

This blog is written by a member of the independent Commission. These views do not necessarily represent the views of the Archbishops' or the Church of England.

David French, member of the Commission, outlines the growing policy interest in developing a metric for wellbeing as an additional contribution to the UK government's analysis of prosperity, and explores why the Commission should be examining this issue and shaping its development.

For generations, economists, philosophers and shapers of public policy have been concerned with how to assess the wellbeing of people and society. GDP (Gross Domestic Product) has long been recognised as an effective but insufficient measure of the prosperity of a nation and its people, not least because it fails to capture the ‘softer’ aspects of wellbeing so critical to the lives of each one of us - such as loneliness, community or social relations, trust, and resilience.

Thinkers and public figures from the King of Bhutan to Professor Lord Richard Layard, co-director of the LSE’s Programme on Community Wellbeing, have made it their business to push the importance of measuring happiness up the public policy agenda. More recently, policy influencers in the UK have turned their attention to developing reliable measures of wellbeing, alongside GDP, to assess prosperity. In July 2021 HM Treasury published guidelines on wellbeing analysis which state that ‘there is an absence of monetised values [for the softer aspects and the] evidence is clear they are important for wellbeing’¹ ; as well as a discussion paper on ‘the monetisation of life satisfaction effect sizes’² which goes as far as to propose a preferred method of measurement and actual monetary values.

We can be sure that policy interest is gaining traction; and it’s time for the Commission to pay attention!

The What Works Centre for Wellbeing, the UK’s independent body for wellbeing evidence, policy and practice, indicates why it matters to try to quantify the correlation between happy families and wellbeing. It found that ‘Relationships are important for both individual and community wellbeing:

‘For individuals, having a partner is as good for you as being made unemployed is bad for you.

*‘In communities, relationships protect people from the effects of shocks’.*³

The Department of Work and Pensions’ Reducing Parental Conflict programme⁴ has found ‘strong evidence that conflict between parents – whether together or separated – can have a significant negative impact on children’s mental health and long-term life chances.’ Its parental conflict indicator shows that 12% of children in couple-parent families were living with at least one parent reporting relationship distress.

Of course, like any new field of study, measuring wellbeing can have its detractors. Some would argue that it is notoriously hard to achieve reliable measures, not least because of inherent subjectivity of attempts to do so; while others would argue that people’s subjective experience of public policy is precisely what matters. There are also those who would question whether a discipline originally developed for health economics can work in other contexts; or that the approach is weakened because some fields of interest or policy may have little direct bearing on wellbeing.

So what should be the basis for the Commission’s interest? Do the Church of England and other faith groups have something distinctive to say

which might help to shape public thinking about wellbeing? Is there a challenge for how the Anglican Church regards families and family relationships - their quality as well as their structures - as contributors to wellbeing? Should wellbeing be the central aim of government policy relating to families and households?

Concepts of wellbeing are obviously relevant to the theological and social underpinnings of our work and to our understanding of the pressures facing families and households today. In his book 'Reimagining Britain', Archbishop Justin wrote:

*'A happy family life, lived out amid difficulty and challenge, is among the deepest satisfactions of human existence, and when it is prevalent in a society it lays the foundations for hope and national character in a way that is impossible to replicate in any other form of human institution. The family or household is never an idol to be worshipped, but it is at the centre of what is needed for a good life.'*⁵

He challenged the Commission to tell it straight and make recommendations to the Church of England about innovative ways to support families and households to flourish and to seek to shape the trajectory of family policy across government departments. So it is timely to regard government interest in measuring wellbeing as a welcome cue for the Commission to explore its value further and to respond to the challenge.

For all these reasons we are indeed interested in highlighting and quantifying the return on public or philanthropic investment in initiatives and services which make a real difference in the wellbeing of families and households; interested in the economics of family support and family and household flourishing; and, most of all, interested in understanding and enhancing wellbeing as a manifestation of God's real and present love for his world.

David French is a member of the Commission on Families & Households and writes in his personal capacity.

- ¹Wellbeing Guidance for Appraisal: Supplementary Green Book Guidance, HM Treasury, July 2021, p7 (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1005388/Wellbeing_guidance_for_appraisal_-_supplementary_Green_Book_guidance.pdf)
- ²Wellbeing discussion paper: monetisation of life satisfaction effect sizes. A review of approaches and proposed approach, HM Treasury, July 2021 (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1005389/Wellbeing_guidance_for_appraisal_-_background_paper_reviewing_methods_and_approaches.pdf)
- ³Valuation of Wellbeing, Social Value UK, What Works Wellbeing, September 2021

4<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/reducing-parental-conflict-programme-and-resources>

- [5](#)Reimagining Britain: Foundations for Hope, Welby, Archbishop Justin, 2018

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