

# Policies for the people

*What would our public services look like if we used wellbeing evidence to inform policy-making? There would surely be more room for arts and culture, says **Jessica Harris**.*

For years the UK has used a cost-benefit analysis as the basis of public policy: by analysing costs and assessing the benefits of particular services (the theory goes), we can ensure a robust approach to evidence-based policy. But what happens when we ask questions about values and assumptions behind this approach to policy-making? What are the implications for public services if a different set of values is used as the starting point? What if we see things less in terms of financial costs and reflect instead on investing in people's futures?

[The Legatum Institute's recent report Wellbeing and Policy](#) has been a catalyst for an important debate about how and why we should use wellbeing evidence to inform policy-making. Hard though it is to define and measure, it argues that wellbeing can help us focus on the importance of happiness, fulfilment, rights and opportunities in people's lives. The report says that one approach is to use subjective measures of wellbeing and identifies a number of core measures for which there is most evidence of validity and relevance. The primary measure focuses on overall satisfaction with life and the report notes that many studies on life satisfaction show that, while income matters, physical health and mental health are even more important.

How does the arts and cultural sector play into this, and how is work received by those responsible for public services? Here are some examples of work across the country.

[Creativity Works](#) uses creative arts activities as a catalyst for personal and social development with people of all ages and backgrounds. It delivers a wide range of programmes, including work commissioned by Bath and North East Somerset Council (B&NES) to provide courses and groups as part of the local Wellbeing College. Its value is endorsed by Basil Wild, commissioner in adult social care and housing at B&NES: "The emphasis is on self-management and prevention. We talk about wellbeing rather than mental health – we want to mainstream it so we deliberately didn't call it a recovery college. Anybody who wants to improve their wellbeing can take courses. It's breaking down the barriers I suppose."

Its value to group members is clear. In the words of one member: "You look around you, and you see all the women that are in the room discovering that there can be some bright bits of the day... I can't tell you how important it was, and art is such a great escapism."

[Birmingham Town Hall & Symphony Hall](#) (THSH) has a well-established programme for schools, family and community engagement. This includes Generation Ladywood, offering musical opportunities, such as singing, learning to play an instrument and access to performances and events in the community and concert halls. The programme aims to improve wellbeing by boosting confidence and self-esteem, supporting skills development, raising aspirations and reducing isolation. THSH also delivers arts-based qualifications for young people and adults often in challenging personal circumstances, supporting skills development, improved confidence and increased wellbeing.

As Generation Ladywood comes to the end of its current three-year period, consultation is underway with members of the community to explore how the programme could be developed to meet the needs of a broader range of individuals and groups. THSH is also one of a group of arts organisations involved in the Birmingham Cultural Commissioning Locality Project. Supported by the cultural commissioning programme, the group is working with local commissioners to strengthen relationships and understand the opportunities for the arts sector to be commissioned to improve wellbeing of people in the city.

[Creative Minds](#), developed and hosted by South West Yorkshire NHS Foundation Trust, delivers wellbeing through partnership work with community artists and creative organisations. It uses creative activities to increase self-esteem, provide sense of purpose, enable social skills and help community integration. Winner of the Health Service Journal's 2014 Award for Compassionate Patient Care, helping participants take ownership of their own activities is part of the ethos. Deb Taylor, whose recovery from depression was through artistic creativity, spells this out: "Who's the professional – the one with letters after their name or the one who lives with a mental health challenge?"

What then is the place of wellbeing in current policy areas? Here are some examples of its shift to centre stage.

The Care Act April 2015 places overall wellbeing of individuals at the forefront of care and support. This includes physical and mental health, access to employment, education and social opportunities. To fulfil the act, local authorities need to involve a wide range of organisations, including arts and cultural organisations, to facilitate access to services that support the wellbeing of those with support needs as well as their carers.

Wellbeing is central to the direction of travel of the health sector. The [NHS Five Year Forward View](#) sets out a framework for how the health service needs to change and emphasises the importance of wellbeing to reduce health inequalities and avoid huge spend on avoidable illness.

The Department for Culture, Media & Sport's (DCMS) report [Quantifying and Valuing the Wellbeing Impacts of Culture and Sport](#) compares the wellbeing impacts of arts engagement with the income needed to achieve the same wellbeing benefit. From this it puts a monetary value of engagement at around £1,084 per person.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Wellbeing Economics' report [Wellbeing in Four Policy Areas](#) notes that a range of studies have linked arts and cultural engagement with better subjective wellbeing, including links with higher life satisfaction, better physical and mental health, community cohesion, combating loneliness and social isolation, as well as pointing to positive results in specific contexts, such as care home residents and work with young offenders.

So what next in this debate? The APPG on Wellbeing Economics has endorsed calls for wellbeing analysis to be used to make the case for more spending on arts and cultural programmes, and in setting priorities for this spend. Perhaps less coverage has been given to its recommendation that other parts of central government should maximise opportunities for the arts to deliver wellbeing, and that local authorities should consider how cultural commissioning might contribute to priorities identified in their health and wellbeing strategies.

As Arts Council England's Chair, Sir Peter Bazalgette, says: "While medicine attends to the body, the arts care for the person and increasingly the NHS and social services are funding them."