

How best to serve young people with evidence?

*The case for collaboration between
What Works Centres*



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Introduction



Since 2010, the number of organisations recognised as What Works Centres has risen more than tenfold”

The foundation and success of Britain’s What Works Network – a group of research centres and charities with a shared mission to commission, conduct, collate and translate causal evidence across a wide variety of policy domains – is a source of great pride for the UK government.

Since 2010, the number of organisations recognised as What Works Centres has risen more than tenfold. With this, the focus on evaluation – and particularly impact evaluations – has risen, first with the formation of a What Works team sitting within the Cabinet Office and more recently, of an Evaluation Taskforce straddling the Cabinet Office and the Treasury, arguably the two most significant departments in shaping government policy overall.

This agenda has survived changes in government, from the 2010 coalition government, to the 2015, 2017, and 2019 elections, as well as transitions of power in between. Michael Gove, the Education Secretary who oversaw the establishment of the Education Endowment Foundation – the first What Works Centre formed under the coalition government – and now a minister for the Cabinet Office, used his 2020 Ditchley lecture to espouse the virtue of evaluation in government, saying:

... At the heart of our programme must be a focus on what works – what actually helps our fellow citizens to flourish.

If this model, with its obsession for empiricism and causality and a passion for scientific communication and openness, has been successful so far, there is at least one area where there is room for improvement: collaboration between centres. This is especially the case for the six centres whose work focuses exclusively, or mainly, on helping young people. While this was already clear before the pandemic, we believe that the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people highlights the importance of such collaboration and demands a determined approach to realising its benefits.

While centres’ leadership teams hold regular meetings convened by the Cabinet Office, collaboration on studies, data analyses, and plans, is still relatively uncommon. In part, this reflects the varied focuses of different centres, and their funding models – which themselves reflect the silos that exist across central government agencies. Despite these constraints, we believe that significantly more collaboration is possible, and that it would be seriously beneficial.

Over the remainder of this paper, we first make the case for evidence-based policy, before recapping the history of the What Works movement and its particular structure in the UK. The remainder of the paper considers the advantages and disadvantages of greater integration and collaboration between centres, and we conclude with some recommendations for how this might be achieved.

Background

What is a What Works Centre?

There are currently 13 What Works Centres. These centres cover a wide variety of policy areas – from homelessness to crime reduction, from early intervention to ageing – but they have several things in common. Each centre aims to collate, create, and translate evidence in their given field. They review and synthesise the available evidence on a given topic – how to improve a child’s grades at school, for example – and try to make that evidence

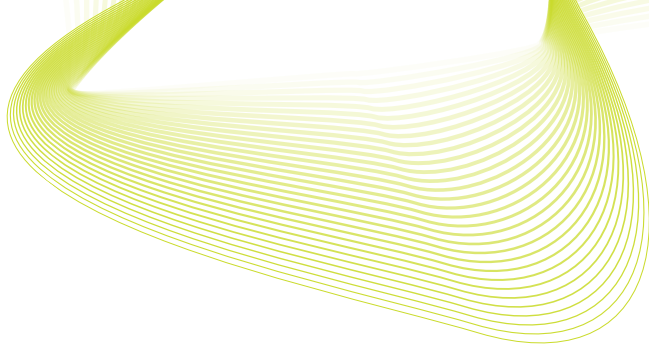
as useful as possible to professionals and practitioners working in an area, as well as to policymakers. Some, but not all centres, focus more on evidence generation: funding, and conducting, original research. What Works Centres often take a broad look at the research, but they are most particularly focused on the question of “What works?” and on conducting causal research to answer questions like “If I do x, what will happen to y?”.

Why do evidence-based policy?

