



# Executive Summary

## UK What Works Centres

Aims, methods and contexts

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Both the full report and this executive summary are available for download at <https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=3731>

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The research was undertaken by David Gough and Chris Maidment of the EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London, and Jonathan Sharples of the EPPI-Centre, currently seconded to the Education Endowment Foundation.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A network of What Works Centres have been developed in the UK over the last five years to “improve the way government and other organisations create, share and use (or ‘generate, transmit and adopt’) high quality evidence for decision-making”<sup>1</sup>. This What Works Network represents one of the first attempts to take a national approach to prioritising the use of evidence in public policy decision-making.

What Works Centres are different from standard research centres. They are ‘intermediary’ organisations designed to encourage and enable the use of research evidence in policy and practice decision-making. The Centres have similar overall aims but different organisational structures and funding arrangements. They work in different areas of social policy and focus to varying extents on different parts of the evidence production-to-use process.

Unsurprisingly, as this is an emerging field, there is not an accepted overarching model to describe and understand the work of such intermediary organisations. This project examines the range of approaches being undertaken by the nine Centres<sup>2</sup>, to provide a means of comparing and contrasting their work and the contexts within which they sit. This report looks at the activities and products of the Centres and how they operate within their sectors.

The purpose is to provide an overall analysis and description of the Network that can support the development of existing Centres and assist in the planning of future Centres and their equivalents. Although we are able to comment on the nature of the Centres, this study is not an independent evaluation of their effectiveness. The aims are to:

1. Develop an analytical framework to understand and compare the nature and work of the What Works Centres, and other evidence intermediary centres and activities.
2. Describe and characterise each of the current Centres as of 2017.
3. Analyse the similarities and differences between the plans, methods, contents and outputs of the Centres and to interpret the key themes emerging from this comparison.
4. Create supplementary resources to assist in the planning of current and potential Centres (subsequent to this report).

The project has been conducted by Prof. David Gough, Dr Chris Maidment and Prof. Jonathan Sharples at the EPPI-Centre at UCL. It should be noted that although the Centres have been given opportunities to check and comment on the accuracy of the data collected, the report is the work of the authors and does not necessarily represent the views of the Centres.

The structure of the report<sup>3</sup> is as follows:

## Chapter 1: Introduction

A description the history, aims and purposes of the Network, and the framework used to collect and compare data on the Centres. This framework categorises their work by five types of activity – Contexts, User engagement and supporting uptake, Communicating and interpreting evidence, Research production, and User perspectives – and includes a structured approach for comparing the evidence standards that are applied for different activities.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network>

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, a tenth What Works Centre (for Children’s Social Care) was still in development.

<sup>3</sup> This is the structure of the full report, available at <https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=3731>

### **Chapter 2: The UK What Works Centres**

A short summary of each of the Centres with information on their history, status, governance, resources, business model, aims and strategies.

### **Chapter 3: Dimensions of difference between and within the Centres**

Description of the activities of the Centres, showing how they are similar and different, organised according to the five categories from the study framework. More detailed examples of specific work by each of the Centre is included in the appendix.

### **Chapter 4: Evidence standards**

An analysis of the different evidence standards that are applied to, and underpin, the production and communication of evidence by Centres.

### **Chapter 5: Cross cutting issues and interpretations**

A discussion and interpretation of some of the commonalities and differences identified in Chapters 3 and 4, including implications for What Works Centres, other research organisations and funders.

## **Key findings**

The What Works Centres conduct a wide array of work: building a more robust and comprehensive evidence base; raising awareness and understanding regarding the need for using evidence, and; influencing local and national policy to consider evidence more effectively. This work has resulted in numerous achievements, some of which were captured in a recent publication by the Cabinet Office (2018) of the first five years of the What Works Network. We have provided an account of the rich range of activities taking place across the Network in Chapter 3.

In describing the nature and activities of the nine UK What Works Centres, this report identifies a number of ways that Centres are similar and different from one another, in terms of: how they perform their key functions; the extent and manner of their work outside of these key functions; and their wider strategies to engage and influence their audiences. Some key themes that emerge from these commonalities and differences are discussed under the following six headings:

- Activities within evidence ecosystems
- User engagement and supporting uptake
- Evidence standards
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Wider systems and contexts
- Collaboration across Centres

