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Stakeholder engagement-as-practice in public sector innovation

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ABSTRACT

Despite the existing literature identifying the importance of stakeholder participation in public sector innovation, little is known about the practice of how stakeholders are engaged by public sector workers. The aim of this article, therefore, is to address this gap through an exploratory analysis of UK public sector innovation cases. By analyzing the micro-processes of engagement work, our findings illustrate different strategies that public workers adopt based on whether innovation derives from the top-down or bottom-up and whether stakeholders are managed or co-produce innovation. For each of these strategies we highlight the prevalence of four sets of practices that were identified as facilitating engagement – procedural, material, relational, and cognitive. Our findings have implications for the existing literature that looks at the “doing” of public sector management.

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Introduction

There is a growing interest in the influence that different stakeholder groups have on the development and implementation of public service innovation (PSI) (Ansell and Torfing 2014; Bekkers and Tummers 2018; Boon, Wynen, and Callens 2023; Mitchell 2022). This interest has emerged due to stakeholder engagement being key in existing PSI antecedent, barrier, and driver frameworks (Cinar, Trott, and Simms 2019; De Vries, Bekkers, and Tummers 2016). It has also been linked to the emergence of collaborative approaches to delivering PSI as an alternative to the shortcoming of New Public Management (NPM) and the notion that co-creating public services can generate greater public value (Chen, Walker, and Sawhney 2020; Hartley, Sørensen, and Torfing 2013; Lindsay et al. 2021).

The existing literature has detailed how various stakeholder groups can have a positive effect on the development of innovation and the conditions that are required to support their participation in innovation processes (Demircioglu 2024; Mitchell 2022). However, existing evidence has indicated that the relationship between stakeholders and PSI is complex (Boon et al. 2023; de Vries, Tummers, and Bekkers 2018). Stakeholders have different aims, agendas, and expectations which has complications for how they engage in PSI (Best, Moffett, and McAdam 2019; Chen et al. 2020). Furthermore, increased stakeholder participation through open innovation and co-production has created significant challenges to established forms of public sector management (Torfing, Sørensen, and Breimo 2023). Indeed, how best to manage stakeholder collaboration is a pervasive debate within the existing literature (Behn 2010; Kelman and Hong 2016; Lopes and Farias 2022).

A key shortcoming in this literature is that existing classifications do not capture the complexity of the practices utilized to engage stakeholders in the development of innovation (Fletcher et al. 2020; Knox and Marin-Cadavid 2023). It is not known what public sector workers do to engage stakeholders or what strategies are adopted, in what scenarios, to drive their involvement

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(Barrutia and Echebarria 2019; Cinar, Trott, and Simms 2021; Lindsay et al. 2018). This is an important research gap to explore as further understanding of the day-to-day organizational practices which facilitate engagement can provide insights into how and why PSIs succeed or fail and add much needed dynamism to existing antecedent frameworks and stakeholder classifications (Cinar et al. 2019; Gullmark and Clausen 2023; Knox and Marin-Cadavid 2023; McGann, Wells, and Blomkamp 2021; Toots 2019).

In this article, the aim is to address this research gap by connecting the existing literature with the internal practices of stakeholder engagement, exploring the research questions: *how can public sector project teams engage stakeholders to enable the development of innovation? What practices do they enact to do this?* To achieve this goal, we focus on internally developed PSI in the UK, drawing on a content analysis of case studies that are available in the OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI).¹ To frame our analysis, we propose an “engagement-as-practice” perspective which draws on existing literature that explores the practice of public sector work (Axelsson and Höglund 2024; Fletcher et al. 2020; Houtgraaf, Kruijven, and Van Thiel 2023; Knox and Marin-Cadavid 2023; Lindsay et al. 2019). This perspective places engagement not as something that exists but as something that is “done” through the everyday routines, behavior norms, narratives, and procedures that organization members enact (Huijbregts, George, and Bekkers 2022; Nicolini and Korica 2021).

Our findings contribute to the existing literature by providing six strategies that are enacted to engage stakeholders in PSI (which we label controlled, associative, collaborative, facilitative, intrapreneurial, and communal). These strategies are PSI context specific, depending on whether innovation is driven from the top-down or bottom-up and the degree to which stakeholders are managed or co-produce. This adds dynamism to existing stakeholder classifications and places the agency of the project team as key to innovation development (e.g., Arundel, Bloch, and Ferguson 2019; Boon et al. 2023; Demircioglu 2024). We also contribute to the existing literature which focuses on the “doing” of innovative service delivery post-NPM (Axelsson and Höglund 2024; Fuertes and Lindsay 2016; Knox and Marin-Cadavid 2023; Lindsay et al. 2019). We advance a set of four categories that capture stakeholder engagement-as-practice (procedural, material, relational, cognitive). The implications of our findings are discussed in line with future research opportunities to understand more about the practices of public sector management.

