

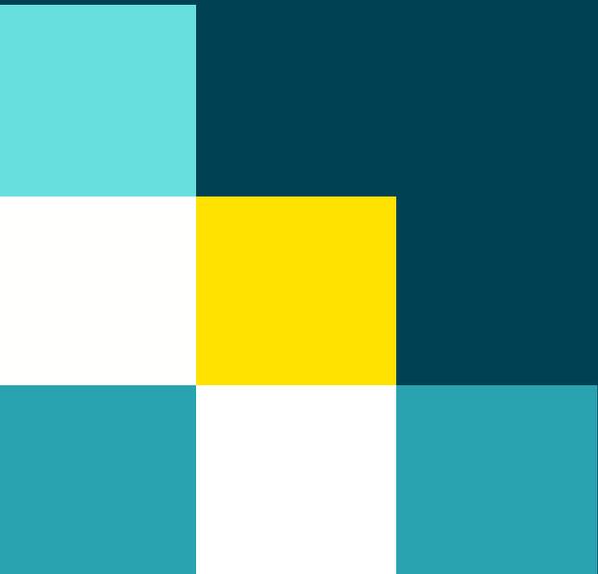


Wales Centre for Public Policy
Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru

What Works Network Implementation Project

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Using ‘implementation’ as a lens

What Work Centres (WWCs) place substantial time and effort into translating and disseminating evidence for their intended audiences. But these efforts will only lead to changes in practice if an engagement with evidence is transferred into changes in policy and practice. Given this challenge, WWCs are interested in how to use evidence, in addition to understanding ‘what works’.

Implementation and behavioural science are rapidly developing fields, which offer widespread opportunities to support these efforts. Yet, to date this research has not widely filtered through to informing how public services are designed and delivered in the UK. This project, funded through the ESRC’s Strategic Fund, aimed to apply the latest thinking and evidence on implementation to the work of the WWCs.

The overarching objective was to develop an applied understanding of implementation science¹ across the Network and, in so doing, increase Centres’ capacity to support implementation activity across different strands of their work - innovation, evaluation, synthesis, translation and use.

As there have been few structured interactions of this type across the Network, the project was also exploring how to develop productive learning partnerships in a way that embraces Centres’ different contexts and foci. The project generated important insights not just on implementation, but also on how to conduct collaborative professional development across the Network.

The following WWCs participated in the WWN Implementation Project: Centre for Ageing Better; Education Endowment Foundation; Early Intervention Foundation; What Works Centre for Crime Reduction; Wales Centre for Public Policy; What Works Wellbeing

Project overview

The project was designed with three phases:

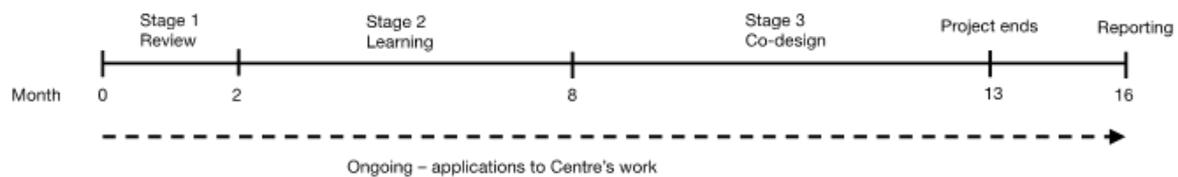
1. Firstly, review current awareness and understanding relating to implementation within the participating WWCs, whilst also defining and refining how Centres want to incorporate implementation into their work.

¹ Implementation science is ‘the study of methods and strategies that facilitate the uptake of research and evidence-based practice into regular use by practitioners and policymakers’ (Bauer et al, 2015).

2. Secondly, run - in light of the initial review - a programme of cross-Network workshops to increase our collective understanding and capacity on relevant implementation topics.
3. Finally, work in partnership with Centres to develop outputs and resources that draw on the implementation evidence, to provide a basis for future applications.

