



The power and potential of well-being indicators

Measuring young people's well-being in Nottingham

Well-being should be one of the most important aims of policy-making. **nef** (the new economics foundation) and Nottingham City Council (NCC) piloted an innovative approach to measuring the well-being of young people.

The pilot shows that:

- *There are two aspects to well-being – life satisfaction and personal development. Personal development means being curious, and engaging in challenging and absorbing activities. Whilst most studies have only focused on life satisfaction, other research has shown that the second dimension of well-being, personal development, is important for people's overall ability to cope well with life's challenges and is directly related to physical health, particularly in later life.*
- *Well-being falls substantially as children get older. While nine per cent of children aged 9-11 have low satisfaction and low personal development, this rises to 16 per cent at age 12-15. Girls suffer a significantly greater drop in curiosity than boys.*
- *A large group – 32 per cent of young people in Nottingham – are at the very least unhappy in life and may be at risk of mental health problems.*
- *Sixty five per cent of primary school children rate their school experience as positive whereas this drops by more than half to 27 per cent at secondary school. Satisfaction with school is a crucial component of children's personal development.*
- *The academically top-performing primary school has significantly lower well-being than other primary schools surveyed. Whilst only a small sample of schools were surveyed, this outcome raises the question of whether there are trade-offs between academic success and promoting curiosity and personal development.*
- *Children who are unhappy at home are three times more likely to have lower well-being than average.*
- *Young people registering sport as their favourite activity had significantly higher well-being than those that didn't.*
- *The link between well-being and 'pro-social behaviour' is weak – in other words young people with high well-being do not necessarily behave more kindly towards other people.*
- *Victims of crime have significantly lower well-being. Fear of crime, however, does not appear to affect well-being.*
- *Well-being indicators can be used to provide new information in a variety of contexts such as the effects of poverty or crime, or to identify differences in well-being between ethnic groups, types of family structure or geographical areas.*
- *Well-being enquiries can provide valuable policy insights. The results suggest that we should consider educating children with a view to increasing their levels of well-being through skills for life such as self confidence, emotional literacy and values. We should also review our educational models to look at how they can better promote personal development and curiosity. The research also supports the case for investing in school and community sporting facilities and opportunities, and makes a case for increased support for young victims of crime.*

Overall, the pilot study shows that measuring well-being is a powerful way in which local government can use its 'well-being powers' to join up different local services and gain important insights into the ultimate impacts of policy. **nef** recommends that government puts together a larger pilot which uses well-being measurement over five regions for several years and further explores the implications of well-being for a range of policy agendas including education and preventative health measures.

Well-being: the challenge to politics

The idea that government should be concerned with people's well-being or happiness is no longer frivolous. There has been a surge of interest in this area, sparked not least by the devastating research finding that whilst economic output has nearly doubled in the last 30 years, life satisfaction levels in the UK have remained flat. (see Figure 1)

