



The Evidence Quarter Impact report – Successes and lessons learnt

Overview

The paper is split into the following sections:

1. Original proposal of the Evidence Quarter
2. About the EQ
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1. Original proposal for The Evidence Quarter

(Taken from a 2019 paper written by Michael Sanders, former Executive Director at What Works for Children’s Social Care and Jonathan Breckon, former Director at Alliance for Useful Evidence, for the formation of the EQ)

Britain is a world leader in evidence based policymaking. The “What Works” agenda was given form and support under two consecutive cabinet secretaries (Lord Gus O’Donnell and Lord Jeremy Heywood) and has seen the formation of a growing number of “What Works Centres” (WWC). The ESRC has played an important part in building the credibility, rigour, traction and longer-term sustainability of this What Works initiative amongst academics, local decision makers and central government. These What Works Centres are organisations that are independent of government, whose purpose it is to collate, create, and translate evidence on ‘what works’ in a given domain. These organisations vary considerably in their scale, funding, and intent, but there is considerable overlap methodologically, and a shared vision around the power of evidence to transform public service, and to deliver better outcomes for citizens.

Although this agenda has been hugely successful, with new What Works Centres being inaugurated every year, there is considerable room for improvement. In particular, we identify four core areas where the promise of the what works network is unfulfilled:

- 1. Translation*
- 2. Collaboration*
- 3. Standards*
- 4. Efficiency*

We are proposing to establish an “Evidence Quarter” (EQ) - a physical location that can be home to multiple WWCs and other organisations dedicated to evidence based public service in the UK. We hope that by bringing these organisations together, greater collaboration can be fostered across the network, addressing several of the challenges described above.



2. About the EQ

Introduction

The Evidence Quarter (EQ) was a home for evidence based organisations. It brought together a number of evidence and research charities and organisations at Albany House, Westminster from September 2020 to November 2024.

The EQ was established as a Community Interest Company (CIC), limited by guarantee, and a subsidiary of Foundations (then What Works for Children's Social Care). Proposed in 2019, the global pandemic inevitably delayed initial progress but the EQ was officially launched in 2021. The EQ community has comprised eleven organisations, though it has also engaged other organisations within the broader what works/evidence-based policy community in its networks:

- € Centre for Evidence and Implementation
- € Centre for Homelessness Impact
- € ImpactEd
- € Neighbourly Lab
- € TASO
- € Foundations
- € Spirit of 2012
- € Centre for Young Lives
- € Reform (Moved out of EQ in Sept 2022)
- € The Legal Education Foundation/Justice Lab (Organisation closed in July 2023)
- € What Works for Wellbeing (Organisation closed in April 2024)

EQ CIC Mission Statement

“Our mission is to bring together leading evidence organisations to increase collaboration, reduce duplication and tackle joint challenges. More than just an office space, the EQ aims to facilitate evidence-minded organisations to become greater than the sum of their parts. By working together, we seek to increase members’ impact and deliver evidence-based change for society. “



3. Successes of the EQ - What we have achieved

Over the last four years, the EQ has achieved many of its original objectives and these are summarised under four headings below: Co-Location, Impact, Sustainability and Community.

Co-Location

Two office fit-outs have been completed, creating an inviting space to work, with many breakout areas for discussions.

- The EQ has grown from 60 to 95 people and with 6 meeting rooms.
- We built a flexible, 80-person hybrid event space that has been used by a number of What Work Centres, Charities and Government departments for large scale events and collaboration meetings. This created both revenue and a focal point for the wider evidence community.
- We hired a Community Manager and Office Manager to develop the relationship between EQ organisations and the wider evidence community, and to address any building-related matters
- The EQ had a Data Protection Officer as a cost-effective shared resource for its members to use on a part-time basis.

Impact

Cross organisational initiatives delivered in partnership across The EQ and with the wider What Works Centres include support for early career development in research, an internship programme and networks addressing common issues such as EDI, impact and research issues.

