Making a Fast Start to Missions

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1.   Introduction & context

The UK's modern industrial strategy asserts, '*Growth is the number one mission of the government. The new industrial strategy is central to that growth mission.*' The strategy sets out a 10-year plan to '*deliver the certainty and stability businesses need to invest in the high growth sectors that will drive growth mission.*' This modern industrial strategy has recently announced five main missions: (1) Kickstart economic growth; (2) Build an NHS fit for the future; (3) Safer streets; (4) Break down the barriers to opportunity, and (5) Make Britain a clean energy superpower.

The creation of the UK's Vaccine Taskforce (VTF) arguably represents the most prominent example of a 'technological mission' premised on an expert-led structure with a single goal. Established in 2020 as a time-bound scientific challenge with a measurable outcome to secure early access to COVID-19 vaccines by mobilising expertise across government, academia, and industry.

While there are lessons to take from the VTF, Labour's missions are 'socioeconomic' in nature, aiming to tackle complex systemic issues that demand cross-sector long-term cultural change rather than technological breakthroughs. Compared to the VTF, Labour's missions are more diffuse and harder to measure but would benefit from the same clarity of mission statement and coordinated governance.

To ensure the success of the missions, and given their complexity, it is necessary to break the mission down and articulate it in terms of a series of specific and measurable objectives. This is particularly important where the mission can be interpreted in different ways or has multiple potential solutions, and the openness can bring ambiguity that may detract from the mission.

This document provides an introductory briefing intended for incoming mission directors to help them make a fast start in their new roles in developing their respective missions. As well as picking out key opportunity areas, the briefing includes insights from those involved in leading previous missions and challenge areas with their reflections on what they would have wanted to know upon appointment to accelerate the early impact.

2.   Insights developed from experience

This briefing paper draws on other relevant work undertaken by the Innovation and Research Caucus (IRC) on aspects of mission-led approaches, as well as including insights and lessons from individuals who have previously worked on previous ISCF challenges and mission. The project also draws on interviews with those involved in missions and mission-led approaches at other Innovation agencies, and the OECD. A full list of individuals consulted is provided in Appendix 1. The briefing is not intended to be comprehensive but reflects a range of experiences that may be relevant to incoming Mission Directors.

3. Defining missions and their development

Mission-oriented policies structure their design and implementation around missions that tackle critical societal challenges. Missions have been defined as 'wicked' problems, grand challenges, or purposeful goals. Furthermore, missions may be either 'problem-focused' (for instance, solving the problem of climate change but agnostic to the available solutions) or 'solution-focused' (for instance, having identified heat pumps as a solution to address energy consumption, then focusing on the mission of implementation of the solution). And, while it is acknowledged that solving the problem may entail some form of scientific technological break-through, especially when it comes to solution-implementation, running these solution-focused missions requires effectively driving social and behavioural changes.

Figure 1 depicts key stages in developing and implementing mission-oriented policies. Designing, implementing, and evaluating mission-oriented policies starts by identifying an overarching goal or mission the policy aims to achieve. More details on the stages in the process of mission-oriented policy development and implementation are available in the IRC report on Missions[1].

Figure 1: Key stages in developing and implementing mission-oriented policies

Source: Ortega-Argiles et al. 2025. *Industrial Strategy and Missions.* Oxford, UK: Innovation and Research Caucus.

The cyclical representation of mission development and delivery here is critical given the evolving nature of missions, which brings with it a need for agility. There is also an inherent complexity in the design of the mission beyond that of typical programmes of work delivered by UKRI. The involvement of multiple research councils and Innovate UK, each with their own priorities and objectives, heightens the need for the mission to be well developed.

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[1] Ortega-Argiles et al. 2025. *Industrial Strategy and Missions.* Oxford, UK: Innovation and Research Caucus. https://ircaucus.ac.uk/publications/industrial-strategy-and-missions-an-evaluation-of-the-role-of-social-sciences-in-the-iscf/

