

What Works Centre for Children's Social Care

Research Assistant

Overview

Dear Candidate,

Thank you for your interest in becoming a Research Assistant for the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care.

The What Works Centre is an exciting 'social start-up' and a fantastic opportunity to make a difference to the lives of children and their families in England. Every year over 700,000 children and young people, and their families, have contact with the children's social care sector. Changes in how the sector supports these children and their families can have hugely significant effects that resonate throughout entire lifetimes.

The Government's reform programme is increasingly giving control over how services should be run – along with accountability for the results – to the practitioners and practice leaders who are closest to children, young people and their families. Local authorities up-and-down the country, and supported by a range of other organisations both statutory and third sector, are using that freedom to try different ways of designing and delivering children's services, and up to £200m is being provided through the Department for Education (DfE) Innovation Programme to support this work.

With so much innovation taking place – and so much potential for change – the sector needs an independent organisation to look across all of this work and systematically develop the evidence base on what works, for whom, under what circumstances, and how. This is the best encapsulation of the What Works Centre's mission – to collect the best evidence on what we already know, work with the sector to prioritise the many questions that remain unanswered, fund research, and determine how best to make evidence relevant and accessible to decision makers. What Works Centres have been a great success in other policy areas – including in education, policing and healthcare – and we expect great things from the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care, which will be a fully-financed and independent body by March 2020.

The Centre is currently being established by a development team, led by innovation charity Nesta. Using £5m of set-up funding from the DfE, the development team is responsible for recruiting the Centre's founding leaders, supporting them to establish its strategy and build the organisation, developing and testing different ways of working with the sector, and providing an injection of capacity early in the Centre's life so that it can make a rapid start in its work.

Reporting to the Centre's Research Fellow, the post holder will support our Research team in conducting Randomised Controlled Trials to support the wellbeing of social workers and other professionals.

Thanks once again for your interest and we look forward to hearing from you.

Michael Sanders

Executive Director, What Works Centre for Children's Social Care

The Role

This role will provide support to our ambitious research programme, which spans randomised controlled trials in workforce wellbeing, evaluations of whole system changes, machine learning, and much more. The Research Assistant will have a crucial role in ensuring the smooth implementation and running of trials and evaluations run by the Centre; including liaising with project partners (which includes local authorities and academics), managing data collection processes, compiling trial materials, in addition to other tasks as required by the project(s).

The role would suit a new graduate from an undergraduate or masters degree, seeking to gain experience in a dynamic research environment.

The Person

The Attributes We Are Looking for in a Research Assistant

Essential

- A commitment to conducting high quality research for the public good
- A high level of organisational ability
- The ability to work as a part of a team
- A high degree of motivation and the ability to work autonomously where appropriate
- The ability to communicate and work with a range of stakeholders both within and external to the What Works Centre.

Desirable

- An understanding or experience of children's social care
- A good degree in social science
- Experience of working with data and ideally econometrics or data analysis.
- Previous experience working in a research environment, for example as a temporary or casual research assistant during university

Initial Terms and Conditions of Appointment

- **Remuneration:** c.£25K pa dependent on experience, plus standard Nesta benefits package.
- **Time Commitment:** This is a full-time role. We would also consider part time applications
- **Location:** Central London.
- **Term:** A fixed initial term of June 2019 to March 31st 2020. Possibility of transitioning into permanent role once the organisation is independently constituted. We would consider and welcome candidates interested in secondments from other organisations.
- **Other**
 - This role reports to a senior member of the Research team.
 - This role is not a public appointment.

Introduction to the Centre

The What Works Centre for Children's Social Care is being created to foster evidence-informed practice in the children's social care sector.

The Centre faces two challenges if it is to be successful:

- *Creating a better evidence base* – by sponsoring new practice-focussed research in areas where existing research is absent, of inadequate quality, or lacking relevance to decision-makers.
- *Ensuring that the Centre's work results in change, not just knowledge* – by investigating and addressing the barriers that might otherwise prevent practice leaders and practitioners from using insights from evidence to inform their decisions.

Addressing these challenges will not be simple.

Making decisions about where to focus the Centre's research budget will require it to build an understanding of where research evidence could have a real impact on practice. To achieve a greater impact, the Centre will also need to influence other researchers and research funders. This will require strategic clarity, an understanding of how evidence is created and used in practice, and the capability to build networks of influence in academia.