Literature review

The internal development of public sector innovation

Public sector organizations are made up of distinct stakeholder groups (de Vries et al. 2018). These include both internal stakeholder groups, such as managers, senior leaders, and front-line employees (Knox and Marin-Cadavid 2023) and external stakeholders such as citizens and businesses (McGann et al. 2021). This conceptualization stems from Freeman’s original outline for stakeholder theory in 1984 which stresses the importance of managers alleviating concerns for environmental uncertainty by managing stakeholders who can influence an organization’s objectives (Freeman 2010). The existing PSI literature generally categorizes innovations as either originating from “internal” or “external” stakeholders and whether these stakeholders operate from the “top-down” or “bottom-up” (Demircioglu 2024).

The classification that PSI is either “internally” or “externally” initiated (Boon et al. 2023; Damanpour and Schneider 2009; Demircioglu 2024; Walker 2014) builds on the idea that innovations benefit from ideas from stakeholders who are primarily affected by the innovation (Cinar et al. 2019; Godenhjelm and Johanson 2018). Internal PSIs are sourced by internal stakeholders (e.g., employees) and include efforts to improve organization processes or the delivery of public services (Walker 2014). Alternatively, external PSIs are sourced by external stakeholders, such as citizens and businesses, with the aim of developing new products or services that could be used by public services (Boon et al. 2023; Demircioglu 2024). Our focus in this paper is on the

role of public sector project teams and therefore we concentrate on internally initiated and developed innovations through stakeholders' engagement.

There is a significant body of literature that classifies PSI as being driven by stakeholder involvement in either bottom-up or top-down processes (e.g., Arundel et al. 2019; Cinar, Simms, and Trott 2023, Cinar et al. 2024; Læg Reid, Roness, and Verhoest 2011). Traditional public administration considers PSI as a predominately top-down process, i.e., driven by politicians or organization leaders. However, post-NPM proposes a more prominent role from those operating from the "bottom-up" to develop innovation, i.e., driven by employees (Demircioglu 2024; Nguyen, Drejer, and Marques 2024; Vigoda-Gadot et al. 2005). However, the relationship between top-down and bottom-up innovation with benefits is not straightforward. For example, leaders can engage with innovation because it has strategic importance for an organization and they are more heavily influenced by external stakeholders, while employees can have a greater understanding of operation processes and engage more with process innovations (Boon et al. 2023; Laegreid et al. 2011).

The existing research indicates that project teams have a crucial role in diffusing innovation both from top-down and bottom-up processes (Saari, Lehtonen, and Toivonen 2015). However, little is known about variations in their strategies and practices for engaging stakeholders in these processes. As the development of public sector innovations are affected differently by stakeholder groups (e.g., Boon et al. 2023; Cinar et al. 2023; Trivellato, Carminati, and Martini 2020), the source of internal innovation is likely to influence the project team's strategy for engaging stakeholders.

Approaches to stakeholder engagement in the public sector innovation literature

Exploring how public organizations engage with stakeholders, Nguyen et al. (2024) identify that the processes, structures, and instruments for engagement have changed pre- and post-NPM. Building on this, it is possible to detail two main perspectives to stakeholder engagement. These perspectives – stakeholder management and stakeholder co-production – are summarized in Table 1.

Early public sector administration literature identified the importance of stakeholder management when considering how public sector organizations can meet their mandates (e.g., Bryson 2004). In line with NPM principles which seek to adopt private sector practices in public organizations, stakeholder consultation before, during, and after innovation implementation was seen as important to manage customer satisfaction (Brown, Waterhouse, and Flynn 2003). This developed from the acknowledgment that managing "outward" to the public, "upward" to authorizing authorities, and "downward" to ensure organizational capacity was a key part of public sector strategy (Moore 1995).

Various private sector strategic analysis tools were adopted, such as the power and interest grid to assist public managers in accomplishing their goals (Eden and Ackermann 1998), or the balance scorecard to help communicate strategy to internal and external stakeholders (Irwin 2002). However, public organizations generally have more diverse stakeholders than private

Table 1. Main stakeholder engagement perspectives in the existing public sector literature.

Perspectives	Description	Influence on innovation	How can stakeholders be engaged?
Stakeholder management	Stakeholders need to be managed by public sector organizations through consultation.	Stakeholders can show support/ reluctance for innovation, input into design, and increase public sector accountability.	Stakeholder analysis, performance monitoring, workshops, focus groups, surveys, and online forums.
Stakeholder co-production	Stakeholders actively create innovation initiatives with public sector organizations.	Stakeholders have power to make innovation design and implementation decisions.	Innovation labs, accelerators, hackathons, open challenges.

organizations who predominately adhere to shareholders. This creates unique pressures on public managers to act “entrepreneurially” and “proactively” (Borins 2000; Currie et al. 2008; McDermott, Fitzgerald, and Buchanan 2013). As such, the adoption of stakeholder consultation practices was widely utilized to help integration of innovation into organizations (McIvor, McCracken, and McHugh 2011).

