mental health foundation

Need Know 2

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Measuring Wellbeing: An Introductory Briefing

Summary

The Coalition Government wishes to measure success not solely in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), but in terms of overall 'national wellbeing'. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) has been asked to start a consultation process on how this might be measured.

There is no standard definition of wellbeing. The Coalition Government's Public Health White Paper defines wellbeing as "a positive physical, social and mental state". There is general agreement that physical, social, environmental and psychological factors influence wellbeing. Wellbeing emerges from these influences because we actively construct our own view of ourselves and our wellbeing in the context of the world around us and our experiences.

This current focus on wellbeing is not new. A good deal of work measuring wellbeing already takes place across the UK, as a way of trying to assess people's satisfaction with their quality of life. The ONS consultation will be able to build on this existing evidence-base.

Any debate on measuring wellbeing needs to ensure that individuals' subjective views on wellbeing are balanced with objective social indicators. The debate also needs to take into account that there may be profound differences in conceptual understanding of wellbeing across different cultural groups in the UK.

There is a wealth of evidence that positive wellbeing influences a wide range of outcomes for individuals and communities, including better physical and mental health, higher educational attainment and more social cohesion. There is also an increasingly strong body of evidence that in order to increase levels of societal and individual wellbeing, there needs to be a reduction in socio-economic inequalities.

The Foundation has therefore welcomed the current debate on measuring wellbeing, and proposals to establish more sophisticated, accurate and robust measurement tools that can be applied to larger sample sizes. It is important that any wellbeing indicators are practical, linked to a robust data source, and mainstreamed into routine data collection.

A single national measure of wellbeing, such as that for GDP, may have some merit in terms of debate at Ministerial and national level. However we would like to see a wider set of indicators created that local communities can use to measure their own population wellbeing against other communities.

Done effectively, the data collected will be of significant benefit in assessing the impact at community level of national and local policies relating to, among other things, public health, mental health, housing, employment, the economy, the arts, education and the environment – all of which contribute fundamentally to the quality of life of over 60 million UK citizens.

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The Government's proposals to measure wellbeing

In November 2010 the Prime Minister announced that "From April next year we will 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. We'll continue to measure GDP as we've always done, but it is high time we admitted that, taken on its own, GDP is an incomplete way of measuring a country's progress".

Ministers (Hurd, 2010) have made particular reference to taking forward the recommendations of a report by Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, that came out of a Commission established by the President of France (Stiglitz et al, 2009). The remit was to "identify the limits of GDP as an indicator of economic performance and social progress, including the problems with its measurement; to consider what additional information might be required for the production of more relevant indicators of social progress; to assess the feasibility of alternative measurement tools, and to discuss how to present the statistical information in an appropriate way".

The key message of the Stiglitz report was that:

> "the time is ripe for our measurement system to shift emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people's wellbeing...Changing emphasis does not mean dismissing GDP and production measures. They emerged from concerns about market production and employment; they continue to provide answers to many important questions such as monitoring economic activity.
>
> But emphasising wellbeing is important because there appears to be an increasing gap between the information contained in aggregate GDP data and what counts for common people's wellbeing. This means working towards the development of a statistical system that complements measures of market activity by measures centred on people's wellbeing and by measures that capture sustainability".

The Office of National Statistics (ONS) has been tasked with consulting on the development of new wellbeing measures that "cover the quality of life of people in the UK, environmental and sustainability issues, as well as the economic performance of the country". The ONS consultation (ONS, 2010) asks for people's views on what matters most in their lives and what is important for measuring the nation's wellbeing, although it acknowledges that much is already known from previous work:

> "Some of the aspects that we know affect national wellbeing include: income and wealth; job satisfaction and economic security; ability to have a say on local and national issues; having good connections with friends and relatives; present and future conditions of the environment; crime; health; education and training; personal and cultural activities, including caring and volunteering".

Initial findings from the first 3,000 responses to the ONS consultation indicate that some of the main themes coming through are: children and the future (people are concerned about the quality of life their children will have in adulthood); freedom; equality and fairness; health; job security (not necessarily wealth); spirituality/faith/religion; and the importance of a good quality local environment, especially having access to green spaces (ONS 2011).

