



Alliance for  
Useful Evidence

# A Practical Guide for Establishing an Evidence Centre

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# About the Alliance for Useful Evidence

The Alliance for Useful Evidence is a network, hosted by Nesta, that champions the smarter use of evidence in social policy and practice. We do this through advocacy, convening events, sharing ideas and resources, and supporting individuals and organisations through advice and training. We promote our work through our network of more than 4,800 individuals from across government, universities, charities, businesses, and local authorities in the UK and internationally. Anyone can join the Alliance network at no cost.

To sign up please visit:

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# Introduction

Over the last 10 years there has been a growth in evidence centres being established – both in the UK and internationally.<sup>1</sup> Some of these have been funded by national governments and others by independent research institutes or philanthropists. These centres aim to improve a range of societal outcomes (e.g. [tackling housing problems](#), [reducing crime](#) or [reducing poverty](#)) by increasing the use of evidence in public policy and services. However, each evidence centre has developed its own distinctive evidence philosophy and methods for working with its users, as suited to its unique context.

This report is an attempt to distil some of the learning that has been generated – both in the UK and internationally – about how to set up an evidence centre. It is aimed at anyone who is in the early stages of establishing a new evidence centre. Since 2013, Nesta and the Alliance for Useful Evidence have supported the development of more than eight evidence centres. The Alliance has collaborated with a range of knowledge intermediaries, acting as an advisor and convenor and sharing our expertise in knowledge mobilisation. In 2016, the Alliance carried out a [scoping study](#) for the Nuffield Foundation, in partnership with Lancaster University, to explore the feasibility of establishing the [Family Justice](#)

[Observatory](#). Between 2017–2019, the Alliance also led a consortium to establish a new evidence centre, now called [What Works for Children's Social Care](#), which was hosted by Nesta until it became an independent charity in April 2020. This report draws on insight from our own experience, published material and interviews with senior leaders from a range of evidence intermediaries to respond to the continuing demand for knowledge on this topic.<sup>2</sup>

For the purpose of this report, we are defining an evidence centre as *an independent organisation that curates and mobilises a high-quality evidence base of research, data and evaluations to help practitioners, policymakers and others to achieve their objectives*.<sup>3</sup> We hope this report will provide a practical and helpful guide for people who are currently considering establishing an evidence centre. We recognise that readers of this report may be working in a variety of very different contexts. Therefore, rather than being prescriptive, this report aims to pose useful questions to help the reader think through their options. It shares examples of how existing evidence centres have approached various challenges and what they have learned in the process and aims to provide these insights in a consolidated and user-friendly manner.

## Drawing on this body of knowledge, we suggest that there are some common ingredients that contribute to successful evidence centres.

Evidence centres benefit from having:

- 1. Clear objectives:** Good knowledge of the centre's intended user group(s) and the context they are working within. Understanding of the current relationship between evidence users and evidence producers and of the drivers that influence users' decision-making. Clear outcomes to work towards and an evidence-informed theory of change.
- 2. Robust organisational development:** Commitment to create an independent and sustainable organisation with effective governance and the right mix of skills and experience, over a timescale that will be sufficient to make a difference.
- 3. Engaged users:** Understanding users' evidence needs and working collaboratively with them in all aspects of the centre's work to increase their capability, motivation and opportunity<sup>4</sup> to use evidence in their decision-making. Key areas of work to enable evidence uptake may include:
  - Consulting intended users about what evidence is needed.
  - Collaborating with users to create new evidence.
  - Communicating and interpreting evidence for end users.

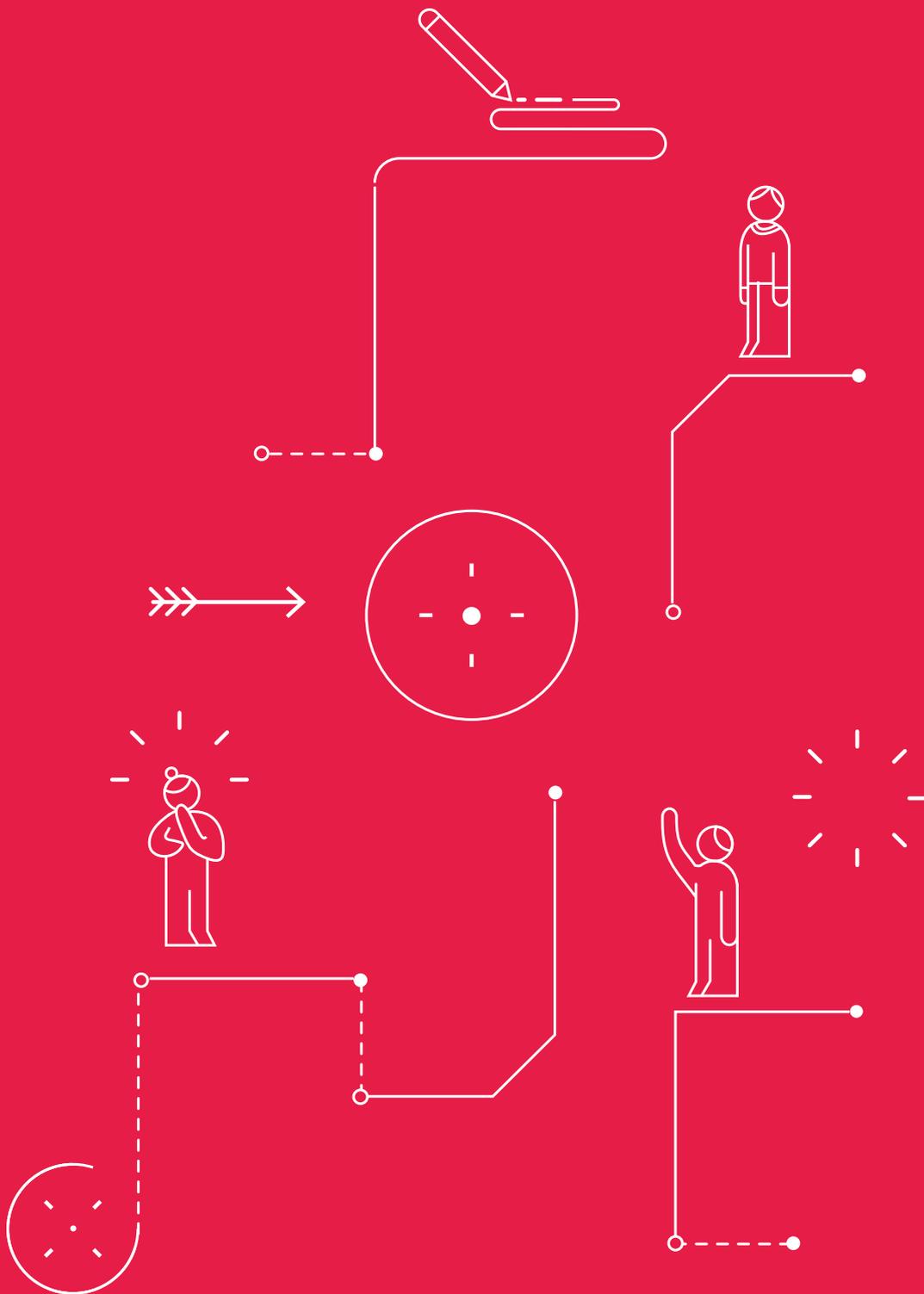
- Increasing people's capabilities to use evidence.
- Embedding evidence in working culture and practices.

- 4. Rigorous curation and creation of evidence:** A robust and transparent approach to selecting and generating high-quality evidence for your users. This might include:

- Defining what the centre considers to be 'evidence' and deciding what evidence the centre will curate.
- Applying standards of evidence.
- Mapping existing evidence.
- Synthesising useful evidence.
- Filling gaps with primary research.
- Building sector-wide capacity to create robust evidence.

- 5. A focus on impact:** Commitment to learn from your activities, including successes and failures, so that you can increase your effectiveness in achieving your objectives.

The five chapters in this report are structured around each of these areas. At the end of each chapter we provide a summary checklist of things to consider.



# 1 What is your aim?

Evidence centres are intermediaries: they seek to achieve change in the world by influencing individual users, professional bodies and organisations to use evidence in their decision-making. This means that a relatively complex chain of events will need to occur before positive societal impacts can be observed.

### Foundations for success

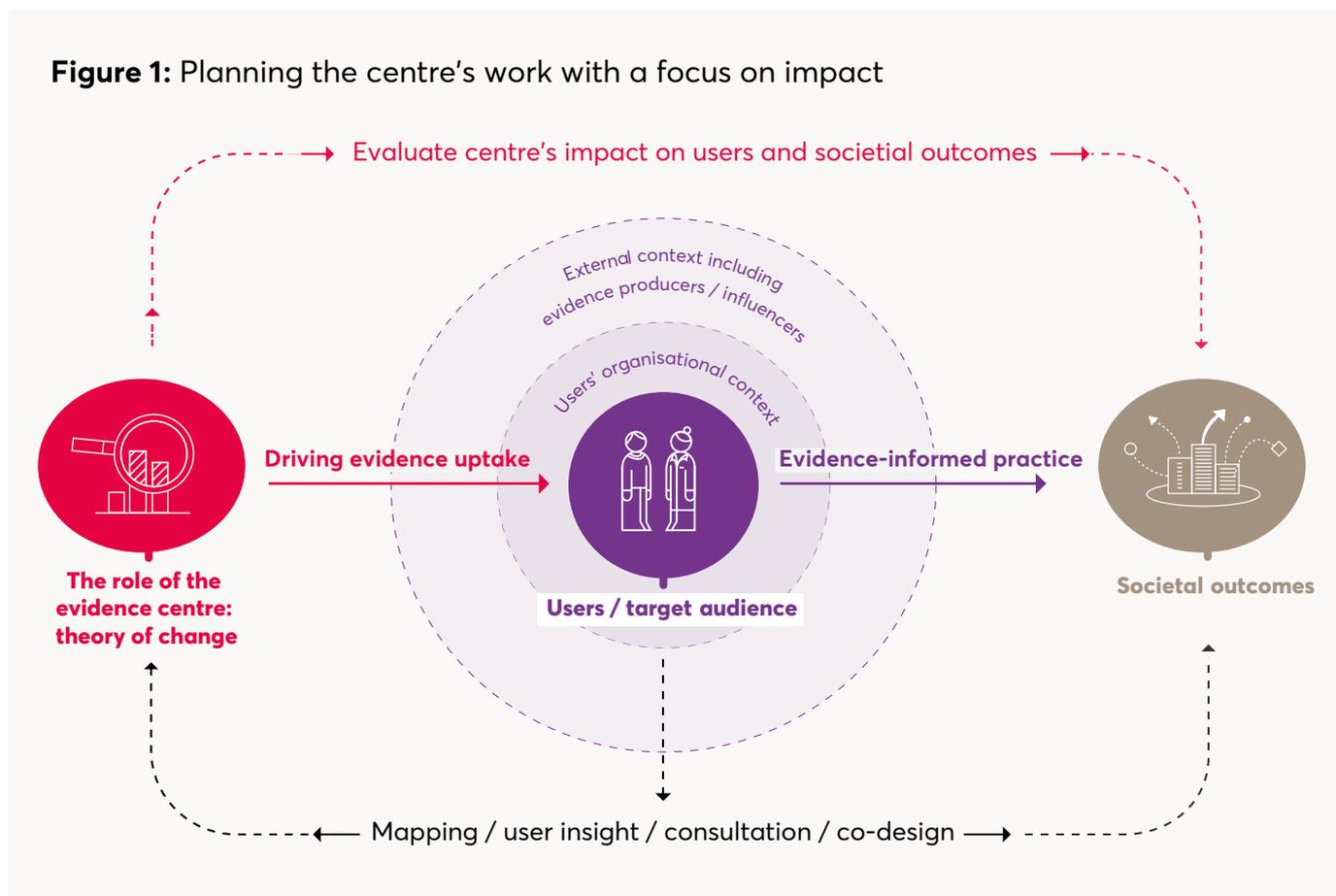
To create solid foundations for the centre's work and increase the likelihood of making a meaningful impact, it may help to clarify the following things at the outset (see also figure 1):

- Who you consider to be your users, their working environment and the broader context shaping their behaviour.
- What the interplay between evidence and decision-making currently looks like for your user group, including barriers and facilitators.
- What societal outcomes you will seek to achieve.

- Your theory of change for how you will work with your users to increase their use of evidence in decision-making and achieve a positive impact.

As figure 1 shows, there is a continual interplay between consultation with the evidence centre's users, definition of its outcomes, the development (and iteration) of its theory of change and evaluation of the centre's impact on its users and broader societal outcomes.

We will address each of these activity areas in turn, drawing on examples of how other evidence centres have approached them.



## Knowing who your users are

Evidence centres seek to achieve their outcomes by influencing the behaviour of individual practitioners and policymakers, and the organisations they work within, to support more evidence-informed decision-making. Therefore, early decisions need to be made about who these intended evidence users are. James Turner, who was involved in establishing the Education Endowment Foundation and later became its deputy CEO, reflected that 'in hindsight we should perhaps have defined this even more precisely from the start.'<sup>5</sup> Decisions about user groups are primarily a question of scope and strategy; for example, it will be easier to work in an intensive and sustained way with a narrower group of users.<sup>6</sup> However, where resources are sufficient, more widespread activity may help to achieve broader change to embed evidence use within a sector.

Evidence centres have taken a range of approaches to defining their user groups. The Education Endowment Foundation particularly targets school leaders who are responsible for making decisions about which teaching and learning interventions to adopt.<sup>7</sup> Teachers are also an important audience as users and implementers of learning interventions.<sup>8</sup> The What Works Centre for Crime Reduction aims to provide a service for all police;<sup>9</sup> this decision is likely influenced by this Centre's location within the College of Policing, which is the [professional body for the police service](#). The UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence has a relatively broad and heterogeneous audience; its regional [Knowledge Exchange Hubs](#) engage with stakeholders from across housing systems, including policymakers, practitioners and residents. Similarly, the [Early Intervention Foundation identifies its audiences](#) as spanning national-level politicians and policymakers, local-level system leaders and service managers, and frontline practitioners.

When making decisions about audience, it is worth bearing in mind that a 2016 review, *The Science of Using Science*, could not find any evidence that passive communication approaches – such as putting evidence on a website – were effective in increasing evidence uptake.<sup>10</sup> Instead, interventions were effective when they combined communicating evidence with strategies for increasing decision-makers' motivation.<sup>11</sup> This suggests that it is worth spending time understanding the specific circumstances and motivations of your user groups to inform your development of engagement strategies (more on this in chapter three).

