Initial Findings from the Consultation on Proposed Domains and Measures of National Well-being

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Abstract

This document gives a brief summary of initial findings from responses to the consultation on proposed domains and measures of national well-being which took place between 31 October 2011 and 23 January 2012.

1. Introduction

On 31 October 2011, the Office for National Statistics issued a public consultation document containing initial proposals of domains and headline measures of national well-being. The domains and measures were based on responses to the national debate on ‘What matters to you?’ (which took place between November 2010 and April 2011), existing research and international initiatives. The aim of the 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 respondents thought that there should be additions or changes. The Annex to this paper lists the proposed domains and interim headline measures on which the consultation was based.

This document summarises key findings and outlines next steps. A more considered response will be published alongside a revised set of domains and measures of national well-being scheduled for summer 2012.

2. Background

The consultation invited comment on a set of 10 areas or ‘domains’ and 40 potential headline measures of national well-being (see the Annex to this paper). Included are measures which reflect our quality of life and the state of the natural environment as well as the performance of the economy and people’s assessment of their own well-being. These measures are grouped into a set of domains covering areas such as individual well-being, health, personal relationships and what we do. The domains and headline measures are being developed as part of the Measuring National Well-being Programme. ONS launched the programme in November 2010 with the aim to develop
and publish an accepted and trusted set of National Statistics which help people to understand and monitor national well-being.

3. The consultation

ONS received an excellent response to the consultation with nearly 1,800 taking part. ONS wishes to thank all those who participated for their thoughtful and helpful comments. The consultation was available on the ONS website and was widely promoted. Activities included contributions to newsletters targeted at interested groups, presentations given at conferences, consultations with interested parties including policy makers, academics and think tanks and email alerts to nearly 3,000 who responded to the national debate and expressed an interest in keeping in touch with the programme.

Contributions were received from a broad range of respondents. A little over half of the respondents gave details of the sector they worked in. Around half of these classified their sector as, ‘other’ which includes non-profit institutions; those not in education, employment or training; media and other, for example full-time carers. Over a third of those who gave details were from the public sector and the remainder were from the private sector.

The majority of responses (more than 90 per cent) were made via the online survey tool, ‘Survey Monkey’, using a dedicated online form. It should be noted that not all respondents answered all of the questions and therefore analysis reported is based on those who answered the particular question being discussed. Other responses were received in the form of a downloadable questionnaire, by letter, email or other means, for example, online articles. The findings presented here are based on responses provided either online through Survey Monkey or via the downloadable form. All individual responses, where respondents have agreed, will be made available online over the coming months.

4. Overview of responses to questions about domains

The five questions asked about domains were:

- Do you think the proposed domains present a complete picture of well-being?
- Do you think the scope of each of the proposed domains is correct?
- Are there any areas where the proposed domains should be merged or divided further?
- Are the names for the proposed domains easy to understand?
- Do you think that the proposed domains adequately reflect the responses to the national debate?

There was broad overall support for the domains proposed, with many suggesting that more domains are needed in order to provide a complete picture of well-being. The most often cited areas for additions covered the arts, culture, sport, spirituality, religion, faith and access to green spaces. There was little support for merging or dividing the domains further. ONS will now consider how to address the gaps identified while retaining a manageable number of domains.

Domain names also received strong support, with more than three-quarters of those who answered the question agreeing that the domain names are easy to understand. However, there were some suggestions, for example, that the domain name, ‘Governance’ needed to be changed and the
domain, ‘What we do’ should be divided into separate domains for work and non-work as these areas were considered too large to be covered in one domain.

Opinion was divided as to whether the scope of the proposed domains was correct. There appeared to be some confusion over the scope descriptions, with many having taken the measures themselves to represent domain scope, as opposed to the written definition provided. Nevertheless, useful feedback was received on what respondents felt should be in scope and out of scope. ONS will undertake further analysis of the responses and use these to more clearly define the scope of each domain.

When asked whether the domains reflected the responses to the national debate, the majority answered ‘don't know’, which provided us with no clear answer. On reflection, this was a question that may have proved difficult for individual respondents. However, there was no strong feeling that ONS had mis-represented the national debate.

