



ON THE  
RIGHT  
TRACK

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# On the right track

Learning from investment in Prevention  
and Early Intervention in Ireland

**Implementation**

## About this summary

This summary outlines learning about implementation from programmes and services for children, young people and families. How well a programme or service is implemented will influence what it achieves. **Implementation** is about the 'how' as well as the 'what'.

Key messages in this summary draw from implementation reports and process evaluations of 22 programmes **delivered under the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative** by 15 organisations. This summary also draws on CES' own learning and experience of supporting implementation of new initiatives and services such as the Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme, the Early Intervention and Transformation Programme (EITP) and the HSE Nurture Programme.

Learning from implementation can support services in working for better outcomes for people. It can also inform policy makers, commissioning and service design so that investment in services can have a greater, longer term impact.

This summary, and others in the series will be of interest to policy makers, service commissioners and providers, involved in the implementation, or delivery, of human and social services.

To read other summaries and outcome reports in the On the Right Track series, visit [www.effectiveservices.org](http://www.effectiveservices.org)

## On The Right Track

## Implementation

From 2004 to 2016, The Atlantic Philanthropies together with government and other organisations invested in 52 programmes and services aimed at improving outcomes for children across the island of Ireland. These programmes used prevention and early intervention approaches in various areas of children's lives, including learning, behaviour, health and development, parenting and inclusion. This investment was known as the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative (PEII).

Organisations receiving funding under the initiative were required to evaluate the programmes they provided. Organisations used a range of approaches to evaluate their outcomes, and also how programmes were implemented. They wanted to improve the lives of children and families in their communities, but also to share their learning with policy makers and those who design, deliver and fund services for children. From 2008 to 2016, CES liaised with organisations delivering the programmes, to summarise learning from the evaluations. Other summaries in this series bring together learning from the evaluations about the outcomes for children and families who took part in programmes funded by the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative.

Learning from the initiative has already been used to inform the design and delivery of new programmes in Ireland and Northern Ireland, including the **Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme**, an initiative introduced by the Irish Government in 2013 which aims to improve outcomes for children living in disadvantaged areas and the **Early Intervention Transformation Programme**, which aimed to transform mainstream services in Northern Ireland.

Learning about implementation, the stages that are involved and the organisational infrastructure which needs to be in place, is useful to service commissioners and providers planning to introduce new services, projects or initiatives. This summary synthesises the learning on implementation from the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative as documented in implementation reports and process evaluations, and draws on CES' learning and experience of implementation with government departments and agencies.

# Introduction

### When commissioning services

**Good commissioning practices pave the way for good implementation and outcomes for citizens.** Consulting with stakeholders, conducting community needs analyses, and planning for sustainability all help organisations to get ready for implementation. New initiatives require sufficient time for community engagement, staff training, planning, and to develop organisational infrastructure, before any services are delivered. These activities need to be well resourced.

**Commissioning approaches should be strategic but flexible.** Strategic commissioning approaches can support providers to implement services effectively in line with national policy initiatives and objectives. Where possible, commissioners should consider flexibility in funding cycles, investment in capacity building and implementation, and use of data.

**It can take 2- 4 years for an initiative to be implemented, and even longer for outcomes to be visible.** Outcomes such as the development of new skills, practices, and better use of data may emerge earlier, build momentum and indicate progress. These short term outcomes should be recognised by commissioners as they measure progress. Judgements about the impact on service users should not be made too quickly.

## Key Messages

**There is no ‘quick fix’ solution for children and families with complex needs.** Structural inequalities and poverty are challenges which are deeply entrenched and may be outside of the scope of individual programmes or services, or make take years to address. Services can support families by building good relationships with them. A partnership approach can help to tackle problems early on and build resilience, all of which can help families and service users with complex needs.

**Whole system approaches hold the key to tackling complex problems in a sustainable way.** They are challenging to implement and require leadership, skills and approaches based on collaboration and services working together both at local and national level. Structures, consortia and groups can support whole system approaches, but they require a significant investment of time and resources to build trust and good working relationships.

**Scale is an important consideration in commissioning services but may not always apply.** Scale is an important aspect of systems change, and the potential for scale needs to be considered at an early stage. Not all initiatives need to be scaled up in order to be worthwhile.

**Plan for sustainability from the beginning.** Initiatives should be embedded into existing services where possible. There should be no unnecessary duplication. People are part of sustainability planning, as services can be vulnerable to changes in leadership and personnel. Capacity building and skills transfer can support organisations to plan for sustainability.

