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# Well-being and Public Policy

Utilising a well-being perspective to inform public policy

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# IGEES

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This paper has been prepared by staff in the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform. The views presented in this paper are those of the author alone and do not represent the official views of the Department or Minister.

The purpose of this working paper is to examine what is meant by well-being in a public policy context and how this understanding might be used to inform the policy-making process.

What is outlined in this working paper is based on initial efforts to pilot the application of a perspective shaped by the *Well-being Framework* to public policy in Ireland.

This working paper will be updated as further approaches to applying such a perspective are developed in an Irish policy context.

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## Executive Summary

### A commitment to utilising the Well-being Framework within the policy process

In *Programme for Government – Our Shared Future*, the Government has not only committed to developing a set of well-being indices to create a well-rounded, holistic view of how Irish society is faring, but has also committed to ensuring that the *Well-being Framework* would be utilised in a systematic way across government policy making in evaluating programmes, reporting progress and setting budgetary priorities (as an important complement to existing economic measurement tools).

The cumulative benefit of the development of a *Well-being Framework for Ireland* and its integration into the policy process is that it will support efforts to deliver greater economic prosperity and social cohesion by:

- Providing an overarching structure to public policy that can contribute to the development of a shared understanding within policy communities and society more generally of what makes for better lives;
- Focusing attention on differences in people’s experiences and policy outcomes, and provide an opportunity to examine and reflect on the progress of Irish society as well as identify key challenges and trade-offs to better inform decision making;
- Being used in tandem with other Government initiatives to focus attention on how limited public resources can be used efficiently to deliver effective public services, identify effective policy actions and enhance strategic alignment across departments promoting effective coordination and cooperation between departments and agencies in implementing policy as well as consideration of cost-effectiveness and sustainability; and
- Providing a foundation structure for the development of more bespoke sectoral specific well-being sub-frameworks (e.g., children and young people, older people, people in employment, new communities in Ireland).

The Government has published a number of reports on an initial *Well-being Framework for Ireland* that set out an overarching vision of “enabling all our people to live fulfilled lives now and into the future”. The *Well-being Framework* is a multi-dimensional approach that seeks to support the development of an understanding of people’s lives. A dashboard of indicators has also been published that provides a high-level holistic description of Ireland’s progress over time and in comparison to other countries.

While the development of a *Well-being Framework for Ireland* and dashboard are key parts of this important cross-government initiative, by themselves they will not fulfil the Programme for Government’s ambition of improving policy and decision-making. The challenge is to develop ways of utilising the *Well-being Framework* within the policy process, whether examining existing policies and programmes or designing and implementing new policies and programmes.

This working paper draws on work to date undertaken by the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform’s Well-being Public Policy Unit that has sought to apply a perspective

shaped by the *Well-being Framework* to policy analysis. What is included in this working paper outlines the various approaches that have been used to date and what has been learned from that experience. This approach has been adopted because the intention is to develop the use of such a well-being perspective in a progressive and proportionate way that allows for a deepening of people’s understanding of well-being in an Irish public policy context and the development of an approach to public policy that is accessible and useful. As a consequence, this working paper is not intended to be a comprehensive presentation of all the ways in which a well-being perspective could be applied to public policy. This working paper will be updated as further work applying a well-being perspective is carried out and different methodologies and approaches are utilised.



## What is meant by “well-being” in a public policy context?

To address the challenge of utilising the *Well-being Framework* within the policy process, it is first necessary to articulate what is meant by well-being in a public policy context. The notion of “well-being” may be familiar, but it is difficult to define. While people sometimes think about it in general terms, such as the things that are good in people’s lives or with people feeling satisfied, happy or comfortable with their lives, the international experience suggests that in a public policy context it is useful to conceptualise well-being by means of holistic multi-dimensional frameworks that combine subjective and objective notions of well-being and recognise the potential tension between supporting well-being today and how doing so might impact on well-being in the future.

The *Well-being Framework* is grounded in Sen’s capability approach (“capabilities of persons to lead the kinds of lives they value – and have reason to value”) and sets out a vision of “enabling all our people to live fulfilled lives now and into the future”. From a public policy perspective, the capability approach:

- Focuses attention on describing people’s lives and the challenges they face. In particular, it can contribute to the policy-making process in terms of defining the policy challenge and setting clear policy goals to be achieved;
- Highlights how the context within which the policy intervention is to be implemented is complex (i.e., society is complex). This understanding focuses attention on the broad

range of interacting factors that ought to be taken into account when designing and implementing public policy to address policy challenges;

- Conceptualises public policy as, in general, providing opportunities for people to change or progress their lives, and, more specifically, as a way of intervening in a targeted manner in cases when opportunity may have been denied by the context in which a person lives (e.g., by poverty or deprivation);
- Offers a multi-dimensional approach to understanding people's experiences;
- Recognises human diversity and the need when examining well-being to look beyond average conditions (societal wide estimates) to differences in people's experiences. There may be asymmetries in the distribution of opportunities between individuals and/or between different groups of people as well as persisting advantage and disadvantage across generations.