When I became the Department for Education’s Permanent Secretary in 2016, one of the first challenges I was confronted by was the rocky beginning of the newly created National Training Service, announced by the then Secretary of State the previous year. The idea was to persuade experienced teachers to relocate to struggling schools by paying them up to £10,000. But it wasn’t working. In practice, very few teachers responded and the scheme was canned. As is the way with such things, I was quizzed by the Public Accounts Committee about this “failure”. I was able to point to the fact that the department had chosen to pilot the scheme in the north-west before any decision was taken to roll it out nationwide, and since it was the pilot that had failed, the government had managed to avoid the much larger waste of money that would have been incurred without a pilot. I emerged relatively unscathed.

Of course, it would have been even better had the department been in a position to make use of research showing what would and would not work. We were in this position four years later, however, when the Prime Minister and Secretary of State wanted urgent advice on how to help pupils catch up on learning they had missed during the first Covid-19 lockdown. Now we had the benefit of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) – a What Works Centre – and its research demonstrating that one-to-one tuition can deliver an average of five additional months’ progress. And hey presto, the National Tutoring Service was born.

Contrast this with the position facing my predecessors in the early 2000s, who were funding a huge expansion in numbers of teaching assistants without the benefit of this sort of research. Ten years later the EEF was created, and one of its first reports demonstrated that students in a class with a teaching assistant often do no better than those in one where only a teacher is present. Of course, teaching assistants can make a real difference when used effectively – the EEF points to the value of working one-to-one or with small groups – but it is obvious how the department and schools would have benefited from having good evidence a decade earlier.



The history

The first What Works Centre was the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), which was established in 1997/1998 with the objective to produce guidance about what the NHS should do based on the available evidence. Although NICE guidance is primarily about drugs and other clinical treatments, it also provides guidance on more social interventions and has a focus on social care.

During the late 2000s and early 2010s, there was a growing interest – led by then Cabinet Secretary Sir (now Lord) Gus O’Donnell – in transferring this idea to other domains, with talk of “a NICE for x, y or z”.

However, it was not until O’Donnell was nearly retired in July 2011 that the EEF was created and became the second What Works Centre. The EEF was also, of course, the first What Works Centre with an explicit mission to support young people; with an objective to reduce the attainment gap between students eligible for free school meals and their peers. The EEF was created with a £125 million endowment under the leadership of Sir Kevan Collins, previously the Chief Executive of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.



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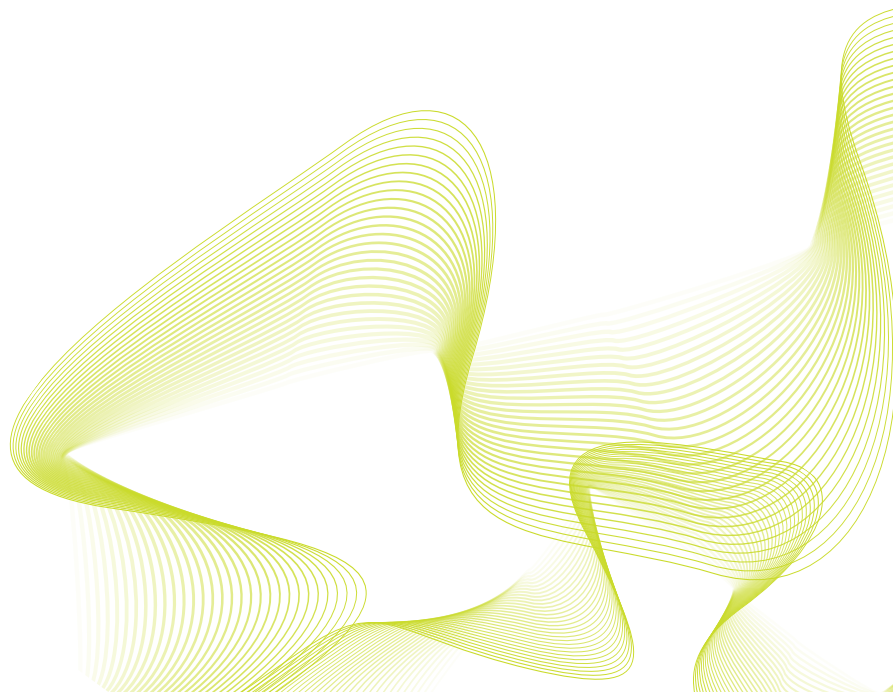
The EEF had no choice but to deviate from the model that NICE had established. The field of education research had historically been much less enthusiastic about scientific methods and causal research than medicine had been. There wasn’t much evidence available to synthesise and there was even less where the research had been conducted in English schools. This prompted the EEF to fund, not just synthesis of research, but individual research projects themselves. To date, they have funded more than 200 randomised controlled trials, which are often held up as the best way to answer these causal questions.