Extensive stakeholder consultation can improve the quality and legitimacy of decisions (Riege and Lindsay 2006). It can also act as a first step in policy implementation as it helps to align and mobilize stakeholders (Sturdy, Smith-Merry, and Freeman 2012). Typically, there are two approaches to stakeholder consultation – open and closed. Open consultation uses public process, such as online forums, where all interested stakeholders can be involved. Closed consultations target more exclusive “expert groups.” However, both approaches have advantages and disadvantages. Open consultation can be a form of participatory policy making which basis its foundation on discussion and democratic principles, while closed consultation can focus on evidence and technical expertise (Fraussen, Albareda, and Braun 2020; Lewis, McGann, and Blomkamp 2020).

As an alternative to NPM practices, collaborative innovation approaches have emerged over the last decade as viable perspectives to co-producing public services more effectively (Hartley et al. 2013; Lindsay et al. 2021; Torfing 2019). Stakeholder co-production differs from stakeholder management by challenging traditional relationships, power, control, and expertise (Durose 2016). The foundation for co-production is the active involvement of end-users (Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015) in the design, management, and delivery of PSI (McGann et al. 2021). The concept denotes that stakeholders are not passive subjects but are “untapped resources” that can mobilize to drive the creation of innovation and public value (Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017; Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016; Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019).

The existing literature has identified several practices that can facilitate co-production. The open innovation concept, for example, enables governments to draw on private sector crowd-sourcing to generate solutions for complex and wicked problems (Mergel 2018; Mergel and Desouza 2013). Likewise, participation in innovation labs or training programmes helps public sector actors to shape innovation to better address public and societal needs (Knox and Marin-Cadavid 2023; Tönurist, Kattel, and Lember 2017). Innovation labs, in particular, are regarded as promoting the co-production of innovation through breaking down the boundaries of public service organizations, transferring learning to public service workers, and increasing the voice and input of citizens (Fuglsang and Hansen 2022; McGann et al. 2021). These initiatives are regarded as particularly effective at encouraging mutual learning and joint ownership of decision-making (Cinar et al. 2023; Lindsay et al. 2021; Torfing 2016).

While these existing stakeholder classifications are useful to understand prevailing logics and highlight a shift in the way stakeholders are managed, there are two underlying limitations. First, it has been well-reported that the transition from NPG to post-NPG was not a clean break, and prevailing logics and practices remain which results in hybrid governance arrangements (Christensen and Læg Reid 2022). Second, the existing stakeholder classifications assume that engagement by stakeholders is static and holistic, which downplays the agency of project teams to strategically “engage” stakeholders in their innovation (Cinar et al. 2019; Yuriev, Boiral, and Talbot 2022). As such, the existing literature largely fails to understand how the practice of “doing engagement” influences PSI (Fletcher et al. 2020).

Stakeholder engagement-as-practice in public sector innovation

The existing literature has highlighted important conditions for facilitating stakeholder engagement, including having enough staff involved in innovation activities, in-house resources, and leadership capabilities (e.g., Burgers, Arundel, and Casali 2024). It has also identified where sources of innovation come from, such as universities, and the benefits of this type of stakeholder engagement on generating ideas and providing information (e.g., Demircioglu and

Audretsch 2019; Cinar et al. 2023). However, less is known about the strategic practices for engagement.

The actions and processes for engagement are important to conceptualize as they provide indication into how public sector innovation can be managed. For example, Kurtmollaiev, Pedersen, and Lie (2024) propose archetypes for how collaborative arrangements are structured based on causal and effectual reasoning. They identify that there is a propensity for collaboration to be goal-directed, well-planned, and strategically managed to ensure success (i.e., using a causation logic). Mechanisms such as “evaluation of costs and benefits” create a certain amount of predictability. Alternatively, they highlight that effectual reasoning, which evokes flexible and adaptive approaches to collaboration, are scarce—but promote “resource mapping” and “mobilisation within open communities” as means to aid this. Additionally, Li and Chen (2024) identify three important mechanisms for achieving high levels of collaboration—creating a sense of urgency, mediating relationships between wider networks of actors, and developing trust to facilitate open discussions.