### *Activities within evidence ecosystems*

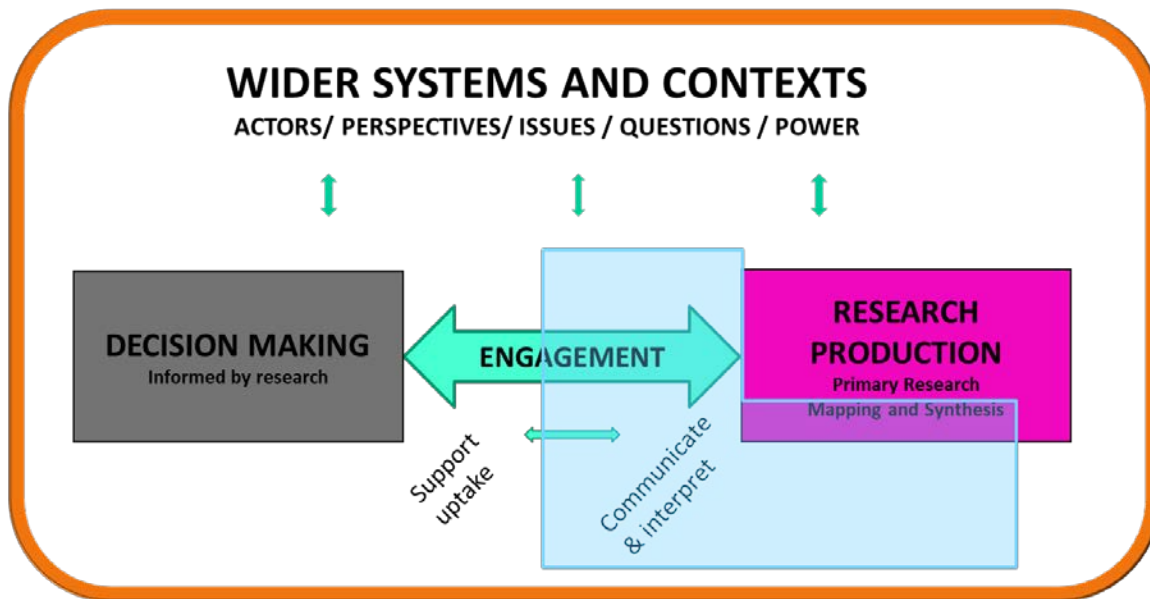
If we consider the work of What Works Centres in the context of the overall evidence ecosystem, then a key question is, what are they doing in relation to that system?

In general, the greatest emphasis of work for the Centres is across three areas: communication; the synthesis of research findings; and providing access to what is known about the evidence base. For example, each of the What Works Centres produces syntheses of research, translates findings into briefings, summaries or toolkits, and interacts with its audience to promote an engagement with this evidence. Relatively less work is undertaken to actively support the uptake and application of evidence

in policy and practice decisions<sup>4</sup>. Hence, the majority of the effort is located in the right-hand side of the ecosystem framework (as shown in the shaded area of the figure below).

If we relate that to the three main objectives set out for the Network – generate, translate, adopt – we see less activity in the ‘adopt’ category than for ‘generate’ and ‘translate’. This is also predominantly a research production (push) approach to the use of research, rather than problem-solving, demand-led (pull) approach.

### What Works Network activities across the research use ecosystem



*Adapted from Gough et al 2011, Gough 2012*

We also observed that the balance of activity for Centres tends to broaden over time. Although the initial emphasis for Centres is often on aggregating, synthesising and providing access to evidence, over time most Centres are placing an increasing proportion of their effort in interpreting research (e.g. producing actionable guidance) and on supporting uptake and application of evidence i.e. broadening of scope towards the left-hand side of the framework.

Another issue is the extent to which Centres are involved in primary research. The nature of primary research is an important issue for all Centres, but most do not have the necessary resources to run extensive research programmes or have decided that these resources are better allocated differently. Undertaking primary research has a number of potential benefits, such as: filling gaps in the current underlying evidence base; increasing the likelihood that primary research is fit for purpose (e.g. for synthesis); and, engaging intended end-users and instilling a culture of enquiry in frontline practice. The varied degree of involvement in – or influence on – primary research may also have implications for the

<sup>4</sup> This is the general trend across the Network although some individual Centres such as the College of Policing are undertaking substantial work in this area.

What Works Network, such as a lack of consistency in evidence standards within, and between, some Centres.

The focus of activity, described above, raises fundamental questions around the appropriate scope for a What Works Centre and how broadly they operate across the different functions of an evidence ecosystem. The two Centres with the largest budgets have adopted two very different approaches. The *EEF* is, arguably, moving to a position where it operates as an integrated and self-contained evidence system in itself. *NICE*, on the other hand, has a much more specific role in the healthcare ecosystem, centered around the creation of evidence-based guidance. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages, which are discussed in more detail.

