

A photograph of three children of diverse backgrounds looking at a tablet together. The image is overlaid with a dark blue tint. The children are smiling and appear to be engaged in a collaborative activity.

THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES

A Manifesto for Innovation

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Preface

With the world around children and young people growing ever more complex and long-standing difficulties amplified by the legacy of the pandemic, the Coram Innovation Incubator (CII) has been created by children's charity Coram as a dedicated vehicle to bring together those from the public, private and third sector to generate, test and scale radical solutions to shared challenges facing the children's social care sector.

The first national innovation survey of children's services providers published in 2021 was designed to gauge the state of innovation in the sector, review organisational capacity and barriers to innovation, and determine what those working in children's services perceived to be the greatest challenges facing the sector.

The most pressing challenges for services were identified to lie around adolescent mental health, followed closely by placement sufficiency, adolescent safeguarding and youth crime. The CII has worked across ten local authority founders and three strategic private sector partners to seek to identify ways to address them.

Innovation projects initiated include a digital outreach tool to engage with and support young people at risk of exploitation, the use of radical technology to generate contextual safeguarding maps and genograms with other initiatives including care records content, housing sufficiency mapping and new tools for those working with looked after children.

The CII is committed to providing the dedicated space, capacity and multi-disciplinary expertise to explore and share innovations with the potential to significantly improve the lives of children and young people.

The **CII Innovation Collective** report brought together for the first time a digest of innovations in action across the country so they can be shared.

The need for capacity is, however, even more pressing as the level of challenges for children continue to rise. How do we rise to this challenge and build the enterprise skills and capacity to innovate which are needed now and for the future? Where are agencies finding it possible to find ways to improve and find new solutions and how can we together secure greater impact?

These are the questions which drive this *Art of the Possible* report, based on a further survey conducted in early 2022 and completed by children's services providers, including local authorities, regional and voluntary adoption agencies, independent fostering agencies and charities.

Whilst the survey cannot be exhaustive, it provides insight on the way forward indicating what we still need to do as a sector to enable us to deliver the best outcomes for children and young people.

Join us in making innovation happen as a member of the Coram Innovation Incubator by emailing innovation@coram.org.uk

Dr Carol Homden CBE

Coram is proud to work with Microsoft, EY and PA Consulting on the Coram Innovation Incubator.



Introduction

As we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic, we must radically reimagine the landscape of children's services to meet the growing needs of a generation of children.

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care has undertaken a Call for Ideas and will produce recommendations to guide sector development, but it will fall to agencies and the people on the front line to make change happen.

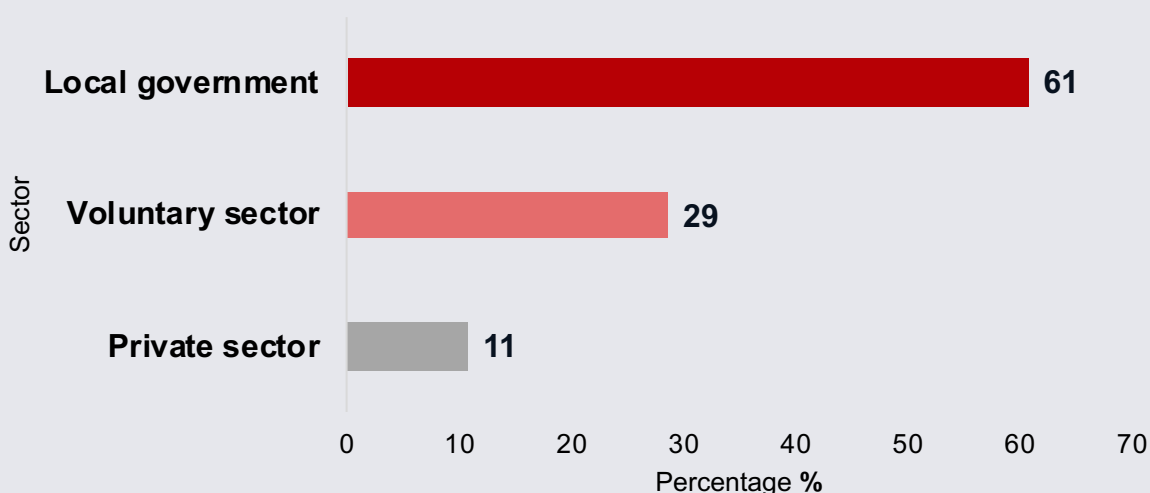
The Art of the Possible survey has been conducted amongst all kinds of agencies – local authority, voluntary and independent – to identify what is needed to champion change by understanding the *Art of the Possible*.

It seeks to re-examine where we are as a sector in terms of innovation and most significantly to capture and celebrate what we have been able to achieve through innovation, as well as identifying the prerequisites for sustaining, replicating and scaling promising projects so they have longevity and a broader impact.

**Change is possible
and this report
shows that we
have the way if
we can secure
the will.**

Figure 1

Type of organisation responding to survey



What is currently possible?

Despite a complex context and significant workforce capacity and financial constraints, children's services providers have been able to innovate and achieve positive change in a number of areas.

It is clear that services are alive to the growing complexities children and young people face and are exploring new models to minimise risk through improving the therapeutic support they can offer to children and families.

These approaches act as a means of early help and can reduce later harm, which in turn helps services manage subsequent demand on child in need and child protection services. Local authorities report particular success in identifying children at an earlier stage and supporting their emotional wellbeing in a setting where they feel comfortable.

Acknowledging a need to provide well-rounded familial support rather than treating the child in isolation, a number of respondents reported promising specialist parental programmes, especially supporting parents with existing vulnerabilities at the immediate pre- and post-natal stage so that their children can remain in their care.

Seeking to tackle broader societal trends impacting families, one local authority has developed a dedicated support service for victims of domestic abuse.

Services are also looking at new ways to minimise the harms young people are exposed to beyond the home by developing better adolescent safeguarding frameworks, with one service initiating a dedicated out of hours helpline for young people at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation ([case study 1](#)).

This focus on intervening early and engaging in more bespoke therapeutic support for children and young people throughout their journey chimes with the findings of the **CII Innovation Collective** ([appendix 1](#)).