## Understanding your users

Conducting some user research might be a useful first step towards understanding your users. Jen Gold, head of the [What Works Team](#) at the UK Government's Cabinet Office, advised:

*It is worth using ethnography so that you properly understand the sector – who are the decision makers? What are the points in their day when they're making decisions? Where do they go for information? Really understanding the users is incredibly valuable.*<sup>12</sup>

Evidence centres have taken a variety of approaches to learning about their users. The What Works Centre for Crime Reduction had an independent evaluation by Birkbeck, University of London, which covered the Centre's first three and a half years of activity.<sup>13</sup> In year one, the evaluators interviewed 49 middle and senior level police officers, community safety managers and police and crime commissioners, and surveyed 655 police officers in these categories. Through this research, they built up a picture of the Centre's intended user group, their attitudes to research and the organisational environment they worked in, to inform the Centre's work going forward.<sup>14</sup>

In its first three months, the development team for What Works for Children's Social Care conducted a 10-week action research project in nine different local authorities. Through this work they sought to gain an in-depth understanding of their potential users across the social work hierarchy, from social work practitioners to assistant directors, as well as involving children and their families. The project team used ethnographic techniques, including contextual interviews and work shadowing, to understand social care professionals' working lives. Through this work, the Centre learned about some of the needs of each of these groups. For example, families wanted better communication from skilled and empathetic workers, social work practitioners wanted evidence-informed tools and knowledge to support skilled decision-making, and managers wanted evidence to support them to provide good supervision. Children's social care leaders wanted evidence on effective interventions and organisational development, as well as opportunities to connect with their peers in other local authorities.<sup>15</sup>

## ‘You need to undertake system mapping and understand who you need to engage.’

### Mapping the interplay of evidence users, evidence producers and the broader context

Practitioners and policymakers, and the researchers who aim to inform their work, exist within a crowded environment of other organisations and influencers. Evidence centres can facilitate interactions between evidence users and evidence producers by acting as an intermediary. However, to do this well, evidence centres need to have a good grasp of the status quo before they seek to intervene. Emily Morgan, operations director, and Georgia Parry, operations manager at What Works for Children's Social Care, advised:

*You need to understand the different groups in your sector ... research and practice ... how collaboratively they work together and how this can be improved ... what their views are of each other. There may be sectors already well connected with academia. How well is it working currently and how can you enhance it?*<sup>16</sup>

Lígia Teixeira, chief executive of the Centre for Homelessness Impact, explained how helpful it had been that she was already familiar with the world of homelessness evidence, policy and practice:

*I'd played a living role in the development of the evidence field for a number of years before I had the idea to create a centre. I knew the key players in the UK and across the world. [...] Get to know them. Talk to the individuals and take a critical stance at the same time. This is really quite important.*<sup>17</sup>

In addition to considering evidence, the behaviour of decision-makers in all sectors is influenced by other powerful drivers, including statute, government policy, regulatory activity and funding constraints. For example, local authority children's social care services are regulated by Ofsted, therefore Ofsted's inspection frameworks will have a powerful day-to-day influence on social care leaders' decision-making. It is a challenge for newly created evidence centres to gain traction with their audiences in the context of these long-established relationships and systems of influence.<sup>18</sup>

Useful groundwork for establishing an evidence centre might involve mapping the current interplay between evidence users and evidence producers, and the broader context of institutions and stakeholders the centre will be operating in. (See Nesta's DIY toolkit for free-of-charge [stakeholder mapping resources](#).) Combined with research insights about your user group, this stakeholder map can help to inform your hypothesis about where there are currently gaps or failures in the system and how the evidence centre can best act to address them. Jen Gold told us:

*It is hugely difficult at a practitioner level to change practice. You might want to drive change in services through inspectorates. You influence the influencers and everything else takes care of itself. In order to do that you need to undertake system mapping and understand who you need to engage.*<sup>19</sup>

## Defining outcomes

Evidence centres are set up with a particular purpose in mind. The aim might be to reduce crime, tackle UK housing problems, improve educational attainment for children in low-income families or reduce poverty and income inequality. These are big challenges and there is a risk that a centre's activity could be spread too thin, making it hard to focus efforts and demonstrate progress. Working with the centre's users to define a clear set of outcomes for the centre may make it easier to determine what is in and out of scope, when to collaborate and when to redirect an opportunity elsewhere. The activities of the centre can then be targeted at achieving an improvement in these outcomes, by supporting evidence-informed decisions.

James Turner explained that for the Education Endowment Foundation:

*To have an anchor on attainment as a primary outcome was really important. There were so many interventions we could test. If we didn't have the constant of attainment, it could become very disparate. The acid test for anything we were doing was always how will this impact on the attainment gap between poorer and better off children?*

Over time, these outcomes can be revised and updated if necessary. James Turner suggested:

*It is always better I think, from the EEF's experience and ones I've been involved in, to start with a relatively defined set of parameters and broaden them out once you start to get those initial ones covered.<sup>20</sup>*

### Box 1: Examples of evidence centres' approaches to outcomes

#### The Education Endowment Foundation

The Education Endowment Foundation seeks to [improve educational achievement for all children](#), especially those who are from low-income backgrounds. Educational outcomes include either attainment outcomes (e.g. reading, writing, oral language or mathematics) or cognitive outcomes (e.g. reasoning and problem-solving skills). These are presented in terms of expected months of progress.<sup>21</sup>

#### The Centre for Homelessness Impact

The Centre for Homelessness Impact aims to [prevent homelessness whenever possible](#). When homelessness does occur, it should be:

- **Rare:** there are few people applying to councils as homeless.
- **Brief:** people are quickly connected to housing.
- **Non-recurring:** people do not experience multiple episodes of homelessness.

#### What Works for Children's Social Care

What Works for Children's Social Care identified [three primary outcome domains](#):

1. The rights of children, parents, carers and families.
2. Children's and young people's outcomes.
3. Parent, carer and family outcomes.

These primary outcomes are supported by intermediate Children's Social Care organisational outcomes (e.g. workforce conditions), which are enablers to achieve the primary outcomes.

#### Early Intervention Foundation

Early Intervention Foundation has [seven child outcomes](#):

1. Supporting mental health and wellbeing.
2. Preventing child maltreatment.
3. Enhancing school achievement and future employment.
4. Preventing crime, violence and antisocial behaviour.
5. Preventing substance abuse.
6. Preventing risky sexual behaviour and teen pregnancy.
7. Preventing obesity and promoting healthy physical development.

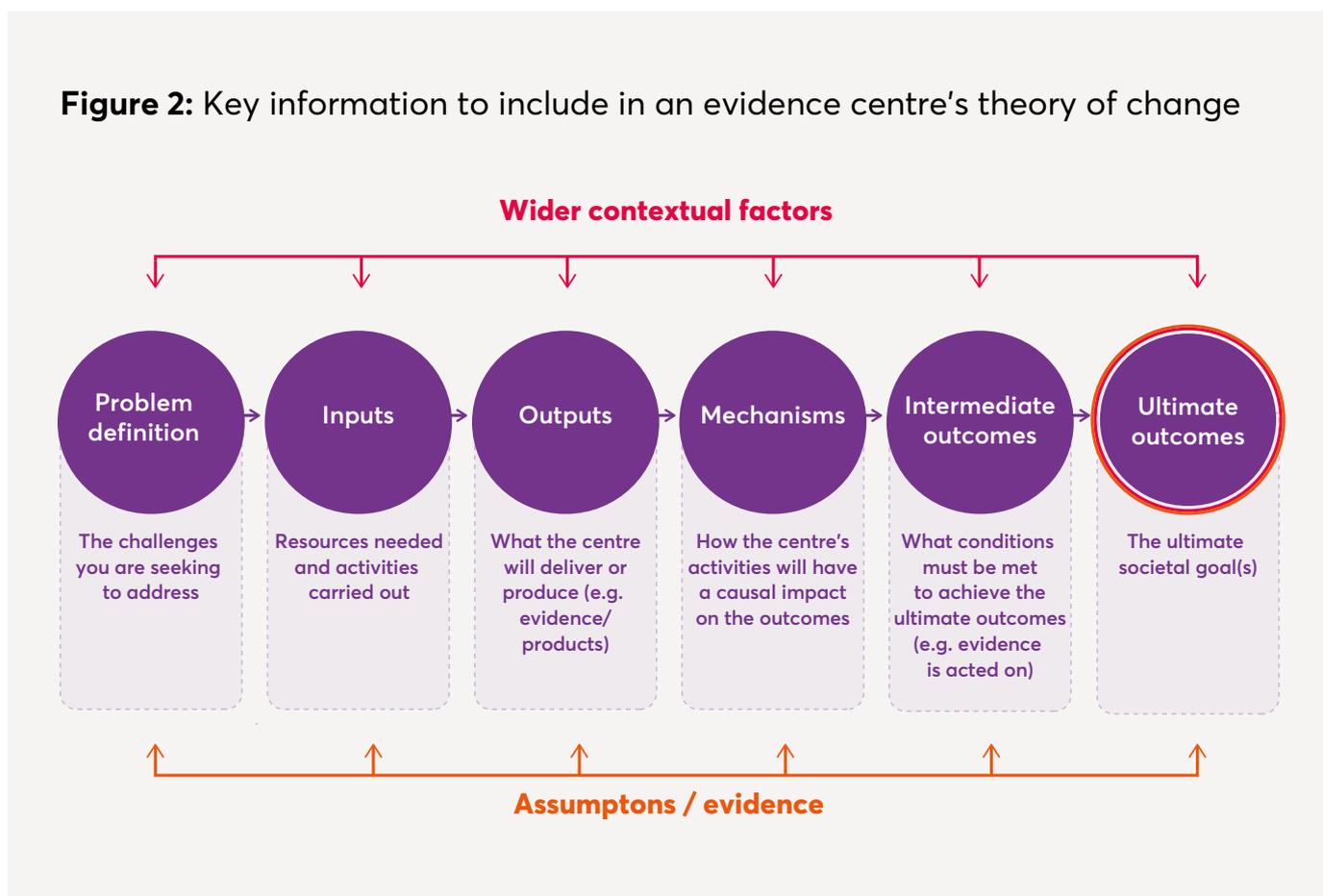
## Developing your theory of change

At an organisational level, a theory of change (or logic model) explains how an organisation plans to achieve its goals. Developing a theory of change is a useful exercise for evidence centres to identify, in partnership with their stakeholders, what problems they will address, how they will address them and what impact they expect to have. The theory of change should show what activities will be carried out and the mechanism of how each activity will have a causal impact on the centre's outcomes.<sup>22</sup> Figure 2 provides an outline of the type of information that is usually included in a theory of change. Outcomes are likely to include intermediate outcomes (e.g. better use of evidence in decision-making), as well as ultimate outcomes (e.g. positive societal impacts such as improved educational attainment).

Evidence centres should seek to ensure their theories of change are informed by the best available evidence

on which mechanisms are most likely to be effective in achieving the desired outcomes.<sup>23</sup> This includes research about effective strategies for enabling evidence use.<sup>24 25</sup> As advised in the Treasury's Magenta Book<sup>26</sup>, we would also recommend that evidence centres involve a broad variety of stakeholders in developing their theory of change and testing its assumptions. As intermediaries, evidence centres achieve their outcomes through others, therefore it is important that their strategy and activities are relevant, useful and acceptable to their users. The Centre for Homelessness Impact's SHARE Framework is a good example of this collaborative approach. They initially developed this framework with their strategic partners in 2018<sup>27</sup> and then carried out a large consultation with their stakeholders across the UK, generating around 500 responses (both online and in person at events and meetings). They further refined and updated the SHARE framework to respond to this feedback and published it again in 2019.<sup>28</sup>

**Figure 2:** Key information to include in an evidence centre's theory of change



A key learning point from the 2018 study by Gough, Maidment and Sharples of the UK What Works Centres was that these Centres 'do not necessarily have explicit theories of change.'<sup>29</sup> When we discussed this with Jen Gold, she explained:

*The evidence sector has changed dramatically [since the What Works Network was first set up]. For new centres it's incredibly useful and much more common to have a theory of change – setting out what you're doing and how it links to your outcomes. It gives you a sense of clarity. Not all What Works Centres had one early on, but I'd recommend generating one to give clarity on the outcomes you're trying to achieve and the audience you're targeting and trying to influence.<sup>30</sup>*

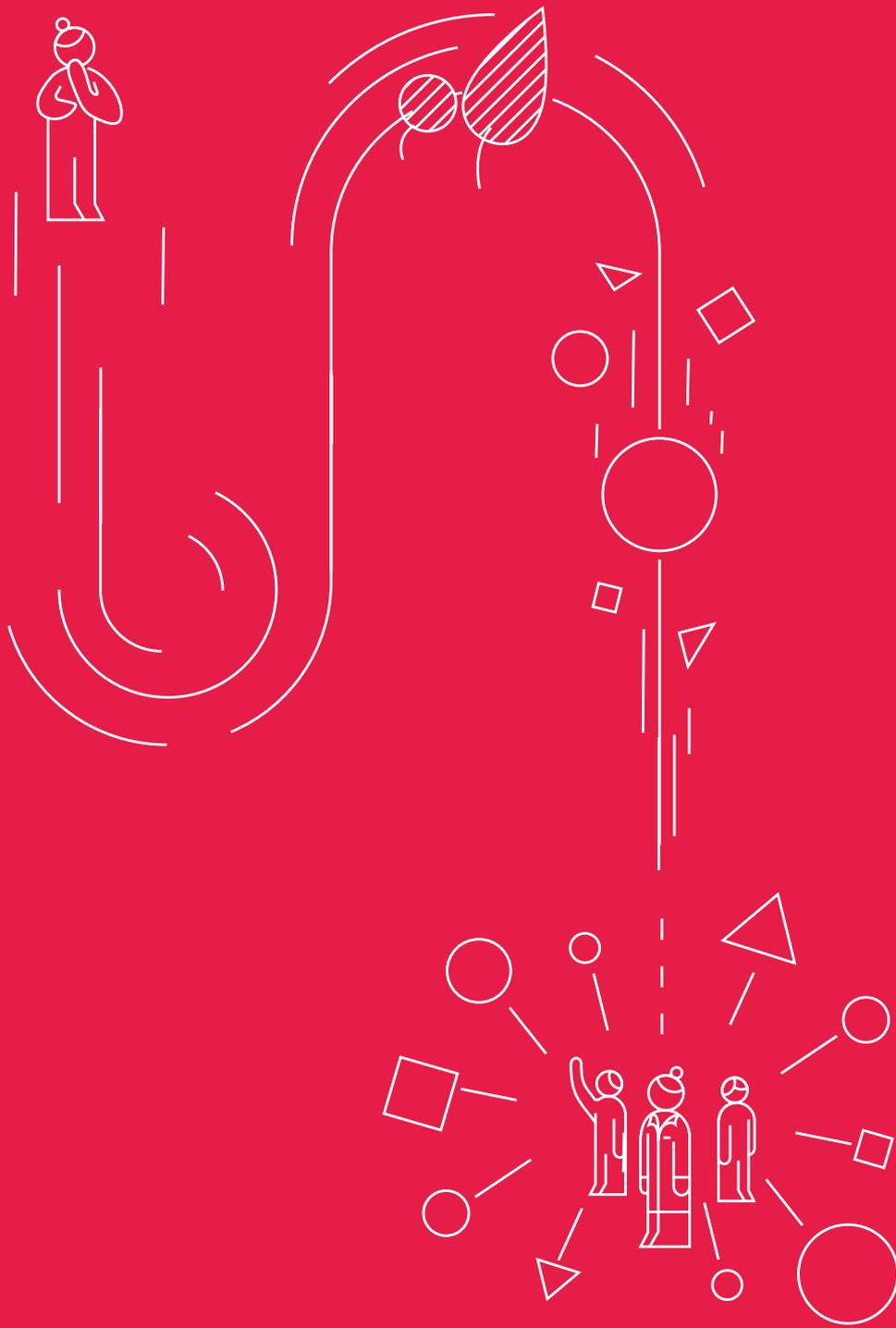
Clear outcomes and a theory of change are also needed at the outset of the centre's work to provide a robust basis for measuring its impact (more on this in chapter 5). In box 2 we have included some resources and additional examples that may be helpful to consult when developing your theory of change.

