

# Leading for the Future:

Learning from a Leadership Development Programme  
for Senior Civil Servants in Northern Ireland

Evaluation Report  
January 2021

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# Introduction

Leading for the Future was a leadership development programme for leaders in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS). The programme was designed in the context of significant challenges in Northern Ireland such as the reshaping of government departments and preparing for an outcomes focused Programme for Government.

The Northern Ireland Civil Service engaged support from CES to design and deliver two Programmes, one for Grade 3 (Deputy Secretaries) and one for Grade 2 (equivalent to Permanent Secretary level). Approximately forty Deputy Secretaries from across the Northern Ireland Civil Service took part in the first Programme.

CES carried out an evaluation with the Grade 3s to explore the difference that the programme made to those who took part, and to generate learning for public services about the design and delivery of leadership development initiatives for senior public servants.

Questionnaires were completed by participants before and after the programme. Focus group sessions were held six months later to explore how leaders had retained and applied learning.

This report presents the findings from the evaluation.

# Key findings

The evaluation highlighted significant positive differences in the skills, attitudes and practices of the leaders who took part. These included changes to individual awareness and behaviours; changes in team culture and engagement; and changes in collaborative working.

- **Collaborative working:**  
The largest reported improvements in the evaluation were in effective working with other Deputy Secretaries and across NICS departments.
- **Behaviour change:**  
Participants reported positive changes in their resilience, determination, motivation and ambition.
- **Relationships and networks:**  
Benefits highlighted by those who took part included the opportunity to build connections, develop relationships and networks.
- **Leaders were working differently:**  
There were examples of staff engagement, collaborative leadership and building leadership capacity and skills within teams. Leaders were more aware of their personal leadership style and its impact on others.
- **Leaders were sharing learning:**  
They were committed to sharing learning and tools from the modules within their departments.

## Focus group sessions six months on revealed how leaders were using the skills developed during the Programme:

- **Leaders were working differently:**  
There were examples of staff engagement, collaborative leadership and building leadership capacity and skills within teams. Leaders were more aware of their personal leadership style and its impact on others.
- **Leaders were sharing learning:**  
They were committed to sharing learning and tools from the modules within their departments.

## Learning from the design and delivery of the Programme suggests the following five success factors:

1. **Support from senior leadership:** to facilitate participation, support sustainability and embedding of the Programme.
2. **A co-design approach:** shaped by evidence, individual and organisational needs and priorities. While participation in the Programme was voluntary, there was 100% opt in following the co-design process.
3. **Trainer knowledge and experience:** including evidence informing public sector reform, leadership knowledge and experience.
4. **An inclusive and reflexive learning approach:** to provide practical tools and techniques which support collaboration and can help to address real life leadership dilemmas.
5. **Monitoring and evaluating outcomes:** to generate learning about outcomes, engagement and effective learning approaches.

### Areas for further development

include coaching and increased use of online platforms to support networking between programme participants.

**“We all have something to give each other. We can really effect change in NICS.”**

Programme Participant

# Background

The *Leading for the Future Programme*, was developed under the auspices of the *Goal Programme for Public Service Reform and Innovation*.

## **The Goal Programme for Public Service Reform and Innovation**

The *Goal Programme for Public Service Reform and Innovation* supports 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 comprised nine strategic sectoral reform projects in Ireland and Northern Ireland. 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 was commissioned to carry out an evaluation of the *Goal Programme* as a whole for CES.

## **The Leading for the Future Programme**

The *Leading for the Future Programme* was developed in response to the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) preparations of the programme for Government (PfG) and the reshaping of government departments.

The programme sought to increase impact within individual departments, collectively across NICS and wider public services, and in partnership with the business and the community and voluntary sector, by:

**Enhancing the individual and collective leadership skills and impact of Grade 3 civil servants in leading systemic and sustainable change for public servants within Northern Ireland.**

## Co-designing learning outcomes

Following an extensive desk-based review of the literature, and co-design process with senior leaders and potential programme participants, CES developed a customised, rigorous and evidence-based leadership programme intended to achieve the following learning outcomes:



**Figure 1:** Learning Outcomes

# What the programme involved

## Content

Five programme modules were delivered over seven months, with roughly four-to-six weeks between each module. Modules drew from evidence and combined theoretical and practical elements. A range of contributors and presenters showcased learning from public services across the island, and shared international leadership expertise, over the course of the programme. Figure 3 provides an overview of the programme modules.