We can also see that collaboration between agencies is a key enabler of successful innovation. There are many examples of agencies working together to strategise and trial new ways to manage the challenges faced by children and young people. For example, one local authority has seen a particularly positive impact of a project deploying social workers to the school setting to work with children, strengthening relationships between social care teams and colleagues in education.

For those children in the care system, regional adoption agencies (RAA) are demonstrating the value of local authorities combining their resources cross-regionally, reporting positive developments in the recruitment and assessment of adopters, for example with dedicated family finding days and developments in matching tools.



APPENDIX 1: The CII Innovation Collective

The CII Innovation Collective is a unique repository that collates and reports on innovative projects and approaches developed across the sector in recent years.

The Collective was originally developed for CII members to bring together disparate initiatives and insights as part of the CII mission to stimulate information sharing across the sector in order to inspire and catalyse innovation. It reports both on examples of successful and evidenced initiatives, as well as taking the learning from innovations that did not materialise as they were originally intended to, acknowledging that experimentation, trial and error are crucial ingredients to successful innovation. The first edition is now publicly available, and can be found at <https://coram-i.org.uk/coram-innovation-incubator/the-cii-collective/>

The first edition identified a breadth of innovation taking place across the sector. The case studies presented in this digest are diverse, but tackle many of the key themes identified by our partners and contributors to our surveys.

Often responding to the necessities of the Covid climate, efforts have been made to rework the existing system: local authorities have pooled resources beyond boundaries to create unitary commissioning hubs; developed tools to model evolving demand; and implemented mechanisms to facilitate multi-lateral information sharing. The examples especially demonstrate the value of collaboration beyond geographical and sectoral boundaries, with many relying on broad sources of insight, expertise and resource.

The CII Innovation Collective showed that children's services are improving their therapeutic support offer, especially around mental health.

What was particularly clear was that services were especially focused on **improving their therapeutic support offer**, be it for young people in the care system, those at risk of criminalisation and exploitation, or those affected by mental health difficulties. This perhaps reflects the increasingly complex challenges faced by children and young people and the need for services to respond to evolving trends and themes.

One area of significant national concern is clearly the scale of the mental health crisis affecting young people as the repercussions of the pandemic become more evident. Many organisations are responding to this, with a number of digital applications seeking to act as an accessible interim support measure for those young people on lengthy waiting lists or needing less intensive support. Such findings correspond to the intelligence provided to us through this survey and highlight the crucial need to spend time seeking solutions in these areas.

The CII Innovation Collective is an evolving repository, produced on an annual basis so that we can remain up-to-date on key developments across the sector and continue to learn from the experiences and successes of colleagues so that we can broaden their impact and benefit more children and young people.

We would welcome inputs so please do get in touch with us at innovation@coram.org.uk to tell us about promising innovations you have seen and contribute to the CII Innovation Collective.



CASE STUDY 1: Making the Change Service – East Riding Of Yorkshire Council

With a growing number of children falling victim to exploitation and rising missing incidents, East Riding of Yorkshire Council has introduced a new dedicated multi-agency support service to provide those at risk with somewhere to turn to.

The **Making a Change Service** is accessible 7-days a week into the evening and is staffed by skilled practitioners, who follow the trauma-informed, relationship based Trauma Recovery Model with the young people they support. The service seeks to engage the whole family network, taking the principles of the family group conferencing model to create an appropriate, sustainable plan for those children with a contextual safeguarding concern.

The service draws on a broad range of expertise, acknowledging the complexities facing many vulnerable young people and the need for inter-related services to effectively collaborate to protect them. It includes Intensive Family Coordinators, dedicated missing coordinators, a health nurse, a specialist substance misuse social worker and police colleagues, who keep in regular dialogue.

There is a specific focus on responding to missing children, with police and cross-regional specialist teams meeting to track key information about vulnerable children and enable information to be shared in a timely manner. The service is also piloting a new way to engage young people in Return Home Interviews, with young people able to open up via an accessible chat tool. 78% of young people are engaging with this tool and all missing young people

are being contacted within 72 hours, allowing support to be swiftly implemented.

East Riding has also refined the structures around the Multi-Agency Child Exploitation Group (MACE) more broadly to boost their efficiency and enable better oversight on high-risk cases, with MACE now led by the Making a Change area manager. They have also introduced fortnightly locality Vulnerable Adolescent Risk Panels involving multi-agency partners to keep track of risks pertaining to specific children, facilitate information sharing and put in place action plans. A crucial cross-border perspective is granted through the involvement of the Vulnerable, Exploited Missing and Trafficked Team, acknowledging the fact that children's lives operate beyond local authority boundaries.

The **Making a Change** model is already showing promising results. It has contributed to a decrease in the number of children going missing in the area: when the service was first set up in July 21, there were 45 children missing, but by January 2022 this had declined to 24. In addition to this, more children are engaging in the Return Home Interviews enabling children to be referred quickly for support where needed. For children supported by the service, outcomes have included a lower exploitation risk level, the provision of stable accommodation, support back to education and a reduction in drug and alcohol use. It shows that a targeted multi-agency approach to engaging directly with young people in a manner that feels accessible to them can make a tangible difference to those at risk.



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The Making a Change Service has contributed to a decline in the number of missing children from 45 to 24



7-days

The Making a Change Service is accessible 7-days a week

There are also examples of services being able to adapt models that have been developed elsewhere, especially where there is a coherent evidence base. These include programmes originally funded as part of the Department for Education Innovation Programme, such as the Family Valued project in Leeds and the Family Safeguarding model in Hertfordshire. These approaches involve offering a cohesive whole-family support package with the aim of enabling children to remain with their families and reduce the number of children in care.

Models such as these alongside the well-established No Wrong Door approach offer direction for children's services on supporting those on the edge of care, with some respondents identifying edge of care as a key area where change has been possible.

With many local authorities facing parallel challenges, it is important that we embrace a spirit of openness when it comes to knowledge sharing to enable services to adopt and build upon the successful work others services have piloted.

It is also clear that we can often enact positive change where there is a pressing, and perhaps more immediate, need to do something differently in order to sustain service delivery. This may be pressure to manage dwindling budgets or of growing demand, which cannot be managed via a business as usual approach.

