



# One Big Thing

starts with one small change

**A Guide to One Big Thing 2024**



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# What is One Big Thing?

**“Innovation is crucial to A Modern Civil Service. We must be able to think differently and experiment with new ideas; many successful innovations have started with making controlled mistakes and learning from them.”**

*Simon Case, Cabinet Secretary and Head of Civil Service*

One Big Thing (OBT) is an annual initiative for civil servants to take action together to improve the Civil Service.

Last year, we focused on data upskilling and after four successful months, One Big Thing delivered over half a million hours of data learning to 212,000 people! That’s the equivalent of 272 working years!

The theme for One Big Thing 2024 is innovation - **“One Big Thing starts with One Small Change.”**

**How?** Civil servants will have the opportunity to deliver localised innovation by making simple, tangible improvements to how we do things.

**Why?** To foster an environment where our people feel comfortable and encouraged to experiment, collaborate, share, test and implement ideas.

**When?** One Big Thing 2024 will launch on 14th October and run until 14th February.





# What are we doing this year on One Big Thing?

The overarching aim of 'One Big Thing' is for all departments to take action around a shared priority. This year's priority is innovation and demonstrating that innovation is accessible to all.

## One Big Thing 2024 will:

1

Equip civil servants with the **knowledge and skills** to formulate new ideas and develop them to deliver value.



### LEARNING

All civil servants will be invited to complete the **Innovation Masterclass** - our innovation e-learning course.

2

**Build towards a culture** where our people feel comfortable and encouraged to experiment, test and implement ideas.



### TEAM CONVERSATIONS

All civil servants participate in a team conversation to **share ideas for a 'small change'**.

3

**Enable civil servants** to experiment with small changes to realise tangible benefits and demonstrate that innovation is accessible to all.



### EXPERIMENTATION

Teams **experiment with delivering the agreed small changes** and log outcome on the One Big Thing platform.



# How will it work?

**!** This is a suggested timeline - departments will communicate exact timings via internal comms

## Department Intranet

- ❑ Find the One Big Thing banner on your department intranet
- ❑ Plan a time to do the Innovation Masterclass

### Step 1 - October

## Preparation - August to September

## Learning

- ❑ Access Civil Service Learning and complete the Innovation Masterclass e-learning

## Team Conversations

- ❑ Read the conversation guidance to understand your department's guidelines for generating ideas
- ❑ Meet in teams to reflect on the learning and share ideas (structure and size of teams to be communicated by departments)
- ❑ Agree 'small change(s)' in teams and the timeframe for delivery
- ❑ Conversation facilitator to log conversation as complete on OBT platform