Throughout the project, Centres would apply the new knowledge, resources and capacity to existing workstreams with support from other Centres and the core team. Figure 1 shows the initial structure for the project:

Figure 1: Initial project structure

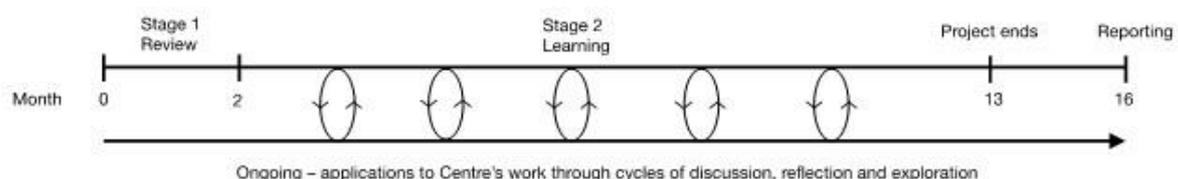


When the project began it was felt that a joint infrastructure for implementation could be developed for the Network, composed of common models, frameworks, tools and capacity (stage 3). This objective was based on a series of assumptions:

- WWCs face comparable challenges on implementation and operate in similar contexts
- The principles, evidence and strategies that underpin effective implementation would be transferrable across different fields
- The application of new knowledge to Centres' work would be straightforward.

As we go on to discuss, these assumptions turned out to be largely inaccurate, which meant that the objectives and format for the project evolved as it progressed. The final format involved dropping the co-design stage (stage 3), extending the learning phase (stage 2) and building in cycles of discussion and reflection to support applications within Centres, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Adapted project structure



Impact of the pandemic

The project was due to begin in March 2020, which coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the project shifted from face-to-face to virtual interactions. The format involved collaborative webinars with further online discussions back within Centres to explore transfer and applications. Inevitably, the pandemic created a degree of disruption to the project – including an initial delay – although engagement from Centres was strong throughout and the programme continued largely as intended. The shift to a virtual format may have provided greater opportunities for a range of colleagues to participate.

Shared interests, different contexts

The Review stage of the project revealed that WWCs are interested in implementation for a range of reasons. For example, some Centres are interested in how practitioners make evidence-based decisions, whilst other Centres are interested in policy implementation. The first activity, therefore, was to establish where we currently sit, both individually as Centres and as a Network, in relation to implementation:

- Who are Centres looking to influence? In what way?
- What is being implemented?
- How is implementation currently being supported?
- What is working well and less well?

A simple proforma was used to collect this information, followed up by discussions with, and between, Centres. Gaining a better understanding of our similarities and differences in relation to implementation informed the process and content of the rest of the project. As we go on to discuss, spending time throughout the project to understand our different contexts was considered essential to being able to collaborate effectively.

WWC's starting points and areas of interest

The initial review revealed that WWCs had significantly different aims and starting points around implementation. This variation applied to their objectives, contexts, language and levels of prior understanding. The WWN is not a set of uniform bodies of course, and the role of Centres also changes over time. The extent of the differences, highlighted early in the project, indicated that significant tailoring and contextualisation is required to translate and apply implementation science concepts to Centres' work. Indeed, this became an ongoing theme running through the project and a key insight when

considering the use of research on evidence use. We explored several themes in the initial review:

Different audiences

WWCs have a wide range of audiences and users when considering implementation, including practitioners, policy makers, commissioners, funders and developers. Some Centres have a narrower set of audiences (e.g. WWCCR) and some broader (e.g. WWW). One shared target audience between Centres are individuals and organisations making commissioning decisions e.g. regional policy commissioners, police chiefs.

What is being implemented?

A wide range of evidence-informed outputs are being implemented across the Network, including practices, policies, programmes, principles, processes and strategies. Furthermore, WWCs are often interested in implementing more than one type of output. This is important, as implementation science has traditionally had a programmatic focus, emanating from the US with an initial focus on healthcare. This programmatic and medical focus means the knowledge base for implementation in other areas – e.g. policy – is less established, which has implications for Centres in terms of the extra effort required to interpret and apply the evidence.