Definitions of wellbeing

There is no agreed definition of wellbeing, although there is general agreement that an intersecting range of physical, social, environmental and psychological factors influence wellbeing, and there is some uniformity across different definitions. Mental health is a crucial element of overall wellbeing, but not the whole story.

The Coalition Government's Public Health White Paper (Department of Health, 2010) defines wellbeing as "a positive physical, social and mental state. Good wellbeing does not just mean the absence of mental illness – it brings a wide range of benefits, including reduced health risk behaviour (such as smoking), reduced mortality, improved educational outcomes and increased productivity at work".

The Scottish Government's mental health improvement plan, Towards a Mentally Flourishing Scotland: Policy and Action Plan 2009-2011 (Scottish Government, 2009), points out that:

> "The idea of mental wellbeing includes both how people feel – their emotions and life satisfaction – and how people function – their self acceptance, positive relations with others, personal control over their environment, purpose in life and autonomy. Each person's experience differs. Some people who experience mental illness may have a good quality of life and experience good mental wellbeing. Others who do not experience mental illness may nevertheless have poor mental wellbeing and a poor quality of life."

The Welsh Assembly Government echoes this definition (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010), defining wellbeing as "a positive physical, social and mental state, requiring that basic needs are met; individuals have a sense of purpose; and they feel able to reach personal goals and take part in society".

The Government Office for Science's Foresight report (Government Office for Science, 2008) on mental capital and wellbeing refers to mental wellbeing 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. It is enhanced when an individual is able to fulfil their personal and social goals and achieve a sense of purpose in society".

The New Economics Foundation (New Economics Foundation, 2008a) states that "well-being is most usefully thought of as the dynamic process that gives people a sense of how their lives are going, through the interaction between their circumstances, activities and psychological resources or 'mental capital'". In its response to the ONS consultation, it has issued a report (New Economics Foundation, 2011) that differentiates between personal and national wellbeing:

> "Wellbeing (human/personal): The extent to which people experience happiness and satisfaction, and are functioning well.
>
> National wellbeing: The overall state of the nation in terms of environmental sustainability, social and economic factors and human wellbeing."

Broadly, academic literature on the subject distinguishes between two dimensions of wellbeing, namely hedonic (positive feelings - life satisfaction, happiness) and eudemonic (positive functioning - engagement, fulfilment, sense of meaning, social wellbeing) (Friedli, 2009). Any debate on measuring wellbeing needs to ensure that both aspects are fully investigated, and that individuals' subjective views on wellbeing are balanced with objective social indicators, such as social integration; social acceptance; social actualisation; social contribution; and social coherence (Keyes, 1998).

The debate also needs to take into account that there may be profound differences in conceptual understanding of wellbeing across different cultural groups and generations in the UK (Newbigging and Bola, 2010), and to avoid the predominance of a traditionally western understanding of wellbeing being applied inappropriately in some communities.

Happiness

'Wellbeing' is not synonymous with 'happiness' (which also suffers from having no universally agreed definition), although sometimes they are used interchangeably. Broadly, 'wellbeing' involves how people feel over a period of time, and does not fluctuate significantly as a result of the daily ups and downs that we all experience. 'Happiness', however, does fluctuate depending on circumstances at any particular time.

The terminological position is complicated by what some have called 'sustained happiness' (which others might define as 'wellbeing'). For example, Action for Happiness, a new movement backed by economist Richard Layard, states that "what matters most is our overall happiness – ie how good life is taking everything into account, including our inner lives, our relationships and our sense of purpose" (Action for Happiness, 2011).

How wellbeing works

The Government's 2010 Public Health White Paper states that our health and wellbeing is influenced by a wide range of factors – social, cultural, economic, psychological and environmental (Department of Health 2010). We also know that there is a complex inter-relationship between mental health, physical health, the environment and societal inequalities

(Friedli, 2009). Wellbeing emerges from all these influences because we actively construct our own view of ourselves and our wellbeing in the context of the world around us and our experiences.

It is difficult to weight determinants of mental health or wellbeing as data is limited and many determinants (such as equality, employment, debt, personal safety, lifestyle) are themselves inter-related. However it is likely that parenting, genetics, life events (and how they are interpreted), and inequality/poverty are all major determinants of mental health, and also of many mental illnesses (McCulloch and Goldie, 2010). The determinants of mental health are also, of course, determinants of physical health as well.

