



The Goal Programme for Public Service Reform and Innovation

Evaluation Executive Summary
October 2019



About the Goal Programme

The Goal Programme for Public Service Reform and Innovation (Goal Programme) supports systemic change in public services in Ireland and Northern Ireland with the aim of improving outcomes for people using public services. The Atlantic Philanthropies funded the programme, providing €10 million towards its development. The Centre for Effective Services (CES) delivered the programme in partnership with seven government departments in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The Programme was established in 2016 and the project work concluded in 2019.

The Goal Programme centred around nine strategic sectoral reform projects in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

CES support for the Goal Programme included gathering and reviewing evidence; preparing evidence reviews; co-designing and developing tools and materials; design and delivery of training and professional development programmes; and running activities and events to share learning about how to achieve reform of public services.

Projects included:

- **Developing Evidence and Knowledge Management**

(Department of Health, Ireland)

- **Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing Pathfinder**

(Department of Health, Ireland)

- **Building Collaborative Working Practices**

(Department of Education and Skills, Ireland)

- **Using Data to Inform Policy**

(Department of Education and Skills, Ireland)

- **Reform of Youth Funding Schemes**

(Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Ireland)

- **Evaluation Training for Civil Servants**

(Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Ireland)

- **Leadership Development Programmes**

(The Executive Office, Northern Ireland)

- **Children and Young People's Strategies**

(Departments of Education and Health, Northern Ireland)

- **Embedding Innovation**

(Department of Finance, Northern Ireland)

An Advisory Group of top public servants from Ireland and Northern Ireland provided oversight of the programme.

Context to the Goal Programme

The origins of what became the Goal Programme for Public Service Reform and Innovation go back to a 2013 meeting of the board of The Atlantic Philanthropies (Atlantic) in Dublin with a group of government ministers from Ireland about how Atlantic might make best use of their final grants to Ireland. A lot of the discussion centred on the need for more effective coordination and joining up of government services. There was a perceived need for capacity building to ensure better delivery of services for citizens.

The governments in Ireland and Northern Ireland both had existing public sector reform programmes, and the Atlantic board saw support for the development of aspects of these programmes as a way of furthering the achievement of their social goals across the island of Ireland, targeted at meeting the needs of disadvantaged citizens and communities. Early in 2015, the Atlantic Philanthropies requested a formal grant proposal from CES for the Goal Programme.

Established in 2008, CES works with agencies, government departments and service providers across the island of Ireland. They are a non-profit organisation with skills and expertise in areas such as education, health, children and young people and social services.

About the Evaluation

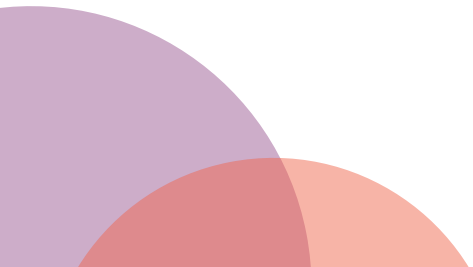
CES commissioned the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) to conduct the evaluation of the Goal Programme. The purpose of the evaluation was to assess what happened across the programme, identify what changed and provide insights into what contributed to those changes, and disseminate the findings to inform future public service reforms. It is not an evaluation of the individual projects, rather their collective contribution to the Goal Programme outcomes. The evaluation, conducted between September 2017 and December 2018, focused on addressing four key questions:

1. How has the Programme been operationalised, implemented and delivered?
2. Has the Programme been implemented as intended? What were the key factors that have been central to its implementation?
3. What tools, resources and materials have proved most useful?
4. Have (and to what extent have) the short-term outcomes been achieved, considering the overall timeline and different development stages of the nine projects?

This executive summary, based on the IPA's evaluation of the programme:

- Highlights progress with regard to achieving the desired short-term outcomes
- Identifies the factors that can help and hinder public sector reform
- Draws out lessons for future public service reform programmes and projects.

The evaluation team based their conclusions on a range of sources used during the evaluation, including key informant interviews, participant workshops, questionnaire analysis, case vignettes and documentary analysis.



Six short-term outcomes

In developing the Goal Programme, CES identified a number of short and long-term outcomes. A central focus of the evaluation was on assessing the degree of achievement of six agreed short-term outcomes listed below.



1

Staff engaged in new ways of working

The Goal Programme has been successful in helping staff engage in new ways of working. Across most of the projects, participants referred to new ways of working to support positive cross-cutting outcomes. For example, participants

in the Children and Young People's Strategies project referred to more joined-up working across departments to develop and deliver the strategies.

