**New Statistics for Old? - The case of the UK Measuring National Well-being Programme**

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**Introduction**

This paper is about a statistical development programme launched in November 2010. The Measuring National Well-being Programme (MNW) of the UK Office for National Statistics is aimed at reporting how the country is doing, not just in terms of economic performance and material wellbeing, but also in terms of social progress, quality of life, the state of the environment and the sustainability of all of this. It addresses a number of wellbeing agendas, not just personal or individual wellbeing, but also a broader concept of national wellbeing, which includes current and future wellbeing or sustainability. MNW is a new programme but drawing on many existing statistical areas and developments, including the annual *Social Trends* report (which has been replaced by MNW reporting activities). In this paper we take stock of the programme and how it came about, note a number of innovative aspects, review the requirements that statistics released under the programme are designed to meet, and consider a number of issues. We explore the role of statistics in facilitating a change in the way we view wellbeing and progress, rather than reflecting an established socio-political model.

**Forty years on: measuring social progress in the UK since 1970**

Prime Ministers are seldom involved in launching statistical programmes[[2]](#footnote-2). However, in 1970 Edward Heath held a reception to mark the publication of *Social Trends* by the then Central Statistical Office. *Social Trends* drew on data from across the government statistical service and beyond, in order to provide an annual picture of social, economic and environmental conditions and how these are changing, to complement the more extensive and well known national economic accounts and headline statistics such as gross domestic product (GDP). This was part of an effort to develop social statistics, which “had long tended to drag behind economic statistics in priority and quality” (Moser, 2000). *Social Trends* was one of the major contributions to the ‘social indicators’ movement, which Bache and Reardon (2013) have noted as the first wave of concern with wellbeing rather than economic growth in recent times (since the end of the Second World War). Bache (2013) places that in the context of post-war prosperity “as the social costs of private affluence became evident. A ‘social indicators’ movement emerged across a number of affluent states that resonated at the highest political levels in some countries, not least the United States, where President Johnson famously spoke [in 1964] of the good society being ‘a place where men are more concerned with the quality of their goals than the quantity of their goods’ ”.

Robert Kennedy echoed Lyndon B. Johnson with a famous 1968 speech in which he associated the emphasis on economic statistics with what he saw as the priority wrongly given to economic conditions in politics and in everyday life. He referred to gross national product (GNP), another headline measure of the national economic accounts, rather than to GDP but the point is the same:

*“Too much and too long, we seem to have surrendered community excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our gross national product [...] – if we should judge America by that – counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and jails for those who break them. It counts the destruction of our redwoods and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and the cost of a nuclear warhead, and armoured cars for police who fight riots in our streets. It counts Whitman’s rifle and Speck’s knife, and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children.*

*Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it can tell us everything about America except that why we are proud that we are Americans.”* (Kennedy, 1968)

Kennedy’s call for statistics that measure everything that “makes life worthwhile” was a huge and daunting challenge for statisticians. The examples he gave were (and still are) largely difficult if not impossible to measure. Nevertheless, *Social Trends* first appeared just two years after the speech, clearly intending to rise to the challenge. There was much other new work done in measuring what came to be seen as ‘more than GDP’ in national statistical offices, academic research centres, non-governmental organisations and in the commercial sector.

Bache (2013) concludes that “However, while new surveys were developed, the [social indicator] movement ran out of steam as economic recession in the 1970s marginalised many of its claims”. We might debate whether there was any running out of steam in the production and publication of social indicators and social reports, especially taking into account the appearance of sustainable development indicators. Indeed, there has been a proliferation of relevant indicators, composite indexes and surveys (see Allin and Hand, 2014 forthcoming, for a review). What seems beyond dispute, however, is that none of these statistical measures managed to challenge the neoclassical economic dominance and attention given to GDP in politics and in public policy and debate. GDP kept on (and keeps on) grabbing the headlines, month after month. GDP is one headline measure from the System of National Accounts, designed to report on national economic performance.

*Social Trends* was designed to be “exciting, non-technical and accessible to the general public well beyond Westminster and Whitehall. It had to be authoritative with the statistical material beyond criticism. But above all it was to be written and produced by us statisticians without political interference. What we included in any issue was up to us to decide, even if the material touched sensitive political nerves, and even if our comments were not popular with our political masters” (Moser, 2000), according to Claus Moser, who was the head of the UK Government Statistical Service at the time *Social Trends* was launched, and very much its champion.

*Social Trends* reports were published over forty years. They had many readers and ‘friends’, although the reports were often seen as a reference book: interesting but not necessarily providing an overall assessment of the state of the nation. (A leader in the *Financial Times* once summed up *Social Trends* as a good read, but “what does it all add up to?”). In later years *Social Trends* appeared as a web-based publication, with rolling updates of a dozen or so chapters covering different aspects of society, the environment and the economy. Since 2011, ONS has evolved this publication into on-line outputs of the MNW programme, including an annual report on life in the UK (eg Self *et al*, 2012).

