

ESRC's What Works Investment Framework

Background

In 2016, we undertook a high-level review (www.esrc.ac.uk/collaboration/collaboration-opportunities/what-works-centres/what-works-investment-framework/) of our current and future role within What Works to help shape our What Works Strategy. The review showed that ESRC has played an important part in building the credibility and traction of this potentially influential and impactful initiative amongst academics, some local decision makers and central government. There was agreement that What Works is a long-term initiative requiring sustained commitment to bring about a change in culture for evidence to be used more consistently in practice to achieve better outcomes for the public.

Summary

The review drew a number of conclusions which we have developed into a What Works Investment Framework. This Framework is guiding our thinking and may be useful for other organisations to use if these types of investments are planned. It has been developed in the knowledge that our role is necessary but the roles of others are essential and need to be clear. Our support for 'What Works' continues to be a flagship activity of ESRC and this Framework outlines three areas of focus for our future role along with a set of our guiding principles for any ongoing or new investment.

Areas of focus for ESRC investment in What Works

- 1. Effective centres:** to ensure over the longer term the What Works approach has the best chance of success we encourage continuous self-improvement; commitment to sharing with and learning from others; measuring impact and assessing effectiveness (in order to promote the demonstrable value of 'What Works', raise its visibility and generate interest and support from users for its evidence and approach).
- 2. Adoption of evidence:** to pursue an improvement to 'adoption of evidence' (arguably the most critical function of the What Works approach) by supporting work which understands and engages users throughout, and develops practices and research which can facilitate better use of evidence.
- 3. Sustained commitment:** to prioritise financial security of existing What Works investment and develop a better understanding of how to embed What Works as a longer term feature of the 'evidence/social science' landscape.

I. Effective centres: What works in What Works

What do we mean by 'effective'?

Our What Works Centres are at a relatively early stage of development and the nature of the approach is bound by long term partnership and culture change. It may be too soon to assess their ultimate impact on improved outcomes for citizens but we can still improve and

measure effectiveness along the way. These three areas of ‘effectiveness’ should be considered when judging how to improve and measure the success of What Works Centres:

- delivery of **core activities** such as research synthesis, translation and user engagement;
- **consequences** of their core activity: such as level of engagement; level of evidence use; and visibility of their work; and
- **ultimate impact** of evidence use: did the evidence that was used bring about improved outcomes for citizens?

What needs to be done?

Consolidate and share learning

Lessons should be learnt where possible. Consolidating, capturing and sharing learning is important to ensure existing centres, or any new centres, are as effective as possible. We will focus on developing better comparative learning based on existing research and experiences of What Works initiatives – ESRC funded or not. Equally, learning could be identified from other countries and the extensive international networks of some What Works Centres (eg Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)) provide a natural opportunity for this activity. This consolidated learning can then be shared with existing What Works Centres, new What Works Centres and potentially non-What Works Centres. We could also consider transferring learning beyond the UK through our other work such as collaborating with developing countries.

Measuring impact

It is too soon to measure the ultimate impact of What Works Centres. Nevertheless the ground work and commitment can be started now – as can the identification and monitoring of the best interim measures of impact. This is an activity best led by What Works Centres themselves with the support of an external evaluator. We will provide advice and expertise in impact evaluation, such as advice on how to assess impact and impact processes or understanding determinants of impact (see *Cultivating Connections* <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/research-and-impact-evaluation/analysis-and-scoping/>).

Proving effectiveness

Continued funding for What Works Centres is contingent on demonstrating that the existing initiatives are making a difference. What Works Centres must think about how they will demonstrate they are an effective mechanism to deliver the ‘evidence into practice’ agenda. Demonstrating the value of What Works Centres to users (a key measure of effectiveness) will be fundamental if centres are to attract new funding partners - therefore securing a more sustainable place in the ‘evidence ecosystem’ (also see ‘Sustained commitment’).

ESRC’s guiding principles to foster ‘Effective centres’

- **Consolidate and share learning:** encourage and enable activities that consolidate, capture, share and embed learnings that can improve the effectiveness of What Works initiatives, including the process of developing new centres.
- **International connections:** develop connections between our What Works portfolio and Strategic Plan including our international strategy.

- **Measuring impact:** require our What Works investments to prioritise and adequately resource measuring and monitoring their impact.