2

Exemplar projects embedding new ways of working in the public and civil services

Participants in the Goal Programme were positive overall that the outcomes from their project would be sustainable. However, given delays in implementation of most of the projects, plus

the fact that projects were phased in with some starting later than others, it was difficult to draw firm conclusions regarding the degree to which the work was embedded at the time the evaluation concluded.

3

Improved collaborative working processes within and between government departments

There was evidence of the Goal Programme leading to improved collaborative working practices within and between government departments. For example, the *Using Data to Inform Policy* project

has contributed to greater collaboration of sections across the department in how they share and use data. However, overall, cross-departmental collaboration had been modest.

4

Public and civil servants connecting learning and practice between Ireland and Northern Ireland

The main arenas where connecting learning and practice across the jurisdictions was viewed in a positive light were the Advisory Group and two learning days, held in 2017 and 2018. The Advisory

Group was seen as providing a 'safe space' where the top managers of each civil service could share experiences. Departmental staff involved in the Goal Programme attended two learning days, where they could share their experience and learning. However, at the project level, the achievement of this outcome was less well developed.

5

Strengthened skills and capacity within the civil and public services

Alongside the development of new ways of working, this outcome was one where significant progress was made. Project participants identified a number of enhanced skills and

capacities resulting from their participation. For example, in both the *Evaluation Training for Civil Servants* and *Leadership Development Programme*, the projects themselves carried out evaluations that indicated that participants had strengthened their skills and capacity.

6

Increased numbers of civil and public servants with experience of driving improvements in outcomes and working collaboratively

This was another very positively reviewed outcome by departmental staff involved with the Goal Programme. As with the embedding

issue, however, challenges remained regarding spreading the benefits from projects more widely across the system.

Six factors that can help or hinder public service reform

The evaluation team gave particular attention at the evaluation workshops to identifying significant factors that drove success and presented challenges/barriers to reform during the Goal Programme. Drawing from the workshops and evidence from the interviews, these factors, grouped into six themes, capture the learning from the evaluation about what helps and what hinders reform.

Leveraging senior buy-in and sponsorship

The evaluation team identified two main roles for senior level sponsorship, heads of government departments and the next management tier down:

- a. A largely 'symbolic' role, giving status and credibility to the planned change, and
- b. A practical role, where particular behaviours and actions can help or hinder reform.

A critically important practical role for the project sponsors was in terms of modelling behaviours that support change and innovation.

Going with the grain: aligning with context, priorities and what has gone before

Fitting in with public service-wide or corporate goals/objectives and strategies, or with earlier initiatives or consultations was helpful in terms of giving the projects traction. This made for an easier process, as staff could recognise that the projects were important. In some cases, such as the *Building Collaborative Working Practices* project and the *Leadership Development Programme*, they linked with wider public service reform priorities identified in high-level reform plans: The Civil Service Renewal Plan in Ireland and the draft Programme for Government in Northern Ireland, respectively. In other cases, such as the *Reform of Youth Funding Schemes* and *Embedding Innovation* projects, the issues tackled followed

on from previous work identified as a government priority. In these cases, participants saw the projects as a clear and logical progression of the work.

Getting and keeping the right people/skills/expertise and managing succession

Departmental project leads are crucial to project development and implementation, as their role is to act as change agents. Once the project team is established, it is important to invest in their capacity and development. Dealing with staff turnover can be a challenge. Better use of succession planning and knowledge management can ease the difficulties.

Accessing and using external supports

Putting an emphasis on co-design and co-production of projects, through wise and careful use of external supports, plays an important role in skills and capacity development. The research and facilitation skills provided through CES' external support helped in progressing the projects. Another key role for the external support was to strengthen capacity of the departmental teams.

In the case of the *Knowledge Management* project in the Department of Health, departmental personnel emphasised what they referred to as 'the benefits of a middle ground approach' - not on your own, but also not commercial consultants coming in and telling

you what to do. CES people became 'part of the journey', 'a partner and a critical friend with them on the journey'. It was noted that this is somewhat unusual for the civil service.

