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The Goal Programme for Public Service Reform and Innovation

Evaluation Vignette ②
Project Selection for 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.

Project selection

Participating Government Departments and CES selected nine large-scale sectoral reform projects in Ireland and Northern Ireland to form the core of the Goal programme. These nine exemplar projects are testing new ways of working in the public and civil service.

The journey to arrive at this choice of nine projects highlights a range of issues around the selection of demonstration projects concerning civil service reform.

Initial thinking on projects

CES had to operate to a very tight timescale of a few months to develop and submit a proposal to The Atlantic Philanthropies for grant support for what became the Goal programme, between January and April 2015.

Initial thinking in CES was influenced by work they had previously undertaken studying the evidence on how to make joined-up government a reality[1]. Other influences were the outcome-focused whole of government agenda being pursued in Northern Ireland and in Scotland, and a study undertaken by the Carnegie UK Trust on the enabling state[2]. The enabling state theory promotes concepts such as citizen and community empowerment, citizen involvement in the co-production of public services, and more joined-up services.

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1   http://www.effectiveservices.org/resources/article/ces-primer-on-whole-of-government-approaches
2   https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/the-enabling-state-a-discussion-paper/

In the funding proposal that was submitted to The Atlantic Philanthropies, CES stated that:

> "This opportunity should focus on a number of existing large-scale sectoral reform programmes which are 'ready to go' and use these as a platform for embedding new ways of working in the public and civil service."

Originally, it was envisaged that six large-scale sectoral reform projects would be agreed between the partner government departments, CES and The Atlantic Philanthropies. Six indicative projects were put forward, such as the development and implementation of national children's strategies (all-island); support for the implementation of the youth justice review (Northern Ireland); and implementation of the Healthy Ireland Strategy (Ireland).

These suggestions had some degree of support from the Irish and Northern Irish civil service, but had not been discussed in detail with senior officials. CES realised that further discussions were needed to firm up on projects to be included in the programme.

Development of criteria for project selection

One central idea that emerged was that projects selected should be ones that would not happen without the support of the Goal programme.

> "Actually it was in our discussions with the Department of Health, they said you should be looking for projects that we couldn't do without you guys... not... it's on our back log of things to do and getting you in will help get the box ticked - It should be something we couldn't do without an organisation or support."

In addition, CES recognised the importance of having criteria to guide their discussions with civil service managers regarding what projects should be included in the Goal programme. For a project to be part of the Goal programme, it had to meet the criteria developed by CES and set out in Box 1.

Box 1 Project Selection Criteria

Project

1. The project is reform oriented and seeks to deliver outcomes at a strategic, systematic level.

2. The project is of an appropriate scale for this programme.

3. The project involves a number of divisions, agencies or Departments.

4. The project will develop and implement a plan with its host/sponsoring body to share the capacity building and learning across the host organisation, this programme, North and South, and other networks.

Participating Organisations

1. Key stakeholders required for implementation of the project are willing to engage.

2. The organisation makes staff and resources available to work on the proposed system change.

3. Key staff can convey what support they would like to receive (organisational readiness).

Leadership

1. The project is a Government/Department priority.

2. People in leadership positions are committed to creating the culture for the proposed systems change, including enabling and actively modelling new ways of working and sharing learning across Departments/agencies.

3. Leaders are willing to commit their organisation's staff and resources to enabling systems change.

4. Leaders commit their organisation to work with CES and The Atlantic Philanthropies in the delivery and evaluation of this programme.

Source: Internal CES Goal scoping document, October 2015

In discussions between CES and some senior civil servants involved in the process, it was evident that some criteria were particularly influential in the minds of those involved when it came to project selection. In particular:

- The project is a strategic priority for senior management in the civil service,

- The project was one where external support from an organisation like CES was required,

- Willingness to share learning across departments and jurisdictions,

- That it should be possible to measure the difference the input had made.

The involvement of the external advisor to the programme, Sir Peter Housden, former Permanent Secretary to the Scottish government, was seen as helpful with regard to the development of criteria. As Peter himself noted:

> "My role there was [as] an advisor, so I was challenging about the number and about the depth [of projects] and were we confident we were going to add value. What associates were we going to put into the field? What would give us confidence that this would not just be an extra pair of hands, but that we would be making a strategic difference, and that there would be, and this was an absolute key thing, that there would be learning coming out of the programme."

The process of project selection

Following the grant approval, a more detailed engagement with senior civil servants took place. As one of theCES Goal senior managers noted: "Those discussions really did shape the overall design of Goal... CES thinking about what Goal might be or could be shifted quite significantly in that period."

