

# ESRC What Works Strategic Review: report of stakeholder survey and documentary analysis June 2016

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## Introduction

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. As well as two existing centres of excellence – the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence and the Educational Endowment Foundation – the network consists of a number of new independent institutions part-funded by government, with significant support from ESRC. Programmes of work focus on key research areas including:

- crime reduction
- local economic growth
- wellbeing
- early intervention
- poverty
- public sector reform in Scotland.

Our portfolio is mixed in terms of type of investment as well as the area of social science including some core funding for Centres, some smaller contributions for specific projects and other What Works related activity such as the Alliance for Useful Evidence.

Specifically, this Strategic Review aims to address the following issues:

- Whether and on what terms we may want to re-commission existing What Works Centres or activities;
- Terms for co-funding new emerging centres;
- What role ESRC should play at different stages in the What Works lifecycle (eg as a catalyst for exploration and development only, or as an on-going funder after a Centre reaches 'steady-state'); and
- Terms under which ESRC should taper/cease investment ie our exit strategy

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.

## **Review approach**

The Review gathered evidence through the following approaches:

- Written (on-line) consultation survey with What Works Centres, their advisors and users, and other relevant external stakeholders
- Analysis of existing What Works Centre documentation (including Investment Annual Reports, Researchfish data, ESRC What Works Reflection Day Report, relevant ESRC Council papers, and other related documents)
- Discussions with ESRC Office, Council members and co-funders

This report discusses the findings from the consultation survey and documentary analysis conducted as part of the Review by ESRC's Evaluation, Strategy and Analysis team. The overall findings of the Review will be used to inform the development of a set of 'evidence-based' overarching principles to steer ESRC's assessment of and involvement in future What Works propositions.

## **Consultation survey**

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)

The survey explored the following areas:

- Attitudes towards ESRC's involvement in the What Works initiative to date, including suggestions for where improvements could be made
- Perceived benefits/challenges of participation in the wider What Works Network
- Possible areas where ESRC could add value to the What Works initiative in future, and perceived priorities areas for ESRC investment
- Views on the long-term sustainability of What Works Centres and the factors that might facilitate this.

A series of questions was drawn up and an invitation to submit written responses was circulated to the respondents groups noted above. Invitations were sent to a purposive sample of 158 stakeholders across these groups. In total, 84 respondents participated in the survey (some in joint responses with colleagues), representing a 51 per cent response rate. Just under half (38) of the respondents were What Works Centre/activity representatives, and nearly a third (24) were from What Works governance/advisory bodies or co-funders. The remainder of the sample consisted of user stakeholders (11) and other external stakeholders with interest in the What Works initiative (11).

This was a qualitative exercise, designed to explore the areas outlined above in depth. A thematic analysis of the key themes arising from the survey responses is discussed in Section 5 below. Where feasible, responses from What Works Centre/activity representatives are compared with those from the rest of the sample ('Other' respondents: ie those in governance/advisory roles, user stakeholders and other external stakeholders). More detailed comparisons across individual stakeholder groups were not undertaken due to small numbers in these sub-groups.

## **Documentary analysis**

Before discussing findings from the consultation survey, it is useful to consider some background context on the What Works initiative, drawn from an analysis of key documentation. Documentary evidence relating to survey findings will be presented in relevant sections of the report below.

### **ESRC involvement in What Works**

ESRC Council ([www.esrc.ac.uk/about-us/governance-and-structure/esrc-council/](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/about-us/governance-and-structure/esrc-council/)) have highlighted on a number of occasions ESRC's longstanding commitment to supporting work that strengthens the contribution of robust evidence based on social science research to inform policy making, professional practice and the provision of public services. ESRC Council has also been committed to engaging with the Government's commitment as stated in the Open Public Services ([www.gov.uk/government/collections/open-public-services](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/open-public-services)) and Civil Service Reform ([www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-reform-plan](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-reform-plan)) White Papers to improving the transparency of decision-making including the greater and more robust use of evidence. This led, in 2013, to the Cabinet Office's decision to establish What Works Centres and a co-ordinating network in a number of key policy areas, including crime reduction, early intervention and local economic growth, formally launched in 2013. Since then the initiative has grown to include initiatives in Wales and Scotland as well as a What Works Centre for Wellbeing.

