



Evaluation
Task Force



What Works Network Strategy

Evaluation Task Force

November 2023

Foreword

It's been a decade since Jeremy Heywood – then new in his role as Cabinet Secretary – outlined a vision for driving up the quality and use of evidence in government. That vision grew into what we now know today as 'What Works.'

The What Works Network is a remarkable initiative that has reshaped the way public services are designed and delivered in the UK. Consisting of thirteen What Works Centres, the Network brings together evaluation professionals who help to shape policy decisions that reach the lives of the public.

The Network has been at the vanguard of generating and using evidence to inform policy and practice across a range of sectors, from education and health to crime and local growth. It has also fostered a culture of innovation and collaboration among practitioners, researchers, and decision-makers, creating a vibrant community of evidence enthusiasts who share a common vision of improving outcomes for the British people and communities.

In the past ten years, What Works Centres have collectively designed and delivered over 500 trials and evaluations. The evidence from these trials has fed directly into the policy cycle, with government departments scaling up funding and delivery for programmes that achieve meaningful outcomes.

The Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) is a great example of this. The Education Endowment Foundation's trials found strong evidence of NELI's positive impacts, which gave the Department for Education the confidence to roll out NELI to state-funded schools in England. The programme has already reached two-thirds of schools with reception pupils, which is an incredible achievement that wouldn't have been possible without What Works Centre evidence.

Another example comes from the College of Policing and its What Works Centre for Crime Reduction, which led what was at the time the world's largest randomised trial of body-worn video cameras by police.

It was unclear how officers and the public would react to the cameras, so this was tested in a trial involving more than 2,000 police officers across ten London boroughs. The findings showed that cameras led to a fall in complaints against officers, and that officers on average did not change how they implemented stop and search. This evidence convinced the Metropolitan Police to fully scale-up the technology, which led to all 22,000 frontline officers across the Metropolitan Police Service being issued a camera.

The evidence that centres collect and share is also changing the public sector's commissioning practices at the local level. The Youth Endowment Fund's violence deterrent toolkit is being put to use by 20 police forces, who are required by the Home Office to put a share of their funding towards approaches that are shown to be effective by the toolkit's evidence.

The successes of the What Works Network and its member centres are also recognised within and beyond the UK. Today, we see foreign governments seeking

to emulate the UK's model of evidence-based policymaking. We are very proud of our international reach, and are committed to working closer with, and continuing to inspire, our international counterparts.

We welcome the vision laid out in this strategy, which sets new and bolder ambitions for What Works Centres – and His Majesty's Government – in the use of evidence in the public sector.

The What Works Network is not only a source of knowledge; it is also a beacon of inspiration, reminding us to never settle on what we already know, and to let the evidence guide us to better outcomes for the British people.

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Contents

Background

The need for a new strategy	5
Our aim	6

Strategic priorities

1. Better WWC coverage of HM Government policy priorities	6
2. Greater use of What Works evidence to inform decisions about public services	6
3. More collaboration between What Works Centres and with international partners	7
4. High-performing WWCs which deliver high-quality evidence and demonstrate real impacts	8
5. Stronger advocacy for the importance of long-term funding and independence of WWCs	8

Future direction

1. Better WWC coverage of HM Government policy priorities	9
2. Greater use of What Works evidence to inform decisions about public services	12
3. More collaboration. between WWCs and with international partners	14
4. High-performing WWCs which deliver high-quality evidence and demonstrate real impacts	17
5. Stronger advocacy for the importance of long-term funding and independence of WWCs	20

Table 1. Table of acronyms

CfAB	Centre for Ageing Better
CHI	Centre for Homelessness Impact
CoP	College of Policing
EEF	Education Endowment Fund
ETF	Evaluation Task Force
LEG	What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth
MaPS	The Money and Pensions Service
NICE	National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
TASO	Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education
WCPP	Wales Centre for Public Policy
WWC	What Works Centre
WWCW	What Works Centre for Wellbeing
WWN	What Works Network
YEF	Youth Endowment Fund
YFF	Youth Future Foundation

Background

The What Works Network was established in March 2013 to embed vital evidence into policy making and service delivery. Since then it has grown to encompass 13 What Works Centres (WWCs). Each WWC is committed to increasing both the supply of and demand for evidence in their areas of policy and practice, and ensuring robust evidence shapes decision-making at every level in the public sector.

Awareness of the potential for and benefits of the greater use of evidence within Government has been growing. However, despite these developments and some [great examples](#) of evaluations across pockets of HM Government, high-quality evidence on the impact of government policies remains the exception rather than the rule. As noted by the National Audit Office (NAO), much of HM Government's spending is not currently evaluated. ([NAO 2021](#)).

The need for a new strategy

In April 2021, the [Evaluation Task Force](#) (ETF) was established with the aim of improving evaluation across government and furthering the use of evidence about 'what works' in government decision-making.¹ As part of its remit, the team took over responsibility for the secretariat of the What Works Network from the former Cabinet Office What Works team.

