

Barriers and Enablers of Public Sector Innovation
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Introduction

Innovation helps governments meet challenges such as sustainability, digital transformation, and improving public services (OECD, 2020). Addressing innovation barriers and enablers is crucial, as effective innovation in municipalities can lead to more sustainable services, better citizen engagement, and improved organizational adaptability (OECD, 2020). In contrast to the private sector, the public sector operates differently, as its primary purpose is to serve its citizens. This comes with challenges such as limited resources, strict structures, and the need to remain accountable to the public (Natário & Couto, 2022). These challenges hinder the introduction of new ideas and improvements in service delivery, which makes innovation crucial in the public sector.

According to Demircioglu (2017), the public sector creates new ideas, processes, or services through innovation to improve the quality of service delivery. Innovation also allows public sector organizations to adapt to societal changes and improve the efficiency and inclusivity of public services (OECD Public Sector Innovation Lifecycle, 2020). Hambleton and Howard (2012) emphasize the role of inclusive leadership in fostering public sector innovation, while Cinar et al. (2018) identify collaboration and organizational challenges that affect innovation processes. Examples of innovation within the public sector include implementing new technologies, streamlining processes, or creating policies that improve community well-being.

Public organizations often face barriers such as a lack of leadership support, risk-averse cultures, and limited resources, which hinder innovation (Cinar et al., 2018; Demircioglu, 2017; OECD, 2017). Barriers such as resistance to change, fear of failure, and limited collaboration with other organizations further complicate the implementation of new ideas (Demircioglu, 2017; OECD, 2017).

While prior studies, such as Cinar et al. (2018), discuss stage-specific dynamics in public sector innovation, most research has not systematically explored these differences. Moreover, the majority of studies are conducted in international contexts, and those focusing on the Netherlands rarely examine how barriers and enablers vary across innovation phases. This study aims to fill that gap by examining how barriers and enablers influence innovation during the stages of idea generation, proposal development, and implementation in Dutch public sector organizations, and to provide practical recommendations for promoting innovation.

Central question: What are the perceived barriers and enablers of innovation at the stages of idea generation, proposal development, and project implementation in Dutch municipalities?

Sub-question: How can Dutch municipalities reduce barriers and strengthen enablers of innovation at different stages?

This research starts with a literature review on public sector innovation. It identifies important barriers and enablers and their effect on different stages of the innovation process. Next, the methodology and research design are presented. These sections outline the study's approach to the data collection and analysis. The findings section combines survey results and qualitative observations. The conclusion summarizes insights and offers recommendations for promoting innovation in public organizations. Finally, the discussion addresses the study's limitations, outlines directions for future research, and interprets the findings in relation to existing literature.

Literature review

This literature review was conducted to identify the main barriers and enablers of innovation in public sector organizations and to understand how these factors influence different stages of the innovation process. The selected stages of the innovation process are idea generation, proposal development, and project implementation.

The selection of studies followed the PRISMA (Page et al., 2021). To select relevant academic studies, a structured search was performed. In the identification phase, relevant articles were retrieved from Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science using predefined search terms. These platforms are widely recognized databases for academic research (Singh, Singh, & Piryani, 2023). During the screening phase, duplicates were removed, and titles and abstracts were reviewed to exclude irrelevant studies. In the eligibility phase, the full texts of the remaining articles were assessed in detail against the inclusion and exclusion criteria (See table 1). Finally, in the inclusion phase, studies meeting all criteria were included in the literature review. Studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded during the screening and eligibility phases. As this study did not aim to conduct a full systematic review, some PRISMA items such as risk of bias assessment and full documentation of excluded full-text articles were not applied.

The search strategy used combinations of the keywords: “*public sector innovation*,” “*barriers to innovation*,” “*enablers of innovation*,” “*phases of innovation*,” “*innovation stages*,” and “*innovation in public sector Netherlands*”. The selection focused on articles published recently, written in English and centered on innovation in public organizations. Studies that specifically focused on private sector innovation were excluded.

As shown in Table 2, each study was examined for its theoretical foundation, research aim, context, and findings. Based on the literature reviewed, several recurring themes have occurred and are discussed in detail below.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Focus on innovation in the public sector organizations	Focuses only on the private sector or technology firms
Uses or discusses a recognized theoretical framework	Lacks any theoretical foundation or conceptual framework
Presents empirical research (e.g., case studies, surveys, cross-sectional studies) or systematic literature reviews	Purely opinion-based, conceptual without evidence, or anecdotal
Analyzes barriers, enablers, or stages of innovation (e.g., leadership, culture, resources, collaboration)	Does not address how innovation happens, what influences it, or why it fails/succeeds
Applies to the public sector globally or in relevant contexts	Country-specific contexts that are not generalizable or not comparable to the public sector
Published in peer-reviewed journals or official institutional sources	Outdated or not peer-reviewed

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for literature selection

Authors	Theoretical foundation	Research aim	Context and key variables	Findings	Limitations
Bos-Nehles, Bondarouk, & Nijenhuis (2016)	Explores innovative work behavior (IWB) by using leadership frameworks like Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory.	To study how leadership behaviors promote IWB in knowledge-intensive public sector organizations.	Focused on the Netherlands Fire Services. They examined leadership behaviors, collaboration, and idea realization.	Leadership behaviors such as good communication and support for collaboration encourage IWB.	Limited to a single organization and focuses on small innovations which reduces generalizability.
Cinar, Trott, & Simms (2018)	Based on Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations framework, which analyzes barriers to public sector innovation.	To categorize barriers in the public sector innovation process and explore their characteristics.	Systematic review of 63 studies; barriers categorized as organizational, contextual, or collaboration specific.	Organizational barriers are common across all stages; contextual barriers are most problematic during implementation.	Focuses more on identifying barriers than offering solutions and relies heavily on qualitative studies.
Demircioglu (2017)	Focuses on empowerment frameworks to explore relationships between autonomy, access to information, and barriers.	To study how empowerment practices lower perceived barriers to innovation in public organizations.	Australian public sector: variables are empowerment practices, organizational challenges, and innovation outcomes.	Empowered employees overcome barriers such as strict structures more effectively.	This paper uses data from the Australian public sector, so some of the results may not be generalizable to other countries, particularly non-Anglo-Saxon countries. The Netherlands is one of those countries.
Demircioglu and Audretsch (2017)	Used Self-Determination Theory	To study how workplace conditions affect innovation in public organizations.	The research focused on the Australian Public Service and looked at factors like experimentation, motivation, feedback, managing poor performance, and budget constraints.	Experimentation and motivation were the strongest factors for encouraging innovation. Feedback and addressing barriers also helped, budget constraints had little effect.	This paper uses data from the Australian public sector, so some of the results may not be generalizable to other countries, particularly non-Anglo-Saxon countries. The Netherlands is one of those countries.

De Vries, Bekkers, & Tummers (2015).	Systematic review of 181 studies on public sector innovation.	The aim is to identify antecedents, types, and outcomes of innovation.	Public sector globally. Variables are Environmental (e.g., political demands), organizational (e.g., leadership), innovation-specific (e.g., complexity), and individual (e.g., creativity).	Leadership and culture grow idea generation. Political factors influence adoption. Innovation is shaped by drivers and barriers across four levels.	No stage-specific focus. Relies on secondary data. Anglo-Saxon focus limits applicability to contexts such as the Netherlands.
Hambleton & Howard (2012)	Focuses on civic leadership theories which emphasize collaboration between political, managerial, and community leaders.	To examine how civic leadership fosters public service innovation and social inclusion.	Case studies in Bristol, Swindon (UK), and Enschede (Netherlands); variables include leadership collaboration and innovation zones.	Collaboration between different leadership roles creates "innovation zones" where solutions can grow.	Does not evaluate long-term effects or address technological and policy aspects of innovation.
Klomp & Roelandt (2004)	Focuses on innovation systems theory and Baumol's innovation policy categories.	To research policy strategies for improving innovation and productivity in the Netherlands.	Netherlands, with a focus on R&D investment, public-private collaboration, and productivity growth.	High R&D investment and strong science/business connections create productivity improvements.	Focuses on measuring inputs like R&D spending instead of assessing the actual results of innovation.
Moussa, McMurray, & Muenjohn (2018)	Examines leadership theories (transformational, participative) and organizational culture frameworks.	To explore how leadership behaviors, culture, and barriers influence public sector innovation.	Systematic review of public sector studies; variables are trust, openness, risk-taking, and barriers like bureaucracy.	Leadership that fosters trust and openness supports innovation, but bureaucracy and resource shortages hinder progress.	Relies on secondary data without directly observing how factors interact in practice.
OECD (2020)	Uses the Public Sector Innovation Lifecycle as a framework for understanding innovation stages.	To provide a structured model for managing public sector innovation processes.	Global focus on innovation stages: problem identification, idea generation, proposal development, implementation, evaluation, and diffusion.	Each stage presents unique challenges, that require different strategies for success.	The framework has not been tested with real-world data and lacks detailed examples of how it applies to specific countries such as the Netherlands.

Table 2: overview of selected articles

Innovation definition

A fundamental question is what innovation refers to in the public sector. According to Demircioglu (2017), innovation in the public sector involves creating new ideas and processes, or services to improve the efficiency and quality of the public service delivery. According to the OECD Public Sector Innovation Lifecycle (2017), innovation is important in the public sector as it allows organizations to adapt to societal changes, improve the efficiency and inclusivity of public services. Similarly, Cinar et al. (2018) and Hambleton and Howard (2012) highlight that innovation plays an important role in solving societal challenges such as digitalization, sustainability, and inclusivity. They also point out that in these areas, innovation is often held back by barriers such as strict regulations, limited collaboration, and internal resistance. Examples of innovation within the public sector are implementing new technologies, streamlining processes or creating policies that improve community well-being. Kattel et al. (2014) emphasizes that public sector innovation must be aligned with the public value creation. It should focus on societal outcomes like trust, equity, and legitimacy. They highlight that innovation in this context is different from the private sector, as it prioritizes the citizens over profit. In this thesis, public sector innovation is defined as the development and implementation of new ideas, services or processes that improve public service delivery and societal outcomes such as inclusivity, trust, and well-being. Unlike private sector innovation, it is primarily driven by public value rather than profit motives (Demircioglu, 2017; OECD, 2017; Cinar et al., 2018; Kattel et al., 2014).

Role of leadership in innovation

Leadership practices that promote trust, openness, and risk-taking are important drivers of innovation in public sector organizations. Moussa et al. (2018) focus on the role of transformational and participative leadership in creating a culture that promotes innovative behaviors. Similarly, Bos-Nehles et al. (2016) mention the importance of good communication and support for collaboration, by focusing on the Netherlands Fire Services. Hambleton and Howard (2012) provide a wider perspective, by showing how civic leadership can create “innovation zones” through collaboration between political, managerial, and community leaders in local governments. Stewart-Weeks & Kastle (2015) add that leadership does not only promote trust and openness but also helps overcome organizational resistance. They advise a framework of “infection, inspiration, and implementation” where leaders play an important role in making innovation possible. These studies collectively show that leadership behaviors play an important role in enabling idea generation and creative problem-solving. Their findings however are different in scope and context. For example, Moussa et al. (2018) rely on secondary data, while Hambleton and Howard (2012) focus on specific case studies. This limits their generalizability.