## What can we learn from those who have sought to apply a well-being perspective to public policy?

One way of addressing the challenge of utilising a well-being perspective in a public policy context is to consider the experience of other countries. The OECD (2021) has identified five institutional building blocks that underpin a well-being approach:

- Multi-dimensional well-being monitoring – To broaden the information used in the policy process to take account of what matters for people's well-being today (current and distributional well-being outcomes) and in the future (resources for future well-being).
- Evidence-based priorities – To prioritise policy objectives based on multi-dimensional well-being evidence (e.g., link well-being evidence to government agenda setting and policy prioritisation within their budgetary processes).
- Long-term focus – To support a more future-focussed and anticipatory approach to public policy (e.g., encourage the consideration and development of prevention and early intervention approaches to addressing policy challenges).
- Integration and collaboration – To bring a multi-dimensional approach to considerations of policy challenges (e.g., to enable an integrated and collaborative approach to the design and implementation of public policy).
- Actively connecting – To develop a shared vision of what matters most to societal well-being (e.g., important that the development of the well-being initiative is supported by inclusive and transparent engagement with private and civil society stakeholders).

The OECD (2013a) has set out four ways in which measures of subjective well-being are used as part of the policy process.

- Complement other outcome measures – Provide additional information to what has already been captured by more conventional indicators.



- Better understand the drivers of subjective well-being – Provide an empirical way of testing and identifying what factors are critical aspects of people’s well-being (i.e., examine the relationship between outcomes that measure progress and people’s perceptions of their well-being).
- Support policy evaluation and cost-benefit analysis (especially where non-market outcomes are involved).
- Identify potential policy problems – Help set policy default options (e.g., setting policy defaults to influence people’s behaviour in positive directions based on how people respond differently to “default” options such as “opt in” or “opt out” clauses).

Durand and Exton (2019) have compared the experience of various national governments in putting well-being at the heart of public policy by integrating evidence on well-being into decision-making:

- Integrating dashboards of well-being indicators into budget decision-making and national development strategies.
- Using legislation to lock an outcomes-based approach into government processes.
- Creating new institutions or government posts with responsibility for well-being.
- Building civil service capacity and shifting culture of practice within institutions.

While the experience of others is important to addressing the challenge of how to apply a well-being perspective to public policy, it is important to ensure that it is located within the existing Irish context (i.e., that what is proposed is meaningful and reasonable). It is not just enough to set out an elegant approach to applying well-being to public policy that draws on “best” practice (i.e. technical change), it is equally important that what is set out is seen as relevant and useful in an Irish policy making context, and that it is used (i.e., adaptive change).

## How does well-being fit within an Irish public policy context?

The well-being initiative is part of an ongoing process of reform that has developed the various elements of Ireland’s performance framework. The performance framework is underpinned by a number of initiatives that contribute to:

- Demonstrating how public money is used (Performance Budgeting initiative);
- Utilising evidence to inform policy-making (Public Spending Code); and
- Developing the capacity of the civil service to undertake evidence informed policy work (establishment of the Irish Government Economic & Evaluation Service).

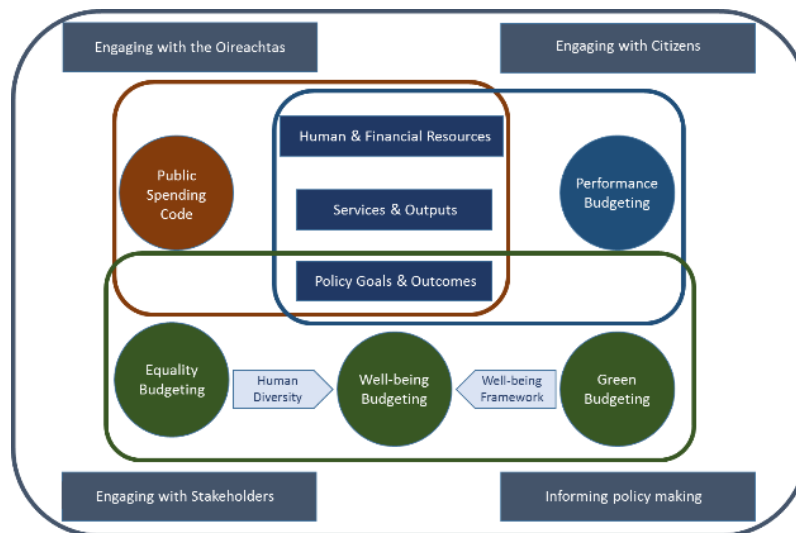
In more recent years, the development of the performance framework has placed an increasing focus on policy goals and the impact of public policy on people’s lives (i.e., Equality Budgeting and Green Budgeting and now Well-being Budgeting).

These recent goal-focussed initiatives share key components. For instance, the Equality Budgeting and Well-being initiatives have an explicit focus on how people’s experiences differ from one another and how the impact of public policy can differ between groups of people.



These approaches can contribute to better public policy by supporting the development of more refined descriptions of policy challenges, the articulation of clearer policy goals and identification of people who may benefit from more targeted policy interventions.

There is clearly a link between the Green Budgeting and Well-being initiatives as sustainability is a cross-cutting theme in the *Well-being Framework*, and one of the dimensions of the *Well-being Framework* is concerned with the quality of the environment in the place in which people live and work (i.e., Environment, Climate & Biodiversity dimension). From another perspective, the impact of climate change on how people live is likely to be reflected in other dimensions of the *Well-being Framework* (e.g., people’s health, damage to infrastructure, the quality of houses). In addition, an equality perspective is also relevant as the consequences of efforts to address the causes of climate change and mitigate its impacts are likely to vary between groups of people in Irish society.



