Collaborative policy making in a pandemic: reflections and advice for practitioners

May 2022

Contents

Collaborative policy making in a pandemic: reflections and advice for practitioners 1
Contents 2
Introduction 3
Authors 4
Acknowledgements 5
The aim of this report 6
The characteristics of the pathfinder approach 6
When you should take a different approach to policy making 7
The seven phases of a pathfinder project 8
Phase 1. Ground clearing and set-up 9
Phase 2. Kicking off: forming the group and getting a focus 9
Phase 3. Field work: digging into the issue through interviews, workshops and user research 12
Phase 4. Analysis: making sense of the fieldwork findings, prioritising the issues to work on 13
Phase 5. Developing ambition and objectives for change, starting to identify outline solutions 14
Phase 6. Finalise products: more engagement and address feedback, tackling dilemmas and contentious issues 15
Phase 7. Formal consultation, reporting and approvals 16
Project outputs and what is happening next 17
What we learned about success factors for projects like this. 17
1. Core team capacity, capability and mindset. 17
2. Strong parent focus. 18
3. Open and permissive project leadership from the department. 19
4. Way of working: virtual collaboration and problem-solving methods 19
5. CWG composition 22
Complications and challenges 22
1. Pace and timing 22
2. Clarity of purpose, outputs, roles and expectations of the CWG 23
3. The Challenge Panel: what it is for and how it works best 24
4. Balance between working in plenary and working in sub-groups 26
5. How government works for outsiders and how change gets delivered in a complex system 26
6. Communication and staying in touch with CWG members 28
Collaborating online during a pandemic 29
Conclusions 32
Appendix 1. Where you can find out more about tools and methods used in the pathfinder 33

Introduction

In November 2018, First 5 | A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 was jointly launched by an Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr Katherine Zappone TD, Minister for Health, Simon Harris TD, and Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills, Mary Mitchell O'Connor TD. It contained a number of actions relating to parenting support.

A Parenting Support Policy Unit was established in the (then) Department of Children and Youth Affairs to provide cross-government co-ordination of policy direction, activity and performance relating to parenting support initiatives. The unit was tasked with leading the development of a national model of parenting support services.

In February 2020, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) contracted the Centre for Effective Services (CES) to help co-ordinate and support the What Works Programme. Part of this work programme involved supporting the development of this national model. What Works is an initiative led by the DCEDIY, with funding from Dormant Accounts, to support a move towards evidence-informed prevention and early intervention services for children, young people and their families. This includes enhancing the use and availability of data and evidence; supporting learning and development; and ensuring quality at the levels of policy, service and provision. This report was commissioned by the DCEDIY and supported through the What Works Programme.

The CES is a non-profit, all island organisation which works with government departments and service providers to design, develop, implement and evaluate public policies and services. The CES worked in partnership with the Parenting Support Policy Unit to plan and lead the development of a national model of parenting support services.

In 2020, following engagement with providers of parenting support services and a review of international approaches to parenting support services, a collaborative process to develop the model was planned. The collaborative working group established had 12 members consisting of representatives from the Department, the Health Service Executive, Children and Young People Services Committees, Tusla - Child and Family Agency, and community and voluntary providers of parenting support services. A core project team of five people consisting of staff from the Parenting Support Policy Unit and the CES commenced planning a process which mirrored that of previous pathfinder projects[1] undertaken in Ireland including the Young People Mental Health Project[2] and a review of Sexual Assault Treatment Units undertaken by the Department of Health.[3] A primary objective of those pathfinders was to build the policy development capacity of the civil service.

Following the introduction of public health restrictions due to COVID-19, the approach had to be adapted to reflect the requirement for online working. The commencement of the project and research with Irish parents were also delayed. Upon research into suitable online platforms and collaboration tools, the project team was able to commence the meetings of the collaborative working group in October 2020. Online workshops of 2 hours duration were

[1] For pathfinder reports and toolkits see https://www.effectiveservices.org/resources/15-days-a-story-about-collaborative-problem-solving-in-public-services

[2] See: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/117520-national-youth-mental-health-task-force-report-2017/.

[3] See: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e9ee89-department-of-health-policy-review-of-the-national-sexual-assault-tr/.

usually held every two weeks. The project team faced two key challenges – leading the development of a model and managing a new way of working.

The following report sets out our reflections on what worked well and what we would change in the future. We hope it will assist others who are tasked with developing policy and wish to do so in a collaborative manner.

Authors

Peter Thomas is an expert adviser to governments and public service providers. In addition to running a thriving international advisory business, Peter is a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Government in London and an Associate of the Centre for Effective Services, Dublin. He is widely published and provides expert advice to government and other public service organisations. His areas of expertise include: civil service reform, role and structure of organisational centres, leadership of change, performance management, the centre of government, collaboration, engagement, delivery and capability.

Catherine Whitty is a Project Specialist with the Centre for Effective Services. Catherine's area of work is practice development. She contributes to projects which support service providers and practitioners to develop and implement quality services, build their capacity and promote better outcomes for service users. Catherine's background is in the nursing/midwifery profession. Before joining the CES, her most recent roles included Director of Public Health Nursing and National Practice Development Co-ordinator for the Public Health Nursing Service. She holds post-graduate qualifications in nursing studies, healthcare management and nursing education.

Ciara Pidgeon leads the Parenting Support Policy Unit in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. She is responsible for the cross-government co-ordination of policy direction, activity and performance in the area of parenting support and related family support initiatives. Ciara has extensive experience of policy development across a range of areas, including acute hospital services, primary care and health insurance. She holds post-graduate qualifications in public administration, policy analysis and public health.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the participation and dedication of the core project team and the collaborative working group who drove the project; the many stakeholders who participated in interviews and focus groups; everyone who responded to the online consultation and shared their experiences and ideas; and the senior leaders who gave the permission, direction and encouragement required to make it a success.

Our thanks in particular to:

Aine Lynch
Aisling Gillen
Anna Visser
Anne Pardy
Anne Tansey
Anne-Marie Brooks
Ben Ryan
Bernie Laverty
Bernie McNally
Bronagh Quinlan
Carmel Brennan
Catherine O'Donohoe
Clare Cashman
Conor Rowley
David Studer
Emer Musonda
Eoin Roche
Fergal Lynch
Francis Chance
Gráinne Hickey
Helen Deely
Karen Kiernan
Kate Duggan
Kate Murphy
Kathryn O'Riordan
Liz Chaloner
Maria Tobin
Marion Quinn
Martina Mannion
Niamh Carey
Nicole McMahon
Roisin Doherty
Ruth Geraghty
Tracey Monson
Virginia Pye
Yvonne Lecky
Zara Lafferty
Focus Group Participants
Interviewees

We are very grateful to all those who reviewed and commented on this report. The views, opinions, errors and omissions are those of the authors alone.

The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

The aim of this report

This report draws out the immediate lessons and insights from the collaborative policy development project that led to the national model of parenting support services. The target audience for the report is others who are using, or considering using, a collaborative approach that builds on the experiences, strengths and insights of a diverse group of practitioners (referred to herein as the pathfinder approach).

This report draws on:

- A learning workshop with the Collaborative Working Group (CWG) (including a pre-workshop questionnaire).
- A workshop with the core team.
- One to One interviews with the core team, and with some members of the CWG and the Challenge Panel.

This report aims to:

- Explain the distinctive characteristics of the pathfinder approach and the prerequisites for taking this approach.
- Describe the key activities of each phase of a pathfinder project, including top tips for each phase.
- Reflect on the success factors for this approach and set out some of the key challenges you are likely to face.
- Describe the practicalities of carrying out the project entirely online during a pandemic and the team's core learnings from that experience.
- Provide some suggestions and links to resources that will help you in shaping your own pathfinder project.

The characteristics of the pathfinder approach

The characteristics of this approach differ from typical policy-making. They are derived from the principles of open policy making, system thinking and research into the characteristics of successful policy making[4].