Common barriers in public sector innovation

Barriers in innovation are common across different stages of the innovation process. Moussa et al. (2018) mention bureaucracy, resource shortages, and workplace politics as big challenges to innovation. Similarly, Cinar et al. (2018) categorize these barriers into organizational (e.g., strict structures, collaboration challenges) and contextual (e.g., regulatory constraints) groups. They emphasize that different barriers emerge during different stages. De Vries, Bekkers, and Tummers (2015) add to this by categorizing barriers at environmental, organizational, innovation-specific, and individual levels. Bloch & Bugge (2013) critique the overgeneralization of barriers across stages of innovation. They mention that barriers are different between incremental and radical innovation processes. They advise to adapt strategies to match the process. Albury (2005) highlights additional barriers, such as short-term funding and weak reward systems, which are common in public organizations. Even

though these studies have different approaches, these studies agree on the need to solve systemic challenges to create innovation in the public sector. However, many of these studies rely on qualitative or secondary data and focus less on actionable strategies, which may limit generalizability.

Enablers and strategies

To improve innovation in the Dutch public sector, organizations should focus on creativity, teamwork, flexibility, and empowering employees at every stage. Leadership training that encourages creative thinking and creating safe spaces like innovation hubs help employees collaborate and test ideas. Bloch and Bugge (2013) mention the importance of offering resources. Gullmark (2021) highlights the importance of cross-field collaboration and psychological safety in promoting innovation. Motivation and empowerment are also important. Audretsch and Demircioglu (2017) suggested that internal motivation and freedom to experiment, improve innovation. They linked this to the Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory. This theory explains that people are most motivated when they feel autonomous, competent, and connected. Similarly, Demircioglu (2017) showed that giving employees power and access to information reduces perceived barriers to innovation. But they also mention that providing information alone may not have the same positive effect. To turn ideas into actionable proposals, processes should be simplified, and feedback should be encouraged. Albury (2005) and Hijal-Moghrabi et al. (2020) mention that simpler systems and diverse feedback, improve results. As discussed in Bloch and Bugge (2013), the Nordic MEPIN project shows that involving stakeholders early in the process, strengthens proposals. Hambleton and Howard (2012) add that informal collaboration between leaders promotes innovative solutions, especially when leaders create 'innovation zones' through open dialogue. Kattel et al. (2014) suggest that in the implementation stage, flexible plans and real-time feedback can prevent resistance to change. Empowering local teams to adapt the solutions, as seen in the SureStart initiative (Hauknes & Koch, 2005), leads to better outcomes. Gullmark (2021) mentions that the fixed routines help with small improvements, but flexible routines are needed for significant changes. Together, these studies suggest that creating supportive and empowered work environments, encourages innovation. However, their findings are often context specific. It focuses on regions like Australia or the UK, which may limit applicability in other cultural contexts, such as the Netherlands.

Culture, resources in innovation

Organizational culture and the availability of resources play an important role in creating innovation. Moussa et al. (2018) mentions the importance of promoting a culture that encourages openness and risk-taking. Similarly, Bos-Nehles et al. (2016) emphasize how strong leadership can support collaboration, even when resources are limited. De Vries et al. (2015) highlight that having enough resources at the organizational level is essential. Hauknes and Koch (2005) emphasize that systemic and administrative innovations often depend on collaboration across sectors and the sharing of resources. They mention that public-private partnerships are as important for creating innovation, especially when they must overcome resource limitations. These studies show that building a supportive culture and ensuring enough resources are important to create innovation. However, many of the studies focus on general innovation processes. It does not explain how factors affect specific stages of innovation.

Policy and structural support, innovation

Policies and organizational structures are important for encouraging innovation in the public sector. Klomp and Roelandt (2004) mention that public-private partnerships help bring

scientific knowledge to businesses. They found that high investments in research and development (R&D) are strongly connected to increases in productivity. Cinar et al. (2018) highlight how regulations and difficulties in collaboration can hinder innovation, especially during the implementation phase. De Vries et al. (2015) point out that political decisions and public demands play a big role in whether innovation is accepted. Together, these studies show that aligning policies with organizational needs and addressing structural barriers can improve innovation. However, their focus on inputs, such as R&D spending, rather than outcomes, limits the practical relevance of these findings. Additionally, Klomp and Roelandt (2004) note that the effectiveness of government-funded R&D can vary, depending on how it is structured and targeted.

Innovation process stages

According to the OECD Public Sector Innovation Lifecycle (2020), innovation in public services has six stages: problem identification, idea generation, proposal development, project implementation, evaluation, and diffusion. These stages align with other concepts from different studies. For example, Rogers (2003) mention how sharing successful innovations through networks is essential, which supports the lifecycle's focus on the diffusion stage. Similarly, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) explain how organizations create knowledge by combining tacit and explicit knowledge, which is important for generating ideas and developing proposals. Hagel et al. (2010) discuss the change from limited to abundant information. They emphasize the role of data in identifying problems, which is an important starting point in the lifecycle. Additionally, Christensen's (1997) concept of disruptive innovation mentions how unmet needs or new technologies can create innovation, which matches with the early stages of the lifecycle. Together, these studies strengthen the OECD framework. The limitations of these studies are assuming innovation follows a linear process. This simplifies the complex nature of public sector innovation. Additionally, they offer some guiding principles and case examples, but do not provide tools or implementation strategies.

This research will focus on the stages generating ideas, developing proposals and implementing projects. The reason for this choice, will be explained in detail in the section "Research design".

Conclusion

In conclusion, even though studies offer useful insights into barriers such as bureaucracy, resource shortages, and regulations (Cinar et al., 2019; De Vries et al., 2016), as well as enablers such as leadership, collaboration, and a culture of risk-taking (Demircioglu, 2017; Albury, 2005), they often do not focus on the Dutch public sector (De Vries et al., 2016). Research on how these barriers and enablers affect innovation across different stages of innovation, such as idea generation, proposal development, and project implementation, is limited (De Vries et al., 2016; Bloch & Bugge, 2013). Most studies focus on the private sector and do not look at the challenges and dynamics of public organizations. This research gap highlights the need for research into how barriers and enablers operate throughout the innovation process in public settings. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining stage-specific perceptions of innovation within Dutch municipalities.

Research design

This study applies a mixed-methods research design, by combining quantitative survey research with qualitative observations. This justification for this choice is based on the existing literature such as (Bos-Nehles et al., 2016; Demircioglu, 2017; De Vries et al., 2015). These studies often rely on only one method, either qualitative or quantitative. Even though qualitative studies provide insights into behaviors and organizational contexts, they often lack generalizability (Cinar et al., 2018). On the other hand, quantitative research offers statistical findings but may miss important contextual details (Klomp & Roelandt, 2004; De Vries et al. 2015).

To prevent these limitations, researchers recommend a mixed methods approach for studying innovation. By combining both methods, this study ensures a more complete understanding of the topic (De Vries, Bekkers & Tummers 2015). Surveys help identify patterns, and observations capture in-depth organizational dynamics (Audretsch & Demircioglu, 2017; Hambleton & Howard, 2012). Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) also highlight that mixed methods strengthen research and that it leads to more reliable conclusions. Public sector innovation involves both measurable outcomes and complex organizational behaviors, which is why this combination provides a complete view of the barriers and enablers of innovation.

The aim is to examine perceived barriers and enablers of innovation at three stages: idea generation, proposal development, and project implementation within Dutch municipalities (Cinar et al., 2018; Demircioglu, 2017; OECD, 2020). A cross-sectional approach is used. This means that the data were collected at a single point in time to provide a picture of how municipal employees experience innovation-related challenges (Levin, 2006).

The quantitative part includes a structured survey that measures employees' perceptions of barriers (e.g., bureaucratic constraints, resource shortages, lack of collaboration) and enablers (e.g., leadership support, flexibility, teamwork). The survey structure is based on the OECD Public Sector Innovation Lifecycle (OECD, 2020). This framework identifies six stages: problem identification, idea generation, proposal development, project implementation, evaluation, and diffusion. However, using all six stages would make the research too broad. To keep the study manageable, three stages that are most relevant to the research are selected.

The selection of these stages is based on the findings of Cinar et al. (2018). Their study shows that barriers react differently at specific stages of the innovation process. For example, organizational barriers, such as strict structures, resistance to change, lack of resources, are most common during the phase's idea generation and proposal development. In contrast, collaboration challenges between stakeholders, conflicts in organization cultures and insufficient knowledge-sharing, become more of an issue during the project implementation stage. Based on this, the research will focus on idea generation, proposal development, and project implementation. It was initially planned to use a stratified random sampling method to ensure an adequate representation across different municipal departments, age groups and tenure groups (Lavrakes, 2008). The actual response distribution suggests that data collection followed a voluntary response model.

The qualitative part consists of observations from three different meetings within the municipality. These observations offer insights into how leaders and teams interact when discussing innovation. This allowed the observational data to complement the survey results by providing additional insights into how leadership, collaboration, and organizational

processes functioned during innovation meetings. A structured observation checklist was used, which was based on innovation factors mentioned in previous studies (Demircioglu, 2017; Moussa et al. 2018). The research design steps are presented in Figure 1.

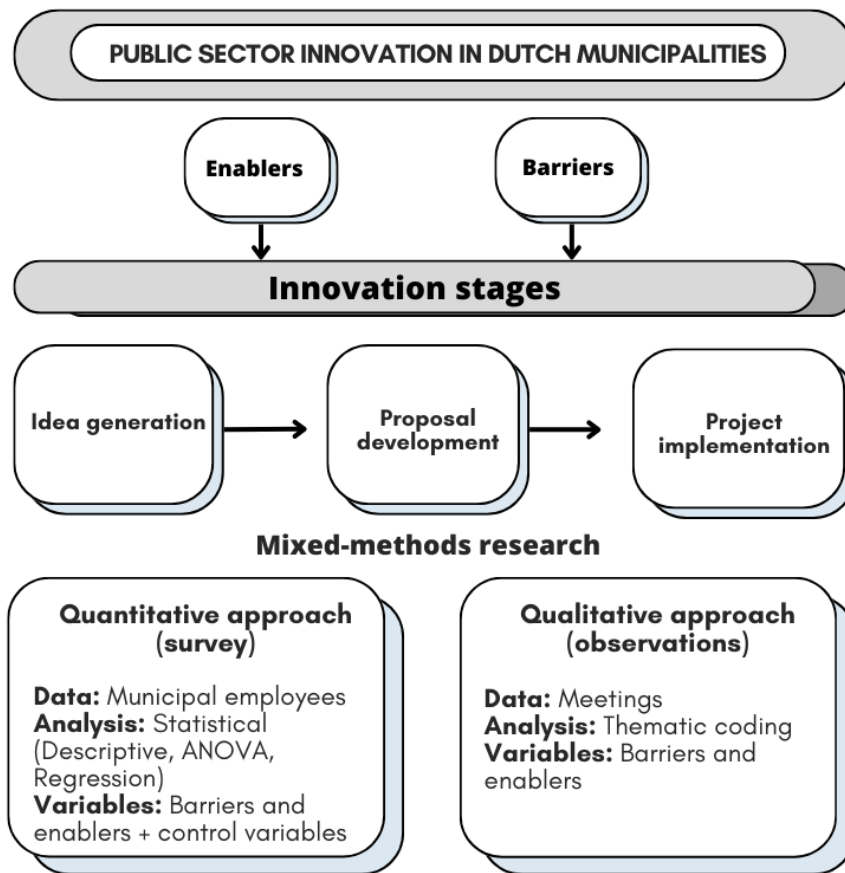


Figure 1: Research design

Method

Sample and sampling method

The survey was administered to municipal employees across different departments, such as policy, project management, operations, IT, finance, and administration. To make subgroup comparisons possible, respondents were categorized based on department, employment length, and age. This categorization allowed analysis of whether perceptions differ based on department, tenure, or age. In addition, respondents were also asked how frequently they are involved in innovation-related activities (e.g., generating ideas, developing proposals, implementing projects). This measure was used to describe the sample's engagement with innovation.

