

Well-Being Matters

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

Well-being clearly matters to the current government. In November 2010, the Prime Minister announced the ONS would be launching a national project to measure well-being. Six months on we review the progress made so far, and what it could mean for those involved in the Well-being and Changing Spaces programmes.

National Measures of Well-being

On the 14th November 2010, the first news emerged that the Prime Minister David Cameron would be asking the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to measure national well-being and happiness. 11 days later, the Prime Minister gave a speech in which he promised that from April 2011, *“we’ll start measuring our progress as a country, not just by how our economy is growing, but by how our lives are improving; not just by our standard of living, but by our quality of life.”* The speech also made it clear that, in future, policy decisions will be based on their impacts on well-being. For example, he criticised marketing aimed at children as being good for the economy but bad for well-being. The Prime Minister stated that his business was to improve people’s lives, not just to increase economic activity. Meanwhile, one Downing Street source was quoted as saying *“next time we have a comprehensive spending review, let’s not just guess what effect various policies will have on people’s wellbeing. Let’s actually know.”*

What’s being done

There are two aspects of this agenda – measuring well-being and then using these measurements to shape policy. What’s been done so far focuses on the first aspect, within which the Prime Minister asked the ONS to carry out two processes. Firstly, as mentioned in the last issue of *Well-Being Matters*, a consultation period was opened, which concluded in April this year, and asked people to make proposals as to what should be considered part of ‘National well-being’. Secondly, questions have been incorporated in two national surveys to generate unprecedented data on people’s experiences of life. The first official data was collected in April.

Consultation

Most initiatives that have taken place around the world to measure progress differently have been dominated by elite groups of experts, or officials drawing up lists of ‘important things to measure’ in boardrooms. The ONS took the decision to broaden the debate with an open consultation. 20,000 people participated in 170 events held around the country, or by responding to on-line questionnaires, whilst thousands of others contributed via other social media such as Twitter. Most of the events targeted academics, practitioners and those involved in the well-being agenda, but events were also held for community members in some local areas, as well as in schools.



The questions asked have typically been around what constitutes progress and national well-being and which aspects should be measured.

The national debate was also reflected in the media, with 265 articles in UK national newspapers mentioning happiness or wellbeing in the context of measurement in the six months following the government announcement (compared with only 57 in the six months before the announcement).

The ONS will be reporting on the results of the consultation in July this year. The main themes emerging appear to be job security, relationships, health, freedom of society and spiritual beliefs. Whilst there has been some debate about the use of subjective measures like those used in the Well-Being Programme Evaluation, happiness and life satisfaction were clearly highlighted by the public as central to well-being, together with other feelings such as trust, belonging, and identity.

Measuring subjective well-being

Anticipating the centrality of these subjective issues, and recognising the lack of data on them, a commitment was made early on to collect official statistics on people's experience of life in the UK. Each year 200,000 adults will answer a set of questions incorporated into the UK's largest population survey, the Integrated Household Survey. As of April, the ONS has started collecting data. For the first year, the following four pilot questions have been identified:

- Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?
- Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?
- Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?
- Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?

The survey will create an unprecedented amount of data, allowing detailed changes over time to be measured, as well as comparing different population groups and regions. The first data should be available in July 2012.

Meanwhile, the Opinions Survey will sample 1,000 respondents a month with a broader set of questions, to get a deeper picture of well-being in the country and to help question development.

What it means

For the nation as a whole, this is potentially fantastic news. Many people and organisations have long argued that a focus on economic growth as the sole measure of progress has led to other crucial issues being marginalised, such as inequality, environmental damage and the quality of our lives. If the Prime Minister sticks to his word, then this could all change. Policies will be judged in terms of their impact on people's lives overall and not exclusively on overall economic impacts. Politicians will be held to account in terms of the difference they make to people's well-being. Of course economic factors should not be forgotten, but they should be considered alongside others such as work-life balance, the quality of our cities and healthy lifestyles.

For the types of organisations involved in the Well-Being and Changing Spaces Programmes we anticipate the following specific opportunities:



- **Baseline for evaluation:** The data collected as part of the Integrated Household Survey will be representative at the local authority level, allowing practitioners collecting data on well-being to compare their beneficiary groups with the population in their area.
- **Identify areas of need:** Sub-regional data will allow well-being ‘trouble spots’ to be identified. Assessments can also be made at the group level, for example ethnic minorities or age groups. Over time, the more in-depth data from the Opinions Survey will allow practitioners to understand what specific aspects of well-being are in deficiency for particular groups, which will help tailor service delivery.
- **Demonstrate value:** We have always said that data from the Well-Being Evaluation will be useful for securing future funding. With well-being higher up the agenda, and soon to be an aspect of official government statistics, the utility of this Evaluation for demonstrating the value of your activities will have dramatically increased.
- **Advocacy:** The organisations involved in the Well-Being and Changing Spaces Programmes are pioneers. The outcomes and impact that you are creating and recording as part of this Evaluation are now much higher on the Government agenda. In the same way that large corporations can exert influence on the Government by pointing to their contribution to economic growth, your organisations should now be exerting influence on the Government by pointing to your demonstrable contribution to well-being.
- **Holding government to account:** The success of the well-being agenda depends upon it being used by a wide range of actors. In the same way that many economists will criticise the government for adopting policies which they believe will be detrimental to growth, those working in well-being should be able to hold government to account when it adopts policies which we believe will harm well-being. If the Government is using the language of well-being, then those who know the most about people’s lives in the UK, including yourselves, should make sure to use that language back at them.

Of course, it is still early days, and it remains to be seen what will happen. But it is vital that those that have been working on well-being for years, such as yourselves, make the most of this opportunity. The Government has been criticised on many fronts for going forward with this agenda, with suggestions that it is a distraction, that well-being can’t be measured or that they are promoting the agenda whilst adopting policies which will reduce well-being.

It is important that we make sure that well-being does not become a distraction – that it is given the serious consideration it deserves. The Well-Being Evaluation has already clearly demonstrated that well-being can be measured robustly and that significant and long-lasting positive changes in well-being can be achieved. From this base, the science and practice of well-being can be used to evaluate policies the Government adopts, so that they know when their policies are not consistent with the well-being rhetoric that they are endorsing.

[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 Victoria Bradford at CLES Consulting on 0161 236 7036 and rrt@cles.org.uk

