

ESRC INVESTMENT IN WHAT WORKS CENTRES

Evaluation report for the ESRC

January 2022



CONTENTS

Executive Summary	4
1 Introduction	17
1.1 What is What Works?	17
1.2 ESRC's involvement in What Works	18
1.3 Objectives of the evaluation	19
1.4 Structure of the report	21
2 Methodology	22
2.1 Step 1: Development of logic models	23
2.2 Step 2: Evidencing the logic models	24
2.3 Step 3: Comparative analysis	27
2.4 Step 4: Assessing the contribution of ESRC	27
2.5 Limitations	28
3 The Contribution of ESRC to Knowledge Mobilisation	30
3.1 Contribution to knowledge mobilisation by Centres	31
3.2 The role of ESRC in knowledge mobilisation	50
3.3 Value for money	54
4 What Works in What Works	60
4.1 Comparisons of the Centres' characteristics	60
4.2 Activity comparisons between Centres	74
4.3 Trends observed across the Centres	77
4.4 Additional cross-cutting observations	86
5 Overall Findings and Recommendations	89
5.1 Key findings	89
5.2 Recommendations for the ESRC	104
Logic Models	107
Evidence Collection Plan	120
Centre-by-Centre Findings	126
Further Analysis of Survey Results	181
Survey Questions	191
Mapping of Research Questions and Methodology	195

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has invested in excess of £10 million in seven¹ What Works Centres (WWCs) since March 2013. After almost seven years of investment, ESRC wanted to take stock and consider the strategy for its investment in What Works. To this end, it commissioned Frontier Economics in September 2019 to evaluate its What Works investments² to inform its investment approach in What works.

The work focused on generating answers to the following questions:

- What has been the contribution of ESRC to knowledge mobilisation as a result of its investment in the What Works Network?
- Does ESRC's investment offer value for money for ESRC?
- What can be learnt about what works in What Works?
- What are the implications for ESRC's future investment strategy?

Logic models, describing intended outcomes and impacts were developed for each Centre and were used as the basis for evidence collection. Quantitative evidence (e.g. previous funding applications, website analytics, publication lists) was combined with evidence from 65 stakeholder interviews and surveys covering over 300 users of WWCs, to assess what the Centres had achieved.

The achievements of the Centres were considered with reference to a counterfactual world where the ESRC had not been involved in order to isolate, to the extent possible, the specific contribution made by the ESRC in the Centre's achievements. A comparative analysis across the different Centres was also used to stimulate and test a series of questions about the structure, leadership and focus of Centres and identify lessons learned.

The evidence underpinning this report was gathered during 2020 and reflects the journey of each of the Centres and the ESRC since 2013. The centres and the ESRC have continued to evolve since 2020 with the pandemic substantially changing the landscape within which both operate. The findings and recommendations in this report should be considered in this context.

The Centres' contributions to knowledge mobilisation

THE CENTRES HAVE PLAYED A CENTRAL ROLE IN A CULTURE CHANGE WITHIN GOVERNMENT AND ACADEMIA

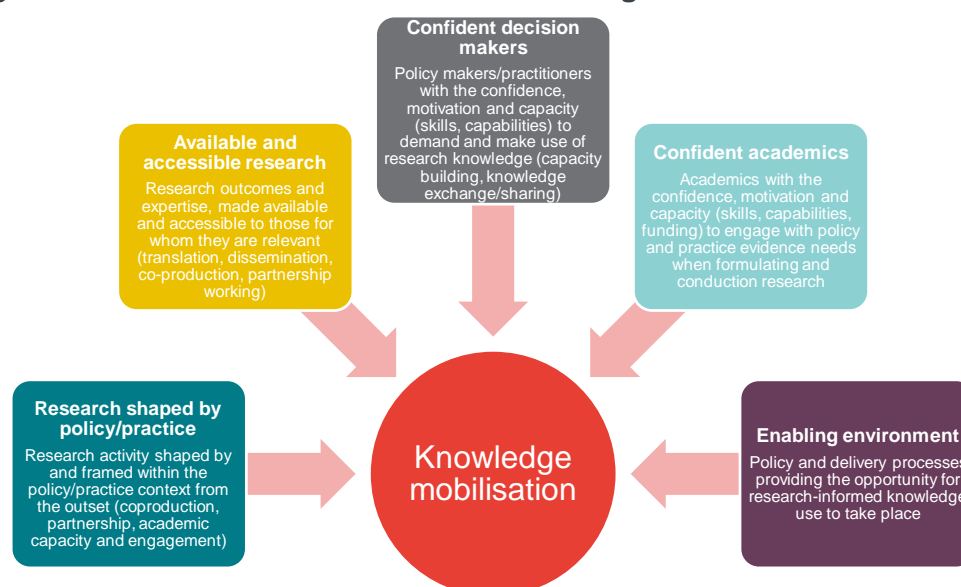
Our work suggests that the Centres have played a central role in culture change within UK government and academia by creating conditions for knowledge mobilisation – and enabling impact which extends beyond the Centres themselves and was unlikely to

¹ We include current and former Centres in this number (i.e. some Centres have not continued to exist in their original form). The Centres in question include the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, the Wales Centre for Public Policy, the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth, What Works Scotland, the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction, the Early Intervention Foundation and the Education Endowment Fund

² Note that Frontier Economics was not asked to evaluate the What Works Network as a whole.

have occurred in the same way in their absence. Successful knowledge mobilisation occurs when a critical mass³ of the conditions in Figure 1 are achieved.

Figure 1 Conditions for successful knowledge mobilisation⁴



Source: *Frontier Economics*

The existence of the Centres has increased the emphasis on knowledge mobilisation and provided additional incentive for academics to generate evidence that is useful for decision makers. The Centres have created improved mechanisms for interpreting academic evidence and channelling it to decision makers. Through engagement with the Centres, decision makers look to draw on academic evidence to inform decisions, have a better understanding of how to interpret evidence and expect evidence to be presented in a way that resonates with the decisions they have to take. As a result of the work of the Centres, academics (both those directly involved in the Centres and others) are also more aware of the questions that decision makers are facing, the context within which they work and the need to ensure their evidence is useful.

As illustrated in the box below, WWC research outputs and expertise are available, accessible and being used. WWCs have also undertaken a wide range of direct engagement activities such as stakeholder events, training events and research surgeries for practitioners. The combination of research outputs and direct engagement is vital to build capacity, confidence and motivation amongst policy makers and practitioners to enable them to make use of research knowledge.⁵

³ Determining this critical mass is one of the many challenges that face the Centres and researchers more broadly. Research is ongoing regarding as how best to mobilise knowledge.

⁴ There is no widely agreed definition of knowledge mobilisation. For some commentators, knowledge mobilisation refers to activities undertaken to make evidence available and accessible to decision makers e.g. through translation, dissemination etc. We have taken a more holistic view of knowledge mobilisation for this work, which also captures how research activity is shaped as well as how academics who are confident to engage with decision making when undertaking research and decision makers who are confident in making use of research in their work.

⁵ As found in the Alliance for Useful Evidence's "The Science of using Science", the success of interventions facilitating access to research evidence is conditional on interventions simultaneously trying to enhance decision makers' opportunity and motivation to use evidence.

WWC RESEARCH OUTPUTS AND EXPERTISE

Between 2014 and 2020, ESRC-funded Centres produced:

- 300 evidence reviews (ca. 50 of them systematic reviews) – most respondents to our survey indicated that they draw on evidence reviews produced by the Centres on a regular basis (2-3 times a year or more);⁶
- A range of toolkits that provide easily digestible summaries of the existing evidence base (for example, monthly views of the College of Policing’s Crime Reduction Toolkit increased from 4,000 at its inception in April 2015 to a peak of just under 15,000 in October 2019);
- Hundreds of blogs and policy briefings; and
- A significant online presence with a combined Twitter following of over 200,000.⁷

There are clear examples where the Centres’ work has had a direct influence on policy or practice. It was not possible to identify such clear examples for all Centres. While such examples can be useful, assessing a Centre’s contribution to knowledge mobilisation on this basis alone would be limited. It fails to recognise that not all areas of policy and practice present equal opportunities for influence in a given time period. It also ignores that, even if successful knowledge mobilisation occurs, it may not always be possible to trace the link directly back to a Centre.

EXAMPLES OF DIRECT INFLUENCE ON POLICY AND PRACTICE

Guidance on how to develop a Local Industrial Strategy

The guidance produced by the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth (WW Local Economic Growth) about how to develop a Local Industrial Strategy is widely used by central government, local authorities, Local Economic Partnerships and others. This is an example of research and analytical expertise provided by the Centre being mobilised to translate a policy ambition into actionable evidence-based guidance on implementation.

Inclusion of wellbeing within HM Treasury’s Green Book

The What Works Centre for Wellbeing (WW Wellbeing) successfully promoted the use of wellbeing as an aim of public resources as defined in HM Treasury’s Green Book. In 2018, the Green Book was revised with direct input from the Centre to include wellbeing as an aim. The Green Book provides essential guidance to policymakers across government on how to appraise and evaluate alternative policy options. The inclusion of wellbeing in the Green Book is significant. It means that policymakers across government will factor wellbeing into the development of all new policy initiatives – therefore embedding this across government.

⁶ WW Local Economic Growth: 61% (N = 66); WCPP: 89% (N = 71); WW Scotland: 48% (N = 29); WW Wellbeing: 56% (N = 97).

⁷ Numbers in bullets derived from data provided by the WWCs.

IT APPEARS UNLIKELY THAT OTHER KNOWLEDGE MOBILISATION MECHANISMS WOULD HAVE BEEN AS EFFECTIVE

Alternative knowledge mobilisation models were not explicitly in scope for this study, but it appears unlikely that when the centres were established, there were alternative models that would have brought about a comparable culture change. Centres embarked on a lengthy process of creating relationships, synthesising existing evidence and generating a clear signal to both decision makers and academics that knowledge mobilisation is important. Our research suggests that engagement from academics in knowledge mobilisation is by no means automatic. Alternative options, such as making knowledge mobilisation more central to academic research grants, is unlikely to have had the same traction. Most academics have neither the motivation nor the capacity to engage fully with the needs of decision makers in the way that the Centres do. Individual research projects would also have lacked the comprehensive and strategic plan for bringing together evidence that WWCs offer.

ESRC's contribution to knowledge mobilisation

Alongside the Centres, the ESRC has also been on a learning journey to understand how best to support the WWCs. The findings in this section showcase the areas where ESRC has added significant value to the WWCs. As ESRC has developed its understanding about the most effective ways to collaborate, it has made a significant contribution to knowledge mobilisation, which extends beyond its funding commitments to Centres.

ESRC FUNDING HAS BEEN CRITICAL TO THE WWCS AND MAY HAVE BEEN A CATALYST FOR OTHER FUNDING

ESRC funding has focused on those Centres which are either academically led or have academic contributors. Not all Centres follow this model, but for those that do, our work found that ESRC's funding has been critical. Alternative funding sources would not have stepped in to take the place of the ESRC. Feedback from participants in the evaluation suggests that other funding sources for the Centres may not have materialised at all in the absence of ESRC funding. At a minimum, this indicates that the Centres would have been smaller in the absence of ESRC funding and therefore unlikely to achieve the same outcomes. ESRC's investment appears to have acted as a catalyst for other funding.

BUT ESRC'S ROLE GOES WELL BEYOND FUNDING – IT IS VITAL IN BRINGING ACADEMICS TO THE TABLE

ESRC's prestige and reputation for independence were vital in bringing academics to the table and helping to break down the silos in which academic research and policy and practice often exist. Academic fears that the research agenda and recommendations from the Centres would be heavily influenced by government and politics were allayed by ESRC involvement and helped to create an environment in which academics felt comfortable. Similarly, academics told us they were concerned that without ESRC there would have been more focus on short-term targets. They

valued the longer time horizons offered by ESRC involvement and indicated that this was critical to getting and retaining high-quality academics.⁸

AND PROVIDES AN IMPORTANT ONGOING BRIDGE BETWEEN ACADEMICS AND POLICYMAKERS

ESRC has in some cases also played a role in bridging the gap between academics and policy makers by helping to make the case for WWCs within the academic community and encouraging an emphasis on impact, engagement, relevance and social value through their involvement. ESRC's well-established and trusted relationships with academics have allowed it, at times, to convey some difficult messages, such as the need for timely evidence, to the academics within the Centres.

Its ability to bridge the gap between decision makers and academics remains highly relevant as the Centres evolve and new challenges arise. ESRC is uniquely placed to confront the challenge of easing the tension between decision-makers' demands for fast results and digestible outputs and academic demands for rigour.

ITS ESTABLISHED INFRASTRUCTURE ALSO PLAYS A KEY ROLE

Alongside ESRC's reputation, its established administrative infrastructure helped to embed independence in the Centres from the start. This infrastructure included established systems for handling data, undertaking peer review and independent governance. The consensus amongst our interviewees was that ownership of these processes was a key part of ESRC's role and, without this, the setting up and running of the Centres would have been significantly slower and/or more costly. Beyond the initial set-up of the Centre, the ongoing support provided by ESRC through funding managers, for example aiding the coordination and logistics of the Centres, was noted by some interviewees.

Value for money of ESRC investment

Whether the ESRC's investment in the WWCs represents value for money to ESRC⁹ cannot be fully answered by this study as it has not been possible to fully quantify and monetise the impact of the Centres' work.¹⁰ ESRC was central to the establishment of the WWCs. The Centres are unlikely to have existed in their current form or at their current scale, without ESRC's investment. Although it is not possible to fully quantify at this stage, as outlined above, one does not have to expect too much of the Centres for the ESRC's investment to likely constitute good value for money. The ESRC currently devotes less than 1% of its overall annual expenditure to What Works.¹¹ The scale of impact created by the Centres does not need to be particularly great to generate benefits well in excess of their funding cost.

⁸ This involvement was as academic leads for some Centres (e.g. WW Local Economic Growth) and as partners or work strand leads in others (e.g. WW Centre for Crime Reduction and WW Wellbeing).

⁹ Note that the focus of this study has been the value for money of these investments to the ESRC, rather than the value for money of individual WWCs.

¹⁰ Going forward, it will be important for ESRC and the Centres themselves to gather as much evidence as possible to illustrate that their work represents good value for money. Quantitative data alone will be insufficient to provide enough insight into this but qualitative work, including for example case studies, can shed some light on the sort of value that the work of the Centres generates. Periodic surveys of the users of the Centres' work will also add valuable evidence on the extent to which Centres engage with their audiences. The key to useful evidence of this nature will be capturing the work of the Centres against a clear counterfactual.

¹¹ <https://esrc.ukri.org/about-us/what-we-do/>

The WWCs position would be strengthened if they undertook some more robust impact assessment going forward, they would be able to demonstrate their value for money more quickly. Key to any future investment by the ESRC in WWCs is creating a much clearer benchmark for the Centres against which their performance can be objectively assessed, to avoid future difficulty in being able to determine value for money. We suggest how future impact assessments might be better supported in the recommendations section.

Cross-cutting lessons about what works in What Works

Throughout our evaluation, we also learnt a range of other things about what works in What Works. Evidence on what good knowledge mobilisation looks like is still evolving, and no WWC appears to offer a superior model for knowledge mobilisation. This is perhaps unsurprising as our work suggests that the right approach to knowledge mobilisation in any area is likely to depend critically on the nature of the research and knowledge base in an area as well as the nature of the audience for that work. There are a number of important cross-cutting lessons that we have identified from our work which potentially extend to all WWCs, not just those funded by the ESRC now or in the future. These cross-cutting lessons comprise helpful activities and behaviours which have enabled some centres to navigate the complexities of their areas well, from which others could learn.

SOME CENTRES MAY HAVE AT TIMES SET THE QUALITY BAR FOR EVIDENCE TOO HIGH

While the Centres have contributed to a culture change in knowledge mobilisation, our work has also highlighted that some Centres may have, at times, set the bar on evidence quality too high to produce valuable insights for decision makers. Decision makers commented that it was not useful for a Centre to spend substantial time and budget synthesising an evidence base for the conclusion to be that “there is no evidence of sufficient quality” to answer the decision maker’s question. Decision makers also commented on the lack of practical guidance from the answers provided by the Centres in some cases. They were left with the question: “What does this all mean for me?”. A pragmatic approach to presenting a level of evidence that reflects the nature of the question being asked should be taken here, with the best available evidence being presented in each case. A more behavioural approach as proposed by the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) could also be effective. This would involve identifying the barriers and enablers to adopting evidence-informed practice and using these insights to develop a knowledge mobilisation strategy which can be monitored and adapted over time.¹²

SOME CENTRES COULD BE MORE AMBITIOUS IN THE QUESTIONS THEY ADDRESS

There is scope for some WWCs to be more ambitious in the questions that they seek to address, recognising that not all questions will be fully answerable with journal-quality academic research. The temptation is to frame questions with a view to what high-quality academic research could answer robustly (for example with randomised control trials or experimental approaches) rather than with respect to what decision

¹² <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/developing-a-behavioural-approach-to-knowledge-mobilisation-reflections-for-the-what-works-network>

makers really need to know. Success in this sphere may look different and may simply mean narrowing the range of possible answers to a question (or potential policies that could be effective), not simply providing a synthesis of journal-quality evidence that may not address the policy question directly. By enabling Centres to incentivise academic research that is of high quality but not necessarily journal standard may help to widen the useful evidence base on which decision makers can draw.

A refreshed approach to setting the question each WWC seeks to address could also increase the breadth of audience for a Centre's work, increasing a Centre's potential value. While it is likely to be easier for Centres to achieve impact if they have a narrow audience and a specific focus, our findings suggest that the narrow focus of some Centres may have limited their relevance and potential value in terms of tackling the most pertinent cross-cutting policy questions. A compromise might involve setting a wide question on which the Centre is focused but breaking down the Centre's work into stages to address different aspects in turn.

CENTRES NEED A CLEAR BASELINE AGAINST WHICH THEY ARE JUDGED

One of the biggest difficulties faced by this evaluation was the lack of a clear baseline against which the performance of the Centres could be judged. Initial work to scope the Centres was not sufficiently refined to create a clear and systematic assessment of:¹³

- The overarching (and more detailed) questions that the Centre was seeking to answer (as agreed with the funders);
- The state of existing evidence on each of those questions and gaps in the evidence base; and
- The state of knowledge and understanding by decision makers of the existing evidence and the size and nature of gaps in that understanding.

There was also no shared articulation by funders and users as to what good would look like (over a given time frame) for a particular Centre. This is also important. Closing all gaps may not be possible in a given funding period, so the targets that the Centres set themselves need to be appropriately focused and achievable in the time available.

A Centre should set out one or more options of what it believes should be possible over a funding round, prompting a discussion with decision makers and funders as to what combination of actions would be most useful to them. The Centre could then target its efforts more effectively in terms of prioritising raising awareness, raising understanding and, in cases where evidence gaps could be filled, in creating evidence (or at least communicating the gap in evidence to the academic community). In the case of evidence gaps, the Centre could engage in a dialogue with ESRC to agree whether there is scope for the gaps to inform calls for research initiated by the Centre or through other channels.

AN EVALUATION FRAMEWORK SHOULD TRACK THE CENTRES AGAINST THEIR AGREED BASELINE

The evaluation framework should articulate the specific theory of change for each Centre with agreed metrics that should be collected throughout the lifetime of the Centre to measure progress. The specific metrics would need to be Centre specific and agreed by the Centre and the funders but should include measures of the existing

¹³ Such as conducted by the Centre for Homelessness Impact

understanding of the evidence base by decision makers or the depth of research addressing specific sub-questions the Centre is setting out to answer. Evidence may not always be quantitative but could include clear case study examples where a Centre has successfully been able to inform or influence the policy-making process in line with its stated objectives. A future evaluation could then look to assess the extent to which progress has been made against the baseline to fill the prioritised gaps in the evidence or knowledge gap over the funding window. ESRC (or other funders) could also consider including a requirement for Centres to track and report progress against this baseline as part of its funding agreements.

THERE SHOULD BE A SUITABLE RANGE OF VOICES IN THE GOVERNANCE OF A CENTRE

There is no strong evidence that the number of funders is a key determinant of whether Centres perform well, but the number of funders does raise some interesting considerations to be aware of.

For Centres where only a single co-funder beyond the ESRC is involved, there is a risk that over time the Centre will drift towards a consultancy style model and academic engagement will lessen as a result. For these Centres, consideration should be given up front with regard to how best to ensure that a range of voices shape the work of the Centre. This could be through adapted governance arrangements that ensure that a senior group are able to steer and prioritise the Centres' work. For example, this group could include senior cross-cutting decision makers from outside the funding departments, a wider set of distinguished academic leaders beyond the specific institutions actively involved with the Centre, as well as potentially leaders from the private and third sectors. The choice of stakeholders involved in this group should be tailored for each project, to ensure relevance and effective challenge.

For Centres with many funders, there is a risk that objectives and output will become muddled or a single funder's voice will dominate. For these Centres, a similar senior governance group that provides advice on long-term development and strategic direction and constructive challenge on the Centre's approach may also be of benefit.

CENTRES SHOULD ENSURE APPROPRIATE ACADEMIC INVOLVEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

Significant academic involvement is key to the success of the Centres. Centres have had success in achieving knowledge mobilisation under both single- and multi-institution models. Single-institution models, particularly those where a leading academic took on a substantial leadership role, have benefited from the drive and focus of concentrated leadership and the relative freedom associated with a single institution driving forward the work. Multi-institution Centres have also achieved knowledge mobilisation and, in fact, the collaboration between two universities was considered a key part of the success of What Works Scotland (WW Scotland). But there are also risks associated with both models.

Building on the Alliance for Useful Evidence's finding that big consortiums can be difficult to manage,¹⁴ we found that a lack of a focal point can limit a Centre's ability to have an impact. Involving fewer institutions may also be beneficial from an administrative standpoint. However, for single-institution models, there is a risk that the

¹⁴ Alliance for Useful Evidence (2020), "Been there, done that: lessons learned in establishing evidence Centres", <https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/been-there-done-that-lessons-learned-in-establishing-evidence-Centres/>

evidence base is not reflective of the work of the wider academic community or emerging schools of thought.

Regardless of the consortium model, successful Centres need to demonstrate:

- Good knowledge of the existing evidence base across a range of relevant disciplines and institutions including emerging schools of thought;
- Good connections with a range of highly respected academics in the relevant fields of study;
- An ability to translate evidence in a way that supports decision makers; and
- Clout in conveying the messages coming from evidence, particularly those that go against the current direction of travel of policy and practice.

THIS MAY MEAN ENSURING INVOLVEMENT FROM ACROSS A RANGE OF INSTITUTIONS

There are instances where all of these characteristics could come together in a single institution or even a single individual within that institution, but in many rapidly evolving fields of study, the relevant characteristics are likely to be spread across a range of individuals across institutions. For the majority of Centres, this is likely to mean involvement from a range of academic institutions. Where this is the case, it may still be appropriate to have a single institution in the lead to avoid some of the practical and administrative difficulties this presents, but the Centre's funding agreement should be accompanied by clear and formal expectations of how that institution will bring in other relevant academics. The earlier discussion on clear governance structures and roles is again relevant here.

FOCUSED LEADERSHIP IS KEY

Regardless of the consortium model, focused academic leadership can help the Centre progress to delivering outputs more quickly. But there is a risk that such leadership might steer the work in an unhelpful way or might be unwilling to take on board feedback which could enhance the work of the Centre. There is also a risk that over-reliance on a single motivated individual could threaten the sustainability of the Centres. An alternative model, which is gaining increasing traction among the Centres, is one where a Centre is not led by academics but by a non-academic lead who has close relationships with one or more academics.

What appears to be key to ensuring knowledge mobilisation is that the leader of the Centre has a clear and intuitive understanding of the existing evidence base, the ability to translate the evidence to the questions posed by decision makers and the ability to ensure the evidence is conveyed with clout and in a way that supports decision-making. These characteristics could be possessed by an academic or a non-academic lead and an assessment of who is best placed to lead a particular WWC should seek the right individual, ensuring the search extends beyond purely academic circles. If an academic lead is the preferred choice, then it remains important to have a non-academic support function to ensure continuity in relationships and understanding if the academic lead moves on.

THE ROLE OF AND RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GEOGRAPHIC AND THEMATIC CENTRES SHOULD BE CLEARER

Most of the WWCs are thematic, that is, they focus on a subject area (e.g. wellbeing) which is applicable across multiple geographies, but there are also geographic Centres

in Wales and Scotland. The thematic model has been very effective at progressing the thinking in the respective policy areas of focus. For instance, many of the examples of helpful initiatives referred to by those interviewed provide a better understanding of an extensive existing research base (e.g. WW Local Economic Growth toolkits), or the creation of innovative analytical frameworks (e.g. the effect, mechanism, moderators, implementation and economic (EMMIE) cost framework for WW Crime Reduction).

The geographic Centres have not focused on progressing particular areas of policy but have been very effective at developing a strong local presence and relationships with local partners. This has facilitated coordinated, whole-systems thinking on cross-cutting policy matters in a way that the thematic Centres have not accomplished as successfully. This method of working has arguably also had a better impact on knowledge mobilisation, as closer partnerships with their stakeholders has enabled Centres for devolved nations to better respond to user needs and achieve greater buy-in from these users, in contrast to the thematic Centres which have occasionally struggled to make their outputs practical and meet the needs of their users.

Decision-making needs to be devolved across a sufficient range of topics covering a sufficiently large amount of expenditure to warrant investment in a Centre focused on a geographical area. The overarching evidence base created by the thematic Centres should be sufficient for application to local areas within England, and it should be the responsibility of the thematic Centres to ensure that they have a dialogue with relevant local decision makers, not just national ones, and that they work closely with those areas to mobilise the evidence that best suits their needs. Again this an area where clear and formal expectations about the appropriate level of engagement with local decision makers could be articulated in the funding agreement of the Centre and measured throughout the lifetime of the Centre.

Our work suggests that geographic Centres should focus on creating the right relationships to mobilise knowledge created by the relevant thematic Centres. They should work closely with the thematic Centres to ensure that specific evidence gaps that relate to their area are articulated and considered. The Centres should then focus on taking that evidence base and mobilising it in a way that is sympathetic to the local context. This is a model that has been particularly effective in supporting the mobilisation of work undertaken by the Wales Centre for Public Policy¹⁵. This is also an area where thematic Centres, with ESRC support, are already taking action through a series of pilot projects seeking to make their work more relevant to different geographies.

Recommendations for the ESRC

ESRC SHOULD CONTINUE TO INVEST IN KNOWLEDGE MOBILISATION

Part of ESRC's mission is to contribute to the effectiveness of public services and policy in the UK.¹⁶ Mobilising high-quality academic evidence and knowledge around what works in public services and policy appears central to ESRC fulfilling this objective. WWCs have shown themselves to be a good model for knowledge mobilisation.

¹⁵ [Increasing the Impact of the What Works Network across the UK | WCPP](#)

¹⁶ <https://esrc.ukri.org/about-us/what-we-do/>

Superior models for knowledge mobilisation could exist, but the evidence on what knowledge mobilisation tools are effective and in what contexts is still evolving. Importantly, we also lack a clear framework and baseline for judging the performance of Centres. This makes it difficult, at this point, to identify a superior model for knowledge mobilisation, should one exist. It also means that there is likely continued benefit from experimentation in knowledge mobilisation tools and the model for knowledge mobilisation so long as there is a consistent framework for judging the success of different models and a requirement for a robust evaluation against that framework, as set out above

ESRC SHOULD CONTINUE TO DEVELOP ITS CRITERIA FOR WHEN AND HOW MUCH TO INVEST IN WWCS

To maximise the value for money from its investments, it is appropriate for ESRC to concentrate its funding on Centres which best support the aims of ESRC and to reflect evolving experience to date and wider context. We provide an initial outline of what additional criteria could look like. ESRC could consider the role of additional criteria and how performance against criteria could inform the shape of funding over time.¹⁷

¹⁷ Previous research has also noted that ESRC's lack of flexibility in its funding model can create challenges, limiting its strategic capacity and leaving little room to adjust to changing needs.

Gough D, Maidment C, Sharples J (2018), "What Works Centres: Aims, methods and contexts". London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London. ISBN: 978-1-911605-03-4.

PROPOSED ADDITIONAL CRITERIA FOR INVESTMENT BY ESRC

The extent to which the Centre addresses significant, overarching and pervasive policy questions. ESRC should seek to prioritise investment in Centres that are set up to address significant longstanding and largely apolitical policy questions. This will ensure the Centre is able to influence policy across the political spectrum and remain relevant.

The extent to which the questions lend themselves to rigorous academic study. ESRC has a clear reputation for championing academic independence and excellence. Given that, it makes sense for ESRC to prioritise funding for Centres where the question the Centre seeks to address can *either* draw on an established, yet underutilised, academic research base, *or* where there is clear potential for academic research. This should be kept under review over time as the level of academic study that a policy question lends itself to may change. By outlining this approach to investment from the outset, ESRC can provide a clearer signal to co-funders about the likely lifespan of their investment and the indicators that will lead to alternative funding for the Centres being found or for the Centres to reach the end of their lifecycle.

The extent to which the Centre brings together evidence from multiple sources/disciplines which may not currently be joined up. Where there is already a single repository of research, or a leading hub of expertise that is already well recognised and connected to policy in a particular field, the impact of a Centre would be limited. Where relevant knowledge and evidence is dispersed across many academic institutions or even academic fields, the impact of a Centre will likely be greater. While this criterion could arguably apply to whether or not *any* funding should be directed to a WWC, this is a particularly pertinent issue for ESRC as it is uniquely placed through its connections with other Research Councils and within UKRI to set appropriate conditions to incentivise and encourage coordination and collaboration amongst academic institutions and disciplines.

ESRC SHOULD SET OUT A CLEAR VISION FOR THE END GAME FOR ITS INVESTMENTS

ESRC should consider what it wants the end game for its investments to be and whether there is a point in time when it might expect Centres to be funded by other funders without ESRC involvement or to become self-sustaining in some way. This could be similar to the approach taken by ESRC to funding of other large Research Centres and institute awards, noting that this is duration based rather than related to context change.¹⁸ This might be when the evidence landscape in the area is more developed or the role of evidence assessment is being provided within government. Alternatively, it might be when academic involvement is no longer required or when it can be secured without ESRC funding and involvement in a Centre. At this stage it is not clear if alternative funding arrangements are feasible (i.e. not clear that private sector and/or third sector can be incentivised and interested to invest) but having a long-term vision of the future of current and prospective investments is important.

¹⁸ For example, the Transition and legacy model – see <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-large-investments/esrc-Centres-and-institutes/Centres-transition-funding/> and <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-large-investments/esrc-Centres-and-institutes/legacy-Centre-status/>

1 INTRODUCTION

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has invested over £10 million in the What Works Network (WWN), including core funding for some What Works Centres (WWCs) as well as funding for specific people and projects through and across the network.

Frontier Economics was commissioned by ESRC in September 2019 to evaluate these investments with a view to answering the following four questions:

- What has been the contribution of ESRC to knowledge mobilisation as a result of its investment in the WWN?
- Does ESRC's investment offer value for money for ESRC?
- What can be learnt about what works in What Works?
- What are the implications for ESRC's future investment strategy?

1.1 What is What Works?

The WWN was launched by the Cabinet Office in March 2013 with the stated aim: “to ensure evidence is at the heart of decision-making”.¹⁹ The network seeks to ensure that the best evidence of “what works” is available to both policy makers and practitioners and to overcome the Institute for Government's finding that “government often struggles to draw on academia effectively when forming policy”.²⁰ The network is broadly based on the role that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) performs for health but is focused on key areas of social policy.²¹

The WWN is coordinated by the Cabinet Office's What Works Team, which operates across government to embed a culture of rigorous testing and evaluation in the design of policy and the delivery of services.

Beyond engaging with policy makers, many WWCs also engage and use evidence to inform professional practitioners. The term “decision makers” is used in this report to capture the audience of WWCs and includes both policy makers and practitioners.

The network currently consists of nine WWCs and five affiliate or associate members in key areas of social policy.²² Together, these Centres cover policy areas which account for more than £250 billion of public spending.²³ Each WWC focuses on an area where an evidence base already exists, but where there has previously been limited authoritative synthesis and communication of the evidence available to those making policy decisions.²⁴ The Centres are independent of government but are each designed around policy requirements. The focus and design of each Centre differ, but they each have three key functions: supporting the **generation, transmission and adoption** of evidence. The Centres also seek to **promote good evidence** by identifying research gaps and maximising learning from new interventions. These functions were set out at

¹⁹ HM Government (2013), “What Works: evidence Centres for social policy”.

²⁰ Institute for government (2018), “How government can work with academia”.

²¹ Cabinet Office (2011), “Open Public Services White Paper”.

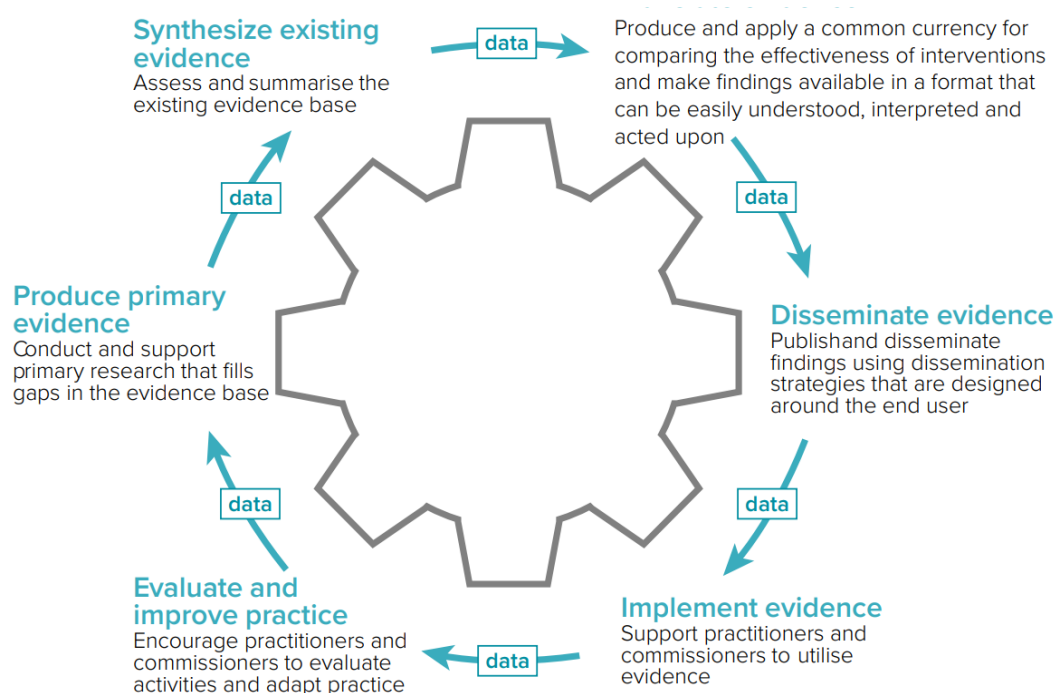
²² In addition to these, there was WW Scotland. However, it closed following the conclusion of its initial agreed funding after neither ESRC nor the Scottish Government renewed funding.

²³ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-Network#the-what-works-Network>

²⁴ HM Government (2013), “What Works: evidence Centres for social policy”.

the launch of the WWN, as described below. The activities of the WWCs and how these interact are summarised in Figure 2. Overall, the WWCs were intended to be boundary-spanning and to operate very much at the nexus or intersection of academia and research users (including the public). As such, their roles vary from very specific pieces of commissioned work to a far broader symbolic role about harvesting and promoting the use of evidence.

Figure 2 What Works Centres' areas of activity



Source: What Works Network (2018), "The What Works Network: Five Years On", Adapted from MAGIC (2016), "The Digital and Trustworthy Evidence Ecosystem".

1.2 ESRC's involvement in What Works

ESRC has been closely involved in the WWN from the outset. Three key roles of ESRC were highlighted by the government at the launch of the network:²⁵

- ESRC and other partners work closely with the government to identify the policy areas in which the first WWCs were created.
- ESRC has a role to ensure that the "highest standards of academic rigour are applied" by working closely with the WWCs and the What Works National Adviser.
- ESRC has a role as a key funding partner for several of the WWCs.

ESRC has been directly involved with seven²⁶ of the WWCs. For five of these, ESRC is a core funder alongside government or other partners. For the remaining two Centres – the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the Early Intervention Foundation

²⁵ HM Government (2013), "What Works: evidence Centres for social policy".

²⁶ We include current and former Centres in this number (i.e. some Centres have not continued to exist in their original form).

(EIF) – ESRC is not a core funder but has funded specific research projects undertaken by the Centres.²⁷

The Centres that ESRC works with are outlined in Figure 3, which shows the key policy areas each Centre works on, the year they were formed, their main funding partners and details of ESRC's investment.

In addition to the funding provided to individual WWCs, ESRC also provides a strategic fund available for collaborations between WWCs. This has funded a small number of collaborative projects. For example, the Left Behind Places programme is led by the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth (WW Local Economic Growth) in collaboration with a further six What Works Centre partners, and funding for a joint campaign to identify recommendations on Social Emotional Learning in schools was awarded to the Education Endowment Fund and Early Intervention Foundation.²⁸ These additionally funded schemes are out of scope, although we refer to some of them throughout the report to highlight their effects as perceived by stakeholders.

Wider activities of the WWC not supported by ESRC funding are also out of scope of this evaluation but are examples of other models of WWCs and illustrate the broader scale of the network that ESRC helped to develop.²⁹

1.3 Objectives of the evaluation

There are three key evaluation objectives for this study:

- Understanding the contribution to knowledge mobilisation by each of the investments and the portfolio as a whole;
- Understanding ESRC's role and the extent to which it has added value by participating in What Works; and
- Contributing to the evidence base of what works in What Works, by determining effective approaches and conditions of What Works investments.

²⁷ It is worth noting that ESRC investment also comes with certain limitations on the range of research organisations that can bid to run what works investments (government partners do not have these restrictions so ESRC involvement limits the field of possible candidates and many organisations with knowledge mobilisation expertise are excluded as lead applicants).

²⁸ ESRC proposal documents.

²⁹ The seven members of the What Works Network that ESRC has not been a funding partner for are:

- (i) **Centre for Ageing Better:** focussed on policies to improve later life in relation to fulfilling work, safe and accessible homes, healthy ageing and connected communities.
- (ii) **Centre for Homelessness Impact:** focussed on the use of evidence for policies and practices working to end homelessness.
- (iii) **NICE:** provides national guidance and advice to improve health and social care. NICE is an affiliate member of the Network.
- (iv) **What Works Centre for Children's Social Care:** seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social care sector.
- (v) **Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education:** helps universities meet challenging targets to eliminate equality gaps in higher education. The Centre is an affiliate member of the What Works Network.
- (vi) **Youth Endowment Fund:** supports programmes and community partnerships working with children at risk of being drawn into crime and violence. The Fund is an affiliate member of the What Works Network.
- (vii) **Youth Future Foundation:** work on removing the barriers preventing disadvantaged young people from entering the labour market. The Foundation is an affiliate member of the What Works Network.

Figure 3 What Works Centres receiving ESRC funding (in no particular order)

What Works Centre	Key policy areas	Year formed	Main funding partners (past and present)	Time period of ESRC investment	Total ESRC investment	Co-funders' investment
What Works Centre for Wellbeing	Wellbeing in a range of contexts, e.g. communities, the workplace, housing, sport and leisure activities	2014	ESRC, AHRC, Arts Council England, BEIS, DCMS, DfT, DHSC, DWP, English Heritage, FSA, National Lottery Heritage Fund, Historic England, MHCLG, PHE, Big Lottery, Power to Change	Jun 2015-Oct 2019	£3,155,000 (incl. £49k strategic fund)	£4,213,000
Wales Centre for Public Policy (associate member)	Public services and policy issues relevant to the Welsh Government	2017**	ESRC, Welsh Government	Oct 2017-Sep 2022	£2,584,000 (incl. £75k strategic fund)	£2,500,000
What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth	Analysing which policies are most effective in supporting and increasing local economic growth	2013	ESRC, BEIS, DfT, DWP, MHCLG	Sep 2013-Feb 2020	£2,119,000 (incl. £119k strategic fund)	£3,500,000*
What Works Scotland (associate member, concluded at end of 2019)	Public services in Scotland	2014	ESRC, Scottish Government	Jul 2014-Dec 2019	£1,720,000	£1,712,000
What Works Centre for Crime Reduction	Reducing crime – from prevention through to reducing reoffending	2013	ESRC, College of Policing	Sep 2013-Mar 2018	£1,551,000	£1,037,000
Early Intervention Foundation	Early interventions to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of poor outcomes	2013	DfE, DWP, MHCLG, PHE	Dec 2014-Nov 2019	£730,000	N/A***
Education Endowment Fund	Education (focused on 3-18 year-olds, particularly those facing disadvantage)	2011	DfE ESRC non-core funding	Nov 2016-Nov 2019	£670,000 (incl. £90k strategic fund)	N/A***

Source: What Works Network (2018), "The What Works Network: Five Years On"; ESRC (2019), "Invitation to Tender Mini Competition: Evaluation of ESRC What Works Investments 2013-2019".

Note: BEIS (Business Energy, Industrial Strategy and Skills), DfT (Department for Transport), DWP (Department for Work and Pensions), MHCLG (Ministry of Housing, Community and Local Government), AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council), DCMS (Department for Digital, culture, Media and Sport), DHSC (Department for Health and Social Care), FSA (Food Standards Agency), PHE (Public Health England), DfE (Department for Education)

*What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth (WW Local Economic Growth) funding has been extended to 2023, meaning a further investment of £1.5m from ESRC, and £2.25m from co-funders; this funding has been omitted from the figures above as it is outside of the scope of this evaluation.

**Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) was formed as a successor to the Public Policy Institute for Wales (PPIW) (which was founded in 2013). The PPIW may also have received separate ESRC funding grants.

Some ESRC investment figures include "strategic funds"; these are funds awarded by ESRC for particular research programmes which usually involve several WWCs; as such, while the funding is awarded to a "lead applicant" (to which we attribute the investment in the table), in reality this funding is shared between several WWCs.

***Co-funder investment for Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) and Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) are not shown, as ESRC was not a core funder of these Centres.

1.4 Structure of the report

The rest of the report is divided into the following sections:

- Section 2 provides a summary of the methodology used in evaluating each investment and answering the questions put forward in the terms of reference. Further methodological details, including the method for evidencing and evaluating the theories of change, evidencing and evaluating ESRC's role and the comparative analysis of Centres, can be found in Annex B.
- Section 3 discusses, in turn, the contribution that ESRC has made to knowledge mobilisation through its investment of each of the seven WWCs, its own role in contributing to the achievements of the ESRC-funded WWCs and how it has specifically added value.
- Section 4 discusses the comparative performance of the different ESRC-funded WWCs and tries to identify patterns and factors associated with strong performance.
- Section 5 takes a forward look at how ESRC could strengthen its role in the WWC.
- In addition, we have included the following Annexes:
 - Annex A: The logic models for each of the ESRC-funded What Works Centres;
 - Annex B: The evidence collection plan that was implemented in the evaluation;
 - Annex C: Centre-by-Centre findings on the contribution to knowledge mobilisation;
 - Annex D: Further survey results;
 - Annex E: Survey Questions; and
 - Annex E: Mapping of the detailed evaluation questions and how they have been addressed.

2 METHODOLOGY

CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY

Our methodology involved four steps

Step 1: Development of logic models for each of the individual Centres that ESRC has invested in as well as ESRC investment as a whole. The logic models show the pathways through which these investments were expected to generate impacts, where these impacts were likely to be felt and by whom.

Step 2: Evidencing the logic models with quantitative and qualitative data. In practice this involved:

- Collection of all available relevant secondary data and evidence held by ESRC, the WWCs themselves or available online.
- Surveys of the users of the work produced by the Centres funded by ESRC to test how the outputs of the Centres are being used.
- Stakeholder interviews with central and local government officials, academics, practitioners and funding partners to gain a more in-depth understanding of their interactions with the Centres and what impacts may have materialised to date.
- Synthesising the evidence collected, triangulating across the different sources to assess the outputs, outcomes and impacts of each of the Centres and, as such, their overall contribution to knowledge mobilisation.

Step 3: Conducting a comparative analysis of the Centres to assess what factors might influence outcomes. The comparisons drew on all available data (outputs produced by the Centres, feedback received from users in surveys etc.) and were used to stimulate some interesting questions about where Centres have focused their activities and whether there are lessons that can be drawn from this.

Step 4: Assessing the specific contribution of the ESRC to any achievements accomplished by the Centres. Drawing primarily on our qualitative interviews, our approach considered each Centre in isolation and attributed impact with reference to a counterfactual in which the Centre existed but ESRC was not involved. Using this approach, we were able to draw out areas where the contribution of ESRC may be more or less than the proportion of funding it contributed.

ESRC wanted an evaluation to help it to develop an evidence-based view as to whether and, if so, how it should refine its investment strategy in What Works. As indicated already, to answer this question fully, our evaluation involved answering a complex set of interacting questions: firstly, to identify the impact of the individual Centres that have received funding from ESRC; then to assess the magnitude and nature of ESRC's contribution to those achievements; and finally to consider comparisons between the Centres as a means to understanding how ESRC's investment could be further refined to better meet its objectives.

We adopted a mixed-methods, theory-based approach to these questions. This means that we used a mixture of quantitative and qualitative tools for evidence and the theories of change underlying each of the individual investments and the portfolio as a whole. For the sake of brevity, we provide a concise summary of the main features of our

approach here. The interested reader can also refer to the relevant Annexes where we have copied across the relevant sections from our detailed Inception report.

Our methodology was divided into four steps, as set out in the diagram below. Fundamentally, the approach was designed to help us understand:

- What have ESRC-funded WWCs delivered in terms of their activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts and how far is this attributable to ESRC; and
- What would have happened if ESRC had not been involved in What Works – the counterfactual (a discussion on the challenges and limitations of the counterfactual used is provided in Section 2.4).

The evidence we drew on to address these questions included a range of secondary sources (e.g. publications) as well as primary data which we collected through surveys and stakeholder interviews.

Figure 4 Four step methodology



Source: *Frontier Economics*.

2.1 Step 1: Development of logic models

The first stage of our work involved the development of detailed logic models (see Annex A for detail) for each individual ESRC investment as well as ESRC investment as a whole (1.8). The logic models were intended to set out the pathways through which these investments were expected to generate impacts, where these impacts were likely to be felt and by whom. However, as they were developed retrospectively rather than when the Centre was first created, it is possible that they have been influenced by what has been possible or what has occurred since.

To construct a theory of change, we collaborated with the ESRC-funded WWCs to build logic models that describe their activities, outputs and intended outcomes and impacts. The logic models and associated evaluation/monitoring indicators informed the evidence we had to collect from each Centre to show the extent to which each step in the logic chain is occurring in practice. The logic models were agreed by each of the Centres.

In addition, we constructed an overarching logic model of the ESRC's view of What Works as a whole in collaboration with ESRC. This allowed us to: 1) make an assessment of how each Centre performed relative to ESRC's forward-looking objectives (or at least objectives as of now, rather than when the Centres were created) and 2) be able to compare Centres against each other.

2.2 Step 2: Evidencing the logic models

We undertook a substantial data- and evidence-gathering exercise (see Annex B for detail) to evidence the monitoring indicators from our logic models and assess the achievements of each Centre so far. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from a variety of sources as no single source is able to provide a comprehensive overview given the complex and iterative nature of knowledge mobilisation (defined below).

KNOWLEDGE MOBILISATION DEFINITION

In considering ESRC's contribution, and in consultation with ESRC, we refined the research questions originally set out to reflect a broader articulation of the purpose of the Centres on knowledge mobilisation as opposed to evidence mobilisation.

The objective of **knowledge mobilisation** is to support and enable policy-making that results in improved outcomes for citizens and the delivery of more (cost) effective public services.

Knowledge mobilisation enables the use of research-informed knowledge in the policy process or in service delivery practice through a complex and dynamic process in which multiple factors come into play and interact, including:

- Research activity, shaped by and framed within the policy/practice context from the outset (co-production, partnership, academic capacity and engagement);
- Research outcomes and expertise, made available and accessible to those for whom they are relevant (translation, dissemination, co-production, partnership working);
- Policy makers/practitioners with the confidence, motivation and capacity (skills, capabilities) to demand and make use of research knowledge (capacity- building, knowledge exchange/sharing);
- Academics with the confidence, motivation and capacity (skills, capabilities, funding) to engage with policy and practice evidence needs when formulating and conducting research; and
- Policy and delivery processes providing the opportunity for research-informed knowledge use to take place (enabling environment).

Alone, each of the above would not constitute successful knowledge mobilisation. Rather, they are each ways of supporting knowledge mobilisation which can only occur if a critical mass³⁰ of the above factors is conducted. Networking and relationship-building underpin all of the processes above, but for ease of presentation we have separated these out in our work.

Given the complex nature of knowledge mobilisation and its dependency on external events and circumstances, conducting an impact assessment of knowledge mobilisation is difficult. These practical difficulties should be considered when reviewing this evaluation.

The three-step approach of our evidence gathering was as follows:

³⁰ Determining this critical mass is one of the many challenges that the Centres and researchers more broadly face. Research is ongoing regarding how best to mobilise knowledge.

Step 1: we collected all available relevant secondary data and evidence (e.g. previous funding applications, website analytics, publication lists, etc.) held by ESRC and the WWCs in scope for the study.

Step 2: we conducted surveys of the users of the ESRC-funded WWCs³¹ to gain an understanding of how the outputs of the Centres are used by central and local government, practitioners, the private sector and others. In total, we received more than 300 responses. The survey questions can be found in Annex E.

Step 3: we conducted 65 stakeholder interviews (with central and local government officials, academics, practitioners, funding partners and others) to gain an in-depth understanding of their interactions with the Centres, what aspects of these interactions they consider to be working well and where things can improve. We also explored what impacts may have been achieved to date and how stakeholders perceive ESRC's role in the work of the Centres. Stakeholder interview insights were drawn based on the strength of feeling expressed by the interviewee and the prevalence of the views expressed. Specifically, we classified a view as “consensus” where more than 90% of respondents who expressed a view on a subject held the same viewpoint. We classified as a broadly held view instances where over 60% of respondents who expressed a view had the same viewpoint.

Step 4: we then synthesised the evidence collected, triangulating across the different sources to assess the outputs, outcomes and impacts of each of the Centres and their overall contribution to knowledge mobilisation.

The full list of monitoring indicators and a summary of the extent to which we were able to gather quantitative evidence for each ESRC-funded WWC is shown in Figure 5. In summary, we were able to gather a reasonable amount of quantitative evidence on the outputs, outcomes and impacts of the Centres. The quantitative evidence was most plentiful for WW Local Economic Growth, WW Scotland, WCPP and WW Wellbeing, where the evidence gaps were relatively small. For the remaining three Centres, very little quantitative evidence was available.

It is worth noting that the relative dearth of quantitative evidence for EEF and EIF can be explained by the nature of the investments. Specifically for EIF, ESRC funded three partnerships which for various reasons were ended before completing and hence little quantitative data was available. Given the specific nature of ESRC investment, we based our evaluation on qualitative interviews with key stakeholders. For EEF, ESRC has provided non-core funding for a single, specific package of activity within EEF's own (related) research and impact agenda, carried out by a single researcher.

On the whole, quantitative data was made available by the Centres and significant effort was made to satisfy our data request even though the information was not always easily available or stored in the correct format and hence easy to extract. It is worth reflecting whether it is worthwhile for the Centres to put together processes for collecting output, outcome and impact data on an ongoing basis which can support efforts to demonstrate the impact of investments going forward. We provide recommendations on what metrics it might make sense to collect in the future in Chapter 5.

³¹ Not all Centres were covered by the survey for different reasons. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were not able to roll out a survey for the WW Crime Reduction. Nor did we conduct surveys for the EEF and EIF due to the nature of the ESRC investment in these Centres, which was for specific projects covering a relatively small proportion of the work of the Centres.

Figure 5: Summary of available quantitative evidence by Centre

Evaluation metric	Metric type	WW Local Economic Growth	WW Scotland	WCPP	WW Wellbeing	WW Crime reduction	EIF	EEF
Systematic reviews completed	Output	Y	X	Y	Y	Y	X	X
Volume of evidence reviewed	Output	Y	X	X	Y	X	X	X
Number of toolkits developed	Output	Y	X	X	Y	Y	X	X
Accompanying materials produced (blogs, reports, briefings etc.)	Output	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	X	X
Number of events hosted	Output	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	X	Y
Number of events attended	Output	Y	Y	Y	X	X	X	X
Number of engagements with government officials	Output	Y	Y	Y	X	X	X	X
Number of demonstration projects	Output	Y	X	X	X	X	X	X
Number of new pieces of research linked to centre (direct or indirect)	Output	X	X	Y	Y	X	X	X
Number of PhDs/fellows/post docs	Output	Y	Y	X	Y	Y	X	X
Volume of advice provided to stakeholders	Output	Y	X	Y	Y	X	X	Y
Volume of social media posts (linked in, twitter)	Output	Y	X	Y	Y	X	X	X
Citations of evidence reviews	Outcome	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Citations of other publications	Outcome	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Views and downloads of evidence reviews	Outcome	Y	X	Y	X	Y	X	X
Views and downloads of other publications	Outcome	Y	X	Y	X	X	X	X
New research generated from evidence reviews	Outcome	X	X	Y	Y	X	X	X
Number of invitations to events/advisory groups/AAPGs etc.	Outcome	Y	Y	X	X	X	X	X
Use of WWC evidence by target audiences	Outcome	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	X	Y
Website visitors and views	Outcome	Y	X	Y	Y	Y	X	X
Social media impact (views, followers, shares, re-tweets etc.)	Outcome	Y	X	Y	Y	X	X	X
Attendance at WWC events	Outcome	Y	Y	Y	X	Y	X	X
Better understanding of existing evidence by target audiences	Impact	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	X	X
Use of evidence provided by WWCs to shape policy decisions	Impact	Y	Y	Y	Y	X	X	X
Decision making at local and national level more aligned with evidence	Impact	Y	X	Y	Y	X	X	X
Practitioner engagement with improved evidence base	Impact	Y	Y	Y	Y	X	X	X
Attraction of additional funding by the centre	Impact	Y	Y	X	Y	X	X	X
Specific ultimate impacts related to each WWC (e.g. area impacts, falls in crime)	Impact	Y	X	X	X	X	X	X

Source: Frontier Economics.

Note: Green indicates that significant amount of quantitative data is available for an indicator while red indicates the opposite. Note that not all indicators are relevant for all Centres (given their different focus and the differences in ESRC investments) and hence red does not necessarily mean that quantitative data was expected to be available.

In addition to the quantitative evidence, the interview work provided us with valuable qualitative information which filled a number of gaps in the quantitative data and provided further insight into the other research questions.

Figure 6. summarises the interview work we carried out. In short, we interviewed a mix of organisations including practitioners, academics and government. Relatively small numbers of interviews were conducted for EEF (2 interviews) and WW Crime Reduction (3 interviews).

Figure 6 Summary of qualitative interviews by Centre

Centre	Interviewees	...of which practitioners and local govt.	...of which central govt**.	...of which non-central govt. funders	...of which academics (includes Centre leads)	...of which funding managers	Other
WW Wellbeing	17	5	2	3	5	1	1
WCPP**	8	3	1	0	1	3	0
WW Local Economic Growth	10	5	3	0	1	1	0
WW Scotland**	8	3	1	0	3	1	0
WW Crime Reduction	3	0	0	0	1	2	0
EIF	6*	1	0	0	3	1*	1
EEF	3	0	0	0	2	1	0
Overarching	11	0	3	1	0	0	7

Source: Frontier Economics.

Note: Interview count includes the 17 scoping interviews conducted at the start of the project.

* ESRC funding manager for EEF and EIF is the same. Hence there is a double counting of this interview in the table.

**In the cases of WCPP and WW Scotland, “central govt.” interviewees refer to interviewees in the Welsh/Scottish Governments respectively, and “local govt.” interviewees refer to lower levels of local government in the two nations.

2.3 Step 3: Comparative analysis

We combined all of the available quantitative and qualitative evidence (gathered in Step 2) to conduct a comparative analysis of the Centres and assess what factors are associated with better outcomes. When comparing the Centres, it is important to recognise that there are many reasons why the outputs, outcomes and impacts of Centres will vary. Indeed many of these factors are beyond the control of the Centre. Therefore, the comparisons drawn do not imply that one Centre is more valuable than another. Rather, the comparisons are used to stimulate some interesting questions about where Centres have focused their activities and whether there are lessons that can be drawn from this.

We were able to make basic comparisons of the funding and activities of different Centres by drawing on data supplied by the Centres themselves. Specifically, we compared some of the outputs produced by the Centres, such as evidence reviews, publications, toolkits, social media presence, training and workshops, and others.

We were also able to compare the survey results of the four Centres for which surveys were run. The types of issues we were able to examine were around how far stakeholders engaged with the outputs produced by the Centres and how users felt about these outputs (whether they were relevant and helpful).

Similar insights could be drawn from the stakeholder interviews, where specific examples were provided of what users found helpful for each of the Centres and what could be improved going forward.

2.4 Step 4: Assessing the contribution of ESRC

We assessed ESRC’s contribution to What Works between 2013 and 2019 relative to four questions:

1. What has been the contribution of ESRC to knowledge mobilisation³² as a result of its investment in the WWN?
2. Does ESRC’s investment offer value for money for ESRC?
3. What can be learnt about what works in What Works?
4. What are the implications for ESRC’s future investment strategy?

Assessing the contribution of ESRC is far from straightforward. A starting point for our assessment was to attribute the impact of each Centre in proportion to the funding provided by ESRC. So, if ESRC contributed 50% of the funding, it could be assumed to have contributed to 50% of the impacts of that funding. However, this approach misses important ways in which ESRC (and indeed other funding partners) has contributed (or can contribute) to its investments in What Works. In some cases, ESRC may only be responsible for 50% of the funding, but without ESRC’s funding the project

³² Knowledge mobilisation is the process which enables the use of research-informed knowledge in the policy process or service delivery practice which should lead to improved outcomes for society at large through better policy-making.

would not have happened at all. This could be the case where ESRC was a catalyst for the Centre or where academics may not have been willing to be involved without ESRC approval. An approach focusing purely on the funding contribution also misses other important ways in which ESRC could add value, for example through value in-kind contributions.

Fitting this reality into our models of counterfactuals is difficult, as ESRC could arguably be responsible for both the entire impact of the investment and only for half of it.

Drawing primarily on our qualitative interviews, our approach considered each Centre in isolation and attributed impact with reference to a counterfactual in which the Centre existed but ESRC was not involved. Using this approach, we were able to draw out areas where the contribution of ESRC may be more or less than the proportion of funding they contributed.

Similarly, developing a counterfactual of what would have happened in the absence of the Centre is difficult to achieve; for example, it is possible that some areas of research would have been undertaken anyway or the desired impact could have been reached regardless. Therefore, we need to be careful in attributing any change to a Centre.

Taken together, these steps allowed us to address the research questions set out in the project brief. A detailed mapping of the research questions and our approach to dealing with them is provided in Annex F.

2.5 Limitations

There are a number of limitations of the work and challenges which had to be overcome in order to address the research questions. The most important limitations of the work are noted below:

- The research team experienced difficulty in recruiting stakeholders for interview, particularly for the Centres which have already closed down and/or where work took place a long time ago (e.g. WW Scotland, EIF). Staff turnover at most organisations sometimes made it difficult to gain insights relating to the early years of operation of the Centres.
- In addition to the above, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our ability to gather evidence was severely limited for some Centres (e.g. for WW Crime Reduction, interview work was limited and we were not able to conduct a survey). Further, although the surveys we rolled out achieved a good response rate, it is likely that even more responses would have been achieved had the pandemic not coincided with our fieldwork. Across the board, the pandemic also made recruitment of stakeholders even more difficult and delayed fieldwork.
- There is likely to be selection bias in our survey responses as those who responded are more likely to be those with stronger opinions on the WWC's work/who are most interested in the WWC. This means that the number of extreme responses (either in support of or in opposition to the WWC) may be inflated. Similarly, there is likely to be selection bias in our interview data as the Centres provided us with key contacts to interview.