ESRC Council has confirmed on a number of occasions its commitment to What Works as a corporate priority but has also stressed that ESRC must ensure that it protects its independence and adopts an active leadership role, and that any centres established will need to meet the ESRC's requirements for an open and transparent commissioning process, independence from government and high academic quality. ESRC also made a commitment in its Delivery Plan 2016-2020 ([www.esrc.ac.uk/news-events-and-publications/publications/corporate-publications/delivery-plan/](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/news-events-and-publications/publications/corporate-publications/delivery-plan/)) to continue with What Works:

*“We will maintain and extend investment in the innovative ‘What Works’ network, providing robust evidence to guide decision-making on public spending. As one of the core funders of the ‘What Works’ initiative, we will continue to work in partnership with government departments and other funders by investing in an increased understanding of what makes effective knowledge exchange.*

### **Core functions of a What Works Centre**

The core functions of a What Works Centre, as set out in the Cabinet Office membership requirements ([www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-works-network-membership-requirements](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-works-network-membership-requirements)) are as follows:

- **evidence generation/synthesis** (including: develop consistent metrics and methods and identify research gaps)
- **evidence translation** (publish and disseminate findings in a format that can be understood, interpreted and acted upon)
- **evidence adoption** (including: identify and fill capability gaps; support effective evaluation of locally commissioned projects; “users at the heart”)

This Strategic Review is not assessing the performance of individual Centres. Nevertheless an understanding of the extent to which What Works activities to date can be mapped onto these membership requirements provides helpful background context for the discussion of survey findings below. A mapping exercise was conducted as part of this review and data from this analysis are included where relevant in the discussion of survey findings.

### **Consultation Survey: Discussion of key findings**

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 choose up to three priorities from a list of specific investment options. Findings from the latter two questions are presented in Tables 1 and 2 and are also discussed below alongside the thematic analysis of responses to the related open-ended questions, and any relevant points from the documentary analysis. The survey findings presented below are based on a largely qualitative exploration of the issues raised in responses.

### **Providing independence, rigour, quality, credibility**

As noted above, ESRC Council support for the What Works initiative was contingent on an open and transparent commissioning process, independence from government and high academic quality. These requirements are echoed in a National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) report (*The NICE Way: Lessons for Social Policy and Practice* (2014)) that noted independence and scientific robustness as key principles in the successful operation of similar institutions. Survey findings show that ESRC has clearly played an important role in ensuring that these principles have underpinned the What Works initiative. The most frequently noted benefit arising from ESRC’s involvement to date was the perceived positive effect of ESRC’s independence, rigorous commissioning and commitment to quality. Two thirds of all survey respondents made comments related to this theme. Respondents noted that ESRC support for the What Works initiative has helped to establish its autonomy from Central Government and build its credibility. This has been key in attracting academics and their organisations to work with the What Works Centres.

Further credibility stems from the rigorous commissioning processes and the 'kite mark' of academic quality associated with ESRC funding. This credibility is thought to have provided reassurance for user stakeholders and enhanced the visibility of the initiative within Government, for example helping officials to 'make the case' for evidence use with Ministers.

### **Promoting culture change amongst academics and users: making research useful/using research evidence**

As discussed above, Council papers note ESRC's on-going commitment to increasing the use of robust evidence in decision-making. Survey findings indicate that ESRC's involvement in What Works is seen to be promoting culture change around the use of research evidence. Comments (from around one in three respondents) noted ESRC's role in encouraging a greater focus on policy and practice amongst academics, as well as contributing to a greater awareness and acceptance of the value of evidence within government. ESRC is also thought to have supported new ways of thinking about research impact, and has promoted a broader conceptualisation of evidence beyond Randomised Control Trials.

