



It's how we do things around here

An introduction to the NHS Institute's **work process**

'The NHS Institute seeks to provide high-impact, innovative solutions for the NHS in unbeatable cycle times. The use of a creative, core work process is key to the creation of these solutions'

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The basics

What is the 'work process'?

The term 'work process' describes a particular way of working which we are embedding as the norm across the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement. It is a structured process that helps us generate, test and implement the most innovative ideas and solutions for better health and social care. From the initial understanding of the requirements or 'problem', through to successful delivery of the solution, the work process is essentially a creative method of problem-solving. Set out in clear phases, it is helping our teams, and their NHS and social care partners, break away from their traditional mindsets and think in a fresh, new way about the challenges and opportunities they face.

Where does it come from?

The work process we have developed has its origins in the design industry where the idea of having significant involvement from end-users in the design and production process has long been recognised and valued. World class organisations such as Nike, Apple and the Mayo Clinic in the USA, all follow clear, structured work processes because they know this is the best, most assured way of achieving the innovative services and products their clients want.

Q: How do you systematize innovation?

A: The system is that there is no system. That doesn't mean we don't have process.

Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple, business week 2004

While we have been inspired by their success and learned from others, we have worked hard to develop a work process that fits with our needs and objectives and, even more importantly, the wider needs and priorities of the NHS and social care. We have achieved this through:

- ◆ linking with and learning from many world class improvement organisations and experts
- ◆ thoroughly reviewing and assessing the ideas and evidence set out in relevant studies and other literature
- ◆ extensive discussions with our partners in the NHS and the Department of Health
- ◆ developing and testing our work process at every opportunity with real teams and projects.

In fact, we have developed our work process using the same creative approach and techniques that the process itself promotes. It will be continually tested and refined as our experience grows and teams tell us what is working well and what could work even better.



Why do we use it?

We already know that other world class organisations favour a work process approach. This is compelling but it's not the full picture for us. The NHS Institute has a unique role in the NHS. We seek to provide high-impact, innovative solutions for the NHS. We firmly believe that the use of a creative, core work process is the best way to ensure we fulfil this ambitious aim. Following a systematic but flexible work process will help our teams convert concepts and ideas into innovative solutions that make a real difference to NHS and social care organisations, patients and service users. It will encourage us to take appropriate risks - something at the heart of all innovation - while ensuring our end solutions are relevant; fit for purpose and actually wanted by staff and patients.

'To stay successful as an Institute, we need to keep developing world-class solutions for the NHS in super quick time. The work process is our secret weapon.'

Helen Bevan





As well as helping us achieve our vision, there are other practical but powerful reasons why a core work process is so important:

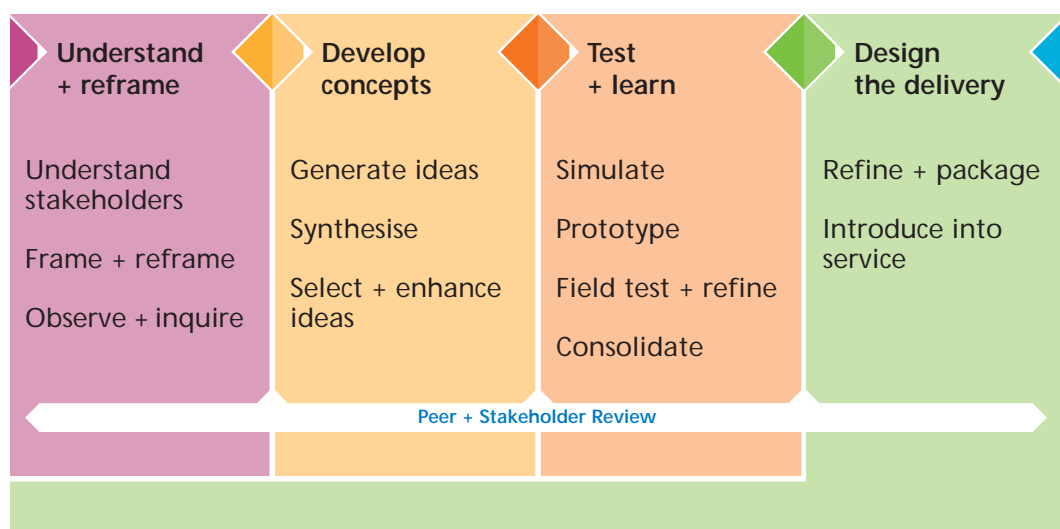
- ◆ it helps 'bind' an organisation - particularly useful in a flexible, non-hierarchical organisation like ours
- ◆ it allows teams to be drawn from inside and outside the NHS Institute and focus around the delivery of outstanding products
- ◆ it strongly supports the concept of co-design where clinicians, care professionals, patients and other stakeholders are fully-engaged and integral to the design and delivery of any new solution.



