

MEASURING WELLBEING IN NORTHERN IRELAND: ROUNDTABLE 1

24 March 2014, Queen's University Belfast

Introduction

The first Carnegie Roundtable on Measuring Wellbeing in Northern Ireland set out to:

- establish a shared understanding of the international and national policy debate on wellbeing and the measurement of economic performance and social progress, and
- begin to assess the relevance of the debate for Northern Ireland's governing institutions (regional and local) and identify priority issues.

The following are some of the issues discussed by roundtable members.

Understanding the wellbeing and measurement policy debate

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been collecting wellbeing data and publishing it under the title [Life in the UK](#) since 2012. As a result of the Carnegie Conference 'Measuring What Matters in Northern Ireland' the Minister of Finance and Personnel asked for a [Northern Ireland version](#) of the data which has recently been published.

There is some debate about the best balance of subjective and objective wellbeing measurement domains and in Northern Ireland there are issues about the availability of data that is directly comparable with the rest of the UK. There is also some debate about the difference between individual and collective wellbeing and how they should be measured.

In Scotland the [National Performance Framework](#) is focused on wellbeing outcomes measured by a range of indicators that allow policy makers to respond to the direction of those indicators over time. The roundtable will look at this in detail at future meetings.

Two further initiatives in Northern Ireland link to the debate on wellbeing. OFMdFM's [Delivering Social Change](#) programme is addressing the roots of poverty through cross departmental programmes focused on, *inter alia*, literacy and numeracy in primary schools, positive parenting programmes and support for NEETs. Such programmes are showing some promise in improving wellbeing at a project level.

The Public Sector Reform initiative wants to produce tangible impacts on people's lives as a result of the work it is undertaking. Improvements to wellbeing can be achieved through a greater emphasis on prevention and the co-creation of services with communities, for example.

Priorities and themes for Northern Ireland

Presentations from Kathryn Torney of [The Detail](#), Denis Bradley, freelance journalist and Heather Moorhead of the NI Confederation of Health and Social Care, helped identify a

number of priorities and themes. Education, segregation, mental health and the legacy of conflict stood out as areas critical to wellbeing.

The education system does well for those at the higher end of the achievement scale but there is a long tail of under-achievement. A quarter of all adults have poor literacy and/or numeracy and there is evidence that this includes a significant cohort of current school leavers: 70 % of those enrolling in adult literacy/numeracy courses are aged 16-25.

Segregation continues in schools with half of children taught in schools where the other children are of the same religion. 90 % of public housing is segregated.

A disturbing indicator of mental health is that there have been nearly as many suicides (3228) since 1998 than there were troubles related deaths (3428) from 1969-1997. There are more deaths from suicide than road accidents.

There is a close correlation between troubles-related trauma and suicide with limited understanding and action on areas such as addiction and depression also related to the legacy of conflict. The issue of how to de-traumatise a community is not being addressed. Any strategy to improve wellbeing must acknowledge that many of the barriers to progress are rooted in the experiences people have had during the troubles.

Above all, the challenge for wellbeing in Northern Ireland is to address multi-generational deprivation and this is something that cannot be done by project scale interventions but requires systemic change.

Towards a shared narrative and implications for policy design

The idea of developing a shared narrative across all levels of government focused on wellbeing outcomes is a compelling one. Such a narrative would be positive and clear highlighting the strengths of Northern Ireland and guided by a vision that is bold, simple, aspirational and reflects our heritage. It has the potential to help us get beyond the concept of a divided community to one that embraces diversity and includes a politics that re-engages those that are currently alienated especially young people and women.

There are a number of opportunities to ensure a joined up approach to the challenge. A Programme for Government that is focussed on wellbeing outcomes and measured by a suite of wellbeing indicators would be a significant step forward from the traditional focus on inputs and outputs. A performance framework not unlike that used in Scotland alongside a performance budgeting process could underpin a new-look Programme for Government.

The introduction of community planning as part of the reform of local government is another opportunity to directly connect the delivery of services by the public sector with what communities experience as wellbeing. Wellbeing is an empowering concept for communities and the opportunity for good community planning connected to wider public sector reform and written into future Programmes for Government suggests that this is a serendipitous moment to be charting a way forward for wellbeing in Northern Ireland.

The roundtable's work will continue with a second meeting in June followed by a study visit to Scotland.