A pathfinder project is:

- Carried out by a collaborative working group who are working part-time, with a diversity of experience and perspective;
- Supported by a core project team that is credible, open, brave and ambitious;
- Able to balance pace and urgency with the need to create space to think, and allows people to participate whilst continuing their day jobs;
- Outward looking and open to new or different thinking – with a strong focus on service user experience, analogous settings and external practice;
- Prepared to use carefully adapted and structured problem-solving tools and collaborative methods;

[4] See: Policy making in the real world, IfG; System stewardship, IfG

- A process of co-creation, through the involvement of stakeholders across governmental and non-governmental systems; and,
- Undertaken with a system stewardship mindset – government and policy makers are facilitators and enablers rather than controllers.

The core team comprised of three civil servants from the lead policy unit, a CES Project Specialist and a CES Graduate Intern. Two of the civil servants from the lead policy unit were full-time, while the final core team member worked roughly 2 days a week on the project. The CES core team members worked approximately 1 day a week each on the project. The core team mirrored the project's underlying principles of collaboration to manage and support the whole process, gathering evidence, facilitating workshops and taking the lead on production of the outputs.

The Collaborative Working Group consisted of 12 members drawn from different areas across the DCEDIY, Tusla, the HSE, Children and Young People Services Committees, and community and voluntary organisations working directly with parents. They met in workshop sessions every two weeks for two hours, in addition to reviewing outputs and reports that informed the development of the model. 13 workshops were held between October 2020 and August 2021. The Collaborative Working Group members also worked in smaller subgroups conducting interviews and focus groups as part of the fieldwork element of the project.

The Challenge Panel was made up of 16 senior managers from across the civil service, public service and organisations working directly with parents. They met three times through the project for online workshops lasting 2 hours each.

When you should take a different approach to policy making

Whilst the pathfinder approach is not a quick fix, it can be quicker and more effective than the normal policy development process. However, it requires substantial investment of time and resources in a core team. It asks a lot from other key players across the system. It is not an approach to undertake lightly. There are two essential prerequisites.

Prerequisite 1. It is a complex policy issue that cuts across existing systems

Supporting parents to deliver the best outcomes for children and families is a complex policy and operational challenge that arises across many different policy areas. It is an issue that goes beyond the capacity of any one organisation to understand and address, and there is often disagreement about the causes of problems and the best way to tackle them. Developing a solution often requires an understanding of the functions of different organisations. Such issues tend to be the subject to a large volume of priorities and initiatives and a number of different government actors and agencies. But the context of the issues also matters – the realpolitik of an issue at the heart of a crisis or scandal rarely permits the time or space to think differently and get to root causes.

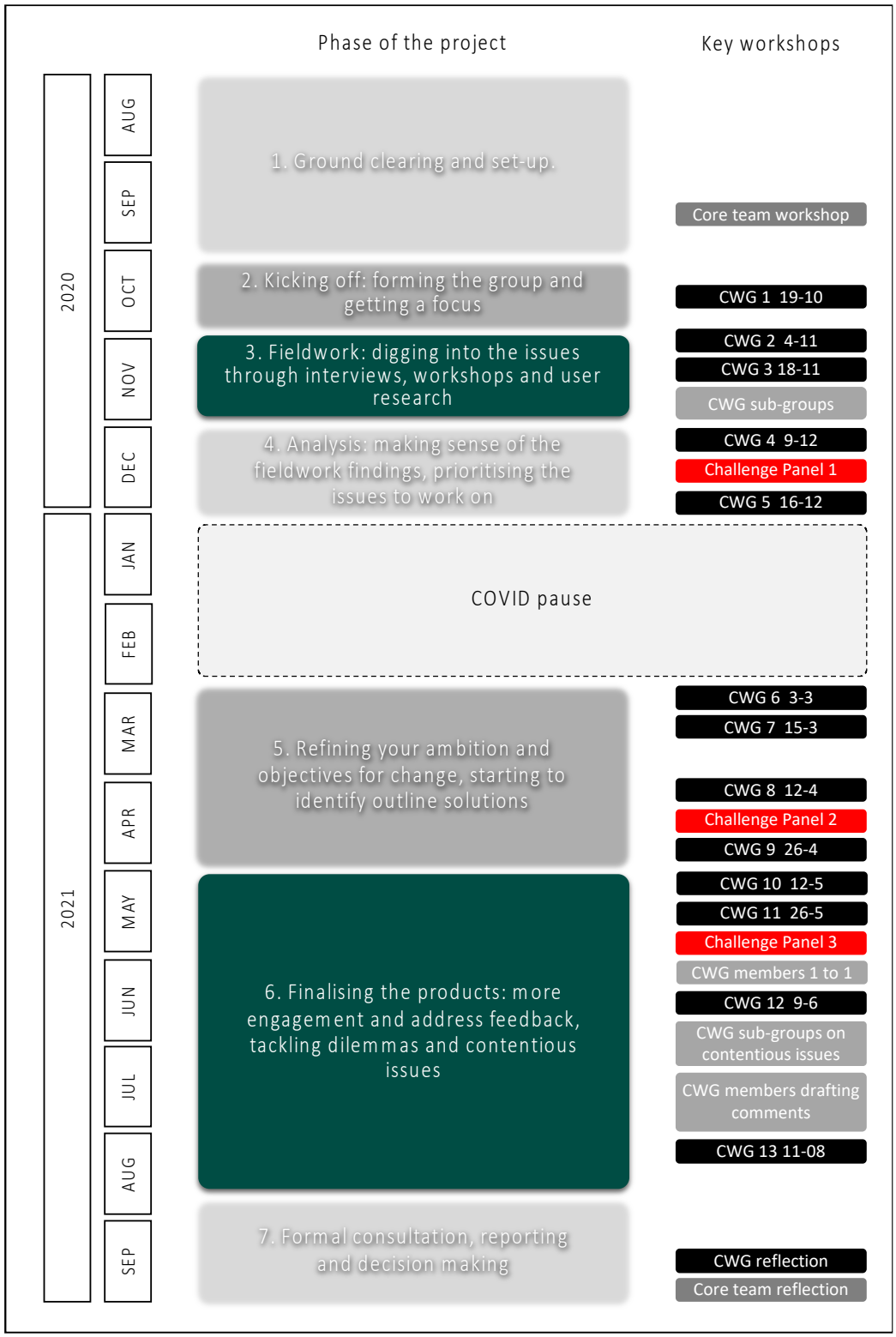
Prerequisite 2. There is permissive and brave departmental leadership

Conventional policy development fails more often than it succeeds on these complex issues. If we have the same people as usual working on policy, in the same way, why would we expect the outcome to be any different? Senior leaders who take the pathfinder approach must accept that no one person can understand the system sufficiently and certainly doesn't know all the answers. They must allow the core team and cross-system

working group to explore and adjust the scope, outputs, and solutions in an unconstrained way as they get to the heart of the issue. They need to see the role of the civil service as a facilitator rather than a top-down controller.

The seven phases of a pathfinder project

Figure 1. The phases of a pathfinder project



Source: Peter Thomas

There are seven distinct phases of a pathfinder project. The CWG at the heart of the project operates from the 2nd to the 6th phase. The first and last phases are run by the core project team with limited input from the CWG.

Phase 1. Ground clearing and set-up

Understanding the landscape of policy and what has been learned elsewhere to provide the fuel for the next stage is essential. This work also helps you to identify stakeholders and potential working group members. Who you invite to participate in the CWG and Challenge Panel are critical.

Key activities

- Assemble core information pack: provision survey, demographic data on parents, a literature review of parenting supports in Ireland, and a rapid review of the literature on international parenting support policy and practice.
- Establish an overall scope: what is in play and what is beyond the scope of the project?
- Design and plan project, supported by coaching sessions for core team and advice from colleagues on pathfinder methods.
- Identify, recruit and brief CWG and Challenge Panel members.
- Design and initiate user research so it is available when the CWG needs it most.

Top tips

- Don't over specify the focus and nature of outputs in this stage – the CWG must own these and they will evolve during fieldwork and analysis.
- Spend time up-front coaching the core project team on using the trickier tools and working through the optimal pace and rhythm of the project plan.
- Try to have a mix of capabilities in the CWG: good connectors with wide networks; facilitators and brokers; perspectives from different parts of the system; and good team players.