Table 1: Stages of mission development

Mission Phase	Main task to be achieved	Features
Mission Formulation: Strategic orientation	Informing and selecting specific societal challenge(s) and strengthening the legitimacy of focused policy intervention towards clear and precise objectives	*Legitimacy* A consensus is found among a wider group of stakeholders (including citizens) regarding the need and relevance of the mission
		Directionality The policy is guided by clear and well-informed orientations and strategic guidance formalised in a mission
		Intentionality Specific and well-articulated need-based goals, with a clear timeline and milestones, are derived from the mission
		Flexibility The targets and means of intervention to meet can be revised at different stages of the process when needed
Mission Design: Policy coordination	Coordinating the strategies and activities of the different institutions involved in the policy	*Horizontality* The plans and activities of policy bodies covering different policy fields are coordinated to achieve the mission
		Verticality The plans and activities of policy bodies at different levels of government are coordinated to achieve the mission
		Intensity The decisions regarding the intervention (objectives, modalities, level of resources) are taken collectively by the involved policy bodies and are binding on them.
		Novelty The plans and activities of different policy bodies and stakeholders are co-ordinated (e.g. via a portfolio approach) so as to cover and experiment with various alternative solutions to achieve the mission
Mission Implementation: Policy implementation	Ensuring the consistency and effectiveness of the modes of intervention and resources of the public and private partners mobilised to achieve the policy objectives	*Policy mix consistency* The policy encompasses a diverse and consistent set of policy interventions (technical, financial, regulatory, etc.) to support different disciplines, sectors, areas and markets, across the innovation cycle, as needed to achieve the mission
		Fundability Public and private stakeholders involved in the different facets of the initiatives (phases of the innovation process, sectors, markets, etc.) are mobilised to commit resources for the achievement of the mission.
		Evaluability The policy is endowed at the outset with input and output indicators as well as valuation procedures adapted to its systemic nature, in order to assess the results and learn from its implementation in view of continuous improvement.
		Reflexibility Evaluation and monitoring results are used to inform decision-making and reform the initiative (revision of objectives, adaptation of governance and operating procedures, etc.) as needed to achieve the mission

Source: *Adapted from OECD (2024), Mission-Oriented Innovation Policies for Net Zero: How Can Countries Implement Missions to Achieve Climate Targets? OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/5efdbc5c-en.*

Social science research can provide insights to Mission Directors that may shape the way that missions are developed, ensuring that they address societal needs and align with policy goals. This can range from ensuring that the relevant perspectives of different stakeholders are understood to be identifying high-risk that may limit the acceptance of mission projects.

4.   Leveraging UKRI's role

A key aspect of the success behind existing missions and challenges has been the ability of UKRI, and its constituent bodies, to convene. Working across all aspects of the research and innovation ecosystem and from the blue skies of research, through to supporting the commercial application and scaling of innovation, UKRI is uniquely positioned to ensure the success of a mission-led approach. The cross-council/agency nature of the missions has the potential to bring together different communities in the delivery of missions.

A key aspect of missions is that they cannot be effectively engaged by one actor alone. That is, they require coordination across a variety of stakeholders, each of which might internally consist of different subgroups with different incentives. For instance, driving heat pump adoption requires understanding that consumer decisions are driven by several factors, some of which are controlled by policy makers (e.g., regulations), but many of which are not. In that case, the private sector consisted not only of heat pump manufacturers but also installers, housing designers, contractors, and providers of complimentary systems.

Discovering effective pathways to mission completion requires mapping, coordinating, and intervening across stakeholder groups – something that the public sector can do well. UKRI is well-positioned to stand behind these communities by supporting innovation, convening stakeholders across boundaries, and understanding the incentives and levers that can generate collectively appropriate results. This is reinforced in Table 2, which highlights the roles and activities of different groups at different stages of the mission.

