

## The Social Innovation Competence Centre in the UK

The UK Centre - *Social Innovation Connect* - is based at Glasgow Caledonian University. It has been conceived as a catalyst for discovery, a forum for research and capacity building and an advocate for policy change. It aspires to ‘build a better-connected UK SI ecosystem across regions with stronger transnational ties to Europe and beyond and will develop new ways of working in order to tackle the underlying causes of social problems’. In response to the ambiguities surrounding social innovation processes described above, SIC will be focussing in particular on social innovations that work outside the conventional social enterprise model driving change in other sectors.

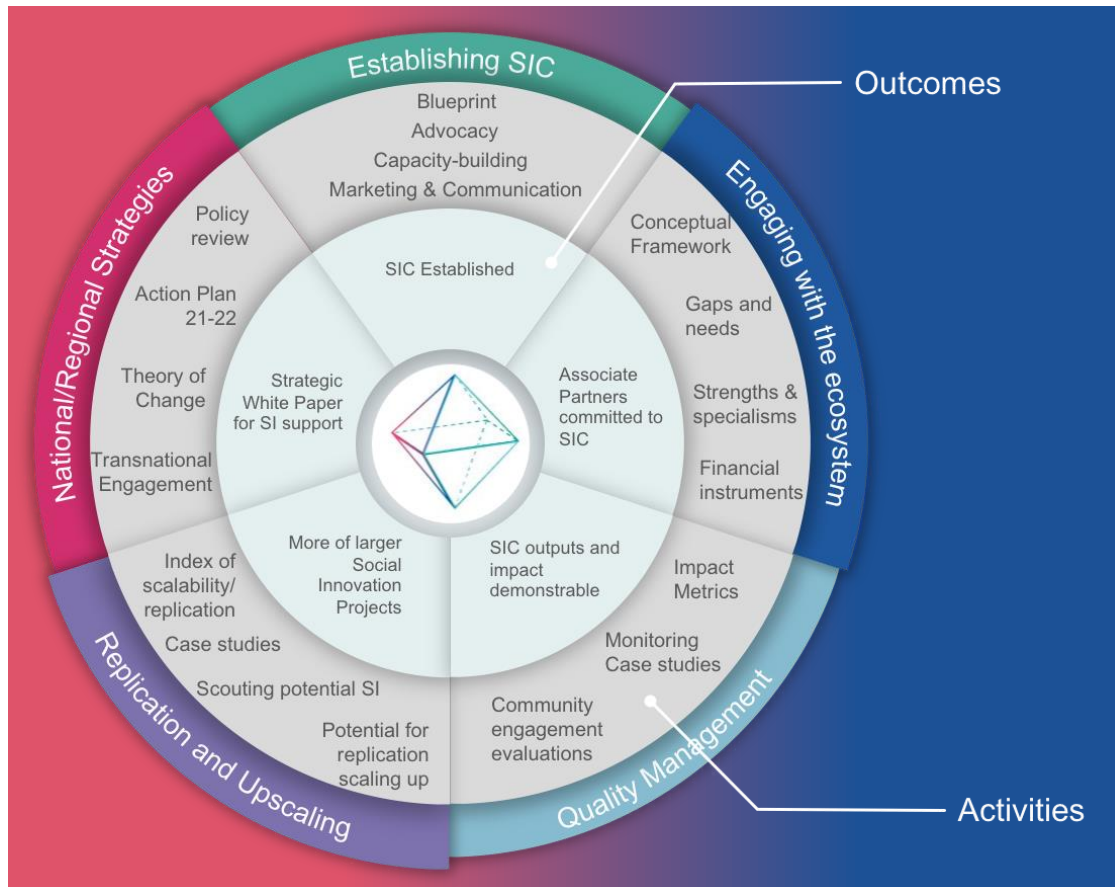


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework for the UK Social Innovation Competence Centre

The Centre will work co-creatively on five strategic priorities:

- **Establishing SIC** – An initial blueprint for social innovation is developed, including a programme of activities to define the concepts and strategic activities of the Centre. This should include
  - Advocacy to bring social innovation to the political agenda of organisations from all sectors to demonstrate how this can be a movement for positive change.
  - Training and capacity-building, though workshops and mentoring, raising awareness to the wider public;
  - building communication channels between relevant actors and forging links between them through the common thread of social innovation.

