

WHAT SHOULD THE 'WHAT WORKS NETWORK' DO?

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In March 2013 Nesta hosted the **launch of the What Works Network**. Led by the ESRC, Cabinet Office and the Big Lottery Fund, these new centres have the ambitious task of improving the links between the supply, the demand, and the use of evidence. These will complement existing bodies – NICE in health, and the Education Endowment Foundation in schools, orchestrating evidence across the areas of active and independent ageing, early intervention, crime reduction and local economic growth.

This short paper recommends five ways that the What Works centres can ensure that they maximise their impact, and avoid the mistakes of past evidence initiatives, which were often overly focused on supply rather than demand and use, and on academic research to the exclusion of other types of evidence.

In summary, the What Works centres should:

1. **Orchestrate all relevant kinds of evidence** – from data to formal experiments, qualitative research to quantitative, practitioner insight to experience: the key is to focus on what's most likely to improve the effectiveness of the users of evidence. That will include communicating what doesn't work as well as what does – and not shying away from being blunt.
2. **Involve the likely users of evidence in the shaping of work programmes, prioritisation and governance** – the more that they share ownership of these organisations, the more likely it is that they will value them.
3. **Mobilise evidence for multiple types of use** – from policymaking at national or local level to management and front-line activity.
4. **Try to influence the creation of new evidence** – to ensure it addresses live compelling problems, and where possible to bring down the costs of evidence creation. Evidence also needs to support innovation and experiment – not crush it.
5. **Be ready to adapt** – the What Works Network should reflect on its own impact, learn from the evidence about evidence, and respond to what is and isn't effective.

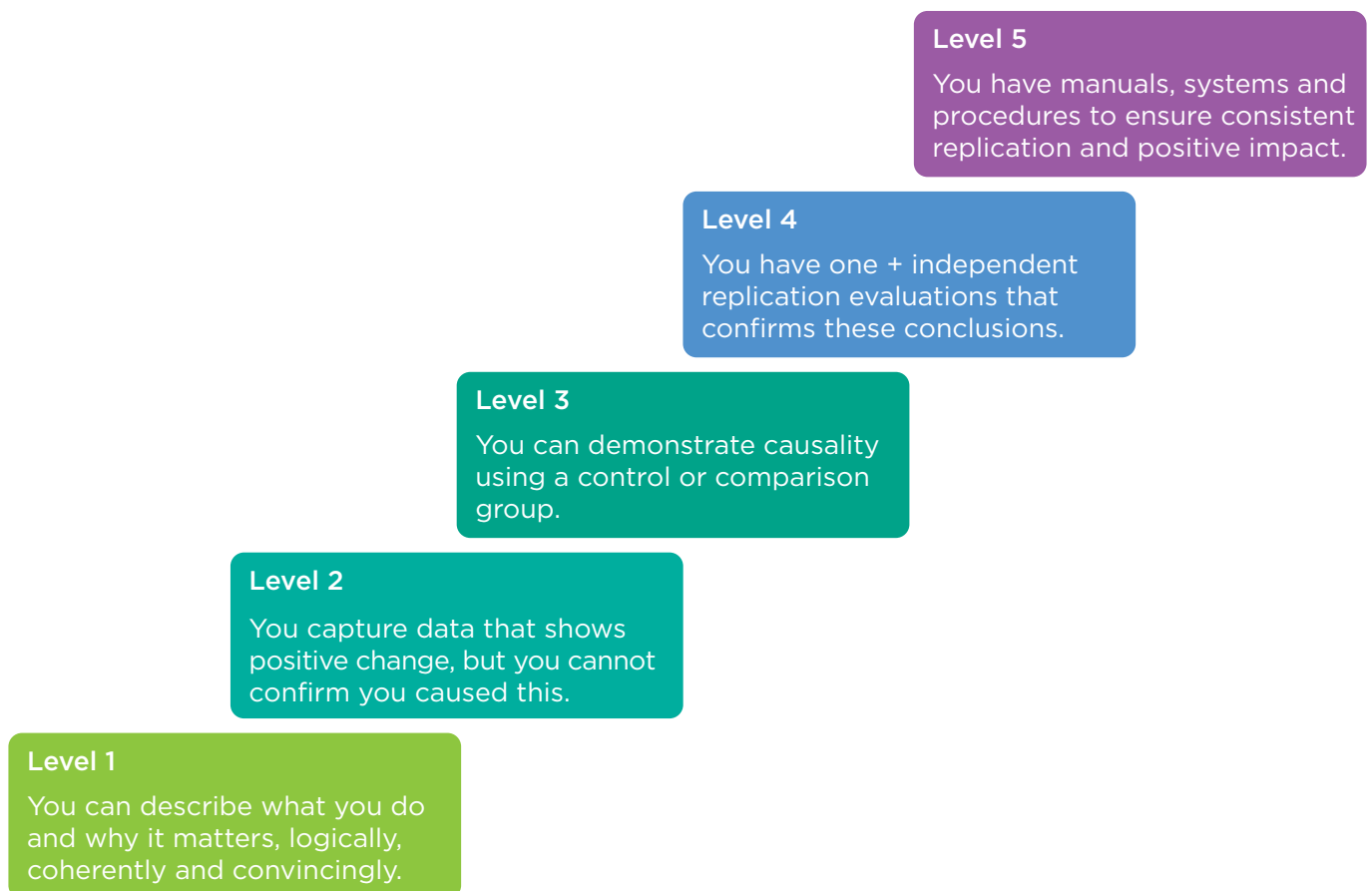
1 CONSIDER ALL TYPES OF RELEVANT EVIDENCE