Memon et al. (2020) emphasize that it is not only important to calculate the right sample size, but also to explain why it fits the study. Based on a total population of 471 municipal employees, a sample size of approximately 212 responses was needed to achieve a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error. Although a stratified sampling approach was initially planned to ensure representation across departments, age groups, and tenure levels, the actual response distribution suggests that data collection followed a voluntary response model. The survey was made available to all employees via the organization's intranet, and three reminders were posted during the data collection period to encourage participation. Despite these efforts, 75 out of approximately 471 employees completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of about 16%. The uneven response across departments limits subgroup comparisons and introduces a potential risk of non-response bias. However, demographic details such as age, tenure, and department were collected to provide context for the sample.

Survey design

The survey was developed based on the findings from the literature review. Rather than using a single standardized scale, individual items were used from several academic studies and official frameworks discussed in the review. These sources were selected because they are relevant to public sector innovation and aligned with the important themes of this research. This approach made it possible to design a survey that fits the specific context of Dutch municipalities, while also staying closely connected to the academic literature.

All items were measured using a consistent 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree"). The statements were organized into three stages of the innovation process: idea generation, proposal development, and project implementation. In addition, a separate section addressed general barriers and enablers of innovation. While the items were drawn from different sources, they were combined into composite scales per innovation stage or theme (see Appendix A for the full questionnaire). Reliability testing was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha, with a threshold of ≥ 0.7 . This is considered acceptable for internal consistency (Field, 2018). The following sources were used:

- Idea generation items were adapted from Bos-Nehles et al. (2016), Gullmark (2021), Moussa et al. (2018), Demircioglu (2017), and Hambleton & Howard (2012).
- Proposal development items were adapted from OECD (2020), Cinar et al. (2018), Bos-Nehles et al. (2016), Demircioglu (2017), and Moussa et al. (2018).
- Project implementation items were based on Demircioglu (2017), Cinar et al. (2018), and OECD (2020).
- Barriers and enablers items were drawn from Cinar et al. (2018), Moussa et al. (2018), OECD (2017), Gullmark (2021), and Hambleton & Howard (2012).

- Open-ended questions were inspired by OECD (2020) and Cinar et al. (2018) to receive practical suggestions and experiences related to structural barriers.

Qualitative observations

To complement the survey, qualitative data were gathered through structured observations. In total, three innovation-related meetings were observed. These were regular team and strategy sessions that involved discussions on ongoing or proposed innovation projects. Observing leadership discussions, decision-making, and collaboration between departments provided insights into the employees' perceptions. The observations focused on themes mentioned in previous research, such as leadership encouragement, collaboration challenges, and bureaucratic constraints (Demircioglu, 2017; Moussa et al. 2018). A structured observation checklist was used to maintain consistency across different meetings. During the observed meetings, field notes were taken using a structured observation checklist (see Appendix B).

Data analysis

The survey data were analyzed with R. This is a statistical computing tool, in which it is possible to uncover trends and patterns in employees' experiences. The first step involved descriptive statistics, to summarize how employees rated the barriers and enablers at each stage of the innovation process (idea generation, proposal development, and project implementation). Additionally, ANOVA tests were conducted to examine whether perceptions of barriers and enablers differed between subgroups such as age, department, and tenure. A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to identify which factors most influence how employees experience each phase of innovation. The goal was to find out which barriers and enablers matter most. Six potential factors from the survey were tested: bureaucracy, encouragement to experiment, fear of failure, supervisor support, internal collaboration, and safe experimentation. These variables (measured as degree of agreement with statements) serve as independent variables, while the dependent variables are the average score per innovation phase (how positively conditions are perceived per phase). The six predictors were selected because they represent the most consistently reported barriers and enablers across multiple studies in the literature. Other factors, such as resources or political influences, while relevant, were either not applicable across all phases, not directly measured in the survey, or would have complicated the model given the sample size. This selection allowed for a focused and statistically reliable regression analysis. The qualitative observation findings were analyzed by using thematic coding. Discussions and behaviors were categorized into themes such as leadership behaviors and collaboration between department. The findings from the observations were used to complement the survey results. The thematic analysis followed the approach by Braun and Clarke (2006). They combined both deductive (predefined) and inductive (emerging) themes.

Ethical considerations

The survey was conducted online via a link posted on the organization's intranet, accompanied by a brief explanation of its purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality. Employees were reminded three times over the course of the data collection period. All participants were informed that their responses would be used solely for academic research and could not be traced back to individuals. The observational component involved attending three innovation-related meetings, where participants were informed in advance about the research purpose. Participation in both the survey and observations complied with ethical research standards and was approved in advance by the University of Twente's Ethics Committee (Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences/domain Humanities & Social Sciences). Informed consent

was obtained implicitly through voluntary participation. The data are securely stored on a password-protected server at the municipality and will be retained for five years. After this period, the data will be permanently deleted in accordance with the government policy.

Results

This section presents the main findings from the survey and observations.

Survey participation

The 75 respondents represented a mix of age groups, departments, and experience levels. Most were between 25 and 44 years old. A wide range of departments participated, with notably high responses from Governance & Strategy, HR & Legal Affairs, and Information Management. Involvement in innovation was relatively high, with the majority reporting that they were regularly or frequently engaged in innovation-related activities. Work experience was also varied: while many had 1–5 years of service, a substantial number had more than 10 years or were newer employees with less than one year of experience.

Descriptive analysis per innovation phase

Idea generation: Respondents feel safe to share ideas (mean ≈ 4.0) and experience active encouragement from their manager to create new ideas (mean ≈ 3.7). This indicates an open climate where ideas are welcome. However, time appears to be limited. Participants moderately agree that they have enough time for new ideas (mean ≈ 3.2 ; SD 1.0). In addition, participants experience bureaucratic obstacles in this phase. They do not deny that rules and procedures make it difficult to propose ideas (mean score 2.8 indicates slight disagreement with the statement ‘rules do not hinder’). People also report receiving hardly any training or support to develop innovation skills (mean ≈ 2.6). This suggests that employees often see barriers in lack of time and formal rules hindering innovation, while a safe culture and managerial support are important enablers in the idea generation phase.

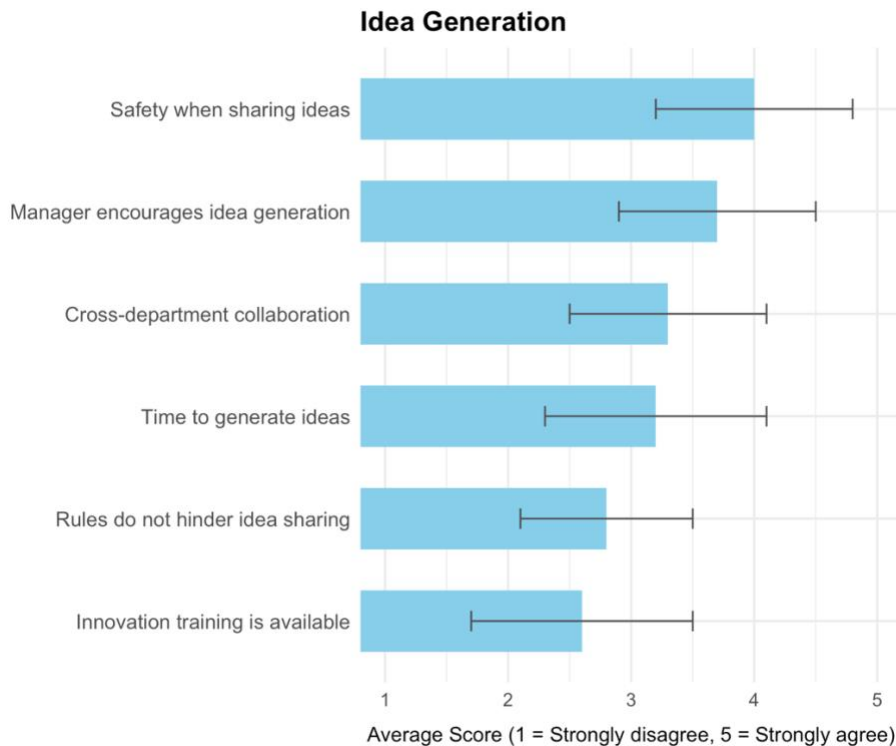


Figure 2: Average perceptions during the idea generation phase.

Bars show mean scores (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) on statements about conditions during idea generation and sharing. Black lines show one standard deviation above/below the mean. Respondents feel quite safe and supported during idea generation, but experience relatively little time, limited training and some hindrance from rules/procedures.

Proposal development: Clear bottlenecks around process and procedure emerge at the proposal development stage. Respondents disagree that there is a clear procedure for evaluating and selecting ideas (mean only ≈ 2.2 , SD 0.8). Most also feel that approval procedures are too complicated or slow. The statement ‘procedures are not too slow’ was rated low on average (mean ≈ 2.6). This shows that a lack of structure and bureaucracy are seen as barriers. Unclear procedures and lengthy decision-making limit converting ideas into approved proposals.

Additionally, team support and autonomy are present as enablers. Most respondents indicate that their team helps in developing ideas (mean ≈ 3.6) and that they have enough freedom to shape proposals (mean ≈ 3.8). Useful feedback is also received (mean ≈ 3.5). Knowledge of the necessary steps is on average neutral to slightly positive (mean ≈ 3.1), suggesting that some know how to submit a proposal while others are searching.

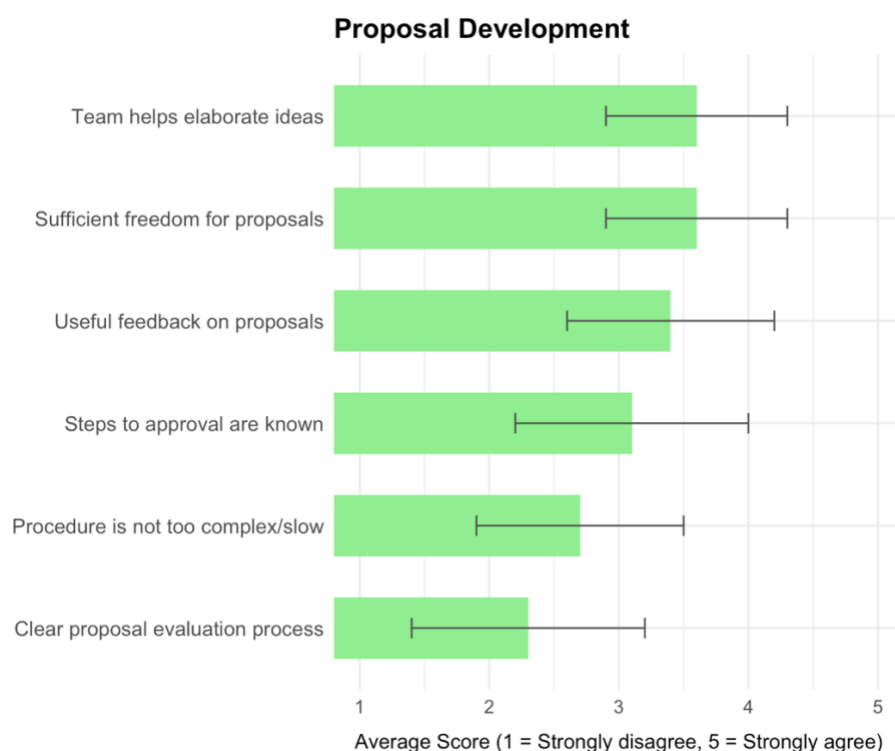


Figure 3: Average perceptions during the proposal development phase.

