



“What Works Centres” contributing to government action in the UK

For many years, the UK has been pushing impact assessment and evidence-based policies. As early as 1999, the labour government published a report¹ aimed at expanding the latter². Subsequently, the notion of setting up agencies for knowledge transfers began to make headway. What Works Centres (WWCs) were created with the support of David Halpern, Chief Executive of the Behavioural Insights Team³ and Geoff Mulgan, Chief Executive Officer of the Nesta innovation foundation⁴. The goal of these structures is to inform government decision-making by highlighting “what works”.

Evidence-based policies provide the scientific grounding for the WWCs

The need for effective public policy rollout is increasingly pressing and this involves introducing sturdy assessment processes. One of the trialled assessment methods is evidence-based policy which emerged in the medical sector in the 1990s. This approach is now being used in other areas such as public policies in the US⁵ and with the WWCs in the UK⁶. Public decisions are now based on impact assessments⁷ rather than simply on positions of principle or hunches. “A successful impact assessment provides a picture of the face of society had the assessed policy not been introduced. By comparing it with the actual situation, this imagined situation, also known as counterfactual, allows for a causal relationship to be determined between government intervention and an indicator deemed as relevant (health, employment, education, etc.)⁸”.

Institutionalisation, spin-offs and support

In 1999, the British Health Minister established the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)⁹ which was tasked with judging the cost-effectiveness of medicines and medical devices. The NICE is at the cutting edge of evidence-based health policy and, as from 2010, it was used as a template for setting up eight WWCs. Six theme-led centres cover different areas:

- The Education Endowment Foundation
- The Early Intervention Foundation
- The What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth
- The What Works Centre for Crime Reduction
- The What Works Centre for Wellbeing
- The Centre for Ageing Better

¹ <http://www.worldcat.org/title/modernising-government/oclc/42950771?ht=edition&referer=di>

² The word *evidence* evokes empirical corroboration and proof.

³ Unit – now independent from the Cabinet Office (Prime Minister’s departments), that was set up in 2010 and which is comprised of experts in behavioural economics and civil servants. It is tasked with coming up with public policies using the nudge approach to gently encourage good decision-making and making randomised evaluations: <http://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/>

⁴ A foundation responsible for promoting innovation in public services: <http://www.nesta.org.uk/>

⁵ https://www.economie.gouv.fr/files/files/directions_services/igpde-editions-publications/revuesGestionPublique/IGPDE_Reactive_Etats-Unis_juillet-aout_2015_En.pdf

⁶ <http://www.eif.org.uk/press-release-what-works-centres-success/>

⁷ <http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/assets/2014/11/evidencebasedpolicymakingaguideforeffectivegovernment.pdf>

⁸ http://www.strategie.gouv.fr/sites/strategie.gouv.fr/files/atoms/files/guide_methodologique_20160906web.pdf

⁹ <https://www.nice.org.uk/>

Two affiliate members of the WWC network with regional scope have been established for Scotland (What Works Scotland, responsible for recasting public services) and Wales (Public Policy Institute for Wales, to fight poverty)¹⁰.

The centres have been given three key assignments:

- Producing high quality summary reports by systematic reviews of literature and making recommendations to public decision-makers
- Mainstreaming and support: sharing findings with practitioners, commissioners and policymakers and providing support through training and spin-off programmes
- Assessing implemented public policies

What Works Centres are different from standard research centres¹¹ as they are independent and led by non-profit organisations, foundations and universities (for instance, the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction is a consortium of eight universities). Closeness to government is ensured (a three-strong team from the Cabinet Office coordinates with the WWCs) and is vital¹².

Projects have a lifespan of between three and fifteen years with annual budgets ranging from £500,000 to £14 million, funded by a combination of government and non-government sources.

A meeting point for practitioners and researchers

Practitioners have difficulty accessing available scientific knowledge and making wise use of it¹³. The WWCs are attempting to address this problem by popularising scientific research. They are also striving to come up with effective solutions that reflect the situation in the field and to convince public decision-makers of the interest represented by “evidence”. Additionally, the WWCs share evidence in accessible ways with local practitioners¹⁴. The aim is to forge a true partnership between public decision-makers, researchers and practitioners in the field which will involve a shift in professional mindsets¹⁵.

There are still roadblocks, such as the time-lag between the length of experiments and the need to make fast policy decisions. In addition, policymakers have fairly cold feet because experimenting means accepting the random nature of decisions taken; this is not a situation with which they are at ease.

State of play for the WWCs

Projects abound with the Public Policy Institute for Wales boasting no fewer than 60 research projects in two years and the Education Endowment Foundation having conducted 127 experiments in six years. Some projects have had positive outcomes such as the randomised evaluation of police officers wearing body-worn cameras¹⁶. The evaluation enabled the devices to be issued to over 22,000 Met frontline officers. Another key success story is the Teaching and Learning Toolkit¹⁷ designed by the Education Endowment Foundation. This interactive toolkit provides the results of experimental assessments of “educational interventions” and is used by 64% of the 543 school leaders surveyed¹⁸.

More broadly, although these initial results are encouraging, they do not allow firm conclusions on the method’s effectiveness to be drawn. Moreover, as the WWCs are fairly recent creations, there is not sufficient perspective. The WWCs scope for action may sometimes be restricted owing to unclear boundaries for their activity (Wellbeing or Ageing Better). Lastly, at present, the centres cannot all count on a dedicated professional team. In spite of these shortcomings, countries such as Canada¹⁹ and France²⁰ are attempting to replicate the WWC model.

Virginie Ma-Dupont

10 <http://londonfunders.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/Ross%20Neilson%20-%20What%20Work%20Works.pdf>

11 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network>

12 <http://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/why-what-works-centres-are-working>

13 <http://www.cairn.info/revue-tiers-monde-2009-4-page-853.htm>

14 <http://londonfunders.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/Ross%20Neilson%20-%20What%20Work%20Works.pdf>

15 <http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ross-neilson-and-robbie-coleman.pdf>

16 <http://news.met.police.uk/news/rollout-of-body-worn-cameras-191380>

17 <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/resources/teaching-learning-toolkit>

18 Survey conducted by the National Audit Office in 2015.

19 <https://mowatcentre.ca/canada-needs-a-what-works-centre-heres-how-we-can-build-it/>

20 http://www.solidarites-actives.com/pdf/Ansa_RapportWWC_2017_VF