The What Works centres should orchestrate all kinds of evidence – from data to formal experiments, qualitative research to quantitative, practitioner insight to experience. That will include communicating what doesn't work as well as what does – and not shying away from being blunt.

The What Works centres cover a range of policy areas, with great variance in the depth of knowledge and evidence available in the field. Each What Works centre will have to deal with interventions and programmes at various stages of development, and all the centres will need evidence for different purposes and audiences. This means the What Works Network will need to **consider a range of different evaluation and research methods in order to understand the effectiveness of interventions.**

At Nesta we have adapted and developed **Standards of Evidence**¹ to provide a shared language for understanding the evidence underpinning particular policies or practices. At the higher levels the systematic methods of randomised trials and controls can bring rigour to showing what works. But in many fields there is very little evidence of this kind.

Figure 1: Nesta Standards of Evidence (Source: Puttick and Ludlow 2012)²



As a result, there is no choice but to draw on a wide range of sources. Academic sources can ensure certain quality criteria have been met. But publication lags can delay new approaches being identified, and those approaches which aren't on the radar of academia can be missed out entirely.

It follows that the What Works Network therefore need to **consider a broad range of sources, such as from independent research organisations, think tank literature, government reviews, open data, administrative data, and evaluations commissioned from provider organisations, as well as feedback and insights from service users themselves.**

These can be mapped against the standards of evidence – but experience suggests that in all fields the strongest insights come from the use of multiple types of evidence. Indeed, a single RCT may be more misleading than multiple findings from other, less rigorous sources that all point in the same direction. The key point is to prioritise usefulness, and to orchestrate access to the most useful evidence which won't always be the evidence with the strongest formal credentials.

The new centres should also be frank and honest about what is not working, just as much as what is. This involves the What Works centres **influencing decisions to decommission and stop funding less effective interventions**, just as much as they encourage the adoption of what is working. Yet there also needs to be recognition that there are **differing degrees of 'failure'**. The What Works centres will need to make clear when improvements to an intervention are needed and are sufficient, or when the issues are too great and the intervention should be terminated altogether.³

This frankness requires the What Works network to retain independence from government. Only then will they be seen to offer credible advice, and be enabled to constructively criticise decision making when politicians, officials, and others outside of government, go against what is known without clear rationale or justification.⁴

2 INVOLVE THE USERS OF EVIDENCE

Involve the likely users of evidence in the shaping of work programmes, prioritisation and governance: the more that they share ownership of these organisations, the more likely it is that they will value them.

The What Works centres should be demand-led, ensuring evidence is useful and useable. To achieve this there will need to be **engagement with a range of different users, from policymakers, commissioners, practitioners, academics, service users, media, and a range of others alongside.**⁵

Where do they need evidence? What are their priorities? Where is the biggest gap between what they know and what they need to know? How can evidence be more useful and relevant?

This engagement shouldn't be seen as a one off exercise, instead there should be systematic feedback at all stages – a point we will return to.

Encouraging study circles and their equivalents is one way of embedding a culture that takes evidence seriously. Study circles are regular meetings of practitioners that reflect on new evidence and frontline experience. They exist on a modest scale in some schools and hospitals – but could become much more widespread in these fields, and amongst charities or policymakers. They can then potentially provide feedback to researchers on what's most useful.