## Coaching

Prior to taking part in the programme, each participant took part in a personal and confidential coaching session with a qualified coach. The coaching session was designed to explore participants' personal expectations, to consider the challenges encountered in their roles and to support participants to think about how the programme might support their ability to address these. A second coaching session was provided at the mid-way point of the programme. Participants were encouraged to come to the second coaching session with a specific personal leadership dilemma and to use the session to progress their leadership practice. This second session also facilitated individual reflection on participants' learning journey, role and career.

## Practical application

Participants worked on a small number of projects of strategic importance to NICS. These projects were intended to be a vehicle for collaborative working, with cross-department or cross-sector impact. Programme participants had the opportunity to visit organisations from a range of sectors and jurisdictions.





## Delivering the programme

Two CES associates co-facilitated the programme. Three qualified coaches provided coaching support. A number of CES staff including a senior manager, a research and evaluation specialist and a project administrator contributed to programme development and delivery.

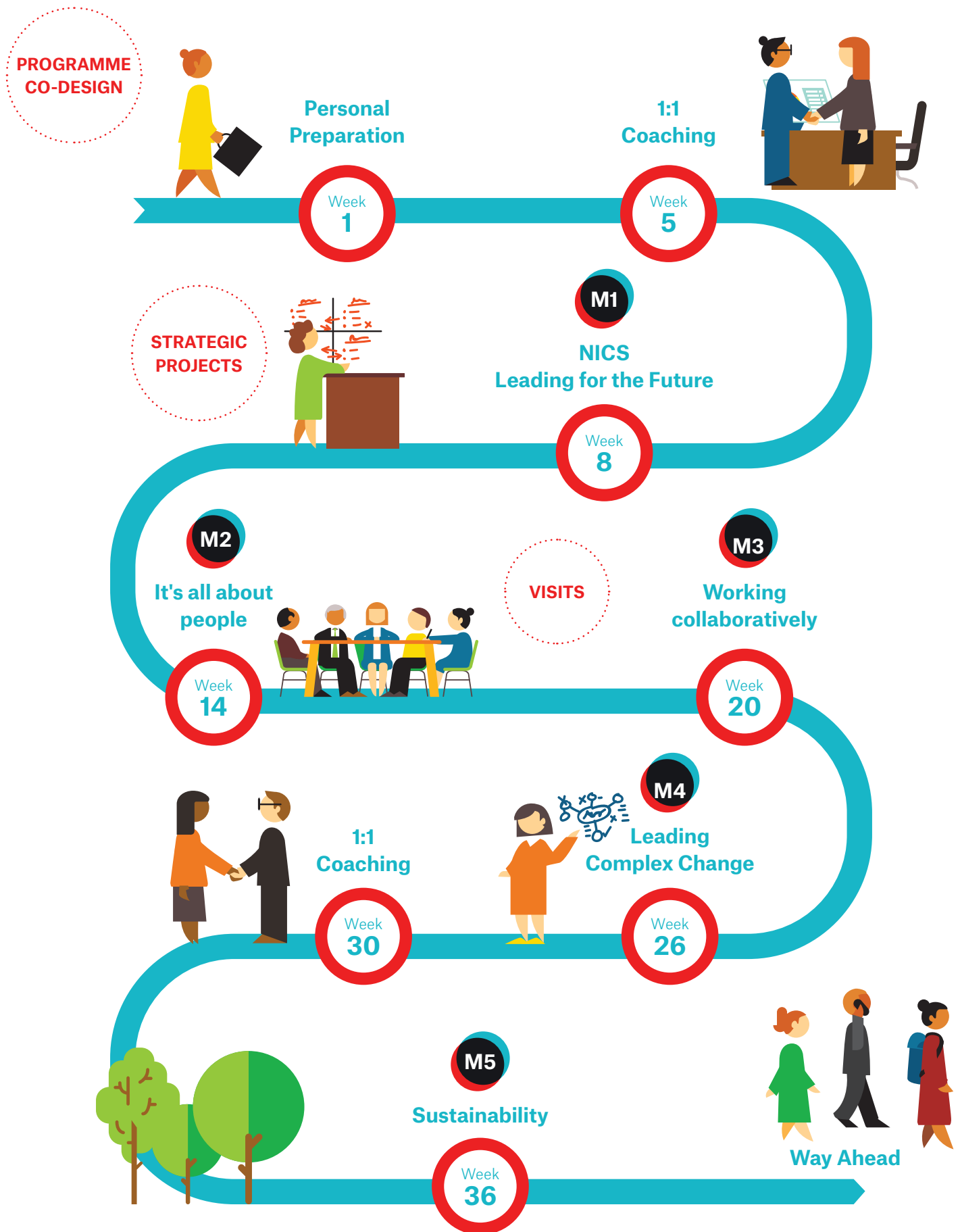
The Centre for the Applied Learning (CAL) provided design, delivery and evaluation support. This included support to plan for sustainability, and to share the programme learning with other leadership development initiatives in NICS.