**What led to the Measuring National Well-being Programme (MNW)?**

ONS had become increasingly aware from the early 2000s of renewed or simply more loudly expressed interest in measures of wellbeing and progress that go ‘beyond GDP’. For example, the Organisation for **Economic** Cooperation and Development (OECD) – emphasis added – embarked on a global project to measure the well-being and progress of societies in ways that were not just about economic performance. The OECD currently comprises 34 countries (with a further six, including China and Russia, in the process of accession), and it has been hosting world forums open to all countries, so it potentially has a widespread influence. As a membership organisation, funded by governments, the OECD’s decision making process is complex, involving permanent staff (some on secondment from national governments), national government ministers and officials (including those acting as the ‘permanent representatives’ of their nation at the OECD, as well as national civil servants and those in other international organisations). It is not in the scope of this paper to explore how the OECD work on wider measures of progress came about, though we can acknowledge the considerable personal input and drive of Enrico Giovannini, the OECD chief statistician at the time.

The OECD’s mission is now “to promote policies that will improve the economic **and social** well-being of people around the world”[[3]](#footnote-3) (emphasis added). Its global project (now the Better Life initiative[[4]](#footnote-4)) led to developments in wellbeing policy and measurement in many countries, with the close involvement of other international organisations such as Eurostat and the United Nations. In particular, the OECD was closely involved in setting up and supporting the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (CMEPSP), which continues to be a major stimulus and source for developments in these areas.

*Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (CMEPSP)*

The CMEPSP was convened in February 2008 and it reported in September 2009. It was led by Joseph E. Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi. A book version of the ‘Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi’ report is called “Mis-measuring our lives: why GDP doesn’t add up” (Stiglitz *et al*, 2010). This contains the executive summary and “short narrative” chapters on the content of the report. Their full report, available on-line[[5]](#footnote-5), contains a further two hundred pages of “substantial arguments”.

Formally established by Nicholas Sarkozy, then President of France, the CMEPSP’s brief was to “identify the limits of GDP as an indicator of economic performance and social progress, including the problems with its measurement; to consider what additional information might be required for the production of more relevant indicators of social progress; to assess the feasibility of alternative measurement tools, and to discuss how to present the statistical information in an appropriate way” (Stiglitz *et al*, 2010, p1). The CMEPSP report was strictly a set of proposals on how to develop measures for France, but the background and reach of the commission suggest that it was always intended for a wider audience. Indeed, the French Government has been taking the report’s conclusions to relevant international gatherings and has been encouraging international statistical organisations to modify their statistical systems in light of the CMEPSP’s recommendations (ibid, p x).

For President Sarkozy the point is to avoid our future and the future of our children and grandchildren being “riddled with financial, economic, social, and environmental disasters”. We must “change the way we live, consume and produce. We must change the criteria governing our social organizations and our public policies”. In short, “We will not change our behaviour until we change the ways we measure our economic performance” (ibid, p vii). It is clear from his remarks that he was not just referring to France.

*Wellbeing measurement in the UK*

The ONS was not only aware of OECD work and the proposed CMEPSP. There was a considerable body of relevant material and expertise across the UK. (It was not surprising that three British economists became members of the 24-strong CMEPSP). ONS was able to draw on much trail-blazing work on wellbeing measurement in academic centres and by researchers in non-governmental organisations, many academic papers relevant to wellbeing and progress and increasing media coverage. Building a close working relationship with the Centre for Wellbeing at the new economics foundation (nef) was especially beneficial. The Centre had been established in the early 2000s and had consistently sought to understand, measure and influence well-being, both directly and by alerting policy makers to the issue.

ONS signalled its intentions to elevate its analysis of ‘societal wellbeing’, and that it was responding to the 2007 Istanbul Declaration[[6]](#footnote-6) on this issue, in an article in its *Economic & Labour Market Review* journal that year. ONS emphasised the need “to understand more fully the requirements for measures beyond GDP” (Allin, 2007, p46), hinting that much of the discussion about ‘beyond GDP’ had been aspirational and with little detail of how new measures would be used, and what would be done differently.

National statistical offices, like all publicly funded bodies, are under resource constraints. They may need to reduce or discontinue statistics for which, after consultation, there is no longer a perceived need that the statistical office should meet. However, such decisions are taken rarely and the maintenance of continuous time-series of data is a strong ethos in national statistical offices. It was apparent that exploring societal wellbeing should be without any reduction in ONS’s commitment to publishing full and timely national accounts (ie the work was about ‘GDP and beyond’, in case ‘beyond GDP’ be wrongly interpreted as abandoning GDP). Indeed there was a need to further develop the national accounts in line with international developments and evolving user requirements, for example on the treatment of the output of public services. The CMEPSP also had this in mind, for their recommendations were to include a number grouped as tackling ‘classical GDP issues’.