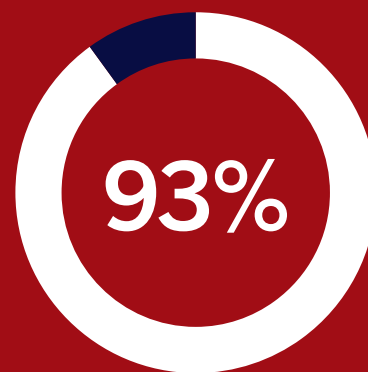
However, conversely, it was also noted that in some service areas facing increasing demand, such as Child Protection and Child in Need services, constraints on resource and time actually precluded the opportunity to focus on innovation, amid the overwhelming need to simply manage the most immediate challenges.

This variability in response to demand perhaps reflects differing resource capacities in different localities and strengthens the case for a collaborative approach across the sector.

More broadly, most children's services were able to mobilise a new way of working in response to the pandemic, faced with no alternative but to use virtual approaches to be able to continue to fulfil their statutory requirements. This was undoubtedly a fundamental transformation of service delivery and the swiftness with which services, children and families adapted to this new approach should be celebrated.

A hybrid approach mixing both the in-person and the virtual is now commonplace and we must acknowledge the benefits of this, not least in terms of improving accessibility and supporting practitioners to manage their workloads by cutting travel time. It is crucial that we harness and take forward such lessons from the pandemic.

**COLLABORATION
BETWEEN
AGENCIES IS
A KEY ENABLER
OF SUCCESSFUL
INNOVATION**



93% of respondents said staff capacity was important to making change possible in their organisation

We can therefore surmise some of the key enablers of change.

Services clearly recognise the importance of early well-rounded intervention and have been able to better target and hone the support offer for young people and their families.

It is apparent that a key factor in making change possible is collaboration, between services, agencies and sectors, in order to broaden the resource base, offer a wider expertise and share the burden of risk.

With budgets and resources at a premium, the sense of reassurance that something will work is clearly important, although meaningful innovation also requires some degree of trial and error to refine new models and it is important that leaders provide the space and time for their staff to do this.

The unprecedented context of Covid-19 demanded that children's services implemented new methods of service delivery and clearly galvanised innovation in this respect; it demonstrated that children's services are resilient and agile and are adept at pushing through innovation if they are provided with the capacity, structures and license to do so and invest in the key enablers of change.

Although our sample size is relatively small, we can see a unanimity among our respondents in terms of what they see as the key facilitators of change (figure 2) despite their varying organisational sizes and natures. Staff capacity is clearly fundamental, most significantly among our local government respondents who deemed this factor most important. For those in the voluntary sector, having an innovative organisational culture was seen to most enable change.

The question is less *'What shall we do?'* than *'How shall we make it possible?'*: this survey indicates that this is much less a matter of access to capital or social finance than attitude, aptitude and capacity.

Figure 2

Key facilitators of change

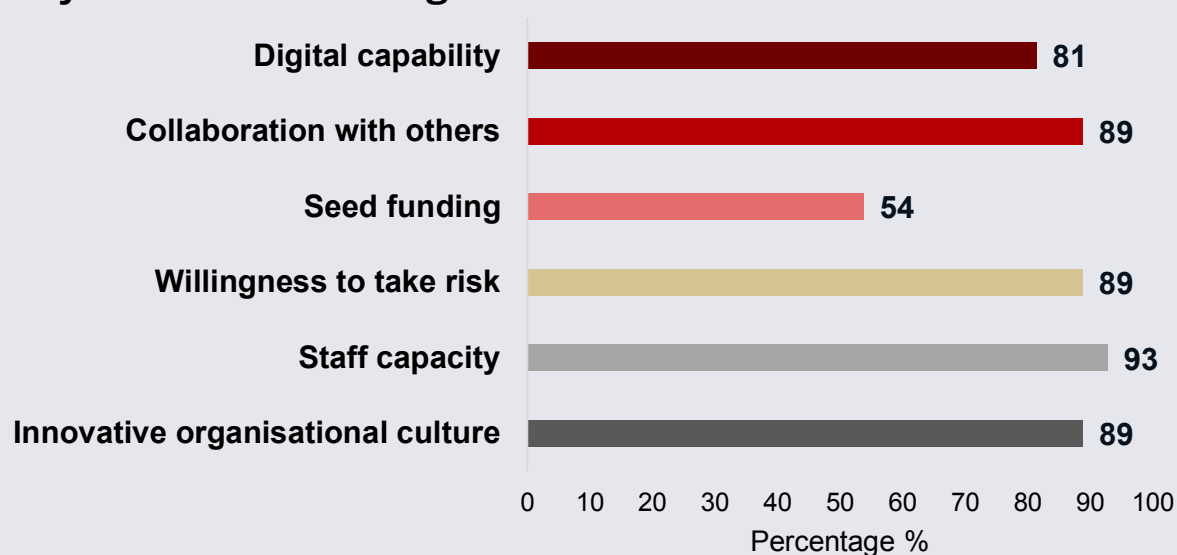


Figure 2: Note respondents were asked to rate the factors shown in terms of how important they are to making change possible on a scale of one to five (one being not very important at all; five being very important). The graph reflects the percentage of respondents who selected either a four or a five on the categories, indicating that they were the greatest facilitators of change.

What could be possible?

Much is evidently possible if we apply our collective drive, motivation and expertise to create a better future for children and young people. In spite of the great work services are undertaking to maximise the art of the possible, there are clearly also a number of factors that can be addressed to foster innovation.

Our survey identified four key priority areas:

- **Organisational development and workforce innovation.**
- **Successfully implementing and embedding innovation.**
- **Demand management, practice and resourcing.**
- **The potential for technological innovation.**

Organisational and Workforce Innovation

One of the key themes that emerged from the survey was the challenges respondents reported in developing innovation internally and changing culture, and particular issues repeated by many were the difficulties around the recruitment, retention and wellbeing of their workforce.

Many felt that existing challenges had been exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic, and did not feel equipped to manage this. This applied to both the additional pressures on staff, as well as higher absence rates leading to less capacity to drive innovation.

There were a number of particular issues raised in relation to the workforce:

- **Difficulties in recruiting and retaining social workers – a limited pool of candidates and high turnover rates.**
- **Issues of culture – an increasing focus on work/life balance, resilience, and the availability of support for staff.**
- **Equality and diversity and the importance of ensuring the organisation is fair and equitable, and builds on the strength a diverse workforce can bring.**
- **Staff training, capacity and experience – ensuring that staff are offered development opportunities, and experienced staff are encouraged to stay in role.**
- **External views of the sector, and the additional pressures this can create.**

Although this was the most consistent area of difficulty raised by responses, it was also one of the areas with the fewest references to changes and practice that had been implemented in each area.

