



From data to decisions: how good data drives good outcomes

A series of workshops held at the UK Innovation Districts Group Summit in June 2026, exploring the relationship between purpose and measurement in Innovation Districts and how a clear understanding of purpose makes it easier to prioritise, interpret and communicate data.

Introduction

Innovation Districts play an increasingly important role in the economic growth story of places across the UK and internationally. They bring together businesses, universities and other knowledge institutions, entrepreneurs, investors, talent and support infrastructure within defined, connected places. Through this concentration of activity, they can support collaboration, knowledge exchange and commercialisation, attract investment and talent, and contribute to longer-term productivity, regeneration and inclusive economic growth.

However, while the potential importance of Innovation Districts is widely recognised, it can be much harder to articulate clearly what they are trying to achieve, how their role is shaped by the places in which they operate, and how their contribution should be evidenced. Discussions about measurement can too easily begin with the question, “What data do we have?”, rather than “What are we trying to achieve?”. This can result in long lists of indicators that are technically measurable but are not necessarily connected to the purpose, priorities or audiences of an Innovation District.

At the UK Innovation Districts Group Summit in June 2026, Metro Dynamics facilitated a set of workshops in which all Summit participants explored the relationship between purpose and measurement in Innovation Districts.

The sessions were deliberately structured to take participants through a sequence of exercises, moving from defining the outcomes an Innovation District is seeking to achieve, to considering how those priorities differ across places, and only then identifying the evidence needed to demonstrate progress. Rather than focusing on indicator selection in isolation, the aim was to show how a clear understanding of purpose makes it easier to prioritise, interpret and communicate data.

The session was intended to help participants:

- Understand the importance of defining success before selecting indicators;
- Explore how the purpose and priorities of Innovation Districts vary across different place contexts;
- Recognise that different stakeholders require different types of evidence; and
- See data not as something technical or abstract, but as a tool for demonstrating progress towards clearly defined objectives.

This write-up has two purposes:

- To reflect on what emerged from the discussions and exercises, particularly the value of starting with purpose before data, the importance of prioritisation, and the role of evidence in helping Innovation Districts articulate their contribution and demonstrate progress.
- To provide the structure and approach used in the workshops and the supporting materials so that the session, or individual elements of it, can be adapted and repeated elsewhere.

What emerged from the discussions?

The discussions brought together participants with a wide range of experiences of Innovation Districts, including those responsible for delivering established districts, organisations involved in supporting and governing them, and places considering how Innovation Districts might form part of their future growth strategies. The following themes emerged both from the discussions themselves and from the way participants approached the exercises.

Innovation Districts can be vehicles for wider place-based change

Innovation Districts are often associated with research commercialisation, start-up formation, inward investment and business growth. However, a broader conception of success emerged, encompassing outcomes relating to people, place and economic opportunity. Alongside innovation and firm growth, significant emphasis was placed on talent attraction and retention, skills development, collaboration between organisations, accessibility, quality of place and the ability to connect local communities and businesses to new opportunities.

This reflects the increasingly important role that Innovation Districts play within wider place-based growth strategies. Rather than being viewed solely as concentrations of research activity or specialist workspace, Innovation Districts are increasingly expected to support a wide range of economic and social outcomes. Success is therefore not only about generating innovation, but also about how that innovation contributes to stronger businesses, better jobs, more attractive places and broader economic opportunity.

The outcomes most associated with successful Innovation Districts are often those that sit between district activity and long-term economic impacts. Collaboration, commercialisation, talent development, investment attraction and business growth were frequently seen as critical areas of change. These outcomes are particularly important because they are both meaningful in their own right and sufficiently close to district activity to be influenced, monitored and evidenced more credibly than wider measures of economic performance alone.

Innovation districts can solve different problems in different places

While there may be broad agreement on the types of outcomes that Innovation Districts can support, there is much less consensus about which outcomes should be prioritised in any given location. The challenges facing places differ significantly, and so too does the role that Innovation Districts are expected to play.

In larger city and metropolitan contexts, attention often focuses on issues such as fragmentation, coordination, navigability and the need to articulate a clearer collective proposition. In places with weaker research capacity, priorities may instead centre on partnership-building, external connectivity, business support and the adoption of innovation. Elsewhere, the emphasis may be on strengthening local ecosystems, connecting institutions and businesses, or creating a stronger identity across multiple places.

Part of the value of Innovation Districts lies in their ability to respond to the specific challenges and opportunities of the places in which they operate. They are not a standard intervention model that can be replicated in the same way everywhere; instead, they play different roles in different contexts.