We have also noted that *within* domains there can be significant variation in the strategies and activities that are used to face similar challenges. A good example is the variation in evidence standards used across the Network, where there is variation both within, and between, Centres.

The variation between Centres may be very appropriate. Centres are working in different systems with different audiences, legal status, relationship with government, degrees of funding, aims and roles, and different stages of development. It is therefore not surprising if they require different strategies. It is also possible that some of the variation may just be serendipitous; however, without more explicit Theories of Change it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the choices Centres make are strategic considerations of all the choices available. Centres do, of course, explain their strategies and their activities, but they do not tend to provide much detail on the specifics of:

- The nature of the evidence ecosystem that they are intervening in.
- The ways in which evidence is not being used, engaged with, or produced that is limiting the functioning of that evidence system (i.e. the extent of evidence-informed policy and practice in their sector).
- How their work will change that evidence ecosystem.
- The Theories of Change that explain how the methods that they apply will achieve the desired aims and objectives (though a number of Centres are planning or undertaking work to develop theories of change).
- How their work will help the evidence ecosystem work within the wider systems (see Wider Systems and contexts below).

### *User engagement and supporting uptake*

Users of research are not simply the recipients of research findings, they can be involved in all aspects of the evidence ecosystem. They can be informed, consulted or given decision-making power in:

- The uptake of research through the implementation of evidence-informed decisions.
- Access to, and consideration of, recommendations and guidance.
- Engagement activities that support knowledge mobilisation mechanisms (such as access to evidence, skills to enable use) and address behavioural needs (such as creating opportunities and motivation to consider research) (Langer et al. 2016).
- The production and generation of syntheses of research and/or primary research.

As already discussed, the Centres have undertaken less work on research uptake and implementation than on research production and engagement. Despite this, the Centres all aim to increase the use of research findings in decision-making. In doing this, the Centres vary in how they define their main 'users', on such dimensions as:

- Which potential users are prioritised (and which are not).
- How tightly these users are specified.
- The relative emphasis on individuals, groups or organisations.
- The emphasis on engaging early adopters/champions or a broader audience of users.
- The distinction between the users of Centres outputs and services, and the ultimate beneficiaries of the Centres' work.
- Equity issues of differential engagement with both the use of, and production, of research.

In general, it would be helpful if there was greater specification on how and why particular users and beneficiaries are selected and prioritised, and the nature of engagement with evidence that the Centres are hoping to achieve.

### *Evidence standards*

What Works Centres need to be clear about the quality and relevance of the research findings that they are using to inform decision-making. Most Centres have some formal processes and/or criteria for standards of evidence, although there is considerable variation in how these standards are defined and applied. Some of the evidence standards have been created by the Centres themselves, while others are externally developed systems.

Some evidence standards are specified (i.e. codified) in methods manuals. These may describe the process of determining the standard of evidence and also rate evidence as meeting a particular criteria or quality rating. Clarity about both methods and criteria can help to achieve consistency and quality of evidence standards.

Where there are not codified processes or criteria then individual research reports often specify the methods used for that particular study, meaning standards can vary from report to report within Centres.

Unsurprisingly, Centres have been predominantly concerned with evidence about research on the impact of interventions, or 'what works', however Centres use different cut off points regarding the required level of robustness for such primary studies, and/or different criteria to determine whether the studies meet these requirements. More consistent standards across the Network would help audiences to expect a certain quality of output and, therefore, generate confidence in the findings presented.

At the same time, Centres are developing standards relating to qualitative methods, for example, the *EEF's* guidance for evaluators on conducting implementation and process evaluation. The co-production model of *Scotland*, where the Collaborative Action Research consists of qualitative and mixed methods case studies, is another interesting example.

In summary, Centres vary on many aspects of evidence standards including:

- Processes for undertaking a study or other research product.
- Methodological approaches and standards.
- Report specific or manualised systems for applying standards.
- Specific criteria for grading the quality of a product.
- Quality assurance from: internal processes; external criteria; or external reporting standards.
- The parts of the evidence ecosystem to which the most explicit evidence standards are applied.
- The types of research questions to which the standards are applied.
- The level of detail provided for each of such processes and criteria.

Individual Centres also do not always apply standards of evidence consistently in different parts of their evidence ecosystem. For example, we found differences in:

- *The degree of specification of standards* – Centres tend to have the most developed and codified standards for the part of the evidence ecosystem in which their work is mostly focused.
- *The purposes for which the research is being undertaken* – for example, different standards for a systematic review undertaken to inform planning a piece of primary research rather than to inform a toolkit.
- *Decisions to provide evidence quickly* – for example, recommending certain actions as evidence-informed on the basis of individual studies, even though the Centre normally uses syntheses as the foundation for decision-making.