"There was a very important exploratory phase where the concept was plain [to see], but it was sort of in pencil and in outline." (CES Associate)

The identification of projects throughout 2015 happened at an interesting juncture for the civil services in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. Austerity had come to an end, but its legacy of chronic under-funding and under-resourcing were still being experienced by government departments. However, the reform programmes, also introduced as a response to the economic crisis, had ensured that civil servants had become more accepting of change and the need to improve capacity and productivity. CES recognised:

> "You have to start where people are at... actually for them to get their heads around any kind of reform and innovation, that was already a leap because they were trying to keep the show on the road."

Arising from these discussions with senior officials, a number of projects emerged that met CES criteria and were supported by the participating government departments. One example of a project that emerged from this process is the leadership development programme in Northern Ireland, which arose from engagement between Sir Peter Housden and Sir Malcolm McKibbin, then head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Leadership development is a central issue in the reform of the Northern Ireland civil service (NICS). Leadership development was a new area of work for CES, and there were initially some concerns, within both CES and the NICS, about taking on the

project. Nevertheless, CES selected it because of the strategic nature and importance of the issue and drafted in support, where required, to help develop the project.

In terms of actually selecting the final projects, there was an understandable reluctance on the part of senior managers within the civil service to sit in judgement on projects put forward by colleagues in other departments, or across the border. So, in an iterative process, the three members of CES' Goal senior management team had discussions with the relevant departments, usually involving three meetings for each project, to decide if this was the 'right' kind of project for Goal. There was also a concern to keep the number of projects manageable, and while the numbers increased from the originally envisaged six, a number of potential projects were also turned down, either because they did not fully meet the criteria set out in Box 1 or because the proposal was submitted too late in the assessment process.

The final projects selected

The number and scope of the individual projects to be supported under the Goal programme was agreed by CES with the participating government departments in Ireland and Northern Ireland, in late 2015/early 2016. Nine projects were identified and agreed: six from government departments in Ireland, and three from government departments in Northern Ireland:

- Developing **evidence and knowledge management** (Department of Health, Ireland)

- **Youth mental health** and well-being **pathfinder project** (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 programme** (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)

Conclusion

Arising from the discussion on project selection, a number of lessons emerge:

- The dialogue on project selection between CES and senior management from participating departments was vital to choosing projects likely to have positive outcomes. Each brought their own perspectives to what would work in the context of the programme, and it was only through dialogue that the projects began to take shape.

- Having clear criteria, themselves the subject of discussion and engagement, assisted project selection. Core criteria, such as the need for the project to be a strategic priority, and the need for learning to be shared from the experience, guided the process.

- Projects were chosen where the value added by CES was intended to deliver a positive outcome.

- A balance between ambition and pragmatism is needed. The final list of projects that emerged are ambitious in scope but tempered by the reality of where government departments are at in terms of their own priorities.

On this latter point of ambition versus pragmatism, it is worth referring back to the initial thinking on projects in the grant proposal. Notwithstanding CES interest in the enabling state literature and issues such as co-production of services with citizens, in the main the projects finally selected tend to be more top-down in nature, focused on reform within the civil service. Box 2 illustrates this point. Projects are classified as to whether they are mainly concerned with mission support, primarily internal management improvements that support the achievement of Departmental objectives, or mission delivery, primarily focused on service improvement. Five of the projects can be classified as mission support-oriented, and four as mission service-oriented.

Projects are also classified as to whether they are mainly concerned with reform internal to a Department or whether they have a cross-Departmental focus. Three are primarily concerned with change within one Department, and six have an explicitly cross-Departmental remit.

CES believes this is a reflection of the high degree of emphasis on cuts and efficiency savings at the time of the establishment of the Goal programme. Furthermore, CES themselves needed to be flexible and responsive in order to adapt to what was seen to be stretching, yet achievable by departments.

Nevertheless, the projects selected do have the potential to support the reform of public services to the benefit of citizens in a substantial manner. As the former head of NICS noted in the case of the Northern Ireland civil service:

> "The concept of improving public service and to steer the way and bring in innovation was absolutely consistent with our thinking at that time... It also tied in well in that the new Programme for government was outcomes focused but it was also trying to get us to work much more collaboratively with others and to disrespect the boundaries between our own individual departments; so, again, that was a good synergy."

Box 2 Goal project classification

Project	Mission support	Mission delivery	Departmental focus	Cross-Departmental focus
Developing evidence and knowledge management (Department of Health, Ireland)	✓		✓	
Youth mental health and wellbeing pathfinder project (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 programme (The Executive Office, Northern Ireland)	✓			✓
Children's and Young People's Strategies (Department of Education and Health, Northern Ireland)		✓		✓
Embedding innovation (Department of Finance, Northern Ireland)		✓		✓

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