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What Works Centre for Local Employment Support

Joint ESRC-DWP funding opportunity

Applicant webinar

24 February 2026

Housekeeping

- **Recording & FAQ compilation:** will be published on Funding Finder
- **Chat:** for technical issues, general comments, & introductions (may be visible during recording)
- **Questions:** please submit via Live Q&A (can like & up-vote)
- **Sensitive or confidential questions:** email the team directly (workinglives@esrc.ukri.org)

Agenda

1 The WWCLES funding opportunity

James Canton, ESRC

2 What it's like to set up and run a WWC

Jon Yates, Youth Endowment Fund

3 The wider policy landscape

Mike Jones, DWP

4 Evidence challenges 'on the ground'

Matt Russell, East Midlands Combined County Authority

5 How to apply

Annie Gibney, ESRC



6 Q&A session

Facilitator: Francesca Lace, ESRC





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The funding opportunity: a high-level overview

James Canton

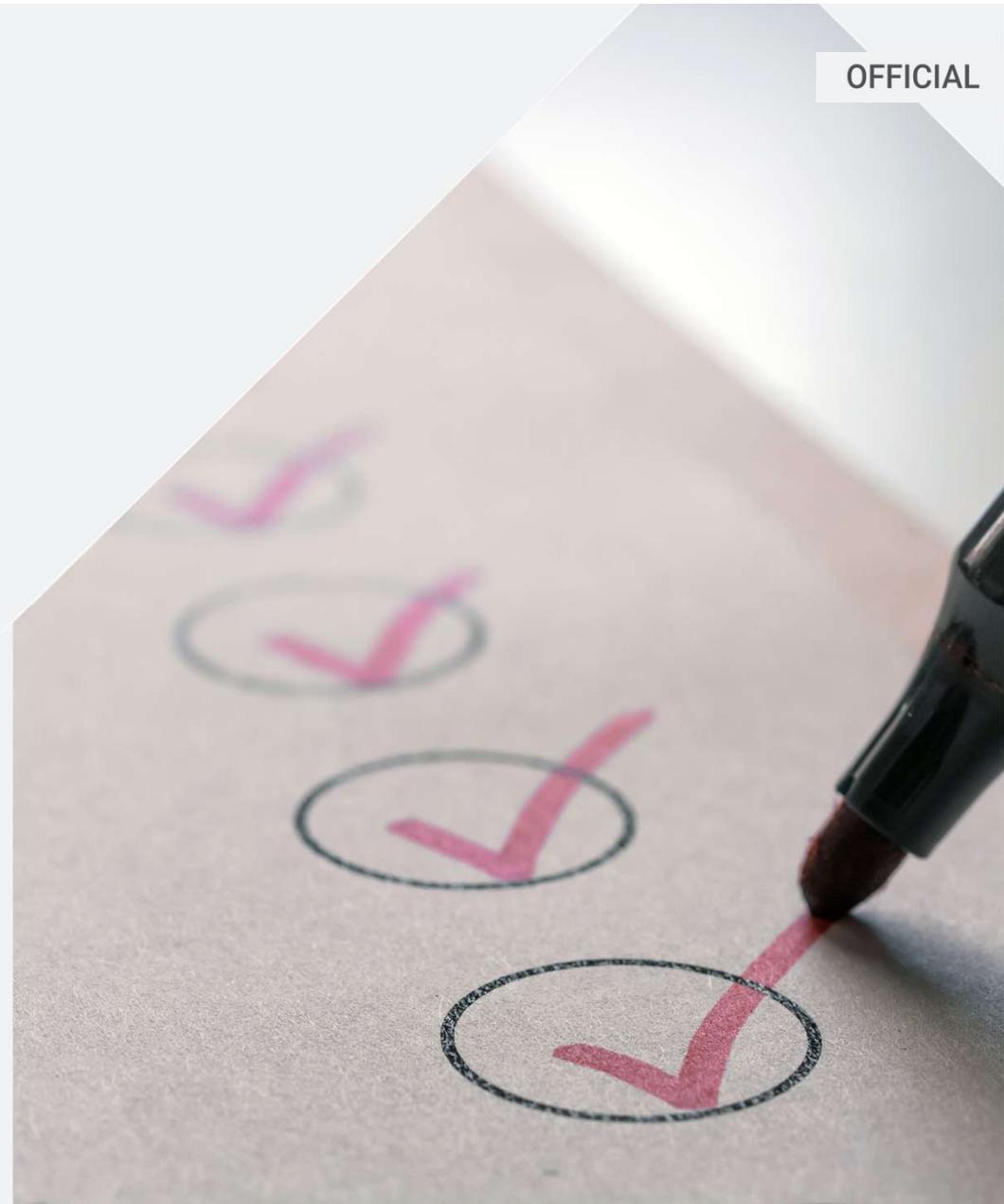
Deputy Director for Innovation & Public
Policy, ESRC



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Key high-level details

- Total funding available: up to £15 million
- ESRC & DWP will fund 80% of the total
- Funding is for a single award
- Centre must start by 22 January 2027 & run for 60 months (subject to a formal gateway review following a 9-month project initiation phase)
- Proposals must include *at least* one project co-lead from a UK-based business, third sector, or government organisation, subject to standard ESRC eligibility and costing rules.



