
Getting evidence into action to improve Scotland's public services

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What Works Scotland aims to improve the way local areas in Scotland use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.

We are working with Community Planning Partnerships involved in the design and delivery of public services (Aberdeenshire, Fife, Glasgow and West Dunbartonshire) to:

- learn what is and what isn't working in their local area
- encourage collaborative learning with a range of local authority, business, public sector and community partners
- better understand what effective policy interventions and effective services look like
- promote the use of evidence in planning and service delivery
- help organisations get the skills and knowledge they need to use and interpret evidence
- create case studies for wider sharing and sustainability

A further nine areas are working with us to enhance learning, comparison and sharing. We will also link with international partners to effectively compare how public services are delivered here in Scotland and elsewhere. During the programme, we will scale up and share more widely with all local authority areas across Scotland.

WWS brings together the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, other academics across Scotland, with partners from a range of local authorities and:

- Glasgow Centre for Population Health
- Healthcare Improvement Scotland
- Improvement Service
- Inspiring Scotland
- IRISS (Institution for Research and Innovation in Social Services)
- Joint Improvement Team
- NHS Health Scotland
- NHS Education for Scotland
- SCVO (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations)

This Working Paper is one of a series of papers that What Works Scotland is publishing to share evidence, learning and ideas about public service reform.

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www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk

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Introduction

In the UK, the 'What Works' Network is constituted by multiple independent centres focusing on delivering evidence to a variety of policy areas including health and social care, educational achievement, crime reduction and early intervention¹.

What Works Scotland (WWS) was launched in July 2014 as a collaborative between The Scottish Government, ESRC, the University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow. Unlike the specific focus of What Works Centres in England, WWS has a broader focus on public service development and reform.

WWS is working with Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) and stakeholder partners to achieve its aims, namely to:

- Identify and better understand what is working and not working in public service delivery in Scotland, and how we can translate knowledge from setting to setting
- Contribute to the development of a Scottish model of service delivery that brings about transformational change for people living in different places across Scotland

The overall mission of WWS is to use evidence to transform public services for all of Scotland's communities to flourish. The emphasis of WWS on the use of evidence in planning, service delivery and service reform has led to a stream of work focused on Evidence to Action (E2A).

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

Background

This paper is based on discussions with WWS partners at an E2A Roundtable event held in October 2014, co-hosted by Sandra Nutley and Huw Davies from the University of St Andrews. The aims of the Roundtable were to:

1. Engage with the evidence to action work of WWS
2. Generate a shared understanding of concepts and processes
3. Agree key shared ideas and terminology for the evidence to action approach
4. Explore the implications of the above for the WWS workplan

The structure of the day included introductory presentations on current E2A thinking from Davies and Nutley², discussions of issues and challenges surrounding E2A experiences by WWS partners in the Scottish public service context, and discussions of a set of E2A-related propositions developed and presented by WWS collaborators.

This paper develops the outcomes of the Roundtable discussions and provides a foundation for continued E2A work within the overarching WWS initiative.

² To find out more about Davies and Nutley's work see the Research Unit for Research Utilisation (www.ruru.ac.uk) and Nutley, Walter and Davies (2007) *Using Evidence. How research can inform public services*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Evidence to Action: The WWS approach

WWS is committed to making E2A a central component of its work. What Works Scotland takes a broad approach to the question of What Works for public service reform³. In order to understand what works it is necessary to:

- ***Know-about problems:*** the nature and formation of social problems.
- ***Know-what works:*** what policies, strategies or interventions will bring about desired outcomes.
- ***Know-how (to put into practice):*** e.g. knowledge about effective programme implementation.
- ***Know-who (to involve):*** e.g. getting stakeholder buy-in and building alliances for action.
- ***Know-why (requirements of action):*** relationship between values & policy/practice.
- ***Know-whether having any impact:*** monitoring, evaluation and accountability.

This broad approach will inform the delivery of our evidence to action approach and will be realized through the following processes:

1. Explore

Explore evidence of what is and isn't working in public service delivery and reform. Evidence gathering is not limited to the Scottish context; evidence and learning is also drawn from international sources and examples.

2. Combine

Combine research evidence, data, local evaluation, and local knowledge and experience. Evidence is synthesized as an ongoing component of the research process and supported by resources like the Evidence Bank and

³ Adapted from Nutley (2012) Presentation to Campbell Collaboration Colloquium
<http://www.sfi.dk/Default.aspx?ID=10712>

Administrative Data Resource Centre, and WWS partner resources to synthesize, manage and visualize evidence.

