

# Well-Being Matters

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

In this issue of well-being matters, we explore the relationship between well-being and the natural environment. How does government understand the links between well-being and the environment? Can we improve individual well-being whilst protecting the environment? Are there any trade-offs? This issue will consider these questions, as well as including a round-up of some of the latest well-being news.

## Well-being and the natural environment: a happy marriage?

### The policy landscape

The well-being agenda is about focussing policy on improving people's lives today. Environmentalists aim to protect the environment by restricting behaviours that damage the natural environment. What could they possibly have in common? And yet the two have been brought together in a variety of policy documents in the UK, in Europe and elsewhere. The UK's sustainable development strategy, *Securing the Future*, spelt out the relationship between the two for the first time in 2005, identifying 'personal well-being' as part of one of the two pillars of sustainable development:

- **Living within environmental limits.** Respecting the limits of the planet's environment, resources and biodiversity – to improve our environment and ensure that the natural resources needed for life are unimpaired and remain so for future generations.
- **Ensuring a strong, healthy and just society.** Meeting the diverse needs of all people in existing and future communities, promoting personal well-being, social cohesion and inclusion, and creating equal opportunity for all.<sup>i</sup>

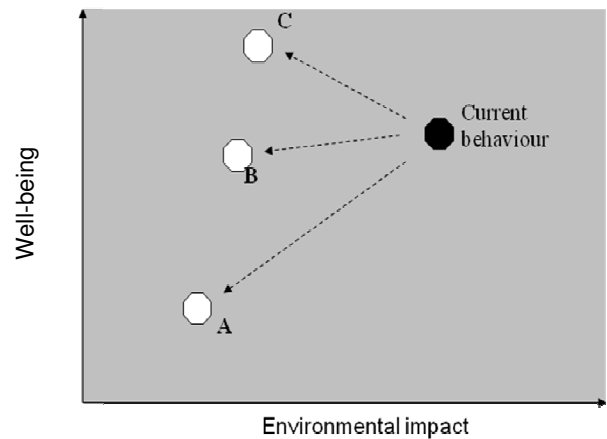
In other words, the role of Defra (the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) is to both protect the environment and ensure high well-being for all. A tough challenge. To help them, their sustainable development indicator set includes measures of well-being, similar to those used in the Big Lottery Fund well-being evaluation tools.<sup>ii</sup>

### Connects and disconnects

Can they do it? One of the key questions is whether the two goals are compatible – does environmental sustainability come at the cost of reduced well-being or might greener lifestyles actually make us happier and healthier? This was the topic of research commissioned by Defra, and prepared by nef in partnership with leading academics in the USA, Australia and the UK.<sup>iii</sup> The paper does not just rely on what people say they want, but is based on evidence of the relationships between well-being and different aspects of behaviour, lifestyles and attitudes.



The conclusions drawn in this paper are far reaching. On the one hand, there appear to be some tensions between well-being and environmental sustainability – for example in terms of long-distance tourism. But in many cases the evidence suggests that more pro-environmental behaviours and lifestyles do not infringe on well-being, and could actually improve it. These cases have been called ‘double dividends’ by Professor Tim Jackson, who is on the UK’s Sustainable Development Commission.<sup>iv</sup> Figure 1 demonstrates what is desired – changes like **C**, that lead to reduced environmental impact *and* increased well-being.



Some of these double dividends are changes that need to happen at the national or cultural level. For example, low self-esteem and so-called ‘status anxiety’ can lead to conspicuous consumption – buying material goods to demonstrate your status - with obvious environmental impact.<sup>v</sup> But it is difficult to deal with without major changes, for example by restricting advertising and product placement.<sup>vi</sup>

The following case studies show how some projects that are funded through the Well-being and Changing Spaces funding programmes can lead to improved well-being and reduce environmental impact.<sup>vii</sup>

## Double dividends

### Active Transport

#### Get Moving North Tyneside, Sustrans, North Tyneside

Sustrans and partners deliver 10 Active Travel projects in England. These projects are designed to enable people to make more active and sustainable transport choices. In this process participants gain new skills and confidence, get outdoors and become more active as well as increase the amount of walking and cycling they do for transport purposes. One of these projects is Get Moving North Tyneside which operates in two locations – North Tyneside Borough and Cobalt Business Park (where activities target the park’s employees). The research undertaken with the different groups of participants of this and other Active Travel project shows not only a rise in mental, physical and social well-being but also an increase in walking and cycling for transport purposes.

### Green gyms

#### The Orchard Shed Project, Margate, Ecominds, Mind

Part of the *Changing Spaces* Programme, the project aims to restore the grounds, pond and building located in the derelict Royal School for Deaf Children orchard, while conserving the flora and fauna, using volunteers and benefiting mental health service users. The overgrown orchard will be restored as a productive garden that will also maximise opportunities for wildlife. This will involve learners from the college, Thanet Mind and the Windmill Community Allotment Project, bringing together community groups and volunteers, and offering expertise on developing a ‘forest garden’ and a herb growing area. Among the aims and objectives of the project is to offer ecotherapy through the development of the orchard, encouraging integration into the local community, and improving deaf and mental health awareness. Overall, it anticipates providing self-healing through green activities and experience in gardening.