Strategic ambition

To establish an **independent, co-created, trusted** national centre of excellence that supports local and regional employment outcomes by:

- Generating **robust** evidence on **which local levers genuinely enable** people to access, remain in, and thrive in work.
- **Building** local and regional **capability** to confidently draw on and apply rigorous evidence in policy design and delivery.
- Driving **system-wide collaboration and learning** across organisations, communities, and policy sectors.

Focus

- Role and effectiveness of local and regional government levers to increase and sustain labour force participation across the UK
- Particularly:
 - Active labour market policies and cross-policy collaborations
 - Government–third sector–employer partnerships focused on improving employment outcomes
 - What works for people living with ill health, long-term health conditions, disabilities, and informal caring responsibilities

Expected objectives & activities

1. Convene partners and build shared understanding
2. Assess, synthesise and mobilise actionable evidence
3. Co-develop, test, and evaluate innovative solutions – and support their wider adoption
4. Enable real-world implementation and learning



Out of scope

- People for whom work is not an appropriate pathway
- Interventions without employment as an outcome (primary or secondary)
- Activities not led by or which do not substantively involve local/regional government actors
- Passive labour market policies outside local/regional control
- Large-scale or national programme delivery
- Replicating the work of the planned Workplace Health Intelligence Unit (as such, employer-led interventions are not in scope)



What Works Network (WWN) Membership Requirement

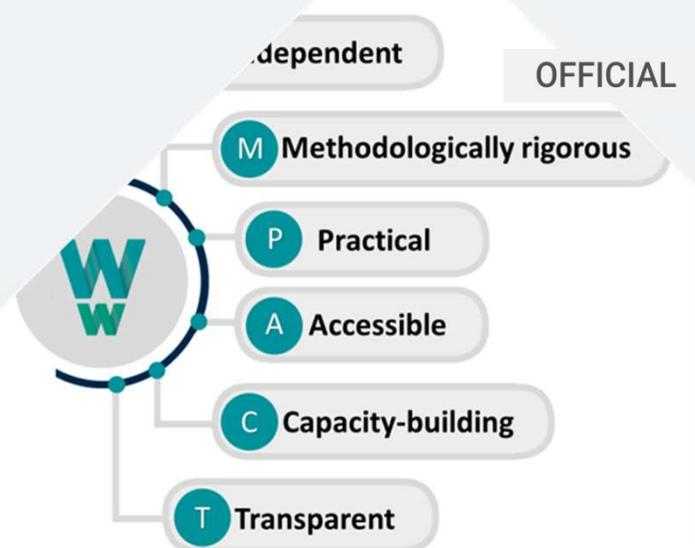
You **must** apply to the Cabinet Office for formal What Works Centre status within the first 12 months of the award.

This process is run independently of ESRC and DWP.

Your WWCLES application must demonstrate:

- Full alignment with What Works Network membership requirements
- Familiarity with the WWN application process, with appropriate time and staff resource allocated

You are strongly advised to review the [Cabinet Office's membership criteria and guidance](#) on establishing a What Works Centre when developing your proposal.



Evaluation Task F

What Works Network: Membership Requirement

Purpose of the What Works Network

The 'What Works Network', and each of its constituent centres, provides evidence of "what works" to the people who make decisions. The people who include government ministers, civil servants, council members, and other public sector leaders.



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Spotlight: What it's like to set up and run a WWC

Jon Yates
Chief Executive
Youth Endowment Fund



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Establishing a What Works Centre

Jon Yates





Our vision

A world where no child becomes involved in violence.

Our mission

To find what works and build a movement to put this knowledge into practice.





Focusing on 7 essential sectors



Children's Services



Education



Health



Neighbourhoods



Policing



Youth Justice



Youth Sector



Five reflections

1. RCTs are essential and hard
 - Commit
 - Fight against fast spend targets on them
 - Have experts
 - Choose carefully: evaluable, gap, changeable

1. Systematic reviews are the best
2. Get off the fence - think 'Best Bets'
3. Plan change from the start: build relationships
4. It's worth doing





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Scene-setter: The wider policy landscape

Mike Jones

Deputy Director, Central Analysis &
Science Strategy, DWP



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Why are DWP funding a new What Works Centre?