In addition, the What Works Network should build upon and complement the work already underway. The UK Government is opening up much of its data to be interrogated and used. We have a world-class academic research base to utilise, as well as excellent independent research institutions and foundations, such as the Wellcome Trust and Dartington Social Research Unit.

Alliance for Useful Evidence

The Alliance for Useful Evidence is a network of over 1,000 members, encompassing users and producers of evidence from across academia, third sector, companies, providers, governments, and others, from the UK and around the world. A component of the Alliance for Useful Evidence is to provide a forum for discussion, debate and knowledge sharing, for those working in the same fields, and to enable ideas to be shared across different sectors. There are many events held across the UK, and a number of discussion papers regularly published on a range of issues, from scientific advice in government to the use of evidence by charities, and numerous other hot topics. For further details and to join the Alliance for Useful Evidence see:

www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/

Knowledge sharing and debate is therefore crucial. The Alliance for Useful Evidence, led by Nesta in partnership with the Big Lottery Fund and ESRC, is a network with over 1,000 members which could help facilitate these conversations.

3 MOBILISE EVIDENCE FOR MULTIPLE USES – FROM POLICY TO FRONT-LINE ACTIVITIES

Mobilise evidence for multiple types of use – from policymaking at national or local level to management and front-line activity.

The What Works centres will be looking for what is working in policy, programmes and practice, or a mix of these. Although the distinctions are rarely mutually exclusive, the table below begins to outline some of the differences between these, and the audiences involved.

Table 1: Areas of focus for the What Works Network (source: Puttick 2012)⁶

	What do we mean by this	Audiences to involve and influence
Policy	<p>Testing, experimenting and learning from what is effective policy, in terms of guidelines, legislation, principles that are implemented to impact and change conditions conducive to human welfare.</p> <p>Social policy has been defined as <i>“public policy and practice in the areas of healthcare, human services, criminal justice, inequality, education and labour.”</i>⁷</p>	Policymakers at a central and local level.
Programmes	The approaches and models being developed to address social challenges, either within the public sector or outside by providers, for instance, Family Nurse Partnerships. Tasks could involve developing, testing and evaluating different programme models.	<p>Commissioners and other funders, such as philanthropic foundations.</p> <p>Providers across third sector, private sector and public sector.</p> <p>Service users</p> <p>Front-line practitioners</p>
Practice	Best practice skills and culture. Tasks could involve training or creating communities of practice.	<p>Front-line practitioners</p> <p>Providers</p> <p>Service users</p>
Interventions	Types of products, such as technologies, developed to address specific challenges or to enhance ways of working.	<p>Front-line practitioners</p> <p>Commissioners</p> <p>Service users</p>

Identifying effective interventions is not the end result. The recent Nesta study on adoption of NICE guidelines in primary care points to a **need for much greater attention to adoption and speed of adoption across public services**. This will help both to encourage faster take-up of proven models, as well as better understanding of why and how effective models spread.⁸

The What Works Network also needs to ensure that the identified interventions are implemented correctly to help maintain impact when used elsewhere. This requires clarity and advice on how much the intervention can be changed and adapted to suit the new context, and what elements are core, to help increase the chances of success when rolled out.

To support implementation and adoption, the engagement and involvement with commissioners, practitioners, and others, is again absolutely vital. This active communication could take the form of events, training sessions, newsletters, and other forums that enable ideas and issues to be discussed and shared. Nesta is developing tools through its Open Workshop which will help practitioners and policymakers to interpret, use and make the most of evidence.⁹

4 INFLUENCE EVIDENCE CREATION TO HELP ADDRESS LIVE PROBLEMS

The What Works centres should try to influence the creation of new evidence – to ensure it addresses live compelling problems, and where possible to bring down the costs of evidence creation. Evidence also needs to support innovation and experiment – not crush it.

If the What Works Network is going to find the best interventions then it is **vitaly important that research production is not ignored**. With the opening up of public services there is a plethora of new approaches and interventions that may be more efficient, making experimentation and testing ever more important. Yet many providers – particularly smaller, charitable organisations – need help and support to evaluate their work. This should be addressed. **We do not want to be in a position where those provider organisations who can afford to pay for an evaluation make it onto the list of What Works at the expense of potentially better alternatives.**

This means the What Works centres should be leading the way to make it easier to evaluate. Our understanding of what are effective programmes and practices has evolved greatly over the past decades, yet the research methods used to evaluate them has remained fairly static. There is therefore a great need to **innovate and advance new methodologies**.

