

Wellbeing: why it matters

» Wellbeing is the subject of increasing attention from policy makers and Parliamentarians, says Lisa Ollerhead of the Analysis and Insights Team in Cabinet Office.

The 2012 Olympics and Paralympics were a great success for our athletes. But what difference did they make to the rest of us in the UK?

Advances in the measurement of national wellbeing, led by the Office for National Statistics, are starting to shed light on questions like this in new ways. For example, the chart at Figure 1 shows levels of happiness – measured by answers to the question ‘How happy were you yesterday?’ – over the period 2011 to 2013. We can see interesting patterns in the data with positive effects around the Royal Wedding, Diamond Jubilee, Olympics and Paralympics. It seems they make us happier.

Like a lot of the national wellbeing measurement, this is at an early stage: only two years of experimental data. In

Wellbeing

A growing body of research suggests that evidence about wellbeing, or the quality of our lives, can be factored into a wide range of decisions and support better policy-making. Advances in the measurement of wellbeing are enabling this to become a reality.

In March 2014, an independent commission chaired by Lord O’Donnell published a report on exactly this, *Wellbeing and Policy*. Lord O’Donnell said: “GDP alone is not enough. To measure a country’s progress, we also need to look at how satisfied we are with our lives and how worthwhile our lives are.”

future, longer time series will support more robust analysis. But already these results are suggestive of the sorts of questions we could ask. For example, we can start to see the evidence that bank holidays are probably good for the country’s wellbeing – but with a few more years of data perhaps we might start to see patterns of which bank holidays are the best, and even consider whether it might

be better to move a bank holiday into early winter, when the nights are drawing in and we’re feeling low.

The Wellbeing Policy Programme team in the Cabinet Office works with colleagues across government, particularly the Social Impacts Task Force (made up of analysts from across Whitehall and the devolved administrations), to improve civil servants’



awareness of and ability to use evidence like this.

This isn't about Government deciding that it's going to make people 'happy'. It's about supporting the important life decisions and choices of individuals.

An increasingly international agenda

Ten years ago only a few countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) were measuring wellbeing. Now, most are.

As one of the leading countries in a quickly developing field, the UK is both supporting and learning from the excellent work of international organisations such as the OECD and individual nations as the focus moves beyond measurement to policy

and practice.

We're in this position because in 2010 the Prime Minister promised to "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."

Following this speech, the Office for National Statistics worked first to understand what people mean by 'wellbeing', and then to measure it. The framework they came up with includes both objective measures, like employment, life expectancy and levels of crime, and subjective measures, like how citizens actually experience and feel about progress. This includes measures such as job satisfaction, satisfaction with health and fear of crime, but also subjective wellbeing – how we feel about life in general.

The academic literature on

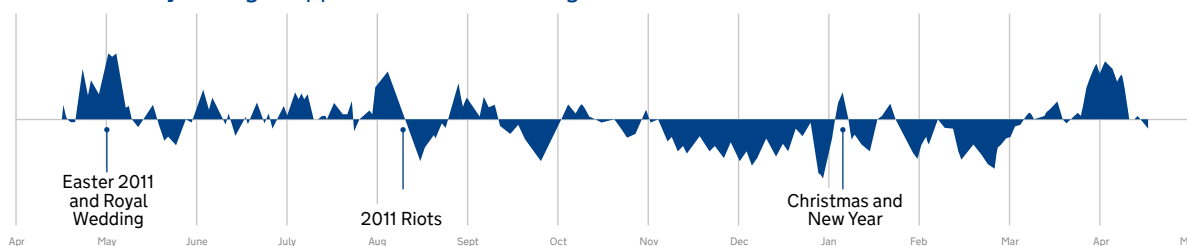
subjective wellbeing has grown rapidly over the last ten years and there is a strong evidence base on what makes people satisfied or dissatisfied with life. This literature challenges a lot of our assumptions about what improves wellbeing and why. It shines a spotlight on social relationships, neighbourliness, personal choice and control, empathy and kindness, and altruism. Thinking about what drives our wellbeing opens up exciting new avenues for policy and implementation. Analysing the data can be insightful and engaging – here are a few other examples.