- Our engagement with the Centres revealed that data collection and recording varies a great deal from Centre to Centre. As such it was difficult to obtain consistent and complete data for the same metrics across all Centres.

Related to the points above, there was a general conceptual difficulty in comparing ESRC's investment across the different Centres both because of the differences in quantitative data availability and the variation in scope and function of the Centres. Consequently, cross-Centre comparative analysis was predominantly based on qualitative input from stakeholder interviews and survey data.

There was also a general difficulty in tracing outputs to ultimate impacts (which is not unusual in complex evaluations like this), especially where the users of the Centres' work are diffuse and hard to define and where impacts are general and influenced by multiple policy interventions, making it difficult to separate out the role of the Centres from wider policy changes that were likely to influence the same outcomes. Consequently, our quantitative analysis focused on the outputs associated with the Centres, while the qualitative work (interviews and surveys) tried to unpick the intermediate outcomes/impacts of the Centres. Attributing outcomes and impacts specifically to ESRC investment was also challenging given the issues outlined above but also because Centres receive funding from multiple sources. Again, attribution was based on qualitative input from key stakeholders who were able to comment on the specific role played by the ESRC.

Finally, it should be noted that the evidence underpinning this report was gathered during 2020 and reflects the journey of each of the Centres and the ESRC since 2013. The centres and the ESRC have continued to evolve since 2020 with the pandemic substantially changing the landscape within which both operate. The findings and recommendations in this report should be read in that context.

3 THE CONTRIBUTION OF ESRC TO KNOWLEDGE MOBILISATION

CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY

ESRC-funded Centres have played a central role in a culture change in knowledge mobilisation by creating the conditions within both UK government and academia – an enabling impact which extends beyond the Centres themselves³³. They have done so in various ways:

- By increasing the emphasis on knowledge mobilisation and providing additional incentives for academics to generate evidence that is useful for decision makers;
- By improving the mechanisms and formats for channelling academic evidence to decision makers;
- By boosting awareness amongst academics (both those directly involved in the Centres and others) of the questions that decision makers are facing, the context within which they work and how they use evidence;
- By encouraging decision makers to engage more with evidence to inform decisions and expect evidence to be presented in a way that resonates with the decisions they must take; and
- By improving decision makers' understanding of the evidence base and the complexities of applying that evidence in practice.

ESRC funding has been crucial for these Centres. In its absence, the Centres would have been smaller or may not have materialised at all in some cases. ESRC's contribution to the Centres extends beyond funding. Its prestige and reputation for independence were vital in bringing and retaining academic involvement and helping to break down the silos in which academic research and policy and practice tend to divide. Alongside ESRC's reputation, its established administrative infrastructure helped to embed independence in the Centres from the start. Ownership of these processes was a key part of ESRC's role and without this, the setting up and running of the Centres would have been significantly slower and/or more costly.

The question of whether the ESRC's investment in the WWCs represents value for money to ESRC is not a question that can be fully answered by this study as it has not been possible to quantify and monetise the impact of the Centres' work.³⁴ However, ESRC was central to the establishment of the WWCs. The centres are unlikely to have existed in their current form or at their current scale, without ESRC's investment. Although it is not possible to fully quantify at this stage, as outlined above, one does not have to expect too much of the Centres for the ESRC's investment to likely constitute good value for money. Key to any future investment by the ESRC in WWCs is creating a much clearer benchmark for the Centres against which their performance can be objectively assessed to avoid future difficulty in determining value for money.

³³ There is no widely agreed definition of knowledge mobilisation. For some commentators, knowledge mobilisation refers to activities undertaken to make evidence available and accessible to decision makers e.g. through translation, dissemination etc. We have taken a more holistic view of knowledge mobilisation for this work, which also captures how research activity is shaped as well as how academics who are confident to engage with decision making when undertaking research and decision makers who are confident in making use of research in their work.

The ESRC's model of funding the investments in scope of this evaluation is to jointly provide a grant to the What Works Centre with other co-funders.³⁵ The division of funding and management responsibility across ESRC and other funders means that the impact of investments has to be attributed across the different stakeholders involved. To reach a view of the extent of the contribution made by ESRC to knowledge mobilisation through its investment in What Works involves first establishing what the Centres themselves have contributed to knowledge mobilisation and then assessing the contribution that ESRC funding and activities have made to those achievements. A detailed Centre-by-Centre assessment is provided in Annex C. This chapter draws together these detailed assessments to provide an overall commentary on the contribution of ESRC to knowledge mobilisation as defined in the methodology.

3.1 Contribution to knowledge mobilisation by Centres

In this section, we draw together and summarise the contributions to knowledge mobilisation for each of the ESRC-funded WWCs. We also provide our view of the contribution of ESRC to these achievements. As noted above, ESRC's contribution extends beyond its financial contribution if it plays a wider role in ensuring that each Centre operates in a way which is conducive to knowledge mobilisation. Our interviews highlighted a consistent set of messages as to how ESRC adds value to individual Centres and the network as a whole. To avoid unnecessary repetition, on a Centre-by-Centre basis, we draw together these observations in Section 5.

In addition to funding provided to individual WWCs, ESRC provides a strategic fund available for collaborations between WWCs. The activities and impacts achieved through the strategic fund are out of scope. We acknowledge the possibility that some areas highlighted for improvement in this section will be addressed using the strategic fund.

3.1.1 What Works Centre for Wellbeing (WW Wellbeing)

The WW Wellbeing was launched in October 2014 and is unique in its structure. It consists of four academic strands which each received separate grants and an associated "hub".

The Strategic Hub comprises an evidence team, a communications team, an implementation team and a governance team. Together, these teams help the hub to achieve its three key roles, which are to:

1. Provide thought leadership and coordinate across the wellbeing sphere of policy makers, practitioners and each of the academic strands. This also involves promoting collaboration between the strands and the wider WWN.

³⁴ Going forward, it will be important for ESRC and the Centres themselves to gather as much evidence as possible to illustrate that their work represents good value for money. Quantitative data alone will be insufficient to provide enough insight into this but qualitative work, including for example case studies, can shed some light on the sort of value that the work of the Centres generates. Periodic surveys of the users of the Centres' work will also add valuable evidence on the extent to which Centres engage with their audiences. The key to useful evidence of this nature will be capturing the work of the Centres against a clear counterfactual.

³⁵ Even in the case where it is not jointly funding an investment with another major co-funder, the funded academic institution will continue to bear 20% of the full economic cost of the proposed activity.

2. Conduct translation, communication and implementation activities for the Centre. This ranges from running WW Wellbeing's Twitter handle and website to engaging with policy makers and practitioners through events, and offering advice and support. It also includes publishing briefs and blogs which were cited by half of those interviewed as being some of the most helpful content produced by the Centre.
3. Perform a quality assurance role according to the principles of robustness, relevance and communication on the work produced by the four strands.

The four WW Wellbeing strands are as follows:

- **Cross-Cutting Capability (Lifelong Wellbeing):** Hosted by the London School of Economics (LSE) Centre for Economic Performance. The strand's objective is to build the capability or the "skills" of the WW Wellbeing users to understand, present, analyse, interpret and apply wellbeing evidence to inform decision-making.³⁶ The cross-cutting team was intended to be embedded into the hub but this was not completed.
- **Culture and Sport:** Hosted by Brunel University. The strand's objective is to analyse and enhance the existing research and evidence base on the effectiveness of different interventions in sport and culture in making a positive impact on wellbeing in different contexts, and to increase the utility of the evidence base for policy makers and practitioners to make better-informed choices about exploiting culture and sport interventions to improve wellbeing.³⁷
- **Work and Learning:** Hosted by the University of East Anglia (UEA) Norwich Business School. This strand's objective is to develop a better understanding of what works in terms of raising the wellbeing of the unemployed, those in work and adult learners, and to publish and disseminate findings in a format that can be acted upon by prospective users.³⁸
- **Community Wellbeing:** Hosted by the University of Liverpool. This strand's objective is to highlight the most effective ways of making a positive impact on individual or community wellbeing and to demonstrate how those who are most influential or have the most interest can act to improve wellbeing.³⁹

While the distinction between the strands is clear from the perspective of the Centre, the intricate relationship between the strands, and in particular the lack of differentiation in the eyes of many of the users we interviewed, prompted us to carry out a more holistic assessment of the impact of WW Wellbeing. Despite this approach, it is worth noting that, while most strands were helpful in completing this evaluation, the level of data they were able to share varied in line with the level of engagement from the strand.

ESRC contributed approximately £1.8 million of funding to WW Wellbeing between June 2015 and October 2018. This equated to around 40% of the funding, with the remaining funding coming from a range of funders including DCMS, BEIS, MHCLG, DWP, DH, DfT and the Welsh Government. Following this initial funding period, ESRC contributed a further £1.3 million for specific projects and the Centre has received

³⁶ What Works Wellbeing Cross-Cutting Capability specification.

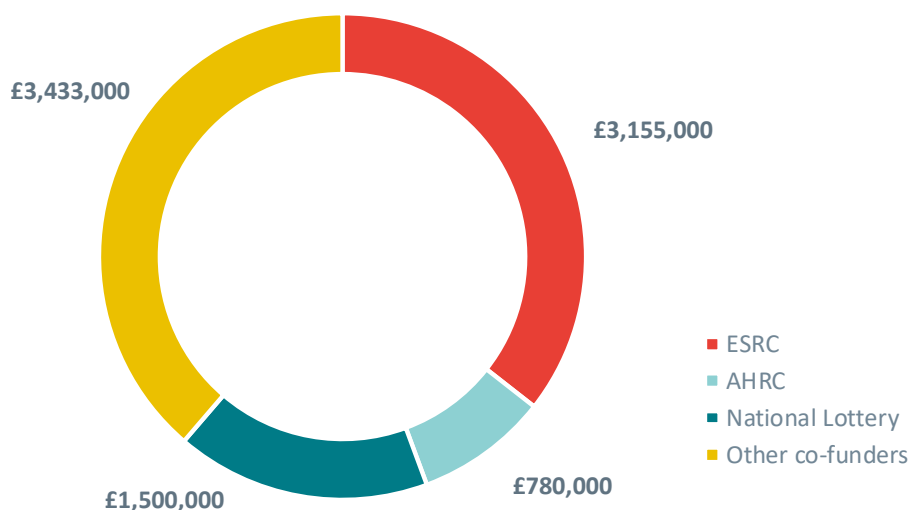
³⁷ What Works Wellbeing Sport and Culture specification.

³⁸ What Works Wellbeing Work and Learning specification.

³⁹ What Works Wellbeing Community specification.

additional external funding including £1.5 million from the National Lottery. WW Wellbeing also received a £49k strategic fund investment from ESRC.⁴⁰

Figure 7 WW Wellbeing funding breakdown



Source: Frontier Economics analysis of ESRC data.

Note: ESRC figure includes £49k strategic fund, a type of fund which was awarded by ESRC for particular research programmes which usually involve several WWCs; as such, while the funding is awarded to a “lead applicant” (to which we attribute the investment in the chart), in reality this funding is shared between several WWCs.

Key contributions of the Centre

Across its four strands and together with the hub, WW Wellbeing produced 196 evidence reports⁴¹ and 16 systematic reviews, and conducted 72 workshops.

The Centre has a significant reach, having achieved a large number of website views and a substantial Twitter following. For example, Figure 10 shows the monthly impressions that are achieved by posts tweeted by WW Wellbeing’s Twitter handle. In

⁴⁰ Strategic funds are funds awarded by ESRC for particular research programmes which usually involve several WWCs; as such, while the funding is awarded to a “lead applicant” (to which we attribute the investment here), in reality this funding is shared between several WWCs.

⁴¹ Between 2016 and 2018.

total, between September 2016 and March 2020, the Centre achieved 5.4 million impressions, a number that has grown steadily over time.

Figure 8 Monthly impressions of posts tweeted by @WhatWorksWB



Source: Twitter analytics for the @WhatWorksWB Twitter handle provided by WW Wellbeing hub.

Note: Not adjusted for growth in Twitter users over time.

The WW Wellbeing's work has done a great deal to enhance the profile of wellbeing measurement as a research area.

"The Centre has raised the profile of wellbeing." (WW Wellbeing practitioner)

A clear example of this is its successful promotion, championed by the Strategic Hub's evidence team, of the use of wellbeing as a valid aim of public resources, as defined in HM Treasury's Green Book.⁴² In 2018, the Green Book was revised with direct input from the Centre to include wellbeing as an aim. This impact was also recognised by numerous survey respondents.

Another achievement of the Centre is that it was able to establish "itself as a credible/independent source of wellbeing data" (survey respondent – practitioner). This is in line with evidence found in previous research on the WWCs which found that "Wellbeing has been establishing credibility and status as a major known voice in its field through producing relevant research".⁴³

One academic respondent described the Centre as their "go to" source. It was able to achieve this due to its high-quality output. It consistently outperformed the other four WWCs which we conducted surveys for with regard to the user-perceived quality of its content⁴⁴ and the impact that the Centre had on the individual.⁴⁵ For example, 69%⁴⁶ of survey respondents agreed to a significant extent that the Centre's output was "accessible", and interviewees (two from funding bodies and one practitioner) pointed

⁴² The Green Book is guidance issued by HM Treasury on how to appraise policies, programmes and projects. It also provides guidance on the design and use of monitoring and evaluation before, during and after implementation (HM Treasury website).

⁴³ Gough D, Maidment C, Sharples J (2018), "UK What Works Centres: Aims, methods and contexts". London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London. ISBN: 978-1-911605-03-4.

⁴⁴ We asked: "To what extent do you agree that the What Works Centre for Wellbeing provides content that is _____?" using the following adjectives: relevant; useful; robust; comprehensive; authoritative; independent; accessible; and practical.

⁴⁵ We asked: "To what extent has the WWC helped you as an individual with the following?": More aware of the evidence; Access the evidence; Understand the evidence; Use the evidence.

⁴⁶ N = 98.

to the Centre's ability to distil evidence into digestible and user-friendly outputs – the accessibility of WW Wellbeing's outputs may also be partly attributable to its having a central communications team. These user-friendly outputs include its blogs, which were highly praised, and the cost benefit toolkit which was described as helpful.

CASE STUDY: WELLBEING AS AN EXPLICIT POLICY OBJECTIVE

HM Treasury publishes guidance – The Green Book – on how to appraise policies, programmes and projects in order to achieve government policy objectives and deliver social value. It applies to all proposals that concern public spending, taxation, changes to regulations, and changes to the use of existing public assets and resources.

It also provides guidance on the design and use of monitoring and evaluation before, during and after implementation.

National performance and therefore policy decision making has traditionally been measured in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) and productivity. More recently, there has been a shift towards considering a broader set of societal objectives.

In 2018 the Green Book was revised with direct input from the What Works Centre for Wellbeing to explicitly include wellbeing as an aim of policy appraisal. The Green Book now states that:

“Economic appraisal is based on the principles of welfare economics – that is, how the government can improve social welfare or wellbeing”

This addition embeds the use of wellbeing evidence into the practice of policy evaluations. It is an example of the Centre successfully raising the profile of a complex area of research and policy interest, and is clear evidence of impact on guidance that will inform policy making and a better understanding of this area of research.

This achievement has been recognised by the numerous stakeholders we engaged with. One interviewee from Central Government stated that:

“The Centre's biggest achievement was getting wellbeing on the agenda and demonstrating that it... can be assessed with rigour and linked to economics”.

The work conducted by the Centre around loneliness appears to be one of its most impactful pieces despite the lack of ESRC funding.⁴⁷ One interviewee claimed that the work had helped set policy direction and achieve buy-in from policy colleagues:

“The work on loneliness was well received, and has been useful in setting the policy direction...[The reason it was successful was that:] There was buy-in by policy colleagues, who were quite interested in the outputs. And the people running the project had a clear idea on what they wanted to achieve, and communicated the project well.”
(Central government official)

In addition, the DCMS has cited the work on loneliness in the Building Connections funding scheme.

⁴⁷ ESRC was not involved at all in this specific piece of work; rather, it was funded by National Lottery. Therefore ESRC can only take credit in so far as saying that ESRC's investment was instrumental in the creation of the Centre and without the Centre this piece of work would not have happened.

There were some areas in which according to stakeholders there was room for improvement. While the content produced by the Centre was praised for its high quality, some of the output was considered “too theoretical to be useful in practice” by a couple of users (for instance, the handbook on how to integrate wellbeing into economic analysis within government). This has reportedly limited its impact in practical work although the hub is working with the academics to focus on communicating their findings in a practical way. Some of the stakeholders we interviewed reported that the nature of funding arrangements and, notably, a perceived lack of flexibility afforded to the Centre has also hindered their ability to react to decision makers’ requests regarding what would be helpful.

In addition, stakeholders reported tensions between the hub and some of the academic strands⁴⁸ which it was felt could have been minimised by funders setting clearer expectations at the outset regarding the hub’s role and providing appropriate levers to support the hub’s role in managing the programmes of work across the strands (e.g. direct funding for each of the strands to be centralised via the hub, or accountability measures to ensure the hub and the relevant strands remained in constant communication).

As far as the ESRC’s role is concerned, it was reported that the ESRC was at the forefront of the partnership to start with as it worked collaboratively with the hub to pull people together and offered match-funding which helped to leverage additional funding partners. Over time, the nature of the engagement changed as the funding status of WW Wellbeing changed. In the first instance (during 2015-18) ESRC was a core funder contributing around 40% of the centre’s core funding. Since 2018, ESRC has contributed in other ways⁴⁹ as it is no longer a core funder.

A concern was raised by the hub that these changes may have affected the Centre’s ability to continue to obtain funding. They believe that the changes led to challenges and friction which could have been avoided with increased communication to understand what both ESRC and the Centre needed from each other.

In summary, WW Wellbeing has widely disseminated evidence via its four workstreams, but it is difficult to disentangle the impact of individual workstreams and thus evaluate them separately. Users found the evidence accessible and digestible, and 89% of survey respondents agreed to some extent or to a significant extent that WW Wellbeing had helped them as an individual to use the evidence on wellbeing in their day-to-day work.⁵⁰ Further, WW Wellbeing has done a great deal to enhance the profile of wellbeing measurement as a research area, for example through the inclusion of wellbeing as an aim of public resources as defined in HM Treasury’s Green Book. However, there is less evidence of how the Centre has helped practitioners mobilise evidence.

⁴⁸ The unique structure of WW Wellbeing was intended to promote collaboration between the hub and the academic strands. The extent to which this was achieved varies across the different strands. In particular, while the team from LSE running the Cross-Cutting strand and the hub achieved a lot, it was felt that the collaboration could have been even stronger. For example, the Cross-Cutting strand was the subject of three board actions and a claw-back of funds which were diverted to the hub.

⁴⁹ This has included transition funding to the Centre via the academic strands during the period 2018-19 as well as linked investment via the Secondary Data Analysis Initiative (SDAI) call and other awards where WW Wellbeing has been able to be included as co-investigators

⁵⁰ N = 97.

3.1.2 Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP)

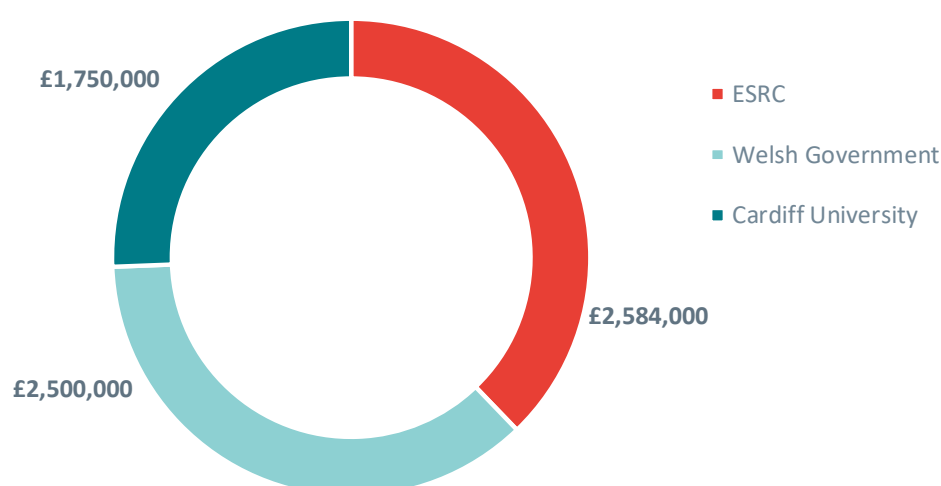
The WCPP was established in October 2017. It works with leading policy experts to provide Ministers, the Civil Service and public services in Wales with independent and authoritative evidence and expertise to improve policy-making and public service outcomes. It also undertakes academic research to advance understanding of policy-making and evidence use.

The WCPP builds on a demand-led model of evidence mobilisation which was developed by its predecessor – the Public Policy Institute for Wales (PPIW). ESRC funding has enabled the WCPP to extend this way of working to meeting public services' evidence needs alongside those of Welsh Government Ministers.

ESRC committed approximately £2.5 million of core funding to the WCPP between October 2017 and September 2022. This was matched by funding from the Welsh Government. In addition, Cardiff University has provided about £1.75 million of funding.

In addition to this core funding, to date, the WCPP has attracted seven other grants with a total value of approximately £300,000 from the ESRC's What Works Strategic Fund, the ESRC/UKRI Productivity Initiative, the National Institute for Health Research, the NHS Confederation, the Welsh Local Government Association, and Wales TUC. Funding from the What Works Strategic Fund has been allocated to two projects for which the WCPP is the lead applicant and has been shared among several WWCs that have worked in collaboration with the WCPP. The activities and impacts achieved through the strategic fund are out of scope, albeit that we acknowledge it is possible that some areas highlighted for improvement in this section will be addressed using the strategic fund.

Figure 9 WCPP funding breakdown



Source: Frontier Economics analysis of ESRC data.

Key contributions of the Centre

Building on the links and work of the PPIW, the WCPP was well placed to make a positive impact on the Welsh Government policy landscape. The Centre has reviewed and mapped existing evidence on public service provision, produced new outputs (such as 14 peer-reviewed journal papers), and communicated evidence to policy makers.⁵¹ To date, the Centre has also hosted a variety of events to disseminate this evidence, including 27 expert workshops and roundtables. Beyond this, the Centre has been active in using online and social media channels to further disseminate its work.

The Centre collaborates closely with the Welsh Government to identify its evidence needs, ensuring that collaboration is at the heart of the evidence produced and that this evidence is fit for purpose, according to a member of the WCPP advisory board we interviewed. Furthermore, the WCPP's unique demand-led, expert-oriented model has enabled high-quality outputs to be produced in a timely and responsive fashion for stakeholders. The Centre is seen to provide an important brokerage role, bringing together people with the right knowledge to address a given policy issue. This has been important for developing links between policy and academia which did not previously exist. It has also aided Public Service Boards to establish focus for research, ensuring priorities are aligned across Boards.

The policy impact of this very dynamic activity is evident from a few stand-out examples such as the success of the work on preventing youth homelessness, which was viewed almost 1,800 times and downloaded over 800 times. It also resulted in a £4.8 million innovation fund to develop housing and provide support to prevent youth homelessness.

"The WCPP report tells me that there is a clear need to promote and encourage new and innovative options to both house and support young people. I am therefore pleased to announce £4.8m of funding to establish a brand-new innovation fund to develop suitable housing and support options for young people." (The Minister for Housing and Regeneration November 2018)⁵²

In total, the WCPP has contributed to as many as 60 ministerial briefings and 44 reports. According to our surveys, the WCPP has the highest engagement out of the four Centres with evidence reviews and reports, and there was broad agreement amongst interviewees that the outputs produced by the WCPP were of high quality.

Our survey found that the WCPP's activities have helped stakeholders become more aware of the evidence and gaps in evidence, and to access and understand the evidence. For each of these impacts, at least 24% of respondents⁵³ said the WCPP had helped to a significant extent, with at least 80% saying it had helped to some extent. It also appears to have helped stakeholders to use the evidence, although this appears to be the weakest area for the Centre, with 63% of respondents⁵⁴ saying that the Centre had helped them to use the evidence to some extent. This is corroborated by one practitioner we interviewed who felt that the Centre is yet to determine how to effectively

⁵¹ According to WCPP data provided to Frontier Economics.

⁵² <https://sheltercymru.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Statement-by-the-Minister-for-Housing-and-Regeneration-20-11-2018.docx>

⁵³ N=68.

⁵⁴ N=68.

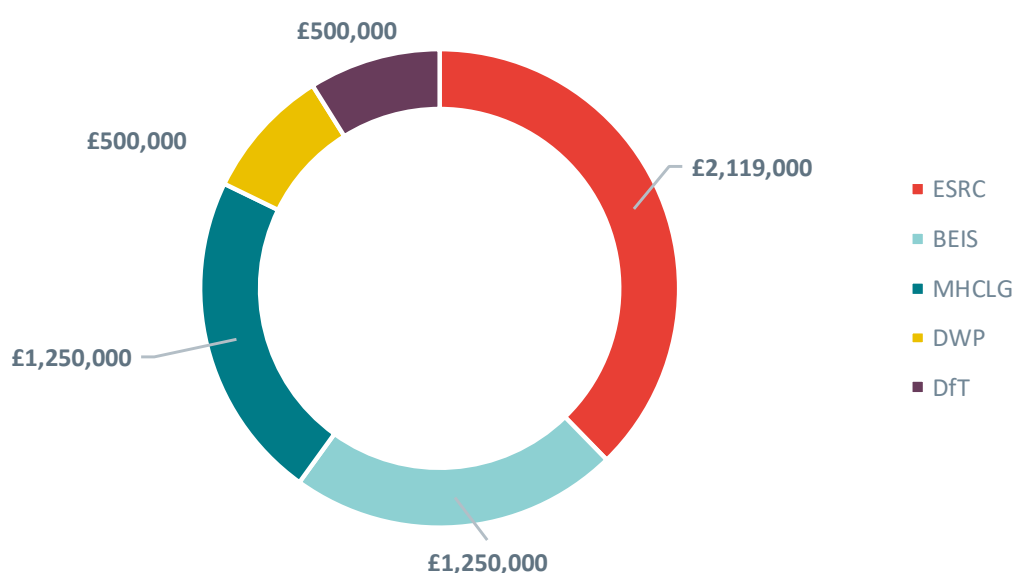
and consistently turn evidence into practice. They noted that while the relationship and collaboration with government is strong, there is room for improvement in collaborative relationships with practitioners on the ground, in particular, by helping practitioners overcome the barriers to evidence use through additional support, which is currently lacking. This is to be expected because the WCPP inherited from the PPIW an established way of working and trusted relationships with Ministers which it had developed over the previous four years. It has been working with public services for much less time. Moreover, public services are a more diverse group of evidence users, which makes the task of defining evidence needs more complex.

3.1.3 What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth (WW Local Economic Growth)

WW Local Economic Growth was also one of the earliest Centres to be set up, established in the autumn of 2013 and funded by ESRC, DfT, BEIS and MHCLG.⁵⁵ The Centre's overriding objective was to support, develop and deliver better local economic policies which are based on the best available evidence.

ESRC contributed approximately £2.1 million of funding to WW Local Economic Growth between September 2013 and February 2019 and has committed a further £1.5 million for the third phase beginning in 2020. This equates to around 50% of phase 1 funding and 20% of phase 2 funding and will account for around 40% of phase 3 funding. Other funders for the Centre were BEIS (all phases), MHCLG (all phases), DWP (phase 2) and DfT (phases 2 and 3). The fact that the Centre is going through its third funding cycle, and there is a continued desire by central government to continue to fund it, is at least partially symptomatic of the Centre's success.

Figure 10 WW Local Economic Growth funding breakdown



Source: Frontier Economics analysis of ESRC data.

Note: ESRC figure includes £119k strategic fund, a type of fund which was awarded by ESRC for particular research programmes which usually involve several WWCs; as such, while the funding is awarded to

⁵⁵ The Centre was previously funded by DWP as well.

a “lead applicant” (to which we attribute the investment in the chart), in reality this funding is shared between several WWCs.

Key contributions of the Centre

WW Local Economic Growth has produced a significant amount of publications and other materials which appear to be reaching their intended audience and are considered useful by funders and practitioners that we interviewed. It has assessed and translated almost 11,000 papers into 11 evidence reviews, has produced 16 toolkits and 32 “How to evaluate” case studies in order to help practitioners better understand and use evidence.

Its work has a significant reach. Its evidence reviews have received over 17,000 views and its toolkits have received 9,000 views, and the Centre has 3,500 Twitter followers. It also appears to have a base of regular, engaged users, with 60% of respondents to our user survey saying that they engaged with WW Local Economic Growth evidence reviews on a regular basis.⁵⁶ High levels of engagement were also reported for research reports, policy briefings, blogs and case studies.

On the whole, users of the Centre’s content indicated that WW Local Economic Growth produces impactful content (Figure 60). Around half of respondents indicated that the content produced by WW Local Economic Growth is to a large extent independent, authoritative, robust, useful and relevant. There is potentially some room for improvement when it comes to the extent to which materials are perceived as practical and comprehensive – around 20%-30% of survey respondents indicated that the outputs of the Centre are to a large extent practical or comprehensive (around 80% indicated that they are practical and comprehensive to some extent).

Data we received from the Centre shows that the WW Local Economic Growth team has provided advice to over 60 organisations around the country, including at least 17 local authorities and ten government departments. Events hosted by WW Local Economic Growth in recent years have been attended by over 700 people.

The Centre is regarded as having been instrumental in supporting local and central government in certain initiatives. The guidance on how to develop a Local Industrial Strategy (LIS) was considered particularly impactful by all the local practitioners we interviewed (bar one, who did not mention the LIS), who commented that this was used widely by central government, local authorities, Local Economic Partnerships and others.

“The work the Centre did on Local Industrial Strategies was very well received – in particular the guidance they produced. The reason for that was that it solved lots of pressing issues we had at the time in terms of developing a strategy. A combination of right time, right place and producing a very relevant piece of work led to this being very widely used by local authorities.” (Local government stakeholder)

Similarly, the work around how to conduct evaluations (guidance and workshops) was very well received by the practitioners that we interviewed.

⁵⁶ Defined here as more than 2-3 times a year (N = 66).

“...the work of the Centre and the workshops have been very helpful in shaping our thinking about monitoring and evaluation. Before, this used to be an afterthought – WW Local Economic Growth has helped to bring it to front of mind and embed best practice as well as help navigate the political landscape.” (Local government stakeholder)

Therefore WW Local Economic Growth appears to have both widely disseminated existing evidence and generated new evidence. Our interviews with WW Local Economic Growth stakeholders indicated that the Centre’s outputs have impacted practitioner decision-making, and our user survey suggests that WW Local Economic Growth work has mobilised knowledge by helping end users to make better use of evidence.⁵⁷

CASE STUDY: LOCAL INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

As part of the wider push to improve productivity in the UK, the Industrial Strategy (published in 2017) articulated the five foundations of productivity and set out several Grand Challenges to put the UK at the forefront of the industries of the future.

In the following two years, Local Government including Combined Authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships were required to spell out how they would support the strategic priorities set out by the Industrial Strategy to promote productivity growth. As a result writing Local Industrial Strategy (LIS) became a prime focus for Combined Authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) up and down the country.

WW Local Economic Growth produced a range of materials to support Local Authorities and LEPs in the development of their LIS. These included:

- A publication setting out what principles places should bear in mind when developing their LIS;
- Workshops with interested parties;
- Various toolkits which touched on relevant areas.

The materials were very well received by their intended audience. We interviewed five stakeholders who had involvement in the preparation of LIS and the majority (unprompted) highlighted the work carried out by WW Local Economic Growth in this area as particularly useful. Stakeholders considered the guidance document⁵⁸ produced by WW Local Economic Growth as particularly insightful and valuable. The document proved to be a valuable resource at the right time. One stakeholder commented that:

“This work solved lots of pressing issues we had in developing a strategy. It was a combination of right time, right place and producing a very relevant piece of work. Lots of other Local Authorities have been using it too.”

⁵⁷ We found that 57% of survey respondents agreed to some extent or to a significant extent that “the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth helped you as an individual use the evidence” (N = 60).

⁵⁸ https://whatworksgrowth.org/public/files/18-06-21_Designing_Effective_Local_Industrial_Strategies.pdf

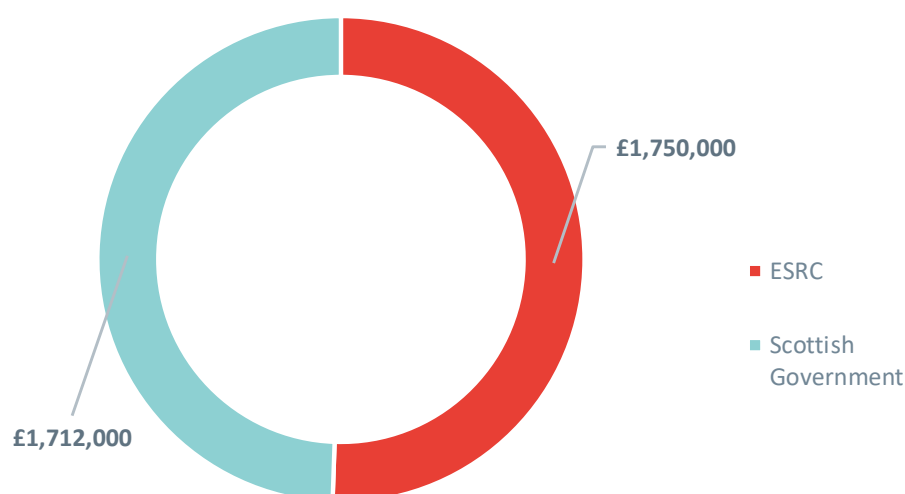
3.1.4 What Works Scotland (WW Scotland)

WW Scotland was established in response to the 2011 Christie Commission⁵⁹ and the Scottish Government's priorities for reform⁶⁰ to focus on developing a so-called "Scottish approach" to public services reform. The initiative was set up jointly by the Scottish Government and ESRC and brought together the University of Glasgow and the University of Edinburgh as academic partners. At the conclusion of the agreed funding period, the Centre ceased to exist as neither ESRC nor the Scottish Government renewed funding. The WW Scotland website and other online resources are now maintained by Policy Scotland at the University of Glasgow.⁶¹

As with the other WWCs, WW Scotland aimed to improve the use of evidence in decision-making. This Centre's work primarily focused on public services in local areas across Scotland; specifically in four council areas (Aberdeenshire, Fife, Glasgow and West Dunbartonshire).

ESRC contributed approximately £1.75 million of funding to WW Scotland between July 2014 and December 2019. This equated to around 50% of the funding received by the Centre, with the remaining 50% coming from the Scottish Government. Interviewees felt that without the funding contributed by ESRC the Centre would have struggled to attract the critical mass of researchers required to get good work done. This suggests that without ESRC investment WW Scotland would have achieved less than 50% of what it did achieve. Hence the ESRC impact might extend beyond the 50% contribution it provided.

Figure 11 WW Scotland funding breakdown



Source: Frontier Economics analysis of ESRC data.

⁵⁹ [Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services](#)

⁶⁰ [Scottish Government's priorities for reform](#)

⁶¹ <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/the-project/>

Key contributions of the Centre

WW Scotland did not spend as much time or resources on reviewing and mapping existing evidence compared to other Centres. Instead, the Centre worked with Community Planning Partnerships CPPs and adopted a collaborative action research approach to identify potential areas for public service reform, before generating Scotland-specific evidence on interventions. Over its lifetime, the Centre produced 247 publications and held a large number of events, including 118 workshops and 291 engagement activities.⁶²

The Centre's activities contributed to several key impacts. First, WW Scotland played an influential role in progressing and embedding participatory budgeting within the Scottish Government and local authorities, a practice which prior to this was not well known or well tested. Participatory budgeting involves community members deciding how part of a public budget will be spent, enabling citizens to work with decision makers on budget decisions about the services.⁶³ Starting off in the form of relatively small-scale projects, this work eventually developed into something "transformational", according to a WW Scotland practitioner, specifically referencing participatory budgeting.

According to one practitioner we interviewed, WW Scotland resources on this topic have added to the research base, provided the evidence to inform national policy and set the groundwork for local authorities to incorporate the practice into their processes. Two CPP members were nominated for democracy pioneering awards in the UK for their work with WW Scotland on participatory budgeting and the Scottish Government has now set a target for 1% of all budgeting to be done via participatory budgeting.

Second, the evaluability framework produced by WW Scotland is another good example of impact. This is a systematic approach to deciding whether and how to evaluate complex initiatives or issues. Evaluability Assessments (EAs) now form the basis of a number of policy changes and have been integrated into Scottish Government guidance to inform evaluation planning,⁶⁴ according to one WW Scotland academic we interviewed. Interaction with WW Scotland progressed from proactive suggestions by the Centre to explicit commissions by Ministers, which demonstrates the buy-in which the Centre was able to achieve and the behavioural shift by users towards embedding the number of specific and localised changes in a number of policy areas for local government, including child poverty, universal income, social justice, education and anti-social behaviour prevention, to illustrate some additional concrete impacts of WW Scotland outputs. Together, all these impacts contributed to an emerging focus on place-based approaches in Scottish policy-making.⁶⁵ For example, one practitioner we interviewed mentioned that a legacy of their engagement with WW Scotland was that they were currently working on a project discussing what a CPP could learn from the "Everyone Everyday" project in Dagenham and how it could perhaps help in the recovery from COVID-19.

⁶² According to WW Scotland data provided to Frontier Economics.

⁶³ <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/topics/participatory-budgeting/>

⁶⁴ See for example: <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/research-and-analysis/2018/12/evaluation-policy-makers-straightforward-guide/documents/evaluation-policy-makers-straightforward-guide/evaluation-policy-makers-straightforward-guide/govscot%3Adocument/00543857.pdf>

⁶⁵ <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/topics/place-based-approaches/>

Links between the Scottish public sector and the academic community have also been developed. A key achievement identified by the Centre was its role as a catalyst for public servants and academics to work in more inquiry-focused ways.⁶⁶ Although it is too early to make a full assessment of long-lasting impact, CPPs reported that the connections which WW Scotland helped build between the communities and the academics are still being used.

“Even though the Centre is now gone, the connections between the communities, and some of the academics are still being used.” (WW Scotland local government)

“The legacy of the Centre, such as new connections and training materials have meant the capacity has been built to maintain the relationship between research and council policy.” (WW Scotland local government)

However one interviewee (practitioner) noted that the relationships they developed “could have been developed further” and that the relationship has “slightly faded away”. This may point to the value of Centres depreciating over time without continued nurturing.

While it is clear that the thinking and the products from WW Scotland generally landed well with their public sector users, and the Centre was able to secure a high level of public engagement, there is some evidence to suggest that more could have been done in communicating these outputs more widely in order to maximise engagement and raise the profile of the work being done, particularly among non-governmental organisations.

Accessibility of the work was not rated as highly by survey respondents as other qualities, and this finding was particularly driven by respondents from the third and private sectors. Commonly cited development points included reference to outputs which were “too complicated to understand”, “very academic” and even “too highbrow and not practical for charities”.

3.1.5 What Works Centre for Crime Reduction (WW Crime Reduction)

One of the first WWCs to be set up, the WW Crime Reduction, was established in 2013 within the College of Policing⁶⁷ alongside an academic consortium of eight universities to support the Centre led by University College London.

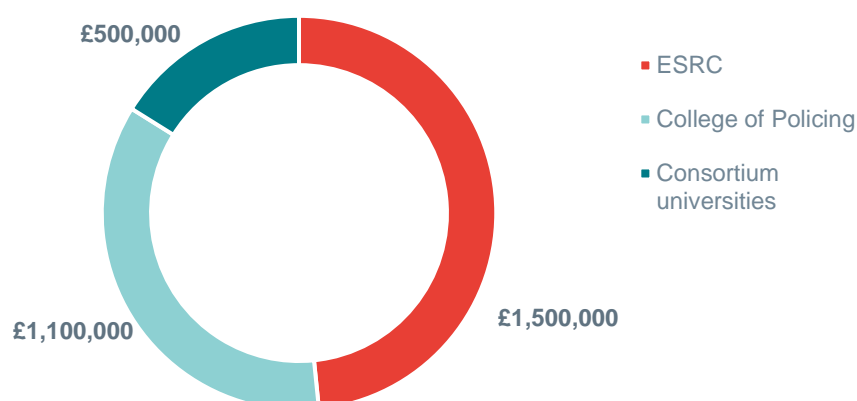
ESRC investment in the WW Centre for Crime Reduction totalled around £1,551,000 to cover the academic consortium during the period from September 2013 to March 2018. The College of Policing continued to be a member of the WWCN after 2018. The breakdown of this funding is £1,500,000 for Phase 1 – originally set to conclude in August 2016, with a no-cost extension to 2017 – and a subsequent £51k of additional funding specifically for updating the search for crime reduction systematic reviews and drafting entries for the Crime Reduction Toolkit produced by the Centre, extending ESRC’s investment to March 2018. The ESRC’s funding was part matched (40%) by

⁶⁶ [Reflections on the What Works Scotland Initiative, August 2019](#)

⁶⁷ The College of Policing was established in 2012 as the professional body for everyone who works for the police service in England and Wales.

the College of Policing, with the remaining 10% contributed in-kind. Participating universities in the consortium also contributed around £500k for Phase 1 in proportion to their staff costs.

Figure 12 WW Centre for Crime Reduction Phase 1 funding breakdown



Source: Frontier Economics analysis of ESRC data.

Note: The College of Policing funding figure refers to cash investment and does not include any contribution “in-kind” such as staff hours.

Key contributions of the Centre

Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the UK, and the subsequent pressure this put on policing services, we were not able to gather as much evidence as originally planned for the WW Crime Reduction. Specifically, we were not able to carry out interviews with practitioners or circulate a user survey as we did for other Centres that received core funding from ESRC. Instead we rely on three interviews with other stakeholders – with an academic and investment managers – data provided by WW Crime Reduction, and evidence from previous assessments to evaluate WW Crime Reduction’s contributions.

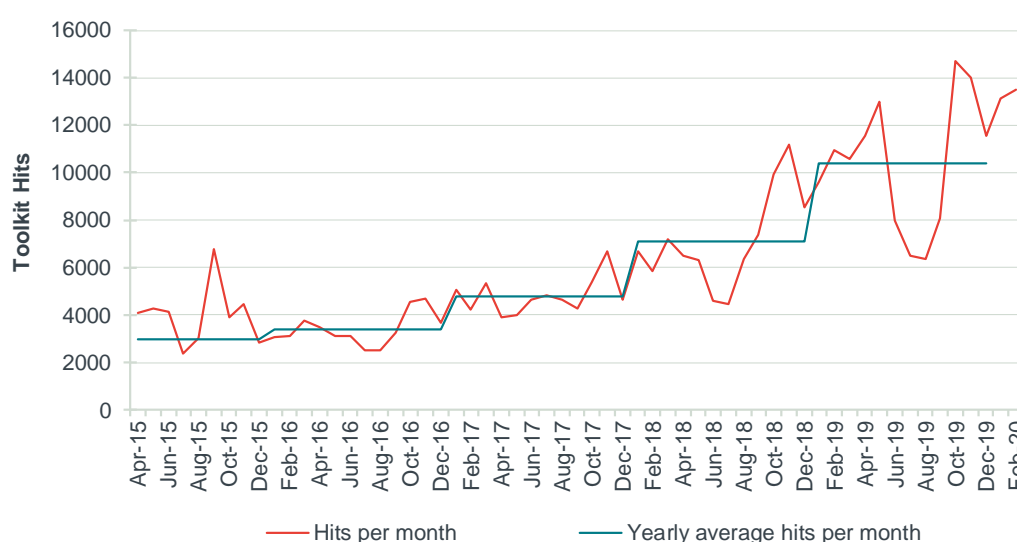
Our interviews with the investment managers highlighted the two main methods through which WW Crime Reduction sought to mobilise knowledge while receiving ESRC funding: (i) the dissemination of evidence; and (ii) aiding the academic consortium in its systematic mapping and translating evidence for practitioners. This was achieved through reviewing all existing systematic reviews of what works in crime reduction, producing 12 new systematic reviews, conducting primary research, developing the effect, mechanism, moderators, implementation and economic (EMMIE) framework, producing a cost benefit tool, designing and evaluating an evidence-based learning programme, building one toolkit and producing 54 toolkit narratives (more have since been added following the end of ESRC funding).

By mapping and translating evidence, the Centre made evidence more easily accessible, understandable and, ultimately, useable by all decision makers.

“Synthesis and translation of existing evidence in the form of a ‘tool’ is useful to practitioners.” (former WW Centre for Crime Reduction investment manager)

The stand-out example of this was the Crime Reduction Toolkit, which widely disseminated a large body of research and in 2017 won a European Public Sector Award.⁶⁸ Figure 13 shows that the Crime Reduction Toolkit web page on the WW Crime Reduction site has experienced high and growing visitor numbers. Other sources also suggest the Crime Reduction Toolkit had a far reach.^{69,70} For example, all police interviewees in the evaluation of WW Crime Reduction carried out by Birkbeck, University of London and the College of Policing had heard about the Crime Reduction Toolkit (3.5 years after the Centre’s launch). However, most had not used the toolkit themselves in any detailed way at that point.⁷¹ This suggests that while WW Crime Reduction was able to widely *disseminate* evidence to practitioners, the extent to which it *mobilised* knowledge by affecting practitioners’ day-to-day decision-making was limited at the time the study was conducted and it has not been possible to assess it as part of this study.

Figure 13 Crime Reduction Toolkit web page hits, April 15 to Feb 20



Source: Frontier Economics analysis of WW Crime Reduction data.

The academic consortium also developed the EMMIE evidence evaluation framework referred to above. The EMMIE framework provides decision makers with a method by which to assess and rank evidence on crime reduction. While we do not have evidence on how the EMMIE framework (which is used to assess evidence disseminated in the Crime Reduction Toolkit) contributed to knowledge mobilisation directly, it offers a

⁶⁸ https://www.epsa-projects.eu/index.php/Crime_Reduction_Toolkit

⁶⁹ College of Policing Annual Survey 2017. (Inconsistencies were identified in the responses to the questions on use of College resources which has led to some doubts about the reliability of this data. This may be due to lack of familiarity with College terminology for specified products or services.)

⁷⁰ Hunter, Gillian and May, Tiggey and Hough, Mike (2017), “An evaluation of the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction: final report”. Project Report. College of Policing, London, UK.

⁷¹ Ibid.

channel through which more evidence can be incorporated into decision-making in policing if it were used to its potential.

“The WW Centre for Crime Reduction’s development of the EMMIE framework was worth the investment alone [because it provides a more practical framework for assessing evidence than conducting RCTs].” (WW Crime Reduction consortium academic)

The academic consortium also acted to fill the gaps it identified in the evidence base for crime reduction. Over its lifetime, it produced around 50 publications, some of which resulted from the fast-tracking of priority research identified by the College of Policing. We were unable to determine whether the primary research of the consortium led to knowledge mobilisation but, given that the research was identified as priority primary research, it was able to plug key gaps in evidence which could be instantly used.

From the Centre’s formation to the end of ESRC funding, there is some evidence that attitudes of police practitioners towards using research in their day-to-day activities had improved. The independent Birkbeck evaluation of WW Crime Reduction from 2017 found that there had been “a shift towards greater use of research and ... that greater importance is now attached to using research” compared to 2014.⁷² The Crime Reduction Toolkit continues to be viewed frequently on the WW Crime Reduction website and collaboration between police forces and academia has generally increased.⁷³

While ESRC’s investment in WW Crime Reduction appears to have led to the dissemination of evidence widely within crime reduction, the extent of the impact this had on knowledge mobilisation during the period that ESRC provided funding is unclear from our evaluation. However, ESRC’s funding was instrumental in the early part of WW Crime Reduction’s lifetime and has thus facilitated the Centre’s ongoing activities and achievements,⁷⁴ which we understand have focused increasingly on knowledge mobilisation since the conclusion of ESRC’s funding.

In summary, it is clear that some significant outputs have come out of the Centre, notably the EMMIE framework and the Crime Reduction Toolkit, which have shaped how practitioners evaluate and implement evidence-informed practice.

However, there are some ways in which WW Crime Reduction could have enhanced this impact on the crime reduction community even further. The roles of key stakeholders (ESRC, the College of Policing and researchers involved with the Centre) could have been more clearly defined and communicated. For instance, ESRC could have taken a more active role in facilitating engagement between stakeholders in order to achieve a collaborative rather than consultative working environment.

There were clearly benefits to WW Crime Reduction’s work programme being shaped by College of Policing priorities, but this may also have led to less focus on other important research which could have helped shed light on how well policing practices work in different contexts.

⁷² Hunter, Gillian and May, Tiggey and Hough, Mike (2017), “An evaluation of the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction: final report”. Project Report. College of Policing, London, UK.

⁷³ Ibid – The Birkbeck evaluation found that “Interviewees were much more likely than in 2014 to be involved in research, in partnership with a university, and identified benefits resulting from these collaborations”.

⁷⁴ <https://whatworks.college.police.uk/About/Pages/default.aspx>

Greater emphasis and more active engagement with policy makers and police forces might have generated greater demand for WW Crime Reduction outputs. For instance, interviewees from the Birkbeck evaluation recommended that the Centre should “promote and publicise where evidence-based practice had been successfully applied, to hammer home ‘live examples’ of its impact on policing practice”. Another recommendation suggested the Centre should better signal where evidence-based methods were being introduced in policing.

A generally wider perspective beyond policing (to include, for instance, educators and social workers) would have been beneficial to inform a more cross-cutting perspective on crime reduction.

3.1.6 Early Intervention Foundation (EIF)

The EIF is a charity established in 2013 to champion and support the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes.

In addition to core funding from DfE, DWP, PHE and MHCLG, ESRC provided the EIF with an additional £730k of non-core funding to fund a set of three evaluations:

1. Step-Up campaign for low-level victims of domestic violence: Blackpool Council and Lancaster University.
2. Functional Family Therapy: Croydon Council and Queens University Belfast.
3. Baby Express, a magazine for first-time parents: Greater Manchester Council and NatCen.

These projects were novel in their attempt to conduct randomised control trials (RCTs) with local authorities in partnership with academics. The ambition was that these projects could illustrate what was possible in this space and that others would follow.

Key contributions of the investment

EIF’s goal of carrying out RCTs via a collaboration between academics and local authorities was novel, but not ultimately successful as each of the projects ended before completion. The reasons for the projects ending early varied by project and included personnel issues (i.e. difficulties in recruiting practitioners and/or key personnel leaving their roles) and relationship issues (e.g. tensions between the academic and local government partners). Therefore, we were unable to find any impact resulting from ESRC’s investment in the EIF partnerships. Nonetheless, learnings can be drawn from the evaluations:

- Effective working partnerships require strong relationships to be built. Expectations should be defined, equal partnership should be maintained, and channels for communication should be set up. A willingness to participate and flexibility are required from all partners.
- Projects should have resilience built in at the outset to help withstand personnel changes, changes in scope and context.
- Clear oversight and support mechanisms for projects are required and engagement must be maintained. It does not seem to matter where this responsibility sits (whether with ESRC as the funder, EIF as the intermediary or the partners on the

project), but this function is fundamental to ensure that partnerships run as smoothly as possible.

Annex C contains further detail on these learnings.

3.1.7 Education Endowment Fund (EEF)

The (EEF) was established in 2011 by the Sutton Trust and the Impetus Trust, with a funding grant from DfE. The EEF and Sutton Trust are, together, the government-designated What Works Centre for Education.

In 2013, ESRC provided non-core funding towards the Knowledge Mobilisation Research Package for the EEF. This entailed a funded placement which was matched by EEF to fund a second member of staff. Together they carried out research and policy development activities which sought to bring about a strategic shift in the EEF's approach to engaging and implementing evidence (e.g. encouraging dialogue and interactions between research users, producers and intermediaries). The objective was to investigate and promote more effective ways to improve the uptake of evidence-informed practices in the classroom in order to maximise the impact achieved by existing and future evidence, produced by both the Education Endowment Foundation and external partners. Over two grants, between November 2013 and November 2019, ESRC invested approximately £650k in EEF for its Knowledge Mobilisation work package. The DfE is the main overall funder for EEF. In addition to this funding, EEF together with EIF received £90k for a joint strategic fund project.

Key contributions of the investment

ESRC's funding of this work programme has had a catalytic impact on how EEF approaches knowledge mobilisation. Initially, EEF had a traditional approach to knowledge mobilisation, whereby it would develop research outputs which were then translated, communicated and disseminated. Little work was conducted on how these outputs were then implemented; instead, it was left to practitioners to find ways to use the outputs.

The work completed using ESRC's funding set out strategic ideas and translated these into practical initiatives for the EEF to adopt that would shift away from this linear approach of research outputs to users to a "systems-based" approach. A "systems-based" approach involves repeated interactions between the evidence, researchers and practitioners in order to increase the uptake of finished evidence products.

"ESRC's investment helped EEF move with the times because of the lead researcher's understanding of knowledge production and its use. Without their help EEF would not be the organisation that it is today." (An academic involved with the WWN)

This approach is reflected in the Research Schools Network developed by the EEF, which supports the use of evidence to improve teaching practice. The Research Schools bridge the gap between research and practice by sharing their knowledge on putting research into practice, and by supporting schools in their region to use evidence more effectively to inform their teaching and really make a difference in the classroom.

Another example of this strategic shift towards "systems-based" approaches to knowledge mobilisation emerging from the placement is the *Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants* campaign. This campaign was the first attempt by the EEF to distil

the best available evidence on the topic into a guidance report with practical recommendations for schools. As part of the campaign, two mobilisation approaches were piloted, both involving a range of practical engagement and implementation activities (e.g. conferences, training workshops, action-planning activities and school-to-school support). These approaches were then evaluated to help understand what has and has not been effective, and the insights were subsequently used to enhance future mobilisation strategies. These learnings have fed into an additional 15 guidance reports following a similar format covering many of the key areas of interest for schools.

Furthermore, these learnings from work conducted by the lead researcher, funded by ESRC and EEF, have since been shared with other WWCs through presentations and conferences to help them develop a mobilisation strategy. Both policy and school audiences reported changes in their views, opinions or behaviours as a result of the presentations conducted by the lead researcher.⁷⁵

3.2 The role of ESRC in knowledge mobilisation

Our work identified a variety of ways in which ESRC has played a role in knowledge mobilisation that goes above and beyond the impact attributed to its direct funding of the relevant WWCs. As discussed previously, we assessed the ESRC role by looking at a counterfactual where the ESRC was not involved in WWCs. This effectively asks the question: What would have happened to What Works if ESRC had not been involved in the initiative? The evidence we gathered suggests that ESRC adds value that goes well beyond the funding it provides, through:

- **Catalysing funding** from co-funders who might not otherwise have invested without participation from ESRC. This can come both from the extra money provided (allowing benefits of scale) as well as the legitimacy granted by ESRC participation;
- **Shaping and brokering** the scope of a What Works investment. ESRC grants influence negotiations with co-funders to increase focus on ESRC's goals;
- **Academic prestige** for the universities and academics interested in applying to host the Centre and receive the funding. The associated prestige means higher-quality proposals, as there is more interest and competition;
- **Providing independence** to researchers in their policy-focused work that might otherwise be influenced by government and politics. Even if there is no realistic risk of interference, ESRC can help to reduce the perception that it has occurred or could occur; and
- **Administrative processes and support** for applying for and receiving funding that would not be present in other funding models in this area. The proposal, peer-review and panel process for ESRC is unique to its status as a research council. These processes bring advantages and disadvantages for different stakeholders.

3.2.1 Catalysing funding

ESRC played a critical role in the initial establishment of the WWN. This was a consensus view amongst interviewees (including funders, academics and practitioners associated with individual Centres and interviewees with an overarching interest in the

⁷⁵ Evidence taken from ESRC internal documents.

WWN). This role extended beyond the direct financial commitment it made to the Centres to the role it played in encouraging and legitimising funding from other sources, including government departments.

Three interviewees noted that without the involvement of ESRC, the network might never have got off the ground.

“ESRC’s role in the existence of the network early on was crucial. It’s quite possible to imagine that without its funding and participation, the network would never have launched.” (Central government official)

“Bringing in funding was the main contribution of ESRC; without this, the What Works Centres certainly would’ve crumbled. This includes ESRC’s ability to bring in staff and fund their work.” (Former central government official)

“The role of ESRC was in corralling interest from across sponsors into a coherent, cross-cutting programme of work. Without ESRC taking a leading role in knowledge mobilisation as an area, there wouldn’t be clear ownership of knowledge mobilisation. Even without new research, mobilising and translating existing knowledge is extremely important and valuable. Not only that but it is a social science where improvements in understanding and practice can be made.” (Central government official)

This catalysing role continues as Centres head towards funding renewals. In the recent renewal of WW Local Economic Growth, ESRC stepped in to fill the gap left by DWP. Without this, we were told it may have been difficult for the Centre to get renewed funding over the line.

3.2.2 Shaping and brokering the role of ESRC-funded What Works Centres

ESRC was also considered to have played a critical role early in the establishment of the network. Its ability to bridge the gap between decision makers and academics was key in the early stages of developing the Centres but has continued to remain highly relevant as the Centres have evolved and new challenges have arisen. ESRC is uniquely placed to confront the challenge of easing the tension between decision-makers’ demands for fast results and digestible outputs and academic demands for rigour. ESRC was considered a mediator between academics and researchers on the one side and decision makers on the other.

“Without ESRC [the WWC] would need to be more of a consultancy model which probably wouldn’t appeal to academics.” (WW Local Economic Growth funder)

ESRC’s well-established and trusted relationships with academics were critical for bringing academics to the table but this relationship also enabled it to convey some difficult messages, such as the need for timely evidence, to the academics within the Centres.

“ESRC helped to convey need for timely evidence to academics and brought authority to the Centre.” (WCPP personnel)

It was also recognised that ESRC was prepared to experiment with the model and embrace and learn from differences between the Centres. Their role in embracing different models meant that it was possible for different styles of Centre e.g. topic based versus geographically based to be pursued. ESRC was committed to a range of approaches and for the experiences of these Centres to be learnt from, in part from an evaluation such as this.

“ESRC allowed flexibility in the What Works model and were prepared to experiment and learn from difference as opposed to opting for a one size fits all approach.” (WCPP practitioner)

“Overall, I found ESRC were very supportive of taking an innovative approach with WW Scotland and worked hard to support both WW Scotland and the Scottish Government in helping to ensure that WW Scotland was a success.” (Scottish Government official)

“ESRC were very supportive throughout the relationship...They were particularly valuable in providing the flexibility for changes to be made to the project as time went on.” (EIF practitioner)

3.2.3 Academic prestige

Our interviews with academics from across all ESRC-funded Centres revealed the importance of ESRC's academic prestige in attracting academics to get involved with the Centres. All but one (a practitioner) of the interviewees raised the point that a key part of ESRC's role was providing academic prestige to the WWCs they funded. As noted above, it was the brand and reputation of ESRC that was considered critical in achieving momentum and buy-in for the What Works projects. Without ESRC's brand and its associated reputation for independence and rigour, academics would have been far less willing to engage with What Works. Government funding partners also recognised the role that ESRC played in this regard and recognised that the involvement of ESRC was critical in getting the highest calibre academics to the table.

“Without ESRC we wouldn't get the right people.” (Funding partner, WW Local Economic Growth)

“ESRC brought academic brilliance and rigour.” (WCPP practitioner)

“ESRC funding attracted academics.” (WW Crime Reduction funding manager)

“While the Scottish Government did not appear to place specific value on ESRC brand (it carries less weight in Scotland), the Government did place significant weight on attracting the right academics to work in the Centre and ESRC brand was perceived by academics as key to achieving this.” (WW Scotland funding manager)

3.2.4 Providing independence

As found in the 2018 review of the WWCs,⁷⁶ academics highly value the independence brought by ESRC's involvement in a WWC. Interviewees noted that, if funding had been

⁷⁶ Gough D, Maidment C, Sharples J (2018), “UK What Works Centres: Aims, methods and contexts”. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London. ISBN: 978-1-911605-03-4.

provided by other funders without involvement from ESRC, the nature of the work undertaken by some of the Centres would have been slightly different (for example, it may have been dictated more by government objectives, according to a funder for WW Local Economic Growth, at the expense of academic rigour). Academics felt that they would probably have been given less freedom in discussions and there would have been more of a focus on short-term targets. They valued the longer time horizons offered by ESRC and indicated that this was critical to getting high-quality academics involved in the work,⁷⁷ although it is worth noting that this could have contributed to the inability of the Centres to report adequately on short-to-medium term outcomes.