## What are the key lessons of initial efforts to apply a well-being perspective in an Irish policy context?

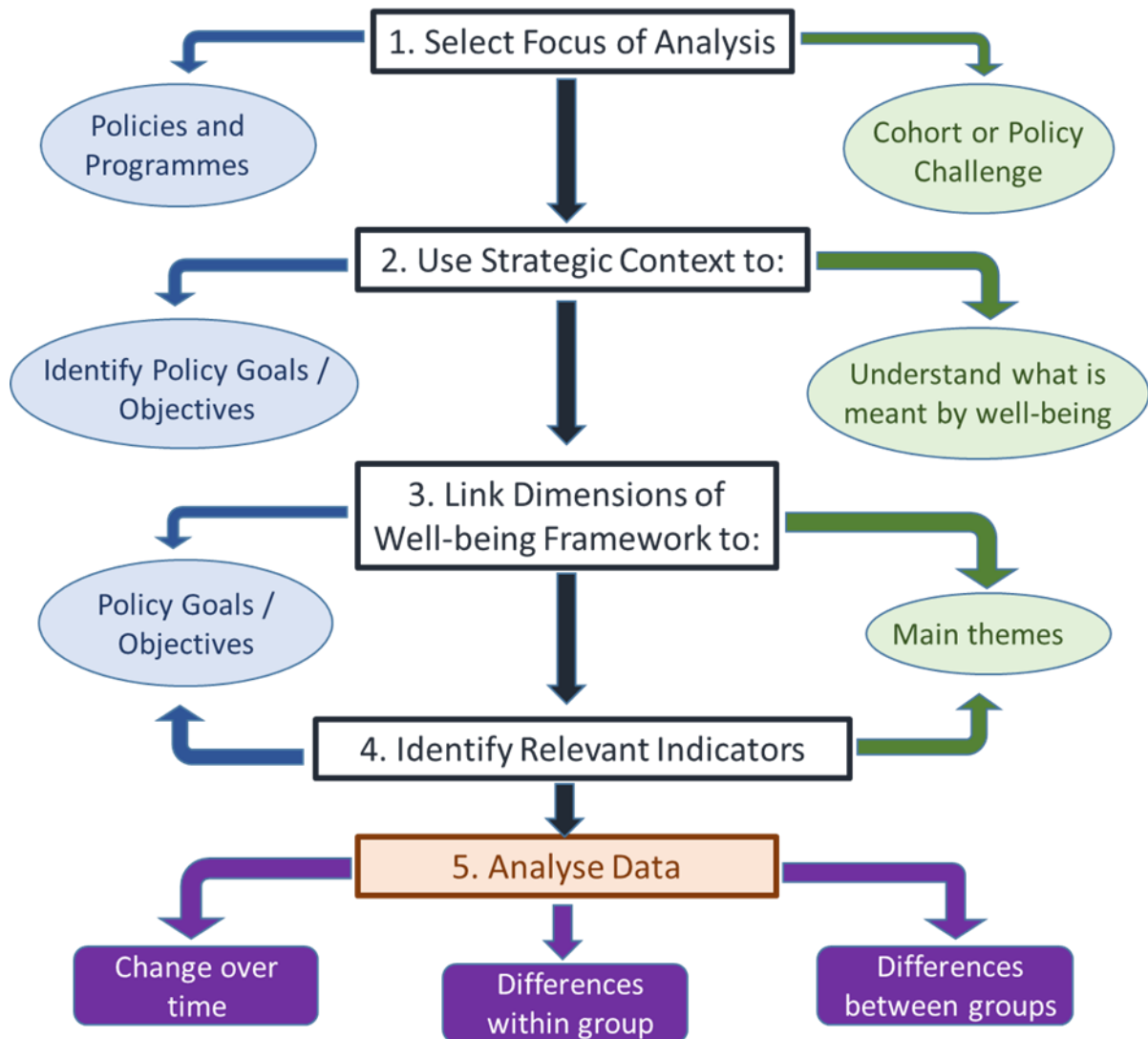
The WPPU has undertaken pilot work to develop an understanding of how a perspective shaped by the *Well-being Framework* might be applied in an Irish public policy context. The key features of the approach used examine the relationship between well-being and public policy include:

- The “strategic context”, that is, the key strategic policy documents that contribute to an understanding of what is meant by well-being for a particular policy area and the relevant policy goals and objectives associated with a set of policies and programmes.
- A set of indicators that are relevant to both the well-being dimensions and the policy under consideration.

In the pilot work, the steps used to examine the relationship between well-being and policy were to:

- Link the dimensions of the *Well-being Framework* with:

- The key aspects or themes of what is meant by well-being for a particular cohort or policy area; and / or
- The policy goals associated with a set of policies and programmes; and
- Examine indicators to address key questions such as: How has well-being changed over time? How does the well-being of a particular group of people compare to that of people in general? How does well-being differ within the group of people that is the primary focus of a public policy?



