

The Executive Leadership Programme

Background to the Programme

The Executive Leadership Programme was designed in 2018 by the University of Limerick [Prof Sean Redmond and Dr John Bamber] and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs under What Works (formerly QCBI). What Works aims to enhance the skills of practitioners, providers and policymakers to appraise and apply evidence informed prevention and early intervention approaches to their work with children, young people and their families. In line with the aims of this initiative, the Executive Leadership Programme is designed to improve the capacity of local professionals to deal more effectively with complex policy, programme and practice areas.

Participants

The University of Limerick team work with those responsible for securing better outcomes in a given location or in relation to a specific issue. The programme offers around 20 places to professionals with the capacity to bring energy, leadership and influence to needed developments. Participation is voluntary, and recruitment is arranged through appropriate local agencies or structures with oversight for work with children, young people and their families.

The Programme in Limerick

After a successful pilot in 2018-2019 with over 20 local leaders working in Dublin's North East Inner City, the UL team will work through the Children and Young People's Services Committee, to run the programme in Limerick in 2019. The first 2 days of the 6 day programme will be on 29-30 of July, with days 3 and 4 in September, and days 5 and 6 in October, on dates to be agreed.

Programme Aims

The programme takes a common-sense, but distinctively novel approach informed by the latest thinking on how to deal with complex problems. Complex areas, known also as 'Wicked Problems', persist despite significant state, voluntary and community sector activity. Indeed previous and current intervention activity and resource investment by the state and voluntary sector, may layer new complexity into the problems experienced by local citizens, and exacerbate negative effects on their quality of life.

At street level, wicked problems can include local criminal activity/community safety, drugs misuse, poor educational achievement, and poor community efficacy. At local and area level, problems can be compounded by the inability of agencies and bodies to mobilise effectively to make the best use of resources. At national level, such problems can include the failure of statutory bodies to work together effectively, or to appropriately govern national/local state and voluntary sector partnerships to bring about improvement for residents. In this case, the promise of new resources alone is unlikely to improve the situation without reforming ways of thinking and practising, and transforming systems.

Wicked Problems have multiple layers, have no stopping rule in that they are likely to continue indefinitely, and are likely to morph, adapt, displace or manifest themselves as new problems. They are unlikely to be significantly affected by off-the-peg, community located, evidence-based programmes which prescribe solutions where these are not sensitive to local context.

The Structure of the Programme

While the organisation of the programme can vary depending on specific requirements, it is usually scheduled in three two-day blocks at the University of Limerick. The three connected parts focus on problem definition, idea generation, and change theory. All parts involve stress testing of the assumptions and ideas generated by small working groups in presentations to the larger group. In Block 3 the stress testing process involves an external panel of experts.

Problem definition [Block 1]

Block 1 starts with highly focused, short theoretical inputs on wicked problems and social and organisational change. After this participants identify a long-list of complex problems, for example faced by residents in a given locality or situation. From these, a short list of three or four problems are identified for closer scrutiny. Significant attention is then devoted to understanding the nature of the problems identified, and how they sustain themselves. Smaller teams are formed to work the problem through. This process, certainly at mid-level governance, is sometimes uncomfortable but very necessary, as too often solutions are identified without a deeper understanding of the scope and complexity of the problems. This problem definition process is designed to permit more nuanced, creative and effective solutions to problems.

Idea generation [Block 2]

In Block 2, each team submits their analysis to an initial peer review process with the larger group. The purpose of this is to ensure that the teams have considered the problem from multiple perspectives, and can convincingly articulate how the problem sustains itself. After this stress test, the team moves on to generate ideas that are designed to:

- a. Demonstrate how they mitigate the problem(s) identified
- b. Show how they contribute to improving the quality of life of residents
- c. Indicate how they can be feasibly implemented
- d. Consider unintended consequences (of particular risk with wicked problems).

Theory of change [Block 3]

In Block 3 ideas are further refined by the teams and peer reviewed by the wider group. The focus is on making a convincing case about what needs to be done to bring about productive change, and how this can be achieved. In effect, it is about articulating a robust, well defended 'theory of change'. In addition an external panel of experts, not dissimilar to a 'Dragons Den' process, examines the proposals made by each team and provides constructive feedback to further develop the ideas.

Intended Outcomes

The Executive Programme is intended to work on three levels.

1. Improving the capacity of individual participants to understand and tackle Wicked Problems.
2. Enhancing cross-agency/disciplinary, integrated and collaborative approaches to dealing with complexity.
3. Generating new, innovative, creative responses to complex problems.

The responses are in the form of proposals which can be implemented subject to further development, approval or resources, by the teams or others as appropriate.

To give an illustration of what is possible, teams on the pilot programme identified three problem areas: stopping open drug dealing in a specific location, improving the effectiveness of community leadership, and improving working relationships between the statutory sector and community and voluntary bodies.

