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Ann is Senior Manager in the Programme Management Office with responsibility for the QQI project structures and toolkit and for the facilitation of strategic corporate plan design and reporting. Ann is programme manager for two key cross-organisational programmes:

- The Amended Legislation Programme – a suite projects to implement new quality assurance and regulatory functions conferred on QQI by the amended Qualifications and Quality Act 2019, including the introduction of the TrustEd Ireland, a new statutory quality mark, which is part of a suite of legislative measures designed to protect international learners.

- The Information & Quality Governance Programme – a group of projects to enhance QQI's information management structures, knowledge management and internal quality assurance.

Ann has extensive experience and quality, change and project management in the multinational and multilingual IT sector and, prior to joining QQI in 2020, was programme manager for a post-graduate business programme at Technological University Dublin.

Paper**Title:** The PMO – A Hub for Quality Evaluation and Strategic Interconnectedness**Abstract**

QQI, as a comparatively large agency with a diverse and expanding range of functions, uses the Programme Management Office as a tool for change management, evaluation and quality assurance to implement change and improvement in a consistent, timely, considered and efficient manner. In recent years, QQI has reimagined its PMO to become a key cross-organisational driver of quality assurance, knowledge management and connectedness. A new central resource repository for all staff called The Projects Hub was launched in 2022, and includes the project management toolkit, a projects register, a repository of open projects, an archive of closed projects and a lessons learned database. It is also the central organisational repository for annual strategic corporate plans and reports. There has been a marked increase in the number of activities that are formally structured as projects before the Projects Steering Group with more grouping of projects into coherently connected programmes.

Introduction

In 2020, QQI established a Programme Management Office to focus on project management as a tool to enhance and evaluate quality in the implementation of strategic objectives. This paper describes QQI's project management processes, governance structure and the PMO function.

In preparation for the launch of QQI's new Statement of Strategy 2025-2027, a 360-degree review of QQI project management processes and governance is underway. Project managers and the members of the project governance function have recently been surveyed and their input on what works well, the challenges and their improvement suggestions are also explored.

About QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is the state agency responsible for promoting the quality, integrity, and reputation of Ireland's tertiary education system, spanning both further and higher education; ensuring that learners achieve qualifications that are valued nationally and internationally; and providing trusted information on the qualifications included in the National Framework of Qualifications.

QQI's functions include:

- The quality assurance of public HEIs.
- The quality assurance and regulation of independent/private HEIs.
- The validation of programmes & the awarding of qualifications for independent/private HEIs.
- The quality assurance of Further Education and Training (post-secondary VET and adult education) institutions and the awarding of their qualifications.
- The role as qualifications authority and custodian of national framework of qualifications (NFQ).
- Research and innovation: publishing authoritative information about quality and qualifications.
- ENIC/NARIC qualifications recognition advice.

September 2024 saw the commencement of key provisions of the QQI Amendment Act 2019, which introduced of the following new functions for QQI:

- **Quality Assurance of English Language Education via TrustEd Ireland** - a new statutory quality mark for higher education and English language education providers who have demonstrated that they meet national standards to ensure a quality experience for international learners.
- A new statutory **Learner Protection Fund** for the protection of enrolled learners.
- **Due diligence** assessment of the business operations (capacity and capability) of private/independent providers (HE, FET, ELE).
- **Listed Awarding Bodies (LABs)** - professional, sectoral, technical, and international awarding bodies that do not currently have awarding powers to make NFQ awards,

but who will seek voluntary, regulated access to the National Framework of Qualifications.

- The promotion of **Academic Integrity** and the power to prosecute contract cheating.

QQI has a staff of 86, working across 5 key functional directorates/divisions, which are further split into divisions and units with specific functions.

The Programme Management Office

In mid-2020, following a decision by senior management to focus on project management to enhance quality in the implementation and achievement of strategic objectives, a formal Programme Management Office (PMO) function was established.

While QQI already had project management processes and a programme board in place, it was recognised that there was scope to:

- increase the number of work activities being conceived, planned and reviewed in a structured way as projects with clear links to QQI's strategic objectives.
- develop the project management toolkit and increase project management skills and support across the organisation.
- use the PMO and as a cross-organisational hub for strategic change management, evaluation and quality assurance to support staff to implement change and improvement in a consistent, timely, considered and efficient manner.