Applying appropriate tools and techniques to support change

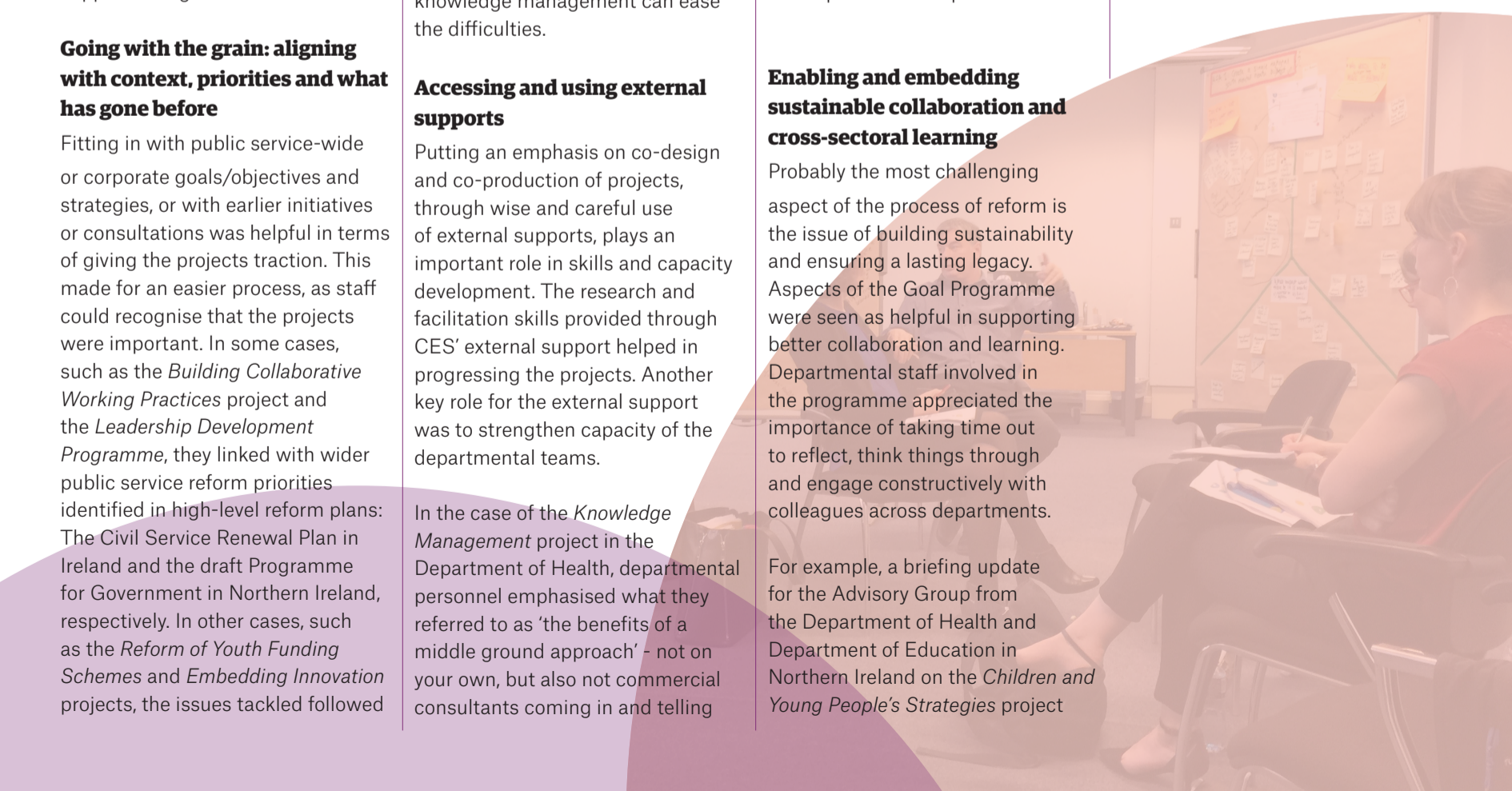
Two aspects of the technical supports provided by CES were particularly helpful to reform projects. One was the analytical frameworks, project management and facilitation skills provided. The other was the identification and presentation of evidence to underpin the change. Both support project development and implementation.

Enabling and embedding sustainable collaboration and cross-sectoral learning

Probably the most challenging aspect of the process of reform is the issue of building sustainability and ensuring a lasting legacy. Aspects of the Goal Programme were seen as helpful in supporting better collaboration and learning. Departmental staff involved in the programme appreciated the importance of taking time out to reflect, think things through and engage constructively with colleagues across departments.

For example, a briefing update for the Advisory Group from the Department of Health and Department of Education in Northern Ireland on the *Children and Young People's Strategies* project

noted that the Goal Programme had achieved 'the development of a mind set and a willingness to pursue other projects jointly across departments'. Among those projects identified are a trial Family Drug and Alcohol Court between the Department of Health and the Department of Justice, and a joint project between the Department of Health and the Department for Communities, which aims to support the most vulnerable families to secure access to benefit entitlements.