Cross-network interests on implementation

Although there are significant differences in contexts and objectives relating to implementation across the WWN, there are, nevertheless, some shared interests between some Centres. This includes:

- Developing common language and frameworks e.g. knowledge mobilisation vs implementation
- Evidence-informed decision making e.g. identifying priorities, assessing options, judging feasibility
- Developing and strengthening ‘home grown’ interventions e.g. refining approaches, selecting implementation strategies
- Monitoring implementation
- Applying behavioural science e.g. COM-B frameworks
- Considering users’ contexts and barriers to implementation

Across these specific topics, there is a universal interest to embed implementation thinking and activities as part of system-wide changes. Centres are looking to change cultures and mindsets around research use, not just develop practices, as one participant explained:

“Our whole focus as a What Works Centre is on getting sound, evidence-informed decision-making”

Bringing expertise and ideas to the network

In the second stage of the project (Learning) had two elements – webinars with inputs from experts, and discussion groups for Centres to explore implications for their work.

Expert webinars

The language and concepts being used by Centres when thinking about implementation differs, so an initial goal was to develop some shared conceptual understanding, drawing on both external insights and internal knowledge and examples from across the WWN. We ran a series of eight structured workshops, exploring some key themes relating to implementation and how they might relate and apply to WWCs.

The typical format was 2hr workshops, with inputs from external experts on implementation science and strategies, interspersed with opportunities to explore how these insights related to Centres’ work.

The Role of Context in Implementation

- Webinar 1: *The Role of Context in Implementation*, with Prof. Annette Boaz ([link](#))
- Webinar 2: *Integrating Contexts: Examples from WWCs* ([link](#))

Evidence-Informed Decision-Making

- Webinar 3: *Identifying Priorities and Problems*, with Stuart Kime ([link](#))
- Webinar 4: *Evidence-informed Decision Making* ([link](#))

Developing and Strengthening Interventions

- Webinar 5: *How to Develop Interventions with Implementation in Mind – 1*, with Dr. Bianca Albers & Jane Lewis ([link](#))
- Webinar 6: *How to Develop Interventions with Implementation in Mind – 2*, with Dr. Bianca Albers & Jane Lewis ([link](#))
- Webinar 7: *Rapid Cycle Testing and Design*, with Dr. Deon Simpson

Taking a Behavioural Approach

- Webinar 8: *A Behavioural Science Approach to Implementing Change*, with Dr. Danielle D’Lima ([link](#))

Working groups to explore applications

The webinars with external speakers proved to be valuable in building a better understanding of implementation theory and concepts. However, it was felt that further discussion and reflection was needed to apply that learning within Centres:

“There have been very interesting theoretical discussions, but it feels that what is needed now is practical discussions and ideas around how this is now used day to day in work.”

We agreed, therefore, to explore transfer and applications in smaller working groups at this point, organised around three specific sub-themes:

1. *Building implementation into the design of approaches/interventions*
2. *Integrating implementation thinking at a policy level*
3. *Integrating context and working with different stakeholders*

The working groups reflected collectively on the concepts and evidence covered to date, shared examples of relevant activities (including where things have and haven't worked) and captured case studies of applications. The outputs and outcomes from the Learning phase are discussed in the following section.

Has the project achieved its aims?

The overall aim of the WWN Implementation project was to develop an applied understanding of implementation science across the Network and, in so doing, increase Centres' capacity to support implementation activity across their work. Throughout the project we monitored progress towards these objectives by considering five criteria:

- **Engagement** – Are WWCs participating in the aspects of the project that are of interest to them?
- **Understanding** – Is our collective knowledge of implementation developing?
- **Collaboration** – Is sharing of knowledge and strategies occurring across the Network?
- **Outputs** – Are materials and resources being developed that can support Centre's work?
- **Applications** – Are there examples of the work directly informing Centre's wider implementation

The sections below summarise the progress that was made in these five areas and the insights that were generated in the process. Evidence and insights are drawn from the following sources:

- Two anonymised surveys with participants (mid-point in February 2020 and at the end of the project in August 2020)
- WWC ‘progress updates’ – summaries of current and future interests and applications relating to implementation, written by Centres at the end of the project
- Discussions between Centres throughout the project

Engagement – Are WWCs participating in the aspects of the project that are of interest to them?