*“Key staff and organisational characteristics are persistence and realism. Such initiatives take time, resources and energy, and engaging organisations and people can be gruelling.”*



### When implementing services

**Start with a shared vision.** Involving stakeholders internally and externally to explore the problem and what you want to achieve can generate buy in and develop more integrated and effective services. Logic Models and Theories of Change are useful tools that help create a shared vision and can be revisited over time to assess progress.

**Anticipate and plan for change.** How change is introduced and communicated to all stakeholders helps to shape its success. Change may generate resistance. Providers need to clearly communicate what they are trying to achieve, how it meets the needs of the communities, and how it fits with existing service provision.

**Good relationships built on trust promote effective implementation in the long term.** This includes relationships between service providers, the communities they operate in and the people they work with. There may be an initial temptation to 'dive in', but experience suggests that time spent on consultation and building relationships in the early stages can contribute to better results later on.

**Gathering data is critical to improving services and needs to be planned from the outset.** Providers should think about what data they need and for what purpose. Data ethics, consent and data protection are important factors to consider in planning how data will be gathered, shared and archived. Highlighting the benefits of data to practitioners helps to get them involved in using and gathering data.

**Local decision-making structures can generate buy in and make initiatives more sustainable.** Formal boards, steering groups and local consortia can all help initiatives to become embedded within the community, build strategic partnerships, identify target groups and opportunities for collaboration. New structures should be planned in the context of existing community initiatives and have the appropriate people and a clear purpose to make them work.

**Investing in practitioners builds capacity to implement change.** Professional development and training builds confidence and skills in staff to adopt new work practices, including use of data. Organisational supports such as coaching or mentoring can help staff to apply new skills and maximise the impact of training. Networks and communities of practice allow practitioners to share and learn from each other and build relationships.

**Implementation teams help to bring in change and keep the initiative on track.** Teams should reflect a range of skills, perspectives and experience and can provide direction and support throughout the implementation process. Teams should have a clear role, scope and mandate and a relationship with other governance structures.

**Implementation is about how a programme, service or intervention is delivered.** A good programme will only deliver outcomes for people if it is implemented well.

Effective implementation is about using practices that help to ensure that a programme, service or intervention is delivered as intended, and that it achieves its outcomes. A range of frameworks, tools and approaches can help to plan implementation, identify what can support it, and flag any potential barriers.

Research suggests that there are generally 4 overlapping stages in implementation.

- **Stage 1** involves exploratory activities (for example, doing consultations, stakeholder mapping, gathering evidence on the proposed programme or intervention)
- **Stage 2** involves planning and resourcing (for example, developing an implementation plan, securing resources and staff training)
- **Stage 3** involves initial implementation (or delivery of the new programme) and
- **Stage 4** involves full embedding of the new programme in the system.

## Implementation – a good start means better results later on

Feasibility is about services and activities being realistic and possible within a particular context. Experience from the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative demonstrated that the first two stages of exploring and planning were critical to helping organisations implement services effectively within their communities. There can often be a temptation to 'dive in' to fix a problem quickly. Providers who spent time on exploring and getting ready for implementation were more likely to generate buy in, use their resources efficiently and have the capacity to deliver what they intended.

Assessing the context or setting is an essential activity in the early stages of implementation. Data and research evidence can help to understand the problem and its prevalence. Activities such as stakeholder mapping and carrying out a community needs analysis can help providers to develop local knowledge, avoid duplication, and understand the context for an initiative or service. Good relationships with stakeholders and service users are important to establish from the outset.

*“All staff felt that having built in time for planning and preparation... led to greater and improved communication... and clearer decision-making.”*

Feasibility involves ensuring that services and activities are realistic and possible within the particular context. Activities include assessing the availability of staff, funding, and other inputs. Assessing organisational capacity and readiness is another important aspect of determining feasibility. Implementation may involve staff taking on additional responsibilities or adapting to new ways of working. Training may be required, but training alone is not enough to change practice. Professional supports such as coaching or mentoring can help staff to adopt new approaches. Organisational infrastructure such as governance arrangements, human resources and information technology should also be in place.

All of these elements are critical to maintaining pace and to design an initiative or service that achieves its objectives. Experience shows that when these issues are neglected, there may be a significant impact in terms of costs, time delays and in some cases, failure. Relationships with stakeholders can become frustrated and resistant. Staff can experience high levels of stress and burnout, and the quality of services may deteriorate. Both research and experience suggest that if these activities are overlooked, they will need to be revisited at a later stage.