- **EQ Early Career Development Group** – the group had been meeting since January 2022 delivering 21 sessions over the years. The group was a space for females or non-binary people in the early stages of their careers at the EQ to come together and share challenges, advice and support. We covered topics on negotiation and promotion, imposter syndrome, race and gender stereotypes/biases at work, and navigating difficult conversations; and we hosted guest speakers and action learning sets that some participants have then gone on to lead within their own organisations.
- **EQ Student Internship Programme** - running since 2021 over 4 summers, we had over 1000 of applications, with 4 cohorts and a total of 26 interns successfully recruited across 4 EQ organisations. Previous interns from CEI and TASO have continued ad hoc work after the internship has finished, and we had fantastic feedback both from EQ



organisations and the interns on how valuable this programme has been! (See feedback in appendix)

- **EQ Equality Diversity and Inclusion group** - The EDI group was launched with its first meeting in March 2023 and continued to meet quarterly. The EDI group ensured that a diverse range of perspectives and ideas were embedded in the EQ's first strategy, as well as its ongoing events and activities. The group also had a focus on improving and sharing internal policies and procedures, as well as sharing expertise and learning around EDI and research. A number of new policies have been embedded from the sharing of expertise of this group such as the adoption and fostering policy that Foundations now have in place. There is also a bank of shared templates and policies available that were also created by this group. Shared EDI practices have been key as small organisations, which may not have their own EDI practices or groups in place, seek to grow.
- **The What Works Network Impact Group** was relaunched in September 2022 and continued to meet quarterly. This group enabled the EQ and WWN to focus on ways they measured and demonstrated impact, including how evidence-based organisations showed their impact when it is behind the scenes and how they can illustrate their impact to funders and government departments.
- **Research Directors Breakfast** - this group was launched across the WWN in February 2023 as a space to have research clinics, to look at similar challenges across the network, and to also provide an opportunity to have critical friends and seek peer feedback. The group continued to meet quarterly, focusing on a range of different topics from EDI within research, which provided some thought provoking insights and a reevaluation of what they can do within their teams, to a focus on training needs within research.
- **Shared training** - The EQ started to establish some shared training opportunities across the EQ network, the first was led by Nancy Hey, CEO of What Works for Wellbeing on the science of Wellbeing in February 2023 and another on Mentoring in September 2023 in preparation for the launch of the EQ mentoring scheme. Both of these sessions were well attended and there was further appetite for more.

Sustainability

The EQ had been able to generate funding to invest back into the EQ through hiring of the event space and maximising office space and desks.

- The EQ had 98 desks and the cost per desk ranged from £550-£738, depending on if it included meeting room access and if the organisation was a non-profit. The rental income at its highest point was in July 2022 at £52,857 per month when the EQ was nearly at full capacity with 85 desks being rented out and 10 hot desks, this was prior to the merger between What Works for Children's Social Care and the Early Intervention



Foundation as well as Reform leaving. Income from the event space hire over the years was £9,253 from April 2023-March 2024 and £3,688 from April 2024 to October 2024.

- The business model was put under strain by changes in working practices following the pandemic. This created significant financial uncertainty which meant that the EQ was forced to hold funds in reserve and could not implement plans to deliver on wider strategic objectives. The organisation became unviable when EQ was unable to find new premises that suited all member organisations' needs, following the end of the lease at Albany House.

Community

EQ has sought to move beyond simply providing office space, to strengthen the evidence-based policy community, among its members, in the wider what works network, and through engagement with other like-minded organisations.

- The creation of a co-location of organisations that allowed collaboration between the What Works Network and other evidence minded organisations
- Built and embed the established community of EQ organisations so they could work together to prevent duplication, share resources, reducing rent costs and other back office services (Data Protection Officer) and tackle shared problems to create bigger impact
- Nurtured new and smaller WWCs within the EQ, supporting grassroots evidence movements
- The EQ led a range of regular events internally, in total 44 cross EQ events, including: internal Lunch & Learn discussions to better understand each other's work, external guest speakers, wellbeing and training sessions, and social events. The EQ also hosted bi-annual social events (the Christmas Party and the Spring Social) every year to help nurture relationships across The EQ with around 50 people attending them on average. We also held regular 'Getting to know our Community' sessions hosted by EQ members. The EQ developed the community engagement of current member organisations through these activities and events to support increased knowledge sharing and collaboration.
- The EQ hosted a series of Better Evidence, Better Government events over 3 years with the Kings Policy Institute, 9 events in total, bringing together well-known speakers from within Government, academia and evidence-led organisations to raise the profile of the role of evidence in the policymaking process as well as the EQ's reputation. Speakers have included Lord O'Donnell, Brooke Rogers, David Halpern and audiences have been of 100+, with a mixture of online and in-person.
- An EQ wellbeing survey went out to members quarterly since August 2022 which gave the opportunity to provide feedback on the EQ physical space. We also sought regular



feedback from the EQ Working group and at the EQ CEOs' meetings. Actions from feedback such as new booths for the office and a kitchen rota were been completed.