Seven lessons for future public service reform programmes

Seven lessons learned from the evaluation of the Goal Programme, of interest to those engaged in future reform initiatives, are set out below. These lessons are based on the evaluation of the Goal Programme, plus the evaluation team's knowledge of public service reform initiatives more generally. The lessons resonate with an OECD (2018) report on innovation in government, particularly around the use of 'systems approaches'.

Focus on projects where desired outcomes are clear but the path there is uncertain

A Goal Programme-type intervention, running exemplar projects and using appropriate external supports, is most appropriate for mid- to large-scale projects, which are focused on a real issue of concern to the public, with cross-organisational boundaries, or ones that address serious capacity issues across organisations, and which are likely to provide fruitful opportunities for doing things differently. A Goal Programme approach is particularly useful when there is scope to shape and design the project and use external expertise to plug gaps rather than as an extra pair of hands. In other words, this type of approach works best when the desired outcomes are reasonably clear but where the means of getting there need exploration and clarification.

Build strong but flexible governance arrangements

Flexibility and adaptability in the application of governance arrangements is important if they are to be supportive of change. Used rigidly, governance arrangements can become an additional administrative constraint on projects. Maintaining oversight but applying it in a flexible manner, for example, not overly formulaic and proportionate in manner, allows for adaptation, but at the same time imposes a discipline on project management and accountability.

The governance arrangements put in place – the use of Memoranda of Understanding, the Advisory Group, project sponsors, project leads, and formal reporting requirements, were generally seen as providing a good framework to support reform projects in the Goal Programme. The Advisory Group played an important role in bringing senior leaders together from both parts of the island to oversee and discuss reform. Project sponsors set the tone for reform. In particular, in cross-organisational projects, the role of the sponsor in freeing up the project team from the day-to-day constraints of departmental responsibilities can be crucial to success.

Encourage leadership - at all levels

Distributed leadership builds the capacity for change and improvement across levels and organisations. As a leadership model, it moves away from a simple view of leadership from the top to more collaborative and shared leadership. Organisations need to support the development of middle management change leadership capabilities.

For example, the cross-departmental project team working on the *Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing Pathfinder* project were given the freedom to come up with creative solutions to the issues facing youth mental health services. They were tasked with piloting new models for delivering whole-of-government projects. This 'light touch' approach, and detachment from traditional departmental hierarchies, was seen as particularly important in allowing the group the freedom to explore options. It did, however, present challenges for some team members, and their line managers.

Balance pace and urgency with the need to take time and be iterative about change

A tension present in reform efforts is balancing the need for a sense of urgency and pace to ensure implementation happens, with a recognition that change in the public sector takes time. Experience suggests that a managed reform process requires having an identifiable person responsible for implementing a reform, deadlines for implementation and a forum for holding them to account. At the same time, the process should create space and time for creative solutions and options to emerge.



Take care over team selection and support their development

The pace of change and considerable amount of substitutions of personnel in many cross-agency initiatives can erode team effectiveness. It can also be difficult for staff to divorce themselves from the realities of their organisational boundaries and accountability structures. There is a consequent need to free up team members and invest in their skills and capacity development.

Make appropriate use of external support

Of particular benefit are two aspects of external support. One is the evidence base it can provide to support reform. The production of supporting documentation, analytically rigorous but accessible in manner, provides a foundation for reform efforts. The other main aspect is the facilitation tools, techniques and expertise that external support can provide.

A particular aspect of the co-design of the Goal Programme was CES' expertise. As noted by a department official, it was 'not CES replacing civil servants work, it was another skill set'. One departmental project lead referred to 'the value of an independent, evidence-based approach'. The rigour, project management, facilitation and presentation skills of CES and their associates were key attributes in progressing the projects.

Plan for sustainability and embedding of reform

It is important to be conscious of the issue of sustainability from the start. Reform succession is also vital but often forgotten. Are there people to step in and continue the reform when others move on? Staff turnover is going to happen, so there is a need to find ways to manage it better. Better succession management, use of knowledge management, etc. can help in this regard.

In Northern Ireland, the *Leadership Development Programme* for senior civil servants has played an important role in driving and embedding the culture change needed to embed reform. Participants on the programme noted much greater collaboration and a changed leadership culture and referred to a greater sense of collective responsibility for the future development of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. This collaborative focus is being further developed through a Top Leaders Forum, arising from the success of the *Leadership Development Programme*. This forum is a senior management network for Grade 2s and 3s (permanent secretaries and deputy secretaries) that meets monthly. One senior manager described the forum as illustrative of a change in culture at senior levels towards more engagement, collaboration and networking.