By 2007 the UK already had a well developed and regularly published set of sustainable development indicators (SDIs), which might also be seen as entering the territory ‘beyond GDP’. The SDIs are linked with government policy, though they have a wider use. They are not the responsibility of ONS, though some SDIs are based on ONS data. This raised the question of the fit between measures of national wellbeing and SDIs, because the ONS’s concept of national wellbeing includes sustainability as well as current wellbeing. This does not seem to have been fully resolved. A revised set of SDIs, for England only, was published in 2013. Where indicators are also to be found in the ONS MNW set, or in other summary indicator sets, they are meant to “align” (Defra, 2013, p6) and the current ‘traffic light’ assessment of progress for each indicator “may be amended depending on the outcome of the Office for National Statistics’ investigation into measuring change for the National Well-being measures” (ibid, p8).

As part of the Government Statistical Service, ONS considers government as well as public requirements. With a general election due in 2010, ONS also looked at what all the political parties were saying about wellbeing because, in varying degrees, all of them had recognised that quality of life is a purpose of government. In 2007 the Conservative Party Quality of Life Policy Group had recommended that the UK should agree on a more reliable indicator of progress than GDP and use it as the basis for policy-making. Michael Marmot had been commissioned by Ministers to advise on reducing health inequalities in England and his 2010 report included a key message that economic growth is not the most important measure of our country’s success (these and other examples from Allin and Hand, 2014 forthcoming, Chapter 7). This was not a view universally held, though. Johns and Ormerod for example, writing from the Institute of Economic Affairs, were not convinced of the role of ‘happiness’ in economics and public policy. How a measure of ‘gross national happiness’ or wellbeing, supplementing GNP “would actually produce better decisions is, however, rarely spelt out in detail. The use of even a sensitive happiness metric in public policy would be as vulnerable to anomalous and ethically questionable results and losses of information as any other numerical metric subject to crude maximisation” (Johns and Ormerod, 2007, p14). ONS considered all points of view and decided that there was a need to take forward the measurement of national wellbeing.

Things moved rapidly following the general election and the formation of the coalition government. The Budget Statement of June 2010 recorded that “The Government is committed to developing broader indicators of wellbeing and sustainability, with work currently underway to review how the Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi report should affect the sustainability and well-being indicators collected by Defra, and with the ONS and the Cabinet Office leading work on taking forward the report’s agenda across the UK” (HM Treasury, 2010, p10).

Having a statutory requirement for statistics puts them at the top of the priority listing in ONS planning and budgeting. As yet there is no sign of UK or European legislation specifying measures of statistics on national wellbeing and progress. However, the idea of looking more broadly than the economic case when (some[[7]](#footnote-7)) public sector organisations are procuring goods and services is now captured in Public Services (Social Value) Act, which requires public authorities “to have regard to economic, social and environmental well-being in connection with public services contracts” (UK Parliament, 2012). The legislation does not define “well-being” but official guidance notes that “In these tight economic times it is particularly important that maximum value in public spending is achieved. However currently some commissioners [of public service contracts] miss opportunities to secure both the best price and meet the wider social, economic and environmental needs of the community.” (Local Government Lawyer, 2013). National statistics should help identify these wider needs and, ideally, allow more local data (for the “community” in scope) to be captured. Is this a quasi-statutory requirement for national wellbeing statistics?

**The Prime Minister’s Happiness Index?**

We noted above one occasion on which a Prime Minister launched, albeit in a low-key way, a statistical programme. History did repeat itself, in 2010, and with rather more attention. First a kite was flown. On October 25th, less than six months after becoming Prime Minister, David Cameron made a speech to the Confederation of British Industry in which he set out a strategy for growth, how “we can create a new economic dynamism in our country” (Cameron, 2010A). Like many political leaders dealing with the aftermath of financial crisis and economic recession, David Cameron was greatly concerned with growth and jobs. In a speech almost entirely devoted to this, the Prime Minister also spoke about the wider role of government, touching on the issue of wellbeing. The idea of ‘general wellbeing’ was something that he had spoken about while leader of the opposition, including a TED session (Cameron, 2010). Mr Cameron said in his October 2010 speech: “In the weeks ahead, we will be setting out how we will bring a new emphasis on well-being in our national life, and how we will work with business to spread social and environmental responsibility across our society.”

Less than a month later, on 20th November 2010, the Prime Minister gave a speech on wellbeing during which he said “today the government is asking the Office of National Statistics to devise a new way of measuring wellbeing in Britain. And so from April next year, we’ll 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” (Cameron, 2010B). This was at the launch of ONS Measuring National Well-being Programme. ONS had established this programme not only to meet the needs of government policy makers (part of the launch event was to showcase wellbeing policy) but generally to provide wider measures of the nation’s progress beyond just focusing on GDP, to capture more fully economic performance, quality of life, the state of the environment and sustainability issues.

Nevertheless, the ONS programme has frequently been mis-reported in the media as being to produce ‘Mr. Cameron’s Happiness Index’, which is wrong on all three counts. It is not just for the Prime Minister and was not commissioned by him: ONS initiated the programme, including bidding for funding from the government’s Spending Review in June 2010; it is not just about happiness, even broadly defined to sum up psychological wellbeing, but about national wellbeing more generally; and it is designed to produce a number of measures, not a single index.