- The UK's labour market is at a challenging crossroads, with **record numbers of the country's working age population registered as economically inactive**.
 - This includes over 2.7 million individuals locked out of work because of ill-health, LTHCs, and disability. DWP estimates that the cost to the UK of lost output due to working-age ill-health alone is £132 billion.
- At the same time, the **Government is increasingly devolving responsibility for delivering employment support to regional and local government bodies** – as part of the **Get Britain Working** reforms – with locally led interventions like the Inactivity Trailblazers, WorkWell, Connect to Work, etc.
- However, for this to succeed, **local actors must be able to identify and implement evidence-based approaches** and best practice. There are challenges here:
 - **Evidence on labour market interventions is dispersed** across various research bodies, think tanks, and academic institutions, but not always synthesized or accessible in a form that is useful for policymakers.
 - **Many regional and local governments lack the capacity, capability or resources** to gather or interpret evidence on the effectiveness of the programs they run.
- A dedicated **WWC for Local Employment Support** – with a focus on health & disability-related economic inactivity – would help to mitigate these issues, by **synthesising, helping to generate, and disseminating the evidence base** in an accessible way to local users.

The wider policy context



'Labour Market Evidence Synthesis and Dissemination' – outputs and provisional timeline

DWP have commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to conduct preliminary research, culminating in a 'lessons learned' report (expected April 2027), to hand over to the WWCLES.



Given the estimated timeline below, we expect this research to inform the eventual nine-month 'project refinement' phase of the WWCLES, more so than applications.

 Initial User Consultation report – published, presented to the project Steering Group and used to make decisions on evidence synthesis prioritisation.	Expected April 2026
 Evidence Syntheses – summarising existing literature on labour market interventions, focusing on the customer groups relevant to devolved labour market support programmes.	Expected May 2026, July 2026 and January 2027
 Dissemination materials – for example: web-based toolkits, running webinars, producing case studies/ best practice examples, developing key finding or crib-sheet resources, etc, tailored to the target audience to make the findings as useable as possible.	Expected May 2026, July 2026 and January 2027
 Lessons Learned report – to assess how effective the evidence reviews have been, and the extent to which target audiences have felt included in the process to generate findings, that can be applied by the full WWC.	Expected April 2027



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Spotlight: Evidence challenges 'on the ground'

Matt Russell

Director of Strategy, Reform and Insight

EMCCA: East Midlands Combined
County Authority



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Challenges faced by EMCCA in generating and using evidence in local employment support.

CLAIRE WARD
MAYOR OF THE
EAST MIDLANDS





Challenges with Data Granularity - Local employment support relies on highly granular, place-based insight.

Data isn't available at the right geographic scale
Small sample sizes undermine reliability
Limited ability to disaggregate for equalities and socioeconomic analysis



Challenges with Data Access - Even where valuable data exists, regional bodies often cannot access it

Restrictions on key central government datasets
Inconsistent access across sectors and partners
Fragmented access routes
Governance and infrastructure issues



Challenges from Changes in Data Collection - Shifts in national data systems and methodological changes are creating uncertainty and gaps

Delayed or slow-release datasets
Missing or inconsistent data due to system transitions
Evolving local administrative boundaries



Organisational Capacity & Culture Challenges - Beyond technical data constraints, local systems face softer barriers

Varied data capability across local authorities – 19 LA's to engage with
Fragmented or duplicated data collection
Limited capacity to generate robust evaluations

Implications for Local Employment Support Delivery - These constraints collectively mean that:

- Interventions may be designed with incomplete insight into local labour market dynamics.
- Support can be misaligned to specific community needs, especially small geographic communities or groups with protected characteristics.
- Regional decision-makers are forced to rely on anecdotal or 'good enough' proxies when better data exists but cannot be accessed or disaggregated.
- It becomes harder to evaluate impact, build accountability, and demonstrate value for money.

Opportunities Identified:

- Developing harmonised subnational statistics and new geographies with ONS.
- Improving cross-government data sharing, especially on adult skills and NEETs.
Building the EMCCA Data Centre and strengthening governance, data sharing principles, and secure access.
- Embedding sub-regional outcomes and equalities considerations in new frameworks.