The learning style adopted by the CES team delivering the programme was underpinned by the following learning approaches:



Figure 2: Learning Approaches

# Senior Civil Service Leadership Programme



**M** = Module

Figure 3: Leading for the Future: Programme Overview

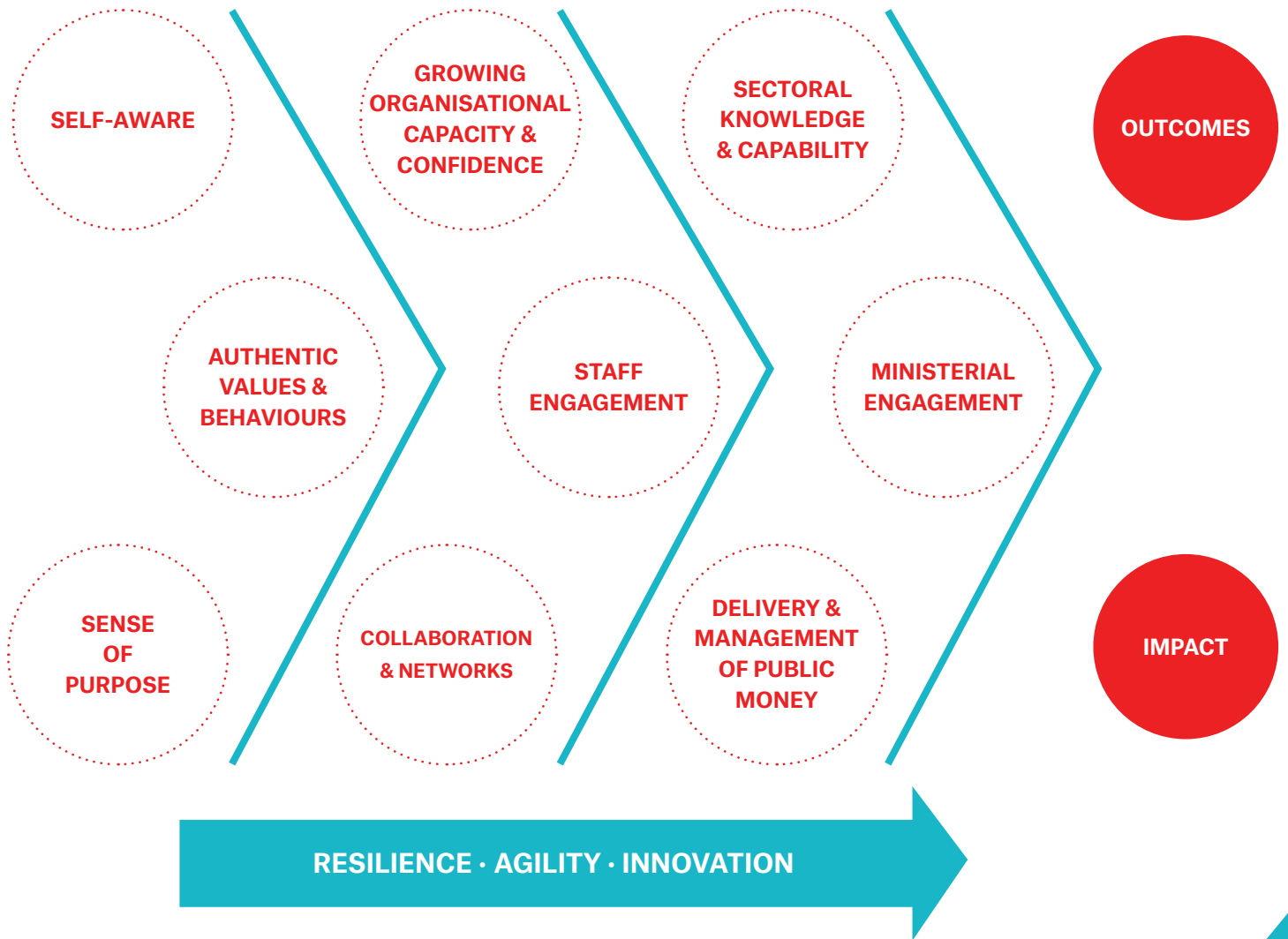


Figure 4: NICS Leadership Culture and Practices

# Evaluating the Programme

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## EVALUATION APPROACH

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Processes to evaluate Leading for the Future were built into the programme from the beginning. A number of methods were used to assess:

- Learning outcomes
- Application and sustainability of the learning
- Programme participants' experiences of, and learning from, individual modules
- Programme implementation.

The evaluation was undertaken by CES. The Centre for Applied Learning provided support to review and analyse the emerging findings.

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## ASSESSING POSITIVE CHANGES IN LEARNING OUTCOMES

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Analysis of pre, post, and follow up programme questionnaires combined with data collected via the individual post-module questionnaires and focus group discussions explored evidence of 'distance travelled' in key outcome areas, at the start, end, and six months after the programme concluded. The pre, post and follow up questionnaires included fifteen statements across three domains:

1. Changes in individual awareness and behaviours.
2. Changes in team culture and engagement in Grade5/7; enhanced individual and collective leadership.
3. Changes in collaborative working.

The average scores for all participants who completed both the before and after questionnaires were calculated, along with a total score which is the sum of the three scales. For all scales, the higher the scores, the greater the participants perception of their effectiveness.

The results for participants who completed both questionnaires are shown in Figure 4. The average scores for all participants who completed both the before and after questionnaires were calculated, along with a total score which is the sum of the three scales. For all scales, the higher the scores, the greater the participants perception of their effectiveness. The results for participants who completed both questionnaires are shown in Figure 5.

There were statistically significant improvements across each of the three domains. More detailed analysis showed that the largest reported improvements were in effective working with other G3 leaders and across NICS departments. Meanwhile the smallest improvements were in the use of evidence to support planning and decision-making, and consistently modelling the values of NICS.

A small number of participants completed a follow-up questionnaire six months later, to examine if any improvements had been sustained. Responses showed that there was not a significant drop-off in the scores. However, there were only eight responses that could be matched, so these respondents may not be representative of the whole group.

### Individual changes

Programme participants in their qualitative feedback also reported positive changes in their own resilience, determination, motivation and ambition.

### Team changes

Participants noted an enhanced appreciation of their need for leadership visibility and a better awareness of their personal leadership impact on others. Examples were cited of continued commitment to enhance staff engagement.