Engagement with the different elements of the project was generally excellent. WWCs participated in all stages of the project and actively shaped its strategic direction. Typically, each WWC had one or two people who were involved consistently throughout the project, although additional colleagues were brought into discussions and webinars where appropriate.

As we discuss later, applying implementation research was found to be a highly active and context-specific process. It would have therefore helped to establish clearer expectations at the outset for the processes required to explore applications back in Centres (see Reflections section below).

Understanding – Is our collective knowledge of implementation developing?

Making sense of implementation science is tricky. Abstract concepts can take a while to grasp and the language can be confusing, particularly when looking across different fields of research e.g. implementation science, behavioural science, political science. Different research fields use many different theoretical models and frameworks, which break down factors, activities and behaviours that contribute to implementation in contrasting ways. It often takes repeated engagements with different models and concepts to understand the strengths, weaknesses and potential relevance to a Centre’s work.

As we go on to discuss, the reflective and collaborative nature of the project was felt to be a real asset in building an applied understanding of the research. It was often through discussions and exploring applications in different contexts that a deeper and nuanced understanding developed.

There are clear signs that participants’ understanding of implementation developed significantly through the project, as shown in the mid and end-point survey findings (see Figure 3 below).

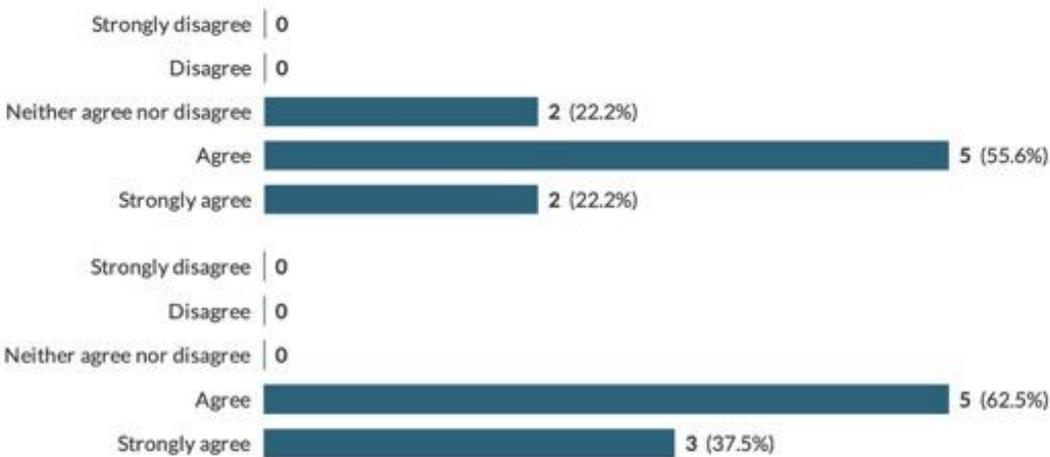
One participant reported:

“I now have a much more rounded view of what implementation means, and how it functions in sectors other than my own. I’ve learnt more about the considerations that must accompany, or create, effective implementation in our context”

The development of shared language and understanding in relation to implementation was felt to be a particularly important outcome. The development of shared language has previously felt to be a barrier to collaboration between Centres, as one participant highlighted:

‘A lack of a shared language can get in the way of meaningful collaboration. We are trying to talk about the same thing, although we are not sure if we are talking about the same thing, and spend a lot of time trying to work out if we are talking about the same thing!’

