

*embedding ideas*

*embedding an idea is an art  
that needs to be explored  
in different contexts*

The Innovation and Improvement programme reviewed four IRISS projects and has conceptualised embedding an idea as similar to growing a seed.

This guide will give you an overview of this perspective, frameworks, tools to consider, and practical examples to use when you grow your own ideas.



# Process



IRISS uses the Young Foundation's model of social innovation when thinking about innovation processes. We believe embedding frames this model. So no matter where you are in an innovation or improvement process - germinating, planning or nurturing - all decisions affect how an idea is embedded.



## Germination

“Why not go out on a limb,  
that’s where the fruit is”



## Planning and nurturing

“Life is a garden - dig it!”



## Reaping what you sow

“In a garden grows that  
what a gardener sows”

# Process



## Germination

Ideas are sourced, sown, supported, and the quality of the idea reviewed. At the end of this phase the idea should be able to be clearly articulated, and champions should exist to support buy-in.



## Preparation and nurture

Planning for, and responding to, your environment. This phase starts with preparation and finishes with nurturing but takes place in a continuous reflective cycle. Nurturing starts when a clear plan is in place, a team of qualified people have responsibility for the components in the plan, and the environment is deemed ready.



## Reap what you sow

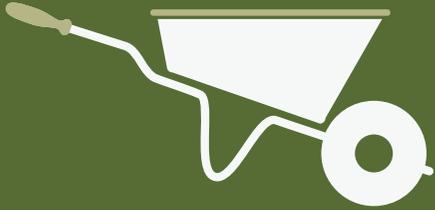
Finally you can evaluate the embedding process and think about what best practice looks like in relation to the idea.

# *time*

Unlike seed growth, there is no set time frame in which an idea will take root, develop and grow. Our experience and evidence<sup>2</sup> has shown that an idea can take anywhere between two to four years to embed. We would encourage that you do not rush or force this process, so the roots of an idea form strongly and support continued growth.

Over time the environment in which an idea is embedded will change. Commitment to embedding an idea from all levels of an organisation and strong leadership will support the ideas growth.

# Process

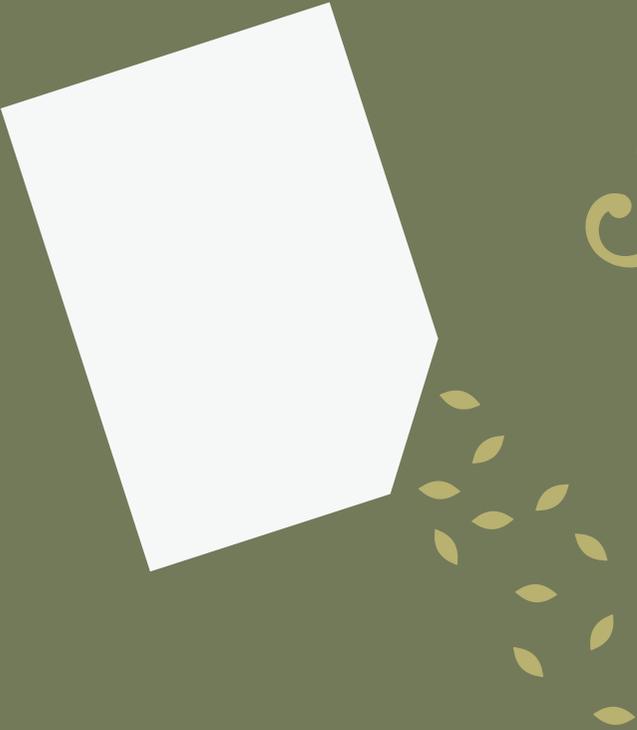


Our experience of the embedding process is similar to other people's observations.<sup>1</sup>

- The process is winding, parallel, divergent and convergent
- An idea morphs, it is pruned and reinvented
- An idea is shaped by many people
- People and networks become distracted from the purpose of the idea, and engage and disengage intermittently over time
- The idea develops in multiple contexts
- The multiple paths taken by different people impact upon the outcome
- The outcome is indeterminate, with various other ideas having taken shape and other embedding processes being explored

*germination*





# *Sourcing and sowing*

Some of the ideas we worked with were sourced and chosen by the communities in which change was sought. Others were developed separately and introduced into a new context. There is no right or wrong way to source or sow an idea. This process simply needs to be sensitive to the people who may be affected by the idea, and use a process which will engender support and buy in from people.