**Key features of the Measuring National Well-being Programme (MNW)**

ONS successfully obtained funding in the 2010 Spending Review for its proposed programme of work to develop new measures of national wellbeing and progress for the four financial years 2011/12 to 2014/15. (Work up to March 2011 was funded out of existing budgets. ONS sees this as a long term development programme, so funding required for April 2015 onwards will need to be obtained through the next Spending Review, as with any other government-funded work).

The aim of the MNW programme is “to provide a fuller picture of how society is doing by supplementing existing economic, social and environmental measures” by produce accepted and trusted measures of the wellbeing of the nation[[8]](#footnote-8). The stated aim does not exactly define the wellbeing of the nation. The programme is designed to help answer the question ‘how is the UK as a whole doing?’ The concept of national wellbeing is meant to embrace everything needed to be able to answer the question in a meaningful, accepted and trusted manner, and so that action and decisions at all level, from the individual to the government, can be taken. In these terms, national wellbeing, or how the nation is doing, should then address the present state of the nation, whether progress is being made, and if current progress is sustainable in the longer term: all of these dimensions (and more) are wrapped up in the idea of national wellbeing.

Rather than precisely define national wellbeing, the scope of the MNW can simply be gleaned by its acknowledgement of the influence of the CMEPSP report: the programme can be understood as the ONS’s implementation of the CMEPSP’s recommendations and its associated engagement with international initiatives in looking at ‘GDP and beyond’.

There is no doubt that the ONS programme was greatly influenced by the 2009 CMEPSP report, which concluded that “the time is ripe for our measurement system to shift emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people’s well-being” (Stiglitz *et al*, 2010, p10). ONS staff examined the CMEPSP recommendations directed to national statistical offices, which cover ‘classical GDP issues, quality of life, sustainable development and the environment, and found that they provided a good basis on which to proceed. The recommendations struck many chords with existing (albeit incomplete) statistical outputs that contribute to a fuller picture of national wellbeing and progress. For example, work on human capital, social capital, natural capital, the measurement of household wealth and analyses of the distribution of income and wealth could be brought into, and taken forward under, the MNW programme. The ONS programme embraces all of these in a way that seeks to respond to the international developments, to interest across the UK in wider measures than GDP, as well as to the UK government’s request for new measures.

MNW is a statistical development programme that draws on a wide spectrum of statistical sources, so an early decision in the programme was to include headline indicators. These are being formulated in the programme and aim to indicate succinctly the state of play in each of the areas that matter to people. (See Bache *et al* 2014, Appendix Table 1, for the current indicators, which relate to areas such as health, relationships, job satisfaction, economic security, education, environmental conditions and measures of personal wellbeing. The latter are based on an individual’s assessment of their own wellbeing, also called subjective wellbeing). How these indicators are to be presented, the measurement framework, is still under development. However, by taking the approach to *national* wellbeing that it did meant that the ONS and the OECD would embark on somewhat different approaches. The OECD’s *How’s Life?* reports reflect a conceptual framework that distinguishes between current and future individual wellbeing. Drawing on the capabilities approach, the OECD measures *current* wellbeing “in terms of outcomes achieved in the two broad domains” of material living conditions and quality of life. The OECD assesses *future* wellbeing by looking at the state of “some of the key resources that drive well-being over time and that are persistently affected by today’s actions” (OECD, 2013, p21). For the UK programme, assessing national wellbeing means looking both at current and at future wellbeing concurrently.

*Innovation*

There are three innovative aspects to MNW. First, it kicked off with a period of considerable public engagement and debate around the question “what matters?” The CMEPSP report encouraged – though this was not a formal recommendation – that ‘round-tables’ be held in each country. The ONS approach (summarised by Bache *et al,* 2014) went considerably further in taking discussion out through social media, workshops and other events. All of this was covered in national and local news media. The second major development was that, for the first time, ONS included subjective wellbeing measures in its regular household surveys. The questions resulted from an intensive period of investigation, made possible by building on long-established academic research and survey work on subjective wellbeing. The questions were not just for ONS surveys, but the intention is to include them in other government surveys, to create a wide spread picture of wellbeing in different policy areas. This reflects the third eye-catching aspect of MNW, that of close working with policy makers prompted by government wanting to give greater attention to wellbeing in policy.

Working through the responses to the national debate enabled ONS to identify the key areas that matter most to people (ONS, 2011) and to make initial proposals of domains and headline measures of national well-being. The initial proposals were then subject to further, but more targeted, public consultation, from October 2011 to January 2012. The aim of that consultation was to gather feedback on whether the domains and measures proposed reflected the broad scope of well-being, were easy to understand and whether users felt there should be any additions or changes. The ONS published a report summarising the 1,800 responses, which showed that there was broad support for the proposed domains and measures (ONS 2012).