## Box 2: Theory of change resources and examples

- [Magenta Book: Central Government guidance on evaluation](#), HM Treasury (p24-26)
- [Theory of change: The beginning of making a difference](#) by New Philanthropy Capital<sup>31</sup>
- [Using Programme Theory to Evaluate Complicated and Complex Aspects of Interventions](#) by Patricia Rogers<sup>32</sup>
- [The Science of Using Science](#) by the EPPI-Centre, UCL<sup>33</sup>
- The Early Intervention Foundation's theory of change in their [2018–2023 strategy](#)
- The Centre for Homelessness Impact's [Share Framework](#)
- [The Alliance for Useful Evidence's Theory of Change](#)

## Chapter 1 summary checklist: What is your aim?

- ✓ Define the ultimate 'real world' outcomes the evidence centre is aiming for.
- ✓ Identify the centre's primary user group(s) whose decision-making it will seek to influence.
- ✓ Undertake research with the centre's users to understand their motivations and their working environment and how this influences their decision-making.
- ✓ Map the current interplay of evidence users and evidence producers and the broader context the centre will be operating within, including key influencers and levers.
- ✓ Develop an evidence-informed theory of change in collaboration with your users, showing what activities the centre will undertake and how these will help to achieve its objectives.



## **2** How will you design a robust organisation?

## The aim of this chapter is to help those of you who are considering setting up an evidence centre to think through some of the decisions you will need to make on practicalities.

How can you best involve the centre's users from the earliest stage of its development? How can you ensure that the evidence centre has the *right kind of independence*, so that it can produce robust and trustworthy evidence but still be impactful? What kinds of funding arrangements might work best? What options might there be for incubation and hosting during the set-up phase? How long might it take? What governance, leadership and staffing might be needed? Each of these areas will be addressed in turn.

### Consulting users from the outset

Frequent consultation with the centre's users is also important to inform decisions about organisational design. Which activities should the centre prioritise? What skills and experience would they expect to see represented in governance and staffing? In its first weeks of existence, What Works for Children's Social Care began by holding five large events for social work practitioners. Over the next two years these events were followed up with hundreds of visits to individual local authorities, with the aim of eventually visiting and/ or working with every local authority in England. A range of advisory groups were also set up to ensure the centre received feedback on areas of its work before the work took place. This sustained engagement has been important to build positive relationships with sector leaders, so that they become champions of the centre's work.<sup>34</sup> It has also led to local authorities approaching the centre with ideas for research they could collaborate on.<sup>35</sup>

### The right kind of independence

It is generally agreed that evidence centres need to be independent but what is meant by this? The UK's What Works Network defines independence as 'Providing independent, unbiased advice to users, retaining editorial control over all research

and products.<sup>36</sup> The people we interviewed for this report discussed the following types of independence as being particularly important:

- **Independence from funders:** It is essential that funders are not able to influence research findings, which must be derived from the evidence. However, it may be appropriate for funders to feed into decision-making about research questions, especially if they will be the end user once the research is complete.<sup>37</sup>
- **Political independence:** Some evidence centres emphasised the importance of being politically non-partisan, so that they can influence policy effectively across political cycles.<sup>38</sup>
- **Avoiding organisational capture by a particular sector:** Evidence centres need to be in a position to speak truth to power, whether this is to government ministers, officials or service leaders.<sup>39</sup> The needs of end users also need to take precedence over academic interests and priorities.
- **Freedom to publish:** Evidence centres often have an agreement with funders and research partners that the results of their research will always be published. This decision cannot be changed if findings are unfavourable or difficult.<sup>40</sup> They may manage the publication of difficult research findings by giving partners advance notice, so that they have time to prepare their response to the findings.<sup>41</sup>

However, while independence from government may 'help build trust and credibility, particularly with practice-based stakeholders,'<sup>42</sup> a close relationship with government can also be important to help evidence centres to achieve impact. Gough, Maidment and Sharples observed that the status of NICE and the College of Policing as arm's-length government agencies (independent of government but funded

to deliver functions on behalf of the government) gives them a greater influence over practice in their sectors, compared with other evidence centres.<sup>43</sup>

Jen Gold commented:

*You need to be independent enough that you can give an honest appraisal of government policy, but there are advantages of closeness and access. What you want to avoid is a centre being located in an organisation that is also responsible for service delivery (and could be seen as marking its own homework). Equally it is problematic if a centre is hosted or funded by a lobby organisation.<sup>44</sup>*

## Funding arrangements

Evidence centres need some form of core funding for an initial period while they are first in development. One study of What Works Centres in the UK noted that most of these Centres had funding in the form of one-off grants to support the Centre's development, which may be combined with a mixture of separate grants to undertake specific projects.<sup>45</sup> Two Centres (NICE and the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction) had recurring grants, which put them on a more secure footing, and two Centres (the Centre for Ageing Better and the Education Endowment Foundation) had endowments to fund them over a longer timeframe: 10 and 15 years respectively.<sup>46</sup> More recently, the [Youth Futures Foundation](#) was set up in February 2019 with £90 million of funding to help disadvantaged young people into work and the [Youth Endowment Fund](#) has been established with £200 million to tackle youth crime and violence over the next decade.

Jen Gold advised funders supporting the initial development of new evidence centres that it is important to be realistic and to recognise that they may need to be in this for the medium- to long-term:

*When it comes to sources of funding for evidence centres, there is not a big range of options. Evidence centres tend to need core funding to get going and realistically, many won't be financially independent after a one- to three-year incubation period. Funders need to be realistic about financial sustainability.<sup>47</sup>*

Gough, Maidment and Sharples suggest that endowments are a particularly beneficial funding model for evidence centres as they give the centre greater financial flexibility, as well as the ability to make longer-term plans.<sup>48</sup> Jen Gold also supported this view:

*If resources are available, spend-down endowments are a good option – providing financial sustainability while enabling centres to invest in supporting the large-scale generation and adoption of evidence.<sup>49</sup>*

James Turner suggested to potential funders of endowments:

*One thing that keeps the EEF very on point is that there are expectations on spend which lead to action. If a funder wanted to exercise control, it could define spending targets every year, but there is a delicate balance between autonomy and control.<sup>50</sup>*

In lieu of an endowment, longer-term funding arrangements are preferable. Ruth Stewart, director of the Africa Centre for Evidence based at the University of Johannesburg, explained that it is essential to the stability of their centre that they are able to attract longer-term grants:

*I've just been fighting hard to try and get three-year grants, so that some of our staff can actually get three-year contracts. [...] I think around half of our staff are being paid from large grants that are two or three years in extent. And about the other half are being paid from much smaller grants and have more vulnerability. We try to make sure that actually, people's contracts are not determined by the project's length that they're working on.<sup>51</sup>*

A report by the Institute for Government echoed these points, observing that when evidence centres lack long-term funding, 'this reduces their ability to appoint staff and develop long-term plans.'<sup>52</sup> Some evidence centres – if operating in a sector with a relatively poor evidence base – may need to fund, support or deliver robust evaluations to grow that evidence base. In order to show results, impact evaluations<sup>53</sup> may need to be carried out over longer timeframes (e.g. three to five years or longer) and if evidence centres are only funded in the short term, it will be hard for them to promote this type of work. With its 15-year endowment, the EEF is able to follow recommended practice for evaluating complex interventions by starting with small-scale pilot studies and building up to impact evaluation if those pilots show promise.<sup>54</sup> Of course, once evidence is created, evidence centres then need to work with their users to enable its translation into practice, an activity that also requires staffing and funding.

Funding bodies should consider the role they could play in providing core funding to an evidence centre over a period of time, to support that centre's stability and enable it to work opportunistically, as well as develop a long-term strategy. Evan White, executive director at the California Policy Lab, explained that its core funding from the Arnold Foundation had 'given us flexibility – often we design a project, start work on it, and then get funding for it. We haven't waited for the funding to come in, otherwise we'd miss the policy cycle and risk the project no longer being relevant.'<sup>55</sup>

## ‘There can be both benefits and challenges of being hosted within a larger organisation.’

Evidence centres and their funders will need to have continued alignment in their objectives if this partnership is to work well.<sup>56</sup> Involving funders in discussions about the centre’s outcomes and theory of change could help to promote alignment from the outset. Funders should also identify a clear individual sponsor to work with the evidence centre<sup>57</sup> and have a position in the centre’s governance structure (see more on this below).

Previous research<sup>58</sup> and interviewees contributing to this project advised that while core funding is valuable, it is beneficial for evidence centres to have a range of funding streams. What Works for Children’s Social Care received core funding from the Department for Education in its incubation phase but in the longer term it will seek to work with a variety of funders. Emily Morgan and Georgia Parry from this Centre explained that:

*Having different funding streams is important. There is an attitude that if you show that you can get other funding it means you’re more stable. [...] When you have other funding streams you know you can do the work you want to do because you have funders funding that. It can also give you more confidence to speak up to your funders because you’re not relying on one funding stream.<sup>59</sup>*

The closure of the Mowat Centre in Canada in June 2019, after its funding from the Government of Ontario was not renewed, illustrates the vulnerability of organisations that rely on income from a single funder. However, while having more than one funding stream may help evidence centres to be sustainable, the involvement of multiple funders may also increase the complexity of contractual negotiations, reporting and governance requirements, as well as reducing flexibility in budget allocation.<sup>60</sup>

### Incubation and hosting

Many evidence centres begin their life within a host organisation; this might be a charity, a university or an independent government-funded body.<sup>61</sup>

Sometimes this arrangement is considered open-ended or permanent; for example, the Wales Centre for Public Policy has a long-term arrangement to be hosted at Cardiff University (initially for four years and subsequently renewed for a further five year period). The What Works Centre for Crime Reduction is permanently hosted by the College of Policing for England and Wales, which is an independent professional body for policing.<sup>62</sup> Alternatively, sometimes evidence centres are hosted through a temporary and transitional arrangement to enable the development of a new legally independent organisation. For example, the Centre for Homelessness Impact was initially incubated by the charity [Crisis](#), until it became a legally independent organisation (more information on timescales below).

Where an evidence centre starts out as a consortium of organisations, this can be helpful in bringing diverse knowledge, skill sets and networks. The [UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence](#) is a consortium of 14 organisations led by the University of Glasgow (where the Centre’s director and its administrative hub are hosted). Ken Gibb, director of the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence, explained that a consortium model has worked well for that Centre and they spent time during the bidding process planning a strong organisational structure.<sup>63</sup> Some interviewees who had worked on establishing an evidence centre as part of a consortium group also explained that partnerships made up of multiple organisations could be challenging to manage. For example, Greg Wilkinson, programme director of the incubator team setting up

What Works for Children's Social Care, emphasised the importance of early attention to establishing joint-working arrangements:

*We came together as four to five organisations quickly and didn't do a lot of talking at the start of the programme about who would be in charge of what, and what the ground rules were for working together. It led to frictions, pinch points, which sometimes got in the way of our being as effective as we might have been.<sup>64</sup>*

Interviewees who contributed to this report also explained that while an incubation period may be necessary, there can be both benefits and challenges of being hosted within a larger organisation. Evidence centres hosted within universities often felt that they benefited from their host's reputation.<sup>65</sup> Evan White commented that 'The reputations of UCLA and UC Berkeley have been essential for helping [California Policy Lab] to build credibility.'<sup>66</sup> Evidence centres also felt that they benefited a great deal from the business services provided by their host organisations during incubation, such as finance and legal.<sup>67</sup> However, there were also challenges involved in trying to establish a new entity within a larger organisation. For example, during incubation, it may not always be clear who has the sign-off on decisions, the evidence centre's shadow board or the hosting organisation's board. Also, while the host organisation may be very supportive, their process requirements may be time-consuming.<sup>68</sup>

Emily Morgan and Georgia Parry at What Works for Children's Social Care recommended that if the plan is for an evidence centre to transition to full institutional independence, it is helpful to have a clear roadmap from the outset:

*Set expectations of what you're trying to achieve – what type of organisation you're trying to establish. Will it be a company, charity or a community interest group? Knowing what you're aiming for is helpful. Understanding the period that you have for your set-up is also important. The contract that the DfE had with Nesta [to incubate What Works for Children's Social Care] was not just a wait and see. A solid end date helps.<sup>69</sup>*

Some of the practical tasks that will need to be accomplished during a set-up phase, before an evidence centre can become a fully independent organisation, are laid out in box 3. Emily Morgan and Georgia Parry explained that many of these tasks, such as opening an organisational bank account, were much more time-consuming than they originally anticipated.<sup>70</sup>

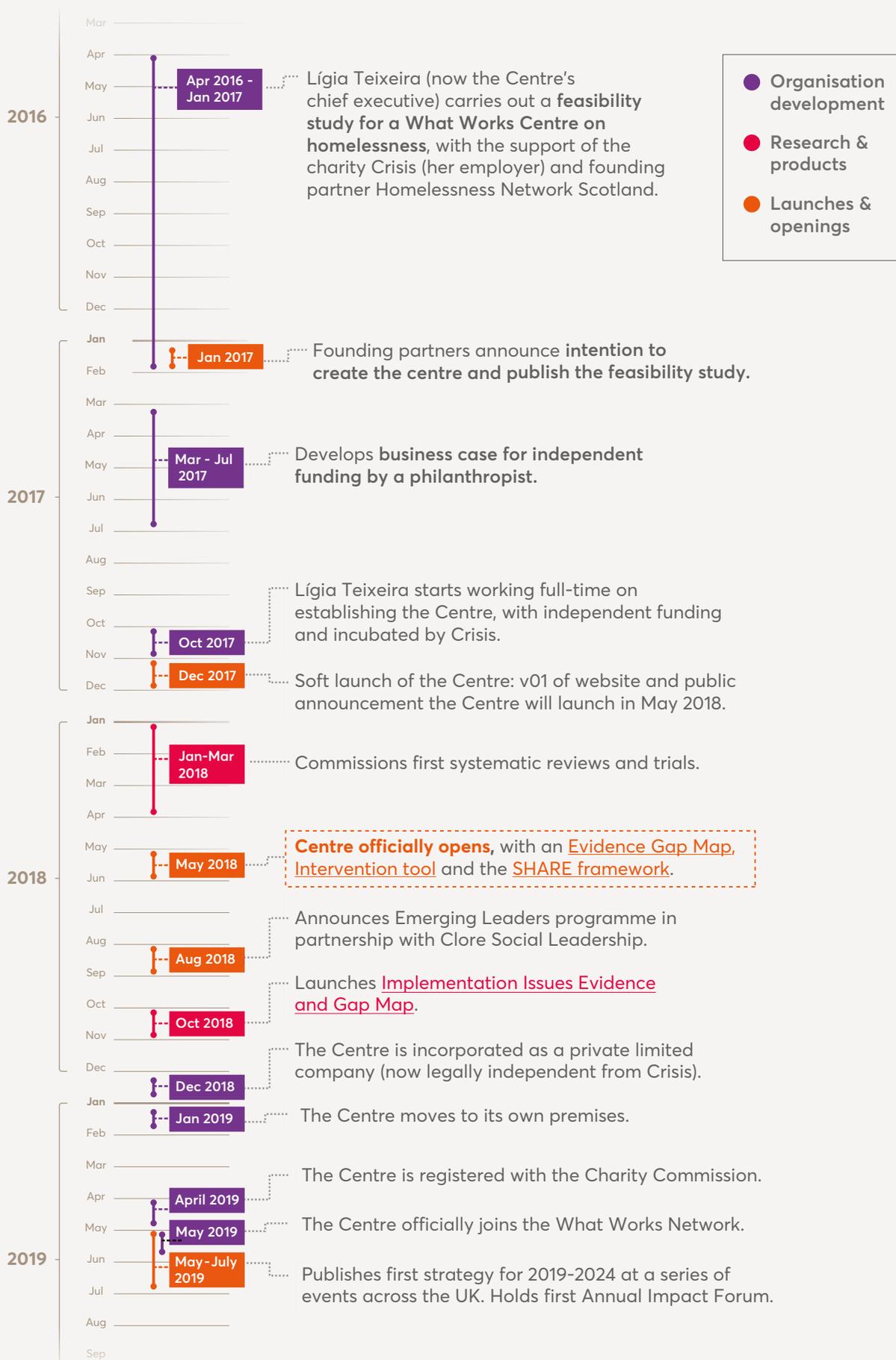
### Box 3: Preparations for legal independence<sup>71</sup>

- Business plan (or comparable)
- Confirmed funding streams
- Governance structures
- Decision on legal form (e.g. charity, social enterprise or limited company)
- Official registration with the relevant body (Companies House and/ or the Charity Commission)<sup>72</sup>
- Deed of transfer (if spinning out of a larger organisation this is drawn up as an agreement between the two parties prior to spin-out)
- Registration with HM Revenue and Customs (if in the UK)
- Business services (e.g. legal advice, finance, IT support), insurance and premises
- A bank account.