It was clear from the case studies that there was a benefit in developing ideas in and with communities as this meant there was localised energy and a network to champion and support the growth of the idea. This community also needs power, capacity, resources, knowledge and skills to develop and sustain an idea's development. Sometimes this was found within the community, other times it needed to be sought from elsewhere. We found that creating an inclusive group and involving all interested parties in the conceptual development was found to be incredibly useful in sowing the ideas.



# Supporting

Be open to and provide the space and time for the development of your idea. Clarity around an idea supports its articulation and other people's buy-in.

We promoted ideas by:

- Developing profiles about people
- Establishing what the idea offers these people
- Mapping how people engage with the idea
- Understanding people's expectations
- Thinking about how these expectations are realised and/or managed

Ways we developed ideas were to:

- Prototype the idea at a small scale
- Mock-up visuals to explain the idea
- Provide people with experiences that simulated the idea

# Type

Ways of thinking about types of ideas include:<sup>3</sup>

personal interactions,  
relationships and  
experiences



how a multitude of  
interactions shape  
a service



new collaborative  
service models



potential future  
service systems  
and scenarios



# Quality

While some ideas are good in principle, they may not address the core issue people experience or may throw up other issues that had not been considered. We suggest that in the germination period, the idea is given time to be experimented with, shaped and challenged. Most importantly, the idea should be tested by, and with, the people the idea aims to support. This can be time consuming but can also lead to key insights into the success and potential failure points of an idea.

In our experience, testing ideas in practice enabled us to establish insights about what worked and what needed to be reconsidered. Refreshing and informative feedback was provided which, although it could potentially dent confidence, ultimately strengthened the idea and our strategic approach.



*preparation and nurture*

The image features a soft-focus background of a garden. In the foreground, there are various green plants, including some with long, thin leaves and others with broader, rounded leaves. In the mid-ground, a wooden trellis structure is visible, partially obscured by the blur. The overall lighting is warm and natural, suggesting a sunny day. The text 'preparation and nurture' is written in a white, elegant cursive font, positioned in the upper left quadrant of the image.

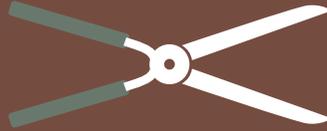
# Culture

Cultures can generally be thought of as shared values, beliefs, and assumptions that influence how an organisation thinks and feels.<sup>4</sup> These elements influence how easy it is for your idea to take root, and the nutritional support it will receive from those that surround it.

We thought about our own and our partners cultural norms and discussed these similarities and differences. Sometimes these norms were easy to distinguish and we capitalise upon and addressed what we knew. Other times this was more difficult and we had to be sensitive about how cultural norms were being challenged. In difficult situations we were generous with reflection time, and took a co-productive or co-design approach. This enabled people to discuss the changes the idea instigated. Sometimes this supported people to be part of the ideas development; other times it did not. This meant that we had to think about whether the idea addressed the need, or whether it met with resistance because it did not align with people's personal philosophies.



# Leadership



As embedding in social services tends to be an organic process, leaders need to be comfortable with uncertainty and complexity while providing direction and vision (which may change during the embedding process). Positive responses to challenges, and the motivation, encouragement and nurturing of other people are key to ensure the vision of the idea is strived for cohesively.

The person who leads the process, also needs to feel ownership, have responsibility, buy into the idea, and have the capacity to manage the project, make changes, deploy resources and take risks. In our experience, when these elements are missing embedding an idea is unlikely to be successful.

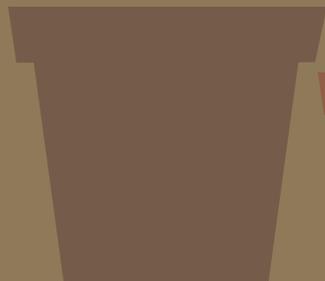
To dissuade from the idea that embedding is another tick-box exercise, we encourage leaders to think about their own motivations. For example, where would they sit on a scale from preventative to reactive? What is their perspective on risk? What supports do they require as leaders?

