

Supporting the spread of healthcare innovations

Learning from the NHS InSites Programme

Contents

<u>About this initiative</u>	3	<u>Portfolio and methods</u>	69
<u>Introduction and key findings</u>	7	<u>Culture & capabilities</u>	78
<u>Our learning approach</u>	20	<u>External Partnerships</u>	87
<u>Overview of innovation functions</u>	28	<u>Patient & Public Involvement</u>	93
<u>Research insights</u>	41	<u>Learning, Evaluation & Impact</u>	97
<u>Vision and strategy</u>	49	<u>Thanks and appendix</u>	102
<u>Governance and resources</u>	57		



About this initiative

About the NHS InSites Programme

[NHS InSites is a national programme](#) established to build innovation capacity within the NHS by providing ring-fenced innovation funding and support to a network of NHS organisations to help them “*optimise their ability to nurture, adopt and scale innovation*” (NHS InSites Impact Report 2025).

The programme consists of 18 NHS “Innovation Sites” (Sites) working in a peer learning network. The programme is coordinated by the NHS InSites Hub, based at Mid and South Essex (MSE) Foundation Trust. The 18 Sites span across England and are working side by side to align processes, share intelligence on implementation, build capability within their sites, and test and evaluate innovations to meet the needs of their populations.

The core objectives of the programme are:

1. **To evaluate NHS England supported innovations in real-world settings** aiming to generate evidence of their impact and to understand the strategies for successful implementation.
2. **To strengthen the organisational capability and infrastructure** of the member sites to facilitate rapid adoption, evaluation and scaling of innovation.
3. **To build an innovation culture and talent pool** which create the conditions for innovation to thrive in member sites.
4. **To inform future policy and strategy** on the most effective ways to implement innovation across the NHS.

About this learning initiative

To support the generation of practical learning from the NHS InSites programme, [The Health Foundation](#) commissioned [Innovation Unit](#) to work with the NHS InSites network to understand how Sites have set up and are operating their innovation functions.

Through a mixture of interviews, workshops, and data collection - conducted between Jan - April 2025 - we mapped, analysed, and compared their innovation functions. This report examines the roles that innovation functions play within NHS organisations and outlines the models and approaches through which they are delivered.

We highlight the strengths and challenges of different models and approaches, as well as

showcasing examples of best practice and key enablers which have allowed Sites to make progress against key objectives. We have also identified shared areas of ongoing development across the cohort.

The organisations included in the NHS InSites programme are mostly NHS trusts but also include one Academic Health Partnership and one Integrated Care Board. So whilst the models we describe for setting up innovation functions will be most relevant to those working on innovation within NHS trusts, the general approaches and learnings captured are relevant to a wider audience of innovation stakeholders working at different levels across the system.

Who was involved?

We heard from all 18 Sites who are currently part of the NHS InSites Programme.

These organisations consist of 16 NHS trusts - including acute, mental health, and community providers, as well as one integrated care organisation, and two ambulance trusts - one Academic Health Partnership, and one Integrated Care Board.

The size of organisations vary from 691 staff members (the ICB) to 24,000.

There was a relatively even mix of early-stage and more mature innovation functions. A third of Sites (33%, n=6) have been running their innovation function in its current form for over 5 years. 28% (n=5) of Sites have been running their innovation function for 3 - 5 years and 28% (n=5) have been running for under 3 years.



Introduction and key findings

Introduction

The Government's 10 year health plan puts innovation front and centre in its plan to create an NHS “fit for the future”.

Innovation - specifically in the fields of data, AI, genomics, wearables, and robotics - is positioned as a key enabler to the NHS achieving the three strategic shifts - from analogue to digital, from hospital to community, and from treatment to prevention.

The plan also includes bold policy proposals for growing the capacity of NHS organisations to accelerate the adoption of innovation at scale, including requiring them *“to reserve at least 3% of annual spend for one-time investments in service transformation, to help translate innovations into practice more rapidly”*.

NHS InSites is a national *capacity-building* programme that helps participating NHS organisations to develop the capabilities and infrastructure needed to adopt and scale innovation more rapidly. In doing so, it offers unique insight and valuable learning on how best to support NHS organisations deliver the innovation ambitions set out in the 10 year plan.

This learning initiative, funded by the Health Foundation and carried out by the Innovation Unit before the publication of the 10 year plan, looked in depth at the “innovation functions” of each of the 18 Innovation Sites (Sites). The analysis draws out key insights and opportunities that can inform how NHS organisations and systems continue to build the conditions for innovation, both now and in the future.

This report brings together the findings from the NHS InSites Programme learning initiative. It is full of detailed insights, themes and best practice examples, covering a range of areas, including:

- How to create a needs-led innovation strategy
- How to mobilise the skills, capabilities and resources to support adoption
- How to create a supportive innovation culture
- How to embed learning and grow evidence of impact



Key findings

Here we highlight 4 key findings that emerged through the work, which offer important insights for organisations looking to establish or grow their innovation functions.



Key Finding

There are a variety of roles and approaches that can be adopted by NHS innovation functions; ensuring these are developed strategically to align with local priorities and opportunities is an important determinant of success.

Across the Sites there is generally a shared understanding and definition of innovation as "*something new to the context that delivers significant impact.*" However, there are also a wide range of potential benefits that Sites focus on – ranging from improvements in clinical outcomes, to staff empowerment, to commercial gains - depending on wider organisational priorities and culture.

KEY FINDING 1

To support innovation across these opportunity areas, each innovation function has evolved to play a range of roles within their organisation or system. These can broadly be categorised as:

1. Identifying strategic priorities for innovation
2. Establishing effective systems and processes for identifying, triaging, testing and implementing innovations
3. Providing support to innovators and adopters for specific innovation projects
4. Growing innovation culture and capabilities
5. Developing partnerships and securing external funding

While most functions play each role to some extent, some prioritise specific roles over others.

Recommendations:

As Sites develop, they should:

- Work with partners across their system to agree where innovation can have the biggest impact on their strategic priorities
- Agree some priority roles and projects and apply a test and learn approach to grow local ownership and work out how their innovation function can add most value

Across the wider NHS ecosystem:

- Key stakeholders should continue codifying and developing maturity matrices against each of the core innovation function roles - to further support organisational improvement



Key Finding

An innovation function's positioning and relationship with other teams is critical to success; getting this right takes time and investment, and must be responsive to local context.

The ability of innovation functions to deliver on their key objectives is shaped not just by what they do, but where they are positioned within their organisations, and how this enables them to build relationships. Our research suggests that there is no optimal location - the context and priorities of each organisation will always be unique.

Larger, more mature innovation functions are often less constrained by their location, as they have had time to develop relationships across organisational boundaries, and with other enabling functions.

KEY FINDING 2

In contrast, smaller and less well-established functions are often shaped by where they sit in an organisation.

For example, if they are positioned within well-established Research functions, they will often be more focused on specific clinical issues. Whereas if they sit within Business Development and Enterprise functions they may focus more on opportunities for commercialising innovation.

Recommendations:

As Sites look to maximise their impact over time they should:

- Grow relationships and structures which enable collaboration across the whole organisation. For example, through multi-stakeholder innovation steering groups.
- Work with executive sponsors to champion innovation and enable innovation teams to work with key stakeholders and leaders from across the organisation.
- Periodically review how well their structures and governance are setting up their innovation functions for success and be open to changing them, if needed.



3 Key Finding

Innovation functions bring unique capabilities that can drive transformational change - but without dedicated investment and leadership support, their impact is limited and at risk.

Innovation teams bring a set of distinctive capabilities that compliment wider improvement and transformation efforts. These include:

- Identifying challenges where new approaches or solutions may yield significant benefits
- Building partnerships with intrapreneurs and entrepreneurs, including clinicians, people with lived experience, industry and academic partners

- Supporting innovators and adopters to navigate financial, legal and operational processes and support the culture and practice change needed to successfully implement innovations.

Crucially, they can also act as the engine room for innovation across an organisation, embedding it as a whole-organisation mission and building the capabilities of staff at all levels to participate in it.

However, these contributions are only possible when innovation functions are resourced and supported to play this role. Without dedicated investment and leadership support innovation risks being de-prioritised or overlooked. This can make it much harder for organisations to transform how services are organised and delivered, and will make it difficult for them to

respond to the significant challenges set out in the 10 Year Plan.

Once established, more mature Sites are able to offset investment through:

- Increased ability to attract external funding and commercial partnerships
- Improved outcomes and efficiencies generated by new models and technologies

However, roughly a third of the Sites we spoke to are 100% reliant on the NHS InSites programme funding for their innovation budget, highlighting that innovation functions are not yet 'business as usual' across the NHS, and until organisations are able to implement 3% protected budgets, national programmes like NHS InSites will play a critical role in helping team establish and build the case for longer-term investment.



Key Finding

Innovation functions within NHS organisations are most effective when they act as facilitators of innovation rather than its primary drivers.

Ultimately it is clinical and operational staff - not innovation teams - who are the adopters, producers and end users of innovation and it is their ongoing ownership in implementing and embedding innovations that dictates success.

For this to be the case, innovation projects need to be rooted in real-world problems and driven by staff who are invested in solving them. The experiences of staff impacted by new innovations also needs to be carefully attended to.



To participate fully in innovation, staff need time, encouragement, access to targeted support to build confidence and momentum, and a culture that values experimentation and learning. Innovation functions can play an important role as coaches and enablers, offering light-touch guidance, structured frameworks, and opportunities for reflection.

However, this is an area that all Sites find challenging in the context of a system that continues to face high demand and financial pressures.

Additionally, for innovations to move beyond pilots and become embedded as business-as-usual, key corporate functions - such as IG, procurement, and finance - need to be actively involved.

Innovation teams play a critical role in engaging these functions early, clarifying their contribution, and working with them to ensure the right processes are in place.

In doing so innovation functions help create the conditions for these teams to take ownership of their role in enabling successful implementation and scale.

KEY FINDING 4

Embedding new ways of working or adopting new products takes sustained effort over time. Innovation teams can offer vital support and help create the conditions for success - but they are often small, with limited capacity, and operate across large, complex organisations.

For innovation to take root and spread, it must ultimately be owned and driven by the wider organisation. A key role of innovation functions is therefore to help build the culture, capabilities, and processes that enable this to happen.

Recommendations:

As Sites develop, they should:

- Focus on creating the optimal conditions for scaling up staff-led innovation
- Build strong relationships - built on deep understanding - with other key enabling functions so that barriers to implementation can be collectively addressed
- Work with leadership and communications teams to champion innovation - whilst ensuring that the voices of all staff are considered in how innovation is applied



Our learning approach

Our learning approach

In this section we provide an overview of our approach, methods and who was involved.

We reflect on the purpose of the work and why we approached it as a learning exercise for the participating Sites, as well as a research initiative with potential to be useful to other NHS organisations and partners in the wider NHS innovation ecosystem.

We also briefly explain the rationale for the structure of the learning framework and how we used it to guide the quantitative and qualitative data collection.

It includes:

- Our design principles
- Key research activities
- Our learning framework
- An overview of the data collection tool

Design principles

The learning approach taken by Innovation Unit has been shaped by three key design principles:

1. Usefulness to Sites

The development process and outputs were designed to be directly useful to the Sites themselves (as well as a wider audience). This meant focusing on areas they identified as priorities, offering a structured way for them to assess their progress and impact, and creating open spaces for honest reflection by Site Leads and Executive Sponsors.

2. Sensitivity to context

We have been mindful that each Site operates within a unique local context, with different challenges, opportunities, and system dynamics. We have sought to draw out themes in a way which is non-prescriptive, acknowledging this variation.