While there were clear and recognised benefits from working directly with the other funders, regular input from ESRC was valued as it gave the researchers the academic autonomy and independence to be able to keep their academic objectives intact. On the other hand, this could mean going against government objectives, as one of the WW Scotland academics we interviewed mentioned.

ESRC helped some Centres navigate conversations with other co-funders, which allowed the academics to generate the academic work that was also in their interest. Again, this independence was perceived as being key to ensuring that high-quality academics would get involved with the Centre's work.

*“ESRC played a large role in supporting the UCL academics to ensure that they were able to create creative and independent work rather than effectively act as consultants to the College of Policing.”
(WW Crime Reduction academic)*

“ESRC bring authority to the work of the Centre, and most important is the independence which they bring.” (WCPP advisor)

However, comments from government funding partners suggested that, at times, they would have valued ESRC being stronger about pushing academics towards what they considered the “right outcomes”. This tension goes straight to the heart of the problem the ESRC-funded WWCs are trying to solve in bringing academics and decision makers together. It is to be expected that in an endeavour such as the WWCs, there will be calls from the academics to protect their academic reputations, perhaps compromising on answering policy evidence needs, coupled with calls from decision makers to answer the specific question they have posed, perhaps compromising on academic rigour. The fact that this tension arises and was demonstrated in our interviews is unsurprising. Going forward, to help reduce this tension during the funding period, ESRC should help to broker discussions to ensure that expectations are clear from the outset, for example, getting agreement from decision makers and Centres about the speed of turnaround or the relevance of outputs that is expected from Centres.

3.2.5 Administrative processes

ESRC has an established administrative infrastructure which proved a significant resource for getting the Centres up and running. This included established systems for handling data, undertaking peer review and independent governance. The consensus amongst our interviewees was that ownership of these processes was part of ESRC's role within the WWN.

⁷⁷ This involvement was as academic leads for some Centres (e.g. WW Local Economic Growth) and as partners or work strand leads in other (e.g. WW Crime Reduction and WW Wellbeing)

The implication of comments made by a range of overarching interviewees who were involved in the setting up the WWN is that, without the established ESRC administrative processes, setting up and running the Centres would have been significantly slower and/or more costly.

“Running the admin side and assurance for the academics. ESRC ‘gets’ it.” (WW Local Economic Growth funder)

“ESRC imposed stringent peer-review processes.” (Overarching - central government official)

“ESRC has a great reputation for research, and has a good infrastructure for handling data, peer review, and independent governance.” (Overarching – independent advisor to the WW Network)

After the initial setting up of the Centre, ESRC played an ongoing administrative role such as aiding with the coordination and logistics of the Centres, which was noted by a couple of the interviewees. Beyond administrative support to the commissioning and grant management processes, ESRC assigns an investment manager to each What Works centre it funds. This role involves acting as a key direct contact point for the Centre with ESRC, providing oversight and support for performance, including through promoting collaboration with ESRC and its other investments, and with a focus on impact and knowledge exchange. In addition, ESRC allocates staff resource to coordinating across its What Works portfolio and supporting collective activity that sits beyond individual investment managers, such as the Strategic Fund.

Several funders noted that the ongoing administrative role played by ESRC was an area for improvement (see section 5.1.4).

3.3 Value for money

To understand the value that ESRC has derived from its investment in WWCs would ideally involve taking each Centre in turn, quantifying its impact in terms of the knowledge it has successfully mobilised (that would not have otherwise been),⁷⁸ and then putting a value on that achievement. This exercise would be repeated across Centres to understand where the biggest impacts have been as well as identifying the factors which were intrinsic to that success. By identifying what has generated most value and why, and how it compares to other potential investments the ESRC could make, the ESRC could shape its future investment decisions.

Unfortunately, it has not been possible to identify clear quantitative measures of knowledge mobilisation against which to judge individual Centres and make comparisons between them. One could immediately jump to looking for specific examples of where each Centre’s work has influenced decision-making in a clearly positive manner (e.g. a new policy, a change in policy, a new framework) and take that as a measure of each Centre’s impact. However, while these would clearly be important examples of impact, assessing a Centre’s contribution to knowledge mobilisation on this basis alone would be a mistake. Application of knowledge may do as much to prevent mistakes of the past from being repeated as it does to influence a positive direction for change. Honing in on where changes are made as a result of evidence

⁷⁸ Relative to the counterfactual where the Centres did not exist.

ignores any examples where the correct interpretation of the evidence base is to maintain the status quo.

Such an approach would also implicitly make the assumption that all areas of policy and practice present equal opportunities for influence in a given time period. They do not. A variety of contextual factors mean that mobilisation is possible in some areas at some points in time and not others. Successful knowledge mobilisation occurs when decision makers have the knowledge base they need to consider important questions of public policy at their fingertips at the point in time at which they want to and are able to bring about change. In other words, even if the best available evidence has been synthesised and made available to decision makers in a specific area, a lack of appetite to focus on said area (due to say changing political priorities) will necessarily limit any impacts from a Centre's work. Clearly, not all areas of policy and practice present equal opportunities for influence in a given time period. A variety of contextual factors mean that mobilisation is possible in some areas at some points in time and not others. The conditions for successfully mobilising knowledge to achieve change in policy or practice are critical and vary substantially across Centres and across time.

Even if successful knowledge mobilisation occurs, it may not always be possible to trace the link directly back to a Centre's work. Decision makers work in complex environments facing a range of competing demands and challenges to implementation. When making changes, it may be extremely difficult for policy makers to surface the specific pieces of evidence or knowledge that led or contributed to a decision. The implication from all of this is that creating evidenced links between the work of the Centres and decision-making within government is, at present, extremely difficult.

That is not to say that there have not been examples of successful knowledge mobilisation where a Centre's work has had a direct influence on policy or practice. Our interviews with stakeholders revealed several such examples. For example, the guidance produced by WW Local Economic Growth about how to develop a Local Industrial Strategy is widely used by central government, local authorities, Local Economic Partnerships and others. This is an example of research and analytical expertise provided by the Centre being mobilised to translate a policy ambition into actionable evidence-based guidance on implementation. Another example is WW Wellbeing's successful promotion of the use of wellbeing as an aim of public resources, as defined in HM Treasury's Green Book.⁷⁹ In 2018, the Green Book was revised with direct input from the Centre to include wellbeing as an aim – therefore embedding the use of wellbeing evidence in the practice of policy evaluations. This is an example of the Centre successfully raising the profile of a complex area of research and policy interest and is clear evidence of impact on guidance that will inform policy-making and a better understanding of this area of research.

It was not possible to identify such clear and direct examples for all Centres, and Centres should continue to collect examples of where their work has directly delivered impact on policy and practice. But our work suggests that the Centres have played a central role in a culture change within both the UK government and academia by

⁷⁹ The Green Book is guidance issued by HM Treasury on how to appraise policies, programmes and projects. It also provides guidance on the design and use of monitoring and evaluation before, during and after implementation.

creating the conditions for knowledge mobilisation⁸⁰ – an enabling impact which extends beyond the Centres themselves. The creation of the Centres increased the emphasis and provided incentives for academics to generate evidence that is useful for decision makers taking decisions about policy and practice. The Centres have created improved mechanisms for interpreting academic evidence and channelling it to decision makers. Through engagement with the Centres, decision makers look to draw more on academic evidence to inform decisions, have a better understanding of how to interpret evidence and expect evidence to be presented in a way that resonates with the decisions they have to take. For example, our survey and interview work highlights that all Centres produce work which is used by academics, practitioners, local and central government and others. As a result of the work of the Centres, academics (both those directly involved in the Centres and others) are also more aware of the questions that decision makers are facing, the context within which they work and the need to ensure that their evidence is as useful as possible.

The desire to have a greater focus on using evidence in decision-making within government was the motivation behind the creation of the WWCs, so the Centres cannot be considered the only catalyst for the observed culture change.⁸¹ But by combining a focus on the needs of decision makers with the capacity to create and share evidence to meet those needs is key to the success of the Centres. The culture change might have been slower or stalled entirely without this combination of conditions being put in place.

We found evidence that WWC research outputs and expertise are available, accessible and being used. Between 2014 and 2020, ESRC-funded Centres produced:

- 300 evidence reviews (ca. 50 of them systematic reviews) – most respondents to our survey indicated that they draw on evidence reviews produced by the Centres on a regular basis (2-3 times a year or more);⁸²
- A range of toolkits that provide easily digestible summaries of the existing evidence base (for example, monthly views of the College of Policing's Crime Reduction Toolkit increased from 4,000 at its inception in April 2015 to a peak of just under 15,000 in October 2019);
- Hundreds of blogs and policy briefings; and
- A significant online presence with a combined Twitter following of over 200,000.⁸³

WWCs have also undertaken a wide range of direct engagement activities such as stakeholder events, training events and research surgeries for practitioners. The combination of research outputs and direct engagement is vital to build capacity,

⁸⁰ The desire to have a greater focus on using evidence in decision-making within government is what led to the creation of the WWCs, so the Centres alone cannot be considered the catalyst for the observed culture change. But by combining a focus on the needs of decision makers in government with the capacity to create and share academic evidence to meet those needs is key to the success of the Centres. The culture change might have been slower or stalled entirely without this combination of conditions being put in place.

⁸¹ An example of this culture change and desire for greater impact from research occurring in the wider research sphere is the new commitment to tie centralised university funding to "Impact Cases" submitted to the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

⁸² WW Local Economic Growth: 61% (N = 66); WCPP: 89% (N = 71); WW Scotland: 48% (N = 29); WW Wellbeing: 56% (N = 97).

⁸³ Numbers in bullets derived from data provided by the What Works Centres.

confidence and motivation amongst policy makers and practitioners such that they are able to make use of research knowledge.⁸⁴

While alternative knowledge mobilisation models were not directly considered as part of our work, it appears unlikely that, at the time the Centres were set up, there were alternative models that would have brought about a comparable culture change. Centres embarked on a lengthy process of creating relationships, synthesising existing evidence and generating a clear signal to both decision makers and academics that knowledge mobilisation is important. Alternative options could have included making knowledge mobilisation a more intrinsic part of academic research grants or funding for Research Centres. While this might have led to research that was more relevant to policy and practice in some instances, our research suggests that most academics have neither the motivation nor the capacity to engage fully with the needs of decision makers in the way that the Centres do. While Centres have taken alternative approaches to engaging academics, their experience suggests that a wide engagement from academics is by no means automatic. For some Centres, such as WW Local Economic Growth, there has been a heavy reliance on a single motivated academic. In others, such as WW Wellbeing, the Centre was organised so that the Strategic Hub played a central coordinating role to bring in a wide range of academics with no previous knowledge mobilisation experience.

The other key advantage of the Centres relative to alternative approaches is their ability to bring together evidence from a wide range of sources both from within the UK and from further afield in a coordinated way. Individual research projects may have lacked such a comprehensive and strategic plan for bringing together evidence. By virtue of their size and ability to pull research from a range of sources and their capacity to create the right relationships,⁸⁵ WWCs were able to create the necessary environment for a culture change in knowledge mobilisation.

ESRC funding has focused on those Centres which are either academically led or have academic contributors. Not all Centres follow this model, but for those that do, our work has found that ESRC's funding has been critical. Alternative funding sources would not have stepped in to take the place of the ESRC. In fact, we heard that other funding sources for the Centres may not have materialised at all in the absence of ESRC funding. At a minimum, this indicates that the Centres would have been smaller in the absence of ESRC funding and therefore unlikely to have achieved the same outcomes they did with the funding. More likely, it means that the contribution of the ESRC to these Centres extends beyond its funding contribution and that ESRC's investment was a catalyst for other funding and generates a higher return on investment than could have been achieved by its funding alone.

ESRC's prestige and reputation for independence were vital in bringing academics to the table and helping to break down the silos in which academic research and policy and practice tend to divide. Academic fears that the research agenda and recommendations from the Centres would be heavily influenced by government and politics were allayed by ESRC involvement and helped to create an environment in

⁸⁴ As found in the Alliance for Useful Evidence's "The Science of Using Science", the success of interventions facilitating access to research evidence is conditional on interventions simultaneously trying to enhance decision-makers' opportunity and motivation to use evidence.

⁸⁵ The Institute for Government's 2018 report on how government can work with academia highlights that "Every department should create an 'expert network' to help officials find relevant academics and the WWCs are helping to facilitate this".

which academics felt comfortable. Similarly, academics told us that without ESRC they were concerned there would have been more of a focus on short-term targets. They valued the longer time horizons offered by ESRC involvement and indicated that this was critical to getting and retaining high-quality academics.⁸⁶

Alongside ESRC's reputation, its established administrative infrastructure helped to embed independence in the Centres from the start. This infrastructure included established systems for handling data, undertaking peer review and independent governance. The consensus amongst our interviewees was that ownership of these processes was a key part of ESRC's role and, without this, setting up and running the Centres would have been significantly slower and/or more costly. Beyond the initial setting up of the Centre, the ongoing support provided by ESRC through funding managers, for example aiding the coordination and logistics of the Centres, was noted by a couple of interviewees.

ESRC has in some cases also played a role in bridging the gap between academics and policy makers by helping to make the case for WWCs within the academic community and encouraging an emphasis on impact, engagement, relevance and social value through their involvement. ESRC's well established and trusted relationships with academics have allowed it, at times, to convey some difficult messages, such as the need for timely evidence, to the academics within the Centres.

It therefore appears clear that without ESRC involvement in the establishment of the network, which relies heavily on prestigious academics and institutions, it would have struggled to launch in the same capacity. ESRC continues to play an important role which goes beyond funding. Its ability to bridge the gap between decision makers and academics remains highly relevant as the Centres evolve and new challenges arise.

The question of whether the ESRC's investment in the WWCs represents value for money to ESRC cannot be fully answered by this study as it has not been possible to quantify and monetise the impact of the Centres' work. ESRC was central to the establishment of the WWCs. The centres are unlikely to have existed in their current form or at their current scale, without ESRC's investment. Although it is not possible to fully quantify at this stage, as outlined above, one does not have to expect too much of the Centres for the ESRC's investment to likely constitute good value for money. The ESRC currently devotes less than 1% of its overall annual expenditure to What Works.⁸⁷ The scale of impact created by the Centres does not need to be particularly great to generate benefits well in excess of their funding cost, particularly given the size of public expenditure relevant to the Centres, as shown in Figure 14. If the WWCs undertook some more robust impact assessment going forward, they would be able to demonstrate their value for money much more quickly. Key to any future investment by the ESRC in WWCs is creating a much clearer baseline for the Centres against which their performance can be objectively assessed, to avoid future difficulties in being able to determine value for money. We provide our suggestions of how future impact assessments might be better supported in Chapter 5.

⁸⁶ This involvement was as academic leads for some Centres (e.g. WW Local Economic Growth) and as partners or work strand leads in others (e.g. WW Crime Reduction and WW Wellbeing).

⁸⁷ <https://esrc.ukri.org/about-us/what-we-do/>

Figure 14 Comparison of ESRC investment to policy area spending

Centre	ESRC Investment	Public spending in relevant policy area
WW Wellbeing	£3,155,000 (incl £49k strategic fund)	Planned NHS mental health funding stood at £13.1bn for 2019/20.
WCPP	£2,584,000 (incl £75k strategic fund)	£5.467bn was budgeted for local government and public services spending in Wales for 2019/20.
WW Local Economic Growth	£2,119,000 (incl £119k strategic fund)	Local authorities in England spent on average £8.55bn per year on cultural, environmental and planning services between 2014 and 2019.
WW Scotland	£1,720,000	£12.161bn was spent on general public services in Scotland in 2018/19.
WW Crime Reduction	£1,551,000	Policing in England and Wales received on average £7.793bn per year in government funding between 2015 and 2020.
Early Intervention Foundation	£730,000	Local authority spending on early intervention services for young people was £1.9bn in 2017/18.
Education Endowment Foundation	£670,000 (incl £90k strategic fund)	Education spending in the UK was £91bn in 2018/19.

Source: ESRC investment: ESRC. Public spending in relevant policy area: NHS Mental Health Dashboard (NHS website) [WW Wellbeing]; Welsh Government Final Budget 2019-20 (Welsh Government) [WCPP]; Local Authority Revenue Expenditure and Financing: 2018-19 Provisional Outturn, England (MHCLG statistical release) [WW Local Economic Growth]; Government Expenditure and Revenue in Scotland (GERS): 2018 to 2019 (Scottish Government) [WW Scotland]; Police Funding for England & Wales 2015-2020 (Home Office statistical bulletin) [WW Crime Reduction]; Children and young people's services: Funding and spending 2010/11 to 2017/18 (Action for Children report) [EIF]; 2019 annual report on education spending in England (IFS) [EEF].

4 WHAT WORKS IN WHAT WORKS

CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY

Throughout our evaluation, we also learnt a range of other things about what works in What Works. Evidence on what good knowledge mobilisation looks like is still evolving. No WWC appears to offer a superior model for knowledge mobilisation. This is perhaps unsurprising as our work suggests that the right approach to knowledge mobilisation in any area is likely to depend critically on the nature of the research and knowledge base in an area as well as the nature of the audience for that work. We identified a number of important cross-cutting lessons from our work that potentially extend to all WWCs, not just those funded by the ESRC now or in the future, including:

- Being clear about the appropriate quality bar for evidence for each WWC;
- Creating a clear baseline against which Centres can be judged;
- Ensuring a suitable range of voices in the governance of a Centre;
- Ensuring appropriate academic involvement and leadership; and
- Being clear on the respective roles of geographic and thematic Centres.

A clear initial understanding and assessment of these issues should be part of the set-up of the Centres and should enable them to determine the approach model for the Centre as well as a clear set of objectives and a baseline against which they can be judged. We considered WWCs across a number of dimensions to ascertain what Centres can learn from experience to date in shaping their work going forward.

While under a single umbrella network, the WWCs are structured and operate in a variety of different ways. This variation presents an opportunity to explore the differences between Centres and make some high level comparisons. This section explores the similarities and differences between the ESRC-funded WWCs to contribute to the understanding of “what works in What Works”. We recognise that there are many reasons why the outputs, outcomes and impacts of Centres will vary, many of which are beyond the control of the Centre itself. The comparisons drawn in this section are not meant to be reflective of the quality of the work of a Centre. Rather, we present a series of observations, based on the evidence we gathered, where there might be an opportunity to improve the work of the Centres individually or the network as a whole.

4.1 Comparisons of the Centres’ characteristics

We identified a number of key ways in which the Centres differ from each other. This section explores these differences and draws out some lessons about the ways in which these differences interact with the perceived quality of output from the Centres and the extent to which they have achieved knowledge mobilisation. The main differences, covered in turn below, are:

- **Specific investment vs. core funding:** Some investments are related to specific projects to be undertaken by members or associates of a What Works Centre, while others provide core funding to the ongoing work of the Centre.

- **Length and security of ongoing funding:** The investments vary in how long a Centre has been funded for and how the certainty of ongoing funding was secured (i.e. the process for reinvestment by ESRC and other co-funders).
- **Number and type of co-funders:** ESRC has worked with a range of different co-funders, sometimes with just one other party funding a Centre and other times up to three or four.
- **Consortium types (single university vs. multiple university vs. non-academic involvement):** There are a number of different models for how research institutions and non-academic institutions have organised themselves in bidding for the What Works investments.
- **Research focus (devolved nation vs. policy area):** The types of What Works investments can be loosely grouped by the type of evidence they focus on. For example, WCPP and WW Scotland focus on the devolved nations while others focus on specific policy areas like crime reduction.
- **Target audiences:** The anticipated users of research are defined differently for different investments, with some focused on central government while others aim at local government, practitioners or beyond.
- **Leadership:** The organisation of leadership for a Centre and the types of people leading them vary substantially.
- **Existing ecosystem:** The Centres themselves were set up or expanded within pre-existing research and policy ecosystems, but the level of development of these ecosystems may influence the effect the investments have.

Figure 15 shows how each of the Centres have been categorised. The findings in this section inform our recommendations in section 5.2.

Figure 15 Categorisation of Centre Characteristics

	Core funding?	Length of funding	Number of co-funders	Consortium type	Research focus	Target audiences	Central academic	Academic led*
WW Wellbeing	Yes	3 years	13	Multiple universities	Thematic	Multiple audiences	Multiple central academics	No
WCPP	Yes	5 years	1	Single university	Devolved nation	Multiple audiences	Yes	Yes
WW Local Economic Growth	Yes	3 years	4	Single university	Thematic	Single primary audience	Yes	Yes
WW Scotland	Yes	5 years	1	Multiple universities	Devolved nation	Multiple audiences	No	No
WW Crime Reduction	Yes	3 years	1	Multiple universities	Thematic	Multiple audiences	No	No
EIF	No	4 years	4	Multiple universities	Thematic	Multiple audiences	No	No
EEF	No	3 years	1	Single university	Thematic /Cross-cutting	Multiple audiences	Yes	No

Source: Frontier Economics.

Note: *Refers to the Centres themselves rather than where ESRC's funding is directed.

Specific investment vs. core funding

The majority of ESRC's investments evaluated as part of this project are for core funding towards the ongoing work of the Centre. However, two of the investments – the Knowledge Mobilisation Package with EEF and the Evaluation Partnerships with EIF – related to specific projects undertaken by members or associates of a What Works Centre.

The evidence suggests that whether funding is core or non-core is not the key factor in whether knowledge mobilisation is achieved. There are examples of successful knowledge mobilisation activities by Centres receiving core funding⁸⁸ and by those receiving non-core funding.⁸⁹ Likewise, there are examples of Centres whose activities have been less successful in contributing to knowledge mobilisation who received core funding⁹⁰ and also those receiving non-core funding.⁹¹ While the set of examples is limited, it is our assessment, based on our interviews, that the nature of funding was

⁸⁸ For example, the work conducted by WW Local Economic Growth on Local Industrial Strategies or the work conducted by the WCPP on childcare, where one practitioner interviewed noted that they were able to direct practitioners away from some non-beneficial activities.

⁸⁹ The specific investment provided by ESRC to the EEF is an example of non-core funding successfully contributing to knowledge mobilisation. This is particularly evident in the production and usage of the "Making best use of Teaching Assistants" (MBUTA) guidance document which subsequently formed the foundation for EEF's overall scale-up strategy. Similarly, ESRC funding helped the EEF to shift away from its early "top-down" approaches to knowledge mobilisation which focused on the uptake of finished evidence products, to a more "systems-based" approach which is reflected in their Research Schools Network.

⁹⁰ For example, a handbook on how to integrate wellbeing into economic analysis within government was considered by a couple of interviewees to be too theoretical to be useful in practice.

⁹¹ In contrast, the Evaluation Partnerships at EIF received non-core funding and (see Annex for more details) did not contribute noticeably to knowledge mobilisation.

not the key determinant of the success or otherwise of knowledge mobilisation endeavours. Rather, the combination of a well-articulated objective, a clear target audience for the Centres' work and a tangible opportunity for real influence were the key to successful knowledge mobilisation.

Length and security of ongoing funding

ESRC is perceived to have played a catalytic role in the establishment of the WWCs it funded by a third of those we interviewed, speeding up or making possible the establishment of the Centres. The majority of co-funders we interviewed stated that their partial funding of the Centre was motivated by ESRC's involvement and the funding it provided. Without this, some felt that they would not have engaged with the WWCs at all. This was particularly the case amongst the smaller funders of WW Wellbeing.

"ESRC and involvement of the other departments made it incredibly good value for [us] to invest, as there was both a pool of funders as well as match-funding from ESRC." (WW Wellbeing funder)

"ESRC's involvement was a significant reassurance for [us] when deciding to invest in the Centre. ESRC's status as a funder gave [us] confidence that the research was going to be robust and valuable." (WW Wellbeing funder)

"The Centre would have struggled without it [ESRC funding]. This is particularly true as local authorities have been cutting down on analytical costs, and would have no scope to fund this kind of work, even though it is important for them." (WW Scotland academic)

"[ESRC takes] A development and catalysing role within the evidence ecosystem, which is very important." (EEF academic practitioner)

"ESRC's role in the existence of the network early on was crucial. It's quite possible to imagine that without its funding and participation, the network would never have launched." (Central government)

Perhaps initially, ESRC might have seen its role as purely catalytic, creating Centres that could become self-sustaining and no longer required their investment. We understand that a desire to create self-sustaining Centres sat behind the initial ESRC three-year funding programmes (e.g. WW Local Economic Growth and WW Crime Reduction). The aim was for Centres to demonstrate sufficient progress during the initial grant period to demonstrate to both current and prospective co-funders (such as different government departments, or NGOs) the value for money (or at least the potential for value for money) of the Centre going forward without ESRC's investment.

However, this does not appear to have been possible in practice. Neither WW Crime Reduction nor WW Scotland was able to secure funding to continue in their original form absent ESRC investment. In fact, funding was increased to five-year grants for WW Scotland and WCPP to provide more time for the Centres to establish relationships, and to ensure early projects reached completion.

Indeed, our interviews suggested that longer-term ESRC funding, giving ESRC a clear stake in the WWCs, continues to be critical to the ongoing success of the Centres for two key reasons:

- Retaining high-quality academic input into the Centres; and
- Allowing the Centres to build the necessary relationships to mobilise knowledge.

Retaining high-quality academic input

Other funders place a high value on the quality of academics involved in the Centres, but academics fear that, absent ESRC involvement, the research agenda and recommendations from the Centres would be heavily influenced by government and politics. Academics told us that without ESRC they would be concerned there would have been more of a focus on short-term targets. They valued the longer time horizons offered by ESRC involvement and indicated that this was critical to getting and keeping high-quality academics involved in the work.⁹² Without ESRC's involvement, the academic-policy maker relationship could revert to a consulting-contracting one, as for other research bids. This could prevent the realisation of the long-lasting benefits the WWCs are striving for. This suggests that ongoing ESRC funding is likely to be critical to ongoing academic involvement unless another mechanism can generate the same level of trust within the academic community about how the work of the Centres will be used.

“A strong political association could look quite suspicious to academics, and so ESRC provided the independence and legitimacy needed to get them on board.” (WCPP advisor)

“ESRC played a large role in supporting the UCL academics to ensure that they were able to create creative and independent work rather than effectively act as consultants to the College of Policing.” (WW Crime Reduction academic)

“There is value in the academic partnerships and networking etc. which [we] would not otherwise be able to get from a direct commission.” (WW Wellbeing funder)

Allowing Centres to build relationships

In line with the findings of the Alliance for Useful Evidence, we find that it takes time to build the groundwork for WWCs, particularly for developing new relationships.⁹³ This significant time investment means that it can be hard for both types of Centres to build relationships with the variety of stakeholders necessary within a three- or five-year funding programme. For the Centres for devolved nations, this involves building relationships with the relevant decision makers across a range of policy areas. For the thematic Centres, it means building relationships with decision makers across a range of geographies.

“Getting evidence into practice is based on relationships and ‘whole-systems’ approaches which can’t be formed overnight.” (WCPP practitioner)

Enabling the Centres to have longer funding programmes can allow them to focus on their work without worrying about having to look for quick wins in order to receive additional funding.

⁹² This involvement was as academic leads for some Centres (e.g. WW Local Economic Growth) and as partners or work strand leads in others (e.g. WW Crime Reduction and WW Wellbeing).

⁹³ Alliance for Useful Evidence (2020), “Been there, done that: lessons learned in establishing evidence Centres”, <https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/been-there-done-that-lessons-learned-in-establishing-evidence-Centres/>

On the flip side, longer time frames pose a risk that the Centre's work will become misaligned with government priorities and less relevant. Security of funding also creates a risk that complacency will set in. Overall, our work suggests that ongoing ESRC funding for the Centres where ESRC has a clear strategic interest is likely to be critical to the continuation of WWCs where academic input is critical. But, in our view, ESRC should consider what it wants the end game for its investments to be and should ensure that there are clear points in time when the ESRC takes a decision as to whether or not it will continue its funding. This decision should be based around clear and objective criteria that should include an assessment of:

- Whether the Centre has reached a point where continued academic involvement is either unnecessary or can be secured without ESRC funding; and
- Whether the Centre has achieved its goal as judged by a clear process for assessing the Centre's impact (more on that later).

Number and type of co-funders

ESRC has worked with a range of different co-funders of Centres, sometimes with just one other party funding a Centre and other times with three or four. The number of funders is typically reflective of those who have an interest in the policy area of the Centre. For example, the WCPP (Welsh Government and Cardiff University) and WW Scotland (Scottish Government) have fewer additional funders, whereas WW Wellbeing (which cuts across a number of policy areas) has more than ten funders involved.

There does not appear to be a steadfast rule that Centres with more or fewer funders perform better than others. However, we identified a number of risks associated with having too few or too many funders.

Too few co-funders

If there are too few funders alongside the ESRC, there is a risk that a single non-ESRC funder will be treated as the only key stakeholder. This can lead to a lack of challenge regarding the outputs that the Centre should be producing. Some involved in single co-funded Centres noted that the Centres had the potential to drift towards a consultancy model and this was not viewed favourably by the academics. For Centres where a single co-funder alongside the ESRC is the most sensible approach, ESRC should consider how best to ensure that the Centre maintains its attractiveness to academic involvement. This could be achieved in a number of ways, including ESRC taking a more active role in shaping the work of the Centre or ensuring that there is a robust governance and advisory framework in place to guide the work.

"[ESRC] looks at the performance of the Centre objectively, in a way that the Welsh government might find harder in that they have more of a direct client/contractor relationship than ESRC does." (WCPP funding manager)

There are some policy areas where a single co-funder might not be the ideal approach. This is particularly likely to be the case for Centres that seek to consider policy questions that cut across different government departments or practitioner silos. These Centres could benefit from a connected approach across multiple funding partners. For example, while policing is a major factor in determining the crime rate, the factors that determine whether someone commits a crime are much wider ranging and can include

education, poverty, health, etc. Encouraging conversation outside departmental and practitioner silos can help facilitate a wider discussion and achieve a more holistic approach to addressing a knowledge gap. For Centres where this is likely to be the case, ESRC could consider whether it can play a stronger role in unlocking funding from a wider range of partners. Alternatively, where this could be difficult, it could consider whether there would be value in including a wider range of decision-maker perspectives as part of introducing an advisory framework and governance structure to guide Centres' work.

"Encouraging more funders to get involved could have improved the WW Crime Reduction – the current feeling is that more funding partners with interest in crime reduction should be involved, to represent a number of interests." (WW Crime Reduction funding manager)

For Centres with fewer co-funders, ESRC may need to be willing to consider having a longer-term stake as, if ESRC were to withdraw its funding for such Centres, it might threaten their existence if other funders were unable to pick up the full funding amount.

Too many co-funders

If there are too many funders, the objectives of a Centre can become muddled, resulting in output that struggles to meet any needs. Funders are likely to have differing priorities. Where there is an imbalance of power, the work programme may shift in favour of the larger funders or the funders which have put in the most money (for example, Historic England in comparison to the DWP in WW Wellbeing) or, alternatively, the work programme may shift in favour of the "loudest" funder. If funding from a variety of sources is to be maintained, the needs of each of those involved should be considered.

"Another obstacle for the Centre achieving more of a policy impact might have been the number of different funders involved, and the resultant pushing and bargaining amongst funders to get the research they were interested in. This pushing and bargaining may have led to the purpose and expectations of the Centre becoming blurred." (WW Wellbeing funder)

"[We] are a small player in a large group of funders, and in some cases have had to fight to be heard, and to ensure that we too are getting value out of our funding input." (WW Wellbeing funder)

However, these risks can be mitigated by outlining objectives for investment at the outset. It is important for Centres with lots of funders, each with differing priorities, to establish at the outset the clear purpose and priorities of the Centre as well as principles of collaborative working. Some funders may wish to be "silent" and have little involvement with the Centres, while others will expect a high degree of involvement. There is no reason why a combination of these approaches cannot work but, for it to do so, objectives must be clearly outlined and agreed up front, perhaps through a memorandum of understanding. This clear agreement of objectives and ways of working is something that ESRC could play a key role in facilitating.

Consortium types (single university vs. multiple university vs. non-academic involvement):

There are several different models of how research institutions and non-academic institutions organised themselves in bidding for the What Works investments. The

models include: i) a single university leading the work, ii) multiple universities sharing the work or leading the work in collaboration, or iii) non-academic institutions such as Independent Research Organisations (IROs) handling the research.

Centres have had success in achieving knowledge mobilisation under both single and multi-institution models. WW Local Economic Growth and EEF are both examples where a leading academic from a particular institution led the research and was broadly considered highly influential for the investment's achievements according to interviewees.

"ESRC's investment in [the Knowledge Mobilisation Research Package] meant that the EEF could move with the times... Without which EEF would not be the organisation that it is today." (EEF academic)

Multi-institution Centres have also achieved knowledge mobilisation, such as the UCL-led consortium (made up of academics from various institutions) underlying WW Crime Reduction with its Crime Reduction Toolkit. Another example is WW Wellbeing, which operated a hub-and-spoke model with different academics/institutions at each "spoke" and produced "digestible pieces of evidence" across all the strands – though with less collaboration between them than in the case of WW Crime Reduction.

WW Scotland is a unique case which saw a successful collaboration between two institutions (Edinburgh University and Glasgow University) overcoming scepticism that was expressed by several interviewees (funders and academics) at the outset. These interviewees suggested that this collaboration was in and of itself, a key success of the Centre. Despite this, a couple of interviewees felt that the Centre could still have achieved more if it had been run by a single institution.

However, two inefficiencies can occur in a multiple-university model. Building on the Alliance for Useful Evidence's finding that big consortiums can be difficult to manage,⁹⁴ we found that a lack of a focal point can limit a Centre's ability to have an impact. A couple of interviewees for both WW Scotland and WW Wellbeing noted that the lack of visibility between the different academics at the different spokes may have limited the Centre's impact.

"I have never properly grasped who from the Centre was involved in what, and it has taken me months to get to my current understanding." (WW Wellbeing central government funder)

"It was sometimes difficult to see which workstream had an impact...because the different academics wanted to take responsibility for the various impacts. Eventually I lost track of who was running what workstream and their activities." (WW Scotland practitioner)

Secondly, involving fewer institutions could also be beneficial from an administrative standpoint. For example, granting responsibility to just one university could have reduced the burden on both the Centre's funder and administrators. This is particularly true for WW Wellbeing where the strained relationship between the hub and some of the strands was noted by half of interviewees with a direct awareness of the Centre's

⁹⁴ Alliance for Useful Evidence (2020), "Been there, done that: lessons learned in establishing evidence Centres", <https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/been-there-done-that-lessons-learned-in-establishing-evidence-Centres/>

administrative structure. A similar issue was also raised by a couple of interviewees regarding WW Scotland.

“The academics never saw the Strategic Hub as an equal partner, but simply as a communications/administrative addition to their existing academic work.” (WW Wellbeing employee)

“It was very hard for the hub to get the relationship and authority needed [from each of the strands].” (WW Wellbeing funding manager)

“One issue with the set-up of the Centre was the massive management overhead associated with managing the Centre over 2 universities.” (WW Scotland academic)

Overall, we did not find definitive evidence in favour of one type of consortium model over another but we did observe trade-offs between the different models which ESRC should consider when setting up future funding arrangements. From our work, it appears clear that, regardless of model, successful Centres need to have:

- Good knowledge of the existing evidence base across a range of relevant disciplines and institutions;
- Good connections with a range of highly respected academics in the relevant fields of study;
- An ability to translate evidence in a way that supports decision makers; and
- Demonstrated clout in conveying the messages coming from evidence.

There are instances where all of these characteristics could come together in a single institution or even a single individual within that institution, but, in many rapidly evolving fields of study, it is our view, that the relevant characteristics are likely to be spread across a range of individuals across institutions. For the majority of Centres, this is likely to mean involvement from a range of academic institutions.

Where this is the case, it may still be appropriate to have a single institution in the lead to avoid some of the practical and administrative difficulties, but this should be accompanied by clearer and more formal expectations of how that institution should bring in other relevant academics. In our view, this may mean that a non-academic support function within the Centre plays a key role in coordinating across institutions and channelling knowledge to decision makers. In some cases, this could involve selecting an academic “lead” to deliver messages about evidence to decision makers. In others, it could involve bringing together research from a range of courses into a digestible output that decision makers can engage with. In all cases, a mapping of key expertise across the partner academic institutions which can be shared with decision makers would also help funding partners and those wishing to engage with evidence to identify relevant knowledgeable individuals.

Research focus

The core What Works investments can be grouped according to the focus of their research programmes, that is, those with a thematic focus (WW Crime Reduction, WW Wellbeing, WW Local Economic Growth) and those focusing on a devolved nation (WCPP, WW Scotland). The Centres with a thematic focus consider the specific policy areas of crime, wellbeing and local economic growth in depth, while the Centres for devolved nations work across a spectrum of policy areas and develop their specific

programmes of work in partnership with the devolved governments in Wales and Scotland. We can examine the relative strengths and weaknesses of these two models over the ten years of What Works.

The thematic model has been very effective at progressing the thinking in the respective policy areas of focus. For instance, many of the examples of helpful initiatives referred to by those interviewed provide a better understanding of an extensive existing research base (e.g. WW Local Economic Growth toolkits), or the creation of innovative analytical frameworks (e.g. the EMMIE framework for WW Crime Reduction). This is in contrast to the WCPP, which has focused rather on translating existing research to the Welsh local context, and WW Scotland, which has contributed new thinking for local policy but less so to advancing a particular field of research.

The rationale for the WCPP and WW Scotland was based on the devolution of policy in these areas as well as the distinct policy environments of these countries. In Scotland for instance, the government is very centralised, and “mega-local” authorities operate with a high degree of autonomy. The landscape is also full of a number of public services, such as Community Planning Partnerships. As a result, existing UK-based or any other research is not easily extrapolatable to these contexts, and there is therefore a need for an intermediary organisation such as a What Works Centre.

WCPP and WW Scotland have focused on the development of a strong local presence and relationships with local partners. This has facilitated coordinated, whole-systems thinking on cross-cutting policy matters in a way that the thematic Centres have not accomplished as successfully. This method of working has arguably also had a better impact on knowledge mobilisation, as closer partnerships with their stakeholders has enabled Centres for devolved nations to better respond to user needs and achieve greater buy-in from these users. Meanwhile, the thematic Centres have occasionally struggled to make their outputs practical and meet their user needs.

“The WCPP has managed to get a much more unified approach among the 22 Welsh local authorities. For instance, they have managed to get agreement to a common framework, and everyone has a much better understanding of the role of local authorities in commissioning care from the market and how to get the most from the mixed economy of public/private.” (WCPP practitioner)

“The legacy of the Centre, such as new connections and training materials have meant the capacity has been built to maintain the relationship between research and council policy.” (WW Scotland practitioner)

“We didn’t feel involved in the discussions... As a result, the outputs were not really fit for purpose.” (WW Wellbeing funder)

“The handbook on measuring wellbeing impact could have been quite relevant for government economists, but the reality is that it has hardly been used at all.” (WW Wellbeing funder)

We considered whether the same rationale that supported devolved Centres in Scotland and Wales could also be used to create a case for Centres with a “local” focus within England. However, we must question whether there would be similar added value in creating a What Works Centre for “the North” or “the Midlands”, etc. In our view, decision-making needs to be devolved across a sufficient range of topics covering a large enough amount of expenditure to warrant investment in a Centre focused on an

area. The overarching evidence base created by the thematic Centres should be sufficient for application to local areas within England and it should be the responsibility of the thematic Centres to ensure that they have a dialogue with relevant local decision makers, not just national ones, and are working closely with those areas to mobilise the evidence that best suits their needs.

Having absolute clarity over the roles of Centres for devolved nations and thematic Centres is important to ensure the efficient operation of the network. Our work suggests that the advantages of Centres for devolved nations may be around:

- Greater legitimacy in the local area through development of a strong local presence and relationship with partners;
- Coordinated, whole-systems thinking on cross-cutting policy matters facilitated by the strong local presence; and
- Closer partnerships with stakeholders which can enable Centres for devolved nations to better respond to users' needs and achieve buy-in from these users.

This suggests that the role of these Centres should primarily be around developing the right relationships to mobilise knowledge created by the relevant thematic Centres. They should work closely with the thematic Centres to ensure that specific evidence gaps that relate to their area are articulated and considered. The local Centre should then focus on taking that evidence base and mobilising it in a way that is sympathetic to the local context. This is an area where thematic Centres, with ESRC support, are already taking action through a series of pilot projects seeking to make their work more relevant to different geographies.

Target audiences

It appears that having a clear audience or user group helps a Centre to succeed as it helps to frame the desired outputs that the Centre should focus on producing. For example WW Wellbeing and to some extent WW Scotland have struggled in this respect. These Centres had a multitude of workstreams aimed at a mix of user groups. This resulted in confusion as to who was doing which bit of work or who was the right person to go to for a particular query. The numerous workstreams and audiences can also dilute the output on a given topic. If stakeholders engage with the Centre with high expectations and are met with this diluted output, it can harm relations and potentially decrease the desire to engage in the future (e.g. some stakeholders have decreased their engagement with WW Wellbeing or are considering their future involvement with the Centre).

"The What Works Wellbeing Centre caters to a very wide audience, and I feel that it would be key for them to review this. The evidence needs to be disseminated well in a targeted way, something which does not happen enough at the moment." (WW Wellbeing funder)

On the other hand, it is possible that an overly narrow focus could reduce the impact achieved. For instance, WW Crime Reduction targeted only the police and not the wider scope of organisations on the crime reduction spectrum (e.g. education, social work, probation, mental health). There is no evidence to suggest either way whether this approach would have increased the impact or resulted in a more diluted impact, but it is worth being aware of these alternative stakeholders in case specific collaborations are appropriate.

Identifying the right audience is not solely achieved by determining the right departments or institutions to engage with, but also requires identifying the right people within those departments. For example, many of the Centres currently engage only with analysts within central government. While it is important to engage with analysts, as these are the people that will be most familiar with the evidence and any gaps, it is important to also engage with policy advisors as they will be the people who influence Ministers and write policy briefings. A handful of interviewees noted that there is a level of disconnect between these communities in some government departments and therefore, to maximise the mobilisation of knowledge, the Centres should be looking engage with policy advisors directly rather than relying on internal transmission mechanisms.

Ultimately, the audience targeted by each Centre should be made explicit from the outset and the extent to which this audience is being reached and their needs are being met can then be monitored by more systematic impact tracking.

Academic leadership and involvement

Significant academic involvement is key to the success of the Centres, and Centres have found different ways of achieving the level of involvement required.

Having a single prominent personality can help an ESRC-funded WWC to develop an identity and a brand. A few of the Centres have a well-known leading academic or principle investigator in research and policy spheres. This has resulted in the Centres being well respected amongst the relevant research and policy community, which helped the Centres to develop strong relationships and support. The prominence of these individuals was regularly noted by those interviewed. It also appears easier for these individuals to mobilise evidence. For example, there was an instance where a Minister had a particular policy agenda that they wanted to push. Armed with the evidence, and their reputation, the individual academic lead from one of the Centres was able to highlight that the decision would be a bad one. While the policy was not stopped completely, a reduction in its scale was achieved. Finally, focused academic leadership can help the Centre progress to delivering outputs more quickly. For example, we were told that one Centre's principle investigator who is a high profile figure had the licence to set the direction of work. As such, the Centre was able to identify priorities within a week, based largely on the EEF model. In comparison, other Centres were also able to set their standards of work, but it was often a lengthier process involving a big consultation.

However, there is a risk that the wrong individual may steer the work in an unhelpful way or may be unwilling to take on board feedback which could enhance the output produced to make it more practical and user friendly. There is also a risk that an over-reliance on these individuals could threaten the sustainability of the Centres. This is particularly a problem if these central academics hold all of the relationships rather than the relationships being with the Centre as a whole. Therefore it is important that there is a blend of skills in each Centre's leadership team and similarly that there is broader visibility of those working in the Centre to offer greater access points to stakeholders. An alternative model, which is gaining increasing traction, is one where the Centre is not led by academics but by a non-academic who has close relationships with one or more academics. We understand that in the case of WW Local Economic Growth, a policy engagement role has been opened to support the lead academic and reduce the

reliance on that individual. In the case of WW Wellbeing, the Centre's lead (the Strategic Hub) has taken on this important role. The role of the College of Policing in WW Crime Reduction is another example of this. This approach of non-academic leads has helped academics to mobilise evidence in multiple Centres. What appears to be key to ensuring knowledge mobilisation is that the leader of the Centre has:

- A clear and intuitive understanding of the existing evidence base;
- Good connections with a range of highly respected and emerging academics in the field;
- An ability to translate the evidence to the questions posed by decision makers; and
- The ability to ensure the evidence is conveyed with clout in a way that supports decision-making.

These characteristics could be possessed by an academic or a non-academic lead and an assessment of who is best placed to lead a particular WWC should seek the right individual, ensuring the search extends beyond purely academic circles.

The wider ecosystem

The context within which an ESRC-funded What Works Centre is set up has a large impact on its ultimate “success” – all the way from the co-production of work between a Centre and its users to the reception of this work and its impact within these organisations.

Political appetite is a big factor

If a Centre produces work of political significance at the moment when it is needed, it has a far greater likelihood of landing well and influencing senior policy officials, Ministers and other notable individuals of interest. For instance, a DCMS official we interviewed reported that the WW Wellbeing work on loneliness had been received incredibly well and had had a significant impact on their Loneliness Strategy at the time, travelling much further than any other pieces the Centre had produced for the department. The interviewee highlighted that loneliness was of particular interest to those at the head of the department at the time. In the case of the WCPP, there was a broad recognition amongst practitioners of the timeliness of evidence reviews as a valuable factor for the outputs. This appears to have been possible due to the close relationships developed by the Centre, local officials and practitioners, made possible by the local focus of the Centre and its way of working.

“The WCPP is very quick at identifying research and filling in the gaps – its timeliness and speed are very impressive.” (WCPP practitioner)

The learning here is therefore to ensure that the Centres are well connected amongst those with an interest in their field to stay on top of what is particularly topical at a given time. Moreover, the Centres need to be flexible enough to respond. This can be a challenge due to the reality of evidence generation. The production of robust and rigorous research, which is the core mandate of a WWC, is a process which often takes time. It can be difficult for the research community to produce outputs at the pace required by the policy community, and this is a key source of friction for the What Works model.

“At the beginning, the timeframes within which the work was needed was quite a shock, particularly for those outside of government. ESRC has been instrumental in conveying this difficult message to academics.” (WCPP advisor)

“I recognise that department priorities do change, and quite rapidly, so this can be a challenge for the Centre to keep up with. However, a bit of foresight could be beneficial.” (WW Wellbeing central government funder)

Therefore some thought is required as to how an ESRC-funded WWC might be able to better respond to the needs of their policy and practitioner customers. One suggestion by a Welsh practitioner was to embed researchers within the policy environment (e.g. within local authorities) on an ongoing basis, so that they would be able to better understand and potentially anticipate the needs of their end users in good time, which might help reduce some of this friction.

In some cases, for example a more recent initiative taken by WW Local Economic Growth, funds have been ringfenced (i.e. stimulus fund) for projects which would be scoped jointly with funders to ensure the Centre had the ability to respond to changing priorities in the correct way.

Available funding for implementation

Another issue which can have implications for the work of an ESRC-funded WWC is the implementation context that it hopes to influence. A WWC may produce interesting and relevant information for a particular group, but if these users do not have the capacity to implement the recommendations or the changes required, the impact of this work will instantly be limited.

For instance, funding availability on the part of the local partners was a key theme within the Functional Family Therapy grant (an evaluation partnership run by the EIF), where progress was significantly impeded by the removal of children’s services funding for Croydon Council at the time.

In times of budget constraints, local authorities simply may not be able to implement the gold standard intervention advised, so the Centres should be mindful of the need for real-world, implementable solutions when making recommendations.

Time constraints can be an obstacle to adoption

Similarly, time constraints can also be problematic for the uptake of the work of an ESRC-funded WWC. This is particularly symptomatic of policy officials within central government departments, but also features within local authorities where there are large workloads and low resourcing. It is difficult for these users to engage in the evidence being produced and to think about how this might influence “new ways of working”, since their jobs are already so demanding. This lack of participation by end users appears to limit the knowledge mobilisation being achieved by at least two of the Centres.

*“Users may lack the time to read and digest all the information.”
(WCPP practitioner)*

“Our department was unable to invest much time into the Centre, which has limited the benefits of its outputs for them. As a result, there hasn’t been much policy influence of the Centre within the department.” (WW Wellbeing central government funder)

These realities re-emphasise the importance of producing outputs which are as simple and easily digestible as possible. Other solutions that could be tested include:

- Integrating in-kind contributions alongside the funding bid by departments, so that there are decision makers with availability to engage with the Centre; and
- Prompting the Centres to focus more on helping individuals to identify the most relevant evidence for them and joining up the dots to aid them in how they can use the evidence.

The Centres may want to consider testing their key outputs in a variety of formats, such as by using A/B testing on communications or testing the comprehension of outputs in lab conditions. Such rapid low-cost evaluation options would build the evidence base on what works with target audiences.

These and other contextual factors are important when setting out the objectives for each Centre and what it is possible to achieve over a given funding horizon. For example, if it is clear that policy is slow to adapt in a certain area, then this is something that needs to be recognised in setting out what the Centre can seek to realistically achieve. In this case, the initial funding period for such a Centre would not be seeking to achieve real policy change. Instead, a more sensible objective might be to achieve a better evidence-based understanding of the pros and cons of different policy options by junior decision makers so that they are better informed when they are in positions where they can inform their superiors or take decisions themselves.

4.2 Activity comparisons between Centres

Figure 16 provides an overview of the different outputs produced by the Centres. This allows for some comparison of Centre outputs to provide an overview of Centre activity and how it is broken down across the four activity groups: evidence synthesis, evidence generation, evidence dissemination and capacity building. We do not attempt to assign values to these differences but rather to recognise and reflect on those that we observe.

We can see that the numbers in the figure largely reflect the different focuses for each of the Centres. All the Centres appear to have focused most effort on evidence dissemination rather than generation, synthesis and capacity building. However, the dissemination techniques used differ slightly. For example, WCPP holds significantly more engagement events with stakeholders than the other Centres. Meanwhile WW Wellbeing is more than twice as active on social media compared to the next most active Centre.

With regard to generation and synthesis activity and capacity-building activities, WW Crime Reduction and WW Local Economic Growth appear to have a much more balanced activity, whereas WW Wellbeing and WW Scotland appear to have placed relatively greater emphasis on generation and synthesis compared to capacity building (we explore this further when considering the differences between thematic Centres and Centres for devolved nations below). Finally, WCPP appears to have placed relatively greater emphasis on capacity building rather than on generation and synthesis.

Finally, the figures are to some extent reflective of the scale of each of the Centres. WW Wellbeing, which was active across a wide range of policy areas, has higher numbers of publications, a larger number of engagements and greater social media

activity compared to Centres such as the WW Crime Reduction, where activity has very much focused on a narrow topic for a specific audience.

Although helpful to see the different focuses for each Centre. These figures cannot be used to directly compare the work of each of the Centres due to the following:

- Each ESRC-funded WWC has different aims and objectives which have directed their respective work programmes. As the Centres were not intended to perform the same functions, the validity of comparison is an issue.
- Data recording is inconsistent and of varying quality across the Centres. The key performance indicators (KPIs) we were able to collect to evaluate Centre performance over time differ from Centre to Centre, as does the scope of each of these measurements. Recording is incomplete in many instances.

The inspection of quantitative metrics in isolation fails to recognise the context in which much of this activity has taken place as well as the relative depth of the outputs being produced. For instance, WW Crime Reduction has produced a single Crime Toolkit which has been developed in close collaboration with its policing audience, covers a range of pertinent issues and has generated numerous and wide-ranging impacts across the field. It is rather different in nature and complexity to the 16 WW Local Economic Growth toolkits which have been produced.

Figure 16 Cross-cutting inputs, activities and outputs for each Centre

		Description	WW Wellbeing	WCPP	WW LEG	WW Scot- land	WW Crime	EIF**	EEF***
Inputs	Funding	ESRC input only.	£3,155,000	£2,584,000	£2,119,000	£1,720,000	£1,551,000	£730,000	£670,000
	Number of Months Active	Duration of ESRC investment.	53	60	78	66 *	55	51 *	34
Evidence Synthesis Evidence	Evidence reviews	Large-scale, systematic assessments of existing literature available in a given research field.	16	5	11	0	12	0	(*)
	Publications	Includes published papers, working papers, think pieces, case studies, guidance documents.	196	58	42	247	47	3	(*)
	Toolkits	The synthesis of evidence findings into easily accessible dashboards, interactive tools, etc.	(*)	0	16	(*)	2	0	(*)
	Total		212	63	69	247	61	3	(*)
Evidence Dissemination	Policy influence	Includes briefings, consultations, advisory committees, contribution to policy documents.	68	563	2	56	11	0	(*)
	Online content	Includes blogs, podcasts, newsletters, press releases, videos, audio clips.	641	133	192	35	19	0	(*)
	Social media activity	Number of Twitter posts.	4,443	956	1,875	(*)	(*)	0	(*)
	Engagement with stakeholders	Includes events, presentations, debates, seminars, roundtables, meetings, working groups.	268	786	23	281	157	8	(*)
	Total		5420	2438	2092	372	187	8	(*)
Capacity Building	Training and workshops	Opportunities for skills development.	72	27	43	118	41	0	(*)
	Collaborations	Expert partnerships and collaborative projects, including those which consist of non-core funding for the Centre.	67	328	(*)	55	(*)	0	(*)

Source: Frontier collation of ESRC and WWC data.

Note: this table is based on self-reported activities conducted by the Centres. The figures help to portray the relative emphases of each of the Centres. However, due to differences in scope/reporting, it is difficult to directly compare between the Centres based on these figures. In addition, the duration of ESRC investment (at the time of the evaluation) as well as differences in how information is recorded make it difficult to make robust comparisons between Centres.

*ESRC investment has concluded, ** ESRC investment into EIF was towards just three evaluations (non-core funding). All other EIF activities and outputs are not included in this table. ***ESRC investment into EEF helped to deliver a strategic shift in the Centre which has resulted in numerous outputs produced by the Centre. For simplicity and due to the difficulty in distinguishing between these we have not reported outputs and activities for EEF in this table but details about the contribution to knowledge mobilisation from ESRC's investment into EEF can be found in Annex 3.7.

4.3 Trends observed across the Centres

As noted earlier, we were able to undertake a survey of users for the subset of Centres where stakeholders are directly engaged with the activities and outputs. The survey was intended to gain an understanding of how stakeholders engaged with Centres and their thoughts or observations on the Centre.⁹⁵ The individual Centre surveys also contained some common or overlapping questions which allow for some comparison between the relevant Centres. The four Centres, for which a survey was possible were: (i) WW Local Economic Growth, (ii) WCPP, (iii) WW Scotland, and (iv) WW Wellbeing.

This section explores the five interesting themes that we observed in the survey results and were corroborated by the interviews we conducted. These trends are:

- the perception of the Centres' content
- the reported ways in which the Centres have helped respondents
- what respondents feel the Centres should be doing
- how frequently respondents engage with the Centres
- the impact of COVID-19 on evidence needs.

We note that there is likely to be selection bias in our survey responses given that those who responded are more likely to be those with stronger opinions on the WWC's work/most interested in the WWC. This means that the number of extreme responses (either in support of or in opposition to the WWC) may be inflated.

It is also not possible to make a strong judgement of whether the samples are biased given that the end-user base of the Centres is unknown to the Centres.

The perception of the Centres content

Each of the WWCs is committed to six principles⁹⁶ designed to uphold the academic legitimacy of the Centres and improve the effectiveness of services and outcomes for citizens. Based on these principles, in conjunction with ESRC and the Centres, we established a number of desired qualities that the content produced by the Centres should have. These eight qualities are that they should be:

- accessible
- authoritative
- comprehensive
- independent
- practical
- relevant
- robust
- useful.

⁹⁵ Unfortunately, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implications for the police service, we were unable to distribute surveys to users of the WW Crime Reduction's outputs.

⁹⁶ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-works-network-membership-requirements/what-works-network>

We asked respondents about the extent to which they felt the content produced by the Centres met each of these qualities.

The results (Figure 17 – Figure 20) indicate that the content produced across all of the Centres is broadly considered relevant, independent and robust. Over 80% of respondents⁹⁷ for each Centre indicated that they agreed to some or a significant extent with this statement. WW Wellbeing scored marginally higher with its users than the other three Centres and had more users who appeared to agree with the statement to a significant extent.

In comparison, all Centres appeared to score less well in terms of the practical nature of their content. This trend is consistent with our findings from the interviews. The broad message is that while the content is strong, the Centres have not yet mastered the best way to help users apply the output practically. To overcome this, it is vital that the Centres consistently engage with their target audience to learn from them what is preventing the outputs from being practical. Ultimately, the Centres should not be a one-way machine but should constantly adapt based on input from key stakeholders.

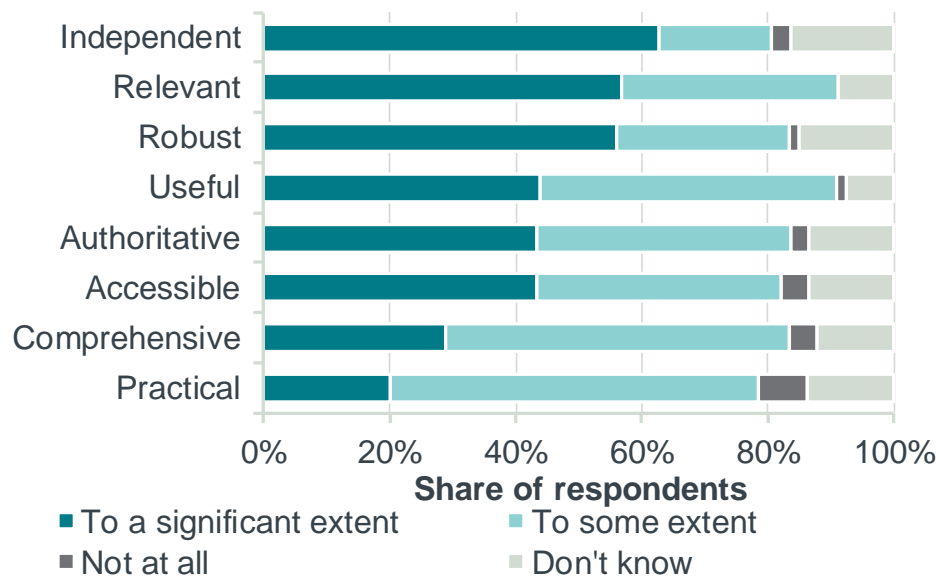
“A lot of time has been spent working on evidence translation and dissemination from a supply perspective, e.g. how to present the evidence in a nice way, however what hasn't yet been cracked is how to get evidence into practice.” (WCPP practitioner)

“On reflection, the project was very good, and a lot was achieved. However, given the chance, I would focus on what works in implementation, and how to make new initiatives normalised—enough wasn't done in this space.” (WW Scotland academic)

“Evidence reviews are very high standard. However, from a central government perspective sometimes it is useful to have lower quality but more applicable evidence too.” (WW Local Economic Growth funder)

⁹⁷ N = 67 (WW Local Economic Growth) ; 71 (WCPP) ; 29 (WW Scotland); 98 (WW Wellbeing).