# Plan

Despite being organic, embedding should be planned for with clearly articulated aims and objectives, tasks and individuals responsible aligned, and time lines agreed. We tended to develop and revise plans corroboratively with project stakeholders, through project development plans and project briefs, in meetings, workshops, over email, and using online collaborative tools like Basecamp. Whilst this took time, it also acted as a transparent way to communicate with the people who were integral to embedding the success of the idea. This enabled people to reflect upon and celebrate what was achieved, to learn from one another, and to think and act collectively or with empathy and understanding. It also meant that when we needed to change direction with our work it was easier for people to understand.



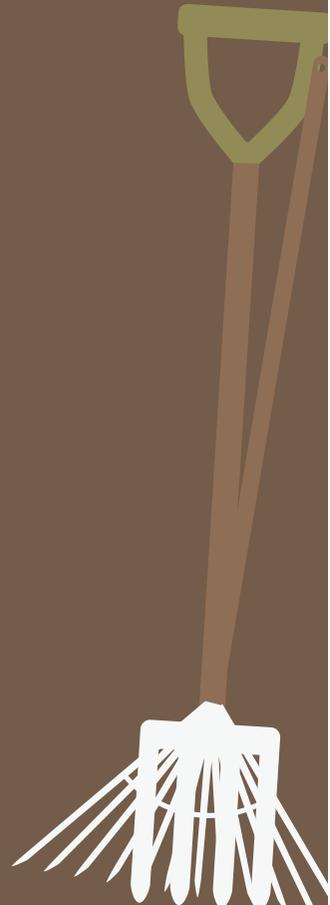
“All gardeners  
need to know  
when to accept  
something  
wonderful and  
unexpected”  
(Allen Lacy)



# *Structures and procedures*

How an embedding process is weaved into existing structures and procedures needs to be considered from the outset so the idea flourishes. However, difficulties can arise when an idea challenges existing structures and processes. In these instances we tended to question why the structures and processes needed to change, which usually signified a deeper rooted issue around cultural, communication and personal interactions. In such cases, it is a good idea to reflect upon the idea and the core issue it is trying to address.

**Tip** - ways to think about new approaches to existing processes and structures are discussed in Embracing Change.



# People

We encourage an approach to embedding that has a relentless curiosity, openness of mind and ability to recognise the importance of all of the elements detailed here, no matter how seemingly insignificant.



A team of people with different skills, knowledge, experience and importantly decision-making responsibility, support an embedding process. On our projects this included service managers, front line practitioners, service users and their extended support networks, and people with skills that are evidence, innovation and technology based. These unusual partnerships did not exist in any one place. We had to bring them together and give people time and space to get to know each other and understand each other's strengths and weaknesses. We believe this collaboration is one of the main drivers behind innovative ideas.

**Tip** - reinforcing that people have permission to try new things can be important to the success of the development of ideas and the embedding process.

**Tip** - support people by providing a safe environment and encourage them to use this safe space to challenge themselves, others and the idea.

**Tip** - training, resources, tools, as well as on-going support and assistance is likely to be needed by the people involved.

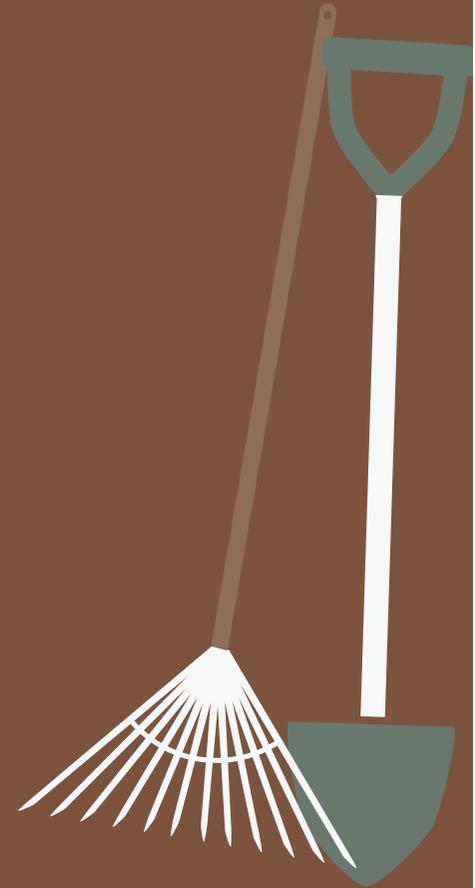
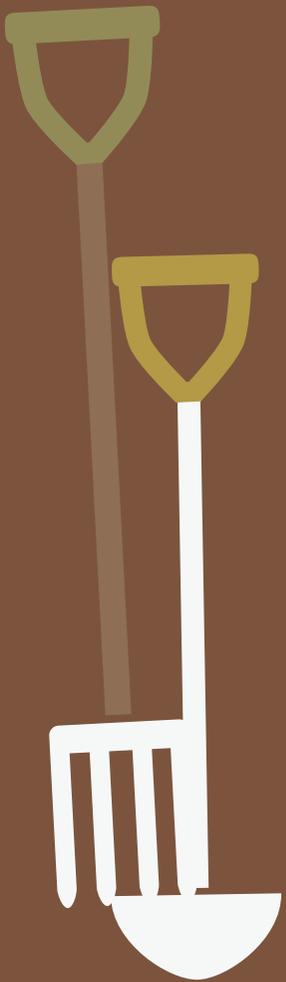
# Readiness

