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The Goal Programme for Public Service Reform and Innovation

Evaluation Vignette **5**
Promoting the Use of Evidence and Data

September 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.

Background

This vignette highlights a theme that emerged from a number of the projects during the evaluation of the Goal programme: the emphasis on producing and promoting the use of evidence and data to inform policy development and decision-making. Participants from government departments viewed this as a helpful feature of the Goal programme. Evidence is one of those terms that is difficult to pin down. As Leeuw, Ling and Rieper¹ note

“... the concept itself escapes a precise definition. Indeed, part of its power is that, while it is seen as a ‘good thing’, it is sufficiently malleable to appeal to a variety of constituencies.”

Here, we are concerned with attempts to improve the level and quality of information available to support policy and programme development, and the use of that information to better manage public policy and services.

Greater use of evidence in driving policy and practice is widely seen as desirable but limited in practice. Mayne² argues that

“The bottom line is that too often, seeking and considering evidence is not part of management. Managers often don’t see themselves as having enough time to manage for results. Their days are fully occupied in planning, keeping the program on course, fighting fires and reporting. At best, they may be able to react to evidence gathered from monitoring that identifies problems arising such as planned outputs not being delivered. The more in-depth reflection on the theory of change of the program and the extent to which the program is contributing to the desired outcomes may be seen as a luxury few can afford.”

¹ F.L. Leeuw, T. Ling and O. Rieper (2010), ‘Introduction’, in O. Rieper, F. L. Leeuw and T. Ling (eds), *The Evidence Book*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

² J. Mayne (2010), ‘Results management: can results evidence gain a foothold in the public sector?’, in O. Rieper, F. L. Leeuw and T. Ling (eds), *The Evidence Book*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

The Goal programme sought to build in the development of an evidence base for the projects and promote the use of evidence more widely as a vital element in the policy process. The programme drew upon the expertise available from Goal project participants to produce the evidence and liaise with departmental project members as to its use.

Developing the evidence base

A particular aspect of the co-design of the Goal programme was the expertise brought to the projects by CES. As noted by a department official, it was “not CES replacing civil servants’ work, it was another skill set”. One departmental project lead referred to “the value of an independent, evidence-based approach”. The academic rigour and research and presentation skills of CES were key attributes in progressing the projects:

“ Their background in social science and psychology, the academic rigour that they apply to that. And also, being able to draw out the essence from the literature so that it was applicable in the department environment, that it wasn’t in ‘highfalutin’ language, it was applicable... Their understanding of how the department, you know, works and what the other challenges are.”

(Departmental interviewee)

In other words, an important contribution of CES was its encouragement that the projects be informed by evidence. Departmental personnel were encouraged to reflect that it was important that new ways of working would be grounded in evidence from a variety of sources. Whilst in principle civil servants are well aware of the need for sound evidence-informed policies, sometimes, as highlighted by the quote from Mayne above, this can be overlooked. Having the external support of CES as part of the Goal programme helped to keep the use of evidence as a priority.

A list of some of the evidence produced during the Goal programme is set out in Table 1.

<p style="text-align: center;">Table 1 Examples of evidence produced to support Goal programme projects</p>		
Evidence review to inform the design of the Leadership Programme	Literature review on knowledge management	Briefing paper on communities of practice
Synthesis of Irish data and evidence on mental health and wellbeing for 0-25 year olds	Literature review document and practice wisdom report on collaborative working	Good practice guidance and self-assessment tools for effective collaborative practice
Comparative evidence reviews of international children and young people's and family support strategies	Evidence review for the revised Youth Funding Scheme	Research briefing on youth assemblies

Promoting the use of evidence

Various Goal projects promoted the use of evidence to inform decision-making and programme design. Three projects that illustrated different aspects of the benefits seen by users are looked at here: *The Reform of Youth Funding Schemes*, the *Leadership Development Programme* and *Evaluation Training for Civil Servants*.

Reform of Youth Funding Schemes project

The *Reform of Youth Funding Schemes* project supported the Department of Children and Youth Affairs with the design of a new outcomes-focused funding scheme for young people and assisted with the phased implementation of this

new scheme. A document, *'Sources of evidence informing the design of the Revised Youth Funding Scheme'* produced for this project was highlighted as particularly useful by departmental staff. The document presents the evidence that has informed the design and development of the revised scheme. Based on a review of practice from a range of sources, the review highlighted lessons that were drawn on in the design of the scheme in relation to the following areas:

- Structure and governance
- Needs analysis and outcomes
- Monitoring, evaluation and measurement
- Planning and reporting
- Implementation

The Department is using a workbook, also developed during the project, to help with the analysis of young people's needs in each Education and Training Board (ETB) area, and a performance and oversight framework comprising of a measurement and monitoring tool. These documents support the allocation of funding based on an analysis of needs in an area and the oversight of this funding. These tools, according to the departmental project lead, are "decently grounded in evidence".

Leadership Development Programme

In designing the *Leadership Development Programme* for the Northern Ireland Civil Service, particular attention was given to identifying and using the evidence base on leadership that was available. This evidence supported a move away from the importance of developing single 'heroic' leaders towards developing a more collaborative view of leadership. Research into systems and complexity formed a further strand of evidence underpinning the programme.

To take one illustrative example of how evidence informed programme design, leading cultural change was identified as a critical area of work for leaders. The *Leadership Development Programme* made use of this research into culture to support assessment of the existing culture and to identify strategies to create the desired culture to support the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Evaluation Training for Civil Servants

This project aimed to provide a professional development programme for civil service staff in understanding the role of evaluation in human services. It was concerned with upskilling civil servants to better understand and use evaluation evidence to inform decision-making.

The training is for departmental staff who may need to commission or use evaluations; the aim is to enable participants to have a better understanding of evaluation methodologies, and to be better able to critically assess the findings from evaluations. During the Goal programme and the development of the training, participants were asked to complete a pre-programme self-assessment questionnaire about the level of support they felt they would require in six key evaluation competencies. The results of the before-and-after assessment by participants in the pilot were very positive; participants reported that they needed less support, following the training, across all competencies. It should be noted this is only for a small number of civil servants and its full impact cannot be assessed until the training has been running for a while.

Conclusion

The need for sound evidence to inform policy and practice is a constant refrain of public service reform efforts. At the 2015 OECD Public Governance Ministerial Meeting, ministers emphasised the importance of evidence as a critical underpinning of public policies. They also recognised the need for a continuous effort to develop policy-relevant evidence, including processes within government that allow for the use of evidence. Embedding a culture of evidence and evaluation is one of the headline actions in *Our Public Service 2020*, the Irish Government's public sector reform plan. Similarly in Northern Ireland, the OECD Public Governance Review of 2016 called for better use of evidence by the public service in policy design and development.

Challenges remain in ensuring that good quality evidence finds its way into the policy-making process. Experience from the Goal programme suggests that one way to help address these challenges is through the appropriate use of external support to help develop the evidence base and promote the use of evidence. Providing relevant supports to policy makers can help them more fully understand the sorts of questions that need to be answered, and agree on the most appropriate evidence that will help solve policy problems. This means having a strategic approach to policy development and ensuring policy makers are supported to use evidence during the project cycle.

Evidence is only one factor influencing decision-making. Many political decisions are driven by values and ideological positions. Experience, resources and habit, for example, can all also influence decisions. Evidence itself is very rarely clear cut: it needs testing and examining. The point here is not that evidence in and of itself will necessarily lead to better decisions, but that as part of the mix, it can contribute to more informed policy and practice.

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