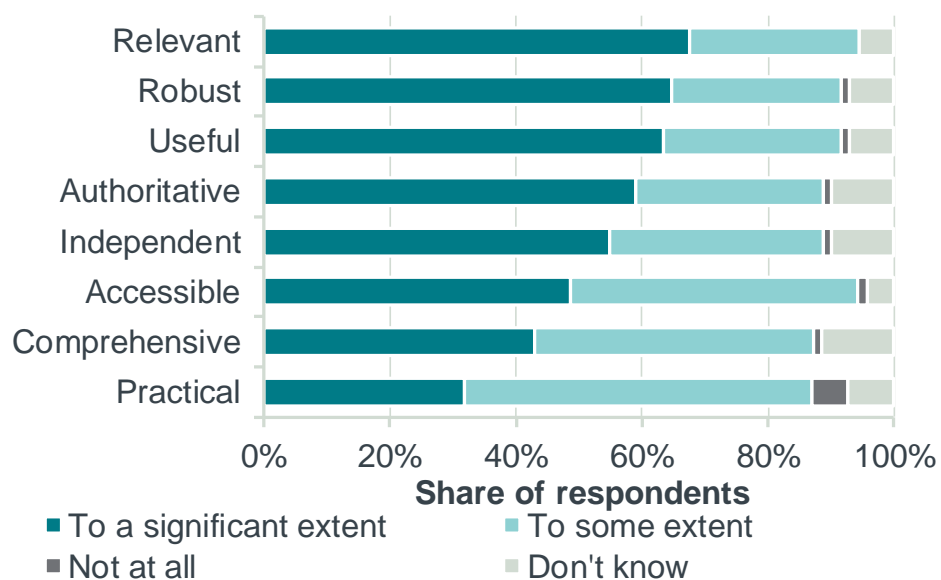
Figure 17 To what extent do you agree that the WW Local Economic Growth provides content that is _____?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N=67.

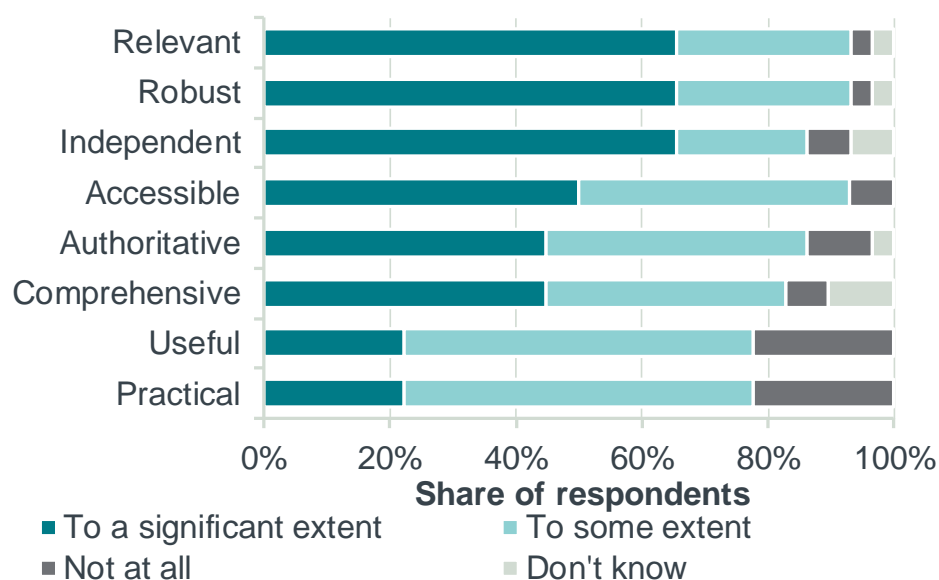
Figure 18 To what extent do you agree that the WCPP provides content that is _____?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N=71.

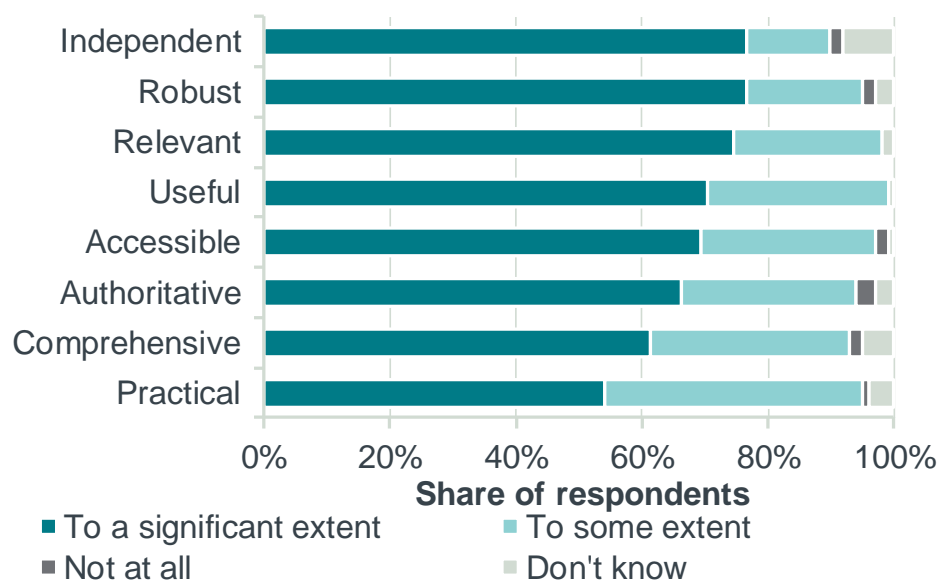
Figure 19 To what extent do you agree that the WW Scotland provides content that is _____?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N=29.

Figure 20 To what extent do you agree that the WW Wellbeing provides content that is _____?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N=98.

The reported ways in which the Centres have helped respondents

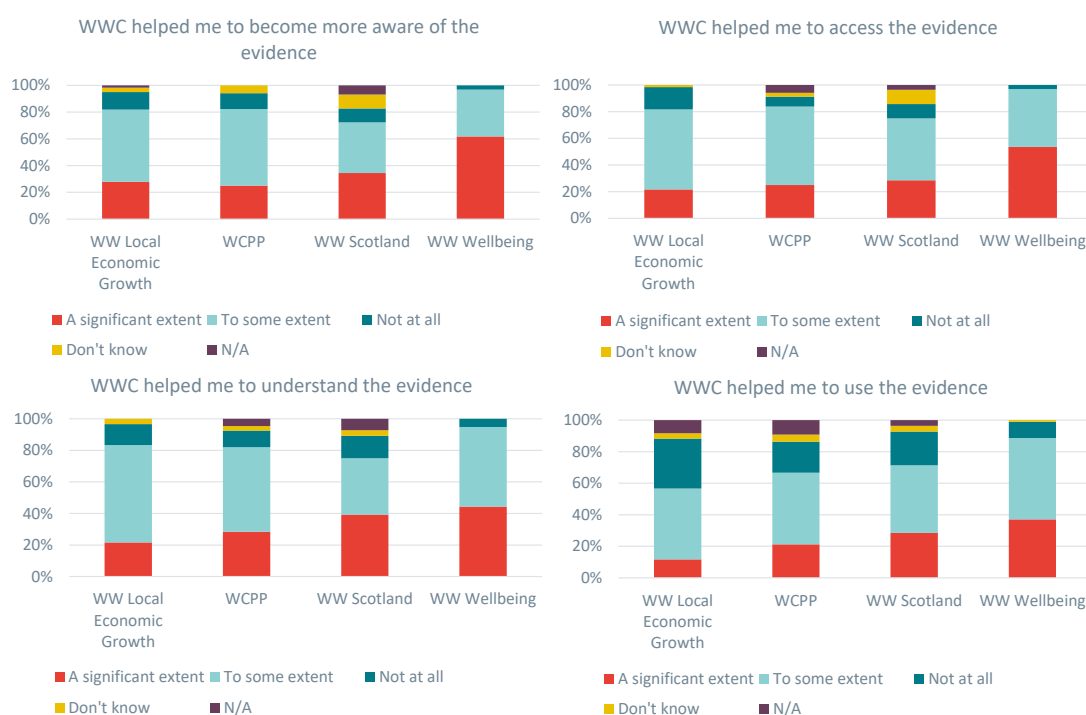
To help identify the impact achieved by the Centre, we asked respondents the extent to which the Centre had helped them to:

- become more aware of the evidence
- access the evidence
- understand the evidence
- use the evidence.

Figure 21 compares how the Centres for which survey data was available compare on these four questions. All four Centres appear to have had at least some impact, across each of the four objectives for the majority of respondents. At least 72% of respondents⁹⁸ felt that they had been helped to become more aware of the evidence, access the evidence and understand the evidence for each of the Centres. While these results are positive, it seems that the Centres have had least impact in helping respondents to use the evidence. This is consistent with the fact that the practical nature of the content produced by all the Centres scored relatively poorly. WW Local Economic Growth appears to have performed below the other Centres in this area.

Overall, the survey suggests that WW Wellbeing has had the largest impact on those engaged with the Centre across each of the four objectives.

Figure 21 To what extent has the WWC helped you as an individual with the following?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N = 61 (WW Local Economic Growth) ; 68 (WCPP) ; 29 (WW Scotland); 97 (WW Wellbeing)
Only responses for content types included as options in all surveys shown.

⁹⁸ N = 61 (WW Local Economic Growth) ; 68 (WCPP) ; 29 (WW Scotland); 97 (WW Wellbeing).

What do respondents feel the Centres should be doing?

We wanted to get an understanding of what stakeholders felt was the role of each of the Centres. To achieve this, we asked respondents about the extent to which the Centres should be engaging with a number of activities. The activities explored were:

- improving the quality of the UK evidence base
- enabling easy access to an authoritative evidence base
- developing networks of individuals and organisations concerned
- promoting the importance of evidence-informed decision-making
- improving the ability to design, deliver and evaluate policy.

With the exception of WW Scotland, the results for each of these activities were similar across each of the Centres. Over 85% of respondents felt that the Centre should be improving the quality of the UK evidence base to a significant extent and enabling easy access to an authoritative evidence base. This was closely followed by activities promoting the importance of evidence-informed decision-making, for which between 73% and 78% of respondents said the Centres should be engaging with this to a significant extent.

Improving the ability to design, deliver and evaluate policy was similarly important for respondents to the WW Local Economic Growth and WCPP surveys, but only 61% of respondents to the WW Wellbeing survey felt they should be engaging in these activities.

The least important area across all of the Centres was in developing networks of individuals and organisations. Only 40% of respondents felt that Centres should be engaging with this activity to a significant extent. However, the majority of the remaining respondents still felt that the Centre should engage in this to some extent.

Respondents to the WW Scotland survey were much more likely to select “not at all” or “don’t know” to each of these activities, with the exception of promoting the importance of evidence-informed decision-making, which was considered to be the most important activity for the Centre to engage in.

Figure 22 To what extent should the WWC be engaging with each of the following?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N = 73 (WW Local Economic Growth) ; 75 (WCPP) ; 32 (WW Scotland); 104 (WW Wellbeing).

How frequently do respondents engage with the Centres?

To get an understanding of which activities and outputs stakeholders engaged with and the frequency of that engagement we asked how many times did you engage with the following content:

- evidence reviews and reports
- evidence/policy briefings
- blogs and online articles
- events.

Respondents were able to pick from the following options: (i) All the time (once a month); (ii) Very regularly (4-6 times a year); (iii) Fairly regularly (2-3 times a year); (iv) Seldom (1 time a year or less); or (v) Never.

The highest engagement with evidence reviews and reports was observed by the WCPP. 89% of respondents to their survey said they engaged at least 2-3 times a year,

with 31% saying they engaged at least 4-6 times a year. This is likely to be a reflection of the focus of WCPP in producing reports as a key output. This was closely followed by WW Wellbeing with 73% and 28% respectively.

WW Wellbeing had similar engagement rates for its evidence/policy briefings. The lowest engagement rates for these was the WCPP.

WW Wellbeing had the highest engagement with blogs and online articles out of the four Centres, with almost 50% of respondents saying they engaged at least 4-6 times a year. Meanwhile, WW Local Economic Growth had the lowest engagement. This is likely a reflection of its substantial social media presence, noted earlier.

Finally, as to be expected given it is the most time consuming, engagement with events was much less frequent for each of the Centres. WW Scotland had the highest share of respondents that had attended at least one event while WW Wellbeing had the least.

Figure 23 In the last year, how many times did you engage with the following content from the WWC?



Source: Frontier Economics.

Note: N = 73 (WW Local Economic Growth) ; 74 (WCPP) ; 32 (WW Scotland); 104 (WW Wellbeing)
Only responses for content types included as options in all surveys shown.

The impact of COVID-19 on evidence needs

This evaluation was conducted during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. Our surveys, which were sent out as the first national lockdown began to ease, provided us with an opportunity to explore whether stakeholders felt that their evidence needs might change because of the pandemic and whether and how the Centres should be adjusting to this “new normal”.

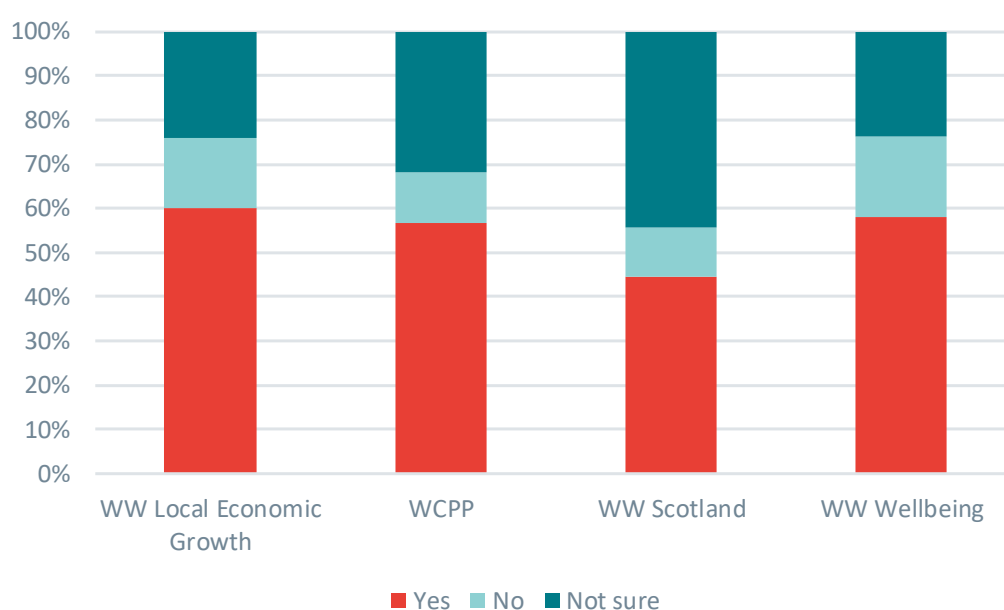
Over half of respondents for WW Local Economic Growth, WCPP and WW Wellbeing felt that their evidence needs were likely to change going forward. This was slightly lower for respondents to the WW Scotland survey as a greater proportion answered “not sure”.

One commonly stated reason for believing that evidence needs would change was the belief that overcoming the economic and social damage caused by the virus would require evidence to identify the most appropriate approach. It was also suggested that the economic damage might limit funding, which would prompt a greater emphasis on using evidence to maximise the value for money.

Another area where respondents felt their evidence needs would change was in how they obtain evidence, and there was a particular desire for making content and learning opportunities more accessible online. One respondent noted that, while this is inevitable given the reduced face-to-face interaction, they feared exacerbating the “digital divide” and the impact it could have on marginalised communities.

Finally, many respondents pointed to their desire for more timely data and evidence. As the situation caused by the pandemic is ever-changing, they thought they should strive for having “high-quality evidence... as live as possible” and in particular “more real time evidence and more lay knowledge as to how communities are coping with the crisis”.

Figure 24 Given the current COVID-19 circumstances, do you anticipate that your evidence needs are likely to change going forward?

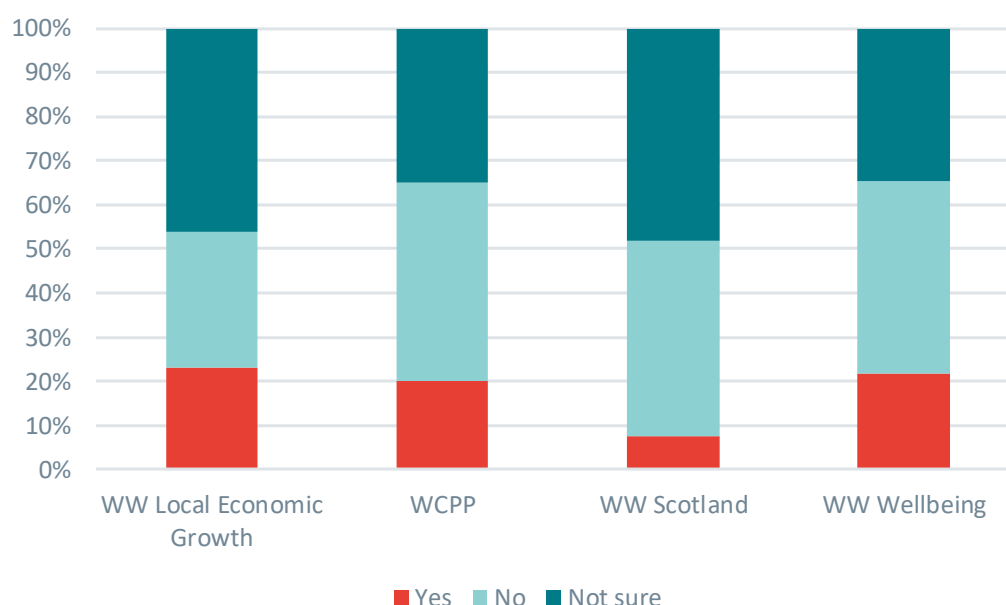


Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N = 50 (WW Local Economic Growth) ; 60 (WCPP) ; 27 (WW Scotland); 88 (WW Wellbeing).

Despite this feeling that evidence needs are changing, there was less consensus amongst respondents that their interaction with the ESRC-funded WWCs would also need to change. Many of those who said it would not thought so because they already engaged regularly with the Centre. However, some who suggested their interaction would change, asked for more engagement from the Centre.

Figure 25 Given the current COVID-19 circumstances, do you anticipate that your interaction with What Works is likely to change going forward?



Source: Frontier Economics.

Note: N = 52 (WW Local Economic Growth); 60 (WCPP); 27 (WW Scotland); 97 (WW Wellbeing).

4.4 Additional cross-cutting observations

A number of other observations emerged from comparisons across the entirety of the Centres studied as part of this review.

Judging the appropriate quality bar for evidence

While the Centres have contributed to a culture change in knowledge mobilisation, our work has also highlighted that some Centres may have, at times, set the bar on evidence quality too high to produce valuable insights for decision makers. Decision makers commented that it was not useful for a Centre to spend substantial time and budget synthesising an evidence base for the conclusion to be that “there is no evidence of sufficient quality” to answer the decision maker’s question. Decision makers also commented on the lack of practical guidance from the answers provided by the Centres in some cases. They were left with the question “What does this all mean for me?”. A pragmatic approach to presenting a level of evidence that reflects the nature of the question being asked should be taken here, with the best available evidence being presented in each case. A more behavioural approach, as proposed by EIF, could also be effective. This would involve identifying the barriers and enablers to adopting evidence-informed practice and using these insights to develop a knowledge mobilisation strategy which could be monitored and adapted over time.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/developing-a-behavioural-approach-to-knowledge-mobilisation-reflections-for-the-what-works-network>

In our view, evidence quality needs to be context specific, reflecting the nature of the question that a WWC is seeking to address as well as the situation within which the audience for the work is taking decisions. There is scope for some WWCs to be more ambitious in the questions that they seek to address, recognising that not all questions will be fully answerable with journal-quality academic research. The temptation is to frame questions with a view to what high-quality academic research could answer robustly (for example, with RCT or experimental approaches) rather than with respect to what decision makers really need to know. Success in this sphere may look different and may simply mean narrowing the range of possible answers to a question (or potential policies that could be effective), not simply providing synthesis of journal-quality evidence that may not address the policy question directly. By enabling Centres to incentivise academic research that is of high quality but not journal standard may help to widen the useful evidence base on which decision makers can draw.

We believe that a refreshed approach to setting the question each WWC seeks to address could also increase the breadth of audience for a Centre's work, increasing its potential value. While it is likely to be easier for Centres to achieve impact if they have a narrow audience and a specific focus, our findings suggest that the narrow focus of some Centres may have limited their relevance and potential value in terms of tackling the most pertinent cross-cutting policy questions. A compromise might involve setting a wide question on which the Centre is focused but breaking down the Centre's work into stages to address different aspects of the question in turn.

Creating a clear baseline against which Centres can be judged

One of the biggest difficulties faced by this evaluation was the lack of a clear baseline against which the performance of the Centres could be judged. Initial work to scope the Centres was not sufficiently refined to create a clear and systematic assessment of:¹⁰⁰

- The overarching (and more detailed) questions that the Centre was seeking to answer (as agreed with the funders);
- The state of existing evidence on each of those questions and gaps in the evidence base; and
- The state of knowledge and understanding by decision makers of the existing evidence and the size and nature of gaps in that understanding.

There was also no shared articulation by funders and users of what good would look like (over a given time frame) for a particular Centre. This is also important. Closing all gaps may not be possible in a given funding period, so the targets that the Centres set themselves need to be appropriately focused and achievable in the time available.

For example, suppose a Centre had agreement to focus on developing a better understanding amongst decision makers of whether policies of type A, type B or type C were more cost effective in increasing a given outcome. As part of their preliminary work, they establish that there is robust academic evidence on policy type A for the UK, for policy type B there is some emerging international evidence and there is no existing evidence on policy type C. They also establish that there are gaps in both awareness (i.e. decision makers are not aware of the available evidence) and understanding (i.e. decision makers are aware of the available evidence but misunderstand or misinterpret

¹⁰⁰ Such as conducted by the Centre for Homelessness Impact.

it). In the lifecycle of the Centre, it might be possible: to ensure that evidence on policies A and B is well communicated and understood; to improve the evidence on policy B, making it more UK specific; and/or generate new evidence on the impact of policy C. There will likely be trade-offs and not all of these things will be possible in the timeframe and within the budget of the Centre. The Centre should set out one or more options of what it believes should be possible, prompting a discussion with decision makers and funders about what combination of actions would be most useful to them. The Centre could then target its efforts more effectively in terms of prioritising raising awareness, raising understanding and, in cases where evidence gaps could be filled, in creating evidence (or at least communicating the gap in evidence to the academic community). In the case of evidence gaps, the Centre could engage in a dialogue with ESRC to agree whether there is scope for the gaps to inform calls for research initiated by the Centre or through other channels. Looking forward, the creation of a baseline for each Centre, means that an evaluation framework could and should be established to track the progress of the Centre against the baseline. The evaluation framework should articulate the specific theory of change for each Centre with agreed metrics that could be collected throughout the lifetime of the Centre to measure progress. The specific metrics would need to be Centre specific and agreed by the Centre and the funders, but could include measures of the existing understanding of the evidence base by decision makers or the depth of research addressing specific sub-questions the Centre is setting out to answer. A future evaluation could then assess the extent to which progress against the baseline to fill the prioritised gaps in the evidence or knowledge gap had been filled over the funding window. ESRC (or other funders) could also consider including a requirement for Centres to track and report progress against this baseline as part of its funding agreements with Centres.

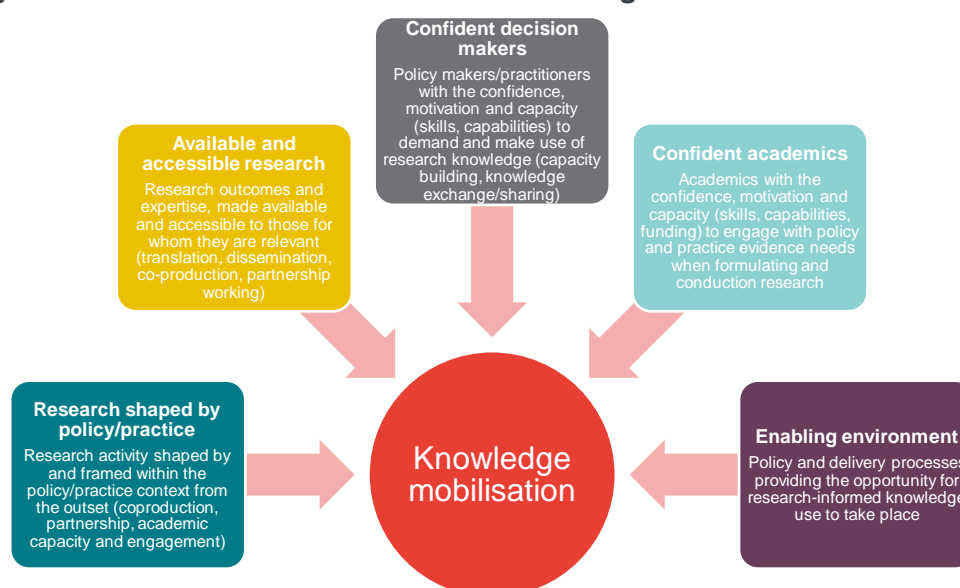
5 OVERALL FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter summarises the key findings of the evaluation, outlining the role of ESRC and the success of its investments in the WWN. It then goes on to describe the ideas that have been put forward by stakeholders involved in the network for how ESRC could strengthen its role. Finally, it consolidates these findings and suggestions in a series of recommendations for ESRC.

5.1 Key findings

Successful knowledge mobilisation occurs when a critical mass¹⁰¹ of the conditions in Figure 26 are achieved. This means that decision makers¹⁰² have the knowledge base they need to consider important questions of public policy at their fingertips at the point in time at which they want to and are able to influence policy direction.

Figure 26 Conditions for successful knowledge mobilisation



Source: Frontier Economics

5.1.1 ESRC-funded What Works Centres have contributed significantly towards successful knowledge mobilisation

Creating evidenced links between the work of the Centres and decision-making within government is, at present, extremely difficult. There are examples of successful knowledge mobilisation where the Centres' work has had a direct influence on policy or practice, but it was not possible to identify examples for all Centres. But our work suggests that the Centres have played a central role in a culture change within both UK

¹⁰¹ Determining this critical mass is one of the many challenges that the Centres and researchers more broadly face. Research is ongoing regarding how best to mobilise knowledge.

¹⁰² Beyond engaging with policy makers, many What Works Centres also engage and use evidence to inform professional practitioners. The term "decision makers" is used to capture the audience of What Works Centres and includes both policy makers and practitioners.

government and academia by creating the conditions for knowledge mobilisation¹⁰³ – an enabling impact which extends beyond the Centres themselves. The creation of the Centres increased the emphasis on knowledge mobilisation and provided additional incentives for academics to generate evidence that is useful for decision makers taking decisions about policy and practice. The Centres created improved mechanisms for interpreting academic evidence and channelling it to decision makers. Through engagement with the Centres, decision makers look to draw more on academic evidence to inform decisions, have a better understanding of how to interpret evidence and expect evidence to be presented in a way that resonates with the decisions they have to take. For example, our survey and interview work highlighted that all Centres produce work which is used by academics, practitioners, local and central government, and others. As a result of the work of the Centres, academics (both those directly involved in the Centres and others) are also more aware of the questions that decision makers are facing, the context within which they work and the need to ensure that their evidence is as useful as possible.

We found evidence that WWC research outputs and expertise are available, accessible and being used. Between 2014 and 2020 ESRC-funded Centres have produced:

- 300 evidence reviews (ca. 50 of them systematic reviews) – most respondents to our survey indicated that they draw on evidence reviews produced by the Centres on a regular basis (2-3 times a year or more);¹⁰⁴
- A range of toolkits that provide easily digestible summaries of the existing evidence base (for example, monthly views of the College of Policing's Crime Reduction Toolkit increased from 4,000 at its inception in April 2015 to a peak of just under 15,000 in October 2019);
- Hundreds of blogs and policy briefings; and
- A significant online presence with a combined Twitter following of over 200,000.¹⁰⁵

WWCs have also undertaken a wide range of direct engagement activities such as stakeholder events, training events and research surgeries for practitioners. The combination of research outputs and direct engagement is vital to build capacity, confidence and motivation amongst policy makers and practitioners to enable them to make use of research knowledge.¹⁰⁶

Alternative knowledge mobilisation models were not explicitly in scope for this study, but it appears unlikely that when the centres were established, there were alternative models that would have brought about a comparable culture change. Centres embarked on a lengthy process of creating relationships, synthesising existing evidence and generating a clear signal to both decision makers and academics that knowledge mobilisation is important. Alternative options could have included making

¹⁰³ The desire to have a greater focus on using evidence in decision-making within government is what led to the creation of the WWCs, so the Centres alone cannot be considered the catalyst for the observed culture change. But combining a focus on the needs of decision makers in government with the capacity to create and share academic evidence to meet those needs is key to the success of the Centres. The culture change might have been slower or stalled entirely without this combination of conditions being put in place.

¹⁰⁴ WW Local Economic Growth: 61% (N = 66); WCPP: 89% (N = 71); WW Scotland: 48% (N = 29); WW Wellbeing: 56% (N = 97).

¹⁰⁵ Numbers in bullets are derived from data provided by the What Works Centres

¹⁰⁶ As found in the Alliance for Useful Evidence's "The Science of using Science", the success of interventions facilitating access to research evidence is conditional on interventions simultaneously trying to enhance decision makers' opportunity and motivation to use evidence.

knowledge mobilisation a more intrinsic part of academic research grants or funding for Research Centres. While this might have led to research that was more relevant to policy and practice in some instances, our research suggests that most academics have neither the motivation nor the capacity to engage fully with the needs of decision makers in the way that the Centres do. While Centres have taken alternative approaches to engaging academics, their experience suggests that a wide engagement from academics is by no means automatic. For some Centres, such as WW Local Economic Growth, there has been a heavy reliance on a single motivated academic. In others, such as WW Wellbeing, the Centre was organised so that the Strategic Hub played a central coordinating role to bring in a wide range of academics with no previous knowledge mobilisation experience.

The other key advantage of the Centres relative to alternative approaches is their ability to bring together evidence from a wide range of sources both from within the UK and from further afield in a coordinated way. Individual research projects may have lacked such a comprehensive and strategic plan for bringing together evidence. By virtue of their size and ability to pull research from a range of sources and their capacity to create the right relationships,¹⁰⁷ WWCs have been able to create the necessary environment for culture change in knowledge mobilisation.

5.1.2 ESRC's contribution to knowledge mobilisation

Overall, ESRC's investment in the WWCs appears to have been associated with a culture change in knowledge mobilisation that is unlikely to have happened in the same way in their absence. Evidence of this culture change is not sufficient to determine that the WWCs have represented a good return on investment for the ESRC. It is theoretically plausible that the Centres could have come about in the absence of the ESRC and that the funding provided by the ESRC could have come from elsewhere. We therefore need to understand the extent to which the contribution of the WWCs to knowledge mobilisation was contingent on ESRC funding and would have looked different in its absence.

Our work has found that ESRC's funding has been critical. Alternative funding sources would not have stepped in to take the place of the ESRC. Feedback from participants in the evaluation suggests that other funding sources for the Centres may not have materialised at all in the absence of ESRC funding. As described by one stakeholder:

"ESRC's role in the existence of the network early on was crucial. It's quite possible to imagine that without its funding and participation, the network would never have launched." (Central government official)

At a minimum, this indicates that the Centres would have been smaller in the absence of ESRC funding and therefore unlikely to have achieved the same outcomes they did with the funding. It could mean that some of the Centres would not have materialised at all. This means that the contribution of the ESRC to these Centres extends beyond its funding contribution and that ESRC's investment appears to have acted as a catalyst

¹⁰⁷ The Institute for Government's 2018 report on how government can work with academia highlights that "Every department should create an 'expert network' to help officials find relevant academics and the WWCs are helping to facilitate this".

for other funding and generates a higher return on investment than could have been achieved by its funding alone.

ESRC's prestige and reputation for independence were vital in bringing academics to the table and helping to break down the silos in which academic research and policy and practice tended to divide. Academic fears that the research agenda and recommendations from the Centres would be heavily influenced by government and politics were allayed by ESRC involvement and helped to create an environment in which academics felt comfortable. Similarly, academics told us they were concerned that without ESRC there would have been more of a focus on short-term targets. They valued the longer time horizons offered by ESRC involvement and indicated that this was critical to getting high-quality academics involved in the work.¹⁰⁸

"Without ESRC we wouldn't get the right people." (Funding partner, WW Local Economic Growth)

"ESRC brought academic brilliance and rigour." (WCPP practitioner)

Alongside ESRC's reputation, its established administrative infrastructure helped to embed independence in the Centres from the start. This infrastructure included established systems for handling data, undertaking peer review and independent governance. The consensus amongst our interviewees was that ownership of these processes was a key part of ESRC's role and, without this, the setting up and running of the Centres would have been significantly slower and/or more costly. Beyond the initial set-up of the Centre, the ongoing support provided by ESRC through funding managers, for example aiding the coordination and logistics of the Centres, was noted by a couple of interviewees.

ESRC also played a role in bridging the gap between academics and policy makers by helping to make the case for WWCs within the academic community and encouraging an emphasis on impact, engagement, relevance and social value through their involvement in the Centres. ESRC's well-established and trusted relationships with academics allowed it to convey some difficult messages, such as the need for timely evidence, to the academics within the Centres.

*"Without ESRC [the What Works Centre] would need to be more of a consultancy model which probably wouldn't appeal to academics."
(WW Local Economic Growth funder)*

It therefore appears clear that without ESRC involvement in the establishment of the network, which relies heavily on prestigious academics and institutions, it would have struggled to launch in the same capacity. ESRC continues to play an important role that goes beyond funding. Its ability to bridge the gap between decision makers and academics has remained highly relevant as the Centres have evolved and new challenges have arisen. ESRC is uniquely placed to confront the challenge of easing the tension between decision makers' demands for fast results and digestible outputs and academic demands for rigour. ESRC is seen as a mediator between academics and researchers on the one side, and decision makers on the other.

The question of whether the ESRC's investment in the WWCs represents value for money to ESRC is not a question that can be fully answered by this study as it has not

¹⁰⁸ This involvement was as academic leads for some Centres (e.g. WW Local Economic Growth) and as partners or work strand leads in others (e.g. WW Crime Reduction and WW Wellbeing).

been possible to quantify and monetise the impact of the Centres' work.¹⁰⁹ However, ESRC was central to the establishment of the WWCs. The centres are unlikely to have existed in their current form or at their current scale, without ESRC's investment. Although it is not possible to fully quantify at this stage, as outlined above, one does not have to expect too much of the Centres for the ESRC's investment to likely constitute good value for money. The ESRC currently devotes less than 1% of its overall annual expenditure to What Works.¹¹⁰ The scale of impact created by the Centres does not need to be particularly great to generate benefits well in excess of their funding cost. If the WWCs undertook some more robust impact assessment going forward, they would be able to demonstrate their value for money much more quickly. Key to any future investment by the ESRC in WWCs is creating a much clearer benchmark for the Centres against which their performance can be objectively assessed, to avoid future difficulty in being able to determine value for money. We suggest how future impact assessments might be better supported in the recommendations section below.

5.1.3 Cross-cutting lessons about what works in What Works

Throughout our evaluation, we also learnt a range of other things about what works in What Works. Evidence on what good knowledge mobilisation looks like is still evolving. No WWC appears to offer a superior model for knowledge mobilisation. This is perhaps unsurprising as our work suggests that the right approach to knowledge mobilisation in any area is likely to depend critically on the nature of the research and knowledge base in an area as well as the nature of the audience for that work. There are a number of important cross-cutting lessons that we have identified for our work which potentially extend to all WWCs, not just those funded by the ESRC now or in the future. These cross-cutting lessons comprise helpful activities and behaviours which have enabled some centres to navigate the complexities of their areas well, from which others could learn.

Judging the appropriate quality bar for evidence

While it is clear that the Centres have contributed to a culture change in knowledge mobilisation and their work has been used by their intended audiences, there have also been suggestions from stakeholders that to produce valuable insights for decision makers sometimes requires a recognition that not all questions will be fully answerable with journal-quality academic research.

Creating a clear baseline against which the work of the Centres can be judged

One of the biggest difficulties faced by this evaluation was the lack of a clear baseline against which the performance of the Centres could be judged. Looking forward, the creation of a baseline for each Centre and a clear articulation of what good looks like for each Centre, means that an evaluation framework could and should be established to track the progress of the Centre against the baseline.

¹⁰⁹ Going forward, it will be important for ESRC and the Centres themselves to gather as much evidence as possible to illustrate that their work represents good value for money. Quantitative data alone will be insufficient to provide enough insight into this but qualitative work, including for example case studies, can shed some light on the sort of value that the work of the Centres generates. Periodic surveys of the users of the Centres' work will also add valuable evidence on the extent to which Centres engage with their audiences. The key to useful evidence of this nature will be capturing the work of the Centres against a clear counterfactual.

¹¹⁰ <https://esrc.ukri.org/about-us/what-we-do/>

Ensuring a suitable range of voices in the governance of a Centre

There is no strong evidence that the number of funders is a key determinant of whether Centres perform well or not but the number of funders does raise some interesting considerations to be aware of.

For Centres where only a single co-funder beyond the ESRC is involved, there is a risk that over time the Centre will drift towards a consultancy style model and academic engagement will lessen as a result. For these Centres, consideration should be given up front with regard to how best to ensure that a range of voices shape the work of the Centre. This could be through adapted governance arrangements that ensure that a senior group are able to steer and prioritise the Centres' work. For example, this group could include senior cross-cutting decision makers from outside the funding departments, a wider set of academics beyond the specific institutions actively involved with the Centre, as well as potentially leaders from the private and third sectors. The choice of stakeholders involved in this group should be tailored for each project, to ensure relevance and effective challenge.

For Centres with many funders there is a risk that objectives and output will become muddled or a single funder's voice will dominate. For these Centres, a similar senior governance group that provides advice on long-term development and strategic direction and constructive challenge on the Centre's approach may also be of benefit.

Ensuring appropriate academic involvement and leadership

Significant academic involvement is key to the success of the Centres. Centres have had success achieving knowledge mobilisation under both single- and multi-institution models. Single-institution models, particularly those where a leading academic took on a substantial leadership role, have benefited from the drive and focus of concentrated leadership and the relative freedom associated with a single institution driving forward the work. Multi-institution Centres have also achieved knowledge mobilisation and, in fact, the collaboration between two universities was considered a key part of the success of WW Scotland. But there are also risks associated with both models. Building on the Alliance for Useful Evidence's finding that big consortiums can be difficult to manage,¹¹¹ we found that a lack of a focal point can limit a Centre's ability to have an impact. Involving fewer institutions may also be beneficial from an administrative standpoint. For single-institution models, there is a risk that the evidence base is not reflective of the work of the wider academic community or emerging schools of thought.

Regardless of the consortium model, successful Centres need to demonstrate:

- Good knowledge of the existing evidence base, across a range of relevant disciplines and institutions including emerging schools of thought;
- Good connections with a range of highly respected academics in the relevant fields of study;
- An ability to translate evidence in a way that supports decision makers; and
- Clout in conveying the messages coming from evidence, particularly those that go against the current direction of travel of policy and practice.

¹¹¹ Alliance for Useful Evidence (2020), "Been there, done that: lessons learned in establishing evidence Centres", <https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/been-there-done-that-lessons-learned-in-establishing-evidence-Centres/>

There are instances where all of these characteristics could come together in a single institution or even a single individual within that institution, but in many rapidly evolving fields of study, it is our view, that the relevant characteristics are likely to be spread across a range of individuals across institutions. For the majority of Centres, this is likely to mean involvement from a range of academic institutions. Where this is the case, it may still be appropriate to have a single institution in the lead to avoid some of the practical and administrative difficulties, but this should be accompanied by clear and formal expectations of how that institution should bring in other relevant academics. The earlier discussion on clear governance structures and roles is again relevant here.

Regardless of the consortium model, focused academic leadership can help the Centre progress to delivering outputs more quickly. But there is a risk that such leadership might steer the work in an unhelpful way or might be unwilling to take on board feedback which could enhance the work of the Centre. There is also a risk that an over-reliance on these individuals could threaten the sustainability of the Centres. An alternative model, which is gaining increasing traction, is one where the Centre is not led by academics but by a non-academic lead who has close relationships with one or more academics. What appears to be key to ensuring knowledge mobilisation is that the leader of the Centre has a clear and intuitive understanding of the existing evidence base, the ability to translate the evidence to the questions posed by decision makers and the ability to ensure the evidence is conveyed with clout and in a way that supports decision-making. These characteristics could be possessed by an academic or a non-academic lead and an assessment of who is best placed to lead a particular WWC should seek the right individual, ensuring the search extends beyond purely academic circles. If an academic lead is the preferred choice, then it remains important to have a non-academic support function to ensure continuity in relationships and understanding if the academic lead moves on.

Being clear on the respective roles of geographic and thematic Centres

Most of the WWCs are thematic, that is, they focus on a subject area (e.g. wellbeing) which is applicable across multiple geographies, but there are also geographic Centres in Wales and Scotland. The thematic model has been very effective at progressing the thinking in the respective policy areas of focus. For instance, many of the examples of helpful initiatives referred to by those interviewed provide a better understanding of an extensive existing research base (e.g. WW Local Economic Growth toolkits), or the creation of innovative analytical frameworks (e.g. the EMMIE framework for WW Crime Reduction). The geographic Centres have not focused on progressing particular areas of policy but have been very effective at developing a strong local presence and relationships with local partners. This has facilitated coordinated, whole-systems thinking on cross-cutting policy matters, in a way that the thematic Centres have not accomplished as successfully. This method of working has arguably also had a better impact on knowledge mobilisation, as closer partnerships with their stakeholders has enabled Centres for devolved nations to better respond to user needs and achieve greater buy-in from these users. The thematic Centres have occasionally struggled to make their outputs practical and meet their user needs.

We considered whether the same rationale that supported devolved Centres in Scotland and Wales could also be used to create a case for Centres with a “local” focus within England. However, we must question whether there would be a similar added

value in creating a What Works Centre for “the North” or “the Midlands”, etc. In our view, decision-making needs to be devolved across a sufficient range of topics covering a sufficiently large amount of expenditure to warrant investment in a Centre focused on an area. The overarching evidence base created by the thematic Centres should be sufficient for application to local areas within England and it should be the responsibility of the thematic Centres to ensure that they have a dialogue with relevant local decision makers, not just national ones, and that they work closely with those areas to mobilise the evidence that best suits their needs.

Our work suggests that geographic Centres should focus on creating the right relationships to mobilise knowledge created by the relevant thematic Centres. They should work closely with the thematic Centres to ensure that specific evidence gaps that relate to their area are articulated and considered. The Centres should then focus on taking that evidence base and mobilising it in a way that is sympathetic to the local context. This is an area where thematic Centres, with ESRC support, are already taking action through a series of pilot projects seeking to make their work more relevant to different geographies.

5.1.4 How can ESRC strengthen its role?

Being more strategic

As discussed in Section 3, there was a broadly held view amongst all stakeholders that ESRC played a crucial role in the early stages of the WWN. Without ESRC funding and engagement, it is reasonable to assume that the network would have struggled to launch, or its growth might have been limited.

However, several stakeholders noted that, once the Centres were established, ESRC was less involved in their strategic direction.

“Once funding has been awarded, ESRC’s day-to-day role is more an administrative than strategic one. They have been effective as a secretariat in getting projects up to the point of awarding funding but have tended not to be assertive beyond that. The strategic direction of projects once funding has been awarded has been driven more by the Centres themselves and by government.” (Central Government official)

“Early on, they did not contribute much strategy.” (Central Government official)

Several stakeholders observed that greater ESRC involvement might have been beneficial in steering the work programme of individual Centres. For instance, ESRC could have done more to assist WW Crime Reduction to branch out from policing into a broader role of mobilising crime reduction evidence, it could also have helped to define the research questions for WW Wellbeing and could have done more to steer the work of WW Local Economic Growth to make it more useful for policy makers.

“Funding decisions were very much led by the College of Policing, while ESRC’s role was simply to provide funds.” (WW Crime Reduction funding manager)

“It would be helpful if they [ESRC] were to agree more specific research questions at the outset.” (WW Wellbeing funder)

“ESRC should try to help ensure outputs [from the Centres] are such that government can use them.” (WW Local Economic Growth funder and policy maker)

Several policy makers and practitioners also observed a lack of clarity and cohesion in the vision for ESRC’s involvement in the Centres. They suggested that ESRC should be taking the lead in identifying where Centres are needed (i.e. where there were evidence gaps). For example, ESRC could seek to lead the way in mapping out the persistent policy questions where better evidence is required. Examples given included the labour market, agriculture, social care, public health and ageing. This could also mean incorporating a blue skies element to the network, where there are clear policy questions but existing evidence is sparse.

“ESRC should be leading in mapping out the key areas where more evidence is needed. For example, where is the What Works for DWP and the labour market? Who will drive that forward if not ESRC?” (Central government official)

“ESRC need to invest strategically in issues which will be important in the future, before a critical mass has developed.” (WCPP practitioner)

The potential for playing a more strategic role appears to be recognised by some stakeholders at ESRC.

“I would like to see ESRC take a proactive role in assessing what sorts of things are being funded and why. Among other things, this requires a better understanding of how one area of social policy relates to another, so that ESRC can think about which part of the process they can best intervene in order to get the greatest value for their investments.” (ESRC official)

“New WWCs should be created on the basis of both bottom-up (Is the project a feasible one to undertake?) and top-down (Is the project relevant to UKRI?) considerations.” (ESRC official)

Doing more to shape and facilitate the conversations between the Centres and decision makers to ensure expectations are aligned

As noted in 3.2.4, a broadly held view across stakeholders was that one of the key challenges for ESRC-funded WWCs is to foster collaboration between academics and policy makers/practitioners. There does not appear to be a consensus amongst stakeholders as to what ESRC’s role in this space should look like, but some interesting ideas emerged.

Several stakeholders noted that ESRC could play a stronger role in ensuring that the evidence produced by the Centres was useful for decision makers. There were concerns that sometimes the bar on the quality of evidence was set too high and that prevented the evidence from being applied in practice and having “impact”. Stakeholders considered that ESRC could play a key role in changing the character of research by placing a stronger focus on the applied impact of new understanding, coupled with supporting the development of the absorptive capacity of policy makers for rigorous evidence and encouraging humility where things are not known.

“Evidence reviews are very high standard. However, from a central government perspective sometimes it is useful to have lower quality but more applicable evidence too.” (WW Local Economic Growth, policy maker)

“The Centre’s output was quite academic and wasn’t super ready to give to policy makers... The handbook was produced by two people from LSE, it was supposedly for economists but the handbook wasn’t very user friendly and was very large.” (WW Wellbeing central government official)

While ESRC can play a role in this cultural change in research through the WWCs they fund, the wider ecosystem will also need to be involved in this change for it to succeed.

“The challenge [of improving evidence use in policing] is very much one of culture change, and one that cannot be achieved by the WWC alone.” (WW Crime Reduction academic)

Drawing together thoughts from across several stakeholders, the evidence suggests that ESRC could play this role at the commissioning stage by ensuring that the correct expectations about the role of academics and policy makers in the Centre were agreed and were subsequently held to. For example, one stakeholder suggested that ESRC could be a key partner in helping to create and maintain a consensus or “unified vision” between funders and the Centre on the expectations of the Centre and what its research priorities should be.

“There was no ‘unified vision’ of what the purpose of the Centre was [between the funders and the Centre].” (WW Wellbeing funder)

Several stakeholders suggested that ESRC might not be well placed to play an ongoing role in ensuring that decision makers continue to be the focus of the Centres’ work. As an institution, ESRC adheres broadly to the Haldane principle, which is the idea that decisions about what to spend research funds on should be made by researchers rather than politicians. Instead, it might be more appropriate if these facilitating conversations were led by the Cabinet Office or by a lead funder. However, ESRC was in a good position to communicate and set expectations with other funders about the role of the academics in the Centres at the outset.

These commissioning conversations could usefully have multiple dimensions.

Firstly, ESRC could play a stronger role in embedding the need for evidence use in policy-making. For example, one overarching stakeholder we interviewed suggested this could be done by encouraging professional bodies to sign “evidence declarations” (outlining commitments to using evidence in practice) such as the one signed by the College of Policing in 2017.¹¹² While this would not directly result in greater knowledge mobilisation, the public commitment could encourage the desired behaviours. Although it is not clear that ESRC is best placed to influence this.

Secondly, the role of ESRC at the commissioning stage could also extend to helping to shape partners’ understanding and expectations of what academic evidence can and cannot provide. These conversations should take place upfront and could then be referred to throughout the lifespan of the Centre.

¹¹² <https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/event/evidence-declaration/>

“ESRC could be doing more to ‘bridge the gap’ between the two groups. Doing so would be in the direct interest of ESRC, as it would make sure that the Centres are ‘staying relevant’ and that the ultimate outputs of the Centres are useable within government.”
(Overarching – independent advisor to the WW Network)

“...the solution to this, and generally for achieving a greater impact from the Centre, would be to have a more formalised interaction between the Centre and funders at the outset.” (WW Wellbeing funder)

Finally, ESRC involvement is a key motivator for many academics who have worked in the Centres. Given its strong links with academics, ESRC could play a key role in promoting collaboration and empathy between academics, and policy makers and practitioners. It was noted, for example, by one WCPP practitioner that “researchers can be quite naive about how hard it is to bring about change”. Practical options for achieving this aim included ESRC on-boarding academics, for example helping academics to understand the need for flexibility of research and also to recognise the time taken to implement change “on the ground”.

Another option suggested by one of the WW Local Economic Growth funders was the wider use of tools like the stimulus fund included in the new contract for the Centre. This fund effectively ring-fences some of the funding to enable conversations between the Centre and policy makers so that projects are properly scoped out and agreed up front. This was seen as a key mechanism for ensuring that Centre outputs were useful for policy makers.

Another practical suggestion for how to bridge the gap between academia and practice could be for ESRC to help promote the integration of the two spheres. An overarching stakeholder in the network suggested that research fellowships could offer an effective model for ESRC to achieve this. By offering fellowships so that practitioners and policy makers could temporarily engage with academic research, ESRC could well lay the foundation for more effective collaboration in the long term. We understand that there are some cases of this already occurring, but this could go further if ESRC more systematically connected Centres with their other policy fellow schemes. Or, alternatively, Centres could embed someone within policy departments.

Finally, one suggestion was that ESRC could adapt its peer-review processes for the WWCs to better reflect the needs of users. It was observed by one stakeholder that “Neither the peer-review process nor the Funders Groups currently comprise of a representative group of research users. Involvement of these individuals would be beneficial in order to ensure the bidding allocations, work programmes and outputs are aligned with what is most relevant and helpful for users”. This could ensure that WWCs are designed with both academic independence and users’ needs in mind.

Focusing investment on cross-cutting questions

A number of overarching stakeholders suggested that ESRC could do more to strategically focus Centres on cross-cutting policy questions, particularly those where current research evidence may be limited. One stakeholder observed that some of the ESRC-funded WWCs (e.g. WW Crime Reduction and EIF) were quite specific in their focus and a broader scope for a Centre would be better.

“A broader scope for a WWC is better, because so many of the problems are cross-cutting. You can see this in medicine, where you don’t often have standalone institutions focusing on e.g. liver health, you have broader institutions that work those strands in and across their research.” (Central government official)

Another observed that the peer-review process might not give sufficient merit to cross-disciplinary work and cross-cutting Centres might help to stimulate the right types of evidence.

“Their peer-review process is very biased against this [cross-cutting research], since the people who peer review always feel that their area is not well-enough represented. Perhaps it is for this reason for instance that the next round of funding for the Wellbeing Centre was rejected.” (Overarching stakeholder)

Several Centre and ESRC stakeholders referred to the potential to make greater use of the ESRC strategic fund in this space. This fund was viewed by these stakeholders as one way of ensuring funding efforts across the board were more joined up. However, another stakeholder commented that “high staff turnover at ESRC has meant that the strategic fund for projects across Centres has been poorly run by ESRC in the past.” An alternative to the strategic fund could be a themed call for funding, where ESRC would encourage projects in cross-cutting areas where they have identified gaps. This would be a more strategic approach and would ensure that the funded efforts were of a higher quality.

However this greater focus on cross-cutting questions is achieved, it will of course be vital that the cross-cutting questions considered are indeed useful to decision makers. In practice, this will require ESRC to consider how to identify the relevant questions. This is likely to involve a process of engagement between decision makers and researchers, facilitated by ESRC, to determine what the appropriate questions are. It could also involve the ESRC undertaking an exercise to estimate the “size of the prize” that could be unlocked from incremental improvements in the answer to each of the questions posed.

Encouraging a greater focus on implementation

The Centres generally appear to perform well in the translation and dissemination of evidence and the dissemination of knowledge. However, there was a broadly held view across decision makers that there was room for improvement in the ability of Centres to achieve the final stage of knowledge mobilisation – implementation.

“It was difficult to understand how to apply the learnings to real life.” (WW Wellbeing practitioner)

“Evidence reviews are very high standard. However, from a central government perspective sometimes it is useful to have lower quality but more applicable evidence too.” (WW Local Economic Growth policy maker)

“A lot of time has been spent working on evidence translation and dissemination from a supply perspective, e.g. how to present the evidence in a nice way, however what hasn’t yet been cracked is how to get evidence into practice.” (WCPP practitioner)

Drawing together the findings suggests that there is a breakdown somewhere in the knowledge mobilisation cycle. It appears that in some cases the knowledge and

evidence generated by the Centres is not sufficiently tailored to the needs of the policy makers and practitioners. In our view, there are many potential reasons why this might be the case. At its heart, it may reflect the inherent tension between the academic objective for high-quality research of the standard that can be published in well-respected journals and the needs of policy makers for sometimes less robust but tailored research. It could also reflect a misalignment between research focus and policy questions, particularly those that change rapidly and are driven by political motivations. However, it could equally reflect that, despite their efforts, potential users are not aware of relevant evidence or that Centres do not consistently present or tailor their knowledge or evidence in a way that chimes with policy makers and can be put into practice. It appears likely, in our view, that all of these factors are at play.

Several of the Centres recognised the difficulties in turning evidence into action or impact in their respective policy areas. They suggested that there was limited understanding of how best to achieve this in certain policy contexts (e.g. where there is high turnover amongst evidence users).

The Knowledge Mobilisation Package has gone some way to identifying how knowledge can be effectively mobilised, but some of our interviewees perceived that there was scope to extend this research to make it more applicable to a wider audience. There was broad recognition across all stakeholders that different audiences have different needs when it comes to evidence and different mobilisation approaches will be required in different contexts.

One overarching stakeholder suggested that a separate Centre focused on researching how knowledge mobilisation can be achieved more effectively could help.

“A new Centre could be set up to research how to use evidence in different areas, as this has affected several Centres who have struggled to get their evidence into action.” (Overarching stakeholder)

One practitioner suggested that a separate collaborative body that engages directly with practitioners to help facilitate the implementation of knowledge could be the way forward. Either of these, the new Centre or collaborative body, would require long-term investment if adopted.

“What is rather needed is a collaborative body to ensure that the evidence actually reaches the hands of the decision makers.” (WW Wellbeing practitioner)

Another suggested that incentives for more active sharing of insights on what has worked well in knowledge mobilisation between Centres could drive the desired change. Also developing case study evidence to show what actually happens on the ground could be helpful.

While these observations were raised in the context of what ESRC could improve, there was also recognition that ESRC may not be best placed to directly facilitate a greater focus on implementation, given its strong focus on and links to the academic world.

However, one Centre stakeholder suggested that an area where ESRC could play a role would be in ensuring WWCs receive funding to cover their own evaluation “self-reflection is often neglected and key KPI measurements are not always collated”. ESRC could look to explicitly build this component into any new Centre it funds.

“The impact measurement of What Works Centres is weak, because they are given no resource to study themselves. ESRC could do a bit more to think about what success looks like and how to monitor it.” (EEF staff)

Some Centres have taken steps to encourage regular evaluations. For example, WW Crime Reduction set aside part of its funding for an ongoing independent evaluation of its work and WW Local Economic Growth partnered with Arup and CfC, who were responsible for recording key metrics. However this is inconsistent across Centres and the depth of these evaluations is often limited.

What is typically measured are metrics in relation to the Centres’ activities and engagement, such as their publications and reports, the number of people accessing the website and the number of events and attendees at these events. What is lacking is reflection on what impacts these activities have, such as on whether they resulted in any behaviour being changed or in any policies being implemented. These metrics need to be tailored to the context and objectives of the Centres, as noted earlier.

Supporting greater collaboration between academics

Several stakeholders indicated that greater collaboration between academics could have a beneficial effect on the output from ESRC-funded WWCs.

“More collaboration may improve output.” (Overarching stakeholder)

“There may also be scope to broaden the academic community which is involved in the Centre.” (WW Local Economic Growth policy maker)

Whereas in some WWCs, such as WW Scotland, multiple academics have led research, in others, such as WW Local Economic Growth and WCPP, a single or small number of influential academics have been largely responsible for the Centres’ outputs.

The concerns about over-reliance on individual academics was largely expressed by those stakeholders as being an issue of succession planning. There was a concern that the Centres would lose traction if the prominent individuals were to leave or retire. Several policy makers suggested that ESRC should think about this issue.

A less frequently expressed view was a concern that individual voices dominate the output of the Centre, creating a risk that some strands of research could be undervalued or neglected in Centre outputs and discussions.

Stakeholders did not make particular suggestions about how ESRC could facilitate the inclusion of a wider network of academics within Centres. However, in our view, ESRC could most effectively play this role during initial negotiations about Centres by ensuring that Centres have a clear plan for (and are judged against) engaging a broad set of stakeholders and succession planning.

Playing a stronger role in the network

There was a broadly held view across stakeholders that ESRC could play a stronger role in coordinating the WWN.

Some overarching stakeholders commented that there was a degree of duplication in the research conducted; for example, there are numerous overlapping Centres around the field of education and children.

Overarching stakeholders and those from the WCPP pointed to confusion around who to speak to within the network about a given topic, which prevented effective collaboration.

It was suggested by these stakeholders that ESRC could do more to encourage coordination across the network through improving coordination amongst ESRC staff managing the different What Works investments and with staff in the wider non-ESRC-funded network.

However, it was suggested by another overarching stakeholder that ESRC is not well placed to facilitate cross-Centre collaboration. This should be deferred to the What Works Council. However, in their view, ESRC was well placed to take the lead on simplifying or centralising the current WWN (e.g. by consolidating research). This relates back to ESRC taking a more strategic role in its investments in the network, as noted above.

Playing a more active role if the Centre is falling short

The joint funding of WWCs is important for fostering wider stakeholder buy-in, credibility and collaboration, but it has sometimes been unclear which party is responsible for holding a Centre to account. To maximise the impact of the WWCs, several overarching stakeholders were clear that action must be taken where a Centre is falling short of its goals.

“When [ESRC] have been assertive they have been much more successful, as it provides incentive for all parties to ‘up their game’.”
(Overarching)

“ESRC could be more bullish in holding Centres to account.”
(Overarching)

“Clearer communication of accountability and overall strategy could help Centres function better and deliver more relevant results.”
(Overarching)

Given its central position within the organisation of the WWN, stakeholders felt that ESRC should be prepared to be more active when a Centre is perceived to be underachieving. As outlined in section 3.2.5, ESRC has a role in active investment management but there is room for ESRC to go further. For example, this might take the form of scoping conversations which could ensure clarity about the expectations of the Centre from both the perspective of funders and academics and could set out a clear benchmark of what “success” looks like. Or it could be in the form of more active coordination to ensure joined-up workings within the Centre.

Looking longer term

Our findings indicate that short-term funding has the potential to inhibit the impact of the ESRC-funded WWCs. While setting a limit on the duration of funding could be useful if ESRC saw itself as having a purely catalytic purpose, it could also dampen the impact of a WWC coming to the end of its ESRC funding. This prompts the question of

whether ESRC should adjust its focus to the longer term, at least with regards to the WWCs.

“If you consider ESRC’s activities from a historic perspective, where they have made the most impact is when they have provided long-term funding.” (WCPP practitioner)

“This type of organisation does not make sense as a short-term investment – it would be quite damaging to the network formation if this was the case as it would prevent clarity in its strategy.” (WW Wellbeing practitioner)

On the other hand, it is also clear that longer investments involve downsides too. Several central government stakeholders have noted that having the ability to keep at least some of the funding flexible is important to enable regular conversations between the Centres and users of the evidence and enable a change in direction in the face of changing priorities.