While ideas should be ambitious, if their ambition outstrips people's capacity, skills or knowledge, the idea is unlikely to take root.

We suggest you think about the knowledge and experience someone needs to understand your idea. For example, if your idea involves your organisation working co-productively, but currently practice is based on consultation, there are likely to be a number of areas that require development before change is embedded. One way we tested how easily an idea may be adopted was to quickly and roughly prototype and test the idea in practice. Be open to your idea needing to be refined to make it 'ready', and keep in mind whether the idea aims for radical or incremental change.

When it became apparent that an organisation's culture was a barrier to adopting an idea, our projects included (or were led) using a collaborative approach. This aimed to develop the behaviours and attitudes of people alongside the development of the idea. Cultural readiness can take a long time and will benefit from good quality communication in the form of a vision for change, training and positive role models.<sup>5</sup>

**Note** - your evaluation of readiness may change the way you think about embedding. In such instances we could encourage a co-productive, co-design approach so both agendas can be developed in tandem.



# Communication

Communication is important to support ongoing learning, to support motivation around the idea, and to give and receive feedback. Effective communication can take time; however it is integral to success.

Cultural differences can highlight different communication styles. We would suggest time is provided for reflection throughout an embedding process, including all stakeholders where appropriate. We have found this can aid the development of the idea, the process that is being worked through, and can indicate how people perceive success.



**Tip** - Use a network map to reflect on the best way to communicate with different audiences.

**Note** - where feedback is requested, ensure time is given to respond to this feedback accordingly.



*reaping what you sow*

# Evaluation

In order to know what difference an idea is making, and depending upon the type of idea you are embedding, take stock of a situation as it is currently experienced. This evidence provides a benchmark for reflection.

Sometimes people want to hear others' reflections about an idea before they will engage with it. Integrating reflective practice throughout an embedding process can encourage people to safely engage with an idea that has no evidenced outcome. This can also act as a method to develop buy-in for an idea.

We have used participatory evaluation techniques to establish inclusive views about the development of an idea, to generate evidence about the outcomes an idea supports, to evaluate the project design, and to collaboratively define success and best practice.



“There are no gardening mistakes, only experiments”  
(Janet Kilburn Phillips)

# *conclusion*

“Gardening is an exercise in optimism, it shows that you believe in tomorrow”

We find it useful to use this gardening concept so the short and long term effect of decisions made during a project are considered and cultivated. This invokes a sensitivity in our work, and an acknowledgment that embedding an idea is a continual process, dependent upon the context and people involved as much as the quality of the idea.

# references

1. Van de Ven A H (1986) Central Problems in the Management of Innovation, *Management Science*, no. 5, 590-607
2. Burke et al. (2012) An introductory guide to implementation, Dublin: Centre for Effective Services
3. Meroni and Sangiorgi (2011) *Design for Services*, UK: Gower
4. Drumm M (2012) Insight 17: Culture change in the public sector, Glasgow: IRISS
5. Burke et al. (2012) An introductory guide to implementation, Dublin: Centre for Effective Services

All quotes have been attributed to author where acknowledged.

Images from <http://unsplash.com>

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