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A particularly consistent theme across different places was the importance of coordination. Across the range of place contexts, fragmentation, weak connections between organisations, difficulty navigating support systems and a lack of alignment between actors were frequently identified as barriers to innovation-led growth. In response, Innovation Districts were often seen as providing a mechanism for bringing together businesses, universities, investors, public bodies and other partners around shared objectives.

This places relationships, networks and collective action at the centre of the Innovation District model. Physical infrastructure and specialist space remain important, but their value is often realised through the connections and collaboration they enable. In this sense, Innovation Districts are not simply places where innovation happens; they are structures through which innovation activity can be organised, coordinated and amplified.

The implication is that there is unlikely to be a single definition of Innovation District success. Strategies, measurement frameworks and evaluation approaches should reflect the particular role a district is playing within its local context, rather than relying on a common set of indicators or expectations across all places. Identifying the problem is therefore only part of the task: solving it will depend on partners with different stakes in the outcome and different reasons to act.

Success needs to be meaningful to the partners you need to act

This was particularly evident when participants were asked to consider success from different stakeholder perspectives. Innovation Districts depend on businesses, investors, universities, public bodies, entrepreneurs and talent making different decisions and taking different forms of action. These partners may share an interest in the success of the district, but they do not necessarily have the same stake in the problem or define success in the same way.

The workshops highlighted a tendency for Innovation District outcomes and measures to be framed predominantly through a public-policy lens. Measures relating to jobs, skills, inclusion, accessibility, regeneration and wider economic outcomes were readily identified. Comparatively less frequently was evidence to influence the decisions of businesses and investors brought to the fore: whether firms can access the skills, customers, facilities, collaborators and finance they need; whether commercial opportunities and investable pipelines are emerging; or whether the district is reducing the risk or friction associated with locating, investing and growing there.

This matters because measurement is not only about demonstrating accountability. It can also help an Innovation District articulate its value to the organisations whose participation, investment and behaviour are necessary for it to succeed. A local authority, business owner, investor, university and prospective employee may all require different evidence before concluding that a District is working.

A useful measurement framework should therefore ask not only “what does success look like?”, but “success for whom, and whose decisions or behaviour are we trying to influence?”

Prioritisation matters more than comprehensiveness

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the sessions was the importance of prioritisation. Innovation Districts have access to an ever-expanding range of datasets, indicators and performance measures, and conversations about measurement can often become focused on

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what can be measured rather than what should be measured. However, an effective framework is rarely one that captures everything. More often, it is one that focuses attention on the measures that matter most to the priority partners and the changes they need to see.

To reinforce this point, participants were not only asked to select indicators, but were also given permission to discard them. Alongside the menu of potential metrics, each group was provided with a physical "bin" and encouraged to actively remove indicators that were not relevant to the role, priorities or objectives of their Innovation District. This proved to be one of the most engaging elements of the exercise.

The response highlighted an important challenge for Innovation Districts: the issue is rarely a lack of available data. Instead, it is selecting the evidence that is genuinely useful and resisting the temptation to measure everything. Once groups had clarified the purpose of the Innovation District, the outcomes they were seeking to achieve, and the audiences they needed to communicate with, decisions about data became significantly easier. In many cases, participants found it easier to identify indicators that should be discarded than to debate the merits of those that remained.

This has important implications for how Innovation Districts approach monitoring and evaluation. Measurement frameworks can easily become extensive collections of metrics that are difficult to interpret and disconnected from decision-making. The session reinforced the value of a more focused approach, where indicator selection is driven by purpose and where exclusion is viewed as a strength rather than a weakness.

In this sense, good measurement is defined as much by what is left out as by what is included. The most useful indicators are not necessarily those that are easiest to collect or most commonly used elsewhere, but those that demonstrate change to the stakeholders whose decisions or actions matter.

Data works best when it follows purpose

All participants were able to identify a wide range of outcomes that Innovation Districts can support, recognised that priorities differ between places, and that different stakeholders require different forms of evidence. But many highlighted that that sequence is not necessarily what happens 'on the ground', where quite frequently it can be a case of data first.

The workshops underpinned that Innovation Districts should start with a clear understanding of purpose before turning to questions of measurement. Rather than asking "what data do we have?", it may be more useful to begin by asking:

- What change are we trying to achieve?
- What role is the Innovation District playing in achieving it?
- Who needs to act, invest or behave differently for that change to happen?
- What does success look like from their perspective?
- What evidence would be meaningful to them?

Only then does the question of which indicators to use become meaningful. In this sense, the workshop reinforced a simple but important principle: good data does not define purpose; it helps demonstrate whether purpose is being achieved.