### **Facilitating better use of evidence**

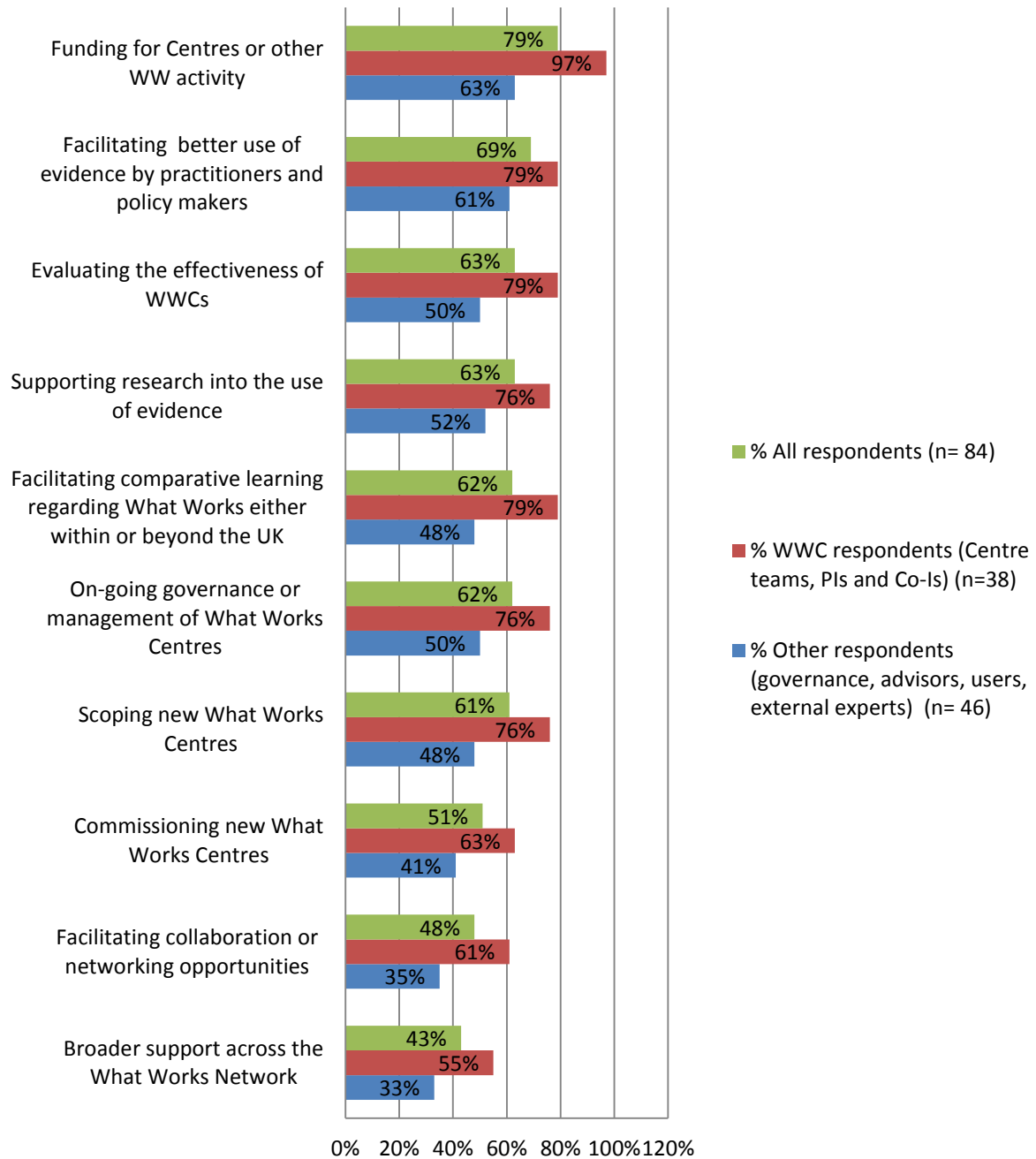
The NICE report emphasised the importance to What Works initiatives of remaining close to frontline practice, for example:

*“Producing guidance and information is not enough; practitioners need tools and programmes that enable them to engage with and use the information effectively.” (The NICE Way: Lessons for Social Policy and Practice (2014))*

The documentary analysis of What Works Centre activities indicates that some progress is being made here. Four out of the seven ESRC-supported WW investments had reported the development of toolkits and/or guidebooks for users, five had provided advice to users through participation in working groups or advisory panels, or through briefing Ministers directly, and all seven had engaged with users through workshops, talks and presentations, as well as through policy briefings and blogs. Survey findings indicate, however, that improvements are still required in this area. When asked to suggest possible improvements to ESRC involvement, around one in five respondents thought that ESRC could do more to help to make What Works more useful for policy and practice. This message was more strongly stated when respondents were asked directly whether ESRC could add value in *facilitating better use of evidence* in the future, and the majority (69 per cent respondents) chose this option (see Table 1). Furthermore, 50 per cent of respondents selected *“Funding for delivery of initiatives to increase evidence adoption/uptake”* as a priority for future ESRC investment (see Table 2). As Table 2 shows, this was the second most frequently selected priority (after funding). Respondents working in What Works Centres/activities were less likely to select this option as a priority than the 'Other' respondents (who included those in governance/advisory roles, co-funders, users and other external stakeholders). Around 59 per cent of the latter group selected this option compared with 39 per cent of What Works Centre/activity respondents.

