



Local Wellbeing Conference Report

Public Wellbeing: Local action making a national change

9 September 2008. QEII Centre, Westminster, London

“The time is right for governments and public agencies to act”

Geoff Mulgan, Director, Young Foundation

Lord Professor Richard Layard, Chairman of the morning session, began by recognising that the Local Wellbeing Project is reflecting a **historic change of attitude in local government** – a shift of focus from wealth to wellbeing reflecting the global debate about what defines human progress.

In the keynote address, Chief Statistician for the OECD, Enrico Giovannini discussed the need to develop a more comprehensive view of progress rather than just concentrating on gross domestic product (GDP). What is needed is information that is relevant to local communities and the OECD is beginning to ask **‘what do local communities consider to be progress?’**



Enrico Giovannini

Mr. Giovannini was followed by Lucy de Groot, Executive Director of the IDEa and Chair of the Local Wellbeing Project Advisory Board. She discussed the role of local government in promoting wellbeing, clearly stating that Local

government’s role is to work with communities to **create the conditions for wellbeing to be enhanced.**

The ministerial address was given by James Purnell MP, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Whilst supporting the wellbeing agenda, Mr. Purnell highlighted the importance of addressing some of the counter arguments that often emerge when an agenda is gathering pace.



Lord Professor Richard Layard and James Purnell MP

One of the **strongest challenges** for the wellbeing agenda relates to issues of definition. According to Mr. Purnell, the terms of the wellbeing debate can shift around and this means that lots of people with similar but different ideas are clustering under the same banner.

In his conclusion, Mr. Purnell told delegates that governments should give **power and freedom to people** so that they can choose their own utopias.

Legislation and societal norms are important, but they are not sufficient – they need to be complimented by a distribution of power which allows people to get where they want to in life.

The morning session concluded with Geoff Mulgan, Director of the Young Foundation, talking about the Local Wellbeing Project.

He pointed out that wellbeing is one of those subjects where the public are ahead of the policy makers – happiness and wellbeing are firmly in the everyday vocabulary of citizens, reflecting everyday concerns. This is why **the time is right for governments and public agencies to act.**

The midday session focused on the Local Wellbeing Project’s three ‘big initiatives’. Dr. Martin Seligman, the Director of the Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Centre, posed the question: **can young people be educated to be happy?**



Dr. Martin Seligman

According to Dr. Seligman, Positive Psychology and **wellbeing should be**

taught in schools as it improves a pupil’s ability to learn through reduced levels of depression as well as higher levels of wellbeing and happiness. Evidence from the Penn Resilience Programme, which is being piloted by the Local Wellbeing Project, suggests that students progress on their strengths, show improved behaviour and attain higher grades at school.

This was followed by talks about promoting emotional resilience to older people from Diana Whitworth, a consultant, and Dr. Chris Williams, from the University of Glasgow. They both discussed the impact of depression on older people and the potential for the Full of Life programme, which is being trialled by the Local Wellbeing Project, to **improve older people’s wellbeing**, by increasing their emotional resilience.

The third ‘big initiative’, Guaranteed Apprenticeships, was presented to delegates by Irene Lucas, Chief Executive of South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council and Dr. Ian Johnston, a consultant.

They highlighted the problems with the current educational system relying too heavily on desk-based, abstract and theoretical learning. Young people need options that build some of the other skills or strengths they possess, which often means **more ‘hands on’ learning opportunities.**

The showpiece of the afternoon was the Big Debate, chaired by Lord Victor Adebawale. The motion was **'this house believes local government has no business trying to make people happy'**.

Arguing for the motion were Clare Fox, Director of the Institute of Ideas, and Paul Ormerod, Economist and author of "Why most things fail...And how to avoid it". Arguing against the motion were Geoff Mulgan and Sir Richard Leese, Leader of Manchester City Council.



Geoff Mulgan, Sir Richard Leese and Lord Victor Adebawale

For many, the debate was the highlight of the day, with Lord Adebawale proving the perfect foil for the passionate debaters. Given the audience, it was not surprising that **the motion was resoundingly defeated**. However, some delegates did find the arguments persuasive enough to make them reconsider their views – both for and against wellbeing in public policy.

Throughout the day delegates' wellbeing was enhanced by relaxation sessions, ranging from Tai Chi to Chair Yoga and massages.

Key Points from the break out session on... How can we really measure wellbeing?

- Measurements of life satisfaction can either be global measures based on large datasets, or moment based measurements of people's mood.
- It is important to establish causality – what is the relationship between different factors and wellbeing? To do this you need to track people and have trials that are very natural.
- Local government is best placed to measure wellbeing. Measurement can provide new insights as well as inform service design and delivery.

Professor Paul Dolan, Professor of Economics at Tanaka Business School, Imperial College
Nicola Steuer, Head, new economics foundation, Centre for Wellbeing

Key Points from the break out session on... Sustainability and wellbeing: how can we achieve both?

- A key question is whether the relationship between wellbeing and environmentally friendly behaviour always involves a sacrifice?
- In terms of practical solutions, repetition is important as it helps turn an event into a habit. It is not just about having one initiative running at a time or repeated on an annual basis; it is about having a number of approaches running simultaneously so that the messages are repeated in different ways.

Rosie Milner, Positive Psychology Researcher, University of East London and Team Leader, Communities and Local Government
Beverley Taylor, Head of Environmental Campaigns & Green City, Manchester City Council

Key Points from the break out session on... Neighbourhood and Community Empowerment: does it really make us happy?

- The neighbourhood provides an organised base for families and households and is also the place where the strongest social networks exist.
- Empowerment work should help build social networks and encourage neighbourly contact.
- Local government also needs to empower people through more action-focused local projects rather than the traditional meetings and committees.

Mandeep Hothi, Associate, Young Foundation

Professor Anne Power, Professor of Social Policy and Deputy Director of the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, LSE

Dave Barlow, Manchester City Council

Key Points from the break out session on... Win: win situation. Parenting programmes and wellbeing

- Parenting schemes need a universal underpinning. This universality both makes these schemes a normal part of parenting, and avoids the danger of one group of people seeming to be instructing another group on how to bring up children.
- Mental health is the single most important determinant of parental quality: the wellbeing of parents is therefore vital for the wellbeing of children.

Professor Sarah Stewart-Brown, Chair of Public Health, Warwick University Medical School

Yvonne Roberts, Senior Associate, Young Foundation
South Tyneside parenting group

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Local Wellbeing Project Funders:

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