The QQI PMO's functions include:

- Managing and maintaining the QQI project management processes, including the project management toolkit and resources.
- Providing guidance and support to project managers on an ongoing basis.
- Advising and facilitating QQI's project governance structures.
- Facilitating the development of the annual corporate plan and managing the corporate plan reporting process.
- The compilation and publication of the statutory annual report.
- Programme/ project management of key cross-organisational projects and programmes including:
 - The Amended Legislation Programme of projects – introducing QQI's new functions as described above.
 - The Information and Quality Governance Programme of projects – a suite of inter-connected projects focused on the review and improvement of QQI's records and data management and internal quality governance.

In the initial months, the PMO took time to familiarise itself with the organisation, speaking to and surveying project managers and sponsors to understand their needs and to ensure a “right size” approach to the development of the project management toolkit and processes. This included a review and revision of QQI's project management governance structures with the executive management team.

One of the first steps taken by the PMO, was the creation of a central QQI Projects Register with reporting functionality, which was made accessible to the entire organisation, and which details key high-level information on projects.

The Projects Steering Group & the 3-stage Project Management Processes

Every 3 years, QQI develops its new statement of strategy, which is realised through the design and implementation of the annual strategic corporate plans. A significant portion of the strategic work activities which form the annual corporate plans are distinct and focused pieces of work, more of which are now planned, implemented and evaluated as projects or programmes of projects.

Projects are approved, monitored and evaluated by the Projects Steering Group (PSG). This governance committee is comprised of the executive management team, IT management, the PMO team and also includes an external project management expert.

The PSG meets monthly to

- Review/approve new project proposals
- Monitor and evaluate project progress via projects progress updates
- Review and approve project closure

Project managers are allocated a dedicated timeslot to present and discuss their projects at the Projects Steering Group. The PMO manages and facilitates the PSG meeting process, including giving ongoing support, guidance and advice to project managers, preparing agendas and meeting notes and publishing a monthly review of the PSG meeting and projects presented.

Proposed projects or programmes which have a significant financial impact, which are cross-organisational, which propose a significant policy change necessitating major internal or external consultation, or which are not already referenced in the corporate plan, are required go through a pre-scrutiny and approval process with the Executive Management Team before being further elaborated as projects for an presented to the PSG.

QQI has implemented a 3-stage project management process supported by 3 key standardised templates.

- **The Project Charter**

This is the key project initiation and planning tool where all new project proposals develop and outline the following key project components:

- Project purpose and objectives including specific reference to the delivery of one or more strategic corporate objectives
- Project team details and resources requirements
- Project deliverables, timelines and dependencies
- Project cost analysis
- Project risk analysis
- Stakeholder engagement and communications planning
- Project quality planning and considerations

- **The Project Update**

Project managers are required to present updates to the PSG when a significant deliverable has been achieved, where there is a significant change or development in a project requiring approval or where project advice or guidance is sought.

Additionally, projects must provide updates to the PSG at least every 6 months.

- **Project Closure Document & Lessons Learned**

Project closure is a deliberate reflective process, and the project closure document includes a summary of the achievement of key deliverables, a lessons learned analysis, projected cost versus actual cost and details of the full project document archive.

This high-level 3-stage approach was implemented taking account of the relative size and complexity of QQI's projects. Detailed project management and implementation is undertaken by the project team typically at the directorate and division level with further specific project management resources and tools provided by the PMO.

The Projects Hub

In January 2022, the PMO launched The Projects Hub, a new Microsoft Teams-based central resource repository for all staff.

The Projects Hub houses all QQI project management resources and templates, the central projects register, the Projects Steering Group meeting notes and agendas, a repository of open projects and an archive of closed projects, and the lessons learned database. It is also the central organisational repository for the development of and reporting on the annual corporate plans. The aims of this cross-organisational knowledge management resource are:

- to increase the visibility and accessibility of project management resources and information at all levels of the organisation
- to facilitate learning and knowledge-sharing to increase cross-organisational support for and awareness of work activities in a busy organisation with a diverse range of functions
- support strategic connectedness via project management and corporate plan design and reporting

The Projects Hub		
1	Administration	The Projects Register
		Current Meeting Docs (where project managers upload project documents for the monthly PSG meeting)
		PSG Meeting Notes & Agendas
		Lessons Learned
2	Open Projects	Repository of open projects - a folder per project for key project documents presented to PSG (charters and progress updates)
3	Closed Projects	Repository of closed projects - a folder per project for key project documents presented to PSG including the Project Closure Document.
4	Project Management Resources	A curated list of links to project management standards, blogs, articles and other resources
5	Project Templates and Forms	Key QQI Project Management Templates & Forms