5. Overview of responses to questions about measures

The general questions about measures were:

- Is the number of measures about right?
- Is the balance between objective and subjective measures about right?

Overall, the majority of respondents agreed that the number of measures, and the balance between subjective and objective measures was about right. Of the few who provided additional comments, there was greater support for more rather than fewer measures, and for more rather than less subjective measures. There was also some general support for using measures that could be provided or analysed for sub-groups of the population such as children, young people, older people, the disabled, and those living in different types of family and household circumstances.

6. Summary of responses to questions about measures within domains

Only one question was asked of the headline measure, life satisfaction, within the ‘Individual well-being’ domain, which was ‘Are there any variants on the measure suggested which would be more appropriate?’

The written responses included comments like ‘Provided the other aspects of subjective and psychological well-being are covered in more detailed analyses, this headline measure is suitable’ and suggested variants such as ‘What gives meaning and purpose to your life?’ and ‘Let's have the word contentment. Are people generally content with their overall situation? Satisfaction sounds more like how you feel about some item you have just purchased. Happy would not be right as no-one is happy all the time.’ When variants were suggested they were either in line with the four questions which are being asked in the Integrated Household Survey or they suggested other ways of measuring well-being such as the World Health Organisation quality of life measure or the Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale. Measurement of autonomy and power was also mentioned.

For all other domains the questions were:
• Should any of the measures be removed?
• Are there measures which should be added?
• Are there any variants on the measures suggested which would be more appropriate?
• If only one or two measures should be used which ones should be chosen?

For those who responded ‘yes’ to removing measures from the ‘Our relationships’ domain, the most commonly mentioned was the measure ‘satisfaction with your spouse/partner’. Many suggested that this should be replaced with a measure of satisfaction with either family or friends or those living in the same household. For example ‘Asking about spouse/partner is all very well for couples. There are millions of non-couples and even for couples this is only one relationship. What about parent/child, teacher/pupil, etc’. Loneliness was also mentioned as a possible additional measure. When asked to choose just one or two measures, the most commonly chosen were, ‘satisfaction with your spouse/partner’ and ‘satisfaction with your social life’.

For those who responded ‘yes’ to removing measures from the ‘Health’ domain, the most commonly mentioned was the measure ‘GHQ12 assessment of mental health’. This could in part be because respondents were not familiar with the measure, which is mainly used in health assessments and research studies. Some additions suggested were healthy lifestyle measures. For example ‘There should be measurement of physical fitness, engagement in outdoor leisure activities and sport’ and ‘a measure of access to good quality food and water’. Measures of satisfaction with the quality of, and access to, healthcare were also suggested. When asked to choose just one or two measures, the most commonly chosen were ‘satisfaction with your health’ and ‘satisfaction with your mental well-being’, followed by ‘healthy life expectancy’.

For those who responded ‘yes’ to removing measures from the ‘What we do’ domain, the most commonly mentioned was the measure ‘percentage undertaking any volunteering in the last year’. Written responses included suggestions that unpaid care should be included and that ‘job satisfaction’ should be replaced with some measure of satisfaction with all activities. The most frequently suggested additions or changes for leisure activities were that the quality of, access to and affordability of, leisure activities was more important than the amount of leisure time. For example, ‘Rather than the satisfaction with the amount of leisure time available, is it not more important to know whether people are happy with both the amount of time and the scope of leisure activities available’. Other suggestions included measures related to more specific activities. For example ‘How you spend your leisure time - participation in art/culture/music/sport/history and museums’. When asked to choose just one or two measures, the most commonly chosen was ‘satisfaction with the amount of leisure time you have’.