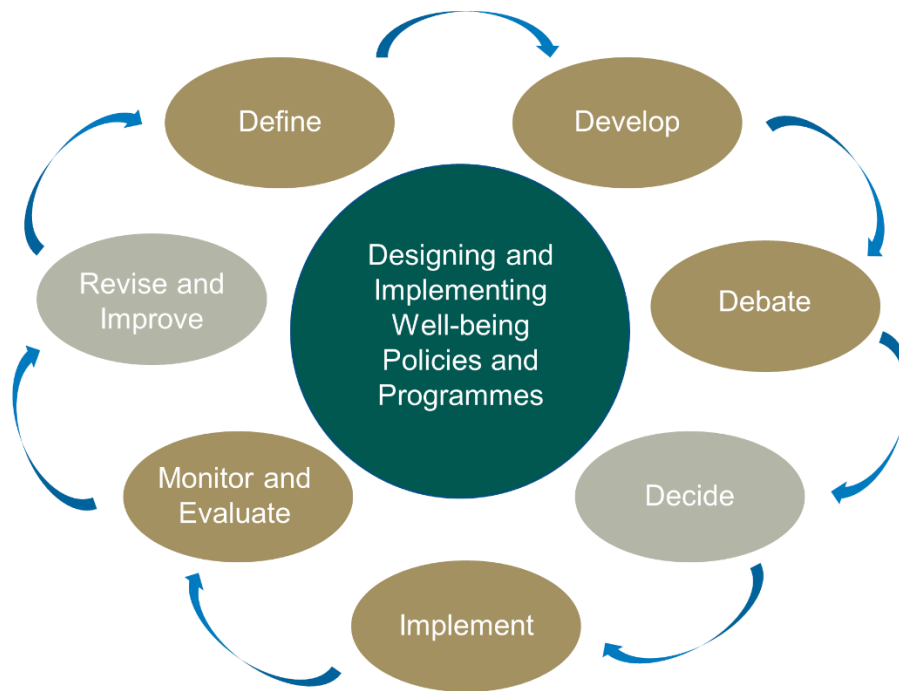
What is presented in this working paper seeks to address three key questions that are intended to support initial work in applying the *Well-being Framework* to examining the relationship between well-being and public policy:

- How can existing public policy be linked to the Well-being Framework?
  - Policy goals and objectives set out in key strategic policy documents are central to establishing a link between public policy and the *Well-being Framework*.
  - Policy goals or objectives are explicit statements of the intended results of the policy or programme. They provide an opportunity to state the benefits of a policy, programme or programmatic intervention to the individuals who access a service, and to society more generally. It is the stated “benefits” that identify the particular well-being dimension(s) that should be associated with the policy goal or objective.
  - As the intention is to provide an empirical description of the relationship between well-being and public policy, it is necessary to identify indicators that are relevant to both the well-being dimension and the public policy under consideration.
  
- How does the quality of evidence inform an understanding of the relationship between well-being and public policy?
  - When examining the relationship between well-being and public policy, it is important to acknowledge how differences in the quality of evidence inform understanding of the nature of that relationship (i.e., how direct the relationship is between the policy intervention and the policy outcome).
  - The highest quality of evidence are the *results* (or dependent variables) from rigorously conducted evaluations such as Randomised Controlled Trials (RCT) or Quasi-experiments. When indicators of this quality are used, it is possible to state that the policy or programme *has* (or *has not*) *enhanced* a particular dimension of well-being (or a particular aspect of a dimension of well-being). However, such rigorously conducted evaluations are expensive, are relatively uncommon in an Irish context and the associated methodologies may not necessarily be appropriate for some policy challenges.
  - The work undertaken by the WPPU has relied on impact indicators and context indicators.
  - *Impact indicators* are indicators that are relevant measures of the intended well-being outcome (as set out in a Programme Logic Model). The focus of the analysis is on the overall trend or direction of travel, that is, is the indicator demonstrating progress toward an intended goal. With an *impact indicator*, the policy or programme might be described as being *associated with the increase* (or *decrease*) in a particular dimension of well-being (or a particular aspect of a dimension of well-being).
  - *Context indicators* are relevant measures of the intended well-being outcome (i.e., encompassed in the stated policy goal) but there is an indirect link between the policy outcome and the public good or service (i.e., through a complex series of intervening variables and / or feedback loops). Such indicators may also help understand demand or need for a particular public service. With a *context indicator*, the policy or programme might be described as being *implemented in the context of improvement* (or *deterioration*) on a particular dimension of well-being (or a particular aspect of a dimension of well-being).

- How does the approach to examining data inform an understanding of the relationship between well-being and public policy?
  - To date, the work of the WPPU has tended to consider three basic questions:
    - How has well-being changed over a period of time?
    - How does the well-being of a particular group of people compare to that of people in general?
    - How does well-being differ between sub-groups of the group that is the primary focus of a public policy?
  - These questions are important because they shape the perspective from which the relationship between well-being and policy is examined, and a given perspective can shape conclusions about the relationship. For instance, what might be seen as the well-being of a particular group of people improving over time may be tempered by the realisation that their well-being is less than that of people in general, or that the well-being of some within the group is better than others.

## How might a well-being perspective inform the design and implementation of public policy?

The final aspect of addressing the challenge of utilising a well-being perspective in a public policy context is to consider how it might inform efforts to design and implement effective public policy. While this will be the subject of a specific piece of work, it is nonetheless worth noting that by locating well-being within the various stages of a policy making cycle, an evidence-for-policy approach can bring to the fore key issues, and provide insights into methods and approaches that inform the design and implementation of effective policies and programmes. In particular, it may enhance the clarity around the development of policy goals and objectives, especially in those cases where policy challenges and policy interventions are complex.



## How will the use of a well-being perspective enhance public policy in Ireland?

As an approach to public policy, a multi-dimensional well-framework can assist the policy making process in understanding people's experiences by focusing on:

- Describing people's lives and the challenges they face when defining the policy challenge (to be addressed) and setting clear policy goals (to be achieved);
- Taking account of differences between people (their needs and priorities, individual abilities and contexts, what matters to them in terms of living lives that are meaningful and fulfilled); and
- Considering the broad range of interacting factors that shape the world in which people live.