Phase 2. Kicking off: forming the group and getting a focus

An essential part of establishing the CWG is getting to know each other's expectations, experience and uncertainties. This requires careful design of the initial CWG sessions to work on content while building team relationships.

By using the information pack from the ground clearing stage and the experiences of the CWG members as fuel, you should move quickly to an initial structuring of the problem using an issue tree. An issue tree (sometimes called a logic tree or problem structure) is a graphical breakdown of a question that vertically dissects it into its different components. The tree progresses into detail as it reads to the right (see Box 1 below for more about this tool). This is the core problem solving tool that supports the pathfinder approach. At this point you will also sharpen the scope and test the boundaries of the project with the CWG.

Formulating the correct initial scope for the project is an art. Some policy issues are so broad, the methodology can potentially get lost or deliver findings that are too general. The scope must be narrow enough to be manageable yet cover enough ground to explore the root

causes and key complications. Too often policy-makers can rush to chase implicit solutions without taking the time to stand back and understand the context and system.

Key activities

- Introductions, expectations, relationship building and establishing ways of working.
- Initial project overview of scope, definitions, governance, methods, and way of working. Do this in a way that uses the collaboration tools (especially those you intend to use online).
- Engage with the information pack and literature review findings to fuel an initial brainstorm on issues. Use that to test and refine the outline of the issue tree.
- Identify stakeholders who you need to engage with throughout the project.
- Prioritise the issue tree and agree initial key lines of enquiry and key questions for fieldwork in each sub-group.
- Use the first Challenge Panel to test your scope, definitions, and key issues in current provision. Find out what their expectations are of the outputs and the model.

Top tips

- Share expectations of the project within the CWG. Discuss your roles and each other's perspectives on the issue. You want CWG members to at least understand and respect these even if they cannot all be reconciled [see key lessons later].
- Don't assume that everyone knows and understands each other's role and experience on this topic, particularly when working in different organisations. Give people time to get to know each other and appreciate the diversity of experience within the group.
- Be upfront. Let people know that some ambiguity and fuzziness is necessary around scope, workstreams and outputs in the first phase to allow the CWG to shape the project later. This might feel uncomfortable but goes with the territory of a pathfinder project.
- Listen carefully to each other and look for common ground that connects the different perspectives within the team.
- Don't short circuit the discussion of scope and problem structure (the issue tree) – it's your foundation. If the group are not happy with their first efforts, pause, discuss why it seems hard, and reconvene later to allow people the time to think. Alternatively, you can get sub-groups to do some work on it before the next CWG workshop.
- Accept that some people will find structured problem-solving tools hard - it is fine to rely on other team members who find this approach easier.

Box 1. Issue trees

Issue trees help you to structure and focus your analysis by providing a link between your problem statement and the questions you most need to explore through your fieldwork.

You use them:

1. To break a problem into component parts so that problem solving work can be divided into manageable pieces.
2. To give you a strong framework and structure for thinking about the problem and how you solve it:
   - Solving the parts will solve the problem.
   - The branches of your tree cover all the potential issues and do not overlap.
3. To build common understanding of the problem structure amongst your team through the process of creating and using the tree.

This pathfinder used miro to produce an initial draft issue tree which the CWG then developed, refined and prioritised. Part of their first cut is shown below.

Source: Peter Thomas

Phase 3. Field work: digging into the issue through interviews, workshops and user research

If you want to take a fresh look at long-standing challenges, you have to look differently at the problem and understand the perspectives of other people in the system. To support this project, the Department had already commissioned or completed:

- A consultation with young people (aged 14-18 years) and children (aged 8-12) gathering their thoughts and views on family, relationships and parent support needs.
- A consultation with parents which explored their experiences, needs and preferences in relation to sources of parenting support.
- A survey of households with children under 18 years of age on parents' awareness, usage and experience of parenting support services.
- A literature review of parenting support in Ireland.
- A rapid review of literature on international parenting support policy and practice.

Working together to meet with and listen to service providers and users is a key feature of this approach. Field work is a really energizing phase of the project. It helps to build relationships, ambition and commitment amongst the CWG. Even when done virtually, it fuels informal reflection and discussion about emerging issues, which is crucial preparation for later phases. In face-to-face fieldwork, it is often the train journey or walk to an interview that allows CWG colleagues to exchange perspectives and formulate their insights. Fieldwork is delivered by sub-groups who, in turn, divide into pairs for each activity.

Key activities

- Map the different kinds of parental support, the various key stakeholders, and then establish a target list for interviews and focus groups.
- Prioritise and refine the issue tree to pick out the issues you most need to explore with different stakeholders and players in the system.
- Sub-groups work through their respective fieldwork plans and agree what they want to ask of whom – their key lines of enquiry. These lines of enquiry should reflect your prioritisation of the issue tree.
- A mix of interviews and focus groups carried out by CWG members in their sub-groups. Commission any further user and comparative research that is necessary.

Top tips

- Make time for discussion and reflection within the team whilst doing the field work: informal chats after interviews, and simple routines like taking 5 minutes after each interview to jot down the key 6 or 7 points that struck you in an interview.
- Respect the people and organisations you are meeting – listen and try to clarify and understand what they are saying. Be clear about the purpose of this engagement.
- Be flexible with your lines of enquiry – they are prompts, not blinkers. If something new or interesting arises – follow it up. Ask open questions – leave space for people to say what is on their mind.

- Always work at least in pairs, whether you're conducting interviewing or running focus groups and workshops – two perspectives will get more from an interview and the subsequent discussion between the interviewers helps to formulate and make sense of emerging issues.

Phase 4. Analysis: making sense of the fieldwork findings, prioritising the issues to work on

This is a pivotal point in the project. Working in smaller teams on the fieldwork creates the challenge of how best to come back together and pool what you have done. You have to make time to share what you found, listen carefully and clarify the CWG's understanding of the issues to be addressed. You need an extended CWG workshop because this takes at least 90 minutes for each sub-group, longer if you allow the whole group to reflect and make connections. Then the group needs time to pick out the patterns, contradictions and insights that inform the initial thinking around solutions. This process may take two or even three extended sessions with the CWG. The issue tree provides the structure for holding a single story together about the findings.

Key activities

- Each sub-group plays back what fieldwork they did and what they found.
- The whole group takes time to build a shared view of what they learned and the story they are telling against each arm of our issue tree.
- Add in and reflect on findings from user engagement and consultation and how they confirm or challenge your own findings from fieldwork.
- Second challenge panel.
- Produce a rough first cut of ideas for actions and solutions to the key issues you are identifying.
- In light of the themes from fieldwork, user research and the second Challenge Panel, the CWG prioritises what further fieldwork and research is needed.
- Take stock of how CWG members feel about where they are in the project and how productively you are working together. Agree any adjustments that are needed.

Top tips

- This phase requires a longer whole group session to allow time for findings to breathe, and for people to discuss and reflect. You will need at least one all-day workshop (if in-person is possible) or a 3-to-4-hour online session. Sometimes you may need more than one. Anticipate this in your project plan.
- If there is a valuable discussion emerging around a point, stick with it – that discussion will help people to process the findings and to generate ideas for common themes and solutions.
- Be flexible about timing. You need to get to a good enough point to move on after each step. If you cannot – stop, take a break for coffee to allow people to re-group. If you get stuck - reflect on why you are stuck and reconvene on a later date. You can form sub-groups to work further on tricky issues and come back with their ideas to the next CWG.

- Accept that this can be the messiest, most difficult to manage phase. You need to be brave enough to stop, pause, reflect, and use the whole group to make sense of what has come from the research and where you need to go next.
- Don't try to impose a structure too early on implications and potential solutions – allow workstreams for solutions and actions emerge and then stand back to see what they add up to.
- Do keep using your issue tree to help reflect on the emerging story and the extent to which/how well you have answered key questions on the issues you prioritised.
- Don't waste time drafting or revising outputs in this phase – capture the information but focus team energy on generating insights

Phase 5. Developing ambition and objectives for change, starting to identify outline solutions

This phase starts by standing back and asking what success would look like and how you should frame your objectives for change. Then you get more specific about *who* could do *what* to achieve those objectives. The discipline of setting out a limited number of objectives for change provides a powerful basis for generating and challenging potential actions.

