



Is the UK Getting Innovation Right?

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This research was commissioned and managed by the Nesta project team led by Jen Rae, with invaluable expertise from Madeleine Gabriel, Ksenia Zheltoukhova, Kathy Peach, Laurie Smith and Harry Farmer.

The research report and additional summary was edited by Alex Porter, with thanks to Nesta's Communications team for their ideas and input in the editing process.

BritainThinks

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Introduction

Britain is entering a new decade with an appetite for change. Having granted this government the first significant majority in a decade, public attention is likely to turn to the domestic issues neglected while British decision-makers settle the Brexit question.

Our research shows that people want action on widening inequality, struggling public services and the global climate crisis, and see innovation as a vital tool to tackle the social and economic challenges facing the UK. While the public are positive about change, people do not feel empowered to shape the future or that they have much influence over how the Government prioritises the problems that innovation could solve. They also feel that innovation helps only a select few, and has the potential to do much more.

To ensure the public's expectations are met, we urge the Government to rethink its innovation agenda for the new decade to:

- Direct research and development funding to tackle the challenges that really matter to people, like climate change, inequality and poor health.
- Increase the impact of innovation at a local level by devolving more of the UK's research and development budget to cities and regions, spreading the benefits of innovation across the UK.
- Become more transparent about how public money is spent on innovation and how these decisions are made, to justify to the public how innovation policy is improving people's lives.
- Involve the public in meaningful conversation about the future and the role of innovation by making greater use of new 'participatory futures' methods.

What the UK thinks about the future

The public perceives a wide range of interlinked challenges facing society, spanning their personal lives, their local communities and the country and world in general. Over half the people we spoke to feel the world is changing too quickly and, in that context, feel uncertain about the future. This uncertainty is particularly acute among young people, with 69 per cent of 18–24 year olds saying they do not know what the future will bring.

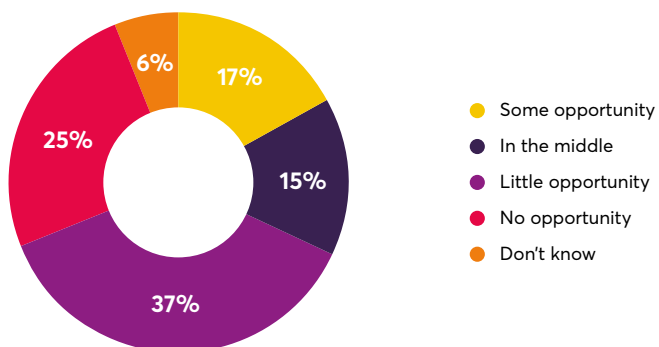
Figure 1 All those who agree with the following statements.



Two thirds (66 per cent) also feel there is little to no agreement in the UK around a long-term vision for the country; only 40 per cent of the public feel positive about the long-term future of the UK.

As well as feeling uncertain about the future, the public feel disempowered to shape it themselves – 62 per cent say they have little to no opportunity to shape the long-term future of the country.

Figure 2 Level of perceived opportunity to shape the long-term vision for the country. Q17. Overall, how much of an opportunity do you feel you have to shape the long-term vision for the country? On a scale of 1–7, with 7 being a great deal of opportunity and 1 being no opportunity. [No opportunity: 1, little opportunity: 2–3, in the middle: 4, some opportunity: 5–7] Base: all respondents (n=3,838).