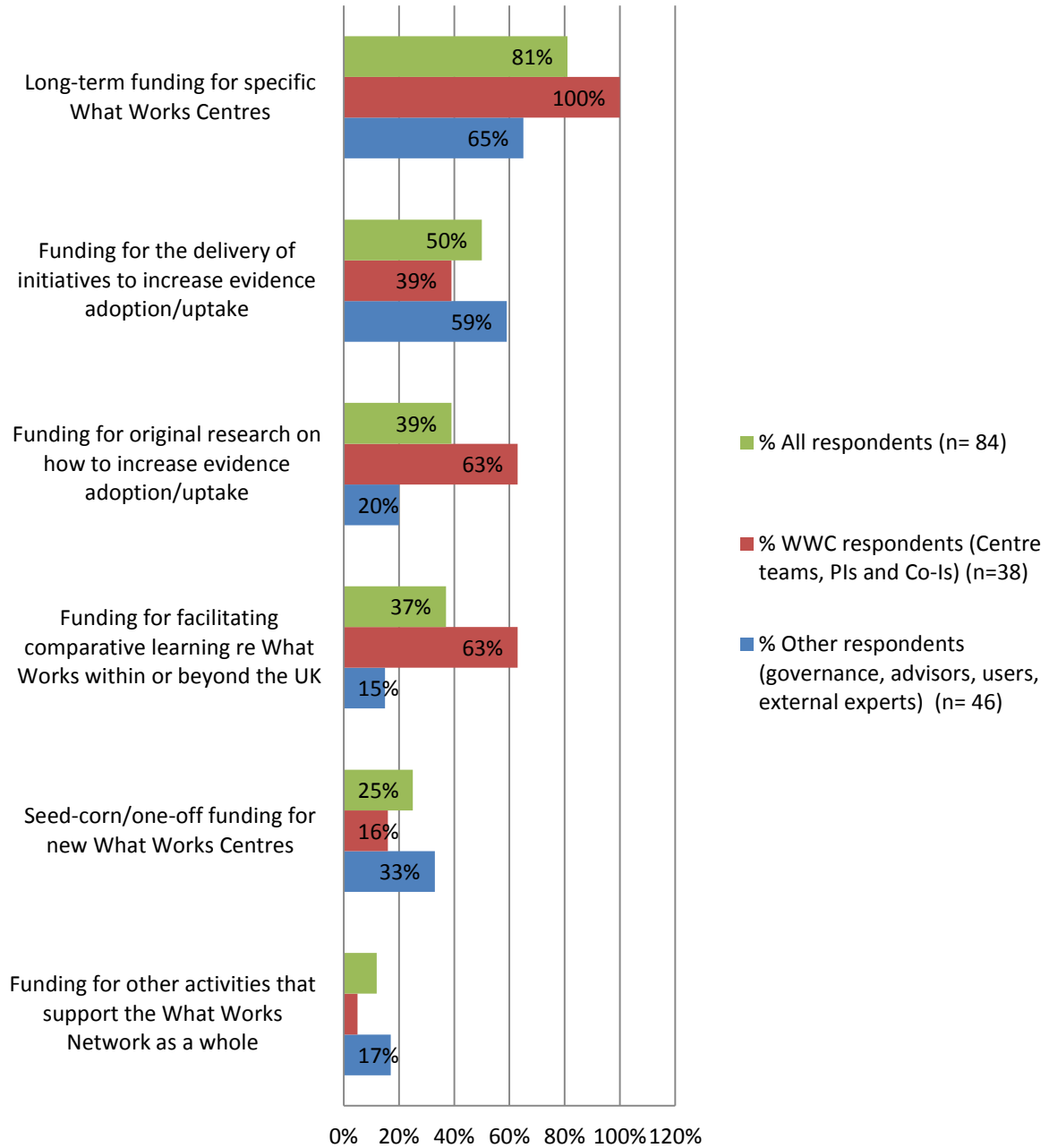
**Table 1: Future roles for ESRC**

*“In which of the areas listed below do you think ESRC could add value to the What Works initiative in the future?”*  
**per cent Respondents selecting individual options**



**Table 2: Priorities for ESRC investment**

*“If ESRC decides to continue its support for the What Works initiative in future, which of the following forms of funding do you think would be most important? (Please select up to three priorities)”*  
**per cent Respo**



Supporting evidence use was seen as critical to the success of What Works Centres. For example:

*“What Works Centres will fail unless we give more attention to demand, absorptive capacity and wider political and public buy-in”* (External stakeholder)

*“Evidence needs to be adopted or what’s the point?”* (User stakeholder)

*“Fundamental to success, but the translation of evidence is likely to be more resource intensive than originally imagined”* (WW Centre/activity representative)

*“Need to encourage uptake. Knowing what works is not effective unless we can afford to put understanding into practice.”* (WW Centre/activity representative)

Continued investment in engagement with policy and practitioner worlds was seen as essential. Specific suggestions included:

- Require Centres to improve engagement with policy makers and practitioners (*“not just publishing the report and hoping for the best”* (User stakeholder))
- Help HEIs to understand WW requirement for impactful and policy relevant outputs
- Support capability building among academics to help engage with policy makers
- Undertake more communication with users to raise profile of the initiative and promote involvement
- Support joined up outreach and user engagement so that users can easily look across network to inform decision-making
- Develop better understanding of the how users listen to evidence
- Improve understanding of the evidence landscape and gaps
- Support initiatives that focus on evidence uptake
- Support secondments between What Works Centres and user organisations to help shape and develop Centres and develop a pool of evidence champions and a network of people with a shared vision of impact