To develop a framework for measuring national wellbeing, the ONS drew on an OECD working paper (Hall *et al*, 2010), as well as on other frameworks that had emerged in UK work and in the wellbeing literature. As noted above, the OECD uses a different framework from that suggested by Hall *et al*. It is not that the UK has struck out in a different direction, but simply that there was need for a framework at that point in the UK programme. The challenge was to start structuring the measurement of national wellbeing with an eye to international developments while providing some common ground on which to engage nationally, including with “academics across the social sciences, life sciences and humanities” (Spence *et al*, 2011, p2).

Figure 1: The Framework for Measuring National Well-being in the UK

Source: Beaumont (2011, Figure 1). © Crown copyright 2011 – used under the terms of the Open Government Licence, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/2/>

The framework for measuring national wellbeing published by the MNW programme in October 2011 is shown in Figure 1. It places individual wellbeing at the heart of national wellbeing, identifies six broad factors (such as health) directly affecting individual wellbeing, and three more contextual domains (governance, the economy, the natural environment). Crucial in forming a full picture of national wellbeing are the distributions of each of the domains (suggested in the diagram by a ‘dimension’ of equity/fairness) and the sustainability over time of each domain (the bottom axis in the picture).

*Measuring subjective wellbeing*

Bache *et al* (2014*)* refer extensively to the ONS programme in their paper. However, they mainly focus on just one aspect of the programme, which they describe (p6) as “one of the key demands of the Stiglitz Commission”, namely the CMEPSP recommendation 10, that “Statistical offices should incorporate questions to capture people’s life-evaluations, hedonic experiences and priorities in their own survey” because measures of subjective wellbeing, which these are, as well as objective measures “provide key information about people’s quality of life” (Stiglitz et al, 2010, p18).

Although the assessment of individual wellbeing through the measurement of subjective wellbeing sits at the core of the ONS framework, subjective wellbeing is only one component in the approach to measuring quality of life proposed by the CMEPSP. However, ONS had not previously undertaken regular or extensive subjective wellbeing surveys[[9]](#footnote-9) and there was clearly an appetite for new measures of personal wellbeing, which may be why this element of the MNW programme gained so much attention.

By April 2011 – the date referred to by the Prime Minister for the start of a new way of measuring progress - four experimental subjective wellbeing questions had been tested and were introduced in ONS’s continuous Annual Population Survey (APS) of UK households. This allowed the subjective wellbeing questions to be analysed using at least some of the key determinants of wellbeing, as well as by demographic and geographic attributes. ONS took the decision to use only a few questions within a large sample (165,000 adults are questioned over the course of a year in the APS). This is in contrast to many in-depth studies of subjective wellbeing, which tend to have many questions exploring wellbeing conducted with a relatively small sample: two different approaches to using a fixed amount of funding.

There are pros and cons. One reason for using only a short set of questions makes it easier for the managers of other government social surveys to include them, to build a richer evidence base and to extend subjective wellbeing measurement into specific areas of government. These subjective wellbeing data are not just meant for analysing personal wellbeing, they contribute to the fuller picture of national wellbeing and progress in the UK.

The four questions asked by ONS in the APS are shown in Table 1, along with a note of the specific approach from which each question is drawn. The questions are very similar to (but not precisely the same as) the core measures described in the OECD’s *Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-Being* (OECD, 2013A).

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| **Table 1: The four questions about subjective wellbeing asked by ONS in its Annual Population Surveys**  *(All asked using a 0 to 10 scale where 0 is “not at all” and 10 is “completely”)* | |
| “Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?” | *This comes from the evaluative approach to measuring subjective wellbeing (ie a cognitive assessment of how life is going).* |
| “Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?” | *From the eudemonic approach.* |
| “Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?” | *This is about experience, specifically positive affect.* |
| “Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?” | *Experience, negative affect.* |

Source: Hicks (2011)

ONS decided to use a limited number of questions and also to capture different aspects of subjective wellbeing identified in the literature (Tinkler and Hicks, 2011) and shown in Table 1 above. Dolan *et al* (2011) had recommended to ONS that this was the best way of providing a broad overview of subjective wellbeing. Life evaluation, positive and negative affect are discussed and endorsed in the CMEPSP report. The fourth approach included by ONS is taken from the eudemonic perspective, concerned with positive functioning, flourishing and having a sense of meaning and purpose in life (e.g. NEF, 2011, and Hubbert and So, 2013).

Alongside the APS data collection, ONS continues to use its monthly Opinions Survey (OPN) to carry out testing and development of subjective wellbeing questions, and to cover aspects of subjective wellbeing in more detail. OPN collects data from 1,000 respondents in each monthly sample, so it is markedly smaller than the APS but nevertheless gives broadly similar results of overall subjective wellbeing of adults in the UK (eg ONS, 2012B). Hicks *et al* (2013, p79) summarise the testing and development of the ONS subjective wellbeing questions.

*The full breadth of the MNW programme*

As noted above, the CMEPSP was a significant influence on the ONS programme. Much of the report was about ‘known problems’ and potential solutions. However, the timing and the authority with which it was delivered helped ONS draw together and build on many of its existing developments. Table 2 gives a flavour of how the MNW programme reaches all parts of the agenda set by the CMEPSP recommendations. This is not to say that everything is sorted: even within the UK’s well developed and funded national statistical system, it will still take time for some of these developments to come to fruition.

