

# **ESRC What Works Strategic Review: Report of Stakeholder Survey June 2016**

## **Executive summary**

### **Background**

This report presents the findings from a consultation survey carried out as part of a high-level review of ESRC's current and potential role across the What Works initiative. The Review aims to inform internal strategic decisions regarding ESRC's on-going contribution to the What Works Network, including where ESRC's unique role and active leadership should be focused.

ESRC is a major funding and administrative partner in the What Works Network which aims to provide robust research evidence to guide decision-making on £200 billion of public spending. ESRC is committed to strengthening the contribution of social science in this area, but has stressed that established centres must meet the ESRC's requirements for an open and transparent commissioning process, independence from government and high academic quality. Current programmes of work focus on key research areas including crime reduction, local economic growth, wellbeing, early intervention, poverty and public sector reform in Scotland.

### **Consultation survey approach**

The consultation survey reported here sought input from the following groups:

- ESRC What Works Centre/activity representatives
- What Works advisory/governance body representatives
- What Works user stakeholders
- Other external stakeholders (for example Alliance for Useful Evidence, What Works Network advisor, Non-ESRC What Works Centres)

In total, 84 from a purposive sample of 158 stakeholders participated in the survey, representing a 51 per cent response rate. Just under half (45 per cent) of the respondents were What Works Centres/activity representatives, whilst 55 per cent of respondents represented What Works governance/advisory bodies, co-funders, user stakeholders and other external stakeholders.

Survey respondents were asked to provide feedback on ESRC's current and potential future involvement in the What Works initiative. Specifically, respondents were asked to highlight elements that had worked well/less well, and to make suggestions for improvements. Respondents were also asked to select from a list of possible areas where ESRC could add value in future, and to identify priorities for ESRC investment from a list of specific options. It is important to note that the Review is not an impact or process evaluation of What Works Centres nor is it providing an appraisal of the different What Works models.

### **Key survey findings**

ESRC support for the What Works initiative is thought to have helped to establish the autonomy of the initiative from Central Government and build its credibility. This is seen as critical in attracting academics and their organisations to work with the What Works Centres. Further credibility stems from the rigour and academic quality associated with

ESRC funding, providing reassurance for user stakeholders and enhanced visibility for the initiative within Government.

ESRC is seen to have championed a greater focus on policy and practice amongst academics, and contributed to a greater awareness and acceptance of the value of evidence within government. Some progress is being made in supporting evidence use in decision-making. However improvements are still thought to be needed in this area. The majority of respondents (69 per cent) thought that ESRC could add value in facilitating better use of evidence in the future. Furthermore, 50 per cent of respondents selected "*Funding for delivery of initiatives to increase evidence adoption/uptake*" as a priority for future ESRC investment.

ESRC's investment is thought to have been critical to the establishment of What Works structures and networks. The stability of funding is thought to have encouraged user involvement, and supported the What Works initiative to reach a wider user base and cover a broader remit than would have been possible without ESRC's involvement.

There was a clear call for continued ESRC funding in the What Works initiative, with the majority of respondents (79 per cent) suggesting that ESRC could add value to the initiative in future through further funding. Echoing these responses, 81 per cent of respondents selected '*Long term funding for specific Centres*' as a priority for ESRC investment.

A longer-term financial commitment was perceived as necessary to enable proper establishment of Centres and to allow the centres to build on resources invested to date. Improving evidence use was seen as a long-term project that required long-term support. Culture change in evidence use, and the associated benefits in terms of knowledge exchange and impact would be realised over time, but needed a more sustainable base to achieve this. Funding from ESRC could also help to leverage funding from other sources. There was recognition, however, that on-going funding should be dependent on evidence of effectiveness.

There was less support for future ESRC involvement in commissioning new What Works Centres, and only 25 per cent of respondents saw seed corn/one-off funding for new Centres as a priority for ESRC investment in What Works. There was a perceived need to consolidate learning and understand 'what works in What Works' before funding more Centres, particularly while the sustainability of existing Centres was not secure.

Factors perceived as being conducive to a Centre's long-term sustainability fell under two main headings: a demonstrable value to its user base and a longer term funding model. What Works Centres need to ensure that their work is relevant to user needs, is accessible to and adopted by users, and has demonstrable impact. Partnership working with user communities is seen as key to meeting their needs. Longer term funding will allow for sustainability planning, including the facility to leverage more funding from other sources. Critically, on-going funding from non-government sources such as ESRC will enable Centres to maintain independence from users, and thereby retain their credibility as authoritative sources of evidence.

Sustainability was seen to be less feasible if the number of Centres were to expand, leading to an inevitable dilution of resources, and possible fracturing of the evidence landscape.

What Works sponsors need to address the trade-off between proliferation and sustainability, and develop a clearer model to decide priority areas.

As mentioned above, there was a recognition that continued funding was contingent on demonstrating that initiatives were making a difference. ESRC could take an overview of how different models are working in different contexts, share learning and support the development of an emerging impact narrative.

ESRC has provided valuable support for managing relationships, expectations and tensions, as well as access to existing processes and structures, support and guidance. Existing systems will need to be strengthened to ensure that the challenges of working with multiple funders and stakeholders can be effectively addressed. There was a call for more coordination of work between What Works Centres, although few thought that this was a priority role for ESRC.