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The Goal Programme for Public Service Reform and Innovation

Evaluation Vignette ①

Distinctive Elements of the Goal Programme

October 2018

The Goal Programme for Public Service Reform and Innovation

supported systemic change in public services in Ireland and Northern Ireland with the aim of improving outcomes for people using public services. The programme, funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, was delivered by the Centre for Effective Services (CES) in partnership with seven government departments in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The programme, which started in 2016, comprised nine strategic sectoral reform projects. These projects were exemplars for testing new ways of working in areas such as leadership development, innovation, knowledge management, collaborative work practices and capacity building.

The Institute of Public Administration carried out an evaluation of the Goal Programme for CES. This vignette, on the topic of the use of data and evidence, is one of the outputs of the evaluation.

Distinctive elements of the Goal programme

What distinguishes the Goal programme for public service reform from other reform efforts? Are there aspects of the design of the programme that are likely to enhance the chances of systemic change in the way public services are delivered across the island of Ireland?

The evaluation team have identified three important elements of the design of the Goal programme which have the potential to significantly affect the reform effort, and which are a particular focus of the evaluation: the emphasis on co-design and co-production; the all-island dimension; and the weight given to shared learning.

Co-design and co-production by CES and government departments

“What co-design meant here was a process of exploration about ways in which we could provide material, pragmatic support for programmes the Governments wanted to do, where we could add some value and, at the same time, draw them into the deeper strategic conversation.” (CES associate)

Built in to the Goal programme is the idea of co-design and co-production of the programme by both CES and the participating government departments.

Some of the senior civil servants involved in the design of the Goal programme independently highlighted that the relationship with CES provided a different model of change to the more traditional models of carrying out the work themselves or commissioning consultants to undertake the work. In the Goal programme, the participating departments worked jointly with CES in the delivery of the project. The design of the Goal programme displays more elements of a partnership rather than the contractual approach traditionally taken with consultants. To this extent, it is something of a hybrid method,

between the civil service taking on the work itself, or outsourcing most of the work to a consultancy. In the case of the Goal programme, the civil service is using the particular expertise of CES, backed by the funding support from The Atlantic Philanthropies, to assist their own staff to build skills and capacity, and to work on priority reform initiatives.

The co-design of the programme has been important in ensuring early buy-in from participants. Public servants are under significant pressures of work, after years of staff reductions and growing demands on their time. If there had been any sense that the projects selected for the Goal programme were not of value, involvement would likely have been sporadic, and staff dis-engaged from the start. One CES manager cited the emphasis within CES on implementation science as influencing their approach to co-design and production to avoid such outcomes:

“our implementation science thinking, you know, and some of the concepts around feasibility, readiness for the work and ensuring that we’re not landing something on people that... [they] can’t or don’t want or it’s not appropriate to them.”

All-island dimension

When they became convinced that the idea of the Goal programme was a good idea, the board of The Atlantic Philanthropies expressed a keen interest in having an all-island dimension to the programme. This was important to The Atlantic Philanthropies in terms of helping ensure a lasting legacy from the investment of their work with government in both Ireland and Northern Ireland.

CES's all-island remit

CES has an all-island remit, with offices in both Belfast and Dublin. They also have prior experience in running a number of all-island initiatives. Consequently, when The Atlantic Philanthropies raised the possibility of an

all-island programme it was attractive to CES as they saw the increased opportunities for learning from having projects from both jurisdictions.

CES had stronger, direct working relationships with government in Ireland than in Northern Ireland, where their work had been more focused on support for civil society organisations. As a result, some initial work went into engaging with senior management in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) to ensure relationships were at a similar level in both jurisdictions. The role of Sir Peter Housden, former Permanent Secretary to the Scottish government, as advisor to CES was helpful here. He had pre-existing working relationships with senior civil servants in Northern Ireland and Ireland and was able to help engage with them on a peer-to-peer basis.