### Timescales

Georgia Parry at What Works for Children's Social Care emphasised that as the practicalities around transitioning to legal independence can be time-consuming, it is important to be realistic about timescales: 'It's easy to underestimate how long everything takes. We agreed with Nesta over a year ago to start the process of spin-out. [...] It might take 18 months rather than six months.' Figure 3 provides an example timeline of some of the key events involved in establishing another evidence centre – the Centre for Homelessness Impact.

**Figure 3: Development timeline for the Centre for Homelessness Impact**



People involved in setting up evidence centres also emphasised that achieving widespread culture change to value evidence is not a quick task. Max Nathan, deputy director, What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth, told the authors of another report:

*We need at least 10 years to do what our funders want us to do. [...] A large part of our role is cultural and institutional influence and change. That takes a lot of time to do – we're dealing with large institutions and traditions of not doing evaluation, or not doing evaluation well.*<sup>73</sup>

An evaluation of the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction spent three and a half years tracking the Centre's progress. Even after this period of time, the authors concluded that the task of increasing evidence use in crime reduction "is a long game (and certainly longer than expected at the outset of the project), of which the full impact is unlikely to be seen for some years."<sup>74</sup> Of course, while the project of widespread culture change may be slow, this does not mean that the pace of activity will be slow and there is plenty of scope for incremental achievements in the meantime.

## Governance

Evidence centres need clear governance structures to provide advice, effective scrutiny and timely decision-making. Those we interviewed for this report made a number of recommendations on governance:

- A centre's governance needs will change over time as the organisation becomes more independent.<sup>75</sup>
- During the start-up phase things will need to move quickly. It needs to be clear who has the final sign-off, especially when you are incubated within another organisation with its own governance structures.<sup>76 77</sup>
- A well-known and respected chairperson on your governance board can help to give the organisation credibility in its early stages.<sup>78</sup>

- Ensure that your governance board includes research methods expertise (as relevant to your evidence centre), policy expertise, sector expertise and representation of end users.<sup>79</sup>
- Include the funder in your governance structure: this can help avoid tensions and drift.<sup>80</sup> The What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth has an annual funders group that jointly agrees their work programme.
- Reach a clear agreement with funders about the milestones and outputs they will see during the set-up phase.<sup>81</sup>

Lígia Teixeira explained how governance structures for the Centre for Homelessness Impact transitioned during its set-up:

*The shadow board became our board of trustees. Before the shadow board I had an advisory board from the feasibility study. It is really important to have lots of people involved from the beginning to make this a success. We always had buy-in from the key people.*<sup>82</sup>

It may be useful for an evidence centre's governance board to hold a 'pre-mortem' session at one of its early meetings. The Behavioural Insights Team has defined pre-mortems as 'an exercise where decision-makers imagine the future failure of their project, and then work back to identify why things went wrong. This process encourages people to explore doubts, thereby highlighting weaknesses that can then be addressed.'<sup>83</sup> Jen Gold recommended to us that evidence centres hold pre-mortems and noted that the Youth Endowment Fund held a pre-mortem session as part of its set-up.<sup>84</sup>

If your evidence centre will be commissioning research or carrying out research in-house, consider whether you will need your own research ethics committee. The What Works Centre for Children's Social Care has taken the decision to establish a [research ethics committee](#), to review in-house research projects.

## Leadership and staffing

As with governance, the leadership and staffing needs of an evidence centre may change between its set-up phase and when it moves into 'business as usual'. Several interviewees emphasised that it is crucial to the success of a new evidence centre that you get the leadership right. Jen Gold suggested focusing on the skills that are needed for leadership, rather than assuming you need someone with experience in that sector:

*Those setting up the Centre might think they want a leader from [their own sector] to run it. But the reality is that you might need to look elsewhere for the right expertise. The same goes for staffing centres. In the early days the EEF really benefited from hiring economists.<sup>85</sup>*

Michelle Welch, director of public finance at Policy Labs in the USA, recommended that for a policy-focused evidence centre, you need 'senior leaders with experience in government, experience managing and running an organisation [...]. You need a leader who can strategise and knows how government works.'<sup>86</sup> However, she also cautioned that you 'don't build a lab around one star individual – make sure you also develop operational policies and procedures, comms capability, around them.'<sup>87</sup>

Interviewees suggested that during their initial incubation, evidence centres can benefit from the following staffing:

- Good project and programme management, especially where there are multiple partner

organisations contributing to a consortium.<sup>88</sup>

- Research expertise which includes relevant methods expertise as well as familiarity with the existing field of evidence.<sup>89</sup>
- Engagement lead(s) who understand the sector's networks.<sup>90</sup>
- Staff with lived experience (of working in the sector and/or receiving the relevant services).<sup>91</sup>

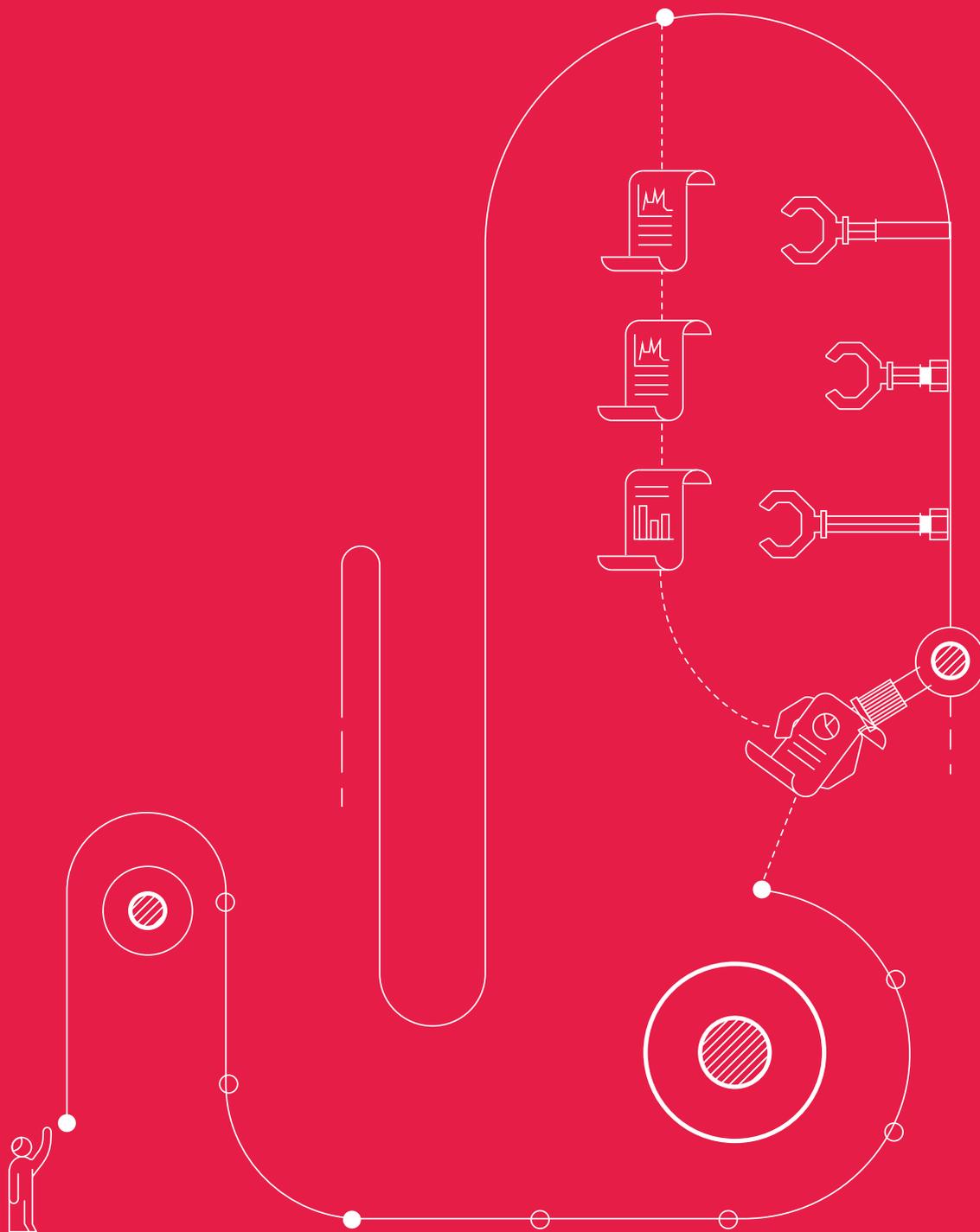
The balance of staffing and resourcing of various functions (e.g. in-house research, commissioning, implementation, communications and knowledge mobilisation) will vary depending on the focus and strategy of each evidence centre. Ewan King, chief operating officer at the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) and previously engagement lead for What Works for Children's Social Care, emphasised the benefits of well-resourced sector engagement and communications:

*Close listening to the sector needs to be invested in. [...] In this crowded space, you need good, visually appealing comms. Great website. Really good social media profile. High class events. Really good presentations. All of those things matter when you're getting out there.<sup>92</sup>*

Ken Gibb, director of the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence, also emphasised that 'it's really important that people know what we're doing'. Regular communications activities at the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence include webinars, posts on social media and a weekly email newsletter to members of their network.<sup>93</sup>

## Chapter 2 summary checklist: Designing a robust organisation

- ✓ Involve the centre's users from the outset to inform organisational design.
- ✓ Consider how you will ensure the evidence centre's independence.
- ✓ Seek funding arrangements that will provide the evidence centre with stability and flexibility and enable long-term planning.
- ✓ Explore different options for hosting the evidence centre while it is established; this might be for a transitional period or as a long-term arrangement.
- ✓ Make your plans with realistic timescales.
- ✓ Consider what governance arrangements will be needed during different periods of the centre's development, to enable timely and robust decision-making.
- ✓ Consider what mix of skills and experience you will need at each stage of the centre's development: during the initial set-up period and for 'business as usual'.



### 3 How will you enable evidence uptake?

This chapter will explore a range of methods that can be used by evidence centres to enable their audiences to use evidence in their decision-making. These activities to encourage research use are sometimes referred to as 'knowledge mobilisation'.<sup>94</sup>

Evidence centres need to support uptake actively because, realistically, evidence will only ever be one input to decision-making alongside other influences such as professional judgement, organisational circumstances and stakeholder preferences.<sup>95</sup> Among these competing priorities, research evidence can struggle for airtime. There are also practical barriers to evidence uptake: busy professionals commonly identify a lack of time and capacity as barriers to them engaging.<sup>96-97</sup> It has been estimated that it can take over a decade to see research findings implemented in clinical settings.<sup>98</sup>

A study by Davies, Powell and Nutley of research agencies working in the fields of health care, social care and education found that these agencies were 'using a range of knowledge mobilisation approaches, from the traditional to the more innovative, but often do so in a rather makeshift way.'<sup>99</sup> The study observed that agencies found it difficult to evaluate their knowledge mobilisation practices and there was relatively little knowledge sharing between them.<sup>100</sup> More recently, the report by Gough, Maidment and Sharples about UK What Works Centres observed that compared with efforts to collate and produce evidence, 'relatively less work is undertaken to actively support the uptake and application of evidence in policy and practice decisions.'<sup>101</sup> However, the report also observed that the balance of activity in these Centres was gradually changing: 'over time most Centres are placing an increasing proportion of their effort in interpreting research (e.g. producing actionable guidance) and on supporting uptake and application of evidence.'<sup>102</sup>

Research by behavioural scientists suggests that for a behaviour (such as evidence uptake) to take place, people need to have the capability, motivation and opportunity for this behaviour. If any of these conditions are not present, the behaviour will not happen.<sup>103</sup>

Drawing on this behavioural research, as well as research describing the full range of knowledge mobilisation strategies available (see box 4), evidence centres should consider how they will encourage and enable their users to use evidence in their decision-making.<sup>104</sup> This may include interventions at the level of individuals, teams, organisations or wider networks within a sector.

#### Box 4: Knowledge mobilisation practices by research agencies: eight archetypes

- Knowledge production (product pushers).
- Brokering and intermediation (*own* research; *wider* research).
- Evidence advocacy (proselytisers for an evidence-informed world).
- Research and practice (research *into* practice; research *in* practice).
- Fostering networks (building on existing networks and developing new ones).
- Advancing knowledge mobilisation (building knowledge about knowledge work).

From [Davies, Powell and Nutley](#).<sup>105</sup>

This chapter will share some of the evidence from the research literature about which approaches are more effective to enable evidence uptake<sup>106</sup> and give some examples of evidence centres' current practices. These are clustered into five groups of evidence mobilisation activity that are particularly relevant to evidence centres.

## 1. Consulting intended users about what evidence is needed

It makes intuitive sense that evidence will be better received by decision-makers if they have agreed that there is a need for that evidence. *The Science of Using Science* report identified Delphi panels, journal clubs and user engagement as effective approaches that enable decision-makers to discuss the relevance of various evidence to their work. Through these processes, decision-makers are motivated to use evidence and have increased opportunities to do so.<sup>107</sup> These activities 'seek to create "pull" by evidence users (as opposed to 'push' from evidence producers).<sup>108</sup>

Evidence centres have consulted with their user groups in a range of ways on which topics they most need evidence about. The [Wales Centre for Public Policy](#) has 'taken a demand-led approach right from the beginning'.<sup>109</sup> The Centre helps Welsh government ministers to identify their evidence needs and then develops a work programme to source evidence to meet these needs.<sup>110</sup> Steve Martin, the Centre's director, observed that this means 'you have created a landing pad for the work by understanding what the interest is first'.<sup>111</sup>

The UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence developed its own process for [co-producing research priorities with its users](#), which was informed by the [Tobin Project](#) in the USA. It ran prioritisation workshops with its regional knowledge exchange hubs (including policymakers, housing researchers, practitioners and representatives of the private and voluntary sectors) and its international advisory board. It also ran five residents' voice focus groups around the UK. These combined activities enabled it to generate [10 priority areas](#) for its research programme, which included improving housing affordability, increasing housing supply and improving outcomes for tenants in the private sector.

