

Innovation Labs Process Evaluation

Dec 2010 – Feb 2012

External Report



May 2013
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Glossary

Innovation Labs initiative: the term used to describe the whole project, from planning, through to development and implementation.

Innovation Lab workshop: a space where people with different skills and experiences come together to think creatively and innovatively about solutions to problems.

Co-design: a method by which products or services are devised jointly by the people who are likely to use the end product and people with the technical skills to make them work.

Incubation period: a period of time where people involved in the Innovation Labs initiative could go online between the Innovation Lab workshops to comment and add suggestions to the ideas for final products.

Project Team: the original team working on, monitoring and making decisions about the Innovation Labs initiative. The project team consisted of funding staff and young people who met regularly and made decisions on the process.

Project Board: when the grants were awarded, the Project Team became the Project Board. The Project Board had similar duties, but was also responsible for making decisions on who received funding, and monitoring funding henceforth.

Professionals: the name given to anyone involved in the Innovation Labs initiative in a staff capacity within the evaluation.

Young People: used to describe any of the young people that had voluntarily given their time to the Innovation Labs initiative within the evaluation.

1. Summary

The Innovation Labs initiative is a partnership run by Comic Relief, Nominet Trust, and Right Here (a partnership between Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Mental Health Foundation). The aim of the initiative is to work with young people (aged 16-25), technology experts, youth workers and mental health professionals to explore how digital technology could better help young people look after their mental health and wellbeing. The initiative began with a seven month idea-generation process, delivered by the Cernis Partnership¹ and steered by a Project Team made up of the three funders and a group of young people. Around 200 ideas were generated through two face to face Innovation Labs workshops where young people, technical experts and the funders were brought together to develop ideas to help improve and support young people's mental health and wellbeing. Between the two Innovation Lab workshops an online consultation was held, which was known as the incubation period. Ideas ranged from one based around how best to engage with a GP to another that provided support around getting a job.

The resulting eight ideas were used to develop a grants programme, with not-for-profit organisations funded to build products that help improve young people's mental health and wellbeing through technology. In total the initiative took two years from initial discussions between funders to the beginning of the product building. Each of the not-for-profit organisations was awarded approximately £47,000 to develop these ideas, and they began work in February 2013.

2. About this Evaluation

This evaluation explores the project from inception until the point at which organisations were awarded funding to develop the final products. It is written in a narrative style which begins in part one by describing the process by which the

¹ The Cernis Partnership was a partnership formed for this process consisting of Cernis, Working with Joe, Practical Participation, White October, Neon Tribe and Mihealth.

Innovation Labs initiative developed and took shape, and then moves on to analyse key questions about the partnership, co-design and effectiveness of the initiative.

3. Key Action Points

The Innovation Labs initiative can be broken down into the following key action points:

- In late 2010/early 2011, an initial discussion took place between funders, leading to the decision to further explore the use of Innovation Lab workshops and co-design to generate ideas for new forms of digital support for young people with mental health problems.
- A meeting was set up in April 2011 with young people and voluntary sector projects working with young people to gather their views and perspectives on how the work should proceed.
- In October 2011 the tender was awarded to the Cernis Partnership to run the Innovation Lab workshops and incubation period).
- The first Innovation Lab workshop took place on 10th December 2011.
- The online incubation period took place from mid-December 2011 until February 2012.
- The second Innovation Lab workshop took place on 18th February 2012.²
- Between February and August 2012 the funding bodies decided on the level of funding, and then the Project Team established the funding criteria and processes.
- July 2013: Grants programme opened for applications, attracting over 30 Expressions of Interest to develop the eight final product ideas with around half being asked to submit full Business Plans
- February 2013: The seven organisations awarded funding began working to develop their products

² The Cernis Partnership produced a project report detailing the logistics around the running of the Innovation Labs. It can be found here: <http://www.right-here.org.uk/resource-centre/>

4. The Funders

The Innovation Labs initiative was predominantly funded by Comic Relief, Nominet Trust and Right Here (Paul Hamlyn Foundation/Mental Health Foundation), with a small amount contributed to the initiative by The Invictus Trust, a funding organisation working in Cornwall around mental health and young people. In late 2010/early 2011 Comic Relief and Right Here were looking to produce work on digital technology and the mental health of young people. Nominet Trust was interested in this work and looking to work with organisations that have specific expertise in working with mental health and young people, so completed the partnership. The Invictus Trust heard of the project and became interested, so was invited to attend Innovation Lab 2 (later providing funding for a prototype of one product).

5. Management and Governance

Early in the Innovation Labs initiative the funders recruited a cohort of around ten young people with and without experience of mental health problems from their networks to create a Project Team. Their function was to provide a consistent group to monitor the work and ensure young people's views guided the direction of the work, while feeding in to the design and ideas generation process. The overall membership of the Project Team was made up of the funders and a majority of young people, with an agreement that three young people were needed to be present for any decisions to be made (matching the three funders). As one professional said *"it's not a steering group; it's a decision-making group."* Young people attending the Project Board had equal voting rights and involvement in all the decisions made, though the funders had the right to veto any financial decisions that went against their organisational principles (this was never used). When setting up the grants programme the Project Team became the Project Board, with additional responsibilities around the monitoring of funded projects.

