



Centre for Local
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local work

voice

Well-being and regeneration

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Introduction

At its very heart regeneration is, or at least should be, about people's well-being. It is about reducing the disparities in our society and creating, or redressing, the conditions that enable people to lead happy and fulfilled lives. It is about ensuring that people's social and economic rights are met and that everyone has the opportunity to share the benefits of living and working in safe yet vibrant places. It is about delivering improvements to the natural and built environments, stimulating economic opportunities, ensuring good governance - indeed all of the components of Egan's model for a sustainable communityⁱ. And at its most fundamental regeneration is about supporting individuals to flourish and communities to thrive.

But to what extent is regeneration a transformative process that delivers tangible, sustained improvements in well-being for people and communities in need? In many ways, I'm not sure that we know. Whilst we have undoubtedly got better at measuring the outcomes of regeneration initiatives in terms of economic, social and environmental change we remain less aware of how this change actually impacts upon people's lives - in terms of both how they feel and how they function.

This *Local Work: Voice* introduces some of the findings from the field of well-being (and happiness) research and suggests 'well-being' adds valuable insights for how we both deliver regeneration and assess its impacts in the UK. It is recognised that 'well-being' can be a difficult term given its use in a whole range of contexts but it is used here to complement existing notions of quality of life within the regeneration sector and to offer new insights into people's *experience* of their quality of life.

Focusing on the positive

Well-being is very much in vogue. From Labour peer Richard Layard's book *Happiness* to the BBC's television series *The Happiness Formula*, to Conservative leader David Cameron's recent claim that we should be "focused not just on GDP, but on GWB – General Well-Being", it seems there is growing interest and rhetoric about itⁱⁱ.

Much of the recent discussion on well-being has its origins in the positive psychology movement. The premise of this movement, which has emerged over the last three decades, is that for too long we have sought to understand people and the world around them by focusing on pathology, adopting a model which seeks to identify the causes, manifestations and treatments of disorder and distress. What has been learnt is that whilst this model of 'ill-being' has often helped to diagnose the problem, it has not always moved people closer to the solutions for, or indeed prevention of, those problems.

In response, the aim of positive psychology has been to understand and then build on the factors that support well-being and which enable individuals, communities and societies to flourish. Through this approach, the individual is no longer seen as passive but rather an active agent who is a decision maker, with their own choices and desires, and with different strengths and competencies.

This approach offers remarkable insights for regeneration. Firstly, the parallels that can be drawn between regeneration and the 'old' psychology of ill-being are immediately apparent. Given the prevailing policy and funding contexts for regeneration, there has been an increasing move towards identifying places, communities and individuals by what they do not have. We have all come to learn the rules of the regeneration game that require us to measure what is lacking (jobs, skills, community safety, decent homes etc) and the perverse sense of achievement that ensues if our area gets selected as one of the 'most deprived' when it comes to government

funding decisions. In the process, of course, we have been conveying these messages of ill-being to the communities themselves.

But the emerging science of well-being also talks to regeneration in other ways. It teaches us that by concentrating on problems alone, we will not find solutions. That if we deliver regeneration initiatives that fail to address the psychological needs of human beings, we cannot hope to achieve thriving communities. And if we do not recognise people as assets (in the broadest sense) within their community, we will lose the chance of delivering positive and sustainable change over the longer term.

More recently, psychologists such as Barbara Fredrickson have also suggested that positive feelings actually lead to good functioningⁱⁱⁱ. In other words feeling satisfied or happy is not just an outcome or reward for doing the right things, it also increases our potential for doing well in the future. Fredrickson calls this the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (as it broadens our potential responses to challenging situations and builds our capabilities) and gives weight to the claim that 'well-being' should be a key aim of regeneration practice and wider public policy.

Where does our well-being come from?

To help think about the potential that a well-being approach can offer, it is useful to turn to recent research exploring where happiness and satisfaction with our lives comes from^{iv}. This suggests that, in general, around 50% can be accounted for by our parents and upbringing (which is partially genetic, partially linked to early environments), around 10% is linked to our circumstances (including our income and material possessions), and the remaining 40% related to our activities and behaviours.

Looking firstly at the 10% related to circumstances, researchers have found that material wealth is only weakly correlated with subjective well-being, at both the national and individual levels. Undoubtedly a relationship exists, but after

a certain (surprisingly low) level of wealth is reached, the strength of this relationship declines markedly.^v However, in a regeneration context, where some people remain materially or economically poor, this 10% linked to circumstances is important. Unless people's basic needs for subsistence, shelter and safety are met and everyone's right to a certain quality of life is achieved, we cannot hope to support individual flourishing or thriving communities. At its most acute level, regeneration is therefore about addressing well-being through tackling issues of poverty, ensuring everyone shares the conditions that support healthy human functioning - rather like providing the right nutrients for plants to grow.

