

# Well-Being Matters

*A research and policy briefing as part of the national Well-being evaluation*

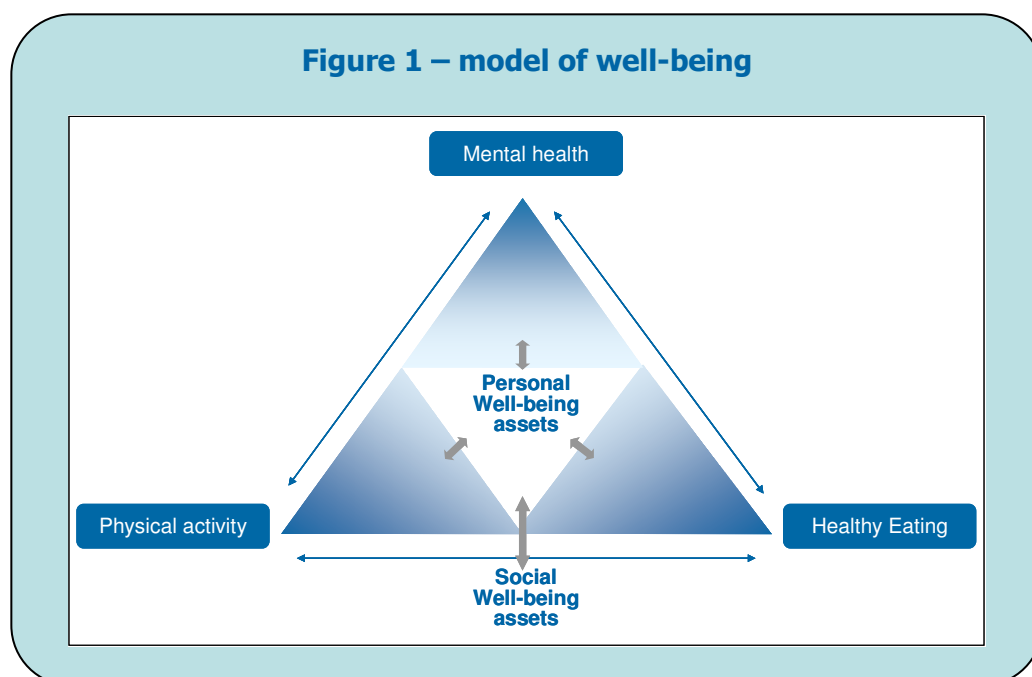
On a regular basis throughout the evaluation, we will be producing short briefings summarising the latest research and policy news relevant to the Big Lottery Fund Well-Being and Changing Spaces Programmes. In this, the first issue, we introduce our understanding of well-being which informs the approach we are taking as part of the national Well-being evaluation, and the evidence base on which it has been developed. We also highlight some of the latest findings from the field of well-being research.

## Well-being – the holistic picture

The term 'well-being' has gained currency in recent years, having been incorporated in almost all aspects of government policy, including health, children and young people (in the 2003 *Every Child Matters* framework), the place-shaping role of local government (the 2006 Local Government White Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities*), work and productivity, and sustainable development (*Securing the Future*, 2005). In the 2007 spending review, a number of government departments incorporated specific well-being targets in their new Public Services Agreements.

What is meant by well-being? The DIUS *Foresight Review on Mental Capital and Wellbeing*, released in 2008, defined well-being as 'a dynamic state, in which the individual is able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community'.<sup>i</sup> The three strands of the Well-Being Programme (physical activity, healthy eating and mental health) feed into this, but to hold them together we have also identified personal and social well-being assets as being central to the Programme. This is shown in figure 1.

**Figure 1 – model of well-being**



The important thing about this model is that each element within it interacts with others. As a result a project working to improve one element can expect to have positive impacts in other areas too, particularly with regards to personal and social well-being assets. For example a project aiming to improve eating habits, may lead to improvements in self-esteem and stronger social ties. Perhaps more importantly, there is also evidence that these changes at the assets level may be important in ensuring the sustainability of changes at the strand level.

The following sections summarise some of the links that previous research has already demonstrated between the various aspects of well-being.