What Works for Children's Social Care has developed its own version of [the Delphi method](#) to help set its research priorities for 2020 onwards. This process has involved bringing together [a range of stakeholders](#) (e.g. children's social care professionals, children and young people, parents and carers, senior leaders and academics) to complete a series of online surveys and identify through an iterative process their individual and shared priorities for research. The [results from this process](#) will then feed into its research programme for the following year.<sup>112</sup>

## 2. Collaborating with users to create new evidence

Once evidence centres have identified a set of priorities with their users, they will need to produce evidence on these topics. If new research is required, there is an opportunity to involve end users in the planning and delivery of the research, to ensure that the end result has 'practice-based relevance'.<sup>113</sup> *The Science of Using Science* review found some evidence that purposeful user engagement and consultation had a positive impact on people's subsequent motivation to use evidence.<sup>114</sup>

Evidence centres have collaborated with evidence users to carry out research in a variety of ways. This collaboration covers a spectrum from more traditional forms of involvement (e.g. taking part in research as a participant) to full co-production. To select a few illustrative examples: at the participation end of the spectrum, the Education Endowment Foundation has worked with teachers in hundreds of schools to evaluate education interventions; in 2018 more than a third of schools in England had participated in EEF-funded projects, including more than 130 randomised controlled trials.<sup>115</sup> In the middle of the spectrum, What Works for Children's Social Care recruited local authorities to participate in the choice and design of interventions to improve social workers' wellbeing, which were subsequently evaluated by randomised controlled trial.<sup>116</sup>

At the co-production end of the spectrum, What Works Scotland developed a model called [collaborative action research](#). This involved researchers and practitioners working together to identify an issue of interest, carrying out research on that topic, sharing their findings with colleagues and implementing changes to their practice informed by this new evidence.<sup>117</sup> Research by Carnegie UK Trust has found that people largely have very positive attitudes to co-produced evidence. A UK-wide survey carried out in 2017 found that 8 out of 10 people thought co-production would make evidence more relevant and 8 out of 10 people also thought that co-production would make evidence more influential for policy and practice.<sup>118</sup>

### 3. Communicating and interpreting evidence for end users

Evidence centres collate bodies of research and data for their end users, to provide them with easy access to the types of evidence they need to inform decision-making. Whether or not decision-makers decide to make use of the evidence collated will partly depend on how effective the centre is at communicating it.<sup>119</sup> *The Science of Using Science* review found that interventions providing access to evidence (such as via a website) are only effective in increasing people's use of evidence if steps are taken to actively encourage them to engage with the content. For example, people are more likely to visit a website if they are notified that new evidence in their area of interest has just been uploaded.<sup>120</sup> The review also found that user-friendly design, tailoring and framing messages to enhance their relevance are influential factors in how well evidence is received and whether it will be applied. Social media platforms can also increase people's motivation to engage with evidence and provide convenient access.<sup>121</sup>

#### Online evidence tools

Evidence centres have developed a variety of online tools to help facilitate access to evidence for their end users. The Centre for Homelessness Impact has '[evidence and gap maps](#)' showing which outcome areas have more or less rigorous evidence. Jen Gold pointed out that, as gap maps do not require a lot of analysis, they can be created 'comparatively rapidly so you have a product you can launch the centre with.'<sup>122</sup>

Some evidence centres have intervention comparison websites (variously called 'tools', 'toolkits' or 'stores'), which rate and rank interventions according to the evidence of how effective they are, as well as showing transparently how much trust can be placed in that evidence. If cost information is available, this is usually included as well. Evidence centres' practice in developing these online tools has evolved over time, to include a greater focus on user-led design. For example, when the College of Policing's Crime Reduction toolkit was originally developed they did not involve police in the design process. They later carried out user testing and additional design work with the aim of improving the interface and usability of the toolkit for their audience.

When members of the development team for What Works for Children's Social Care were developing the centre's own [evidence store](#), staff from the College of Policing advised them of the importance of involving their end users throughout the design process. This would be crucial to ensure that evidence was presented on this website in a way that made it clearly relevant and helpful for social work professionals, as well as being straightforward to understand. The development team [worked closely with social workers](#) from two local authorities, who informed decisions about all aspects of the design and language used. Through this process, the development team was advised to highlight three types of information in the dashboard design: what types of outcome an intervention was trying to achieve, how effective the intervention was and the strength of the evidence. Cost information was not included on the dashboard as this evidence was usually unavailable. In each evidence summary an additional category was added about implementation, as social workers said this information was particularly useful for them.<sup>123</sup> When new evidence summaries are uploaded to the evidence store, the centre's users are notified via a newsletter and updates on social media.

#### Evidence-based guidance

Evidence centres have also developed guidance as a tool to help interpret evidence for a practitioner audience. Guidance can help to overcome barriers to action for practitioners by advising them on *what they should do* on the basis of the available evidence. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) develops evidence-based guidance for health and social care practitioners. It starts by creating a bespoke guidance committee for each piece of guidance, involving user representatives, practice representatives and academics. The committee then develops its guidance through a process that involves reviewing the available research evidence and discussing as a group how the evidence should be interpreted and applied in practice.<sup>124</sup> Once the guidance has been produced, NICE works with stakeholders who provide health and care services and organises conferences to raise awareness of the guidance.<sup>125</sup>

Inspired by NICE, other evidence centres have developed their own processes for creating user-focused guidance for practitioners. The Education Endowment Foundation had evidence on its [Teaching and Learning Toolkit](#) which showed that, overall, teaching assistants were a high-cost intervention that had relatively low impact, and only limited evidence. When it found that this evidence was not leading to schools investing less in teaching assistants, it developed [guidance](#) to explain to schools how they can make best use of teaching assistants. It also developed additional resources to support schools with implementing their recommendations. It held a *Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants* campaign to publicise these resources to schools. An [evaluation](#) of its campaign found some evidence that schools had changed their practice in using teaching assistants and that this had a positive impact on pupil attainment in some areas. James Turner reflected: 'The big change the EEF is trying to make is to affect practice, which is why the acceleration of the production of guidance reports in recent years has been so important and well received.'<sup>126</sup>

The Early Intervention Foundation has also developed tools and guidance to help translate what evidence findings mean for its practice audiences. It wanted to develop guidance for primary schools to communicate the evidence on social and emotional learning. It carried out qualitative research with schools to help it understand schools' motivations around social and emotional learning and what the barriers might be to using evidence to inform their practice. It found through this qualitative research that schools already see social and emotional learning as important and believe they are doing this well. The Early Intervention Foundation then tailored its communications to schools to explain 'what "delivering SEL well" looks like, rather than [...] "why SEL matters".'<sup>127</sup>

### Evidence for policymakers

Some evidence centres primarily provide evidence for policymaking audiences. In these cases, individual research reviews may be directly commissioned by the policymaker or agreed with its funders group as part of a broader work programme (as in the case of the Wales Centre for Public Policy<sup>128</sup>). Box 5 provides some examples of centres that provide evidence for policymakers in Sweden, Denmark and Norway.

## Box 5: Scandinavian evidence centres working on social welfare

- The [Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services](#) (SBU), established in 1987, is an independent organisation funded by the Swedish Government to [evaluate medical and social service interventions](#). The SBU produces high quality systematic reviews, which report on the effects of interventions as well as economic, organisational and ethical issues. They also highlight gaps in evidence based on their reviews. They offer an Enquiry Service, which enables policy makers to submit questions and they respond with a summary of the available research evidence.<sup>129</sup>
- The [Danish National Institute of Social Research](#) (SFI) is funded by the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs and the Interior to carry out systematic reviews with the Campbell Collaboration on welfare policy.<sup>130</sup>
- The [Norwegian Institute of Public Health](#) (FHI), established in 2002, includes a Unit for Social Welfare Research which is funded to produce reviews for five different Norwegian Government departments (Children, Youth and Family Affairs; Integration and Diversity (IMDi); Health; State Housing Bank; and the Labour and Welfare Organisation).<sup>131</sup>
- All three centres have historically had close relationships with the [Cochrane Collaboration](#) and the [Campbell Collaboration](#) and use the [GRADE scale](#) for assessing the strength of evidence.<sup>132</sup> They have tended to prioritise evidence from randomised controlled trials (RCTs), although in Denmark and Sweden they are transitioning to a more inclusive approach to evidence to inform social care policy.<sup>133</sup> Systematic reviews from the SFI in Denmark are included in the [Campbell Collaboration's library](#).
- All three evidence centres 'determine their research priorities in consultation with government agencies, stakeholders, professionals and clients. Study findings inform policy, guidelines, and spending decisions.'<sup>134</sup>

Stephen Meek, director of the Institute for Policy and Engagement at the University of Nottingham, emphasised that relationships with individual policymakers are the best route towards achieving research uptake:

*Building relationships where you develop trust – get insight into the people you're trying to influence (what they're doing and what works for them) – will help you get better at tailoring your product to what they need.*<sup>135</sup>

Some of our interviewees from policy-focused evidence centres explained that timeliness is also a key factor in enabling the effective communication of evidence to inform policy. Evan White at the California Policy Lab explained: 'When an answer is required quickly, it's about working out what can be done to a high quality within that time – because it's better to have something than nothing.'<sup>136</sup> Ruth Stewart at the Africa Centre for Evidence explained that she will have a dialogue with policymakers about how they can work within time constraints:

*What we try to do is to be quite pragmatic and transparent. So if you've only got three weeks, this is what we can do and these are the pragmatic decisions we're making [...] We might only look at South African evidence, we might only look at systematic review evidence, but we put all those kind of decisions on the table so that they can see what decisions we're taking.*<sup>137</sup>

Steve Martin explained that it was crucial to provide evidence for policymakers in a timely way because otherwise 'the evidence need evolves and you end up answering a question nobody is asking anymore.'<sup>138</sup>

#### 4. Increasing people's capabilities to use evidence

The *Science of Using Science* review found evidence that education and training interventions can increase people's skills to use evidence (e.g. finding evidence, analysing it and applying it) and their motivation to use it.<sup>139</sup> Passive approaches to education, such as disseminating information, were not effective. But programmes aimed at building skills (e.g. critical appraisal) could lead to an increased use of evidence if they also tried to increase participants' motivation at the same time.<sup>140</sup>

Evidence centres have carried out work with their audiences to build their skills to use evidence in a variety of ways. For example, the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction had [evidence base camps](#) for police officers over a five-day period. These training camps tapped into participants' motivation to use evidence by supporting them to develop their own research questions and then to find and analyse trustworthy evidence to answer those questions.

The What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth worked with local areas over a five-month period to help them develop evidence-based Local Industrial Strategies. This involved helping their partners to identify sources of data to analyse their local context, make a case for intervention and identify the evidence for different policy options. They shared their learning from this work in a piece of guidance for local areas.<sup>141</sup>

## 5. Embedding evidence in working culture and practices

The individual decision-makers targeted by evidence centres are located within wider organisational cultures and practices, which may influence their motivation, skills or opportunities for using evidence (see also discussion in chapter one). Once an evidence centre has carried out initial research and engagement to understand the particular context-specific constraints affecting how their target audience uses evidence, it can initiate activities to help overcome these barriers.

### *Changing culture to value evidence use*

Attitudes toward evidence-informed decision-making are one of the influences on individuals' evidence uptake.<sup>142</sup> Therefore, evidence centres may undertake 'evidence advocacy'<sup>143</sup> with the aim of changing professional cultures to place a higher value on evidence use.<sup>144</sup>

An evaluation of the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction observed that senior leaders in the police force had a crucial role 'in either promoting a force culture open to research or indeed one which suppresses innovation.' This meant that 'the top-down support of the chief officer team remains essential for encouraging an interest and commitment to evidence-based practice.'<sup>145</sup> *The Science of Using Science* review recommends targeting professional norms around evidence use to encourage people to consider this to be a normal and routine part of decision-making.<sup>146</sup> Activities such as journal clubs, which provide a forum for professionals to discuss evidence with each other, may be one of the ways to promote these professional norms.<sup>147</sup> Other examples include mentoring and joint practice development.<sup>148</sup>

As Davies, Powell and Nutley have observed, knowledge mobilisation may take the form of seeking 'to create, develop or mould collaborations and networks that shape and share expertise, and to increase the role that research-based knowledge can play in these networks.'<sup>149</sup> The What Works Centre for Crime Reduction has created a [network of evidence champions](#) spanning nearly all of the police forces in England.<sup>150</sup> The role of the evidence champions varies

between individuals but some of their responsibilities might include accessing and sharing research with colleagues, promoting evidence-informed practice and developing evidence-informed practices in their own force. Similarly, the Educational Endowment Foundation has worked with the Institute of Education to develop a [Research Schools Network](#), which works with schools to help them use evidence to improve how they work. Evan White said that at California Policy Lab they find it helpful to have champions at different levels of government: the executive level, programme level and data analyst level. This is 'to ensure that the research and advice is listened to and taken into account in decision-making. Turnover can make that tricky.'<sup>151</sup>

### *Influencing structures and processes*

An impactful way that evidence centres can potentially influence professional practice within organisations is to influence organisations' decision-making processes and infrastructure so that evidence use becomes more routine.<sup>152</sup> *The Science of Using Science* review found that people could be more motivated to use evidence if their organisation promoted evidence-informed practice through supervision or executive training.<sup>153</sup> Organisations can also embed easier ways of accessing evidence, such as providing evidence summaries or hotlines.<sup>154</sup>

The Centre for Homelessness Impact developed a What Works Community Pilot to work with three local authorities for eight months, to help them apply evidence to the challenge of increasing successful private tenancies for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. These pilots involved sharing expertise from the Centre, as well as three organisations that were experts in data, design and behaviour change. The project aims to embed [new ways of accessing and using evidence](#) into these local authorities' routine working practices. Learning from the pilot was used to refine the offer before scaling the programme to other authorities.

At the more assertive end of the spectrum, there is the potential for evidence centres to work with institutions that have the authority to enforce evidence-informed practice.<sup>155</sup> For example, the College of Policing defines evidence-informed standards for the police and these are then inspected against by the police regulator.<sup>156</sup>

## ‘Centres can accelerate evidence-based practice by ensuring inspectorates base their assessment criteria on evidence.’