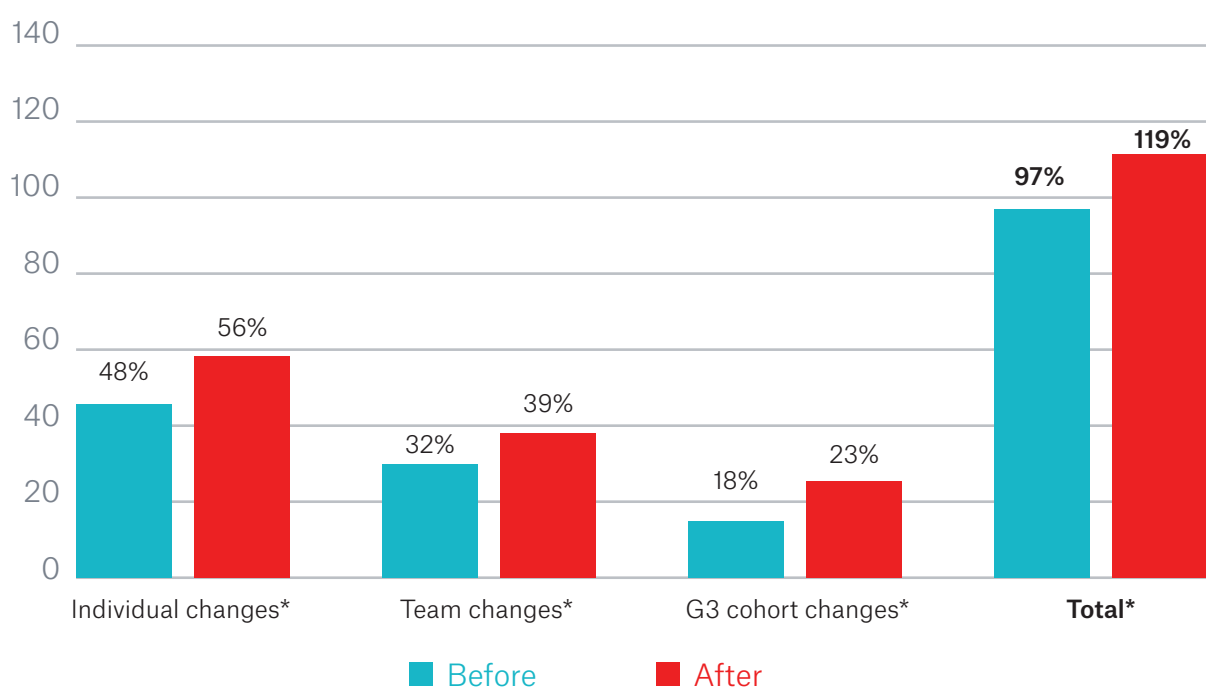
### G3 cohort changes

One of the main benefits of participating in the programme was the opportunity to build connections, forge relationships, and develop networks.

**“The Programme has given me confidence, helped me to understand my role, purpose and where I add value, particularly in developing others. It has also given me new friendships and networks, which are invaluable.”**

Programme Participant

**Figure 5:** Participant self-ratings pre and post programme



\* Statistically significant improvement

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## APPLYING AND SUSTAINING CHANGE

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Focus groups, facilitated six months post-programme, explored whether participants had retained and applied the learning from the programme, and whether this resulted in longer-term changes to behaviours, culture, and staff engagement.

Participants shared the ways in which they actualised the learning and started to 'do things differently' as a result of the programme.

Examples included:

- Adopting a more collaborative approach to leadership.
- Building leadership capacity and skills within teams.
- Using the power of teams to help deliver leadership messages and share decision-making.
- Being attentive to personal leadership style and how it impacts on others.
- Reviewing and revising approaches to staff engagement.

The application of the learning has also been enhanced by the participants' commitment to sharing the learning and the associated tools from the modules within their departments.

Sustaining the learning from the programme will likely be increased by the changes that participants reported for the teams they lead and the wider civil service.

**"We face common challenges. We have a shared opportunity to work together to address these. We, as a Grade 3 group, have the capacity and capability for effective change."**

Programme Participant

## PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES OF THE PROGRAMME

Participants shared their experiences of participating in the programme via questionnaires at the end of each module. The questionnaires explored participants' perceptions of whether the modular objectives were achieved, provided early indicators of changes arising for participants, as well as key learning insights and associated actions.