Ultimately, the length of investment period will need to balance the tension between making a Centre appealing to the academic community, who will have a preference for stable and predictable funding (and hence longer funding horizons) and minimising the administrative burden associated with funding decisions, and the desire of funders to be able to influence the scope of works periodically so that it remains useful and relevant. When Centres are first set up, longer funding periods may be required, especially where relationships need to be built across a variety of stakeholders as this takes time. On the whole, the current funding model appears to strike a reasonable balance between these tensions, particularly where some funding is ring-fenced for work to be agreed throughout the funding period.

5.2 Recommendations for the ESRC

1. ESRC should continue to invest in knowledge mobilisation

Part of ESRC’s mission is to contribute to the effectiveness of public services and policy in the UK.¹¹³ Mobilising high-quality academic evidence and knowledge around what works in public services and policy appears central to ESRC fulfilling this objective. WWCs have shown themselves to be a good model for knowledge mobilisation. Arguably superior models for knowledge mobilisation could exist, but the evidence on what knowledge mobilisation tools are effective and in what contexts is still evolving. Importantly, we also lack a clear framework and baseline for judging the performance of Centres. This makes it difficult, at this point, to identify a superior model for knowledge mobilisation. It also means that there is likely continued benefit from experimentation in knowledge mobilisation tools and the model for knowledge mobilisation so long as there is a clear framework for judging the success of different models and a requirement for a robust evaluation against that framework.

2. ESRC should develop additional criteria for when and how much to invest in WWCs

¹¹³ <https://esrc.ukri.org/about-us/what-we-do/>

To maximise the value for money from its investments, it is appropriate for ESRC to concentrate its funding on Centres which best support the aims of ESRC and to reflect evolving experience to date and wider context. We provide an initial outline of what additional criteria could look like. ESRC could consider the role of additional criteria and how performance against criteria could inform the shape of funding over time ¹¹⁴.

- **Criteria 1: The extent to which the Centre addresses significant, overarching and pervasive policy questions.** ESRC should seek to prioritise investment in Centres that are set up to address significant policy questions. We believe that such questions should be longstanding and largely apolitical in nature, for example: How can the costs and benefits of pandemic management better be quantified? What are the most effective ways to reduce unemployment and increase employment? This will ensure the Centre is able to influence policy across the political spectrum and remain relevant. In practice, this will require ESRC to consider how to identify these questions. This is likely to involve a process of engagement between decision makers and researchers to determine what the appropriate questions are. It could also involve the ESRC undertaking an exercise to estimate the “size of the prize” that could be unlocked from incremental improvements in the answer to each of the questions posed.
- **Criteria 2: The extent to which the questions lend themselves to rigorous academic study.** ESRC has a clear reputation for championing academic independence and excellence. Given that, it would appear to make sense for ESRC to prioritise funding for Centres where the question the Centre seeks to address can *either* draw on an established, yet underutilised, academic research base, *or* where there is clear potential for rigorous academic research. It may be that the level of academic study that a policy question lends itself to shifts over time or that fruitful new research becomes ever more scarce. ESRC should keep its investment in Centres under review to ascertain whether there remains sufficient value in maintaining the close involvement of academics in a Centre. By outlining this approach to investment from the outset, ESRC can provide a clearer signal to co-funders about the likely lifespan of their investment and the indicators that will lead to alternative funding for the Centres being found or for the Centres to reach the end of their lifecycle.
- **Criteria 3: The extent to which the Centre brings together evidence from multiple sources/disciplines which may not currently be joined up.** A key objective of WWCs is to create a central evidence base, such that evidence can be more easily accessed and used by decision makers. Where there is already a single repository of research, or a leading hub of expertise that is already well recognised and connected to policy in a particular field, the impact of a Centre, over and above the existing base, would be limited. In contrast, in policy areas where relevant knowledge and evidence is dispersed across many academic institutions or even academic fields, the impact of a Centre will likely be greater. While this criteria could arguably apply to whether or not any funding should be directed to a WWC, this is a particularly pertinent issue for ESRC. ESRC is uniquely placed to leverage its role

¹¹⁴ Previous research has also noted that ESRC’s lack of flexibility in its funding model can create challenges, limiting its strategic capacity and leaving little room to adjust to changing needs.

Gough D, Maidment C, Sharples J (2018), “UK What Works Centres: Aims, methods and contexts”. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London. ISBN: 978-1-911605-03-4.

and understanding of the academic community and landscape, particularly through its connections with other Research Councils and within UKRI to set appropriate conditions when funding Centres to incentivise and encourage coordination and collaboration amongst academic institutions and disciplines.

3. ESRC should set out a clear vision for the end game for its investments

ESRC should consider what it wants the end game for its investments to be and whether there is a point in time when it might expect Centres to be funded by other funders without ESRC involvement or to become self-sustaining in some way. This could be similar to the approach taken by ESRC to funding of other large Research Centres and institute awards, noting that this is duration based rather than related to context change.¹¹⁵ This might be when the evidence landscape in the area is more developed or the role of evidence assessment is being provided within government. Alternatively, it might be when academic involvement is no longer required or when it can be secured without ESRC funding and involvement in a Centre. At this stage, it is not clear if alternative funding arrangements are feasible (i.e. not clear that private sector and/or third sector can be incentivised and interested to invest) but having a long-term vision of the future of current and prospective investments is important.

4. ESRC should consider whether to fund work to create the development of a common framework for judging evidence across the Centres

Building on previous research in the WWCs,¹¹⁶ our work also found evidence that standards for judging the quality of evidence are not consistent across Centres. For example, the Centres apply different standards when judging the required level of robustness for primary research. As well as making it more challenging for audiences to be confident in the findings presented by Centres, it can also result in Centres setting standards that are inappropriately high, meaning that decision makers are told that there is no available evidence on which they can draw. While the quality of evidence needs to be context specific, as noted above, there could be value in ESRC commissioning research or working jointly with the Cabinet Office and the other funders and key users of each Centre to define what evidence standards are appropriate in different contexts. ESRC could also consider whether there are implications for its wider research funding to ensure that there are sufficient incentives for academics beyond the Centres to engage in research which is useful for decision makers but which might not meet the high bar associated with academic journals.

¹¹⁵ For example, the Transition and legacy model – see <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-large-investments/esrc-Centres-and-institutes/Centres-transition-funding/> and <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-large-investments/esrc-Centres-and-institutes/legacy-Centre-status/>

¹¹⁶ Gough D, Maidment C, Sharples J (2018), "UK What Works Centres: Aims, methods and contexts". London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London. ISBN: 978-1-911605-03-4.

LOGIC MODELS

This Annex includes the set of logic models which we have produced in partnership with each Centre during the scoping phase of this evaluation. This included compiling information from documents submitted to ESRC as well as interviews with the Principal Investigators (or equivalent) for each Centre.

The complete list of Centres considered is as follows:

- 1.1 What Works Centre for Wellbeing
 - 1.1.1 Work and Learning
 - 1.1.2 Culture and Sport
 - 1.1.3 Communities
 - 1.1.4 Cross-Cutting strand
- 1.2 Wales Centre for Public Policy
- 1.3 What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth
- 1.4 What Works Scotland
- 1.5 What Works Centre for Crime Reduction
- 1.6 The Early Intervention Evaluation Partnerships (in partnership with the Early Intervention Foundation)
- 1.7 The Knowledge Mobilisation Package (in partnership with the Education Endowment Foundation)
- 1.8 Generic What Works

In general, the expected timelines for each of the elements of the logic models are as follows (although there will no doubt be some exceptions to this from case to case). Activities and Outputs are expected to see completion throughout the course of their funding; Outcomes are expected to be underway in the immediate term following these, and Impacts are expected to be achieved in the medium to long term, assuming sustained engagement and continued activity in the space created by the WWCs.

It should be noted that the Centres have evolved over time and therefore the extent to which different types of activities are conducted will have shifted. Given the retrospective nature of the logic models, both for WWCs individually and our investment as a whole, this shift may not have been accurately captured.

1.1 What Works Centre for Wellbeing (WW Wellbeing)

ESRC contributed approximately £1.8 million of funding to WW Wellbeing between June 2015 and October 2018. This equated to around 40% of the funding, with the remainder coming from a range of funders including BEIS, DCMS, DH, DfT, DWP, MHCLG, PHE and the Welsh Government.

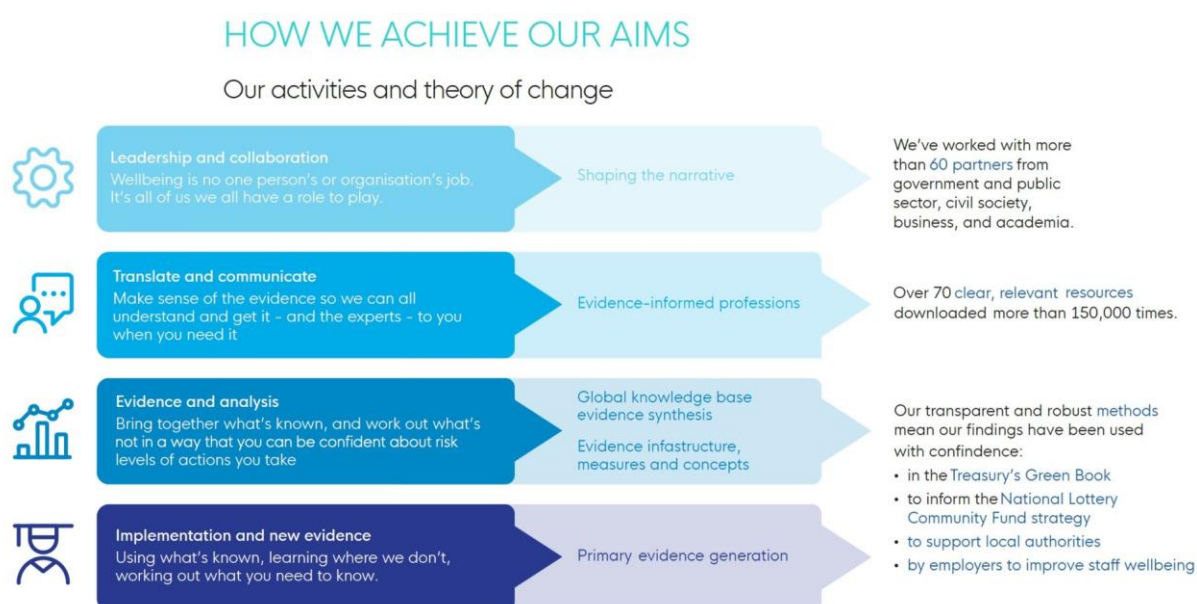
Following this initial funding period, ESRC contributed a further £1.3 million for specific projects and the Centre has received additional external funding including £1.5 million from the National Lottery.

WW Wellbeing also received a £49k strategic fund investment from ESRC.¹¹⁷

The central aim of the Wellbeing strands is to influence the way wellbeing concepts and evidence are used by its key audiences.

The overarching logic model produced by the Centre can be found in Figure 27. This is followed by the logic models we produced in partnership with each of the strands.

Figure 27 WW Wellbeing overall logic model



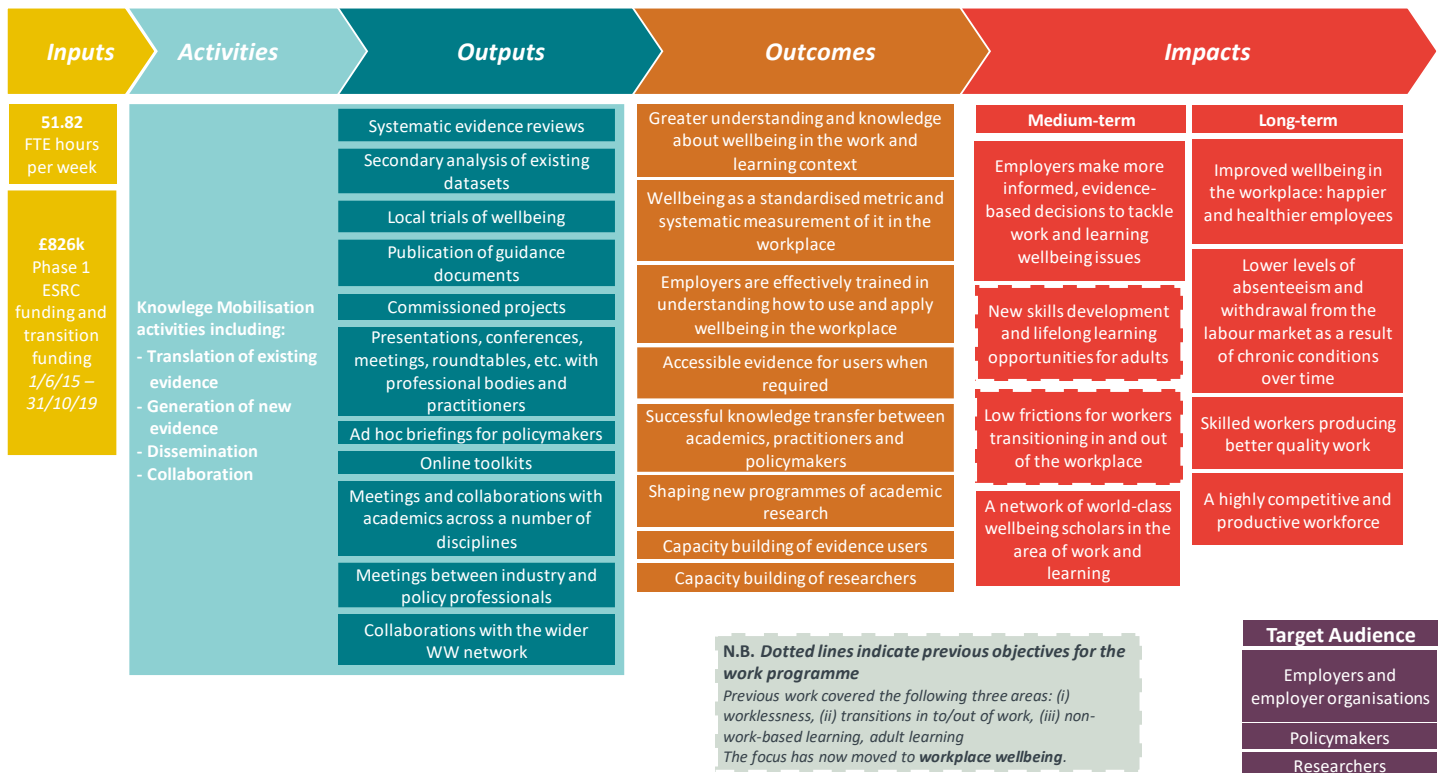
Source: <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/strategy-2020/>

¹¹⁷ Strategic funds are funds awarded by ESRC for particular research programmes which usually involve several WWCs; as such, while the funding is awarded to a "lead applicant" (to which we attribute the investment here), in reality this funding is shared between several WWCs.

1.1.1 Work and Learning

ESRC funding of the Work and Learning strand of WW Wellbeing is hosted by the University of East Anglia's Norwich Business School. It aims to promote wellbeing-driven policy across the entire spectrum of work and learning, but has shifted in focus more recently towards increasing workplace wellbeing.

Figure 28 WW Wellbeing Work and Learning logic model

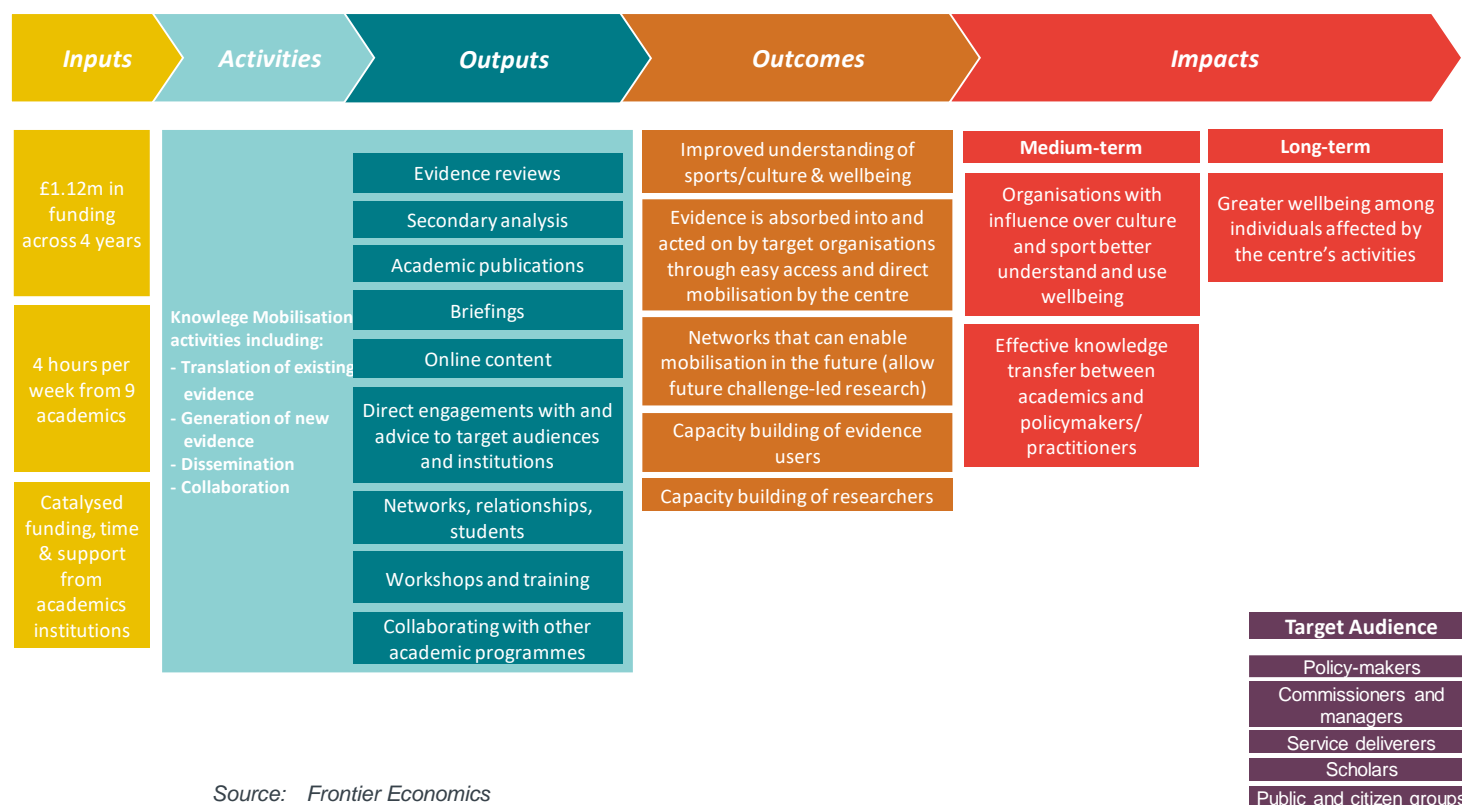


Source: Frontier Economics

1.1.2 Culture and Sport

ESRC funding of the Culture and Sport strand of WW Wellbeing is hosted by Brunel University. It aims to integrate wellbeing considerations into the culture and sports organisations.

Figure 29 WW Wellbeing Culture and Sport logic model

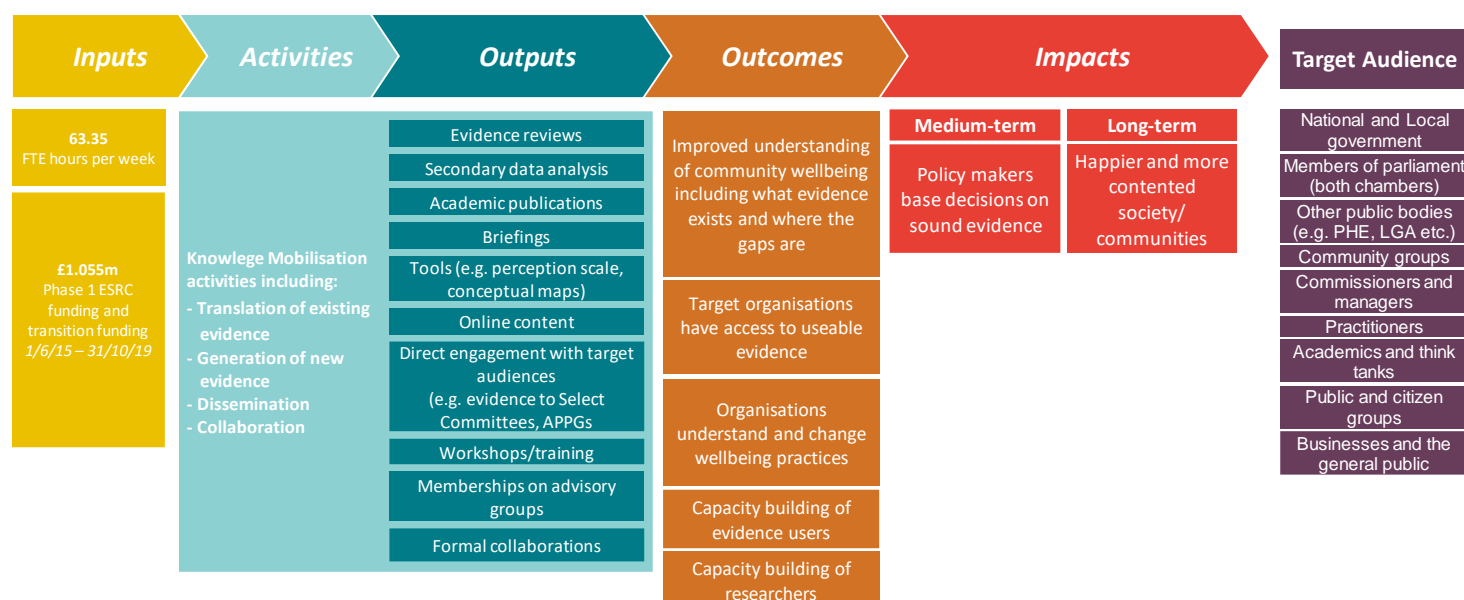


Source: Frontier Economics

1.1.3 Communities

ESRC funding of the Community strand of WW Wellbeing is hosted by the University of Liverpool. This strand looks at creating an evidence base for community wellbeing in order to achieve a happier and more content society.

Figure 30 WW Wellbeing Communities logic model



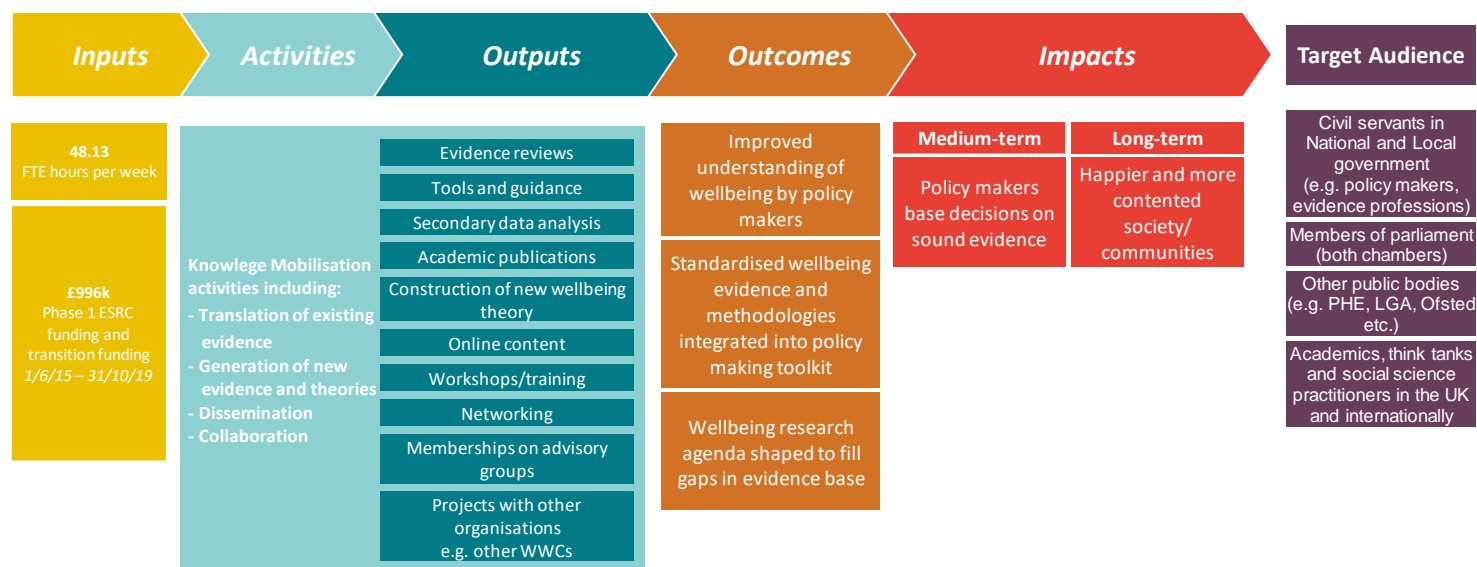
Source: Frontier Economics

1.1.4 Cross-Cutting strand

ESRC funding of the Cross-Cutting strand of WW Wellbeing is hosted by the LSE's Centre for Economic Performance.

It aims to standardise the use of wellbeing in public policy analysis, and ensure that government and the economic analysts within it are oriented towards wellbeing.

Figure 31 WW Wellbeing Cross-Cutting logic model



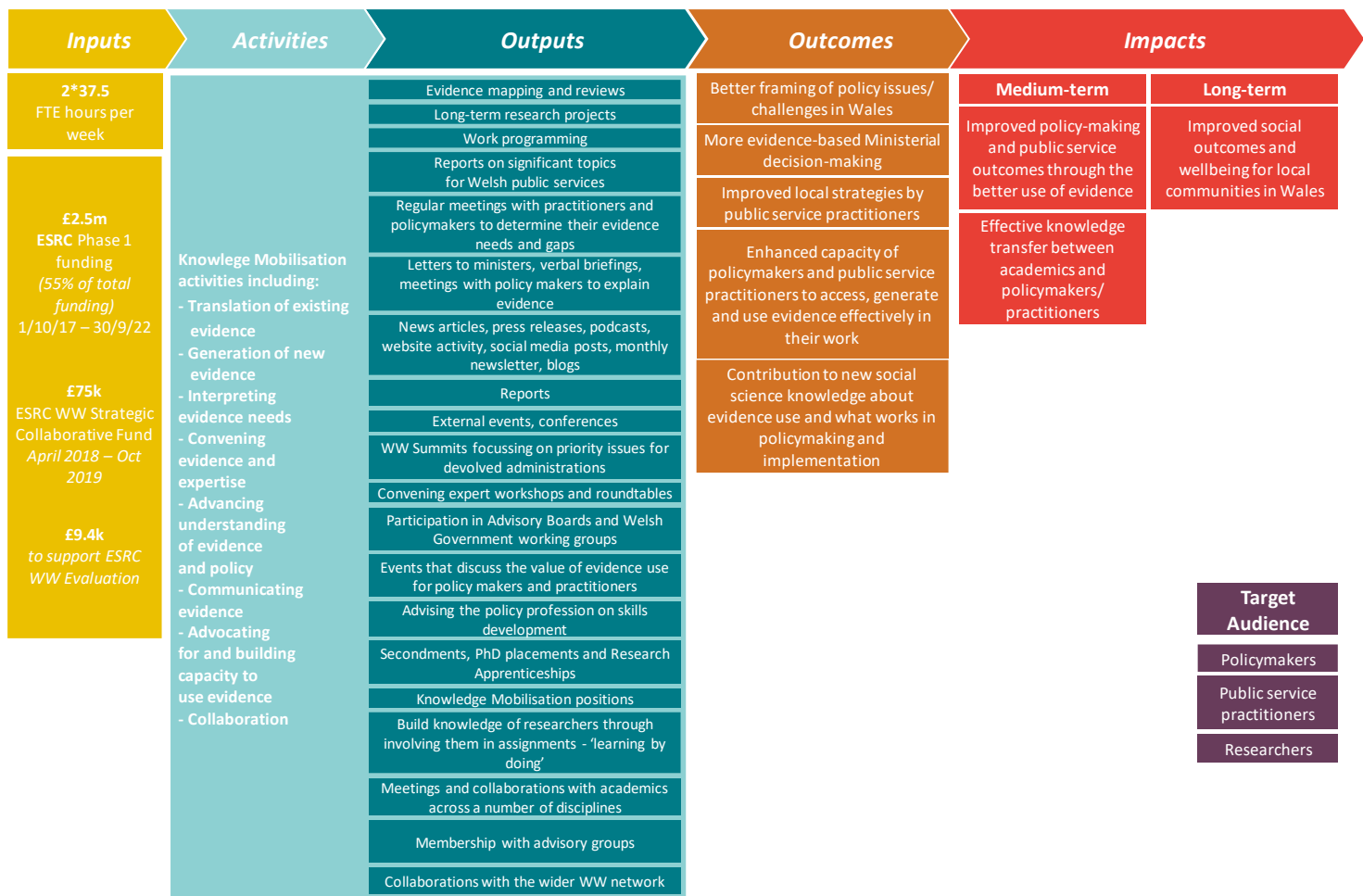
Source: Frontier Economics

1.2 Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP)

The WCPP was established in October 2017 to extend the Welsh Government's existing Public Policy Institute for Wales (PPIW), which focused on policy-making and implementation, to include a public services arm. ESRC provides core funding for this Centre which will last until 2022.

The WCPP works with leading policy experts to provide Ministers, the Civil Service and public services with independent and authoritative evidence and expertise to improve policy-making and public service outcomes in Wales.

Figure 32 WCPP logic model



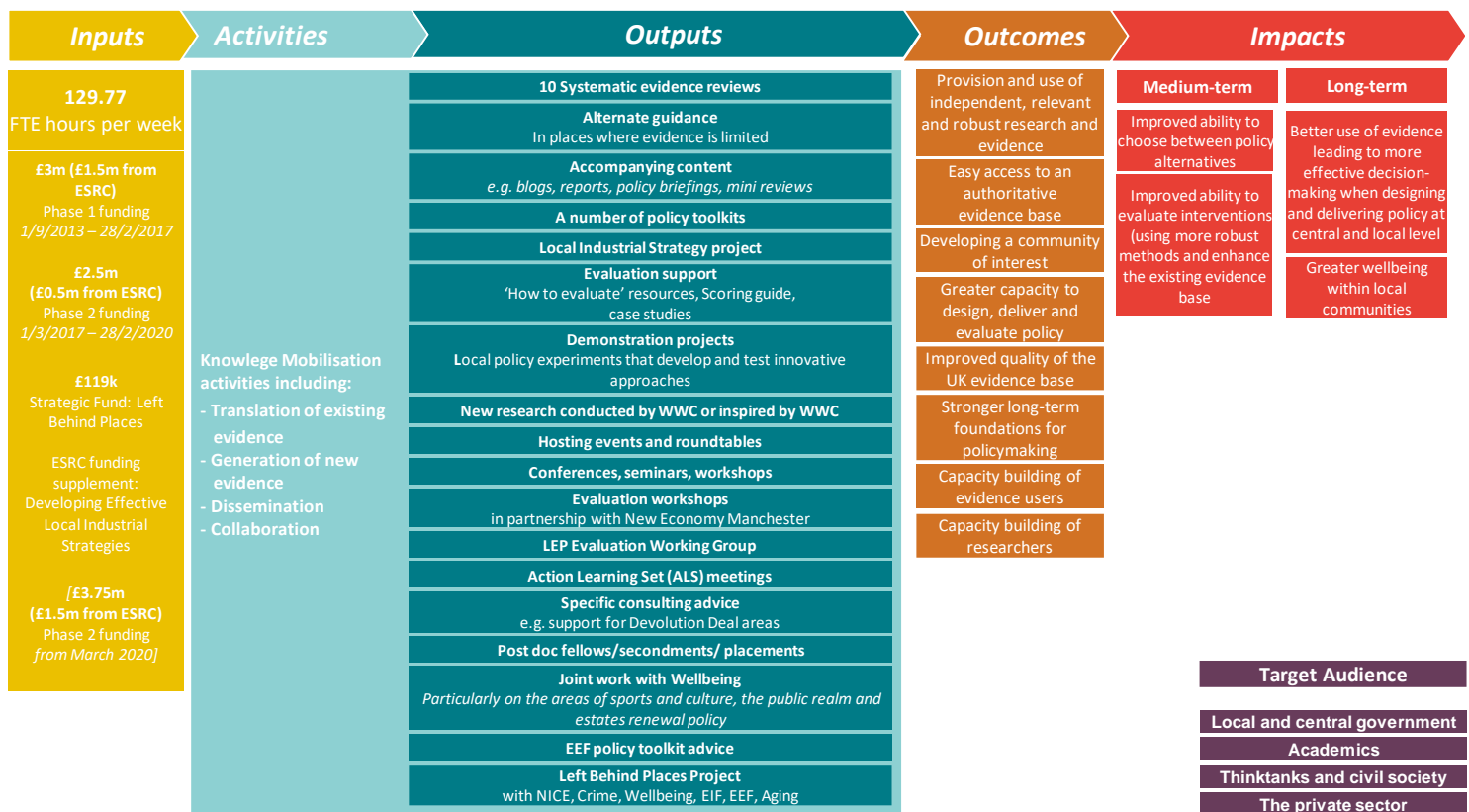
Source: Frontier Economics

1.3 What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth (WW Local Economic Growth)

The WW Local Economic Growth has received core funding from ESRC since September 2013 and was established in partnership with the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Business Energy Innovation and Skills, and the Department for Transport. ESRC's joint research partners in this case were a collaboration of the LSE's Centre for Economic Performance, Arup and the Centre for Cities.

The WW Local Economic Growth aims to support local practitioners to deliver effective, evidence-based policy.

Figure 33 WW Local Economic Growth logic model



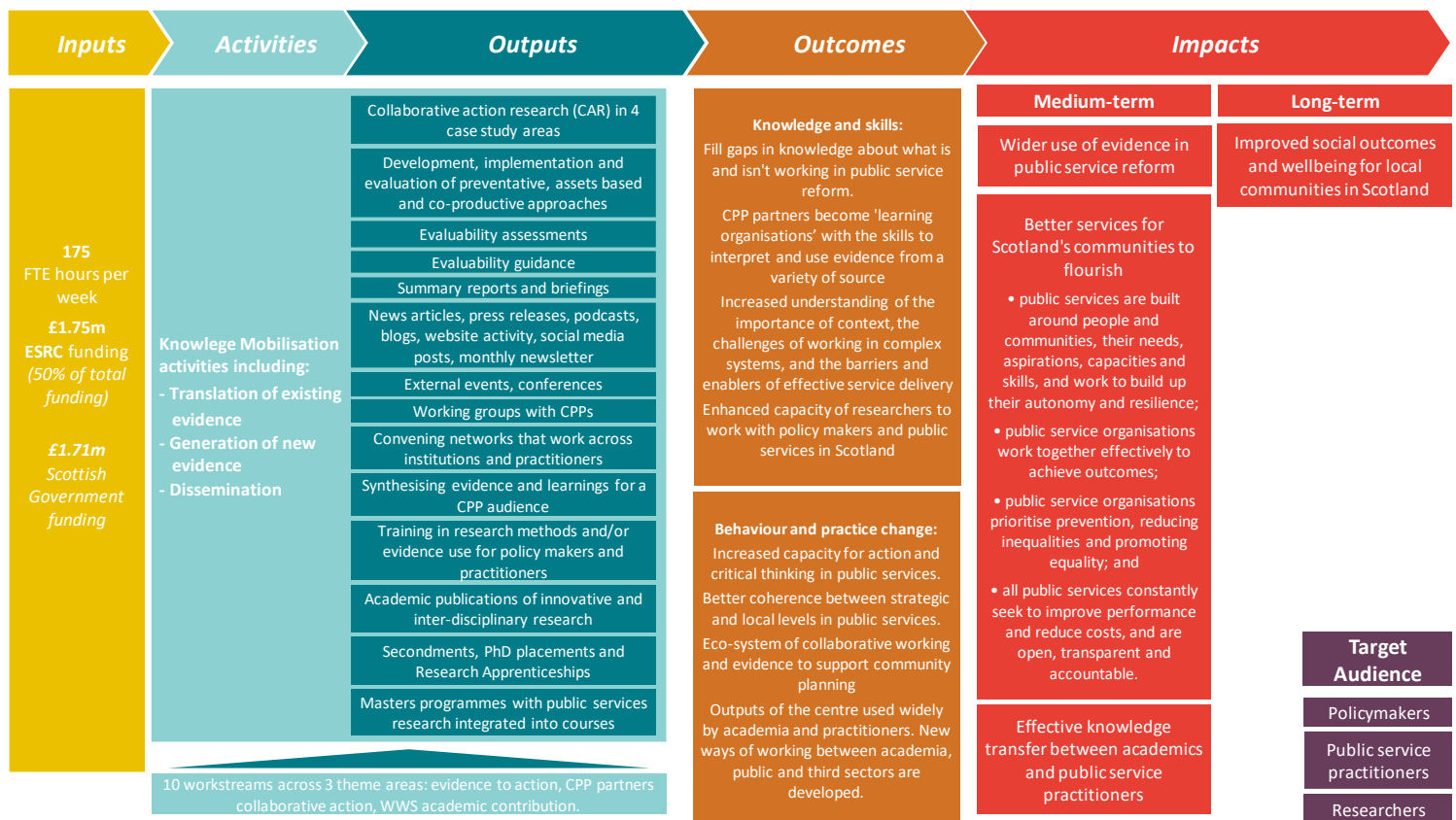
Source: Frontier Economics

1.4 What Works Scotland (WW Scotland)

The work of WW Scotland carried out the recommendations set out in the Scottish Government's Christie Commission; that is, to set out a "Scottish approach" to public services reform. It aimed to improve the way local areas in Scotland use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.

ESRC's joint research partners for this venture were the University of Glasgow and the University of Edinburgh. Core funding for this Centre was provided from July 2014 until December 2019.

Figure 34 WW Scotland logic model



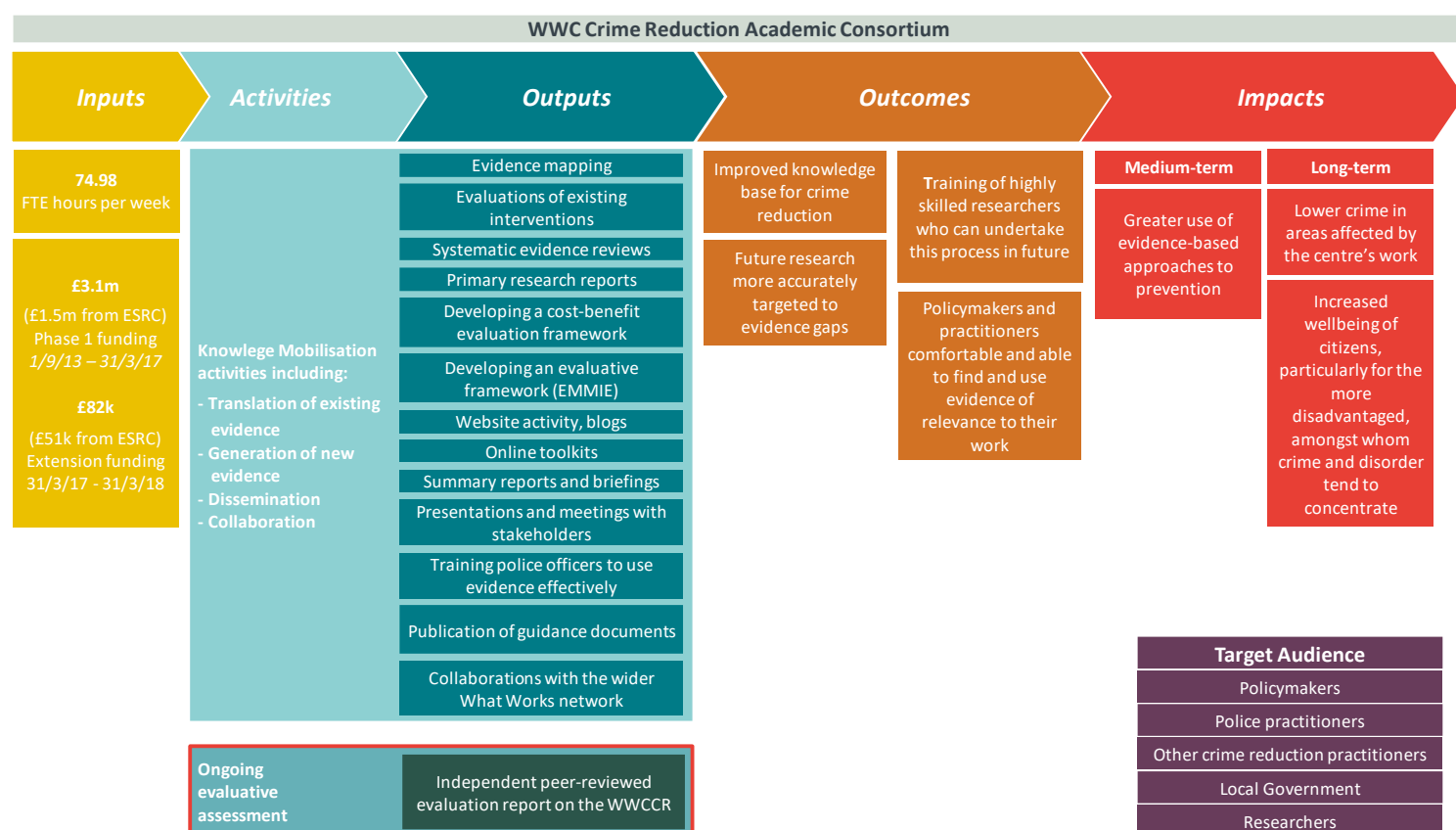
Source: Frontier Economics

1.5 What Works Centre for Crime Reduction (WW Crime Reduction)

One of the first WWCs to be set up, the WW Crime Reduction was established in 2013 in partnership with the College of Policing and University College London. ESRC provided core funding to the consortium between September 2013 and March 2018.

The WW Crime Reduction aims to improve the evidence base for crime reduction and better embed evidence into the decision-making of policy makers and police practitioners.

Figure 35 WW Crime Reduction logic model

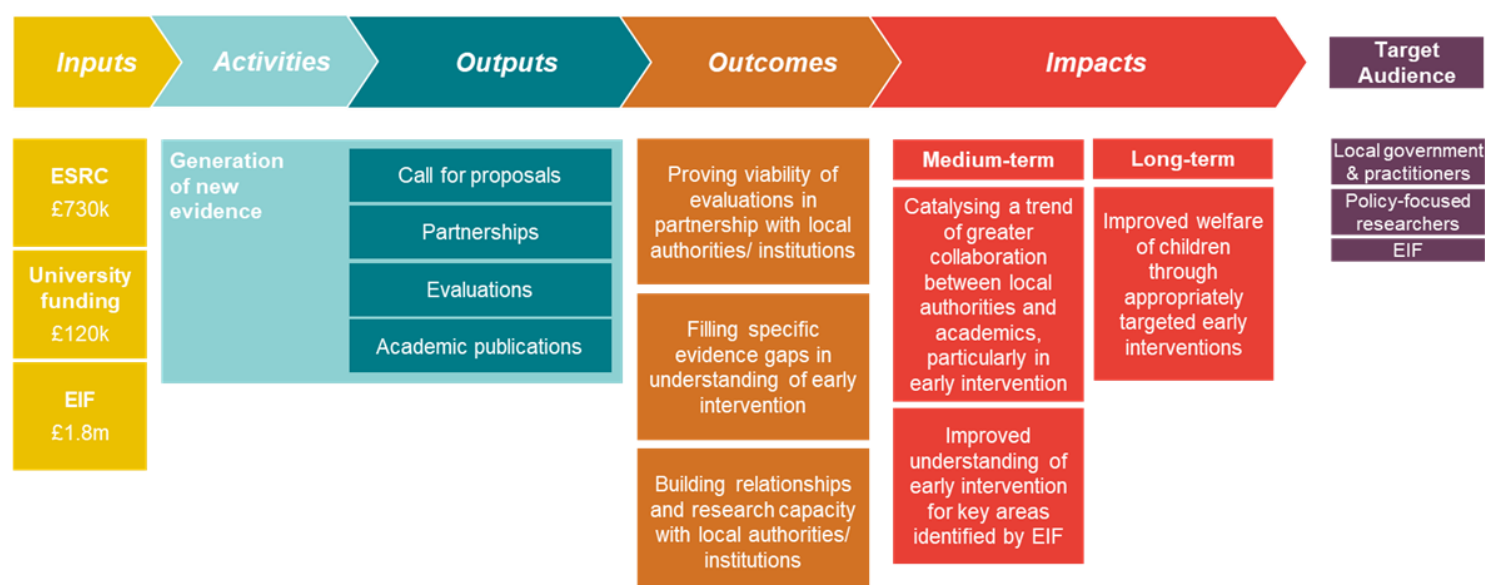


Source: Frontier Economics

1.6 The Early Intervention Evaluation Partnerships (in partnership with the Early Intervention Foundation)

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is a charity established in 2013 to champion and support the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes. ESRC grants for the Early Intervention Evaluation Partnerships provided non-core funding for EIF, which in turn funded a set of three evaluations that aimed to fill key evidence gaps and catalyse future funding in the area.

Figure 36 Early Intervention Evaluation Partnerships logic model

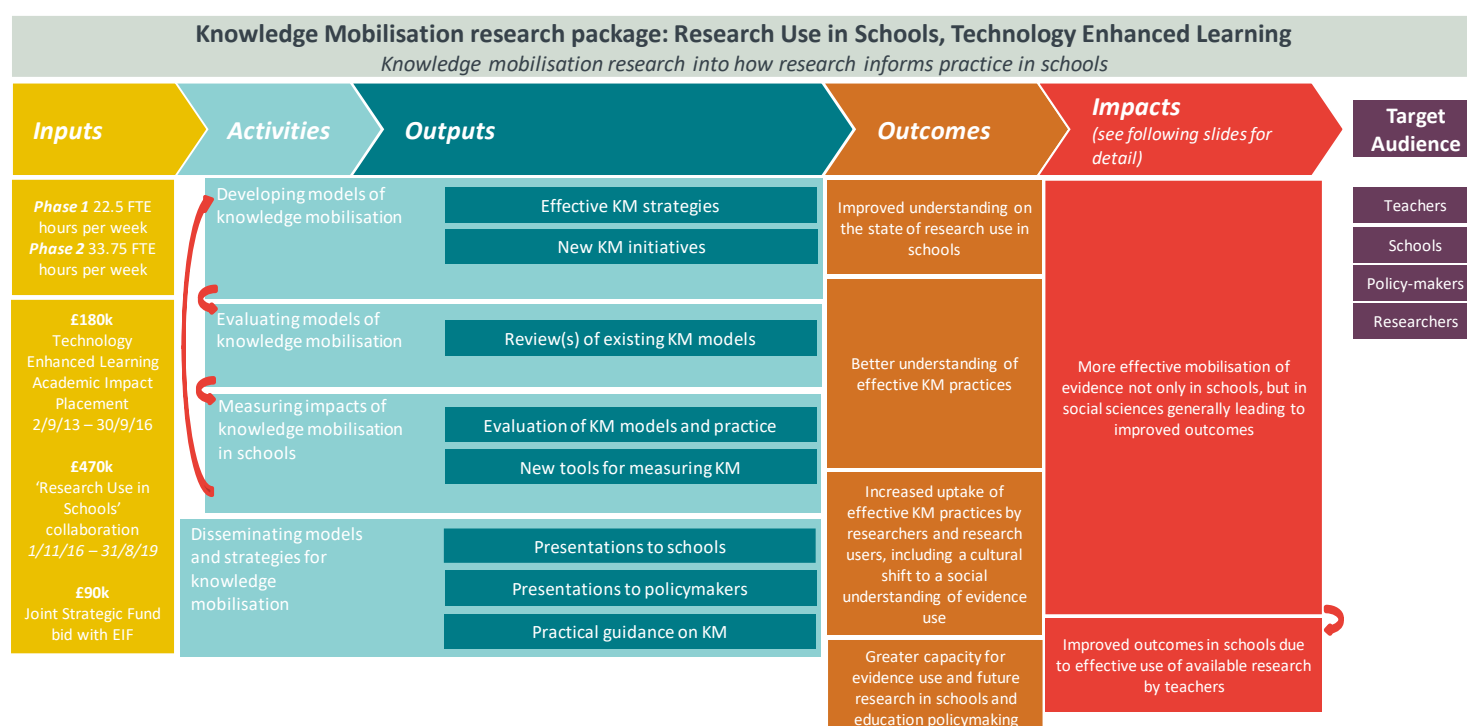


Source: Frontier Economics

1.7 The Knowledge Mobilisation Package (in partnership with the Education Endowment Foundation)

ESRC's investment in the Knowledge Mobilisation Research Package for the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) lasted from December 2013 to August 2019. This investment is distinct from other ESRC What Works investments. The grant provided the EEF with non-core funding for a single, specific package of activity with its own (related) research and impact agenda. This activity was carried out by a single researcher.

Figure 37 Knowledge Mobilisation Package logic model



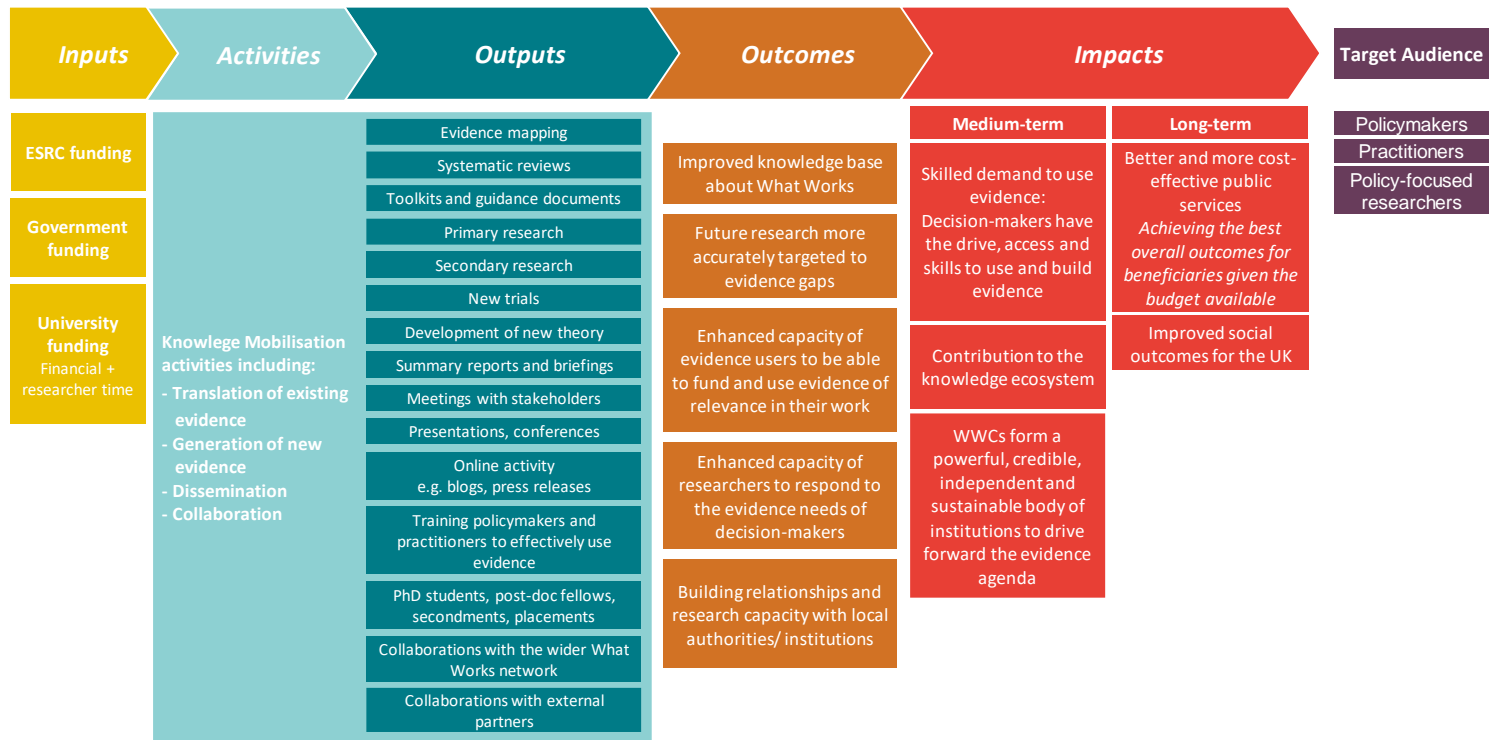
Note: Jonathan Sharples was also part of the EPPI review of the What Works Network that informed his work in this area, but is not within the scope of this evaluation

Source: Frontier Economics

1.8 Generic What Works Centre

Based on the existing WWCs under consideration in this paper, this generic logic model provides a consolidated overview of the principal activities carried out by a What Works Centre.

Figure 38 Generic What Works Centre logic model



Source: Frontier Economics

EVIDENCE COLLECTION PLAN

This Annex sets out in detail the methodology as agreed in the Inception Report prepared by Frontier Economics.¹¹⁸

1.9 Evidencing the Logic Models

As part of the logic model development discussed in the main report, we put forward a range of monitoring indicators which were used to evidence the impact of the individual WWCs and ESRC respectively.

The precise indicators suggested for each Centre are somewhat different given the different areas of focus. When conducting the logic models we were aware that the availability of data would be different for each Centre, which also reflects the indicators proposed for collection. As is often the case, indicators relating to activities and outputs are generally more easily evidenced, as was the case in this evaluation. In comparison, data for outcomes and impacts was harder to obtain and the links to the Centres harder to establish.

In the sections of this Annex that follow, we provide an overview of the types of indicators that we planned to collect as evidence for this evaluation. For reference we also provide a table outlining the data we were subsequently able to collect to evidence these indicators and we outline alternative methods we used to collect new data.

1.9.1 Activities and Outputs

To evidence the outputs produced by the Centres, we firstly collated information from public sources such as the Centres' websites. We supplemented this with internal data that each Centre had independently collated. Figure 39 outlines the data that we were able to collect from each Centre against our proposed evaluation indicators. Note that while we were able to collect most of the metrics, direct comparisons are difficult to draw. We had hoped that the required data had been stored in a consistent way across each of the Centres. While this was the case for some data, there were substantial differences in the data collected by the Centres

1.9.2 Short-term outcomes

Short-term outcomes are those that occur soon after activities and outputs have been produced and as an immediate consequence of these. For the most part we were able to harvest relevant information from public sources such as websites, social media sites and others to evidence some of the short-term outcome indicators. For example, citations and downloads of evidence produced by the WWCs, as well as "shares2" and "retweets" were harvested from existing websites.

There are some indicators for which we needed to engage with WWC staff to gather data (e.g. attendance at WWC events.). Other indicators required us to collect primary data (either through interviews or surveys) from those using the outputs produced by the WWCs (e.g. government officials, practitioners etc).

¹¹⁸ See footnote in Methodology section for where to access

1.9.3 Long-term outcomes and impacts

Long-term outcomes and impacts are those that occur as a result of the activities of the WWCs but with a time lag. These were typically more general, harder to measure and more difficult to attribute to individual WWCs. Most of the long-term outcome and impact indicator data was collected from target audiences through interviews and surveys. For example, indicators measuring how far the evidence generated by WWCs is used by decision makers was necessarily evidenced through primary interviews with those who could use the evidence (central and local government, arm's-length agencies, charities, community groups and others). However the individuals we interviewed, or who filled out our survey, likely represent a small proportion of the final user base of WWC work, especially given the various channels for evidence dissemination used by the Centres (Twitter, journals, blogs, workshops etc.).

We had considered using publicly available national statistics which reflect the ultimate intended impacts of the WWCs (such as having a happier and more contented society, reductions in crime, etc.). However, we realised that the challenge in attributing any changes in these statistics to the work of the WWCs was unavoidable. These ultimate impacts will be a function of many factors including other competing policies, the economic cycle and a large number of other exogenous factors. As such, the marginal contribution of the WWCs could only be evidenced in a qualitative way through interviews with key stakeholders.

Figure 39 Proposed evaluation metrics against the logic model and a breakdown of where quantitative data was obtained for each Centre

Evaluation metric	Metric type	WW Local Economic Growth	WW Scotland	WCPP	WW Wellbeing	WW Crime reduction	EIF	EEF
Systematic reviews completed	Output	Y	X	Y	Y	Y	X	X
Volume of evidence reviewed	Output	Y	X	X	Y	X	X	X
Number of toolkits developed	Output	Y	X	X	Y	Y	X	X
Accompanying materials produced (blogs, reports, briefings etc.)	Output	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	X	X
Number of events hosted	Output	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	X	Y
Number of events attended	Output	Y	Y	Y	X	X	X	X
Number of engagements with government officials	Output	Y	Y	Y	X	X	X	X
Number of demonstration projects	Output	Y	X	X	X	X	X	X
Number of new pieces of research linked to centre (direct or indirect)	Output	X	X	Y	Y	X	X	X
Number of PhDs/fellows/post docs	Output	Y	Y	X	Y	Y	X	X
Volume of advice provided to stakeholders	Output	Y	X	Y	Y	X	X	Y
Volume of social media posts (linked in, twitter)	Output	Y	X	Y	Y	X	X	X
Citations of evidence reviews	Outcome	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Citations of other publications	Outcome	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Views and downloads of evidence reviews	Outcome	Y	X	Y	X	Y	X	X
Views and downloads of other publications	Outcome	Y	X	Y	X	X	X	X
New research generated from evidence reviews	Outcome	X	X	Y	Y	X	X	X
Number of invitations to events/advisory groups/AAPGs etc.	Outcome	Y	Y	X	X	X	X	X
Use of WWC evidence by target audiences	Outcome	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	X	Y
Website visitors and views	Outcome	Y	X	Y	Y	Y	X	X
Social media impact (views, followers, shares, re-tweets etc.)	Outcome	Y	X	Y	Y	X	X	X
Attendance at WWC events	Outcome	Y	Y	Y	X	Y	X	X
Better understanding of existing evidence by target audiences	Impact	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	X	X
Use of evidence provided by WWCs to shape policy decisions	Impact	Y	Y	Y	Y	X	X	X
Decision making at local and national level more aligned with evidence	Impact	Y	X	Y	Y	X	X	X
Practitioner engagement with improved evidence base	Impact	Y	Y	Y	Y	X	X	X
Attraction of additional funding by the centre	Impact	Y	X	X	Y	X	X	X
Specific ultimate impacts related to each WWC (e.g. area impacts, falls in crime)	Impact	Y	X	X	X	X	X	X

Source: Frontier Economics.

Note: Green shows that an indicator is well evidenced while red suggests the opposite.

1.10 Approach to Secondary Data Collection

As set out above, a large number of indicators (particularly those relating to activities, outputs and short-term outcomes) were evidenced using secondary data. Although

secondary data was in principle available, there was variation in how information was stored and by whom, and what format it could be extracted in.

Where data was collected and held by the WWCs themselves (e.g. amount of advice provided to various stakeholders), we worked closely with them to enable efficient and seamless sharing of information. Data held in other locations needed to be harvested. For example, publication data was extracted from the Research Fish publications.

1.11 Approach to Primary Data Collection

Some primary data needed to be collected in order to fully evidence the impact of the WWCs. We collected several types of primary evidence as part of the work:

- Information on *how* the work of individual WWCs has been used (e.g. to inform calls for new research, to include in policy papers/submissions to decision makers etc.);
- Information about the *extent* to which the work of individual WWCs has been used (e.g. whether work is used regularly or infrequently, which parts have been used more/less etc.);
- Information about the specific involvement and role of ESRC in supporting the WWCs (where applicable);
- Information about what may have happened if the WWCs had not existed.

We collected the information set out above through a combination of surveys and semi-structured interviews. We describe below how these worked in practice.

1.11.1 Semi-structured interviews

We developed a programme of interviews with key users of the evidence generated by the WWCs in order to understand how far this evidence is used and whether or not it influences decision-making. We also used the interviews to gather more evidence on the specific role ESRC plays in the success of WWCs.

Overall we interviewed 65 stakeholders in the relevant WWCs. The split of interviewees across Centres, and the breakdown of interviewees' roles is provided in Figure 40. This figure sets out how many interviews we conducted for each Centre and the roles of those we interviewed. However, we also interviewed a further 11 stakeholders with an overarching interest in the WWC (not specific to one Centre).