The cumulative benefit of the development of a *Well-being Framework for Ireland* and its integration into the policy process is that it will support efforts to deliver greater economic prosperity and social cohesion by:

- Opportunities to examine and reflect on the progress of Irish society;
- Differences in people's experiences and policy outcomes;
- Identify key challenges and trade-offs to better inform decision making;
- Identify effective policy actions; and
- Enhance strategic alignment across departments promoting effective coordination and cooperation between departments and agencies in implementing policy as well as consideration of cost-effectiveness and sustainability.

It is intended that this working paper will be updated on an ongoing basis as different methodologies and approaches associated with a well-being perspective are applied in an Irish policy context.

# 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this working paper is to examine what is meant by well-being in a public policy context and how this understanding might be used to inform the policy-making process. The focus of this working paper is very much on the experience of applying a perspective shaped by the *Well-being Framework* in an Irish public policy context. What is described in this working paper are approaches that have been applied as part of a pilot exercise to using such a well-being perspective, and the main lessons that have been drawn from that experience. As a consequence, this working paper is not intended to be a comprehensive presentation of all the ways in which a well-being perspective could be applied to public policy. This approach has been adopted because the intention is to develop the use of a well-being perspective in a progressive and proportionate way that allows for a deepening of people's understanding of well-being in an Irish public policy context and the development of an approach to public policy that is accessible and useful. Over the next few years, as further work is undertaken and different methodologies and approaches are utilised, this working paper will be updated.

Over the last decade or so there has been an increasing focus on the issue of “well-being”. This increased salience has been particularly evident through the development of well-being frameworks, most notably by the OECD and New Zealand. While this change has been driven by an acknowledgement of the limitations of economic growth as a measure of how society and people are progressing, it is not something new:

Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.<sup>2</sup>

In the *Programme for Government – Our Shared Future*, the Government has set out a commitment to developing a set of well-being indices to create a well-rounded, holistic view of how Irish society is faring. In June 2022, the Government published *Understanding Life in Ireland: The Well-being Framework. Second Report*. (This develops an initial report that was published in July 2021, *First Report on a Well-being Framework for Ireland*.) The *Well-being Framework for Ireland* is composed of 11 dimensions of well-being. It provides an overarching structure that can contribute to the development of a shared understanding within policy communities and society more generally of what makes for better lives.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the Government has also committed to ensuring that the *Well-being Framework* would be utilised in a systematic way across government policy making in evaluating programmes, reporting progress and setting budgetary priorities (as an important complement to existing economic measurement tools). While high-level well-being frameworks are important in terms of developing a shared understanding of what makes for better lives and

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<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to Prof. Arthur Grimes and Dr. Conal Smith (Victoria University of Wellington), Tim Hughes (The Treasury, Government of New Zealand) and Dr. Claire Hickey (Centre for Effective Services) for their comments and guidance on an initial draft of this paper. The author is also grateful to colleagues in NESC and members of the Interdepartmental Group on Well-being for their comments and observations on later drafts of this paper. As ever, all errors and omissions are the responsibility of the author.

<sup>2</sup> Robert F. Kennedy, University of Kansas, 18 March 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Both of these reports and other relevant materials are available at:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/1fb9b-a-well-being-framework-for-ireland-join-the-conversation/>



influencing public debate on strategic priorities, such frameworks do not in-and-of-themselves fulfil the ambition of improving policy and decision-making. Instead, as the *First Report* notes, if the framework is to fulfil the ambition of improving policy and decision-making, then it is important to go beyond presenting high-level indicators and develop a knowledge base around well-being as a policy objective and integrate well-being into the various stages of the policy making process.

This working paper builds on the *First* and *Second Reports* by considering how the initial *Well-being Framework for Ireland* might be utilised in a systematic way to inform public policy in Ireland. The first part of this paper locates the well-being initiative within the broader suite of reforms that have contributed to developing Ireland's performance framework over the course of the last decade or so.

The working paper then examines well-being in a public policy context. Well-being is sometimes associated with people feeling satisfied, happy or comfortable with their lives. Public policy that "enhances well-being" has an obvious appeal as few, if any, would argue that policy should increase dissatisfaction, unhappiness or discomfort. However, such an approach may see people as consumers (i.e., emphasising a prudential or self-responsibility approach as to what makes them feel happy or satisfied). What it may miss is the idea of people as citizens. Such a perspective requires a broader understanding of people's lives and how a multitude of factors can impact not only on their happiness or satisfaction but also on their ability to progress and change.<sup>4</sup>

This broader more holistic approach to well-being is evident in Sen's (1999: 18) capability approach, "capabilities of persons to lead the kind of lives they value – and have reason to value". From a policy-making perspective, the capability approach's concern with what a person can be and what they want to achieve presents public policy as a means of creating opportunities for people to change and progress their lives.

The remainder of the working paper considers how such an understanding of well-being might be applied in a public policy context. It does so by, first, noting lessons from the experiences of other countries to place a well-being perspective within the policy making process. That said, it should not be forgotten that context matters, and that what is presented as a mature initiative in any one country is likely to be a consequence of a long process of development.<sup>5</sup>

The working paper then focuses on well-being within an Irish context. At this initial phase of the well-being initiative, two main elements of how a well-being perspective might be utilised have been identified:

- Set out an overarching *Well-being Framework* that defines well-being in terms of key dimensions and aspects that are important in the Irish context. This is summarised in Chapter 5 as the *Well-being Framework* is covered in detail in the two reports that have been referenced above.

