

Introduction

For more than a decade, The Atlantic Philanthropies, sometimes in conjunction with Government and other organisations, has invested over €96m in agencies and community groups running 52 prevention and early intervention programmes throughout the island of Ireland. These include a funding partnership with the Irish Government to support three large-scale model prevention and early intervention projects in disadvantaged areas of Dublin. The Initiative supports diverse services working in a wide range of areas such as early childhood, literacy and learning, child health and behaviour, parenting, sexual health and youth mentoring.

The Centre for Effective Services has synthesised the learning from 16 of these organisations about how they implemented evidence into their daily work. This included choosing, developing, implementing and evaluating their evidence-informed services and programmes. This briefing paper provides a summary of the key learning. It contains *6 key messages* and *9 recommendations*.

Key Messages

1

There is no one magic bullet to improving outcomes for all children. The most suitable approach for any group needs to be informed by what is already known to be effective, the nature of the problem, the fit of the proposed approach to local needs and the ability to resource and sustain the initiative.

2

Actively engaging with the community is key to identifying and developing approaches most likely to work locally.

3

It is possible to take effective approaches developed elsewhere and translate them to work within local services. Attention needs to be paid to fit to local context and modification may be necessary.

4

Developing 'home grown' programmes to improve outcomes can also be effective. Challenges include design, maintaining momentum, and ensuring consistency in delivery.

5

Organisational readiness to implement the approach is crucial. This includes having an implementation plan, strong leadership, adequately trained and supervised staff, and good ways of getting feedback.

6

Organisations need more than funding to be able to deliver their work successfully and demonstrate its effectiveness: capacity building around evaluation and support are needed.

Why is Implementation Important?

The evidence base about what works in health, education and the social services continues to expand. We now have a greater understanding of the issues that children and young people are faced with and how childhood experiences can impact on them throughout their lives. There are many good quality evaluations that examine how different approaches can improve problems or reduce the likelihood of them occurring in the first place. Outcomes for children and young people, however, have not necessarily improved in line with these advances in knowledge. There is an 'implementation gap' between the evidence of what works in theory and what is delivered in practice.

Carefully planned and well-resourced implementation of evidence-informed approaches can lead to better outcomes. There is broad agreement that implementation is a complex process since it involves managing challenges across multiple levels: systems transformation; changing service provider behaviour; and restructuring organisational settings.

How should we implement evidence-informed approaches? Implementing evidence-informed approaches takes time and occurs in incremental stages, each requiring different conditions and activities. The initial stages involve exploring and planning activities. Following this, the innovation is implemented (often through pilots), before it is fully embedded in the system and evaluated. Each stage is essential to the implementation process and cannot be skipped. However, setbacks or on-going problem-solving may require a return to an earlier stage. On average it takes two to four years to fully establish an evidence-informed programme in a community (Fixsen, 2005).

What the Services Said

"Generally the way we had worked was that we spotted a problem and we did something about it. In a way we hadn't put much thought into it, and asked questions like is this the best way to do it? Who else has done this? How could we find out? Are we sure that this is going to get us the best results?"

"I think certainly for everybody involved... it convinced us that evidence-based approaches are the correct way to go."

"It was very challenging because we hadn't worked like that. We hadn't really looked at the evidence. We had to look at it from a practical point of view as well."

Key Recommendations

Identifying a problem and a solution

Effective implementation begins with fully understanding the problem or outcome that needs to be improved and deciding on the best course of action in light of the available evidence. This involves assessing the needs of those affected by the issue, understanding what is most likely to work, the fit and feasibility of any proposed approach, and the organisation's capacity or readiness for implementing it.

It is also important to secure buy-in through consultation with key stakeholders (organisational leaders, front-line staff and the public). Champions are needed to support and drive the work, and good leadership is crucial. The exploration stage ends when the decision has been made to adopt a particular approach.

Learning from the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative showed that consulting and working with the local community was critical to helping organisations understand the reality of a problem for a locality, making sure any proposed innovation will be locally appropriate and workable, encouraging buy-in and managing unrealistic expectations.

Organisations who selected evidence-based programmes developed elsewhere often had to adapt these to fit to local context and culture. Those who developed 'home grown' programmes faced challenges over design and ensuring consistency in service delivery.