The workshop structure

Each workshop was a 50-minute facilitated session comprising three linked activities. These were designed to take participants from defining what success looks like for an Innovation District, through considering how this differs between places, to identifying the evidence required to demonstrate progress to different audiences.

The session deliberately did not ask participants to construct a full theory of change. Instead, it used a simplified logic model to focus attention on the short- to medium-term outcomes that Innovation Districts can influence, measure and manage. The rationale for Innovation Districts, their core inputs and assets, and their potential longer-term impacts were provided as a starting point, leaving participants to concentrate on the changes that should happen between these elements.

Activity 1: Defining Innovation District outcomes

The first activity established a shared starting point for the workshop by asking participants to consider what changes an Innovation District should be expected to enable.

Participants were introduced to a simplified Innovation District logic model (over page). The model set out:

- the economic rationale for Innovation Districts;
- the inputs and assets needed to support them;
- a blank section for short- to medium-term outcomes; and
- the longer-term impacts to which an Innovation District may contribute.

Working in small groups, participants were asked to complete the outcomes section by reflecting on three questions:

- What is changing because an Innovation District exists?
- What behaviours or activities are different?
- What would we expect to see more, or less, of if it is working well?

The intention was to encourage participants to distinguish outcomes from the activities undertaken by an Innovation District and from the longer-term economic impacts that it may help to support.

This focused discussion on the part of the logic chain that is often most useful for management and measurement: the observable changes that can reasonably be influenced over the short to medium term. These might include, for example, increased collaboration between industry and academia, higher levels of business innovation, more firms scaling and growing, improved talent attraction and retention, or stronger pathways from research to commercialisation.

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Figure 1. Simplified Innovation District Logic Model

Innovation districts are intended to create the conditions for innovation-led growth by bringing together knowledge-producing organisations, businesses, entrepreneurs, investors, talent and support infrastructure within a defined, well-connected place. The rationale is that proximity, density, mixed-use environments and coordinated governance can increase collaboration, accelerate knowledge exchange and commercialisation, attract investment and talent, and support longer-term productivity, regeneration and inclusive economic impacts.			
Why? (Rationale)	What is needed? (Inputs)	What do we want to happen? (Outcomes)	What difference it makes? (Impacts)
Innovation districts respond to key challenges in the UK economy: • Innovation increasingly relies on collaboration • Proximity and density support knowledge sharing • Strong places help attract talent and investment • There is often a gap between research and commercial opportunity • Productivity growth requires new ideas and innovation • Effective innovation requires coordination across actors	To create an innovation district, several core ingredients are required: • Physical assets (e.g. buildings, labs, workspace) • Knowledge institutions (e.g. universities, R&D organisations) • People and talent • Finance and investment • Business support and programmes • Leadership and governance • Supportive place conditions (e.g. connectivity, amenities)	<i>Short- to medium-term changes enabled by inputs:</i>	Longer-term economic impact: • Economic growth • Productivity improvements • Increased business growth and investment • Growth in high-value jobs • Stronger sector clusters and specialisms • Enhanced reputation as a centre for innovation

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Activity 2: Exploring different place contexts

The second activity tested how the role and priorities of an Innovation District might change in response to different local conditions.

Participants selected one of four fictional place profiles:

1. **Greater Norchester**, a megacity with multiple innovation areas;
2. **Westford**, a large city with a core anchor Innovation District;
3. **Midshire**, a polycentric region without a single dominant centre; and
4. **Ashway**, a smaller city without a major research-intensive university.

Each profile presented a different mix of assets, opportunities and challenges. Greater Norchester combined the scale and depth of a major global city with fragmentation and overlapping innovation propositions. Westford had a successful central Innovation District but faced questions about how its benefits could reach surrounding communities and other parts of the city. Midshire possessed complementary specialisms across several towns but lacked a single anchor or unified external proposition. Ashway had a smaller research base but strong potential for applied, employer-led innovation grounded in practical business needs.

Using a structured worksheet, groups discussed:

- the main innovation challenges and opportunities within the place;
- the role that an Innovation District could realistically play; and
- the outcomes that should be prioritised in response.

The exercise was intended to demonstrate that there is no single model for an Innovation District. Priorities should reflect the economic context, assets and institutional landscape of a place, as well as the particular gaps or opportunities that an Innovation District is well positioned to address. The activity therefore moved participants from a broad set of possible Innovation District outcomes towards a more selective and place-specific view of success.