How does it work?

There are four main phases in the work process:

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i Understand and reframe - concerned with really understanding the problem from different perspectives. 'Framing' is about getting agreement among the team and other stakeholders on what it is that you are going to work on. There will be continual reframing of the project as your understanding grows. Observation is an important activity in this phase - not only directly observing the areas you are trying to improve, but also exploring how other organisations inside and outside of healthcare have tackled similar challenges.
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ii Develop concepts - this phase helps you take the experiences, stories and information gathered in the 'Understand and reframe' phase, and start to think differently about potential solutions. Idea generation is an important part of this and, when done properly, can give fantastic results. The work process encourages teams to capture even the ideas that seem outrageous at first - these might well lead to the breakthrough concept you're looking for.
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iii Test and learn - the part of the process where you try out your ideas quickly and informally at first, in simulated situations, then by more extensive field testing and evaluation. The whole point of this phase is to make sure the final solutions are really useful for the people who are going to use them. Some ideas will fail and others will change dramatically as you test. This is all valuable learning and is fully supported by the work process.
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iv Design the delivery - the earlier phases are about making sure the final product is as good as it can be, but it's equally important to develop ideas about how the product will actually reach those in the NHS that can benefit most. Although you need to be thinking about this right from the beginning and all throughout the earlier stages - this is the time to finalise delivery mechanisms, launch and marketing plans.



Although the work process is presented in a linear way, in practice it is much more flexible, with a great deal of overlap and movement between the phases. Progress of the project is influenced by a series of reviews where the project direction is assessed by stakeholders - for instance NHS staff - and peer groups from within the NHS Institute. As well as providing 'quality control' and governance, these reviews ensure projects stay:

- ◆ true to their goals
- ◆ rooted in the wider NHS and social care improvement systems
- ◆ focused on the needs of users.

What's it being used for?

Our aim is to ensure the work process is used in everything we do – not just in developing products for the NHS and external clients, but within our own organisation too, helping us to become more effective and better at using our resources and skills. That's why we're working hard to embed the work process into our everyday activity in The NHS Institute, encouraging staff to think about it as 'how we do things around here'.