Figure 40 Summary of qualitative interviews by Centre

Centre	Interviewees	...of which practitioners and local govt.	...of which central govt.**	...of which non-central govt. funders	...of which academics (includes Centre leads)	...of which funding managers	Other
WW Wellbeing	17	5	2	3	5	1	1
WCPP**	8	3	1	0	1	3	0
WW Local Economic Growth	10	5	3	0	1	1	0
WW Scotland**	8	3	1	0	3	1	0
WW Crime Reduction	3	0	0	0	2	1	0
EIF	6*	1	0	0	3	1*	1
EEF	3	0	0	0	2	1	0
Overarching	11	0	3	1	0	0	7

Source: Frontier Economics.

Note: Interview count includes the 17 scoping interviews conducted at the start of the project.

* ESRC funding manager for EEF and EIF is the same. Hence there is a double counting of this interview in the table.

**In the cases of WCPP and WW Scotland, "central govt." interviewees refer to interviewees in the Welsh/Scottish governments respectively, and "local govt." interviewees refer to lower levels of local government in the two nations.

To determine which individuals to approach for an interview we asked the Centres to provide us with a short list of names of people across a variety of roles (funders, practitioners, policy makers) who have engaged with their Centre. We then approached a randomly selected number of these individuals until we had arranged a sufficient number of interviews.

Alongside the interview with Centre stakeholders, ESRC put us in touch with 11 individuals that had a more holistic and overarching perspective of the WWCs and the network as a whole.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular its implications for police services, we were not able to carry out interviews with College of Policing staff or police practitioners.

Each interview took approximately one hour to complete. A prep sheet was shared with interviewees around a week ahead of the interview date. This provided a high level summary of the project and some guidance questions that we wished to explore. This helped interviewees prepare and, where relevant, to forward the invite to other colleagues who might be knowledgeable about the work. However, we wanted to keep these questions broad to leave room to explore topics raised by the interviewee. The prep sheet and cover letter also provided detail on how the information obtained during the interview would be stored and used, setting out all data protection arrangements¹¹⁹ in detail.

¹¹⁹ We made it clear that information provided would be analysed together with data provided by other interviewees and only aggregate themes coming out of all interviews would be shown in our report. No individual respondent would be identified in the report unless they had expressed their consent and desire for this.

The example topic areas we shared with interviewees ahead of the interview were as follows:

- Your background, how you got involved with the Centre and the evaluation and your reflection of this;
- What you understand as the role for the Centre;
- The overall impact you feel the Centre has currently and should have going forward;
- Any engagement you have had with the wider What Works Network; and
- Your general sense of ESRC and the wider What Works Network.

1.11.2 Surveys

The stakeholder interviews went a long way towards generating valuable insight into the impact of the WWCs and the specific role of ESRC in that. To complement the evidence collected through interviews, we also used surveys as an instrument to reach a wider audience. For many WWCs, the immediate user of the work generated will be central and local government; for others it will be specific practitioners (e.g. police, schools) but in certain cases (e.g. WW Local Economic Growth, WW Wellbeing etc.) the impacts of the Centres may be felt by a much larger set of stakeholders (e.g. community groups, local councils, civil society etc.). It was not possible to expand the interview programme to include all possible target audiences but it was important to attempt to capture at least some of these more diffuse impacts through surveys.

The surveys needed to be tailored to the target audience but followed broadly the same structure as the interview topic guides, delving into whether and how the work generated by the WWCs has been used or indeed not used (and the reasons why). A full list of the questions asked in each survey is presented in Annex F.

We administered four surveys with the help of the relevant WWCs (WW Local Economic Growth, WCPP, WW Wellbeing and WW Scotland).¹²⁰ The survey was sent out to each Centre's mailing list and included in their regular newsletter. Each Centre also sent an additional reminder email to their mailing list. A detailed analysis of the sampling of surveys can be found at the beginning of Annex D, but a shorter description is given below. We managed the process carefully and in a way that ensured GDPR compliance.

Summary of survey sampling

Surveys were sent out to four of the five WWCs that received core funding from ESRC: WW Local Economic Growth, WCPP, WW Scotland and WW Wellbeing.

The distribution and Centre-specific sampling are discussed in greater depth in Annex D. However, we provide an overview here. Figure 41 gives a summary of the overall response rates of the four surveys.

¹²⁰ Not all Centres were covered by the survey for different reasons. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were not able to roll out a survey for the WW Centre for Crime. Nor did we conduct surveys for the EEF and EIF due to the nature of their activities.

Figure 41 Summary of survey responses

Centre	Survey responses	Completion rate	Minimum number of responses to a closed-ended question
WW Wellbeing	111	67%	88
WCPP	83	66%	60
WW Local Economic Growth	81	53%	50
WW Scotland	41	56%	27

Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: Completion rate measured as the number of completed surveys (where a respondent clicked through to the end of the survey) divided by the number of respondents who entered the survey.
Closed questions are those with a defined list of possible responses, as opposed to open-ended questions, where respondents must type in an answer in their own words.

We note that there is likely to be selection bias in our survey responses given that those who responded were more likely to be those with stronger opinions on the WWC's work/most interested in the WWC. This means that the number of extreme responses (either in support of or in opposition to the WWC) may be inflated.

It is also not possible to make a strong judgement on whether or not the samples are biased given that the end-user base of the Centres is unknown to the Centres. For example, we found that respondents to the WW Wellbeing survey were more likely to be from London and Greater London than another region in the UK. But, since we do now know the exact geographic distribution of stakeholders/end users of WW Wellbeing, we cannot say whether respondents from London and Greater London are overrepresented, underrepresented or equivalently represented in our sample.

CENTRE-BY-CENTRE FINDINGS

This Annex provides a more in-depth discussion on each Centre. The Annex covers each Centre in turn and assesses each Centre against the agreed Centre-specific logic model developed for this work. When combined with an assessment of ESRC's contribution to each Centre, set out in the main report, we are able to make an assessment of ESRC's contribution to knowledge mobilisation.

3.1 What Works Centre for Wellbeing (WW Wellbeing)

3.1.1 Background

ESRC contributed approximately £1.8 million of funding to WW Wellbeing between June 2015 and October 2018. This equated to around 40% of the funding, with the remaining funding coming from a range of funders including DCMS, BEIS, MHCLG, DWP, DH, DfT and the Welsh Government.

Following this initial funding period, ESRC contributed a further £1.3 million for specific projects and the Centre has received additional external funding including £1.5 million from the National Lottery.

WW Wellbeing also received a £49k strategic fund investment from ESRC.¹²¹

The WW Wellbeing is unique in its structure. It consists of four strands, which each received separate grants, and an associated “hub”.

The Strategic Hub comprises of an evidence team, a communications team, an implementation team and a governance team. Together these teams help the hub achieve its three key roles:

4. Provide thought leadership and coordinate across the wellbeing sphere of policy makers, practitioners and each of the academic strands. This also involves promoting collaboration between the strands and the wider WW Network.
5. Conduct translation, communication and implementation activities for the Centre. This ranges from running WW Wellbeing's Twitter handle and website to engaging with policy makers and practitioners through events and offering advice and support. It also includes publishing briefs and blogs which were cited by half of those interviewed as being some of the most helpful content produced by the Centre.
6. Perform a quality assurance role according to the principles of robustness, relevance and communication on the work produced by the four strands.

The four WW Wellbeing strands are as follows:

- **Cross-Cutting Capability (Lifelong Wellbeing):** Hosted by the LSE's Centre for Economic Performance. The strand's objective is to build the capability or the “skills” of the WW Wellbeing users to understand, present, analyse, interpret and apply wellbeing evidence to inform decision-making.¹²² The cross-cutting team was intended to be embedded into the hub but this was not completed.

¹²¹ Strategic funds are funds awarded by ESRC for particular research programmes which usually involve several WWCs; as such, while the funding is awarded to a “lead applicant” (to which we attribute the investment here), in reality this funding is shared between several WWCs.

¹²² What Works Wellbeing Cross-Cutting Capability specification.

- **Culture and Sport:** Hosted by Brunel University. The strand's objective is to analyse and enhance the existing research and evidence base on the effectiveness of different interventions in sport and culture in making a positive impact on wellbeing in different contexts, and to increase the utility of the evidence base for policy makers and practitioners to make better informed choices about exploiting culture and sport interventions to improve wellbeing.¹²³
- **Work and Learning:** Hosted by the UEA's Norwich Business School. This strand's objective is to develop a better understanding of what works in terms of raising the wellbeing of the unemployed, those in work and adult learners, and to publish and disseminate findings in a format that can be acted upon by prospective users.¹²⁴
- **Community Wellbeing:** Hosted by the University of Liverpool. This strand's objective is to highlight the most effective ways of making a positive impact on individual or community wellbeing and to demonstrate how those who are most influential or have the most interest can act to improve wellbeing.¹²⁵

Where possible, we have collected activity and output data for each of the individual strands to use in assessment against their logic models produced in the Inception report.

However, the intricate relationship between the strands, and in particular the lack of differentiation in the eyes of many users we interviewed, has prompted a more holistic assessment of the impact of the WW Wellbeing. Despite this approach, it is worth noting that, while most strands were helpful in completing this evaluation, the level of data they were able to share varied in line with the level of engagement from the strand.

3.1.2 Activities and outputs

In this section we outline the key activities and outputs conducted by each of the strands. A summary of the metrics of these key activities and outputs can be found in Figure 42 to Figure 45 for the Cross-Cutting, Culture and Sport, Work and Learning, and Community Wellbeing strands, respectively.

Each of the Centre's strands has been involved in:

- **Translating existing evidence:** this includes conducting evidence reviews and developing tools and guidance documents.¹²⁶
- **Generating new evidence:** such as academic publications, local trials and conducting secondary analysis of existing datasets.
- **Disseminating evidence and best practice and building capacity:** for example producing briefings, hosting workshops and training events, and providing online content.
- **Collaborations with other organisation or stakeholders:** this includes working together with other WWCs (e.g. WCPP), meeting and collaborating with academics and engaging with policy professionals.

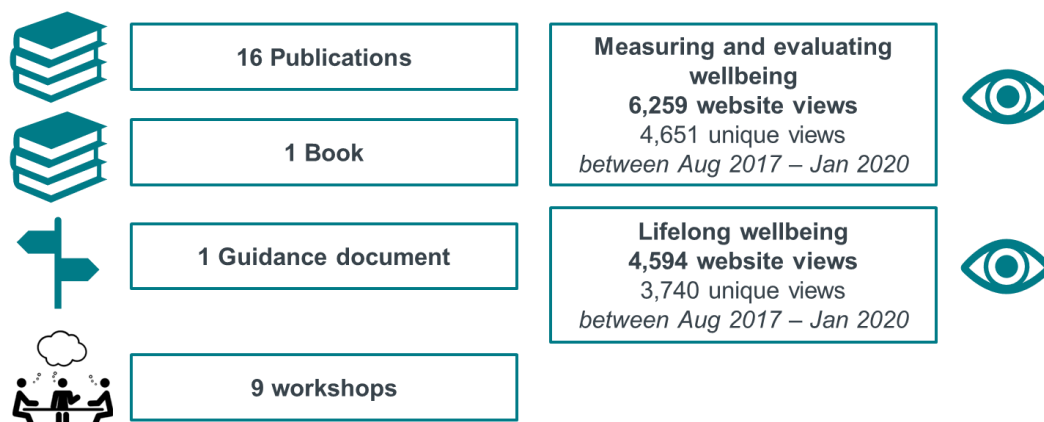
¹²³ What Works Wellbeing Sport and Culture specification.

¹²⁴ What Works Wellbeing Work and Learning specification.

¹²⁵ What Works Wellbeing Community specification.

¹²⁶ While all the strands have conducted activities relating to the translation of existing evidence, they have not all conducted all of the examples listed. This is true also for the examples listed for generating new evidence, disseminating evidence and best practice, and building capacity, and collaborations.

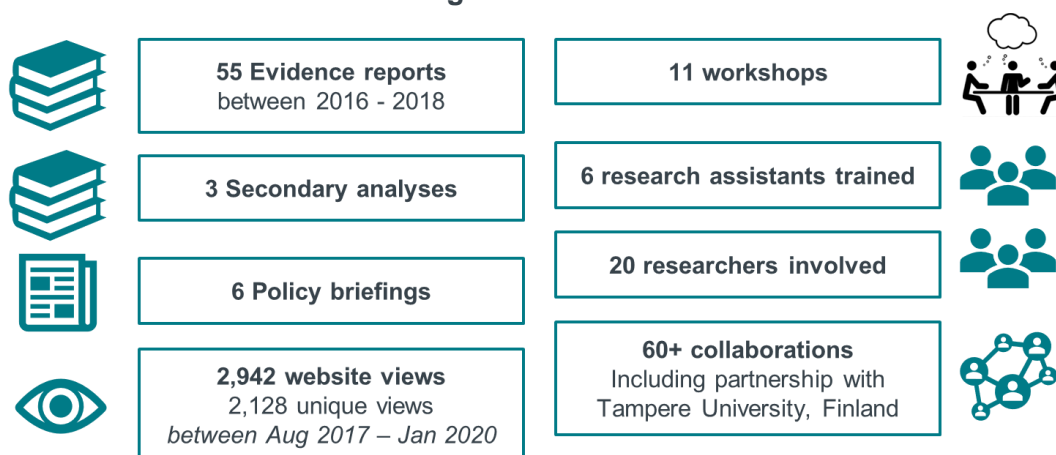
Figure 42 Activities and outputs produced by the Cross-Cutting (Lifelong wellbeing) strand of the WW Wellbeing



Source: What Works Centre for Wellbeing Source.

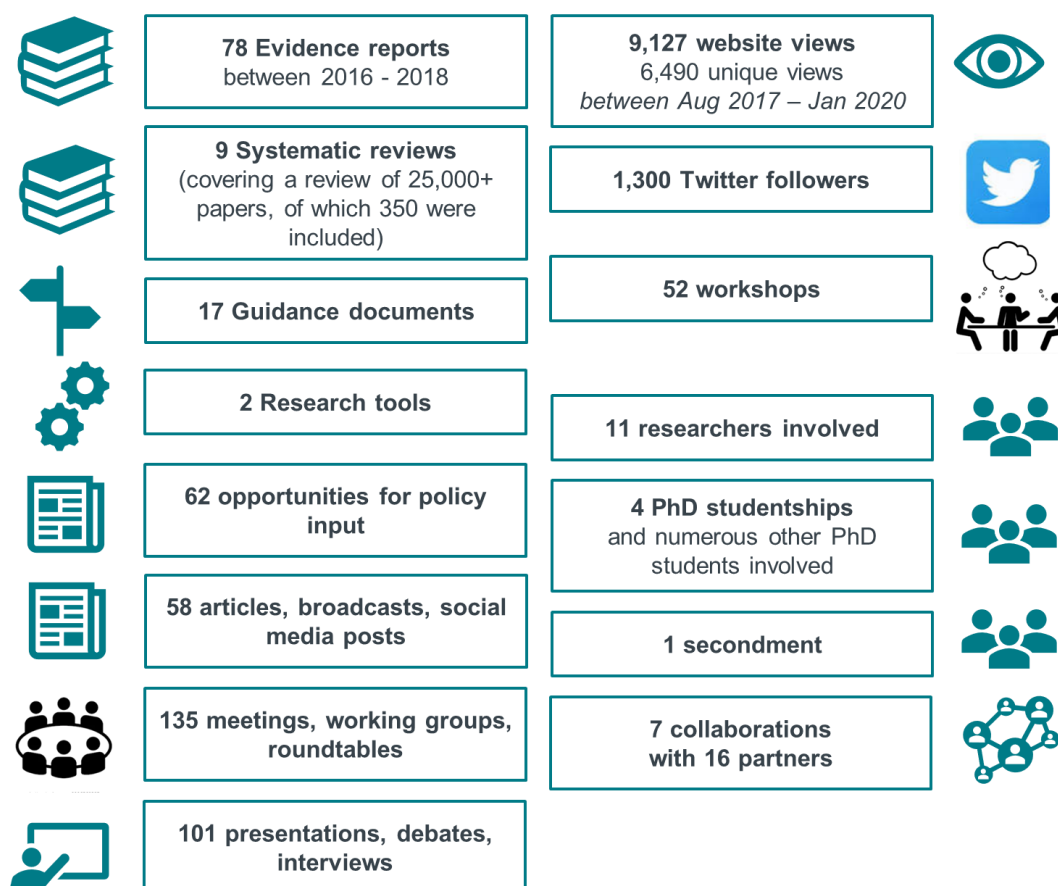
Note: Some of these outputs and activities were the result of the Strategic Hub rather than the Cross-cutting strand. There was limited coordination between the Strategic Hub and the Cross-cutting strand.

Figure 43 Activities and outputs produced by the Culture and Sport strand of the WW Wellbeing



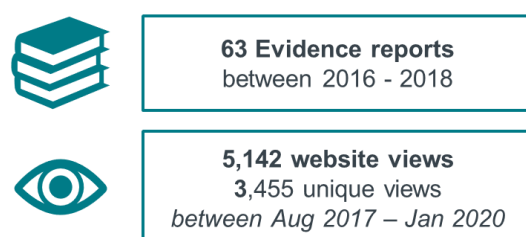
Source: What Works Centre for Wellbeing Source.

Note: Some of these outputs and activities were the result of coordination between the Strategic Hub and the Culture and Sport strand.

Figure 44 Activities and outputs produced by the Work and Learning strand of the WW Wellbeing

Source: What Works Centre for Wellbeing Source.

Note: Some of these outputs and activities were the result of coordination between the Strategic Hub and the Work and Learning strand.

Figure 45 Activities and outputs produced by the Communities strand of the WW Wellbeing

Source: What Works Centre for Wellbeing.

Note: Unfortunately we were unable to obtain any data from those directly involved with the strand, the stats used in this infographic were obtained from the central hub.

It is worth noting that, while many of the outputs are attributable to specific strands, they are facilitated by the work of the hub. For example, the hub is instrumental in helping to organise some of the events and meetings. In addition, the hub runs the WW Wellbeing's website and Twitter page. Figure 46 shows the monthly impressions that

are achieved by posts tweeted by the WW Wellbeing's Twitter handle. In total, between September 2016 and March 2020, the Centre achieved 5.4 million impressions.

Figure 46 Monthly impressions of posts tweeted by @WhatWorksWB

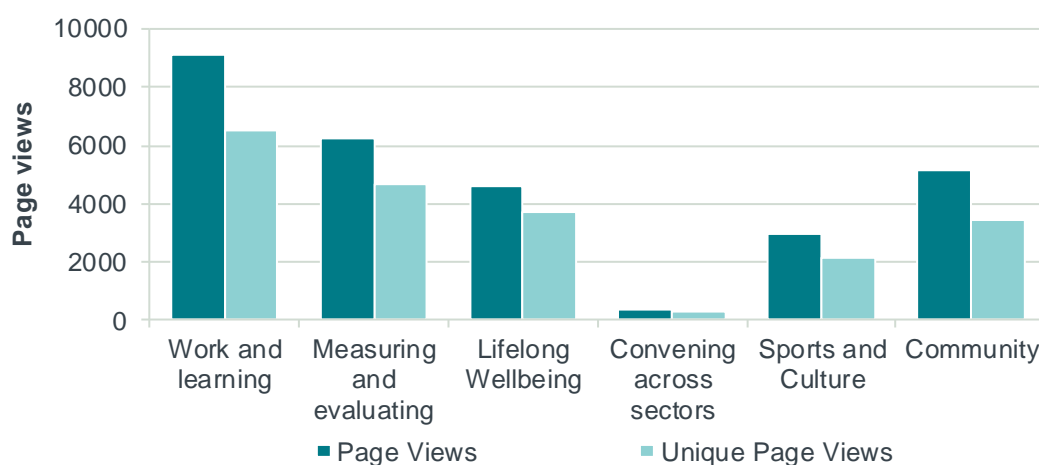


Source: Twitter analytics for the @WhatWorksWB Twitter handle.

We can also use the WW Wellbeing's website metrics to gain an understanding of how the stakeholder engagement varies by work led by each of the strands. According to website data between 1st August 2017 and 1st January 2020, the most-engaged-with strand was the Cross-Cutting strand, which includes lifelong wellbeing and measuring and evaluating wellbeing and attracted ~8,000 unique views in total. This was closely followed by the Work and Learning strand, which achieved ~6,000 unique views (see Figure 47).

Similarly, these appear to be the two most-engaged-with strands according to our survey (see Figure 48). However, it should be noted that the WW Wellbeing's website has now been updated to differentiate between a greater number of topic areas, and these topic areas were used as options for our survey. Therefore a direct comparison is difficult.

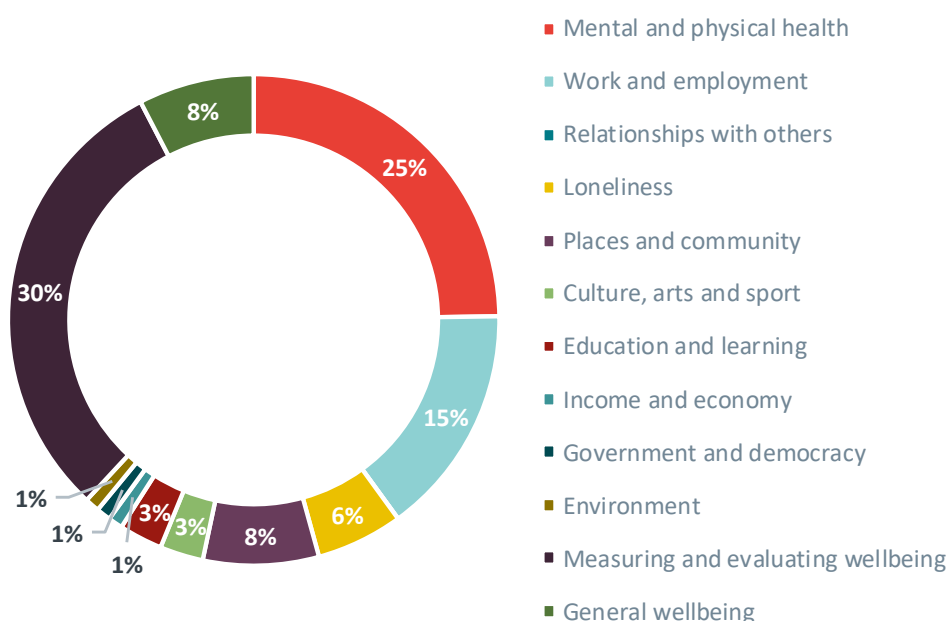
Figure 47 WW Wellbeing website – Page views between 1st August 2017 and 1st January 2020



Source: WW Wellbeing website analytics.

Note: The WW Wellbeing website was revamped in January 2020 so comparable data for each page is unavailable.

Figure 48 Of these topic areas covered by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, which do you engage with most?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N = 105.

3.1.3 Outcomes and impacts

Our interviews and survey results suggest that the work of the WW Wellbeing has achieved a number of positive outcomes and impacts. In this section we summarise some of the more prominent examples and outline the key messages from the survey.

One of the main impacts achieved by the WW Wellbeing is enhancing the profile and importance placed on measuring wellbeing. A clear example of this is in its successful promotion, championed by the Cross-Cutting strand, of the use of wellbeing as a valid aim of public resources as defined in HM Treasury's Green Book. In 2018, the Green Book was revised with direct input from the Centre to include wellbeing as an aim. This impact was also recognised by numerous survey respondents. For example, one respondent (a central government stakeholder) wrote that the Centre's biggest achievement was "Getting wellbeing on the agenda and demonstrating that it... can be assessed with rigour and linked to economics". Another respondent answered with "Raising the profile of wellbeing".

Another achievement of the Centre is that it was able to establish "itself as a credible/independent source of wellbeing data". One respondent described the Centre as its "go to" source. It was able to achieve this due to its high quality output. Numerous survey respondents and interviewees pointed to the Centre's ability to distil evidence into digestible and user-friendly outputs. This includes its blogs, which were highly praised, and the cost benefit toolkit, which was described as helpful. Moreover, it consistently outperformed the other Centres we conducted surveys for in relation to the

quality of its content¹²⁷ and the impact that the Centre had on the individual.¹²⁸ These cross-Centre results can be found in Annex D.

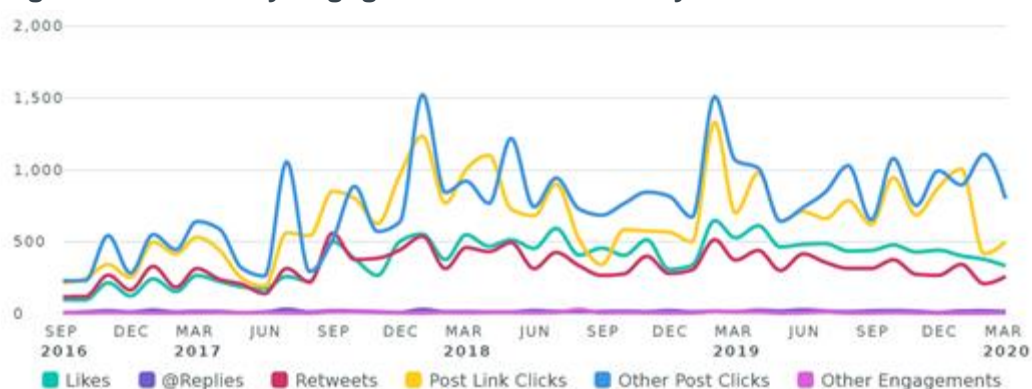
The work conducted by the Centre around loneliness appears to be one of its most impactful pieces despite the lack of ESRC funding.¹²⁹ One interviewee claimed that the work had helped set policy direction and achieve buy-in from policy colleagues:

“The work on loneliness was well received, and has been useful in setting the policy direction...[The reason it was successful was that:] There was buy-in by policy colleagues, who were quite interested in the outputs. And the people running the project had a clear idea on what they wanted to achieve, and communicated the project well.”
(Central government official)

In addition, the DCMS has cited the work on loneliness in the Building Connections funding scheme. The success of this work was believed to have been brought about by ensuring that a clear objective was set from the outset.

It is also worth noting the engagements with tweets published by the WW Wellbeing’s Twitter handle as an imperfect measure of the impact achieved by the Centre. Between September 2016 and March 2020, the Centre’s tweets have had 91k engagements, which include over 16k likes and almost 14k retweets. The most-engaged tweet, which contained an infographic on the link between wellbeing and places, spaces and social connection, achieved 71 likes and 73 retweets.

Figure 49 Monthly engagements with tweets by @WhatWorksWB



Source: Twitter analytics for the @WhatWorksWB Twitter handle.

¹²⁷ We asked: “To what extent do you agree that the What Works Centre for Wellbeing provides content that is _____?” with the following adjectives: Relevant; Useful; Robust; Comprehensive; Authoritative; Independent; Accessible; and Practical

¹²⁸ We asked: “To what extent has the WWC helped you as an individual with the following?”: More aware of the evidence; Access the evidence; Understand the evidence; Use the evidence.

¹²⁹ ESRC was not involved at all in this specific piece of work; rather, it was funded by National Lottery. Therefore ESRC can only take credit in so far as saying that ESRC’s investment was instrumental in the creation of the Centre and without the Centre this piece of work would not have happened.

KEY LEARNINGS

The **What Works Centre for Wellbeing** is modelled as a hub-and-spoke structure, with a central hub coordinating the activities of four distinct areas of wellbeing research; Work and Learning, Sports and Culture, Community and Cross-Cutting Wellbeing.

The Centre has achieved some positive impacts and is regarded as an important player in achieving knowledge mobilisation for wellbeing evidence.

There were some areas in which according to stakeholders there was room for improvement.

- While the content produced by the Centre was praised for its high quality, some of the output was considered “too theoretical to be useful in practice” by a couple of users. This has reportedly limited its impact in practical work although the hub is working with the academics to focus on communicating their findings in a practical way.
- The nature of funding arrangements and, notably, a perceived lack of flexibility (by some stakeholders we interviewed) afforded to the Centre has also hindered its ability to react to decision makers’ requests regarding what would be helpful.
- In addition, stakeholders reported tensions between the hub and some of the academic strands which it was felt could have been minimised by funders setting clearer expectations at the outset regarding the hub’s role and providing appropriate levers to support the hub’s role in managing the programmes of work across the strands.
- As far as the ESRC’s role is concerned, it was reported that the ESRC was at the forefront of the partnership to start with as it worked collaboratively with the hub to pull people together and offered match-funding which helped to leverage additional funding partners. Over time, the nature of the engagement changed as the funding status of WW Wellbeing changed. In the first instance (during 2015-18) ESRC was a core funder contributing around 40% of the centre’s core funding. Since 2018, ESRC has contributed in other ways¹³⁰ as it is no longer a core funder. A concern was raised by the hub that these changes may have affected the Centre’s ability to continue to obtain funding. They believe that the changes led to challenges and friction which could have been avoided with increased communication to understand what both ESRC and the Centre needed from each other.

¹³⁰ This has included transition funding to the Centre via the academic strands during the period 2018-19 as well as linked investment via the Secondary Data Analysis Initiative (SDAI) call and other awards where WW Wellbeing has been able to be included as co-investigators

3.2 Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP)

3.2.1 Background

The WCPP was established in October 2017. It works with leading policy experts to provide Ministers, the Civil Service and public services with independent and authoritative evidence and expertise to improve policy-making and public service outcomes in Wales. It also conducts research to advance understanding of policy-making and evidence use.

The WCPP builds on and extends the work of its predecessor the Public Policy Institute for Wales (PPIW), which focused on Welsh Government policy-making and implementation. ESRC provides core funding to enable the Centre to apply the demand-led model of evidence mobilisation developed by the PPIW to meet the evidence needs of public services.

The WCPP is jointly funded by the Welsh Government, ESRC and Cardiff University. ESRC's current core funding is worth £2.5 million for this Centre and runs until 2022.

The work for Welsh Ministers is conducted using the funding from the Welsh Government. While this is out of scope for this evaluation of the ESRC's investment, there are significant and very positive synergies between the workstreams for the Welsh Government Ministers and for public services and the metrics reports may include some work produced for Ministers. The metrics reported in this section cover just under the first half of the current grant term (October 2017 to February 2020).

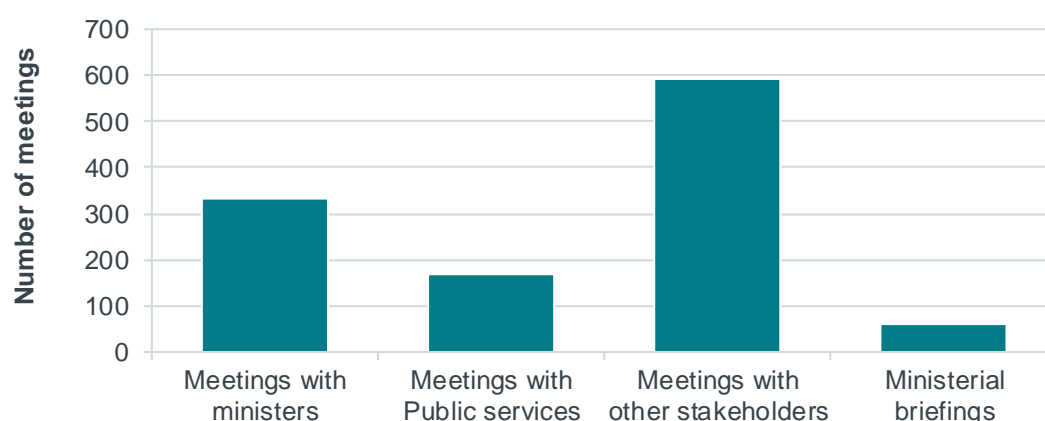
3.2.2 Activities and outputs

To achieve the overarching objective of demand-led knowledge mobilisation, the WCPP has conducted a number of activities and subsequently produced various outputs. This section provides an overview of these activities and outputs which are summarised in Figure 50.

Figure 50 Activities and outputs produced by the WCPP

Source: Frontier Economics.

Firstly the WCPP regularly engages with key stakeholders. This is part of the dynamic process of determining appropriate research activities to conduct based on the policy context and of disseminating evidence following the research activities. Since October 2017, the WCPP has held over 1000 meetings with key stakeholders (see Figure 51). Furthermore, our survey finds that over a quarter of respondents have attended at least two meetings in the past year.

Figure 51 Number of official meetings attended by the WCPP

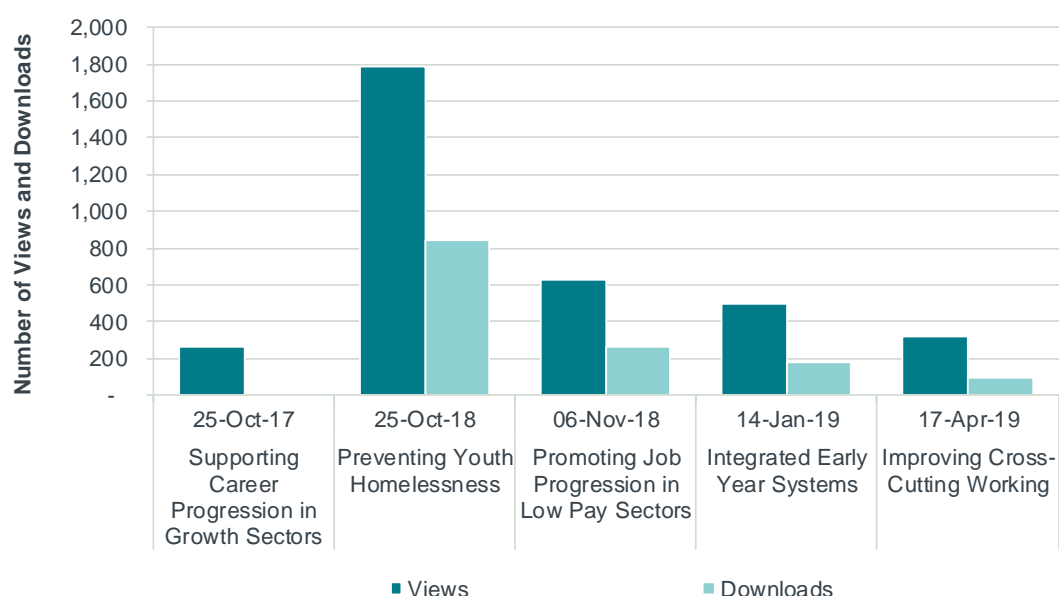
Source: WCPP – Key activity indicators – Monitoring tracker.

Secondly, the WCPP has invested a lot of time ensuring that research outcomes and expertise are made available and accessible to those for whom they are relevant. Its translation of evidence has led some to see the Centre as a “knowledge broker” between experts and policy makers who do not read papers or studies.

In total, the WCPP had published 44 reports. On average each report is viewed 384 times and downloaded 129 times.

Alongside reports, the WCPP has compiled five evidence reviews examining more than 600 papers in total¹³¹. The reach of these evidence reviews varies quite significantly. The most popular review was on the topic of preventing youth homelessness published in October 2018. It has been viewed almost 1800 times and downloaded over 800 times. Figure 52 contains the reach figures for all of the evidence reviews. In total, the evidence reviews have been viewed ~3500 times and downloaded ~1400 times.

Figure 52 Views and downloads of evidence reviews published by the WCPP



Source: WCPP publication and monitoring data.

Although primarily focused on evidence translation, the WCPP has also generated new evidence. In total it has produced 14 peer-reviewed journal papers.

As well as producing reports and generating new evidence, the WCPP has looked to disseminate evidence through a variety of channels. One particularly innovative channel used by the WCPP is podcasts, the first of which was published in July 2019. To date it has now released 5 podcasts. Active use of social media is also used to update stakeholders on their work. On average the WCPP tweets 100 times a quarter with each receiving 2.8 retweets on average. Additional statistics on the WCPPs communications channels can be found in the summary infographic.

To further the dissemination of the knowledge, the WCPP have hosted 27 dissemination events with an average attendance of 40. In addition to this they have

¹³¹ 600 papers were included in the References.

also presented at 41 external events. Alongside this the WCPP has organised 27 workshops and roundtables to help build capacity amongst policy makers and practitioners.

Only a very small proportion of the WCPP's current core funding is dedicated to capacity building but it has recently held a number of internal capacity-building events such as a training session on systematic reviews, a seminar on knowledge mobilisation and systems mapping conducted by the researcher leading the EEF's knowledge mobilisation work, and a seminar on the politics of evidence by Dr Justin Parkhurst.

3.2.3 Outcomes and impacts

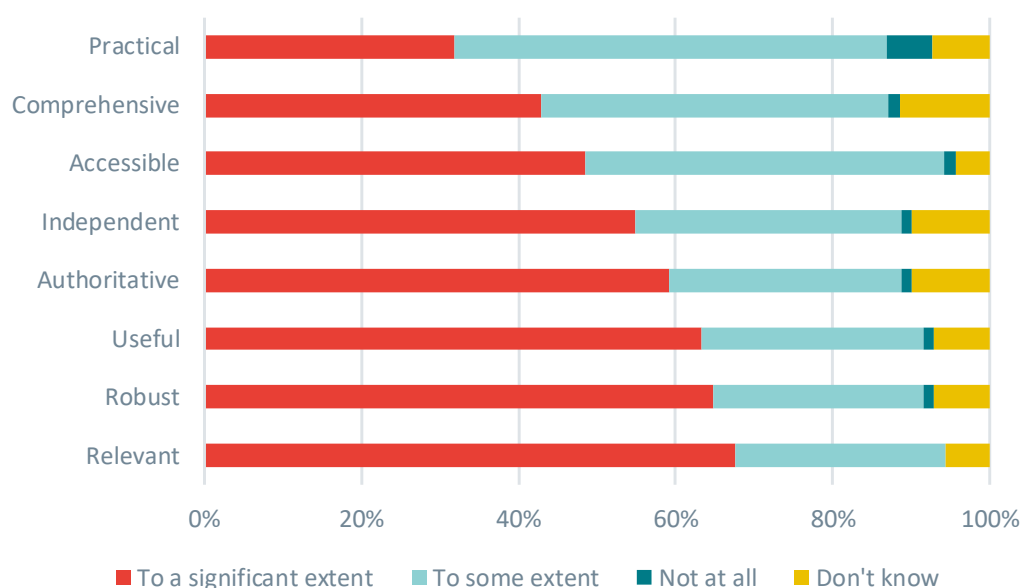
To help determine the outcome of the Centre, we asked respondents the extent to which the WCPP provides content that is:

- Relevant;
- Useful;
- Robust;
- Comprehensive;
- Authoritative;
- Independent;
- Accessible; and
- Practical

The results can be found in Figure 53. Overall respondents were broadly positive about the content produced by the Centre. The Centre's content scored particularly highly in regards to its relevance, robustness and usefulness with around two-thirds of respondents saying this was the case to a significant extent. In comparison, while still scoring highly, less than one-third of respondents thought the Centres content was practical to a significant extent.

When comparing the responses by the role of respondents we found that practitioners were slightly less positive about the Centres content than academics and Welsh Government respondents. This is particularly true in regards to the content's relevance, usefulness, comprehensiveness and accessibility. Additionally, Welsh Government respondents were more positive about the extent to which the content is practical.

Figure 53 To what extent do you agree that the Wales Centre for Public Policy provides content that is _____?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

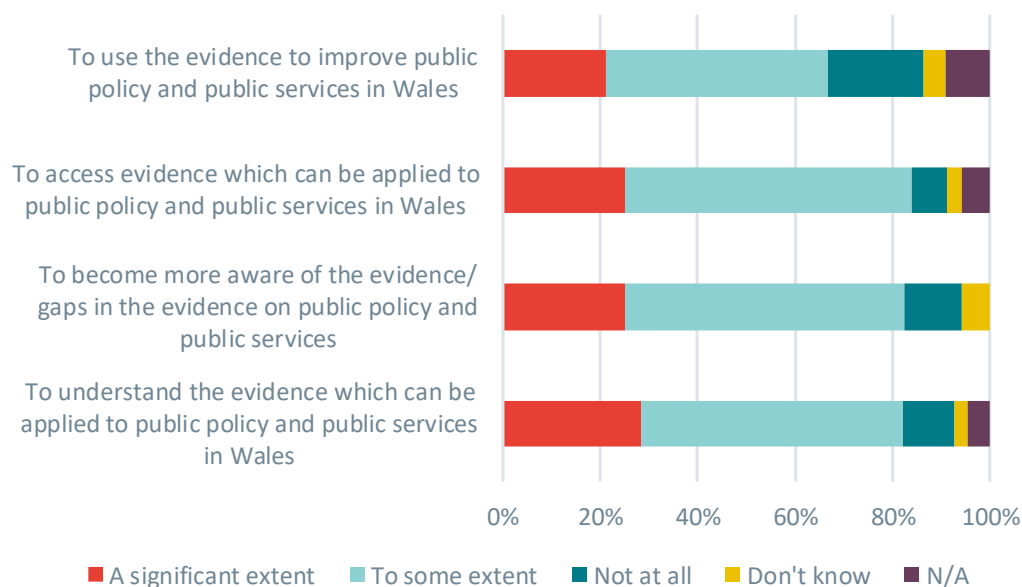
Note: N = 71.

To help determine the impact the Centre has achieved we asked respondents the extent to which the WCPP has “helped you as an individual with the following”:

- **To become more aware of the evidence/gaps** in the evidence on public policy and services in Wales
- **To access evidence** which can be applied to public policy and public services in Wales
- **To understand the evidence** which can be applied to public policy and public services in Wales
- **To use the evidence** to improve public policy and public services in Wales

The results can be found in Figure 54. For the first three of these impacts, the results were particularly positive. For these impacts, at least 24% said the WCPP had helped to a significant extent with at least 80% saying it helped to some extent. The results also indicate that WCPP has also had an impact in helping individuals to use the evidence, however this appears to be the weakest area for the Centre with only 63% saying it had helped to some extent. As noted above, currently only a very small proportion of the Centre’s budget is dedicated to capacity building so it is not surprising that this is not perceived to be its major contribution.

Figure 54 To what extent has the Wales Centre for Public Policy helped you as an individual with the following?

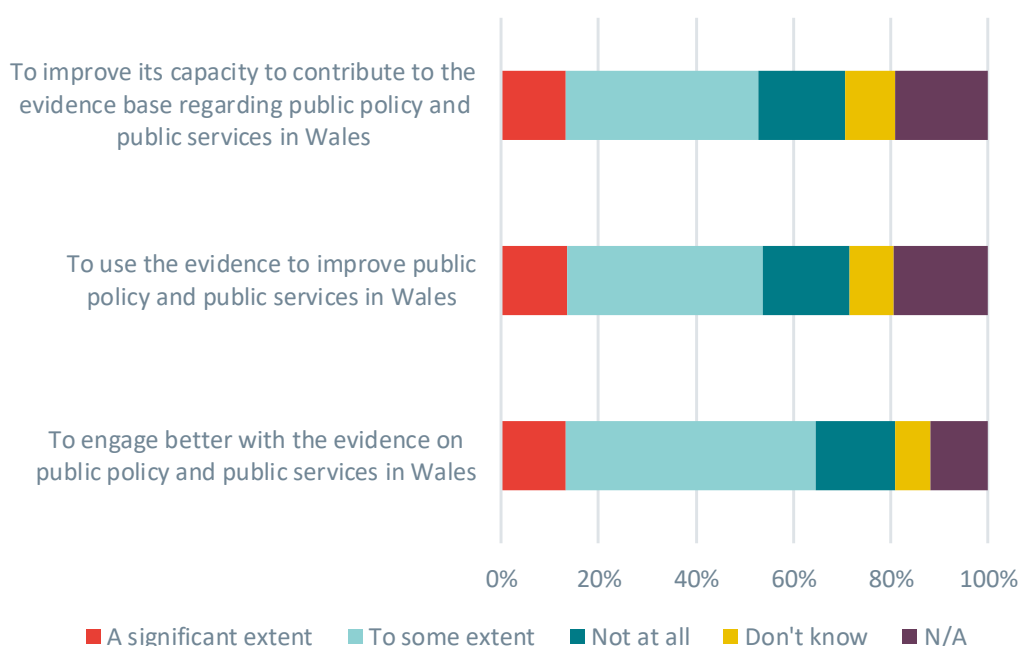


Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N = 68.

We asked a similar question regarding the impact the Centre has achieved for the respondents organisation (see Figure 55). While the responses are still largely positive, it is clear that the Centre has had less of an impact on organisations than on the individuals that engage directly with the Centre.

Figure 55 To what extent has the Wales Centre for Public Policy helped your team/organisation with the following?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N = 68.

Our interviewees held similarly positive attitudes towards the WCPP. The Centre was seen as providing an important brokerage role which brought the right people together with the independence and depth of knowledge required. The relationships formed by the Centre were considered particularly strong between researchers and all levels of government. For example the Centre often helped the Public Service Boards (PSB) to establish focus for the research ensuring that priorities were aligned. A key reason this relationship was possible, was the geographic focus of the Centre. This provided more weight to the findings of the Centre and helped connections form.

Furthermore, according to one of the practitioners we interviewed: the Centre has done “a great job at distilling evidence into easy to digest bits” and their “digital dissemination is excellent”.

However, one practitioner we interviewed felt that the Centre is yet to determine how to effectively and consistently get evidence into practice. They noted that while the relationship and collaboration with government is strong, there is room for improvement in collaborative relationships with practitioners on the ground. In particular, helping practitioners overcome the barriers to evidence use through additional support which is currently lacking. This reflects in part the fact that, compared to its work with Welsh Government Ministers, the Centre had only been working with public services for a relatively short period of time when the interviews were conducted. The Centre has recently sought to strengthen its impact on evidence use by securing funding from the What Works Strategic Fund to work with other What Works Centre on a project to improve the implementation of evidence.

KEY LEARNINGS

The **Wales Centre for Public Policy** was set up in 2017 to build on and extend the work of its predecessor, the Public Policy Institute of Wales, in order to meet the evidence needs of public services as well as Welsh Government Ministers. The Centre relies on a demand-led, expert-driven model which combines its knowledge of Welsh policy and public services with subject from across the UK and internationally.

Overall, the WCPP has established itself as a generator of high-quality and relevant outputs, and is perceived well by its user community. It has seen much more success with respect to its policy advisory arm; the Centre is well embedded in Welsh Government activity, and there are several key examples of policy impact. However the Centre has further to travel in terms of making the same impacts in the Welsh public services community, this reflects the fact that it has been working with public services for a much shorter time than it has with Welsh Government Ministers.

Furthermore, WCPP is an active member within the wider WWN, regularly communicating with other Centres and engaging in joint projects.

To maximise its impact going forward, the Centre should consider ways to develop further its relationships within the Welsh public services community to enable the Centre to reach a wider audience than it has to date.

A key gap in the What Works function of this Centre is its contribution to capacity building amongst practitioners in order to mobilise evidence into practice. It receives very little funding to do this work. In the short-term it could invest in more training efforts or encourage secondments and placements in order to develop the skills base for the users of their outputs. In the longer-term, the funders might want to consider allocating a greater share of future core funding to addressing this issue.

3.3 What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth (WW Local Economic Growth)

3.3.1 Background

WW Local Economic Growth was established in the autumn of 2013 and is funded by ESRC, DfT, BEIS and MHCLG.¹³² The Centre's overriding objective is to support develop and deliver better local economic policies which are based on the best available evidence.

The Centre has been involved in a range of activities:

- **Generating new evidence:** supporting local practitioners in piloting innovative approaches.
- **Translating existing evidence:** conducting systematic evidence reviews in a range of policy areas relevant to local economic development from transport to access to finance. Producing a range of other material such as toolkits, guidance documents, blogs, policy briefings, etc.
- **Disseminating evidence and best practice and building capacity:** hosting events and roundtables, holding evaluation workshops, providing ad hoc advice, etc.
- **Collaborating with other organisations in the network:** working together with other WWCs (e.g. Left Behind Places project).

WW Local Economic Growth is in its third three-year funding round, which started in spring 2019. The current funding arrangement is for a total of £3.75 million over three years, of which ESRC is contributing £1.5 million. The remaining £2.25 million in funding is provided by BEIS, DfT and MHCLG. ESRC was a major contributor in the previous two funding rounds (which totalled £5.5 million for the period 2013-2020) providing 36% of the funding (£2 million).¹³³ The Centre has also received supplementary funding for specific projects outside the scope of the original funding agreements, such as the strategic fund support for the Left Behind Places project and supplementary ESRC funding for the development of Local Industrial Strategies guidance.

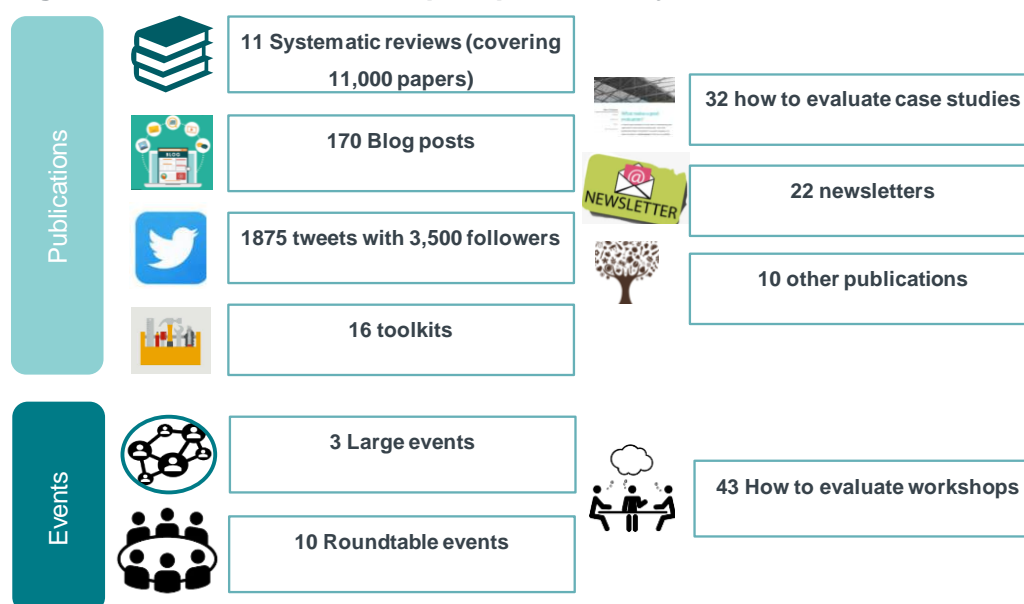
The Centre is jointly run by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the Centre for Cities and has seven staff who contribute around 130 FTE hours per week.

3.3.2 Activities and outputs

The key activities and outputs of WW Local Economic Growth are summarised below.

¹³² The Centre was previously funded by DWP as well.

¹³³ ESRC funding accounted for 50% of funding in phase 1 (September 2013 - February 2017) and 20% of funding in phase 2 (March 2017 - February 2020).

Figure 56 Activities and outputs produced by WW Local Economic Growth

Source: Frontier Economics analysis of WW Local Economic Growth data.

Evidence synthesis, translation, dissemination

The Centre has produced **11 systematic evidence reviews**,¹³⁴ the findings from which were published between 2014 and 2016. In total, close to 11,000 papers were reviewed as part of the evidence reviews. The reviews have covered a wide range of topic areas relevant for local economic development, from broadband through to apprenticeships and transport.

- In addition to the evidence reviews, the Centre has developed **16 toolkits**, focusing on different areas of policy. Toolkits have been developed in each of the following areas:
- Local Industrial Strategies
- people
- business
- places.

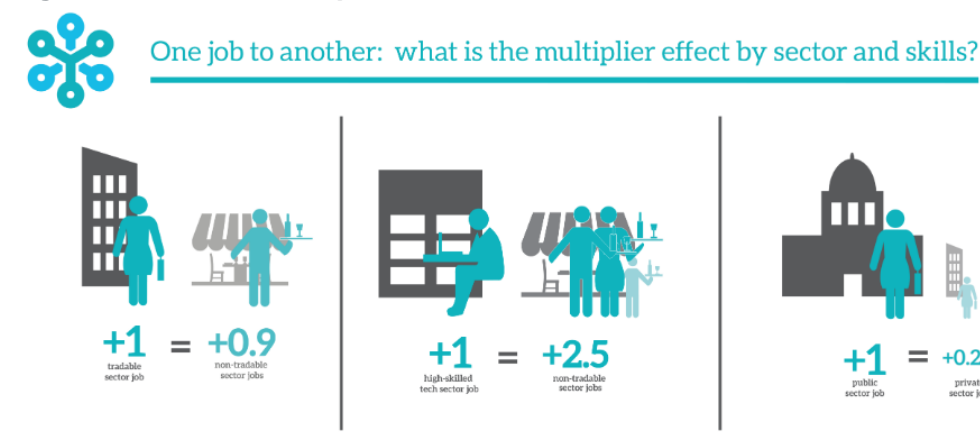
The toolkits were designed to support more effective, evidence-based policy design by easing access to findings from the available evidence base and making them easier to digest. The toolkits also pointed to the key issues and questions that policy makers should consider when appraising existing schemes and considering new policy. For example, local economic development policy can often focus on attracting employers to a particular area in the hope that this will generate additional employment across the local economy. Typically, multipliers estimating the indirect and induced effects¹³⁵ associated with businesses relocating are used to justify policies aimed at attracting

¹³⁴ The evidence reviews were conducted in partnership with Arup and covered the following topic areas: Access to Finance, Apprenticeships, Area Based Initiatives, Broadband, Business Advice, Employment Training, Estate Renewal, Innovation, Public Realm, Sport and Culture and Transport.

¹³⁵ Indirect effects refer to supply chain effects (i.e. how much additional employment across other sectors does an extra job in sector X generate due to the interdependence of sectors – sector X purchasing goods and services from sector Y in order to deliver its outputs) and induced effects (i.e. how much additional employment is generated from the additional spending in the local economy of the extra job created in sector X?).

business. WW Local Economic Growth's local multipliers toolkit examines the evidence base on the size of local multipliers and how they vary by the type of job that is being generated to produce concise and impactful summaries such as the one shown below.

Figure 57 Local multiplier toolkit



Source: WW Local Economic Growth website.

In addition to the evidence reviews and toolkits, the Centre has produced a range of other impactful publications including 32 “How to Evaluate” case studies showing in practice how evaluations can be conducted in a robust and pragmatic way in a range of policy areas. Examples include innovation schemes, employment training, area-based initiatives, apprenticeships and others. Case studies are assessed according to their methodological robustness (using the SMS scale).

A range of other publications have also been produced by the Centre including, 170 blogs, 22 newsletters and around ten other publications, including, for example, guidance on how to develop Local Industrial Strategies (LIS).

Network building

The Centre worked closely with central and local government to run a number of LIS workshops to understand the challenges faced in developing an evidence-based LIS and produced guidelines (ten principles) which users could abide by in their work.

In addition to the publications discussed above, the Centre has also hosted a number of events including more than 40 How to Evaluate workshops, ten roundtables, ten review discussions and three large events (including a Disadvantaged Places event).

3.3.3 Outcomes and impacts

The outcomes and impacts of the activities of the Centre have been evidenced through a mixture of stakeholder interviews, survey work and basic analysis of data on their reach.

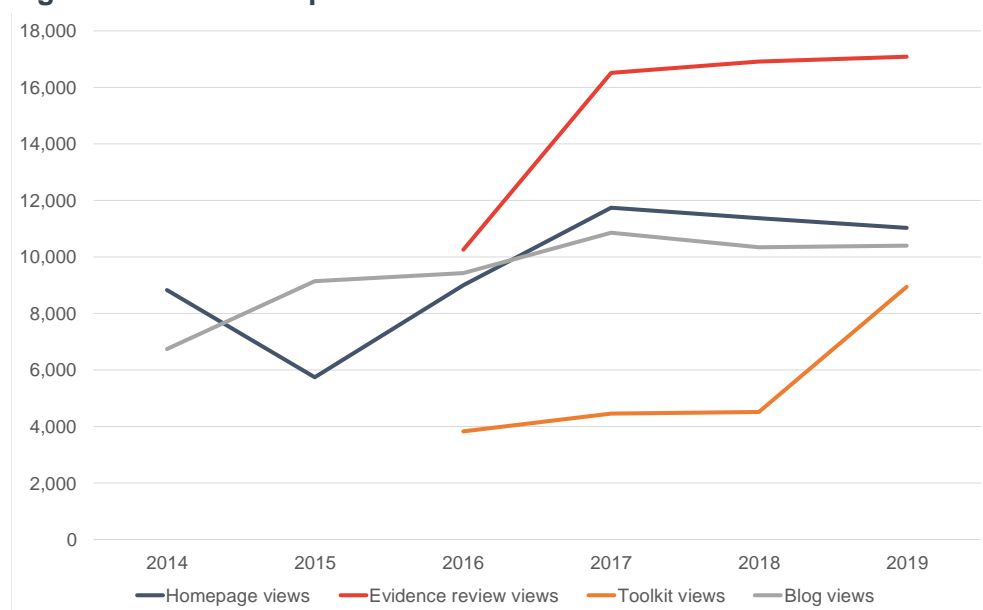
Evidence synthesis, translation, dissemination

Website analytics show that the materials produced by WW Local Economic Growth are viewed by a large and growing number of users. Last year alone, there were over 80,000 page views of the WW Local Economic Growth website.

Of the publications put together by the Centre, the most popular appear to be evidence reviews which attract the highest number of views (see below). The most viewed publications last year were:

- evidence reviews with over 17,000 views
- blogs with 10,000 views
- toolkits with 9,000 views.

Figure 58 Views of publications over time



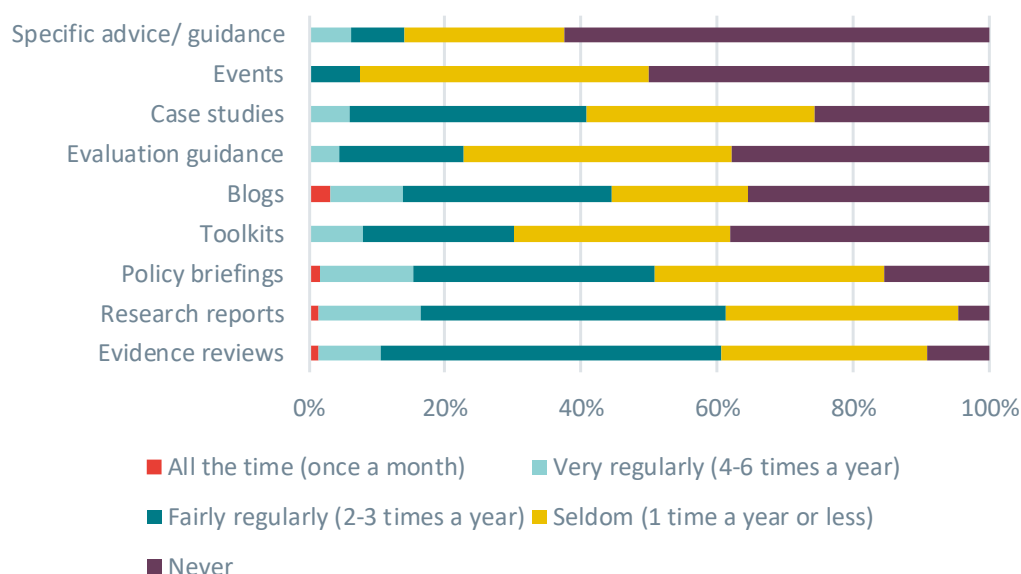
Source: Frontier Economics analysis of data provided by WW Local Economic Growth.

Survey responses (see Figure 59) also indicate that users engage regularly with evidence reviews, with 60% of respondents saying that they engage with this content on a regular basis.¹³⁶ High levels of engagement were also reported for research reports, policy briefings, blogs and case studies.

On the whole, users of the Centre's content indicate that WW Local Economic Growth produces impactful content (Figure 60). Around half of respondents indicated that the content produced by WW Local Economic Growth is to a large extent independent, authoritative, robust, useful and relevant. Relatively few respondents indicated that the outputs are to a large extent practical or comprehensive (around 20% and 30% respectively).

¹³⁶ Defined here as more than 2-3 times a year.