Place Profile 1: Greater Norchester, Megacity with multiple innovation areas

Greater Norchester is one of the largest and most internationally connected city-regions in the country. It has a large population, a deep labour market, several globally recognised universities, major teaching hospitals, corporate headquarters, cultural institutions and a well-developed investor ecosystem. Over time, different parts of the city have developed distinct innovation identities. A life sciences quarter has grown around one of the major hospital campuses; a digital and AI cluster has emerged close to the central business district; a creative-tech neighbourhood has developed in a former industrial area; and an advanced manufacturing and robotics testbed has been established on the edge of the city.

These places have grown through different combinations of institutional leadership, market demand, public investment and local entrepreneurial activity. Each has its own networks, branding, workspace offer and programme infrastructure. Several local agencies, universities and development bodies promote innovation activity in different parts of the city, sometimes using similar language about start-ups, global talent, frontier technologies and investment readiness.

For firms and investors, Greater Norchester offers scale, diversity and access to an exceptional concentration of skills, capital and customers. However, the innovation landscape can be difficult to navigate. Businesses looking for support may encounter multiple entry points, overlapping accelerator programmes and different district-level propositions. Internationally, Greater Norchester is widely recognised as an innovative city, but competitors with simpler and more unified propositions are increasingly visible in global investment and talent markets.

The city continues to attract investment and high-skilled workers, but growth pressures are also visible. Commercial rents are rising in the most successful districts, transport networks are congested at peak times, and housing affordability is affecting the ability of some workers and founders to remain in the city. Smaller firms can benefit from the density of opportunity, but may also struggle to access the right facilities, networks and finance without strong connections into established institutions.

Place Profile 2: Westford, Large city with core anchor innovation centre

Westford is a large regional city with a strong industrial history and a growing reputation for knowledge-led growth. Over the past decade, the area around the central station, main university and teaching hospital has been transformed into a recognised Innovation District. New lab space, co-working facilities, public realm improvements and business support programmes have attracted life sciences companies, digital firms, start-ups and specialist professional services.

The district is now one of the city's most visible economic assets. It features prominently in inward investment material and is frequently used as evidence that Westford is repositioning itself as a modern, innovation-led economy. The university has increased its commercialisation activity, the hospital is involved in more research partnerships, and the district has become a popular location for graduates, founders and growing businesses.

Beyond the core, the picture is more mixed. Some surrounding neighbourhoods have lower qualification levels, weaker employment outcomes and limited awareness of the opportunities emerging within the district. Employers in the Innovation District report skills shortages, while residents nearby often do not see clear routes into the jobs being created. Other employment locations across the city including older industrial estates, town centres and outer neighbourhoods are not always connected to the innovation narrative or to the business support available in the core.

The district's success has also created practical pressures. Demand for workspace is high, and some early-stage businesses are finding it difficult to remain in the area as rents rise. There is growing interest from developers and investors, but some civic partners are concerned that the district could become detached from wider city priorities unless stronger links are built with communities, local suppliers, schools, colleges and firms elsewhere in Westford.

Place Profile 3: Midshire, Polycentric region

Midshire is a region made up of several medium-sized towns and smaller cities, connected by road and rail but without one dominant urban centre. Each place has its own economic identity. One town has a long-standing advanced manufacturing base; another has a growing digital and creative sector; a third is home to a specialist technical college and training campus; and a fourth has attracted clean energy firms linked to nearby infrastructure assets.

The region has a substantial business base, particularly among SMEs and mid-sized firms with strong technical capabilities. Innovation activity is often practical and industry-led, focused on improving production processes, adopting new technologies, developing prototypes and solving operational problems. There are pockets of collaboration between employers, colleges and local public bodies, but these relationships are often strongest within individual towns or sectors rather than across the region as a whole.

Midshire is not usually perceived externally as a single innovation economy. Investment propositions are often developed by individual local authorities or institutions, each emphasising their own assets and sites. Firms in one part of the region are not always aware of specialist facilities, skills provision or potential collaborators elsewhere. National funders and investors sometimes find the region difficult to understand because there is no obvious flagship district, major research campus or single city-centre innovation hub.

At the same time, the region has advantages that larger cities lack. Midshire is comparatively affordable, land is available for expansion, and several firms are looking for locations where they can test, manufacture and scale new products. The region's towns are close enough to collaborate but distinct enough to offer different specialisms. Partners increasingly recognise that the combined scale of the region may be more compelling than the offer of any individual place, but there is no settled view on how this should be organised or branded.

Place Profile 4: Ashway, Small city without a major research university

Ashway is a medium-sized city with a strong industrial and service economy. It does not have a large research-intensive university, but it does have a modern teaching university, a well-regarded further education college, specialist training providers and a number of innovative SMEs. The city's business base is strongest in areas such as logistics technology, health services innovation, low-carbon retrofit, food production, materials processing and digital adoption in traditional sectors.