In October 2022, Professor David Halpern's 10 year term as What Works National Advisor concluded. Since 2013 he supported the development of WWCs and tirelessly promoted the use of evidence across government.

It's never been more important to ensure public spending and resources go further by having a really empirical government. Part of this requires ensuring there is an excellent network of WWCs ready to inform public sector decision-makers. But we also need to ensure these centres are delivering value for money and are working as effectively and efficiently as possible.

It is in the context of these developments that we, the ETF, decided it was time to review the strategic direction of the What Works Network, and set out a refreshed vision for its future.

To inform the development of this strategy, we undertook documentary reviews and extensive consultations with all WWCs, many departments and organisations which fund centres, and other stakeholders.

¹ The creation of the Evaluation Task Force was announced in the Declaration on Government Reform (2021). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/declaration-on-government-reform>

Our aim

Our ambition is for a more strategic and visible network of high performing WWCs and programmes, which produce and translate evidence to support decision-making in all Government priority areas of social policy.

This strategy will outline how we expect to deliver this vision over the next 5 years, identifying the roles for each part of the What Works Network and other stakeholders.

Strategic priorities

Our strategic priorities have been shaped by considering both the achievements of WWCs over the past 10 years and the remaining challenges and barriers which inhibit further gains in driving up the demand for and use of evidence by decision-makers in all layers of public services.

1. Better WWC coverage of HM Government policy priorities

We want the composition of the What Works Network to reflect the priorities and public spending commitments of HM Government.

- We will assess expressions of interest in the What Works Network on the basis of whether the proposal fills an important gap in the network's policy area coverage.
- Through our engagement across government, we will identify policy areas where there is potential for a WWC, and proactively explore this potential with relevant stakeholders.
- We will create a new type of What Works Network membership – What Works Programmes – and invite expressions of interest for these. Programmes will typically be narrower in terms of their policy area scope, but the purpose is to be more responsive and agile as new challenges for government emerge.

2. Greater use of What Works evidence to inform decisions about public services

What Works is based on the principle that good decision-making should be informed by the best available evidence. If good evidence is not available, decision-makers should use high-quality methods to build a reliable evidence base to inform future decisions.

We want civil servants and front-line practitioners to be aware of the WWCs that operate in their areas of interest. We also want them to engage with these centres' outputs and use the evidence they generate, collate and share.

We want WWCs to proactively engage with their stakeholders. Centres should share concerns about existing programmes or practises they see on the ground; communicate what they see as opportunities or priorities for policy making; and propose ways to fill critical gaps in evidence that they've identified.

- We will work with WWCs to build more and stronger connections to colleagues within HM Government.
- Working with stakeholders across government, we will seek to systematically increase the demand for evidence by integrating requirements for robust evidence/evaluation into standard government processes.

3. More collaboration between What Works Centres and with international partners

We want the What Works Network to have a collective impact on policy making and practice that is greater than the impact of its parts (i.e. individual centres).

Some WWCs work in overlapping policy areas (e.g. education) or with similar demographic groups (e.g. children and young people). We want centres to make the most of their shared expertise by learning from and working with one another, whilst minimising the risk of siloed working and duplication of efforts.

We are increasing the expectations we have for centres and their cross-network collaboration. We want WWCs to take the lead in initiating cross-network collaborative activities.

The UK is a world leader in the pursuit of evidence on What Works, with other countries regularly approaching many WWCs and the ETF looking to learn from them. A number of WWCs already have international programmes and collaborations. These are well-established within the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). Many other centres have successfully worked with evidence centres and researchers to draw on international evidence and best practice.

We want to see an increase in the depth and breadth of partnerships and joint working that WWCs have with both devolved administrations (where possible) and international counterparts. In building these relationships, and pooling interest and resources, our hope is that this will reduce duplication of activities and generate more and better evidence.

- We will support cross-network collaboration by placing a greater focus on forward-looking activities in existing What Works Network forums and offering assistance in establishing new collaborative initiatives.

- We will support international ambitions of WWCs by facilitating cross-centre learning (specifically drawing on learning from EEF and NICE) and seeking opportunities to promote the work of centres and the network in international forums.
- We will explore opportunities to work with counterparts in other countries who are similarly seeking to embed evidence within their government decision-making. We will explore the potential to collaborate in the generation and use of evidence in areas of social policy in which there are shared international interests.

4. High-performing WWCs which deliver high-quality evidence and demonstrate real impacts

We want and expect WWCs to have demonstrable impacts and achieve meaningful outcomes. Collecting, generating, and sharing evidence only matters insofar as this changes outcomes.

To this end, we plan to introduce regular performance self-assessments of WWCs. In assessing performance, we will recognise the significant differences in WWC budgets and build on existing key performance indicators and reviews conducted by or for their funders.

- We will review performance self-assessments and provide feedback to centres. If a centre cannot adequately demonstrate through their activities and outcomes that they are delivering against expected standards, we will either place them in a probationary period and revisit their performance in the near future, or recommend removing them from the network.
- We will seek views from WWCs and funders on our proposed approach before implementing it.