2. Adoption of evidence: Facilitating better use of evidence

Facilitating better use of evidence is seen as fundamental to the success of the initiative, including continued engagement with policy and practitioner worlds. To do this effectively, What Works initiatives must develop and deliver evidence that is demanded by and meets the needs of users and users must have the skills, opportunity and motivation to use the evidence (<http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/evidence-exchange/the-science-of-using-science-evidence/>).

Some progress has already been made in supporting evidence use in decision making through the development of toolkits and guidebooks; advice to users; briefing ministers directly; policy briefings; and blogs. Improvements are still required in this area. What Works Centres are discovering that the translation of evidence is more resource intensive than originally anticipated.

Lessons learnt from NICE for social policy and practice

“[A] key recommendation is for an approach that engages with wider social values and interests – getting services users, providers and others involved is vital to success. Any new NICE-type institution aiming to be an evidence intermediary must avoid only working in a ‘navel-gazing’ technocratic, academic research focussed silo. There is a need to engage with wider audiences and the difficult and messy politics that goes with making tough decisions relating to crime, education and other areas of social policy”.

The NICE Way: Lessons for Social Policy and Practice (2014)

What needs to be done?

Develop capability to use evidence

Ensuring users have the capacity, skills and motivation to use evidence is also a key feature of getting evidence adopted more consistently. This can be delivered in part through the What Works Centres themselves as well as the Alliance for Useful Evidence. We have worked proactively to build the capability of academics in particular and this continues to be a priority for us.

Original research on adoption of evidence

There is still limited empirical evidence on how research is translated into practical application and certainly less in social science compared to the healthcare sector.

Users value What Works Centres

Evidence must meet the needs of users if they are to consider adopting it and this activity needs to be sufficiently resourced with users fully engaged throughout the process

ESRC's guiding principles to foster 'Adoption of evidence'

- **Developing capability to use evidence:** to invest in activities which build the capability of users and academics to facilitate the contribution of high quality academic research to better outcomes for public services and the economy.
- **New research into the adoption of evidence:** continue to invest in original research into knowledge mobilisation in the social sciences that is relevant and transferable to What Works Centres.
- **Engagement with users:** continue to require our What Works investments to prioritise and adequately resource necessary and sufficient engagement with users.

3. Sustained commitment: an established feature of the evidence landscape

Achieving a genuine improvement in outcomes for citizens as a result of more consistent use of evidence in decision making is a long-term endeavour involving a change in culture. We have been and still are committed to using high-quality academic research to better public services and the economy over a sustained period. We are also committed to What Works as a mechanism for delivering this agenda. Sustained commitment from ESRC and others will help 'What Works' to deliver the benefits of improved evidence use over time and become an established feature of the evidence landscape.

Our review demonstrated that our involvement in What Works brings independence, rigour, credibility and quality to the initiative – all essential conditions for a trusted and effective evidence supplier. Our involvement is also valued for engaging academics and reassuring users about the importance of evidence in decision making and thus contributing to a shift in culture. Sustained commitment will provide the opportunity for What Works Centres to continue to use our quality kite-mark, bringing independence, academic rigour and scrutiny to What Works Centres – necessary for their long term success.

What needs to be done?

Demonstrate and promote value to users

To be sustainable What Works Centres will need to be able to provide and promote evidence of the utility and effectiveness of outputs to help attract new partnerships and funding.

Overarching vision for embedding What Works in the evidence landscape

ESRC are not the only players needed to make a success of What Works (or any initiative to deliver evidence into practice). We need a clear collective vision to ensure we work together effectively and achieve more than we could alone. This should also consider the need, extent of and mechanism for coordination amongst the What Works Centres.

Longer term funding models

In the development of a new What Works Centre, sustainable funding models should be considered from the start. We are working to better understand how to maximise the likelihood of long-term sustainability beyond the period of ESRC funding both for current and potential new What Works Centres.

ESRC's guiding principles to foster 'Sustained commitment'

- **Promoting financial security for existing centres:** provide interim financial security for existing centres and support them to be more self-sustaining in the long run by focussing on: being effective centres; adoption of evidence; and sustained commitment from users.
- **Sustained interest from key stakeholders:** to support and play our part in promoting What Works activity and its demonstrable value to users. This will help to maintain and generate visibility and interest amongst key stakeholders – a key part of developing sustainable centres.
- **Sustained commitment to evidence use across the UK evidence landscape:** to collaborate with others to support the most appropriate mechanism(s) (currently What Works) to deliver a long-term and sustainable approach to 'using evidence' which serves the needs of the UK.