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| **Table 2: Examples of how the UK Measuring National Well-being (MNW) programme is addressing the CMEPSP recommendations** | |
| **CMEPSP recommendations cover:** | **UK Measuring National Well-being (MNW) programme includes:** |
| **Classical GDP issues**  Household perspective; income and consumption (rather than production) and wealth; distribution of income, consumption and wealth; income measures of non-market activities. | * ONS has published national accounts since the late 1940s. Various measures of household income are calculated and analysed eg for effects of the financial crisis on households’ real disposable incomes * Regular measures of income inequality and analyses of how taxes and benefits redistribute income between various groups of households in the UK (annual articles since the 1960s and more recently podcasts) * Analyses from survey of wealth and assets (first wave held 2006-08) * Developing and updating household satellite accounts eg valuing informal care * Exploring case for using time use data to measure national wellbeing * Improved measures of public service output, following the 2005 Atkinson Review * Wider measures of public sector debt and a generational accounting approach to long term public finance in the UK |
| **Quality of life**  Improved measures of people’s objective conditions and capabilities; comprehensive assessment of inequalities; survey data on quality of life domains; information to aggregate across quality of life dimensions, allowing different indexes; subjective wellbeing data. | * Developing and consulting on domains and measures * Topic reports eg governance, also measures of children’s wellbeing * Analytical articles examining different dimensions of inequality * Regular outputs on personal wellbeing * Interactive charts and maps * Review 2005 work on development of measures of social capital measures and availability of current measures |
| **Sustainable development and environment**  Dashboard of indicators of stocks; indicators of physical aspects of environment, especially proximity to dangerous levels of environmental damage. | * Working with department currently responsible for UK Sustainable Development Indicators to ensure SDIs complement national wellbeing measures * Environmental Accounts (published since 2002) following methodologies and conventions recommended by UN System of Environmental and Economic Accounts (SEEA) * Roadmap for development of natural capital accounting published 2012 * Estimates of UK stock of human capital and working with OECD consortium to develop methodology |

Sources: Stiglitz *et al* (2010) and ONS MNW programme outputs at: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/publications/index.html>

*Progress and further work*

At a conference in 2012 to mark the first two years of the MNW programme, Glenn Everett, the current programme director, summarised how far the programme had progressed, with many outputs and the first new annual report on life in the UK. There was also more to do on domains and measures of national wellbeing and on subjective wellbeing questions, all subject to further testing, user feedback and possible development. There was also the issue of how to assess the progress of the UK from these measures: was it always clear whether, say, an increase in the value of a measure meant that the UK was making positive progress in that area? ONS promised to continue cooperation with international partners, including through the UN, OECD and EU, as well as further consultation and engagement within the UK. Users and everyone with an interest in this programme are encouraged to keep an eye on the MNW website (see Table 2 above) and to participate in consultation and discussion about the programme[[10]](#footnote-10).

**Using MNW data: making a difference?**

The APS data are being analysed by ONS and others (e.g. Abdallah and Shah, 2012), including looking at sub-groups of the population and making comparisons below the national level. As the sample grows further detail will be available and will provide users with a large dataset to undertake further analysis. ONS is publishing estimates at a more local level and for small sub-groups of the population with more precision (e.g. ONS 2013). The latest data currently available are for 405 local areas across the UK. Such results are not end-products in themselves, but should be the starting point for understanding how reported wellbeing varies between areas and population groups.

The appearance of ONS subjective wellbeing data prompted the Treasury to update its “Green Book” to include reference to using subjective wellbeing data in cost-benefit analyses (HM Treasury, 2011, p 58). The Green Book requires officials assessing proposals for policies, programmes and projects to ensure that “public funds are spent on activities that provide the greatest benefits to society, and that they are spent in the most efficient way” (ibid, page v). ONS is also working with government researchers to develop tools to evaluate the impact on subjective wellbeing that specific policies and publicly funded projects have made. However, the general ethos of the ONS is that it can only go so far in terms of linking their measurements to specific policies and programmes. The ONS data provide more of an overall picture and a backdrop against which policy officials are encouraged to build their evidence base. This is why departments are encouraged to include the ONS subjective wellbeing questions along with more detailed questions in their own research surveys, and to draw on more policy-relevant indicators such as measures of poverty.

There is a slight tension here, at least during the early years of the MNW programme. The MNW programme is seeking to establish standardised questions for assessing personal wellbeing and to encourage their use in many different surveys, beyond those conducted by the ONS. However, the ONS questions were described at least initially as experimental and potentially open to amendment in subsequent years. In practice this has not lead to significant changes, so the use of the questions in other surveys is enabling a richer picture of wellbeing to be built up.

Although the subjective wellbeing questions were the new element of MNW from April 2011, the MNW programme is about more than subjective wellbeing in assessing national wellbeing and progress. Similarly, the ONS programme is not about the end of using GDP. Rather, this is a pluralistic approach to measurement, to provide measures for people with different interests and to encourage the use of a set of wider measures of national wellbeing and progress overall. Those interested in economic growth and those focussing on subjective wellbeing will find each of these measures within the ONS set, but the intention is to shift attention to the full set of wider measures of national wellbeing.