Figure 3: Survey responses to the statement “My understanding of implementation has changed as a result of this project”

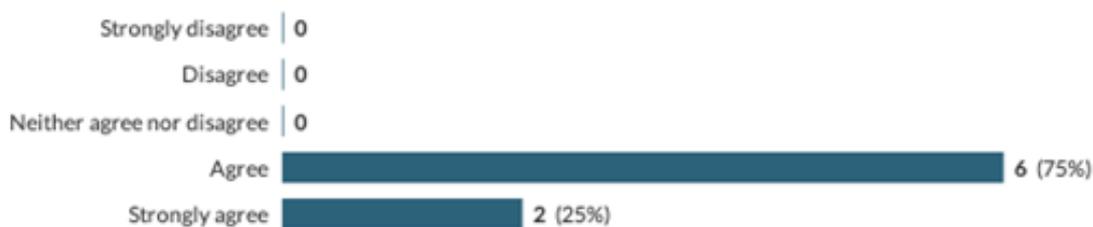


Source: Online survey of participants, comparing first and second surveys

Collaboration – Is sharing of knowledge and strategies occurring across the Network?

What Works Centres already collaborate in a range of ways, be that sharing ideas on methods (e.g. producing guidance) or working on joint priorities. Nevertheless, this project is, to our knowledge, the first time that Centres have participated in joint professional development over an extended period, using a structured process. All participants felt this promoted collaboration across the Network, as indicated in the survey at the end of the project (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Survey responses to the statement “This project has helped to promote collaboration between What Works Centres”



Source: Online survey of participants

There were numerous reported benefits to collaboration. For example, we found that considering examples of how other Centres are supporting implementation provided ideas for our own context. Doing so has identified a number of shared interests and opportunities for future joint working e.g. What Works Wellbeing and Wales Centre for Public Policy considering implementation in policy settings. Further insights and implications of the collaborative nature of the project are discussed in the Reflections section below.

Outputs – Are materials and resources being developed that can support Centre’s work?

As mentioned in the introduction, an initial aim for the WWN Implementation project was to develop some common models, tools and frameworks for the Network, however, as the project progressed we realised that was an unhelpful and unfeasible aim. The Network is highly diverse in terms of their aims, audiences, approaches, and forms of evidence. Whilst Centres may have overlapping interests in relation to implementation, they face distinct challenges in terms of what it means and looks like.

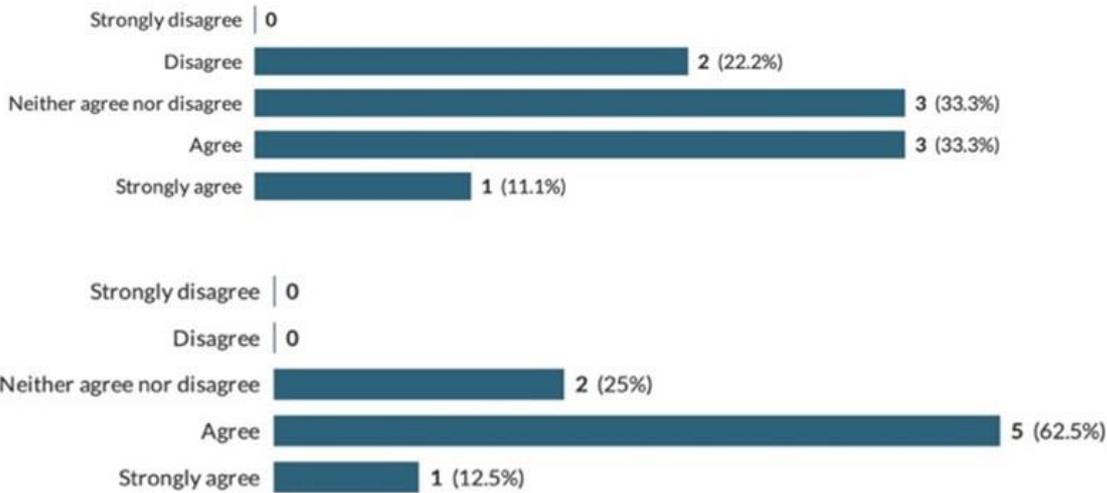
We found, therefore, that whilst implementation concepts and principles may be transferrable across different fields, they need to be tailored to Centres' own context and approaches when being applied. A significant output of the project has been shared interest, language and conceptual understanding relating to implementation, but the application of those ideas to Centres is highly specific and takes time. Any resulting tools, models and resources will almost always require tailoring to context i.e. EEF's 'School's Guide to Implementation'.