These suggestions are in line with recommendations from the NICE report:

*“Key recommendation is for an approach that engages with wider social values and interests – getting service 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-focused 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))

Support for evidence use was not necessarily seen as a separate initiative, but could/should be included within the delivery of What Works Centres. For example:

*“Getting evidence used is one of key functions of What Works Centres – understanding how best to facilitate is this is crucial to ensuring Centres are adding value and sustainable.”* (WW Centre / activity representative)



*“Evidence use should be embedded in funding for existing What Works Centres since it’s a core role rather than a separate work stream” (WW Centre/activity representative)*

Other initiatives such as the Alliance for Useful Evidence could also support evidence use. Some respondents thought that national and local government and professional networks had a responsibility to address this issue, and to help to embed culture change. Professional training was thought to be helpful and should be expanded. It was also seen as essential to demonstrate the effectiveness of evidence use: comments pointed to a lack of visibility of What Works Centres amongst practitioners. For example:

*“There must be publicity to show that evidence makes a difference or it’s just an ivory tower exercise ignored by most practitioners. Few in local government know about them – they need to establish credibility and traction if they are to make a difference”. (User stakeholder)*

Suggestions for initiatives to raise visibility and credibility included translation events, a synthesis of practical tips for practitioners on the ground, and case studies of how users have used evidence effectively. It was also seen as important to acknowledge the expertise of practitioners and policy makers and to recognise that it was not just about passing knowledge in one direction.

### **ESRC funding**

In response to open questions about positive elements of ESRC’s involvement in What Works to date, nearly a third of respondents mentioned specific benefits arising from ESRC funding for the initiative. ESRC’s investment is thought to have been critical to the establishment of What Works structures and networks. The stability of funding has made it easier to persuade users to get involved, and has 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. ESRC funding is seen to have facilitated links with other What Works Centres and the wider What Works Network, links between policy makers and other centres/academics, and helped to build alliances with other funders. ESRC investment has enabled What Works Centres to undertake rigorous impact evaluation as well as contribute directly to the evidence base where gaps have been identified.

There was a clear call for continued ESRC funding in the What Works initiative, with 79 per cent of respondents selecting *‘Funding - either funding for Centres or other WW activity’* as a way in which ESRC could add value to the initiative in future. Echoing these responses, the majority of respondents (81 per cent) selected *‘Long term funding for specific Centres’* as a priority for ESRC investment. This was the most frequently selected priority. Although What Works Centre respondents were more likely to select this as a priority compared with ‘Other’ respondents (who included governance/advisory roles, co-funders, users and other external stakeholders), this was still clearly a majority view: 65 per cent of the latter group selected this option, compared with all What Works Centre/activity respondents.

Most of the comments made with regard to on-going funding focused on the need to support the independent status of the centres and to help centres to plan for sustainability. A longer-term financial commitment was needed 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. There was

recognition, however, that on-going funding should be dependent on evidence of effectiveness. Funding from ESRC could help to leverage funding from other sources, for example “*acting as catalyst to funding from others (through the signals that ESRC endorsement provides – rigour and robustness).*” (What Works governance /advisory body/co-funder representative). For some, it was unclear whether the initiative could survive without the security of ESRC funding.

Examples of comments on the perceived rationale for longer-term funding:

### **To consolidate/build on existing investment**

*“This is a real chance to strengthen evidence-based policy making. It has high level political and civil service support. Let’s really capitalise on these conditions!”* (What Works governance /advisory body/co-funder representative)

*“There is still a perception that doing it this way (Eg evidence-based/led) is more time consuming and the ‘platinum standard’ and that we haven’t got the capacity to do this. I argue however that we can’t afford not to be doing it this way because we need to be more efficient and more effective. A little more effort upfront will deliver capacity and benefits longer-term.”* (User stakeholder)

*“Abandoning these too early would risk wasting investment to date.”* (WW Centre/activity representative)

### **Recognising long term nature of initiative (building relationships, changing cultures)**

*“What Works Centres need to be seen as long term interventions that need institutional and cultural change in their users to achieve objectives.”* (WW Centre/activity representative)

*“In 2 years we have built credibility with policy makers. ESRC provides critical mass. If no further funding, it would be a missed opportunity to build on existing success in translating research to impact.”* (WW Centre/activity representative)

*“It feels like there is just the beginning, and that without more sustainable funding some of these initiatives will falter, because it is taking so long to change the culture in the use of data.”* (User stakeholder)

### **To leverage more funding**

*“ESRC strategic support would help Centres to leverage future investment from other sources”* (What Works governance /advisory body/co-funder representative)

*“ESRC funding is the key to unlocking other funding and providing stability”* (WW Centre/activity representative)