## Cross-strand linkages

### *Physical activity and mental health*

There is extensive evidence about the benefits of moderate physical activity on many aspects of mental health.<sup>ii</sup> These are some of the key ones:

- ❑ reduced depression symptoms;<sup>iii</sup>
- ❑ reduced levels of stress and anxiety;<sup>iv</sup>
- ❑ alleviation of some of the symptoms of schizophrenia.<sup>v</sup>

Mental illness aside, it is also known that small bouts of exercise can improve short-term mood through the release of endorphins.<sup>vi</sup> Contact with the natural world, which can often be combined with physical activity, is also known to improve mental health.<sup>vii</sup>

Of course, the link can run the other way too. For example, depression has been linked to increased risk of cardiovascular disease as a result of inactivity.<sup>viii</sup>

### *Healthy eating and mental health*

There are two known main benefits of healthy eating with respect to mental health:

- ❑ essential fatty acids (found in fish) have been found to protect against depression and affective disorder, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and schizophrenia;
- ❑ dementia has been linked to high intake of saturated fats, and low vegetable consumption.<sup>ix</sup>

### *Healthy eating and physical activity*

Evidence of a relationship here is more limited. However, the *Health Survey for England* consistently shows a positive correlation between healthy eating measures (e.g. fruit and vegetable consumption) and physical activity measures (e.g. amount of sport per week). This is not surprising, given what we know from cognitive psychology. 'Cognitive dissonance' means that changes in behaviour in one domain should lead to change in the other, as individuals start identifying themselves as being 'health-conscious'.

## From strands to well-being assets

Both the academic literature, and evidence from evaluations of previous programmes demonstrate the impact that efforts to achieve strand-specific outcomes may have on wider well-being assets, both personal and social. These are just a few examples:

- ❑ a community gardening project in an inner city area of Sydney, Australia, ostensibly aimed at encouraging residents to grow their own food, also led to improvements in community feel, and an increase in individuals' sense of purpose;
- ❑ a controlled study found increased life satisfaction amongst gardeners compared to non-gardeners;<sup>x</sup>
- ❑ the MEND anti-obesity programme has been proven to improve self-esteem;
- ❑ a controlled trial found nutritional supplements reduced anti-social behaviour amongst young offenders.<sup>xi</sup>

## From assets to strands

Perhaps most relevant for Well-being Programme portfolios who have only set explicit targets in terms of one or two strands, are the benefits of well-being assets in terms of *sustaining* strand-specific outcomes, and producing *'spillover'* of benefits from one strand to another.

Many reviews have identified the relevance of social well-being. Participation in civic society, social support and networks, and even levels of 'neighbourliness' (how often one speaks to one's neighbours) have been found to reduce risks of mental ill health.<sup>xii</sup> This is particularly relevant for the elderly and vulnerable, for whom social isolation is also associated with poor physical health.<sup>xiii</sup> At a strand specific-level, eating with others has been found to lead to healthier eating.<sup>xiv</sup>

There is similarly strong evidence in relation to personal well-being. Positive personal well-being is seen to be an important tool in helping 'people feel able and motivated to exercise choice and control and to adopt healthy lifestyles'.<sup>xv</sup> Enhancing feelings of control is recognised as a fundamental aspect for changing lifestyles in relation to physical activity and healthy eating – a fatalistic attitude can lead to neglect and stagnation.<sup>xvi</sup> As previously noted, mental health problems can be a barrier to increasing physical activity. This is even the case for people who do not have diagnosed mental health problems, but do have a lack of positive well-being - a state that has been described as 'languishing'.<sup>xvii</sup> Individuals who are 'languishing' show the same increased risks of cardiovascular disease as do individuals with depression. Furthermore, the most dramatic reduction in risk of cardiovascular disease is seen amongst those identified as 'flourishing' – with high positive well-being. Only 8% of flourishing individuals suffered cardiovascular disease, compared to 12% amongst other healthy individuals.

The National Institute for Mental Health in England builds a strong case for focussing on mental well-being and mental health. Based on the gathered evidence, they conclude that:

*"Even small improvements in mental well-being will achieve significant cost benefits through improvements in physical health, productivity and quality of life"<sup>xviii</sup>*

These findings fit well with recent developments in the field of positive psychology. Barbara Frederickson's *broaden-and-build* model explains how positive emotions such as resilience and creativity serve as resources allowing one to grow and develop. The model is built upon a large battery of studies which have found people's abilities and approaches to problems changes as a result of their mood, with positive moods helping people think creatively and flourish. Such positivity is required if people are to change their lifestyles, as is the intention of many of the projects in the Well-being and Changing Spaces Programmes.

## Further information

For further information about any of the issues raised in this briefing, or for any general queries regarding the national Well-being evaluation please contact:

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