6. Service Users & Innovation Models

For all three funders, the involvement of service users was of key importance, both from the perspective of ensuring the best end product and of helping empower those

service users³ through their involvement. At the same time, it was important to frame the process with technical knowledge and skills to establish what would and would not be possible. For these reasons, the funders wanted the products developed through co-design - when products are devised jointly by the people who are likely to use the end product and people with the technical skills to make them work. They planned to develop the ideas through events where people with different skills and experiences come together to think creatively about solutions to problems, otherwise known as Innovation Labs. Innovation Labs are most commonly used in the private sector, particularly in the fields of design and technology, where they can be used to develop new ideas and ways of working. They are not commonly used in the mental health field, at least not in England, although Right Here had been aware of similar initiatives in North America. The use of the Innovation Labs model, coupled with the levels of funder involvement and co-design meant this way of working was highly unusual. Though it was always hoped that the idea generation would result in a funding programme, it was not possible to guarantee that this would happen because the process was new and untested.

Overall the initiative was viewed extremely positively by everyone interviewed, with one person reflecting what many others intimated when they said *"lucky, lucky, lucky me to be involved"*. The learning for all stakeholders has been significant and wide ranging. For the initiative to work the way it did, clear and effective involvement of young people was crucial, and it is clear that they shaped and guided the Innovation Labs initiative, and benefitted significantly themselves. The success of the Innovation Labs initiative as a model for developing digital products is not entirely definable at this stage. Strong ideas that people felt would work were developed, funding was awarded and the projects are beginning their work on the final products. There were some concerns raised about the later stages of the design process, and until the final products are developed it is difficult to assess exactly how effective the initiative has been in the development of them.

³ For the sake of simplicity of language, I am using the terminology of "service users" to describe the broader ethos of involvement, engagement and leadership and "young people" when referring specifically to this project.

7. Key Findings:

1. Everyone interviewed felt the initiative had been successful up to this point, and most said it had been exciting and interesting. One young person said the views of each individual were *"listened to and respected"*, and several young people expressed increased confidence as a direct result of their involvement. All interviewed felt that ideas were stronger as a result of the involvement of young people shaping and directing the direction of work.
2. The Innovation Lab workshops were felt to be successful, but the online incubation period in between less so. During the incubation period it was difficult to ensure young people had equal opportunity to feed in, so some people felt that this has not gathered views equally and effectively. This stage of the work could have benefitted from additional face to face time.
3. It was notable that some people felt designers and technology experts should have had more authority and leadership in the initiative, while some thought the balance just right. There was, perhaps, a tension between what was most important for the development and design of the end product, and what was most important for the integrity of involving young people. A key outcome for a co-design process such as this is the benefit for the young people involved, whether this is increased knowledge, confidence or empowerment. Other sectors using co-design may use it purely to bring about the best end product possible, rather than considering the benefit to the people involved in the process. This initiative aimed for both.
4. The Innovation Labs initiative was exploratory and experimental. Part of the reason it was possible for the funders to work in this untested way was that they shared the initiative and worked in partnership. Each individual and organisation brought different skills and capacity, and the fact that any potential financial or reputational strain was shared meant no single organisation would be left exposed if the initiative was unsuccessful; they were therefore able to be more open minded about how the final outcomes might look.

8. Summary of Recommendations

1. Work around the needs and circumstances of the young people you are trying to involve. Make sure young people feel listened to, can contribute easily and feel their input is of equal value to professionals involved in the work (though different from).
2. Ensure you have skills in involvement, and if you want to involve service users who are particularly socially excluded make sure you have the capacity and funding to support the work that will be needed.
3. Everyone involved in needs to be kept regularly updated and encouraged to engage, whether they are very close to the work or more distant.
4. Innovation Lab workshops and incubation periods should be used more as they resulted in positive experiences and ideas, though online testing should be held on Facebook to capture as many people as possible and avoid the need for additional log-ins. In both elements it is important to monitor the relationship between professionals and service users to make sure the interaction is equal and fair.
5. Do not discount ideas because they are simple. It is sometimes the simplest ideas that are needed most.
6. Consider the balance between the involvement of young people (or service user) and the design of the end product. It is not a choice between one or the other being successful, but a tension can exist between them that may need acknowledging.
7. Technical expertise needs to be threaded in right from the beginning, and projects seeking to do something similar could benefit from having technology designers more integrated at an earlier stage.
8. Prototype the end products to develop ideas more, and eliminate some that may not be effective in the long run.
9. This method of co-design is likely to result in tender/request for funding applications that are more prescriptive than other bidding processes. Allow for the fact that not all tenders may be successfully bid for.
10. Ensure bureaucracy does not limit or delay the work of the partnership by agreeing certain key processes.
11. As funders, ensure that strengths and risks are shared.

9. Conclusions

The way the initiative has been set up, with Innovation Lab workshops, co-design and joint funder working, has unequivocally resulted in a project that people feel huge passion, excitement and drive about, which in itself is a success. The use of co-design and Innovation Lab workshops is highly unusual in the production of funding programmes, and the way the partnership worked was unusual and new to many of the stakeholders. The sense of excitement about using these methods in future was clear, and came through from person after person. It will be interesting to see how the end products develop and what learning will result from this second stage.