

Case Study

Talking wellbeing

A public dialogue approach to effective policy-making

Vital statistics

Commissioning body:

Cabinet Office, with programme management by the New Economics Foundation (NEF)

Duration of process:

11 months: January 2014 – November 2014

Total public participants involved:

137

Total stakeholders involved:

30 frontline workers

Total specialists involved in events:

14 policy or topic specialists

Cost of project:

£291,098 total
Sciencewise funding = £223,280

The Government has made great strides in measuring national wellbeing. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has developed a 'wellbeing wheel' of 41 measures which, together, form a picture of social, environmental and economic progress in the UK. This measurement framework incorporates objective and subjective measures – accounting for citizens' own views on progress alongside traditional indicators.

A key challenge for Government remained – how to bridge the gap between the measurement of wellbeing and the use of these data to make better policies, and to address that within the spirit of Open Policy Making in Government.

This public dialogue project aimed to address this challenge by exploring with members of the public how wellbeing evidence could be used in considering three policy areas in three different Government departments – increasing the income of low earners, reducing loneliness and increasing community control through community rights. Essentially, the project tackled the question 'So the Government is measuring wellbeing: what can and should it do to improve it?'

Policy maker view

“Hearing members of the public deliberate was such a highlight at the events, it really got me thinking about how people relate to the issues. Policy leads often don't get the chance to speak enough to the end users of our policies.”

Policy maker focusing on dialogue for low-income earners

Influence on policy and policy makers

The project team worked with policy makers from the Cabinet Office, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) on the three policy issues, as well as with the Cabinet

Office on the use of the wellbeing approach more generally in building more Open Policy Making.

Policy makers involved in the process were very positive about the value of the dialogue. They reported the results to their ministers and to the cross-government Social Impacts Task Force, and disseminated the results to over 50 key figures in the wellbeing field and in the three policy areas.

Cabinet Office policy makers also confirmed that the dialogues were successful in meeting a key objective around developing, testing and learning about using a wellbeing lens in public dialogue. They learned that this approach was possible, it could be operationalised and that wellbeing could enhance a

dialogue by helping public participants to frame their views about a policy around what really drives their own and other people's wellbeing. A wellbeing lens helped participants engage deeply on the policy topics of discussion. Policy leads identified impacts including:

- What was learned was a sufficient basis on which to develop a toolkit for others to use on how to run a 'wellbeing dialogue' and to share this learning more broadly
- The experience has supported the design, development and implementation of follow-on dialogues on wellbeing (launched in 2015) which will help to shape the work of the What Works Centre for Wellbeing – which will, in turn, influence a range of policy decisions.



Background

Since 2010, the ONS has introduced one of the world's most comprehensive systems for measuring national wellbeing. The evidence from the system allows the relative influence of different circumstances on wellbeing, and thus policy priorities, to be assessed. In 2011, Prime Minister David Cameron expressed his intention to use these data to inform policy:

“Right across Whitehall we are today applying to the design of policy the best that science teaches us about how people behave – and what drives their wellbeing.”¹

The ONS has developed a ‘wellbeing wheel’ of 41 measures over 10 domains² which, together, form a picture of social, environmental and economic progress in the UK. This measurement framework incorporates objective and subjective measures – effectively accounting for citizens’ views on progress alongside traditional indicators. Building wellbeing into policy is expected to provide the following benefits:

- **Innovation** because it encourages consideration of factors that are not always systemically considered in policy (social networks, altruism, personal control, etc)
- **Joining-up** because it draws attention and makes connections to other important areas of policy
- **Early intervention** by focusing on building assets rather than addressing deficits.

While wellbeing measurement has developed over recent years, the question remained about how to bridge the gap between the science, measurement framework and academic literature on the one hand with practical policy decision-making on the other. That was the question that this dialogue project sought to tackle.