But recent work in relation to 'circumstances' has also recognised that people's overall well-being partly depends on how they judge their life relative to those around them (Easterlin 1995)^{vi}. For example, in the USA, it has been found that life satisfaction or happiness is predicted by one's income *relative* to the mean income within the state, even when holding for absolute income.^{vii} Similarly, Layard notes that all else being equal, the level of average happiness in a country is higher the more equally a country's income is distributed. In seeking to explain such trends, two interesting dynamics have been noted – adaptation and comparison. Firstly, we adapt. We tend to learn very quickly to view our current position as normal and as we adapt, our expectations about what will make us happy invariably rise. Secondly, human beings are creatures of comparison and we continually compare ourselves to other people and where we want to be. As we achieve certain goals we change whom we compare ourselves to and find new sources of unhappiness.

The implication of these findings is that increasing inequality is bad for well-being. This is true of income inequality but also regarding access to opportunities, influence over decision making and service provision. This lends support to initiatives that not only aim to deliver improvements for people and areas in need but also seek to 'narrow

the gap' between the most deprived neighbourhoods and local, regional and national averages (e.g. Neighbourhood Renewal).

Beyond issues related to our circumstances it is also what we do, the activities we engage in and how we relate to others (the 40%) that plays a vital role in our well-being. This could include behaviours such as socialising, exercising, and participating in cultural life, as well as activities like working towards goals, caring for others and being engaged through meaningful work. It is here that well-being research perhaps offers the greatest potential to local regeneration policy and practice. Interestingly, whilst the remaining 50% may have once been seen as the private realm of the family, growing recognition of the importance of effective interventions during the early years - reflected in the Government's Sure Start programme and the recent introduction of parenting classes - suggests that this too may be an area in which regeneration can affect change.

Of course, many regeneration practitioners will already recognise the merits of this approach. That we need to not only address the economic circumstances and physical conditions of people and places in need, but also the emotional and social needs of citizens. Part of the problem to date, however, is that acknowledgement of the importance of this approach has not always been matched by an ability to measure its outcomes. And we all know that when it comes to regeneration what gets measured, matters.

Measuring well-being

As a consequence of detailed empirical research in this field, there are now established approaches to measuring people's subjective well-being, at the individual and population (e.g. neighbourhood) levels. Most current research emphasises how people feel about their lives (the happiness agenda) but does not explicitly consider the extent to which actual behaviours or actions are aligned with, or detract from, these feelings.

At **nef**, we are working to an expanded definition of well-being that distinguishes between how people feel and how they

function. These measures can help to assess what are arguably the ultimate ends of regeneration - people leading happy and fulfilled lives without detriment to future generations - as well as the building blocks along the way. These building blocks, for example, could be whether people feel optimistic about the future of their area, if they feel they have the opportunity to use their skills and demonstrate what they are good at, or if people have a sense of autonomy and control over their lives. *Importantly, these well-being measures capture people's perceptions of themselves but also how they view themselves in relation to others.* This moves the debate away from one focused solely on the individual to an approach which also recognises the social context in which people live their lives.

We refer to this as personal feelings and personal functioning and social feelings and social functioning.

- ***How we feel about ourselves (personal feelings)*** – capturing people's direct evaluation of their feelings, as well those factors which have been found to pre-dispose people towards higher levels of well-being. This includes:
 - happiness/life satisfaction
 - satisfaction with specific domains (e.g. standard of living)
 - optimism
 - self-esteem
 - depression

- ***How we function on a personal level (personal functioning)*** – capturing the basic psychological needs that regeneration activity should seek to satisfy in order for people to function in healthy or optimal ways, and those aspects that are linked to enterprising activity and creativity. This includes:
 - autonomy
 - competence and sense of achievement
 - meaning and purpose
 - resilience
 - interest in learning and future orientation

- ***How we feel in relation to those around us (social feelings)*** – capturing the quality of peoples' interactions with others and the key aspects of social relations on personal health and functioning. This includes:
 - social isolation and loneliness
 - sense of belonging (e.g. to people, to place)
 - respectful and fair treatment
 - social support
 - social progress

- ***How we function in a social context (social functioning)*** – capturing pro-social behaviour and regeneration activities that build social capital, which can help to improve the well-being of both the person involved and those around them. This includes:
 - volunteering
 - social engagement and participation
 - caring for others
 - altruism

Rather than replace existing approaches, the use of well-being measures can therefore help to provide an added dimension to assessing quality of life in regeneration areas and enable us to report this through both qualitative and quantitative means. Thus, objective measures such as employment status, crime rates, educational attainment, housing quality, environmental degradation (and increasingly satisfaction with the local area/services measures) can be viewed alongside well-being indicators to demonstrate people's lived experiences and to provide a more holistic view of change at a local level.