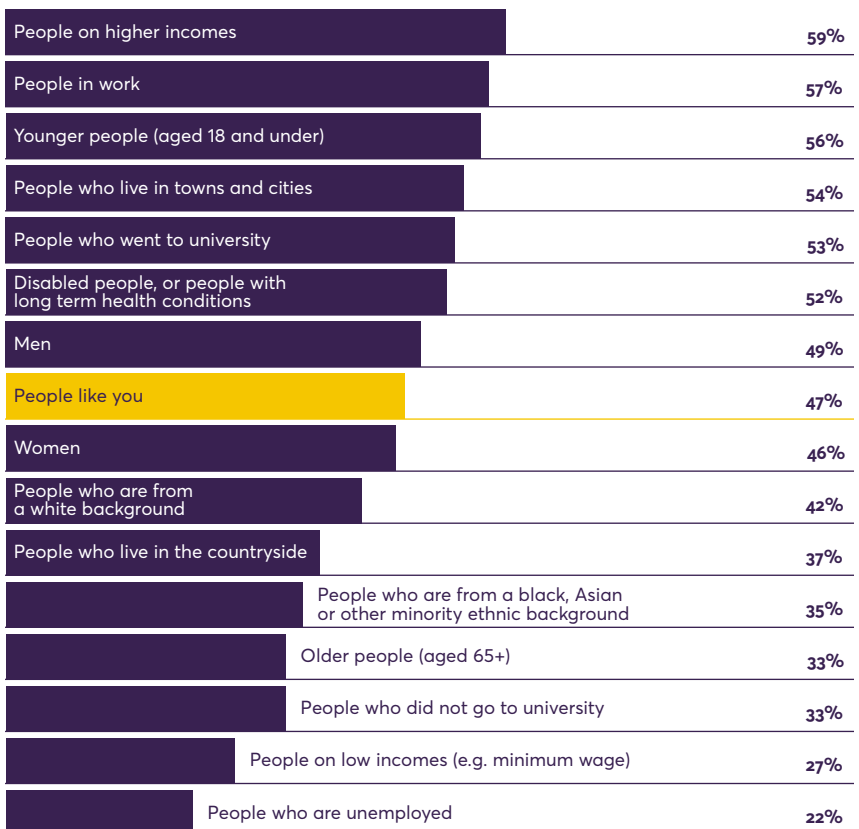
What the UK thinks about innovation and change

In the context of the challenges they experience, the public are eager for change. They see benefit in allowing people to take risks and fail in order to drive society forwards, and a majority think that change in culture and society is usually a good thing.

What the UK thinks about innovation and who benefits from it

The term 'innovation' resonates with the public. It is widely understood to mean something new having a positive impact, and many associate it with meeting an unrealised need. Reported awareness of innovation in certain areas is high, but when it comes to specific examples those at the front of people's minds are often limited to innovations

Figure 3 Percentage believing that innovation has had a positive impact on each group of people. Q3. How positive or negative is the impact of innovation on each of the following groups of people? (Total positive impact = very positive impact and somewhat positive impact.) Base: all respondents (n=3,838).



that have caused some public inconvenience – even when the outcome has been positive. Innovations that happen on a systemic level often fly under the radar.

However, many believe innovation can fall short of having a positive impact on society, usually because government policies are contradictory or underinvested in. Despite this, there is significant appetite for innovation to tackle the challenges society faces: innovation is generally perceived to have had a positive impact on the lives of the public. The pace of developing technology is felt to be one way in which innovation has sought to solve an unmet need, but had unintended consequences.

There is a perception that not everyone benefits equally from innovation. There are clear 'winners' (younger people, higher earners, graduates) and 'losers' (older people, lower earners, people who are unemployed).

What the UK thinks about how innovation should be targeted

Priorities for innovation largely align with the biggest challenges facing society: improving the UK economy, making the UK's population healthier, addressing the causes of climate change and making the UK safer.

Figure 4 Percentage believing that innovation in each area is amongst the top three most important to society. Q6. In which of these areas do you think that innovation is most important to society? Top three most important. Base: all respondents (n=3,838).

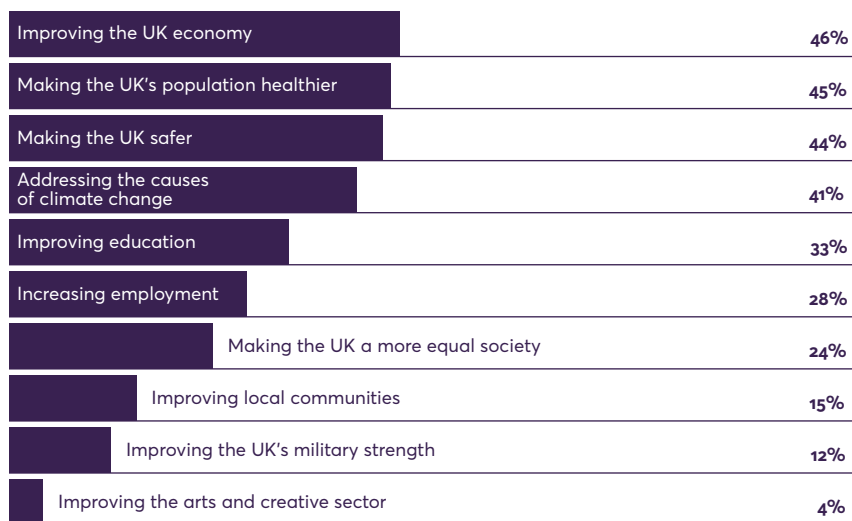


Figure 5 Percentage preferring different priorities in innovation policies.