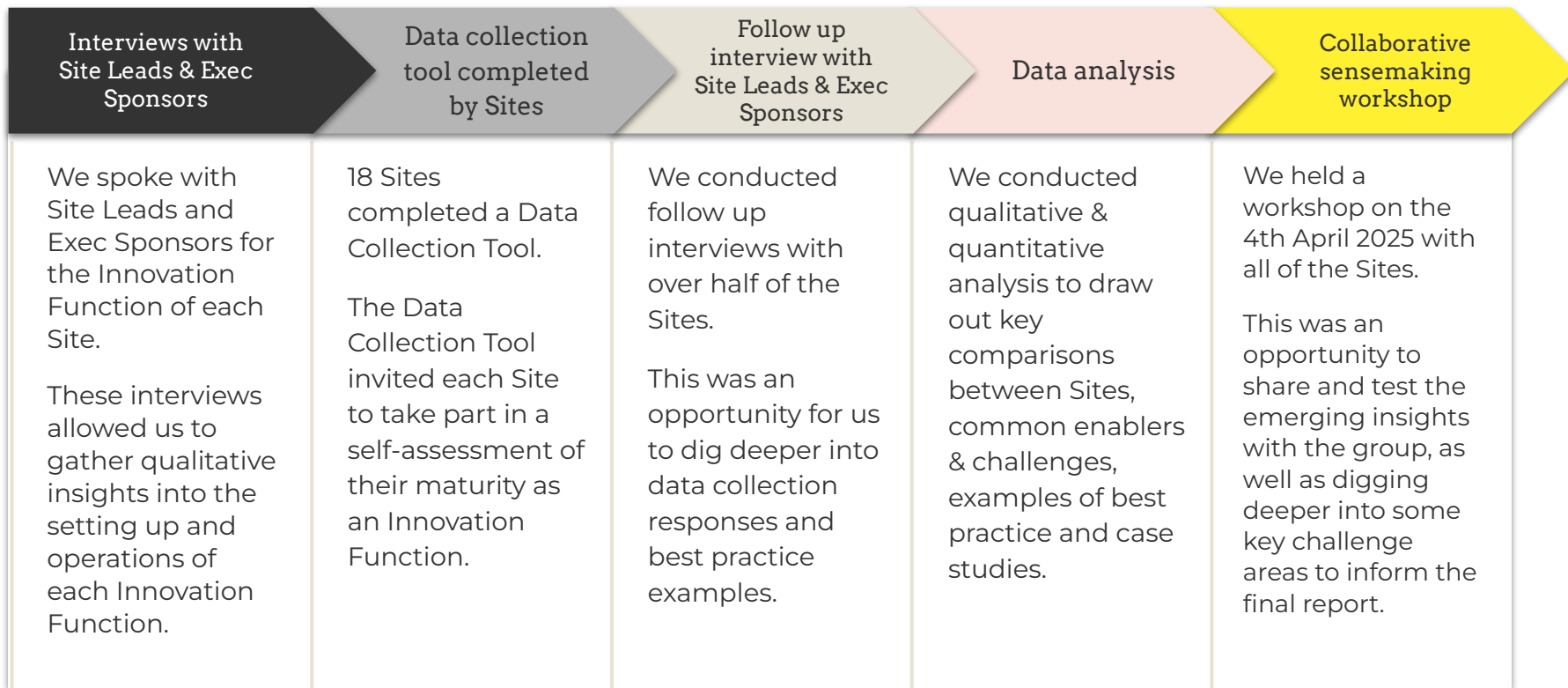
3. Learning from previous work supporting NHS innovation

Our learning framework and research questions were informed by previous work delivered by Innovation Unit looking at what is needed to support innovation within the NHS. This included:

- Our work developing the [Adopting Innovation Wheel](#) as part of a project supporting the development of four innovation hubs across the NHS.
- Our previous work supporting Sites on the NHS InSites programme to assess their wider organisational culture and capabilities around innovation.

The learning framework and research questions were tested with a sample of Sites before use.

Key research activities



Learning framework overview

Drawing on existing evidence, insight from the InSites Hub team and previous work supporting NHS innovation, we created a learning framework to guide and structure our research questions and activities.

This learning framework established 8 key domains and 25 sub domains which focused our key areas of enquiry and framed our data collection.

This framework was tested and refined with a small group of Sites. The full breakdown of domains and sub domains, as well as a rationale for their inclusion is covered in the following slides.

The 8 key domains used as part of the data collection tool were:

1. Context and background
2. Vision and Strategy
3. Governance and Resources
4. Portfolio and Methods
5. Culture and Capabilities
6. External Partnerships
7. Patient and public involvement
8. Learning, evaluation and impact

Learning framework (1)

Domain	Sub Domain	Why this matters?
1. Context and background	Organisational context; Development history; Future plans	Each Site is very different in size, focus, geography & context, and we wanted to explore how this influences the development and priorities of its innovation function.
2. Vision and Strategy	Innovation strategy; Strategic communications; Innovation definition	Having a shared understanding & commitment to innovation is critical to securing buy in from leaders, helping staff feel empowered, and ensuring that activities support agreed areas of priority. We wanted to understand if Sites have a clear vision, strategy and priorities for innovation, how they are developed in the context of wider system priorities, and how they are embedded in practice.
3. Governance and Resources	Governance; Funding; Innovation Workforce	Having clear lines of accountability, sustainable funding, expert roles and mature relationships are vital for developing effective innovation cultures and high impact projects. We wanted to understand where innovation functions sit within their organisations, how they are staffed and funded, and how they are leveraging internal and external relationships to access additional skills and investment.
4. Portfolio and Methods	Innovation portfolio; Problem definition & prioritisation; Horizon scanning & selection; Investment & business processes; Adoption approach; Evaluation & learning	Having a strong methodology with streamlined processes for innovation testing, evaluation, and implementation into BAU, is essential to ensuring that innovations address priority needs and are implemented and sustained with support from operational and clinical teams. We wanted to understand each Site's approach to innovation, the extent to which this involves partners across the organisation and beyond, and their approaches to risk, evaluation and learning.

Learning framework (2)

Domain	Sub Domain	Why this matters?
5. Culture and Capabilities	Organisational infrastructures & support; Staff capacity & capabilities; Organisational Culture	Having leaders, programmes and processes which actively encourage new ideas, enable participation in innovation and support honest learning is essential to creating an inclusive and impactful innovation culture. We wanted to understand how Sites are nurturing supportive cultures, growing and embedding organisational capabilities and developing staff confidence and skills.
6. External Partnerships	Local partners; Local/regional innovation, research or improvement partners; Wider partners (including industry)	Having strong relationships with local health, care and voluntary sector partners, as well as external experts, funders and industry, enables organisations to leverage additional capabilities and resources, and create opportunities for greater impact at scale, including new care pathways and integrated models. We wanted to understand which partnerships Sites have prioritised and the opportunities this has created.
7. Patient and public involvement	PPI; Equality, Diversity & Inclusion	Working closely with diverse patients and the public ensures that innovation is informed by different perspectives and ideas and is focused on improving the quality and equity of people's experiences and outcomes. We wanted to understand how this work is resourced and embedded throughout Sites innovation activities.
8. Learning, evaluation and impact	Measuring impact; Impact examples; Lessons learned	Developing a mature learning approach creates opportunities for Sites to reflect on the overall strengths of their innovation strategy, function and impact, and surface opportunities for development and improvement. We wanted to understand how Sites measure success and where they are achieving impact.

Data collection tool

We developed a data collection tool - informed by our learning framework and tested with Sites - to capture insights across the 8 key domains.

Sites were asked to rate their maturity within each subdomain against a number of indicators informed by detailed 'Questions to consider', and to provide a brief explanation of their score. The rating scale used was:

- 1 = little / no progress has been made
- 3 = making progress
- 5 = proud to share

The Background and Context section was not rated as this provided contextualising information about the size, focus and history of the organisation and its innovation function.

A note on limitations:

- *The scoring approach was subjective, and this should be kept in mind when reviewing the quantitative results.* However, we found that it was useful to understand how Sites rate their own maturity and their ratings were well supported by their qualitative responses.
- *Not all Sites responded to every indicator, meaning that the total sample size for each indicator doesn't always equal 18.*



Overview of innovation functions

Overview of innovation functions

In this section we provide an overview of NHS innovation functions, drawing on the information Sites shared with us across the domains about their aims, structures and funding.

It highlights the diversity of models and approaches developed by different Sites, and the importance of context and maturity.

We conclude that there is no one-size-fits-all way to design an NHS innovation function but there are many common themes, as well as important learning that will be useful to the Sites and others starting out on their innovation journey. Further detail on many of the areas is also included in the following Research Insights section.

It covers a range of cross-cutting themes:

1. Defining and applying innovation
2. Range of NHS innovation function roles
3. Developing strategic priorities
4. Positioning of NHS innovation functions
5. Models of governance and oversight
6. Balancing a focus on digital innovation
7. Invention vs Adoption
8. Typical size of innovation functions
9. Innovation Funding

Defining and applying innovation

Defining innovation

There is a high degree of consistency among Sites in their basic definition of innovation as

“something new to the organisation that has the potential to significantly improve outcomes for patients, staff, or the organisation as a whole.”

This shared definition gives them a broad remit, while the emphasis on novel solutions that can offer substantive positive impact helps distinguish innovation from wider improvement activities.

Applying innovation

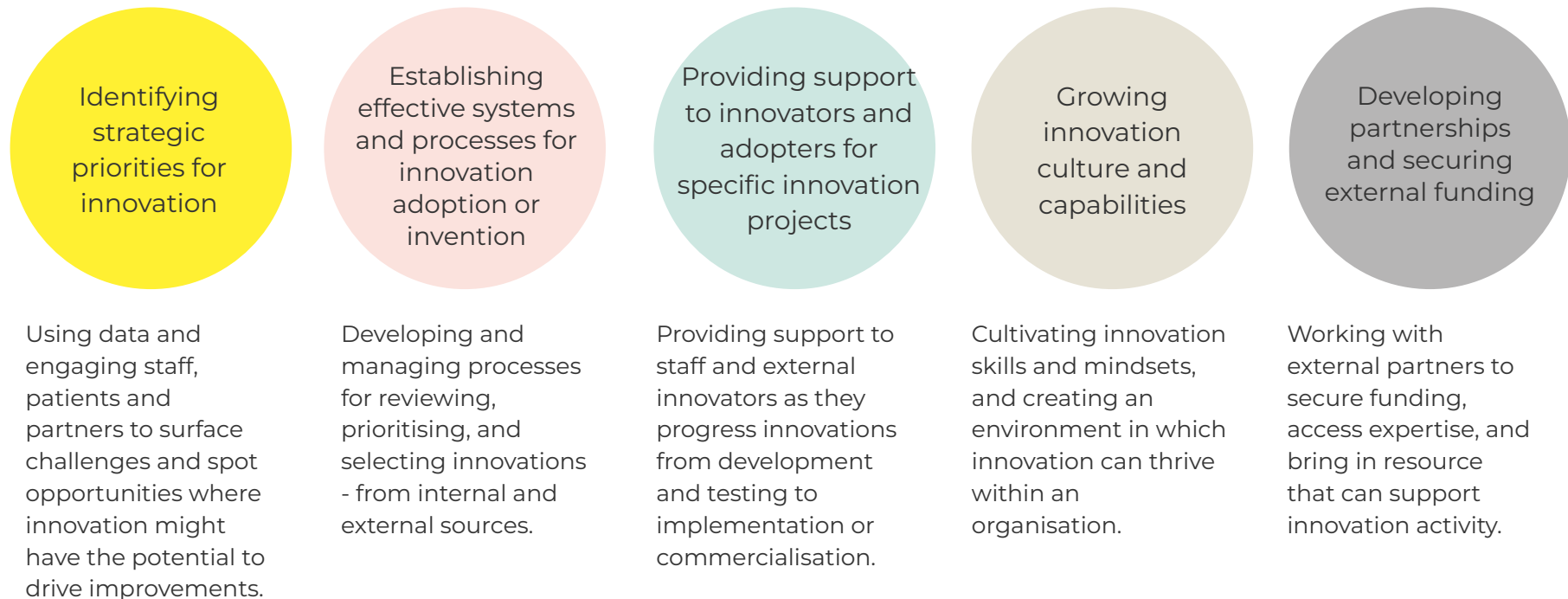
Where Sites differ more is the emphasis they place on the different potential benefits of innovation. Some prioritise improvements in patient outcomes, others focus on workforce wellbeing or operational efficiency. These differences reflect a range of contextual factors, including organisational priorities, leadership focus, culture, and local population needs.

The main benefit areas that Sites focus on realising through innovation include:

- **Innovation as a way to deliver better care for patients**
- **Innovation as a means of tackling healthcare inequalities**
- **Innovation as a means of solving operational or financial pressures**
- **Innovation as a way to empower and motivate staff**
- **Innovation as a driver of longer-term, strategic changes**

Range of NHS innovation function roles

Innovation functions have evolved to play a range of roles within their organisation or system which are summarised below. Some focus primarily on one core function, while others span multiple roles. This often depends on the high level benefit area that Sites are focused on achieving through innovation. As a result each innovation function is unique in the scope and focus of its work.



Developing strategic priorities

The extent to which Sites develop targeted strategic priorities for innovation differs from organisation to organisation.

This often depends on the high level benefit areas that Sites are focused on, and the extent to which the innovation function sees its role as identifying strategic priorities versus for example, its role in supporting wider culture and capabilities development.