One theoretical model of psychological wellbeing put forward encompasses six distinct dimensions of wellness - autonomy (a sense of self-determination); environmental mastery (managing one's life and the surrounding world); a sense of personal growth and development as an individual; positive relations with others; purpose in life; and self-acceptance (a positive evaluation of oneself and one's past life) (Ryff and Keyes, 1995).

Wellbeing therefore depends not just on the circumstances of our lives (for different people may experience different levels of wellbeing even though they may live similar lives; or similar levels of wellbeing despite leading very different lives) but on how we as individuals interpret and respond to those circumstances. Recent welcome initiatives such as the promotion of emotional resilience among children in school and the expansion of psychological therapies focus on trying to change the way people think in order to improve their sense of wellbeing (and reduce levels of poor mental health).

However there is also a need to think more critically about the relative contribution to wellbeing of individual psychological attributes (such as autonomy and positive feelings) and the circumstances of people's lives such as housing, employment, income and status – in other words, what conditions are necessary to create optimum wellbeing, and what policy initiatives and interventions will produce these conditions? (Friedli 2009).

Measuring wellbeing

A good deal of work has already been undertaken to measure wellbeing (and 'happiness') in both communities and individuals. This has demonstrated positive factors such as good relationships, being employed and being financially secure alongside negative factors such as poor relationships, family bereavement, poor health and unemployment (Ballas, 2009).

Wellbeing has commonly been divided by researchers into objective wellbeing (the material and social environment that influence communities and individuals, like housing and education) and subjective wellbeing (individuals' own assessment of their wellbeing) (Social Development Research Network, 2005). This suggests that a range of wellbeing indicators will be necessary in order to gain the best overall picture of either national or individual wellbeing. It is also crucial that wellbeing indicators are practical, linked to a robust data source, and mainstreamed into routine data collection.

The ONS itself has already published analyses on measuring societal wellbeing (eg Allin, 2007) and a comprehensive overview of current measures of subjective wellbeing (Waldron, 2010). This latter report:

> "reviews what is meant by the term subjective wellbeing, why it is important to measure it, how it can be measured, what subjective wellbeing questions are currently being asked on major social surveys in the UK and what the potential uses of subsequent data might be. The main purpose is to review what is already being done so that ONS, the rest of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) and others can consider their role in providing national subjective wellbeing data as highlighted by the landmark Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi commission report (2009)".

Waldron's paper lists a range of existing surveys that look at measuring subjective wellbeing, including:

- Understanding Society (formerly British Household Panel Survey, BHPS)
- the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Public Attitudes and Behaviours towards the Environment survey. DEFRA published an overview of wellbeing in 2010, updating measures of overall life satisfaction, satisfaction with selected aspects of life, positive and negative feelings and engagement in positive activities
- the European Social Survey (2006 wellbeing module), cited by Waldron as the most comprehensive international attempt to measure national levels of subjective wellbeing.

There is also a good deal of existing literature and guidance looking specifically at mental wellbeing. The Care Services Improvement Partnership (CSIP) produced a mental wellbeing impact assessment toolkit in 2007, now available from the National Mental Health Development Unit (NMHDU, 2011), which enables local areas, organisations and projects to look in detail at the subject of mental wellbeing and mental health promotion and assess the impact they make.

The North East Public Health Observatory has produced a Mental Wellbeing Atlas of regional and local authority level maps of factors that influence mental health and wellbeing (NEPHO, 2010). NEPHO argues that an index of factors influencing wellbeing, as opposed to wellbeing itself, is desirable in that it would indicate the scale of the challenge for local work and possibly the extent to which government should provide support, particularly funding.

The NHS North West and the North West Public Health Observatory conducted a Wellbeing Survey, launched on 25 January 2010, of 18,500 residents of the North West of England, to understand more about positive mental health and wellbeing (NWPHO, 2010). The survey found that there needs to be greater attention and effort on improving mental wellbeing in order to help people live healthier, happier and more productive lives.

Scotland has a strong recent record of developing mental wellbeing measurement indicators. In December 2007, NHS Health Scotland finalised an indicator set to monitor the mental health (mental health problems and positive mental health/mental wellbeing) of the adult population at a national level in Scotland. During this work, a new scale, the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), was developed to assess population positive mental health. Work is now ongoing to establish mental health indicators for children and young people (NHS Health Scotland, 2011).