One organisation is supporting practitioners to develop their own ideas and responses to improving their work (case study 2), which could potentially lead to both improved practice, and an increased sense of agency in driving innovation with a practice-led focus.

A number of respondents highlighted changes to their culture – such as a 'shared commitment to our ethos', and the need to 'bring staff on the journey' instead of imposing change.

A challenge noted by a few was the difficulty of having a clear 'financial value' attributed to changes to improve staff retention and wellbeing, and the struggle that individual organisations face in sector-wide issues, such as the lack of potential qualified staff when recruiting.

The impact of the pandemic was felt in a number of ways – there were the clear additional pressures on staff, but a number of respondents also noted the positive changes that were enabled by the pandemic, such as flexibility with homeworking, and remote working meaning fewer barriers to professionals and families attending meetings.

There was also a focus on the future and developing a plan for creating a sustainable workforce. Succession-planning and apprenticeships were highlighted, and other responses to support the creation of a pathway into the sector for a range of potential applicants.

In the coming year, the CII will explore with its members the potential for a workforce initiative to support cross-sectoral workforce development.

**WE HAVE THE DRIVE,
MOTIVATION AND
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CREATE A BETTER
FUTURE FOR
CHILDREN AND
YOUNG PEOPLE**

Successfully Implementing and Embedding Innovation

The second theme that was raised in a number of responses related to the challenges of implementing new and innovative practice.

Many respondents touched on the practical issues of implementing innovation, often linked to staff capacity. One response in particular identified the need to use an agile approach to address the challenges in their organisation.

This also relates to the capacity to sustain, refine and scale innovation, and the importance of this to ensuring that innovation is practical and effective.

It was recognised that more significant input from outside the sector could be beneficial, and introducing some of the working practices and innovation in the private sector in particular could be helpful in encouraging the sector's own thinking about innovation and implementation.

This was echoed in another response that identified the need for external evaluation to validate the work, and to generate a better understanding of innovations, what could be most useful, and in helping to cost new projects and define benefits.

Another factor raised by a range of respondents, and particularly important given the range of organisations who responded to our survey, was the specific context of their own organisation, and the strengths and challenges this created. In particular some smaller organisations identified that their small size meant that

they may have less capacity to develop and implement innovation.

However, others saw this as a benefit, particularly in the third sector, as it meant that there were potentially fewer barriers to implementing a new way of working, and they had a clearer sense of being able to try innovation easily.

All of the above factors relate to the need to understand how innovation works in the specific organisational context, and how we need to adapt our approach to each individual environment.

This is one of our key priorities for the Incubator over the coming year: to develop and test the ideas we have generated over the past year and in the coming months, and support our partners to be successful in embedding and understanding innovation in the practice context.

With support from its private sector colleagues, the CII provides a cross-sector platform for sharing effective strategies to implement sustainable innovation. The CII's bespoke workforce development programme will create innovation leaders within our member organisations and provide key methodologies practitioners can apply to innovation in their organisation.



CASE STUDY 2: Frontline's Innovation Programme and The Thrive App

The charity sector is supporting social work practitioners in local authorities to trial innovations with the potential to make a difference to practice. Frontline runs a dedicated **Innovation Programme** for social work practitioners, providing a space and structure for idea generation and development. With a personal understanding of the day-to-day challenges facing practitioners, Frontline fellows are empowered to explore new ways to tackle the bureaucratic barriers social workers face and support them to find ways to provide better support to the families they work with.

One interesting innovation being explored within this programme is The Thrive App. The Thrive app will aim to support case management and staff wellbeing, providing an accessible structure for social workers to manage and track their cases, reflect on their wellbeing and manage work-related stresses and access a breadth of resources to use in their practice. It responds to social work wide challenges, including excessive bureaucracy brought on by the demands of growing caseloads, and the link between stress and burnout and social worker retention. The product is in its early phases; following a successful pilot using a prototype, a refined version of the app will now be built. The early indications, however, suggest that this could be an useful addition to the social worker's toolbox as they seek to manage the demands of their role in the context of growing pressures.



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Frontline is currently supporting 18 social work fellows on its Innovation Programme

Demand Management, Practice, and Resourcing:

Respondents also highlighted a number of other, often interrelated, practice areas requiring innovative solutions.

Many respondents called for a response to be mounted to the issue of rising demand, which is straining delivery of support and meaning there is a lack of capacity to explore the innovations that could lead to broader service improvement amid a need to focus on delivering the core service offer.

In this context, services report a need for innovative solutions to ensure they can best support the children presenting to them with an increasingly complex set of needs, often SEND related. This complexity is likely also related to broader societal challenges which significantly impact children and families, especially rising poverty, disparity and inequality and rates of domestic violence.

This reinforces the need to collaborate across sectors and take an approach that considers broader societal change, rather than viewing the needs of children's services in isolation.

However, we can act as a sector to go some way to remedying these issues, for example improving the quality and breath of direct work tools available to children's services and deploying technology as a tool to support demand management and early intervention.

We also see parallels with last year's findings, with issues related to placement sufficiency (and the experiences of children in care more broadly) and mental health, both for children and their parents and carers, highlighted.

That these challenges remain so prevalent is unsurprising, given the fact that the number of children coming into care is increasingly exceeding the number of placements available and the scale of national concern about a mental health crisis that was evident even prior to the pandemic.

In its second year, the CII will operate 'innovation streams' related to these two key areas of focus, as well as adolescent safeguarding, and work with its local authority members and expert partners from other sectors to design and trial innovative solutions, building on work already underway within and beyond the CII.

The Potential for Technological Innovation

Innovation is clearly not solely synonymous with new technology. Many innovations in the sector relate to new practice approaches for supporting young people and families, new collaborative commissioning arrangements, new incentives to drive foster carer recruitment or new cross-regional or inter-agency working models.

However, with technology becoming increasingly sophisticated over recent years and a growing digital native generation, many children's services providers have turned to technology to assist them in a variety of ways as they seek to better the service they can provide to their communities.

