



Towards a Wellbeing Framework

One year on

Introduction

The Carnegie Roundtable on Measuring Wellbeing in Northern Ireland reported¹ after eighteen months of deliberation, including a detailed process of stakeholder engagement.

We combined our own local and diverse experience with international evidence on designing a whole of government approach to wellbeing – to support better outcomes for citizens and communities. A key recommendation is an outcomes-based wellbeing framework that can act as a lynchpin for a far-reaching set of public sector reforms and an invigorated administration, one that is newly invested in the capabilities² and freedoms of citizens and communities.

The Roundtable recommended seven steps towards placing the wellbeing of citizens at the heart of government and since the publication of our report, a number of positive developments have taken shape. This paper examines each step by identifying the key questions around implementation.

The Seven Steps

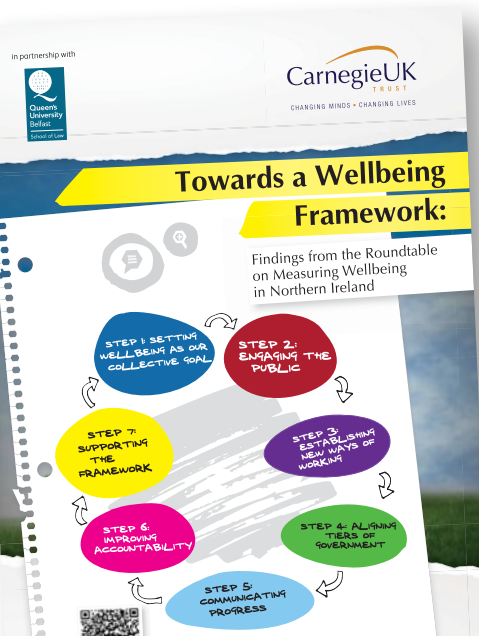


Step 1 is to put wellbeing at the heart of government and we are pleased to note that this has been taken forward as part of the *Fresh Start* agreement and the workshops convened for the design of the *Programme for Government*, with a commitment to an outcomes-based wellbeing framework.

What is the role of outcomes in placing wellbeing at the heart of public services?

The adoption of an outcomes-based approach is a significant step that can support more collaborative approaches to policy design and delivery across departments and with key stakeholders.

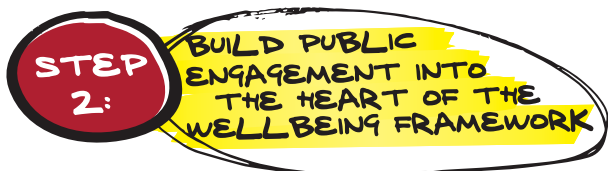
We recommend that the outcomes approach³ be accompanied by an explicit reference to the role of 'wellbeing' as a narrative that supports wider systems change as identified in our seven steps. A coherent vision of societal wellbeing is unlikely to emerge merely through the aggregation of outcomes. The outcomes should be guided by an over-arching narrative and thereby work together to be 'more than the sum of their parts'. The application of an outcomes methodology *per se*, one that has been designed primarily to enhance performance





management, will not necessarily deepen the administration's capacity to address issues such as inequality and barriers to living fulfilling lives.

One way of supporting this approach is to group the high-level outcomes under each of the four inter-related domains shown in the diagram: social, economic, environmental and democratic. This understanding of wellbeing is also informed by the capabilities approach – always bringing the focus back to what the people of Northern Ireland need to live lives they have reason to value.



Step 2 recommends a public conversation using wellbeing as the gathering point to talk about the outcomes citizens themselves seek, individually and collectively. That conversation is – in a sense – already under way in many places and in a variety of forms: in civic spaces, in community planning gatherings, among artists, poets and writers, in civil society and in the business community. The task now is to connect the PfG consultation with those voices and aspirations.

What is the role of a public conversation on wellbeing?

The restoration of trust and confidence in the delivery of public services and the re-animation or engagement of citizens and communities are intrinsic features of societal wellbeing. Civic participation is both a means and an end: it is a means to better policy and programmes; it is an end because opportunities for reasoned deliberation and engagement on issues that affect our lives contribute to individual/collective wellbeing and a restored sense of agency (the ability of citizens to influence decisions made about their lives).

A public conversation on the *Programme for Government* could draw from the rich pool of innovative methodologies now available to ensure that the conversation is meaningful. It could tap into existing bottom-up deliberations, which have so much to say to us about societal wellbeing and an emergent sense of ownership of our public policy ecology. This initial engagement could be used as a first step in a process of using the new Wellbeing Framework as a platform for communication that might embed a greater sense of public ownership of policy co-design and collaborative delivery.



Step 3 is that civil servants need to be supported in finding new ways of working, breaking down old silos and reaching out to new forms of collaboration at every point in the policy cycle. We have noted the leadership and changes taking place at the new NI Civil Service Board.

How can systems change and new ways of working support societal wellbeing?

As an organizing principle and narrative, wellbeing implies a new set of dispositions, skills and practices across the 'whole of government' if we are to meet expectations at local government level and among stakeholders. This is more than a technocratic

question. In the mid- to long-term, Northern Ireland – together with modern welfare states across the world – is facing into a period of deep structural challenges (welfare, economy, ecology, finance) that will re-define the functions of government and demand new levels of confidence, outreach, and consensus building around policy objectives, services and values.