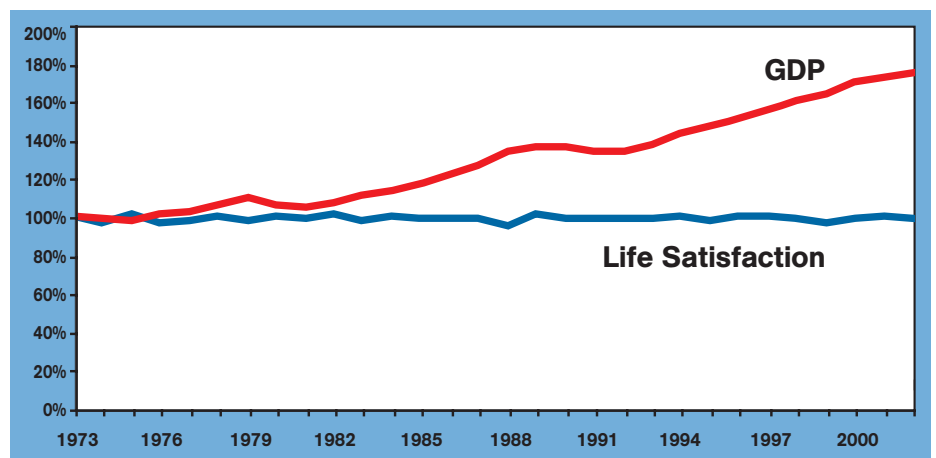


Figure 1: Life Satisfaction and GDP in the UK 1973-2002

Whilst the Government is slowly adjusting to this new reality, there are signs of change. For example, the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit has reviewed the policy implications of psychological research on life satisfaction. At the local level, councils have gained new powers to promote economic, social and environmental well-being. These new directions for policy thinking raise questions about how to define, promote and measure well-being. In order to shed more light on these challenges, **nef** and Nottingham City Council (NCC) undertook a pilot project to measure the well-being of young people in Nottingham.

Over 1,000 children and young people in Nottingham, aged 7-19 were surveyed. We used the results of the questionnaires to create scales of life satisfaction and curiosity (used as an indicator of children's capacity for personal development). The

youth curiosity scale assesses both young people's tendency to become absorbed in activities and their capacity for exploration.

One of the key findings of the research is that there is more to life than satisfaction. Many researchers measure well-being only in terms of people's satisfaction with their lives (commonly called life satisfaction). Our research, however, confirms the view that there is at least a second dimension to well-being, which we call 'personal development' and which has important implications for the future of research and policy-making. Other research suggests that this second dimension of well-being is related particularly to long-term health outcomes and to the ability to cope flexibly and creatively with life's challenges.

A two dimensional model of well-being

Life satisfaction captures satisfaction, pleasure, enjoyment, and contentment.

Personal development captures curiosity, enthusiasm, absorption, flow, exploration, commitment, creative challenge, and potentially also meaningfulness.

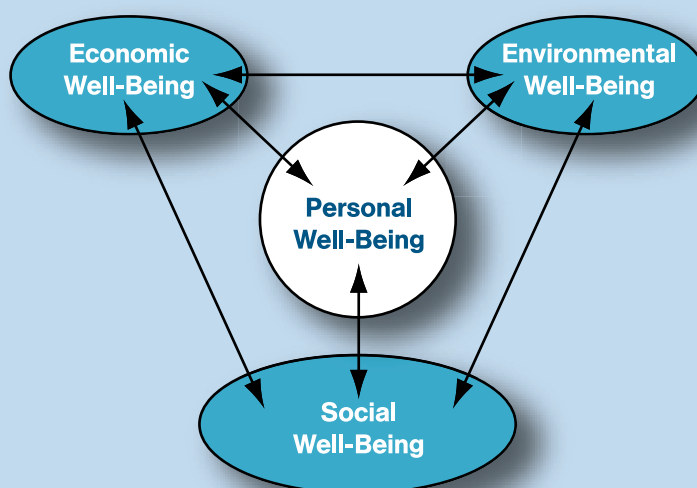
The results from even this relatively small pilot study on young people's well-being sheds light on some key policy areas, from schooling and crime to looking at the kinds of activities that directly promote well-being. The research also shows that the very act of using such shared indicators across local government can begin to transform the way in which it works – both practically and in the kinds of questions asked.

The local government ‘power of well-being’

In the Local Government Act 2000, all local authorities in England and Wales were provided with a new ‘power of well-being’. This power entitles local authorities to do anything that might achieve the promotion or improvement of the economic, social or environmental well-being of their area.

The power of well-being is relatively new, and local authorities are still exploring its use. Whilst the power has been used by some local authorities, there is little agreement over what it means and confusion over how it should be used. There is, however, a growing recognition that it can create opportunities for a greater degree of local flexibility in the design and delivery of services. Effectively the Act is a piece of legislation that seeks to create and encourage the much written about concept of ‘joined-up’ government, at the local level.

nef’s framework for understanding well-being proposes that local authorities need to consider how economic, social and environmental well-being links with, and is influenced by, people’s personal well-being. Indeed we propose that these areas are important precisely because of their effect on people’s personal well-being. By placing people’s well-being at the core of policy formation, councils can be more innovative and potentially more efficient and effective too.