When we interviewed Jen Gold, she suggested that inspectorates have a lot of influence on frontline services. Centres can accelerate evidence-based practice in specific sectors by ensuring inspectorates base their assessment criteria on evidence.<sup>157</sup> Evidence centres could play an important role by working with regulators to encourage them to align their standards and inspection frameworks with the most up-to-date evidence.<sup>158</sup> James Turner explained that in recent years the Education Endowment Foundation has begun to work more closely with Ofsted on specific issues:

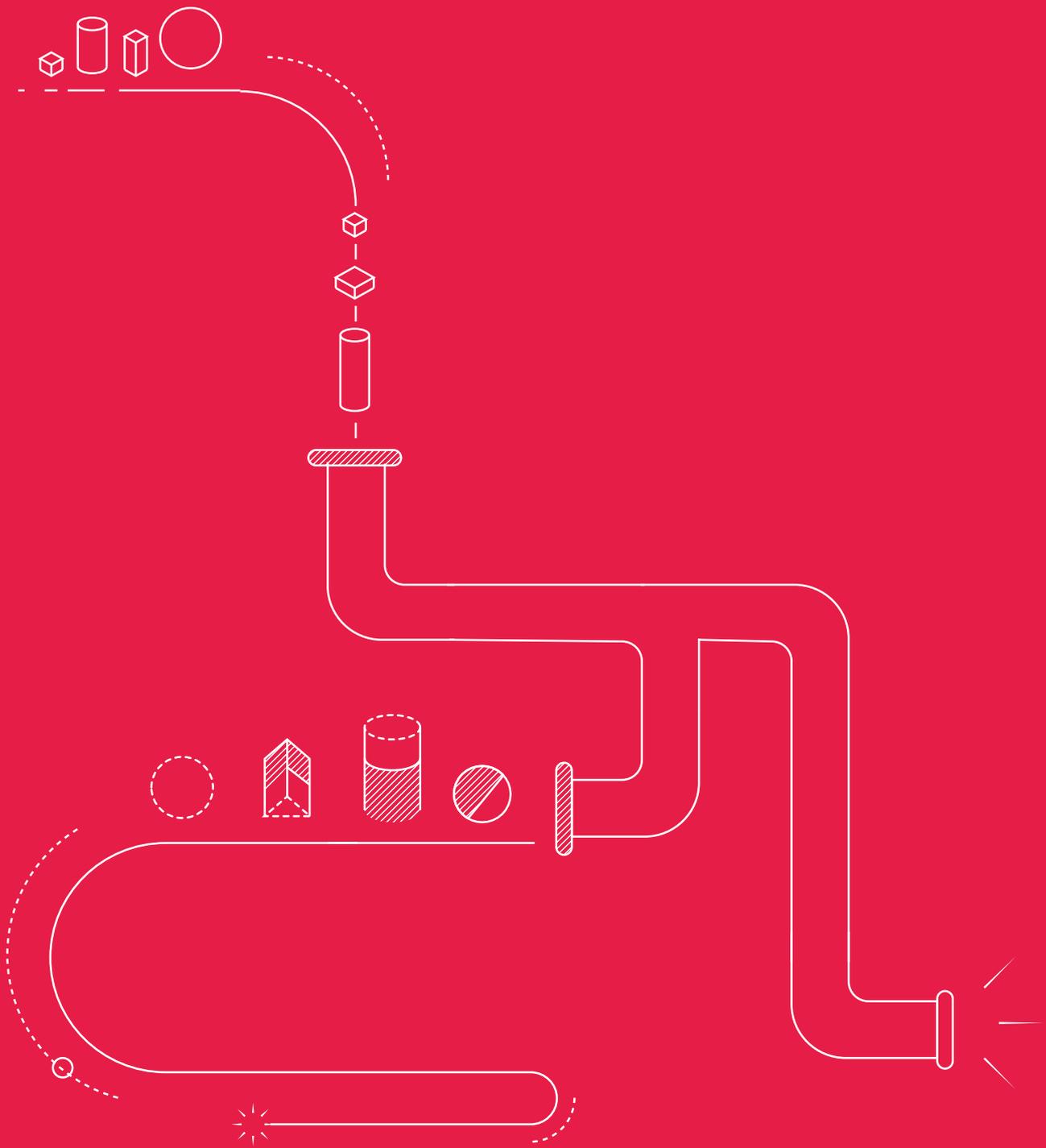
*The EEF wanted to make sure that school inspections were being evidence led. We also knew that if there was any contradiction between what the EEF was recommending and what Ofsted was recommending, schools would find it harder to act on the evidence. Ultimately, Ofsted and league tables are big drivers of behaviour in schools. So it would be a huge challenge if there was a big disconnect between what Ofsted was saying and the EEF's position.<sup>159</sup>*

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy has an interesting role in this context. Washington State legally mandated evidence-based practice in children's services by passing a bill in 2012 which required that 'prevention and intervention services delivered to children and juveniles in the areas of mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice be primarily evidence-based and research-based.'<sup>160</sup> This bill made provision for the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to create an [inventory of evidence-based practice in children's services](#). It regularly updates this inventory and makes it public through its website. More recently in the USA, the [Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act](#) was passed by Congress in 2018. The aim of this legislation was to promote the use of data in decision-making by government agencies and make government data more accessible to inform policymaking.

### Chapter 3 summary checklist: *Enabling the uptake of evidence*

In summary, we recommend that people developing evidence centres consider how they might work with the centre's users, including individuals and organisations, to support and motivate their uptake of research evidence, using some or all of the following methods:

- ✓ Consulting users on what evidence is needed.
- ✓ Collaborating with users to create new evidence.
- ✓ Developing targeted and tailored methods for communicating evidence.
- ✓ Working with users to increase their capabilities to use evidence in their work.
- ✓ Supporting and motivating users to embed evidence in their working culture and practices.



## 4 What evidence will you curate or create?

This chapter sets out some of the decisions to make about what types of evidence the centre will curate for its users, how to share the evidence base that already exists, and how best to fill gaps in evidence within the centre's available resources.

### The topics we will discuss here are:

- How to define 'evidence'.
- What standards of evidence to apply.
- How to share existing evidence.
- When to create new evidence.
- How to build sector-wide capacity.

### Defining what the centre considers to be 'evidence'

If a centre is created to improve societal outcomes through better use of evidence, it is helpful to be clear about what constitutes 'evidence'. The evaluation by Hunter, May, and Hough of the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction found that police stakeholders were confused about what 'evidence-based' policing meant and some senior officers had a much broader view of what constituted research evidence than others.<sup>161</sup> Centres may differ on the subject of whether expert opinion and practitioner judgement constitute types of 'evidence' in themselves, or are different forms of knowledge that are important for the interpretation of research evidence as part of a decision-making process.<sup>162</sup>

The Alliance for Useful Evidence recommends a 'horses for courses' approach to using research evidence, which acknowledges that different types of evidence are suited to different purposes.<sup>163</sup> Rather than taking a stance that some types of evidence are better or stronger than others, we recommend that decisions about the type of evidence that is required are led by the purpose for which the evidence will be used. The table on page 31 sets out examples of a variety of types of evidence, a description of what they are and the sort of purpose they are suited to. Clearly this is far from being an exhaustive list: the examples included are some of the more common types of evidence curated (and created) by evidence centres and the focus is orientated towards evidence centres working in a social policy or a social science context.

**Table 1: Choosing the right type of evidence for the purpose**

Evidence type	Description	Suitable purpose
Qualitative research	Research methods include interviews, focus groups, surveys and ethnography. <sup>164</sup>	Learning about people's attitudes, experiences or behaviour. <sup>165</sup>  The What Works Centre for Wellbeing includes qualitative research in its systematic reviews. <sup>166,167</sup>
Process evaluation	A study that documents the process of how an intervention was delivered and the experiences and opinions of those involved. Usually a combination of quantitative and qualitative data.	Understanding how an intervention works and why it was successful or unsuccessful. Process evaluations may look at the fidelity and quality of implementation, causal mechanisms and contextual factors that influence outcomes. <sup>168</sup>  The Education Endowment Foundation funds some process evaluations through its <a href="#">pilot projects</a> .
Impact evaluation	A research design that compares a group that has received an intervention with a comparison group that did not receive it. Any differences in observed outcomes between these groups are attributed to the intervention. A randomised controlled trial (RCT) provides the strongest measure of causal impact. <sup>169</sup>	Testing whether an intervention or practice was effective in meeting its objectives and the extent to which any observed changes can be attributed to the intervention.  By quantifying the benefits of interventions, impact evaluation also provides a foundation for economic evaluation.  Some of the UK What Works Centres have funded or carried out impact evaluations. <sup>170</sup>
Economic evaluation	Research designs that identify and compare the costs and benefits of interventions, such as cost-effectiveness analysis and cost-benefit analysis. <sup>171</sup>	Comparing options (alternatives versus doing nothing) to see which approach offers the best value for money.  See the Washington State Institute for Public Policy's <a href="#">benefit-cost tool</a> .
Rapid evidence assessment	A review of research involving a structured search and quality assessment of evidence, designed so that it can be completed within time constraints.	Informing a <a href="#">time-sensitive decision</a> , such as a policy initiative or service implementation.  The Africa Centre for Evidence has provided a <a href="#">rapid evidence synthesis service</a> for South African Government departments.

**Table 1: Choosing the right type of evidence for the purpose (continued)**

Evidence type	Description	Suitable purpose
Systematic review	A systematic search for studies fitting predetermined criteria, to answer a research question. Describing and summarising the combined findings of the included studies and assessing the quality and validity of the studies included. <sup>172</sup>	Drawing overall conclusions from a body of evidence on a specific topic.  Systematic reviews are carried out by a variety of evidence centres (see more on this below).
Meta-analysis	Pooling statistical results from more than one study to identify average effect sizes. <sup>173</sup>	Combining a body of research on a similar topic to create an overall estimate of treatment effect.  Meta-analyses underpin some of the UK What Works Centres' evidence repositories, such as the <a href="#">Teaching and Learning Toolkit</a> .
Secondary datasets	These may be governmental or administrative datasets, such as <a href="#">performance data about government services</a> or <a href="#">nationally collected statistics about the private sector</a> .	Understanding the scale of a problem or demand for a service. Understanding trends over time.  The What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth has developed a <a href="#">guide on using data for local economic policy</a> .

It may be useful for centres to identify the types of evidence they will be curating and why. For example, an evidence centre that is focusing on the question of whether particular practices or interventions 'work' might prioritise impact evaluations, systematic reviews and meta-analyses over other types of evidence. Evidence centres with a broader remit may take a more eclectic approach. Explaining this reasoning could help the centre's users to understand how the centre can help them.

### Applying standards of evidence

Our definition of 'evidence centre' in this report (see the introduction) includes organisations that 'curate and mobilise a high-quality evidence base'. This notion of *high-quality evidence* is important to differentiate an evidence centre from other, less reliable, information sources and to justify why centres' users should place their trust in them. Identifying transparent standards of evidence and applying them consistently is a crucial way for evidence centres to build this trust. In their review of UK What Works Centres, Gough, Maidment and Sharples recommended that these centres should

aim to achieve more consistency in how they apply evidence standards – both within individual centres and also across the What Works Network: 'More consistent standards across the Network would help audiences to expect a certain quality of output and, therefore, generate confidence in the findings presented.'<sup>174</sup>

Standards of evidence support decision-making by helping us understand what kind of evidence there is to support a particular practice or intervention. Some of these standards also help us to understand the quality of that evidence so that we know how much confidence to place in it. These standards tend to provide user-friendly ratings (e.g. a score out of three, four or five) to show where evidence is comparatively stronger or weaker against a set of chosen dimensions.<sup>175</sup> A review published by the Alliance for Useful Evidence in 2018 analysed 18 different standards of evidence that were being used in UK public policy by a range of different organisations.<sup>176</sup> Some of the different purposes of these evidence standards are set out in table 2, with examples.

**Table 2: Purposes of standards of evidence used in UK public policy**

Purpose of the evidence standard	Examples
Rating the suitability and quantity of evidence available to show whether an intervention has a positive causal impact on its intended outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Nesta standards of evidence</a>.<sup>177</sup></li> <li>• Early Intervention Foundation <a href="#">evidence standards</a> for its Guidebook.</li> </ul>
Rating the confidence we can place in bodies of quantitative evidence (impact evaluations/cost-effectiveness studies) according to a set of quality criteria.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GRADE framework used by NICE to <a href="#">develop its guidelines</a>.</li> <li>• <a href="#">EMMIE framework</a><sup>178</sup> (used by What Works Centre for Crime Reduction and adapted by What Works for Children's Social Care).</li> </ul>
Rating the quality of evidence included in systematic reviews of qualitative research.	CERQual framework used by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing <sup>179</sup> and NICE.
Rating the confidence we can place in a single impact evaluation.	Education Endowment Foundation <a href="#">padlock rating scale for evaluations</a> .
A robust process for producing evidence about the effectiveness of interventions.	<a href="#">HACT</a> (Housing Associations Charitable Trust) Standard for Producing Evidence. <sup>180</sup>
A robust process for carrying out systematic reviews.	The <a href="#">Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions</a> .

As this table shows, the purpose and content of standards of evidence used in different evidence centres and institutions in the UK varies considerably. This variation may be partly explained by the need for standards of evidence to be appropriate for the context in which they will be used. For example, academics at UCL developed the EMMIE framework for the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction because the centre's audience needed to know more about interventions than simply whether they 'work':<sup>181</sup>

*In deciding if, when, where and on whom to target a specific intervention, policymakers need evidence on which settings and subgroups are most likely to benefit from the intervention, which will most likely be unaffected, and which may have possibly negative outcomes.*<sup>182</sup>

Standards of evidence also need to be suitable for the type of evidence that the centre will be working with. For example, the GRADE framework (designed

for rating bodies of quantitative evidence) will be of limited usefulness for a centre working with a mainly qualitative evidence base. Evan White, executive director at the California Policy Lab (CPL), explained that the relevance of evidence was more important to government partners than considerations of quality: 'Government partners appreciate that CPL understands their challenges and produces applicable, useful research. They value that more than an RCT.'<sup>183</sup> The What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth automatically excludes studies that do not include a comparison group and this has limited the evidence base that it has to work with.<sup>184</sup> As one article has argued, centres with overly restrictive standards of evidence that exclude too much of the evidence available to policymakers and practitioners may have challenges in demonstrating their usefulness.<sup>185</sup>

## Mapping existing evidence

For many evidence centres, the task of curating a high-quality evidence base will logically start with reviewing what evidence already exists. Relevant evidence that already meets the centre’s quality standards can be synthesised<sup>186</sup> and shared with its users. Jen Gold commented that this mapping exercise ‘can shape your strategy as well as being a useful tool in helping others.’<sup>187</sup>

Evidence centres have mapped their audience’s evidence base in a variety of ways. Starting in 2015, the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) has created ‘gap maps’ based on a structured process of searching for and screening impact evaluations and

systematic reviews on a variety of topics.<sup>188</sup>

The maps visually describe a field of evidence, showing where impact evaluations or systematic reviews exist (depicted by circles, which are scaled to reflect the number of studies) and where there are gaps. Each circle can be clicked on to access a link to the referenced studies. Figure 4, below, shows a section from one of 3ie’s evidence gap maps. The What Works Centre for Crime Reduction carried out a systematic review to identify all published systematic reviews of interventions to reduce crime. It identified more than 300 systematic reviews, covering 60 different interventions and this evidence is gradually being added to its [Crime Reduction Toolkit](#).

**Figure 4:** Section of 3ie’s Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Evidence Gap Map<sup>189</sup>



## Synthesising useful evidence

Once mapping is completed, the centre's research activities can be informed by a sound knowledge of the type and extent of evidence that already exists. Published studies and systematic reviews on relevant topics can be summarised and made accessible via toolkits, maps or guidance. Additional synthesis may need to be carried out at this stage. The Education Endowment Foundation populates its Teaching and Learning Toolkit with information about the comparative cost-effectiveness of interventions, by converting attainment outcomes into 'school progress in months' and comparing this with the delivery cost per pupil.<sup>190</sup> James Turner commented:

*In terms of bang for buck, synthesis is where it's at. If the EEF had relied only on RCTs and didn't have the toolkit to start with (it was there from the start in a basic form, which relies on synthesis) they may not have been as successful or well received in the sector early on.<sup>191</sup>*

If good-quality primary research already exists on priority topics for the centre's users, but this evidence has not yet been collated in a usable way, the centre may carry out new reviews. These may be full systematic reviews or more rapid types of review depending on the centre's standards of evidence and the resources available. Some of the early research activities for What Works for Children's Social Care included carrying out new [systematic reviews of Intensive Family Preservation Services](#) and [Family Group Conferencing](#). These are interventions that are widely used in children's social care but whose evidence base was not well known by the sector. Some evidence centres, including What Works for Wellbeing and the Early Intervention Foundation, have published both rapid evidence reviews and full systematic reviews.<sup>192</sup> While systematic reviews take longer and are more resource-intensive than other types of review, they benefit from a higher likelihood that all relevant evidence will have been captured and included in the analysis. However, as James Turner acknowledged, 'in practice you can only have good synthesis if there are good individual studies behind them,'<sup>193</sup> which presents challenges when the existing evidence base is thin.