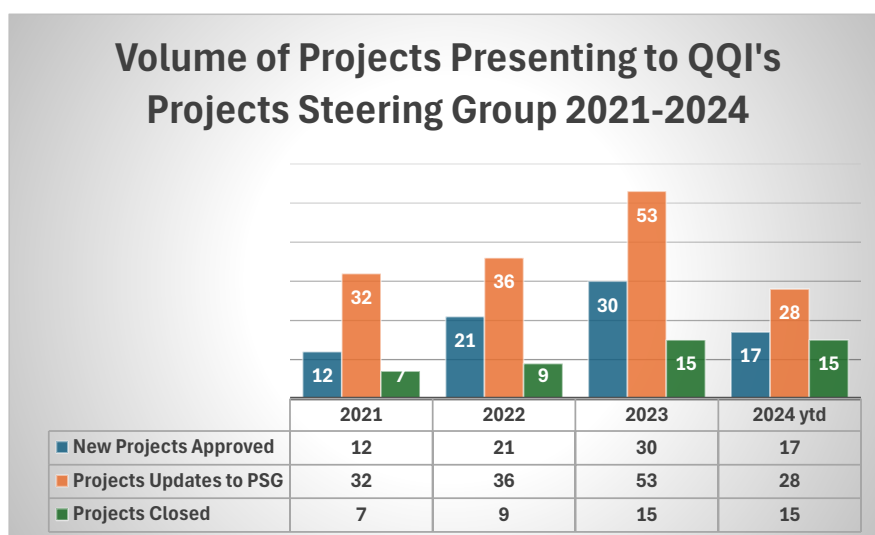
6	Project Managers Forum	A place for PMs to support each other, seek assistance, share experience and project management resources
7	Corporate Plan	The organisational hub for the development, management and reporting on QQI's annual corporate plans.
8	Annual Report	The organisational hub for compilation and QQI's annual report prior to publication.

100% of project managers surveyed view The Projects Hub as a valuable resource, which is well structured as a “one-stop shop” for project management. Several respondents mention its value to new starters and cite the benefit of being able to review and learn from colleagues’ project charters, progress updates and closure documents.

The Impact and the Views from the Organisation

The Numbers

2021 to 2024 saw a marked increase in the number of strategic work activities formally proposed, evaluated and closed as projects under the governance of the Projects Steering Group.



Programmes of Connected Projects

Additionally, the number of work activities structured into connected and coherent programmes of projects has increased. In 2020, the Amended Legislation Programme was the sole articulated programme of linked projects. Since then, 4 additional key strategic programmes have been developed and are being delivered:

- The Integrated Programme of Projects for QQI Award Standards and Certification
- The Rethinking Assessment Programme of Projects
- The Information and Quality Governance Programme
- The Programme for the Review of National Framework of Qualifications and Associated Policies

Project managers report that conceiving and managing related projects as a wider programme is beneficial because it helps:

- identify linkages, dependencies and the scope for efficiencies across various project strands.
- signal to the rest of the organisation the scope of work of particular divisions to get support from colleagues and management.
- understand the totality of the QQI resource requirement to inform a conscious decision regarding the overall cost/benefit and impact.
- with consideration of stakeholder engagement, including the extent to which stakeholders should be or have the capacity to be involved in various project strands, thus helping design most effective and efficient mechanisms for stakeholder engagement across the spectrum of the programme.

The main challenges identified by managers of larger programmes of work are:

- sequencing of the various strands of the programme, which often involve the same internal resources and can lead to overload and delays
- achieving and maintaining internal coherence and agreement on priorities and approaches

Reflecting on their experience managing larger programmes, one project manager recommends not having too many multiple project strands underway simultaneously and stresses the importance of building in sufficient time between strands to allow for slippage and reflection.

Feedback from Project Managers

The Project Charter: Project managers surveyed mention that completing the project charter gives them the time, space and structure to define and sharpen their focus at the beginning of a project. They describe it as a valuable template, which forces consideration of scope, vision and deliverables to ensure that all key areas of the project are addressed with risks are examined early on. Improvement suggestions include the addition of a sign-off appendix to ensure timely and advance consultation with key supporting functions such as Communications, Stakeholder Engagement, Finance and IT.

Project Updates: Reporting project progress via updates at the PSG is described as a good accountability and oversight mechanism which contributes to effectiveness and quality. Project managers describe receiving valuable support, diverse perspectives and advice to help them evaluate their projects and to stimulate consideration of other potential directions when appropriate. Some project managers note that attending the PSG can be daunting for new staff and that advice is not always focused on the project approach and can often veer into the policy space.

Project Closure: 100% of project managers agree that completing and formally documenting project closure, including lessons learned is a valuable and worthwhile exercise. They describe it as good way to mark a milestone, which affords them the time to reflect properly on what went well in the project, what could be improved and any follow-on actions required.