5. Stronger advocacy for the importance of long-term funding and independence of WWCs

Funding arrangements vary between WWCs, but public funding plays a key role. For the 10 WWCs that are independent organisations (i.e. not part of non-departmental public bodies), over 85% of their funding comes from government departments, research agencies or other public bodies.

The nature of public spending – which is governed by spending reviews – creates unique challenges for government departments seeking to provide WWCs with secure and long-term grant funding. Short-term funding cycles, however, are not ideal for centres and their ability to invest in strategic and longer-term research activities. Frequently revisiting and renewing centres' short-term grant agreements also requires significant levels of funder resources.

We would like to see more centres move towards greater diversification of funding where possible. However, given the role centres play in informing public services, it is unreasonable to expect they could all operate fully independently via private financing. Our ambition is to encourage centres to access an increasing portion of funds from outside government. This should both reduce reliance on government, and the vulnerability that stems from relying on single sources of funding. It would also provide some WWCs with opportunities to expand the impact and reach of their work beyond geographical constraints of their core funding.

- We will work with funders and colleagues across government to identify opportunities that improve the security and enhance the stability of WWC funding arrangements.

Independence is an important principle for the What Works Network, and it is one by which the network is judged. But in practice, independence means different things to different people, and WWCs operate according to very different models of financial and operational independence from the bodies that fund them.

- We will work with WWCs, and colleagues in commercial, finance, grants, and policy, to create a handbook which sets out in more detail what independence for these centres can and should realistically look like in practice.

Future direction

1. Better WWC coverage of HM Government policy priorities

As secretariat for the What Works Network, the ETF oversees applications and expressions of interest from organisations interested in joining the network.

The current set of What Works Network member organisations reflects the efforts of motivated individuals and the funding prerogatives of departments and other sponsoring organisations over the last decade. It is not the product of centralised or top-down planning by Cabinet Office or HM Treasury, nor should it be.

However, moving forward we would like to see the priorities of HM Government better reflected in the membership of the What Works Network. To the extent that public spending reflects government priorities, it is worth briefly considering how the What Works Network membership and activities aligns with broad categories of annual public sector spending.²

Policy areas like Education (primary and above; £101.0 billion) and Early years, child development and family (including under 5's education; £32.6 billion) are well-supported by activities delivered across three WWCs (Foundations, EEF, and Transforming Access and Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO)). Earlier this year, two previous WWCs – the Early Intervention Foundation and What Works Centre for Children's Social Care – completed their merger to become Foundations. We see this as a positive development, and there are early signs that the merger has produced a stronger organisation and reduced the risk of overlapping agendas.

The What Works Network offers more limited coverage in other policy areas, such as benefits, work and pensions (i.e. social protection; £290.7 billion).³ For example, while the Youth Futures Foundation (YFF) specialises in work and benefits programmes, this relates only to people aged 14-24. Old age (state) pensions and services (£137.3 billion) and sickness and disability programmes/benefits (£65.4 billion) are other large areas of social protection spending which are only covered to a very limited extent by the network's Centre for Ageing Better (CfAB) and Money and Pensions Service (MAPS). We believe there is reasonable scope for 'what works' evidence and evaluation to shape, adapt, and test programmes and policies in this area.

Another example where the What Works Network has limited coverage is the justice system (£14.1 billion). There are a few members which cover aspects of public safety (£29.8 billion): the College of Policing's What Works Centre for Crime

² See Table 5.2, 'Public sector expenditure on services by sub-function, 2018-19 to 2022-23' from the 'Public sector spending' spreadsheet accessible at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/public-spending-statistics-release-july-2023>. Figures cited are calculated using 2022-23 outturn figures.

³ Excluding 'Family and children' programmes (10.4).

Reduction focuses on research and evidence in policing, and the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) focuses on reducing violent crime in disadvantaged youth. But there is no centre that is more actively focussed on the challenges facing the justice system, including reducing re-offending (which the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) [estimates](#) results in social and economic costs of over £18 billion annually).

A final example of a potential gap in What Works Network coverage is net zero. HM Treasury has produced [estimates](#) of government's net zero spending which are around £6.5 billion per year between 2021-22 and 2024-25. There is no centre that actively collates, generates or disseminates evidence in this policy area.

Our ambition is to have a What Works Network which better reflects, and therefore serves, the breadth of government policy. In addition to our existing membership criteria, we will therefore consider new applications and expressions of interest through this wider ranging ambition.

We will expect successful applicants to demonstrate how they are meeting important gaps in the network's policy area coverage and avoiding duplicating efforts. Where applications align closely with areas covered by existing centres or other research organisations, we will ask whether this is something that could be absorbed into these organisations, and/or whether establishing a What Works Programme (rather than a full centre) may be feasible.

Through our existing engagement across government, and using our position in the Cabinet Office Delivery Group (which sits at the centre of government, and includes the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit and Delivery Architecture teams), we will identify the highest priority policy areas where there is potential for a WWC, and proactively explore this potential further with stakeholders in those departments/organisations.

