

Designed for certainty. Asked to innovate.

Why innovation is hard to deliver in government

Government has never been short of ideas. Across the public sector, people are experimenting with new technologies, redesigning services, testing new policies and looking for better ways to deliver outcomes.

Yet many promising initiatives struggle to progress beyond pilots, business cases or isolated successes. Not because the ideas are poor, but because moving an idea through decision-making, funding, implementation and adoption is often harder than generating the idea itself.

Government must balance innovation with accountability, transparency, equity and public trust. The systems that support those objectives are essential, but they can also make change slower and more difficult than many leaders would like.

Where good ideas get stuck

	Permission	People are encouraged to improve how things work but are often unclear about what can be changed immediately and what requires approval, and from whom.
	Governance	Small ideas can be asked to meet the same evidence and assurance requirements as major initiatives.
	Capability	The expertise needed to solve a problem often spans teams, functions or agencies, while some specialist skills may not exist within government and may need to be sourced externally.
	Capacity	Innovation is usually expected to fit around existing commitments rather than having dedicated investment or focus.
	Decision-making	Ideas lose momentum while waiting for approvals, funding or organisational alignment.
	Adoption	Even successful initiatives can struggle to become part of normal operations.
	Pace	By the time enough certainty has been gathered, the opportunity may have changed.

Why this matters now

Governments are facing rising delivery costs, ongoing workforce constraints, growing community expectations and increasingly complex challenges that cut across organisational boundaries. At the same time, technological advancement continues to accelerate, creating new opportunities to improve outcomes.

Realising those opportunities depends on organisations being able to move ideas through decision-making, implementation and adoption more effectively than many current systems and processes allow. Increasingly, attention is shifting towards faster decisions, proportionate governance, progressive evidence-building and successful adoption at scale.

What is changing?

From		To
One-size-fits-all governance	—————>	Risk-based delivery pathways
Seeking perfect information	—————>	Building evidence progressively
Sequential approvals	—————>	Faster decision cycles
Pilot success	—————>	Scaled adoption
Measuring activity	—————>	Measuring outcomes
Delivering projects	—————>	Realising benefits

Where innovation loses momentum

The biggest barriers to innovation usually sit at the **transitions** between ideas, decisions, implementation and adoption.



High-performing organisations focus on reducing friction at the points where ideas are most likely to lose momentum.

What we see in organisations moving faster

1

They decide earlier

The organisations that move fastest are not necessarily making more decisions. They are making the critical decisions sooner, before complexity increases and options narrow.

2

They integrate planning and delivery

Planning and delivery are treated as a continuous cycle rather than a series of hand-offs. Learning from implementation informs future decisions in real time.

3

They focus on benefits, not activities

Success is measured by the value created and benefits realised, not by the milestones completed, reports produced or projects launched.

4

They match governance to risk

Oversight is scaled to the level of uncertainty, complexity and consequence rather than applying the same process to every initiative.

5

They design for adoption from the start

Leadership, capability, behaviours and organisational readiness are considered early, making it more likely that successful initiatives become embedded as business as usual.

6

They mobilise the right capability at the right time

Innovation is accelerated by combining internal expertise with diverse and targeted skillsets, ensuring capability gaps do not stall progress.

The small shifts that create bigger movement

The organisations moving fastest are rarely redesigning entire systems.

They are removing friction from the key areas that influence how quickly ideas become outcomes.

Faster decisions

Reducing unnecessary waiting time between insight and action.

Progressive evidence

Collecting enough evidence to make informed decisions, rather than delaying until certainty is achieved.

Proportionate governance

Applying oversight that matches risk rather than treating every initiative the same way.

Clear ownership

Establishing accountability for moving successful ideas into implementation and scale.

Adoption by design

Considering people, behaviours, capability and operating model impacts from the outset.



Questions worth discussing

? Where does innovation most commonly lose momentum in our organisation?

? Are our governance settings aligned to today's risks or yesterday's?

? How many successful pilots have scaled into business as usual?

? How much value is lost through avoidable delay each year?

? Who owns adoption and benefits realisation?

The OCM perspective

In our experience, innovation rarely stalls because organisations run out of ideas.

More often, momentum slows when an initiative moves from exploration into delivery, as decisions take longer than expected, ownership becomes less clear and governance expands in response to uncertainty. While pilots may demonstrate success, many struggle to make the transition to scaled implementation.

The organisations making the most progress are not abandoning controls or accepting greater risk. Instead, they are taking a more deliberate approach to decision making, applying governance in ways that support rather than hinder progress, and creating clearer pathways for successful ideas to move into implementation and adoption.

For government, the challenge is often less about generating innovation and more about creating the conditions that allow promising ideas to become meaningful outcomes.

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