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<sup>4</sup> Edwards and Imrie, 2008; Sointu, 2005; Barnes, Taylor and Ward, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, many point to the work on well-being in New Zealand. As Huang, de Renzio and McCullough (2020) observe it is important to acknowledge the broader context within which New Zealand's focus on well-being developed. In the 1980s and 1990s, New Zealand introduced a series of reforms focussed on promoting economic growth and driving efficiency through the introduction of private sector practices in government. Initially, these reforms were perceived as being successful, but by the mid-1990s there were growing concerns about poverty and inequality. Over the course of the last decade or so, New Zealand has sought to address these and other challenges by placing an explicit focus on inter-generational well-being and thinking about policy impacts through the development of its *Living Standards Framework* and, more recently, its *Well-being Budget*.

- Use that *Framework* to identify relevant indicators that will support the measurement of well-being at different levels of policy analysis:
  - Cross-government (meta level) – High-level indicators are used to develop a summary description of how the various dimensions of well-being have progressed over time. (See Chapter 5 for a summary of the Well-being Dashboard that is hosted by the Central Statistics Office);
  - Locate well-being within the public policy environment as described by existing policies and programmes (macro level) – Utilise the *Well-being Framework* to understand the relationship between well-being and public policy. Indicators are used to provide a retrospective, quantitative description of progress toward achieving stated policy goals in order to inform efforts to improve the impact of public policy on people’s lives. (See Chapter 6); and
  - Build knowledge of well-being as a policy objective in order to better understand complex policy challenges and inform the design and implementation of more effective policies and programmes (micro level). The purpose of Chapter 7 is to highlight key issues around the use of a well-being perspective to inform the various stages of a policy cycle. It is intended that these issues will be given greater consideration as part of a separate piece of work.

The cumulative benefit of the development of a *Well-being Framework for Ireland* and its integration into the policy process is that it will support efforts to deliver greater economic prosperity and social cohesion by:

- Providing an overarching structure to public policy that can contribute to the development of a shared understanding within policy communities and society more generally of what makes for better lives<sup>6</sup>;
- Focusing attention on differences in people’s experiences and policy outcomes, and provide an opportunity to examine and reflect on the progress of Irish society as well as identify key challenges and trade-offs to better inform decision making;
- Being used in tandem with other Government initiatives to focus attention on how limited public resources can be used efficiently to deliver effective public services, identify effective policy actions, and enhance strategic alignment across departments promoting effective coordination and cooperation between departments and agencies in implementing policy as well as consideration of cost-effectiveness and sustainability; and
- Providing a foundation structure for the development of more bespoke sectoral specific well-being sub-frameworks (e.g., children and young people, older people, people in employment, new communities in Ireland).

How these benefits are achieved will take time. This working paper sets out some initial ways of applying a perspective shaped by the *Well-being Framework* in an Irish public policy context. As experience and understanding of well-being and public policy deepens, this working paper will be updated.

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<sup>6</sup> The development of a well-being perspective is not simply about balancing material and non-material sources of well-being, but is also about considering the balance between, for instance, the needs of current and future generations, differing cultural perspectives on well-being, well-being of the individual and groups in society as well as the environment and biodiversity. (The author is grateful to Tim Hughes for highlighting these points.)

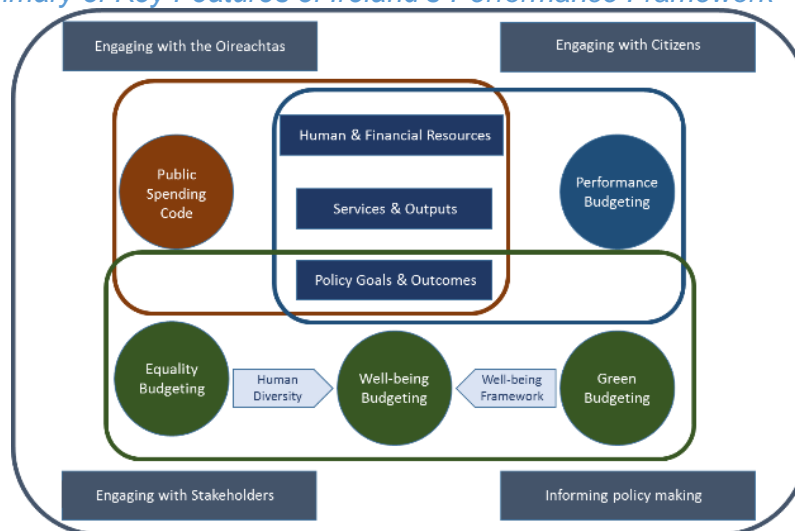
## 2. Well-being Initiative and the Performance Framework

The purpose of this Chapter is to outline how the well-being initiative is located within an overall performance framework that seeks to enhance the use of evidence in the policy process and ensure that the limited available public resources are used efficiently to deliver effective public services. Furthermore, as the well-being initiative is associated with change, this Chapter also considers the challenges associated with the development and introduction of a new approach within the policy making process; especially one that is to be utilised in a systematic way across government.

### 2.1 Location of the Well-being Initiative in the Performance Framework

The well-being initiative is part of an ongoing process of reform that has been associated with the development of Ireland's performance framework. As with each of the elements of the performance framework that have been introduced over the course of the last decade, the well-being initiative is important in its own right, and as part of an overall structure that is seeking to improve how public money is best used to enhance the lives of people living in Ireland. Figure 1 provides a high-level summary of the location of the well-being initiative within the performance framework.

Figure 1 – Summary of Key Features of Ireland's Performance Framework



The performance framework is underpinned by a number of initiatives that were introduced at the start of this reform process. These reforms contribute to:

- Demonstrating how public money is used (Performance Budgeting initiative);
- Utilising evidence to inform policy-making (Public Spending Code); and
- Enhancing the capacity of the civil service to undertake evidence informed policy work (establishment of the Irish Government Economic & Evaluation Service).