Nick Lee at NCC noted that:

“The ‘power of well-being’ is more than just a legalistic mechanism, it has the potential to stimulate the debate around ‘what is the value of public services’ – not by incrementally improving service provision as the ‘Best Value’ process does, but by focusing on the concept of the good life, active citizenship, community and civic renewal and engagement processes. However, drawing together policy makers from different services has been difficult in the past as people have been concerned about their own performance ratings and targets. By creating indicators that give us evidence regarding outcomes for all young people, this pilot has naturally supported the change of culture that all councils are seeking; demonstrating how cross-cutting policy development can facilitate positive outcomes.”

Findings from the well-being pilot in Nottingham

Note: All percentage figures should be treated with some caution. They are quoted here to the nearest percentage. Due to the sample sizes, however, they should be considered as indicative only.

The overall well-being of young people

Just over half (52 per cent) the young people score well on both categories of life satisfaction and personal development (see Table 1). However, 12 per cent score poorly on both. In particular, nine per cent of young people in Nottingham have ‘very low’ life satisfaction and can

be considered at very high risk of depression. The 23 per cent scoring ‘low’ in life satisfaction are also at risk. Together they form a large group – 32 per cent – of young people in Nottingham who are, at the very least, unhappy in life and may be at risk of mental health problems. Well-being falls substantially as children get older (see Figure 2).

Percentage of Young People			Personal Development			
			Very Low	Low	Medium	High
			2%	26%	57%	15%
Life Satisfaction	Very Low	9%	12%		20%	
	Low	23%				
	Medium	45%	16%		52%	
	High	23%				

Table 1: Children’s overall well-being by category and levels

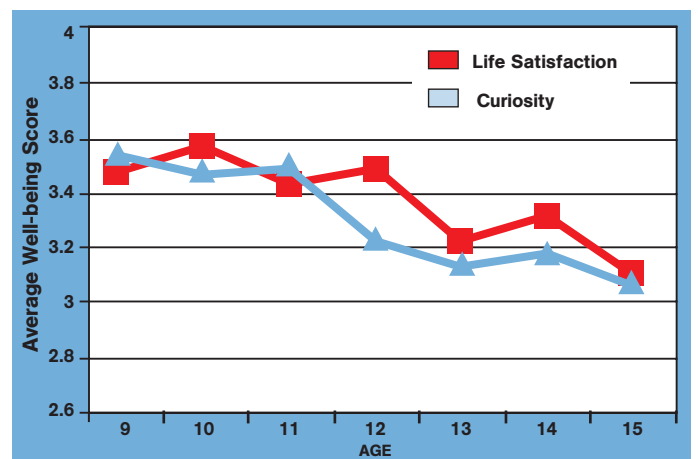


Figure 2: Average overall well-being by age

Question	Primary School % ‘Strongly Agreeing’	Secondary School % ‘Strongly Agreeing’
I learn a lot at school	71%	18%
School is interesting	65%	12%
I enjoy school activities	65%	18%

Table 2: Responses to key questions by type of school

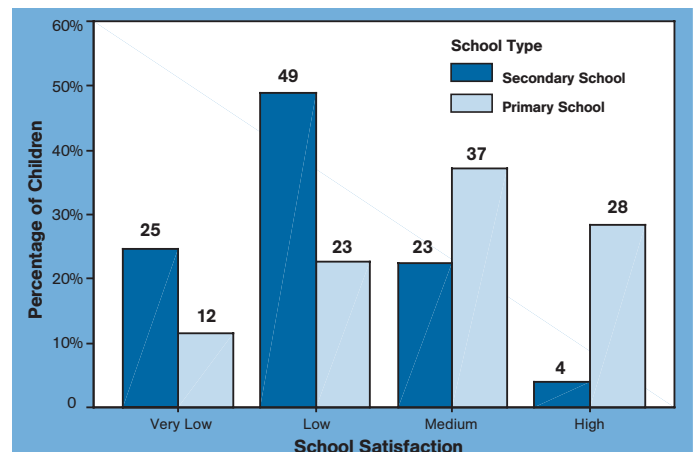


Figure 3: School satisfaction by type of school.