Despite these studies providing valuable insight into the different conditions for organizing collaborative innovation, they do not provide insights into the strategic practices for engaging stakeholders. For example, *how* is urgency or trust created? To provide a more dynamic understanding of stakeholders’ involvement in PSI we conceptualize an “engagement-as-practice” perspective which is a part of wider literature that focuses on the “practice” perspective present in public administration (Chandra and Paras 2021; Hansen 2011; Höglund et al. 2018; Huijbregts et al. 2022; Knox and Marin-Cadavid 2023; Lindsay et al. 2019). This perspective draws on two complimentary approaches: (1) engagement as a multi-dimensional construct (Kahn 1990); and (2) the practice of “doing” engagement (Fletcher et al. 2020; Nicolini 2012).

Kahn’s seminal concept states engagement is when people “*employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally*” (Kahn 1990:694). This concept has been utilized to study employee engagement in public sector settings and provides a multidimensional understanding of what can drive job satisfaction and performance (Hameduddin and Lee 2021; Jin and McDonald 2017; Knox and Marin-Cadavid 2023). Engagement has been recently conceptualized as a management practice which focuses on “doing engagement” (Bailey et al. 2017; Fletcher et al. 2020). This approach is rooted in the social practices that resemble “*routinized regimes of materially mediated doings, sayings, knowing, and ways of relating that form the building blocks for understanding organizational phenomena*” (Nicolini and Korica 2021:5). In this sense, stakeholders can be engaged physically, cognitively, and emotionally in PSI through the enactment of various organizing practices.

Practice-orientated scholars that study organization and management outline three key elements of practice-based approaches—the “what,” “who,” and “how” (Jarzabkowski et al. 2016). The “what” refers to specific *practices* that are enacted and represent shared routines and behaviors. The “who” refers to the *practitioners* that are involved in enactment or performance of practices. The “how” refers to *praxis*, the means in which practices are embodied and mobilized by practitioners. Importantly, praxis considers the “*social effects generated by a practice in connection with other practices*” (Corradi, Gherardi, and Verzelloni 2010:277) and therefore represent bundles of integrated activities that structure processes and individual purpose (Nicolini and Monteiro 2017; Schatzki 2002). They are bound within a specific context and represent specific social rules or instructions that are ordered in ongoing processes (Nicolini 2012).

In this study, we are interested in uncovering “what” practices and “how” they are enacted by public sector workers. Considering the existing research on public sector innovation and stakeholder engagement, it is possible to conceptualize a framework for capturing the practices which can engage stakeholders in PSI, which we will use as a starting point in our analysis (e.g., Arundel et al. 2019; Boon et al. 2023; Cinar et al. 2023, Cinar et al. 2024; Læg Reid et al. 2011; Nguyen et al. 2024). The framework (Figure 1) captures two core features - innovation sources (top-down versus bottom-up) and stakeholder engagement (management versus co-production).

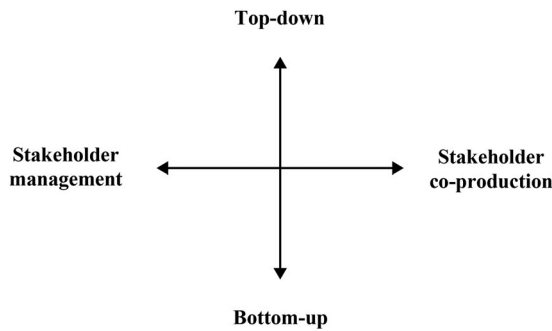


Figure 1. Framework for capturing stakeholder engagement strategies.

Methods

Research context and data

The UK was selected for the study context because it was one of the core countries who adopted NPM practices to reform government in the 1980s and 90's (Cooper et al. 2022). However, more recently, intense post-NPM-style reforms based on e-government, transparency, citizens' engagement, collaborative governance, and coordination are prevalent (Christensen and Lægheid 2022). These post-NPM practices are “layered” onto existing NPM practices (Torfing et al. 2020), creating hybrid governance arrangements where management-related tools also remain important (Christensen and Lægheid 2022). The UK, therefore, represents an interesting context where multiple different stakeholder engagement practices and conditions are present in PSI initiatives.

To explore how stakeholders are engaged in UK PSI, we used archival data that is available in the OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI) from 2023. This database afforded us access to a large archive of UK cases and has been previously utilized in PSI studies to unpack innovation dynamics (e.g., Demircioglu and Vivona 2021). Indeed, the UK submitted the highest number of cases to OPSI. The utilization of archival data for many qualitative cases, such as in OPSI, has been highlighted as providing robust generalizations and knowledge that link contextual, situational, and institutional conditions to various outcomes (Douglas et al. 2020). The OPSI provides rich qualitative data detailing innovations, challenges, conditions for success, lessons learned, key outputs, collaborators, and stakeholders.

The database contained 53 innovations that were developed by local, regional, or national government project teams. Our rationale for excluding innovations developed by external stakeholders was because these entries in the database had a different perspective as they were written from the point of view of nonpublic sector organizations. These organizations can often have an indirect approach to engage the public sector to innovate and likely adopt different practices as a result (e.g., Best et al. 2019). To ensure the validity of our analysis, we ensured that cases had the central public sector innovation team as the unit of analysis, thus relating directly to our research question.