Making research insights both useful and accessible to decision makers will mean moving beyond the world of reports and portals. The Centre will work with practitioners to build innovative products and services that practitioners and practice leaders use and value. This will demand specific capabilities in entrepreneurship and product development.

Over and above the mechanical tasks of ensuring that useful evidence exists and is accessible, the Centre will need to work with leaders at all levels of the social work system to help them to effect a change in culture. These leaders want to establish the most effective norms for using the best available evidence in the 152 local authority areas in England, not to mention in their partners in other public services, in the policy-making and regulatory bodies, and amongst voluntary, community and private sector organisations that work for and alongside them in delivering services. The Centre's role is to help them do that.

Context to the Centre's Work

As big a challenge as this initiative represents, this is an opportune moment to be taking them on. The Department for Education has a clear, coherent, and consistent reform programme that for several years has worked towards its vision of a profession moving away from paperwork and process compliance, to embrace professional freedom and accountability. The Centre's goal, of supporting the profession to make use of evidence both in practice, and in the development of practice systems, is extremely well aligned to that reform programme¹. The Centre is not working alone; it will have the

¹ Detail on the policy context can be found in the 2011 [Munro Review](#), and in DfE's 2016 strategy paper [Putting Children First](#)

support of central Government, local authorities and representative bodies, a variety of voluntary and community sector organisations, and practitioners and practice leaders keen to help shape and use the Centre's work.

The Centre will also benefit from being part of the network of What Works Centres – now ten in total – with ever greater influence and profile. This includes the What Works Centres for [Education](#), [Early Intervention](#), [Crime Reduction](#), [Local Economic Growth](#), [Health and Social Care](#), [Wellbeing](#) and [Ageing, and others](#). Led by the Government's National Adviser on What Works, Dr David Halpern, and supported by a dedicated team in the Cabinet Office, the What Works Network will provide the Centre and its leaders with a group of peers who will be a valuable sounding board for strategy and organisational development, as well as a resource for collective influence².

The Centre is currently being established by a development team, led by innovation charity Nesta. Using £5m of set-up funding from the Department for Education, the development team is responsible for recruiting the Centre's founding leaders, supporting them to establish its strategy and build the organisation, developing and testing different ways of working with the sector, and providing an injection of capacity early in the Centre's life so that it can make a rapid start in its work.

In parallel with the work of the development team, the Department has commissioned a Research Partner for the Centre. The Research Partner team, led by Cardiff University, will develop a set of standards of evidence and then – through a programme of reviews, trials and other evaluations – strengthen the evidence base around effectiveness and cost-effectiveness within the sector. It too has around £5m of Government funding, giving the Centre and its research partner a combined budget of almost £10 million over 3 years.

The Centre's Executive Director will direct and be accountable for the work of both Incubator and its Research Partner, and will report to the Centre's Founding Board, chaired by Sir Alan Wood. The Researcher will report to the Centre's Head of Research, who reports in turn to the Executive Director.

The Incubator and Research Partner contracts run until March 2020, after which there will need to be a new financial settlement to fund the Centre's ongoing programme of work.

If the Centre is successful in its mission then the simple question 'what works?', will be generating answers that are used by practitioners to make better decisions, and by practice leaders to design better systems, all across England. The 700,000 children and their families who are supported by social workers and their colleagues each year will be living better lives as a result.

² More information on the What Works Network and its constituent members can be found in the recent publication What Works – Five Years On, available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/677478/6.4154_What_works_report_Final.pdf

About Nesta

Nesta is an innovation foundation. For us, innovation means turning bold ideas into reality. It also means changing lives for the better.

We use our expertise, skills and funding in areas where there are big challenges facing society, from the frontiers of personalised healthcare to stretched public services and a fast-changing jobs market.

Nesta is based in the UK and supported by a financial endowment. We work with partners around the globe to bring bold ideas to life to change the world for good.

How to apply

To apply, please send your CV and a supporting statement outlining clearly how you would succeed in the role to recruitment@nesta.org.uk, citing “WWC Research Assistant” in the Subject of the email.

Closing date for applications is: **12pm 7th June 2019**