The question is how much this change is linked to their experiences and the conditions of their lives, such as quality of schooling, and how much to an inevitable change with age. Our research shows that the quality of children’s experience at school appears to be a crucial factor in enhancing their capacity for personal development. However, for enhancing their satisfaction with life, other factors such as their family and friends are more important.

Well-being drops in secondary schools

Sixty five per cent of pupils at primary schools rate their experience at school positively, indicated by medium or high school satisfaction, whereas by the time children move to secondary school, this drops to only 27 per cent (see Figure 3).

The difference between children’s experience of primary school and secondary school is clearly very marked. This is generally understood by practitioners and policy-makers

as an issue of ‘transition’ between schools. Our data suggests that transition is not the complete story. Well-being in secondary school never recovers. The scale and abruptness of the change is extremely striking. Some of the responses to individual questions highlight the problems that children seem to find. Table 2 shows the three questions with the largest changes.

Overall, secondary school children seem to become bored, stop learning and no longer enjoy the activities available at school. All of these problems are certain to undermine children’s curiosity and personal development, since getting involved in activities that they find interesting and challenging, and learning from such experiences, are all key factors in developing children’s potential. Girls lose more curiosity than boys at secondary school. We need to find out what is causing this, particularly as it is well-known that girls do better academically than boys. Are there schools which do not suffer from

this phenomenon, and what do they do differently?

Well-being in schools and academic performance

Of the four primary schools that participated, the school with the highest national academic test results scored lower on well-being than the other three. This unexpected result requires further investigation. It raises the question of whether there are trade-offs between narrow measures of academic success and promoting well-being, particularly curiosity. Or are there more specific reasons why children at this school have lower well-being?

These results point to a fundamental debate about what education and schools are for. We argue that they should provide young people with the skills for living a flourishing life rather than purely focusing upon narrow academic skills.

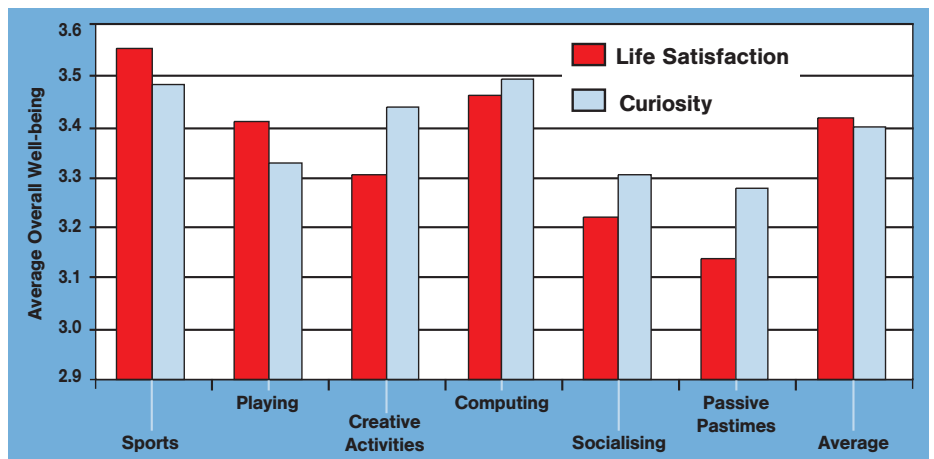


Figure 4: Average overall well-being by type of favourite activity

Happier kids aren't necessarily nicer kids

We had thought that having greater well-being might lead someone to engage in more 'pro-social' behaviour – in other words displaying behaviour that enhances other people's well-being. Our research shows that, whilst pro-social behaviour is more strongly related to personal development than to life satisfaction, it appears to be a fairly independent trait. It seems that the promotion of pro-social behaviour may not be the same thing as the promotion of well-being. It is not clear if this is only true for younger people or whether it is also the case for adults. Further work is needed to explore the relationship between personal well-being, pro-social behaviour and social well-being or social capital.

Poverty and low life satisfaction are related

We found that although life satisfaction and curiosity appear to be lower for children from households with no employed adults, only the differences in life satisfaction are statistically significant. Whilst this link between life satisfaction and poverty might seem obvious, it has not always been found.