Both the Performance Budgeting initiative and the Public Spending Code are central to how the *Well-being Framework* will be utilised as a way of informing public policy. These key initiatives have a shared focus on the:

- Resources provided to support the implementation of policies and programmes (i.e., human and financial);
- Services these resources are used to deliver; and
- Results or impacts that these services have on people's day-to-day lives.

These initiatives differ in terms of the perspectives they bring to questions around the efficient use of public resources to deliver effective public services. The Performance Budgeting initiative has shifted the balance of emphasis away from a single focus on the provision of resources to one that is more concerned with how those resources are used. The Public Spending Code focuses on appraising proposed programmes and schemes and evaluating existing programmes and schemes.

In more recent years, the development of the performance framework has placed an increasing focus on policy goals and the impact of public policy on people's lives (i.e., Equality Budgeting and Green Budgeting and now Well-being Budgeting). These initiatives are concerned with questions around the intention of government policy, and progress toward achieving policy goals, within the broader context of limited public resources.

These recent goal-focussed initiatives also share key components. For instance, the Equality Budgeting and Well-being initiatives have an explicit focus on how people's experiences differ from one another and how the impact of public policy can differ between groups of people. These approaches can contribute to better public policy by supporting the development of more refined descriptions of policy challenges, the articulation of clearer policy goals and identification of people who may benefit from more targeted policy interventions.

There is a clear link between the Green Budgeting and Well-being initiatives as sustainability is a cross-cutting theme in the *Well-being Framework*, and one of the dimensions of the *Well-being Framework* is concerned with the quality of the environment in the place in which people live and work (i.e., Environment, Climate & Biodiversity dimension). From another perspective, the impact of climate change on how people live is likely to be reflected in other dimensions of the *Well-being Framework* (e.g., people's health, damage to infrastructure, the quality of houses). In addition, an equality perspective is also relevant as the consequences of efforts to address the causes of climate change and mitigate its impacts are likely to vary between groups of people in Irish society.

Over the course of the last decade, Ireland has implemented a series of Spending Reviews that have utilised an approach that focuses on a few elements of a Programme Logic Model and a number of the evaluation criteria. (See Table 1) It is likely that any initial policy analysis of the relationship between well-being and public policy will benefit from being able to apply such an approach.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See: *Public Spending Code – Value for Money Review and Focused Policy Assessment Guidelines*  
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/public-spending-code/>

*Table 1 – Programme Logic Model and Evaluation Criteria*

Key Elements of the Programme Logic Model	
Strategic Objective	Described the desired outcome at the end of the process. The objectives should ideally be described in both qualitative and quantitative terms.
Input (or resources)	The financial input is the budget made available to the programme. There are also non-financial inputs such as human inputs (e.g., staff), physical inputs (e.g., buildings and equipment), data inputs (e.g., information flows) and systems inputs (e.g., IT, procedures).
Activity (or processes)	Collections of tasks and work steps performed to transform inputs into the outputs of a programme.
Output	The goods or services that are produced by a programme.
Result	The effects of the outputs on the targeted beneficiaries in the immediate or short-term.
Impact	The wider effects of a programme from a sectoral or national perspective and include the medium-to-long-term effects on the targeted beneficiaries.
Key Evaluation Criteria	
Rationale	Programme objectives and their validity (e.g., Why is a public policy intervention necessary? What market failure is being addressed? How does the programme fit with other programmes that target the same economic or social issue or the same category of beneficiary?)
Efficiency	How resources are transformed into outputs (e.g., questions around timeliness and output cost)
Effectiveness	The extent of achievement of the specific objectives in terms of results (e.g., What did the programme achieve? What is the performance gap between actual and expected results?)
Impact	Focus on wider socio-economic effects as well as the medium-to-long-term impacts on target beneficiaries (e.g., What are the wider socio-economic effects of the programme? What are the medium-to-long-term impacts of the programme on targeted beneficiaries?)
Continued Relevance	Justification for continued allocation of public money to a programme (e.g., Has the programme been achieving its objectives? Is the rationale being kept under review? Is the service being provided by another body either public, private or community?)

## 2.2 A Process of Change: Development and Progression of the Well-being Initiative

The purpose of this working paper is to consider how the initial *Well-being Framework for Ireland* might be utilised in a systematic way to inform public policy in Ireland; to develop the well-being initiative so that it proves to be a useful tool within the policy making process. To do so, it is necessary to go beyond simply describing the *Well-being Framework* and encouraging others to apply it to their policy work. What is included in this working paper is based on initial efforts to apply the *Well-being Framework* to aspects of public policy in Ireland. The experience of doing so is intended to help inform and support the work of others who wish to utilise this *Framework*. Over time, as a body of policy work is developed, understanding of well-being in an Irish public policy context will be enhanced and approaches for doing so will be progressed. The intention is to develop the use of a well-being perspective in a progressive and proportionate way that allows for a deepening of people’s understanding of well-being in an Irish public policy context and the development of an approach to public policy that is accessible and useful. Over the next few years, as further work is undertaken and different methodologies and approaches are utilised, this working paper will be updated.