Sixty-four percent of respondents to our survey indicated that they were employing new technology in their service (figure 3), rising to seventy-five percent among our local authority respondents. Services clearly recognise the unique opportunities offered by technological innovation and the merit in capitalising on the 'Art of the Possible' in this domain

Across children's services, new technologies are being applied in a range of ways:

- to support assessments and treatment delivery for children and young people
- to manage case notes
- for data analysis and data sharing purposes
- to interact with children and young people in a new way via virtual or mixed reality tools.

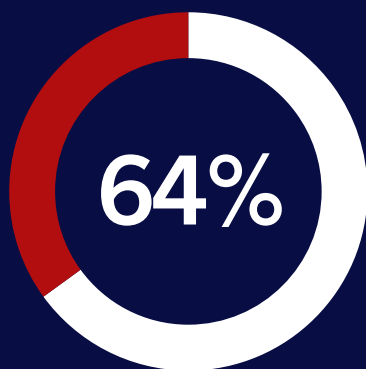
Respondents reported that technology had a time-saving benefit as it enabled them to, for example, automate or digitise tasks that were historically completed manually, increase the efficiency of processes including data collection, collation and analysis and expedite response times to enquiries from service users or other agencies.

These time savings can then be diverted to other areas of service improvement and by reducing their administrative burden, frontline staff have more time to spend working directly with children and families.

Furthermore, some respondents highlighted the role technology has played in enhancing our ability to communicate, both with young people and with fellow professionals. It allows us to meet young people in a space where they may feel more comfortable and enhances the accessibility of services for others. This has been noted to have a positive impact on take up and engagement.

For care experienced young people, practitioners recording case notes using audio devices has the potential to enable them to engage with and understand their past in a new, more personalised way, and technology can also allow those in care to crucially maintain safe relationships with birth families.

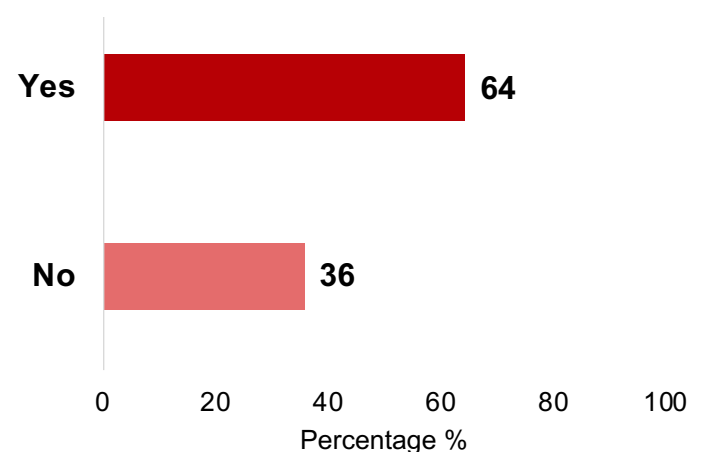
For staff, technology also allows us to work more flexibly and enables agile working. Professionals



64% of organisations surveyed are using new technology in their service

Figure 3

Are you employing new technology in your service?



from across agencies are meeting virtually, and by reducing travel times, it is now easier to get more people in the same space at the same time to discuss a particular case or service plan.

Undoubtedly, the Covid-19 pandemic has played a crucial role in accelerating some of these trends by requiring us to use virtual means to keep in touch and continue to provide statutory services. We have all become accustomed to using digital platforms to meet with each other and we must continue in this vein where it is safe and appropriate to do so.

Many respondents also touched on the potential for technology to assist them in their data collection and data analysis endeavours, and this is an area the CII emphasises as having ground-breaking potential to truly transform children's services. Thanks to a host of advanced analytics and artificial (or assistive) intelligence tools, we now have platforms that enable us to share data across teams and agencies more effectively and garner more in-depth insights about children, young people and the risks they face in a more efficient manner.

The ability for technology to aid services to **analyse large amounts of data to support better decision making** was identified as having the most significant potential to support a step change in outcomes for young people by the respondents to our survey (figure 4). This has the potential to benefit children's services from a strategic perspective in terms of informing broader service provision, resource distribution and demand management considerations. Operationally, it also means social work practitioners have a fuller view of the child so they are better able to identify signs of risk in children and can prioritise accordingly to better target support interventions.

Coram-i recently hosted a webinar in collaboration with our colleagues at Microsoft, EY and Xantura, which focused on how we can employ new technological tools for early help, prevention and to deliver better, personalised care. These include the **One View** platform, developed by EY and Xantura, which compiles data from across council services, including housing and debt management, in order to give practitioners a more well-rounded picture of the child, their history and what might impact them and their family at a given time, and triggers alerts to practitioners of escalating risk.

Figure 4

In which of the following areas do you feel technology has the most potential to support a step change in outcomes for young people?

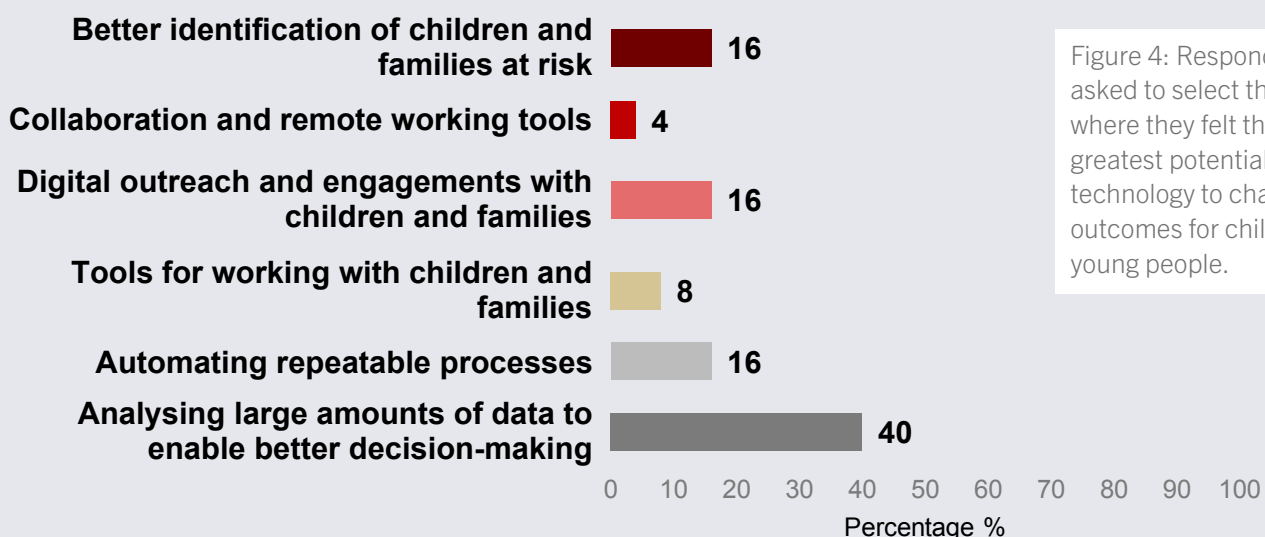


Figure 4: Respondents were asked to select the one area where they felt there was the greatest potential for technology to change outcomes for children and young people.

