

# Discovering what works

**Five years ago, the UK government established the What Works Network. The idea was to ensure all policy making and service delivery was based on evidence. It was an impressive undertaking and one of the first times a national approach had been used to put evidence at the centre of decision making. SHELLY FARR BISWELL reports on how it's looking five years later.**

The What Works Network consists of 10 independent centres that cover a range of issues from ageing to education, crime reduction, and local economic growth.

**The What Works Network consists of seven full members and three affiliate centres.**

Full-member centres	Year established
National Institute for Health and Care Excellence	1999
Education Endowment Foundation	2011
Early Intervention Foundation	2013
College of Policing's What Works Centre for Crime Reduction	2013
What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth	2013
What Works Centre for Wellbeing	2014
Centre for Ageing Better	2015
Affiliate centres	
What Works Scotland	2014
Wales Centre for Public Policy	2017
What Works Centre for Children's Social Care	2017

In broad terms, the centres have three functions: to find evidence of what's working, to translate that evidence so that it's accessible to the people who need it, and to encourage the adoption and use of that evidence.

In describing the work of the network, What Works National Advisor Dr David Halpern wrote in *The What Works Network: Five Years On*: "Though we still have a long way to go, the What Works approach, and the more robust methods on which it is founded – such as the use of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and the more systematic analysis of what is working where and why – is rapidly becoming the new normal."

**Considering the evidence**

Since the network was established, the 10 centres have produced or commissioned 48 comprehensive evidence reviews, as well as numerous rapid evidence reviews. These reviews have provided a foundation for developing policies and delivering services. For example, a trial on police wearing body-worn cameras showed that the cameras reduced allegations against the police by a third and increased the amount of video evidence available to prosecute violent crime. Based on the evidence, 22,000 London police officers have been issued with body-worn cameras.

Each centre has its own methodology in how it undertakes reviews, but all follow a similar process that includes working with academic and user panels to identify and scope a review, considering available research, and drawing conclusions based on the research. As well as assessing research that's already available, many centres support primary research and work with researchers to identify and fill any information gaps.

Established in 2014, the What Works Centre for Wellbeing is one of the newer and smaller centres. Centre director Nancy Hey says the centre has a broad remit covering projects across government, businesses, universities, and several NGOs.

"One of the exciting aspects of having the network is that centres often act as bridges between theoretical and practical knowledge. For example, since being established, our centre has seen the academic discipline for wellbeing grow, which includes research being undertaken to fill information gaps," she says.



Nancy Hey

The centres use evidence from around the world. For Hey's centre, that has meant following the New Zealand government's work to develop Indicators Aotearoa New Zealand (wellbeing indicators).

As she adds, "What's just as crucial is how evidence is used and adopted. Within our centre, we work to understand each profession and user group we're working with so that we can communicate the findings in a way that is relevant and practical.

"We also aim to present findings with curiosity. 'How do these findings compare with your experience?' There needs to be an ongoing dialogue about what evidence shows and what practitioners experience."

**Making a lasting impact**

As the *Five Years On* report states: "If the What Works initiative is to have lasting impact, the interventions and programmes that are shown to work need to be widely adopted."

Professor Jonathan Sharples, who has been seconded to the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), which is the What Works Centre focused on education, and two University College London (UCL) colleagues completed a review of the What Works Network in July 2018. He says that their research shows that as centres become more established, they are placing more emphasis on working with stakeholders to understand and use the evidence available.





**Jonathan Sharples**

“The initial emphasis for centres is often on aggregating and synthesising the evidence that’s already available. When centres begin to mobilise that research and work more closely with end-users, there is often a significant increase in supporting the uptake of that evidence,” he says.

As described in the UCL review: “... as the Centres have developed, they have begun to take a more bi-directional view that goes beyond the traditional ‘push’ (production) model of research where evidence is generated then disseminated, interpreted, and used. The Centres have increasingly recognised the additional ‘pull’ (demand) processes where users inform research production to ensure that the outputs meet their needs (in terms of perspectives, topic content, and format).”