Working alongside organizations such as the OECD, our universities, the What Works network, and training organizations such as the Centre for Effective Services, we look forward to an implementation period marked by close collaboration with the NICS and stakeholders in the identification of capacity building requirements, innovation, and drawing on relevant international experience. There may be a role for a reconfigured Roundtable in mapping the current policy landscape and holding some of these learning opportunities as we embed a new learning culture that is better connected – globally and locally – during the life of the next Assembly mandate.



Step 4 is to align the contributions of local government and the Executive departments so that all are working with a shared purpose while respectful of scale, diversity and place.

What opportunities exist to ensure that both central and local priorities are aligned in a way that both responds to local concerns for diversity while contributing to some shared high level outcomes?

Local Government reform and Community Planning represent a significant democratic moment in the life of Northern Ireland. Wellbeing is already embedded in place-based policy conversations tailored to the unique features of diverse communities, convened by the new local authorities. Community Planning Partnerships can provide an important mechanism for cascading ideas upwards and downwards in a mutual exchange, contributing to the formulation of some shared outcomes.

Community Planning aims to achieve horizontal alignment of public services at the local level but this is unlikely to be effective unless a similar degree of horizontal integration is achieved between Executive departments and agencies. Statutory community planning partners will need to hear consistent messages from the centre. The use of Single Outcome Agreements could be an effective means of formalising the necessary degree of horizontal and vertical integration as they affect local delivery. Place holders for local government input to some high-level outcomes in the PfG could also be considered. Future PfGs could also include an annex for the publication of place-based wellbeing frameworks developed by Community Planning Partnerships across the eleven local authorities.



Step 5 asks us to think more creatively about how we can communicate social progress. The Northern Ireland Research and Statistics Agency is exploring new approaches to measuring and communicating wellbeing outcomes.

How can Government communicate openly on social progress?

One of the lessons of indicators work in Europe is that we can make no easy assumptions about the existence of user groups and the translation of data into policy impacts. Frameworks, outcomes and indicators are not sufficient in themselves to mobilize meaningful and deep democratic engagement. They are simply the tools.

It will be important that the chosen indicators lend themselves to clear communication through a range of innovative techniques such as data visualization, live dashboards, engagement through cultural and media communities, social media and crowd sourcing experiments in data collection and display. Even these approaches will only be impactful insofar as there is a sustained high-level political commitment to civic engagement at every point in the co-design and delivery of policy and services.

STEP 6: USE THE WELLBEING FRAMEWORK TO IMPROVE ACCOUNTABILITY

Step 6 is to use outcomes to improve accountability. We welcome the intensive engagement by the Assembly's Committees dealing with finance, public accounts and the First and Deputy First Minister.

How should the audit process change?

The effectiveness of the audit process in supporting the achievement of outcomes across the public sector has been questioned by many of those involved. As the PFG moves to an explicitly outcomes focus, it will be vital for the 'value for money' strand of the audit process to be aligned with the outcomes to which public bodies commit themselves. To be successful such a change must confidently deal with programmes delivered across departments, reward collaboration, encourage innovation and managed risk, and move from a culture requiring proof of attribution to recognising contribution to outcomes.

Alongside this more enabling scrutiny culture for auditors and reporting via scorecards to Assembly Committees, the key to real accountability is citizen engagement throughout the policy cycle.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Contact the team via
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or follow us on Twitter
 @NIwellbeing

STEP 7: SUPPORTING THE WELLBEING FRAMEWORK

Step 7 is to support the outcomes-based wellbeing framework.

What can Carnegie and the QUB School of Law do to support the implementation phase of the wellbeing framework beyond the launch of the PFG?

We are actively considering the future of the Roundtable in the context of the implementation phase. We are keen to support the re-animation of civic society, including the private sector, in meaningful ownership and engagement in the policy process, including delivery. The CUKT and QUB are also actively engaged in conversations around the need for a What Works-type of think-and-do tank.

We also note with interest the potential for the Compact Civic Advisory Panel (included in the Fresh Start agreement) to engage with the implementation of a wellbeing outcomes framework. We propose that the Terms of Reference for the Panel be drawn up with reference to the recommendations on wellbeing as set out by the Roundtable.

Conclusion

Our work doesn't end here and we will continue to promote wellbeing during these times of change. The challenge for all of us now is to rise to the question posed by our friends at the Corrymeela Community, *How shall we live well together?*

Dr Peter Doran, Jennifer Wallace, John Woods
March 2016

Endnotes

- 1 Towards a Wellbeing Framework: Short Report – Carnegie UK Trust
- 2 The capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum is an exceptional philosophy that has been operationalized to engage “abstract concepts of human wellbeing and development with the values and experiences of the poor”. The ideas behind it underpin the work of a variety of organizations including the United Nations Development Programme. It can provide fundamental principles to guide policy development with wellbeing and social justice at its heart. Insofar as the capabilities approach is participative, deliberative and democratic, wellbeing can be viewed as both a means and an end; it informs our practices around democracy, agency, equality and those factors that promote or inhibit substantive freedoms. *What can the capabilities approach add to policy analysis in high-income countries?*, What Works Scotland: Working Paper.
- 3 For more on our qualified approach to outcomes see pages 52-57 of our [Background Report](#) prepared for the Roundtable on Measuring Wellbeing in Northern Ireland (2015).