It also means that the What Works centres support the funding of primary research, or work with others, such as research councils, to signal and fill the gaps in evidence when they are identified.

In response to the need for innovation in research methods, Nesta is supporting the development of **Randomise Me**, an innovative, free to use online trials generator that will strip the complexities out of randomised controlled trials (RCTs), enabling anyone to set up and run their own trial (see the text box). The What Works centres should build upon this to explore and develop other methods that enable providers to evaluate their work in flexible but rigorous ways.

Randomise Me

Nesta is working with Ben Goldacre to create Randomise Me, a free to use online platform that will enable any individual or organisation to set up and run a trial to test interventions and answer questions relevant to them. The aim is for Randomise Me to help strip out the complexities commonly associated with the method and enable RCTs to be more commonly used, helping to robustly test different issues and interventions in an agile and low-cost way. The Randomise Me platform will launch at Nesta in summer 2013.

As well as innovating with how evidence is generated, there is also a need to ensure that it is accessible, useable and easy to interpret. This will require the What Works centres advancing evidence visualisation, communication and dissemination.¹⁰

A related point is that **evidence needs to support, not work against, systems of innovation**. All parts of public policy and practice need experimentation and creativity to discover better alternatives. By its nature, innovation has to go beyond what's already known – and experimentation needs space to adapt and sometimes to fail. Applying evidence criteria too soon can stifle innovation.

But all experiments should involve measurement and clarity about what counts as success. In short we need both more open and creative experimentation to generate new ideas – and more rigorous evidence to determine what deserves to be scaled-up.

5 BE READY TO ADAPT

The What Works Network should reflect on its own impact, learn from the evidence about evidence, and respond to what is and isn't effective.

The What Works network should learn from similar evidence institutions around the world that also broker links between research and practice. At Nesta we sought to find evaluations of these 'arbiters of evidence', hoping to find the institutions and mechanisms effective at improving the use of research and evidence in decision making. Yet although these institutions may appear to be effective at identifying what is working in different fields, we only found a couple of evaluations that show how effective and impactful the institutions are at actually ensuring this information changed decision making.¹¹

The What Works Centres should therefore build in evaluation of their own work from the outset.

They should explicitly test different mechanisms for generating and disseminating evidence, and monitor the impacts this is having, with the knowledge then shared across the What Works Network.¹²

Evaluating Project Oracle: a London-wide evidence generation campaign

To increase our understanding of how evidence can be generated at low cost, and then effectively incorporated into decision making, Nesta is evaluating Project Oracle. Project Oracle is the only city-wide evidence generation campaign of its kind in the world. We are interested in the impact that Project Oracle is having through **testing the different mechanisms that are being trialled**. Details of the work streams are available on the **Project Oracle website**. Nesta's evaluation of Project Oracle will be published in autumn 2013.

For the same reasons the network will need to continually test, evaluate and experiment with different approaches, as well as refreshing the lists of 'what works'. **Finding 'what works' implies that once identified the work is done. It isn't.** Our problems change, we change, and prevailing wisdom will be overturned. What works in one period may cease working in another, equally what works in one location might not work when tried elsewhere. Instead **we should be looking at 'what is working now,' recognising that the collation of convincing evidence is just the beginning.**¹³

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Nesta has been involved in the What Works Network since its inception and we are delighted that they are now becoming a reality. We will be watching their progress closely and hope that they have the impacts anticipated.

If you have any thoughts or comments please do let us know. Contact **Ruth Puttick** at Ruth.Puttick@nesta.org.uk

Table 2: Information on various evidence centres and initiatives

This list is not exhaustive, rather it is intended to give a flavour of the types of organisations and initiatives underway in the UK and internationally.