Some Sites have existing technical expertise and develop strategic innovation priorities aligned with leveraging this capability. Others focus on supporting wider organisational-level priorities or setting general thematic areas which staff are invited to respond to.

The main types of innovation priorities referenced by Sites include:

Condition or clinical area focus

Such as mental health, cancer, or elective recovery

Technology focus

Such as AI, virtual wards, and genomics

Workforce and productivity focus

Such as digital literacy and automation

Population and health inequality focus

Such as personalised care and prevention

Culture and capability focus

Such as creating a culture of innovation, staff involvement, and growing organisational reputation around innovation

Positioning of NHS innovation functions (1)

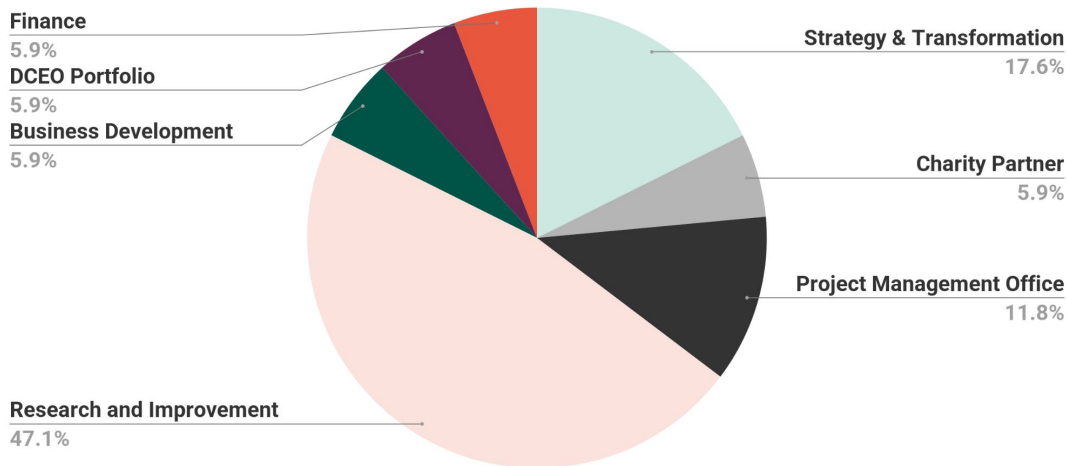
No one-size-fits-all model

Where NHS innovation functions sit within their organisations varies widely and there are benefits and trade-offs for each model. Each organisation's unique context means there's no one-size-fits-all model - and what works best may change over time. Many Sites described year-on-year changes to positioning, often driven by organisational restructures or changes in leadership.

Optimising over time

This doesn't mean that where the innovation function sits is unimportant. Its location within the organisational structure can shape the types of innovation that are prioritised or supported. For example, close alignment with Research may steer focus toward clinical innovation. Mature Sites regularly assess the benefits and drawbacks of their current setup, and are willing to adjust positioning over time to maximise impact.

Position of the Innovation Function within its organisation



Positioning of NHS innovation functions (2)

Coordination with other “change” functions

A key area of variation across Sites is the extent to which innovation is positioned as a standalone function, or integrated within broader change functions, such as research, quality improvement (QI), or transformation. There is no single best model, both standalone and integrated approaches can be effective. What matters is ensuring that the innovation function has sufficient visibility, resource, and clarity of role to make a distinctive and valued contribution within the organisation - alongside other functions.

Standalone innovation function	Part of a broader function covering QI, transformation, and/or research
<p>Benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can enable Sites to easily communicate a distinct offer to staff and raise visibility of innovation-specific opportunities <p>Risks / drawbacks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of innovation efforts not being well-aligned with other improvement, research or transformation efforts 	<p>Benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports alignment and coordination cross all “change” functions • Can benefit from pooled resources <p>Risks / drawbacks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of small innovation teams being used as extra capacity for existing improvement efforts, and organisations lose out on the distinctive value that innovation-specific capabilities can bring

Models of governance and oversight

The reporting and governance arrangements for innovation functions vary across Sites. In some Trusts, innovation functions report to a dedicated Innovation Sub-Committee, while in others reporting is embedded within broader committees such as Improvement, Research, or Performance Committees.

In addition to formal reporting lines to Trust Boards and Committees, some Sites work with informal sub-groups of the Board, supporting more flexible access to senior leadership and lower administrative burdens.

Whilst each Site's arrangements are different, some common dynamics emerged in terms of trying to create the optimal governance for an innovation function.

Key Governance Dynamics

- **Essential role of executive sponsor** - who can be a champion for innovation, and who is enabled to do so by having innovation as a core part of their remit
- **Getting the balance right between oversight and freedom** - some level of oversight is vital to ensuring ongoing organisational buy-in for the work of the innovation function but too much scrutiny can also act as a barrier
- **Sustainable governance models** - finding a structure that aligns with existing governance structures, and that key stakeholders can commit to in the long run is vital to ensuring sustainability

Balancing a focus on digital innovation

Given the emphasis on the digital shift within the NHS and the increasing number of digital innovations entering the market, another important aspect of innovation functions is the degree to which they focus on digital innovation versus a broader remit, and how they operationalise this in practice. Sites described a range of approaches which we've outlined below.

Approach	Benefits vs Trade-offs
Innovation function with a single team covering digital and non-digital innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports joined-up approaches • Teams may struggle to progress digital innovations due to a lack of digital expertise or limited access to Digital teams
Innovation function with distinct teams covering digital and non-digital innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintains strategic coherence via shared governance & proximity, while also enabling focused expertise • Requires concerted coordination with separate Digital teams
Innovation function working separately (but in coordination with) a digital innovation team that sits within the Digital function	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for deep digital specialisation alongside dedicated resource for wider innovations • Requires concerted effort to coordinate activity with higher risk of duplication or fragmentation if not well-aligned

Adoption, invention, and commercialisation

Another key area where Sites differ in their approaches to innovation is the extent to which they focus on supporting the adoption of external innovations versus a focus on the invention of internal innovation ideas. Depending on what stage an innovation is at, there may also be opportunities for Sites to commercialise both internal and external innovations. Where Sites focus depends on a range of internal and external factors. Mature Sites are able to measure the effectiveness and impact of different activity streams, and optimise their focus accordingly.

Adoption

All Sites are set up to assess and support the potential adoption of external innovations to some degree.

Where there is more variation is the extent to which Sites are focused on working with external innovators who are at an early stage of developing their innovation idea, versus working with more established innovations that have been tried and tested elsewhere.

(See next slide for more detail.)

Invention

In addition to this universal focus on adoption, a number of Sites are also focused on supporting internal innovators. The nature of this support varies significantly.

Some sites focus on helping staff develop and implement innovative ideas that improve services within the Trust, regardless of commercial potential. Others treat innovation as a potential revenue stream, and triage ideas based on their scope for wider commercialisation.

Commercialisation

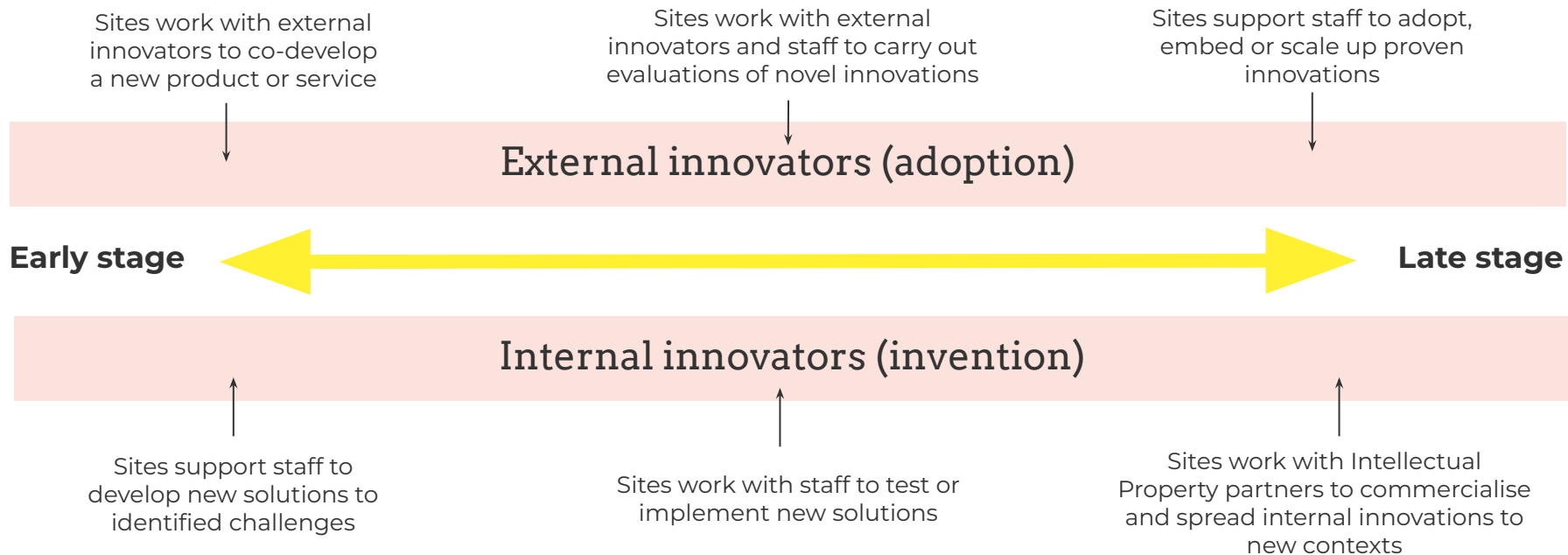
A small number of larger Sites have built strong commercialisation capabilities, often supported by Intellectual Property (IP) expertise, and strong links with industry or research partners.

Smaller Sites that lack these capabilities internally have experimented with contracting external organisations to support with areas like IP.

For other Sites - such as those which are Charity-funded - commercialising innovation is not a priority focus area.

Early stage vs late stage innovation

Sites also differ in the extent to which they are set up to focus on innovation at each stage of the development process. This is true for both invention and adoption, and some of the ways in which innovation functions work with innovators and staff at each stage are outlined below. Mature sites are able to work flexibly at different stages of the development process, and identify where to focus resource in order to drive progress against key organisational priorities.



Typical size of innovation functions

Small (0.5 - 3 FTE) 11 sites in the cohort

Most innovation functions we spoke to at this size are built around a dedicated, full-time Innovation Project Manager, supported by an Exec Sponsor, and - where resourcing allows - a part time Clinical Lead or Director of Innovation.

Core skills and capabilities include:

- Project management (PM)
- Change management
- Comms & engagement
- Data analysis & evaluation
- Governance, Risk & Compliance (GRC) awareness
- Business development & grant-management

Medium (3 - 8 FTE) 3 sites in the cohort

As innovation functions grow, they typically build on the core team structure by:

- Adding clinical innovation consultant capacity (e.g. fellows or secondments)
- Recruiting specialist support in areas such as digital adoption, comms, benefits realization and data analysis, and business development
- Bolstering PM & implementation capacity with additional programme managers and support officers

Large (8+ FTE) 4 sites in the cohort

For innovation functions which scale beyond this, we typically see team growth in the form of:

- Expanded leadership & strategic oversight e.g. full-time Innovation Directors and Heads of Business Development
- Dedicated core functions for Comms, Operations, and Partnerships
- Thematic teams offering business development or delivery support around key domains e.g. AI & Automation, Digital Health, Genomics

Innovation Funding

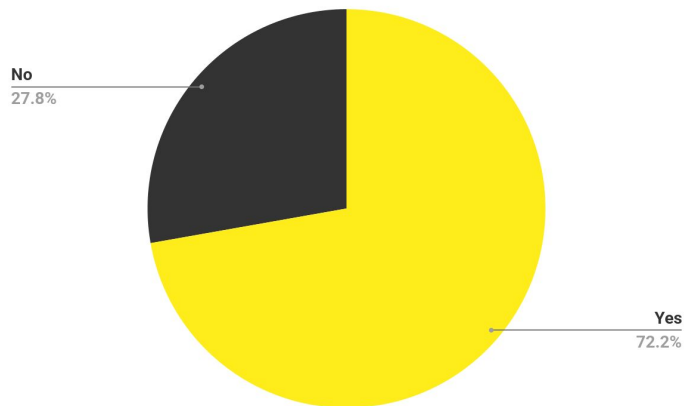
Recurrent funding for innovation

Accessing recurrent funding was seen by Sites as key for safeguarding the long-term sustainability of their innovation functions. The majority of Sites have some form of access to recurrent core funding for their innovation function - either from internal or external funding sources, or both (excluding NHS InSites funding). However a sizeable minority (5 Sites) - particularly made up of smaller innovation functions - are almost entirely dependent on the NHS InSites programme for core funding.