- **Engaging with the Ecosystem** – The ecosystem is still nascent and requires a more coherent and cohesive approach in order to work more effectively. This involves:
  - Identifying where social innovation is taking place and how it is being applied within the region and the country as a whole, developing a ‘heatmap’ of social innovation practice;
  - Working with associate partners in order to explore more deeply the effectiveness and coherence of organisations claiming to apply social innovation and contributions made to the ecosystem by actors who wouldn’t ordinarily define themselves as social innovators.
  - Defining areas of support, such as financial instruments and other resources that help to drive the social innovation movement;
  - Characterising the societal needs and gaps in existing systems providing pipelines for societal change;
- **National/Regional Strategies** – For the ecosystem to thrive there needs to be a clear commitment to social innovation approaches from government, whether that be regional or local. As such we need to work with policymakers to:
  - Audit current policy and to determine to what extent they might be improved in order to drive positive societal change;
  - Define a theory of change that envisages a step-change in the public sectors approach, by adopting and prioritising social innovation measures;
  - To benchmark national policies against their European counterparts;
  - To propose an action plan for future policies;
- **Quality Management and Monitoring** – In order to evaluate and monitor the project, there should be quality management measures introduced at three different levels:
  - To work with social innovators to determine the extent to which their activities meet the defined criteria that characterises social innovation;
  - To assess the extent to which policy and the ecosystem is helping to nurture and drive social innovation at a regional and national level;
  - To ensure the quality of the Centre itself and to measure its effectiveness within the context of the defined programme.
- **Replication and upscaling** – Having identified concrete examples of where social innovation has made significant impact at a local level, there is a need to explore to what extent it might be scaled or replicated:
  - At a regional/national level to explore how local social innovation might be transferred to different contexts;
  - At a transnational level to identify opportunities for replicating successes, understanding the different contexts and aspects that might need to be adapted within different ecosystems;
  - To reverse the process and adapt best practice cases to the local/regional/national context within the UK.

## Challenges

The Social Innovation Competence Centre programme has been largely conceived as a way of ensuring the European Social Fund (ESF) can be effective across the Union by learning from and tapping into the most effective social innovation initiatives. From the outset, this presents Social Innovation Connect with a major challenge. Other Centres are intrinsically linked with national and regional policymakers since it will help governments determine how

the funding for social innovation is directed. For this reason, ESF Management Authorities were asked to endorse candidate centres in the first instance. In the context of BREXIT, despite endorsement by the Management Authority at the proposal stage, the policymakers within Scotland and the wider UK have absolutely no obligation to work with the Centre. As such it is largely dependent on our own skills in lobbying and the network we are able to build that will determine the success of the project. However, it is also true that the UK and especially Scotland, have a long tradition of social innovation initiatives including historical figures such as the a Welsh textile manufacturer, philanthropist and social reformer based, Robert Owen and his utopian projects in New Lanark, Scotland. More recently, the Scottish Government funded 62 social innovation projects through ESF. It will be important to tap into these kinds of initiatives, to determine how much they have been effective and assess the potential for replication or growth. On the other hand, whilst there are hugely successful public sector social innovation initiatives throughout the UK – e.g. social impact bonds, community share offers etc. – there is a lack of policy cohesion especially in the wake of BREXIT.

But, as described above, the greatest challenge revolves around the ambiguity of the term itself – especially among the general public – and the overlap with other related terms such as social enterprise and social entrepreneurship, that are often applied synonymously, as well as the muddy differentiation between them and more established forms of innovation, entrepreneurship and enterprise. Social enterprise ecosystems have been well established in some countries – e.g. the Scottish Social Enterprise Ecosystem map produced by Scottish Government<sup>1</sup>, which defines areas of support for development, financing, learning, networking and policy in social enterprise. In many ways this further demonstrates UK public sector’s commitment to social innovation but it may also be a chimera since investment in this ecosystem remains relatively low, as previously explained. Furthermore, the majority of support offered to social enterprises / social entrepreneurs often replicates the approach taken within more commercial innovation ecosystems, looking at proven models for incubation, ideation, pitching and growth, that would help grow a conventional business. There is nothing inherently wrong with this but, ultimately, it can mean that support is skewed to those well-developed processes for encouraging and evaluating business innovation, but the more problematic area of societal impact and change is largely neglected because methods for empirical evaluation and measurement are still embryonic, as observed by GIIN. In order to tackle this anomaly, the Centre will seek to explore case studies of social innovation from a wide range of sectors and interrogate to what extent they demonstrate the defined characteristics of social innovation according to the literature.

Importantly, the Centre will seek ways to propose alternative approaches to social innovation that are not exclusively predicated on more conventional processes such as enterprise creation and support and will on the other hand develop metrics for impact measurement. Initially this will largely be predicated on a Theory of Change Model (see below) that we have devised for the Centre. Through this we have envisaged a series of outcomes that by nature are deliberately radical in their intentions. In 2013, Roberto Mangabeira Unger<sup>2</sup> talked about the existence of ‘a vast array of small-scale innovations coming from the grass roots’ which is evidence of the success of social innovation, but that the ‘transformative potential of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.impactfundingpartners.com/sites/default/files/files/2019-06/SE%20Eco-System%20Interactive%20Map%20Scotland%202019%20final.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Unger R.M. (2015) Conclusion: The Task of the Social Innovation Movement. In: Nicholls A., Simon J., Gabriel M. (eds) *New Frontiers in Social Innovation Research*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.  
[https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137506801\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137506801_12)



these small-scale innovations is, however, squandered because they commonly fail to be received and understood.’ Speaking of a more macro approach to social innovation, he proposed a direction consisting of four *projects*:

- Vanguardism: to take a more radical perspective in generating ideas
- Education: to develop programmes that are analytical rather than informational
- Public Service: to find ways in which the state can and should engage civil society
- Deepening democracy: to develop systems whereby populations are more directly involved in the democratic process.

By framing our Theory of Change model to these four long-term projects – which, nearly a decade later, remain as relevant as they were in 2013 – we hope to ensure that Social Innovation Connect balances its immediate short-term objectives with an overarching awareness of the need for radical experimentation.