### Step 2 - November

### Step 3 - November to February

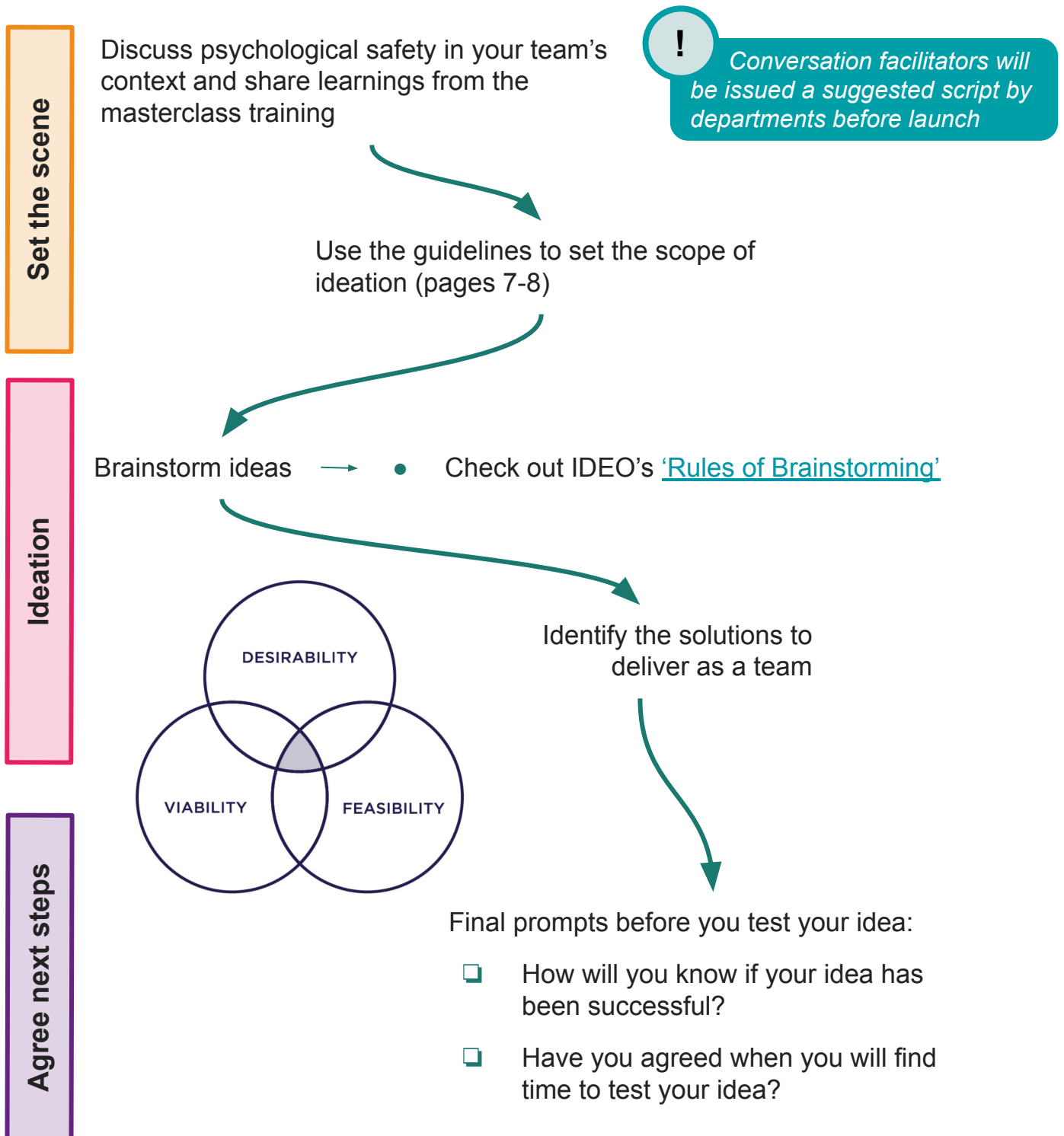
## Experimentation

- ❑ Try out your 'small change' and reflect on the impact
- ❑ Conversation facilitator to log learnings from experiment on the One Big Thing platform
- ❑ Check out the case studies of 'small changes' from across your department



# How will it work?

Conversations will be based on the innovation process as set out in the Innovation Masterclass, but here is a sneak peek!





# How are you going to make a small change this year? Part I

One Big Thing is about **experimentation, testing and learning**. All team conversations should be a safe space to share and explore ideas freely, without certainty that they will succeed.

## Guidelines to help with generating your ideas:

- 1 Your idea should be within your team's influence to change**

Think about what is in your scope of influence and what change, no matter how small, you can make to bring value to your team, organisation or the public.
- 2 Explore your idea's connection to your customer and department**

Try to frame the problem you are working on within your work, departmental and broader Civil Service context and objectives. Here are some tips on checking out any pre-existing work and evidence around your idea:

  - Reach out to internal networks
  - Check with your data and analysis or science/research teams
  - See if anything has been published internally or on gov.uk
- 3 Be creative with the resources available to you**

We know good innovation often requires money and investment. One Big Thing is different - it is about bringing a fresh and creative perspective to solve problems by pushing within existing budgets and resources.

  - What tools, resources and funding do you already have available to you?
  - How can you modify, repurpose or combine resources?
  - What existing networks and relationships can you use?



# How are you going to make a small change this year? Part II

## 4 Before you test your idea or run your experiment, consider if approvals are required (if any!)

Depending on the nature of your problem and solution, you may need to consider and get approval from relevant seniors or meet certain requirements e.g. policy, legal or accessibility requirements.

Ask yourself, what is stopping you from testing out your idea? Do you need to wait for permission? In some cases, you won't. Use the rules and guidance in your department the right way but don't see them as a barrier.

