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# The Goal Programme for Public Service Reform and Innovation

Evaluation Vignette ③

**Distributed Leadership in the Goal Programme for  
Public Service Reform**

February 2019

## **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.

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## Background

This vignette on distributed leadership describes the objective within the Goal Programme of a tiered and cross-departmental approach to leadership and explores the benefits of this approach (see Figure 1).

Distributed leadership is a concept that has come to prominence in recent years. Bolden<sup>1</sup> (2011) refers to it as “a shift in focus from the attributes and behaviours of individual ‘leaders’ to a more systemic perspective, whereby ‘leadership’ is conceived of as a collective social process emerging through the interactions of multiple actors”. It is seen as a useful concept in public service reform, where issues cut across organisational boundaries, there are multiple goals, and it is desirable to view leadership in collective terms rather than as the preserve of individuals.

### Top-level leadership for the Goal Programme

While distributed leadership envisions leadership roles at various levels within and across organisations, the need for top-level leadership remains. In the Goal Programme, the Advisory Group and the Secretaries General/Permanent Secretaries heading up the departments in which the projects are based play this top-level leadership role.

Membership of the Advisory Group encompasses a chairperson with experience of public sector reform in another jurisdiction, the Secretaries General/Permanent Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries General/Deputy Secretaries<sup>2</sup> from the participating government departments, the director of CES and a board member and Atlantic Philanthropies nominee. One of the objectives of the group is to provide leadership and support to the programme<sup>3</sup>.

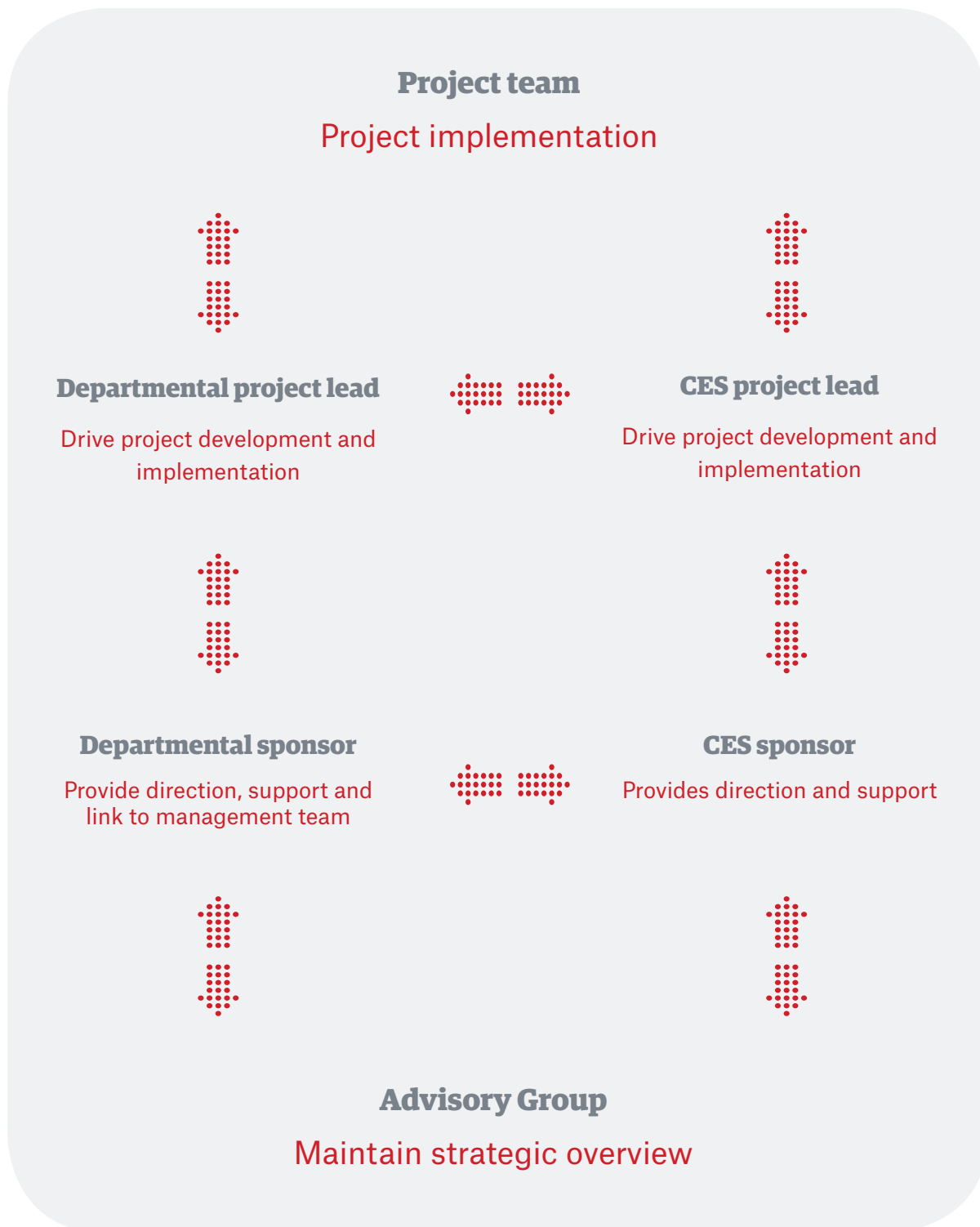
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1 Bolden, Richard (2011), Distributed Leadership in Organisations: A review of Theory and Research, International Journal of Management Reviews, Volume 13, 252-269