Table 2: Stages, Activities and Roles across stages of the mission

Episode	Activities/Outcomes	Roles of:			
		Public Sector	Private sector	Citizens/end-users	Intermediaries/ Community Leaders/ Influencers
Ideation	Formulation of possible mission objectives, timelines, and nature of challenge, Provides basis for discussion of objectives and approaches	Synthesis of evidence base to define mission, surfacing of potential solutions and approaches. Harnessing of regional/ global knowledge spillovers.	Identify variety of solutions and technical options. Identify stakeholders and relevant networks.	Participate in needs analysis and ground-level articulation of the problem and associated pain points.	Provide leadership for user-innovation, i.e., prototyping, tinkering, experimentation and influencing public-private actors
Legitimation	Discussion and consultation among stakeholders. Agreement on mission objectives, timelines, scope, and stakeholder roles.	Convening role to support development of agreed objectives and approaches. Appreciation of contested issues and possible resolutions	Contribute to mission definition etc. Help identify supply/ value change conflicts and contestations	Willingness to engage in conversations about possible solutions for socio-behavioural change. Help build critical mass of adoption.	Serve as role models and advocates. Also help in mediation/ bridging of contested issues
Implementation	Working out of stakeholder roles and co-ordinated action. Progress towards mission objectives.	Provide – structure (including incentives), coordination (including knowledge coordination) and governance (including default nudges/ rules/ laws). Support for R&D/technical development. Develop appropriate regulatory/incentive structures. Co-ordination role, monitoring and measuring progress. Develop default nudges/ rules/ laws to facilitate ease of adoption. Also not just create rules and incentives but actively educate and mobilize users	Entrepreneurial/innovative contribution to mission objectives. Align indirectly related activities to/with mission objectives.	Openness to break-free from habitual/ inertial behaviour and learn new habits/ know-how associated with new emerging socio-technical solutions.	Knowledge dissemination and education, including translation of scientific-technological jargon into lay people language
Completion	Mission success – full or partial.	Monitoring and measurement of system level outcomes	Co-partners in monitoring progress and measurement of system level outcomes	Willingness to share ground-level data on progression, continued challenges and opportunities.	Mobilize and facilitate feedback collection and learning
Retrospection	Consultation and capture of learning from mission. Feedback into improved MIS operations	Evaluation, capturing lessons and feedback.		Sharing ground-level feedback on experiences with the solutions (what worked? what didn't)	Knowledge integration and dissemination

Source: Nelles J. et al. 2024. Understanding mission innovation systems and case studies. Oxford, UK: Innovation and Research Caucus

5.   Insights for Mission Directors

The remainder of the paper introduces thematic areas raised across our research on missions and in interviews with actors involved with the ISCF challenges and international mission programmes. At the end of each of these thematic sections, we highlight actionable insights that provide useful reflections for Mission Directors.

5.1 Autonomy and Authority

A recurring theme in the interviews was the real and perceived autonomy and authority of the person responsible for leading the mission. While accountable to a Senior Responsible Officer, or equivalent, and often working closely with an advisory board or champion, the level of autonomy and authority was not universally understood or appreciated when assuming the role as mission of challenge director. Indeed, the complex and wicked challenges that underlie many of the missions demand the skills and authority to work across boundaries to coordinate and convince stakeholders within and across departments as well as external actors. This requires directors to think and act differently.

With the appointment of previous challenge directors being both internal and external to UKRI, there were considerable differences in the institutional knowledge base of directors. For the internal

appointments an understanding of, and the ability to, navigate the internal structures and systems was initially regarded as an advantage. Several challenge directors still found the machinations of UKRI and the parent government department challenging to work with.

Another challenge experience was where the systems within UKRI were considered to constrain and detract from the ability of the Challenge Directors interviewed to deliver the ISCF Challenges. This primarily related to the rules and mechanisms of UKRI around funding calls and the allocation of funding, which were established procedures and protocols already existing for good reason. However, this was a source of difficulty for some challenge directors who wished to pursue alternative approaches towards mission delivery.

It is important that mission and challenge directors have the potential, working with the existing systems and structures, to introduce new ways of working and solutions that enable their missions and challenges to succeed.

Actionable insights

>> There is a need for Mission Directors to understand the wider, often cross-governmental context in which Missions sit and the associated opportunities and limitations this brings.

>> Mission Directors will need to develop and retain a certain degree of autonomy to think and act differently in delivering the mission.

>> This will involve understanding the authority they have and how it can be used creatively to achieve mission objectives.

>> Mission Directors must develop an understanding that their formal authority may not always be sufficient and where they will need to enhance and rely on soft skills to build coalitions.

5.2 Clarity and common purpose of missions

One of the challenges inherent in missions, and a feature of their multistakeholder nature, is that absent strong leadership for different actors often see the mission, and its solutions, differently. Establishing a clear definition of the problem to be solved and the goal to be achieved and effectively communicating these are central to getting a diverse array of actors *thinking* about moving in the same direction. This is a crucial precursor to persuading them to act to achieve their set goals.

Often, mission leaders will focus on the goals which drive the interventions. However, our research demonstrates that securing agreement on the interpretation of missions (or problems) itself is also important to ensure that stakeholders and potential partners are willing to consider proposed goals. For instance, it will be difficult to coordinate communities who reject the premise in the first place. Being clear about what the problem is, why it is a problem, and who is affected by the problem can help diverse actors understand that coordination may be in their self-interest even if it is not immediately obvious. By clearly defining the problem – ideally in consultation with stakeholder groups – actors have a clearer sense of *why* they need to work together in ways that targets, no matter how clear, cannot effectively do on their own. Establishing an understanding of the mission is vital for both internal and external coordination.