Name	Country	Institutional form	Headcount	Budget	Funding source	Staff	Area of focus/policy areas	What does it do?	Evaluation approach
Experimentation Fund for Youth	France	Government funding stream	12 managing administration of fund	€230m (€53m of which come from 'private sources')		Policy and academic researchers (Affiliate J-PAL Professors)	Youth services	Proposals are solicited for thematic calls (i.e. reducing school drop-out rates) from either a) NGOs who feel they have a particularly good intervention and an evaluator (of their choosing); or b) a state-led programme (in this instance there must be a national evaluation). They stress that there is no programme funding for the 'intervention', with the Experimentation Fund only funding the evaluation of it. They aim to 'set strong methodological requirements for evaluations.'	RCTs only.
Campbell Collaboration	Based in Norway, but international scope	Network	-3 + ? network	0.6m/year	Administration and network of academics	Public bodies and private foundations (UK=Home Office)	Education, Crime and Justice, Social Welfare.	Provides statistical meta-analyses on education, criminal justice, health, and social welfare interventions.	Only findings from RCTs are included.
NICE	UK	Regulatory body	-250	60m/year	Department of Health	Research analysts; project management	Health	To publically rule on what are the most effective and cost effective options available to the NHS.	Using the Accreditation Mark.
EPPI Centre	UK	Academic Research Centre	-20	?	Cochrane, ESRC, UK Govt Departments	Academic researchers	Education, Health and Social Policy.	Methodological programme of evidence-based work on social programmes to influence education policy.	Systematic reviews.
Center for Court Innovation (NB - Young Foundation incubating UK equivalent - Centre for Justice Innovation)	USA	NGO	175 Full-time employees	\$17.6m in 2010	87% government grants; 13% private foundations and fee-for-service contracts	Project managers, researchers, technical assistance	Justice	The Center has three primary areas of work; research, demonstration projects and expert assistance. The centre focusses on creating new programs that test innovative approaches to public safety problems.	There are experts from within the criminal justice field who test the effectiveness of the program. The line between 'practice' and 'research' is very blurred.
Third Sector Research Centre	UK	Attached to University	>35	Funded for five years initially, by ESRC (£5 million), OCS (£5 million) and Barrow Cadbury Trust (£250,000).	Economic and Social Research Council, Office of Civil Society and Barrow Cadbury Trust.	Academic researchers, knowledge exchange teams	Third Sector research - across policy areas	TSRC commissions independent research which is then actively disseminated via the knowledge sharing website.	It commissions studies in social finance, service delivery, workforce and workplace development, impact and quantitative analysis.

Name	Country	Institutional form	Headcount	Budget	Funding source	Staff	Area of focus/ policy areas	What does it do?	Evaluation approach
Project Oracle	UK	Accreditation body and capacity building programme led by Greater London Authority	1-3	TBC once funding confirmed	GLA (now in second phase, money secured from local authorities and ESRC)	Research project management. Plus a 'match making service' between projects and academic researchers	Young people in London	Project Oracle aims to bring providers of youth services – many of which are small and charitable – in line with academically rigorous standards of evidence.	Developed 'Standards of Evidence' with a theory of change at Level 1 to multi-site, independent RCTs at Level 5.
Government Social Research Service	UK	Professional grouping within civil service	-1,000	?	UK Government Departments	Social Researchers	Cross social policy	The GSR provides evidence to understand, develop, implement, monitor and evaluate government policies and services.	
University of Colorado Blueprints for Violence Prevention	USA	Academic Research	?	?	University	Academics	Violence Prevention	The Blueprints mission is to identify truly outstanding violence and drug prevention programmes that meet a high scientific standard of effectiveness. This means the programme is used by governments as a resource.	Blueprints have evaluated over 900 programmes. Each programme is evaluated by Blueprints then by an independent advisory board.
RAND Promising Practices Network	USA	Network	-8 + ? Network	?	Independent foundations; RAND corporation	Admin; experts	Various	The PPN is a group of individuals and organisations who are dedicated to providing quality evidence-based information about what works to improve the lives of children, families, and communities.	A team of RAND researchers from different fields evaluate the network.
Washington State Institute for Public Policy	USA	Research Institute	-12	300k-700k per project	Funded on a project-by-project basis, as directed by the legislature. A local college provides administrative support to the institute.	Academic and policy researchers	As directed by Washington State legislature	The aim of the institute is to provide impartial research to Washington State.	They have a multi-stage model, starting with meta-analyses and modelling using their econometric model. They produce 'Which?' style consumer reports that list different programme options.
EdLabs	USA	University department	?	?	University (and some matched funds)	Academic	Education research	EdLabs is an education research and development Lab devoted to closing the achievement gap. It was set up by Harvard University.	EdLabs complete rigorous tests to ensure interventions work and are effective.
Coalition for Evidence Based Policy	USA	Not for profit research network	Four core staff and + advisory board	\$500,000	Philanthropic foundations (and small Government contracts)	Researchers	Promoting the use of evidence in governmental decision making	Established to promote the use of evidence in policy and decision making by ensuring government implements policy that is proven to work and that is backed up by evidence. The Alliance for Useful Evidence is its sister organisation in the UK.	Classify according to 'top tier' criteria.