The Whitehall Wellbeing Working Group has published a summary on the use of wellbeing concepts in developing and appraising UK Government policy (Whitehall Wellbeing Working Group, 2005).

The economics of wellbeing is also an area that continues to be researched. HM Treasury has published a working paper that looks at developments in the economics of wellbeing (HM Treasury, 2008). This reviews the empirical evidence on wellbeing, summarises key research findings and assesses their potential impact for policy, providing a series of proposals as to how to incorporate wellbeing evidence into policy appraisal. At Westminster, an All Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics has been established.

The New Economics Foundation, funded by the Big Lottery, has produced a set of wellbeing evaluation tools (New Economics Foundation, 2008b).

It will be seen from all this that focusing on wellbeing is not new, nor the call for judging success by other than economic performance. The ONS work will be able to build not only on existing survey findings, but also on a number of relatively recent examples of Governmental initiatives that include:

- the UK Government's 2005 Sustainable Development Strategy, Securing the Future, with its commitment that "by the end of 2006 the Government will sponsor cross-disciplinary work to bring together existing research and international experience and to explore how policies might change with an explicit wellbeing focus"
- the present Coalition Government's Public Health White Paper (Department of Health, 2010), which proposes that "local government and local communities will be at the heart of improving health and wellbeing for their populations and tackling inequalities"
- Sir Michael Marmot's review of health inequalities in England (Marmot, 2010), which specifically links reduced inequalities with social cohesion and improved wellbeing - "the health and wellbeing of today's children depends on us having the courage and imagination to rise to the challenge to do things differently, to put sustainability and

wellbeing alongside economic growth and bring about a more equal and fair society"

– the current proposed NHS reforms in England aim to establish local Health and Wellbeing Boards in every local authority

– Scotland's Better Health, Better Care: Action Plan of 2007, which refers to an expansion of the health and wellbeing portfolio to include key determinants such as sport and physical activity, housing, homelessness, poverty, social and financial inclusion and regeneration

– the Welsh Assembly Government's aim to move towards sustainable development by improving the social and environmental wellbeing of people and communities, which includes developing specific indicators of wellbeing (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010).

The benefits of measuring and promoting wellbeing

There is a wealth of evidence that positive wellbeing influences a wide range of outcomes for individuals and communities. These include:

> "healthier lifestyles; better physical health; improved recovery from illness; fewer limitations in daily living; higher educational attainment; greater productivity, employment and earnings; better relationships with adults and with children; more social cohesion and engagement and improved quality of life. These outcomes are…associated with the presence of positive mental health, sometimes referred to as 'wellbeing'" (Friedli 2009).

There is also an increasingly strong body of evidence that in order to increase levels of societal and individual wellbeing, there needs to be a reduction in socio-economic inequalities, and the gap between rich and poor, across the UK (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Friedli, 2009; Marmot, 2010). We would hope that a better understanding and measurement of wellbeing, and how it is generated, will lead to policies that address these inequalities.

For too long, economic benchmarks such as GDP and limited health measures such as life-expectancy have been used to assess quality of life, ignoring the fact that being richer or living longer are often poor indicators of personal happiness and wellbeing.

To demonstrate improvements to societal and individual wellbeing, we need to be able to measure wellbeing. The Foundation has therefore welcomed the current debate, and proposals to establish more sophisticated, accurate and robust measurement tools that can be applied to larger sample sizes. It is important that any wellbeing indicators are practical, linked to a robust data source, and mainstreamed into routine data collection.

A single national measure of wellbeing, such as that for GDP, may have some merit in terms of debate at Ministerial and national level. However, especially at a time when the Government is committed to transferring power to local communities, a single measure averaged from a wide variety of local data will be too blunt an instrument to help local communities develop effective local strategies. We would like to see a wider set of indicators created that local communities can use to measure their own population wellbeing against other communities.

Done effectively, the data collected will be of significant benefit in assessing the impact at community level of national and local policies relating to, among other things, public health, mental health, housing, employment, the economy, the arts, education and the environment – all of which contribute fundamentally to the quality of life of over 60 million UK citizens.

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The Mental Health Foundation is a UK-wide charity that carries out research, campaigns for better mental health services, and works to raise awareness of all mental health issues to help us all lead mentally healthier lives.

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