and our dominant ideas of the social contract between the citizen and the state serving the purposes we want them to serve? Are they creating the outcomes we want them to create?

In the discussion paper, Laura Bunt and I suggest that innovation efforts are directed at the practice of public policy itself through a new set of principles first and foremost with the intention of regaining public through the incorporation and validation of more explorative, learning-based and open-ended (in short, 'creative') processes in public sector contexts. Here follows a short overview of these principles:

### #1: Outcomes, not 'solutions'

Social reality does not pause for implementation just as public problems are not solvable in fixed ways. Whether they exist in order to secure civil rights, a well-functioning job market or a reliable tax regulation,

recognizing that public services are operating within a wider system of organisations, influences and interventions give way to new possible paths forward in terms of creating more empathetic, co-productive and well-functioning public service systems. In this sense, the goal is not some kind of redemption in relation to the public problem, but to search out potential ways to address social and wicked problems. The challenge becomes how to institutionalize an adaptive capacity in public governance that can make the best possible use of public resources to create better outcomes for the population rather than merely ensure 'service delivery'.

### #2: Experimentation as an approach to policymaking

By the very nature of addressing public problems through implementing policy and programmes, public sectors are already doing multiple 'experiments' as their everyday practice. The question is if we wish to continue believing in our ability to foresee how our plans will unfold in practice or if we instead wish to accept and make use of the unpredictable consequences that go with attempts to intervene in complex social realities? Given the current state of uncertainty, I suggest that the legitimacy of public governance increasingly should come through policymaking as a process of discovery. The experimental approach is necessary because innovation inherently destabilises existing operational, organisational and administrative structures. Experimentation not only 'rehearses the future' through imaginative foresight and prototyping, but pro-actively encourages challenges and critique from the public, potential users, colleagues, partners, experts and other relevant actors devoted to the experimental search for the possible.

### #3: Exercising a new type of authority

Where the prompts for public problems are unknown, authority comes not just from having access to superior resources or formal powers, but in understanding the context and conditions that affect problems. For example, a doctor prescribing treatment is endowed with formal authority. But in managing long-term conditions that require behaviour change or engagement from family and local networks, the doctor often has to take on a new type of authority role to ensure an effective outcome. Rather than control or specify activity and outputs, this role to a larger degree has to distribute various efforts and resources in order to lever the collective capacity for better public outcomes. Here, there is not necessarily a direct causality between authoritative knowledge and public interventions since the reasons and conditions for making decisions often have to be explored and learned rather than be known fully or in advance.

### #4: Re-thinking useful evidence

The shift to new types of processes and effects (innovation) and different types of roles, functions, and activities (coproduction) seem to involve a fundamental shift in what we consider as legitimate and useful 'evidence'. What is particularly challenging for policy makers in this context is that (innovation) policy not only invents new forms of thought and foundations for decisions and actions, but also involves the invention of novel procedures of documentation, computation and evaluation. In this light, we should certainly ask whether it is innovation projects that fail or whether they are failed by wider networks of support and validation. Innovation in policy innovation thus implies taking a good hard look at the formalizing processes themselves in order to build systems and legitimizing processes that take the premises of creative and potentially innovative processes seriously.

### #5: Designing for policy

Innovation processes constantly set up new horizons, directions and incentives for decision-making. Here, the concept of design is useful since, rather than formulating a plan that sits distinct from practical application, it is in the testing and iteration that the plan truly comes to life. The consistent emphasis on understanding and using the 'architecture' of the problem as a driver in exploring possible ways of addressing it will inherently build questions of implementation and systemic implication into the design process; both focusing on the concrete causes and consequences involved as well as the interconnected systems and networks involved in dealing with it. In this way, design approaches deliberately create a tension with common interpretations and thus subverts instrumental logics of policy while by opening up for the 'agentive powers' and imaginative capabilities of the people involved.

While public managers and employees struggle to navigate the cross-pressures of budget cuts, the insoluble character of public problems has never been greater. My contention is that the legitimacy of the public sector has become something that is 'at stake', relying on the ability to act more productively and responsibly in very complex and uncertain settings. What in particular should characterize public interventions under these circumstances where, at the same time, consistent budget cuts risk jeopardizing not only public productivity and positive policy outcomes, but also the general well-being and living standard of citizens? Innovation as a concept is vitalized by a desire to imagine the world in its possibility and to push current perceptions of what can be done. In many ways, it can prove to be an excellent coping mechanism in pursuit of building new kinds of public services and, with this, facilitating a process aimed at a necessary renewal of the foundations of public legitimacy.

**Read the discussion paper at:**

[http://www.nesta.org.uk/blogs/assets/features/innovation\\_in\\_policy](http://www.nesta.org.uk/blogs/assets/features/innovation_in_policy)

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### **About the author**

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