Expected ROI

Larger innovation functions are more likely to have access to recurrent funding, but this often comes with expectations around return on investment. Most of the largest innovation functions we spoke to reported some form of revenue target for their function - ranging from £200K to £2 million.

Innovation function receives some form of recurrent, core funding (not including NHS InSites funding)



Main sources of recurrent, core funding

1. Internal budgets - 11 Sites
2. NHS Charity partner - 3 Sites
3. Health Innovation Network - 3 Sites
4. Academic Health Science Centre - 1 Site



Research insights

Research insights

In the following sections we provide an overview of the quantitative and qualitative insights gathered through our interviews and data collection tool.

We start with an overview of Sites' maturity ratings for each of the domains and subdomains, followed by a discussion of key themes and learning opportunities.

We then go on to present the findings in relation to each domain, including:

- Sub-domain maturity ratings
- Discussion of key themes
- Best practice examples
- Focused case studies

It covers:

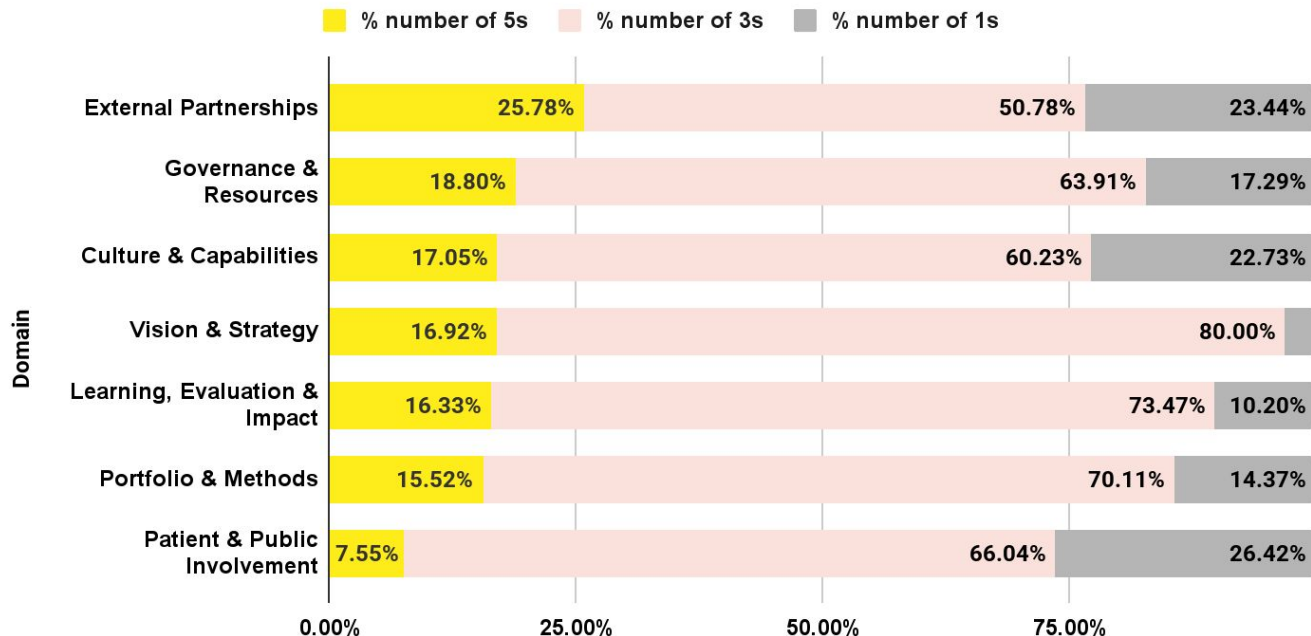
- Maturity ratings overview
- Vision & Strategy
- Governance & Resources
- Portfolio & Methods
- Culture & Capabilities
- External Partnerships
- Patient & Public Involvement
- Learning, Evaluation & Impact



Maturity ratings overview

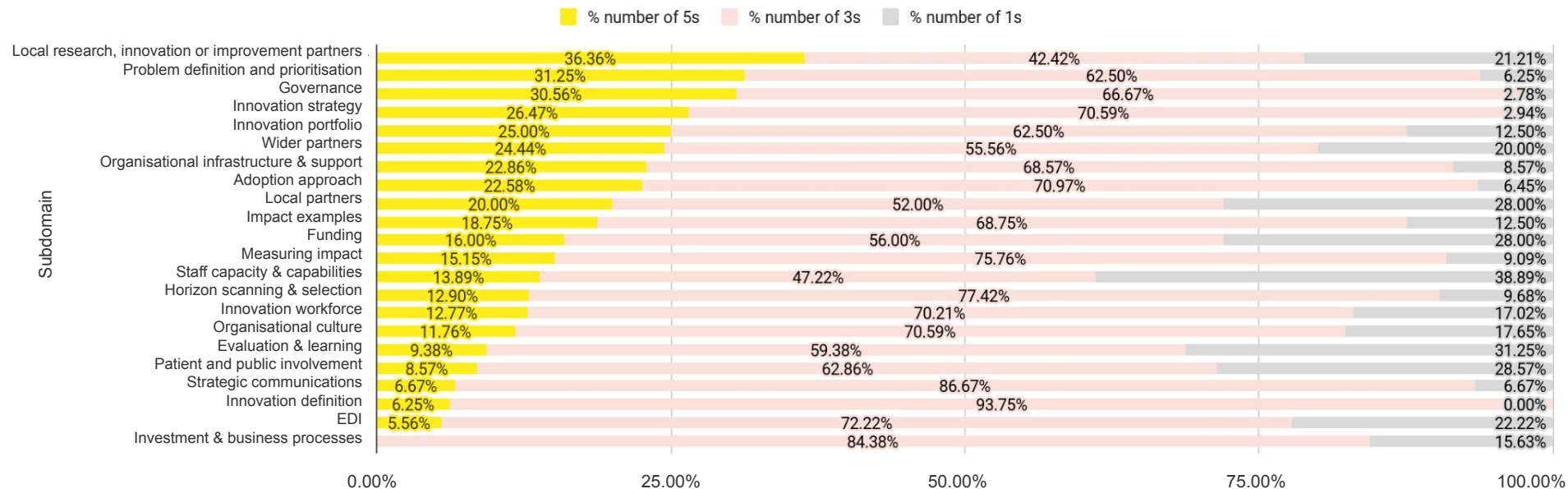
Maturity Rating by Domain

Ordered by % of 5s



Maturity Rating by Subdomain

Ordered by % of 5s



Reflections on the maturity ratings

Where Sites are making progress:

Strong foundations

The areas that received the highest proportion of positive ratings (3s and 5s) were core foundations such as governance, vision and strategy, and problem definition and prioritisation. These strengths are helping Sites align and focus their innovation activities around key organisational missions, with examples showcased throughout this section.

External partnerships

The Domain and Subdomain that scored the highest number of top ratings (5s) were both related to External Partnerships - highlighting the existence of a large minority of Sites who have developed highly mature, value-creating partnerships with a range of local partners. However interestingly there are also a large minority of Sites scoring these areas as a 1.

Where Sites are experiencing challenges:

Staff capacity and capabilities

A key challenge for all Sites is enabling staff across the organisation to access the time and resources to progress innovation. This scored the highest proportion of 1s across all Subdomains.

Evaluation and learning

Capturing the full impact that innovation functions, and the innovations they support, are having within their organisations - and using this to drive improvement - is another area where a large minority of Sites have reported limited progress.

Funding

Securing sustainable funding models for their innovation function is an ongoing challenge and a priority issue for a significant number of Sites.

Opportunities emerging from the maturity ratings

Opportunities for cross-Site learning

External partnerships

There is a high degree of variability in the maturity scores provided by Sites around their External Partnerships - particularly around “Local research, innovation or improvement partners”. This suggests there is a clear opportunity to support ongoing learning between Sites in the cohort; with more mature Sites sharing their partnership models and best practice approaches with Sites who are earlier in their partnerships journey.

Patient and Public involvement

Patient and Public involvement is identified as an area that a large number of Sites have yet to develop. However through the wider research it's clear that there are pockets of confidence and good practice developing which should be shared across the network.

Opportunities for additional cohort-wide learning and support

Transition to BAU

The one Subdomain which no Sites scored a top rating (5) was Investment and Business Processes. This area focused on how innovation functions work with wider enabling functions to progress innovations from pilots to BAU. Achieving this is vital for ensuring that the benefits enabled by new innovations continue to deliver long term value for organisations at scale. This is an area where all Sites would benefit from additional learning and support to address the root causes of the issue and to identify solutions for improving the rate of adoption.



Vision & Strategy

Vision & Strategy

In this domain we asked Sites about:

- How they define innovation
- The vision and strategies they have in place for innovation and innovation adoption
- How their vision and strategies are developed and who's involved in the process
- How they are communicated across the organisation

Key themes in this area included:

1. Ensuring strategy is needs-led
2. Aligning innovation strategy with wider organisational priorities
3. Developing strategy in line with wider partnership and funding opportunities

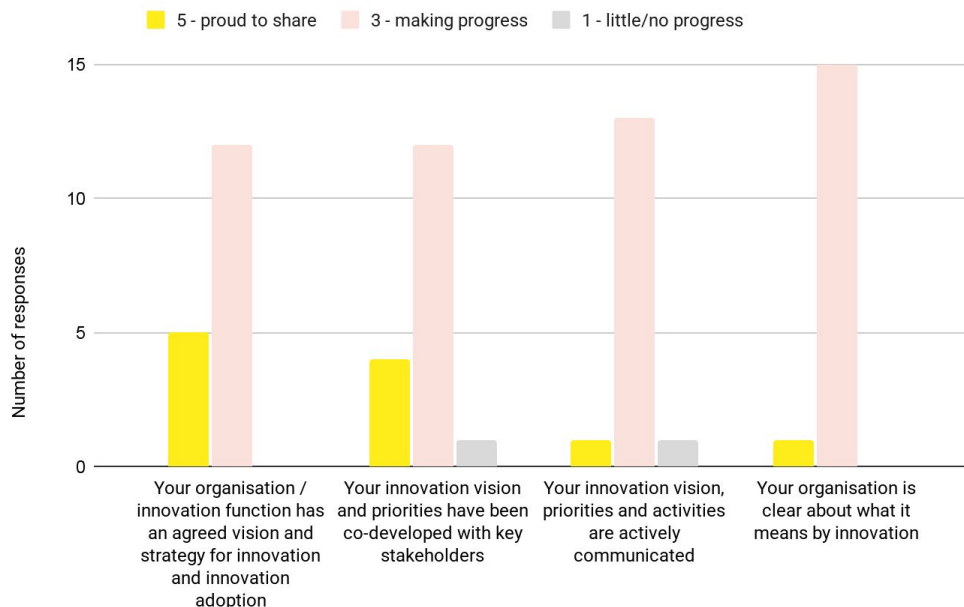
Sub-domain maturity ratings

Sites are making good progress to develop their vision & strategy, but there is more to do to communicate this across their organisations.

All Sites have an agreed vision & strategy for innovation & innovation adoption with 29% (n=5) proud to share this.

Overall, Sites are less confident in communicating their vision and strategy across their organisation:

- Only 1 Site (6%) scored themselves as 'proud to share' for 'Your innovation vision, priorities and activities are actively communicated'
- Only 1 Site scored themselves as 'proud to share' for 'Your organisation is clear about what it means by innovation'.



Key theme 1

Ensuring strategy is needs-led

Focusing innovation strategies on real-world problems and challenges experienced by staff, patients and the wider organisation is critical to ensuring that new innovations supported by the innovation function have the highest chance of being adopted and sustained within the organisation.

A key role for innovation functions is to uncover these problems, validate them with data, and discover more about them through engagement with staff, patients, and other key partners. Validated problems can then be reframed as specific “innovation needs” statements which can inform strategic priorities.

Best practice approaches

Workshops to develop problem statements and innovation opportunity areas

These workshops give staff and patients the chance to: develop clear problem statements; prioritise them and identify which ones are best addressed through innovation (rather than research or quality improvement); and define the essential features or outcomes any innovation must deliver.

Several sites stressed the need to make workshops valuable for staff involved to avoid engagement fatigue - such as by including horizon-scanning on cross-cutting technologies relevant to the organisation.