Bars show mean scores (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) on statements about conditions during the proposal development phase. Black lines show one standard deviation above/below the mean. Respondents perceive strong team support, freedom and feedback when developing proposals, but point to clear process barriers: unclear or slow formal procedures and poor knowledge of the approval process limits progress.

Project implementation: In the implementation phase, the focus shifts to resources and collaboration. Insufficient resources appear to be a main barrier. Respondents disagree that they have enough time, people and budget to implement innovation projects (mean ≈ 2.7 , SD 0.9). Bureaucracy also plays a role here. Participants experience moderate agility. On the statement whether they can move quickly when problems arise, the score was moderately positive (mean ≈ 3.3). Managerial support during implementation is present but not overly strong (mean ≈ 3.2), suggesting that managers do support the projects but that there is still room for more intensive guidance. Additionally, mutual coordination between departments is considered important. Almost all participants confirm that good cross-departmental coordination promotes project progress (mean ≈ 4.0). But the general question on cooperation between departments scored lower (mean ≈ 2.8). This implies that although the importance of integral cooperation is recognised, it is not always realised in practice. External partners (citizens, businesses) are sometimes involved (mean ≈ 3.2) but this is also not consistent. Staff continuity is seen as positive (mean ≈ 3.8): stable teams (low turnover) make long-term innovations easier.

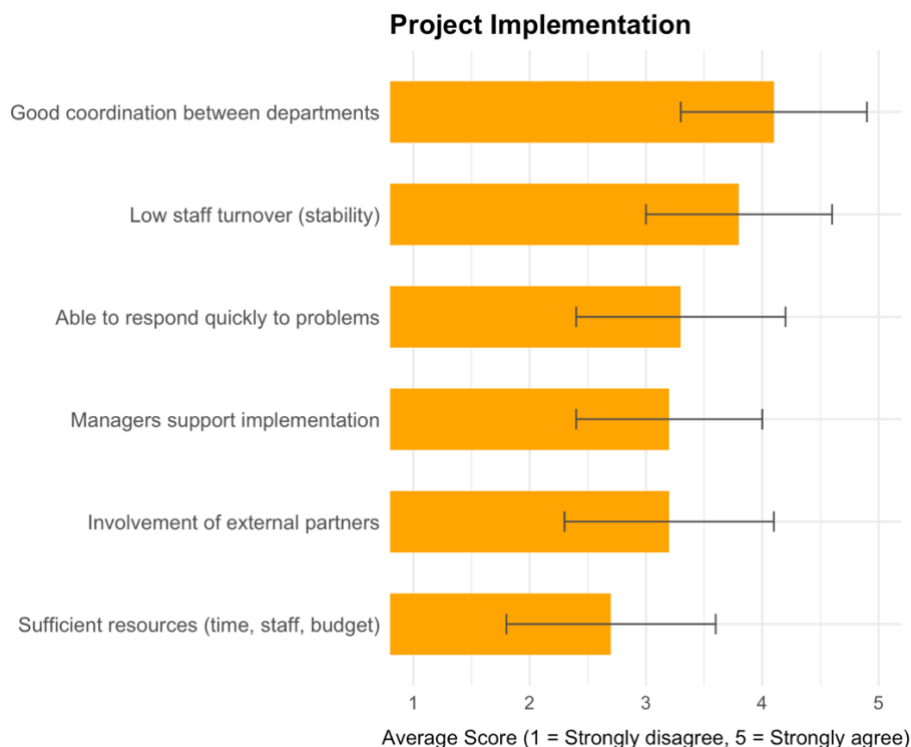


Figure 4: Average perceptions during the project implementation phase.

Bars show mean scores (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) on statements about conditions during the project implementation phase. Black lines show one standard deviation above/below the mean. Participants mainly experience resource barriers (lack of time, staff, money) and challenges in cross-departmental cooperation, while factors such as some management support, stable teams and limited flexibility present a more mixed picture.

Differences between subgroups

Research is conducted on whether different groups of respondents perceived the mentioned barriers and enablers differently. The mean scores per innovation stage were compared across age groups, departments and tenure using ANOVA tests. These subgroup differences were found to be generally small. No statistically significant differences were found between age groups in their perceptions of the three innovation phases (all $p > 0.36$). Thus, younger and older employees experience similar bottlenecks and opportunities.

Additionally, between the tenure groups (shorter than 1 year, 1-5 years, 6-10 years, >10 years), differences in average perceived barriers/enablers were not significant ($p > 0.10$). There was a slight trend that employees with 6-10 years of service were slightly more positive about the idea generation phase (mean score 3.7 vs 3.2 in other groups), but this difference was not strong enough to be statistically reliable. Overall, newcomers, middle groups and highly experienced employees see similar barriers and enablers during innovation.

Finally, the differences by department were analyzed. Although the average scores varied by department (e.g. employees of Public Affairs reported relatively high scores, while Supervision & Enforcement scored lower), these variations could largely be explained by the small numbers of respondents per department and did not prove significant ($p = 0.29-0.61$ for phase scores). In other words, no consistent differences were found between departments in how participants perceived the innovation phases. The lack of significant differences may partly be due to the limited sample per department (some clusters had only 1 respondent), but

it also suggests that innovation barriers and enablers are organisation-wide in nature. Concluding, perceptions of barriers and enablers are consistent across ages, departmental domains and work experience.

Multiple linear regression analysis

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to identify which factors most influence how employees experience each phase of innovation. The goal was to find out which barriers and enablers matter most. Six potential factors from the survey were tested: bureaucracy, encouragement to experiment, fear of failure, supervisor support, internal collaboration, and safe experimentation. These variables (measured as degree of agreement with statements) serve as independent variables, while the dependent variables are the average score per innovation phase (how positively conditions are perceived per phase).

Idea generation phase: Leadership and culture appear to be particularly decisive. Employees who indicated that their manager offers space and trust to innovate score significantly higher for the idea generation phase ($\beta \approx +0.37$, $p < 0.001$). Internal cooperation also plays a role. Those who feel there is good cooperation between departments rate the idea generation phase more positively ($\beta \approx +0.16$, $p = 0.019$). In addition, an encouraging culture contributes. Respondents who feel encouraged to try new ways of working report a slightly better idea generation phase ($\beta \approx +0.13$, $p = 0.04$). Together, these three factors; strong leadership, confidence, encouragement to experiment and good collaboration, explain a substantial part ($\pm 54\%$) of the variance in idea generation phase ratings.

In contrast, the factor bureaucracy (the perception ‘bureaucracy makes innovation difficult’) was negatively related to idea phase score, although not significantly after controlling for other factors ($\beta = -0.08$, n.s.). Fear of failure (‘fear of failure deters initiative’) also had no significant effect on idea phase in multivariate terms. This suggests that although bureaucracy and fear of failure are barriers (they correlate negatively with the idea phase at the bivariate level), their impact on the idea phase is mainly indirect or via other factors. One possible interpretation is that strong leadership and inter-team collaboration can moderate some bureaucratic barriers, while a culture of trust can reduce fear of failure.

Proposal development phase: In the proposal development phase, two factors surface: managerial trust and psychological safety. Respondents who experience a trust and space from their manager rate the proposal development phase significantly more positively ($\beta \approx +0.24$, $p = 0.004$). In addition, being able to experiment safely (without fear of negative consequences) is an important enabler in this phase ($\beta \approx +0.13$, $p = 0.028$). The regression explains about 32% of the variance in proposal development stage. Interestingly, other factors such as perceived bureaucracy, interdepartmental cooperation or ‘encouragement to new ways of working’ had no significant direct influence, when managerial trust and freedom to experiment are in the model. This suggests that the barriers in this phase affect all participants equally, and that a safe culture and support ‘from above’ make the difference in how positively people experience this phase.

Project implementation phase: For the implementation phase, none of the listed factors were found to be a significant predictor of how participants experience this phase. The regression had low explanatory power ($R^2 \sim 0.09$) and no factor stood out with a p -value < 0.05 . This result implies that other factors outside the model play a larger role in the implementation phase. Considering the earlier findings, it is clear that practical resources are strong determinants. Descriptive analysis showed that participants consistently rated resource

availability (e.g., time, staff, and budget) low (mean ≈ 2.7), indicating it as a potential barrier. Moreover, open-ended responses and observations frequently mentioned resource shortages as a major challenge during implementation. These findings imply that practical resources, although not included in the regression model, likely play a key role in shaping how the implementation phase is experienced. Bureaucracy also had another negative (though not significant) effect on implementation experience ($\beta = -0.07$), which makes sense: time-consuming procedures slow down implementation. The lack of significant predictors suggests that implementation bottlenecks are either experienced similarly by all participants, or are mainly caused by factors like resources, which were not included in the model.

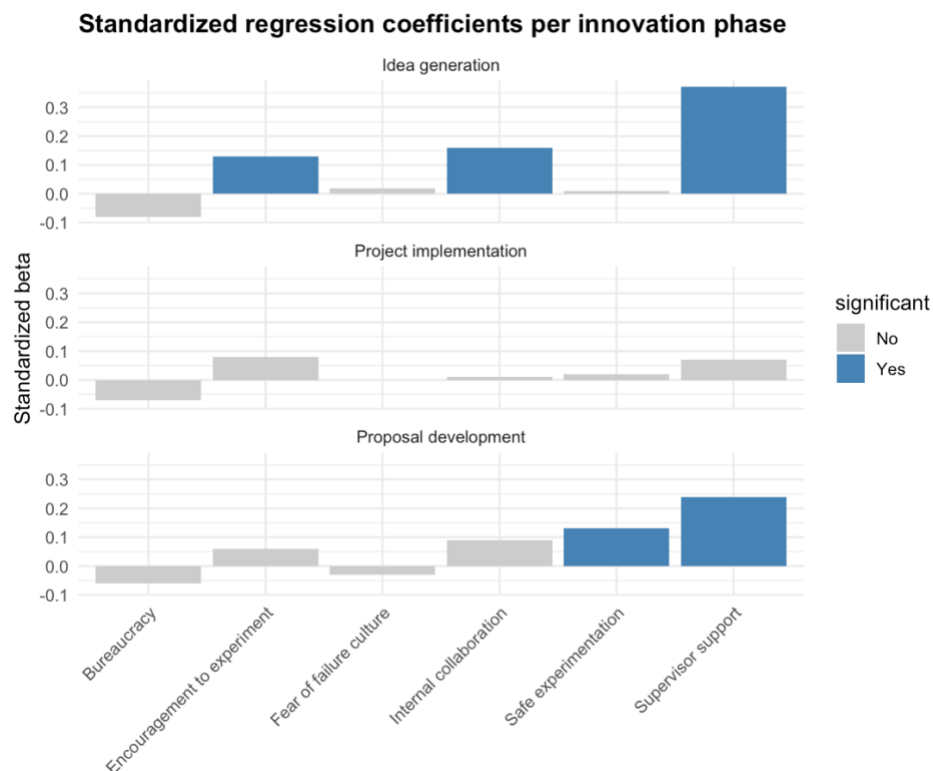


Figure 5: Standardized regression coefficients per innovation phase

Thematic analysis of open questions and observations

In addition to the quantitative results, open responses were analyzed to gain qualitative insights into perceived barriers and desired improvements. Answers to Question 9 (“What is the biggest challenge to innovating in your work?”) and Question 10 (“What would you like to change to make innovation easier?”) revealed recurring themes that hinder innovation.