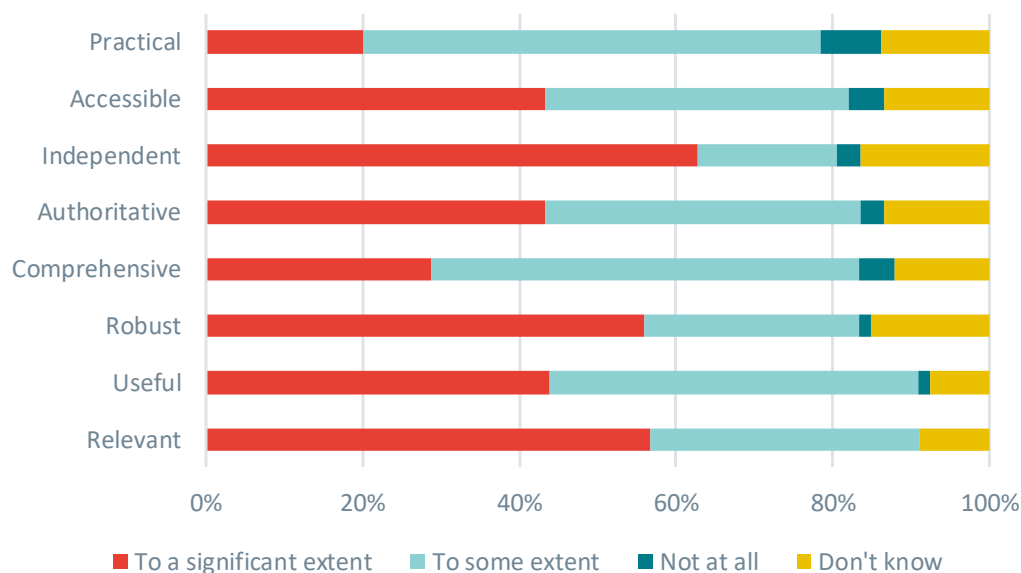
Figure 59 In the last year, how many times did you engage with the following content from the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N = 67.

Figure 60 To what extent do you agree that the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth provides content that is _____?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N = 67.

Capacity building, knowledge exchange

The Centre has hosted a number of events including a range of workshops, roundtables and larger events looking at a range of issues such as “How to evaluate”, “How to

develop a LIS” etc. The Centre estimates that the total attendance at the events it has hosted over the past few years exceeds 700 people. The Centre has also accumulated a sizeable following on Twitter and now has a total of 3,500 followers.

The stakeholder interviews and survey work we carried out suggests that the Centre has been instrumental in supporting local and central government in certain initiatives. The guidance on how to develop a LIS was seen as particularly impactful by stakeholders who commented that this was used widely by central government, local authorities, Local Economic Partnerships and others. For example, one local government stakeholder commented that:

“The work the Centre did on Local Industrial Strategies was very well received – in particular the guidance they produced. The reason for that was that it solved lots of pressing issues we had at the time in terms of developing a strategy. A combination of right time, right place and producing a very relevant piece of work led to this being very widely used by local authorities.” Local government official)

Similarly, the work around how to conduct evaluations (guidance and workshops) has been very well received by practitioners. For example, one local government stakeholder commented that:

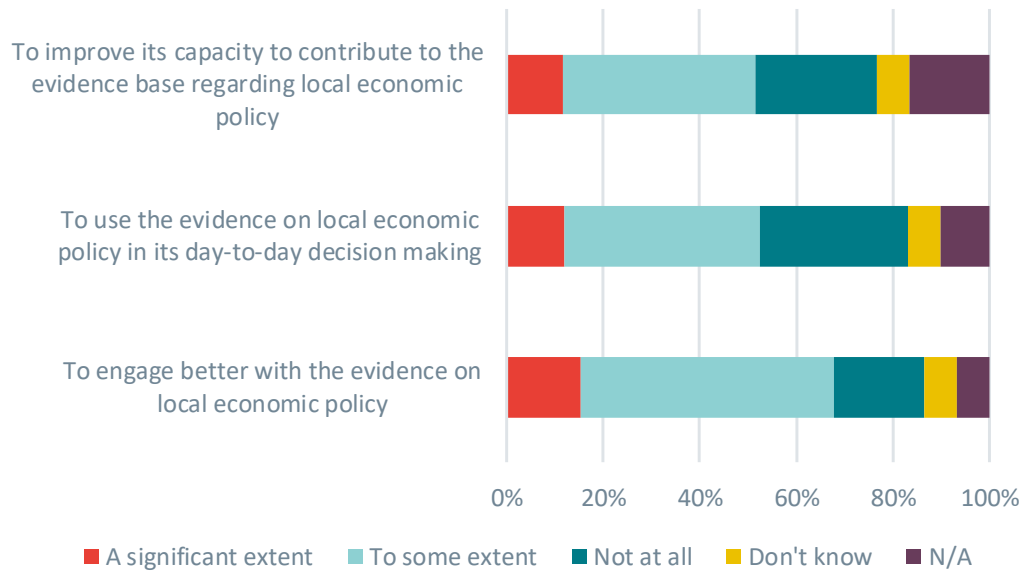
“...the work of the Centre and the workshops have been very helpful in shaping our thinking about monitoring and evaluation. Before this used to be an afterthought – WW Local Economic Growth has helped to bring it to front of mind and embed best practice as well as help navigate the political landscape.”(Central government official)

Survey respondents (see Figure 61) also indicated that the work of WW Local Economic Growth has improved their ability to use evidence in their work. At least half of respondents said that WW Local Economic Growth has to some extent (or to a large extent) helped them to:

- use evidence on local economic policy in their decision-making day to day
- better engage with the evidence on local economic policy
- improve their capacity to contribute to the evidence base.

Interestingly, local government respondents felt more positive about the contribution that WW Local Economic Growth has made to their ability to use evidence in their work.

Figure 61 To what extent has the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth helped your team/organisation with the following?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N = 60.

KEY LEARNINGS

The **What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth** was one of the first Centres established in the network. The Centre is going through its third funding cycle and the sustained desire of central government to continue its investment is at least partially symptomatic of the Centre's success.

The Centre has produced a significant amount of publications and other useful materials which appear to be reaching their intended audience. A combination of survey evidence and feedback from stakeholders suggests that the Centre is performing well and represents good value for money.

Stakeholders have commented that the work produced by the Centre has improved over time and become better tailored to their needs. Outputs which tended to be very academic in nature and perhaps less useful have become better presented. The content is also more responsive to their demands, aided by the implementation of a user panel but also soon the creation of a new policy-facing role at the Centre

Going forward, the Centre could work towards achieving even greater impacts by considering the following.

- Managing the tension between academic rigour and pragmatism. It was suggested that while the Centre's outputs apply very high standards to the evidence they bring forward, this can come at the expense of limiting the amount of applicable evidence available.
- Improving the visibility (raising the profile) of all those working within the Centre and broadening the reach of the Centre across the academic community to involve a wider set of academics in its work where possible.
- Better aligning the Centre's work programme with government priorities and having flexibility to adapt to a changing environment.

3.4 What Works Scotland (WW Scotland)

3.4.1 Background

WW Scotland was established in response to the 2011 Christie Commission¹³⁷ and the Scottish Government's priorities for reform,¹³⁸ to focus on developing a so-called "Scottish approach" to public services reform.

The initiative was set up jointly by the Scottish Government and ESRC and brought together the University of Glasgow and the University of Edinburgh as academic partners. ESRC invested core funding for this Centre worth £1.75 million over five years (01 July 2014 – 31 December 2019). Although the Centre has now come to a close, the What Works Scotland website and other online resources are maintained by Policy Scotland at the University of Glasgow.¹³⁹

As with the other WWCs, WW Scotland aimed to improve the use of evidence in decision-making. This Centre's work primarily focused on public services in local areas across Scotland, specifically in four council areas (Aberdeenshire, Fife, Glasgow and West Dunbartonshire). The Scottish Government was a key stakeholder but directed very little of the Centre's work programme.

However, in contrast to the other WWCs, but similar to the WCPP, WW Scotland delivered the goal of evidence mobilisation across a range of research areas for the devolved nation of Scotland, rather than focusing on any particular policy theme. The research programmes for these Centres were therefore fundamentally more demand-led and responsive to specific user needs.

WW Scotland was also distinct in terms of its approach to evidence gathering. Firstly, the bulk of the Centre's activity was focused on primary research rather than systematic reviews of existing papers, as the researchers believed that the absence of evidence which could be applied to the Scottish context rendered this activity less useful. Secondly, WW Scotland was much less reliant on the methods of randomised control trials (RCTs) and quasi-experimental studies, in favour of a wider range of evidence collection techniques. Finally, the Centre followed a model of co-production in its evidence generation process, placing a large emphasis on collaboration with its several local partners.

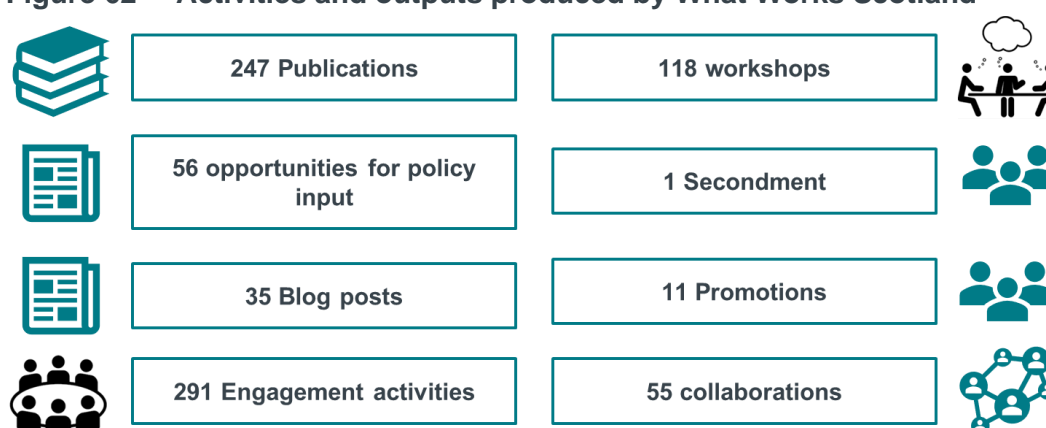
3.4.2 Activities and outputs

WW Scotland conducted a series of activities to achieve its overall goal of public service reform in Scotland.

¹³⁷ [Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services](#)

¹³⁸ [Scottish Government's priorities for reform](#)

¹³⁹ <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/the-project/>

Figure 62 Activities and outputs produced by What Works Scotland

Source: Frontier Economics illustration of data provided by What Works Scotland.

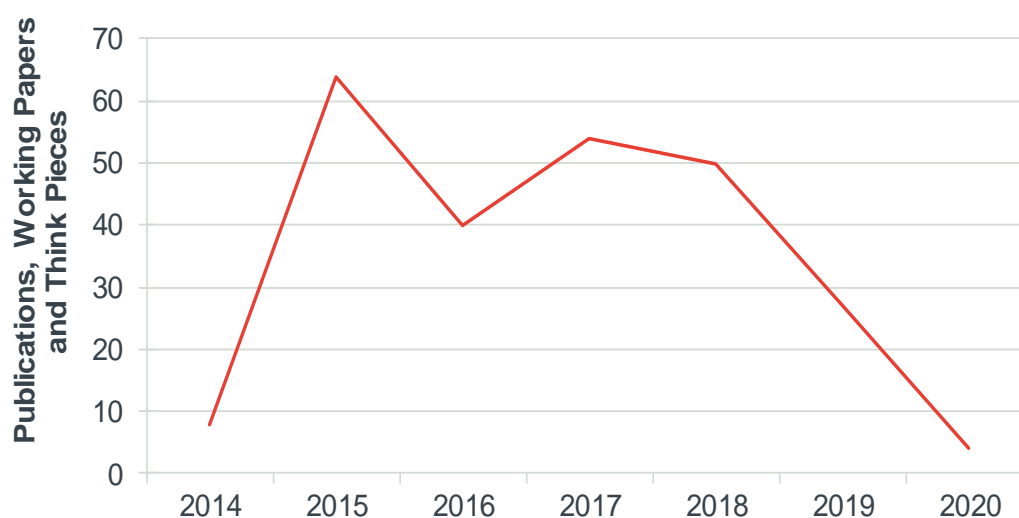
Co-production, partnership, engagement

The Scottish approach to evidence generation was built on the concept that evidence generation is a collaborative process and that working together can generate new ways of thinking and doing.

A key way in which this was modelled was through the use of collaborative action research (CAR) in the Centre's work – a methodological innovation, since this form of research had never before been applied to such a complex and multi-agency context such as public services. WW Scotland researchers partnered with four local authorities (Aberdeenshire, Fife, Glasgow, West Dunbartonshire) to observe and reflect on their practice to identify their key evidence needs, and responded to this with the appropriate research activities. The approach was very bottom-up, with no explicit agenda at the outset, in contrast to traditional methodological approaches and, indeed, in contrast to the WCPP's expert partnership model.

Evidence generation, dissemination

The Centre was certainly active in producing outputs associated with the research conducted. The Centre has produced 243 publications (research reports, CAR papers, peer-reviewed academic publications, etc.), five working papers and four think pieces.

Figure 63 WW Scotland evidence generation

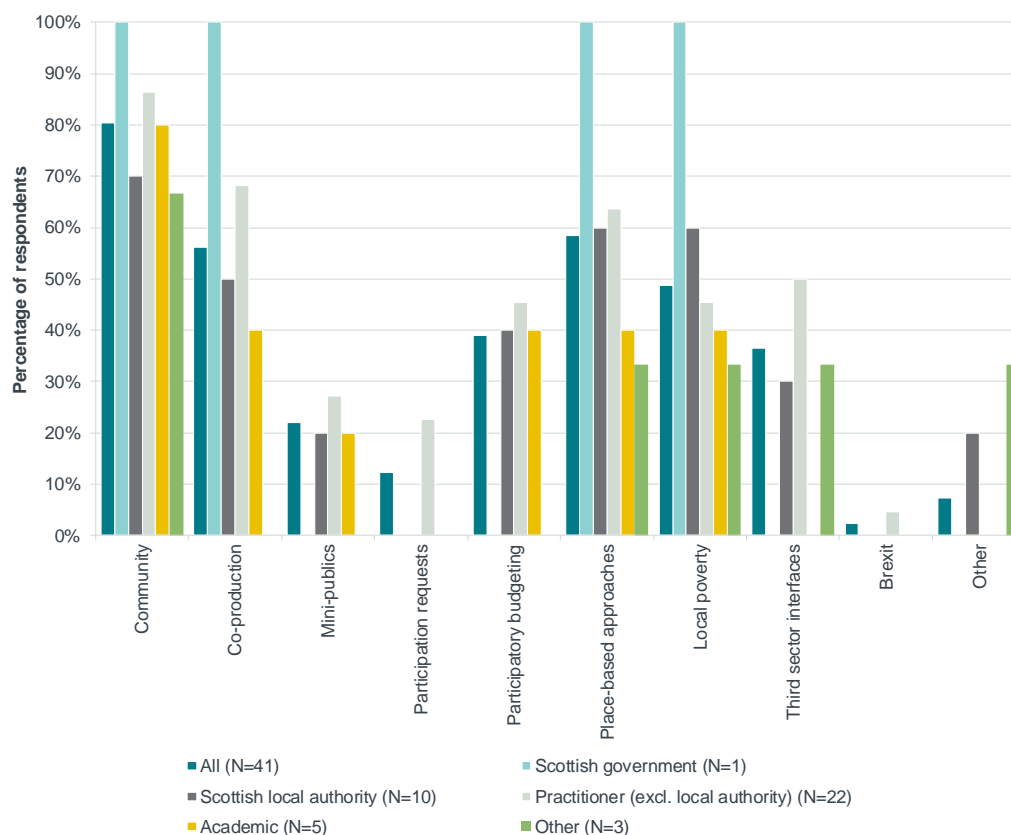
Source: *What Works Scotland*.

These publications examined three key things:

- (i) what works in mobilising evidence for public service reform;
- (ii) how to support the implementation of collaborative public service reform;
and
- (iii) how to enhance public service reform through community empowerment.

This perspective was applied to a range of policy questions, including the areas of community participation, participatory budgeting, poverty and childhood, welfare reform, health and social care integration, and many more.

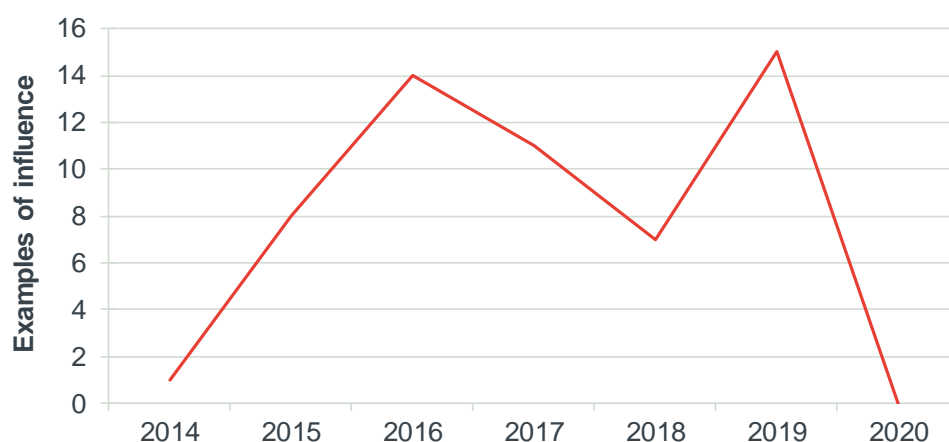
Figure 64 Which of the following policy areas covered by What Works Scotland do you engage with?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

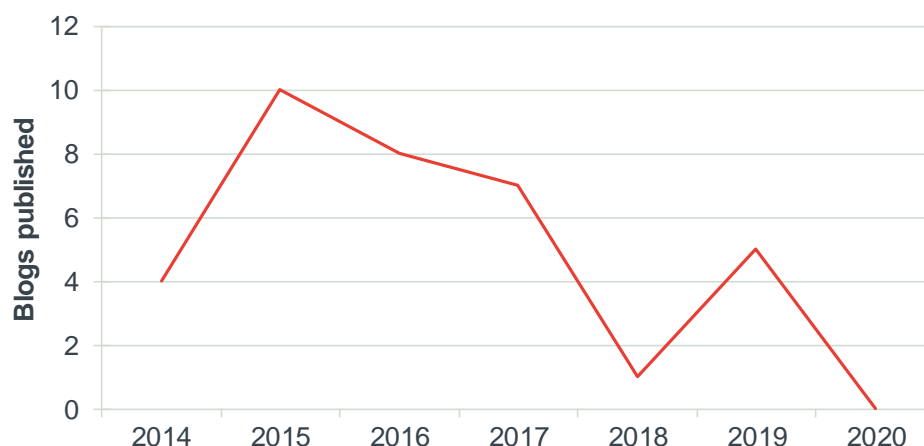
It can be seen that the top areas of interest are WW Scotland's work on community, place-based approaches, co-production and local poverty.

The evidence produced has fed into a number of policy documents, government working groups and advisory panels, which has allowed dissemination into public sector spheres.

Figure 65 WW Scotland policy influence

Source: What Works Scotland.

The Centre used online publishing to some extent as a form of dissemination. The total number of users of the WW Scotland website between 2015 and 2019 was 65,228 with 235,632 total page views. Furthermore, the Centre released 35 blogs over the years.

Figure 66 WW Scotland Blogs published

Source: What Works Scotland.

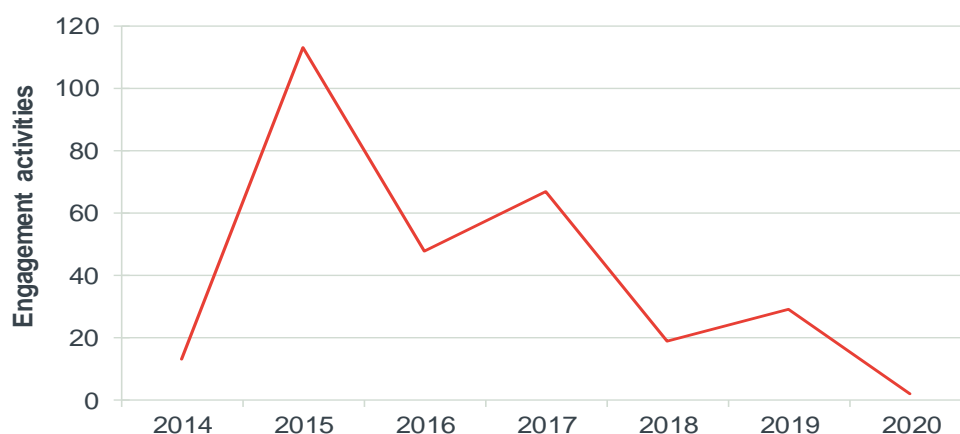
Network building

The nature of the Scottish model and its reliance on collaboration across a variety of public, private and third-sector agencies necessitated the development of a wide-ranging and robust set of networks.

As such, WW Scotland hosted a multitude of events that brought a variety of different public service stakeholders together to exchange ideas. Between 2014 and 2019, WW Scotland led 291 engagement activities, including conferences, meetings, presentations and debates. Over 70 of these were seminars and workshops attended

by more than 2,750 participants from community groups, policy makers, service providers and academics to create evidence-informed debates and impact on the scale and pace of public services reform.

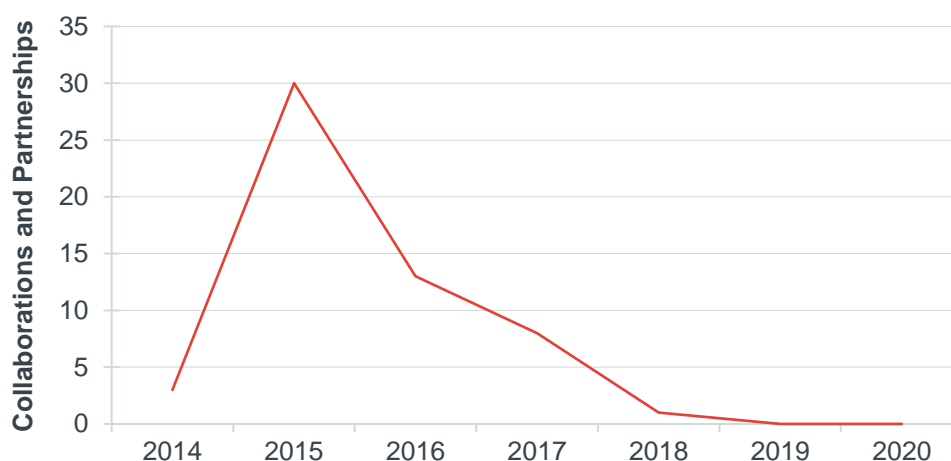
Figure 67 WW Scotland engagement activities



Source: What Works Scotland.

Over its course, WW Scotland also engaged in 55 collaborative projects in partnership with over 40 local partners.

Figure 68 WW Scotland collaborative projects



Source: What Works Scotland.

Collaboration of WW Scotland with the wider WWN was on the whole light touch. The Centre retained a close relationship with the WCPP on account of their commonalities as Centres for devolved nations, but there was limited contact with the other Centres given the perceived lack of overlap in research approaches.

Capacity building, knowledge exchange

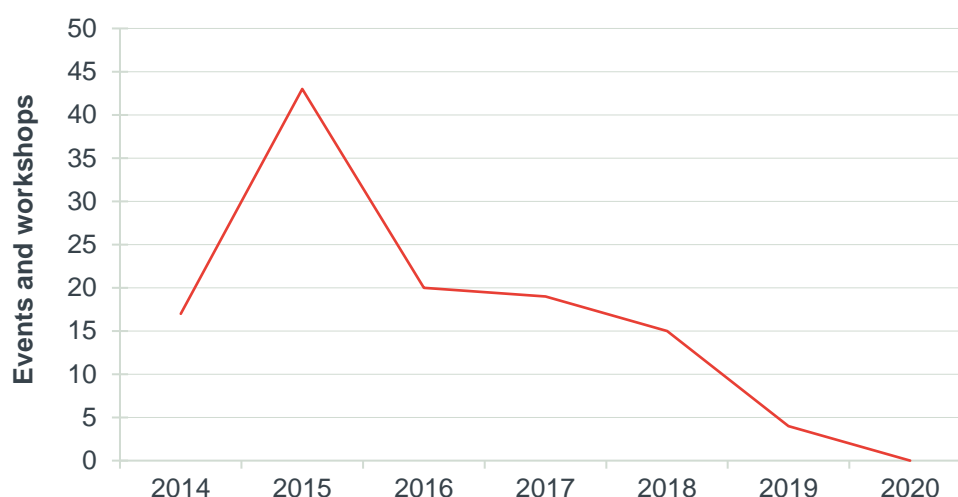
WW Scotland invested a good amount of effort into capabilities development for policy makers and researchers alike.

In particular, while the first four years of the WW Scotland research grant were spent developing the thinking and research for these topics, most of the effort in the final year was oriented around embedding these research products with key audiences, by drawing together the key findings in order to generate a shared understanding of “what works” in public services reform.

This was achieved using a range of activities adopted to develop and promote joint approaches to working.

On the policy side, WW Scotland organised 118 workshops, with an average reach of 50 attendees for each. These brought together practitioners, policy makers and representatives from third-sector organisations to provide opportunities for knowledge sharing and connections to be built.

Figure 69 WW Scotland Workshops and events



Source: What Works Scotland.

On the academic side, there were six PhD students working at the Centre and two secondees from the Glasgow Centre for Public Health.

The Centre also pitched evaluation projects of community interventions to Masters students at the University of Glasgow for their dissertations, which resulted in 172 collaborations between students at the University of Glasgow, community organisations and public services. An officer is now also posted at each of the universities.

3.4.3 Outcomes and impacts

Co-production, partnership, engagement

It has been noted that co-production, collaboration and engagement with public service practitioners was core to the function of WW Scotland. This was recognised by several of the Centre’s users as one of the biggest achievements of the Scottish approach.

The model enabled WW Scotland to apply a whole-systems approach to solving local problems, which was broadly seen as quite effective and provided the ability to “unshackle particular silos”. Practitioners highly valued the otherwise rare opportunities for knowledge sharing across organisations, which the Centre provided.¹⁴⁰ Above all, the experience generated some key learnings for project managing collaborative practice, including setting expectations, equal partnership and accounting for adequate time to build stable and meaningful relationships.¹⁴¹

However, the Centre’s ambitious plan to work across the entirety of the public services landscape in Scotland may have resulted in a more decentralised and perhaps fragmented governance of the Centre. One overarching interviewee suggested that there may have been “*too many chefs, not enough cooks*”, referring to the fact that there were so many research leads that it became unclear who was leading which tasks.

Conversely, other critiques suggest that the Centre’s focus may have been too narrow. A Scotland-specific approach meant that the Centre was fairly disconnected from the rest of the UK, and did not seek insights from elsewhere, including the other WWCs, which might have benefited some areas of their work. This held the Centre back somewhat from creating an authoritative evidence base, which is something that is still being worked towards.

Finally, the application of CAR to a public services context generated insights and learning in the complex arena of multi-agency public services,¹⁴² which are an asset to the evidence base for effective knowledge mobilisation practices. The work had specific success in West Dunbartonshire, where it spawned further reviews in Perth & Kinross and the opportunity for a WW Scotland researcher to inform Scottish Government policy on place-based approaches.

Nevertheless, the CAR approach was received with mixed responses. The freedom and lack of specific research question were regarded as both a strength and a weakness by the researchers, and the reactive nature of the research was challenged by the funders, as it meant that outputs were delivered with considerable delay, running well into year 3 of the programme.

Evidence generation, dissemination

The Centre produced some key outputs with substantial policy significance.

For instance, WW Scotland played an influential role in progressing and embedding participatory budgeting within the Scottish Government and local authorities, a practice which prior to this had not been well known or well tested. Participatory budgeting involves community members deciding how part of a public budget will be spent, enabling citizens to work with decision makers on budget decisions about the services.¹⁴³ Starting off in the form of relatively small-scale projects, this work eventually developed into something “transformational”, according to a WW Scotland practitioner, specifically referencing participatory budgeting. WW Scotland resources on this topic have added to the research base, provided the evidence to inform national policy and

¹⁴⁰ [Reflections on the What Works Scotland Initiative, August 2019](#)

¹⁴¹ [Reflections on the What Works Scotland Initiative, August 2019](#)

¹⁴² <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/publications/collaborative-action-research-and-public-services-insights-into-methods-findings-and-implications-for-public-service-reform/>

¹⁴³ <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/topics/participatory-budgeting/>

set the groundwork for local authorities to incorporate the practice into their processes. Two CPP members were nominated for democracy pioneering awards in the UK for their work with WW Scotland on participatory budgeting. The Scottish Government has now set a target for 1% of all budgeting to be done via participatory budgeting. Stirling Council recorded that it was using WW Scotland resources to inform its development of participatory budgeting (2018), and Glasgow Council set up a new steering group overseeing four pilots across the city over the next two years.

The evaluability framework produced by WW Scotland is another good example. This is a systematic approach to deciding whether and how to evaluate complex initiatives or issues. Where the practice of evaluation was previously limited, evaluability assessments now form the basis of a number of policy changes and have been integrated into Scottish Government guidance to inform evaluation planning, according to one WW Scotland academic we interviewed. Interaction with WW Scotland progressed from proactive suggestions by the Centre to explicit commissions by Ministers, which demonstrates the buy-in which the Centre was able to achieve and the behavioural shift by users towards embedding the methodology in their practice.

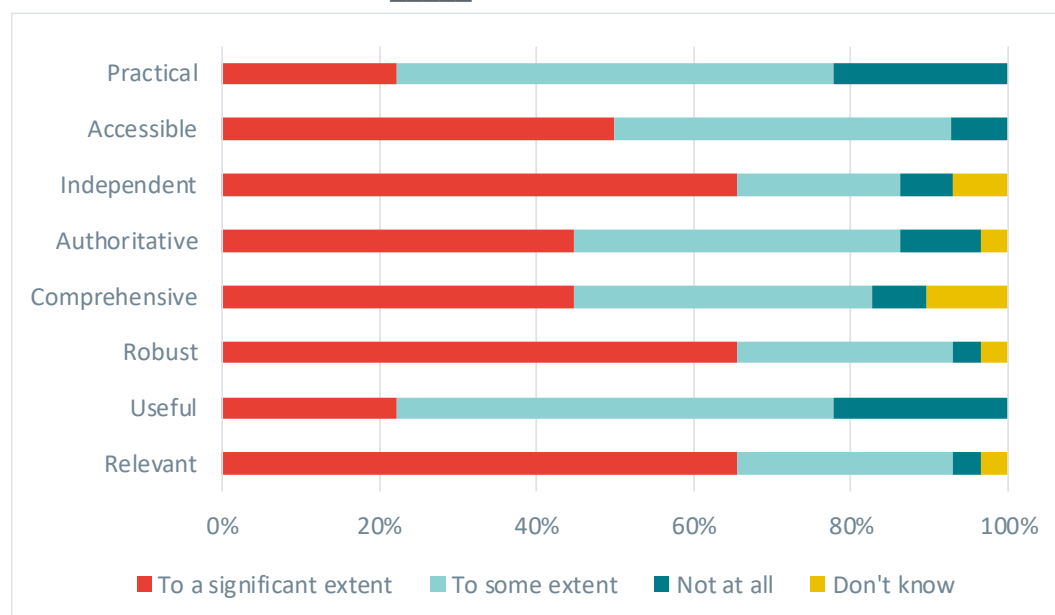
Users of the Centre also pointed to specific and localised changes in a number of policy areas for local government, including child poverty, universal income, social justice, education and anti-social behaviour prevention, to illustrate some additional concrete impacts of WW Scotland outputs. Together, all these impacts contributed to an emerging focus on place-based approaches in Scottish policy-making.¹⁴⁴ One practitioner we interviewed, for example, mentioned that a legacy of their engagement with WW Scotland was that they were currently working on a project discussing what a CPP could learn from the “Everyone Everyday” project in Dagenham, and how it could perhaps help in the recovery from COVID-19. This indicates the extensive reach which WW Scotland was able to achieve across the public services landscape in Scotland within just five years, and points to a small step-change towards a whole-systems reform. It does, however, raise the question of whether the cumulative impact achieved might have been greater if the Centre’s activity had been focused on a single policy area.

However, while it is clear that the thinking and the products from WW Scotland generally landed well with their public sector users, and the Centre was able to secure a high level of public engagement, there is some evidence to suggest that more could have been done in communicating these outputs more widely in order to maximise engagement and raise the profile of the work being done, particularly among non-governmental organisations.

Accessibility of the work was not rated as highly by survey respondents as other qualities, and this finding was particularly driven by respondents from the third and private sectors. Commonly cited development points included reference to outputs which were “too complicated to understand”, “very academic” and even “too highbrow and not practical for charities”. One respondent noted that “WW Scotland missed a chance to lead charities and the third sector”.

¹⁴⁴ <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/topics/place-based-approaches/>

Figure 70 To what extent do you agree that What Works Scotland provides content that is _____?

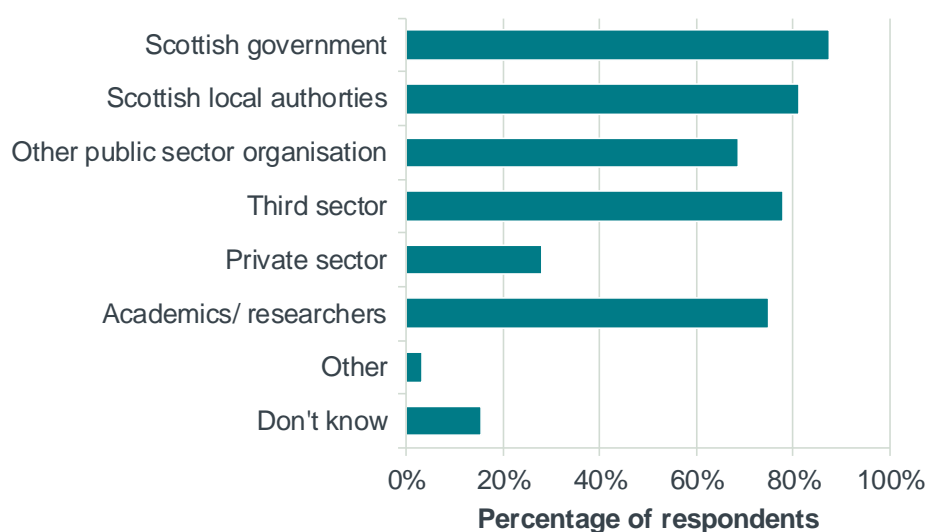


Source: Frontier Economics survey of WW Scotland users.

Note: 28 total respondents.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that while the central customer base for WW Scotland was intended to be the public service community of Scotland, several of the key outputs ultimately generated were of benefit to the Scottish Government. This is reflected in the users' ultimate understanding of the Centre's intended audience. Survey respondents most frequently identified the primary audience for the Centre's outputs as the Scottish Government, alongside local public service bodies.

Figure 71 To what extent should What Works Scotland be engaging with each of the following?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: 32 total respondents.

Network building

The Centre made a decisive contribution in creating a broad set of relationships and networks, and there was some valuable learning along the way.

There is evidence that local partnerships and connections have been strengthened as a result of the collaborative work generated by WW Scotland. For instance, the involvement of WW Scotland in a joint seminar series with Public Health Scotland (PHS) enabled them to draw in a cross-cutting audience from a range of sectors (e.g. crime, housing), in order to encourage a number of joined-up activities for prevention. These seminars were frequently at maximum capacity, indicating widespread stakeholder buy-in.

“WW Scotland developed an extremely broad set of networks and relationships across public services. This is expected to endure beyond the funding period.”

[*Reflections on the What Works Scotland Initiative, August 2019*](#)

There has also been some trust building between the Scottish Government and Scottish local authorities, a relationship which is sometimes known to be strained. The involvement of a Scottish Government secondee in the Centre largely amplified this engagement from central government.

It is less clear whether the Centre has contributed to a similar improvement in relations between the Scottish Government and Westminster, but there are some standalone examples of where some impact has been made. For instance, the Kirkcaldy team in the Fife CPP have developed ongoing communication with the UK Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on matters of welfare reform.

Links between the Scottish public sector and the academic community have also been developed. A key achievement identified by the Centre was its role as a catalyst for public servants and academics to work in more inquiry-focused ways.¹⁴⁵ Although it is too early to make a full assessment of long-lasting impact, CPPs reported that the connections which WW Scotland helped build between the communities and the academics are still being used.

Finally, WW Scotland facilitated a productive working relationship between the University of Glasgow and the University of Edinburgh, two historically rival universities. This was a particularly difficult task given the large management overhead required in coordinating funding for the two institutions as well as an imbalance of researchers between the universities due to unexpected changes in staffing. The appointment of a project manager and commitment from both sides has made a significant difference.

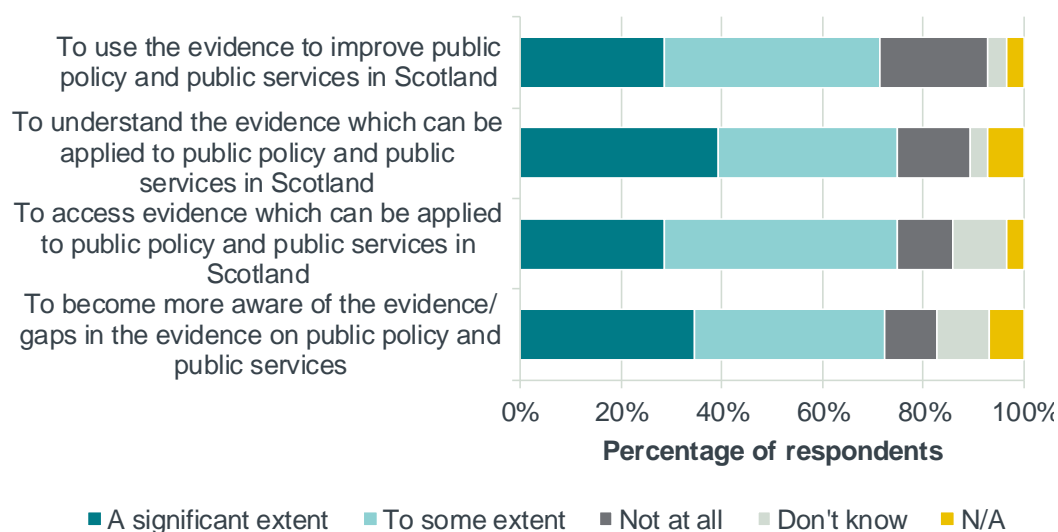
Capacity building, knowledge exchange

The WW Scotland model has potentially been one of the strongest across the network for developing the capabilities of those working within the Centre and the ecosystem around it. This is attributed to its co-production model of research, which allowed research awareness and skills development to be built directly into the production process.

The majority of WW Scotland users surveyed agreed that the Centre had contributed to their capabilities in each of the following categories to some extent or to a significant extent.

¹⁴⁵ [*Reflections on the What Works Scotland Initiative, August 2019*](#)

Figure 72 To what extent has What Works Scotland helped you as an individual with the following?

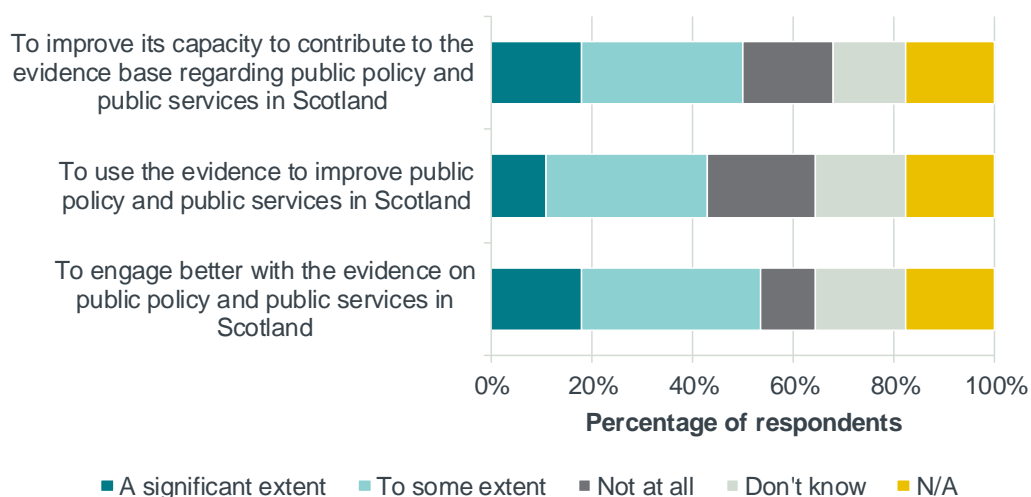


Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: 28-29 total respondents.

Some survey respondents noted that they felt that engaging with WW Scotland had enabled them to attempt to translate some of the learning they had received from the Centre into working practice at their organisations. Although there are no concrete examples of impact yet, this does suggest some indication of behaviour change.

Figure 73 To what extent has What Works Scotland helped your team/organisation with the following?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: 28 total respondents.

In addition, there are notable examples of changes to baseline practice which have come out of WW Scotland – for instance, the integration of evaluability assessments within the Scottish Government and local authorities.

Furthermore, WW Scotland opened up some avenues for knowledge sharing between public service organisations, which did not exist before (e.g. PHS seminar series, connection between Kirkcaldy welfare reform team and DWP).

The legacy of the Centre, such as new connections and training materials, has also meant that some capacity has been built to maintain the relationships between researchers and public service delivery (particularly within the four local council sites, Aberdeenshire, Fife, Glasgow and West Dunbartonshire).

Finally, although academics were not the target audience, the Centre's work had some key impacts on this community. A cohort of almost 200 researchers worked with the Centre, producing policy-facing and "very impact-oriented work", and 11 of these secured academic promotions out of the Centre. Specifically, WW Scotland trained leaders in very specific forms of research, e.g. action research. These researchers gained experience of dealing with policy issues, as well as a greater understanding of and sensitivity to the needs of the policy community.

KEY LEARNINGS

What Works Scotland focused specifically on the public reform agenda of Scotland. This Centre had a different manner of operation to the other WWCs as it drew in a wider range of research methods beyond RCTs and quasi-experimental techniques. This has attracted the criticism that its outputs were therefore of lesser quality than the other Centres, but the Centre was confident of the opposite.

The so-called “Scottish approach” to evidence generation was overtly collaborative and was very much focused on the co-production of research with key stakeholders. This resulted in a much higher degree of capacity building within this Centre compared with others.

The Centre has now come to a close, but reflections on its work reveal the following improvements could be made if considering another Centre of this sort in the future.

- There were some key learnings to come out of this innovative way of working with regard to the best practice surrounding collaborative working. Among other findings, setting clear expectations for collaborators and equal partnership were important themes which could have been better implemented in WW Scotland.
- While engagement levels were high with key stakeholders in the way of discussion groups, meetings and workshops, WW Scotland could have put some greater energy into the communication of its outputs, e.g. through online distribution channels. This would have helped to engage a wider audience, e.g. the third sector.
- Some users suggested that WW Scotland could have broadened its perspective slightly to welcome insights from a wider range of sources and to be more outward-facing. While the rationale for a Scottish approach is robust, this does not preclude the fact that there are some insights to be gained from different approaches outside of Scotland.

Finally, it became clear that the short-term What Works model seemed inappropriate for the long-term goals which ESRC and perhaps other funders intended for this Centre. It takes time to develop deep-rooted and meaningful relationships and therefore to generate helpful insights from this way of working in a short period of time.

3.5 What Works Centre for Crime Reduction (WW Crime Reduction)

3.5.1 Background

One of the first WWCs to be set up, the WW Crime Reduction, was established in 2013 within the College of Policing alongside an academic consortium of eight universities led by University College London to support the Centre.

ESRC was initially a core funder of the Centre – specifically providing the funds for the offsetting up the academic consortium to undertake nine specific work packages to support the Centre – but it has now ceased to provide funding. The academic consortium was disbanded following the end of ESRC funding. The College of Policing continues as the WW Crime Reduction and carries out a number of the functions established through the consortium, funded by ESRC.

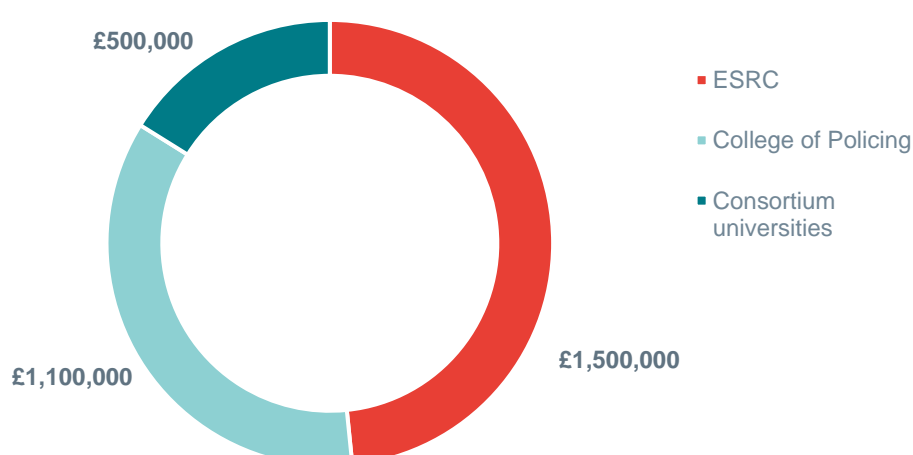
ESRC investment in WW Crime Reduction totalled around £1,551,000 to cover activities during the period from September 2013 to March 2018.

The breakdown of this funding is £1,500,000 for Phase 1 – originally set to conclude in August 2016, with a no-cost extension to 2017 – and a subsequent £51k of additional funding specifically for updating the search for crime reduction systematic reviews and drafting entries for the Crime Reduction Toolkit produced by the Centre, extending the funding of the Centre to March 2018.

The ESRC's funding was part matched (40%) by the College of Policing, with the remaining 10% contributed in-kind.

Participating universities in the consortium also contributed around £500,000 for Phase 1 in proportion to their staff costs.

Figure 74 WW Crime Reduction Phase 1 funding breakdown



Source: Frontier Economics analysis of ESRC data.

Note: The College of Policing funding figure refers to cash investment, and does not include any contribution "in-kind" such as staff hours.

The key aim of the WW Crime Reduction is to improve the evidence base for crime reduction and better embed evidence in the decision-making of police and wider community safety practitioners and key decision makers, such as Police and Crime Commissioners, local government and those working in the wider criminal justice system. The Centre also set out to identify the best available evidence on how to achieve potential savings while reducing crime.

To produce the evidence/research required, academics within the UCL-led Consortium for Evidence-Based Crime Reduction contributed 74.98 FTE hours per week to work related to the Centre. The consortium was made up of 18 academics from eight universities/institutes. As well as working with the UCL-led consortium, the Centre¹⁴⁶ also worked with police and public bodies involved in community safety work. This included probation workers, local authorities, health practitioners, community groups, criminal justice charities and industry.¹⁴⁷

3.5.2 Activities and outputs

The WW Crime Reduction's activities cover a broad range of research areas such as developmental and social prevention, sentencing and deterrence, and community interventions. Therefore the Centre has targeted non-police stakeholders such as retail workers and local authorities as well as the police. In our interviews, we heard from an investment manager that the Centre has been less successful at influencing policy makers than it is at influencing police practitioners.

The Centre was set up in the context of a limited evidence base, particularly regarding contemporary crime reduction challenges. Given this context, the Centre faced immediate trade-offs as to where to focus its resources. The consortium's work was originally set out to cover nine "work packages". The work packages ranged from evidence mapping, to designing a practitioner development programme on evidence appraisal, to generation of primary research. The Centre's activities across these work packages fell into four main categories:

- synthesising existing evidence
- generating new evidence and methodologies
- providing training to develop capability of evidence users
- collaborating with the wider WWN.

Similar to other WWCs, WW Crime Reduction's initial focus was heavily on synthesis and translation of existing evidence in the field of crime reduction. The academic consortium's activities (with support of the WWC) in this area resulted in the **publication of 12 new systematic evidence reviews**. The consortium had also identified and reviewed around 300 existing systematic reviews as of 2017.¹⁴⁸ Since the end of ESRC funding in 2017, WW Crime Reduction has continued its activities to identify and review relevant evidence in the field of crime reduction.

Systematic reviews of the existing crime reduction evidence allowed the Centre to identify gaps in the evidence and other obstacles to evidence-based decision-making

¹⁴⁶ This was undertaken by the College of Policing and not a direct result of ESRC funding.

¹⁴⁷ These engagements were not directly funded by ESRC.

¹⁴⁸ Hunter, Gillian and May, Tiggey and Hough, Mike (2017), "An evaluation of the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction: final report". Project Report. College of Policing, London, UK.

for practitioners. On the whole, the systematic reviews achieved their objective by helping to identify gaps in the evidence base. However, one academic we interviewed, provided some examples of how the process of producing the reviews could have been smoother:

- The College of Policing placed them under **a lot of pressure to deliver results quickly** – for example, it would have been beneficial for the effect, mechanism, moderators, implementation, and economic (EMMIE) cost framework to have been developed before assessing the existing systematic reviews in crime reduction, but the work schedule meant that both of these activities were carried out concurrently.
- The **“wrong questions were being asked”**. In particular, the academic felt that evidence reviews should take a problem-based approach instead of the intervention-based approach preferred by the College of Policing and in line with the approach taken by other WW Centres. The academic we interviewed felt the question of interest should be “what is the problem, why did it occur, what are the mechanisms through which it came about, and what is the best way to address it?”, as opposed to “did X intervention work, and how much did it cost?”.

A portion of the consortium’s activities concerned conducting primary research to fill these gaps. The setting up of the WW Crime Reduction (in particular the funding for the consortium supplied by ESRC) provided a means of fast-tracking research in priority areas already identified by the College of Policing and resulted in **four primary research studies leading to four publications**.

In total, the nine work packages **yielded around 50 publications by the consortium over its lifetime**.

Another follow-on to the systematic reviewing and mapping of evidence carried out by the consortium was the **development of the EMMIE framework**. This is a rating and ranking system which was developed by the consortium for the Centre to help practitioners and decision makers to access the crime reduction evidence base easily and quickly. The EMMIE framework also extended the evaluation methods available to the Centre. This was particularly helpful given some evaluation methods such as RCTs, which are used extensively in other fields such as health, are less suited to crime reduction.

The EMMIE framework underlies **the Crime Reduction Toolkit presented by WW Crime Reduction**. The Crime Reduction Toolkit summarises the existing crime reduction evidence base, assessing each piece of evidence using the EMMIE framework. It allows users to see the impact of different interventions on crime and understand how they work, where they work, how to implement them and their cost.

Aside from larger-scale activities/outputs geared towards disseminating evidence to practitioners and decision makers, like the Crime Reduction Toolkit, WW Crime Reduction disseminated evidence through smaller, day-to-day activities. For example, the Centre sends monthly updates to stakeholders and targeted communications to specific groups to publicise its work and evidence pertaining to crime reduction.

Beyond disseminating evidence, WW Crime Reduction also sought to help in building practitioners’ capacity to use and conduct research during the period in which it received ESRC funding. There is a **dedicated training programme for police officers** to develop intelligent customers of research, as well as the provision of some research

support for officers. One example of this has been the Centre holding **monthly research surgeries** to provide support for officers seeking to submit research proposals. Staff within the College of Policing were also able to take up **secondments** to the UCL Jill Dando Institute of Security and Crime Science to develop skills in using EMMIE. These staff have since trained other research staff at the College of Policing.

The rest of the activities undertaken by the Centre while ESRC contributed funding to the academic consortium aimed to facilitate engagement and collaboration with crime reduction practitioners and decision makers. The Centre maintained **a moderate level of engagement** with its stakeholders, in the form of conferences, seminars, lectures and workshops. To support the development of the WW Crime Reduction, a network of officers were recruited to act as promoters or “champions” of research and evidence-based practice within their force. As of 2017, the Centre had held **four focus groups** to discuss how these champions perceived their role and the kinds of challenges they foresaw in advocating for greater use of research evidence in practice.¹⁴⁹ We understand the Centre has expanded its activities since the completion of ESRC funding of the academic consortium but this is out of scope for this report.

Figure 75 Key activities and outputs produced by the WW Centre for Crime Reduction 2014-2019



Source: Frontier Economics illustration based on data from the WW Centre for Crime Reduction.

Note: This captures the key activities and outputs produced by the Centre during the time ESRC funded the academic consortium. Some were direct outputs of the consortium, others were the result of joint work between the consortium and college staff, and some of these activities and outputs were not a direct result of ESRC funding.

Alongside the 12 new systematic reviews, all existing and relevant systematic reviews on crime reduction were identified, reviewed and summarised into the 54 toolkit narratives.

3.5.3 Outcomes and impacts

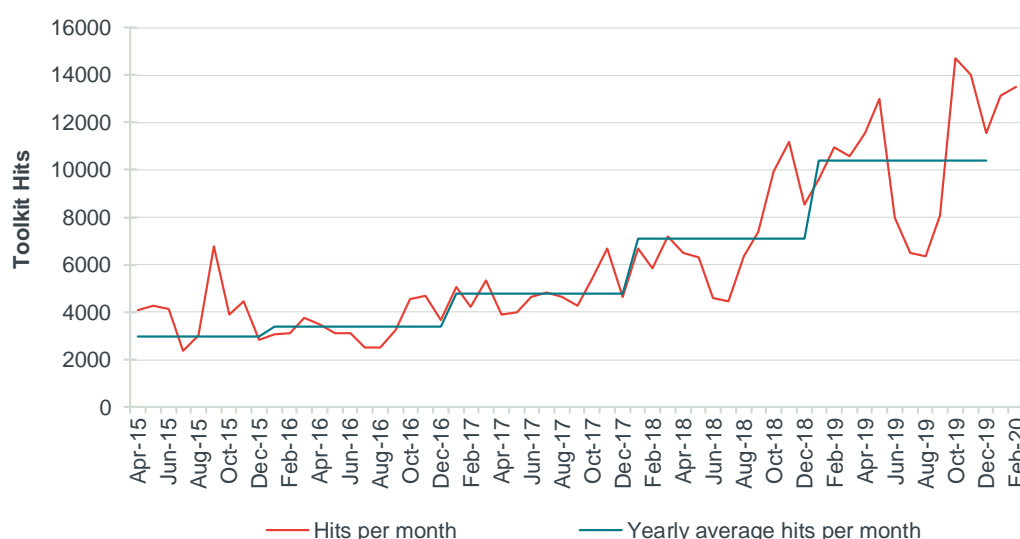
As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and, in particular, its implications for police services, we were not able to carry out interviews with police practitioners, nor to distribute surveys to users of the WW Crime Reduction’s outputs. This means that our evaluation of the outcomes and impacts of the WW Crime Reduction’s activities funded by ESRC is limited in scope.

The EMMIE framework which underlies the Crime Reduction Toolkit has been considered a particular success. One academic interviewee suggested that WW Crime Reduction’s development of the EMMIE framework “**was worth the investment alone**”.

¹⁴⁹ Hunter, Gillian and May, Tiggey and Hough, Mike (2017), “An evaluation of the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction: final report”. Project Report. College of Policing, London, UK.

The Crime Reduction Toolkit is the most common method through which stakeholders would access evidence. In 2017, it won a European Public Sector Award.¹⁵⁰ Figure 76 shows that the Crime Reduction Toolkit web page on the WW Crime Reduction site has experienced high and growing visitor numbers. Monthly views of the toolkit increased from 4,000 at its inception in April 2015 to a peak of just under 15,000 in October 2019. Other sources also suggest the Crime Reduction Toolkit had reached a sizeable number of stakeholders. More than 1 in 10 respondents to the College of Policing annual survey in 2017 reported having used the Crime Reduction Toolkit (uptake was greater amongst senior officers, with over a third of officers at Chief Inspector level or above reporting having used the toolkit).¹⁵¹ In addition, all police interviewees in the evaluation of the WW Crime Reduction carried out by Birkbeck, University of London had heard about the Crime Reduction Toolkit (3.5 years after the Centre's launch). However, most had not used the toolkit themselves in any detailed way.¹⁵³ These findings suggests that by 2016, when the evaluation was undertaken, the WW Crime Reduction had widely *disseminated* evidence to practitioners, but the extent to which it had *mobilised* knowledge by affecting practitioners' day-to-day decision-making was limited.

Figure 76 Crime Reduction Toolkit web page hits



Source: Frontier Economics analysis of WW Centre for Crime Reduction.

We were also able to compare the web page views between 2016 and 2019 of the 12 new systematic evidence reviews conducted by the Centre (Figure 77),¹⁵⁴ which in total received 12k views. While the systematic reviews are likely to have been most utilised, and had most impact via their inclusion in the Crime Reduction Toolkit (discussed

¹⁵⁰ https://www.epsa-projects.eu/index.php/Crime_Reduction_Toolkit

¹⁵¹ Hunter, Gillian and May, Tiggey and Hough, Mike (2017), "An evaluation of the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction: final report". Project Report. College of Policing, London, UK.

¹⁵² College of Policing annual survey 2017 (Inconsistencies were identified in the responses to the questions on use of College resources which has led to some doubts about the reliability of this data. This may be due to lack of familiarity with College terminology for specified products or services)

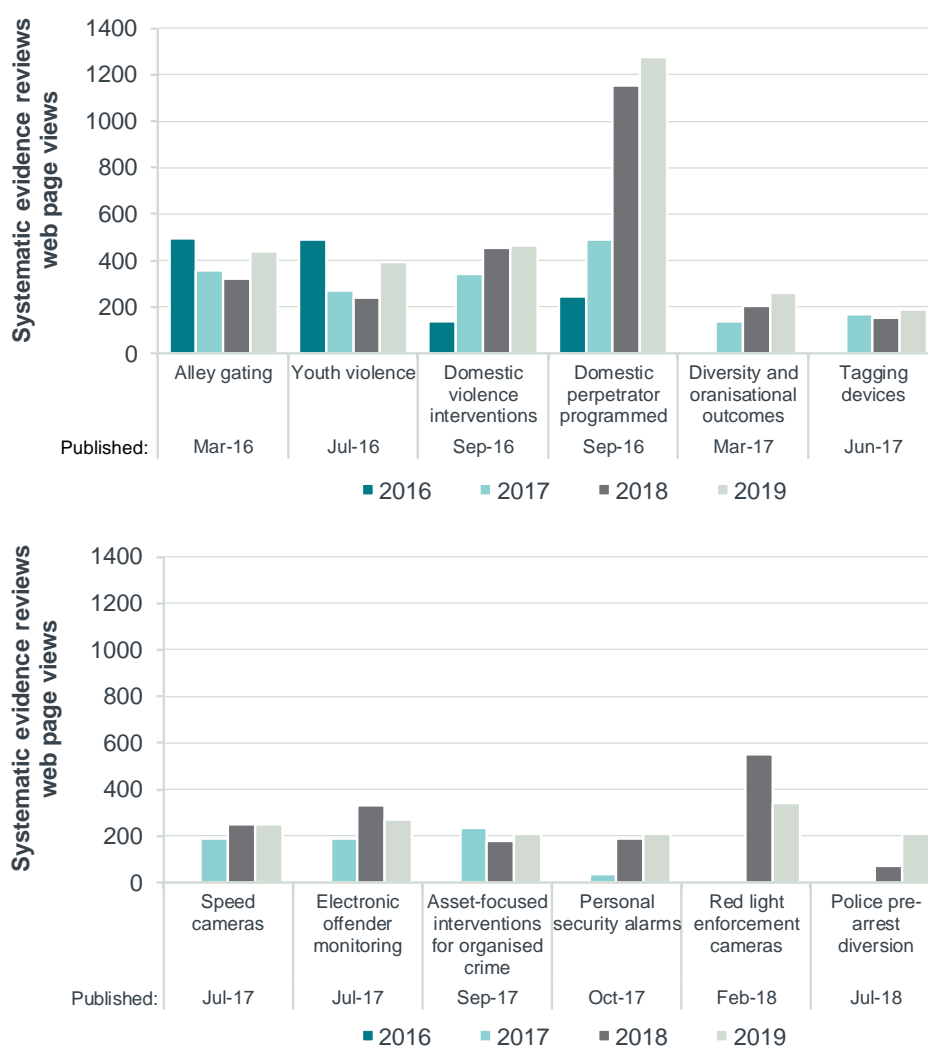
¹⁵³ Ibid

¹⁵⁴ Note the reviews were not all published on the website at the same time.

above), comparing their web page views provides some indication of the reach of the reviews.¹⁵⁵

For example, the domestic violence perpetrator programme review is shown to be relatively successful, with more views than any other review, even in 2019 (roughly three years after its publication). A key driver of the differences in reach achieved by the systematic reviews is the relevance to the police who are naturally the most likely visitors to the College of Policing website. Those that have achieved less views may still be relevant to certain sectors but the Centre has found it more challenging to draw their attention to them. For example, the retail tagging review is relevant to and was shared with private industry/retail but has a smaller reach.