3. Build

Build new evidence through evaluation and a collaborative action approach, allowing inclusion of multiple forms of knowledge which are each valued and combined to produce new evidence for practice.

4. Link

Link evidence to action. The collaborative action approach co-produces research between people involved in community planning within local authorities and the research team, and embeds evidence within the implementation of policy and practice.

5. Share

Share what we learn with other CPPs, comparator CPPs and international partners. Learning and reflection is shared through virtual learning spaces, blogs, knowledge exchange events, reports and academic articles.

What Works Scotland Evidence Bank
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<p>Getting evidence into action is an essential part of the What Works Scotland programme. As one way of making this happen, we are developing a What Works Scotland Evidence Bank: a knowledge service which will co-ordinate and share quality reviews of evidence in direct response to the needs of What Works Scotland issues. The Evidence Bank will also share learning about how evidence can be used to help reform public services and create an evidence resource for local and national public service improvement and reform.</p>
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<p>The Evidence Bank builds on an evidence-to-action model developed by the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR), which explored ways of supporting people delivering services to identify specific gaps in their knowledge and use evidence to help address them. A CRFR briefing about this service and the learning from it can be read here: http://www.crfr.ac.uk/assets/briefing-73web.pdf</p>
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WWS Knowledge Partners resources

WWS will be working with key national partners, and other partners with expertise in helping use evidence of various kinds:

Evaluation Support Scotland provides evaluation resources and training, and supports Third sector evaluation

The Improvement Service works with Scottish councils and their partners to improve the efficiency, quality and accountability of local public services by providing advice, consultancy and programme support. They run the Knowledge Hub: a platform for KE about public service issues

IRISS (The Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services) develop tools for using evidence including data visualization

LARIA (*Local Area Research and Intelligence Association*) are a network of local government researchers

SCVO's (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations) MILO database provides information and analysis on third sector activities and local assets

NHS Education for Scotland synthesizes evidence, supports the knowledge needs of integrating health and social care, and supports knowledge broker roles

NHS Health Scotland provides resources and evidence to support Community Planning and have evaluation expertise

NHS Information Services Division provide quantitative data analysis and modelling

NHS Healthcare Improvement Scotland provides evidence synthesis services and uses data for to improve services across health and social care

Challenges in getting evidence into action

Based on a consideration of propositions about the role of evidence in action at the Roundtable, the following issues were raised:

The Role of Evidence in public service planning and delivery

There are multiple challenges in the use of evidence in CPPs. Often there is insufficient relevant evidence, or what evidence does exist may be conflicting. Evidence may not be in a form that is usable by practitioners or others in the system. It is often not clear whose role it is to be seeking out, synthesizing and using evidence in decision-making. In turn, this lack of clarity serves to perpetuate the perception of risk surrounding the use of evidence within CPPs. If evidence suggests taking new or different approaches there may be an element of risk aversion amongst partners. Different members of partnerships may have different perceptions of the validity of types of evidence. In addition there is a need to balance research evidence with community views, political priorities, local data, local knowledge and current approaches.

Large scale quantitative studies are aligned with a traditional 'hierarchy of evidence'⁴ which promotes the use of RCTs, and sees quantitative data as more valuable than qualitative. This can be a barrier to the generation of knowledge through other methods even though local data, small scale evaluations, co-produced data and community consultation may all be valuable to community planning.

How can CPPs and local service mechanisms balance the different kinds of evidence they need to consider when developing and reforming public services?

Leadership and Human Resources

Within organisations, confusion surrounding who can lead on change, who can act, and who can make decisions is a major barrier to using knowledge and evidence. Leadership on using and acting in an evidence informed way, and influencing others who can act is important in developing learning organisations.

What kind of leadership is needed to develop evidence-informed ways of working? How can this be embedded in leadership development initiatives?

The push to use evidence takes place in the context of ever-increasing time, financial and human resource limitations. Despite their potential motivation to be engaged with knowledge development and application, local planners and practitioners often don't have the time to study the available evidence.

⁴ <http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/assets/What-Counts-as-Good-Evidence-WEB.pdf>

What support is needed for evidence to action to be routine in public service delivery? What kind of knowledge and skills are present and needed in the system?