Families are crucial to well-being

The data shows that children from non-step two-parent families have significantly higher well-being. There are difficulties in drawing simple conclusions from this result, however, since children from previously 'unhappy' parental unions (those that no longer live together) are excluded from this group. Understanding the links between family and well-being would require more data over time

or targeted studies. Looking at the impacts of family structure from a child-centred approach, however, does provide a completely different angle on this very important issue. It is particularly important to adopt this approach because we found that children who are unhappy at home are three times more at risk of being amongst the 12 per cent of young people who have both low life satisfaction and low curiosity.

Crime

Being a victim of crime makes young people worry more about crime and is also associated with lower overall well-being. In contrast being very worried about crime does not have the same effect. This result suggests that it is important to focus on supporting young victims of crime. Despite boys being more likely to be victims of crime, girls are more worried.

Favourite activities

Boys and girls tend to have different favourite activities and the patterns change as children get older. The striking finding is that those children that listed sports as their favourite activity were significantly more likely to have higher levels of well-being than any other group (see Figure 4).

Creative activities are associated more with enhanced curiosity than higher life satisfaction, which would be expected. It is also interesting to see the positive well-being profile of the much-maligned 'computers'. Computer games and surfing the web appeal to children precisely because they get very absorbed in what they're doing, with the associated well-being effects.

Different kinds of young people

We find some clearly different groups of young people that show different levels of life satisfaction, personal development and pro-social behaviour (see Table 3). We have broadly typified these groups in clusters:

- Cluster A – those who score low on all categories (a rather high 13 per cent of young people in Nottingham).
- Cluster B – those who score well in all categories (16 per cent).
- Cluster C – those who are not at all happy but are still somewhat curious and are good citizens (18 per cent).
- Cluster D – the largest group – those who are happy and pro-social but are perhaps a little weary of setting themselves challenges (30 per cent).
- Cluster E – those who are relatively happy and very curious but are not interested in pro-social behaviour (22 per cent).

Boys are more likely to be found in B or E clusters whereas girls are more likely to be in D or C. There is clearly some support for differences in gender stereotypes here.

Policy implications

Libertarians would argue that the state should leave people alone to pursue their own conception of the good: who knows what makes us happy and well better than ourselves? Equally, there is a danger in putting well-being or a more narrow focus on happiness as the goal of all policy. However, not understanding the impacts of well-being nor recognising that a full concept of well-being and its implications for health, relationships,

	Cluster A	Cluster B	Cluster C	Cluster D	Cluster E
Life Satisfaction	Low	Medium-high	Very Low	Medium-high	Medium
Curiosity	Low	Medium-high	Medium	Low	Medium-high
Pro-Social Behaviour	Low	High	Medium-high	Medium-high	Low

Table 3: Five groups of young people and their well-being scores

and ability to cope with life and success would mean that we, as a society, are not paying attention to what really matters to people. The lack of a link between economic growth and life satisfaction clearly illustrates this.

The state's primary aim should be to promote those conditions that allow us to pursue well-being. Asking "what would this existing policy area look like if one of its primary aims were to promote well-being?" is a useful exercise.

Even this small pilot study directly suggests several clear areas of potential public policy change:

Education for well-being

The worryingly high number of children at risk of depression as a result of low well-being suggests that a part of the education curriculum should focus on 'living the good life'. We need to think about what components the curriculum requires to provide young people with the ability to live flourishing lives and to enjoy high levels of well-being. Such a curriculum may include 'skills for

life' – positive attitude, dealing with stress, self-confidence, emotional literacy and self-esteem. It might also include a space for reflection to facilitate the emergence of better self-understanding and pro-social values. It would link not only to mental health issues and to motivation at school but also potentially help create more motivated, curious and entrepreneurial citizens with the obvious benefits to economic and social activity. More work needs to be done looking at the potential benefits of this approach and at the kinds of activities and programmes that could have positive impacts.

Reconsidering educational models

Given the huge drop-off in well-being upon transition from primary to secondary school, as well as the high negative responses in satisfaction to the learning experience, the way in which children are taught may need rethinking to focus more on curiosity and personal development. This is taking place already in a number of schools through initiatives such as the Networked Learning Communities Programme which focuses on pupil consultation. Reconsidering

educational models is not just likely to help increase children's satisfaction with school and to increase motivation, but is also important because it is likely that a curious and engaged approach to life is core to future employment skills and health.

