



Wellbeing

What's in a word?

Wellbeing – what’s in a word?

Put simply, wellbeing is **living well**.

We all have an interest in our own personal wellbeing, and that of our families and close friends. But there is also a less common meaning that relates to **societal wellbeing**, which leans on concepts from philosophy and economics. This is what the Carnegie UK Trust is talking about when we refer to wellbeing.

Societal wellbeing means everyone having what they need to live well now and in the future. More than health and wealth, it includes having friends and loved ones, the ability to contribute meaningfully to society and the ability to set our own direction and make choices about our own lives.

While countries and cultures have some differences in what they think is necessary to live well, there is a remarkable similarity across developed countries. We all want our citizens to be healthy, wealthy and wise.

International experts at the OECD have set out a number of **domains of wellbeing**. These are:

- Material conditions: income and wealth; jobs and earnings; housing.

- Quality of life: health, work-life balance, education and skills, social connections, civic engagement and governance, environmental quality, personal security, subjective wellbeing.
- Resources for future wellbeing: natural capital, human capital, social capital, economic capital.

Societal wellbeing includes economic outcomes – having enough money and financial security to buy the things we need to live and enjoy life. But it is not limited to this. It also includes social outcomes that measure quality of life. Some of these are tangible and easily measurable like education, health and housing, others are less concrete, like a sense of community and support network of family and friends. These intangible factors tend not to be measured by official statistics, though we know people value them as part of living well.

A wellbeing approach also asks us to think about the future as well as the present, we may have what we need to flourish now, but are we using up scarce natural resources to achieve it? Are we taking only our fair share of these resources so that our future selves and future generations can also achieve wellbeing?



Wellbeing as a goal

When politicians talk about putting wellbeing at the centre, they are connecting to a broader change in what we think of as the goal for society. For much of the Twentieth Century, the goal was economic growth. The shared assumption was that quality of life would improve if the economy improved. There is truth in this assertion, large improvements in living standards have undoubtedly impacted on education and health.

But towards the end of the Twentieth Century the nature of social problems began to change from things that respond well to universal delivery of a single service (like basic infrastructure, basic healthcare and school-aged education) to those that need more complex solutions (like inequality, adverse childhood experiences, and long-term chronic illnesses). Economic growth continued, but our societal wellbeing stagnated.

Politicians and governments use short mission statements to show that they take this broader view of social progress – that they want their society to be a good one for everyone, not just an economically productive one.



Wellbeing as a conversation

While there is general agreement on the domains of wellbeing, there is less agreement about the level at which they are set, or the priority given to different domains (see overleaf).

We can all agree on the importance of education, but what we mean by a good education in the UK is very different to what it might be considered to be in Japan or India. Personal security is also universally important but has different connotations in places with experiences of civil unrest (including Northern Ireland) than in other places.

Experts also disagree on the priority given to each of the domains – some argue that the economy is paramount, others that it is the environment, still others see good health as the most important aspiration for society.

There are two ways of finding the answers to these questions. We can ask experts to carry out research, often based on national statistics, that looks for links between indicators of wellbeing and domains of wellbeing **or** we can ask the people what is important to them.

At the Carnegie UK Trust we believe in blending these approaches. Expert analysis can tell us a lot about inequalities for example, but we need to balance this with people's own experiences – it is at an individual, family and community level that the domains of wellbeing come together in lived experience. In this sense, people are the best experts we have on how the domains of wellbeing interact with each other, whether they conflict and if, as a society, we are prioritising the right domains.



Wellbeing as a framework

A wellbeing framework is a device used by governments to measure each of the domains of wellbeing and to monitor whether we are moving forward as a society. There are strong examples in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as further afield in Australia, New Zealand, Mexico and at city and state level in the USA.

Increasingly governments recognise that simply improving the average outcomes for people in health, education, income and so on, does not add up to a sense of social progress. Some people are left behind. And because actions at one part of society might have unintended consequences elsewhere, so while one area improves, it does so at the cost of another. For example, economic indicators like GDP may show an increase due to building infrastructure, but if this is not done in a joined-up way, it can have a detrimental effect on environmental outcomes.

Wellbeing frameworks tend to include:

- A mission statement putting wellbeing at the centre.
- A set of outcomes, like a good place to bring up children, or a more equal society.
- A larger set of indicators that measure progress towards these outcomes.

The frameworks do not generally set targets to be achieved, but rather seek continuous improvement on the indicators. The indicators are usually selected by experts as the best available measures. Those that are selected as indicators are proxies for the outcomes – not proof of them.

When a wellbeing framework is working well, it provokes debate amongst policy makers, practitioners and citizens. Why is crime going down, why isn't health improving, why do some people still do better than others? It is in answering these questions together that we can begin to find new solutions for the challenges we face now.

Where wellbeing frameworks are used, they act as a catalyst for governments to act in more joined up and preventative ways. They can support new relationships between different parts of government, both horizontally (between departments) and vertically (between the centre and the local). They also support parliamentary scrutiny and accountability to the public.



Wellbeing as an approach to delivering public services

A wellbeing framework will tell you what is going on, and dialogue can tell you more about why, but the question of what should be done often comes down to political choices. More needs to be done to help policy makers assess options on the basis of all domains of wellbeing, not just

the ones they are used to working with (for example, health services should be considering their impact on improving education, not just direct health outcomes, and vice versa).

Wellbeing evidence can give us some important pointers on how we deliver services to people in a way that improves, rather than harms, their wellbeing. It is generally accepted that for a good sense of personal wellbeing, people need to feel control over their lives. When things are done to us, instead of with us or helping us to do them ourselves, we can easily disengage. And yet, this method of 'doing to' people is how we have traditionally structured public services.

A new model is developing where the governments' role is to enable people rather than to provide services, variously called the enabling state, the relational state, or simply coproduction. It is a slow moving paradigm shift, but one that is required if governments are to succeed in improving societal wellbeing.



About Carnegie UK Trust

The Carnegie UK Trust works to improve the lives of people throughout the UK and Ireland, by changing minds through influencing policy, and by changing lives through innovative practice and partnership work. The Carnegie UK Trust was established by Scots-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1913.

This leaflet summarises the **evidence** we have gathered from almost a decade of working on societal wellbeing, over which time we have:

- established the first national roundtable on Measuring Economic Performance and Social Progress in Scotland in 2010 and actively engaged in the development of the Scottish National Performance Framework.
- established the Roundtable on Measuring Progress in Northern Ireland and set out steps for

developing a wellbeing framework which were implemented by the NI Executive.

- published case studies of how governments and civil society organisations measure wellbeing in France, the USA, and Canada.
- produced guidance on wellbeing frameworks for cities and regions with the OECD.
- convened an international roundtable discussion on the successes and challenges of developing high-level strategies based on wellbeing and translating this to policy action.
- developed a UK-wide programme on the Enabling State, exploring public service approaches which give citizens and communities more opportunity to shape the services that they receive and to contribute to their own wellbeing.

More information on our work can be found at www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk



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