This is a tough phase as it exposes quite different experiences and beliefs about how change happens and what governments can do to make change happen (see further discussion of this point later in the complications and challenges section). Throughout this phase, you need to really challenge whether initial ideas on solutions make sense and address the key issues identified by the research and stakeholder engagement.

> *"[the] tricky part was actions – it was hard to get concrete actions. They often start as very general – 'we need to improve'. But we must get to a level of detail about what the change is that is going to come out of it." [Core team]*

In parallel, you begin to draft the key components of your products. You must build a strong argument that runs from: the problem to why it matters, and what action will most likely unlock improvement.

Key activities

- Frame your ambition for the impact of the project: what are the objectives for change?
- Prioritize and refine initial ideas on solutions. Test how far they address the issue tree and your objectives for change.
- Test the story you are telling against each arm of your issue tree – build a strong argument for the change needed, and what is needed to make those changes happen.
- Review and test the next iteration of the model in light of the third Challenge Panel session - refine the key objectives for change required to move towards the vision set out in the model.

Top tips

- Think about how you will communicate the story as well as finalising what the story is. Use PowerPoint or other digital tools to make the story visual in presentation format,

even if you need to turn it into prose later. Start with the scaffolding of your argument and build the story onto this.

- It is hard having your ideas and proposals challenged, especially by the Challenge Panel. Even if you might disagree with points they make, you need to clarify and understand why people react to ideas as they do. This enables you to work out how to change or improve your solutions or the arguments you make. . Don't give up on ideas just because they get challenged – but do think about how to reframe or reformulate them to be more compelling.
- Keep using your user research to test and challenge the ambition, the objectives for change and the emerging solutions.
- When engaging with the Challenge Panel and other stakeholders, use members of CWG to articulate the case for change and the draft solutions. This reduces the danger of everything falling upon the core team at this point, which in turn risks losing the engagement of the CWG. Civil service voices are generally less persuasive to stakeholders than the more diverse voices of the CWG members.

Phase 6. Finalise products: more engagement and address feedback, tackling dilemmas and contentious issues

This is a tough period of review and refinement. There is continued engagement to challenge, test and improve both the argument for change and the proposals on how to change. The core team is working very hard in between CWG sessions writing up the revised elements of the model and report. CWG members are giving 1-to-1 comments and views on products and tricky issues. This project used sub-groups to try to resolve some of the more contentious or difficult issues from the Challenge Panel, CWG discussion and consultation with stakeholders. A key challenge for the core team is to keep the CWG engaged and productive as the working rhythm changes from plenary to more 1 -to -1 discussions and offline review of products.

> *"…we had lots of back and forth, lots of input from the group. We brought it back a few times to them, probably more than I would have liked to – but people were very passionate, they wanted to make sure that we all had sight of it." [Core team]*

> *"It was very collaborative, the whole group will say they see their input reflected in their actions, we were very conscious of that. "[Core team]*

There will be some contentious issues within the CWG about tactics for change and how granular the actions need to be if they are to stick.

Key activities

- Challenge Panel session prioritizing the themes they think will have the most impact, and challenging how outline actions are framed.
- Testing and refining the story and emerging proposals with stakeholders and decision makers – through a mix of 1-to-1 interviews and focus groups.
- Taking time for the CWG to reflecting on feedback from engagement; looking ahead to the formal process that products now move towards.
- Going back again to the feedback from research with parents and young people to really challenge whether we have heard and responded to their views and experiences. What story would we report back to those we consulted?

- Identifying remaining tensions and dilemmas that need further thought and the use of sub-groups to work on tricky issues.
- CWG individually reviewing and providing feedback on details of the draft model.
- Running a formal close-down of the active CWG phase of the project, including a project review session reflecting on lessons learnt.

Top tips

- Use the CWG in self-selecting sub-groups and 1-to-1's to help resolve knotty issues rather than defaulting to the core team.
- The engagement of the CWG is supported by their continued involvement in discussions with stakeholders that are testing reactions to the model and outline action plan.
- Be explicit about the change in mode at the end of this phase of CWG engagement. Set out the opportunities there will be to stay in touch and contribute.
- Make time for the whole group to reflect on the experience and share their thoughts on what worked well and what could be done differently.
- Managing the end of the active phase of the CWG needs to be carefully thought out – in different times, a face-to-face event or social occasion with senior sponsors to thank the CWG would be useful.

Phase 7. Formal consultation, reporting and approvals

This extended stage is often unavoidable in government. But it is important that CWG members and Challenge Panel members feel included in what is happening and see latest drafts of the model. You want them to remain advocates for and be supportive of the proposals, but they can only do that if they are kept up-to-date, however informally. This can be uncomfortable for policy makers as it is a more open approach to this stage of policy approval than would normally be the case.

Key actions

- Prepare a revised draft of the Model
- Seek initial ministerial approval
- Complete formal consultation with departments and agencies
- Finalise the draft document
- Seek Minister's approval
- Prepare the Memo for Government
- Develop the Model implementation plan

Top tips

- This can be a mysterious phase for those outside government, and there is a danger that they lose confidence in the process. Keeping them aware and updated on what is happening and how people are reacting is important.
- Talk with the CWG about how they can stay connected and help as the project moves from decision-making to implementation. They are a credible and persuasive asset for implementation.

Project outputs and what is happening next

This report is not intended as an evaluation of the impact of the project - the outputs have only just been published. It is designed to capture and share what has been learnt about working collaboratively on policy-making.

Creating and maintaining cross-government, cross-agency and cross-sectoral interest and engagement in the model will be a challenge. The model, and its actions, offer a means to contribute to the achievement of wider policy goals and improved outcomes in the lives of children and families, e.g., education, health, community safety, etc.

A five year implementation plan has been developed which will help to ensure that the actions proposed are delivered and evaluated. Initial funding to support the model's implementation has been secured and priority actions are underway. Cross-governmental policies and initiatives such as these must take account of both existing actions and be adaptable to support new parenting support initiatives and actions in the future.

What we learned about success factors for projects like this.

Drawing on a long list of success factors identified by participants in previous pathfinders, the CWG picked out seven that resonated most strongly with them. They are reviewed below in order of the importance placed on them by the CWG.

1. Core team capacity, capability and mindset.

The core team is vital. They must design and run the process. They must have or acquire the capacity to use key problem-solving and collaboration tools. They need a wide enough view of the system in which the policy issue exists.

The core team were very committed to running the project in a different way from standard policy-making. This reflected the involvement of the team leader in the Challenge Panel for a previous pathfinder. She had seen how this approach could work from a different angle. She knew they needed to empower the CWG to co-lead the project and co-produce the outputs. She was committed to exposing early thinking and proposals to the Challenge Panel in a way that can feel very uncomfortable for civil servants.

The project was managed by the policy team who own this policy area in their day jobs.

The balance of skills and experience in the core team worked well, with one newer to the civil service, alongside an experienced policy maker who had a track record in this policy area. The team was augmented by two members from the CES who brought experience from outside government.

The capacity and continuity of the core team was a challenge, exacerbated by overambitious scheduling of the middle phase of the project. The loss of administrative support part way through the project increased the burden on the remaining members. Carrying much of the burden of co-facilitation and design, alongside project management, is not feasible for any single team member.

> *"One of the things I found challenging was that dual role of facilitating and participating was really difficult. If I did it again maybe more externally facilitated session at certain times." [Core team]*

Part way through the project, the team leader increased her commitment to the project, going from 2.5 days to 3.5 days. Running and supporting a project like this was a part- time, non-hierarchical and supportive team which played to the strengths of its members, making time to reflect and download, plan and review throughout the project. They were open to challenge and questioning from each other, as well as from the CWG and the Challenge Panel.

> *"[team leader] was very open and flexible, we might have different opinions, but we hashed them out rather than imposing hierarchy. We worked really well together, very open to doing things differently - sometimes my manager didn't see method in my madness but went with it… She was really experienced and knowledgeable, good to work with." [Core team]*

They found it useful to receive support, coaching and challenge through the external expertise sourced via CES:

> *"[external pathfinder expert] input was invaluable. The sessions planning how we would manage the next piece were very helpful for clarity of thought and anticipating potential pitfalls and things that might be difficult to manage." [Core team]*

2. Strong parent focus.

A defining characteristic of this kind of project is that it looks at the world through the eyes of parents, front-line staff and others with a personal stake in the system. This requires the CWG to talk with people and listen without imposing a set agenda - especially early in the process.