2 Secretaries General and Permanent Secretaries are the names for heads of government departments in Ireland and Northern Ireland respectively. Assistant Secretaries General and Deputy Secretaries refer to the next tier of management.

3 Vignette 1 on Distinctive Elements of the Goal programme includes more information on the origins of the advisory group.

**Figure 1: Distributed Leadership, Roles and Relationships**



The Advisory Group also includes the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER). As the government department in Ireland that leads on public service reform, they facilitate the achievement of the outcomes of the Goal Programme in terms of sharing the learning and good practices across the public service. The Northern Ireland Department of Finance, which has responsibility for public service reform, is also involved through one of the three Northern Ireland projects.

The Advisory Group meets twice a year<sup>4</sup>. While participants see this as about right, one interviewee noted that if there were difficulties with aspects of the programme, the long intervals between meetings could potentially be a weakness in terms of providing consistent leadership. However, the information sharing, constructive challenges and discussions more generally in respect of public service reform which have taken place at Advisory Group meetings are regarded very favourably by participants. As one member of the group noted:

“I think it functions well. I think it operates at a relatively high level as a kind of temperature test on where are we now in terms of the programme. But to be honest it goes well beyond that. It goes to really... a kind of cross-jurisdictional discussion around public sector reform. So while we are talking about the individual components, in the Goal Programme, it’s very hard to stop senior civil servants talking more generally about what’s going on in public sector reform and what we might want to share and learn from around that... I think it’s a valuable piece.”

As well as their role on the Advisory Group, the head of the respective departments, as the person with ultimate responsibility for the implementation of the projects, signs off on all documents providing the governance for the Goal Programme, including the memorandum of understanding and project specification document. Departmental personnel commented on this very

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4 One meeting a year is attended by Secretaries General/Permanent Secretaries, the other meeting by Assistant Secretaries General/Deputy Secretaries.

favourably. One departmental project lead noted that having their Secretary General's signature gave the project a greater status within the department than its size and budget would imply: "Having his signature meant we had his time and focus". A CES senior manager commented on "the importance of signing at Secretary General level. It means we have the Secretary General's interest. It's very enabling. It has helped with implementation".

### **Project-level leadership**

All projects have a dual departmental and CES leadership arrangement, encompassing named project sponsors and project leads. Within the departments, the sponsor is required to be at Assistant Secretary/Deputy Secretary level. As the mandated person with responsibility for the project, the sponsors are able to give the projects a profile across the department through reporting on it at departmental management committee meetings. The sponsors, as members of the Advisory Group, also have an important role acting as a connection between the projects and the Advisory Group. The CES equivalent of the project sponsor is a member of the senior management team who, while not involved in the day-to-day running of the project, has an oversight and quality assurance role.

In addition, each project has a departmental project lead, required to be at Principal Officer (PO)/Grade 5 level, and a CES project lead also assigned to each project. These 'tiered leadership' arrangements appear to have worked well, with one departmental interviewee commenting:

“So that governance arrangement and what seems a little bit sort of layered, it's actually very positive.”

