

On the right track

Learning from investment in Prevention
and Early Intervention in Ireland

Leadership

Outcomes Report



ON THE
RIGHT
TRACK

Produced by



Promoting Systems Change in Prevention and Early Intervention Services for Children and Young People

The Role of Leadership: Reflections from a Funder

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Key messages

Systems change to improve outcomes using evidence-based approaches takes time, effort and new ways of working

Funders need to undertake long-term strategic planning and encourage their grantees to do the same, even if funding is short-term

Building capacity involves more than funding project delivery

Systems change involves focused work with multiple stakeholders

Building and maintaining relationships is key to success

Background

The Atlantic Philanthropies (Atlantic) is a limited life foundation which has focused on four critical social issues: Ageing, Children & Youth, Population Health, and Reconciliation & Human Rights. Programmes funded by Atlantic have operated in Australia, Bermuda, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, South Africa, the United States and Vietnam.

Atlantic has been dedicated to bring about lasting change in the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable people. The objective has been to solve urgent and major problems with maximum impact. It has invested grants totalling more than \$6.5 billion globally and \$1.5 billion on the island of Ireland over a limited timeframe (2002-2016) with the donor's active participation. It is due to complete its grant-making in 2016 and close its doors by 2020, becoming the largest Foundation ever to spend down its capital investments.

For more than a decade, Atlantic, sometimes in conjunction with Government and other organisations, invested over €208million / £146million in 30 partner agencies and community groups running 52 prevention and early intervention services and programmes for children and families across the island of Ireland. This initiative was known as the *Prevention and Early Intervention* (PEI) Initiative. Its goal was to drive systems change in services which would improve outcomes for children and young people. This was done by building and strengthening connections particularly between policymakers, researchers and service providers. Funded projects used an evidence-based, outcomes focused approach and were independently evaluated.

Several reflective pieces have been written about Atlantic's grant-making approach in different countries with the goal of sharing the learning from what has worked and what could have been improved.¹ The *On the Right Track* project has synthesised much of the learning from the PEI initiative about how to improve children's outcomes in a variety of areas, as well as how to implement evidence-based services² (www.effectiveservices.org). This report aims to add to that body of knowledge. Interviews and focus groups were undertaken in 2013 with senior staff from the Atlantic teams in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Although retrospective, the report provides useful insights into how Atlantic aimed to support systems change at different stages and what can be learned from that with the benefit of hindsight.

Key learning

Systems change to improve outcomes using evidence-based approaches takes time, effort and new ways of working

The *Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative* stimulated change at many levels. This included capacity building with services to use evidence informed approaches, strategic planning, building new alliances, changing practitioner behaviour, working with policy-makers to encourage change in mainstream services, and robust evaluation of service implementation and effectiveness. A key element in the initiative was trying to grow and support leaders at all levels of the system in policy, practice and academic-based research. Change has taken many years, brought many challenges and is still ongoing. It is important for funders undertaking this type of work to remain committed, stay on track and not switch priorities, even when change may be slower or less visible than anticipated. Using an evidence-based approach provides reassurance and helps sustain confidence that planned actions will likely lead to the planned outcomes.

Funders need to undertake long-term strategic planning and encourage their grantees to do the same, even if funding is short-term

Given the current economic climate this is challenging; but a commitment to outcomes requires a different approach. Funders should focus on outcomes and not just activities and outputs. The following strategies were found to be useful:

- Funders should use logic models to plan coherent development of an overall initiative. They should also support the organisations they fund to develop logic models for each of the individual components or services. Logic modelling can help to structure thinking, act as a framework for monitoring progress and outcomes, and feed into communication strategies. It can also aid the development of a common language, as well as shared ownership and collective agreement over the outcomes that the initiative aims to improve. This is particularly important when a new way of working is being created across different areas and sectors.
- From the start, think about how the impact of the work can be sustained and develop projects accordingly. Consider how projects could potentially be mainstreamed, replicated, scaled up or developed further in the future, and who/what else the projects should link with to maximise their effectiveness. Support organisations to undertake some business planning in the early stages, as this may influence how they develop their operating model to be most effective in the short- and longer-term. Useful strategies include considering strategic positioning (such as leveraged funding, building up partnerships, collaborations or consortia working), and business modelling to take account of future potential sources of income (such as other grant-funding opportunities or generated income from franchising, train-the-trainer approaches, direct or indirect service delivery etc).
- Focus on a small number of grants/organisations and support these fully – offer depth rather than breadth.
- As a funder, take the opportunity to address the complexity of systems and needs, allowing flexibility to create a funding response, within appropriate controls. Remember throughout the process that worthwhile change does not always need to be dramatic or involve ‘the next big thing’ – improvements also come from making small changes that are consistent, effective and sustainable.

- Continuous learning is important to improve what you do as a funder, as well as in the projects you support. Funders should be learning organisations which refine what they do by reflecting on challenges and successes, as well as incorporating insights from other areas. Draw on the internal expertise that exists within your own organisation across jurisdictions and teams to improve your thinking and share learning. Provide independent renowned expertise that can travel the journey with you as a funder, as well as making this external support available to grantees.