This project commissioned both quantitative and qualitative research with parents, which provided valuable insights that were used to shape and challenge key issues and inform solutions as they evolved. The CWG needs these insights and challenges at the right time to fuel their work.

However, partly because of lead-in times for such research, and partly due to f the lack of time scheduled to reflect on some key inputs in the middle part of the project, some people in both the CWG and the core team felt they did not get the full value from this research.

> *"I would have moved the parent consultation to much earlier and created an opportunity for us to engage with that." [CWG]*

> *"By April we had all the user research inputs? But the challenge was how you give them sufficient time." [Core team]*

As always, engaging with parents and front-line voices through fieldwork was a highlight for CWG members.

> *"It has taught me that it is critical to ensure that a wide range of voices and perspectives are included in any work like this moving forward." [CWG]*

> *"Good not to be Dublin-centric. I enjoyed hearing perspectives from the different sectors/agencies" [CWG]*

> *"Hearing the views and diverse perspective was great learning that broadened my perspectives of parenting and challenged me at times." [CWG]*

One benefit of the requirement to work virtually was that the logistical problems of talking to stakeholders and frontline staff furthest from Dublin were removed. Beyond the pandemic,

the CWG and core team agreed that the best approach to fieldwork would be to have a mix of virtual and face-to-face interviews and workshops.

3. Open and permissive project leadership from the department.

A pathfinder project demands bravery and the ambition to make a difference. The project leaders need to be open to different perspectives and ideas, and prepared to expose work in progress to external challenge.

> *"There is a bravery required to allow people from outside government to share the complexity and make suggestions about how to address them." [project sponsor]*

> *"From the beginning I felt valued as an equal... I have had experience with other departmental groups where it feel like a tick box exercise… where the parameters of engagement have been pre-determined and prescriptive. It was evident that [core team leader] and colleagues genuinely wanted our views and valued them highly." [CWG member]*

> *"Government consultation is usually: here is a document, give me your feedback - you never hear again… I had never been involved in a working group like this – from the outset it was being presented as being a very open process." [CWG member]*

The core project team and CWG require permission to explore different approaches and solutions. They cannot be tied to the defensive baggage of the policy that has gone before.

> *"Too often we don't allow people space to do this… [and] we don't do it very well. There is a lot of creativity but designed out of people - we have become too risk averse.." [project sponsor]*

> *"[Our senior leader] was very open to new ways of doing things… You need trust from up the line – and a certain amount of freedom." [Core team]*

In this project, it helped that the department and the policy team were relatively new and there was no existing cross-government policy on parenting support.

4. Way of working: virtual collaboration and problem-solving methods

The heart of the pathfinder approach is a set of problem-solving tools and methods for collaborative working. These tools prioritise effort to where the work can achieve the greatest impact. They enable productive collaboration amongst a group of people who have never worked together before and have demanding day jobs.

CWG members strongly endorsed these tools and methods.

> *"A powerful reminder that core issues of clarity in purpose and scope are critical." [CWG member]*

> *"The logic tree worked well. It was good when you are trying to turn it to solutions, good for breaking things down and staying focused." [Core team]*

> *"The most intensive collaboration I have participated in in my career so far. There is a little voice in your head saying it would be quicker with less collaboration, but it's a very good thing to have done, it shouldn't be done any other way." [Core team]*

"I'm usually a chronic overthinker, but the rapid problem-solving approach has really helped me to pinpoint when I'm hamster wheeling or repeating myself. It's made me a more effective communicator." [CWG member]

"The overall 'rapid problem-solving approach' worked well and I am very impressed still at the breadth and volume of ground we covered." [CWG member]

"The facilitators made the process enjoyable and engaging and built a strong sense of collaboration." [CWG member]

This project was the most successful of the three pathfinder style projects in Ireland so far at creating and using an issue tree to help focus and structure their work throughout the project. It allowed them to make an effortless pivot from structuring the problem to structuring the key issue and objectives for change. The smoothness of that pivot reflects the quality of multiple iterations of the initial issue tree with the CWG.

Another interesting feature of this project was how swiftly the core team acquired the confidence and ability to use key tools.

They had seen and used some elements of the approach previously, but they also talked with colleagues in the Department of Health who had established an action learning network for accelerated problem-solving. The Civil Service Innovation Network also provided introductions to colleagues with experience of digital collaborative tools which was very helpful. One externally provided session gave the core team sufficient confidence to start working with the tools, followed up with some further review and light touch coaching on facilitation plans for CWG and Challenge Group.

"Elements of it are not new. We spoke to Health and to the people involved in the previous ones, looked at the documents produced, there was a reasonable road map to follow. We had to adapt and fit the approach to our purposes, but there was a lot of information out there and it gave us a good sense of what it would look like and feel." [Core team]

"Having the support and guidance from the external expert was fundamental – having had that set me up in a good space." [Core team]

Whilst there were points during the project where additional external facilitation for specific CWG sessions would have allowed the core team to participate more fully in the issues themselves, this project has shown you don't need to externalise the design and facilitation of a pathfinder.

A particular challenge for this project was adapting established face-to-face methods to virtual working. We reflect more on the impact of virtual working later in this report.

The discipline of capturing and quickly sharing back inputs and outputs from every session is a crucial part of the pathfinder approach that creates a strong sense of momentum. The outputs were prepared very efficiently and supported the process. The visual nature of the outputs means people recognise their inputs from the workshop in a way that they wouldn't if there had been standard civil service minutes of the workshop. But this does impose quite a heavy workload with quick turnaround times for the core team. Hence, it is important to have sufficient support within the team and ensure your planning allows enough time between workshops.

"The quality of the documents, the visuals and the use of mentimeter was excellent to capture views and represent them well." [CWG]

“Rapid turnaround of output packs meant that you felt more immersed in the work and more up-to-speed. Specifically, by the time that you had had a chance to absorb the outputs of meeting 1, the agenda and any pre-work for meeting 2 had landed. This continually reinforced learnings and helped us to develop and refine our thoughts over time.” [CWG]

5. CWG composition

The collaborative working group is the vital, defining characteristic of a pathfinder. The group must have certain characteristics: cross-system, frontline and operations staff, key state bodies who own/fund key parts of the system, as well as voluntary sector and front-line perspectives. You must design the group to include diverse perspectives and experiences.

You need a connected and credible core team to identify the right people. In this project they sought out organisations with different connections, networks and perspectives from their own and asked them to help identify the right people.

To recruit members of the CWG, the core team needed a clear pitch on what the project was about, what prospective members would bring to it and what they would get from it. This is also the first step in induction and managing expectations. You must start getting across that this is different from the usual government consultation exercise.

People were prepared to join the CWG and the Challenge Panel primarily because they knew and trusted the core team and the Department sponsor.

The project team discussed the option of having parents as members of the collaborative working group. However, this presented challenges in terms of how parents/participants would be selected. There is no national organisation led by parents themselves to represent and advocate on behalf of parents.

CWG (and Challenge Panel members) stayed engaged to a remarkable extent despite the pandemic pressures, in large part because the project was run true to the promise of genuine collaboration.

> *"At points when I worried it was becoming less open I was able to have direct conversations with the core team. Their commitment, openness and non-defensiveness was very important to the whole process." [CWG]*

Collaboration does not mean consensus. People will disagree and challenge throughout the project. But what matters is that they feel listened to, respected and are open to learning from the perspectives of others. Then, they are more likely to accept the choices that the CWG must make to proceed. Honesty and trust are critical to the functioning of the CWG.

Complications and challenges

1. Pace and timing

Pathfinder projects use pace and urgency to drive progress and force prioritisation. But there are phases where it is essential to create some time to stand back and reflect.