**Some issues for discussion**

The Prime Minister’s words at the launch of the MNW programme were no doubt carefully chosen, but are we clear what they mean? He said “we’ll 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”. Who is “we”? – is the ONS, as the organisation undertaking and publishing statistical measures, or is it a more inclusive reference to all of us, in terms of how we assess our lives and life in Britain? If so, are we all signed up to this?

The intention of the MNW programme is to provide a framework for evaluating progress overall and identifying priorities. It is aimed at policy makers, politicians and governments and at the public, the media, non-governmental organisations in civil society and businesses; all make up the intended audience for the MNW programme (as for all of the output of the ONS). Moreover, the MNW programme includes giving the public a voice. In doing so, the programme recognises that a national debate and on-going consultations might help people in thinking about their own lives and choices. This is as well as more broadly seeking to raise awareness and influence ideas and debate about economic performance, social progress, the state of the environment, and how all these interact. But, inevitably, the debate cannot always be conducted with the same intent and with the same media coverage as for the initial national debate on “What matters to you?” Does it matter that this is no longer so prominent? How long is inspiration needed from political leaders?

Is it the role of the ONS, the producer, to encourage more use of national wellbeing measures? It appears that more attention is being given to understanding the drivers of personal wellbeing than to those of national wellbeing. Allin (2014 forthcoming, p438) drew on informal discussions to form a view of the kinds of areas in which officials were looking at policy through a “wellbeing lens”. These were childhood obesity, community grants, offending reduction and personal budgets for public service users. The field of wellbeing at work appeared to be another policy area to focus on (ibid, p450). Clearly the analysis of personal wellbeing data is important, but the MNW programme seeks to present these data along with measures to determine national wellbeing and how, and why, that is changing. The idea of bringing personal wellbeing into policy is not new but could be exploited further. Are there also opportunities for policy areas to develop a national wellbeing focus and will these be encouraged by intermediaries such as the Legatum Institute Commission on Wellbeing Policy[[11]](#footnote-11)? Will major infrastructure projects, such as airports, high-speed rail networks and new sources of energy, start to be considered against the ‘triple bottom line’ of economic, social and environmental costs and benefits? What about more everyday decisions, like the recent Ministerial suggestion that we buy more seasonal British food rather than imported produce, which involves health and environmental angles as well as economic considerations?

Or will the dominant political narrative in the UK continue to be the need for economic growth and deficit reduction, with concomitant concerns like security of supply of food and energy? The current government needed to set a number of priorities in the wake of the global financial crisis and structural deficits in public finances. These priorities refer to economic growth rather than to wellbeing. By the time of a government report covering 2012-13, the Treasury’s objectives had been replaced by strategic priorities that include reference to “a growing economy that is more resilient” and to reducing the structural deficit “in a fair and responsible way” (HM Treasury 2013, p9) but not explicitly to wellbeing. The only reference to wellbeing in the document is to the wellbeing of the staff of the Treasury (ibid, p43).

A recent guide to the role and purpose “post-April 2013” of the Department of Health does include many references to “wellbeing”, understandable in light of much national and international interest in improving health and wellbeing, though the overall role and purpose of the department is now described as “helping people live better for longer” (Department of Health, 2013, p7). The language of the UK government is now predominantly about sustainable (or perhaps sustained) growth and sustainable (ditto) development, along with a fair and equal Britain, rather than wellbeing. It is in this political environment that ONS must remain strongly committed to producing wider measures of national wellbeing and progress, so that these are available to use alongside the regular data on economic growth and the public finances.

Will earlier, “green” agendas survive? Will these continue to be seen as separate initiatives, such as ‘green growth’ and ‘green jobs’, essentially focussing on specific employment and environmental policies, rather than the ‘big picture’ of national wellbeing, progress and sustainability?

We have been looking at the ONS, UK-wide programme but of course within the UK there are currently two countries in which many governmental functions relating to wellbeing, such as health, education, justice, rural affairs, and transport, are devolved by the UK government. In both countries the main policy focus is on sustainable economic growth. There is a flavour of wellbeing in the aim of the devolved government for Wales, which is “working to help improve the lives of people in Wales and make our nation a better place in which to live and work”[[12]](#footnote-12). The purpose of the Scottish Government is: “To focus government and public services on creating a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth”[[13]](#footnote-13). The word “flourish” resonates with the eudemonic perspective on personal psychological wellbeing that we discussed earlier. In both Wales and Scotland there are developments to measure national wellbeing and progress, with varying degrees of interaction with the ONS programme. In Wales this covers wellbeing and sustainable development in terms of outcome indicators (“how is Wales doing?”) and tracking indicators (“how is the Welsh Government doing?”)[[14]](#footnote-14). “Scotland Performs” measures and reports on “progress of government in Scotland” (also including outcome we well as process indicators)[[15]](#footnote-15).