Engagement cycles across staff groups

Engaging teams at key moments - for example meeting Clinical Business Units during their annual planning process - helps to shine a light on the role that innovation might play in addressing key priorities.

Deploying AI to scan wider data sets

Milton Keynes University Hospital is using AI to scan patient and staff feedback, review incident reports & external reviews in order to develop personas and patient journeys which can shed light on key problem areas.

Surveys for deeper problem analysis

A number of Sites are using Trust-wide surveys both to surface initial problem areas (see Case Study) and to dig deeper into pre-identified “grand challenge themes”.

Case Study: Using Trust-wide surveys in EEAST to gather pain points and inform strategic direction

In East Of England Ambulance Service NHS Trust (EEAST), the innovation team worked with the Trust’s survey team to develop and distribute a survey to all staff members across the Trust. To incentivise engagement, anyone completing the survey was entered into a prize draw for a £50 voucher. Staff were asked a range of questions about their current experience of innovation and the areas they wanted innovation to focus on.

The survey received approximately 130 responses across a range of staff bands, and the results have been incorporated into the innovation implementation strategy, as well as providing a mandate for its delivery.

Key theme 2

Aligning innovation strategy with wider organisational priorities

For innovation strategies to succeed in NHS providers, they must align with organisational priorities and operational realities that affect what can be implemented.

For example, if digital teams are focused on implementing a new Electronic Patient Record (EPR) system - or maximising the benefits of an existing one - then any digital innovation strategy needs to be developed with this context in mind. For Trusts facing substantial financial deficits, delivering potential cost-savings becomes a key strategic priority for innovation.

Best practice approaches

Developing strategy collaboratively with other key functions

This builds shared ownership, enables feedback on priorities, and helps align wider change programmes to maximise impact.

In Alder Hey Children's Hospital Trust for example they are shifting away from having a standalone innovation strategy towards a more collaborative, cross-organisational “Futures Strategy”, where a greater emphasis is being placed on cross-functional collaboration between Innovation, Research, Digital, and Education to better align activity across key functions around a shared vision for the Trust's future.

Key theme 3

Developing strategy in line with wider partnership and funding opportunities

Innovation strategies must be developed with a consideration of the wider external factors - such as regional and national priorities, funding opportunities, policy shifts, and potential system partnerships - that can act as critical enablers to adopting and scaling innovation within an organisation.

Engaging external stakeholders in strategy development can help ensure this alignment, whilst also providing an opportunity to actively communicate the innovation strategy of an organisation more widely with potential partners.

Best practice approaches

Leveraging links between internal strengths and wider regional and national objectives

Effective innovation strategies link existing areas of clinical or operational expertise with wider national and regional priorities.

By clearly articulating internal strengths, such as nationally recognised services or specialist centres, and mapping these against wider regional or national priorities, Trusts can position themselves as demonstrator sites, or partners for national programmes, and attract inward investment.

For example, Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust continues to leverage its expertise around XR technologies in healthcare to access a range of commercial opportunities.

Engagement with wider partners in the local innovation ecosystem

Some Sites are embedding wider stakeholder engagement in their innovation strategy development through their governance structures (see case study).

Other innovation teams have created dedicated surveys to circulate with key external stakeholders in the local innovation and research ecosystem. These have focused on understanding past experiences of working in partnership with the Site as well as surfacing any aspirations for future joint ventures.

Case Study: Leveraging wider expertise through specific “strategy committees” at BWC NHS FT

At Birmingham Women’s & Children’s NHS Foundation Trust, innovation strategy is informed and guided by a “Research and Service Improvement Committee” - chaired by a Non-Exec and reporting to the Board.

With representation from Birmingham Health Partners and Health Innovation West Midlands, the committee has evolved - under the leadership of the Chief Officer for Strategy and Innovation - from a focus on operational oversight to a more strategic, enabling role. This includes leveraging wider academic and industry partnerships to support innovation in the Trust.



Governance & Resources

Governance & Resources

In this domain we asked Sites about:

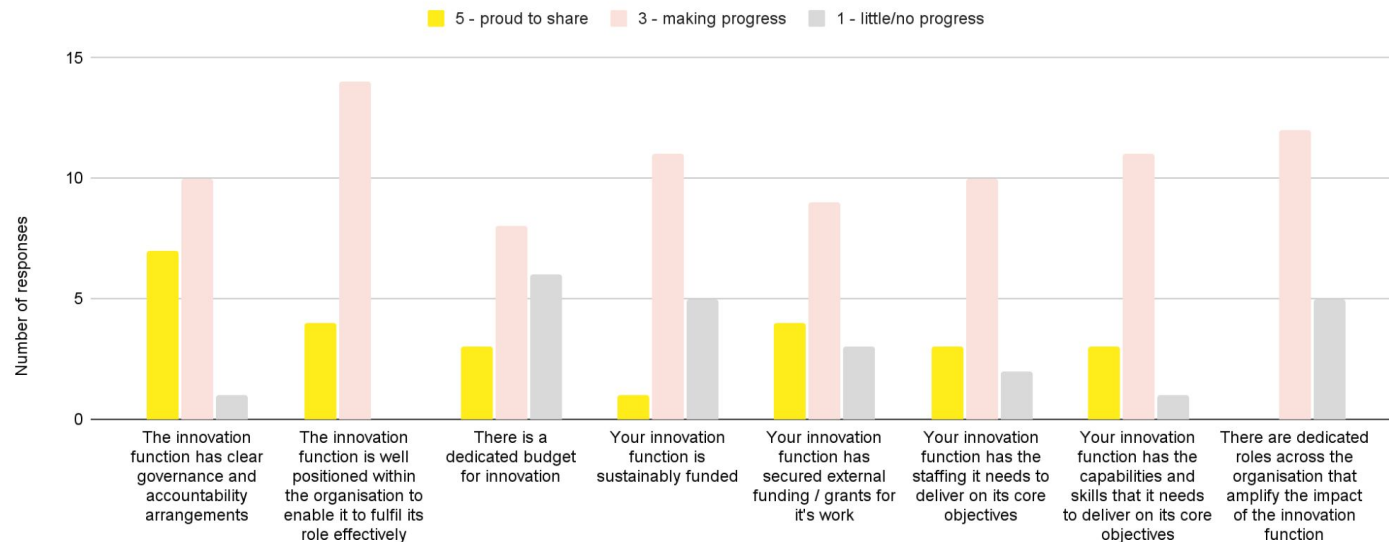
- How the innovation function is governed
- How funding is secured and the sustainability of this
- The budget for the innovation function
- The workforce, capabilities and skills needed to deliver the function's core objectives

Key themes in this area included:

1. Coordinating with enabling functions to drive adoption of innovation into Business as Usual
2. Securing recurrent funding sources for core activities
3. Leveraging industry and academic partnerships to access additional funding and resources
4. Ensuring the innovation function has access to the right skills mix

Sub-domain maturity ratings

Overall, Sites have developed clear governance and accountability arrangements, but sourcing sustainable funding is a persistent challenge.



94% (n=17) Sites are proud to share or are making progress on developing clear governance and accountability arrangements. Only 1 Site scored themselves as ‘proud to share’ for “your innovation function is sustainably funded” and over a third of Sites (35%, n=6) are making little/no progress on “there is a dedicated budget for innovation”. Amplifying the impact of the innovation function through the creation of additional roles and responsibilities also remains a challenge for many sites, with no sites feeling proud to share their approach.

Key theme 1

Coordinating with enabling functions to drive adoption of innovation into Business as Usual

To increase the likelihood that supported innovations become embedded into Business as Usual (BAU), innovation functions must work closely with key enabling teams - such as finance, procurement, digital, and information governance - to ensure alignment with Trust priorities, processes, and operational realities.

Alongside this, they must engage senior leadership teams to build the case for ongoing investments in innovations beyond pilots.

Best practice approaches

Addressing internal bottlenecks in the innovation pathway

A common challenge for NHS innovation functions when trying to progress innovations from pilot phase to business as usual (BAU), is encountering bottlenecks or barriers when engaging key enabling functions like Information Governance (IG), IT or patient safety teams, which often stems from limited capacity available for innovation-related activity.

Mature innovation functions are proactively working with these functions to address these barriers. One approach is to divert innovation funding towards dedicated staff time within IG, IT, or other enabling functions specifically for innovation-related work.

Establishing multi-stakeholder “innovation groups” for early triage of new ideas

These groups provide an opportunity for stakeholders from key functions across the organisation to critically assess potential innovations based on their area of expertise. Early collaboration helps to:

- Build wider buy-in and collective ownership for selected innovations
- Surface potential implementation barriers
- Identify innovations that are not only promising but also feasible to adopt and sustain.

This joined-up approach can increase the likelihood that innovations will move beyond pilot stages and deliver long-term impact.

Case Study: Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust’s (BHT) Innovation Advisory Board

BHT have set up an Innovation Advisory Board which is designed to “*integrate clinical insights, digital and Trust logistics, and governance*”.

By bringing together key stakeholders from clinical, digital, governance, and engineering teams, the board aims to “strategically evaluate and prioritise innovations that enhance patient care, streamline operations, and maintain compliance”.

The group meets quarterly to review proposed innovations and to make consensus-based decisions on what to prioritise and progress where possible.

Breaking down internal silos to increase the visibility of innovation activity

North West Ambulance Service NHS Trust are working to align governance structures for all development, change and innovation work across the organisation. The first steps include a trust-wide project portfolio - for all improvement, innovation or transformation projects with visibility for all, and ensuring that the correct governance and communication channels are in place for projects across the portfolio.

Strategic engagement of senior leadership

Guy's and St Thomas' attribute their success in implementing and scaling innovations to strong advocacy from their Deputy Chief Executive, who enables access to key decision-making forums. This positioning allows them to present "cases for change" to leadership teams - ahead of horizon scanning - helping to secure an SRO for innovation projects early on - something they view as critical to long-term success.

Key theme 2

Securing recurrent funding sources for core activities

In the context of ongoing financial pressures in the NHS, many of the Sites we spoke to are prioritising the development of sustainable funding models for their functions. Smaller Sites, in particular, often rely heavily on NHS InSites funding to support core activity.

While external partnerships and commercialisation are seen as important long-term opportunities for many Sites (see next section), securing some form of recurrent core funding is widely viewed as a critical platform for developing these wider revenue sources and securing future sustainability.

Best practice approaches

Build the case for innovation as a critical enabler for wider organisational needs

Identifying the opportunity areas where innovation can help drive progress on key organisational challenges or priorities - and highlighting the risk of not innovating - can help build the case for longer term, internal funding commitments for innovation.

Develop joint innovation budgets or jointly funded innovation roles with other system partners

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust have two innovation roles which are 50% funded by Cambridge University Health Partners (CUHP). These roles support innovation activity within the Trust as well as across the wider CUHP partnership, enabling strong partnership working across all system partners.

Strategic engagement with NHS charities around shared objectives

A number of Sites have been strengthening their innovation partnerships with local NHS charities. Sites recommend adopting a mutually beneficial approach, focusing on how the innovation function can support the charity to use innovation to pursue its strategic priorities and identifying funding opportunities to deliver this.

Case Study: Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust and CW+ working in partnership to support innovation

In Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, the trust-wide innovation programme is funded by its charity CW+. This setup is the successful product of long term relationship building and integration between the Trust and CW+.

This relationship has been formalised through an MoU, and whilst the charity is the primary funder of the innovation programme, the innovation team is fully embedded within the Trust and reports to a Trust director.

Key theme 3

Leveraging industry and academic partnerships to access additional funding and resources

External partnerships play a crucial role in helping NHS innovation functions access new funding sources, grow their impact, and offset internal budget investment in innovation activity.

Working with industry and academic partners, innovation functions can scale their activities and become more financially sustainable by securing a wider range of income streams beyond internal Trust funding or wider NHS funding streams.

Best practice approaches

Commercialising innovation function capabilities

Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust are developing additional revenue streams through their XR Innovation Testbed Service. This has been developed in partnership with the South West Health Innovation Network and provides a pathway for innovators looking to test within NHS environments.

SME collaborations supporting early stage tech development

Several Sites we spoke to are accessing funding by supporting SMEs to test and co-develop new technology solutions within their organisations. Often this is through successful bids to the Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) or to Innovate UK programmes.

Case Study: Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust

Torbay and South Devon's digital innovation service is about 80% self funded through external income and that's been a key factor in allowing the innovation function to grow within a relatively small Trust that is experiencing severe financial challenges.