### **To protect independence**

*“ESRC funding would ensure continued independence, academic rigour and scrutiny of What Works Centres”* (What Works governance /advisory body/co-funder representative)

*“It is very important that there is a sustainable non-Government form of funding for organisations that are delivering evidence-informed open policy making. Cannot be left to Government, VCS or others. Only ESRC can ensure sustainability and rigour.”* (WW Centre/activity representative)

*“There is a risk that without core funding, What Works Centres will cater only for needs of funders, and will only reflect rather than challenge the status quo”* (What Works governance /advisory body/co-funder representative)

### **Subject to evidence of effectiveness**

*“Benefits and value of What Works Centres would need to be substantiated to justify further funding.”* (External Stakeholder)

A few respondents thought that ESRC funding would add value to specific activities relevant to What Works, such as:

- Pilots in local government services
- Trials and trial support
- Funding for translation research, development of Theories of Change, evaluation etc. (see also below)
- Secondments in both directions to help develop and shape centres, and support culture change
- Evaluation grant funding to help get demonstrator projects off the ground

If more Centres were to be commissioned, comments indicated that ESRC would add value to the process (through its experience of setting up the right structures, and its effective commissioning). As seen in Table 1, 61 per cent of respondents thought that ESRC could add value through *scoping new What Works Centres*, although slightly fewer (51 per cent) thought ESRC could add value by actually *commissioning new What Works Centres*. However, when asked about future ESRC investment priorities, there was limited support for *seed corn/one-off funding for new Centres*. As shown in Table 2, only 25 per cent all respondents selected this option as a priority (only 16 per cent of What Works Centre respondents, compared with 33 per cent of ‘Other’ respondents). 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.

*“I would caution against rapid proliferation of early stage funding given inherently long term nature of What Works Centres and developmental needs of existing cohort.”* (WW Centre/activity representative)

*“There is a risk of fractured evidence landscape. Need to find balance between commissioning new and enhancing existing centres.”*

*“No! Please don’t do any more until we know what works in What Works.”* (What Works governance /advisory body/co-funder representative)

### **Key conditions for sustainability**

Concerns were raised (by around a third of respondents) regarding the perceived current lack of planning for sustainability. Respondents felt that insufficient thought had been given to the longer term funding needs of the initiative. Current funding models were not seen to suit the long-term nature of the What Works initiative and there was little evidence of legacy planning. There was a pressing need to address this issue. A sustainable funding model was seen as a key potential improvement to the What Works initiative.

Respondents were asked specifically for their views on the conditions and/or features of a What Works Centre that they thought would be most conducive to ensuring its long-term sustainability (ie beyond the initial period of funding). The analysis of their responses echoes the findings on priorities for ESRC investment outlined above. The most common response related to the need for a Centre to demonstrate its value to its user base. Over half of all respondents made comments related to this theme, including the need for Centres to demonstrate:

- Relevance to user needs
- Clear demand from users
- Adoption of evidence in decision-making
- Demonstrable impact
- Partnership working (such as strong relationships with user stakeholders, embedded in user community, user involvement in toolkit design)

In line with views expressed above, nearly two in five respondents suggested that further funding would be conducive to greater long-term sustainability of Centres. Further funding would for example:

- Allow for sustainability planning
- Attract/leverage more funding
- Maintain independence from users

Sustainability was seen to be less feasible if the number of Centres were to expand, leading to an inevitable dilution of resources. ESRC needed to address the trade off between proliferation and sustainability, and develop a clearer model to decide priority areas. For example:

*“There is a lack of strategic thinking in the choice of centres – ESRC needs a clear position on what Centres it is supporting and why: there is a finite amount of jam and it is at risk of being spread too thinly across what looks like a random sample of policy areas” (WW Centre/activity representative)*

Respondents called for funding models that recognised the time required to build relationships and change cultures, but also noted that future funding would need to be contingent on evidence of effectiveness.

Discussions with the ESRC Office as part of this Review highlighted the need to be open about the risks and benefits of collaborating in such a multi-partnered endeavour – other than the high resource requirements noted. ESRC is the lead funder but not the only funder and therefore reliant on the role of others for the successful delivery of the initiative. There have nevertheless been advantages of collaborating with many others – not least the value of delivering something that is of such relevance to them that they are actually willing to pay

for it. It was noted that ESRC has attracted nearly £7 million in co-funding via its What Works investments since 2013.

### **What works in What Works?**

As mentioned above, there was a recognition that continued funding was contingent on demonstrating that initiatives were making a difference. Respondents suggested that ESRC should be involved in supporting more learning about what works in What Works, including the development of an emerging impact narrative. ESRC could take an overview of how different models are working in different contexts, share learning and promote flexibility of approach according to circumstances. In line with this recognition, 63 per cent of respondents thought that ESRC could add value in future through support for *evaluating the effectiveness of What Works Centres*.