Agility

Establishing and maintaining a new WWC is both a costly and time-consuming endeavour. To stimulate the greatest possible interest in filling gaps in existing coverage and ensure the What Works Network is flexible enough to accommodate changing policy needs/priorities, we are establishing a new What Works Programme membership category. This will be granted to a specific programme of work and will be more timely and efficient than establishing an entirely new centre.

A What Works Programme could be housed within an existing organisation, or across several organisations. We expect programmes will be smaller in scale/scope, focusing on either a narrower thematic area than those covered by existing WWCs, or addressing an issue that is temporal/time bound or cuts across policy areas (e.g. focusing on specific groups). Applications for programme membership will be considered against the existing IMPACT criteria⁴.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-works-network-membership-requirements>

Existing WWCs may wish to host What Works programmes. Many existing WWCs got their start by being incubated or hosted within an existing organisation. For example, Nesta incubated the former What Works Centre for Children's Social Care (WWCSC), now part of Foundations; and the Centre for Homelessness Impact (CHI) was initially incubated by the charity Crisis.

Applications for What Works Programmes would be assessed using the same IMPACT criteria with expectations modified to reflect the scale of the initiatives. Terms will be limited to 2-5 years (depending on the funding and expected programme duration). At the end of this term, an extension may be considered. Programmes would receive support from the secretariat and from other WWCs via the network's working groups (e.g the Impact group).

2. Greater use of What Works evidence to inform decisions about public services

In the consultations we undertook with centres to inform the development of this strategy, many reported enjoying close relationships with local and central government stakeholders, which they use effectively to inform the development, direction and dissemination of their work. Government stakeholders (i.e. funders) also responded positively about the value of the work produced by WWCs.

However, while some centres reported being well-embedded in all relevant policy areas/departments, this was rare. Many centres reported pockets of engagement, which required sustained efforts to maintain, and were keen for additional support from the secretariat to support this engagement (particularly with HM Treasury and No.10). High turnover of staff in the civil service was also noted, which in some cases meant having to re-establish relationships with new policy or funding leads every 6 months. Through our wider engagement, we are also aware that knowledge of the centres and use of their work within government remains inconsistent.

We intend to build much greater awareness of both the WWCs and the wider Network, and broaden the opportunities they have to contribute to evidence-based work happening across government. and in international forums. Our aim in doing this is to encourage/stimulate more systematic demand for and use of high quality, practical evidence and to identify and generate opportunities for more collaboration and cooperation, including internationally.

Relationship brokering

The former What Works National Advisor engaged senior government stakeholders (including cabinet ministers) on the value of empirical evidence and advocated on behalf of WWCs and their work. The ETF will continue to act as an advocate for WWCs, bridging relationships within government. By drawing on our relationships with departments and our wider network of very senior advocates including Chair of

the What Works Council and members of the ETF Oversight Board, we will continue to promote the work of the What Works Network, and generate interest in further bolstering the what works approach by demanding more and better evidence be used to inform decision-making at all levels of government.

The ETF will work with these individuals and others to support WWCs to build better relationships within government by identifying and creating opportunities to connect with relevant decision-makers.

These opportunities could include making introductions and hosting events which bring the right groups of people together; showcasing WWC examples of evidence-led policy work; and supporting centres to optimise their communications, in order to draw out examples of impact for their desired audiences.

We will also identify opportunities for more cross-departmental engagement (e.g. engaging with bodies like the Government Social Research and Economics professions).

Stimulate demand

Raising awareness of the availability of WWC evidence will only get us so far. We also need to improve the demand for evidence. This will involve a focus on both process and skills.

The ETF is working to establish stronger internal levers to make the expectation that evidence is routinely used to inform decision-making a reality. These activities will involve working collaboratively with other stakeholders, including HM Treasury and Government professions (e.g. policy, finance), to integrate the requirement for robust evidence/evaluation within their processes.

To support this drive for systematic change, we must also ensure people have the necessary skills to access and make use of evidence. The ETF will support the work of other stakeholders to embed analytical capability building into learning and development offers (e.g. working with Government Professions and the Government Campus).

As we increase the demand for evaluation, we also need to ensure there is sufficient supply of people who can deliver good evaluations in their sector. We are aware that both WWCs and government are currently experiencing difficulties recruiting staff with necessary evaluation skills and experience. To address this shortage in government, the ETF commissioned the delivery of an Evaluation Academy. The Academy is an evaluation specific train-the-trainer programme for analysts across government, designed to enable participants to build onward evaluation capacity in future years. We will also seek to support WWCs through the provision of existing tools such as the Evaluation and Trials Advice Panel (ETAP), and support of

programmes of capacity building activities being delivered by the Evidence Quarter.⁵ In addition we will work with others to support further initiatives aimed at boosting the capacity/capability of existing centres/staff and develop a pipeline of skilled evaluators. An example of this work is our recent efforts with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) supporting the development of What Works fellowships aimed specifically at WWCs.