Name	Country	Institutional form	Headcount	Budget	Funding source	Staff	Area of focus/ policy areas	What does it do?	Evaluation approach
J-PAL	USA based with 54 affiliate professors worldwide	Academic department and international network	-200	?	Endowment	Research (90%); Operations (5%); Policy (5%)	Poverty alleviation	Research Evaluations; Policy.	Randomised evaluations are carried out by a team of professors who test the effectiveness of programmes.
Cochrane Collaboration	Worldwide	Network	? + 28,000 network	1.9m (core)+ 19m (group)	State health research institutes in developed countries (UK NIHR equivalents), non-profits, universities	Academic researchers; Administration	Health	They are a network of more than 28,000 people who work together to promote the best available research evidence to healthcare providers.	Their '8-point scale' explicitly asks for enough information for intervention to be replicable.
Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)	UK	Independent charity	80 staff	?	Department of Health and devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland	Various	Social care (including older people, disabilities, families)	SCIE gathers and analyses knowledge about what works and translates that knowledge into practical resources, learning materials and services including training and consultancy. It aims to improve the knowledge and skills of those working in care services, including managers, frontline staff, commissioners and trainers.	Studies available on Research Register for Social Care.
Early Intervention Foundation	England	Consortia	TBC	TBC	Government grant	Researchers	Early years and prevention	Advocates for early, rather than remedial intervention, rigorously assess what works on the ground and advises those planning and delivering services to ensure children, young people and families get the best support possible.	To be determined through an evidence review panel.
Education Endowment Fund	UK	Charity	-7 staff	£125 million	Founded by the education charity the Sutton Trust, as lead charity in partnership with Impetus Trust, the EEF is funded by a £125m grant from the Department for Education. With investment and fundraising income, the EEF intends to award as much as £200m over the 15-year life of the Foundation.	Grant managers and researchers	Education	An independent grant-making charity dedicated to raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils in English primary and secondary schools by challenging educational disadvantage, sharing evidence and finding out what works.	All projects are independently evaluated, where possible, using RCTs.

ENDNOTES

1. The Nesta Standards of Evidence are an adaptation of those used in Project Oracle, for further details see: http://www.nesta.org.uk/blogs/alliance_for_useful_evidence/standards_of_evidence_for_impact_investing_a_new_approach_to_balance_the_need_for_evidence_with_innovation
2. For further details on Nesta Standards of Evidence see Puttick, R. and Ludlow, J. (2012) 'Standards of Evidence for Impact Investing.' London: Nesta. Available online at: http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/assets/features/standards_of_evidence_for_impact_investing
3. Puttick, R. (2011) 'Dealing with negative findings.' In 'Ten Steps to Transform the Use of Evidence.' London: Nesta. Available at: <http://www.nesta.org.uk/library/documents/TenStepsBlog.pdf>
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5. Puttick, R. (2011) 'Making the debate relevant.' In 'Ten Steps to Transform the use of Evidence.' London: Nesta .
6. Table taken from Puttick, R. (2012) 'Why we need a NICE for social policy.' London: Nesta .
7. As defined by the Malcolm Weiner Centre for Social Policy, Harvard Business School. Available at: <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/wiener>
8. Nesta's work on adoption of innovations in public services is due Summer 2013.
9. Nesta Open Workshop, available at: <https://openworkshop.nesta.org.uk/>
10. See Puttick, R. (2011) 'Institutionalising the demand for evidence.' London: Nesta. <http://www.nesta.org.uk/library/documents/TenStepsBlog.pdf>
11. Puttick, R. (2012) 'Why we need a 'NICE for social policy.' London: Nesta.
12. See Mulgan, G. (2013) 'Experts and Experimental Government.' In Doubleday, R. and Wilsdon, J. (Eds.) 'Future Directions of Scientific Advice in Whitehall.' London: Alliance for Useful Evidence. Available at: <http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/Future-directions-for-scientific-advice-in-Whitehall.pdf>
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Nesta is the UK's innovation foundation. An independent charity, we help people and organisations bring great ideas to life. We do this by providing investments and grants and mobilising research, networks and skills.

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