Following on from this process, setting clear purposes and targets is crucial. The most effective purposes are short, unambiguous, and appropriate to the problems that they are meant to impact. It is often useful to have a headline objective that can then be broken down into sub-objectives. Refer to literature on target setting in mission innovation for guidance on objective setting in mission contexts.

Actionable insights

» Mission Directors should leverage the convening power of UKRI to ensure that there is broad agreement from stakeholders as to the problem(s) the mission is intended to address as well as building consensus around the mission priorities.

» Be clear in how the mission is communicated, and to whom, to ensure that the message is consistent, unambiguous, and delivered to all relevant audiences.

» Establish clear targets and milestones that reflect the ambitions of the mission but that are also realistic given timelines and resource constraints.

5.3 Situating place

Place has become an increasingly important dimension of policymaking in the UK. This emphasis highlights the variations within and across UK regions, and the need to ensure that policy is sensitive to the different needs of localities to be effective. The emerging focus on 'missions' in the UK, tackling complex societal challenges, is also aligned with place-based thinking. For missions to be effective, Mission Directors need place to be at the heart of the mission when co-creating different solutions if they are to work in different places.

The IRC has recently undertaken research that extends our understanding of place-based innovation by exploring localised and system-level innovation dynamics in the UK. For missions to be effective, there is a need to understand local dynamics, but also how they relate to activities in other parts of the system. The IRC work for UKRI and DSIT adds nuance to existing thinking about clustering and place-based innovation by highlighting that the benefits of spillovers and knowledge diffusion are not exclusively and may not even be mainly localised.

To realise these benefits, there is a need for missions to be spatially aware and use place as a site for policy experimentation. Being sensitive to different contexts, where different places can serve as testbeds for mission delivery. To achieve this Mission Directors can support local pilots and fund experimentation with the view to scale successful pilots across different places to deliver the mission.

The IRC research suggests that there are opportunities to better connect activities across different places by understanding how they relate and their respective synergies. As a result, there are likely opportunities for fostering partnerships and collaboration across stakeholder communities in different places. This understanding may help Mission Directors develop strategies to enhance local benefits as well as identifying system-wide opportunities.
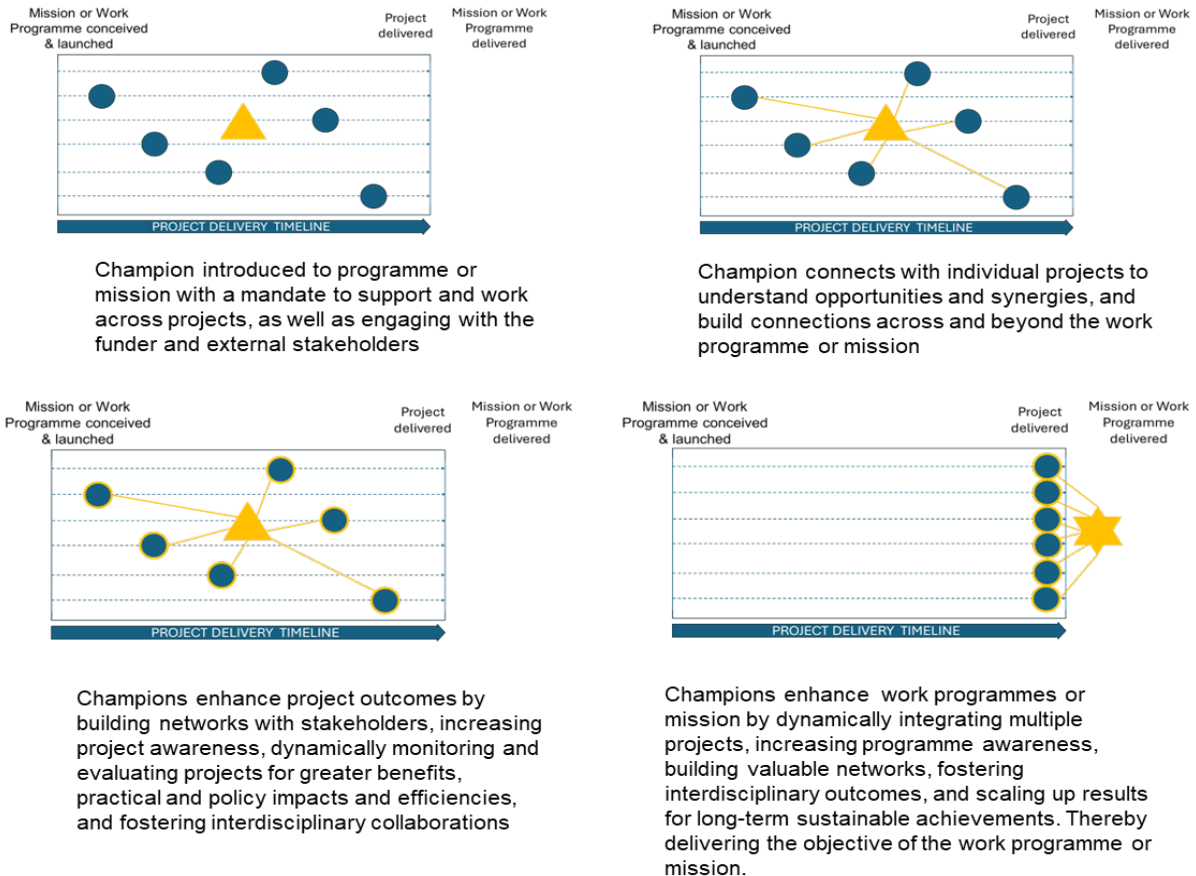
> **Actionable insights**
>
> » Mission Directors should be aware that missions will play out unevenly and encounter different challenges across places. Rather than a barrier, this can be used as an opportunity to develop a better understanding of the spatial factors that influence mission delivery.
>
> » Working across different places in the delivery of missions offers an opportunity for experimentation in delivery that can be adapted to meet the needs and capabilities of different places.
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> » Where an important aspect of mission success requires working across different places, there is scope to extend the 'connected' approach towards places, clusters and cities that has been a feature of previous UKRI funded programmes.