Careers

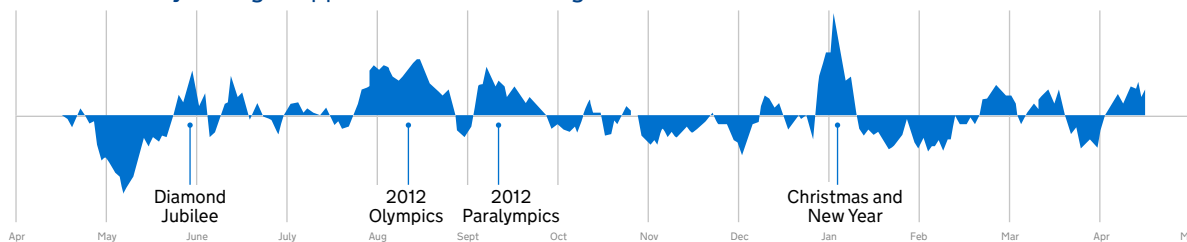
When you chose your career, did you think about how happy it would make you? Or did you focus more on what you might earn?

Figure 1: 'How happy were you yesterday?'¹

2011-12: 7 day average happiness after controlling for other factors



2012-13: 7 day average happiness after controlling for other factors



¹ These charts show a 7-day moving average of happiness, having controlled for the background circumstances of individual respondents and normal 'day of the week' effects (weather which is likely to be an important factor, is not controlled for). The charts are mean-centred so show deviations from the average day of the year. The source is the Annual Population Survey with a sample of n=321,545. This analysis is appropriate for exploring multi-day periods: further methodological work is needed to explore single day effects in the future.



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Figure 2: Life satisfaction by occupation²

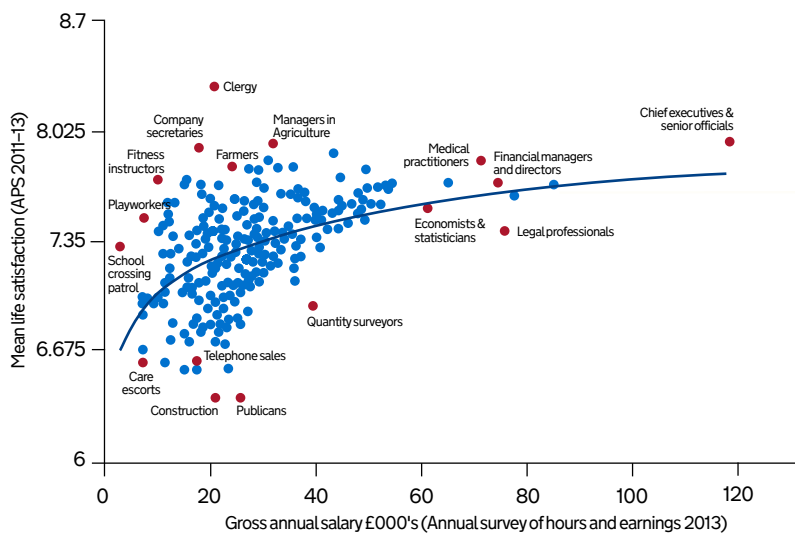



Figure 2 shows the results of research looking at levels of life satisfaction for people in different jobs, plotted against typical earnings. While highly-paid Chief Executives and senior officials do well, take-home pay doesn't seem to be the only important factor. Occupations like publicans and members of the clergy, which have similar income levels, seem to have very different levels of wellbeing.

At an individual level, research tells us much about this. It has been estimated that between a fifth and a quarter of the variation in overall life satisfaction amongst employed people is explained by being in work. And it is fairly widely known that people are happier at work when they feel engaged with what they do, when they like and trust their managers, when they have secure and interesting work, and when they have some autonomy in how they do it.

Measuring the impact of policies

Wellbeing data can help to capture the impact of policies and tell us about what is working or not. Figure 3 is from an evaluation of National Citizen Service (NCS), a programme for people aged 16 or 17. It shows that completing the three-week programme of activities, personal development and social action improved participants' wellbeing compared to a control group. Analysis indicates that participants' levels of anxiety were still lower than those of the control group a year later.