The team has actively sought to build a diversified income stream by developing a range of partnerships and revenue models which have included:

- Securing funding from NHS England for various activities, including commissions for digital content development, and establishing and blueprinting a Community Digital Enablement Programme.
- Securing £60,000 in sponsored equipment from Lenovo for their Digital Skills Hub.

- Developing a more structured commercial offer to industry partners through their XR Innovation Testbed Service - in partnership with their Health Innovation Network - which provides structured evaluation of healthcare XR technologies.
- Building a relationship with a US tech company which is allowing them to purchase their own AI system at a highly discounted rate.

The key ingredients underpinning their success in leveraging these partnerships has been the tenacity, resourcefulness, and passion for innovation that the team brings to their work.

Data collaboration and IP transfers

Some Sites are bringing in revenue by entering into Real World Data collaboration agreements or developing IP tech transfer contracts with Industry partners. In some of the larger innovation functions, like Guys and St Thomas, they have dedicated commercial innovation teams dedicated to identifying and supporting these partnerships.

Universities can support with this. At Newcastle Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust they've agreed an MoU with Newcastle University focussed on collectively maximising the benefits from IP exploitation.

Equipment and infrastructure donations

Some larger industry partners have been providing “sponsored” equipment to NHS innovation functions, or providing tech at discounted rates, either as part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives or in the interest of learning more about potential use cases within the NHS.

Key theme 4

Ensuring the innovation function has access to the right skills mix

Ensuring the innovation function has the right skills mix is essential for effectively delivering key innovation support activities. Identifying key skills gaps and working to address them - either through recruitment or partnership-working - is a key development area for many of the innovation functions we spoke to.

For example, some Sites have identified that they are lacking in the digital expertise required for adoption of digital innovations, which make up an increasingly large proportion of the innovations being considered for adoption.

Best practice approaches

Recruiting for specialist skills to support with digital innovation adoption

As Sites grow, a number are looking to address digital skills gaps within their teams by appointing specific Digital Innovation support staff - often as a joint role sitting between Innovation and Digital to support better connections between these two functions and to reduce barriers in the implementation of digital innovations.

Working with external partners to address skills gaps

In their first few years of operation, the innovation function within Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust, contracted an external not-for-profit to support with IP commercialisation whilst the innovation function was getting up and running.



Portfolio & Methods

Portfolio & Methods

In this domain we ask Sites about:

- The innovation function's ability to adopt & spread a diverse range of innovations
- Processes for horizon scanning, prioritising & selecting innovations
- Their ability to support innovations to become business as usual
- Processes for assessing and managing risk
- How they evaluate innovations & processes for learning and improvement

Key themes in this area included:

1. Supporting innovators to navigate corporate function requirements and the broader innovation pathway
2. Prioritising collaboration to maximise organisation-wide impact
3. Ensuring staff experiences of innovation adoption process are positive

Sub-domain maturity ratings

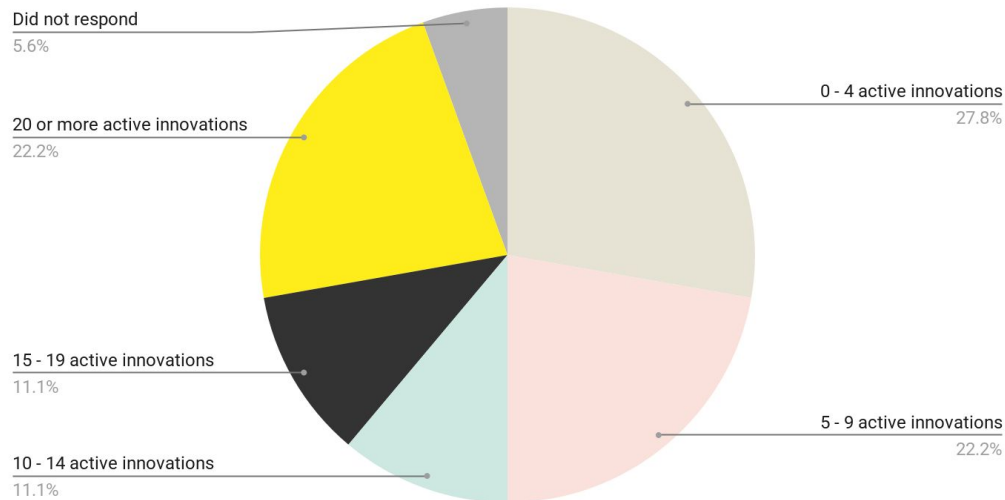
Overall, Sites have the capacity and necessary processes to hold a variety of projects at once at varying stages of the innovation pipeline. However, there is more to be done to support successful innovation pilots to transition to business as usual and to drive improvement through learning from successful and unsuccessful projects.



Key data insights

- Nearly a third of all Sites (31%, n=5) are proud to share their ability to adopt and spread a diverse range of innovations, with the same number proud that they're able to prioritise real world problems
- 0 Sites are proud to share their processes for *selecting* innovations despite 4 of them (22%) being proud of their processes for *identifying* innovations they could test and adopt
- 0 Sites are proud to share that their business functions are set up to support innovation or that their processes and methods support successful innovation pilots to transition to business as usual
- Just 1 Site is proud to share their processes for learning and improvement, and 36% (n=6) are making little/no progress in developing this area

Number of active innovations in the Innovation Function's portfolio at one time



Key theme 1

Supporting innovators to navigate corporate function requirements and the broader innovation pathway

Innovation teams play a crucial role in supporting staff and external innovators to navigate often complex organisational processes - such as procurement, information governance, and clinical safety - that can slow or stall promising ideas.

By providing practical guidance and support, and through their efforts to coordinate and optimise existing processes, these teams help ensure good ideas can move more efficiently through the innovation pathway toward adoption and impact.

Best practice approaches

Detailed mapping of internal innovation pathways and approval processes

Kings College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust have developed an “innovation system” process map which details the key pathways and decision gates which must be followed to progress from problem identification to innovation development or adoption. The map includes links to relevant documents or guidance related to each stage.

Co-developing templates, guidance documents, and standardised approaches for key requirements with other functions

In Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust the innovation team is working with their Digital Informatics Team to map out the digital governance pathway more clearly for innovation-related evaluation projects.

Key theme 2

Prioritising collaboration to maximise organisation-wide impact

NHS innovation functions are typically small teams tasked with supporting innovation across large, complex organisations with thousands of staff. Teams are often grappling with how to strategically allocate their limited time and resources to achieve the greatest possible impact for the organisation as a whole.

Interviewees described a constant balancing act between offering sufficient support to help innovation projects progress, and knowing when to step back to ensure local ownership of the project and to avoid over-committing limited staff time to a small number of projects.

Addressing key internal barriers with other functions is also a key enabler of project success.

Best practice approaches

Early engagement with relevant teams

A key message we heard from all Sites was the importance of starting any process of considering a new innovation with close engagement with the teams who will ultimately be adopting the innovation into practice. This ensures there is active buy-in and enthusiasm from these teams, and allows them an opportunity to input into how the innovation might best be introduced; both vital ingredients to successful innovation.

Clear handovers to responsible functions through co-developed project plans

Successful handovers of innovations to the teams responsible for ongoing implementation of the innovation is a critical enabler and requires careful planning through co-developed project plans.

Collaboration to addressing key internal barriers in the innovation pathway

A common challenge for NHS innovation functions when trying to progress innovations from pilot phase to business as usual (BAU), is encountering barriers when engaging key enabling functions like Information Governance (IG) or IT. These barriers can stem from misaligned priorities, or differing approaches to risk.

Innovation teams are addressing these by working with senior leadership and relevant functions to develop clear, permissive policies in priority innovation areas - such as AI - that clarify expectations, support shared risk-taking, and give enabling teams the confidence and mandate to back innovation with more authority.

Additionally they are working closely with procurement teams to understand their processes and to ensure that priorities across both functions are aligned and complimentary.

Strategic coordination with available expertise and resource across wider functions

NHS organisations include a wide range of capabilities and skill sets which can support improvement work of all varieties. For innovation functions to maximise their impact, identifying these resources and coordinating with them is key. Examples include working with QI teams to access support around journey mapping and evaluation, or working with Library teams to support horizon scanning for new innovations.

Taking a coaching and mentorship approach

Another way innovation functions can amplify their impact is by taking a coaching and mentorship approach which supports staff to develop the capabilities, mindsets, and relationships to progress innovation projects themselves.

Key theme 3

Ensuring staff experiences of innovation adoption processes are positive

Understanding how staff actually experience the implementation of new innovations in their day-to-day work is critical to ensuring that the benefits of innovation are shared fairly across an organisation.

Ensuring staff experiences of innovation adoption process are positive - and sharing these stories - is key to building ongoing support for innovation across the organisation. Where experiences are less positive, it highlights the need for more strategic thinking around the change management and organisational development processes that support innovation implementation.

Best practice approaches

Developing a balanced portfolio of innovation projects

Balancing complex innovation adoption projects - which can cause a drain on staff time and energy - with simpler, easier-to-adopt innovation projects, that can deliver quicker wins and raise morale, is important to ensuring ongoing buy-in and engagement in innovation activities across an organisation.

Showcasing the positive impact that innovations can deliver for staff in internal communications

Ensuring that internal messaging related to innovation within an organisation maintains a strong focus on staff experiences and potential impacts for staff, so that they feel their perspectives are considered and valued as part of innovation projects.

Removing barriers for staff at the start of the innovation pathway

Many sites emphasised the importance of making innovation feel as approachable as possible for staff, opting for a flexible supportive approach with minimal bureaucracy. Methods include reducing the length of the form required to submit ideas for innovation, and providing support to staff ahead of them submitting ideas through formal governance processes.



Culture & Capabilities

Culture & Capabilities

In this domain we ask Sites about:

- The physical & digital infrastructure that supports innovation
- How adjacent teams and functions enable innovation
- Staff capacity & capabilities to engage with innovation
- How organisational culture supports the work of the innovation function

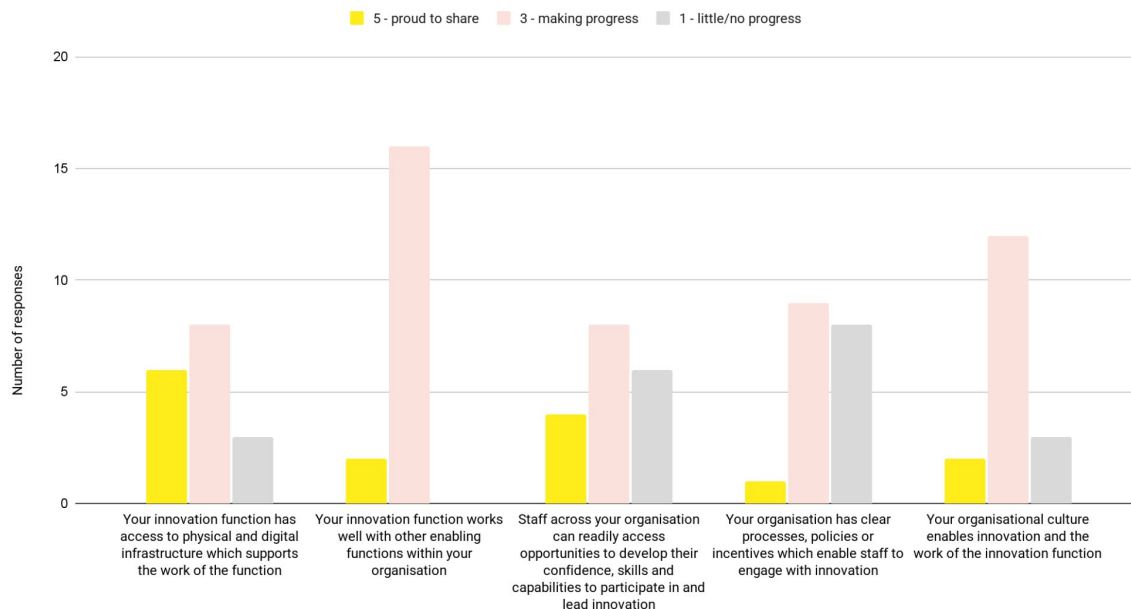
Key themes in this area included:

1. Stimulating organisation-wide interest in innovation
2. Creating development pathways for staff interested in innovation and enabling staff to spend time on innovation projects
3. Creating an inclusive culture where everyone can participate in innovation

Sub-domain maturity ratings

Sites are making progress to work well with other enabling functions but there is more to do to increase opportunities for staff to participate and lead innovation, including the development of clear processes, policies and incentives, and to create cultures which enable innovation.