5.4 Greater than the sum of its parts

The Innovation and Research Caucus was recently commissioned by the UKRI/ESRC to gather robust evidence about the Role of Champions in supporting a programme of work that is part of the overarching mission. We identify the role of Champions to network across a portfolio of projects, identify and coordinate potential synergies, and connect and collaborate with end users and other stakeholders to enhance the impact, visibility and legacy of the portfolio of projects that comprise the programme of work.

While the incoming Mission Directors will have oversight and accountability for the overarching mission, there is often a missing middle layer between the mission and projects that can be addressed by utilising Champions. Research by the IRC suggests that engaging a Champion as part of a work programme across a series of projects can add significant value to the impact of projects to a mission by bringing coherence and leveraging synergies across individual projects.

The experience and expertise of Champions have the potential to support Mission Directors in a more structured way to enhance return on investment in UKRI funded projects as a part of the various work programmes informing the overarching mission. Figure 2 shows the way in which Champions connect projects and add value to both individual projects and the portfolio of projects that comprise a work programme.

Champion introduced to programme or mission with a mandate to support and work across projects, as well as engaging with the funder and external stakeholders

Champion connects with individual projects to understand opportunities and synergies, and build connections across and beyond the work programme or mission

Champions enhance project outcomes by building networks with stakeholders, increasing project awareness, dynamically monitoring and evaluating projects for greater benefits, practical and policy impacts and efficiencies, and fostering interdisciplinary collaborations

Champions enhance work programmes or mission by dynamically integrating multiple projects, increasing programme awareness, building valuable networks, fostering interdisciplinary outcomes, and scaling up results for long-term sustainable achievements. Thereby delivering the objective of the work programme or mission.

Source: *De Silva, M., Abou Hamdan, O., Vorley, T. and Ghorbankhani, M. February 2025. Champions: Transforming Projects to Work Programmes and Missions. Oxford, UK: Innovation and Research Caucus.*

Figure 2: The role of champions in adding value to a programme of work.

At the project level, Champions significantly enhance project outcomes by building robust networks with project stakeholders, increasing project visibility, and dynamically monitoring and evaluating projects to maximise benefits, practical and policy impacts, and efficiencies. They also foster connections across and beyond the individual projects, thereby generating synergies that are greater than the sum of the individually funded projects.

Actionable insights

» The scale of the missions means that distributed leadership teams are required to work across workstreams, with opportunities likely to occur by supporting and fostering synergies.