*“What Works Centres must be judged on the impact of their work on the ground, not just quality of their research, but only after sufficient time has elapsed for them to make a difference. Too early to judge process of large scale cultural change”* (User Stakeholder)

*“Need to develop impact indicators -What does success look like, to whom? What is the critical mass required for successful What Works Centres? Is a focus on a narrow area more likely to be successful than a substantial cross-cutting area?”* (What Works governance /advisory body/co-funder representative)

Some felt ESRC should play a key role, perhaps supporting initiatives to help develop consistent and clear approaches to evaluating effectiveness across the network. Given that ESRC had played such a pivotal role in establishing What Works Centres, some felt that this should perhaps be done at arm’s length. Respondents were also mindful of different models of the centres (eg RCT or not), and suggested that separate evaluations for individual investments might be more appropriate.

Similarly, 62 per cent of respondents thought ESRC could add value by: *Facilitating comparative learning regarding What Works either within or beyond the UK*, but only 37 per cent of respondents selected this as a priority for future ESRC investment. It is worth noting the divergent findings for the two groups on this issue: 63 per cent of What Works Centre respondents compared with only 15 per cent of ‘Other’ respondents selected this option as a priority. It was recognised that there is currently little analytical work on the rationale for current forms and merits or otherwise of these. Comparative learning initiatives could, for example:

- Analyse the effectiveness of different strategies
- Maximise return on investment in the What Works Network
- Support centres to learn from their work.
- Support international collaborations for evidence building

It would be important to avoid duplication, and to recognise the challenges arising from the diversity of models across the initiative.

Although 63 per cent of respondents selected *Supporting research into the use of evidence* as one of the possible ways in which ESRC could add value to the What Works initiative in the future, only 39 per cent of respondents thought that *funding for original research on how to*

increase uptake should be a priority for ESRC. What Works Centre/activity respondents were far more likely to select this option as a priority than 'Other' respondents (63 per cent compared with 20 per cent). Comments in favour of further research on evidence use included;

*“Still only limited empirical evidence on this and much relates to the use of healthcare research and education. Need to build on this”* (External Stakeholder)

*“Otherwise everything else is a waste of time as it will not be taken up and lead to a difference on the ground”* (User Stakeholder)

Others were less convinced of the need for further research:

*“Better to focus on actual initiatives to support evidence use”* (WW Centre/activity representative)

*“Could draw on work being done at some Centres – reduce duplication”* (WW Centre/activity representative)

### **Access to ESRC existing processes/structures, support and guidance**

Nearly half of respondents mentioned that they had benefitted from access to ESRC's resources and skills, for example its established commissioning mechanisms, governance expertise, and management systems and support, as well as from making links with relevant ESRC-funded research or data investments and associated academics. To reiterate this point, 62 per cent of respondents selected 'On-going governance/management of What Works Centres' as a means for ESRC to add value to WW initiative.' For example:

*“ESRC involvement in governance/management provides a useful external view and helps to ensure value for money, independence and neutrality.”* (What Works governance /advisory body/co-funder representative)

A small minority (under 10 per cent) commented on problems arising from commissioning processes (perceived as being either overly bureaucratic or too rushed).

Data provided by the ESRC Office give some indication of the resources required to support What Works. The What Works Centre for Wellbeing for example, with 17 funding partners, took 60 per cent FTE of a Band E for 12 months just to get to interview stage, plus another 30 per cent FTE for the first year of the award. Not including support from other staff, Band E resource alone would account for the 4 per cent project management fee charged across the term of the award (based on £1.5 million of co-funding). Feedback from the ESRC Office indicated that, while there are strong reasons to continue to invest in What Works, this must be in the knowledge that there are consequences and risks to doing so, not least that the often complex and multi-partnered programmes require a high and perhaps unprecedented level of staff resource.

### **Managing relationships/expectations/tensions**

ESRC has also played an important role in managing the tensions that have arisen from the various collaborations within the What Works initiative. Just under a third of respondents noted ESRC's expertise in this respect, for example in mediating between partners' differing

expectations around priorities and timescales, and ensuring that the principle of independence is upheld.

However, about a third of respondents raised concerns about the way in which partnerships had been set up. Tensions had arisen due to lack of clarity with regard to the roles and responsibilities of the different partners involved in What Works Centres (co-funders/academics/centre teams), and where authority/accountability for certain decisions lay. There had also been difficulties in mediating the different priorities, timescales, and intellectual property requirements of centre teams, and co-funding and academic partners.

