

BRITISH WHAT WORKS CENTRES

What are the lessons for evidence-based policy in France ?

Executive Summary

English translation

In partnership with : France Stratégie, le Secrétariat général pour la modernisation de l'action publique (SGMAP), le Commissariat général à l'égalité des territoires (CGET), Santé publique France, la Caisse nationale des allocations familiales (Cnaf) et la Caisse nationale de solidarité pour l'autonomie (CNSA),

The search for effective solutions to ingrained social, health and economic challenges has driven a growing interest in evidence-based policy making in recent years. These challenges range from early years inequalities to school dropout, from unemployment to economic disparities between regions, from drug taking to the loss of autonomy among the elderly. Over the past decade, this interest has contributed to the rising popularity of social policy experimentation, and the use of robust evaluation methods like RCTs, in France. These methods have added a new dimension to the French tradition of public policy evaluation: the ability to establish a causal link between policy measures and changes in service users' lives. Many in the policy community were hopeful that these approaches would enable them to allocate public spending on the most effective evidence-based interventions.

Indeed, since 2007 a lot has been achieved in France. Several large-scale trials have been implemented, including a quasi-experimental trial of the French minimum income scheme, the Revenu de solidarité active or "RSA". A 200 million euro social experimentation youth fund was also set up – le Fonds d'expérimentation pour la jeunesse – that has funded hundreds of pilot projects and around 30 Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs).

However, this optimism gave way to criticisms and questions regarding the feasibility of such impact evaluations, and their use in policy decision-making. In spite of the apparent popularity of social policy experimentation, only a few dozen have actually been conducted in the French context. When evaluations do exist, few decision-makers and professionals use them to inform their practice. Those who would like to apply the lessons from these evaluations struggle to do so because their findings are rarely disseminated in an accessible format. As a result, these impact evaluations rarely inform public policy decisions and frontline services.

These difficulties led Ansa and our partners to look for promising practices in the field of knowledge transfer. In 2016, we decided to conduct a study of the What Works Centres aimed at drawing lessons for the French context. Six partners co-funded and supported this study: the disability benefits agency (CNSA), the family benefits agency (CNAF), three agencies attached to the prime minister's office – a foresight and analysis agency (France Strategy), a modernisation agency (SGMAP), and a regional inequalities agency (CGET), and Public Health France. All of these agencies hope to draw on the experience of the What Works Centres to launch initiatives in their policy area.

Starting from the assumption that it takes time and resources to place “evidence” at the heart of policy and practice, the British government has supported the emergence of independent knowledge transfer bodies in a range of fields: the What Works Centres.

The primary objective of the nine What Works Centres is to support frontline professionals and decision-makers to apply the evidence of “what works” in fields ranging from educational inequality to local economic development. They focus particularly on the evidence of the effects of specific interventions at a local level, rather than large-scale policy levers. Thanks to their evidence syntheses, these centres are now identified by a growing number of stakeholders as the “one stop shop” to the evidence of what works in their sector. Most sought initially to focus primarily on the findings of experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations in their systematic evidence reviews. However, centres faced both a limited supply of robust impact evaluations and an inability to assess the replicability in a British context of interventions developed abroad. These difficulties have led several centres to broaden the definition of evidence to include other types of evaluation or research. Conscience of the need to strengthen the British evidence based, several have also sought to stimulate the production of new impact evaluations to test promising innovations in the UK.

The What Works Centres disseminate the findings of their evidence synthesis and support professionals to adopt effective approaches. They have made evidence about the relative impact and costs of different interventions available through widely accessible outputs, including usually an online interventions library or clearinghouse (sometimes called a toolkit). By providing a rapid response to the question “what works in my sector?” the centres have quickly established themselves as a useful resource for decision-makers and professionals. For instance, certain headteachers have compared the Education Endowment Foundation’s Teaching and Learning Toolkit to the “Which?” consumer magazine, because it is independent, authoritative and clear.

The centres are conscious that making evidence of what works available is necessary but not sufficient to change practice. They are therefore committed to providing support to put evidence into action. The majority of the centres target local commissioners and frontline practitioners, with tailored guidance and toolkits, and – in some instances – support to replicate effective approaches. The majority of the centres have only recently begun this sort of intensive work on adoption, so we know little about their impact on practice. Aware of the need to innovate in this field, the What Works Centres continue to test and improve their dissemination and adoption methods. Several also recognise that to deliver on their mission would require a cultural shift that requires long-term change management in their sector.

All of the centres promote impact evaluation, but only two actually support or fund such evaluations. The What Works Centre for Crime Reduction has limited resources for this work, and has opted to directly support the set up and evaluation of trials in collaboration with police forces. The Education Endowment Foundation, on the other hand, has launched 127 evaluations, including 105 using experimental methods, and involving 7 000 schools – the equivalent of one in four schools in England. By conducting such a large-scale programme of trials, EEF has been able to evaluate the effectiveness of promising innovations, in so doing strengthening the evidence base for what works to reduce the attainment gap between students from rich and poor families in the UK. These trials have also helped build strong links between EEF and local schools and educational charities tackling these issues on the frontline. In our view, much can be learnt from EEF’s experience by those seeking to implement similar trials in France.

Ansa and our partners think that the what works model is a promising approach for strengthening evidence based policy making. Some have suggested that differences between the UK and France mean the model could not be replicated in France. The countries do differ, both in the way the public sector is structured (France is, broadly speaking, more decentralised), and in the role “evidence”

plays in the policy process. However, our initial analysis suggests these differences should not prevent the emergence of what works style centres in France. Indeed, the What Works Centres have faced many of the same questions and criticisms in the UK than they would almost certainly be subject to if introduced in France. The centres have also established themselves in fields where the public sector is structured very differently, both highly centralised and relatively decentralised.

We therefore intend to explore the feasibility of launching what works-inspired initiatives or organisations in France, either by creating them from scratch, or by labelling existing organisations. These centres could take the form of new organisations, teams within government agencies, or a hub-and-spoke network model. These centres can only succeed if they are set up in well-defined fields, have a clear mission, have sufficient resources, and are committed to changing practice over the long-term. Their methodological rigor, independence and transparency are also key success factors. Lastly, they must place the needs and expectations of decision-makers and professionals at the heart of their model if they want to have an impact on policy and practice.

Whatever the policy field, decision-makers and practitioners face the same challenges in developing and implementing policy that is based on evidence. There is currently no forum dedicated to discussing these specific challenges, and to promoting effective practice. L'Ansa and our partners therefore propose to create a cross-cutting network bringing together policymakers, researchers and frontline professionals to discuss how to reinforce evidence-based approaches in France, inspired by the Alliance for Useful Evidence.