Building capacity involves more than funding project delivery

For systems change to be realised, capacity building and additional support are also important:

- Evidence-informed decision-making is key to success, and using evidence of ‘what works’ should be mandatory requirements of grantees. Many organisations need support with this. Provide resources to grantees to allow them to dedicate time and expertise to make better use of evidence, consider and plan new services, prepare for a new way of working, and support implementation.
- Fund the exploration stage – services need resources to be able to undertake needs analysis, stakeholder engagement and choose the approach most likely to work with their client group. Funders often do not support this stage, but it is essential to resource this properly when attempting to change practice. It also gives funders an opportunity to better understand the leadership in and potential of an organisation.
- Use data regularly to examine implementation as projects develop. Help organisations to use evidence to guide decision-making throughout the life cycle of the project, and not just at the end of the funding. Good planning, monitoring and open, ongoing communication are all important.
- Focus on good quality, robust evaluation as part of the initiative, particularly for newly developed services. Require services to evaluate their outcomes and help them do this by providing support in how to commission and manage evaluations.
- Ensure that organisations have access to the right kind of specialised support and expertise. Many organisations will recognise that they do not always have all the expertise ‘in-house’ which they may need but struggle to find and therefore need to use external supports. Funders and commissioners can connect services with focused and effective sources of support, particularly around strategic planning, using evidence, evaluation, policy and dissemination.
- Establish Expert Advisory Committees (EAC) for services to provide them with support and independent perspectives. Nominate your own representative for consistency across all the EACs in an initiative. They may be able to provide ‘bird’s-eye’ insights into the common challenges and successful elements across projects.
- If grantees are using international experts, encourage them to think outside of themselves and how these experts might be useful to other organisations.
- Improve quality by supporting organisations to have strong leadership at Board level.
- Do not underestimate the time and energy needed to support internal changes within organisations, particularly towards adopting a more evidence-informed approach to their work. Using funding to change how an organisation works in one part of its work may also change their approach to other areas of work or design of their services. This may lead to improvements which are broader than the specific project being funded.

- Leadership by service commissioners needs to balance being directive and flexible. To expect, and be open to, changes in plans. Anticipate that there may be timing issues, particularly in the early stages of implementation. Organisations will not always get it right and they will need support and flexibility. Services should be actively supported by their funder to adapt plans if circumstances change. Good feedback loops, strong project management and using data to inform decision-making are all important to ensure that governance requirements can be balanced with the flexibility needed for course corrections.

Systems change involves focused work with multiple stakeholders

Leadership needs to be visible and supported at all levels in the system. These include champions (both formal and informal leaders) who can drive change within the system, whether in policy, practice or academic domains. The following strategies were found to be useful:

- Build leadership support at a senior level in government agencies and departments. Unpack and align your funding goals to the government's policy imperatives, to assist potential government champions to understand how your ideas connect to their strategic policy direction.
- Build strong working relationships with government and non-government organisation partners to change the way people's needs are perceived and met.
- Nurture the support of strategically important advocates within the system. Public figures, commissioners and policy-makers can be influential opinion leaders.
- Use champions to support changes in practice. Bringing people together in Learning Networks or Communities of Practice on focused areas of work can be useful for sharing best practice, raising the profile of the work and providing peer support.
- Use recognised 'experts' in the area of work to provide independent leadership. Expertise in the evidence base, policy or practice issues are all important. They can become valuable 'sounding boards' on the best approach to take, and be seen as having no vested interest. They can also provide useful technical leadership.
- Support individuals and/or teams to undertake site visits to see how issues are being tackled elsewhere. Group visits involving a number of stakeholders (who may not come together otherwise) can be particularly useful for building relationships and to bond a group of people together. These visits can give people time to think more creatively and reflect on how they can work on common goals.
- As part of your funding strategy, require community and voluntary organisations to engage with the statutory sector. Leveraged or 'matched' funding can be useful to raise the profile of the work and build strategic links that may be important for implementation of the current project as well as its future development.

Building and maintaining relationships is key to success

Relationships with external stakeholders, clients, and staff need to be mutually respectful and open. Strong, respectful relationships with grantees and other key stakeholders can help change happen more quickly. The following strategies were found to be useful:

- Invest time and energy in building relationships. Internal relationships can be as important as external relationships, and effort must be put into developing both.

- Use both formal and informal communication, particularly with grantees. Go to visit them, stay in touch, attend their launches, and get to know their work.
- Leaders, irrespective of the organisation they represent, often have to do a ‘hearts and mind’ piece to support change, but also base their arguments on quality evidence of what is likely to be effective. This mix of empathy and objectivity can be tricky to balance. Examine the potential for this type of leadership within organisations at the selection stage, as well as providing support to develop these skills.
- When trying to achieve systems change it is important not to advocate for any one grantee or programme in particular. Grantees have to advocate for themselves.
- Be sensitive to the dynamics between those that get funding and those that do not, and encourage the organisations that you fund to do the same.
- Be aware that the external context is ever changing. Champions may move in the system, so contingencies are required.

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