- Nearly half (44%, n=8) of all Sites are making little or no progress to develop clear processes, policies or incentives which enable staff to engage with innovation
- Only 2 Sites (11%) are proud to share how they work with other enabling internal functions



Key theme 1

Stimulating organisation-wide interest in innovation

Raising the profile of innovation across the organisation is a vital role for NHS innovation functions, helping to position innovation as a shared priority rather than the responsibility of a few individuals or teams.

By actively promoting success stories, inspiring and engaging staff around the potential of innovation, and building networks of innovators, these teams help embed innovation into the organisational culture.

Best practice approaches

Running events to inform and inspire staff

From innovation showcases co-hosted by local Health Innovation Networks to offering introductory training workshops to staff, such as the “Deep Dive” technology sessions offered to staff at Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust.

Developing Communities of Practice

Often these are set up around specific technology areas such as XR or AI and can help sustain a longer term exploration of new opportunities.

Using comms to raise the profile of both the innovation function and innovation generally

Sites are using creative and attractive formats such as “Innovation e-magazines” to showcase innovation success stories.

Taking a hub and spoke model to structuring innovation functions

For large and geographically dispersed providers having local “innovation reps” who can act as a visible touchpoint for staff, who then report back to the central innovation team, is essential for engaging the full range of staff across the organisation.

Embedding innovation training into core staff training

Integrating innovation training into staff onboarding processes and linking it to Continuous Professional Development frameworks helps promote a culture of innovation and build organisation-wide capabilities.

Case Study: Mid and South Essex NHS Foundation Trust

In Mid and South Essex NHS Foundation Trust, the innovation team sees their core role as promoting a culture of innovation; showing staff what is possible and empowering them to lead their own projects.

Alongside their 12 month fellowship program - which provides development, education, networking and mentoring opportunities for staff - they recently held a 2-week innovation series showcasing the great innovation work going on around the trust and giving staff tips and tricks on how to innovate and what to think about when approaching innovation. .

As part of this, they also hosted a pitch event where potential innovators could present their ideas to a panel and receive feedback and advice on how to move their ideas forward.

Key theme 2

Creating development pathways for staff interested in innovation and enabling staff to spend time on innovation projects

Many NHS innovation functions play a vital role in creating and supporting development pathways for staff who are interested in innovation. This can include setting up dedicated fellowship programmes for staff with innovation ideas, or offering secondment opportunities for clinicians to work within the innovation function itself.

Formalising these pathways and roles helps ensure staff have the time, support, and permission they need to progress innovation projects within their organisation.

Innovation Fellowship programs

These provide protected time for staff to dedicate to innovation, with some programmes supporting staff to work on an innovation idea for approximately 1-2 days a month as part of their role (See Case study on next slide).

“Innovation associates” or “clinical innovation consultant” roles

These roles are often secondments and are typically focused on driving clinical innovation more widely across the organisation, by providing clinical expertise and clinical leadership within the innovation team.

Sites highlighted the important role that Consultants in particular can play in helping to inform strategy, to foster a culture of innovation within clinical teams, and to directly support clinicians across the organisation to identify opportunities for innovation.

Case Study: Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

Chelsea and Westminster is taking a structured, developmental approach to building confidence, competence, and ultimately, leadership in innovation across the Trust.

Their **Innovation Fellowship** supports staff with ideas for innovation to build confidence. Fellows are supported to think critically about their ideas and begin testing and developing them.

Staff members who have completed the Innovation Fellowship Programme are designated as **CW Innovation Champions**. These individuals play a crucial role in championing innovation across the organisation by promoting new ideas, mentoring colleagues, and supporting the adoption of innovative solutions. Their involvement helps create a network of innovation advocates throughout the Trust.

Their new **Innovation Associates** position builds on this further by offering dedicated time for individuals to further develop their innovation competencies by working on innovation across multiple services.

The long-term vision is to go a step beyond this and establish **divisional innovation leads**, sitting alongside existing divisional medical directors and research leads. These roles would act as conveners and strategic leaders for innovation within their clinical divisions.

Key theme 3

Creating an inclusive culture where everyone can participate in innovation

Great ideas for innovation can come from every level of an organisation and from every team - and often come from the people - staff and patients (see section: Patient & Public Involvement) closest to the issue.

To realise the full benefits of innovation, projects and processes need to be inclusive, ensuring that all staff can contribute equitably. This requires conscious efforts to remove barriers, particularly those that may prevent certain groups from participating, paying attention to both practical and psychological barriers. For example, this may include creating opportunities for non-clinical or more junior staff to participate, and actively demonstrating that the organisation has a learning culture, where leaders are as interested in learning from 'unsuccessful' projects as they are in celebrating the successes.

Best practice approaches

Recruiting and supporting innovation champions from across the organisation

In Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust they have actively sought to recruit a diverse range of innovation champions, ensuring all parts of the organisation are reached and represented. In Newcastle they are co-designing what it means to be an "innovation champion" with staff to ensure that the role works for them and is as inclusive as possible.

Meeting people where they already are

Attending and organising events where staff are already gathered is a valuable way to raise the profile of innovation across different staff groups - for example, by running on-site workshops with Estates teams

Framing involvement in innovation in terms of staff empowerment

Creating opportunities for staff to feel they have agency and can meaningfully influence their organisation is integral to building a healthy culture. When done right, involvement in innovation can empower staff by involving them in the development and implementation of new approaches that drive positive change. Several sites we spoke to are giving equal weight to how innovation can empower staff, alongside the wider positive impacts innovation can bring.

Case Study: Enabling Support for Care Leavers at Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

In Northumbria Healthcare the innovation team is helping a nurse realise her vision for a support network for apprentices and staff from care-experienced backgrounds.

The nurse first connected with a member of the innovation team when they were speaking informally with staff at a Trust-wide improvement event. The nurse identified that apprentices from a care leaver background often faced barriers to sustaining their placements within the Trust, and felt that a dedicated support network could help address this. However due to clinical demands she had been unable to find the time to progress the idea through the relevant channels.

The innovation team helped to connect the nurse with key stakeholders across the Trust and beyond, including the EDI lead, the head of Learning Development, and local social services. They also facilitated the formation of a cross-organisational working group to help explore the idea further as well as considering other practical support that might be put in place for care-experienced apprentices and staff.



External Partnerships

External Partnerships

In this domain we ask Sites about:

- How the innovation function works with:
 - Local system partners
 - Wider research, innovation or improvement partners
 - Wider stakeholders (such as industry)

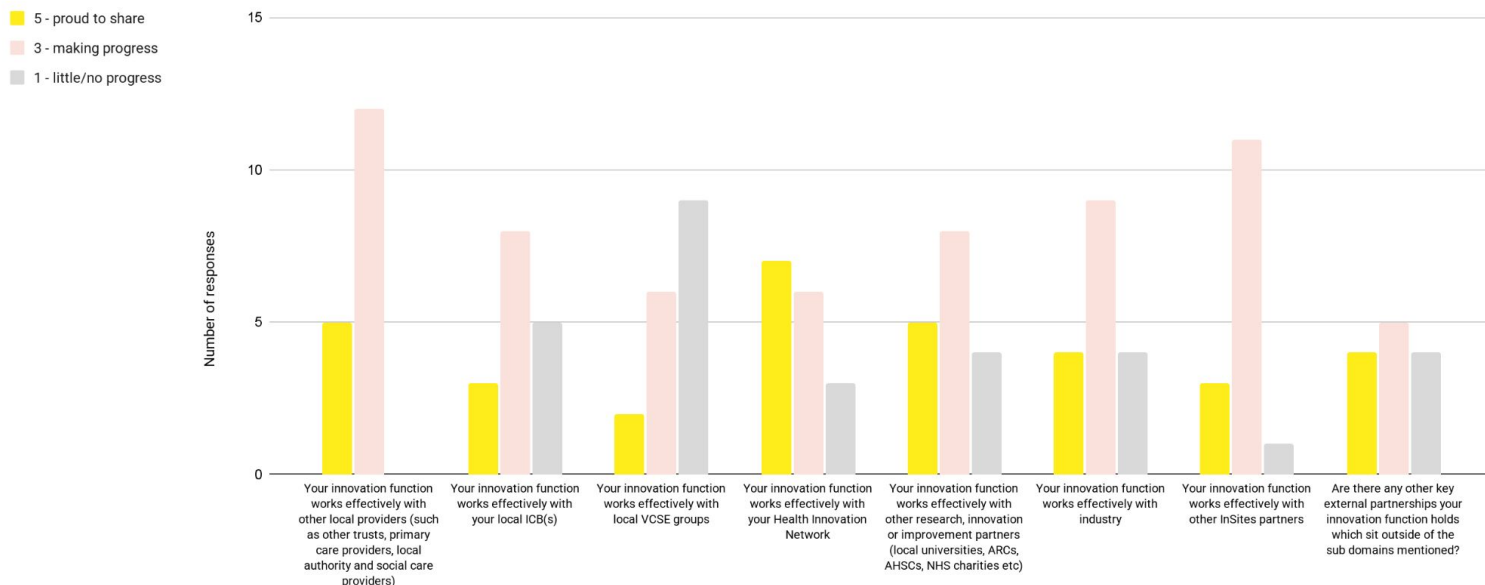
Key themes in this area included:

1. Coordinating and integrating innovation activities across local systems

Sub-domain maturity ratings

Overall, many Sites work effectively with other local providers, as well as other innovation, industry and InSites partners. There is more work to do to develop strong relationships with VCSE partners and local ICBs.

- All Sites are proud to share or making progress on working effectively with local providers (such as other Trusts, primary care providers, local authorities and social care)
- Over half (53%, n=9) are making little or no progress to work effectively with local VCSE groups



Key theme 1

Coordinating and integrating innovation activities across local systems

There is a wide range of stakeholders within local systems working towards shared goals around accelerating innovation adoption within the NHS.

By strategically coordinating and integrating relevant innovation activities across a system, local partners are able to amplify impact, for example, by identifying shared priorities and challenges, reducing duplicative activities, exchanging learning, and identifying clearer pathways for spread and scale.

Best practice approaches

Aligning innovation infrastructure, processes and resources across local NHS organisations

Several Sites we spoke to are consolidating or aligning their innovation infrastructure and processes with other local NHS partners, in order to improve efficiency and scale impact across a local system. For example:

- Trusts in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are establishing a shared innovation “front door” portal with the support of the ICB, Cambridge University Health Partners (CUHP) and Health Innovation East
- Work in Leeds is underway to align Information Governance processes across Acute Trusts in the Provider Collaborative to support better adoption and spread pathways
- In Norfolk and Waveney, innovation training programmes developed by the ICB are being shared with other local partners

Fellowship programs hosted by Trusts but serving the entire ICS

Mid and South Essex NHS Foundation Trust have developed an innovation fellowship model which is hosted by the Trust but which is open to applicants from the whole ICS. This model recognises the potential for connecting innovators from one part of the system with opportunities to test, adopt and scale innovation in other parts of the system. In other areas, ICBs are acting as the host partner for similar system-wide initiatives, often working with their local Health Innovation Network to support delivery.

More formalised partnership working with Health Innovation Networks

Several sites are currently developing more structured and systematic ways of working with their local Health Innovation Network (HIN). This includes taking a more strategic approach to

identifying their organisation's key innovation priorities and communicating these to their HIN. In response, they are asking their HIN to provide quarterly horizon scanning updates specifically aligned to these priority areas. This approach helps ensure that innovation support is focused, timely, and directly relevant to local needs.

Regional innovation networks

Sites reported that regional networks are playing an increasingly impactful role in support learning and partnership work around innovation, and many of the innovation functions we spoke to are playing leadership roles in getting these up and running. Some of these networks are focused exclusively around innovation leads or champions within local NHS organisations, whilst others are working with a wider range of local partners within and beyond the health care sector, often in coordination with the Local Authority.

Case Study: Collaborating across a locality - Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (GHNHSFT) is currently in the process of re-setting up its innovation function after a period of change within the organisation..

Right from the outset, the innovation team has looked outwards to opportunities for collaboration across their local Integrated Care System.

In one of their first key projects, they have actively brought together Gloucestershire County Council, Gloucester University, the ICB, local Primary Care networks and the Mental Health Trust to collaborate on a major bid together.

In addition they are supporting a network of local GPs with a grant application to set up a primary care innovation delivery network.