One central practical output from the project has been a repository of 'WWN Implementation resources'. This resource, housed on the Evidence Quarter website, collates relevant frameworks, tools, papers and reports for the themes covered in the project. Video recordings of all the webinars are included, along with relevant case studies and reports from WWCs. The repository has the potential to be updated with new evidence and examples of WWN activity, as a 'living' library of implementation knowledge, interests and activity.

Applications – Are there examples of the work directly informing Centre’s wider implementation initiatives?

Whilst engaging with implementation science can be challenging, WWCs are applying the learning to their day-to-day work and will continue to do so in the future. Unsurprisingly, the learning influenced the work of Centres more as the project progressed (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Survey responses to the statement “The learning from the webinars is influencing our work”



Source: Online survey of participants, comparing first and second surveys

Applications to Centres' work have also been broader than anticipated. The project was initially framed as supporting Centres' users in implementing evidence-informed decisions e.g. police forces, headteachers. Whilst this has certainly been a focus for the project, applications have been much broader, for example in applying implementation concepts to internal processes within Centres, or exploring how implementation concepts can be applied to programme development.

The barriers to applying new implementation insights also evolved as the project progressed. In the early stages, the main barrier to application was insufficient time and opportunities to do so. Whilst this remained a challenge throughout the project, the main reported barrier at the end of the project were difficulties in translating generic implementation concepts to Centres' specific contexts.

These two barriers together illustrate an important piece of learning from the project: that applying research on implementation requires more than simply bringing useful ideas and thinking to the Network. It involves Centres exploring ideas and concepts outside of their comfort zone, understanding themselves, what they do, making sense of what they have learnt in their context, and only then thinking about how it applies.

As such, effective use of implementation research requires significant discussion and reflection back within the organisation, in addition to external training workshops and discussions. This need for internal reflection is accentuated by the fact that implementation evidence, frameworks and strategies are often not framed in the specific context and interests of WWCs e.g. policy implementation. Overall, this led to a latency effect for applications, as one participant noted:

“It feels like you almost have to go through a period of incubating the ideas and concepts, and playing around with them in your context, before the practical applications start to emerge.”

The latency effect had implications for the design of the project (and future, collaborative WWN projects), as discussed in the Reflections section below. Despite these challenges, all Centres have applied learning from the project to their work, as shown in the examples below:

Education Endowment Foundation

EEF have focused on how implementation science can inform the design and development of programmes and interventions, particularly in the early stages. A webinar on 'Rapid cycle design and testing', by Dartington Service Design Lab, led to a partnership between the two organisations. EEF are currently applying the approach to a government-funded programme to nurture early-stage innovations, with the aim of creating implementation 'friendly' interventions. This work has

revealed a wider opportunity at EEF, to establish what effective implementation looks like across all aspects its work - programme design, evaluation, synthesis and use - with consistent language and concepts throughout.

Early Intervention Foundation

EIF have been applying the insights identified in their 2021 report *Supporting Evidence Use in Policy and Practice* to their work. They have used the WWN Implementation project to develop their thinking about the practical implications of insights from implementation science. They are applying the COM-B behavioural science model to understand different contexts for evidence use and shape their evidence generation activity. They also continue to focus on impact by strengthening their approach to monitoring implementation and measuring impact in relation to evidence use in policy and practice. This includes developing strong Theories of Change and setting clear short and long-term goals at project level, which has been shaped by insights from the WWN Implementation project.

What Works Centre for Crime Reduction

WWCCR are applying the COM-B behavioural science model internally to understand how to change officer and chief constable behaviour: How do we scope our work? How do we get to the bottom of what's causing certain behaviours? What levers and mechanisms do we need to put in place to shift those behaviours? Which stakeholders have the roles and responsibilities to shift and support implementation? A member of the team responsible for developing the COM-B model has been seconded to WWCCR to help embed the principles and processes (an approach to mobilising knowledge that could be transferrable to other Centres). The WWN implementation project has helped WWCCR move from its typical work, such as developing guidance, to think about actively changing behaviours.