The EEF’s success, both in conducting trials and in achieving change in policy and practice, has since inspired the establishment of a range of other centres. In 2013, the What Works Network was established with the creation of four new centres, focused on early intervention, better ageing, local economic growth, and crime reduction respectively.

More centres have joined over time, until, as of January 2021, 13 centres are officially members of the network. A large number of these centres focus particularly, if not exclusively, on outcomes for young people. These centres are very different in their missions, focus, and sponsoring departments – as shown in the table below – but there are inevitably overlaps, which we will discuss in the next section.

TABLE 1: YOUTH-FOCUSED CENTRES

Name	Date founded	Focus	Funding	Sponsor
Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)	2011	Educational attainment gaps – free school meal vs all	£125 million endowment	Department for Education
Early Intervention Foundation (EIF)	2013	Early intervention for children and young people	Grant funding	Various departments, convened by the Department for Education
What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC)	2019	Outcomes for young people with a social worker	Grant funding and contracts	Department for Education
Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes	2019	Widening participation in higher education	Three-year founding grant	Office for Students
Youth Endowment Fund (YEF)	2019	Reducing serious youth violence	£200 million endowment	Home Office
Youth Futures Foundation (YFF)	2019	Increasing youth employment	£90 million endowment	Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport



Differences and overlaps



The differences

Although the What Works Centres described in the table all focus on youth to a certain extent, they are also quite different.

As well as the differences in funding, and how these differences manifest in specific charitable objects, there is also variation in the approaches taken to producing evidence. Whereas the EEF, for example, funds mostly randomised controlled trials, others, like the EIF and TASO, are more focused on reviews of the literature and synthesis, a contrast that reflects their different funding models.

Different centres also prioritise varying aspects of the research process. The EEF, YEF and YFF primarily commission research or evaluation on particular areas of interest. By comparison, TASO and WWCSC both blend primary research conducted internally with research commissioned out to independent evaluators, and the EIF primarily conducts research itself.

Another important difference between centres is the audience of their research and the recipients of their funding.

Some centres have single audiences. For example, research conducted by the EEF usually takes place in schools, but is based on interventions developed in academic institutions, or by charities or private bodies. In order to achieve an adequate sample size, means that up to 120 secondary schools could be recruited for each study.

On the other hand, the YFF, YEF and EIF all aim to influence multiple audiences. The heterogeneity of these organisations, the number of young people with whom they can work, and their lack of universality compared to schools, pose substantial logistical and statistical challenges that differ from those faced by the EEF.

Finally, TASO and WWCSC, who work with higher education providers and local authorities respectively, have a smaller number of stakeholders and potential trial sites than either of the previous groups – just over 100 universities, and just over 150 local authorities that deliver children’s services. Both centres also focus primarily on interventions developed and delivered by professionals working within their target settings: widening participation practitioners and social workers respectively. Both also evaluate interventions that take place either in or around schooling for young people.

The similarities

These differences are important and shouldn’t be underestimated when considering how What Works Centres could and should collaborate more, but there are also important overlaps.