Delivering a well-being approach

A key question, of course, is the extent to which a well-being approach can help to inform regeneration practice, in addition to measuring its outcomes. So what does current thinking, and existing practice, suggest are well-being supportive regeneration interventions?

In relation to enterprise, for example, it suggests that looking *within* communities and providing the support, mentoring and guidance to harness people's passions can improve well-being by engaging people in activities that are meaningful to them and

enabling people to demonstrate their competencies. For employment initiatives (including inward investment), it suggests the need to deliver 'good jobs' that pay a living wage *and* meet people's needs for the right balance between interest, autonomy, and challenge in the workplace^{viii}. Not to mention that activities that help reduce depression and raise aspirations will also be required to support those furthest away from the labour market. It suggests that initiatives that help to capture people's creativity, stimulate engagement and enhance their sense of social connectedness are needed in order to effectively address anti-social behaviour at a local level. It suggests that physical renewal schemes will be well-being supportive if they encourage a sense of belonging and facilitate social engagement in the process. And finally, by way of example, it suggests that regeneration interventions that seek to foster optimism and build resilience during periods of transition (e.g. unemployment to employment) will also help to improve people's overall well-being.

Despite the above examples, this is still a relatively new field of enquiry and the efficacy of a specific or targeted well-being strategy remains largely untested in delivery terms. But some areas are now undertaking pioneering work to implement a well-being approach at the local level, often with an explicit focus on their most disadvantaged and neighbourhood renewal areas^{ix}. In some cases, the potential benefits of a well-being approach have been highlighted through the Local Area Agreement process, with interventions currently being delivered by a range of statutory and non-statutory providers. It is from these areas, and others that follow suit, that we will really begin to learn the lessons and build an evidence base, albeit that the outcomes of this endeavour should be more descriptive rather than prescriptive given variations in social, cultural and geographical contexts.

Where next?

As a rapidly emerging agenda, it is worth giving a final thought to where next for well-being and regeneration?

Firstly, I believe we can expect to see a growing policy debate around well-being over the next few years. The political climate for exploring well-being is favourable, with all three major political parties showing an interest in well-being measurement and in interventions to advance well-being. Secondly, changes proposed to the performance framework for local government - through the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Area Assessment - are already advancing the debate about well-being measurement. This is similarly being played out locally as agencies explore the potential for including well-being indicators in their Local Area Agreement and as well-being audits start to be piloted across the country. The result should be a more textured analysis of regeneration outcomes in the future, capturing not only what has changed but the impact of those changes on people's lives. And finally, we should anticipate that those who are currently active in the well-being field will increasingly work across professions, as aspired to in the Egan Skills Review, to help ensure regeneration acts as a transformative process.

Longer-term the challenge is much greater. It extends beyond the realm of the local and beyond the capacities of the regeneration sector alone. Longer-term we need to fundamentally re-think the way in which we design public policy, distribute resources and measure progress in our society. This is required in order to move us towards a society in which higher personal well-being - or individual flourishing - is achieved alongside a sense of shared purpose, both socially and environmentally. For this, we need to look towards government policy at a national level and affect change across all areas of public service delivery^x. By doing so, we will have a much greater chance of supporting the efforts of local regeneration practitioners to achieve communities that are sustainable, socially just and deliver well-being benefits for all.

Local Work is one of a series of regular policy reports produced by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES). CLES is a not-for-profit think doing organisation, consultancy and network of subscribing organisations specialising in regeneration, economic development and local governance. CLES also publishes Bulletin, Rapid Research and bespoke Briefings on a range of issues.

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^x See **nef's Well-being Manifesto: For Flourishing Society** (2004)

ⁱ Egan J (2004) *The Egan Review: Skills for Sustainable Communities* (London: RIBA)

ⁱⁱ See Layard, R. (2005) *Happiness: Lessons From a New Science* (London: Allen Lane), http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5003314.stm and http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/happiness_forumula/4809828.stm

ⁱⁱⁱ Fredrickson, B. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56, 218-226.

^{iv} Lyubomirsky S, Sheldon K M & Schkade D (2005) 'Pursuing happiness: The architecture of sustainable change' *Review of General Psychology* 9, pp. 111-131

^v Frey B S and Stutze A (2002) *Happiness & Economics: How the Economy and Institutions Affect Human Well-being* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

^{vi} Easterlin (1995). "Will Raising the Incomes of all Increase the Happiness of all?" *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 27(1):35-48.

^{vii} Blanchflower & Oswald (2004). "Well-being over time in Britain and the USA" *Journal of Public Economics* 88:1359-86.

^{viii} Marks N (2005) 'Good Jobs: well-being at work'. In *Reflections on employee well-being and the psychological contract*. London: Chartered Institute for Personnel Development.

^{ix} For example, **nef's centre for well-being** is currently working with Thanet District Council, Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council and Lambeth PCT to pilot a well-being approach in regeneration areas.