

# Bloomberg Philanthropies – What Works Cities

Case study

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# Bloomberg Philanthropies – What Works Cities

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**Date:** 2015 to the present

**Location:** United States

**Mission:** 'To accelerate cities' use of data and evidence to improve people's lives'<sup>1</sup>

**Methods:** Peer and technical support, visits and events

**Spend:** US\$42 million

**Reach:** Currently working with 27 cities in 18 states, covering nearly 11 million people

**Access:** Competitive programme

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## Context

What Works Cities (WWC) was launched by Bloomberg Philanthropies and five partner organisations in April 2015, with the aim of encouraging mid-sized cities across the United States (US) to more effectively use data in their policymaking.

It works intensively with selected cities to improve their use of data, drawing on current best practice standards, and encourages cities on the programme to share their learning and practice with each other.

The programme builds on the increasing number of cities around the world that are using data to inform their decision making and improve services.<sup>2</sup> In the US, reductions in cities' resources led

several major places, such as Chicago and New York City, to increase their use of data in an effort to find out which services were working, and which could be improved. At the same time, an increase in publicly available data on cities has encouraged residents to demand improved services, as they have a better sense of how various services are performing.

WWC was established to further encourage cities to use data in their decision making, to help them maximise the value of their budgets. The programme focuses on 'mid-sized' cities – defined as places with a population between 100,000 and one million people – that do not have the same resources as larger cities such as New York. It is

funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies, a charity founded by the former Mayor of New York, Michael R. Bloomberg, which has a track record of working with cities and encouraging innovation.

As of March 2016, there are 27 cities working with the programme, across 18 states. WWC plans to work with 100 different cities over the course of the three-year programme.

“Sharing ideas and experiences is important, because cities face many common challenges. They shouldn't have to reinvent the wheel – wasting employees' time and taxpayers' money – when they don't have to.”

Michael R. Bloomberg<sup>3</sup>

## Ways of working

### Application process

Eligible cities make applications to the programme on a rolling basis. In the first six weeks, over 100 applications were received.<sup>4</sup> A review committee considers each application, looking at what the city has previously done with data, and seeking to ensure that there is clear buy-in from the city leadership to use data, as well as an understanding of what it can achieve. To do this, the committee may spend time with the city's mayor and leaders. It ensures that there is a city champion for the programme – preferably at a senior level – and that the city is prepared to invest resources in being

a part of WWC. There is no minimum standard of data usage that cities need to have achieved in order to be accepted onto the programme. The review committee tries to have a diverse range of cities on the programme, including those with different politics and at different stages of data usage.

“In the first six weeks, over 100 applications were received.”

### If accepted onto the programme

The five partner organisations that make up the programme have collectively developed a standard for how a city can use data most effectively. Once a city is accepted onto the programme, WWC staff spend time there and assess how the city uses data against the standard. Drawing on this, a city will work through a process to improve its use of data. This process has four stages:

- commit (city leadership set goals)
- measure (progress on goals is monitored)
- take stock (city reflects on how well things are working)
- act (reflections are translated into action).

Each city also receives bespoke technical assistance, tailored to its needs. This is done through the five partner organisations. Each organisation plays a slightly different role for participating cities:

- the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) helps cities conduct real-time evaluations of their programmes
- the Center for Government Excellence at Johns Hopkins University shares best practice on open data and performance management
- the Government Performance Lab at Harvard Kennedy School helps cities to work towards their goals (in the context of a difficult financial climate)
- Results for America is the lead partner and encourages debate about cities' use of data
- the Sunlight Foundation focuses on assisting cities to draw up open data policies.

Technical assistance takes the form of on-the-ground support for cities, with WWC staff helping them to take immediate next steps to improve the ways in which they use data. Cities can also draw on online resources to help guide their work. These resources include guides to effective data usage, and draw on current good practice. Each city designates a primary city champion to co-ordinate all WWC work. They may be a chief of staff or head of innovation, and generally tend to be somebody whose usual role focuses on performance or innovation. WWC works through this person, as well as with the mayor.