In a similar vein, a CES interviewee noted:

“I think you need the two leads to ensure that the work we're doing is congruent with the Goal Programme... From a departmental point of view, you need the lead to ensure that they're getting what they need in

the department. I think you need the two. I found that it worked well.”

The departmental project leads play an important, facilitating role within their departments. One CES senior manager noted “the POs [Principal Officers] have taken ownership of it. It’s a big time investment, but they have credibility with their colleagues”. However, it was also noted that in some instances, the named project lead wasn’t always the project lead in practice; sometimes another departmental staff member involved in the projects was “the person who had the vision around the table”.

There are also issues in some departments around changes in personnel, due to factors such as promotion and mobility. Consistency of departmental personnel, due to retirement or people moving jobs, appears to have presented some projects with difficulties, but this is understood as inevitable in working with government. Furthermore, departmental interviewees noted favourably that the consistency of personnel on the CES-side had, to some degree, helped to counterbalance this challenge. As one departmental project lead commented:

“It also means that when I have change-over in the team I knew I had CES and that that’s a huge comfort... just the continuity across the life of an 18-month project, it’s quite a long project really.”

### *Positive benefits of the distributed leadership approach*

A good level of trust and mutual respect is a striking feature in the relations between CES and the departmental project teams and this both facilitates and is an outcome of distributed leadership. At times this trust enables CES to challenge a department in respect of a project where it deems this to be necessary. According to one project sponsor, at the outset they were not giving sufficient focus to one of their projects and “CES, if you like, brought in a bit of a challenge function about our commitment to it, etc., and that got the whole thing back on track again”. The importance of trust was also emphasised by a project lead: “Departmental staff developed a high level of trust with CES.

CES became part of the journey, a partner and critical friend with them on the journey.”

A further notable aspect of the distributed leadership arrangements for the Goal Programme is that it encouraged a level of independent working by those involved in the projects that would be somewhat counter-cultural within a civil service context. In responding to a question on what she believed to be different or innovative about the Goal Programme approach one project lead said:

“... I got an awful amount of discretion as a result, to run and do things and try to make it move. In hindsight, that was probably the security provided by the fact that our Secretary General stayed very connected. He attended those periodic meetings. The Assistant Secretary was in at the next level. You were updating that group... That supported a creative space for the staff below... It definitely gave that kind of permission to be innovative.”

For some project sponsors this represents a very different way of working. While being aware that the success of the project involved allowing the cross-departmental project team to experiment with new ways of working, one noted that he found this level of freedom challenging and, in his eyes, a departure from the usual departmental controls:

“If I had run it that way, the thing wouldn't have worked, so I had to let these folk go off and do their own thing and pretty much keep a very light touch on it... The challenge of releasing people from the rigid command structure is uncomfortable, I was surprised about how uncomfortable it was... but you probably have to acknowledge at the outset of these processes that they're designed to stretch everybody because if they weren't stretching people, we'd end up where we always are.”



## Conclusions

The Goal Programme sought to implement a distributed or tiered leadership approach. All projects have named departmental and CES project sponsors and leads. Within government departments, the involvement of top-level management is crucial in terms of credibility. Given the other pressures on Secretaries General/Permanent Secretaries, their engagement with the Goal Programme is somewhat limited. It is, however, sufficient to help secure participant commitment to the projects and to encourage reflection and learning on reform efforts at the top management level.

Projects appear to have a greater level of discretion than would be typical in the civil service, in part because of the calibre of the departmental project leads, but also because projects are part of the Goal Programme which the Secretary General/Permanent Secretary has signed off on. This facilitates progress on what are, for departments, quite innovative projects. Issues of turnover of departmental project sponsors and project leads has led to some delays, but the continuity provided by CES personnel is of assistance here.

At an operational level, it is also necessary to have strong leadership. In many of the projects, a high level of trust has developed between the CES and departmental project teams and this is greatly benefitting the projects. Both sets of personnel bring a considerable amount to the project. On the CES side, consistency of personnel and a critical, evidence-based approach and, on the departmental side, knowledge of the department's culture and personnel. Both are critical to successful project outcomes.

Overall, the distributed and tiered leadership approach appears to have benefits for the implementation of public sector reform projects, and this aspect will be further examined during the course of the evaluation.

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