Much policy-relevant research is undertaken outside of government. There is also interest in the research community to review how wellbeing data are being applied to policymaking. One issue to consider here is that of knowledge transfer. To what extent are policymakers drawing on, or are at least aware of, the considerable volume of evidence and measurement tools provided by academic and other non-governmental centres? It should be a two-way street, with a flow of information from policy makers on the policy areas needing development, and a flow of knowledge from researchers with evidence and techniques that could usefully be brought into the policy world. The world has moved on since data about the state of Britain’s economy, society and environment was summarised in the annual volume of *Social Trends*, which policymakers might (or not) have added to their reading pile. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has for example identified wellbeing as a priority area in making the case for the social sciences and its website contains many “evidence briefings” and other reports relating to wellbeing[[16]](#footnote-16).

There are no doubt many other issues worth discussing. To finish with just one more, the question of international comparability of national wellbeing measures sounds challenging. UN fundamental principles for all official statistics[[17]](#footnote-17) call for statistical agencies in each country to use international concepts, classifications and methods in order to promote consistency and efficiency of statistical systems at all official levels. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation in statistical developments are also encouraged. However, this does need to be followed thoughtfully if a requirement for international comparability of national wellbeing is not to overwrite national requirements. The 2007 Istanbul Declaration treads this line carefully, but there still needs to be care in developing international standards and guidance on this topic, so that national approaches can evolve to meet national needs, as well as support international comparisons and aggregation. Trewin and Hall point out that “it is unlikely that any international initiative will include all aspects that are important to any one country” (2010, p10). This means we could end up with several views of the wellbeing of a particular nation – the nationally derived measure, the assessments made by other nations according to their own criteria of what matters, and what international organisations come up with, using criteria that are common across nations. This feels like it needs quite a complex process to reach an accepted set of dimensions for international comparability. The process needs to recognise that national needs may well require different measures.

**Concluding remarks**

Hadfield (2000, p18) reports that the nineteenth century radical Feargus O’Connor, who was active in the Chartist movement although often a thorn in the side of the leaders, “had formerly said that social happiness was to proceed from political equality, a proposition of reason and effort, whereas now he wrote that political equality could only spring from social happiness, a recipe of emotion and magic”. Happiness and wellbeing have long featured in politics and in public policy, with appeals both to reason and to emotion (see eg Allin and Hand, 2014 forthcoming, Chapter 2 for “a short history of national wellbeing and its measurement”). Measurement programmes such as the ONS MNW programme can only be understood by exploring the motivation for measuring wellbeing and particularly the role of wellbeing in formulating, analysing and reporting on public policy.

The machinery of government can move at what might seem at times a frustratingly slow pace. The announcement by the Prime Minister in November 2010 signalled one immediate policy shift, to start measuring wellbeing in national official statistics. The wider implications of this are taking some time to appear, though may well be on a ‘slow burn’. Some government policies were of course already engaged with wellbeing, particularly to link health with wellbeing, but in other areas progress is not so easy to spot. Although wellbeing is less in the headlines, there are several building blocks now in place to support wellbeing in policy, such as the Green Book update, legislation on public value in procurement and the Legatum Institute Commission.

Bache and Reardon (2013, p14) reviewed the emergence of wellbeing as a political concept in the UK Government. They conclude that a paradigm shift in measurement may be taking place, especially through the ONS MNW programme, and that the wellbeing “remains on the government agenda”. However, they also conclude that more action is required by those who support and sponsor policy inside government if “more decisive [well-being] policy action is to follow. In short, a more effective coupling of the problem stream to policy and politics streams is needed for us to claim with confidence that well-being is ‘an idea whose time has come’”. Bache also observed that it is wellbeing measurement that is developing more than policy at the EU level (Bache, 2013, p35).

There is no sorcery involved here, in offering “new statistics for old”! ONS continues to publish GDP and other measures of economic condition as well as now developing wider measures of national wellbeing and progress. We may be starting to acquire better measures, but are we still thinking mainly in terms of economic conditions, whether in politics, policy or everyday life? What more is needed to change how we understand how the country is doing, beyond our economic performance, what real progress are we are making and what sort of world are we handing on to future generations?

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2. Although one politician with a particular interest in statistics was Harold Wilson: President of the Royal Statistical Society in 1972 – 1973, in between his two periods as Prime Minister. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.oecd.org/about/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.oecd.org/statistics/betterlifeinitiativemeasuringwell-beingandprogress.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/documents/rapport_anglais.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/38883774.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Applies to public authorities in England and, to some extent, those in Wales. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See MNW website at <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/index.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John Hall recalls that ONS published subjective wellbeing research and results from other sources in *Social Trends* in the 1970s. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For example through the on-line National Well-being Community at <http://www.statsusernet.org.uk/StatsUserNet/Communities/ViewDiscussions/DigestViewer/?GroupId=121&UserKey=9eab297f-5e96-4075-abde-47cd083354fd> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <http://www.li.com/programmes/commission-on-wellbeing-policy> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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