- The EQ led CEO quarterly meetings with the EQ CIC non-execs, from October 2022, focusing on strategy and development of the EQ concept. This helped drive engagement from CEOs as well as informing strategic planning.
- The EQ launched a coffee meetups scheme in September 2022 where EQ members have a quick catch up once a month with someone from a different organisation, this later changed into a quarterly whole EQ coffee meeting in the event space.
- The EQ launched an internal mentorship scheme in July 2023 available for all EQ members to participate in, this included running mentoring training. Thirty people signed up for the scheme and seven matches were made in the last year, some are still meeting today.
- The EQ led an EQ Working Group, consisting of a champion from every EQ member organisation that met every two months to generate ideas about how to keep up momentum within The EQ Community.
- The EQ developed an EQ intranet site called The Hub. An online community that enabled the EQ members to share news, have discussions in a forum, watch our catalogue of past events and find counterparts in other organisations.
- The EQ website was created and now includes information on each of the organisational members, news articles, blogs and event and internship write-ups.

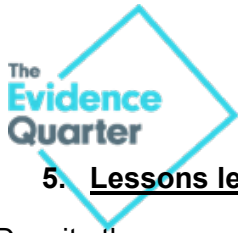


4. Summary of successes

Over these four years the EQ has achieved a great amount of success and development from its original proposal in 2019. Highlights include sharing expertise, through the four EQ/WWN member groups (Impact group, EDI group, Communications group and Research Directors Breakfast) that were created to support the community. These groups will also continue to run by the community post the EQ closing.

The EQ has also had an impact on professional development and the talent pipeline in policy research, through the Student Internship Programme and the Early Career Development Group, with this group continuing and a number of interns continuing to work for EQ organisations.

Lastly, it is the relationships that have been built through the EQ community and its activities that have had a substantial impact creating opportunities, partnerships and connections both on an individual level and on an organisational level that are sure to continue growing post the EQ closing.



5. Lessons learned

Despite the successes detailed above, the EQ faced significant challenges that ultimately led to the closure of the EQ shared space and the winding down of the CIC. We have determined two main reasons for this.

Operations and Governance

One of the largest impacts on the EQ's sustainability was the operating model which required over 90% desk occupancy to break even and with no flexibility on the lease. Commercial companies who give tenants the flexibility that is afforded by the sub lease to EQ members charge a significant premium on that flexibility and operate on a break-even point of 60% occupancy. This was a flaw in the setup of the EQ and meant the EQ and ultimately Foundations (as our head lease holder) were open to significant risk.

The EQ's finances were impacted greatly by any changes in desk occupancy. Tenants were brought in with very short notice periods (originally two weeks) which further exacerbated risk. During the life of the EQ, three organisations left and existing tenants reduced their desk occupancy by 20. Altogether this was a substantial loss in income for the EQ with very little reserves.

The EQ fundraising model needed to be diversified beyond the rental income, to be more project specific and have other core funding streams, such as from the Data Safe Haven project that was proposed or an external membership model. Both projects were never able to get off the ground due to a lack of support and funding. Some preparatory work was done on seeking more philanthropic funding, but we were unable to invest further to pursue this given the significant financial risks.

Another core impact on the EQs success were some unforeseen circumstances that arose, including the merger between our founder What Works for Children's Social Care and the Early Intervention Foundation. Following the merger and the development of a strategy for the new organisation, Foundations was unable to continue to carry the level of financial risk inherent in the EQ model.

The lease end at Albany House for November 2024 also presented a great challenge to find a new office space for the EQ and its members, without its founder member to underwrite the lease. The EQ struggled to find new office space of comparable location, quality and price to Albany House that met all its members' needs, particularly owing to the organisation's limited ability to take the risk of commercial leases. Our current members were split on desired future location and we needed a critical mass in order to make a relocation work.



Without a critical mass of members able to commit new office space and financial arrangements proposed, and without a founder member able to continue underwriting the risks inherent in the business mode, EQ has had to close.

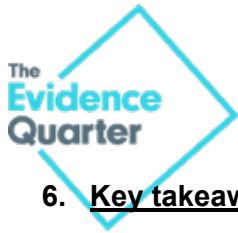
The EQs original concept and mission was to bring together the What Work Centres into one shared office space. This was never fully achieved, as only some What Work Centres joined the EQ; this was partly due to the pandemic, and partly due to other WWCs having their own long leases in place.

The EQ tenant organisations typically had less financial security than some of the larger WWCs, which brought inherent difficulties to sustaining the EQ either in Albany House or another location.

Covid 19 Pandemic

A large unforeseen impact on the EQ was the Covid 19 pandemic. This impacted use of the EQs office space and delayed its opening from April until September 2020. But more significantly, post-pandemic, all EQ organisations moved to a hybrid working model, with organisations requiring fewer desks. This had an impact on the EQ's income both from desk rental and from rental of the large event space the EQ created due to fewer in-person events running during and since the pandemic.