Main barriers (open question 9)

- **Lack of time and high workload:** The most frequently mentioned obstacle is the lack of time due to high workload and daily obligations. Respondents indicate that “Daily tasks take away time and space to innovate” (Respondent 12), suggesting that innovation initiatives continuously end up at the bottom of the priority list. As other participants noted (Participant 32): “There is simply no time because there are many tasks and many meetings.”
- **Silos and lack of collaboration:** Several responses emphasized the lack of cooperation between departments. Examples include: “Departments are fragmented,”

"little knowledge of each other's work," and "collaboration with others (dependent teams) is difficult." Innovation questions often span multiple domains, but because "within the social domain, one topic quickly falls under multiple teams," actions stall or fail (Respondent 6).

- **Unclear processes and responsibilities:** Some respondents referred to the lack of a clear innovation process. "Unclear work structures and who is responsible... that is unclear," wrote Participant 50. Another added (Participant 66): "It is difficult to find out what is needed to move ideas forward... it's unclear what is required."
- **Bureaucracy and slow procedures:** Another dominant theme is frustration with lengthy, rigid processes, rules, and decision-making. Respondents mentioned that they have to "go down long paths... departments are fragmented," and that "it often takes around 2 months before a proposal reaches the municipal council" (Respondent 9), causing momentum to fade. Many mention "bureaucracy" and "rules and frameworks" as core issues. One respondent noted (Respondent 5): "A lot of people have to have an opinion, which means it always gets stuck somewhere." Another participant mentioned (Participant 21): "Decision-making process" as the greatest challenge.
- **Resistance and change culture:** Several respondents point to a culture of reluctance as a barrier. "The group of colleagues who are unwilling" (Respondent 33) was named as the biggest challenge. Others mentioned "unwillingness to change" and that new ideas are "often seen as too big a risk." One respondent remarked (Respondent 47): "You hear a lot of 'buts'." Another simply wrote "being taken seriously" as their main challenge.
- **Lack of resources:** Finally, some respondents pointed to very concrete resource issues as their biggest challenge. For example: "Staff shortages within our team" (Respondent 19) and "budget that is not available when it is needed" (Respondent 2). One respondent summarized the issue as (Respondent 39): "Lack of time, priority, and capacity."

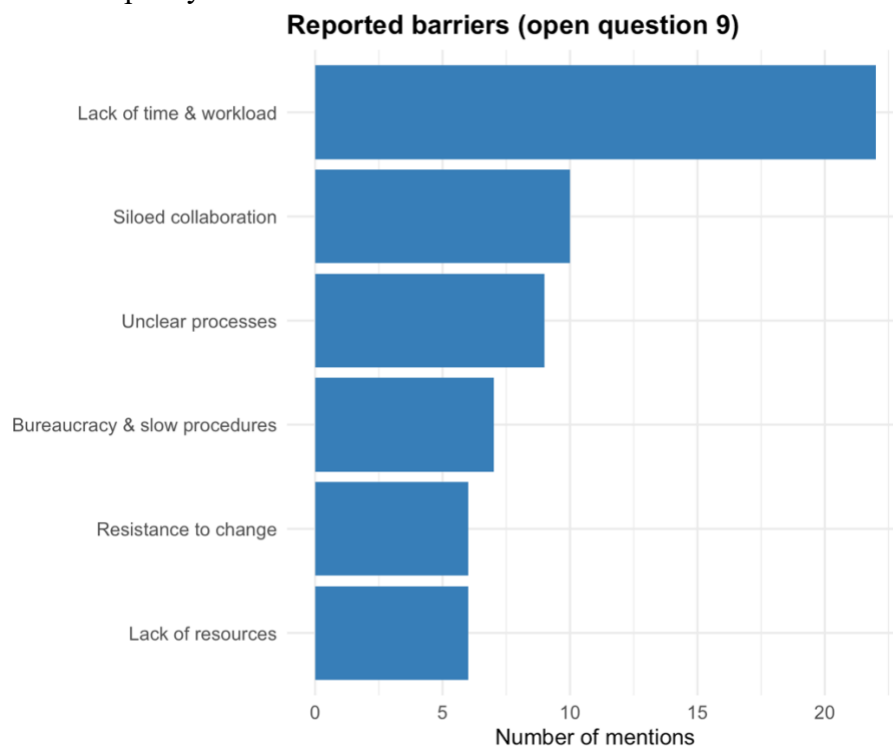


Figure 6: Reported barriers (open question 9)

Proposed ideas (open question 10)

The ideas proposed by respondents on how to facilitate innovation (Question 10) logically mirror the previously mentioned barriers.

- **Making time and space for innovation**
Respondents call for structurally allocating more time for innovation. Suggestions include explicitly scheduling innovation into the workweek: “Time in the planning to experiment” and “Explicitly allocating time for reflection.” Some propose innovation sessions (Respondent 46) and ask for room in the agenda so that innovation becomes part of regular work (Respondent 12).
- **Less bureaucracy, faster processes**
There is a strong call to reduce bureaucracy and speed up procedures. Respondents mention: “Shorter administrative turnaround time” (Respondents 9 and 10), “simplified procedures,” “loosening rigid processes,” and “easy and unrestricted access to a controlled environment for safe testing and experimentation.”
- **Stronger leadership and top-down engagement**
Respondents want management to actively support innovation. They mention “more attention from the MT” (management team) (Respondent 20), and MT members who should “connect and drive change” (Respondent 58). Decision-making authority should shift to lower levels
- **More resources and budget**
Respondents request “a dedicated budget to innovate,” “more money for tools,” and separate budgets. Some suggest assigning FTEs for innovation tasks. Investment in digital tools is also proposed, such as “more digital options” (Respondent 7) and “learning from the private sector” (Respondent 38).
- **Better collaboration and knowledge sharing**
Many suggestions focus on breaking down silos. Ideas include an “action team with colleagues from multiple departments” (Respondent 43), a “think tank” (Respondent 18), more inter-cluster meetings, and innovation contact persons. The goal: “that people and departments are more aware of what each other is working on.”
- **Clear vision and structure**
Respondents ask for “clear frameworks” (Respondent 11) and direction through a well-defined innovation structure. Innovation should be planned: “Not everything is possible, choose a few priorities” (Respondent 50).
- **Cultural change**
A “cultural shift” is needed (Respondent 17). Respondents stress thinking in solutions rather than objections: “don’t get stuck in the ‘buts.’” Emphasis is placed on trust (Respondent 3), acceptance of failure (“9 out of 10 innovations fail”), and more “enthusiasm” (Respondent 5).

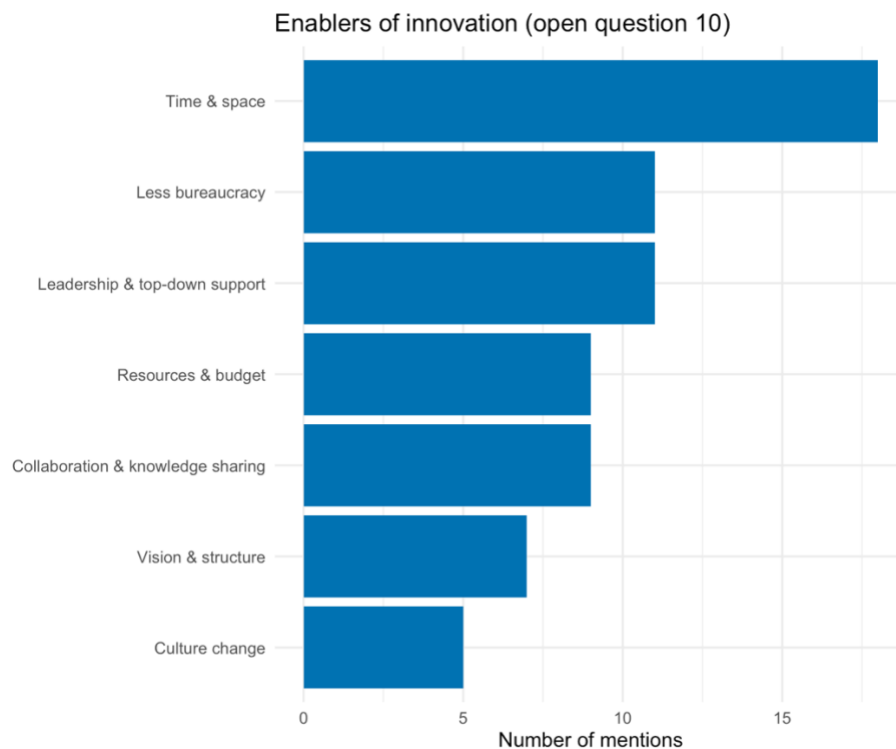


Figure 7: Enablers of innovation (open question 10)

Observations meetings

The observational data from three innovation meetings reveal several recurring enablers and barriers that shape innovation dynamics within the organization. Among the most important enablers are leadership support, team collaboration, and an open culture. Leaders were seen guiding discussions constructively, encouraging participation, and showing openness to experimentation. Collaboration across departments was noticeable and positively influenced the willingness to share ideas. Moreover, the culture within the sessions was generally supportive, allowing room for honesty, reflection, and mutual respect.

However, notable barriers also emerged. Unclear processes were frequently mentioned. This created confusion about follow-up steps and responsibilities. Decision-making delays, linked to slow progress and uncertainty appeared across sessions. Participants were expressing frustration over the lack of concrete outcomes. Resource constraints, particularly related to time, capacity, and ergonomic workspace issues, also limited innovation progress. These findings suggest that while cultural and leadership elements support innovation, structural improvements in process clarity, decision efficiency, and resource alignment are necessary to improve innovation within the organization.