» Previously, Challenge Directors noted that communities of practice developed around, as opposed to across different fundings workstreams, which was considered a missed opportunity.

» An important success factor is likely to require increasing the visibility and impact of mission projects and workstreams with related stakeholder communities.

5.6 Scaling up to deliver the mission

It is commonplace that a significant proportion of early projects funded under the banner of missions begin as pilot initiatives. This approach enables pilot projects to develop insights, test concepts, and assess feasibility, thereby reducing the risk associated with future investment. By starting with pilots, Mission Directors can evaluate the potential impact of projects before committing to full-scale implementation. This also ensures resources are directed toward the most promising and impactful projects.

If governments are to successfully address complex societal challenges to deliver missions, there is a need to scale up successful pilot projects. However, scaling is not a simple act of replication or establishing multiple projects, it requires strategies that support sustainable expansion. For Mission Directors to scale up a pilot project involves expanding the successful elements of the initial small-scale project to address the challenge at scale in a financially sustainable manner.

Research by the IRC highlights the pathways associated with scaling-up mission-oriented pilot projects. The three pathways for scaling-up are identified in Table 2, and while the pathways are not mutually exclusive, there is ordinarily a dominant path.

Actionable insights

» **Horizontal scaling up:** This path can also be called 'roll-out'. In this route, innovations are replicated in new locations or expanded to new user groups or populations. This could also include the solutions being expanded into new markets or across the organization.

» **Functional scaling up:** This path can also be called 'diversification', as this type of scale up consists of new innovations being added to and integrated with the existing innovations. This route could also include the solution to be expanded through inclusion of new partners, users, functionalities.

» **Political scaling up:** This path can also be called 'vertical scaling up'. In this case, innovations are institutionalised through regulations, policies, or legal action. This route ensures that solutions are made sustainable through policymaking, implementation, and financing.

Figure 3 distinguishes between the exploration associated with pilot projects and the exploitation associated with scaling-up projects. Exploration and exploitation activities are best understood as a continuum, rather than two distinct options, with the exploration of pilot projects shaping and informing the exploitation of scale up projects.
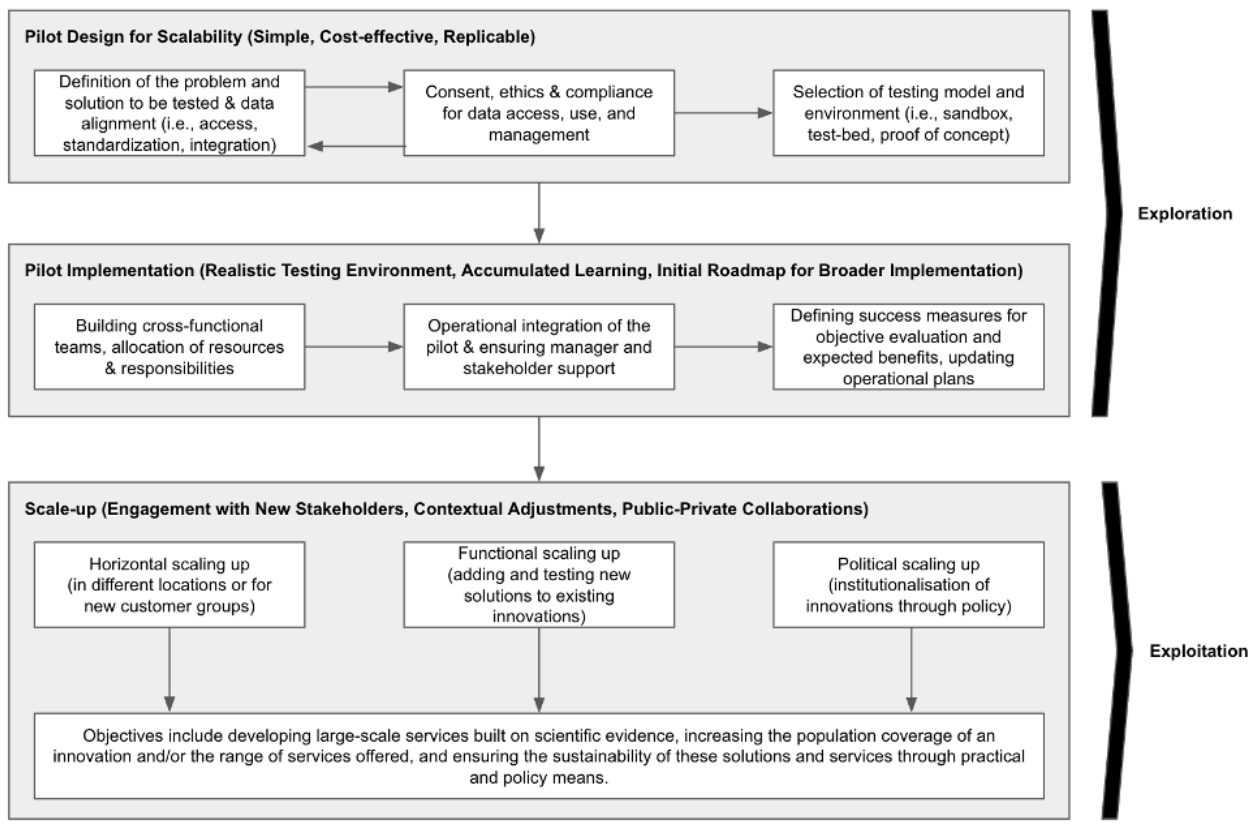
Figure 3: A process model of exploration and exploitation