A few respondents noted that ESRC could play a part in clarifying roles and responsibilities to avoid tensions around delivery and accountability. Suggested improvements indicated that more work was needed on the relationships between Centre staff and academic partners. There are some tensions in evidence – some academics wanted ESRC support to protect them from micro-management, while some Centre management teams wanted advice on how to get the best from academics, and secure more leverage around delivery and quality. For example:

*“Devolve management of grant funding to Centres – establish clearer line between accountability for deliverables and funding.”* (WW Centre/activity representative)

*“More prescriptive bidding process, or use contract instead of grant, to stop academics using What Works Centres for their own interests.”* (What Works governance /advisory body/co-funder representative)

*“Encourage Centre management to allow us to get on with work and stop micro-managing us – seem to want to impose uniform processes on us.”* (WW Centre/activity representative)

### **Perspectives on the wider What Works Network**

Respondents were asked for their views on the benefits and challenges associated with being part of the wider What Works Network. The most commonly noted benefit related to shared learning, mutual support and networking opportunities. Over half of respondents commented on this issue. They appreciated the opportunities to learn from existing structures, review and translation approaches, to build on established practices, and to share understanding with others who face similar evidence adoption challenges. The wider What Works Network was seen to facilitate learning between different administrations, and collaborations between different What Works Centres conducting work in similar areas. Around one in eight respondents thought that the wider What Works Network brought benefits in terms of credibility and visibility. This had encouraged greater academic participation in the initiative, and had facilitated improved opportunities for influence within Government, and increased engagement from senior decision-makers.

The main challenge (raised by two in five respondents) related to the perceived differences between What Works Centres and initiatives. These were thought to be too different to learn from each other. Different approaches to what counts as evidence would make it difficult to develop common outputs, and it was not clear that the What Works initiative was greater than sum of parts.

A small minority of respondents raised challenges related to lack of coordination. There was a perceived lack of coherence for the What Works initiative: respondents noted piecemeal

development and the absence of a clear logic model, the potential for duplication, and the risk of a fractured evidence landscape. A few external respondents noted that it was hard to engage with the Network as an outsider, and this was not helped by the lack of a joined up web presence.

There was a call for more coordination of work between What Works Centres. Suggested improvements (from over a third of respondents) related to the need to:

- Coordinate funding for particular policy areas so that different projects addressing similar areas are aware of each other and if possible are working together.
- Consider ways of working jointly to engage with shared stakeholders and facilitate easier access to the network for users
- Improve sharing of lessons across the network

*“Someone needs to take a coordinating role, as it is important to ensure no duplication/overlap with existing centres, and might be better to expand remit of current centres rather than spend time and money setting up further organisational infrastructure.”* (User Stakeholder)

ESRC’s on-going support for networking and collaboration would be welcomed, particularly for engaging with users, and collaborating across Centres. However, it was recognised that this could be/already is being done by others (including What Works Council, Operational Group and Centres themselves). Indeed, only 48 per cent selected *‘Facilitating collaboration/networking opportunities’* as a way in which ESRC could add value to What Works.

Only 43 per cent of respondents selected *Broader support across What Works Network* as a way in which ESRC could add value to What Works. Very few (12 per cent) thought that funding from ESRC to *support What Works Network activities* was a priority.

## **Conclusions**

ESRC support for the What Works initiative has helped to establish its autonomy from Central Government and build its credibility. This has been key in attracting academics and their organisations to work with the What Works Centres. Further credibility stems from the rigorous commissioning processes and the ‘kite mark’ of academic quality associated with ESRC funding. This credibility is thought to have provided reassurance for user stakeholders and enhanced the visibility of the initiative within Government

ESRC has championed a greater focus on policy and practice amongst academics, as well as contributing 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 required in this area. The majority of respondents 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 has made it easier to persuade users to get involved, and has 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 most respondents suggesting that ESRC could add value to the initiative in future through further funding. Echoing these responses, the majority of respondents selected 'Long term funding for specific Centres' as a priority for ESRC investment.

A longer-term financial commitment was needed 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 ESRC involvement in commissioning new What Works Centres, and few 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, that there is a clear demand for their work from users. There needs to be evidence of how their work has been used in decision-making, and of the impact of this use. Partnership working (such as strong relationships with user stakeholders, being embedded in user communities, user involvement in toolkit design) is key to meeting user 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. Respondents suggested that ESRC should be involved in supporting more learning about what works in What Works, including the development of an emerging impact narrative. ESRC could take an overview of how different models are working in different contexts, share learning and promote flexibility of approach according to circumstances.

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 (for example with differing priorities, delivery timescales and Intellectual Property requirements) 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. Suggested improvements included:

- Coordinate funding for particular policy areas so that different projects addressing similar areas are aware of each other and if possible are working together.
- Consider ways of working jointly to engage with shared stakeholders and facilitate easier access to the network for users
- Improve sharing of lessons across the network