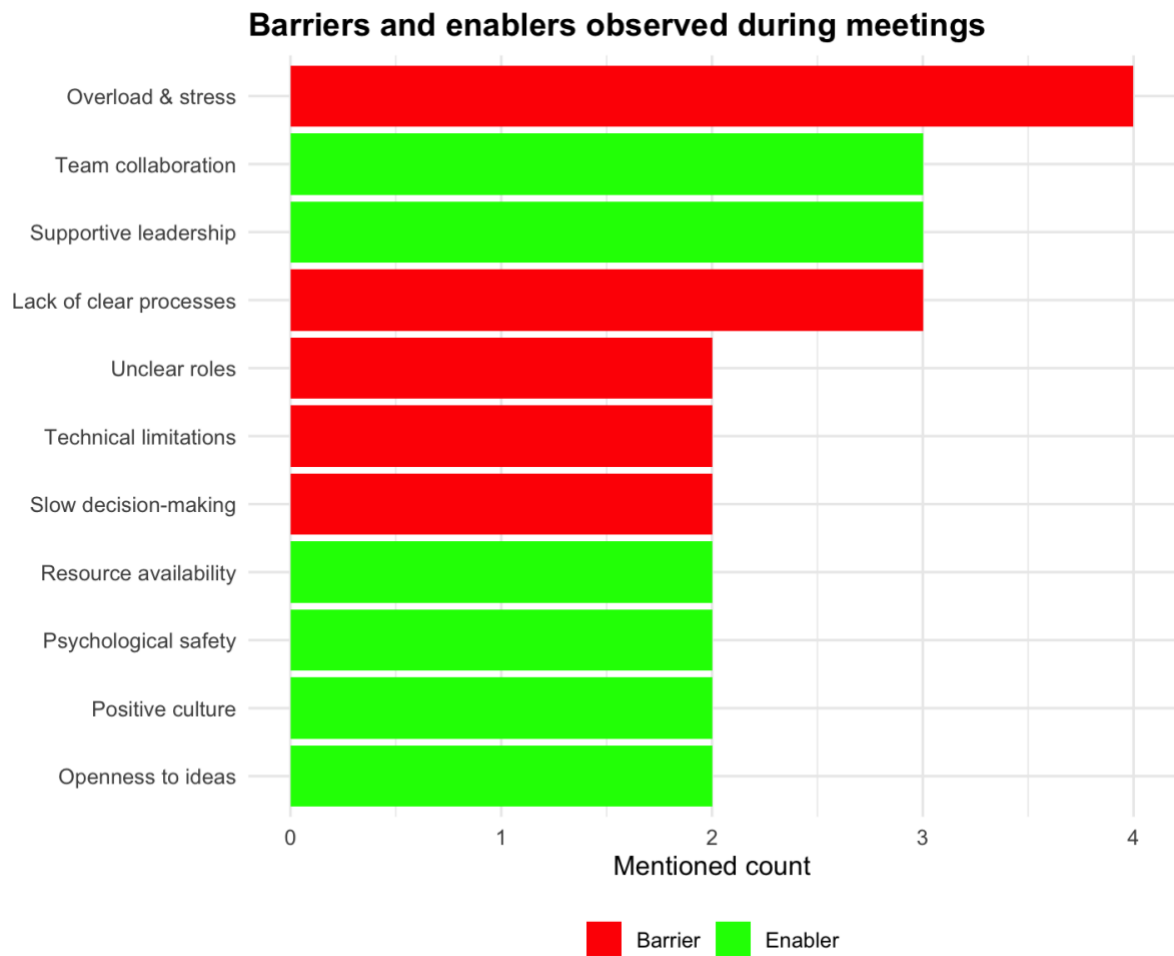


Figure 8: Barriers and enablers observed during meetings

Discussion

This study aimed to research the perceived barriers and enablers of innovation at different stages of the innovation process, idea generation, proposal development, and project implementation, within Dutch municipalities. A mixed-method design was used, by combining quantitative survey data (N=75) with qualitative observations from three innovation-related meetings. The quantitative data provided insights into the relationship between different organizational factors and employees' experiences during each innovation phase. The observations offered contextual insights on leadership, collaboration, and organizational processes. The study builds on the OECD Public Sector Innovation Lifecycle (2020) and includes findings from multiple recognized public sector innovation studies.

Theoretical contribution

This study contributes to public sector innovation theory by providing stage-specific insights into the barriers and enablers of innovation within Dutch municipalities. By building on the OECD Public Sector Innovation Lifecycle (2020) and related literature, the findings show that each phase of the innovation process; idea generation, proposal development, and project implementation, is characterized by different barriers and enablers.

Idea generation phase

During idea generation, employees experience time pressure and bureaucratic barriers as the most frequently shared obstacles. These findings are consistent with the OECD lifecycle model (2020) and Demircioglu (2017), who highlight how strict structures and workload limit early-stage innovation. In contrast, psychological safety and leadership support emerged as the strongest enablers. The regression analysis showed that supervisor support ($\beta \approx +0.37$, $p < 0.001$), internal collaboration ($\beta \approx +0.16$, $p = 0.019$), and encouragement to experiment ($\beta \approx +0.13$, $p = 0.04$) significantly contributed to a positive experience in this phase, which explains 54% of the variance. These findings confirm that trusting leadership, cross-departmental collaboration, and openness to experimentation directly strengthen idea generation, as also emphasized by Stewart-Weeks & Kastle (2015) and Moussa et al. (2018).

Interestingly, bureaucracy ($\beta = -0.08$, n.s.) and fear of failure ($\beta = 0.02$, n.s.) were not significant predictors in the multivariate analysis. This means that while bureaucracy is seen as a barrier in general, its direct effect is partly mediated through leadership and collaboration. This provides a more detailed perspective on earlier findings by Demircioglu (2017) and OECD (2020). The qualitative data supported this: in meetings with open and collaborative leadership, participants shared more ideas, even when bureaucratic rules were present.

Proposal development phase

In the proposal development phase, unclear procedures, complex approval processes, and slow decision-making emerged as the main barriers. This confirmed Cinar et al.'s (2018) argument that organizational inefficiencies strongly influence middle-stage innovation. The regression analysis showed that supervisor support ($\beta \approx +0.24$, $p = 0.004$) and safe experimentation ($\beta \approx +0.13$, $p = 0.028$) were significant enablers, while other factors such as bureaucracy, fear of failure, and collaboration showed no significant effects. These results suggest that once an idea moves into the proposal stage, leadership support and psychological safety (specifically, being allowed to experiment without fear of failure), become essential. The lack of significant effects for bureaucracy and collaboration at this stage builds on earlier

models by showing that formal approval processes become more important than interpersonal or cultural factors once proposals are being developed.

The qualitative observations confirmed this interpretation. While collaboration and leadership were still valued, teams often expressed frustration about unclear procedures and delays in decision-making. Despite open dialogue during meetings, participants struggled with procedural bottlenecks. This shows that leadership alone is not enough when formal decision-making processes remain complex or slow.

Project implementation phase

The implementation phase showed a clear pattern: none of the six predictors had a meaningful impact on employees' perceptions during this stage. Regression analysis showed very low explanatory power ($R^2 \sim 0.09$), with no variable reaching statistical significance. This partly challenges earlier expectations from Demircioglu (2017) and Moussa et al. (2018), who mentioned that leadership and psychological safety support all phases of innovation. Instead, these findings suggest that challenges during implementation are mainly due to structural and resource-related barriers, rather than cultural or leadership-related factors.

The qualitative data supported this interpretation. Employees frequently mentioned practical obstacles such as a lack of staff capacity, insufficient budget, unclear roles, and technical limitations. Across all observation sessions, participants expressed frustration about limited resources, workspace constraints, and unclear follow-up steps. The strong correlation between sufficient resources and positive implementation experiences ($r \sim 0.5$) shows that sufficient resources and organizational support outweigh cultural factors. This finding adds to De Vries et al. (2015) by showing that as innovation moves toward implementation, resource availability becomes more important than leadership.

Another important finding is that there were no clear differences between demographic groups. Employees from different departments, age groups, or tenures reported similar barriers and enablers. This suggests that innovation challenges in Dutch municipalities are broad and systemic, rather than limited to specific groups. This supports De Vries et al.'s (2015) view that structural and cultural factors play a big role in shaping how ready public organizations are for innovation. Figure 9 provides an overview of the main barriers and enablers for each phase.

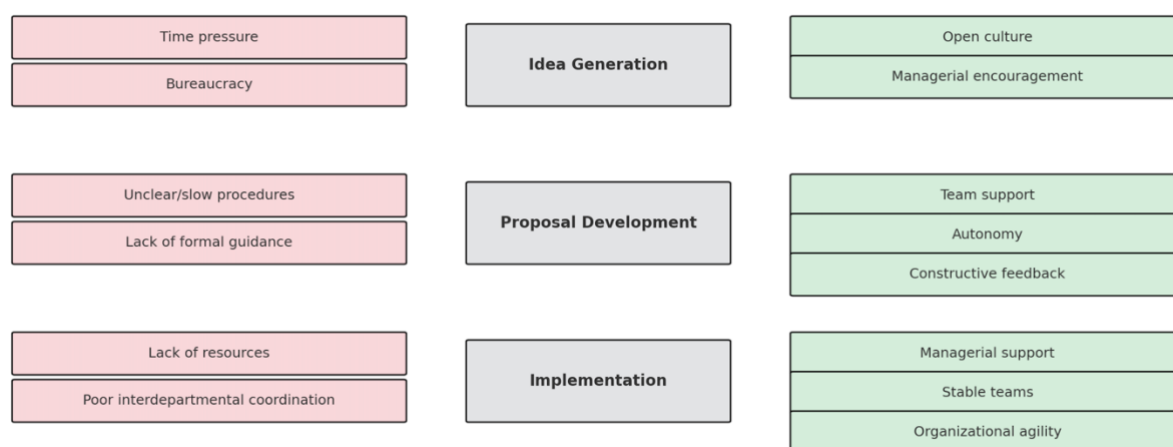


Figure 9: Summary of main barriers and enablers

Broader theoretical implications

This study makes several theoretical contributions. First, it supports the OECD innovation lifecycle by showing that each phase of innovation requires different organizational conditions. Innovation is not a linear or uniform process. Instead, each stage depends on specific enabling factors. This finding aligns with Bloch and Bugge's (2013) critique of one-size-fits-all innovation models. Second, it builds on earlier theory by showing that leadership and psychological safety are important during the idea generation and proposal development stages (Stewart-Weeks & Kastle, 2015; Moussa et al., 2018), but not sufficient for successful implementation. In the implementation phase, factors such as resource availability, structural coordination, and efficient procedures become more important. This challenges earlier models that assumed leadership remains equally important throughout all phases. Third, although cross-departmental collaboration is often seen as essential for innovation (Hambleton & Howard, 2012; OECD, 2020), this study shows that collaboration by itself is not enough. If there is no formal support, such as clear structures, roles, or shared goals, collaboration often fails to result in real, coordinated action. This adds nuance to earlier models, which do not always highlight the importance of institutional support for collaboration to succeed.

Practical contribution

This study shows that municipalities that aim to improve innovation should respond differently at each phase of the process. Because the findings are based on a Dutch municipality, they are directly relevant for similar local governments.

Idea generation phase

In the idea generation phase, leaders should focus on creating a safe environment where employees feel trusted, free to experiment, and comfortable sharing ideas. Employees in this study reported that support from their manager and an open climate made it easier to propose new ideas. Municipalities could arrange dedicated time for innovation, such as planned "innovation sessions" or reserved hours each month. This allows employees to have space to brainstorm without pressure from daily routines. During the observed meetings, teams where leaders encouraged an open dialogue and risk-taking, shared more ideas, even when bureaucratic rules were present.

Proposal development phase

For the proposal development phase, it is important to simplify procedures, provide timely feedback, and avoid long approval delays. Respondents in both the survey and open questions mentioned that unclear processes and slow decision-making often prevent ideas with potential from becoming formal proposals. Municipalities can solve this by clarifying each step of the approval process, by using flowcharts or guides, and by making sure responsibilities are clear. Supervisors should give feedback quickly and help employees navigate bureaucratic challenges. In the municipality studied, participants frequently expressed frustration about complicated procedures and delays, which often caused good ideas to lose momentum.

Project implementation phase

In the implementation phase, municipalities should focus on providing enough practical resources. A lack of time, people, and budget was the most common barrier reported in both survey responses and observed meetings. Municipalities should regularly review whether project teams have enough resources to complete their work and solve shortages early. Assigning a project leader or bringing together members from different departments helps ensure that everyone knows their role and that the project progresses without unnecessary

delays. In the observed meetings, projects were most successful when there was a clear leader and enough resources available. Projects that lacked these often faced problems because team members were busy with other tasks or because there was no one making sure the project stayed on track.