Your 'team' could also be a virtual or extended team from across your department, with partnerships stemming from an idea. More guidance on this will be provided by departments.

## 5 Your idea is an experiment, treat it as such!

One Big Thing is all about bringing out the innovator in you. As with any experiment, it is important to think about how you will evaluate and measure impact to see if your idea works.

Remember, not every idea achieves its goal. Your experiment might not work and that's OK!

Experiments don't fail, they are a way to learn. Ask yourself, what could be done better next time?

“ I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work. ”

Thomas Edison



# The power of small changes

The Civil Service is already an incredibly innovative organisation, with teams across the country finding ways to improve local processes or services:

- Designed to inspire innovation, normalise new ways of working and convene people across silos, Rupert Cryer created **SKYroom**: an innovation space at the heart of government. Implemented in 1 Horse Guards Road, SKYroom was delivered in partnership with external experts and colleagues in Cabinet Office, HM Treasury and the Government Property Agency. With approximately 10,000 users, the then-Chief Executive of Civil Service said that SKYroom “forged a path for other innovative projects in government to follow.”
- Jen Evans founded the **Cabinet Office Glasgow Innovation Group**: a community of data enthusiasts looking to develop and investigate innovative solutions to everyday work problems. Jen also set up the Python Café, co-led by David MacKenzie, which brings together colleagues to put newly established Python skills into practice with simple innovative solutions to real problems from across the Cabinet Office.
- In the **UK Hydrographic Office**, the team automated the licence request process reducing the number of cases raised by 50 to 60%. This cut customer waiting time from an average of 2 days to an instant response.
- In the **Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government**, Sarah Ward convened a team of 6 from different specialisms and divisions across the department to form an **Innovation Squad** with 6 weeks to improve a process of their choice. They were asked to be creative, think innovatively and be unafraid to disrupt.



*DLUHC's 'Innovation Squad' team*

# What is innovation?

**“Innovation doesn’t come from the top down. It comes from being able to absorb, build on and scale really good ideas, wherever they come from.”**

*Sarah Munby, Permanent Secretary  
Department for Science, Innovation and Technology*

There is no single definition of innovation, but having a shared understanding is important to apply it in practice. Innovation in the Civil Service can perhaps best be described as **“doing something new and different that delivers value for the public”**.

There is a whole spectrum of innovation in the Civil Service, from transformational, multi-million pound projects to small scale, continuous improvement changes.

There is no one size fits all approach. The best innovators can simply apply the right techniques to the right idea and this year’s One Big Thing will equip civil servants with techniques for generating and testing their “small change”.

**“ 75% of civil servants believe they would be supported to try a new idea ”**

People Survey, 2023



*Colleagues at Civil Service Live*

Empowering civil servants to be bold and creative, classic characteristics of every good innovator, is at the heart of how we improve service and operational delivery, whilst also helping us make the Civil Service a brilliant organisation to work in.

The pandemic demonstrated our capability to provide world-renowned innovation with, for example, the vaccines taskforce, ventilator challenge, and the furlough scheme.

Looking to the future, continuing to deliver the highest quality service for the public will require us to solve challenges - both big and small - in new and innovative ways.