Contextual and Cultural Factors

Consideration of community context and local needs are critical for successful public service interventions. Community Planning Partnerships are perceived as complex entities, each with unique working cultures, political priorities, and tactical uses of evidence. They also have their own inbuilt challenges and inertia. In reality political priorities often take precedence over evidence-based decision-making, no matter how strong the evidence.

So while context must be a fundamental concern when planning, developing and scaling up public services, it is challenging to assess and manage.

How much is context a given factor, or can it be managed and influenced? How can we understand and unpick the context for evidence-use at micro, meso and macro levels?

Are there useful mapping methods that help to understand and unpick the complex contextual factors affecting any public service reform?

Funding

Funding priorities at national and local levels have a big impact on the way that services are planned and delivered whatever the evidence suggests. The WWS project is taking place in the context of budget cuts to local authorities, and stark choices facing councils about how to spend the remaining resources. Whilst a deeper conversation about evidence may help to shape public services in this context, the challenge remains that budgetary requirement will always trump considerations of 'what works'.

How can we create a culture of evidence use against a backdrop of cuts in public spending?

Evidence to action: Key issues and actions for WWS

Based on an exploration of key propositions around the nature of knowledge for public service reform, workshop participants agreed that the use of research-based evidence will be an important aspect of our E2A activities. WWS partners agreed that the following statements⁵ should underpin our approach to facilitating the better use of research evidence

1. *Research does not speak for itself*

Research needs to be actively translated and communicated, set in context, and must be 'brought to life' in order to be usable in practice. This means that research must be tailored for different audiences in order to incentivise different people. For research to be transformed into knowledge or evidence, the language with which research is animated is important. Stories and case studies may be powerful communication tools, in addition to more traditional ways of presenting evidence.

WWS will draw on a number of resources to help research be a relevant resource for public services, including data visualization, the evidence bank, and expert presentations.

2. *Research does not stand alone.*

Research must be seen in the context of other evidence; interpreted in the context of local systems, cultures and resources; and explored with an understanding of political sensitivities, expediencies and implementation challenges. However, there is a tension between this proposition and the capacity to scale-up and spread particular research-based initiatives or programmes. The interpretation of research, implementation and any scale-up are not simple tasks; they require local skills and capacity to be carried out successfully.

WWS will work with local partners to understand and interpret the research evidence alongside other kinds of data and priorities in order to develop and deliver public services. A collaborative action approach where researchers

⁵ These statements are based on principles developed by Davies and Nutley as part of their work on research use - see www.ruru.co.uk and *Using Evidence* (Nutley, Walter and Davies, Policy Press, 2007)

and local partners work closely together will be a core component of this.

3. *Research has to be integrated.*

Research-based ways of 'knowing' must be integrated with other forms of knowing, for example that which comes from deep experience. It is clear from discussion that research has to be integrated *in order to influence policy and practice*. In order to achieve this a problem focus may be helpful – looking at what the issues are, what the desired outcome might be, and how different kinds of knowledge can inform decision-making.

WWS will develop a network of knowledge brokers for local government that will be equipped to assist with a problem-focused approach to the delivery of evidence for public service delivery. We will model the process and provide training and support with our national partners.

4. *Using research is often not an event.*

The use of research can most often be best seen as a dynamic and iterative process, one which is also better seen in retrospect than in prospect. Often, research-based ideas can seep into the policy discourse, gradually changing priorities and debates. There may be a threshold or 'tipping point' for these changes to occur. In some cases where change is slow, a complex mix of approaches and influences may have converged to build momentum for change and the role of research may not be obvious. Research may influence policy and practice, but it is in turn then influenced by the priorities of practice and policy.

WWS aims to embed different ways of working with evidence into the service planning structure in order to effectively provide the evidence needed for public service reform supported by our national partners.

5. *It's not just learning - unlearning matters too.*

Using research and evidence can be about letting go of dogmatic positions or previously held notions about the world, and this can be as important as acquiring new understandings. To complicate this, it is possible for conflicting knowledge or understandings to be held by a single person at the same time. Thus, the new does not necessarily displace the old. There can be reluctance to accept evidence of something not working if it is an approach that people have

believed in. However it isn't always easy to understand when someone's beliefs are at odds with the evidence. The implication of the need to 'unlearn' is that difficult conversations are required.

WWS's mission includes understanding what doesn't work as well as what works. Through the programme we will be able to explore how evidence of an approach not working plays out through the system. Our aim is to build capacity to have those difficult conversations.

