



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Information Service Briefing Paper

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Public Finance Scrutiny Unit

‘What Works Centres’: An Overview of a Growing Network in Supporting Government and Potential Considerations for Northern Ireland

Introduction

This Briefing Paper is prepared at the request of the Committee for Finance (the Committee), to facilitate its forward work planning for the first session of this new mandate. In particular, it aims to inform the Committee’s understanding of the Cabinet Office’s ‘What Works’ initiative.

The Paper first explains the initiative, including what it entails and how it has been implemented to date in Great Britain (GB) (sections 1-4). Thereafter it highlights key recent developments that are relevant to future discussion on the issue of a WWC in NI (section 5).

1. What are What Works Centres? ¹

The United Kingdom (UK) Government adopted a national approach to prioritising evidence in its decision-making when it introduced the Cabinet Office WWC initiative. The initiative aimed to improve the way in which government and other organisations generate, share and use robust, reliable and relevant evidence in decision-making. It was to support more efficient and effective service delivery across the UK public sector, at both national and local levels.

The Cabinet Office based the initiative on the principle that good decision-makers are best informed by high quality evidence; and if such evidence is unavailable, government should employ high quality methods to establish such an evidence base, i.e. to establish what works. The WWCs therefore are intended to enable policy-makers, commissioners and practitioners in their decision-making, enabling them to base their decisions on strong evidence of what works, and thereby provide cost efficient, useful services.

More specifically, through high quality, independently assessed evidence, the WWCs are to facilitate decision-making by:

- Collating existing evidence on how effective policy programmes and practices are;
- Producing high quality synthesis reports and systematic reviews in areas where such reports and reviews do not exist;
- Assessing how effective policies and practices are against an agreed set of outcomes;
- Sharing findings in an accessible way; and,
- Encouraging practitioners, commissioners and policy-makers to rely on such findings in their decision-making.

In essence, they are to generate and collate evidence that is widely accessible, deliberately tests variations in approach, vigorously evaluates and stops things that do not work. They:

- Run a 'Cross-Government Trial Advice Panel', with experts from across academia and government providing a free service for all civil servants to help test whether policies and programmes are working;
- Share findings from the WWCs across government and promoting discussion on what works;
- Support a civil service with skills, capability and commitment to use evidence effectively; and,
- Help policy-makers to make informed judgements on investment in services that lead to impact and value for money for citizens.

Collectively they establish a 'What Works Network', which works independently in policy areas receiving public spending in excess of £200 billion.²

The Network is promoted and supported by the Cabinet Office and the What Works National Adviser.

The Cabinet Office specifies requirements that all WWCs must follow.³

¹ <http://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network>

² <http://www.gv.uk/guidance/what-works-network>

³ Those requirements can be found at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/451328/What_Works_Network_-_Membership_requirements.pdf
<http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-works-network-membership-requirements>

2. How are they funded?

The WWCs are funded by a combination of government and non-government sources, including the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Big Lottery Fund.

3. Overview of individual WWCs

To date 8 WWCs have been established throughout England, and there are 2 affiliate members, one located in Scotland and the other in Wales.

In no particular order of significance, each is highlighted below, noting its name, date established and policy area covered, as well as its status and funders:⁴

What Works Centre/ Affiliate – Date Established	Policy Area	Status	Funders
National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) - 1999 http://www.nice.org.uk	Health and Social Care	Operationally independent Non-Departmental Public Body of the Whitehall Department of Health	Whitehall Department of Health
What Works for Crime Reduction – September 2013 http://whatworks.college.police.uk/Pages/default.aspx	Crime Reduction	College of Policing	College of Policing and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)
Early Intervention Foundation – July 2013 http://www.eif.org.uk	Early Intervention	Independent Charity	ESRC and Whitehall Government Departments
Sutton Trust/ Educational Endowment Foundation - 2011 http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk	Educational Attainment	A trust founded by parent charities	Whitehall Department for Education

⁴ The table was compiled by the Research and Information Service (RaISe), relying on various sources, such as the Cabinet Office and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

<p>What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth – October 2013</p> <p>http://whatworksgrowth.org</p>	Local Economic Growth	Collaboration between the London School of Economics, Centre for Cities and Arup	ESRC and Whitehall Government Departments
<p>Centre for Ageing Better – Late 2015</p> <p>http://www.centreforageingbetter.com</p>	Improved Quality of Life for Older People	Independent Charity	Big Lottery Fund
<p>What Works Centre for Well-Being – October 2014</p> <p>http://whatworkswellbeing.org.uk</p>	Community Well-Being; Employment and Learning; Culture and Sport	Public Health England	ESRC; Big Lottery Fund; Public Health England; Whitehall Government Departments; the Office for National Statistics; the Local Government Association
<p>Affiliate: Public Policy Institute for Wales</p> <p>http://ppiwi.org.uk</p>	Full range of devolved areas in Wales	Independent of the Welsh Government, but works directly with ministers, accessing researchers and policy experts from across the United Kingdom and beyond	ESRC and Welsh Government
<p>Part of Affiliate: What Works in Tackling Poverty – October 2014 – Public Policy Institute for Wales (see above)</p> <p>http://ppiwi.org.uk/our-work/what-works-in-tackling-poverty/</p>	Poverty	Cardiff University	ESRC
<p>Affiliate: What Works Scotland – 2014</p> <p>http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk</p>	Public Service Development and Reform – Community Planning Partnerships	Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, other academics across Scotland, with partners from: Glasgow Centre for Population	Scottish Government and ESRC

