

## What Works Network

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**Organisation:** Cabinet Office

**Country:** United Kingdom

**Level of government:** Central government

**Sector:** Economic affairs, Education, General public services, Health, Public order and safety

**Type:** Financial Resources, Organisational Design

**Launched in:** 2013

**Overall development time:** On going

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# Description

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The What Works Network is a new initiative to improve the use of high quality evidence when government makes decisions about public services. It is the first time any government has prioritised evidence to inform policy and practice through a national approach.

The What Works Network is made up of six independent evidence centres covering:

- Health and social care.
- Educational attainment.
- Ageing better.
- Local growth.
- Crime reduction.
- Effective early intervention.

The centres cover over GBP 200 billion of public spending and their role is to summarise and share research about what works (and what doesn't) in each thematic area for use by decision-makers in both central and local government – including service commissioners, head teachers, and elected police and crime commissioners. The centres will share findings in an accessible way and will support local practitioners to critically engage with research and apply the findings to their own contexts.

The Network's ambition is to improve the access to and use of rigorous, high quality, independently assessed research to support decision-making at every level. A more intelligent use of evidence will result in public services that deliver better outcomes for citizens and better value for money for taxpayers.

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## Why the innovation was developed

There was and is a need to embed the use of evidence in decision making across UK public services. In important areas like social care and education, we have too little insight into the impact of the services and programmes being provided and therefore too little insight into how best to spend shrinking public budgets. Given the number of commissioning decisions being devolved down to local areas, there is an ever greater need for available, accessible and digestible evidence to inform decisions.

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## Objectives

Improve effectiveness, Improve efficiency, Improve service quality, Improve social equity, Improve user satisfaction

- To enable local decision-makers to make decisions about public services which are informed by evidence.
  - To ensure that policy development and delivery of public services are informed by rigorous and high quality research.
  - To help decision-makers to invest in services that deliver the best outcomes for citizens and value for money for taxpayers.
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## Main beneficiaries

Businesses, Civil Society, General population, Government bodies, Government staff

Public service commissioners and decision-makers, including:

- Policy makers at a national and local level.
- Elected members nationally and locally.
- Commissioners in health, social care, young people's services and education.
- School headteachers.
- Members of Local Economic Partnerships (a local governance structure responsible for cultivating local economic growth).

End users of public services who will receive better and more effective services designed with research input.

Taxpayers who will get better value for money from public services. Together, the What Works centres cover areas with public spending of more than GBP 200 billion.

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## Existing similar practices

### Washington State Institute for Public Policy

In other countries' public administrations

Washington State Institute for Public Policy

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy mission is to carry out practical, non-partisan research - at legislative direction - on issues of importance to Washington State. The Institute conducts research using its own policy analysts and economists, specialists from universities, and consultants. Institute staff work closely with legislators, legislative and state agency staff, and experts in the field to ensure that studies answer relevant policy questions.

<http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/>

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## Results

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**Results not available yet**

# Development

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## Design

The commitment to creating the What Works Network was part of the 2011 Open Public Services White Paper.

Subsequently the policy was fully developed in consultation with a 30-strong expert group of academics, trusts and foundations, Government policy makers and think tanks.

The creation of thematic centres was led by relevant departments, often in partnership, with a focus on testing demand with the local decision-making community and securing buy-in from academia.

Design time: 12 months

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## Testing

The concept of the What Works centres has effectively been trialled in the form of the National Institute of Care Excellence (NICE), which has been operational for almost 15 years. In this time it has generated learning on how best to synthesise and disseminate evidence in an accessible format, and how best to influence practitioners in the health sphere. This learning will be invaluable for the other Centres as they establish themselves in their own spheres.

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## Implementation

### Tools used:

A core part of the development of the What Works Network was working in partnership with Government Departments and a 30-strong expert group of academics, trusts and foundations, Government policy makers and think tanks.

Each of the new What Works Centres are competitively tendered. To encourage well-developed and strong bids we held pre-tender information days with prospective bidders. Benefits included allowing bidders to ask questions which resulted in higher quality bids. The pre-bidding event also allowed bidders to form consortia to ensure the wide range of skills required to be included in a bid team. This ensured that multi-disciplinary teams were able to successfully form.

An example of a successful consortia bid is the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth. This centre is led by the London School of Economics in partnership with a private research consultancy (Arup) and a research charity (Centre for Cities).

### Resources used:

Each What Works Centre's funding varies with contributions from government and non-government partners particularly the Economic and Social Research Council. The estimated budget to deliver the core functions of a What Works Centre is around GBP 1 million per annum although this varies depending upon the scope and institutional set-up.

The initiative is supported by a central secretariat and a national advisor in the Cabinet Office. The national advisor acts as a champion for the use of evidence across government. The secretariat supports this role as well as providing coordination and stakeholder management.

Implementation time: On going

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## Diffusion

The WW centres have a national remit. They each have a responsibility to engage policy makers and practitioners from across their sectors to ensure they are effectively communicating with and influencing the right audiences. We are considering the possibility of extending the Network to include new Centres focussed on other thematic areas.

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## Challenges and solutions

Three key challenges include:

- Developing and maintaining meaningful partnerships with over 39 key stakeholders to ensure and maintain their involvement in the policy development and implementation. Regular liaison and consultation have ensured positive relations.
- Creating the centres as independent bodies resulted in potential diminished control over the quality of research outputs. To overcome this each centre signed a memorandum of understanding agreeing to meet the high rigorous standards to be a What Works Centre.
- Competitively tendering the What Works Centres risked receiving poor quality bids, as they were complex bodies to commission. Robust arrangements were put in place to ensure good quality bids were received. This included holding pre-tendering sessions to allow bidders to ask questions and encourage bidders to form consortia ensuring the multi-disciplinary skills required were reflected in the final successful bid.

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## Partnerships

### Partners from civil society, academic and the private sector

Other

The six independent centres are all delivered by different institutions from across different sectors, including civil society, academic and the private sector.

For example, the What Works centre for local economic growth is being delivered by a partnership between academia, the private sector and civil society. This combination will allow the centre to draw on academic research skills as well as expertise and networks from the private and voluntary sectors.

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## Lessons Learned

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### Conditions for success

Senior support along with support from local users. Our centres were developed with senior civil servant leadership support. Alongside this, local research users were consulted to ensure there was a demand for the new thematic centres.

Working in partnership and active engagement with stakeholders is crucial. Working closely with leading stakeholders ensures that ideas are well developed and supported and can help make proposed solutions stronger and more workable in practice.

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