Q7. For each of the following pairs of statements, please indicate which comes closest to your view. Base: all respondents (n=3,838).

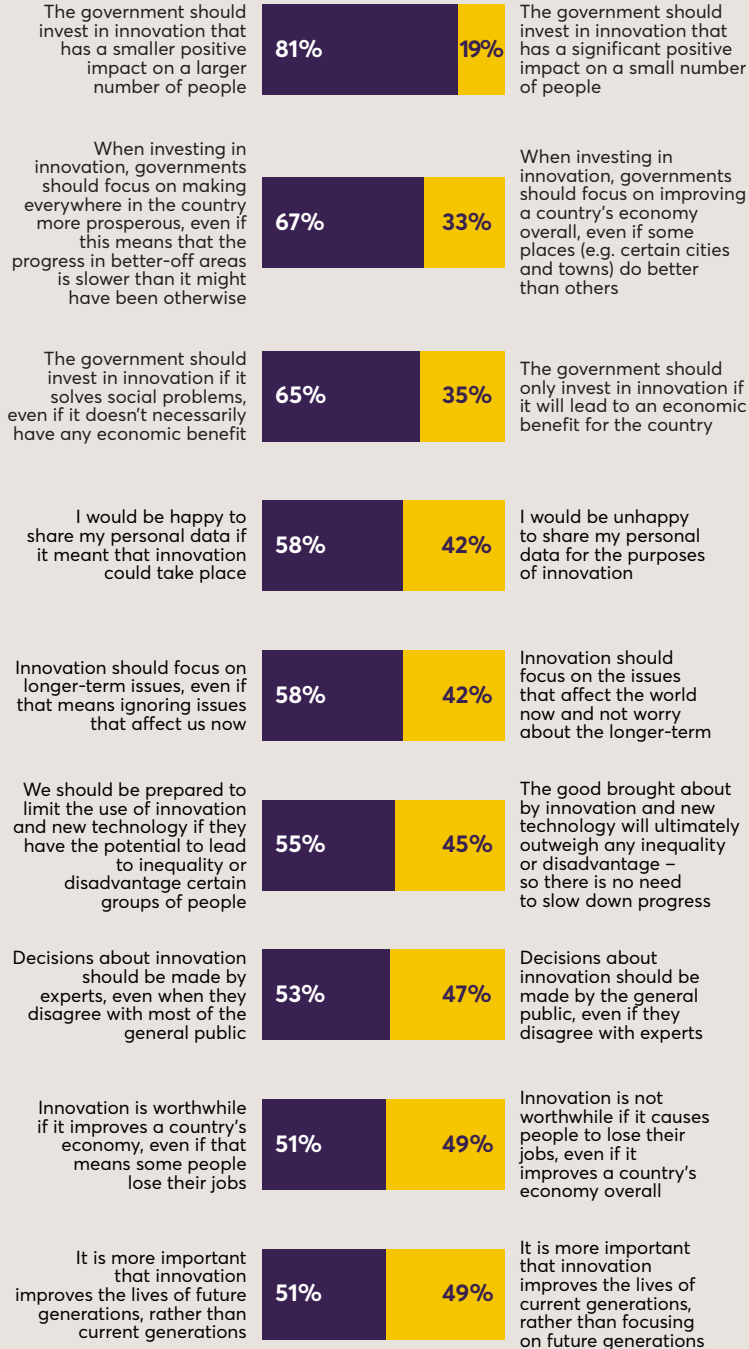
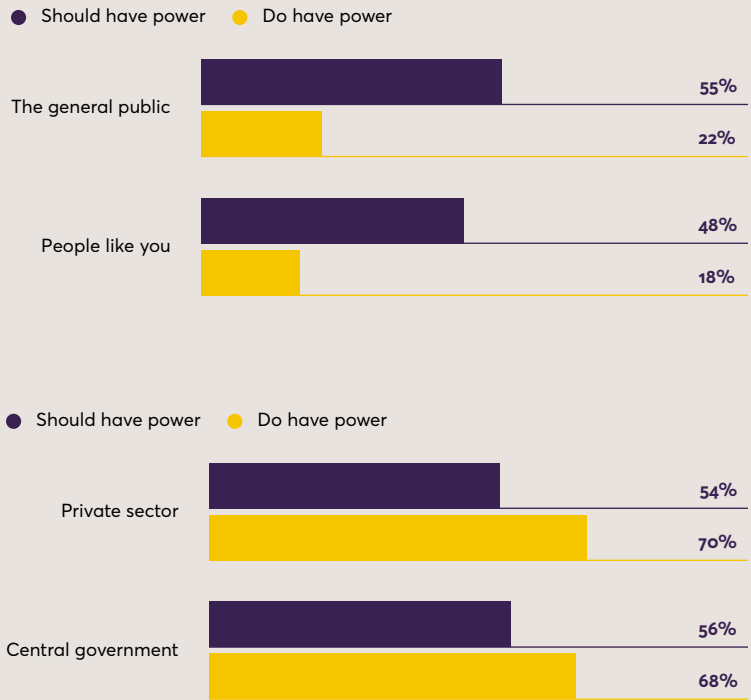