First, there is a large intersection between the groups of young people served by all of these What Works Centres. The largest and most obvious of these is, of course, poverty. Young people eligible for free school meals are explicitly a target group for both the EEF and TASO. Beyond this, young people in poverty are systematically more likely to be involved in children’s social care than their peers and are more likely

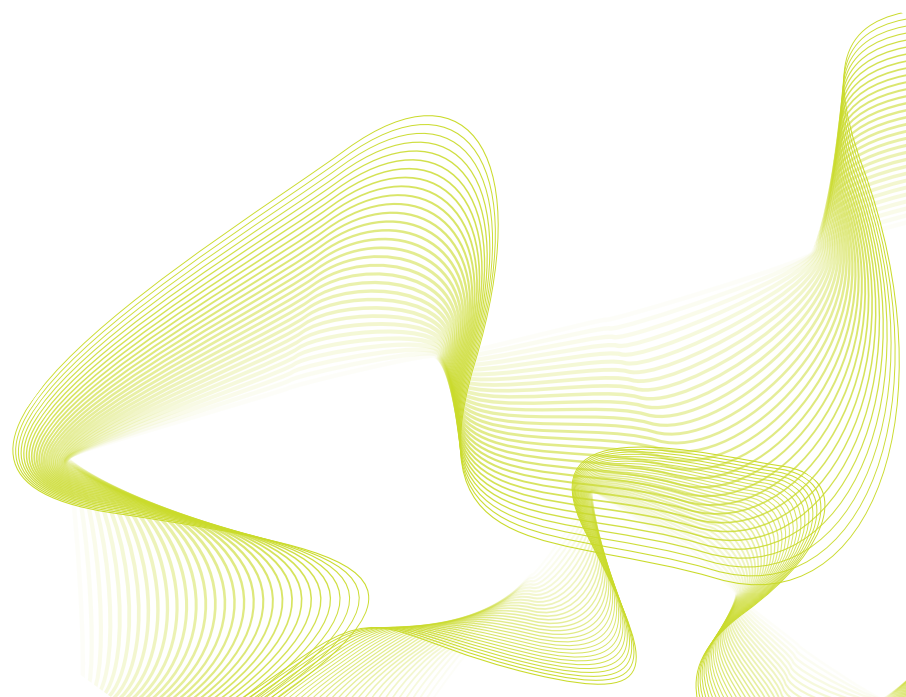


The challenge of supporting children and young people to deal with Covid-19's impact on their lives over the last year is wide-ranging, incorporating education, mental health, social care, crime and more”

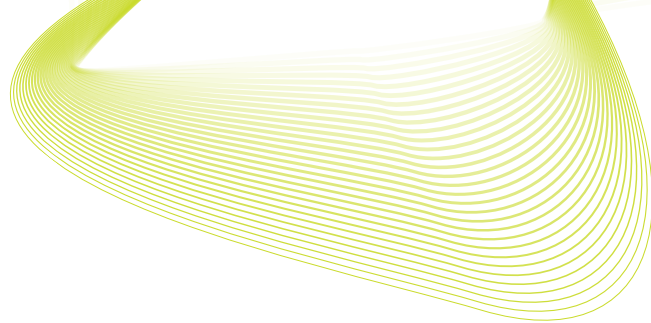
to be victims, or perpetrators, of youth violence. People who grew up in poverty are more likely to experience unemployment later in life than their peers, and there are substantial gaps along socio-economic lines in many areas of child development, which is one focal area for the EIF. Although, on the face of it, the groups of interest are defined differently, these overlaps mean that, sometimes, these What Works Centres are asking similar questions of the same people.

Furthermore, the route to improvement in levels of youth employment or crime reduction, for example, may well include actions taken by schools and social workers, and so individual What Works Centres would benefit from drawing on others' contributions.

These overlaps have been thrown into sharp relief by the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people. For example, while schools had to be closed to most pupils as the first lockdown began, it quickly became clear that it was vital to keep them open to children with education, health and care plans, and children in need – ie those with a social worker – so as to keep open critical lines of support for families, as well as children. Indeed, a major role for the Department for Education in the first months of the pandemic, working in partnership with local authorities and schools, was to keep lines of communication going between these children and their schools, social workers, and health professionals. Equally, as we start to come out of the other side of the pandemic, the challenge of supporting children and young people to deal with Covid-19's impact on their lives over the last year is wide-ranging, incorporating education, mental health, social care, crime and more. Any assessments by What Works Centres of work being done to tackle these challenges will be much more likely to succeed if they take a “whole child” approach.