Idea generation

All WWCs are focused on improving delivery of public services. Because they seek to play a key role in providing evidence to inform the development of government policy and programmes, being responsive to government priorities is crucial (as noted by the role many centres played in supporting the government response to COVID-19).

However, WWCs are not simply evaluation and evidence providers for government/public services. As independent organisations, they have an important role to play in shaping policy priorities, by proactively identifying areas that need more attention or resources. For example, where policies are not working as effectively as they could, WWCs can generate ideas for how these areas/issues could be better addressed (including scoping ideas for new trials to test different approaches).

We will support WWCs to play this role, by (for example) stressing the importance of allowing for this provision within funding agreements, and supporting the creation of opportunities to work collaboratively with policy makers and other stakeholders (e.g. academia; wider research organisations, inspectors/regulators) to consider innovative responses to emergent issues.

3. More collaboration between WWCs and with international partners

Collaborations between WWCs play a key part in What Works Network membership. As part of committing to the IMPACT principles, centres are encouraged to share learning across the network and seek opportunities to collaborate through What Works Council meetings, operational group meetings and other ad-hoc conversations. This communication is crucial for the growth and expansion of individual centres and the wider network.

Combining centres' expertise and resources contributes to both individual centre successes and the effectiveness of the What Works Network as a whole. We want

⁵ The Evidence Quarter (EQ) is a shared office space which brings together evidence-minded organisations, including a number of What Works Centres, and encourages and supports collaboration within this community at a number of different levels. The EQ's capacity building activities are designed to share and nurture knowledge and skills, and the EQ's shared office space provides efficiency across services and resources.

centres to make the most of their shared expertise by learning from and working with one another, whilst minimising the risk of siloed working and duplication of efforts.

Collaboration can take many forms. One form is the sharing and management of resources across centres. The most visible example of this is the Evidence Quarter, which hosts a number of centres and enables them to access desk spaces, meeting rooms and event spaces at lower operational costs. This physical proximity to other centres supports more knowledge sharing.

Shared resources can also extend to staff. For example, a few centres share a Data Protection Officer. Most centres could not justify the cost of a full-time Data Protection Officer, but sharing this resource gives centres access to the expertise they need to sign data protection and other agreements with partners.

Other areas which may offer potential for future collaborations include research ethics (e.g. shared ethics committees) and data sharing (e.g. joint applications for access to secure data and the potential for a joint data archive).

We recognise the valuable role UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and ESRC are playing in supporting these types of collaborations via their Policy Fellowships programme. These are designed to enable researchers from academia to work with both government departments and WWCs on research to address pressing policy challenges. A key aim of these fellowships is creating ongoing relationships between these different stakeholders.

Another form of collaboration which we believe has the potential to offer huge benefits is collaboration in programmes of work in areas of mutual interest. For example, YEF and EEF launched a major joint funding round in 2022 to identify, fund and trial different approaches to improving attendance and reducing exclusions in schools in England.⁶

More evidence can be generated when centres open up their data archives for other centres to benefit from. One example of this comes from a collaborative effort between the EEF and the former WWCS (now part of Foundations). When the EEF made their data archive available for WWCS, this helped the centre measure the impact of certain educational interventions on attainment, specifically for young people who had social worker support. This work identified ten programmes that have what WWCS called 'signs of potential' – in other words, interventions with promising and disproportionately positive impacts for young people who have had a social worker. It specifically helped WWCS identify programmes that could be prioritised in future research focussed on benefitting young people with a social worker.

⁶ <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/news/yef-and-eeef-launch-new-grant-round/>

While most WWCs recognise the potential benefits of collaboration and are keen to collaborate more, they have identified a series of practical barriers. These include limited staff capacity, which means these initiatives (unless linked to an urgent need) are often deprioritised. Even where these joint endeavours have been initiated, it has in the past been challenging to sustain momentum. This again reflects the demanding workloads and staff being stretched to capacity, leaving little time to accommodate collaborative work which is often beyond their defined remit.

Funding also plays a major role in enabling (and prohibiting) the fruition of collaborations and partnerships between centres. Without dedicated funding available, it is very challenging to pursue this type of work. This is especially true for centres with less freedom to determine their own work agenda and those with no core funding in place.

Renewing our commitment to collaboration: next steps for ETF and WWCs

In spite of the constraints that exist, we are keen to increase the expectation for and the ambition of collaborative efforts between WWCs.

We would like to see WWCs more actively engage other centres to generate evidence on shared outcomes. In some cases, trials conducted by one WWC might be able to collect additional outcome measures of interest to other centres. WWCs should circulate draft evaluation plans or trial protocols with other centres on a 'for information' basis. These other centres could then identify additional outcomes of interest and enquire as to whether the trial could accommodate additional data collection.