Figure 6 Those who believe each group currently has/should have decision-making power over innovation. Q10. How much decision-making power, if any, do you think each of the following groups of people currently have over innovation? Q11. How much decision-making power, if any, do you think each of the following groups of people should have over innovation? On a scale of 1–7, where 1=no influence and 7=a lot of influence. (Total do/should have power=5–7.) Base all respondents (n=3,838).



Investment is felt to be best prioritised on innovation that benefits a large number of people across the country, and that seeks to solve social problems – 81 per cent would prefer to see innovation that has a smaller impact on a greater number of people than that which has a deeper impact on fewer people. However, the public are divided on other aspects of innovation (e.g. personal data use and the role of experts).

What the UK thinks about who should make decisions about innovation?

The public feel that they should have power to make decisions over innovation, but most currently believe they have none. The public are also more likely to say that the government and business do have power over innovation than to say that they should have power over innovation.

The landscape for decision-making is complex, but the public see benefits to having different actors involved at different stages of innovation – allowing the public voice to contribute, but with safeguards in the form of business and government.

Table 1 Which groups people think should be responsible at different stages of innovation. Q12. Of the groups below, please indicate who you think should be most responsible for each of the following stages of innovation? Base all respondents (n=3,838).

		Stages of innovation					
		Planning for the future	Coming up with new ideas	Developing new ideas	Manufacturing goods	Delivering services	Adapting to change
Responsibility		Government	Mixed	Business	Business	Business	Individuals
Government		58%	7%	10%	3%	23%	27%
Business		14%	43%	59%	84%	60%	20%
Individuals		17%	39%	22%	4%	7%	40%

Conclusion

So although the UK public are uncertain about the future, and are skeptical that there is a long term vision for the country, there is plenty of potential for the new government to harness the power of innovation to shape the future for the country. The public want innovation that promotes social good as well as economic growth, to make the population healthier and safe, and to address the causes of climate change. They also want innovation to benefit more people and places in the UK.

The Government should use the opportunity of a refreshed mandate for change in the country to rethink its innovation agenda for a new decade.

Further resources

Our Futures: By the people, for the people. A guide to how mass involvement with shaping the future can solve complex problems. www.nesta.org.uk/report/our-futures-people-people

The Biomedical Bubble: Why UK Research and Innovation needs a greater diversity of priorities, politics, people and places. www.nesta.org.uk/report/biomedical-bubble

Innovation Policy needs redesigning to benefit more people and places. www.nesta.org.uk/blog/innovation-policy-needs-redesigning-benefit-more-people-and-places

Smarter Select Committees: How digital tools and methods can help select committees restore public trust in democracy. www.nesta.org.uk/report/smarter-select-committees

Evidence Vs Democracy: How 'mini-publics' can traverse the gap between citizens, experts, and evidence. www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/2019/01/Evidence-vs-Democracy-publication.pdf

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