Alongside the information provided within OPSI for each case study, we triangulated our data through examination of websites and through reports that some innovation teams produced. This included rich data on impact for many cases. Furthermore, some innovations had video media available as either promotional material, demonstrations of the innovation in action, or recordings of meetings or events taken during the development of innovation. The triangulation of these sources helped us to develop a contextual narrative for our theorization (Langley 1999).

Data coding procedure and analysis

Our content analysis followed an abductive logic as we attempted to build an idea of how stakeholders can be mobilized to facilitate the development of PSI following best practice as outlined

by Chen et al. (2020) and Cinar et al. (2023). As a point of departure, we were informed by current stakeholder classifications in the existing literature—top-down (originating from organization leaders) versus bottom-up (originating from lower-down or outside the formal authority hierarchy) (e.g., Demircioglu 2024) and stakeholder management versus stakeholder co-production (as outlined previously). Our analysis focused on building insights from the data regarding the strategies and practices enacted by project teams developing and implementing innovations.

We started by systematically reviewing each OPSI case and capturing key information on the innovation. We considered the entire case form submitted to the OECD by innovation teams and focused on identifying the “contributions” that explained innovation results. That is, while an attribution makes a deterministic claim about a specific factor causing a specific outcome, a contribution identifies multiple factors which influences a result (Mayne 2012). This aligns with a practice perspective that looks for patterns and bundles of practices (Nicolini and Monteiro 2017) and indeed each case identified numerous practices that contributed to innovation development (6.3 on average per case). For each of the 53 cases we identified the practices that were mentioned as contributing to innovation development. We captured this raw data in a codebook in MS Excel, with 483 initial practices identified.

These were refined to generate an initial coding protocol capturing the different practices enacted. Four rounds of coding were then conducted independently by all three authors. After the first round, coding results were compared and then the coding protocol was refined. This was repeated a further two times until an inter-rater reliability of 96% was achieved by the three authors. The coding protocol with illustrative passages is presented in [Appendix 1](#). In the next step the three authors looked at the sets of practices used to engage stakeholders based on classification of the innovation as being driven by the top-down or bottom-up and engagement through stakeholder management or co-production. At this stage we looked at the bundles of practices that were evident, which gave indication into how project teams engaged stakeholders using six different strategies. In our final step we followed Borins (2014), Chen et al. (2020), and Cinar et al. (2023) and utilized quantitative percentages to report our findings and give indication into the propensity of different practices to be enacted in different engagement strategies.

Findings

Our findings identified four main categories of engagement practices enacted by innovation project teams with sub-sets of corresponding practices that were enacted. *Procedural practices* relate to efforts by project team members to engage stakeholders through organizing projects and structuring specific actions or steps in a process. *Material practices* refer to the tangible objects that were created for stakeholders to physically interact with. *Relational practices* refer to efforts made by project teams to build relationships, interact, and generate mutual understanding with stakeholders. Finally, *cognitive practices* relate to actions that aimed to stimulate thinking, learning, problem-solving, and creativity. An overview of these practices and the frequency of their use is presented in [Table 2](#).

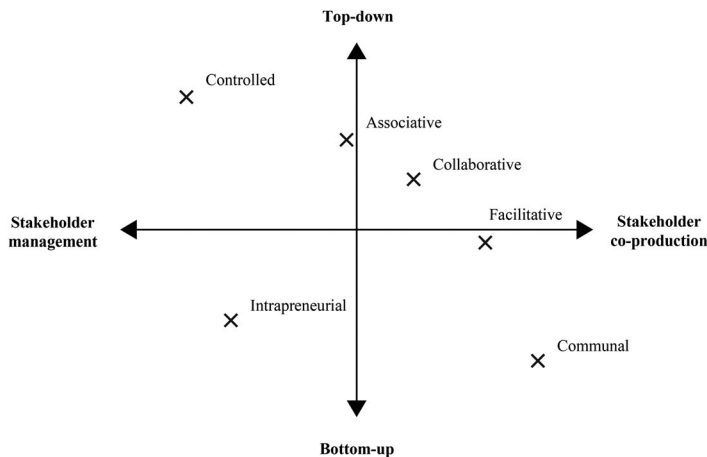
Our analysis identified six strategies for engaging stakeholders, based on the characteristics of the innovation project as being either driven from the top-down or bottom-up and the degree to which stakeholders were managed or co-produced the innovation (e.g., Demircioglu 2024; Nguyen et al. 2024). These six strategies are illustrated in [Figure 2](#) and detailed further below. For each strategy different sets of practices were identified as being key for *how* public sector innovation teams engage stakeholders (e.g., Nicolini and Monteiro 2017). The frequency of how different practices were enacted within each strategy is presented in [Figure 3](#).