We believe WWCs are best placed to take the lead in initiating cross-network engagement, as they can identify areas of common interest where collaborations with other WWCs may be initiated. The ETF will however seek to better support these endeavours. We will do this by ensuring there is a greater focus on forward-looking plans and activities within the What Works Council and Operation Group meetings (providing more opportunity to identify potentially common areas/goals on which to collaborate). We will remain open to playing a further role in facilitating cross-network coordination where useful, considering opportunities to do this as they arise.

We would also like to see more sharing of expertise and good practice across the network, particularly from the more established centres. For example, NICE and EEF could offer valuable reflections on their journeys to establishing international programmes.

International collaborations/partnerships

The UK is considered to be a world leader in the pursuit of evidence on What Works, with other countries regularly approaching WWCs to learn from them. Our ambition is to further develop this and to support the What Works Network to have a greater presence internationally. The intention is to further build the reputation/standing of the network internationally and generate opportunities to build further knowledge and collaborate.

A number of WWCs already have international programmes and collaborations. While these are most established within NICE and EEF, other centres have made inroads in establishing international partnerships (including Foundations, YEF, CHI, WW Wellbeing). COP is exploring licensing its toolkit for use internationally. International engagement was an area many centres indicated they were keen to develop further.

The activity of many WWCs has often been limited to specific nations in the UK (usually England). This typically reflects the devolved nature of policy making in certain domains, and is in large part a function of the legal basis underlying the allocation of funding to WWCs (which can be subject to geographical limits). Where these types of constraints do not exist, we strongly support WWCs establishing programmes and pursuing activities in nations and regions across the UK.

We welcomed the Levelling Up White Paper's commitment to inviting devolved administrations and local leaders across the UK to bring together evidence of "what works" and maximise the opportunities for learning that devolution offers. We will work together with colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that any plans or activities in this area can incorporate relevant WWCs.

Many areas of public service are internationally relevant, and there are opportunities to work with and support other countries to embed evidence within their government systems, and to collaborate on shared challenges. This could include sharing evidence and learning, partnering in the commissioning of evidence reviews, and identifying promising interventions from other countries to be tested in the UK context.

CHI has demonstrated the potential of this type of approach. They established an international panel during the pandemic, supporting the acceleration of what can be learnt from overseas. As a result, an initiative using cash transfers to relieve homelessness was tested by a research trial in Canada in 2018 and is now being trialled by CHI, supported by a grant from the Evaluation Accelerator Fund.

The ETF will raise the profile of the What Works Network and support the international ambitions of WWCs by supporting cross-centre learning (specifically

drawing on learning from EEF and NICE) and seeking opportunities to promote the work of WWCs and the network in international forums (e.g. engaging with initiatives and institutions such as the Global Commission on Evidence, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and counterparts in governments around the world).

We will also explore opportunities to work with counterparts in other countries, including collaboration in the generation and use of evidence in areas of social policy in which there are shared international interests.

4. High-performing WWCs which deliver high-quality evidence and demonstrate real impacts

What Works Network membership

Certification as a What Works Centre provides an indication of both organisational quality and independence. Both WWCs and other stakeholders have emphasised the value of this certification. Over the next 5 years we intend to build greater awareness of WWCs and increase and expand the 'what works' brand recognition. We also want to ensure the What Works Network remains agile enough to respond to emerging and changing policy needs/priorities.

To date there have been three types of WWC membership: **full**, **affiliate** and **associate** members. These developed as the network expanded, reflecting the differing maturity and remit of organisations seeking to join. While the nature and duration of these memberships was never fully formalised, more established organisations were granted full member status, while affiliate status was generally given to newer centres that were still at the beginning of their development. Some centres may not yet have met (or be able to evidence) all criteria required for full membership. Associate membership was given to centres outside England.

Simplification

To support the ambition to build brand awareness and recognition, we aim to simplify the offer. The meaning of the current membership types has been confusing to both centres and other interested parties. To this end we will remove associate membership (merging this into full membership). The Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) is the only associate member of the network. They will be granted full membership with immediate effect.

We will also set clear expectations for the transition from affiliate to full member status. Affiliate membership will be offered to centres that are in their early stages as an organisation and still developing to meet the criteria necessary for full membership (e.g. building capacity in terms of generating new evidence).

Centres with affiliate member status will be expected to progress to full membership within 3 years. This will require submitting an expression of interest (setting out how they meet the IMPACT criteria) to be reviewed by the Secretariat and WW Council Chair, with feedback provided (if required). A final application should then be submitted to the WW Council for consideration. This will be circulated to all council members, with a presentation and discussion scheduled for the next meeting. This will be followed by a vote on a decision to admit the centre in question as full members; to retain as an affiliate (with a recommended time period for the next review); or to revoke membership.

As set out in Section 1, we are also introducing a new What Works Programme membership category.

To ensure the What Works brand retains its reputation for reflecting best practice evidence gathering and generation, we will introduce periodic quality assessments of all centres.

Performance/quality assessment

Many organisations that joined the What Works Network since its creation did so as new or fledgling organisations. These WWCs were admitted on the basis of their plans for activities and organisational development.