Research methods



As well as overlaps in the questions being asked, and who they are asked of, What Works Centres tend to align in terms of their research philosophies and consequently, the methods used to answer those questions.

Although they are, notoriously, most interested in randomised controlled trials, it is probably more accurate to say that What Works Centres have a shared concept of causality and a belief that it can be identified in quantitative data through a combination of experimental and quasi-experimental methods, which use a mixture of statistics and features of the data to approximate the effects of random assignment.

This shared methodological approach substantially reduces the burden of collaboration. Unlike collaboration across disciplines and intellectual divides, there is a pre-existing common language and understanding of the way the world works. This is a strong basis for collaboration.



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The benefits of specialisation

If What Works Centres ask similar questions of similar professionals who are working with the same families, and seek to answer those questions in the same ways, the overlap is clear. However, this does not automatically mean that greater collaboration is a good idea. Indeed, the argument is a classic one in economics: whether greater collaboration and integration leads to better outcomes, or whether greater specialisation is optimal. Both sides of this argument have their merits.

Specialisation offers advantages when the different components are complicated, and so an individual – or an individual organisation – attempting the whole task alone is liable to error. Improving the lives of young people is clearly an area where this applies. The complexity of education policy and practice alone is immense; keeping on top of how the English education system functions – with academies, multi-academy trusts, free schools, grammar schools, comprehensive schools, faith schools, infant schools, primary schools, middle schools, secondary schools, sixth form colleges, further education colleges, all-through schools, private schools and public schools – is complex, even before we start thinking about interventions that aim to improve attainment in various parts of that system. Children’s social care is similarly complex. It can begin conducting assessments months before a child is even born and continues to carry responsibility for care leavers until they are 25; and it runs the gamut, from neglect, through to violent abuse, through to extra-familial threats like county lines.

Individual researchers can perhaps do better, more useful, research if they focus on a particular area and better understand the data, the interventions, the context, and the individuals involved. Organisations can potentially do a better job of influencing policy and practice if they focus on a discrete number of stakeholders running a discrete, if large, number of services. This is true on the demand side of research as well as the supply side. A teacher looking for evidence on how to improve her year six’s maths doesn’t want to trawl through pages of research on how to reduce entry to care.

In practice, there are economies of scale to working with particular datasets and having familiarity with them. Outside of the What Works Network, we might look to the work of Jack Worth from the National Foundation for Education Research into teacher recruitment; the Education Datalab's work with the National Pupil Database; the expertise built up by the Ministry of Justice's Datalab; or Professor Lorraine Dearden's work using the Department for Education's Longitudinal Education Outcomes data set. In these cases, the researchers in question can rapidly analyse large and complex datasets to produce insights and contribute to public debate on a given issue. Specialisation in these examples builds both depth of expertise, and efficiency in deploying it.

The role of What Works Centres in increasing the acceptance of particular research methods within a sector should also not be overlooked. Experienced researchers with deep knowledge and networks within the sector are likely to be instrumental in achieving this change, and so the ability of Centres to recruit specialists from within their own sector is a clear benefit.

The hazards of separation

If specialisation has its benefits, the conditions that allow for specialisation also bring disadvantages.

Organisationally, it is clearly inefficient for each of the six youth-focused What Works Centres to employ their own operations teams, negotiate with their own landlords, and commission their own lawyers and payroll suppliers. This replication of effort both costs money and creates friction in the market for commissioned evaluation. Not only do these multiple operations incur a direct cost, they also create a transaction cost for any organisation – government, school, local authority or evaluator – that deals with multiple centres, while weakening the individual market power of each centre.