While the PMO compiles and maintains a repository of lessons learned from closed projects, only 45% of project managers reported that they use this resource and 50% of project managers did not know that this repository exists.

The top 3 challenges described by project managers can be summarised and categorised as follows:

- Internal stakeholder buy-in, engagement and resource availability. Integration across projects and competing priorities.
- Effective scheduling and time management, particularly with complex and non-routine projects or where projects have third party dependencies outside direct control.
- External stakeholder engagement and the potential for overload.

Some of the **improvement suggestions from project managers** in relation to project management processes and governance in QQI are as follows:

- “Remind staff of the wealth of information that is stored in the Projects Hub, introduce more regular periodic updates around the system”
- Use the Projects Managers Forum for project managers engage more effectively with each other
- Provide more ongoing training to staff on basics of project management
- “Many of QQI's projects involve engagement with the same external stakeholders at the same time, which can create an impression of a significant burden imposed by QQI. Greater consideration of this as part of project governance would be beneficial.”
- Improve the effectiveness of the PSG in terms of managing the entire project portfolio to ensure better synergy between connected projects

Feedback from Senior Management

In their feedback, the Executive Management Team described how project management has evolved in QQI, noting that:

- It is significantly more formalised and structured with more accountability.
- The volume of projects and programmes has grown steadily, signalling widespread buy-in to project management.
- Discussion at PSG is more focused.
- Project management has evolved to become an embedded part of QQI's work.
- Project data and files are well managed and easily accessible facilitating the visibility of potential likely cross-organisational impacts of projects.

When asked what works well, senior management commented as follows:

“As the programme management function has expanded its reach with more and more activities/initiatives being identified as projects, it has given organisational leaders a clearer line of sight on what is happening across the organisation. Hence it is easier to see overlaps and interconnections. As sponsor, the formalisation of initiatives engendered by the process has put a more standardised documentation in place to frame my line management responsibilities”

“The opportunity to discuss projects and to consider dependencies on areas outside the lead business area. External expert view is valuable. Good improvements in consideration of risks in developing projects.”

“The discipline of having to bring a project to the PSG to be questioned and challenged is a good one for staff to develop.”

When asked how QQI project management processes and tools support quality, the executive management team noted:

- The effectiveness of the PSG as an accountability and governance tool to help track, review and adjust projects.
- The transparency of work and the mechanism for project leads to seek guidance at critical points in a project.
- The usefulness of templates and structures, including The Projects Hub to ensure consistency of approach.
- The value of lessons learned and the importance of the review of closed project to inform future planning.
- The neutrality of the project management approach, which guarantees threshold attention for all significant undertakings, contributing to the overall quality of organisational functioning and to fairness in the way colleagues and projects are treated.

Challenges identified by senior management echo the themes outlined by project managers.

Some improvement opportunities identified include:

- organising an event to distil the PMO experience and present highlights of lessons learned to colleagues in the organisation.
- Inviting members of the QQI Board to observe a PSG meeting to understand the importance of project management and the PMO to the achievement of corporate objectives.
- Stress testing and impact analysis of the effects of projects and workload on people and resources.
- Ensuring that all significant initiatives are captured as projects.
- Improved resource allocation sign-off and consideration of financial impact.

The External Perspective

The external subject matter expert who is a member of the PSG was interviewed and identified several critical success factors, which have helped embed project management processes and governance in QQI:

- **Senior management** support for the process.
- A willingness to **evolve maturity** of the project management process over time, rather than expecting a silver bullet.
- The monitoring of **measurable** strategic organisational **objectives**.
- **Mentoring and support** for project managers from senior management, the PMO and colleagues.
- **The feedback loop** - communicating to organisation.
- A level of project management documentation and technology that is appropriate for the complexity of projects.

Some potential opportunities for improvement include:

- Continued development of project manager capabilities to effectively articulate projects and manage time, cost and quality.

- The potential to introduce a shorter project brief document before the Project Charter stage to improve resource requirement projection and more effectively manage the pipeline of projects.
- Reviewing the adequacy of financial visibility related to projects and improvement of the visibility of IT projects.

Closing thoughts from the PMO

- Different levels of experience, varying workloads and different individual and team work practices and dynamics can impact the effective and consistent implementation of project management processes, so the ongoing support of senior management coupled with guidance for staff from the PMO are key to success.
- Project resources and processes require constant review and revision based on the evolving and developing needs of users and the organisation.
- Don't underestimate the appetite for training, resources, communication and information, even in a very busy organisation.