- 1. Choices about what programme, service or practice to use should not be made solely on the basis of evaluations of their effectiveness in other settings. Decisions about which approach to use need to also take account of the fit to local context, the target group's needs and strengths, and resources and readiness of the current services to adopt them.**
- 2. The evidence base for choosing a particular approach and its fit to local need and services should be examined and clearly articulated. The exploration and planning phase may need to be separately funded to allow organisations the time and access to specialised support and capacity building in order to do this.**
- 3. Leadership is crucial in providing direction and vision for implementation and in overcoming challenges that occur during the process. Leaders need to have the skills to manage everyday challenges as well as the creativity, capacity and flexibility to solve new challenges.**

Key Recommendations continued

Setting up and implementing innovations

At this stage there should be a clear plan for implementing the innovation and individuals tasked with specific responsibilities. Preparatory activities begin such as securing funding, hiring and training staff and arranging the necessary resources. Capacity building is a core component of implementation and helps ensure that the desired outcomes are achieved. Careful staff selection, quality training and on-going supervision are all crucial in building capacity for effective implementation. Effective, on-going communication is critical in motivating staff, overcoming resistance to change and giving and receiving feedback.

Local learning from the Prevention & Early Intervention Initiative showed that getting the innovations 'up and running' often took much longer and was more challenging than organisations expected. Often changes were needed in organisational direction, thinking and practice. Leadership and good communication were vital, as well as ongoing community engagement and securing support from key stakeholders. Staff recruitment, training and staff support were critical to success but often difficult to get right. The skills that practitioners needed to engage with families and successfully deliver a programme were not always identified by formal qualifications. With existing staff, there was often a 'hearts and minds' piece to be done to engage and motivate staff to change their existing practices without them feeling professionally devalued. Standardising the approach and ongoing monitoring of delivery were both important for assessing the quality of implementation.

Evaluating the work

In times of constrained public finances it is increasingly important to ensure that we spend our money on activities that provide the greatest possible social and economic return. Basing approaches on reliable and robust evidence and undertaking high-quality evaluations of local work are vital to this. The risk of not doing this is that we do not know if approaches are ineffective or, worse still, if they result in overall adverse or costly outcomes.

The Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative offers useful learning on how to manage the need for robust evaluation against the need to deliver services. These organisations had to commission independent robust evaluations of their work. They found it challenging to manage high-quality evaluations of real world services. Issues included writing tenders, selecting the right research team, governance and quality control. There were often challenges in building relationships with the evaluation teams stemming from differences in perspectives, perceived expertise, control and accountability. Organisations benefited from bringing together groups of experts (separate from the evaluation team) to advise and support them as early as possible in the process, particularly individuals with a research perspective. Setting performance standards, regular meetings and feedback also helped organisations to build professional relationships with the evaluators.

- 4. Organisational readiness for implementing the approach should be assessed with respect to management and decision-making structures, available resources and staffing. Changes to existing ways of working should be supported and effective systems established for training, supervision and monitoring delivery.**
- 5. An implementation plan should be developed and shared with all those responsible for delivery, monitoring and evaluation. The implementation plan should be regularly reviewed and updated. Implementation teams can be useful in providing specialised support and focus.**
- 6. Leaders should manage expectations during the process and provide clear communication, motivation and feedback so that momentum is maintained.**
- 7. Capacity building around evaluation is needed to enable organisations to effectively demonstrate the impact of their work. This should focus on increasing understanding about different types of evaluation, as well as access to specialised support for engaging and managing evaluations.**
- 8. Organisations should undertake the type of evaluation that is most appropriate to the service's stage of development. Decisions have to be made about the purpose of the evaluation, when it should occur and methodological considerations. Outcome evaluations should be undertaken on fully implemented services that have had a chance to 'bed-down' and become business as usual.**
- 9. Service commissioners should consider how their application procedures and their monitoring and feedback requirements about the services they support can be improved. This will mean that central decisions about which services to fund can be made on the basis of the best available and most meaningful evidence.**

For more information contact capturingthelearning@effectiveservices.org

To download the full report Prevention & Early Intervention in Children & Young People's Services: Organisational Learning visit www.effectiveservices.org/prevention/organisational-learning

This briefing was produced by the Centre for Effective Services. CES is an independent, all-island organisation that helps services for children, young people and the community to make better use of evidence of what works so that they can deliver more effective services. Its work is supported by The Atlantic Philanthropies, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government. The Centre is limited by guarantee (Company Number 451580 and Charity Number 19438 in Ireland). Copyright © The Centre for Effective Services, December 2012

Republic of Ireland: The Centre for Effective Services, 9 Harcourt Street, Dublin 2, Ireland; Tel: +353 (0) 1 4160500.

Northern Ireland: The Centre for Effective Services, 65-67 Chichester Street, Belfast BT1 4JD, Northern Ireland; Tel: + 44 (0) 2890 438 433.

www.effectiveservices.org