In January 2021, the second wave of COVID forced a pause in what felt like a relentless cycle of workshops supported by the core team. The break in proceedings was fortuitous. The core team felt they had too little time and insufficient capacity over Christmas to reflect and think about the crucial pivot from analysis to products and solutions.

If they had their time over, the core team and the CWG members would rephrase this middle part of the project. To allow people to really make sense of the findings and draw out the implications for products and solutions, you need at least one, if not two, whole day workshops. These are sessions that you would prioritise as face to face in non-pandemic times.

"We had gathered some much really good information from such a range of people – I am really happy with how that part of the project went. We didn't have time to really process it properly… we could have done more with it." [Core team]

"Lots of the pause was about reassessing the project and what the final output was – the pause was brilliant." [Core team]

Other timing points that the CWG and core team reflected on in interviews included:

- Two weeks between CWG workshops was too tight to allow the core team to turnaround outputs from the previous workshop and prepare for the next. However, regular meetings generated momentum, so perhaps three weeks in between sessions would work best.
- You need to vary the length of workshops to match what needs doing, with some long half days and whole days. Longer, face to face sessions are essential at key points such as the first meeting and when sharing the initial findings from fieldwork.

2. Clarity of purpose, outputs, roles and expectations of the CWG

By design, a pathfinder project aims to work differently from the normal routines of government. This means it is important to share, understand and clarify expectations. It is hard to overestimate how powerful the tendency is to default to normal rituals for meetings and standard conventions for products and consultation. So much policy is initiated with the solutions implied and constrained.

Whilst the overall purpose and scope was established in the first CWG meetings, the nature of the outputs could not emerge until well into the New Year. By then the team could address the question: what does the 'model' need to look like? They could also decide if they are going to make the case for change, and articulate the change required. This was the right time to answer that question, but the ambiguity of outputs up to this point will always be a challenge for a significant proportion of the CWG. Early discussion and regular discussion are required to ensure a shared understanding of the outputs of the group's work.

"We just came with 'we need to have a model'. I think the working group really struggled with that a lot, they found it very hard to see what the final outputs were and where we were going," [core team]

"Perhaps there could have been more clarity on what the group would be producing, managing the expectations– a model in theory is not the same as a model itself. There was an expectation that we would be producing the actual model, how it would operate, be implemented, and evaluated. This did cause some frustration in a number of sessions." [CWG]

Managing these tensions is tough for the core team too.

"It was a bit frustrating and disappointing towards the end in the last few workshops, we got some comments saying what is this model, we haven't done a model. I was really questioning myself, had we not properly articulated what the end point was? And what it might look like. I worry should we have done more about expectations at the outset." [Core team]

Some people thrive on uncertainty, but others find it stressful. The core team must support and reassure those who are finding it difficult. The core team reflected that more 1-to-1 check-ins with individuals at regular points throughout the process would have been helpful, to monitor expectations and see how people were feeling.

3. The Challenge Panel: what it is for and how it works best

The Challenge Panel is a distinctive and potentially uncomfortable element of the design of a pathfinder project. The core team found it invaluable. Even when sessions were difficult, it provided valuable challenge and made them re-think certain choices made. This reflects the core team's personal commitment to openness, listening and challenge.

> *"Rather than here is a proposal on a piece of paper, you have to consider the panel as a safe space to be honest. You can't take it personally, senior people like the opportunity to engage verbally even if it is reactive top of the head stuff and feels like criticism." [Core team]*

> *"The second Challenge Panel was a bit of a car crash. People were reacting so negatively to some of the things they were presented with, but that was invaluable." [Core team]*

> *"The Challenge Panel group helped [CWG] take more ownership and responsibility – because CWG members had to articulate our work and receive challenge – something they would have never done before. This is a really unusual dynamic." [Core team]*

Several CWG members struggled with the challenge group and its role. They felt it was going over old ground and were unsure it was working well enough for Challenge Panel members. The point made previously about testing and clarifying expectations applied especially to those outside government, who are used to a very different style of engagement from government.

> *"[their] expectations were a bit different – they thought they should be signing off on something or review a document so I am not sure I clearly communicated the role of the panel." [Core team]*

The composition, range of perspectives and engagement of the panel was good. Panel members valued making new connections and hearing different perspectives. They appreciated that they were not burdened with large agendas and reports. Senior government participants said attendance from other government departments was more senior and engaged than they had seen before.

> *"Some of the people who are not normally there were there, like the National Parents Council, and not in the standard role so they brought a different outside perspective. That made us more parent centred than provider centred." [Core team]*

> *"I didn't know most of them – my interaction otherwise would have only been with government departments. It was interesting to hear their perspectives." [Challenge Panel]*

Some panel members struggled in the absence of papers to read before the first panel. This was adjusted for later meetings but reflects an intrinsic tension in the desire to minimise the burden on panel members, while fuelling panel members' contributions with pre-meeting stimulus.

> *"We weren't sent any information in advance. That was really difficult because several times when we were asked 'what about this that and the other' we hadn't had a chance to*

digest the inputs… By the second and third meeting that was addressed and we got information in advance." [Challenge Panel]

"I liked not having reams of paper beforehand. I rely on instinct a bit more, often based on personal experiences. If you want a real exchange of ideas it is useful not to drown people in paper." [Challenge Panel]

"Everyone is playing a different role from usual. There is no time commitment other than coming to the meeting. Some external people said 'you didn't give us stuff beforehand - how could we prepare?' but I'm glad we didn't." [Core team]

There is another tension between keeping meetings short and allowing sufficient time for discussion, reflection and challenge, which provides the real value from the Challenge Panel.

"There is a difficult balance between using time and wanting to get most out of people, times I felt we didn't really get to do that much challenging, a lot of the time was listening. Sometimes more time was needed to discuss what we had heard and think about its application." [Challenge Panel]

"Reading the documents in advance is important but it is only through the discussion that we began to understand what the thing was." [Challenge Panel]

"To do the critical friend well, what we needed was to come back the next day or week having been taken through stuff, then having had the chance to understand and think about it – trying to do it all in the space of two hours was a stretch." [CWG]

The short time period between CWG and panel meetings did not help. In addition, the COVID pause left a big gap that interrupted the planned flow of meetings.

"Before the third Challenge Panel there was a longer gap – with some of Challenge Panel saying 'how did we get to that point?" [Core team]

One valuable innovation in this project was that, by virtue of having a member on the CWG as well as one on the Challenge Panel, one large (representative) voluntary organisation created an internal reference group. At this group, the CWG and Challenge Panel members from that organisation would have briefing and discussion sessions with key stakeholders in their organisation. This Challenge Panel member reflected that this mechanism helped her to stay engaged with the project and delve deeper into the issues.

The reactions and reflections of the Challenge Panel and the CWG members point to several ways that this panel could be best supported in future projects:

- Greater clarity for all on the respective and distinct roles of the CWG and the Challenge Panel.
- More pre-meeting briefing material (but not report drafts) to provide stimulus and thinking time. This in turn requires more time between CWG workshops that generate content and the Challenge Panel that engages with that content.
- Schedule an additional Challenge Panel meeting in close succession to another in the middle of the project to allow the Challenge Panel sufficient time to immerse themselves in the emerging findings and objectives for change to provide some substantive challenge back to the CWG (rather than feel they were having to wing it in the moment).

4. Balance between working in plenary and working in sub-groups

This project made less use of sub-groups of the CWG in the early stages than other pathfinders. Nonetheless, CWG members and the core team agreed that sub-groups worked well in the fieldwork stage.

> *"On the fieldwork the subgroups were very effective – and really helped build a good relationship between group members. The work that was done in those sub-groups was very helpful, producing a lot of material coming from a variety of sources." [CWG]*

In order to make more use of sub-groups, it would make sense to form the fieldwork sub-groups early on and use those as the basis for some of the breakouts in plenary sessions. This creates the possibility of asking sub-groups to work on some issues like scope, definitions and problem structures outside of the plenary CWG sessions.