Figure 77 WW Centre for Crime Reduction systematic evidence reviews web page views



Source: Frontier Economics analysis of WW Centre for Crime Reduction website data.

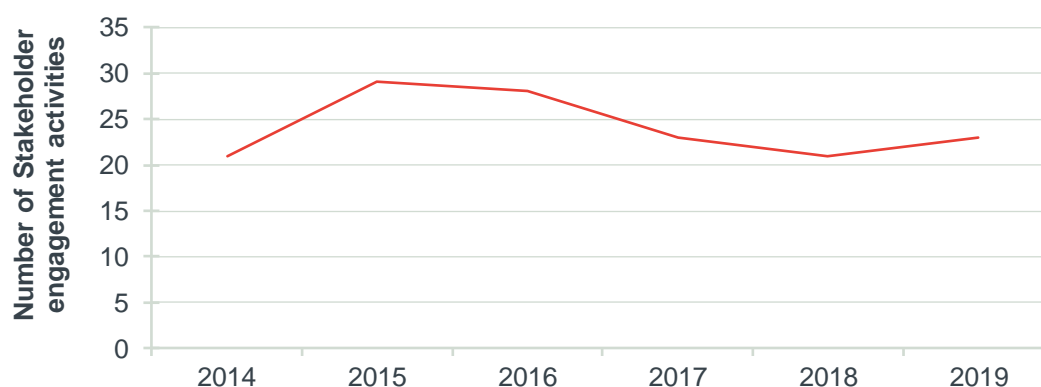
WW Crime Reduction also disseminated evidence via news articles posted on its website, as well as through standalone pages like the Crime Reduction Toolkit page. News items published on the WW Crime Reduction website collectively received an

¹⁵⁵ We acknowledge that web page views are unlikely to fully capture the extent to which a given publication has been disseminated and used.

average of 3,500 views per year from 2016 to 2019.¹⁵⁶ This further indicates that the Centre achieved some success in communicating evidence to users.

Beyond communicating evidence to police and crime reduction stakeholders, some of the Centre's activities were aimed at fostering more active engagement. The Centre has held/attended multiple events such as conferences and expert panels during its lifetime, as shown in Figure 78. These engagement activities also include the monthly research surgeries held by the Centre. These give officers and staff an opportunity to book an hour slot to get bespoke advice and guidance on any research issue they or their force are facing.¹⁵⁷

Figure 78 Number of WW Centre for Crime Reduction stakeholder engagement activities 2013-2019



Source: Frontier Economics analysis of WW Centre for Crime Reduction data.

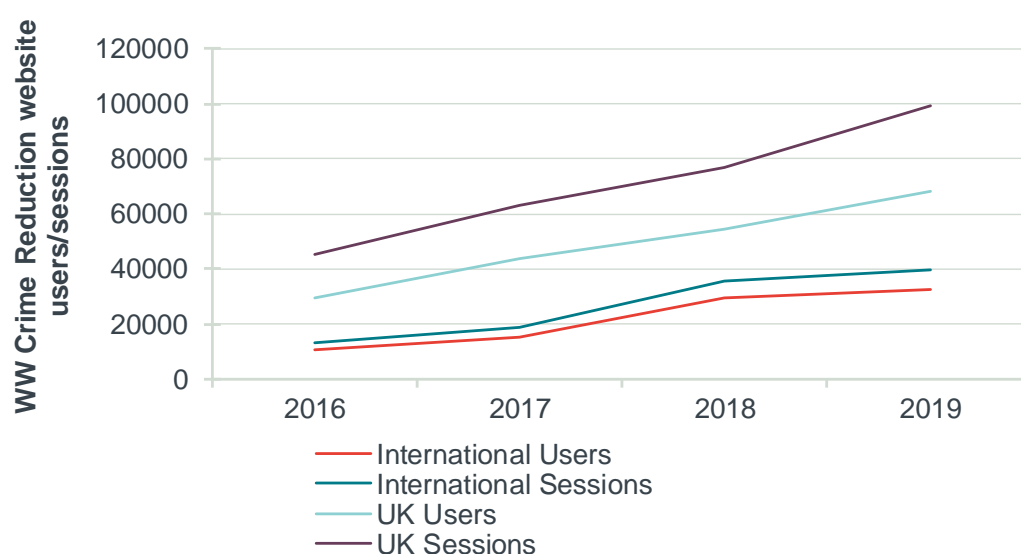
Figure 78 demonstrates that WW Crime Reduction's active engagement with stakeholders through events was moderate and varied across time. This suggests that WW Crime Reduction could have conducted more engagement events with stakeholders in order to mobilise the knowledge it was creating/translating to police practitioners. In addition to these ad hoc engagements, members of the WWC are members of several police-academic and force steering and advisory groups and routinely attend committee meetings.

Some of the Centre's work has been very widely disseminated and has even garnered attention internationally as well as domestically. Figure 79 shows the large number of non-UK users and sessions (the sum of visits by all users) on the WW Crime Reduction website between 2016 and 2019.

¹⁵⁶ There were just over 3,000 views in 2016, 4,300 in 2017, around 3,000 in 2018 and over 3,400 in 2019. Source: WW Centre for Crime Reduction data.

¹⁵⁷ <https://whatworks.college.police.uk/Support/Pages/Research-Surgeries.aspx>

Figure 79 National and international engagement with WW Centre for Crime Reduction website



Source: Frontier Economics analysis of WW Centre for Crime Reduction data.

As well as seeking to improve the accessibility of the evidence base in crime reduction, WW Crime Reduction has also sought to improve the capacity of crime reduction decision makers to create and use evidence themselves.

The Birkbeck evaluation of WW Crime Reduction from 2017 found evidence that there had been “a shift towards greater use of research and...that greater importance is now attached to using research” compared to 2014.¹⁵⁸ The evaluation also found that “interviewees were much more likely than in 2014 to be involved in research, in partnership with a university, and identified benefits resulting from these collaborations”. Similarly, the College of Policing annual survey from 2017 found that 54% of respondents reported using research evidence in decision-making and trying to keep up to date with research evidence at least occasionally.¹⁵⁹

Alongside this, capacity building has taken place within the College of Policing. Secondments have been arranged for six College of Policing staff to the UCL Jill Dando Institute of Security and Crime Science. These were used to enable knowledge transfer relating to the use of EMMIE to College researchers who were then able to train other College staff.

The outcomes and impacts of WW Crime Reduction’s activities have been varied. Certain outputs of the Centre aimed at mobilising knowledge on crime reduction, such as the Crime Reduction Toolkit, have been widely used and valued by crime reduction practitioners and decision makers, whereas other outputs like the cost benefit tool have seen less engagement. But stakeholder surveys conducted in previous WW Crime Reduction evaluations and College of Policing surveys indicate that engagement and

¹⁵⁸ Hunter, Gillian and May, Tiggey and Hough, Mike (2017), “An evaluation of the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction: final report”. Project Report. College of Policing, London, UK.

¹⁵⁹ Inconsistencies were identified in the responses to the questions on use of College resources which have led to some doubts about the reliability of this data. This may be due to lack of familiarity with College terminology for specified products or services.

collaboration between police and academics has improved since WW Crime Reduction's launch.

Police practitioners often lack the time to engage with research, and where they do, it can be difficult for police officers on duty to move from experience-based decision-making to evidence-based decision-making. Hierarchical management and accountability structures within police forces may also pose an obstacle for successful knowledge mobilisation and capacity building.

As mentioned above, we were not able to investigate in more detail the outcomes and impacts of WW Crime Reduction's work. But the evidence outlined in this section suggests that the Centre has had some success at mobilising knowledge and building capacity to use and create evidence in crime reduction. This is despite the challenging environment in which they operate.

KEY LEARNINGS

The **What Works Centre for Crime Reduction** operates in a challenging policy environment. Practitioners face obstacles to using research and evidence in their day-to-day decision-making due to the reactive nature of their work. Additionally, a lot of crime reduction policy is devolved to individual forces and is already highly developed.

There have been significant outputs from the Centre and consortium partnership, most notably the EMMIE framework and the Crime Reduction Toolkit, which have helped illuminate areas where knowledge gaps existed and have shaped how practitioners evaluate and implement evidence-informed practice.

The programme has also demonstrated that practitioners (represented by the College of Policing), ESRC and universities can work collaboratively to produce useful outputs.

However, there are some ways in which the WW Crime Reduction could have enhanced this impact on the crime reduction community.

- The roles of key stakeholders (ESRC, the College of Policing, and consortium academics) could have been more clearly defined and communicated at the outset. For instance, although ESRC helped to facilitate engagement between stakeholders, it could have taken an even more active role in ensuring clear roles were defined. Additionally, although the early frictions were quickly resolved, the College of Policing could have operated in a more collaborative rather than consultative manner with consortium academics earlier in the relationship to minimise these further.
- While there were benefits to WW Crime Reduction's work programme being shaped by broader policing priorities, this may also have led to poor articulation of research questions (for example, the police wanted to know what works in reducing organised crime but it is difficult to conduct *outcome*-oriented research in this area because organised crime is itself poorly defined).
- Greater emphasis and more active engagement with policy makers and police forces might have generated greater demand for WW Crime Reduction outputs. For instance, interviewees from the Birkbeck evaluation recommended that the Centre should "promote and publicise where evidence-based practice had been successfully applied, to hammer home 'live examples' of its impact on policing practice". Another recommendation suggested the Centre should better signal where evidence-based methods were being introduced in policing.
- A generally wider perspective beyond policing (to include, for instance, local government, educators and social workers) would have been beneficial, to inform a more cross-cutting perspective on crime reduction.

3.6 Early Intervention Foundation (EIF)

The EIF is a charity established in 2013 to champion and support the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes.

The EIF received core funding provided by the DfE, DWP, PHE and MHCLG (managed by DfE), running from December 2014 to February 2019. This funding was produced for the synthesis of existing evidence.

In addition to the core funding, ESRC provided the EIF with an additional £730k of non-core funding, which in turn funded a set of three evaluations that aimed to fill key evidence gaps and catalyse future funding in the area.

There were three evaluation partnership investments funded by ESRC:

1. Step-Up campaign for low-level victims of domestic violence: Blackpool Council and Lancaster University
2. Functional Family Therapy: Croydon Council and Queens University Belfast
3. Baby Express, a magazine for first-time parents: Greater Manchester Council and NatGen.

These projects were novel in their attempt to conduct RCTs with local authorities in partnership with academics. The ambition was that these projects could illustrate what was possible in this space and that others would follow.

Unfortunately, while a lot of learning was gained from these projects, each was ended before completing and therefore there is no impact from the evaluations. Although the success of these partnerships was limited, this is not necessarily down to the partnership model. Rather, there was a mixture of unfortunate circumstances and process issues that caused problems.

Ultimately, those that we interviewed think that “collaborative research is very important”, which makes learning from this experience important. Adjustments to the process based on these lessons could help future partnerships succeed.

Given the lack of wider impact from these projects a wider survey was ruled out. Instead, due to the specific nature of ESRC funding, we opted to base our evaluation of ESRC’s investment in the EIF on interviews with the university and academic leads for each of the partnerships as well as those involved at the EIF.

This section will summarise these three key lessons which we gained through these interviews.

Effective working partnerships require strong relationships to be built

One of the difficulties the evaluation partnerships faced was aligning the priorities and expectations of the partners. This was particularly the case with the Blackpool partnership, where the gap between their objectives caused friction between the partners.

Furthermore, reconciliation of these gaps was harder to achieve as none of the partnerships had any grounding rooted in existing relationships. One interviewee suggested that they were paired together purely because of location rather than because of fit. One suggestion to overcome this challenge in the future is to have academics in situ in order to help them gain the perspective of the council.

Although these three projects ended up being unsuccessful, there is evidence that it is possible to build these strong relationships and subsequently align priorities between academics and local councils. The Functional Family Therapy evaluation worked well (up until external circumstances intervened) because they spent the first part of the project ensuring a shared purpose.

Moreover, Blackpool Council learnt from this experience and has since successfully partnered with a number of different universities for different projects. Their experience with these partners was much more positive largely due to the early conversations and discussions they had about values and objectives. These conversations allowed both parties to be on the same page and generated an implicit trust in the relationship beyond the contractual arrangement. This does not mean that major issues do not appear in the relationships, but when they do appear, they are able to work through them.

Projects should have resilience built in to help withstand any personnel changes

Another challenge faced by these evaluation partnerships was their ability to overcome changes in personnel. From our interviews, it appears that, across the projects, there was a reliance on particular individuals.

Any project taking place over a prolonged period of time can expect that not all of those involved at the start will be involved right to the end. Inevitably, some will pursue career changes, others will be forced to take a step back for personal reasons. Whatever the reason, it is important that, when this change occurs, there is a smooth transition and, unfortunately, this was not the case for these projects.

For example, one of the partnerships had a number of personnel changes due to bereavement and maternity. This led to a disjointed approach which was compounded by the lack of a relationship between the parties.

Personnel changes hindering the projects were not limited to the partnerships. The lead at EIF Leon Feinstein left in July 2016. Everyone we interviewed mentioned how much they appreciated the effort Leon had put in to make the projects a success. Moreover, many talked about his importance in facilitating negotiations between the parties. However, after he left, the EIF became very distant and the projects received very little support, which prevented further successful negotiations between the parties in the partnerships.

Clear oversight of projects is required and engagement must be maintained

Until it was clear that the projects were not going to deliver the expected evaluations, the interviewees felt that ESRC was fairly removed from the projects. The sense was that they provided the money and then disappeared early on. There was no monitoring on their part beyond the submissions for the annual report.

At the same time, the EIF had not been funded to take on this monitoring role. The funding from ESRC was designed to go directly to each of the partnerships. Although there had been engagement from Leon while in his position, there was limited engagement from the rest of the EIF and almost all involvement disappeared after he left.

In the future, ESRC should consider taking a more direct role in the oversight of evaluations or should provide the body facilitating the evaluations with additional funding to ensure sufficient oversight.

Alongside any oversight, it might have been worth introducing intermediate steps throughout the project to unlock additional funding. For example, offering a smaller one-year pilot fund to a number of evaluations, which would help to identify any issues such as the ethical challenges that could not be overcome by the Baby Express evaluation.

KEY LEARNINGS

The **Early Intervention Partnerships** were a set of three projects with the Early Intervention Foundation funded by ESRC to evaluate three specific interventions in partnership with three local councils across the UK. The venture was novel but ultimately all three of these partnerships failed to reach completion.

Nevertheless, the exercise has generated some key learnings along the way.

- Effective working partnerships require strong relationships to be built. Expectations should be defined, equal partnership should be maintained, and channels for communication should be set up. A willingness to participate and flexibility are required from all partners.
- Projects should have resilience built in at the outset to help withstand personnel changes, changes in scope and context, etc.
- Clear oversight and support mechanisms for projects are required and engagement must be maintained. It does not seem to matter where this responsibility sits (whether with ESRC as the funder, EIF as the intermediary, or the partners on the project), but this function is fundamental to ensure that partnerships run as smoothly as possible.

3.7 The Knowledge Mobilisation Package (in partnership with the Education Endowment Foundation) (EEF)

3.7.1 Background

The EEF was established in 2011 by the Sutton Trust and the Impetus Trust, with a funding grant from DfE of £125 million. The EEF and Sutton Trust are, together, the government-designated What Works Centre for Education.

In 2013, ESRC provided non-core funding towards the “Knowledge Mobilisation Research Package” for the EEF. This entailed a funded placement which was matched by EEF to fund a second member of staff. Together, they carried out research and policy development activities which sought to bring about a strategic shift in the EEF’s approach to engaging and implementing evidence (e.g. encouraging dialogue and interactions between research users, producers and intermediaries). The objective was to investigate and promote more effective ways to improve the uptake of evidence-informed practices in the classroom in order to maximise the impact achieved by existing and future evidence, produced by both the Education Endowment Foundation and external partners.

Over two grants, between November 2013 and November 2019, ESRC invested approximately £650k in EEF for its Knowledge Mobilisation work package. The DfE is the main overall funder for EEF.

In addition to this funding, EEF together with EIF received £90k for a joint strategic fund project.

3.7.2 Activities and outputs

In this section, we outline the key activities and outputs conducted by the ESRC-funded lead researcher and the EEF match-funded staff member. The range of activities and some examples are as follows:

Generating new evidence

The lead researcher, funded by ESRC, devised EEF’s overall research strategy, which has led to a variety of new evidence on ways to encourage schools to engage with, use and research evidence to improve practice. This strategy now influences one of the largest portfolios of research in the field – £3.2 million total funding covering 13 research projects.

Examples of the work undertaken as part of these research projects include:

- One of the largest randomised controlled trials (RCT) conducted in education to explore different approaches to disseminating and communicating research evidence;
- A national baseline study of schools’ use of research; and
- Developing a standardised, quantifiable measure of research engagement in schools.

Translating existing evidence

Part of the EEF's overall strategy, as developed by the lead researcher and funded by ESRC, was a multi-strand "campaign model" where national guidance on practical school improvement issues was backed up by regional training. Guidance documents produced as part of these campaigns include *Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants*, *Improving Literacy at Key Stage 1* and *Improving Mathematics at Key Stages 2 and 3*.

In addition, reviews of existing knowledge mobilisation models were conducted to produce guidance reports that identify effective knowledge mobilisation strategies. For example the report "*Putting Evidence To Work: A School's Guide To Implementation*", makes six recommendations designed to help school leaders manage change within a school and help teachers develop a better understanding of how to make practical changes to their classroom practice, as well as their role in supporting wider changes.

Disseminating evidence and best practice, and building capacity

Finally, ESRC funding has enabled dissemination activities and activities that have helped build capacity for its usage. As well as managing the operational delivery of the multi-strand campaigns (e.g. *Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants*), the lead researcher, funded by ESRC, has delivered regular presentations to schools on the concept of "evidence-informed practice" and how research can be used to inform schools' decision-making (~50 over the last three years). These presentations are usually framed around a process of evidence-based school improvement and include practical advice on how to find, interpret and act on research evidence.

Alongside this, the lead researcher often communicates EEF research through the national press and media and has given numerous plenary/key note presentations to policy audiences on developing evidence-based education policy and practice. This includes presentations with OECD, US government, EU Commission, Australian state and federal governments, and UK Department for Education.

3.7.3 Outcomes and impacts

There is evidence pointing to an impact being achieved by the EEF through the knowledge mobilisation work conducted by the lead researcher.

The biggest impact achieved by ESRC's investment was the strategic shift it managed to achieve in the EEF's approach to engaging and implementing evidence. Initially, EEF had a traditional approach to knowledge mobilisation, whereby it would develop research outputs which were then translated, communicated and disseminated. Little work was conducted on how these outputs were then implemented; instead, it was left to practitioners to find ways to use the outputs.

The work completed using ESRC's funding set out strategic ideas and translated these into practical initiatives for the EEF to adopt that would shift away from this linear approach of research outputs to users to a "systems-based" approach. A "systems-based" approach involves repeated interactions between the evidence, researchers and practitioners in order to increase the uptake of finished evidence products.

“ESRC’s investment helped EEF move with the times because of the lead researcher’s understanding of knowledge production and its use. Without their help EEF would not be the organisation that it is today.” (An academic involved with the WWN)

This approach is reflected in the Research Schools Network developed by the EEF which supports the use of evidence to improve teaching practice. The Research Schools bridge the gap between research and practice by sharing their knowledge on putting research into practice, and by supporting schools in their region to use evidence more effectively to inform their teaching and really make a difference in the classroom.

Another example of this strategic shift towards “system-based” approaches to knowledge mobilisation emerging from the placement is the *Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants* campaign. This campaign was the first attempt by the EEF to distil the best available evidence on the topic into a guidance report with practical recommendations for schools. As part of the campaign, two mobilisation approaches were piloted, both involving a range of practical engagement and implementation activities (e.g. conferences, training workshops, action planning activities and school-to-school support). These approaches were then evaluated to help understand what had and had not been effective, and the insights were subsequently used to enhance future mobilisation strategies. These learnings fed into an additional 15 guidance reports following a similar format covering many of the key areas of interest for schools.

The *Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants* campaign, in particular, has been received very well. between 70% and 95% of English headteachers are aware of it.¹⁶⁰ The findings in the report have also been used to develop training programmes. These programmes reached 780 schools and over 150,000 pupils through collaborations with partners across Yorkshire and Lincolnshire over two years. The Institute for Fiscal Studies evaluated the impact of the training programmes in South and West Yorkshire on pupil attainment and reported a small, but extensive, impact on pupil attainment in English at Key Stage 2, equivalent to an average of three additional weeks’ progress.¹⁶¹

Finally, the learnings from work conducted by the lead researcher, funded by ESRC and EEF, have since been shared with other WWCs, through presentations and conferences, to help them develop a mobilisation strategy. Both policy and school audiences reported changes in their views, opinions or behaviours as a result of the presentations conducted by the lead researcher.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ NFER Teacher Omnibus Survey, November 2015.

Maxwell et al. (2019a), Formative evaluation of the Lincolnshire teaching assistants scale-up campaign EEF: London. Available at:

https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Campaigns/Teaching_Assistant_campaign_Lincsfinal.pdf

¹⁶¹ Sibieta, L. (2019), Improving the impact of teaching assistants: EEF commissioned scale-up campaign – Impact evaluation EEF: London.

¹⁶² Evidence taken from ESRC internal documents

KEY LEARNINGS

The **Knowledge Mobilisation Partnership with the Education Endowment Fund** is a package of funding provided by ESRC to enable a lead researcher to investigate the process of knowledge mobilisation with the objective of actively trying to improve it within education and across the WWN.

The work programme has had significant impact over its duration, primarily by achieving a strategic shift in the EEF's approach to engaging and implementing evidence.

The resultant strategy has led to numerous well-received multi-strand campaigns and the development of the Research Schools Network.

Many Centres across the WWN have expressed an interest in better understanding best practices for knowledge mobilisation. ESRC's investment has also enabled the dissemination of the knowledge mobilisation learnings from the partnership with EEF to areas outside of education. However there is scope to expand investment in this area of work, in particular, by helping other policy areas to determine the extent to which the learnings are appropriate for them and, if so, how to practically implement the findings. This would complement the overarching What Works effort of getting evidence into action.

Finally, to maximise the knowledge mobilisation objectives, it is important to ensure a diverse group of academics are engaged and understand the potential in this sphere. Expanding the scope of ESRC's investment into knowledge mobilisation could help achieve this.

FURTHER ANALYSIS OF SURVEY RESULTS

Surveys were sent out to four of the five WWCs that received core funding from ESRC: WW Local Economic Growth, WCPP, WW Scotland, and WW Wellbeing. No survey was sent to WW Crime Reduction as the UK's police forces and the College of Policing were heavily occupied by the COVID-19 response at the time we distributed surveys.

Figure 80 Summary of survey responses

Centre	Survey responses	Completion rate	Minimum number of responses to a closed-ended question
WW Local Economic Growth	81	53%	50
WCPP	83	66%	60
WW Scotland	41	56%	27
WW Wellbeing	111	67%	88

Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: Completion rate measured as the number of completed surveys (where a respondent clicked through to the end of the survey) divided by the number of respondents who entered the survey. Closed questions are those with a defined list of possible responses, as opposed to open-ended questions, where respondents must type in an answer in their own words.

This Annex provides additional detail on the process of collecting the survey results, including discussion on the sample for each of the Centre's surveys and the suspected biases.

4.1.1 Survey methodology and sample bias discussion

The surveys were distributed to each Centre's mailing list first via a link in the newsletter of the relevant Centre and then followed up with a separate reminder email containing just the survey link.¹⁶³

Distributing the surveys via WWC newsletter mailing lists was judged to be the most practical distribution channel, as it would ensure the greatest number of survey responses from relevant respondents. However, this meant that we were not able to tailor the sample, and therefore our sample is likely to be biased. In particular, those who responded to the survey were more likely to be those with stronger opinions on the WWC's work/most interested in the WWC. This means that the number of extreme responses (either in support of or in opposition to the WWC) may be inflated.

In this section, we describe the final sample of survey respondents for each WWC in turn. For each survey we, first, discuss the number of respondents and rate of attrition (specifically, we reference the number of respondents who clicked through to the end of the survey, and the lowest number of responses to a closed question¹⁶⁴). Second, we discuss the make-up of the sample according to geography. Third, we discuss the

¹⁶³ With the exception of WW Scotland which did not re-circulate the survey link or a reminder.

¹⁶⁴ Open-ended questions such as "What was the most significant achievement of the WWC?" where a respondent responds in their own words tend to be filled out less frequently.

make-up of the sample according to respondent occupation. Fourth, where relevant, we discuss the split of respondents by WWC workstream/policy area of interest.

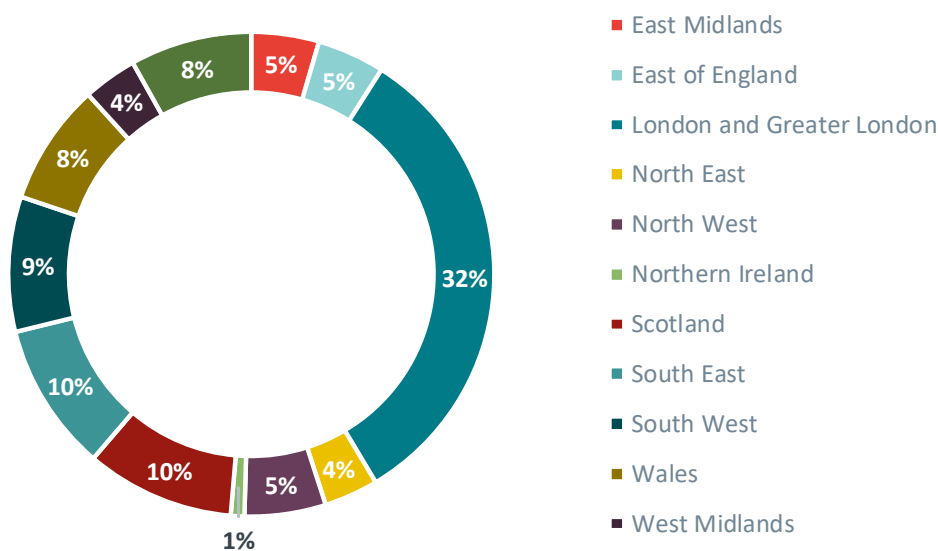
Given that the end-user base of the Centres is unknown to the Centres, it is not possible to make a strong judgement on whether the samples are biased. For example, we find that respondents to the WW Wellbeing survey are more likely to be from London and Greater London than another region in the UK. But, since we do not know the exact geographic distribution of stakeholders/end users of WW Wellbeing, we cannot say whether respondents from London and Greater London are overrepresented, underrepresented, or equivalently represented in our sample.

4.1.2 WW Wellbeing

The survey for WW Wellbeing saw the largest number of responses – 111. Of those who responded, 74 completed the survey, and the lowest number of responses to a closed question was 88.

Respondents to the survey for WW Wellbeing were spread across the UK. But the best-represented region by far was London and Greater London (32%), which accounted for three times more respondents than the next best-represented areas (Scotland and the South East, 10% each). While this is a clear imbalance in gross terms, the relative size of the capital within the UK and the possibility that many stakeholders and end users could be based in London mean it is hard to say whether this reflects an actual bias.

Figure 81 Where in the UK do you operate from?

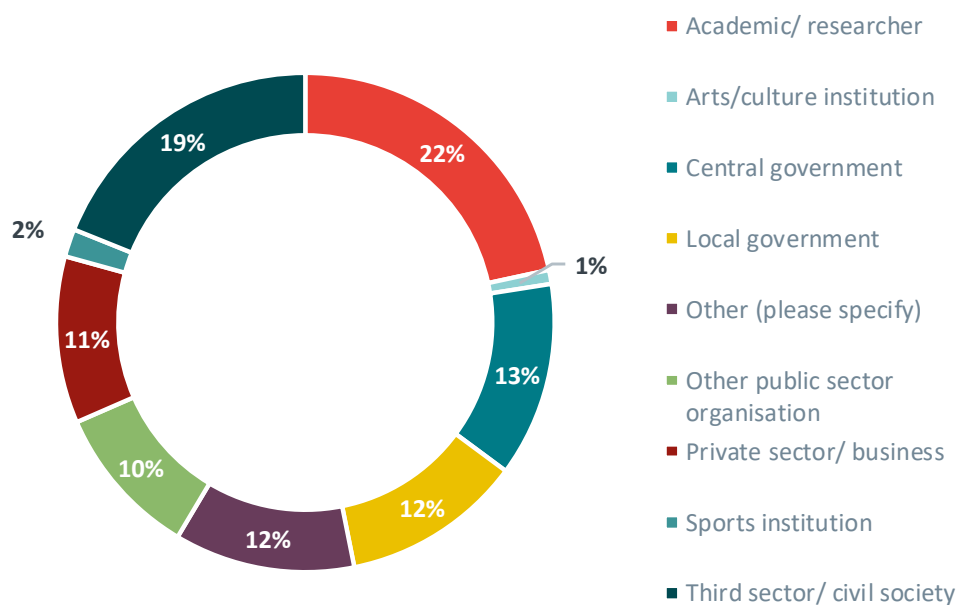


Source: Frontier survey.

Note: N = 111.

There is a health split of respondents from different organisations in the WW Wellbeing survey sample. The two largest groups are Academics/Researchers (22%) and Third Sector/Civil Society workers (19%). Those from Arts/Culture and Sports institutions may be underrepresented in the sample (accounting for 1% and 2% of the sample, respectively). There is no clear pattern in the occupations of those from different locations in the UK.

Figure 82 Which of the following best describes the type of organisation in which you are currently based?

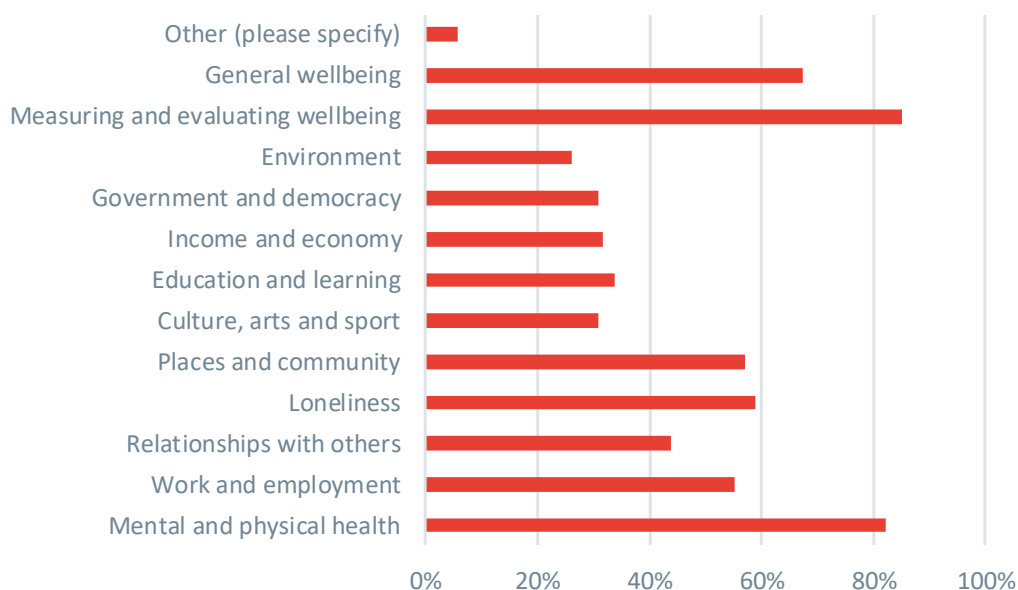


Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N = 111.

WW Wellbeing covered various topic areas via four workstreams. The topic areas varied in size, and this is reflected in Figure 83. There was no clear pattern in the areas of engagement by respondent occupation.

Figure 83 Which of the following topic areas covered by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing do you engage with?

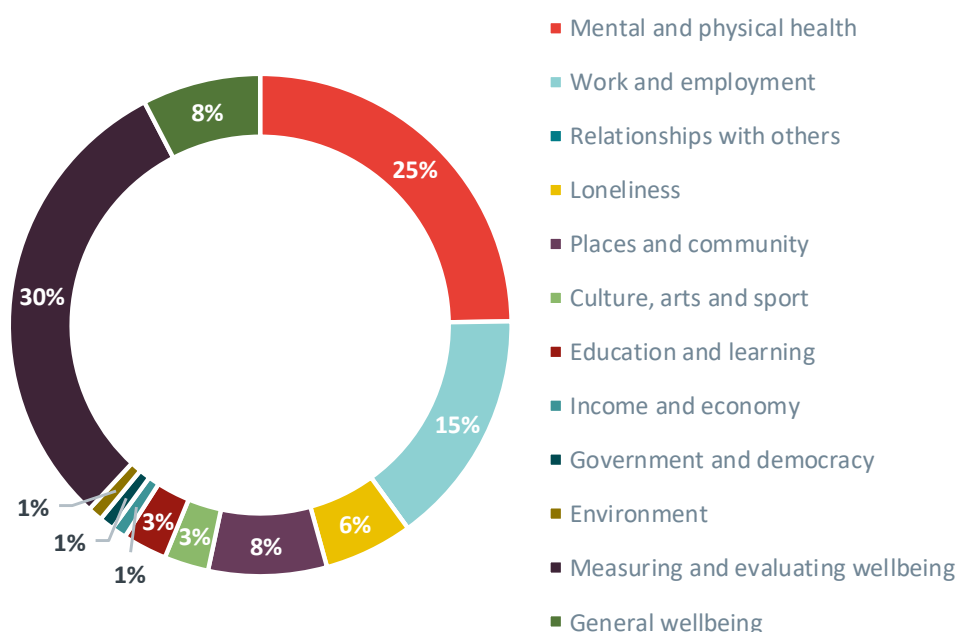


Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N = 107.

As well as asking respondents about their particular areas of engagement, we also asked respondents to the WW Wellbeing survey about which single topic area they engaged with the most (see Figure 84). The responses to this question broadly reflected those to the more general question. However some popular topics of engagement were less likely to be the most engaged-with (e.g. General Wellbeing). The most-selected main topic of engagement was measuring and evaluating wellbeing (which falls into the Cross-Cutting workstream). Again, there is no notable pattern in the main topics of engagement across occupations of respondents.

Figure 84 Of these topic areas covered by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, which do you engage with most?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

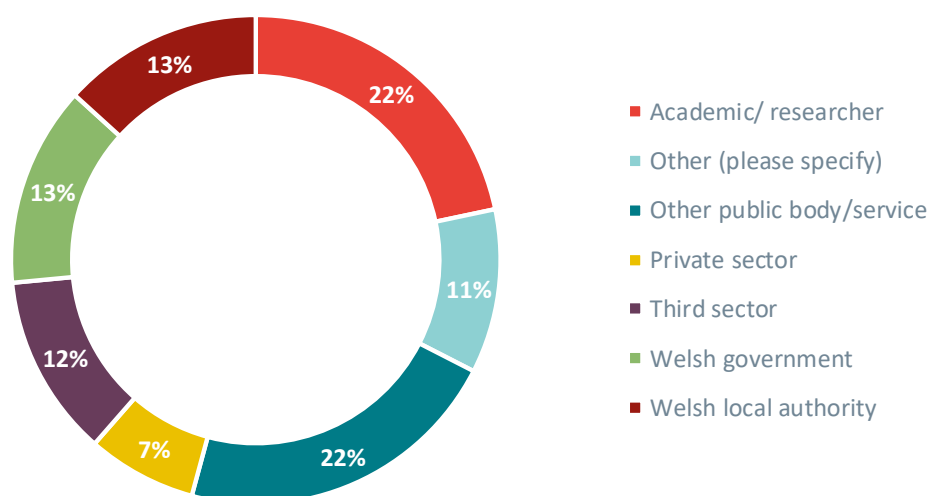
Note: N = 105.

4.1.3 WCPP

Overall, 83 respondents filled out the survey sent for WCPP. Of these, 55 completed the survey. The minimum number of responses to a closed question was 72.

Unsurprisingly, the WCPP survey was mostly filled out by respondents based in Wales (89%). Although there were some responses from elsewhere in the UK, such as London and Greater London (6%), there is no clear pattern in the occupations or policy areas of interest of respondents from these regions, compared with those from Wales.

There is a somewhat even split between the occupations of WCPP survey respondents. The largest groups are Academics/Researchers and Other Public Body/Service Organisations. The smallest group is respondents from the Private Sector. As noted for WW Local Economic Growth, the even split of respondents across types of organisation suggests that the responses to the WCPP survey capture a good balance of views on the WWC's performance from the relevant stakeholders.

Figure 85 Which of the following best describes your current position?

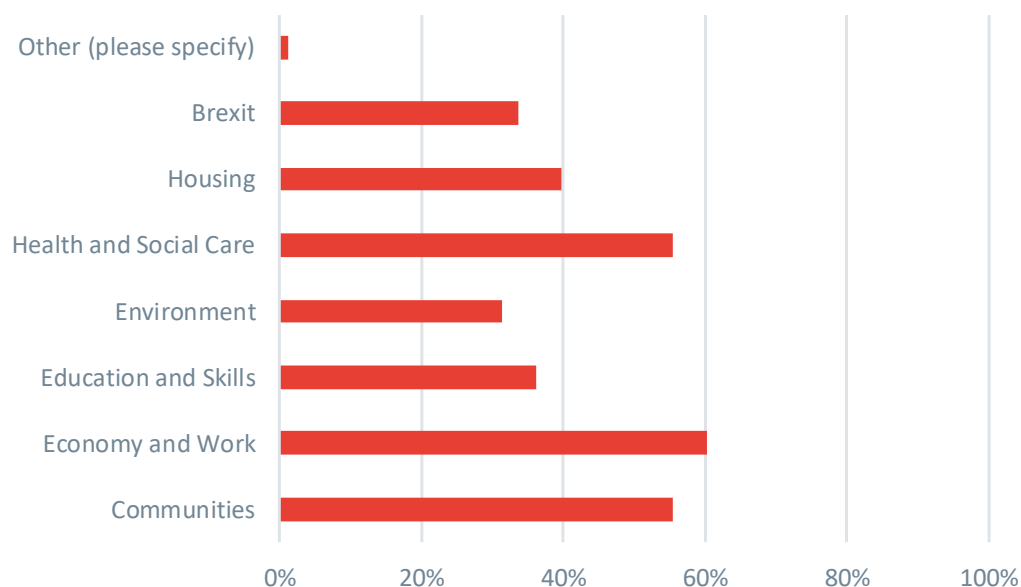
Source: Frontier survey.

Note: N = 83.

WCPP undertook work across several policy areas, and survey respondents could indicate which area(s) they engaged with (see Figure 86). All the listed policy areas received a fair amount of interest, with the lowest rate of engagement (apart from the Other category) was Environment, which was ticked by 26 respondents. The most popular policy area was Economy and Work, which 60% of respondents had engaged with. Therefore no policy area appears to be over/underrepresented.

For most policy areas, there was no clear pattern in the types of respondents who were engaged. However, while the work on Communities was one of the most popular areas of work overall, no respondents from the Welsh Government indicated an engagement in this policy area. Similarly, while other groups were less likely to tick the “Other (please specify)” category, those from the Welsh Government were more likely to do so (specifications include “Social partnership”, “Procurement”, “European Funding”, and “all of these”).

Figure 86 Which of the following policy areas covered by the Wales Centre for Public Policy do you engage with?



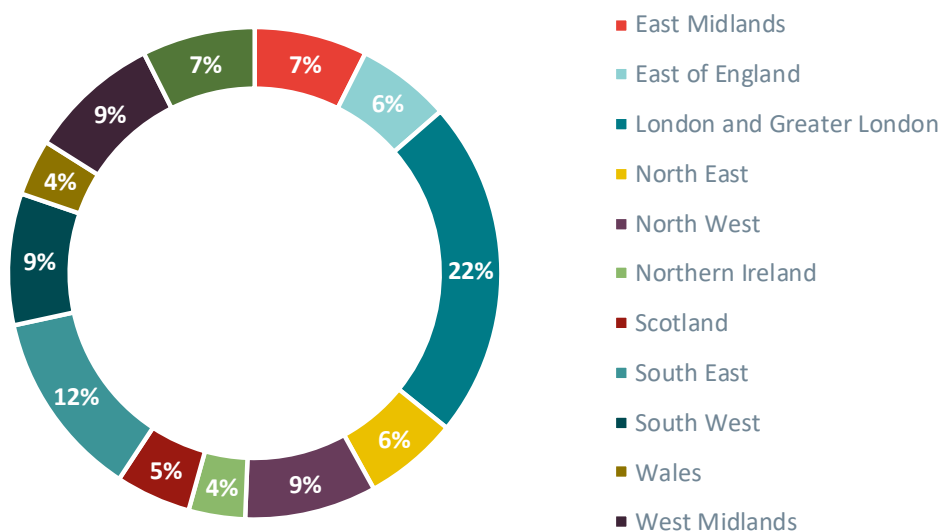
Source: Frontier survey.

Note: N = 83.

4.1.4 WW Local Economic Growth

Overall, the survey sent to WW Local Economic Growth stakeholders returned 81 responses. Just over half (43/81) of these respondents completed the full survey. And the lowest number of responses for a closed question was 50/81.

WW Local Economic Growth engaged with stakeholders from across the country, as evidenced in Figure 87. That said, some regions account for more respondents than others. For example, respondents based in London and Greater London make up just under a quarter of the sample. There is no clear pattern in occupations of respondents based in each region.

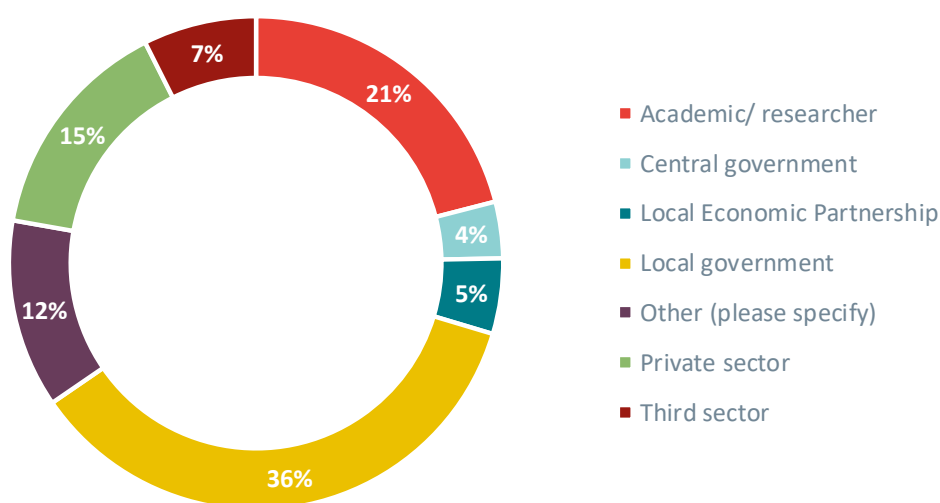
Figure 87 Where in the UK are you based?

Source: Frontier survey.

Note: N = 81.

Whereas there is little clear geographic trend in respondents to the WW Local Economic Growth survey, there is some trend in respondents' occupations. In terms of the current position, the two largest groups of respondents are Academics/Researchers and Local Government Workers (21% and 36% respectively), as shown in Figure 88. Meanwhile respondents from central government only account for 4% of the sample, and those from Local Economic Partnerships only account for 5% of the sample.

While there are some potential imbalances in the sample between respondent organisations, there is a healthy split of respondents between academic, government (policy maker) and practitioner organisations. This would suggest that the responses to the WW Local Economic Growth survey capture a good balance of views on the WWC's performance from the relevant stakeholders.

Figure 88 Which of the following best describes your current position?

Source: Frontier survey.

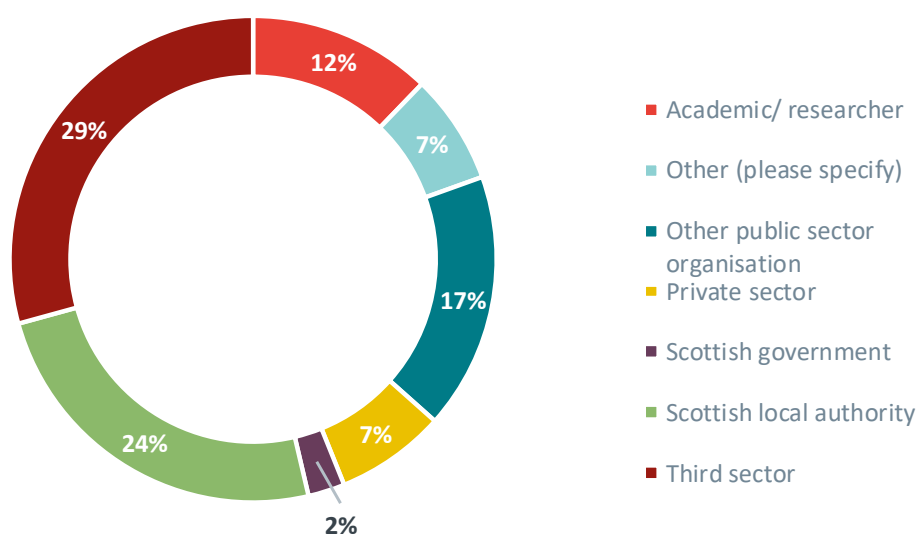
Note: N = 81.

4.1.5 WW Scotland

Overall, the survey for WW Scotland received 41 responses. This was the lowest number of responses across the four surveys. Twenty-three of the respondents completed the full survey. The lowest number of responses to a closed question was 27.

Similarly to WCPP, it is not surprising that the survey for WW Scotland was mostly filled out by those based in Scotland (95%).

The majority of respondents to the WW Scotland survey worked in either the Third Sector (29%) or a Scottish Local Authority (24%). One particular concern was that the survey received only one response from the Scottish Government. Therefore the WW Scotland survey may be biased towards practitioners, those who are likely to use WWC output “on the ground” rather than central policy makers.

Figure 89 Which of the following best describes your current position?

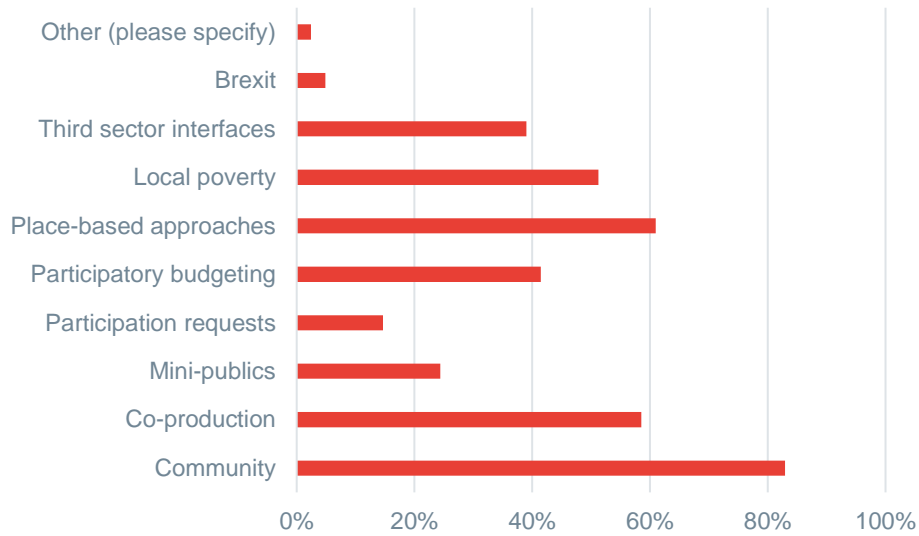
Source: *Frontier survey.*

Note: *N = 41.*

WW Scotland undertook work across several workstreams and on different policy areas. Figure 90 shows which area(s) respondents engaged with. Some policy areas saw much more engagement from respondents than others. For example, work on Communities was engaged with by more than 4 in 5 (83%) respondents but work on participation requests and Brexit saw less engagement (15% and 5% respectively). This means there may be some skew towards certain projects in the feedback gathered via the survey, but it is difficult to say without knowing the scope and reach of each project.

For most policy areas, there was no clear pattern in the occupations of respondents who indicated they engaged with the work produced by the WWC in this area. However, one observation of note was that while more than 40% of respondents overall indicated that they engaged with work on participatory budgeting, none of the Academic/Researcher respondents indicated that they had engaged with this work.

Figure 90 Which of the following policy areas covered by What Works Scotland do you engage with?



Source: Frontier Economics survey.

Note: N = 41.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

We conducted surveys of the users of the WWCs to gain an understanding of how the outputs of the Centres are being used by central and local government, practitioners, the private sector and others. In total we received more than 300 responses.

The surveys were tailored to the target audience but followed broadly the same structure as the interview topic guides, delving into whether and how the work generated by the WWCs has been used or indeed not used (and the reasons why). We provide an example survey (sent to WW Wellbeing stakeholders) below.

Not all Centres were covered by the survey for different reasons. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were not able to roll out a survey for the What Works Centre for Crime. Nor did we conduct surveys for the EEF and EIF due to the nature of their activities.

5.1.1 Common questions and possible responses

- Where in the UK do you operate from?
 - ☐ London and Greater London
 - ☐ North East
 - ☐ North West
 - ☐ South East
 - ☐ South West
 - ☐ East Midlands
 - ☐ West Midlands
 - ☐ East of England
 - ☐ Yorkshire and the Humber
 - ☐ Wales
 - ☐ Scotland
 - ☐ Northern Ireland
- Which of the following best describes the type of organisation in which you are currently based?
 - ☐ Academic/ researcher
 - ☐ Arts/culture institution
 - ☐ Central government
 - ☐ Local government
 - ☐ Other public sector organisation
 - ☐ Private sector/ business
 - ☐ Sports institution
 - ☐ Third sector/civil society
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
- Please could you share your job title, to help us understand how you might be using the What Works Centre for Wellbeing's outputs?

- ☐ Open-ended
- Which of the following topic areas covered by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing do you engage with? Please select all that apply.
 - ☐ Mental and physical health
 - ☐ Work and employment
 - ☐ Relationships with others
 - ☐ Loneliness
 - ☐ Places and community
 - ☐ Culture, arts and sport
 - ☐ Education and learning
 - ☐ Income and economy
 - ☐ Government and democracy
 - ☐ Environment
 - ☐ Measuring and evaluating wellbeing
 - ☐ General wellbeing
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
- Of these topic areas covered by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, which do you engage with most?
 - ☐ Mental and physical health
 - ☐ Work and employment
 - ☐ Relationships with others
 - ☐ Loneliness
 - ☐ Places and community
 - ☐ Culture, arts and sport
 - ☐ Education and learning
 - ☐ Income and economy
 - ☐ Government and democracy
 - ☐ Environment
 - ☐ Measuring and evaluating wellbeing
 - ☐ General wellbeing
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
- To what extent should the What Works Centre for Wellbeing be engaging with each of the following?
 - ☐ Improving the quality of the UK evidence base on [Centre's topic area]?
 - ☐ Enabling easy access to an authoritative evidence base?
 - ☐ Developing networks of individuals and organisations concerned with wellbeing?
 - ☐ Promoting the importance of evidence-informed decision-making?
 - ☐ Improving the ability to design, deliver and evaluate policy?
 - ☐ Supporting organisations to measure wellbeing impact (including by sharing best-practice examples)?

- Who do you consider to be the primary audience(s) of the Centre? Please select all that apply.
 - ☐ Academics/researchers
 - ☐ Central government
 - ☐ Devolved government
 - ☐ Local government
 - ☐ Other public sector organisations
 - ☐ Professional association or other membership body
 - ☐ Private sector/business
 - ☐ Third sector/civil society
 - ☐ Don't know
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
- In the last year, how many times did you engage with the following content from the What Works Centre for Wellbeing?
 - ☐ Knowledge bank
 - ☐ Full evidence reports
 - ☐ Evidence briefings
 - ☐ Measurement tools and resources
 - ☐ Blogs and online articles
 - ☐ Practice examples
 - ☐ Events
 - ☐ Workshops and eLearning
 - ☐ Specific advice/guidance
- To what extent do you agree that the What Works Centre for Wellbeing provides content that is _____?
 - ☐ Relevant
 - ☐ Useful
 - ☐ Robust
 - ☐ Comprehensive
 - ☐ Authoritative
 - ☐ Independent
 - ☐ Accessible
 - ☐ Practical
 - ☐ Collaborative
 - ☐ Iterative
- To what extent has the What Works Centre for Wellbeing helped you as an individual with the following?
 - ☐ To become more aware of the evidence on wellbeing
 - ☐ To access the evidence on wellbeing
 - ☐ To understand the evidence on wellbeing
 - ☐ To use the evidence on wellbeing in your day-to-day work

- ☐ To feel more comfortable conducting evaluations of wellbeing impacts
- ☐ Improve your personal wellbeing
- To what extent has the What Works Centre for Wellbeing helped your team/organisation with the following? We are aware that many people have temporarily moved teams to help deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. When answering this question please consider the team or organisation that you were part of in February 2020 (prior to the current situation).
 - ☐ To engage better with the evidence on wellbeing
 - ☐ To use the evidence on wellbeing in its day-to-day decision-making
 - ☐ To improve its capacity to contribute to the evidence base regarding wellbeing
- What has been the biggest achievement of the What Works Centre for Wellbeing to date in your view?
 - ☐ Open-ended
- How could the What Works Centre for Wellbeing be more useful for you or your organisation?
 - ☐ Open-ended
- Given the current COVID-19 circumstances, do you anticipate that your evidence needs are likely to change going forward?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Not sure
- Given the current COVID-19 circumstances, do you anticipate that your interaction with the What Works Centre for Wellbeing is likely to change going forward?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Not sure

MAPPING OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

ESRC wanted an evaluation to help them to develop an evidence-based view as to whether and, if so, how they should refine their investment strategy in What Works. To answer this question fully, our evaluation involved answering a complex set of interacting questions: firstly, to identify the achievements of the individual Centres that have received funding from ESRC; then to assess the magnitude and nature of ESRC's contribution to those achievements; and finally to consider comparisons between the Centres as a means to understanding how ESRC's investment could be further refined to better meet its objectives.

We adopted a mixed-methods, theory-based approach to these questions. This means that we used a mixture of quantitative and qualitative tools to evidence and value the theories of change underlying each of the individual investments and the portfolio as a whole. For the sake of brevity, we provide a concise summary of the main features of our approach here. The interested reader can also refer to the relevant Annexes where we have copied across the relevant sections from our detailed Inception report.¹⁶⁵

This Annex maps the research questions listed in Table 2 of ESRC ITT for this project to:

- the section(s) of this report in which the question is most directly addressed; and
- the methodology employed by Frontier Economics to answer each question.

¹⁶⁵ See footnote in Methodology section for where to access these.

Figure 91 Mapping of ESRC research questions and methodology

Ref	Question	Section of report	Methodology
EQ1	Has ESRC's investment in What Works between 2013 and 2019 contributed to the mobilisation of social science evidence to deliver improved policy-making, more cost-effective public services and improved outcomes, within and across policy fields? How were these contributions made (or not made)?	4.2	Comparison across WWCs of knowledge mobilisation findings (both activities/outputs and outcomes/ impacts) in interviews, surveys, and analysis of WWC data.
EQ2	Has ESRC's investment in What Works contributed to a change in the way in which social science evidence is mobilised, within and across policy fields? How were these contributions made (or not made)?	Annex C, Annex D	Comparative and WWC-level investigations (using our own surveys, previous surveys/evaluations, interviews and analysis of WWC data) of the outcomes/impacts of WWC activities and outputs on knowledge mobilisation within and across the relevant fields.
EQ3	Has the What Works investment contributed to the mobilisation of social science evidence to deliver improved policy-making, more cost-effective public services and improved outcomes in the particular policy field? How were these contributions made (or not made)?	3.2, Annex C, Annex D	WWC-level investigation (using our own surveys, previous surveys/ evaluations, interviews and analysis of WWC data) of the outcomes/impacts of WWC activities and outputs on knowledge mobilisation within and across the relevant fields.
EQ4	Has the What Works investment contributed to a change in the way in which social science evidence is mobilised in the relevant policy field?	3.2, Annex C, Annex D	WWC-level investigation (using our own surveys, previous surveys/ evaluations, interviews and analysis of WWC data) of the outcomes/impacts of WWC activities and outputs on knowledge mobilisation within and across the relevant fields.
EQ5	What knowledge mobilisation mechanisms and approaches used by the What Works investment have proved most and least effective in relation to the contributions identified in EQ 3? Why were certain approaches effective/not effective?	3.2, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, Annex C, Annex D	Comparison across WWCs of knowledge mobilisation findings (outcomes/impacts) in interviews, surveys, and analysis of WWC data.
EQ6	Has ESRC's investments in What Works contributed to building capacity among the research, policy and practice communities in relation to effective approaches to knowledge mobilisation, within and across policy fields? How were these contributions made (or not made)?	4.3, Annex C, Annex D	Comparison across WWCs of capacity-building findings (both activities/outputs and outcomes/ impacts) in interviews and surveys.
EQ7	Has the What Works investment contributed to building capacity among the research, policy and practice communities, in relation to effective approaches to knowledge mobilisation? How were these contributions made (or not made)?	4.2, 4.3, 4.4, Annex C, Annex D	Comparative and WWC-level investigations (using our own surveys, previous surveys/evaluations, interviews and analysis of WWC data) of the outcomes/impacts of WWC activities and outputs on capacity building within and across the relevant fields.
EQ8	Have relationships been built between the What Works investment and policy/ practice communities, and to what extent have these facilitated knowledge mobilisation? Why (or why not)?	4.3, Annex C	Interviews with stakeholders and users of WWCs covering capacity building and knowledge mobilisation.
EQ9	Has ESRC added value and provided leadership to the What Works investments, the wider network and across UKRI through its actions as a manager and funder? What would have happened differently had ESRC either not been involved or been involved in different ways?	3.3, 5.1, 5.2	Interviews with stakeholders and users of WWCs covering ESRC contribution to relevant WWCs and the network as a whole.
EQ10	Has ESRC's investment in What Works offered good value for money?	3.4	Analysis of WWCs' outputs, outcomes and impacts using WWC data, surveys and interviews, and comparison to the size of relevant policy fields.
EQ11	Has ESRC's involvement as a funder added value to the What Works investment? What would have happened differently had ESRC either not been involved or been involved in different ways?	5.1, 5.2	Interviews with stakeholders and users of WWCs covering ESRC contribution to relevant WWCs and the network as a whole. Survey findings on how the WWCs could generally be improved.
EQ12	What learning can be drawn to inform future ESRC strategy in relation to What Works?	5.1, 5.2, 5.3, Annex C	Comparison across WWCs of evaluation findings.
EQ13	What actions could be taken by ESRC to address any gaps and challenges identified in the evaluation?	5.1, 5.2, 5.3	Analysis of findings from interviews with stakeholders/users of WWCs and survey results.
EQ14	Drawing on the existing evidence base and answers to questions 3, 4, 5, 7, 8 and 11, what can be learnt from a comparative analysis, taking into account the commonalities and differences between the investments (in terms of design, operations, structure and approach, etc.) about:	(see below)	(see below)

(a) Effective approaches to knowledge mobilisation.	4.2, 4.3, 4.4, Annex C, Annex D	Comparison across WWCs of evaluation findings on knowledge mobilisation.
(b) Effective approaches to building capacity among the research, policy and practice communities.	5.1, 5.2, Annex C, Annex D	Comparison across WWCs of evaluation findings on capacity building.
(c) Ways in which ESRC can add greatest value as a funder?	5.1, 5.2, 5.3	Analysis of findings from interviews with stakeholders/users of WWCs and survey results.

Source: *Frontier Economics*.

Note: "Ref" column provides the question reference as listed in Table 2 of the project brief (ITT) published by ESRC.