The pandemic also raised the question of how close organisations needed to be to Westminster, not least as Government officials and Civil Servants also moved to a hybrid working pattern with meetings occurring more often online. Part of the EQ's original core concept was about being in Westminster and close to the Government in order to collaborate through events and meetings and enable influence at a greater scale. Different members attached differing levels of importance to this.



6. Key takeaways

A few key factors caused the EQ to ultimately not succeed: the operating model it was built on, the timing of the Covid 19 pandemic and changes in hybrid working, and the circumstances surrounding the ending of the Albany House office lease.

These challenges highlight the need for flexible leasing arrangements, diversified funding models, and adaptability to external structural changes and shifting working patterns in any similar future initiatives.

Successes and Impact:

- **Resource Sharing and Operational Efficiency:** EQ effectively used shared resources (e.g., Data Protection Officer, Community Manager) to reduce costs and support smaller organisations.
- **Professional Development:** Programmes such as the Early Career Development Group, Mentorship Scheme and Student Internship Programme strengthened talent within the policy research sector.
- **Community Engagement:** Through regular networking events, workshops, and mentoring, EQ fostered a collaborative culture, building a strong network of evidence-focused organisations.

Revenue and Sustainability Challenges:

- **Operational Model Limitations:** High desk occupancy (over 90%) was needed to break even, but this requirement was unsustainable, especially post-pandemic when hybrid work reduced space needs.
- **Pandemic Impact:** COVID-19 delayed EQ's launch and led to lower demand for physical office space and event venues, impacting revenue.
- **Funding Constraints:** Overreliance on desk rentals for funding created financial vulnerabilities. Attempts to diversify through project-based funding (e.g., Data Safe Haven project) were unsuccessful due to limited support.

Dependency on Foundational Support and Lease Flexibility:

- The EQ was heavily reliant on a founder organisation to underwrite the lease, making the transition to an independent model challenging when this support was understandably withdrawn given the level of risk with the model.
- Difficulty in finding a new, centrally located space meeting members' needs underscored the importance of lease flexibility and operational adaptability for shared spaces.

Lasting Influence and Lessons:



- The EQ demonstrated the value of co-located, evidence-based policy organisations in creating a collaborative community with shared initiatives and reduced operational duplication.
- Future efforts in similar collaborative spaces may benefit from flexible occupancy models, diversified funding, and adaptive infrastructure to withstand unexpected disruptions like pandemics.

In summary, the EQ's successes in professional development, community building, and policy influence emphasise the potential of collaborative hubs, despite operational and external challenges that led to the EQs closure.



7. Appendix

Feedback from EQ members -

- Forming more personal relationships with people in organisations that we work with a lot, and having more informal catch ups and conversations
- Getting to know people in other organisations that are close to and involved in the work we do. For example we're embarking on a project where ImpactEd are involved in the delivery team, and we bid (though sadly unsuccessfully) for a research opportunity with Neighbourly Lab
- The internship programme – this was hugely valuable to us. We're too small to have had the capacity to set up our own internship and are unlikely to have reached the audience that EQ reached, and we couldn't have given our interns such a good experience without the wider programme. This has been a huge win for us.
- The regular talks by EQ organisations and especially by external speakers – we've benefited a lot from these, it means we've been able easily to hear talks that we might not have otherwise heard
- As a small and pretty much brand new organisation in the UK when we moved in, being part of the EQ has definitely been important in putting CEI on the map and building our profile and networks in the UK

The What Works Centre for Wellbeing nearly always co-located with partner organisation and with whom we developed a wide range of partnerships including with other What Works Centres e.g. Centre for Ageing Better in 2015, The Children's Society research team ([» Measuring children and young people's subjective wellbeing](#)) and in the Evidence Quarter. We did this as deliberate strategy to partner widely and so the expert leads in our multi-disciplinary teams could have as much expert community and career opportunities as possible than we could provide alone.

During and before our time at the EQ we partnered with:

- Early Intervention Foundation on evidence implementation leading to our local authority cohort programme [» Maximising local area wellbeing](#)
- Centre for Homelessness Impact on Trials [» Wellbeing Evaluation top-up fund announced to accelerate learning](#)
- TASO on student mental health and wellbeing knowledge hub and evaluations [» Supporting student mental health and wellbeing](#)
- Neighbourly Lab on loneliness and social connection research projects [» Reconceptualising loneliness in London](#)
- Spirit 2012 on impact and evaluation of their funding [» Spirit of 2012 – Learning from 10 years of practice](#)



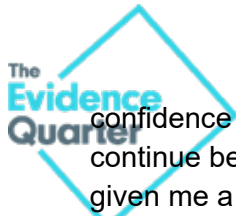
These partnerships were key to sustaining impact and work over time as well as shared learning on methodology we would not have achieved with less like-minded office community.