Conclusion

The Goal Programme illustrates an innovative and novel approach to supporting public service reform. There is now a group of public servants thinking and acting differently and working in new ways. This would not have happened without their participation in the Goal Programme.

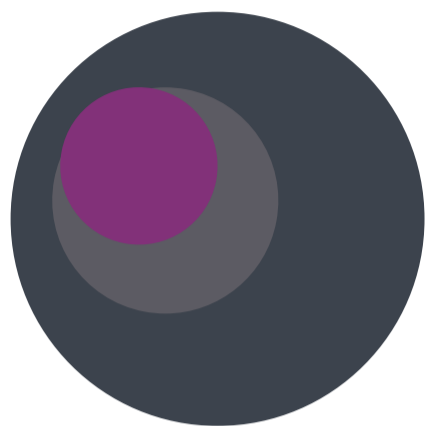
A lesson from the Goal Programme is that external support of the type provided through the programme can support capacity building within the civil service rather than replace it. The civil service used the particular expertise of CES, backed by funding support from The Atlantic Philanthropies, to assist their own staff to build skills and capacity, and work on reform projects.

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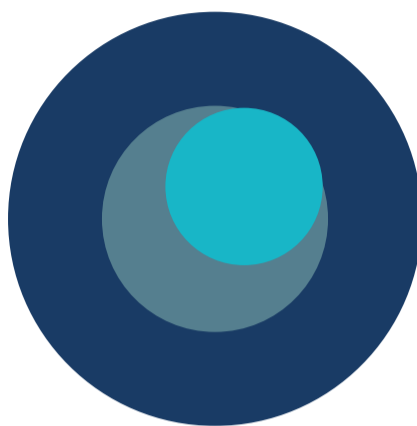
reform efforts. The other main aspect is the facilitation tools, techniques and expertise that external support can provide. Providing public servants with the tools and techniques to work together collaboratively and build capability can provide lasting benefits to reform efforts.

There is strong evidence that engagement of external support is most successful when the external partners have a good understanding of the realities of the public sector context of reform and appreciation of the need to balance competing demands and accountability requirements.

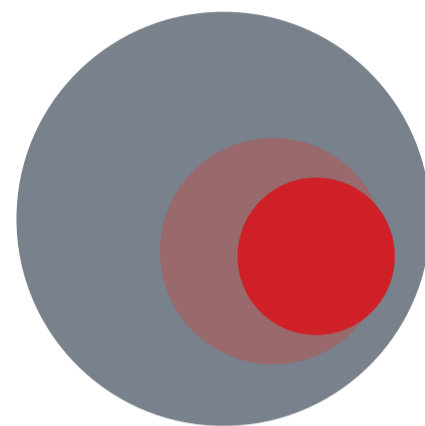
Goal Vignettes



1 Distinctive Elements
of the Goal Programme



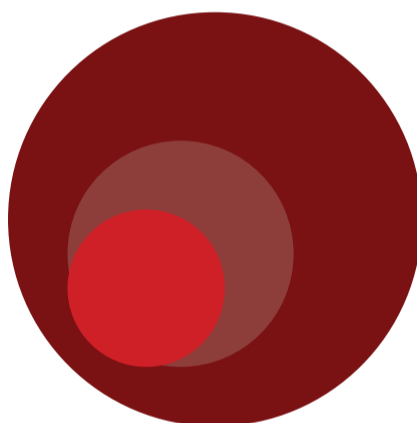
2 Project Selection for
the Goal Programme



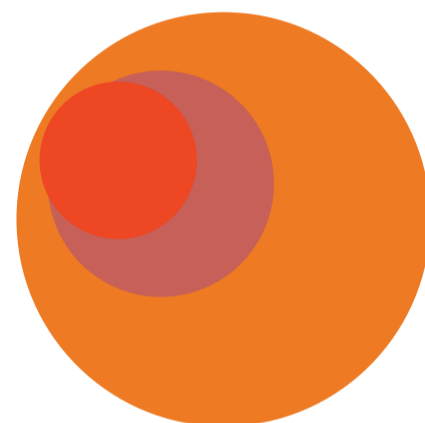
3 Distributed Leadership
in the Goal Programme
for Public Service Reform



4 Strengthening Skills and Capacity
within the Civil and Public Service



5 Promoting the Use
of Evidence and Data



6 Sustaining New
Ways of Working

To read the Vignettes, click on the title or visit:
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