We expect WWCs to fulfil these plans, and we are keen to support them in realising their ambitions. But to date, there are limited formal processes that review whether and how WWCs are performing against the network's membership criteria after they've been admitted (with the expectation of affiliate centres who apply for full membership). Once WWCs are accredited as full members of the network, we do not currently assess whether they are delivering against the network's membership criteria.

Funders of WWCs have a wide range of performance monitoring and management arrangements in place, and there is a degree of overlap in terms of what the network expects of WWCs and what funders expect of them.

We do not wish to introduce fixed term memberships for WWCs; however, we want and expect WWCs to have demonstrable impacts and achieve meaningful outcomes. Collecting, generating, and sharing evidence only matters insofar as this changes outcomes.

To this end, we plan to introduce regular performance assessments of WWCs.

In assessing performance, we will need to recognise the significant differences in WWC budgets and key performance indicators set by their funders.

We will also need to build on existing reviews conducted by funders and the evidence that is gathered and assessed as part of these reviews. Funders play a central role in ensuring that the centres they fund deliver valuable and impactful work. And in many ways, the relationship between a funder and centre already provides the centre with strong incentives to be high-performing organisations.

We plan to ask WWCs to self-assess their performance, using a template that is consistent across the network. Centres will be asked to demonstrate examples of their impacts. We will expect centres to provide recent case studies where they have collated, generated, and shared evidence and improved outcomes as a result. Centres should also provide external references who can support their case study examples.

Centres must return self-assessments of their performance in order to retain network membership and WWC status. As secretariat, we will review self-assessments internally, share and discuss them with funders, and provide feedback to WWCs.

If WWCs cannot adequately demonstrate through their activities and outcomes that they are delivering against expected standards, we will either:

- (unilaterally) Place them on a probationary period and revisit their membership status after 2 years via a similar impact self-assessment.
- (in consultation) Recommend removing them from the What Works Network, and seek approval from the Head of the ETF and our Cabinet Office minister. The outcome of this decision would be taken with immediate effect.

Organisations that lose or forfeit their WWC membership status would be eligible to reapply for membership after two years.

The timing and frequency of these reviews is a key consideration. We believe these reviews, and the associated feedback we will provide, would be most effective as centres approach the end of their existing funding and begin to explore with their funders the scope for future funding. At the same time, we also recognise that WWCs with long-term funding arrangements would be out-of-scope for self-assessment for up to 10 years, whereas WWCs that receive short-term grant funding might face multiple requests for self-assessments within the span of a few years.

To balance these considerations, we plan to ask WWCs to self-assess their performance either (1) 12 months before their core funding arrangement expires, or (2) every 4 years. We will agree the timetable for initial reviews with individual centres to reflect these factors.

Affiliate members will generally not be subject to these reviews, as there will be a built-in review after 3 years of membership for the progression to a full WWC.

We recognise that there are some challenges in assessing WWC performance. For instance, [Frontier Economics' report](#) on ESRC's What Works investments identified the "lack of a clear baseline against which the performance of the Centres could be judged" as one of the biggest challenges in assessing WWC impacts. This speaks to the importance of funders and centres working together to agree meaningful and proportionate objectives.

We will actively work with the What Works Network's Impact Group to design and agree the self-assessment process, and we will seek views from What Works Council on our proposed approach once it is developed.

5. Stronger advocacy for the importance of long-term funding and independence of WWCs

Funding arrangements of the current 13 WWCs are diverse. For the ten WWCs that have been established as independent organisations,⁷ over 85% of their funding comes from government departments, research agencies or other public bodies. Notable exceptions here include CHI (which is currently funded largely by a private philanthropist) and CfAB (which is currently funded by the National Lottery Community Fund).⁸

For WWCs which are organisationally independent, the mechanisms through which their funding is granted typically takes the form of either long-term endowments (EEF, YEF, YFF, CfAB and CHI) or short- to medium-term grants (LEG, TASO, Foundations, WCPP, and WW Wellbeing).

This is important, as funding arrangements have big implications for both the scope and delivery of WWCs' work. For example, the size of the budget and the duration of funding agreements greatly affects capacity for evidence generation, as evaluations/trials take time to set up and deliver; meaning delivery of new research does not accord with short (one- two year) funding cycles.

The WWN secretariat is not responsible for funding or fund-raising on behalf of WWCs, nor is there any intention for it to move into these roles. That being said, both the secretariat and former What Works National Advisor have historically played an active role in supporting centres to access and secure government funding (identifying potential opportunities, convening discussions between departments and centres, and supporting options appraisals). We have also supported the development of funding agreements, and intervened to assist centres and funders navigate funding challenges.

⁷ WWCs excluded here are NICE and MAPS (non-departmental public bodies) and COP (limited company owned by HM Government).

⁸ Youth Futures Foundation (YFF) was established in 2019 with a £90m endowment from Dormant Assets. They are an independent, not-for-profit organisation set up as an asset-locked company limited by guarantee. We have classified YFF's Dormant Assets funding as public funding.