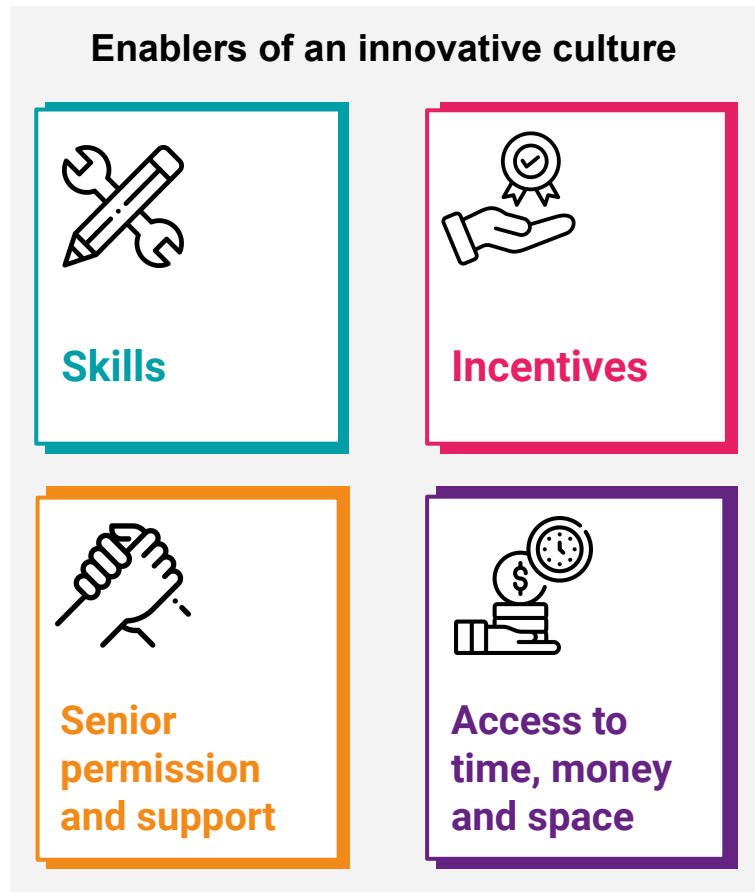


# How do you make the Civil Service more innovative?

Innovation needs a combination of creativity, problem solving and a willingness to take risks, within an environment that promotes proposing and testing new ideas, whether they are successful or not.

Our cross-government innovation work seeks to promote such a culture by sharing best practices and connecting innovators across departments.

It also promotes the [four pillars](#) as a common framework for thinking about the enabling conditions to innovate (right).



Through these pillars, we will embed innovation in our structures, culture and capability, facilitating continuous improvement — a self-perpetuating legacy of reform that would improve services for the public and reduce pressure on the centre to be continually driving change.



# The importance of your environment

What is the common thread that runs through all high performing, innovative teams? A culture of psychological safety.

As defined by Professor Amy Edmondson, Psychological Safety is the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, mistakes and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. The result is a more creative and successful team and organisation.

We want to promote awareness of psychological safety and this year's One Big Thing is a great opportunity to show what can be achieved if we behave in a way that encourages it.

Leaders obviously play a key role in building this culture and our Innovation Masterclass e-learning will include training for team leaders on the importance of psychological safety and the steps they can take to foster it.

**But everyone plays a role in culture change - you can contribute to a psychologically safe workplace by:**

- Focussing on finding solutions with questions like “what can we all do to help solve this problem?” and “how can we improve for the next time?”
- Asking others for their opinions — with prompts like “I’d love to get your feedback on that idea” and provide feedback in a respectful, thoughtful way.
- Actively listening to the ideas shared by your colleagues and asking respectful questions.

Creating healthy cultures takes intention, time, and patience - it won't be achieved overnight but initiatives like One Big Thing can help to raise awareness and set the foundations for systemic change.

“**Through psychological safety we can find out what each member of a team has to offer**”

Beth M. Schwartz, PhD,  
American Psychological Association



# If you want to get a head start, we recommend...

Watch this recording of a research-based training method that develops the skills of leaders and employees to collaboratively generate and implement creative solutions.

- [Clear Ideas - Creativity and Innovation Training Workshop](#)

Check out some of the **recommended books, videos or podcasts** from innovative leaders across the Civil Service:

- [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, by Stephen Covey](#)

“Primarily because of Habit 1: Be Proactive. Innovation is, at its core, about not accepting the 'way things are', and doing something about it.” Recommended by Ruth Newrick, Deputy Director, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero.

- [Think Again, by Adam Grant](#)

“Think Again teaches you how to unthink, test knowledge and test the “but we have always done it like this” mentality.” Recommended by Gabriella Cox, Deputy Head Defence Design.

- [Creative Collaboration - Podcast](#)

“This podcast explores the role of collaboration and diversity in spurring creativity and innovation.” Recommended by Simon Baugh, CEO Government Communications Service.

For the full list of suggested reads, check out the [Innovation Book Club!](#)

Find out more about what **psychological safety** means to you and your team:

- [Psychological safety in the Ministry of Defence](#)
- [What psychological safety looks like in a hybrid workplace](#)
- [A guide to building psychological safety in your team](#)