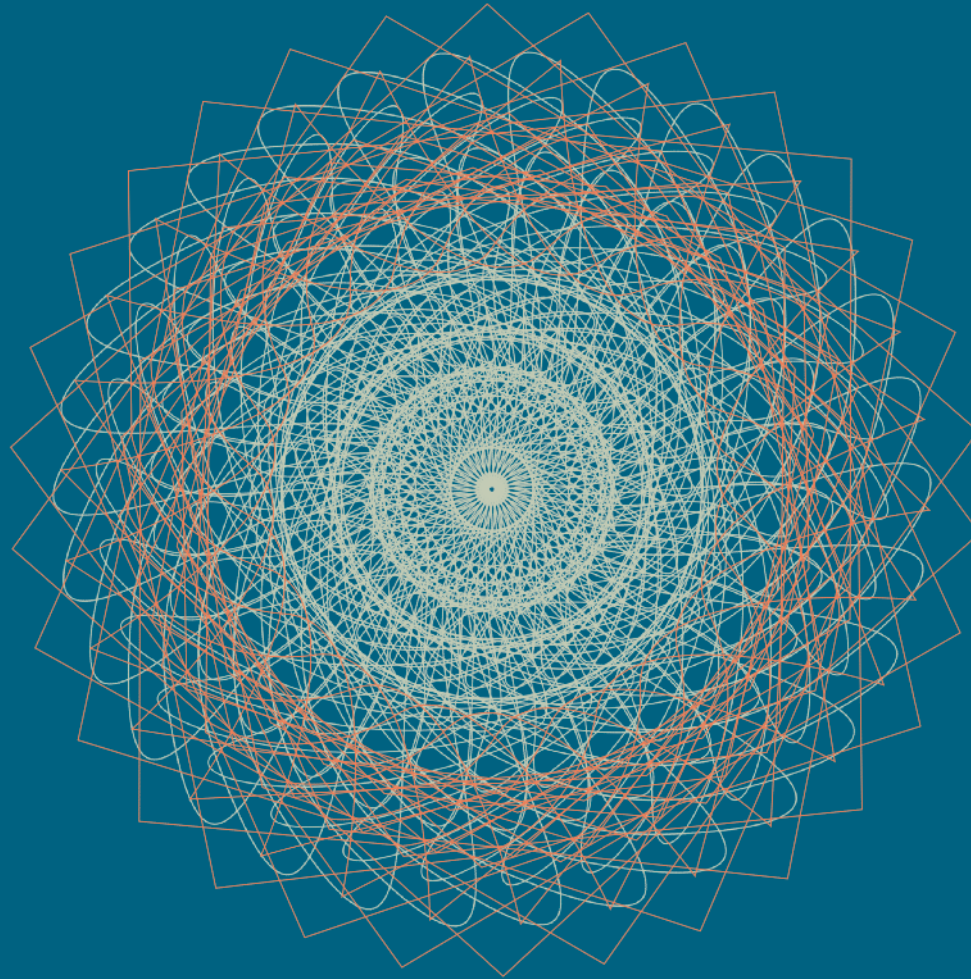


# Implementing public service reform

## Messages from the literature

### Summary



## Introduction

In March 2016 CES published the report

### **Implementing public service reform:**

#### **Messages from the literature.**

The report was produced to inform those involved in public service reform initiatives on what is known about effective implementation of public service reform and to inform CES's work in supporting governments in Ireland and Northern Ireland with public service reform.

This summary highlights the emerging themes from the report, and describes the 'factors to pay attention to' when implementing public service reform. These factors draw on relevant research and learning from a range of disciplines, including public policy and administration, implementation science, change management and systems change. Findings in the report also draw on case studies of public service reform in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, USA, Canada and European countries, along with CES's experience of acting as an implementation partner with government in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The report and this summary are aimed at leaders and managers involved in implementing reform of public services.

## What do we mean by public service reform?

There are a number of different terms used to describe public service reform, including public sector reform, public service reform, public management reform and public administration reform. A useful definition of public service reform is an adaptation of a broad definition developed by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011):

*'A deliberate change to structures and processes of public sector organisations and/or services, with the objective of getting them (in some sense) to work better.'*

This is a broad definition, which could apply to many different types of reform. Reform has been applied to areas such as structures, sector and service regulation, productivity arrangements, and front line service delivery, to name but a few.

## Trends in public service reform

Public service reform efforts internationally have seen changes in trends and focus over the years, where reform has been motivated by different factors, such as fiscal crises, increasing citizen demand for better services, and major shifts in political systems.

The purpose and direction of public service reforms can be seen as an expression of the fundamental role of the State, and its relationship with the citizen. At the present time, public service reform appears to be generally driven by intertwined objectives of delivering high quality public services responsive to citizen's needs, along with the need for cost-effective management, value for money and performance management.

