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# The Goal Programme for Public Service Reform and Innovation

Evaluation Vignette ④

**Strengthening skills and capacity within the civil  
and public service**

**March 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

“Without the capacity to make good decisions and to implement them well, ineffective government is the best expectation one might have; the worst expectation is a failed state.”<sup>1</sup>

A recent study by Barber (2017)<sup>2</sup> examines how to deliver better outcomes for citizens and proposes a ‘public value framework’ as a means to embed continuous improvement across the public sector. The study identifies developing systems capacity as a key pillar in this framework. Developing systems capacity is important because it affects the underlying quality and resilience of a service. In terms of the capacity of the workforce, the study notes that ‘delivering public value requires the right number of people, the right mix of skills, in the right environment’ (ibid, p. 35).

A stated objective of the Goal programme is to support capacity building for more joined up government, to help ensure better delivery of services for citizens. The evaluation team notes progress towards this objective in our research to date and this vignette highlights evidence from four of the nine Goal projects. The four projects referenced in this vignette are:

### 1. **Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing Pathfinder Project, Department of Health (DoH), Ireland**

One of three ‘pathfinder projects’ selected by the Irish Government to demonstrate how the delivery of shared whole-of-government work can be improved. This project specifically aimed to demonstrate new ways of working differently across government to enhance mental health and wellbeing supports for young people.

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1 Murray, J. (2007). Building Capacity. Presentation to the Institute of Public Administration national conference. May 2007.

2 Barber, M. (2017). Delivering better outcomes for citizens: practical steps for unlocking public value. London: HM Treasury.

## **2. Building Collaborative Working Practices Project, Department of Education and Skills (DES), Ireland**

Strengthening the operation, management and governance of collaborative working practices in the Department, as a means of enhancing the quality of policy development.

## **3. Using Data to Inform Policy, Department of Education and Skills (DES), Ireland**

Enhancing the effective use of data to inform policy development and implementation through the design and development of a data map. The map shows data available in the Department and its agencies, and the project also provides training and capacity building for Department staff in the use of data for policy development and implementation.

## **4. Children and Young People's Strategies, Department of Education and Department of Health, Northern Ireland**

Supporting the development and implementation of a new children and young people's strategy (CYPS), the Department of Health and the Department of Education's review and development of the 'looked after children' (LAC) strategy and the Department of Health's 'family and parenting support' (FPS) strategy.

### **The Goal programme uses multiple approaches to strengthen skills and capacity**

A number of approaches are in use across the Goal programme to strengthen skills and capacity amongst civil and public servants, including:

- Using evidence and literature to inform practice
- Using appropriate developmental supports
- Using new tools, techniques and resources
- Co-design and co-production of materials and resources.

### *Using evidence and literature to inform practice*

There is an emphasis on examining relevant research evidence and the associated literature to provide the building blocks for strengthening skills and capacity. Participants in the *DES Building Collaborative Working Practices Project* note how they learnt from the commitment of CES at the outset of the project to examine the literature and research evidence in respect of collaborative work and marry this with practice. A 'Practice Wisdom'<sup>3</sup> document captures the learning and experiences of pilot collaborative working groups, and the experiences of senior managers who were members of pre-existing policy working groups. Capturing and documenting this 'practice wisdom' alongside the findings from the research literature shapes the tools and supports produced for the rest of the project, ensuring they are of high quality and relevance to the project.

### *Using appropriate developmental supports*

A further aspect of strengthening skills and capacity is using appropriate developmental supports, such as case studies. The *DES Data Map Project* started by mapping existing data sets across the Department. Case studies are in development illustrating how to use the data map to inform policy development and implementation. Initial work on the case studies has identified shortages in skillsets around understanding and using data:

“That’s a strong thing coming out of our... case study, the need to build in that skillset across the department. There’s also issues around retaining people with those skillsets” (CES interviewee)

To address this issue, capacity building workshops are planned, and data stewards established in each section of the department to form a network of people to disseminate information through.