Microsoft has developed **knowledge mining technology**, part of its Azure platform, which uses AI to process vast amounts of raw data across multiple formats to delineate patterns, trends and insights quickly. This technology could be used to support children's services practitioners for example in understanding complex family and social relationships and to support redaction work. Whilst not replacing the essential human expertise necessary for assessing risk and deciding the best course of action for a child, this technology can synthesise and rapidly extract the relevant information practitioners need to make a more informed decision about a child in their care.

To watch this webinar, please go to <https://coram-i.org.uk/coram-innovation-incubator/the-art-of-the-possible/>

However, it would be remiss to suggest that we can seamlessly embed such technology across the sector, with many respondents identifying key barriers to doing so.

These include perceived financial barriers, capability and confidence among staff (and even among some service user groups) to operate the technology, new technology conflicting with existing systems or organisations lacking the necessary digital infrastructure to make it work in practice. There was

also a perception that employing technology requires a certain willingness to take risk and that risk aversion among colleagues outside of the core children services teams, such as those in information governance could stall the use of new technology. Many of these themes point to broader issue of organisational culture, which is a recurring theme throughout this report.

Some respondents also raised more ethical concerns, and feared that too much dependence on technology could undermine the essential human elements of social work. Face to face contact is central to child protection practice; for vulnerable children, there is a fear that a child's lived experience may be missed if we depend too much on virtual tools to provide services to children and families.

More broadly social work relies on a relationship-based practice, which technology cannot replace. Anxieties around the place of artificial intelligence and machine learning tools in children's social care are also noted. There are fears that they can create blind spots, and a sense that they cannot replicate the skills of experienced social work professionals in spotting risk and making decisions about children in line with this.

“If we can find ways of using data better, children and families will be beneficiaries. That is the prize at the end of the day”

Annie Hudson, Chair of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel at the CII's Art of the Possible webinar, February 2022

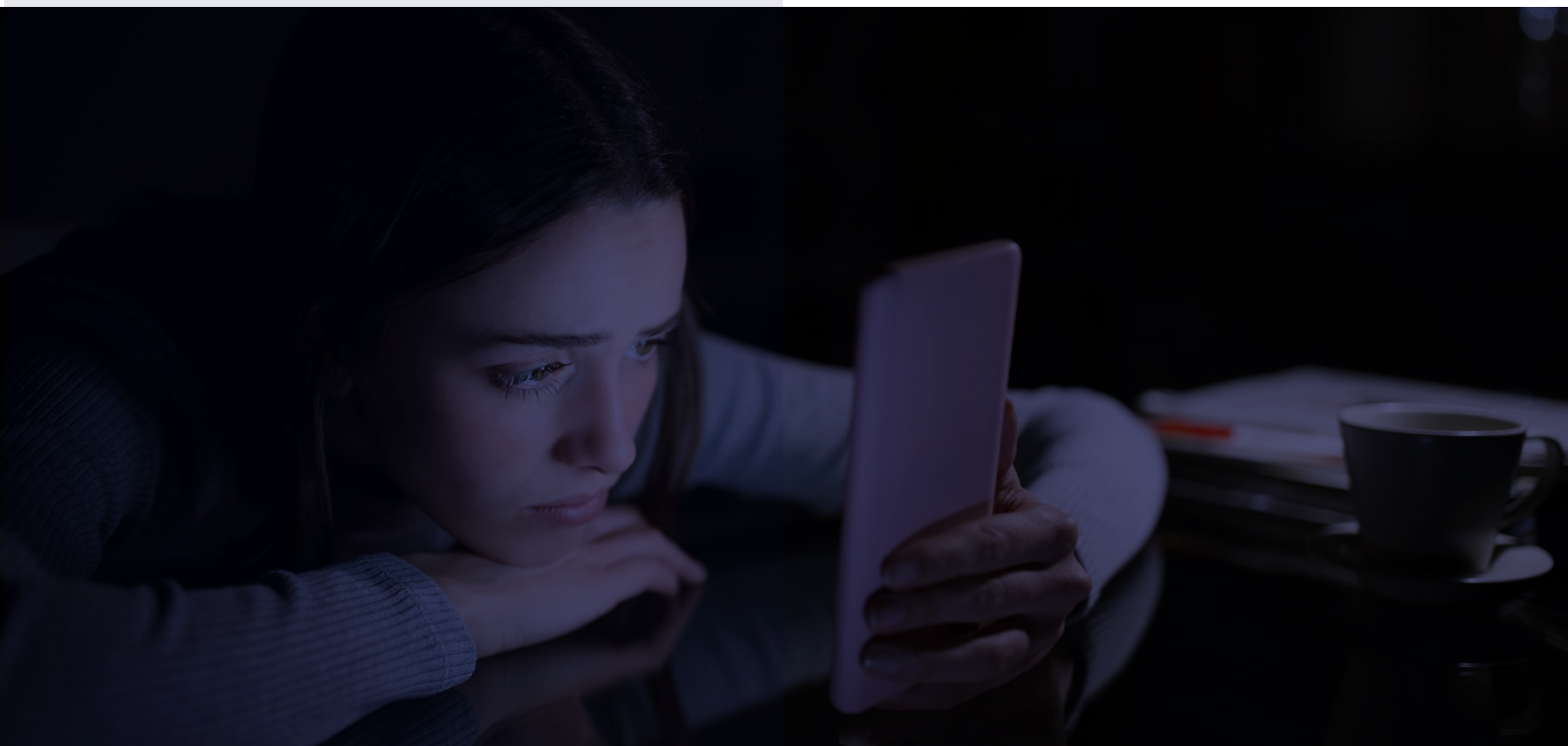
There are also significant security concerns which can act as obstacles to the use of technology. Some respondents highlighted a fear that depending too much on technology risks service provision standing still in the event that the technology fails, as well as anxieties about the security of technology platforms more generally.