Increasing opportunities for sport at school and in the community

The links between sport and well-being are clear from this and other research. The trend towards reduced time spent on sport in the curriculum as well as reduced sports facilities in schools needs to be reversed. Girls are much less likely to take part in sports and therefore there needs to be a specific focus on creating appropriate sporting opportunities for them.

Support for victims of crime

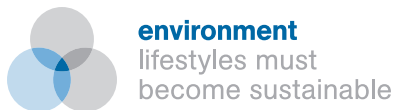
Given the possible link between being a victim of crime and low well-being, it is important to ensure that children who are victims of crime receive appropriate support.

Acknowledgements

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economics
real wealth
means well-being



environment
lifestyles must
become sustainable



society
communities need
power and influence

Where now for well-being indicators?

The pilot has demonstrated how personal well-being indicators can be used in a variety of contexts. There are some limits to the approach, including the way that people adapt to their circumstances and the difficulty of establishing causal direction, but these are not insurmountable issues. Since the study was both small and exploratory, it has shown limited but clearly thought-provoking outcomes which require further exploration.

To better understand how well-being changes and can be changed, we recommend that further work be done testing multi-dimensional models of well-being:

- *On a larger scale.*
- *Over a longer period of time.*
- *Across all age groups.*
- *In more specific settings.*

There will be value also in building up comparative data on well-being across local areas – this could be usefully added to the local area profiles that the Audit Commission is presently piloting. Central government should consider a larger pilot of this work, perhaps nationally or across five regions each using the same methodology, over a period of years. This would help to show how people's personal well-being shifts over time, and compares across place. More use of well-being indicators could

also inform the Comprehensive Performance Assessment regime from 2005 onwards. (The Audit Commission is presently consulting on how CPA will be taken forward beyond 2005.)

More specific research should focus on key issues where well-being has a role to play in new policy-making approaches, for example in schools, workplaces, parenting and families, mental health, and so on. Specifically, we can consider the hypothesis that low life satisfaction is a good predictor of depression. Also, as a matter of priority, we should look into the relationship between personal well-being and public policy – are people with high well-being more economically productive, build more social capital and cost less to provide for in healthcare terms? In addition, building on this pilot study, it would be interesting to track the potential public benefits of young people displaying characteristics of high personal development. Are they the future social and financial entrepreneurs? What support do they need to fulfil their potential? All of these lines of enquiry can be, and need to be, tested.

People's experience of their quality of life is not limited to the personal realm, though this pilot has predominantly focused on this aspect of well-being. Measurements need to be systematically developed that illuminate people's experiences

of, and feeling about, their local communities, businesses, the economy, the education system, crime and the justice system, the natural and built environment, local and national governance, national security and international issues such as cultural diversity, globalisation and environmental sustainability. These types of measures might in time develop into subjective indicators of economic, social and environmental well-being. These would complement the work being done on development indicators, such as **nef's** recent publication *Chasing Progress: beyond measuring economic growth* which details a new Measure of Domestic Progress, available on our website at www.neweconomics.org

In our opinion, the role of government should be to create conditions for the 'good life' and we recommend the use of well-being indicators as a way of measuring the impacts of policy interventions. Ultimately, we should move towards capturing the well-being of the whole nation. Without this research, we will continue to operate in darkness about how people actually experience the quality of their lives and how that impacts key societal issues.

For more details of this work, order a hard-copy of the full report on the pilot from our website www.neweconomics.org The report contains more detail on:

- *Models of well-being.*
- *The local government 'power of well-being'.*
- *The process of the pilot and questionnaire scales used.*
- *Data and analysis of the results from the pilot on schools, sports, poverty and many other issues.*
- *Policy implications, further research areas and the way forward.*

If you would like to participate in our on-going well-being research, and understand more about your own well-being, then please visit our website and complete the on-line survey. For more details of the Well-being Programme at **nef** visit www.neweconomics.org or contact Nic Marks (nic.marks@neweconomics.org) or Hetan Shah (hetan.shah@neweconomics.org)

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