> *"I wish we had made more use of the expertise that we had in the CWG between meetings… We were perhaps too conscious of the commitment we were asking of them, of the pandemic, and of every ask of them outside of the workshop." [Core team]*

Later in the project, at the difficult point of trying to pin down solutions, the sub-groups were helpful both in terms of solving difficult issues and in cementing the engagement of the CWG in the final outputs of the project. Key to effective facilitation by the core team is holding their nerve in throwing back key challenges and contradictions to the CWG to resolve – using the power of the group rather than resolving issues themselves. This ensures collaborative co-production rather than a conventional government consultation exercise. While the use of sub-groups was welcomed, it would have been more effective for all sub-groups to have an opportunity to present their findings to the full CWG. Allowing sufficient time for sub-group feedback is important when planning.

> *"We decided to ask subgroups to take the issue away… and try to figure it out – without core team influence. They put energy into it and it worked really well. They spent time thinking really through something and concluded that some of the CWG's ideas might not work here. For some CWG members who potentially were disengaging a bit… it worked to bring them back and really helped us understand the issues better." [Core team]*

> *"We did this almost as an afterthought – but it would have been better to have done it earlier as a more planned way." [Core team]*

5. How government works for outsiders and how change gets delivered in a complex system

An inevitable consequence of having a diverse, cross system CWG is differences in expectations and experience of how government can make change happen.

In traditional policy making, all that is usually offered to those outside government is a chance to make drafting comments. As a result, many stakeholders will understandably see success as getting recommendations and specific actions included in a report, or even better, a commitment that €x million will be devoted to an initiative.

One of the areas where the core team needed to push back most on were the expectations of CWG members for a directive model, with very specific recommendations.

"There was a high level of frustration amongst some external CWG members that we hadn't developed more directive model of this is how everything should work – that there needs to be total control." [Core team]

"Some people thought we could just come up with a policy and others would have to follow it – That was a tricky part." [Core team]

"…part of that desire for granular actions from CWG – is maybe a lack of trust that if it is not written down it won't happen i.e. if we don't get a detailed granular plan, then how will we hold these civil servants accountable." [Core team]

But the failure of governments to deliver on their policy commitments tells a quite a different story of what helps change happen. The reason for constructing a pathfinder project is the realisation that successful change in a complex system demands collaboration, co-creation and shared ownership.

"We were already conscious that this policy issue cuts across lots of different areas. It's not within our direct control – instead we must attempt to influence and steer things." [Project sponsor]

"By involving people, you are giving them more of a shared ownership of it. They are then definitely more likely to be supportive and really recognise that this isn't government command and control. As policy makers we don't write policy and then it magically happens – people who work in the system need to make the change." [Core team]

"The more I look at successful policy making it is about getting some structure and shape between what is there already and having the model as the framework that draws parameters and lubricate their actions… I didn't think some of the early recommendations coming through were going to get us to where we need to be…" [Project sponsor]

Using CWG sub-groups to work on the most contentious solutions helped to create better solutions. But there remained some frustrations and differences of views about the way the final products were pitched.

"A model is meaningless without an implementation plan, and a plan is meaningless without a budget – we were reassured that at some point in the process there would be a plan." [CWG]

This challenge takes us back to the importance of the core team being upfront about expectations, and addressing what we know will surface later. It might help if there was some input to the CWG early on from others in the system who have been stewards of successful change in complex systems.

"We need to recognise that there are variations in expectations, across the group. Perhaps we needed an earlier discussion within the CWG about where power and influence lie across the system – I am very conscious of the limitations of my [policy team's] ability to 'tell people' what to do." [Core team]

"When you start closing down and focusing on what is achievable it is hard. We had to work hard at times not to lose the CWG members who had more radical expectations." [Core team]

6. Communication and staying in touch with CWG members

Working entirely online made it much harder to gauge participants' mood and develop relationships, particularly when CWG group members had not previously worked with each other. Whereas in previous pathfinder projects, face-to-face workshops provided plenty of informal opportunities to chat one-to-one and get feedback on how people were finding the project was progressing. The core team reflected that in future there is a need to pay more attention to checking the mood of the group collectively and individually as the project progresses. This would help knowing when to adjust the way the project is working and reveal concerns that need be addressed.

This would best be done in two ways:

- Using Mentimeter ratings and comments at the close of plenary sessions to check overall where people were and see if there were issues of concern; and,
- Scheduling informal one-to-one's with CWG members at different points throughout the process.

When the CWG finishes its formal phase, they need updates to keep them engaged as ambassadors for the products. Those who expressed interest in staying involved could be invaluable as the work moves into implementation after government decisions are taken.

Given their significant personal engagement and commitment to the project at that point, it can feel odd for CWG members to suddenly be excluded from the product's journey as they go into formal government consultation and decision-making.

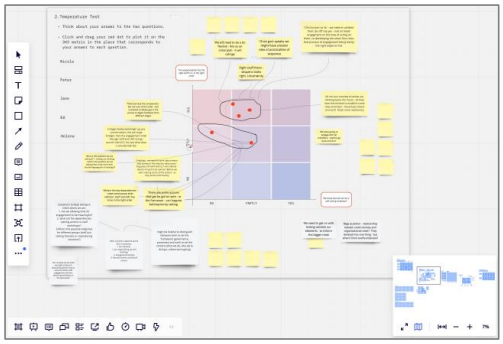
> *"I don't know what [the final product] is like – like handing the child over to the parent and hope they bring it up well. I hope it is an open adoption. Hope our product isn't diluted – I really felt my voice had been heard and was there and could see our inputs all over it." [CWG]*

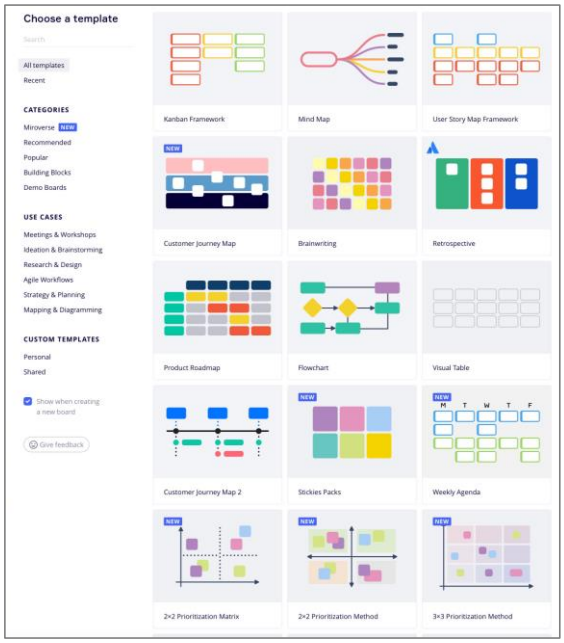
Collaborating online during a pandemic

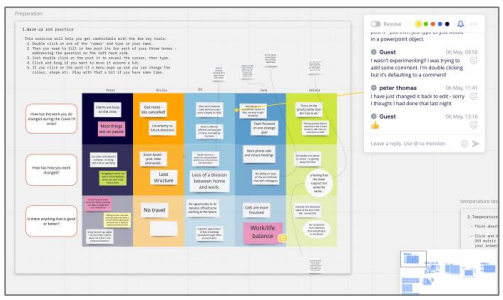
Box 2. The key online tools used by the project

Miro: adaptable with a big stock of templates

Intuitive for experienced power point drawers with lots of templates. However you need to put a bit of time in to learn how to use it, and how to run online sessions with it. Unlike mentimeter you can't just use it with a group and expect them to be comfortable. It is evolving quickly and you can run online video workshops using the app. It is a very useful solo tool too. Few teams use it to its full potential.







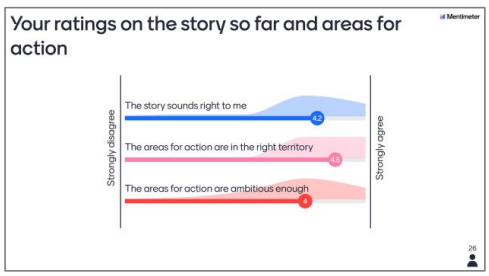
Mentimeter:

This really is simple to use, people connect via their mobile phones and love the interactivity. It's a great way to gather honest feedback quickly, it is very engaging and super reliable techwise.