Finally, successful collaboration should not depend only on personal motivation. It requires formal support, such as dedicated innovation teams, regular knowledge-sharing sessions, and clear responsibility for shared projects. Both survey respondents and meeting participants mentioned the need for better collaboration, more structured information flow, and a shared vision for innovation. Municipalities can support innovation by organizing collaboration and knowledge-sharing in a formal, structured way within the organization.

Limitations and directions for future research

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations. Firstly, the survey aimed to reach around 471 municipal employees, with 212 responses needed for strong statistical reliability. In the end, only 75 employees responded. This smaller sample size reduces the reliability of the results and limits the ability to find meaningful differences between groups. For example, some departments had only one respondent, making comparisons unreliable. No significant differences were found by age, tenure, or department, likely due to the limited data. As a result, the findings cannot be fully generalized, even within the municipality studied, and should be interpreted with care.

Secondly, this study was conducted in just one Dutch municipality. Although the findings may reflect patterns seen in similar organizations, they cannot be assumed to apply to all municipalities. Local context, leadership, and organizational culture vary widely.

Third, the study used a cross-sectional design. Because data were collected at one point in time, no causal conclusions can be drawn. A longitudinal study could better track how innovation changes over time.

Fourth, the number of observation meetings was limited. This means that the findings may not reflect the full variety of innovation practices or leadership styles across the municipality. Also, participants were aware they were being observed, which may have influenced their behavior.

Finally, the study focused on perceptions rather than actual innovation results. While perceptions matter, future research should also include measurable outcomes, such as completed projects or efficiency gains, to strengthen the findings.

Future research can build on these findings. Long-term studies could follow how barriers and enablers develop over time, especially after new policies or organizational changes have been introduced. Studies that combine different levels, such as individual employees, teams, and the whole organization, could provide a more complete picture of how these factors work together to influence innovation. It would also be useful to compare these results with other municipalities or countries to see how much the findings depend on the specific context. In addition, research could explore how perceptions of barriers and enablers relate to actual outcomes, such as successfully completed projects, financial savings, or improved services for citizens. Finally, future studies could examine how changes in procedures or the use of more flexible management approaches affect innovation, particularly in the later stages of putting ideas into practice.

Conclusion

This study examined how public sector employees in a Dutch municipality experience barriers and enablers to innovation across the phases of idea generation, proposal development, and project implementation. The results show that innovation challenges differ by phase. Leadership and psychological safety are especially important in the early stages, while clear procedures and sufficient resources become more important in later stages. Bureaucracy and strict processes remain barriers throughout, but they manifest differently at each phase. Key enablers across all phases include strong leadership, trust, collaboration, and access to resources.

To strengthen innovation capacity, municipalities should focus on reducing unnecessary bureaucracy, simplifying procedures, developing leadership skills, setting up formal structures for cross-departmental collaboration, and ensuring enough resources are available. These findings offer valuable insights for both academic research and practical policymaking in the public sector.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Survey questionnaire

Cover letter in the email

Dear (Recipient's name),

I am conducting a research study as part of my Master's thesis, focusing on the perceived barriers and enablers of innovation at different stages of the innovation process in Dutch municipalities. Your insights and experiences are highly valuable in helping to understand and improve innovation practices within the public sector.

Completion of this questionnaire is voluntary. If you do not wish to answer a question, please feel free to leave it blank and continue with the next question or terminate the survey entirely. You will not be asked to provide your name, and all data collected will be used solely for academic purposes. If published, the results will remain anonymous, and all responses will be processed confidentially. All responses will be collected anonymously and stored securely on a password-protected server at the municipality. The data will be retained for five years and then permanently deleted in accordance with government policy.

For each question, please select the option that best reflects your experience, and kindly try to answer all questions as accurately as possible. There are no right or wrong answers. The questionnaire should take no longer than 10 minutes to complete, and your time and feedback are highly valued and greatly appreciated.

Kind regards,

Sura Samanci

Introduction

This survey is designed to understand your experiences with generating new ideas, developing proposals, and implementing projects in the municipality. Your input will help identify barriers that hinder innovation and enablers that support it.

- Your responses are anonymous and confidential.
- The survey takes approximately 10 minutes.

Section 1: Background information.

Code	Survey item	Answer options
BG1	What is your age group? (Select one)	• Under 25
		• 25–34
		• 35–44
		• 45–54
		• 55–64
		• 65 or older

Table 3: Age group

Note: Although age group is not directly measured in the studies used, prior research (e.g., Demircioglu & Audretsch, 2017) shows that work experience affects how people engage in innovation. “Public sector employees with more work experience tend to better navigate institutional processes and are more likely to engage in innovation, despite structural barriers.” Since age is often linked to experience, it is included here to explore whether different age groups are more or less involved in innovation. This also aligns with OECD practices for demographic analysis in the public sector.

Code	Survey item	Answer options	Source
BG2	Which department do you work in? (Select one)	• Corporate Control	Gemeente Dronten (2024)
		• I-Control Team, Chief Information Officer	
		• Information Management	
		• Finance	
		• Human Resources & Legal Affairs	
		• Governance & Strategy	
		• Services	
		• Work & Income	
		• Youth, Learning Rights & Social Support Act (Wmo)	
		• Society	
		• Support	
		• Waste Management, Cleaning, Civil Engineering & Facility Management	
		• Green Area Management	
		• Spatial Policy	
		• Spatial Development	
		• Supervision & Enforcement	
		• Public Affairs	
		• Other (please specify): [Open text]	

Table 4: Department

Code	Survey item	Answer options	Source
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BG3	How often are you involved in innovation-related activities (e.g., generating ideas, developing proposals, implementing projects)?	• Rarely (less than once a year) • Sometimes (1–2 times per year) • Often (several times per year) • Always (regularly involved)	Demircioglu (2017) - <i>framework on public sector innovation processes</i>
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Table 5: *Involvement*

Code	Survey item	Answer options	Source
BG4	How long have you worked in this municipality?	• Less than 1 year • 1–5 years • 6–10 years • More than 10 years	Demircioglu & Audretsch (2017)

Table 6: *Tenure*

Section 2: Innovation stages.

Instructions: For each statement below, please indicate how much you agree or disagree. (Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

A. Idea generation (IG). *Developing new ideas and brainstorming solutions.*

Code	Survey item	Source
IG1	I have enough time to develop and suggest new ideas.	Bos-Nehles et al. (2016)
IG2	I feel safe sharing ideas, even if they might fail.	Gullmark (2021)
IG3	Our organizational rules and procedures do not make it difficult to propose new ideas.	Cinar et al. (2018)
IG4	My manager actively encourages me to suggest innovative ideas.	Moussa et al. (2018)
IG5	I receive training or support to improve my innovation skills.	Demircioglu (2017)
IG6	Teams across departments work together to develop new ideas.	Hambleton & Howard (2012)

Table 7: *Idea generation*

Note: IG1–IG6 form a composite scale on idea generation, which are adapted from multiple sources.

B. Proposal development (PD). *Turning ideas into structured plans & obtaining approval.*

Code	Survey item	Source
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PD1	I clearly understand the steps required to turn ideas into approved proposals.	OECD (2020)
PD2	Approval procedures are not too complex or slow. It does not discourage action.	Cinar et al. (2018)
PD3	My team helps turn ideas into workable proposals.	Bos-Nehles et al. (2016)
PD4	There is a clear process for reviewing and selecting which ideas move forward.	OECD (2020)
PD5	I have enough autonomy to work on developing proposals.	Demircioglu (2017)
PD6	I receive useful feedback that helps improve proposals.	Moussa et al. (2018)

Table 8: Proposal development

Note: PD1–PD6 form a composite scale on proposal development, which are adapted from multiple sources.

C. Project implementation (PI). *Carrying out approved projects & managing tasks.*

Code	Survey item	Source
PI1	I have the resources (time, staff, budget) needed to complete innovation projects.	Demircioglu (2017)
PI2	Good coordination between departments supports project progress.	Cinar et al. (2018)
PI3	Leadership actively supports project implementation.	Cinar et al. (2018)
PI4	We are able to adapt quickly when unexpected challenges arise.	OECD (2020)
PI5	Low staff turnover makes it easier to continue long-term innovation projects.	Cinar et al. (2018)
PI6	We often involve external partners or citizens in innovation projects.	Cinar et al. (2018)

Table 9: Project implementation

Note: PI1–PI6 form a composite scale on project implementation, which are adapted from multiple sources.

Section 3: Barriers & enablers of innovation.

Code	Survey item	Source
BE1	Bureaucratic processes in my organization make innovation difficult.	Cinar et al. (2018)
BE2	I feel encouraged to try new approaches or methods in my work.	Moussa et al. (2018)
BE3	Fear of failure prevents people from taking initiative.	OECD (2017)
BE4	My manager supports innovation by giving me autonomy.	Gullmark (2021)
BE5	There is a strong culture of collaboration across departments.	Hambleton & Howard (2012)
BE6	I can experiment with new ideas without worrying about negative consequences.	Gullmark (2021)

Table: Barriers & enablers

Note: BE–BE6 form a composite scale on barriers and enablers, which are adapted from multiple sources.

Section 4: Open-ended questions (for practical recommendations).

Code	Survey item	Source
OE1	What is the biggest challenge you face when trying to innovate in your work?	OECD (2020)
OE2	If you could change one thing to make your organization more innovative, what would it be?	Cinar et al. (2018)

Table 10: Open-ended questions

Appendix B: Checklist for observations

1. Leadership roles
• How do leaders facilitate innovation? Are they engaging with innovation ideas, offering guidance, and removing obstacles? (<i>Moussa et al., 2018</i>) • Do leaders encourage risk-taking and openness to new ideas? How do they promote an open climate for innovation during decision-making? (<i>Moussa et al., 2018</i>) • How do leaders provide feedback during the meeting? Is the feedback constructive, supportive, and directed at idea development? (<i>Moussa et al., 2018</i>)
2. Team collaboration
• How do different departments collaborate on innovation-related tasks? Are departments actively involved or working in silos? (<i>Hambleton & Howard, 2012</i>) • How does collaboration affect the innovation process? Are there any barriers such as team conflict or lack of trust? (<i>Demircioglu, 2017</i>)
3. Barriers and enablers
• What barriers to innovation are discussed? E.g., resource constraints, bureaucracy, resistance, or unclear processes. (<i>Cinar et al., 2018</i>) • What enablers of innovation are identified? E.g., leadership support, team autonomy, resources, empowerment. (<i>OECD, 2020; Demircioglu, 2017</i>) • Are barriers/enablers stage-specific? E.g., lack of creativity in idea generation, procedural delays in proposals, or resource shortages in implementation. (<i>Cinar et al., 2018</i>)
4. Decision-making processes
• How are decisions made regarding innovation initiatives? Is the process structured and inclusive, or top-down and informal? (<i>Moussa et al., 2018</i>) • Are there clear criteria for which innovation projects to support? Are decisions aligned with strategic goals or limited by available resources? (<i>OECD, 2020</i>)
5. Resource allocation
• How are resources (budget, staff, tools) allocated to innovation projects? Are resource allocations transparent and well-supported? (<i>Demircioglu, 2017</i>) • Are there discussions about reallocating resources to support innovation? Are efforts made to prioritize innovation where needed? (<i>Natário & Couto, 2022</i>)
6. Innovation progress
• How are innovation ideas moved from one stage to the next? Is there a clear and structured innovation process in place? (<i>OECD, 2020</i>) • What factors support or hinder the progression of innovation? E.g., lack of communication, approval delays, or strategic misalignment. (<i>Cinar et al., 2018</i>) • Is there a sense of urgency or momentum in advancing innovation? Are obstacles actively addressed to maintain progress? (<i>OECD, 2020</i>)

7. Communication and feedback
• How is communication facilitated during the meeting? Are ideas exchanged freely across departments or limited to certain voices? (<i>Demircioglu, 2017</i>) • How is feedback provided during discussions? Is it constructive, idea-focused, and encouraging experimentation? (<i>Gullmark, 2021</i>)

Table 11: Observation checklist

Appendix C: Observation findings

Observation session 1

This section summarizes the key findings from a non-participant observation of a strategy session held on April 1st 2025 within a public organization. The session focused on developing a long-term communication and participation approach. The results are presented according to key themes related to innovation, leadership, collaboration, and organizational processes, based on established literature (e.g., Moussa et al., 2018; OECD, 2020; Demircioglu, 2017).