Taken together, the What Works Centres represent, while not a monopsonist power in the market for youth-focused impact evaluation, certainly a large enough force to change the equilibrium in that market. It favours evaluators to have competitive demand and oligopolistic supply for these services.

If different centres are asking organisations the same questions at the same time, this lack of shared planning is clearly inefficient. If centres ask similar, but not identical, questions of the same organisations, there is a different inefficiency here as well. Conducting studies and collecting data are expensive endeavours. If the data are not collected with ability to answer other questions in mind – for example, the effects for different groups, or on different outcomes – then the data might not exist to answer these questions when they arise in future or, where it does exist, the data sharing needed to answer these questions might be difficult or impossible. Asking a closely related question could ultimately mean running a new, expensive, study, or collecting new data.

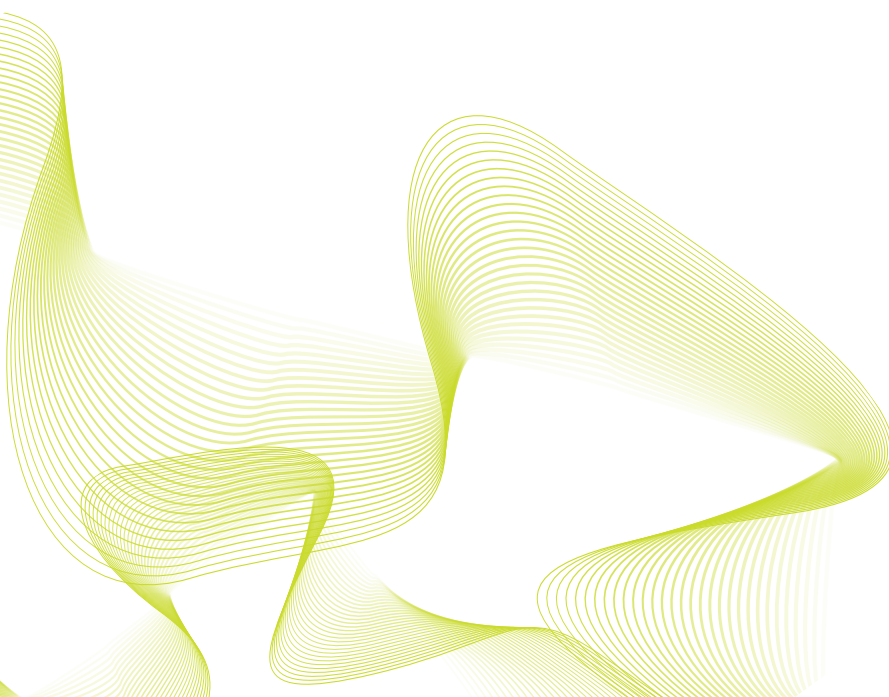
Next, there are kinds of specialisation that do not favour the creation of specialist organisations. Methodological expertise – for example in quasi-experimental



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methods, data science, or machine learning – is difficult to develop, or justify developing, for a small organisation with limited use of advanced analytics. In terms of machine learning, for example, it may be that each of the six youth-focused What Works Centres need a resource equivalent to 0.16 full-time machine learning experts in an average year. This is enough to justify hiring someone jointly, but not separately.

The final hazard of separation speaks to the intersectionality identified earlier. There are very substantial overlaps in the groups of people that each centre works with, and of the challenges facing these people. By only understanding one facet of the young person's experience at a time, the centres run the risk of actively misunderstanding the whole, and their research failing to best serve the people they are trying to help. Similarly, many interventions could impact on multiple areas, and so we equally do these people a disservice if we only consider these outcomes one at a time.



Recommendations for a more united network

We have laid out some of the hazards and advantages of greater integration within the What Works Network, particularly for those centres focused on helping young people. Now, we present some concrete recommendations for how centres could work together in a minimally effortful way.

- **Shared planning**

Each centre's priorities and activities for the year are largely determined before the beginning of a financial year. Coordination of plans could be conducted early in the business planning cycle to avoid duplication, and to collaborate and share resources.