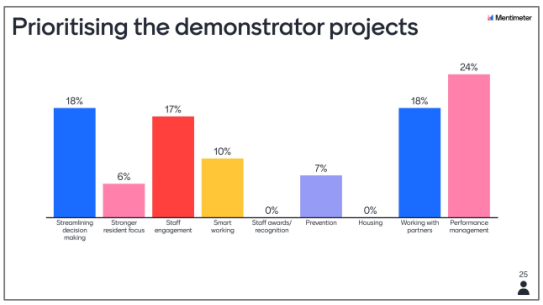
Open ended questions: You can use this template to get people to explaining ratings; answer questions; react to inputs; top 3 things etc. You can use it as you would use post-it note style exercises.

It is much better than awkward plenary session which don't work well with one off groups. People are honest because they are anonymous, and they can see other peoples comments and react to them as they scroll on the screen

Use 'scales' template get people to react to a number of questions. Then use the open ended question to ask why they rated as they did.



Multiple choice: Really good for getting people to prioritise – a similar question type gets people to rank every option.



Source: Peter Thomas

This was the first pathfinder style project in the Irish Civil Service to run entirely virtually. The principles of good workshop planning, design and facilitation remain the same when you are doing it virtually, but it is important to recognise and adapt to the advantages and disadvantages of online working.

Some of the challenges the team faced in translating the pathfinder approach to online working included:

- People remain in their usual work setting at their desk. This negates the key benefit of taking people into a different physical setting at a workshop, thus freeing them up to think and act differently.
- Running long online session is exhausting for participants. The absence of physical movement and informal chats during breaks drains energy. It is not feasible to run whole day workshops, which makes some stages of the pathfinder very hard to translate to online work.
- It is much harder to read the mood, see how a session is working, or judge if the energy of the group is dipping at points.

The team adapted the pathfinder methodology for online working drawing on three key tools;

1. WebEx.

Luckily the core team had already bought WebEx which, like Zoom, has the functionality required for running collaborative workshop easily as a facilitator. At that time, Microsoft (MS) teams was complicated and inflexible for running break out groups and therefore, ineffective for seriously collaborative and interactive workshops.

2. Miro

Miro is one of several virtual whiteboard tools. It is intuitive for anyone familiar with the drawing options of PowerPoint, but it is not as well suited to one off or infrequent use in this type of collaboration. The core team used it well and picked it up quickly to support working with the CWG in plenary and breakouts. However, the CWG did not really engage with it to the extent that Miro enables (e.g. for commenting offline and idea generation). In the future it would be worth trying to get the whole CWG comfortable working with Miro as it creates so many more possibilities for collaboration and working productively offline. Miro has a great issue tree template which was at the heart of the project throughout. Breakout groups worked on the tree and changed it in real time during workshops which is partly why it proved such a resilient framework throughout the project.

3. Mentimeter.

This is one of several similar online voting and quiz tools which are intuitive and flexible, allowing you to rate different options in different ways. The team mainly used three elements of Mentimeter: rating reactions to specific questions; inputting their reactions and ideas via rolling text on Mentimeter's open text question option; and, prioritising a set of options. Tools like Mentimeter allow for anonymous comments which can work well for some members of the group. It helps to facilitate open and honest discussion as everyone got to say what they thought and best of all, got to see what everyone else thought. You can analyse and cluster everyone's inputs. However, the weakness of Mentimeter is that it does not allow you to process what people have generated in real

time, you can only do that after the session. Miro enables you do to this, but entering ideas and clustering them collectively needs more practice for the casual user, and even facilitators who are fairly experienced with Miro.

With this mix of tools, most of the conventional face-to-face collaborative methods used in previous pathfinders can be adapted to virtual working. In fact, significant time can be saved by using these tools. The CWG, Challenge Panel and field work (both interviews and workshop) were all run using these tools. As in face-to-face workshops, what you do by way of planning, design and preparation will be the key determinant of how well it goes on the day.

Even though these virtual tools were all new to the core team (apart from Webex), they mastered them swiftly through their initial preparation and planning sessions with some external advice and coaching.

> *"The tools are very user friendly – menti and miro, I spent the time to see what the most is you can get from them – some trial and error. Some things fell flat and some didn't." [Core team]*

> *"The functionality of working through miro and mentimeter is great – you have all the info ready to go and it is captured as you go." [Core team]*

> *"Miro had great potential, I would have loved to use it more – we used it in earlier workshops. I liked it but no one in CWG really engaged when we tried to encourage offline use and get them to put comments up." [Core team]*

There was a very positive reaction to these tools from the CWG. Several now use them as part of their own day to day virtual working.

A major upside of virtual working is that it reduces geographical and time barriers, mitigating the 'close to Dublin' default of fieldwork and site visits.

> *"major benefits of virtual is the attendance – much higher… A number of people are based outside Dublin and being virtual reduces the burden on them of coming to Dublin. The same applied to field work running focus groups and interviewing people… outside Dublin." [core team]*

No-one argued that future projects should run 100% face-to-face or 100% virtually. There are points where face-to-face is needed. For example, at the set-up stage of getting to know each other, at the point when sub-groups are sharing their findings from fieldwork, and when the final output is starting to take shape. Face-to-face enables informal chats over coffee and full sight of what people are like as you work with them in break out groups. This really helps to create/build relationships. The same applies to site visits and focus groups: you see and hear different things and have informal conversations in the margins.

Conclusions

This project has demonstrated the value of a diverse group of people with different perspectives, experiences and expectations coming together to collaborate on a common purpose: improving parenting supports in Ireland. The project was undertaken at a time when individuals and organisations were forced to rapidly adapt to new ways of working and engaging with others. It was also a time of significant pressure and disruption for Tusla and the HSE arising from the pandemic and a serious cyber-attack. The approach adopted, while not without flaws, provided energy and momentum to a project which could have been side-lined by more urgent work demands.

Collaboration, informed by research and consultation, has enabled the development of a cross-cutting model which takes a whole of Government, action-orientated approach to addressing the issues identified. The model has been approved by Government and welcomed by departments and organisations with a role in the funding and provision of parenting supports.

The implementation of the model over the next five years and beyond will require continued engagement and communication. There are lessons in its development which we can apply to the implementation of the model. For others facing similar policy challenges that do not have an obvious solution, the lessons learnt from this project may help to guide them in their work.

Appendix 1. Where you can find out more about tools and methods used in the pathfinder

This report tells the story of the first pathfinder style project carried out in Ireland.
https://d1j85byv4fcann.cloudfront.net/cesdownloads/15_Days_Report_Final.pdf?mtime=20210210184014&focal=none

This toolkit provides a detailed explanation of the problem solving and collaboration tools which were used in the Youth Mental Health Pathfinder Project in the Department of Health.
https://d1j85byv4fcann.cloudfront.net/cesassets/15_Days_Toolkit_Final_ForWeb.pdf?mtime=20210210183430&focal=none

IDEO.org is a non-profit design studio founded in California that designs products and services alongside organizations that are committed to creating a more just and inclusive world. They have some brilliant cases of how to innovate collaboratively on social policy priorities.
https://www.designkit.org/

Miro provides an engaging, intuitive, in-person collaboration experience with multiple options for real-time or asynchronous teamwork on an online whiteboard. There are free versions as well as corporate ones. It has great functionality and is intuitive but requires some investment in the team to learn how to get the full benefits from it.
https://miro.com/

Mentimeter was also a key tool to support the project. Again, there is a free version, which limit the number of questions you can use in a session. It is simple, there are similar products, workshop attendees consistently love this app.
https://www.mentimeter.com

NESTA in London have produced a free to download DIY toolkit that draws on research of hundreds of design, innovation and group tools – explaining them, giving examples of how and why they were used.
http://diytoolkit.org/media/DIY-Toolkit-Full-Download-A4-Size.pdf

The campaigning group seedsforchange have a great, open access set of easy-to-understand tools for group working: https://seedsforchange.org.uk/resources

Policy Lab was set up in 2014 in the UK Cabinet Office as part of the Civil Service Reform plan to make policy making more open. They bring people-centred design approaches to policy-making - using design, data and digital tools and act as a testing ground for policy innovation across government.
https://www.gov.uk/guidance/open-policy-making-toolkit/getting-started-with-open-policy-making