		Health; Improvement Service; Inspiring Scotland; Institution for Research and Innovation in Social Services; NHS Education for Scotland; NHS Health Scotland; NHS Health Improvement Scotland; Scottish Community Development Centre; Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations	
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4. November 2015 Report – Cabinet Office

In November 2015 the Cabinet Office produced a report entitled ‘What Works? Evidence for decision-makers’. It was compiled when 5 of the 6 initial WWCs had been running for a year or more, and brought together early findings produced by the WWCs.⁵ In its foreword, it stated that the WWCs are expected to deliver a ‘step-change’ in the way that local government, national government and front-line practitioners make decisions about public service delivery.⁶ It underscored the importance of this change given that in 2012/13 alone the UK public sector spent £674 billion.⁷

5. Key recent developments

This section highlights key recent developments that could help inform future discussion on the issue of a WWC in NI.

5.1 January 2016 – Parliament Buildings

On 28 January 2016 the Assembly’s Research and Information Service, in particular the ‘Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series’ (KESS), engaged with colleagues in the Executive, along with the Alliance for Useful Evidence, the Cabinet Office, the ESRC and other interested stakeholders, to discuss the issue of a WWC in NI. To inform discussion, Scottish and Welsh WWC representatives explained the WWC models implemented in Scotland and Wales (affiliate WWCs).

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-works-evidence-for-decision-makers>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-works-evidence-for-decision-makers>, at p 5.

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-works-evidence-for-decision-makers>, at p 33.

Those stakeholders participating in the discussion noted a number of considerations, such as:

- Is there a need for a WWC in NI?
- Do gaps exist in what already exists?
- If there are gaps, what is the best way to fill them?
- Would a WWC for NI help in this regard?
- What would a bespoke, independent model developed for NI look like?
- How would it add real value, and not just be more of the same?

At the end of the discussion it was agreed that the above would require serious consideration before any decisions made.

If considering the above questions, it may be worth factoring into those deliberations the following (amongst other things):

5.1.1 The ‘Leave’ Outcome of the European Referendum Vote in the UK

In NI the ‘Leave’ Vote placed a responsibility on NI politicians, public servants, businesses, academics/higher education institutions and others, to figure out what ‘arrangements’ would appear to be in the best interests of NI post-Brexit - in terms of both funding and policy. There is an apparent need for these individuals to formulate robust, reliable and independent position papers that inform government discussion/negotiation on key issues that are anticipated to arise from Brexit, e.g. how NI’s budgetary, fiscal and economic needs are to be best met after the UK Government triggers Article 50 and the UK departs in some manner from the European Union (EU).

5.1.2 Fiscal Devolution

There is increasing devolution of fiscal powers in the UK from central to the devolved governments; albeit asymmetrical. Despite this trend, a local economist observed in December 2015 that NI suffers from ‘fiscal nimbysism’.⁸ Nonetheless there appears to be increasing pressure on the devolved administrations to use their fiscal powers. In preparing to use such powers in future in NI, e.g. Corporation Tax, it is foreseeable that certain issues will need to be further addressed, such as disaggregating revenue receipts and increasing the reliability of estimations (e.g. improving underlying assumptions, encouraging greater risk-sharing, etc.). Such issues are relevant to Block Grant Adjustments that will be made when such powers are exercised, and ultimately impact on the money available to the Executive for spending.

In the context of fiscal devolution, it also should be kept in mind that a NI ‘Fiscal Commission’, as specified by the ‘Fresh Start Agreement’, is to be implemented.

5.1.3 The Executive’s Programme for Government (PFG)

The Executive plans to implement an outcomes-based government accountability model *via* its PFG, along with its Economic, Investment and Social Strategies, which apparently will link to the Executive Budget in some manner.⁹ This anticipated new approach will require NI politicians, public servants, business, academics/higher education institutions and others, to measure and evaluate how the Executive meets its specified outcomes, amongst other things. Sound methods will be central to this foreseeable work, requiring identification and closure of data gaps.

⁸ Revenue Generation Conference. NICVA. Belfast. 14 December 2015.

⁹ In-person meetings of officials from the Assembly, the Department of Finance and the Executive Office. Parliament Buildings. 27 June 2016.