Experience from the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative suggests some common features of effective implementation.

1. **Leadership was needed at every level.** This included government departments, commissioners/funders, boards, service providers and communities. Sustaining leadership, particularly during times of change was critical.
2. **Services took time to explore and prepare.** Understanding local needs and strengths helped to achieve desired outcomes in new contexts with new groups. Activities implemented without this phase were less successful.
3. **Feasibility issues were addressed.** This involved taking practical steps to ensure sufficient capacity to introduce new practices. This required understanding staff workloads, and sometimes involved stopping other practices.
4. **Staff understood the benefits of the initiative being implemented and were supported.** This was facilitated by clear and, two-way communication strategies. Coaching and mentoring supports enhanced the impact of training, and ensured that new skills and practices were adopted.
5. **Relationships and partnerships were valued.** Service providers recognised, valued and harnessed the considerable knowledge, expertise and experience of local communities. Organisations with well developed relationships found it easier to recruit and engage target groups.

## Five features of effective implementation

This report draws from 22 process evaluations conducted under the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative. Process evaluations examined how the programmes were delivered, what supported their implementation and how challenges were handled.

It builds on an earlier report published by CES in 2012 called 'Organisational Learning.' We also draw from CES's experience of supporting policies and programmes in Ireland and Northern Ireland, including the Area Based Childhood Programme (ABC), the Early Intervention and Transformation Programme (EITP), and the HSE Nurture Programme.

The process evaluations examined how the programmes were delivered, what enabled success, and how challenges were handled. They were mainly qualitative and used field-based data collection methods to document various aspects of implementation, including organisational structure, procedures, staff responsibilities, service delivery structure, management functions, and interagency interaction and coordination. Methods used include interviews with programme management and frontline staff, questionnaires, observations, documentary analyses, and focus groups with participants.

Strong themes emerging included the role of organisational context, evidence, the local and wider environment, collaboration, staff support and leadership in enabling implementation. This learning is transferrable to a variety of other settings and initiatives and can inform future commissioning and implementation of services.

## Learning from experience of implementation





Reports and process evaluations from the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative provide practical learning from the experience of implementing programmes and services in real world settings.

1. **Different approaches helped in winning the hearts and minds of practitioners in gathering data and evidence.** Building staff confidence was important from the beginning, and helping to understand the purpose and basis for an initiative. In some cases evaluation and data gathering activities were challenging for staff. There were tensions between researchers and practitioners. Over time, clear communication and guidance helped practitioners to see the value of evaluation and the data that was gathered. Incorporating data gathering into their existing workload was also challenging for some practitioners. This was particularly difficult when staff were engaging with vulnerable families, or where there were significant time constraints.

## What can we learn from how the programmes were implemented?

2. **Implementation needs different forms of leadership, at different times.** Leaders were seen to have a critical role during implementation but were also key to introducing change and new ways of working. Leaders provided strategic direction and were important as role models, encouraging behaviour change, processes and culture within organisations. A collaborative approach to leadership featured in examples of effective implementation. Collaborative leadership encouraged others at all levels of an organisation and partners to be actively involved, and facilitated reflection and learning as changes were introduced. An absence and lack of continuity of leadership was seen as a significant barrier to implementation.
3. **Partnership involves more than tokenistic conversations with community groups.** Good relationships and partnerships took months, sometimes years to build, particularly in locations which already seemed saturated with services, or where tensions existed between service providers. Implementation benefited when relevant, accurate information was communicated and shared with relevant stakeholders. Pre-implementation activities, including workshops and facilitated seminars, helped to ensure that all stakeholders understood the issues relating to service provision. They generated support and understanding of the purpose and goals of the programme, service or intervention. A lack of appropriate communication led to uncertainty and impacted on delivery.