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3 Centre for Effective Services and the Department of Education and Skills. (October 2017). The Practice Wisdom: Themes from DES interviews, PO workshop, and networking events.

### *Using new tools, techniques and resources*

A third element of the approach to building skills and capacity is through introducing participants to new tools and techniques to enable them to work more effectively together. In the *Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing Pathfinder Project*, participants were exposed to a number of problem-solving and collaboration approaches, tools and techniques during the course of the project. These include tools such as journey mapping, issue trees and temperature tests<sup>4</sup>. Participants found these tools and techniques to be of great value.

In the *Children and Young People's Strategy Project*, the project team found the framework produced by CES for the analysis of the consultation responses particularly helpful.

### *Co-design and co-production*

The emphasis on co-design or co-production of projects is also playing an important role in skills and capacity development. The design of the Goal programme aims to ensure that CES is not imposing solutions and answers, rather the departments identify their needs and the Goal programme affords them the opportunity to address any skills and capacity gaps with supports provided by CES. The key is to strike a balance between providing tools, resources and people, while facilitating and enabling civil servants to upskill and learn new ways of working. Across all departments, interviewees regarded this as one of the most important features of the Goal programme, commenting that CES understands the way in which departments work and respects their timeframes. As a result, civil servants feel they retain ownership and control of their projects:

“My role was really to drive it from the department's side... the goal was that it was co-designed from the outset so that, optically it was seen to be driven from within the department and it wasn't just consultants

<sup>4</sup> For more details, see Gaynor, R., Thomas, P. and Templeman, A. (2017). *15 Days: The Toolkit - A resource for practitioners interested in adapting an accelerated, collaborative problem-solving methodology*. Dublin: Centre for Effective Services.

coming in, telling the department how to work better. So that message was important from the start... it wasn't just that CES turned up with the material and said, this is it... it was really moulded every step."

(Department interviewee)

### **Evidence of progress in strengthening skills and capacity**

At this early stage of the Goal Programme, there is some evidence emerging of progress from the projects examined in embedding skills and capacity development across the public service.

The aim of the *DES Building Collaborative Working Practices Project* is a more efficient and effective approach to collaborative working in order to facilitate better policy making. This in itself will enhance capacity. However, implementing the project is also resulting in learning in a range of areas. Department personnel refer to learning a lot about collaborative working in the course of the project:

"Collaborative working is a phrase that's bandied about and can mean absolutely anything to anybody but there is a discipline and a methodology there that gives this way of working a real structure and points to best practice."

Group members in the *Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing Pathfinder Project* identified a number of enhanced skills and capacities arising from their participation:

"I will take away new facilitation skills and tools to structure group working in the future."

"I have a sense of empowerment and license to make small change in a big system."

"New methods of working, particularly in groups - interactive style, temperature tests, etc."

### *Skills and capacity development is extending beyond the projects*

There is also some evidence of skills and capacity development beginning to extend beyond the projects and being applied more generally within and across departments. For example, in the case of the *Children and Young People's Strategy Project*, a briefing paper notes that the Goal Programme has contributed to 'the development of a mindset and a willingness to pursue other projects jointly across departments.' Examples, from Northern Ireland of this enhanced capacity include the development of a trial Family Drug and Alcohol Court between the Department of Health and the Department of Justice, and a joint project between the Department of Health and the Department for Communities with regard to securing access to benefit entitlement for the most vulnerable families.

With regard to the *Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing Pathfinder Project*, a senior departmental staff member notes that they had started training other potential leaders of projects based around the experience learned from the project:

"We've put about ten people through facilitation training... and we discovered that one... is a fantastic facilitator and she has been used around the house in a whole bunch of things... I think that's been one of the findings we've had, which is that, 'yes, we were able to take some of these techniques and start training people and employing them around the place'."