Controlled

This strategy for stakeholder engagement was evident in 11 (21%) cases. Project teams enacted their authoritative power as commitment to the innovation was mandated by senior leaders and

Table 2. Summary of engagement practices.

Category	Aims	Practices	% of cases
Procedural	Practices aimed to engage stakeholders through organizing innovation projects and structuring specific actions or steps in a process.	Evaluations, audits, and detailed business cases.	40%
		Following standard administrative and governance procedures.	36%
		Target setting and strategic planning.	42%
Material	Practices aimed to engage stakeholders through tangible objects that stakeholder physically interact with.	Digital dashboards, platforms, and data visualization.	32%
		Manuals, guidelines, work packages, and toolkits.	25%
Relational	Practices aimed to engage stakeholders through building relationships, interactions, and generating mutual understanding.	Product pilots and prototypes.	51%
		Brokering partnership and building teams.	64%
		Closed consultation, roundtables, and action groups.	38%
		Networking and conference attendance.	45%
		Personal support and developmental relationships.	21%
Cognitive	Practices aimed to engage stakeholders through stimulating thinking, learning, problem-solving, and creativity.	Transparent communication and agreements.	34%
		Agile work methodologies and design sprints.	47%
		Creating innovation spaces.	25%
		Senior leader attention.	51%
		Training and skills development programmes.	23%
		User workshops and testing.	58%

**Figure 2.** Mapping stakeholder engagement strategies.

innovation was developed in-house. To ensure the cognitive engagement of stakeholders (particularly internal) getting senior leaders to attract attention to the innovation was a common practice. This was not to say that other stakeholders (including external) were not engaged by project teams to consult, rather input for innovation development was overseen by the project teams and therefore wider stakeholder engagement was controlled. Closed consultation, therefore, was an important practice that was enacted. Innovations typically focused on improving internal processes and accountability, through creating standards (e.g., Algorithmic Transparency Standard) or improving data processes (e.g., Data Programme). Procedural practices were important for engaging internal stakeholders, including target setting and strategic planning, following standard procedures, and creating detailed business cases. For the innovations improving data processes digital platforms/dashboards were regarded as a key practice to physically engage stakeholders with the innovation.

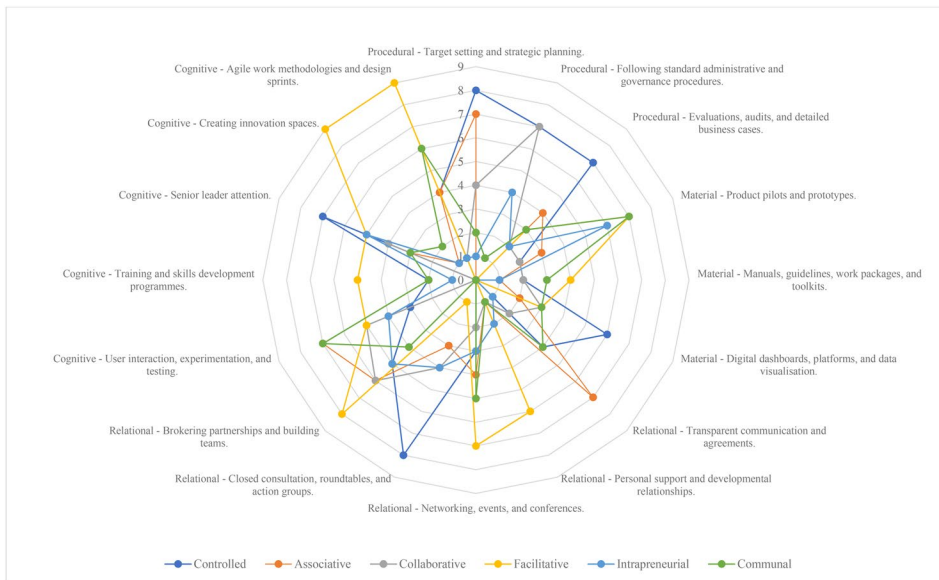


Figure 3. Quantitative summary of practices for each strategy.

Associative

This strategy was present in 9 (17%) of cases and was evident when project teams needed to outsource the development of the innovation (or an aspect of it) to an external partner. This was typically for the procurement of IT services for the creation of digital tools or platforms (e.g., AllergyPA). Although typically a higher number of supplier collaboration has been found in previous studies of PSI (e.g., Cinar et al. 2023), there seems to be a specific engagement strategy that can be enacted in this context. Innovation project teams' engagement involved managing the relationship with the delivery partner and promoting the legitimacy of the innovation to wider stakeholders. Setting clear targets, brokering strong partnerships, and ensuring transparent communication with delivery partners was therefore key. To promote the wider engagement of stakeholders, project teams would often interact with users (both internal and external) to receive feedback into technology and encourage its use.

