

What Works roundtable: Devolved nations and collaboration

December 2019

This note summarises the key points from a roundtable convened on 4 October 2019 which marked the culmination of an ESRC Strategic Fund project led by the Wales Centre for Public Policy with Queen's University Belfast, What Works Scotland, and the Alliance for Useful Evidence.

The project aimed to explore ways to:

- Increase collaboration between the What Works network, and
- Improve the reach of the What Works network in devolved nations.

It involved a series of 'What Works summits' with policy makers and practitioners in the three devolved nations which featured evidence from What Works Centres on a range of key policy issues, from youth mental health to local economic performance.

The roundtable was hosted by Wales Centre for Public Policy in partnership with the Alliance for Useful Evidence, and chaired by Jennifer Rubin and Alison Park. It brought together the National What Works Adviser, the ESRC, Directors of What Works Centres and a range of other stakeholders to share the learning from the project, and discuss ways to increase the reach of the What Works network in devolved nations and support future collaborations between What Works Centres.

Collaboration between What Works Centres

It was noted there is a range of existing collaborations between What Works Centres ranging from light-touch approaches based on 'doing things together', to harmonisation of language around evidence, to more in-depth approaches which mean changing what you do as a result of working with others. Examples of these different approaches are detailed below under 'How?'. It was agreed that collaboration – of various kinds – is worthwhile, but noted that there needs to be a clear purpose and it has to be properly resourced.

Why collaborate?

The main ways of collaborating among What Works Centres that were discussed were: pooling resources, maximising learning, and improving reach.

Pooling resources could mean consulting existing relevant What Works Centres in deciding to fund new Centres and once new Centres are established, sharing data – such as one Centre reanalysing another Centre's data focusing on different outcomes – and running joint trials to avoid contamination (for example, between separate initiatives promoted by Centres that are focused on young people). Joint trials can also show where interventions achieve multiple outcomes or have negative interaction effects (for example, improving attainment but reducing wellbeing).

Collaboration also provides a way to **maximise learning**, from Centres sharing experiences and advice, especially at the inception of new investments and with newly established

Centres, to making use of each other's networks and skills in producing work. Several Centres have networks and an understanding of the policy priorities in devolved nations or specific English cities/regions, and there would be benefit in sharing these.

Finally, collaboration can **improve the reach** of What Works Centres by making it easier for audiences to access evidence from multiple Centres in ways that transcend professional 'silos' and individual Centres' bi-lateral links with government departments.

Engaging with devolved nations and place-based approaches

Several What Works Centres are funded to work exclusively in England but many have partnerships with specific localities or regions, so most have a shared interest in learning about effective place-based approaches to evidence mobilisation.

There are also potential benefits for What Works Centres in engaging with different parts of the UK. In particular it can provide opportunities to test the applicability of evidence in different contexts and to exploit divergence as a source of comparative analysis and trials. And, as noted above, there is potential for What Works Centres to share each other's local knowledge, contacts and networks.

The different **regions and nations of the UK face shared economic and social challenges** which means that evidence that What Works Centres generate in one part of the UK is likely to be useful to other areas. The high level of interest in the What Works summits – which attracted more than 300 attendees, many of whom were not aware of What Works Centres prior to the events – bears this out and demonstrates that there is a strong demand in devolved nations for evidence from the What Works network.

Ideas for future collaboration and engagement

Drawing on discussions, we suggest some next steps which could help to increase collaboration and engagement with devolved nations.

What Works Centres might **collaborate further** through:

- Building common data architecture.
- Sharing office space, such as the Evidence Quarter, which recognises that collaboration rarely happens by accident, and can be cultivated and resourced in shared spaces.
- Identifying ways of joining up work based on shared outcomes, lifecourse, or place-based approaches (see below).
- Comprehensive mapping of the What Works Centres' aims, activities, audiences, to highlight gaps in the evidence landscape which might be filled by creating new What Works Centres and extending the remit of existing Centres, better understanding the value of the current network, and identifying further opportunities for collaboration.

Better **engagement with devolved nations and places** could be encouraged by:

- What Works Centres having embedded posts with credible, established partner organisations.

- Investing in relationship building between What Works Centres and policy makers and practitioners in devolved nations and localities across the UK, with a focus on how Centres' work can help particular places.
- Increased What Works Centre engagement with existing networks in devolved governments and localities.
- Increasing signposting of What Works evidence and making connections between other What Works Centres and policy makers and practitioners in devolved nations and other places. This might also mean finding a way for What Works Centres to share contacts in different areas.
- Creating a digital hub where information about all the What Works Centres can be accessed on a 'neutral' site which is accessible to and trusted by policy makers and practitioners in all four nations of the UK, and is promoted actively by the network.

Participants

Jamila Boughelaf	What Works Wellbeing
Jonathan Breckon	Alliance for Useful Evidence
Dan Bristow	Wales Centre for Public Policy
Jonathan Carter	ESRC
Jo Casebourne	EIF
Anna Dixon	Centre for Ageing Better
John Elvidge	Scottish Government
Irene Fernow	ESRC
Stephen Fraser	Education Endowment Foundation
Jen Gold	Cabinet Office
David Halpern	Cabinet Office
Anna Hopkins	Alliance for Useful Evidence
Audrey MacDougall	Scottish Government
Steve Martin	Wales Centre for Public Policy
Paul Matthews	Monmouthshire County Council
Lynne Miles	What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth
Sarah Miller	Campbell UK & Ireland at Queen's University Belfast
Huw Morris	Welsh Government
Julia Morris	What Works Centre for Crime Reduction
Paul Murray	Campbell UK & Ireland at Queen's University Belfast
Alison Park (Chair)	ESRC
Jennifer Rubin (Chair)	ESRC
Michael Sanders	What Works for Children's Social Care
Emma Taylor-Collins	Wales Centre for Public Policy
Ligia Teixeira	Centre for Homelessness Impact
Nick Watson	What Works Scotland