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How to apply

Annie Gibney

Senior Research Portfolio Manager

ESRC



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The application process: key dates

Stage	Timeline	
Closing date	19 May, 4pm	Project Lead submits full application via the UKRI Funding Service <i>We strongly advise submitting well before the 4pm deadline & involving your research office as soon as possible!</i>
ESRC Office Checks	May	Eligibility, completeness, and compliance checks
Shortlisting Panel	July	Panel assessment – only proposals in top scoring tier will be invited to interview. Decisions by late July
Panel Feedback	August	Shortlisted applicants will receive feedback to support their interview preparation
Interview Panel	w/c 14 September	Will be held virtually
Final Decision	October	Applicants notified in late October regarding funding outcomes
Project start	22 January 2027	Access to funding is dependent on meeting this start date

Applicant eligibility

Project Leads (PLs) (submits the application)

- Must be based at a [UK research organisation eligible for UKRI funding](#) for the duration of the award.
- Can only be named as PL on **one** application

Project Co-Leads (PcLs)

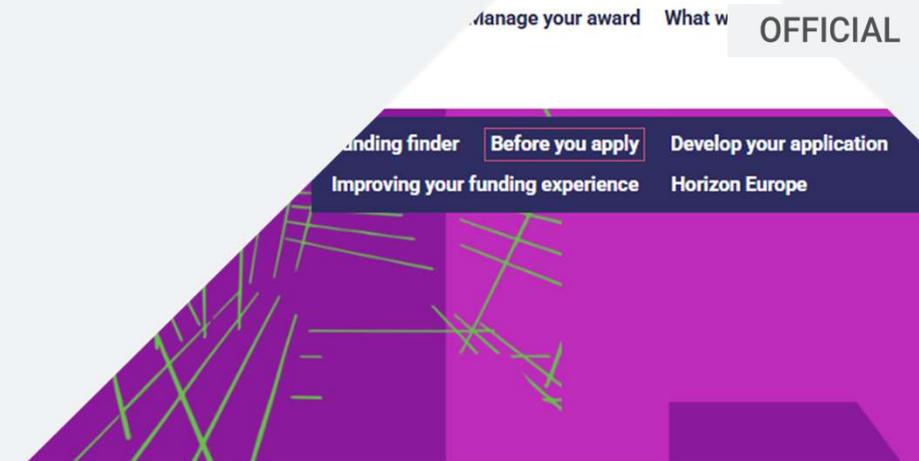
- **At least one** PcL must be from a UK business, third sector or government organisation
- Can include project co-leads based in non-UK research organisations
- All PcLs are subject to relevant [ESRC eligibility rules](#)
- Can be on multiple bids; but multiple inclusions aren't necessarily seen favourably by assessors

Project partners, subcontractors and consultants



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• Subject to [standard ESRC eligibility rules](#)



[Home](#) > [Apply for funding](#) > [Before you apply](#)

Before you apply

Before you apply for funding you will need to do some checks to make sure your project and organisation are eligible.

[Find out if you can apply for funding](#)

Steps to find out if UKRI will fund your project

[Check organisation eligibility](#)

A list of organisations we have approved to apply for funding

[Apply to become an eligible organisation](#)

How you can apply to have your organisation approved to apply for funding

Enabling meaningful collaboration between research and frontline communities

For this funding opportunity you may:

- Allocate over 30% of total costs (100% FEC) to project co-leads from UK business, third sector, and government organisations
- Allow non-academic partner staff to contribute more than one year FTE across the project
- Government-based project co-leads may claim salary costs where they can evidence backfill

You **must** justify your proposed approach in your application.



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Including project co-leads from business, third sector or government bodies

Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) guidance for including project co-leads from outside academia in research funding applications.

From: ESRC
Published: 21 May 2021
Last updated: 17 February 2026 - [see all updates](#)

Documents

 [ESRC project co-leads from UK business, third](#)

Related content

⇒ [Working with other organisations](#)

What assessors are looking for...

- A clear and compelling vision
- A coherent, interconnected and well-structured programme of work
- A rigorous, best-practice methodological approach
- Place-based and whole-system ways of working
- A strong focus on real-world outcomes, underpinned by clear and realistic pathways to impact
- Meaningful collaboration between academic and non-academic partners, supported by strong governance
- Strong team capability to deliver the programme
- Evidence of full adherence to What Works Network membership principles



We will not fund proposals that...

- Duplicate the work of other current What Works Centres
- Wholly focus on a single age group
- Wholly focus on only one type of ill health, long-term health condition, or disability
- Rely solely on quantitative or solely on qualitative research methods
- Clinical trials and associated studentships are not eligible for inclusion



Where to find more information & help

For questions about the opportunity itself, the application process, or ESRC funding rules:

- Opportunity specification
- ESRC research funding guide & ESRC guidance for applicants
- University research office teams
- Email us at workinglives@esrc.ukri.org

For queries about The Funding Service (TFS) system or the submission of your application via TFS:

- Dedicated TFS helpdesk

Email: support@funding-service.ukri.org

Phone: 01793 547490





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Q&A



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Thank you



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