Collaborative

This strategy was present in 7 (13%) of cases and involved collaboration between multiple public organizations. Considering collaboration with other public sector organizations is the most common form of collaboration as reported in other studies, such as Borins (2014) and Cinar et al. (2023), the enactment of a specific stakeholder engagement strategy in this context was somewhat low. Typical innovations in this strategy included collaboration to invest in large scale service (e.g., Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal) or co-produced digital platforms (e.g., London Electric Vehicle Charge Points Dashboard). Key practices focused on ensuring alignment to ensure effective multi-partner collaboration and included building multi-organization innovation teams and structuring projects, following set procedures to ensure project alignment and organization, and ensuring interaction with users.

Facilitative

This strategy was present in 11 (21%) of cases and involved project teams creating the conditions in which external partners could develop innovations. Typical innovations included challenge

funds (e.g., CivTech[®] Scotland) and accelerator programmes (e.g., The Defence and Security Accelerator). Project teams would utilize a market-based logic to engage stakeholders in the development of an innovation through competitive processes. They would set a challenge and provide support for competing external innovation partners. Key practices included creating innovation spaces (such as co-location), providing opportunities for networking and events, and providing developmental relationships such as mentoring or peer support groups. Project teams would incentivize the utilization of agile work methodologies and the development of products and pilots from external innovators.

Intrapreneurial

Just 6 (11%) of cases utilized this strategy which was centered around a single intrapreneur or small intrapreneurial team attempting to develop an innovation from the bottom-up. Typically, an employee or mid-level manager with an idea to improve internal processes (e.g., Statutory services based on value, rather than legislation) or develop capabilities or new services within a public organization (e.g., SKYrooms). This engagement strategy was focused on gaining support from other organizational members to scale the impact of the innovation. Gaining senior leader attention was a key practice, as was developing a product prototype or pilot to demonstrate feasibility. Building teams to support the development of the innovation was also important for scaling. Engagement was strategic and done when needing specific input to advance innovation development. In some cases, this involved closed consultation practices with specific stakeholders, while for others it involved open interaction with users to test and iterate project development.

Communal

This strategy for engagement was present in 9 (17%) cases and involved scaling an innovation through a community of practice. The development of the innovation was more open than the intrapreneurial strategy with user interaction and the utilization of agile work methodologies, hackathons, or design sprints, and product prototypes or pilot projects highlighted as key practices used to help with co-production. The goal of this engagement strategy was to build the feasibility of the innovation through creating a community of support. Networking and events were highlighted as important for achieving this. Innovation project teams were typically made-up of employees and innovations typically included the development of data platforms to address a problem a specific community had (e.g., Comoodle).

Discussion and conclusions

There is a growing interest in the influence that different stakeholder groups have on the development and implementation of PSI (Ansell and Torfing 2014; Bekkers and Tummers 2018; Boon et al. 2023; Cinar et al. 2023; Mitchell 2022). However, existing classifications do not capture the complexity of the practices utilized to engage stakeholders. Resultingly, understanding of how best to manage stakeholder collaboration is a longstanding concern (Behn 2010; Kelman and Hong 2016; Lopes and Farias 2022; Vivona, Demircioglu, and Audretsch 2023). The aim of this article was to connect the existing PSI literature with the practices of stakeholder engagement (e.g., Fletcher et al. 2020; Knox and Marin-Cadavid 2023), by exploring how stakeholders can be engaged to assist in the development of PSI.

These findings contribute to the existing literature by extending classifications of stakeholders which predominately categorizes innovation as being driven from “top-down” or “bottom-up” processes (e.g., Demircioglu 2024). To this broad classification we propose six specific strategies that can facilitate stakeholder engagement, and importantly match each strategy with specific sets of practices. This also has implications for the existing co-production literature which

highlights broad principles as key—mutual understanding, shared goals, effective relations, constant learning, and the inclusion of broad stakeholder groups (Cinar et al. 2023; Lindsay et al. 2021; Torfing 2016). To these principles we offer indication of how they can be facilitated by innovation project teams. For example, the principle “effective relations” can be facilitated through the relational practices we identified in our analysis.

The results of our analysis indicate that the relationship between the conditions and practices of innovation are not static, challenging the perspective that there are normative conditions for PSI (e.g., Demircioglu and Audretsch 2019; Fadda and Rotondo 2022). The agency of the innovation project team and how they engage different stakeholder groups is key to the development of innovation across settings. The strategies that are adopted depend on the setting for innovation development and through the enactment of various practices PSI agents can shape the public sector environment for innovation, including how certain stakeholder engagement barriers are navigated. This extends existing literature that stresses the importance of situation for PSI development where different stakeholder groups have different perceptions of an innovation goal or value (e.g., de Vries et al. 2018). We highlight sets of strategies that innovation project teams can enact to manage these competing goals and values. This implies that, just like in the discretion shown at the street-level in the implementation of policy (e.g., Knox and Arshed 2024), situational agency plays an important role in the development and implementation of PSI.