Response of public servants

CES describe the initial support for the idea of an all-island dimension to the programme from civil servants as 'patchy'. In part because of the austerity climate both jurisdictions had been facing in previous years, there was limited energy and enthusiasm for what some saw as an additional commitment on top of heavy existing workloads. But the early engagement with top officials – Sir Malcolm McKibbin as head of the NICS, and Martin Fraser, Robert Watt and Jim Breslin (Secretaries General of the Departments of the Taoiseach, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Health respectively) in Ireland led to a growing commitment and support for the all-island aspect of the programme.

As the programme progressed and participants became aware of other projects, through presentations and updates at Advisory Group meetings, CES was asked to facilitate contacts across the programme and across the jurisdictions.

Role of the Advisory Group

The main means by which the all-island dimension to the programme takes shape is through the Advisory Group. The all-island Advisory Group oversees and supports the implementation of the Goal programme and advises CES on the programme. The Advisory Group is chaired by Sir Peter Housden

and consists of Secretaries General/Permanent Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries General/Deputy Secretaries from the government departments sponsoring projects under the Goal programme, and providing leadership on public service reform, a CES board member, CES director, and The Atlantic Philanthropies country manager.

There was an initial concern amongst some senior civil servants that such a group might be overly elaborate and involve too much senior input, with long meetings of people who are very busy. The design took account of these concerns. The group meets twice yearly, with one meeting composed of Secretaries General/Permanent Secretaries, and one composed of Assistant Secretaries General/Deputy Secretaries. Great attention is given to ensuring that there is 'rich' content for the meetings of the Advisory Group, and that they are well organised and facilitated to ensure a high level of engagement and commitment to the process by the senior people involved in the meetings. The Advisory Group has a strong learning focus, with an emphasis on new ways of doing things and new knowledge, with the added benefit that the learning is being developed from within two administrations.

Shared learning

“And I think the key thing about Goal is to be a reflective programme that provides that space for the practitioners, with skilled support and challenge, to accelerate their own understandings of the world in which they're operating, because that's where real sustainability and lasting change comes from, when people from this experience go back and think about the next challenge and think, ah-hah, I know what to do now.” (CES associate)

In virtually all public service reform programmes, the aim is to secure the achievement of the desired actions set out in a plan. One thing that makes the Goal programme different is that the implementation of the nine projects that form the basis of the programme is, of itself, not enough. The intention is to push and extend the projects into considering the question of wider organisational learning. This learning is expected to take place at a number of levels:

1. The project itself, with the emphasis on learning from the experience of implementation.
2. The Department as a whole, with the emphasis on applying lessons learned across the organisation.
3. Across the civil service, with a view to identifying lessons for other reform efforts.
4. At a sectoral and system level, for senior civil servants reflecting on how they manage their sectoral and system-wide responsibilities, for example in the education, health and children's sectors.
5. At cross-jurisdictional level, with shared learning between the NICS and Irish civil service.

Learning at the project and departmental levels is primarily the responsibility of project participants and departmental management. Learning at the civil service, sectoral and cross-jurisdictional levels is a primary responsibility of the Advisory Group. Annual Goal learning events, run by CES, are also aimed at spreading the learning from the programme at different levels. These learning events are intended to provide an opportunity for Goal project leads and other key people to come together to share their work and learning.

Conclusion

In an overview of public service reform over thirty years across different countries, Pollitt¹ concludes that 'reforms often have a brief impact, but after a few years all traces of them have disappeared'. One of the aims of the Goal programme for public service reform is to ensure lasting systemic change, through support for exemplar projects of sectoral reform that will introduce and test new ways of working, and through learning from their experience being spread across the system.

This brief overview has highlighted three distinctive elements of the Goal programme for public service reform that differentiate it from other public service reform initiatives and that are intended to bring about reform that is real and lasting.

1 <https://blogs.worldbank.org/governance/30-years-of-public-management-reforms-has-there-been-a-pattern>

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