There is a growing trend in public service reform towards adopting more integrated and joined up approaches to public policy and services. This is known as a 'whole of government' or 'systems change' approach. This trend has emerged in response to a growing awareness of the difficulties in mainstreaming new interventions and addressing the root causes of 'wicked problems', such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change.

## Key messages on implementing public service reform

Learning from the implementation of public service reform is still developing in Ireland, Northern Ireland and internationally. There are a number of theories and models of public service reform, but less is known about the outcomes of reform and there are few robust evaluations of reform initiatives.

The report identifies a number of messages, drawing on the experience of the Centre for Effective Services in working with government departments and agencies to support implementation of diverse policy initiatives across the public service, and on the literature on public service reform. The key messages are as follows:

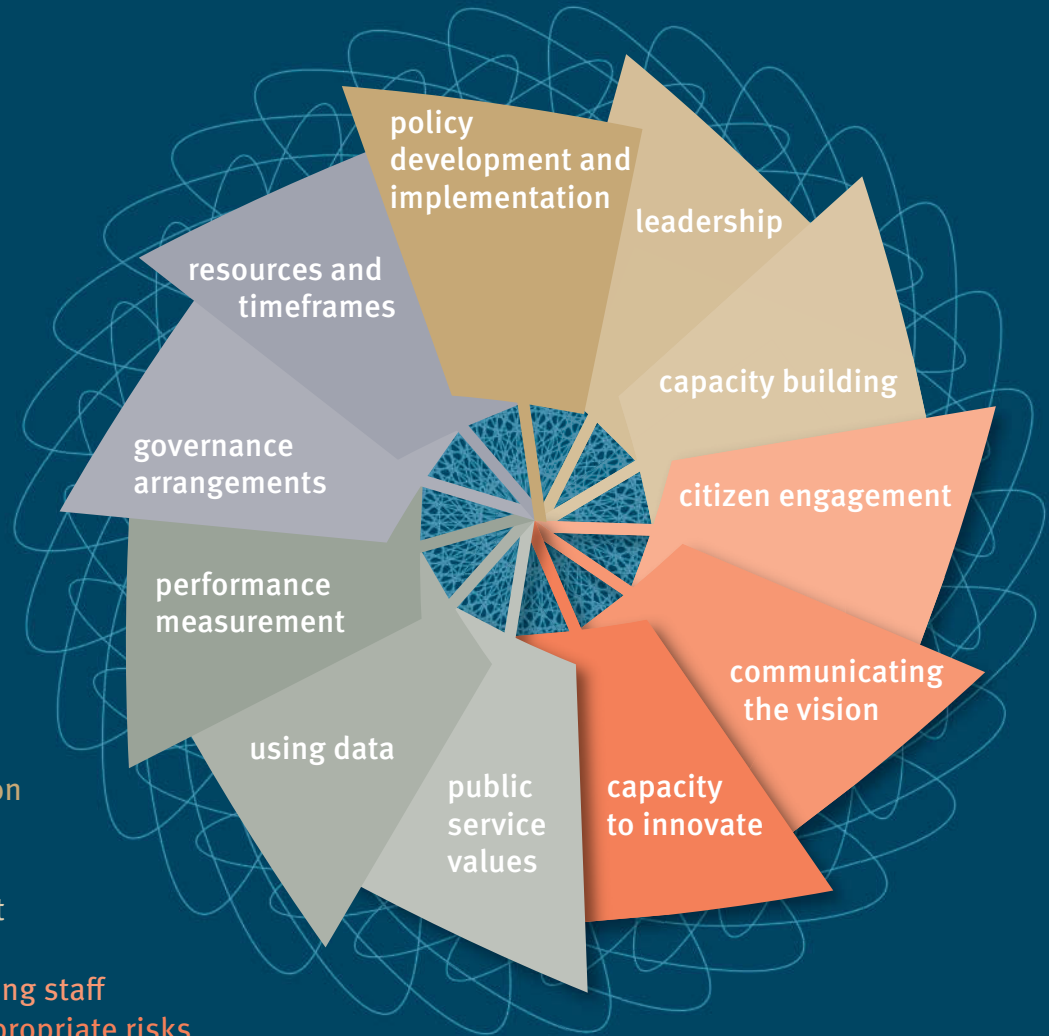
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|---|--|---|
| 1 | A compelling and explicit vision and purpose is essential to guide reform  | The vision, values and purpose of reform need to be clear to ensure support from citizens, public servants and other stakeholders.  |
| 2 | Strengthening policy development skills and integrating expertise on implementation should increase the success of public service reform | Skills required include research, analysis and evaluation, systematic use of data and the capacity to integrate policy development with implementation.   |
| 3 | A citizen centric approach is one of the characteristics of a highly productive public sector but it must be real                        | The literature highlights the challenges of doing this in a meaningful way, and the need for structures and processes that embed citizen participation and engagement.  |
| 4 | Public service reform increasingly involves whole system, whole of government change to deliver needs-led services to citizens           | Whole system change demands a sophisticated change capacity and ability to work across traditional boundaries and silos, rather than a focus on separate dimensions of the public system.   |
| 5 | Changes in governance arrangements and structures alone will not deliver public service reform   | The limited research available on structural reforms cautions against hasty restructuring and suggests that non-structural approaches to achieving improved focus and coordination should be explored instead.                      |
| 6 | Public service change requires leadership geared to managing complex change  | This form of leadership, called system leadership can empower staff, offer flexibility, tolerate chaos and respond to emerging needs.   |
| 7 | Invest in people   | Building capacity for managing complexity and continuous professional development are essential enablers of change.   |
| 8 | Public service values are tangible resources   | Public service values and the intrinsic motivation of working towards the collective good should be harnessed to support reform.  |
| 9 | Achieving systems change takes time and resources  | Systems change can take 7-10 years to achieve. It requires political and administrative leaders to have long term goals and perspectives. Short term timeframes may act as a barrier to effective implementation of reform efforts. |