Security and stability of funding arrangements

In order to help funders better understand the range of funding routes available, the ETF will work with Cabinet Office Grant Management Function to develop internal guidance for departments wanting to support WWCs.

Compared to fixed-term grants, endowments and NDPB status afford centres much greater financial stability, and support their ability to conduct longer term research (including trials). However, neither of these models are straightforward options for future funding of either existing or new WWCs, and both approaches are generally considered only under exceptional circumstances. We are in principle supportive of endowment models for funding centres, but when endowments are not viable funding mechanisms, we believe long-term funding arrangements are the next best option.

We will explore with HM Treasury and Cabinet Office finance and grants colleagues considerations and opportunities for funding WWCs over timescales that exceed individual spending review periods.

As part of our strategic vision for the future of the WWCs, we will encourage funders to put in place long-term funding arrangements (pressing for a minimum of three-year but ideally five-year arrangements). These arrangements should encompass centres' 'core funding,' which we would expect to include reasonable costs for self-directed activities (e.g. independent work, where centres can consider emerging priorities) and management and overhead costs.

Given the role WWCs play in informing the delivery of public services, we do not think it is realistic, or desirable, to expect that any WWC could continue to operate and deliver high-impact work without public funding. We have advised WWC funders against pursuing this as a serious option to consider when evaluating funding options and their viability, and will continue to do so. However, we would like to see WWCs move towards a greater diversification of funding, with the aim that an increasing portion of funds come from outside government. We recommend this ambition should be to target 10% to 15% of funding from supplementary sources, building to this level over a period of time. This would seek to reduce reliance on government funds, and the vulnerability that stems from relying on single sources of funding. It would also provide WWCs with opportunities to expand the impact and reach of their work beyond any geographical constraints of its core funding.

We would advise that any funding targets set for WWCs are non-binding. The target and period to which it relates should be agreed between the funder and centre, and a sensible default period should be the funding duration. The centre should be expected to develop a plan for reaching this target, and progress against it can be part of the grant management discussions and reporting arrangements.

We will work more closely with department funders to ensure they are getting the best out of the centres they fund. We will establish more regular contact with funders, and support them to use their funding tools to ensure centres are delivering as expected and according to membership requirements. We will share examples of good practice with departments and establish a community of practice for colleagues in departments that oversee WWC funding.

It is not uncommon for government departments to approach WWCs asking for advice or support without providing funding (or offering to explore this). These situations present a challenge for WWCs. On the one hand, WWCs and departments recognise that the resources involved in commissioning very small pieces of advice or support are disproportionate to the scale of the services required. Many WWCs are strongly motivated to provide support in these situations, as they recognise the real risk of decisions and approaches being taken without regard to evidence. On the other hand, this model is unsustainable for some centres, which feel they are frequently called upon to provide small pieces of advice or support. We will explore whether there is potential for creating a cross-government call-off framework that could be used in these situations. The goal would be to reduce the frictions faced by departments in commissioning WWCs and to compensate WWCs fairly for their work.

The ESRC – now under UKRI – has been an important funder of What Works activity historically, and is still an active funder and important interested party. This is in spite of challenges and restrictions on funding most WWCs directly, due to eligibility criteria associated with independent research organisation status. While the secretariat will not play an active role in finding new funding sources for specific centres, we will work with existing funding bodies (including ESRC) and pursue new opportunities to attract a wider range of funders to support WWCs (including other UKRI research councils). This will include supporting the development of fellowships and other funding vehicles which WWCs are eligible for. We will also support WWCs to ensure they are well-placed to benefit from potential funding opportunities. For example, we will strongly encourage WWCs to actively develop and maintain relationships with researchers and academics, who are eligible to bid for ESRC/UKRI funding opportunities as principal investigators. This will open up opportunities for centres to receive funding as co-investigators in the research.

Independence

Independence is an important principle for the What Works Network, and it is one that proposals for network membership are judged on. For the purposes of assessing membership, it is defined as *providing independent, unbiased advice to users and retaining editorial control over all research and products*.

In practice, WWCs operate according to very different models of financial and operational independence from bodies that fund them. As secretariat, WWCs and

departments will often turn to us when they have questions or concerns related to independence.

Whilst independence is a crucial requirement for membership of the What Works Network, this shouldn't preclude funders from inputting into how centres are run. Funders should establish and actively make use of governance arrangements which meet their and WWC needs. For example, this may include regular reporting expectations (e.g. performance and expenditure reports and use of Key Performance Indicators). Some WWCs also have mutually agreed governance arrangements which include funder representation on various boards and stock-takes with senior department leaders (in some cases up to the Secretary of State level).

We will continue to work with funders to ensure they recognise centres' independence and autonomy. This is especially important in relation to how WWCs' work is done, and WWCs' role in shaping departments' and other funders' strategic priorities by proactively identifying areas that need more attention.

We will work with WWCs, and colleagues in commercial, finance, grants, and policy roles, to create a handbook which sets out in more detail what independence for WWCs can and should realistically look like in practice.