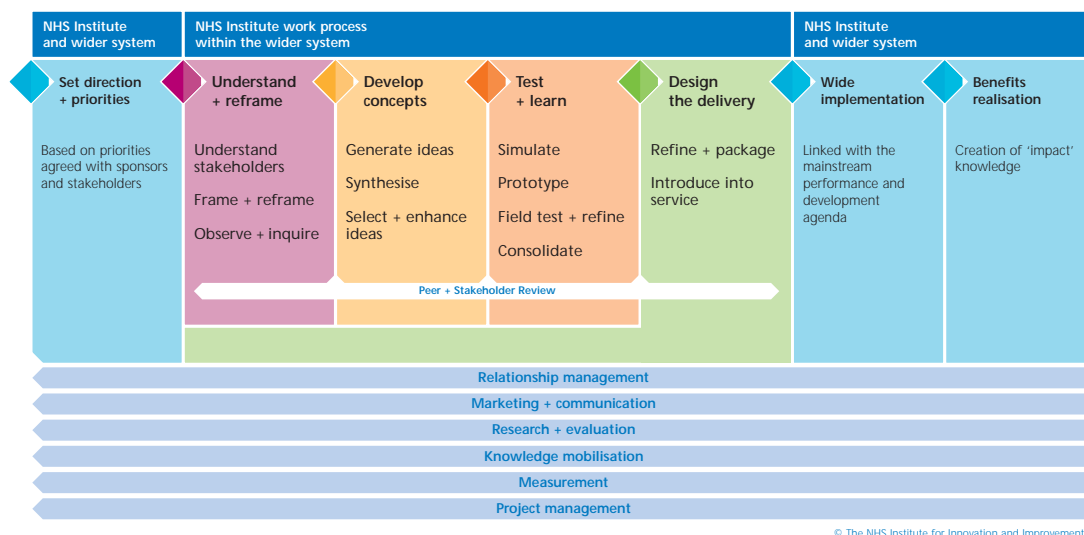
More detail

How does it fit with the wider NHS?

We know we have a unique contribution to make to the NHS and social care – but we also know we will only succeed if that contribution reflects their top priorities and is part of their wider improvement system. This helps us ensure our solutions:

- ◆ focus on the right things (current NHS and social care priorities)
- ◆ are fit for purpose and work well
- ◆ are implemented – as well as shared as widely as possible
- ◆ deliver the intended benefits for patients and staff.

This diagram illustrates how the work process fits into the wider health and social care improvement system:



So, for instance, before getting started on the 'Understand and reframe' phase of the work process, the first step is always to consider how the potential project or piece of work fits with the wider priorities and policies that frontline NHS and social care staff are facing – bringing down waiting times for hospital treatment for example.

And even after phase 5 of the process, when the improvement is launched, the NHS Institute needs to continue to work with end users to help ensure it is adopted as swiftly and widely as possible, and that the benefits will be realised and sustained.



How does it fit with our own business processes?

You can see from the diagram in section 6 that there are a range of other themes and activities that underpin the work process, including relationship management; marketing and communication; research and evaluation. These are the business skills and activities that make the work process possible and users need to consider them throughout their work.

How should it be used?

Flexibly but thoroughly. The strength of the work process is that it is a structured approach that's based on best practice. That doesn't mean that all the activities in each phase always have to be completed to the letter - but no phase or activity should ever be overlooked. It's vital to at least consider every element of the process and, even if an activity doesn't seem immediately relevant to your project, seek advice and look for creative ways to complete it. It's also important when using the work process to consider the impact which decisions in one phase may have on a later phase. The work process is not linear, but fluid, flexible and iterative.

Users need to constantly:

- ◆ cross refer from one phase to another
- ◆ consider the underpinning business activities
- ◆ diverge and converge – thinking and gathering ideas from outside the immediate topic area, and then focusing back down on the problem.



What are people saying about it?

Recent evaluation on the work process shows that people in the NHS Institute are positive about the work process and feel it fits well with the organisation's vision and aims. Staff are also excited by some of the new skills and techniques the process has introduced:

'All the best organisations have a methodology within which to be innovative...this gives you that framework and a set of things that you can go out and try.'

'Looking back, it's been a sharp learning curve, but also a very liberating experience.'

'Fundamentally it's so different because the emphasis has been on trying to be innovative...rather than producing what we've always produced.'

'Clinicians like it... [they like] the fact we're watching what they do. We're not just asking everybody else, and we're not just reading policies and procedures. We're actually going out and observing them, and then asking informed questions based on what we've seen.'

'The observation stage of the methodology has been a fantastic learning experience for me and my team. We thought we knew a lot about improvement, but this probably trebled our knowledge.'

'Yes, idea generation and prototyping in a frontline NHS environment is a bit scary, but it's also very rewarding because staff themselves start to own the problem and become the genuine co-producers of the solution.'

Where can I find out more?

The work process has been specifically developed and designed for NHS Institute staff. However, we are currently testing to see how the work process could be useful for frontline NHS teams who want to do things differently. If have any questions or comments please feel free to contact us at work.process@institute.nhs.uk