## Supportive factors for implementing public service reform

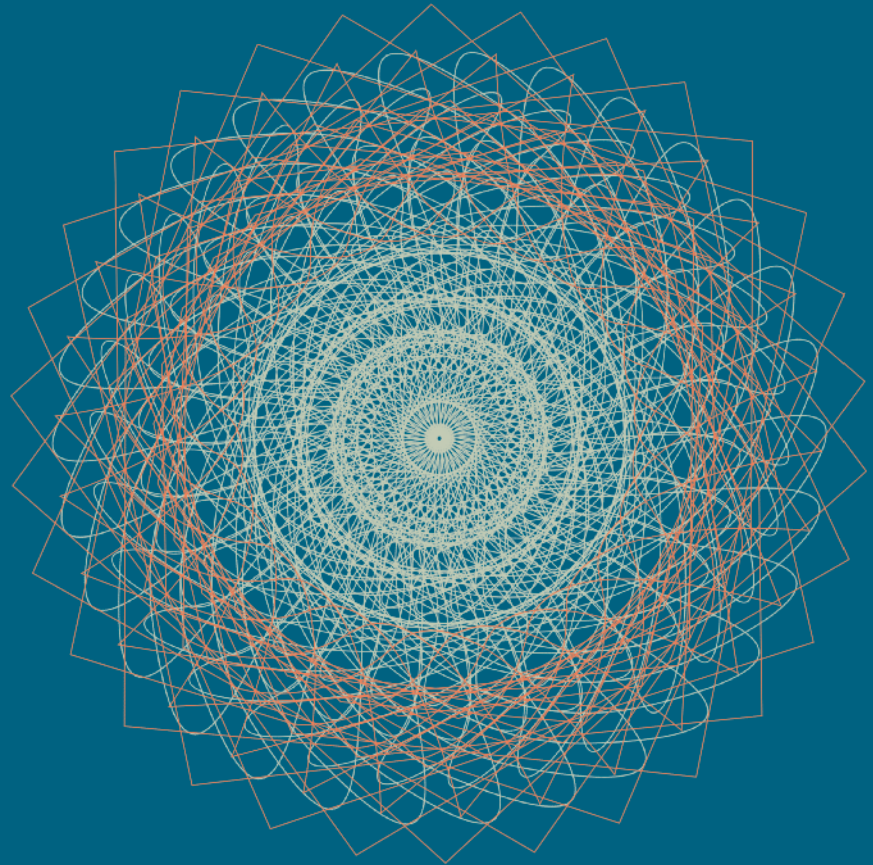
It is possible to identify some supportive factors for effective implementation of public service reform, which should provide guidance to those involved in leading and delivering public service reforms. Unfortunately, the literature is relatively scant on how these factors should be implemented in practice.

The supportive factors that are most important will vary depending on the type of reform at hand, and the nature of the existing system into which reforms are being introduced. The supportive factors presented here represent emergent findings from the literature. They include:

- effective policy development and implementation
- leadership which is flexible, relationship based and focused on achieving systems change
- capacity building and professional development
- citizen engagement and consultation
- communicating the vision for reform and engaging staff
- capacity to innovate and take measured and appropriate risks
- public service values and a learning organisational culture
- using data to inform decisions and provide feedback
- outcomes focused performance measurement and management
- collaborative networked governance arrangements
- adequate resources and timeframes.







To read the full report  
**Implementing public service reform:  
Messages from the literature**  
visit [www.effectiveservices.org](http://www.effectiveservices.org)

The Centre for Effective Services connects policy, practice and research, helping to ensure the implementation of effective services to improve the lives of people across the island of Ireland. Part of a new generation of intermediary organisations, CES is a not-for-profit organisation, with offices in Dublin and Belfast.

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