In terms of wider Government policy-making, the project aimed to bring together the wellbeing and Open Policy Making agendas to strengthen both. In summary, the project was designed to:

- Actively inform and support the three policy areas selected for the project (increasing the income of low earners, reducing loneliness and increasing community control through community rights) by providing:
 - Fresh insights into the problems that needed addressing in each
 - Additional options and choices for addressing these problems rooted in improving the wellbeing of those affected by the policy
 - Communications messaging that resonates with the public and frontline workers, and supports the delivery of the policy options
- Prototype a repeatable Open Policy Making/public dialogue process that builds on the sciences of innovation management and wellbeing, and provides guidance on how to run future processes within Government
- Illustrate the relevance of wellbeing to these and other policy issues, helping to answer the ‘**why?**’ and ‘**how?**’ of putting the wellbeing of people and communities at the heart of decision-making.

¹ Cameron, D. (2011) Speech on the Big Society. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-on-the-big-society>

² <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/interactive/well-being-wheel-of-measures/index.html>

Participation in the process had a direct impact on the policy makers involved. Feedback from them was positive about the benefits of sitting in dialogue workshops and listening to views directly from members of the public. This part of the process appears to be particularly valuable and impactful on those involved, as does creating time and space after the event to reflect on the results of the dialogue. It seems that creating a safe space to think about the implications of the results supports innovation and enables the generation of ideas in response to the policy problem in question. At the right stage of policy, such ideas could and should have a clear impact on decision-making.

Reducing loneliness

Policy makers from the Cabinet Office and other departments were interested in how to reduce loneliness. The specific policy question for this dialogue project was ‘What interventions, and by whom, could best alleviate high levels of loneliness, particularly those which can occur on a neighbourhood level?’

The main benefit for policy makers was the opportunity to hear members of the public deliberate on loneliness and consider what might alleviate it. This was particularly the case as the participants at the workshops had been selected because they had directly and personally experienced loneliness within the last five years (as defined by themselves as part of the recruitment process).

Increasing community control through community rights

DCLG policy makers were interested in the wellbeing outcomes associated with community involvement in local decision-making, and how this learning could inform approaches to encourage more people to exercise their community rights (introduced in the [2011 Localism Act](#)) and take control of decision-making in their communities in other ways. For the DCLG policy makers, the specific policy questions for the dialogue were:

- How can the rights, or the support packages associated with them, increase wellbeing?
- Are there ways to refine the rights that would further enhance wellbeing and, therefore, encourage more people to exercise them?
- How can giving people more opportunities to take control of their communities in other ways help to increase wellbeing?

A key message from the dialogue project was that some participants could see the connections between exercising their community rights and enhanced wellbeing, recognising that the process and outcomes associated with coming together with neighbours ultimately results in a better quality of life. Others felt that the time commitment and uncertainty of using the community rights might be bad for their wellbeing, and were therefore unlikely to exercise them. However, even among these, many were interested in helping shape their communities, particularly if opportunities were available for lower risk and shorter term involvement.

The dialogue specifically highlighted some of the challenges communities face, such as lack of access to resources or perceived lack of influence that make exercising the community rights more difficult and less pressing. For the most part, these barriers were already known and the dialogue acted to reinforce them.

However, it should be noted that there are thousands of communities that have already taken up the community rights:

- Community rights are being used in 86% of local authorities
- Over 6 million people are now living in neighbourhoods where community rights are being used
- Over 2,000 assets of community value have been listed under the Community Right to Bid
- Over 1,500 neighbourhood plans are underway.

In order to encourage even more communities to use their rights, the Community Rights support programme for 2015-16 specifically seeks to provide easy access to information to communities interested in using the rights and to provide opportunities for peer to peer learning, through the advice line and network – www.mycommunity.org.uk. In particular the ‘First Steps’ programme is aimed at communities that are just starting along the path of community action and focuses attention on areas which may find it harder to access the rights without additional help and support. First Steps areas will be identifying priority issues for their area and undertaking some action planning to work out how the rights and other tools might help to address them. The new Community Economic Development programme is also aimed at people in communities in more deprived areas who want to take a lead in shaping their economies for the benefit of local communities.

The dialogues also helped to inform a refresh of communications and mobilisation approaches to ensure messages were clear and accessible.

Dialogue project activities

The dialogue project consisted of:

- A series of workshops with 137 specially recruited members of the public
- Workshops with 30 frontline workers to consider the feasibility of the suggestions from the public. The outcome was a set of written results that were shared with ministers and others.