Furthermore, a significant hindrance to the adoption of data sharing technology is anxiety around GDPR, confidentiality and data security regulations and the resultant complexities of securing and maintaining data sharing agreements across partner agencies in health, police, and social care. Finding a way to alleviate such concerns and facilitate easier data sharing across organisations is a pressing priority.

Technology has great potential to enhance service delivery and support broader priorities of children's services: to manage increasing demand, to identify those at risk at an earlier stage and to interact with children, young people and other professionals in a more accessible way. Enlightening children's services providers about what is possible, how new technology can assimilate into existing systems and working to mitigate some of the understandable anxieties practitioners may have is crucial.

Technology can complement and enhance the skilled work of practitioners and we need to equip practitioners from across organisations with the tools to utilise it.

The CII and its partners share a commitment to enabling children's services to exploit the art of the possible and will work to identify and catalyse ways in which advanced technologies can be embedded and develop best practice data governance principles to support this.



Dreaming of the possible

We asked our respondents to share their vision for children's social care in 2030. The findings demonstrate the ambition, motivation and enthusiasm across children's services to create a better future for children and young people.

With this in mind, we can start to envisage a new blueprint for children's social care that we can strive to achieve, with the following principles at its heart:

01 All children and young people living in a safe, stable environment

We must ensure all children and young people are able to live in a safe, supportive home environment, where their needs can be met so that they have the best possible chance to thrive. This means providing bespoke support to families to help more children to safely stay at home. For those children unable to remain at home, it means providing them with the best alternative whether with kinship, foster or adoptive parents or in residential care, and equipping those caring for them with the specialist knowledge they need to enable children to flourish. To achieve this goal will mean marshalling capacity and innovation.

02 Stronger partnerships across services, sectors and agencies

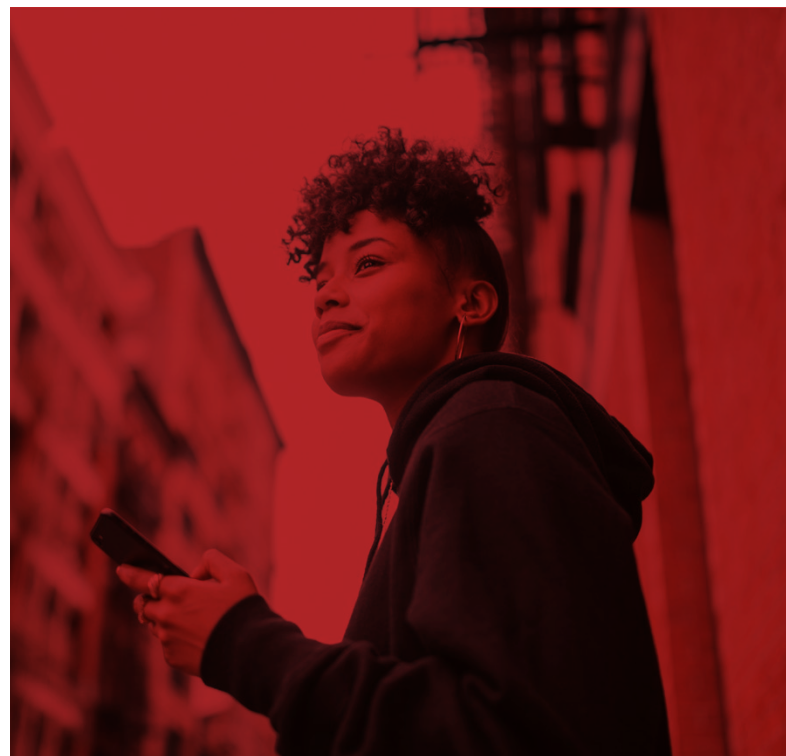
Children's lives often operate across service boundaries and therefore it is imperative that the multiple agencies involved with children and families work collaboratively. A new collaborative practice model would facilitate more effective and timely information sharing, so that practitioners have a more comprehensive picture of the child and family they are working with. It would facilitate and rely on the sharing of ideas and developing solutions in tandem, capitalising on the respective skill-sets and expertise of different parties so that we can improve outcomes together, rather than working in isolation. This should encompass the public, private and third sector.

03 A focus on early help and prevention

We need to provide services with the tools, means and mechanisms to identify children and families in need of support at an earlier point, and tailor this for those at risk of escalating need. By intervening early in a targeted manner we can prevent deterioration and growing complexity of need, enabling children to enjoy a happier, more stable childhood, reducing the number of children in care and breaking the cycles of trauma across generations.

04 A motivated, valued, diverse workforce

We need to ensure that we empower our social care workforce so that they feel that the fantastic work they do is appreciated, valued and rewarded. This means having clear pathways of career progression, better staff support, and making use of the technologies that can help to streamline the administrative burdens faced by individual social work practitioners. The latter would provide the space and time for practitioners to focus on the foundational elements of social work practice and build and sustain positive relationships with those they are working with. This in turn can enhance social work recruitment drives and succession planning, as well as helping social worker retention, supporting us to build our capacity so that we can provide a better service for children and young people.



05 A child-centred national model of social work

Although varying depending on the local context, there are many common challenges shared by children's services and therefore we must think in terms of national solutions. A child-centred national model for social work will absorb the good practice being followed across the country, evidence what leads to better long-term outcomes for children and young people and disseminate it to others so they can adapt it and replicate it in their locality.