6. Knowledge is often co-produced.

Research is not an exclusive domain of technical experts. Policy-relevant knowledge often comes from collaborative processes that break down the distinction between roles of researcher and practitioner. In these instances, technical expertise can be brought together with other forms of knowing, e.g. through experience. When knowledge is co-produced it is more likely to have an impact. However there are practical issues to overcome in terms of division of responsibility for resources and funding, and creating clear roles around control and accountability.

A collaborative action research approach sits at the core of the WWS programme, working with local policy-makers and practitioners to understand the principal research questions.

7. Knowledge creation is deeply social.

The creation of knowledge is a deeply social and contextual practice that occurs through interaction and dialogue. Relationship building can be a critical precondition for common understandings to be reached about a given issue. Paying attention to power imbalances within social interactions can help avoid these derailing any knowledge co-production processes.

Within the culture of public services, the policy perspective of the current Scottish and local government administration is highly influential. It is important to develop a deeply embedded culture of sharing knowledge and to have widespread capacity to use shared knowledge.

The WWS evidence to action model is relational, and seeks to develop close working relationships and a high level of trust to address these issues. WWS will develop and refine tools for understanding and addressing contextual

issues that inhibit change. The programme will have to be alert to factors around organizational inertia; social manipulation; and tactics that may get in the way.

8. *Not products but process.*

When working with an understanding of complex processes that underpin research use, it makes sense to focus more on supporting activities and engagement (how people use evidence) than on the creation and distribution of knowledge products (like evidence summaries or data reports). In a public service reform setting acquiring 'buy-in' during the process of research is necessary, instead of waiting until the end.

When considering what kind of balance is helpful between the creation of research syntheses, summaries, guidelines and other products, and the facilitation of interactive dialogue, it is difficult to find this balance and prioritise outwith the specific context.

WWS will need to wrestle with, and balance, research production and dialogical processes. It will do this through the collaborative action process with local partners.

9. *It's not all about decisions but often more about framings.*

Research can influence change when it causes shifts in the language, concepts, conceptual models or frameworks that define the policy or practice arena. However, there may be few opportunities for this kind of 'reframing' in a context where roles and institutions are driven by pressure to deliver. Research can be most powerful when it questions core assumptions or re-shapes cherished values, but in the public service reform process where roles feel constrained there may be little space for this kind of contemplation that can challenge assumptions.

The WWS approach aims to create opportunities for different kinds of thinking about common issues, and an interrogation of the evidence that might provide these kinds of opportunities⁶.

⁶ This is developed from a previous successful approach in the Meaningful and Measurable Project <https://meaningfulandmeasurable.wordpress.com/>

10. For organisations to be serious about research-use, they need 'skin in the game'.

There is a lot of rhetoric around using research-based evidence in developing public services. To garner proper commitment, these organisations must be active investors (e.g. time, money, reputation). There is very limited current infrastructure for using evidence in the non-health parts of the public and voluntary sectors.

WWS has established an evidence to action working group, bringing together key knowledge partners to consider how to develop organizational resources for using research in public service reform. The collaborative action research approach of WWS aims to help build local capacity and highlight key organizational issues.

11. Leaders in impact settings need to demonstrate active support for research creation and use.

Leaders are important in both supporting the time and resource needs for research use, but also in modelling appropriate research use attitudes and behaviours. Participants also noted the need for distributed and transparent leadership.

The WWS evidence to action strand will link with the leadership strand to identify and develop the skills and capabilities needed for leadership on this issue.

Taking the work forward

This paper sets out how WWS aims to address key issues in using evidence to inform change through the development and extension of existing ways of working, and the development of new resources and approaches. The Evidence to Action workstream is cross-cutting: it will cut across other workstreams such as leadership, governance and prevention, and will link particularly closely with the collaborative action research stream⁷.

By the end of the three years of WWS funding (December 2017) we aim to:

- Have a better understanding of the issues in using evidence to action in public services reform
- Have explored how different kinds of evidence, from research, data, local consultation, and practice can be combined to support decision-making
- Have developed a supported network of knowledge brokers serving the needs of local authority areas
- Have created ways of working together across national partners with an interest in supporting evidence use

This working paper sets out our intentions at the beginning of the programme. Further development of this work will occur between now and 2017.

⁷ Full list of WWS workstreams available within the WWS Workplan 2014-2017, at <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/WWS-workplan.pdf>