In addition to the more technical aspects of variation between and within Centres, there are some more fundamental differences between Centres in their approach to evidence. Most Centres use synthesis of the whole relevant evidence base in order to inform decision-making. Mostly this is through formal explicit methods. The two exceptions are *Wales* and *Scotland* whose remits are, unlike other Centres, territorial rather than topic-based. Consequently, they work across a range of policy areas with a wide variety of evidence. *Wales* uses experts to synthesise evidence while *Scotland* uses a more interpretative realist approach and takes an overtly co-production model to how evidence is produced. *EIF* is also an exception in focusing on the evidence from at least two quality studies rather than a whole evidence base to state that there is a causal relationship between an intervention and outcomes.

Individual Centres and the What Works Network as whole might benefit from greater clarification of the choice of type and method of evidence standards both within and across different Centres.

### *Monitoring and evaluation*

What Works Centres advocate the use of research to inform decision-making, so to what extent are Centres themselves evidence-informed?

An important aspect is monitoring and evaluating their own work and impact. Impact can be assessed on the basis of:

- The ultimate beneficiaries (such as crime reduction or pupil attainment).
- The behaviours of intended users in increasing the use of evidence to inform decisions, and in adopting evidence-informed approaches.
- Intermediate outcomes such as users' knowledge of research findings.

Most Centres are at an early stage in their development and undertake relatively little evaluation of the impact of their work on ultimate beneficiaries. More common are measures of intermediaries (users of research) accessing the Centres' products and some follow up measures tracking their use (such as feedback from users on product usefulness or changes in thinking, and citations of these products in government policy documents). Nevertheless, do such intermediary outcomes lead to positive effects on intended beneficiaries? This is difficult to assess without clarity about both the theory of change and the empirical evidence for this theory, leading from: (i) Centre activities to (ii) various intermediate outcomes (e.g. access of resources), to (iii) evidence-informed policies or practices, and then to (iv) positive outcomes for beneficiaries.

An additional challenge is the limitation of research methods being used to assess impact of the Centres work. Rarely does this involve testing the counterfactual – what would happen to both intermediary and



ultimate outcome goals if the Centres' activities did not take place? Also, many outcome measures in this field are subjective reporting of perceived impact, rather than objective measures of change.

A second aspect of being evidence-informed is the extent that Centres make use of the wider research base on knowledge brokering organisations. Currently, Centres make relatively little reference to this in statements about planning their own work.

### *Wider systems and contexts*

A key consideration for What Works Centres, as intermediary organisations, is how they sit and work within external structures and systems. This includes not just the systems of evidence production and use they form part of, but also the wider political and societal systems in which it is hoped the benefits of evidence use will be realised e.g. policy, improvement, funding, accountability systems (Best, 2010). An implication of such a 'systems' model is that the effectiveness of Centres is a function of how well they integrate with external organisations and the systems in which they operate.

A finding from this review is that all Centres face challenges, to some degree, in impacting on these wider systems. This is not surprising for a number of reasons:

- The wider systems that the Centres are trying to engage with are often predominant influences in the sector (e.g. accountability).
- These wider systems are not always structured in a way that is receptive to research evidence, and so may not form an infrastructure that can naturally accommodate the work of the Centres.
- Centres are typically operating in sectors with historically weak track records and cultures of engaging with research.

These are not isolated to the What Works Network, and are typical of most research organisations, universities and funding bodies that are trying to influence wider decision-making. Indeed, there are potential advantages to having a single organisation, such as a What Works Centre, acting as a focal point for evidence-informed decision-making. By operating in the synthesis, communication and engagement domains of the evidence ecosystem, Centres are well-placed to process a large, and potentially overwhelming, body of evidence, and so provide a degree of coordination to that part of the evidence system.

That coordination only applies to one bit of the evidence ecosystem though. If Centres are going to retain a relatively tight focus then where does the responsibility lie for coordination across the rest of the evidence ecosystem? Moreover, if the Centres are only one element of the evidence ecosystem, how do they best go about influencing the wider, non-evidence systems? In this context, the natural progression we observed in this study for Centres to take on a broader remit – e.g. supporting more active uptake of evidence – is a logical response i.e. providing more coordination to the system by doing more functions. An alternative strategy could be for Centres to retain a tighter remit and operate in a system where there is more overarching coordination (e.g. *NICE* in the healthcare system). In this scenario, Centres may attempt to manage some of overarching coordination, influence it, or stay largely removed.

