



## **Do We Know What's Working in Northern Ireland?**

A few months ago we blogged about why there wasn't a What Works Centre (WWC) in Northern Ireland. There are currently nine of these 'evidence centres for social policy' in Britain, covering issues like health, crime, education and wellbeing, and two affiliate centres based in Scotland and Wales. We thought we may be missing a trick by not having one in Northern Ireland. So we recently organised a small roundtable with colleagues from What Works Scotland (WWS) and the Public Policy Institute in Wales (PPIW) to consider the issue.

We invited a small group of people - mostly within government - to compare these national centres and to discuss whether there is a need for a similar initiative in this region. The meeting was organised by the Alliance in association with the Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe), Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and NI Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). We were pleased that representatives from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Cabinet Office and Institute for Government were also able to attend along with local civil servants, academics and NGOs. We were also delighted to host the meeting in the palatial surrounds of the Senate Room in Parliament Buildings which set the scene nicely for how evidence can improve policy making.

We started with a presentation from Peter May, the current DSD Permanent Secretary and Head of the Policy Profession in NI, who talked about using evidence in local policy-making and asked whether there is a policy gap in Northern Ireland; and if so, how can we fill it? He pointed out the challenges of using evidence in the political context and the importance of learning from the experience of Scotland and Wales.

### **Scotland**

Nick Bland, the co-director of WWS then introduced the work of his centre and the Scottish policy context - long term spending reductions, demographic change and the distinctive Scottish approach to public sector reform. He explained that his centre is co-funded by ESRC and the Scottish Government in partnership with the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh. Their main focus is working with specific Community Planning Partnerships involved in the design and delivery of public services.

## **Wales**

PPIW was established in January 2014 to provide the Welsh Government with authoritative independent analysis and advice. The Director, Steve Martin, explained that the Institute is also co-funded by ESRC with the Welsh Government, and seeks to use evidence to improve policy and practice in Wales and beyond.

## **What Works Network**

The meeting also heard from Sophie Catlin at the Cabinet Office on the other seven What Works Centres. She described the role of the Cabinet Office and the What Works Network which brings all the centres together and supports the establishment of new ones. Sophie also detailed the running of the Cross-Government Trial Advice Panel, with experts from across academia and government, which provides a free service for civil servants to help test whether policies and programmes are working. The Cabinet Office shares findings from the What Works Centres across government and supports the civil service to develop the skills and capability to use evidence effectively. She explained that currently there are no What Works Centres which specifically focus on Northern Ireland.

## **ESRC**

Natalie Jones from ESRC then briefly outlined the role of the council in supporting the development of the centres. They have been major players, along with partners in government across the UK, in facilitating their growth and impact on policy.

## **Next Steps**

Both the Cabinet Office and ESRC are interested in the potential development of a WWC for Northern Ireland. In the discussion that followed the presentations, there were a number of comments and questions on how a WWC could augment the current provision of research and policy advice in the region and which WWC model, if any, would be the most suitable for NI. It was noted that independent policy advice and analysis were not connected to government in any strategic way here and Northern Ireland could be missing out by not being a member of the What Works Network and not bridging local research with the rest of the UK.

The event concluded with a commitment to consider the need for a WWC at a forthcoming meeting of the NICS Policy Champions Network with further discussion with interested parties. It was felt that some scoping could be required on identifying current gaps in the local policy eco-system.

At the Alliance, we believe the event was useful in highlighting the potential of a WWC to support local Ministers and policy-makers with independent, expert advice and analysis. It is clear that funding could be available to develop such a centre however support will also be required from the NI Executive, our universities and other stakeholders to sustain it. We will also need the political support of all local parties and the Northern Ireland Office to adopt the evidence produced by such a centre. This closeness to policy making must be balanced by the need to ensure the independence of the centre in order to avoid charges of biasing evidence for political needs. As Paul Boyle, former CEO of ESRC in a Guardian blog warned "Some of this work may not be pleasing to all ears: sometimes, evidence does not necessarily support policies already in place". Our report on lessons

learnt overseas in countries like the US, Germany and Australia found that independence is crucial for success. Any future WWC in Northern Ireland must therefore demonstrate a fierce culture of impartiality and detachment from political interference and meddling.

### **A What Works Centre for Northern Ireland?**

So, will we see a new centre in this part of the world? Probably not in the immediate future, particularly with an election imminent. However there would appear to be some momentum in improving the local policy landscape and using research evidence more effectively. For example, there was a call earlier this month for the establishment of a Northern Ireland WWC in the report 'Devolution as a Policy Laboratory. Evidence sharing and learning between the UK's four governments' - jointly commissioned by the Alliance with the Institute for Government and Carnegie UK Trust. The report recommended:

*"There should also be active consideration of whether and how a What Works Centre should be established in Northern Ireland. The What Works Centres have the potential to play an important role in making devolution an effective policy laboratory..... The Northern Ireland Executive, What Works Network and potential funders like the ESRC should explore the possibility of establishing a What Works Northern Ireland centre, perhaps along the lines of PPIW."*

The Alliance looks forward to continuing this discussion and welcomes views on making policies work in Northern Ireland

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