Feedback from 2023 interns -

- “What’s really been valuable has been the chance to get familiar with what a social research organisation really does, how it operates, as well as getting a greater understanding of the sectors that we do research in such as education and social care.” (Alexei Russell, CEI)
- “Working with the Communications Team has been nothing short of a privilege. I have been supported, welcomed, and encouraged by everyone here at Foundations, and learned so much about the wider social care sector.” (Amber Hassan, Foundations)
- “Being a part of TASO has made me even more ambitious to work in the Education sector after university, to bring about more equal chances for people from similar backgrounds.” (Miles Johnson, TASO)
- “I now know that there is a name for the career I want, and I am keen to take what I have learned from this experience and go on to complete a Masters qualification in Social Intervention and Policy Evaluation.” (Alexandra Cooper, Foundations)

Feedback from 2022 interns -

- ‘My time at CEI has gone by so quickly which is always a marker of a good time. It’s been my first experience of an office internship and one that has allowed me to grow professionally whilst exploring personal topics of interest. I’ve learnt about how implementation science operates within the workforce and the variety of tasks that people within such an organisation can take on from drafting protocols for a systematic review to carrying out interviews with young advisors. This has been made possible by an incredibly welcoming workforce who have allowed me the opportunity to meaningfully contribute to their ongoing projects.’ (Amaka Dominic-Udeagbaj, CEI intern)
- “My time at Foundations as the Programmes team intern has allowed me to develop my confidence, improve my public speaking, and meet some inspiring and insightful people in the field of children’s social care. I’ve learned that there really is no such thing as a stupid question, and the internship has encouraged me to continue in a similar career when I graduate next year. A huge amount of work and dedication goes into the projects that Foundations are involved in, and it’s been great to be able to play even a small part in some of these.” (Lydia De’Ath, Programmes team intern, Foundations)
- “The last six weeks has widened my understanding of policy and public affairs functions, and the role of strategic communications. My time at Foundations has developed my



confidence as I became familiar with working in a professional setting. I'm excited to continue being involved with Foundations as a Young Advisor, and this internship has given me a greater awareness of the organisation and the care sector." (Maiya Hext, Policy and Communications team intern, Foundations)

- "I've enjoyed my time at Foundations so much. I've learned new skills and been able to develop new ones, including report writing, qualitative analysis and data collection. My managers and everyone I worked with were so willing to help but also believed in me and allowed me to work independently and lead on projects. My time here was invaluable, not only for developing research skills, but also for developing confidence and feeling like I contributed to an amazing organisation." (Mia Meade, Research team intern, Foundations)
- "I spent six weeks interning in the Practice team at Foundations. The practical experience gained from the internship has been invaluable. I was able to acquire first-hand experience in a professional team environment, working on many different projects where I could help in a variety of roles. This enabled me to learn a variety of new skills, such as carrying out interviews and helping to facilitate events with social workers in the sector. I was also able to engage in a research role, allowing me to feel more comfortable and confident with my qualitative and quantitative analysis. This internship has been a chance for a learning experience in the social work sector and given me a great insight into industry." (Amelia Dixon, Practice team intern, Foundations)
- "My time as an EQ Intern has been such a valuable experience. The team at TASO have made me feel incredibly welcome and have created such a positive and encouraging environment which makes each work day a pleasure. Everyone from the EQ I have met has been very friendly and helpful also. On the whole, the work that the EQ does is very important and it is a rewarding feeling to be a part of TASO knowing the potential contributions I could make to causes I feel strongly about. I feel I am cultivating and advancing my skills as each day passes and I would highly recommend an internship with the EQ!" (Hannah Rockett, TASO intern)
- "Being an intern within the EQ, and specifically with TASO, has been a great opportunity. I have been able to contribute to ongoing projects in areas like mental health and racial equality gaps. Everything I have been involved in has been very topical and interesting as a current student. More generally, I have learnt a lot about Widening Participation within the Higher Education sector alongside different research methods and evidence types. I now feel more comfortable looking at studies with a critical lens. Everyone on the team has been so welcoming and ready to answer any questions I may have. Overall, I've had a great time being an intern and would highly recommend it." (LaJane Zarroug, TASO intern)