Wales Centre for Public Policy

The Centre has run training sessions and internal workshops with the whole team to build understanding of implementation science and to explore its potential application to WCPP operations. As a result, it has started to incorporate insights from implementation science into specific pieces of work. For example, the Centre has had an explicit focus on implementation questions in its work for Welsh Government on tackling poverty; and is using implementation frameworks to shape how it approaches working with regions on multi-agency working to support children and families. Alongside this, the Centre is producing a discussion paper exploring what implementation science can tell policy makers about effective implementation, which is being used to inform engagement with stakeholders in Wales about approaches to effective delivery.

What Works Wellbeing

WWW are interested in helping a wide range of audiences – Government, public sector, business, civil society and researchers – use evidence and data on Wellbeing. They place significant focus on making sense of evidence in the user's context and ensuring their needs, interests and language are at the heart of their approach to implementation. They are developing implementation expertise, internally and externally, and the WWN Implementation project has provided an opportunity to learn from theories, models and other What Works Centres. They are drawing on a range of implementation models and mechanisms, including COM-B and EAST, and have learnt from EIF when designing their Local Authority Maximising Wellbeing initiative.

Collaborative learning and development across the Network

When the WWN Implementation project was envisaged, we didn't foresee it overtly as an exercise in knowledge mobilisation and professional learning. That was influenced, perhaps, by an overestimation of the level of existing shared knowledge and language across the Network, and an underestimation of the challenges in transferring and that knowledge to Centres' specific contexts. We have therefore learnt important lessons on how to collaborate as a Network and undergo joint professional development and learning. These insights can be summarised as 'structured reflection' and 'purposeful collaboration':

Structured reflection

Applying implementation research requires making sense of it in your context. We found this to be a highly active process, requiring cycles of engagement, reflection and dialogue. It was often through the discussions - both internally and externally - that an understanding of one's own work emerged. This highlights how important the reflective nature of the project was.

Any future project that tries to engage WWCs with evidence, to inform their practice, should be designed to reflect the need for co-construction of 'new' knowledge - i.e. integration of evidence with the experience and practice. If we were designing the project again we would think more deliberately about what Centres need to bring to the project

in order to transfer and apply the learning, as well as the interplay between the central inputs – e.g. training seminars – and internal elements. This rebalancing happened organically, although we would recommend future projects of this kind should set clear expectations for work within Centres and provide structured opportunities for that.

Purposeful collaboration

If the first lesson is on the importance of reflection, the second is that there is value in doing that reflection collectively. Research use is a social and dialogic process, and it was often by working together on shared interests and challenges in the project, and reflecting on our work together, that a deeper and applied understanding emerged.

Research on research use suggests that evidence-use systems rely on well-functioning relationships, with interactions that are routine, fluid, trusted and coordinated. Our experiences suggest that developing these relationships and interactions takes concerted time and effort. We have seen effective interactions and relationships develop across the life of the project. The rhythm of interactions helped create routines and processes for discussion, through which a better understanding of our coordinated, but differentiated, perspectives and roles, emerged. This mutual understanding developed trust, which resulted in more fluid and productive conversations.

This process all took time and significant effort from participants, and was aided by having a project lead who could coordinate the project and ‘keep the wheels turning’. The development of relationships also felt cumulative, with conversations at the end of the project feeling significantly more productive, as one participant noted:

“There is such potential power here in terms of the impact we are able to have by developing shared language and aligned thinking. It has certainly been a journey for us in terms of what we mean by implementation – that in itself is a fantastic outcome, as it means we are better able to communicate between ourselves and to others. There is real power in that.”