Policy makers attended several of the workshops.

For each of the three policy areas, two rounds of evening workshops – each with about 25 participants – were held in two different locations; a total of around 50 participants per policy theme, with each group meeting twice. The two rounds were held between two and three weeks apart. Each workshop ran from 6.30pm to 9.30pm.

The locations for each policy area were:

- Birmingham and Pontypool – increasing incomes
- Bedford and Leicester – loneliness workshops
- London and Birkenhead – community rights.

After the first round of public workshops, the results were collated. Input was sought from the relevant policy makers and from external topic specialists to consider which areas would be most interesting to follow-up in the second round.

After the first round, there were also three workshops, one per policy area, with frontline workers – relevant stakeholders such as Jobcentre Plus staff, local businesses and community organisers. These participants were also presented with the ideas and suggestions public participants came up with in the first round, and asked to consider their feasibility and the possible impacts on their work.

In the second round, the same participants for each location reconvened. They were presented with the research on the outcomes of the first round, after which they interrogated and challenged the ideas further.

The final results of the dialogue were fully analysed and reported by the dialogue contractors (Hopkins van Mil (HVM)). The New Economics Foundation (NEF) then produced an overarching report which summarised the dialogue findings and included conclusions and recommendations on when and how the public should be engaged in the use of wellbeing in policy-making. NEF's report concluded that:

“Introducing a wellbeing lens helped participants engage with policy issues in a meaningful way. We recommend its use in public dialogue at an early stage of the policy cycle, when challenging objectives and assumptions is most useful. We also recommend its use with other engagement techniques at later stages of the cycle.”

The dialogue results were shared with the three participating Government departments prior to the report being published; presented to the wider cross-Government Social Impacts Task Force; and publicised extensively by NEF, Sciencewise and HVM.

What worked especially well

The process of research and development that fed public ideas from the first round into the second round was very effective and capitalised on the value of the public's input. Adequate time is necessary to do this robustly. The ideas generated in the first round were researched by NEF in the 2 to 3 week period before the second round took place. The ideas and the associated research were fed in to the second round in a very productive way.

The attendance of policy leads at the workshop sessions was critical to the impact of the public dialogue and should be maximised in future dialogues. It was clear from the policy leads who attended the workshops in person that they had been positively affected by hearing stories and views directly from citizens and end users of their policies. There was no evidence in this project of public participants having objections to being observed (a concern sometimes raised by delivery contractors), as long as the observers were introduced clearly and behaved sensitively during the workshops.

The use of a project management organisation that has expertise in the technical content was very useful, although required clarity of expectations from the start regarding the degree of interpretation of results. There were clear benefits from using

staff from NEF in this role as they understood to a great depth the context of the wellbeing field, and were aware of much of the existing evidence and debates. This approach did have risks in terms of the level of interpretation of the dialogue results that was required and how much the views of the specialists (NEF in this case) should be brought to bear in writing the dialogue report. Two reports were published – the main dialogue report by NEF including policy suggestions based on the findings and (as an appendix to that report) a summary of the dialogue results by the dialogue contractors (HVM). Earlier clarity on this reporting would have helped better manage this risk.

What worked less well

There was no specific deadline or decision before which the project had to be completed, yet there was a clear sense of 'having to meet the deadline' agreed with funders. This compressed the delivery of the three public dialogues. This meant there was little time to carry learning from one dialogue into the next as they had to be largely designed concurrently. The compression introduced significant delivery risks that peaked during the period of workshops and reporting, and these could have been minimised by extending the timescale – even 4 to 8 weeks would have made a big difference.

There was, at times, a feeling that discussions at the workshops with the public were slightly rushed or not probing deep enough, or that too much was being expected of participants during an evening workshop session. The amount of 'air time' with participants in workshops should be longer or the amount of content reduced. Over-compression was cited as a specific factor in reducing credibility by two out of three policy leads.

The development of a follow-on toolkit suffered from a lack of resource so started much later than planned. However, in practice, this has meant that the toolkit development is benefitting from follow-on dialogues.

Contact details

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Reports

Full project and evaluation reports available from Sciencewise on www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/embedding-wellbeing-science-in-decision-making