There is scope to incorporate the pre-conditions for scaling-up into the exploratory stages of pilot projects. By identifying the institutional, technical, and political challenges and opportunities associated with scaling early, Mission Directors (and Champions) have scope to shape the conditions for growth – for example by promoting openness and stakeholder engagement.

Actionable insights

» Helping the project holders across workstreams to understand different potential scaling pathways is crucial to improve the chance of scaling the impact of projects to deliver the mission.

» Where possible, designing and adapting projects by considering the factors likely to impact the ability to scale pilot projects at the earliest opportunity will improve the likelihood of success.

» There is a need for Mission Directors, and their teams, to leverage wider connections to help curate the conditions to allow projects to scale that may be outside of the remit of individual projects (i.e. data sharing).

Conclusions

Mission-led approaches have become popular with governments around the world, but it is important to understand that they are implemented in different ways. Put simply, a mission can mean different things to different people. Therefore, being sensitive to the context in which mission-led approaches have been adopted is important when looking to make sense of them and their effectiveness.

The framing and construction of missions will also differ according to the focus. As noted in the introduction some missions are tightly defined with SMART objectives, while other missions are more broadly defined with multiple possible solutions. In both cases, but particularly the latter, it is important that measurable objectives and milestones are identified, and that there is a shared understanding among those involved.

If we are to realise the opportunity of mission-led approaches, there is a need to ensure that how we approach missions is a bold as the ambition for the missions themselves. While existing ways of working can be deployed as part of mission delivery, there is a need to consider whether they will unlock the potential for cross-government and cross–sector collaborations in addressing what are complex societal challenges.

In reflecting on the experiences of those involved in designing, supporting, and leading missions, the aim of this briefing was to draw out the most resonant lessons from individuals who have participated in mission design and delivery and from our research on these topics. These should be read as high level reflections to inform thinking about current missions and more detailed guidance to come. Realising the potential of mission-led government has the potential to represent a new way of governing, but that needs to be accompanied with delivery models that are equally fit for purpose and capable of demonstrating results.

Appendix 1

Contributions to this briefing document came from a number of colleagues including:

Judith Phillips: Healthy Ageing

Ben Farmer: Made Smarter Innovation

Cynthia Bullock: Healthy Ageing

Philippe Larrue: OECD

Ruth Mallors-Ray: Future Flight

Gary Cutts: Future Flight

George MacGinnis: Healthy Ageing

Now you have read our report we would love to know if our research has provided you with new insights, improved your processes, or inspired innovative solutions.

Please let us know how our research is making a difference by completing our short feedback form via this QR code.

Thank you

The Innovation & Research Caucus

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Acknowledgements

About the Innovation and Research Caucus

The IRC supports the use of robust evidence and insights in UKRI's strategies and investments, as well as undertaking a co-produced programme of research. Our members are leading academics from across the social sciences, other disciplines and sectors, who are engaged in different aspects of innovation and research system. We connect academic experts, UKRI, IUK and the ESRC, by providing research insights to inform policy and practice. Professor Tim Vorley and Professor Stephen Roper are Co-Directors. The IRC is funded by UKRI via the ESRC and IUK, grant number ES/X010759/1. The support of the funders is acknowledged. The views expressed in this piece are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the funders.

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