There is interest in sharing learning from the projects across departments. The approach used in the *Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing Pathfinder Project* has generated interest in the civil service in both jurisdictions. The *Building Collaborative Working Practices Project* has attracted attention from other departments participating in the Goal Programme, in particular the Department of Health in the Ireland, where some of the tools are being adapted and used, and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.



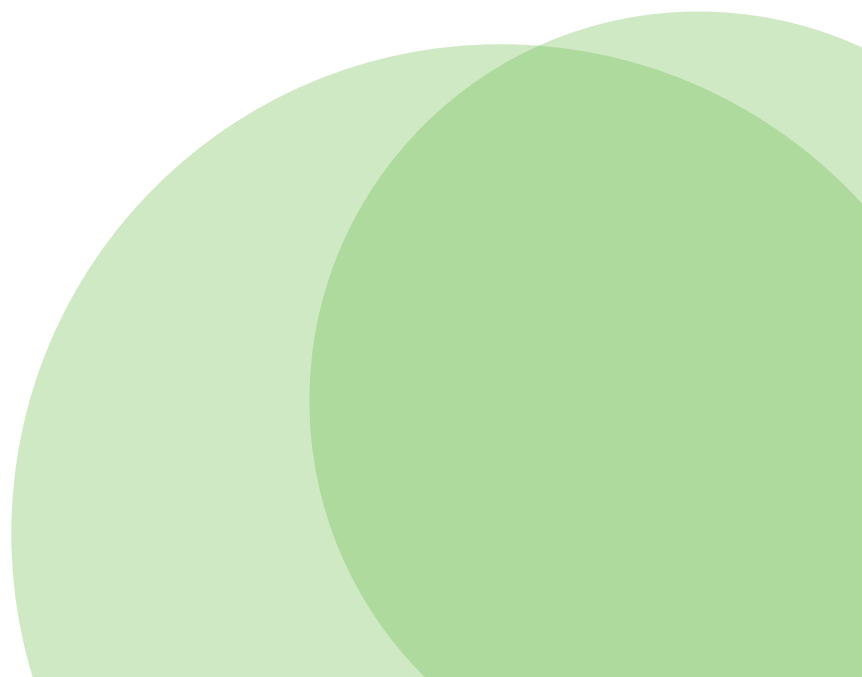
## Emerging learning - three ways to support capacity building

The role and functions of public services are constantly evolving. The skills and capacity of public servants need continuous attention and development to ensure policies and services remain fit for purpose. This vignette highlights three aspects of the Goal Programme that are contributing to strengthening the skills and capacity of public servants:

1. The quality of outputs and rigorous methodologies used by CES set the scene for capacity building by enhancing the knowledge base of public servants. CES assists the departmental partners by producing supporting material such as literature reviews, guidelines, case studies and consultation frameworks. Importantly, these documents are co-productions with the departmental project teams. Interviewees across all four projects commented on the quality of these outputs and the rigour that goes into their production.
2. The introduction of new tools, techniques and approaches that are starting to spread beyond the projects. Staff are engaged in new ways of working, and there is some early evidence of this being embedded within departments.
3. Co-design and/or co-production is crucial to ensuring departmental ownership of the projects and embedding/sustaining results. CES is seen as 'a partner and critical friend with them on the journey', not just as an external contractor who comes in but does not leave capacity behind when they finish.

The four projects examined in this vignette are contributing in different ways to strengthening the skills and capacity of the participants. As the evaluation of the Goal Programme proceeds, it will consider the extent to which these outcomes are sustainable and shared across the civil and public service. A noteworthy point that emerges from the evaluation to date with regard to skills and capacity development is that departments are often well aware

of shortcomings and the need to address them. For example, the data map project had been under consideration in the Department of Education and Skills for some time. Similarly, departments were often acutely aware of the need to enhance their capacity with regard to collaborative working. But often, day-to-day challenges and the priorities of getting the job done militate against their taking concerted action to address these skills and capacity challenges. The Goal Programme, by providing some space and time, allows capacity development to be addressed in a structured way, and helps legitimise appropriate interventions.



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