### Collective learning

From the first module, participant feedback demonstrated the benefit of the programme in enabling shared perspectives, a recognition of common challenges and acknowledgement of the Grade 3 collective as a catalyst in enabling change. The insights generated by this shared perspective appeared to have a motivational impact on participants, in reinforcing leadership styles and facilitating a better appreciation of the 'power' of the collective. The programme provided a learning space, where participants experienced opportunities to learn new knowledge; new theories; and new approaches.

In addition, some participants reflected on the value of the discussions with colleagues about change; how to introduce it; the fact that it is 'whole system'; that leaders must be aware of and value 'emerging change'; and that determination and persistence is needed to hold onto the 'whole system picture'.

**"It has provoked me to reflect and assess. I feel motivated and energised and the relationships with my Grade 3 colleagues in the cohort are deepening and strengthened."**

Programme Participant

**"We all have something to give each other. We can really effect change in NICS"**

Programme Participant

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## PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES OF THE PROGRAMME

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### Approach to implementation

Regular discussions with course directors, coaches, and course contributors enabled capturing the experiences of programme design and delivery. Participants also told us about how they experienced the implementation of the programme.

Encouraging and maximising participant engagement in the programme content and facilitating shared learning was a critical feature of the programme design and delivery. Participants agreed that the programme was successful in setting the foundations for a collaborative network of Grade 3s, with relationships characterised by transparency, trust, and respect. Initial programme activities, such as the two-day residential and exercises to surface leadership dilemmas, were reported as valuable in facilitating team dynamics.

The contributions from guest speakers were reported as helpful in bringing new leadership insights, stimulating discussion, and generating different perspectives.

Participant feedback suggested that the first coaching session increased their readiness to engage with the programme, and that it served to personalise the programme and further communicate its purpose. The second session enabled further reflection on leadership style, goals, and barriers in achieving these goals, as well as equipping participants with strategies to support the achievement of personal leadership ambitions. While generally considered helpful and an important dimension of the programme, a small number of participants suggested that the coaching sessions could have moved beyond the conventional and made greater efforts to stretch participants by injecting a greater challenge function.

**"I have found the course to be an excellent opportunity to take time to consider and develop leadership styles, issues and challenges, with support and insight of peers"**

Programme Participant

**"The external speakers also provided useful contributions, with great insights into leadership"**

Programme Participant



# Learning for the future

The evaluation yielded a wealth of information about the critical success factors and areas of programme design and delivery that could be strengthened further.

It highlights **five factors** which are critical to the design and delivery of leadership development programmes.

1. Commitment of senior leadership
2. A robust and appropriately scoped programme design
3. Specialised trainer knowledge and experience
4. An inclusive and reflective learning approach
5. A process to monitor and evaluate programme implementation and participants' progress

## 1. Commitment of senior leadership

NICS senior leaders were wholly committed to the programme from project inception and throughout its lifecycle. Learning from this evaluation suggests that senior leadership at a system-level is necessary in order to:

- Maintain strategic oversight of the programme.
- Support the sustainability of leadership development activity.
- Support the embedding of the programme.
- Facilitate liaison between CES and Head of the Civil Service (HOCS) and Permanent Secretaries on their roles in the programme.
- Facilitate discussion on the issues of impact and sustainability from the outset.
- Provides support to participants at the preparation stage.
- Protects the time needed to attend the programme.

## 2. A robust and appropriately scoped programme design

Learning from this evaluation suggests that the quality of the programme was a significant success factor in its delivery and ability to engage participants in the content. A programme design that is underpinned by the following characteristics is important to successful programme delivery:

- Taking a co-design approach, which strengthened participant buy-in and sense of ownership of the programme, whilst ensuring that the programme's objectives were aligned with NICS leadership goals.
- Exploring and using the evidence to ensure the development of a bespoke programme that was underpinned by key concepts and a clear conceptual model.
- Utilising experience and 'real time' issues to inform programme content, so that the programme focused on the key issues facing NICS senior leadership.
- Putting coaching at the heart of programme delivery.
- Focusing on the critical role of honing emotional intelligence skills through exercises and trainer inputs which seek to demystify concepts of leadership and foster greater respect for diversity of leadership styles and types.
- Providing opportunities to enable participant reflection, peer engagement, and shared perspectives.