For those who responded ‘yes’ to removing measures from the ‘Where we live’ domain, the most commonly mentioned was the measure ‘fear of violent crime’ with some suggesting that this should be replaced with fear of all crime and others commenting that this was a very negative measure. Suggested additions included measures relating to transport, housing and access to green spaces. For example one respondent suggested a ‘measure of proximity to amenities and to friends and family’ and another ‘housing condition, overcrowding, under-occupancy, fuel poverty’ should be included. When asked to choose just one or two measures, the most commonly chosen were ‘satisfaction with the local area’ and a ‘measure of access to and quality of the local environment’.
No clear suggestions were apparent from those who responded 'yes' to removing measures from the 'Personal finance' domain. Suggestions for additions and variations to the measures included personal or household debt, the ability to manage finance and the sufficiency of income relative to basic needs. For example 'need something more about basic needs being met'. When asked to choose just one or two measures, the most commonly chosen was 'satisfaction with household income'.

For those who responded 'yes' to removing measures from the 'Education and skills' domain, the most commonly mentioned was 'Programme for International Student Assessment' with some commenting that they did not understand what this was. There were also a number of suggestions that the term 'human capital' would be poorly understood and should be re-named or removed. Additional and variant measures included lifelong learning, access to education and training and satisfaction with the quality of educational provision. When asked to choose just one or two measures, the most commonly chosen was 'qualifications levels of the adult population'.

For those who responded 'yes' to removing measures from the 'The economy' domain, the most commonly mentioned was 'Research and Development expenditure'. Of the very few responses received, the most commonly mentioned additions and variants were inequalities in the economy and personal and national debt. When asked to choose just one or two measures, the most frequently chosen was ‘GDHI per capita’.

For those who responded 'yes' to removing measures from the 'Governance' domain, the most commonly mentioned was 'percentage of registered voters who vote', although there were not many responses to this question. Additions and variants included trust in all officials, local or national engagement, the percentage who do not register to vote and a measure of why registered voters do not vote. When asked to choose just one or two measures, the most frequently chosen was ‘trust in Parliament’.

No clear picture emerges from the few responses to the questions about removing or keeping one or two measures in 'The natural environment' domain. However, there were a number of written responses which suggested that access to green spaces should be added or should be a variant on the measures proposed. Three examples are ‘Access to the natural environment - it is a key quality of life predictor’; ‘Access to green spaces with trees, and people’s relationship to the natural environment should receive more focus’ and 'Instead of protected areas should be some measure of open spaces or non-built up land which is accessible'.

7. Next steps

The consultation has shown that there is broad support for the domains and headline measures of national well-being initially proposed, with several common themes for additions and changes. The next steps are to:

- conduct a more detailed review of all responses to the consultation
- hold further discussions with some respondents and with the programme’s Technical Advisory Group
- make appropriate changes to the domains and measures proposed
- analyse the gaps which have been identified and explore ways to fill them
Revised proposals for domains and headline measures will be published in summer 2012, with the intention of presenting this as an experimental ‘dashboard’ of national well-being headline measures. This will be followed in the autumn by a first annual report on measures of national well-being.

About the ONS Measuring National Well-being Programme

This article is published as part of the ONS Measuring National Well-being Programme. The programme aims to produce accepted and trusted measures of the well-being of the nation - how the UK as a whole is doing. It is about looking at ‘GDP and beyond’ and includes:

- greater analysis of the national economic accounts, especially to understand household income, expenditure and wealth
- further accounts linked to the national accounts, including the UK Environmental Accounts and valuing household production and ‘human capital’
- quality-of-life measures, looking at different areas of national well-being such as health, relationships, job satisfaction, economic security, education, environmental conditions
- working with others to include the measurement of the well-being of children and young people as part of national well-being
- measures of ‘subjective well-being’ - individuals’ assessment of their own well-being
- headline indicators to summarise national well-being and the progress we are making as a society

The programme is underpinned by a communication and engagement workstream, providing links with Cabinet Office and policy departments, international developments, the public and other stakeholders. The programme is working closely with Defra on the measurement of ‘sustainable development’ to provide a complete picture of national well-being, progress and sustainable development.
Background notes

1. Details of the policy governing the release of new data are available by visiting www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/code-of-practice/index.html or from the Media Relations Office email: media.relations@ons.gsi.gov.uk

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This document is also available on our website at www.ons.gov.uk.

Annex A: Summary of domains and headline measures

Table of domains

RFT - well-being domains (48 Kb Excel sheet)