## “The programme aims to create a community among the WWC cities.”

In addition to the technical support offered by WWC, the programme also aims to create a community among the WWC cities, so that they can share their learning and practice with each other. Sharing of learning takes place in several ways:

- The online communications platform ‘Slack’ allows staff in programme cities to quickly contact each other, and request advice and support. It also helps the sharing of resources between cities.
- Virtual convening is used every other week, where the five partner organisations take it in turns to host and facilitate a telephone or video conference. On each occasion, the conversation will focus on a particular issue or theme – for example how a city can develop a communications strategy around data and improved performance. The topics for these calls are chosen by the partner organisations, as well as by the cities themselves.
- In April 2016, the first WWC summit was held in New York, bringing together leaders from all cities that have been part of the programme. The aim of the conference was to get cities to share their successes and discuss how their work was progressing. The conference had social time built in, to encourage leaders from the cities to build relationships with each other.
- WWC also operates a peer-to-peer buddy system, where staff from one city will visit another city to learn from them.

## Impact

As the programme is only just over a year old, it is too early to assess the impact that it has had on the cities involved. However, the organisers are considering the need for evaluation, and currently have evaluators providing continuous feedback on the initiative. These evaluators will produce a final report after the end of the programme.

Currently, WWC is beginning to think about what the next iteration of the programme may be. There is an aspiration to extend and expand the scheme and this may include taking it beyond the US.

## Insights

### **Carefully designed application criteria can help to ensure a programme has wide reach**

Using an application process to select who takes part in a programme is one way of ensuring that a group has common ground and is small enough for meaningful conversations. Programmes do not have to select the best-performing applicants, but can set specific selection criteria to support places that might not otherwise be able to access help through other means.

### **Technical on-the-ground assistance can support real-time learning and adaptation**

Technical, on-the-ground assistance allows places to learn in real time, responding to feedback as it happens. Bringing together a mix of different partners supports this process by giving access to a range of information and skills spread across several organisations.

## Further resources

What Works Cities, [What Works Cities program summary](#), What Works Cities.

What Works Cities, [What Works Cities Standard](#), What Works Cities.

## Notes

1. Bloomberg Philanthropies, 'About What Works Cities', Bloomberg Philanthropies, New York City, 2016, retrieved 24 March 2016, <http://whatworkscities.bloomberg.org/about/>
2. What Works Cities, What Works Cities program summary, retrieved 27 May 2016, <http://whatworkscities.bloomberg.org/content/uploads/sites/8/2015/04/What-Works-Cities-Program-Summary1.pdf>
3. Bloomberg, M., 'Why I'm Betting on Cities and Data', *The Huffington Post*, 20 April 2015, retrieved 27 May 2016, [www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-bloomberg/bloomberg-what-works-cities-data\\_b\\_7097304.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-bloomberg/bloomberg-what-works-cities-data_b_7097304.html)
4. Results for America, '100+ Cities Apply to Bloomberg Philanthropies' "What Works Cities", Press Release, 9 June 2015, retrieved 27 May 2016, <http://results4america.org/press-room/100-cities-apply-bloomberg-philanthropies-works-cities/>

## About the authors

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All errors or omissions are the responsibility of the authors.

## About the project

Last year, the Institute for Government began a major research project on public service delivery at a local level in England. This is a vast, complex terrain and there are many important areas that require urgent attention – whether it is how to drive efficiency savings, deliver digital transformation or make effective use of all providers in a local area, including voluntary and private sector organisations. We decided to focus on one aspect that is critical to achieving better public service outcomes for citizens: joining up and integrating public services around local, citizen needs.

Our briefing paper, [Joining Up Public Services around Local, Citizen Needs](#), identified five perennial barriers that repeatedly hinder integration at a local level, as well as several insights on how to tackle them. Limited sharing of what works (and doesn't work) emerged as a critical barrier that needs urgent attention. Although variation is crucial in ensuring that public services meet local needs, not learning from what has been tried before, or elsewhere, is costly, time intensive and risks duplicating the progress made in other parts of the country. At a time when capacity within local government is declining, and less money is available for service delivery, we cannot afford to keep reinventing the wheel.

A set of eight case studies, including this one, provides more detail about the methods and impact of different approaches designed to support learning between areas. Our accompanying paper, [Local Public Service Reform: Supporting learning to integrate services and improve outcomes](#), provides much-needed clarity on what would help people leading integration programmes to share experiences and learn from one another to improve outcomes on the ground.

For more information and resources, visit [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/local-service-delivery](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/local-service-delivery)

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Copies of this case study are available at:  
[www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/local-service-delivery](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/local-service-delivery)

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