1. Leadership roles

The session was guided by an internal leader and an external advisor. The internal leader took care of structure and coordination, while the external advisor led the strategic part of the conversation. Together, they created an atmosphere where participants felt comfortable sharing ideas, especially about how to improve citizen involvement and internal communication.

Leaders encouraged participation and listened carefully to input from the group. There was no sense of judgment or pressure. People felt free to suggest arguments such as changing how participation is organized or doing more work internally rather than external support. Feedback from the leaders was calm, respectful, and focused on improving ideas. This created a safe atmosphere where everyone could contribute.

2. Team collaboration

Although not every department was present, the session brought together different perspectives. Internal participants and an external participant worked together on a shared vision. Everyone had the chance to speak, and the tone was open and constructive.

At the same time, some challenges were mentioned. For example, some project leaders still work on their own rather than coordinating with others. It was suggested that there needs to be more agreement on language and terms, and better cooperation across teams to make innovation efforts more consistent.

3. Barriers and enablers

Several barriers to innovation came up during the session. These included a lack of clear processes, people in the community feeling tired of being asked for input, low involvement of young people, and a general tendency to respond only when asked instead of taking initiative. Also, feedback from citizens and stakeholders is currently based on single moments rather than being collected and monitored over time.

On the positive side, there were also strong enablers. The culture in the municipality was described as practical and open to new ideas. There are enough financial resources, leadership is supportive, and a strategic advisor will soon join the team. The municipality's history of

supporting large events was mentioned as an example of its “can-do” attitude and space for experimentation.

4. Decision-making processes

Most decisions were made by the internal leader, based on advice from the external expert. While the rest of the team could share their ideas and reflections, the final decisions were not made collectively. Still, the decision-making process was clear, and others’ input was visibly taken into account.

Although formal criteria were not stated, it became clear that decisions are often guided by the goal of maintaining the city’s village character and aligning with long-term plans such as a project for 2050. Financial feasibility also played a role. There was also a conversation about whether certain work should be outsourced or kept in-house. The group leaned toward doing more work internally, to build ownership and motivation among staff.

5. Resource allocation

Overall, the project was well supported with resources. Although a small budget gap was mentioned, this did not seem to be a major problem. The team clearly preferred to use internal staff for most tasks, as this was seen as more motivating and better for building internal knowledge.

They also discussed bringing in outside expertise when needed. For example, to provide legal support for the communication strategy or to help guide the project. But the focus remained on strengthening internal capacity.

6. Innovation progress

The innovation process is in its early stages. A first version of the communication and participation story has been created. This includes ideas about tone, keywords, and visual elements like color codes. The next steps involve finalizing this story legally and planning regular participation events (e.g., four times per year).

Progress is supported by committed leadership, available resources, and a shared long-term vision. However, there are also obstacles: unclear follow-up steps, limited youth engagement, and no clear structure for monitoring. The group recognized that while generating ideas is going well, turning those ideas into action and keeping track of progress still need work.

7. Communication and feedback

Communication during the session was clear and inclusive. Everyone had a chance to speak, and the facilitator kept the discussion focused. There was also discussion about how to improve public communication. For example, by using consistent language, visual tools, and terms that connect better with residents.

Feedback was encouraged during the meeting. The external advisor asked for continuous input and emphasized the need for regular reflection. The team agreed that fixed feedback moments, such as quarterly meetings, could help reduce the feeling of disconnection and improve ongoing participation.

Observation session 2

This section presents a summary of the observations made during the Cluster Strategie meeting held on 13 May 2025. The summary is organized according to the observation checklist outlined in Appendix B.

1. Leadership roles

During the meeting, the leader played a guiding and supportive role. The manager of Governance and Strategy introduced a journaling method to help the team reflect on how they work together and what patterns they notice. This approach encouraged openness and made room for new ways of thinking. While the meeting was not about specific innovation projects, the leadership style helped create a space where people could share ideas and raise concerns. The manager also responded positively to suggestions, such as the idea of a Summer School. This showed a willingness to try out new initiatives. Feedback was not given in a formal way but came through encouragement and respectful conversation, which helped build trust and openness in the group.

2. Team collaboration

The meeting showed examples of collaboration across strategic roles, including policy advisors and strategists working in different domains. They shared their thoughts and updates on their own projects. There was clear willingness to listen to each other and build on one another's ideas. Most collaboration happened within the cluster itself, but the discussions showed that people were trying to work across different areas. At the same time, some challenges were mentioned, such as pending director appointments, unclear positioning of projects, and emotional strain. These may make collaboration harder in practice, but the open tone of the meeting helped keep everyone engaged.

3. Barriers and enablers

Several issues came up that could hold back innovation. These included unclear direction, delays in decision-making, and the pressure to work quickly without enough reflection. Some participants said they felt stuck or frustrated, especially because not many decisions had been made in the past six months. At the same time, the meeting also showed what is going well. There was a lot of room to speak openly, and participants felt safe to share when they were unsure or struggling. The team seemed motivated to understand what is not working and to break old habits. These cultural elements of openness, reflection, and mutual trust creates a culture that could help innovation in the organization. Even in the absence of formal processes.

4. Decision-making processes

The meeting did not follow a clear or structured process for making decisions. Team members shared their thoughts and were included in planning, but there was no clear outcome or direction. In fact, the group noted that not many decisions had been made recently, which was a shared concern. Although there was some talk about aligning with the council's political goals, this was not used as a formal guideline for making choices. Instead, most of the discussion focused on making sense of where the team stands and what's needed. But it was not about leading to concrete decisions about innovation.

5. Resource allocation

Resources were not a central topic during the session, and budgets or formal resource distribution for innovation were not directly mentioned. However, certain initiatives such as appointing a project leader for a project, and the suggestion to organize learning experiences

such as Summer School, indicated some attention to time and capacity as resources. At the same time, several participants described feelings of strain, overload, and unclear roles. This suggests that the current use of resources, especially staff capacity, is not fully in line with what's needed. While the group did not directly talk about reallocating resources, the comments hinted that this might be necessary down the line.

6. Innovation progress

The meeting did not follow a structured innovation process. The team did talk about certain projects, but the focus was still on early steps such as defining the name, scope, and internal support. Many participants expressed a strong sense of urgency. They felt frustrated by the slow pace of progress and unclear responsibilities. External pressure was also mentioned, which added to the feeling that something needed to change. The drive to move forward was clearly there, but without more structure and support, innovation was struggling to gain real momentum.

7. Communication and feedback

The communication style during the meeting was open, thoughtful, and respectful. Everyone had a chance to speak, and participants shared both work-related points and how they were personally feeling. Topics such as stress, frustration, or uncertainty were brought up honestly. Even when people disagreed, they did so in a calm and constructive way. There was also a bit of humor and lightness, which helped balance the more serious topics. Feedback was mostly given through group discussion and mutual reflection, rather than through formal comments.

Observation session 3

This section presents a summary of the observations made during the Management Team (MT) meeting held on 14 May 2025. The summary is organized according to the observation checklist that is outlined in Appendix B.

1. Leadership roles

The MT meeting was guided by the leader. Leadership was demonstrated through active facilitation of discussions, regular requests for input, and clear summarization of conclusions. For example, during agenda planning and project updates, the leader emphasized shared responsibility and encouraged coordination among departments. Innovation was supported by openness to suggestions, such as the idea of free lunches on Fridays to improve attendance. Feedback from the leader was constructive and aimed at achieving clarity and collective alignment.

2. Team collaboration

Collaboration was visible across different departmental lines, with participation from different team leaders and policy advisors. Cross-departmental dialogue occurred during discussions about event planning (e.g., Talent festival) and in breakout sessions around workspace challenges. Despite occasional disagreement, the group maintained a respectful and open tone. This created space for different viewpoints to be shared and considered. Working in groups to identify key themes ('rode draden') helped strengthen collaboration and shared understanding among participants.

3. Barriers and enablers

Several barriers to innovation were observed, including technical shortcomings (e.g., non-ergonomic workspaces, insufficient privacy), administrative backlog (e.g., outdated motions list), and unclear processes (e.g., unclear office attendance policies). On the contrary, enablers

were supportive leadership, a positive group climate, and structured facilitation of collective input. The conversations during the MT meeting showed that challenges to innovation depend on the stage of the process. In the early phase, such as coming up with ideas, there was a positive and open atmosphere that encouraged creativity. For example, when discussing plans for the Talent festival or suggesting free lunches. However, when it came to putting ideas into action, more practical problems appeared. Such as outdated administrative systems, unclear rules about office presence, and a lack of proper workspaces.

4. Decision-making processes

Decision-making was both inclusive and structured. Each project was reviewed with input from the responsible team members, and planning was conducted collectively. The leader played an important role in guiding these processes, summarizing agreements, and ensuring clarity in expectations (e.g., planning deadlines, stakeholder involvement). The decisions didn't follow fixed rules or formal plans but were mostly based on what seemed practical and reasonable to the group at that moment.

5. Resource allocation

Although the budget itself was not directly discussed, several points in the meeting suggested that there are limits to available resources. Especially when it comes to the physical work environment. Employees mentioned issues such as a lack of ergonomic furniture, private discussion spaces, and technical support. Ideas such as offering free lunches were brought up as low-cost ways to motivate staff to come to the office more often. Overall, the discussion around resources focused more on how these issues affect employees' daily work and what is practically possible within the organization.

6. Innovation progress

Progress on innovation initiatives was facilitated through group assignments and clear feedback moments with the whole team. Identifying 'rode draden', or common themes, helped the group focus on shared priorities. Yet, there was some confusion about certain policies, such as the rule that employees should be in the office 50% of the time. This pointed to unclear communication about expectations. The meeting structure encouraged ongoing improvement of ideas through repeated discussion and feedback. Group work and plenary sessions allowed participants to reflect, adjust, and build on each other's input. This step-by-step development showed that the team was not only engaged, but also making steady progress toward practical outcomes.

7. Communication and feedback

Communication during the meeting was open and clear, with a safe environment where everyone felt comfortable speaking up. Team members were encouraged to give feedback, and even when they disagreed, it was done in a respectful and honest way. A light and friendly tone, with some humor, helped create a positive atmosphere. Most of the feedback focused on improving ideas and working better together.