- **Shared data infrastructure**

Existing data used by one centre to conduct analysis, or produce the results of a randomised controlled trial, are not easily accessed by others. Although the EEF data archive is accessible through the Office for National Statistics secure data service, more centres could follow this example.

Alongside this, some shared data infrastructure to allow secure data to be stored and used by multiple centres could be useful. Where there is overlap in the stakeholders for different centres, a joint customer relationship management system (CRM) could also be useful.

- **Shared specialist posts**

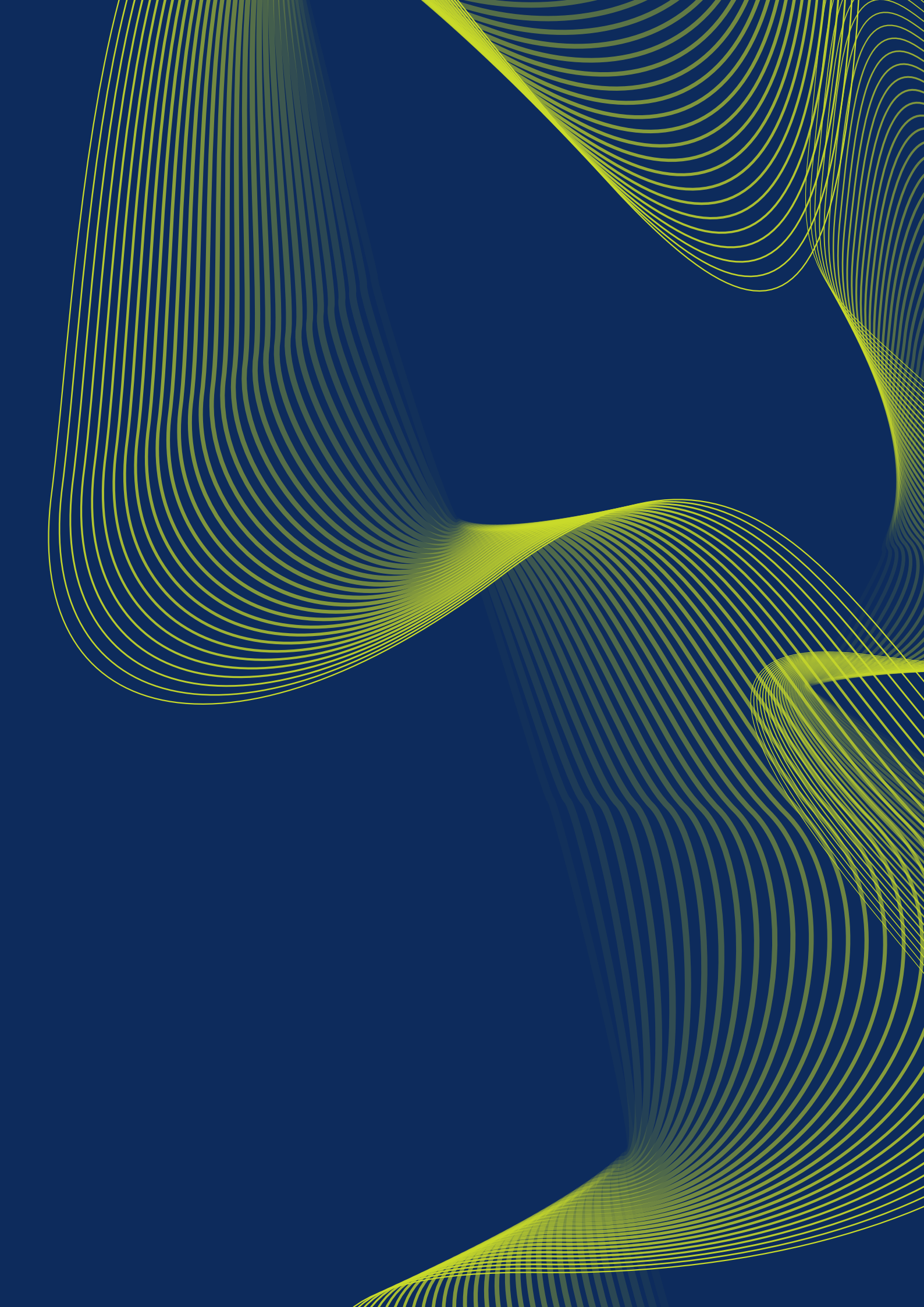
As we have said, there are a number of specialised activities that individual centres cannot engage in, or struggle to engage in efficiently, because they require specialised staff. The impact of the network could be increased by sharing some specialised posts, such as data scientists, events managers and designers. This already happens to some extent, with TASO, WWCS and the Centre for Homelessness Impact – another What Works Centre – sharing a Data Protection Officer.