## Food growing

### **The Booth Centre Good Food Project, Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts, Manchester**

The project aims to change the eating habits of homeless people and improve their health by showing them how to grow and cook fresh food and promote the associated health benefits. The project will teach homeless people how to grow food through redeveloping the Booth Centre garden to grow fruit, vegetables and herbs within their allotment in order to grow food for the Centre. As well as impacts in terms of healthy eating, the project is likely to have key benefits in terms of self-esteem and build social relations. Interaction with nature is also likely to have pro-environmental impacts, as will developing the habit of growing food locally.

These examples all show how it pays for organisations interested in improving well-being to consider the environment and nature. Here are a few common features that can be incorporated into many other projects:

- Active transport – good for health and well-being, reduces environmental impact from transport
- Local, seasonal food – healthier, lower environmental impact
- Community gardens – builds social relations and self-esteem, good for health, and means more local seasonal food is available
- Contact with nature – good for well-being and health, increases concern for the environment and pro-environmental behaviour.<sup>viii</sup>

## Green attitudes

Does caring about the natural environment have any relation to well-being? One might think that fears about climate change and the collapse of biodiversity might make one rather miserable, but actually the correlations tend to go the other way. One study found that pro-environmental attitudes were positively associated with feelings of autonomy and positive emotions, whilst negative attitudes to the environment were associated with negative emotions.<sup>ix</sup> Meanwhile another more recent study using the British Household Panel Survey found a positive relationship between well-being and concern for biodiversity loss.<sup>x</sup> But the pattern is not always straightforward – the same study found that those concerned with ozone depletion actually had *lower* well-being.

Perhaps more exciting than pro-environmental attitudes are pro-environmental behaviours. Here there is also good news: A recent study found that people involved in activism for various causes had higher well-being.<sup>xi</sup> This is not too surprising. Whilst being aware of global problems may lead to pessimism, action to combat it may lead to feelings of competence, meaning and purpose.

## Well-being approach to the environment

But the relationship works both ways. Those interested in reducing environmental impact should also consider the benefits of a well-being approach. For example, Professor Tim Kasser in the USA has demonstrated a clear link between low self-esteem and materialism.<sup>xii</sup> Many people with low self-esteem compensate for this by attempting to demonstrate their worth with material goods, potentially also running up excessive debts. But Professor Kasser's work also shows that those with greater materialist motivations tend to have poorer mental health, engage in more unhealthy behaviours and have lower reported subjective well-being. It appears there is a vicious circle in operation. Aside from the individual, the other victim of this vicious circle is the natural environment, as materialism leads to greater levels of consumption of unnecessary goods, and of course environmental impact. The higher consumption of one individual may boost their morale and status temporarily, but only at the cost of others around them who now feel their own relative lack even more. In the language of economics this is a zero-sum game.

Combating low self-esteem and its underlying causes may well be the next challenge for the third sector, but its one that could reap benefits both in terms of well-being and the natural environment.



## Other well-being news

- The All Party Parliamentary Group on Well-Being Economics, chaired by Jo Swinson MP, held its second meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2010, on improving children's well-being. The third meeting will be in the summer.
- The Young Foundation has launched two reports on well-being and happiness: *Sinking and swimming: understanding Britain's unmet needs* (December 2009), and *The State of Happiness* (January 2010).
- The Children's Society has launched a report on *Understanding Children's Well-being* based on a two-year research programme.
- The Welsh Assembly Government announced on 1<sup>st</sup> March that it would be monitoring well-being as part of its One Wales, One Planet sustainable development strategy.
- In Europe, the EU is funding a new project called *Well-being 2030* which will investigate the role of well-being in twenty years time.

## 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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<sup>i</sup> Defra (2005) *Securing the Future*

<sup>ii</sup> Defra (2007) *Sustainable development indicators in your pocket*

<sup>iii</sup> Marks N, Thompson S, Eckersley R, Jackson T & Kasser T (2007) *Defra Project 3b: Sustainable development and well-being: relationships, challenges and policy implications*

<sup>iv</sup> Jackson (2005) 'Live better by consuming less? Is there a 'double dividend' in sustainable consumption?' *Journal of Industrial Ecology* **9**:19-36.

<sup>v</sup> de Botton A (2004) *Status Anxiety* (London: Hamish Hamilton)

<sup>vi</sup> Gannon Z & Lawson N (2010) *The Advertising Effect: How do we get the balance of advertising right* (London: Compass)

<sup>vii</sup> See also The Young Foundation (2009) *Going green and beating the blues* for a discussion of attempts to improve well-being and increase sustainability.

<sup>viii</sup> Look out for **nef**'s forthcoming report on the benefits of nature, out in May 2010.

<sup>ix</sup> Villacorta M, Koestner R & Lekes N (2003) 'Further validation of the motivation toward the environment scale' *Environment and Behavior* **35**:486-505.

<sup>x</sup> Ferrer-i-Carbonell A & Gowdy J (2007) 'Environmental awareness and happiness' *Ecological Economics*, **60**:509-516.

<sup>xi</sup> Klar M & Kasser T (2009) 'Some benefits of being an activist: Measuring activism and its role in psychological well-being' *Political Psychology* **30**:755-777

<sup>xii</sup> Kasser T (2006) 'Materialism and its alternatives' in M Csikszentmihalyi and I S Csikszentmihalyi (eds) *A life worth living: contributions to positive psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