Sharples says EEF is one example of this shift in emphasis. As teachers and school administrators engage more with evidence-based approaches, they have also started to contribute by evaluating evidence and developing innovations that are then trialled.

“The profession – teachers, head teachers, and school administrators – have become real advocates for evidence-based practice. Robust, well-communicated evidence alongside practitioner expertise is extremely empowering,” he says.

David Halpern highlights just how big this shift has been in his foreword to the *Five Years On* report: “Education is perhaps the most dramatic. Within the space of five years, more than 10,000 studies have been compiled, and more than a hundred large-scale RCTs have been conducted, involving nearly a million children. In so doing, debates that were once dominated by dogma are now driven by evidence. It is a game-changer.”

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EEF is now scaling up several small trials that have shown encouraging results. This will create an opportunity for more schools to engage with evidence, as well as help determine if the trial results can be replicated.

### **Part of a system**

While the centres are part of the What Works Network, they each have different audiences, funding arrangements, administrative processes, and accountability systems. What’s essential for each centre is that it’s meeting the needs of its identified stakeholders.

As Jonathan Sharples explains, “The centres aren’t and shouldn’t be the same. Each centre needs to be relevant and complementary to the sector it’s working within.”

In addition, centres are at different stages of development. At one end of the spectrum is the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), which was established in 1999 to reduce variations in the availability and quality of health care. As the oldest and largest centre, NICE is well integrated in the health care system, with its role clearly defined in the UK’s Health and Social Care Act 2012. At the other end are several centres that are relatively new and have emerging agendas.

Nancy Hey says that while each centre is unique, there are basic principles that all the centres adhere to: “It’s essential that we

conduct a robust assessment of evidence and make our findings relevant to user groups.”

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And, while each centre operates individually, their connection as part of the What Works Network allows centres to share ideas and resources, as well as work together on complex projects.

### **Humility required**

As David Halpern wrote in his foreword to *Five Years On*: “Policy makers and professionals are far too ready to conclude that existing practice is effective – that they already know ‘what works’. In this sense, the first step to more effective policy and practice is not fancy methods, but simple humility.”

Jonathan Sharples agrees. “Using an empirical approach can be very humbling and very challenging. You need to set aside your ideologies and preconceived notions. Results can be very sobering where we’re learning not only what works, but what doesn’t.”

He says one of the challenges can be a lack of commitment in implementing evidence-based interventions.

“That’s where we have found having champions and mentors within the profession invaluable. We get much better uptake if practitioners can share their stories and experiences with their colleagues. After all, evidence is only helpful if it’s being used.”

### **Making evidence count**

Last year, EEF published results from one of the largest RCTs ever conducted in education. Over 13,000 schools were involved in the evaluation, which looked at engaging with schools about research findings. The evaluation underscored the fact that just making users aware of evidence is not enough.

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Three key lessons learned from the evaluation include:

- Traditional communication channels should be just one strand of a multi-faceted approach when sharing evidence.
- There needs to be a bridge between translation and adoption. For example, in the education sector there’s a growing body of evidence that demonstrates the benefits of in-school coaching and mentoring to support changes in classroom behaviours.
- There’s a need to ensure capacity and skills exist within user groups to understand and effectively implement the evidence.

The team at EEF have used the findings from this evaluation to help establish a Research Schools Network. They are also rolling out a series of campaigns and developing sector-led training to encourage the use of evidence.

### **Find out more**

The report on the network, *The What Works Network: Five Years On* report (January 2018), is available at [www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network)

The report *UK What Works Centres* (July 2018) by David Gough, Chris Maidment and Jonathan Sharples, EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London is available at <https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Portals/0/PDF%20reviews%20and%20summaries/UK%20what%20works%20centres%20study%20final%20report%20july%202018.pdf?ver=2018-07-03-155057-243>

A blog by Jonathan Sharples about the EEF evaluation is available at <https://theducationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/untangling-the-literacy-octopus/>