## Filling gaps with primary research

If there is a lack of high-quality and relevant research available, it may be a high priority for a centre to fund or deliver new primary research to fill gaps in evidence. Depending on the remit of the centre and the priorities of its users, this new research might take any number of forms, such as qualitative research, [analysis of datasets](#), process evaluations, impact evaluations and research on research use.

In carrying out (or funding) new primary research, evidence centres can play a role in establishing and normalising research methods that might previously have been unfamiliar to practitioners. For example, the Education Endowment Foundation has played a substantial role in promoting the use of randomised controlled trials in the education sector (see box 6). What Works for Children's Social Care is also promoting randomised controlled trials, as well as exploring the potential use of [machine learning techniques in children's social care](#) research. When there are sensitivities raised by research methods, as What Works for Children's Social Care has recently found,<sup>194</sup><sup>195</sup> it is particularly important to work closely with user groups to enable them to voice their concerns and ensure these are addressed through the research process. As we have seen in the previous chapter, user engagement in primary research also creates valuable opportunities for collaboration between researchers and practitioners, which can help ensure that the research will be 'fit for purpose' and improve uptake.<sup>196</sup>

### Box 6: Primary research funded by the Education Endowment Foundation

With an annual budget of £16.5 million, the Education Endowment Foundation has been able to commission a bold programme of primary research. From the outset, a substantial proportion of its resources have been spent on robust evaluations of education interventions in English schools. This has included pilot studies and a large number of randomised controlled trials and other impact evaluations.<sup>197</sup> After seven years, this centre had funded more than 10 per cent of good quality education trials in the world.<sup>198</sup>

Some evidence centres (such as the Education Endowment Foundation and the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence) invest a relatively large proportion of their resources in commissioning or carrying out primary research, while other centres have particularly prioritised secondary research activities, such as the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth when it was starting out.<sup>199</sup> Ruth Stewart told us that the Africa Centre for Evidence only carries out primary research about 'supporting evidence use'.<sup>200</sup> This [primary research](#) explores how to support the capacity of decision-makers to use evidence and how to build relationships between research producers and research users. The Centre's other research activity is focused on [synthesis](#) e.g. creating gap maps and systematic reviews.

### Building sector-wide capacity to create robust evidence

Centres with smaller budgets may find it harder to fund primary research. Another strategy adopted by evidence centres to help fill gaps in evidence is to support other organisations to deliver robust research. This includes working with researchers, funders, practitioners and policymakers to identify gaps in evidence and ensure that research carried out to fill these gaps is conducted to a high quality. Some examples of these activities include:

- **Highlighting evidence gaps:** NICE identifies evidence gaps through its review process and publishes research recommendations. Funding bodies such as the National Institute for Health Research then request research proposals to fill these gaps.<sup>201</sup>

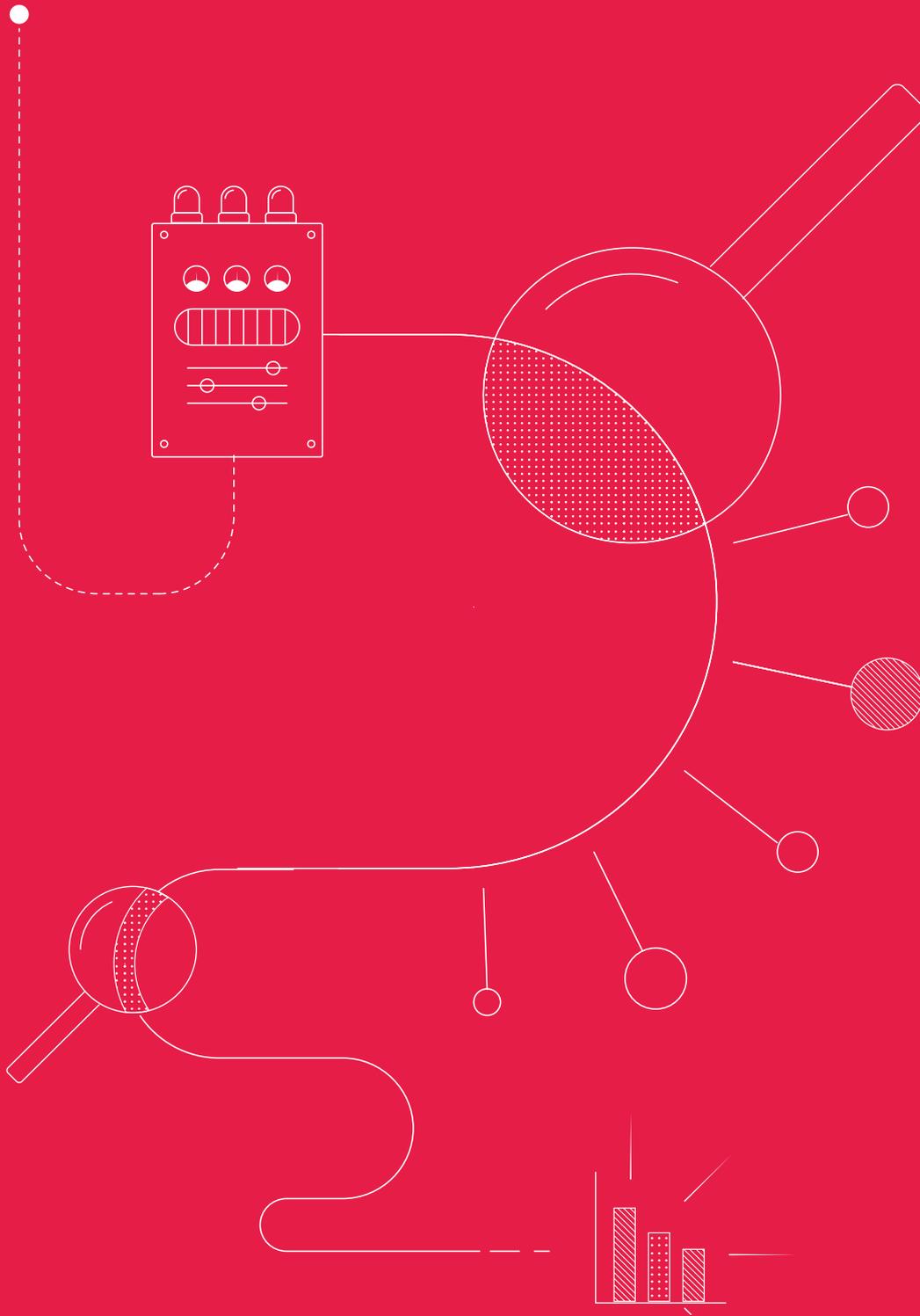
- **Advocating for a robust approach:** The College of Policing worked with the Home Office to ensure that it made high-quality evaluation part of its funding criteria.<sup>202</sup> The What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth has worked with government departments to improve the standard of evaluations they commission.<sup>203</sup>
- **Developing research tools and methods:** The Centre for Homelessness Impact is working with the Office for National Statistics to identify data sources that can be used to measure homelessness at a local and national level. These indicators can be used to track progress by any organisation working in and around homelessness.<sup>204</sup> The Early Intervention Foundation has worked with the early years sector to create evaluation guides and other tools to help drive up the standard of research.<sup>205</sup>
- **Supporting practitioners to evaluate promising practice:** What Works for Children's Social Care is working in partnership with local authority children's services to help them evaluate their services. These evaluations will be shared within the children's social care sector to help [build the evidence base](#) and promote a culture of evaluation.

In the words of Davies, Powell and Nutley, some of these activities may 'blur the distinction between the roles of a knowledge mobilising agency and the normal functions of a service delivery organisation, such as organisation development, service improvement and organisational learning'.<sup>206</sup>

## Chapter 4 summary checklist: *Deciding what evidence to curate or create*

In summary, we recommend that people developing evidence centres consider exploring the following activities in partnership with their user group:

- ✓ Define what 'evidence' means in your evidence centre's context.
- ✓ Identify standards of evidence appropriate to users' needs and the type of evidence the centre will be working with.
- ✓ Map the evidence base and identify evidence that will be suitable and useful to share with users, as well as gaps.
- ✓ Synthesise 'useful' evidence that meets your standards.
- ✓ Where possible fill evidence gaps with new robust research.
- ✓ Work with partners to build their capacity to fill evidence gaps with robust research.



## **5** How will you assess the centre's impact?

## Evidence brokering it is not an end in itself: it is a means to improve societal outcomes by making public policy and practice more effective.

In the first chapter of this report we suggested that evidence centres work with their users to identify a clear set of objectives and develop a theory of change explaining what they will do to help achieve these objectives. In this chapter we will discuss how evidence centres can learn from their activities – including successes and failures – so that over time they can become more effective in achieving their goals.

Previous research by Gough, Maidment and Sharples has highlighted the fact that ‘there are surprisingly few empirical studies examining the effectiveness and impact of intermediary organisations.’<sup>207</sup> Therefore, each evidence centre can make an important contribution to growing this evidence base. Evidence centres with less secure funding streams may also need good evidence of their impact to help them secure longer-term investment.<sup>208</sup>

When you develop plans for how to evaluate your evidence centre’s impact, we suggest you consider the following questions:

- What would be meaningful measures to help track progress towards your outcomes?
- How can you capture progress from the outset?
- How will you review and iterate the centre’s theory of change?
- Is the centre providing a good role model for other organisations?

These are each discussed in turn.

### Identifying meaningful outcome measures

You have already identified your outcomes, but how will you measure them? It is common for organisations to quantify their activities in terms of outputs (e.g. number of reports published, website hits and events delivered). However, this type of information is usually not a useful measure of whether the desired changes occurred: as Gough, Maidment and Sharples observed, ‘it does not show that evidence-informed decision-making is being achieved.’<sup>209</sup> In their 2019-24 strategy, the Centre for Homelessness Impact observed that for evidence centres like them, robust measurement of its own impact is a relatively new endeavour:

*We’ve looked far and wide and, truth is, there is no roadmap for how an organisation like ours understands its impact. So we’re designing one. We will introduce a suite of measures to track impact and report on progress in annual reports. But the ultimate test of all our work will be whether it helps bring about better outcomes for people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness.*<sup>210</sup>

Meaningful outcome measures for an evidence centre are likely to include a combination of:

- **Intermediate outcomes:** users knowing about evidence, accessing it and using it in policy or practice decisions.
- **Ultimate outcomes:** improved societal outcomes (e.g. reduced homelessness<sup>211</sup> or improved wellbeing<sup>212</sup>).

## *‘ We recommend that centres involve their users in identifying meaningful outcome measures.’*

In the first chapter we suggested that centres involve their users in setting their objectives and developing their theories of change. We recommend that centres' users are also involved in identifying meaningful measures for these outcomes; these measures will influence the focus of the centre's work, so they should reflect users' interests and priorities. The Centre for Homelessness Impact published its [co-developed 'SHARE framework' theory of change](#) and carried out wider consultation with its audience, asking 'What indicators and measures strike you as most important to include?'

It is also worthwhile for centres to consult their users as they will know about existing data sources that can be used to help track outcomes. For example, by employing and working with social workers, What Works for Children's Social Care learned about the annual [social work health check survey](#), which was led by the Local Government Association (LGA) and administered individually by local authorities. It is now [working with partner organisations](#), including the LGA, to develop a more standardised survey which can feed into a national dataset to help track social workers' wellbeing.

When developing measures for intermediate outcomes, it may be useful to include tests of users' comprehension, to help you understand how effective your communication of evidence is. Research has found that [64 per cent of schools in England](#) had used the Teaching and Learning toolkit and 54 per cent of surveyed police had used the Crime Reduction

Toolkit<sup>213</sup>. This clearly shows good progress in driving sectoral awareness and uptake of these evidence products. But this does not tell us whether evidence centres' users are able to understand the information they are accessing and implement it in their work. A [recent study](#) carried out with users of evidence centres' toolkits found that some icons communicating the effectiveness of an intervention were correctly interpreted 63 per cent of the time, whereas other icons were only understood 24 per cent of the time. The author of this study explained that 'the best-performing graphics used unambiguous, relevant shapes, colour cues, and indications of quantity.'<sup>214</sup> This sort of test of users' comprehension could be a valuable method for evidence centres to refine and improve their communication methods.

According to evidence centres' theory of change, once evidence is understood by decision-makers, it is important that they go on to use it in their work, in order to improve the quality of policy and practice decisions (an intermediate outcome), and ultimately impact on societal outcomes. The Centre for Homelessness Impact has announced its intention to track progress towards achieving evidence-based policy and practice but acknowledged that it is challenging to gather outcome data on evidence use in a way that is not expensive and burdensome.<sup>215</sup> Its SHARE framework also identifies the datasets that will be used to track progress toward achieving its ultimate outcomes of reducing homelessness.<sup>216</sup>

*‘ It is important to get a good measure of the status quo before work commences (a “baseline”)’*

### Capturing progress from the outset

To best capture the impact of an evidence centre’s work, it is important to get a good measure of the status quo before work commences (a ‘baseline’). For example, the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction set out to galvanise a culture change in police forces towards valuing evidence-based practice and decision-making. In order to measure success in achieving this change, it was important to know what senior police and police officers already thought about evidence use. This centre commissioned an independent evaluation that started when the centre first began to operate. The first year of the evaluation ‘sought to establish a baseline from which to measure change over the three-year programme in the understanding, use and application of research evidence in crime reduction.’<sup>217</sup> Having this baseline made it possible for the Centre to show a gradual shift in organisational culture during the first three years of operation. In 2014, 75 per cent of survey respondents agreed that ‘There is no organisational emphasis on the use of research evidence to inform decision-making.’ This proportion had reduced to 48 per cent by 2016.<sup>218</sup>

A newer evidence centre called TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education), established in 2019, will also receive an independent evaluation over its first three years of operation. This evaluation was commissioned by the centre’s funder, the Office for Students.<sup>219</sup> Those who are considering commissioning an evaluation of an evidence centre may find it useful to consult the Treasury guidance on evaluation (the [Magenta book](#)), which was updated in 2020 alongside guidance on [how to commission and manage complex evaluations](#).

### Reviewing and iterating the centre’s theory of change

Over time, robust evaluation will generate learning about which mechanisms<sup>220</sup> are successful in achieving particular outcomes. For example, an evidence centre might have two activities that seek to increase the use of data in decision-making: light-touch training sessions with individuals and three-month partnership projects with whole organisations. If the evaluation finds that the training sessions have little impact on increasing data use, whereas the partnership projects lead to embedded and sustained changes in how data is used, this is important learning about which of the two mechanisms (individual engagement or organisational engagement) is the most effective.

When this type of learning emerges, you can then review and update your theory of change: ‘Theories of change should clearly be seen as dynamic rather than static, evolving over time as learning from implementation in practice accumulates.’<sup>221</sup> This process of learning and iteration can help to develop a robust, evidence-informed and impactful operating model for your evidence centre.

## Acting as a role model for other organisations

As Gough, Maidment and Sharples have observed, evidence centres can encourage their stakeholders to be evidence informed by modelling this behaviour: 'monitoring and evaluating their own work and assessing their impact.'<sup>222</sup> If centres adopt evidence standards that promote robust evaluation procedures, they can build trust with their users by also adhering to these standards themselves. The UK What Works Network [requires its members](#) to publish 'both the research generated and the evidence around the impact of the Centre's work.'