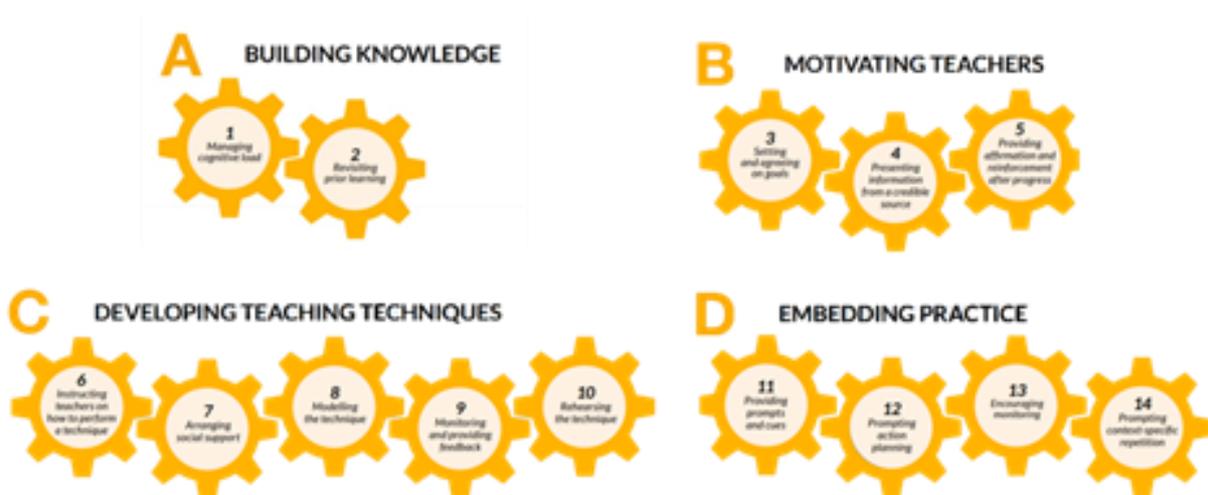
A model for professional development and learning

The WWN Implementation Project has involved experimenting with approaches to professional development and learning across the Network. Having a structure and process for joint and iterative learning has felt different to previous WWN interactions,

and we believe better captures the principles of adult learning and professional development.

The Education Endowment Foundation recently published guidance for schools on effective professional development, based on an extensive systematic review (Sims et al, 2021). It recommends that professional development should include mechanisms that i) build knowledge, ii) develop new techniques and strategies, iii) motivates participants and iv) embeds learning (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6: Mechanisms of effective professional development in education



Source: Sims et al, 2021

The WWN Implementation Project naturally included some of these mechanisms (and more so as it evolved) although future professional development & learning across the WWN should be designed with multiple mechanisms included, explicitly from the outset.

Next steps

The WWN Implementation Project has kick-started a process whereby What Works Centres can work together to apply research and ideas on implementation. It was always intended as an exploratory project that initiates further thinking and action. So where do we go next?

There is an opportunity to capitalise on the momentum and relationships that grew through this project and continue collaborating and learning on implementation. As

discussed, practical applications are beginning to emerge, although Centres see themselves at the beginning of that process. Further structured collaboration, with an explicit professional development focus, would be beneficial.

The WWN Implementation Project has demonstrated the value in creating a structured process for joint professional development, and in having dedicated capacity to coordinate the work, keep people engaged and facilitate the interactions. Central coordination will still be needed in the future, although with established processes and relationships now in place, less capacity may be required to 'keep the wheels turning'. Shared areas of interest for future collaboration include, amongst others:

- Designing and developing innovations and programmes
- Applying behavioural science
- Supporting implementation in policy settings
- 'Preparing' for implementation
- Professional Development and Learning
- Applying implementation thinking and practices within Centres

In the meantime, the repository of 'WWN Implementation resources' will be housed at the Evidence Quarter and the findings of the project will be presented to What Works Council and WWN Operational Group. A dissemination event for external audiences is planned for Spring 22.

Looking wider, there is an opportunity to develop and codify a process for joint professional development across the network. There has been a longstanding aspiration for co-learning and development, and this project has provided a tangible format for how that can work. The insights on professional development from this project could be integrated with the latest evidence on adult learning, to create a model that could be applied to other cross-cutting interests e.g. guidance production, monitoring impact.

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