Innovation in Ashway tends to be practical rather than research-led. Firms are often focused on improving processes, adopting equipment, developing new service models, responding to supply chain pressures and solving workforce challenges. Many businesses would not describe themselves as part of an “innovation ecosystem”, even when they are investing in new technologies or working with education providers to develop new skills provision.

Compared with larger university cities, Ashway attracts less research funding, produces fewer spin-outs and has a thinner investor network. There are fewer specialist labs and less national visibility around frontier research. Some civic leaders worry that Ashway will struggle to compete if innovation is defined mainly in terms of patents, university commercialisation or venture-backed start-ups.

However, Ashway has several assets that could support a different model. Employers have strong relationships with the college and teaching university, and there is growing interest in using public-sector procurement, demonstrator projects and employer-led skills programmes to stimulate innovation. The city has affordable workspace, available development sites and a reputation for practical problem-solving. Local firms often have close customer relationships and a strong understanding of real-world market needs, but they may need more support to adopt technologies, access finance, test new products and connect to external expertise.

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Activity 3: Selecting indicators from a stakeholder perspective

The final activity introduced data, but only after participants had considered the outcomes they wanted to achieve and the place context in which those outcomes were being pursued.

Participants were given a shortlist of indicators covering themes relating to innovation, place and people, drawn from the Innovation District Group Indicator Bank. The measures included indicators based on existing datasets, such as knowledge-intensive jobs, business creation, venture capital investment, productivity, brownfield capacity, public transport accessibility, commercial activity, labour market participation, incomes and qualifications. The wider longlist also identified measures that would require additional or primary data collection, including collaborative research and development projects, business awareness of support, employer engagement with education providers, and participation in innovation programmes.

Individuals within each group were asked to approach the task from one of five stakeholder perspectives:

- business owner or scale-up;
- start-up founder;
- graduate or talent;
- local or national government; and
- investor or venture capital provider.

From the perspective of their allocated stakeholder, participants considered what evidence they would need to be convinced that the Innovation District was succeeding. Groups then selected a small number of priority indicators and explained why those measures mattered and how they related to the outcomes identified earlier in the session.

The exercise also highlighted that some perspectives were easier to populate than others. Participants readily identified measures of wider place and public-policy outcomes, while measures that spoke directly to the priorities and decision-making of businesses and investors were less prominent. This raises a wider question about whether existing measurement frameworks are sufficiently attuned to the full range of partners they need to engage and influence.

The purpose was not to produce a single, definitive indicator framework. Instead, the activity demonstrated that different audiences may look for different forms of evidence and that a useful measurement framework needs to connect three things: the outcomes being pursued, the characteristics of the place, and the stakeholders with whom the Innovation District needs to communicate.

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Figure 2. Innovation Districts Group Indicator Shortlist

	Indicator	Description
Innovation	Knowledge jobs share	Jobs created in knowledge economy
	New start-up creation	Year-on-year change in the number of businesses
	Jobs concentration	Total jobs per km ²
	VC investment per capita	Venture capital invested per resident
	GVA per worker	Productivity of the district workforce
	FDI project flow	Number of inward investment projects (annual)
	Collaborative R&D projects	Strength of industry-research collaboration
Place	Brownfield capacity	% of area previously developed but not currently in use
	Public transport reach from city	% of population with 30 minute public transport journey of district
	Industry diversity	% of all industries represented within the district
	Commercial rent levels	Average rent per sq ft
	Commercial floorspace utilisation	Share of workspace actively in use
	Business awareness of support	Clarity and visibility of innovation offer
	SME engagement in innovation programmes	Reach of innovation support across businesses
	Footfall	Pedestrian activity in the district
People	People economically active	
	Population turnover	Proportion of households that have moved out of district in last 5 years
	People with adequate income	Score based on number of families receiving benefits
	Non-degree job share	Share of advertised / filled jobs not requiring a degree
	Local residents in good jobs	Share of residents in high-quality, well-paid jobs
	NVQ3+ / higher qualification share	Share of population with higher-level qualifications
	Employer-education engagement	Share of firms engaging with local education providers
	Young people engaged	e.g. number attending district hosted events

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About Metro Dynamics

Metro Dynamics was founded in 2015 to support devolution, local economic growth and innovation-led development.

We help places understand their strengths and opportunities, develop ambitious but practical strategies and build the partnerships, capabilities and delivery models needed to achieve lasting economic impact.

Our work spans economic strategy, innovation ecosystems, sector and cluster development, investment, regeneration and place leadership across the UK.

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