The Education Endowment Foundation has shown good practice in its evaluation of its own work. As a major funder of randomised controlled trials of education interventions, this centre has also funded independent impact evaluations of its own communication methods. These [two randomised controlled trials](#) were carried out between 2014 and 2017 and involved 13,000 schools. They explored whether relatively light-touch communication of

education resources to schools (e.g. providing hard copies of resources and invitations to seminars) could lead to improved pupil literacy outcomes. This study did not find any evidence of improved educational attainment. As a result of this learning, the Education Endowment Foundation has [changed its communication practices](#), 'to take a more intensive approach to scale-up, with more structured support for schools and a greater focus on implementation.'

The Wales Centre for Public Policy is carrying out qualitative mixed methods research to develop a deeper understanding of how its activity as a knowledge brokering organisation is [impacting on the Welsh Government's use of evidence](#) in the policymaking process. The team has also reviewed existing evidence on what makes for effective knowledge brokering to facilitate evidence-based policy.<sup>223</sup> Through this work they will seek to generate insights into how they can make their own work most effective, as well as contributing to the broader theory of change for how [knowledge brokering organisations](#) can best influence social policy.

## Chapter 5 summary checklist: Assessing the centre's impact

In summary, when developing evaluation plans for your evidence centre, we recommend that you consider how you can:

- ✓ Identify meaningful outcome measures with input from the centre's users.
- ✓ Put an evaluation in place at the outset to capture progress and learning.
- ✓ Review and iterate your theory of change to incorporate your learning.
- ✓ Aim to provide a role model for how other organisations can assess their impact.

## Appendix: Interviewees

Name and organisation	Date of interview
Evan White, California Policy Lab, USA.	January 2019
Michelle Welch, director of public finance, Policy Labs, USA.	February 2019
Greg Wilkinson, director, Traversum, and former programme director for the Development Team for What Works for Children's Social Care, UK.	February 2019
Paula Arce-Trigatti, director, National Network of Education Research-Practice Partnerships (NNERPP), USA.	May 2019
Ruth Stewart, Africa Centre for Evidence (University of Johannesburg).	November 2019
Jen Gold, head of the <a href="#">What Works Team</a> at the UK Government Cabinet Office.	March 2020
Ewan King, chief operating officer at the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) and engagement lead for the What Works for Children's Social Care incubator programme team, UK.	March 2020
Ken Gibb, director, UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence, UK.	March 2020
Lígia Teixeira, chief executive, Centre for Homelessness Impact, UK.	March 2020
Emily Morgan, operations director and Georgia Parry, operations manager, What Works for Children's Social Care, UK.	March 2020
Steve Martin, director, Wales Centre for Public Policy, UK.	March 2020
Stephen Meek, director, Institute for Policy and Engagement, University of Nottingham, UK.	March 2020
James Turner, chief executive officer, The Sutton Trust, and former deputy CEO at the Education Endowment Foundation, UK.	April 2020

# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> David Gough, Chris Maidment, and Jonathan Sharples, *UK What Works Centres: Aims, Methods and Contexts* (London: EPPI-Centre, University College London, 2018), 19, <https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=3731>.

<sup>2</sup> A list of interviewees is included in the appendix.

<sup>3</sup> The requirement of independence means that this definition does not include in-house government evidence centres or wholly academic research centres in universities.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Michie, Maartje M. van Stralen, and Robert West, 'The Behaviour Change Wheel: A New Method for Characterising and Designing Behaviour Change Interventions', *Implementation Science* 6, 42 (April 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-6-42>.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with James Turner, chief executive officer, The Sutton Trust, and former deputy CEO, Education Endowment Foundation, April 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Gough, Maidment, and Sharples, 'UK What Works Centres', 49.

<sup>7</sup> Gough, Maidment, and Sharples, 'UK What Works Centres', 97.

<sup>8</sup> Gough, Maidment, and Sharples, 'UK What Works Centres', 48.

<sup>9</sup> Gillian Hunter, Tiggey May, and Mike Hough, *An Evaluation of the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction: Final Report* (London: Institute for Criminal Policy Research, Birkbeck, July 2017), 61–2, <http://whatworks.college.police.uk/About/Pages/Evaluation.aspx>.

<sup>10</sup> Laurenz Langer, Janice Tripney, and David Gough, *The Science of Using Science: Researching the Use of Research Evidence in Decision-Making* (London: EPPI-Centre, University College London, 2016), 16–17, <https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/Science-of-Using-Science-Final-Report-2016.pdf>.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Emily Morgan, operations director, and Georgia Parry, operations manager, both at What Works for Children's Social Care, 17 March 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Lúgia Teixeira, chief executive of the Centre for Homelessness Impact, 17 March 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Gough, Maidment and Sharples, 'UK What Works Centres', 11.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Jen Gold, head of [What Works Team](#), Cabinet Office, 4 March 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with James Turner, chief executive officer, The Sutton Trust, and former deputy CEO, Education Endowment Foundation, April 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Education Endowment Foundation, *Sutton Trust–EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit and EEF Early Years Toolkit: Technical appendix and process manual* (London: Education Endowment Foundation, 2018), 17, [https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Toolkit/Toolkit\\_Manual\\_2018.pdf](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Toolkit/Toolkit_Manual_2018.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Taylor, Elaine Drayton, and Tom McBride, *Evaluating Early Help: A Guide to Evaluation of Complex Local Early Help Systems* (London: Early Intervention Foundation, 2019), <https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/evaluating-early-help-a-guide-to-evaluation-of-complex-local-early-help-systems>.

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- <sup>35</sup> Example provided by Georgia Parry: joint project with Bolton Council to test a new model where [social work supervision is provided to designated safeguarding leads](#) in primary schools.
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- <sup>37</sup> Interview with Ruth Stewart, director, Africa Centre for Evidence (University of Johannesburg), 19 November 2019.
- <sup>38</sup> Discussed in interviews with Michelle Welch, Policy Labs, February 2019, and Ken Gibb, UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence, March 2020.
- <sup>39</sup> Interviews with Ewan King, chief operating officer, Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), and engagement lead for the What Works for Children's Social Care incubator programme team, UK, 11 March 2020, and Jen Gold, head of What Works Team, Cabinet Office, 4 March 2020.
- <sup>40</sup> At the outset of each project, the Wales Centre for Public Policy puts agreements in place with the Welsh Government on whether the resulting outputs will be published. In nearly all cases, they will be. (Interview with Steve Martin, director, Wales Centre for Public Policy, 23 March 2020, and additional comments from Emma Taylor-Collins at the Wales Centre for Public Policy).
- <sup>41</sup> Interview with Paula Arce-Trigatti, director, National Network of Research-Practice Partnerships (NNRPP), USA, May 2019.
- <sup>42</sup> Gough, Maidment, and Sharples, 'UK What Works Centres', 109.
- <sup>43</sup> Gough, Maidment, and Sharples, 'UK What Works Centres', 52.
- <sup>44</sup> Interview with Jen Gold, head of [What Works Team](#), Cabinet Office, 4 March 2020.
- <sup>45</sup> Gough, Maidment, and Sharples, 'UK What Works Centres'.
- <sup>46</sup> Gough, Maidment, and Sharples, 'UK What Works Centres'.
- <sup>47</sup> Interview with Jen Gold, head of What Works Team, Cabinet Office, 4 March 2020.
- <sup>48</sup> Gough, Maidment, and Sharples, 'UK What Works Centres'.
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- <sup>51</sup> Interview with Ruth Stewart, director, Africa Centre for Evidence (University of Johannesburg), 19 November 2019.
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- <sup>53</sup> An impact evaluation compares a group that has received an intervention with a comparison group that did not receive it. Any differences in observed outcomes between these groups are attributed to the intervention.
- <sup>54</sup> Peter Craig et al., *Developing and Evaluating Complex Interventions* (London: Medical Research Council, 2019), <https://mrc.ukri.org/documents/pdf/complex-interventions-guidance/>.
- <sup>55</sup> Interview with Evan White, founding executive director, California Policy Lab, 22 January 2019.
- <sup>56</sup> Interview with Greg Wilkinson, director, Traversum, and former programme director, Development Team, What Works for Children's Social Care, UK (2017–2019), 14 February 2019.
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- <sup>58</sup> Ashley Lenihan, *Lessons from Abroad: International Approaches to Promoting Evidence-based Social Policy* (London: Alliance for Useful Evidence, July 2013), [https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/Alliance-paper\\_Lessons-from-Abroad.pdf](https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/Alliance-paper_Lessons-from-Abroad.pdf).
- <sup>59</sup> Interview with Emily Morgan, operations director, and Georgia Parry, operations manager, both at What Works for Children's Social Care, 17 March 2020.
- <sup>60</sup> Gough, Maidment, and Sharples, 'UK What Works Centres', 109.
- <sup>61</sup> See hosting arrangements for UK *What Works Centres*, discussed in Caroline Allard and Ben Rickey, *British What Works Centres: What Lessons for Evidence-Based Policy in France?* (London: Alliance for Useful Evidence, March 2017), 45, [https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/Ansa\\_A4UE\\_whatworks\\_final\\_Full-report-standard.pdf](https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/Ansa_A4UE_whatworks_final_Full-report-standard.pdf).
- <sup>62</sup> See the College of Policing webpage, 'About College What Works', accessed 20 March 2020, <https://whatworks.college.police.uk/About/Pages/default.aspx>.
- <sup>63</sup> Interview with Ken Gibb, director, UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence, March 2020.
- <sup>64</sup> Interview with Greg Wilkinson, director, Traversum, and former programme director, Development Team, What Works for Children's Social Care, UK (2017–2019), 14 February 2019.
- <sup>65</sup> Interview with Ruth Stewart, director, Africa Centre for Evidence (University of Johannesburg), 19 November 2019. She explained that they benefit from the expectation that universities have sound methods, therefore their evidence is trustworthy.
- <sup>66</sup> Interview with Evan White, founding executive director, California Policy Lab, 22 January 2019.
- <sup>67</sup> Interviews with Ken Gibb, UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence, March 2020, and Emily Morgan, operations director, and Georgia Parry, operations manager, both at What Works for Children's Social Care, 17 March 2020.
- <sup>68</sup> Interview with Emily Morgan, operations director, and Georgia Parry, operations manager, both at What Works for Children's Social Care, 17 March 2020.
- <sup>69</sup> Interview with Emily Morgan, operations director, and Georgia Parry, operations manager, both at What Works for Children's Social Care, 17 March 2020.
- <sup>70</sup> Interview with Emily Morgan, operations director, and Georgia Parry, operations manager, both at What Works for Children's Social Care, 17 March 2020.
- <sup>71</sup> List provided by Emily Morgan, operations director, and Georgia Parry, operations manager, both at What Works for Children's Social Care .
- <sup>72</sup> The UK Government provides step-by-step advice on how to set up and register an organisation [as a charity](#) or a [limited company](#).
- <sup>73</sup> Allard and Rickey, 'British What Works Centres', 65.
- <sup>74</sup> Hunter, May, and Hough, 'Evaluation of What Works Centre for Crime Reduction Final'.
- <sup>75</sup> Interview with Emily Morgan, operations director, and Georgia Parry, operations manager, both at What Works for Children's Social Care, 17 March 2020.
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- <sup>77</sup> Interview with Emily Morgan, operations director, and Georgia Parry, operations manager, both at What Works for Children's Social Care, 17 March 2020.
- <sup>78</sup> Interview with Georgia Parry, operations manager, What Works for Children's Social Care, 17 March 2020.
- <sup>79</sup> Interview with Jen Gold, head of What Works Team, Cabinet Office, 4 March 2020.
- <sup>80</sup> Interview with Jen Gold, head of What Works Team, Cabinet Office, 4 March 2020.
- <sup>81</sup> Interview with Emily Morgan, operations director, and Georgia Parry, operations manager, both at What Works for Children's Social Care, 17 March 2020.
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- <sup>86</sup> Interview with Michelle Welch, director of public finance, Policy Labs, February 2019.
- <sup>87</sup> Interview with Michelle Welch, director of public finance, Policy Labs, February 2019.
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- <sup>89</sup> Interview with Jen Gold, head of What Works Team, Cabinet Office, 4 March 2020.
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- <sup>91</sup> Interview with Ewan King, chief operating officer, Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), and engagement lead for the What Works for Children's Social Care incubator programme team, UK, 11 March 2020.
- <sup>92</sup> Interview with Ewan King, chief operating officer, Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), and engagement lead for the What Works for Children's Social Care incubator programme team, UK, 11 March 2020.
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- <sup>140</sup> Langer, Tripney, and Gough, 'Science of Using Science', 17.
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- <sup>148</sup> Langer, Tripney, and Gough, 'Science of Using Science', 35.
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- <sup>185</sup> Bristow, Carter, and Martin, 'Using Evidence to Improve Policy and Practice', 134.
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- <sup>197</sup> Gough, Maidment, and Sharples, 'UK What Works Centres', 36.
- <sup>198</sup> Cabinet Office, 'The What Works Network – Five Years On'.
- <sup>199</sup> Gough, Maidment, and Sharples, 'UK What Works Centres'.
- <sup>200</sup> Interview with Ruth Stewart, director, Africa Centre for Evidence (University of Johannesburg), 19 November 2019.
- <sup>201</sup> Cabinet Office, 'The What Works Network – Five Years On', 14.
- <sup>202</sup> Cabinet Office, 'The What Works Network – Five Years On', 14.
- <sup>203</sup> Allard and Rickey, 'British What Works Centres', 68.
- <sup>204</sup> Teixeira et al., 'The SHARE Framework: A Smarter Way to End Homelessness. Version 2'.
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- <sup>206</sup> Davies, Powell, and Nutley, 'Mobilising Knowledge', 117.
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- <sup>208</sup> Gough, Maidment, and Sharples, 'UK What Works Centres', 109.
- <sup>209</sup> Gough, Maidment, and Sharples, 'UK What Works Centres', 103.
- <sup>210</sup> Centre for Homelessness Impact, 'Ending Homelessness for Good: Our Strategy 2019-24' (Centre for Homelessness Impact, 2019) [https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/59f07e67422cdf0001904c14/5cf50e1873a6235c38b7ae41\\_CHI\\_STRATEGY\\_REPORT\\_FOR\\_WEB.pdf](https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/59f07e67422cdf0001904c14/5cf50e1873a6235c38b7ae41_CHI_STRATEGY_REPORT_FOR_WEB.pdf)
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- <sup>214</sup> Cameron Brick, 'What Works for What Works: How to Communicate Effectively', *What Works* blog, 16 January 2020, <https://whatworks.blog.gov.uk/2020/01/16/what-works-for-what-works-how-to-communicate-effectively/>.
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- <sup>218</sup> Hunter, May, and Hough, 'Evaluation of What Works Centre for Crime Reduction Final'.
- <sup>219</sup> Interview with Jen Gold, head of What Works Team, Cabinet Office, 4 March 2020.
- <sup>220</sup> A mechanism is the method through which an activity can impact on an outcome.
- <sup>221</sup> Ghate, 'Developing Theories of Change for Social Programmes'.
- <sup>222</sup> Gough, Maidment, and Sharples, 'UK What Works Centres'.
- <sup>223</sup> Eleanor MacKillop, Sarah Quarmby, and James Downe, 'Does Knowledge Brokering Facilitate Evidence-Based Policy? A Review of Existing Knowledge and an Agenda for Future Research', *Policy & Politics* 48, no. 2 (April 1, 2020): 335–53, <https://doi.org/10.1332/030557319X15740848311069>.