As such, we offer indication as to why collaborative approaches are not always deemed to successfully drive innovation (Godenhjelm and Johanson 2018; Clarke and Craft 2019). This adds to the emerging critical literature which highlights that collaborative innovation and co-production are not always a panacea to policy problems (Vivona et al. 2023; Wegrich 2019). Indeed, we uncover successful cases where stakeholders are managed without co-producing innovation. This has two important implications for future research. First, while the existing literature has identified core principles of co-production (e.g., Cinar et al. 2023; Lindsay et al. 2021; Torfing 2016), we show four distinctive strategies for engaging stakeholders in co-production, dependent on innovation context. This shows that co-production is not a homogenous endeavor, and the core principles of co-production may not apply to all innovation contexts. Second, it is important to recognize the boundaries (albeit blurry) between stakeholder engagement in innovation and the co-production of innovation. Rather than a dichotomizing stakeholder management from co-production, a dynamic understanding is needed which places management and co-production on a spectrum to understand the nuances of stakeholder engagement and the often hybrid practices that are enacted (Christensen and Lægheid 2022; Torfing et al. 2020).

To do this, future PSI research can connect with the policy implementation discretion literature to understand more about the individual-level behaviors associated with stakeholder engagement and how they are enacted *in situ* (e.g., Knox and Arshed 2024). A shortcoming of this article, as it focused on the innovation project team, is that it does not fully connect with the motives that drive different individuals to adopt different strategies or practices – here links with motivational theories such as public service motivation, sense of community responsibility, or self-determination theory can shed further light on what drives the actions of agents to involve stakeholders in PSI.

We also contribute to the existing literature which focuses on the “doing” of innovative service delivery post-NPM (e.g., Fuertes and Lindsay 2016; Houtgraaf et al. 2023; Knox and Marin-Cadavid 2023; Lindsay et al. 2019). Specifically, we contribute to an engagement-as-practice perspective which is complimentary to the existing strategic management literature in the public sector that identifies the importance of understanding practice at a micro-level of analysis (Axelsson and Höglund 2024; Hansen 2011; Höglund et al. 2018; Huijbregts et al. 2022). The sets of practices we uncovered in this article contribute to the studies that look at the overall conditions that facilitate innovation by detailing the social practices enacted by public sector workers to create these conditions. Thus, we connect a micro-level understanding to existing antecedent frameworks

that highlight the importance of engaged stakeholders for PSI development (e.g., Cinar et al. 2019; De Vries et al. 2016).

This has implications for the existing literature that looks to understand the guiding principles for public administration, post-NPM. By taking a micro-level analytical approach we can dig into the hybrid, complex settings in which public sector workers organize. While the hybridity of public sector governance has been highlighted (e.g., Christensen and Lægreid 2022; Torfing et al. 2020), evidence into how public sector workers navigate this convoluted landscape are scarce. The mixtures of NPM and post-NPM practices highlighted in our analysis emphasize this complexity. To advance understanding of the micro-level practices that structure and organize public sector management new theoretical lenses can be utilized, such as activity theory (e.g., Johnson, Melin, and Whittington 2003) or strong structuration theory (e.g., Stones 2005). These theories can connect how individual agency and behavior shape PSI and wider public sector structures.

Despite the richness of the archive data and the exploratory aim of the study we are aware of several limitations of our study which also offer opportunities for future work. First, we recognized that our research is context dependent and, therefore, do not claim generalizability of the findings across other countries. Second, we recognize the potential selection bias as all entries into OPSI are of “successful” cases and our results could be different if we study unsuccessful cases. However, as Cinar et al. (2024:5) note analyzing submitted innovation case archives provides “*useful, in-depth, and insightful information about the nature of innovation.*” Furthermore, the cases in our sample from OPSI come directly from innovation project teams who were developing the innovations and enacted the practices to engage stakeholders themselves, thus giving access to unique perspectives. Finally, there is a potential problem with how well the case studies in OPSI represent PSI in the UK context. To address these limitations, we ensured comparability across contexts, actions, and outcomes. We did this by selecting cases from the UK and focusing on innovation developed within the public sector context. However, future research can examine the insights uncovered in this study across other cultural and organizational contexts and with other data sets to enhance generalizability and further understanding of public sector management practices.

Note

1. Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI) Case Studies are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution – ShareAlike 3.0 IGO (CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO) – available from: https://oecd-opsi.org/case_type/opsi/.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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