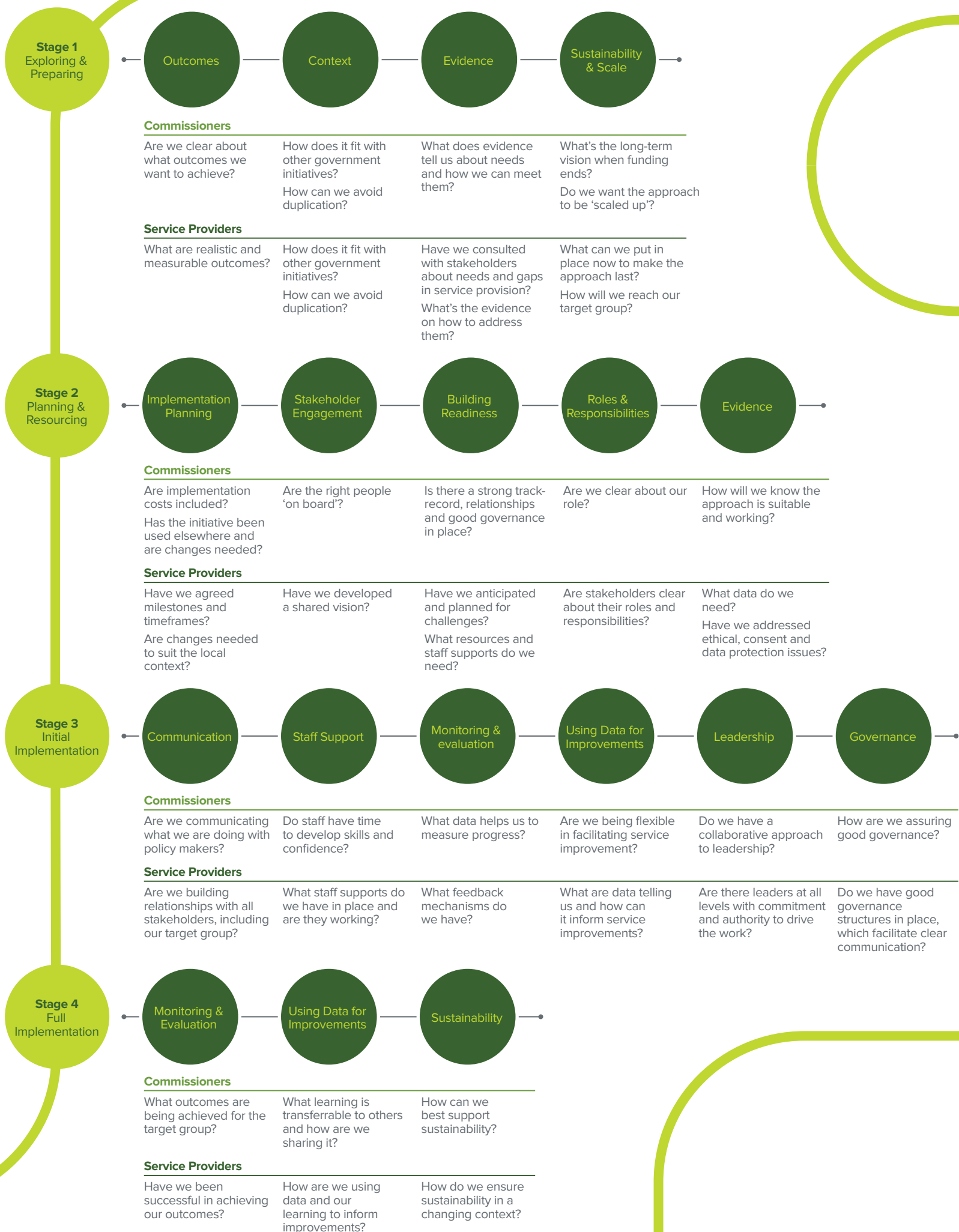
*“Seeing outcome data about your daily activities makes you think twice about what you’re doing.”*

**4. Support for staff should extend beyond one-off training events, and should include skills in dealing with change, communication and collaborative working.** Different training needs emerged at different stages of implementation, suggesting the need for training to be reviewed regularly. Training, coaching and mentoring help to build and develop organisational capacity. Staff also required other support. This included support in dealing with the uncertainty that comes with new ways of working and getting to grips with materials and subject matter that staff and volunteers had not come across before.

**5. Existing requirements and obligations have an impact on whether new practices can be implemented.** When implementing new practices, practitioners learned that they needed to understand how they aligned with professional, policy and institutional obligations such as standards, codes of practice, policies or regulations. For example, programmes implemented in schools needed to align with the national curriculum. In one case, teachers were concerned that some aspects of a programme conflicted with the existing curriculum. They consulted to explore what components could be adapted. The programme was adapted to align better with the curriculum, and it met its objectives and achieved positive outcomes.

# Keeping Implementation on Track

## Questions to help commissioners and service providers during implementation



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9 Harcourt Street, Dublin 2, Ireland.  
+353 (0) 1 416 0500  
office@effectiveservices.org

Forestview, Purdy's Lane, Belfast,  
BT8 7AR, Northern Ireland.  
+44 (0)2890 648 362  
nioffice@effectiveservices.org

[www.effectiveservices.org](http://www.effectiveservices.org)

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