## 3. Specialist trainer knowledge and experience

The CES team that designed and delivered the programme, in partnership with colleagues in NICS, had a wealth of leadership experience that participants reported valuing. Learning therefore suggests that the team leading and supporting the design and delivery of such a programme should represent a blend of leadership experience and knowledge, including:

- Experience of working with internationally credible leadership development.
- Experience of effectively delivering public service leadership programmes at a senior level.
- Knowledge of strategic reform in the public sector.
- Knowledge of strategic development of an outcome framework Programme for Government.
- Knowledge of the evidence informing public sector reform, whole of government work and collaboration.

#### 4. An inclusive and reflective learning approach

Participants reported on the ways in which the programme was delivered using an inclusive and reflective learning approach. Learning from this evaluation suggests that programmes should be underpinned by a learning approach that:

- Taps into the group and the individuals within it to provide live material for understanding group dynamics and real leadership dilemmas.
- Incorporates methodologies that senior leaders can take away and use with their staff and partner organisations.
- Provides practical tools and techniques to support collective leadership and collaborative working.
- Supports senior leaders to act as peer consultants to one another, using a range of questioning techniques and skills, honing listening skills and providing advice, support and solutions.
- Provides participants with opportunities to assess and act on the untapped potential of their networks, internally and externally.
- Creates regular peer-to-peer feedback points.

#### 5. A process to monitor and evaluate programme implementation and participants' progress

The commitment of the NICS senior leadership and the CES team to monitoring and evaluating both programme implementation and participants' progress generated important insights about outcomes, engagement, and effective learning approaches and strategies. Learning from this evaluation suggests that monitoring and evaluation processes should:

- Be designed during the programme design stage.
- Commit to share the emerging learning with programme participants.
- Capture the learning using a variety of methods and at different timepoints.
- Consider how to measure longer-term learning outcomes and to what extent learning outcomes have been sustained.
- Consider both process and outcomes.

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## AREAS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

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The evaluation highlights areas which could be further developed in the design and delivery of future similar initiatives.

### **Strategic projects as a learning tool**

The strategic projects were intended to be a vehicle for collaborative working, with an expected cross-department or cross-sector impact. They aimed to make a practical difference in areas of importance, to be new in focus or to give impetus to an existing piece of work. The projects were endorsed by the NICS Board and each sponsored by an individual Permanent Secretary. However, it was reported by participants and observed by the trainers that the strategic projects were not as effective a learning tool as anticipated. Feedback suggested that this was because the groups had not appointed one key leader to drive the small-team work and the production of the final output, and that this would be necessary in future initiatives.

### **The use of technology**

During the programme delivery, the value of a centrally coordinated communication platform became apparent, specifically to communicate upcoming activity and to share programme resources. This communication was supported in two ways; through regular email contact and the NICS internal e-platform, Totara. Both ended up serving a useful but functional purpose. There may have been benefit in further utilising and promoting the virtual networking opportunities offered by an e-platform, to enable participants a new avenue to engage with one another outside of the programme.

## Conclusion

Leadership is recognised as a key enabler in delivering positive outcomes for citizens. Emerging thinking about leading change in public services emphasises the importance of collective leadership, collaborative and cross government working and engagement with citizens. Organisational development, capacity building and employee engagement is also key to managing change effectively.

This report describes how a customised, rigorous and evidence-based leadership programme can consolidate and enhance this capacity for senior leaders. It outlines the potential in working with an entire tier of senior leadership to co-design and deliver a leadership development experience tailored to individual and organisational priorities. This innovative, system-wide approach to leadership development can contribute to significant changes in the attitudes, motivations, and collaborative practices of senior leaders.

The *Leading for the Future Programme* sought to increase the impact of individual departments and the wider public service in Northern Ireland in the longer term. However, it is recognised that meaningful reform takes time and that attention to sustainability is key from the outset. Mechanisms to support sustainability were built into the programme. These are essential in any future leadership development initiative, to build on the capability and supports developed, and to ensure that systems are in place to share the lessons learned more widely.

The report has been produced under the Goal programme, which supports public service reform and innovation.

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