06 Embracing advances in technology

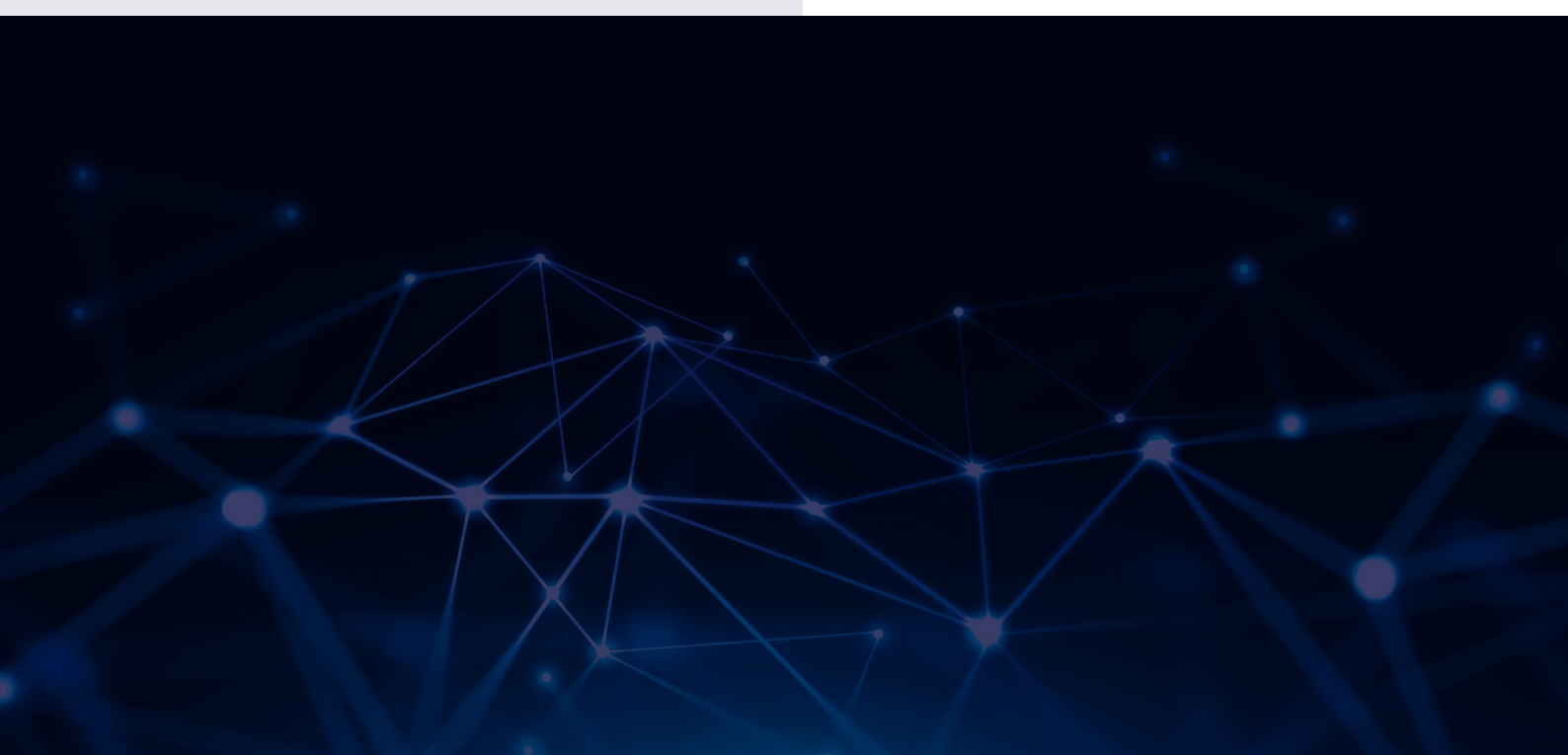
We must ensure we can take maximum advantage of the opportunities we are presented with by the developments in the technological and digital space we have seen in recent years. Many of these advancements can enhance our ability to effectively understand and respond to the data we have, as well as improving the way we can communicate with each other and those using our services. Adopting such technology must be complemented by a cultural shift, and equipping practitioners and service users alike with the capabilities to use it so that we can apply this promise in practice to make a tangible difference for our communities.

07 Enabling children and families to be the agents of change

In order to find what works, we need to harness the expertise and insights of the children and families we work with. A greater focus on co-production and partnership with those we work with allows us to enhance our understanding of their lived experience and get closer to finding solutions that align with their key priorities and respond to their experiences, rather than change being an imposition.

08 A more consistent funding stream

With demand on children's services growing exponentially and children presenting with more complex difficulties, amid rising poverty and an accelerating mental health crisis, we must identify the means based on evidenced social return, to achieve a financial settlement which enables the delivery of consistent high quality services children need to thrive in the longer-term. Government must recognise and create the preconditions for radical, sustainable change.



How do we together make the possible, possible?

The path to securing the radical innovations that can transform our sector and fundamentally improve the lives of children, young people and families is complex, but the challenges are not insurmountable. Much has been achieved and we must use these achievements to catalyse further improvements in order to get closer to our vision.

We all face the limits of capacity, both financial and resource, but we can work to equip children's services providers to make the most of the capacity and expertise already available. This requires leadership and a commitment to foster a culture of innovation throughout the organisation. It means permitting and empowering staff to take on a degree of risk and looking beyond the conventional structures to explore new ideas and practice.

The **CII** is dedicated to helping the sector to maximise the opportunities available to it by acting as a specialist platform to stimulate radical innovation. It provides a capacity to focus on how we can overcome the barriers to innovation and support broader organisational change.

Collaboration is key. By convening a broad spectrum of expertise, the CII offers the chance to explore and pilot new solutions to key challenges and licenses experimentation. In turn, we hope to be able to replicate what works across the sector and broaden the impact to children and young people.

The **CII** will be governed by the idea of the Art of the Possible - thinking creatively, facing risk and having a practical focus on what we can achieve now.

We therefore offer our members the opportunity to enrol on the **Coram Innovation Inset**, designed to enable those in our partner organisations to think about innovation in the practice context and develop projects from idea stage, through implementation and towards evaluation and scalability.

By this time next year, we will work to have a repository of innovation projects developed and trialled by practitioners and managers, and a number of cross-sector ideas for addressing the issues identified in our innovation streams, laying the foundations in 2022 for what we dream can be possible by 2030.

We call on our colleagues across the sector to join us in the mission to realise this vision for children's social care.

“Together we have to rise to the challenge. Our time is now”

Carol Homden CBE



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<https://coram-i.org.uk/coram-innovation-incubator>

The CII Innovation Collective:
<https://coram-i.org.uk/coram-innovation-incubator/the-cii-collective>

INNOVATION

[in.no.va.tion]

noun

1. the action or process of innovating.

* innovation is crucial to the continuing success of any organization*

2. a new method, idea, product, etc.



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