Why might NCS have such a great impact on wellbeing? We have some ideas. In 2008 the Government's Foresight programme, working with the New Economics Foundation, identified five 'ways to wellbeing' – things people can do that seem to make them happier. 

² Care is needed in interpreting this chart – differences between occupations which are close together will not necessarily be statistically significant. With more years of data we will be able to explore this further. This chart was first published in the O'Donnell report, Wellbeing and Policy.

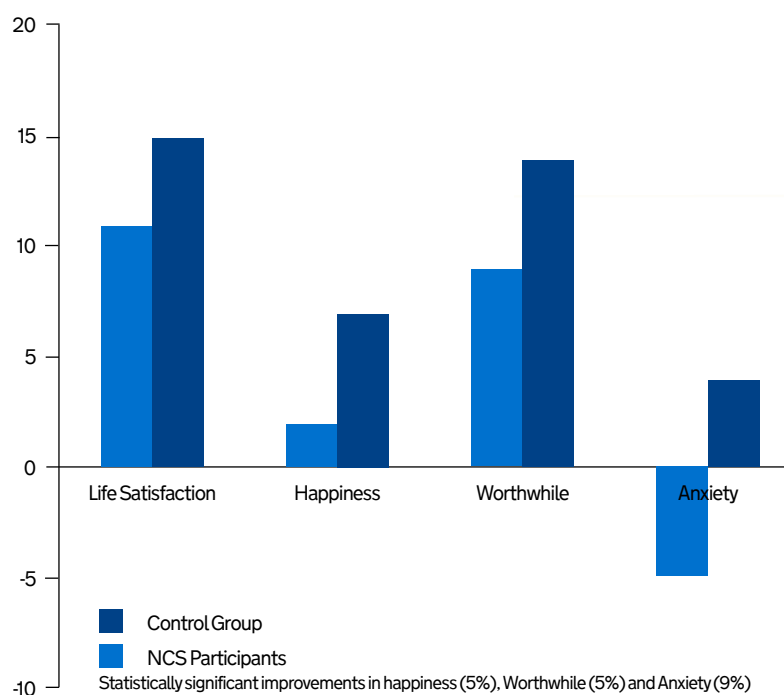




The research found our wellbeing is improved if we connect, are active, take notice, keep learning, and give (you can find out more at www.fivewaystowellbeing.org). NCS includes aspects of all five, and shows how we can actively design them into other services. For example, building opportunities into public services for peer-to-peer advice and support helps people connect and give. This can build wellbeing without sacrificing other key objectives. Using ideas like this, it's not only analysts who can take advantage of the wellbeing evidence: anyone can ask questions about how their policy choices can maximise wellbeing.

The NCS evaluation also shows that subjective wellbeing questions can capture, in a consistent way, the social impact of interventions. They can be a valuable and efficient tool for policy makers, service designers and charities to

Figure 3: Levels of wellbeing before and after participating in the National Citizen Service



convey the value of their work to commissioners and sponsors who need to make decisions on how to spend public money. Knowing the wellbeing impact of interventions could help to choose between projects that have very different ways of improving lives.

So what are you doing about it?

There's much more to do to improve our understanding of wellbeing evidence across Government and to raise awareness of the new opportunities that arise from using it to design policies and services.

It's not about opposing growth, or replacing our traditional economic markers of success like Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Wellbeing is something new: an additional tool that civil servants can

use in their work. In future the Government will know clearly the wellbeing impact of our decisions. And civil servants will be deliberately designing policies, operations and services in ways we know can increase it.

Wellbeing isn't fluffy and soft, or a 'nice-to-have' when times are better. It is measureable and well defined. The data reflects the real experiences of citizens, communities, employees, the unemployed, patients and parents. It reflects what really matters to us and reveals how we are progressing. This makes it an invaluable resource for us all. How can you use it?

If you want to know more about wellbeing data and how you can make use of it to improve policy and services, you can contact me at: lisa.ollerhead@cabernet-office.gsi.gov.uk.

Making equal marriage possible

» The Government proposes laws. Civil servants help turn those ideas into reality. Wally Ford from the Department for Culture, Media & Sport talks about one particularly high-profile example.