Patient & Public Involvement

Patient & Public Involvement

In this domain we ask Sites about:

- Opportunities for patients & the public to engage in innovation
- Funding to support patient & public engagement
- Equity, diversity & inclusion in innovation activities

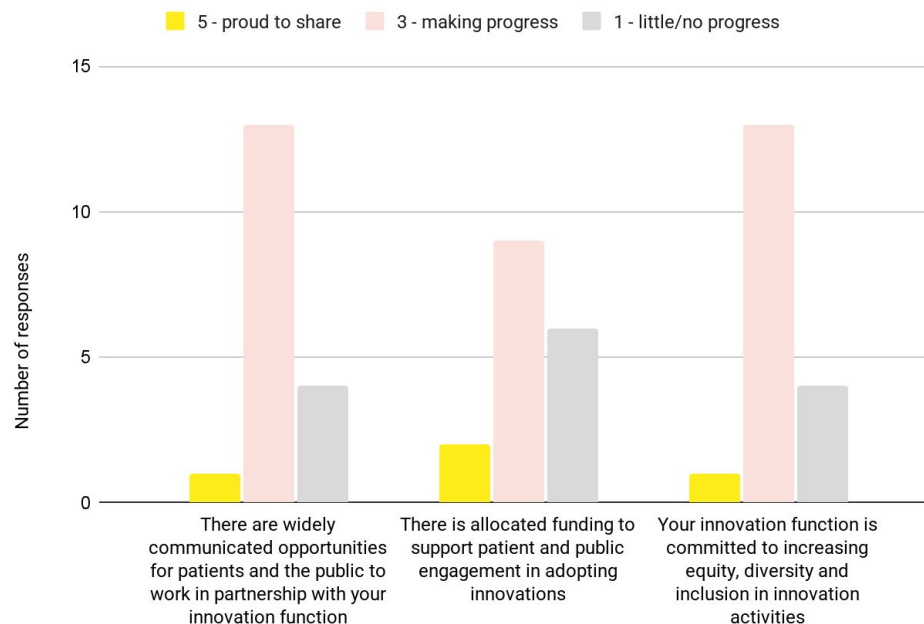
Key themes in this area included:

1. Strengthening partnership working with local communities around innovation

Sub-domain maturity ratings

Sites are making progress to create and communicate opportunities for patients and the public to engage with innovation and overall there is a focus to increase equity, diversity and inclusion in innovation activities. However, there is a lack of allocated funding to support this.

- Nearly three quarters of Sites (72%, n=13) are making progress to develop and widely communicate opportunities for patients & the public to work in partnership with the innovation function. The same number is focused on ensuring that opportunities are equitable and inclusive.
- Over a third (35%, n=6) are making little or no progress to source allocated funding to support patient and public engagement in adopting innovations



Key theme 1

Strengthening partnership working with local communities around innovation

It's vital that NHS innovation functions work in partnership with local communities and patients to ensure that new solutions genuinely reflect their needs and priorities and benefit from their insights and ideas.

Co-developing innovations with people who use services helps build trust, improve uptake, and deliver more equitable and meaningful outcomes.

Best practice approaches

Collaborating with existing community groups

Traditional NHS engagement routes - such as patient groups - often fail to reach the full diversity of local communities, especially under-served groups experiencing some of the poorest health outcomes. Where Sites are working to address this, they are developing closer collaboration with a wider range of community groups to ensure engagement is equitable and inclusive.

Appointing a Research and Innovation Lead to the local VCSE assembly

In Norfolk and Waveney ICB they have recruited a Research and Innovation Lead to sit on the local VCSE assembly. The role is designed to provide clearer VCSE input into research and innovation, ensuring that *“research and innovation strategies are impactful to the communities across Norfolk and Waveney”*, and to facilitate wider community involvement in projects.

Learning, Evaluation and Impact

Innovation function impact and Learning

In this domain we ask Sites about:

- Processes for collecting data to evaluate the impact of the innovation function
- Indicators for measuring the successes of the function
- How able the innovation function is to describe its overall impact

Key themes in this area included:

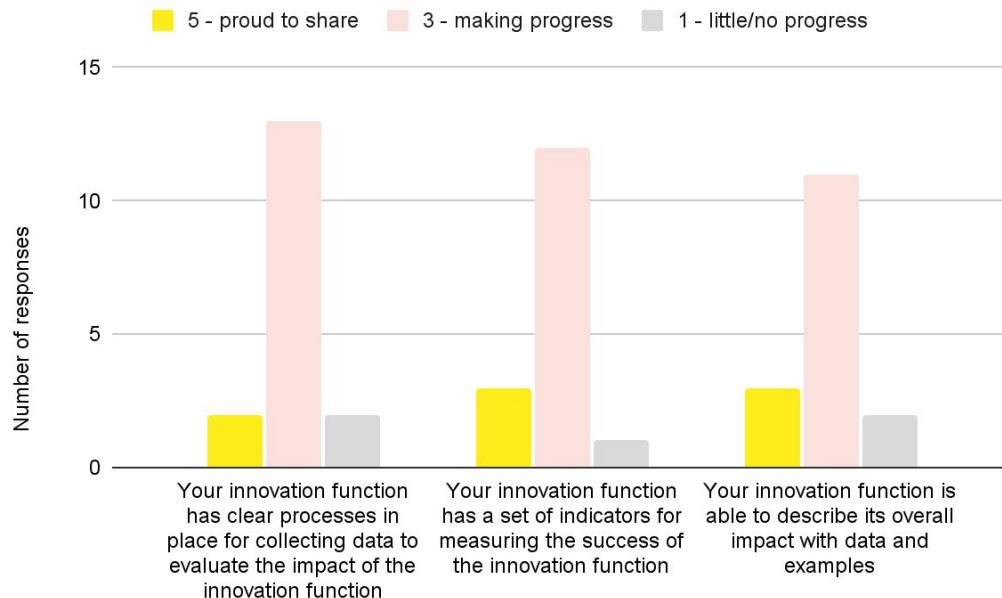
1. Evaluating the impact of an innovation function's activities

Sub-domain maturity ratings

Sites are making progress to create processes to measure and share the impact of their innovation functions.

Across the Sites, there is more to do to develop strategy and standard practice in this area.

- Only 2 Sites (12%) are proud to share processes for collecting data to evaluate the impact of the innovation function
- Three quarters of Sites (75%, n=12) are making progress to develop a set of indicators for measuring the success of the innovation function, with just 3 proud of their approach and their ability to describe their impact with data and examples.



Key theme 1

Evaluating the impact of an innovation function's activities

Capturing and evaluating the full impact of an innovation function's activities, as well as the long term impact of adopted innovations, is key to improving performance and for making the case for continued investment in innovation.

What makes this challenging is the breadth of activities and roles delivered by the innovation function, and the difficulties inherent in measuring long term benefits from implemented innovations. Many innovation functions are still in the process of developing their KPIs. Sites that have developed them are initially focusing on process and output measures, whilst trying to develop more outcome and impact-focused measures.

Common KPI areas for innovation functions

Output / activity measures

- No. of projects / pilots supported
- No. of staff trainings delivered
- No. of funding applications
- No. of events attended
- No. of innovations scoped
- No. of innovations submitted

Outcome measures

- External funding generated
- Formal contracts signed
- No. of innovations embedded into BAU
- Staff engagement with innovation activities
- Staff confidence and capabilities

Impact measures

- Improvements in patient care
- Cost-savings achieved

Best practice examples

Ripple Effect Mapping exercises

In Norfolk and Waveney ICB they have taken a Ripple Effect Mapping approach to help the innovation function visualise and capture the wider impacts of its activities - beyond immediate outputs and outcomes. This enables teams to trace how their activities influence wider staff attitudes and approaches, over time, offering a richer, more holistic picture of the impact they generate.

Academic partnerships to evaluate longer term outcomes of later stage innovations

Several sites are collaborating with academic partners to implement more robust tracking of long-term outcomes and benefits realisation for innovations, with the aim of better demonstrating sustained impact and value. Teams are drawing inspiration from frameworks such as the The Research Excellence Framework (REF) in order to track the full impact of innovation on patients and society.



Thanks & appendix

Thanks

This research was undertaken by the [Innovation Unit](#), a social enterprise with a mission to reduce inequalities and transform systems by growing people-powered innovations.

The authors were Oliver Clayton, Frances Brown and Christina Cornwell.

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We would also like to thank the [InSites](#) team, especially Jana Schulte and Fiona McKenzie, for their help introducing us to the Sites, sharing their expert knowledge, and for bringing the Sites together for our reflection workshop.

Also to the Health Foundation, who funded this research as part of their ongoing strategic focus on supporting radical [innovation and improvement in health and care services](#).

Cover image: Surgery, UK. Mastoid exploration. Adrian Wressell, Heart of England NHS FT. Source: Wellcome Collection. Licensed under CC BY 4.0



Appendix

Adopting Innovation Wheel



PARTNERSHIPS & GOVERNANCE
Structures, relationships and processes that support shared decision making, signposting and mobilising resources.



VISION AND VALUES
Setting a shared tone and direction for innovation adoption, the role of the hub and how it fits in the wider system.



NARRATIVES AND BEHAVIOURS
How communications, engagement and storytelling shape the cultures and practices that enable innovation adoption within the system.



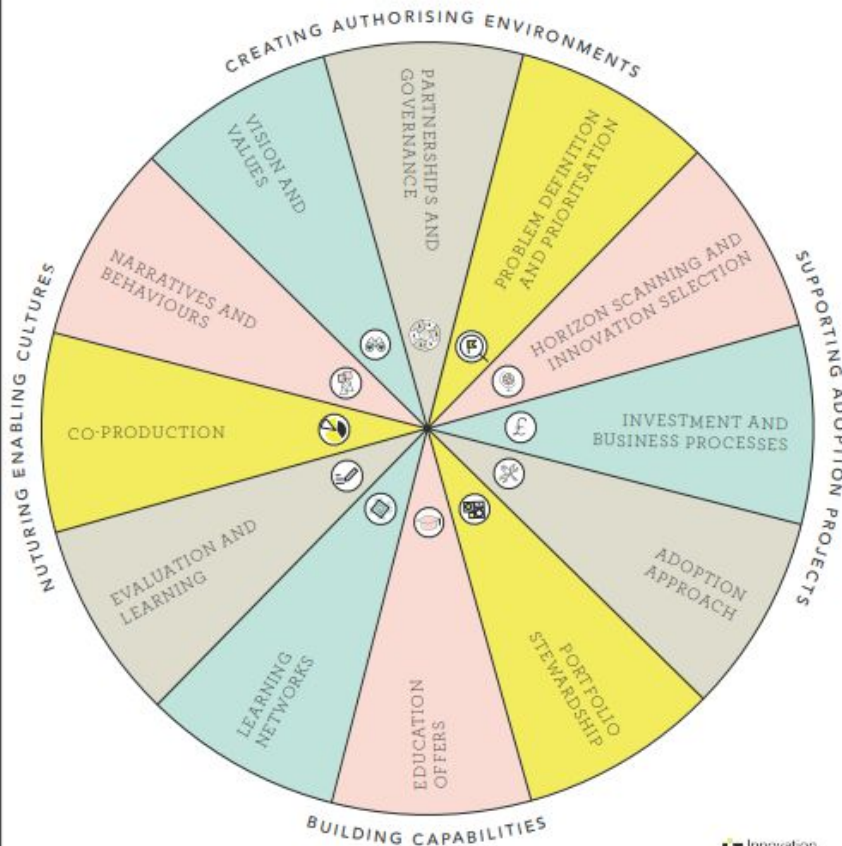
CO-PRODUCTION
Making decisions and working in equal partnership with citizens and staff.



EVALUATION AND LEARNING
The formal and informal mechanisms that enable the system, hub and project teams to evaluate, learn and improve.



LEARNING NETWORKS
Creating opportunities for people across the system with interest and experience in innovation adoption to share insights and learning, offer support and solutions to shared challenges.



PROBLEM DEFINITION & PRIORITISATION
Clear challenges we want to address as a system and the impact we want to have.



HORIZON SCANNING & INNOVATION SELECTION
An approach to identifying, appraising, selecting and approving the innovations we intend to adopt, spread and scale.



INVESTMENT AND BUSINESS PROCESSES
The financial, procurement, information and governance processes that underpin the running of the innovation portfolio and sustainability of the hub.



ADOPTION APPROACH
The methods, tools, frameworks and practical support that guides how we adapt and adopt innovations.



PORTFOLIO STEWARDSHIP
Arrangements to identify, support and learn from past, current and planned adoption projects.



EDUCATION OFFERS
Capability building and knowledge sharing outputs and activities that support leaders, staff and citizens to develop the confidence and skills needed to lead and participate in innovation adoption.