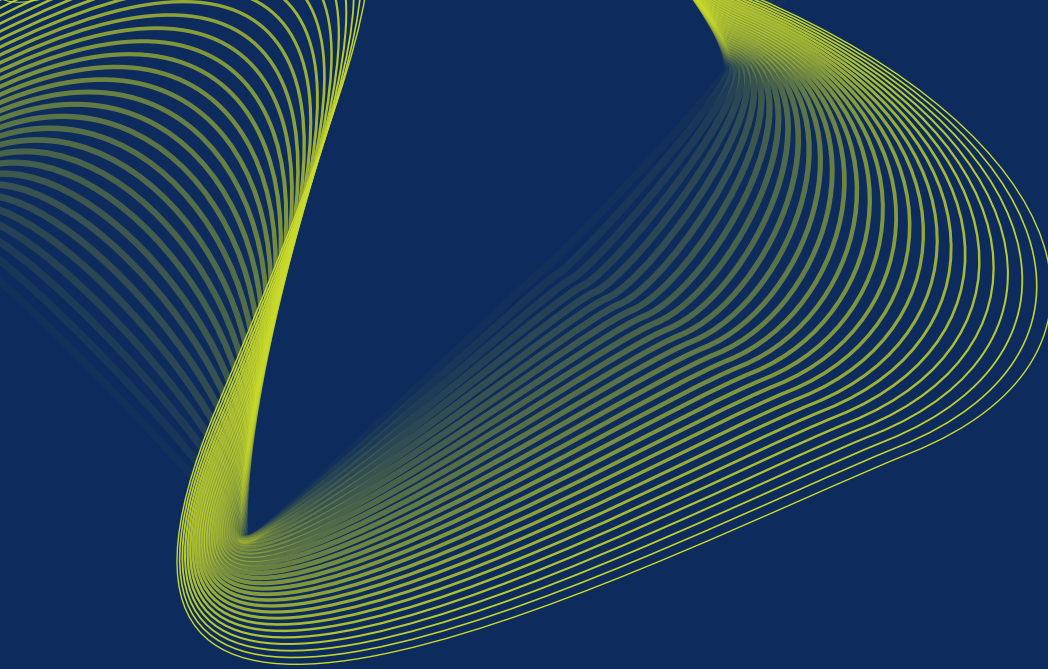
- **Greater collaboration**

Individual centres have limited budgets, which restrict the number of research studies and randomised controlled trials they can conduct. Joint funding of research, both of randomised control trials and, more promisingly, of quasi-experimental studies, could allow for a larger number of research questions to be answered, particularly where the same interventions are posited to impact on numerous outcomes – for example, Multi-Systemic Therapy.

- **Retaining specialisation and brand**

Although greater collaboration could increase the strength and impact of the What Works Centres focused on young people, it cannot be ignored that centres have developed considerable specialism in their areas over time. For example, in the lived experience of particular service users, and knowledge of relevant academic fields. They have also developed reputations within their own sectors, often hard won, as independent and credible assessors of “what works”. This specialisation and reputation should be preserved through any attempts to build impact through collaboration.





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