Whatever the approach, Centres will need to be adept at identifying levers of influence, nimble in capitalising on opportunities as they arise, and persuasive in their approach. Ultimately, there will be limits to what Centres can achieve within their context, which emphasises the importance of making precise, strategic decisions on how and where they place their effort and resources.

Create new systems that disturb existing systems.

Bring the existing systems to the work of the WWC

Embed WWC activities in existing external systems



One area where Centres face a strategic choice is the degree to which they embed their work within existing systems and processes. At one end of the spectrum, Centres can adopt strategies that create new systems that compete with, and disturb, existing systems. Overall, activities such as these, that compete with, and disturb, existing systems occurs least across the What Works Network. The next approach to interacting with the wider context involves attempting to attract, and align, organisations in those external systems to the work of the Centres. At the embedded end of the spectrum are activities that frame and integrate the work of the Centres in existing external activities, policies and structures.

An overall reflection from this study is that activities that frame and embed the work of the Centres in external processes and structures are perhaps underutilised at present, given the promise that these approaches show in influencing decision-making. We saw few examples across the Network of attempts to explicitly analyse the evidence ecosystem and its relationship with the wider systems, to inform Centres' Theories of Change and intervention strategies.

Organisational factors can have a significant impact on the means and degree by which Centres shape both the evidence ecosystem and wider systems in which they operate. There is a general view that independence from government is an advantage for Centres – whilst that can be true in some aspects, there are also potential trade-offs. For example, being close to government can create natural opportunities to integrate a Centre's work into policy systems, although at the same time create unhelpful perceptions of non-independence and top-down compliance with users.

Unsurprisingly, the overall budget a Centre has at its disposal influences the scope and nature of its engagement activities. Centres can also be constrained by the timescales of the funding cycles they work to, as well as the degree of freedom they have on budget allocation. A lack of budget flexibility may also limit the strategic capacity of the Centres. As they seem to have relatively limited scope for their own income generation, it is unclear how funding can be sustained without government or philanthropic support.

Finally, an important variable in relation to the Centres' role and impact is its point of development. The What Works Network is a relatively new initiative, with all but two of the Centres being five years old or less (*NICE* was established in 1999, the *EEF* in 2011). Inevitably, the relative infancy of many Centres creates limitations on their impact and reach as they develop their brand and credibility, build networks and relationships, and establish products, services and expertise. Centres are not static of course, and we captured examples of rapid and significant shifts in Centre's strategy, activities and impact.

### *Collaboration across Centres*

The Centres were formally set up as the What Works Network in 2013 and regularly meet as part of the Network. The collaborative work to date has predominantly been through more informal bilateral arrangements between Centres. There is potential for broader collaboration across the whole or part of the Network and hopefully this report is a contribution to that process.

The wide range of approaches employed, and challenges experienced, suggests that there is much that the Centres could learn from each other. There are many potential incentives for the Centres to work together, such as:

- *Strategic development* – Discussing strategies with others may help a Centre to clarify the reasons behind the strategic choices they have made, and better understand the alternative approaches that are available.
- *Shared learning* – Sharing experiences and observed impacts may help highlight the value of certain work or of undertaking it in a certain way; for instance, the benefits of influencing the primary research agenda and the different strategies available for this.
- *Coherence at Network level* – Greater collaboration could lead to consistency and clarity in areas where more consistency might be expected and useful, such as evidence standards.
- *Brand image and funding* – Such consistency could help build confidence in What Works outputs and so raise the profile the Network.
- *Collaboration on overlapping topic areas* – Some issues and policies may be of interest to more than one Centre.
- *Infrastructure efficiencies* – Where areas of interest overlap, pooled resources can achieve impacts that align with the agendas of two or more Centres. An example could be the joint development of methods and processes.

There may be disincentives too though such as actual or perceived lack of flexibility, financial costs, and the possibility of competing interests. Finally, the Network has criteria for membership and these could be expanded to cover things such as joint standards (including evidence standards) and reporting processes.

### *In conclusion*

This report provides a description and comparison of the UK What Works Centres to improve our understanding of the work their aims and methods.

The What Works Network is unique in its aim to ensure that public services across a wide range of policy areas are informed and improved by the best available evidence. The variety of approaches identified by this study demonstrate the scale of the What Works Network initiative.

This report identifies potential points of development for the Centres though we recognise that they operate with varying remits and funding and in different contexts that may constrain the extent that they are able to engage with some of these issues.

The findings of the study may also have relevance for the funders and audiences of the Centres, other intermediary organisations and individuals working between research use and research production, including any future What Works Centres.

Additionally, for researchers and others interested in evidence use, the report provides a case study of a unique network of knowledge creation and mobilisation.

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A full list of references is included in the main report:

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