If the *Well-being Framework* is to be of use in an Irish policy-making context then it is necessary to think about more than just the structural parts and components of the initiative (i.e., the “what” or technical change associated with an initiative). It is also important to consider how people might try to use or implement this initiative (the “how” and “why” or adaptive change associated with an initiative). Despite people’s best intentions, it is relatively “easy” to focus on what should be part of a “process” than it is to think about the challenges those trying to use it are likely to encounter. Initiatives of this type are often trying to change how people think (i.e., how they understand or conceptualise a policy challenge) and behave (i.e., initially use the new initiative and then change how they implement or deliver a policy or programme). Those who might use a new initiative as part of their work, are often far removed from its design.

Figure 2 seeks to set out a summary understanding of the relationship between technical and adaptive change. In this case, the “pilot-reform” position might be seen as reflecting the status-quo at the time of the publication of the initial *Well-being Framework for Ireland*, following on from the Government’s commitments in the *Programme for Government*.

Figure 2 – Process of Change

<b>Adaptive Change</b>	<b>Mature</b>	A few public service bodies have independently developed their own well-being approach to inform policy process within their organisations.	All public service bodies are fully engaged in utilising all elements of the well-being approach and recognise it as making a valuable contribution to the policy process and the work of their organisation.
	<b>Initial</b>	No consideration of well-being as part of the policy process.	A well-being framework has been developed and public service bodies are complying with reporting requirements, but few regard the framework as having any relevance to policy process or value to the work of their organisation.
		<b>Pilot-Reform</b>	<b>Mature Post-Reform</b>
		<b>Technical Change</b>	

The “mature post-reform” stage might be seen as reflecting a time in the future when a reform initiative has been developed and progressed such that there is a structured approach with streamlined processes and clarity about which public service bodies are included and their roles. From the point of view of the well-being initiative, this stage might describe a situation in which:

- The *Well-being Framework* has been developed over a number of iterations;
- There is a significant body of work that has sought to understand well-being as a policy objective in an Irish context;
- Guidance has been developed to support an evidence informed approach to the design and implementation of policies that seek to enhance well-being of people living in Ireland;
- Methods have been developed to present and consider questions relating to trade-offs between well-being dimensions, issues of sustainability, resilience; and
- There are mechanisms to support enhanced cooperation and coordination between bodies pursuing similar policy goals.

The move from “pilot-reform” stage to “mature post-reform” stage will require change, with change taking place in a context of embedded practices, processes and procedures as well as guidance around the development of public policy. However, the challenge is not to impose a new way of doing things from the centre or to add another way of doing policy to an already crowded field. Instead, the challenge is to develop an approach to public policy that people will find useful in carrying out their day-to-day work. This is why it is important to reflect on the second dimension, ‘adaptive change’.

The ‘initial’ position in terms of adaptive change might be seen as reflecting a situation in which few stakeholders are aware of a new reform initiative. Those who are aware of it may pay it little attention as it is perceived as having little direct impact or relevance to their work. The ‘mature’ position might be seen as describing a scenario in which all stakeholders are engaged with the new initiative.

If the well-being initiative is to progress so that the *Well-being Framework* is utilised across government as part of the policy process, it will be important to illustrate its value as a part of the policy making process. This is not a simple or straightforward task, and will require time and leadership across the public service. At the initial stage attention can be drawn to the experience and lessons of other countries to illustrate the potential benefits of including a well-being perspective in the policy making process. (See Chapter 4.) However, if the initiative is to gain traction in an Irish policy context then it needs to demonstrate its usefulness. Appeals to the experience of other countries will not suffice. Instead, it will be necessary to invest effort in exploring the usefulness of the well-being perspective by undertaking pilot projects that utilise the *Well-being Framework* to examine the relationship between well-being and public policy. Such undertakings will require leadership that embraces the opportunity, recognises the potential value of a well-being perspective for their own policy sphere and has the capacity to innovate in order to best utilise the reform.

The purpose of this investment is to arrive at a position of maturity on both the technical and adaptive dimensions of change. If this is achieved then the well-being initiative would be a highly developed and valued approach, utilised across all levels of government as a means of informing the policy process and resource allocation decisions in order to deliver effective public services to people living in Ireland. However, if adaptive change is not actively



supported, there is a risk that the increasing sophistication of the available tools will be of little use to the policy process. Instead, various levels of government would be compelled to report “well-being” indicators or describe services or resource allocations in terms of “well-being dimensions”. Under such circumstance, it would be unlikely that they would be using the *Framework* to better understand the challenges that people face, consider a sufficiently broad range of potential policy actions to address these challenges, identify opportunities for cooperation and collaboration or reflect on how progress in one area of well-being may be hindering progress in other areas. Essentially, the potential of a well-being perspective to enhance public policy will not be realised.

The approach of developing the use of a well-being perspective in a progressive and proportionate way is central to mitigating the risk of the initiative resulting in compelled compliance. What is set out in this working paper draws on efforts to date of applying a perspective shaped by the *Well-being Framework* to policy in Ireland; rather than setting out all possible ways of doing. The latter could lead to confusion and frustration as many approaches require individual level data that is not available in an Irish context. Instead, the intention is to try and develop approaches to utilising a well-being perspective based on ways that are familiar to those working in an Irish policy context and have the potential to make a meaningful contribution to how they go about examining and thinking about policy challenges. This working paper will be updated over the next few years as further work is undertaken and different methodologies and approaches are utilised.

### 3. What is “well-being” in a Public Policy Context?

While the notion of “well-being” may be familiar, it is difficult to define. In general terms, well-being is often associated with things that are good in people’s lives or with people feeling satisfied, happy or comfortable with their lives. This suggests that attention should focus on what it means to lead a meaningful and fulfilling life and on identifying the experiences that contribute to such a life (e.g., positive emotions, engaging with others, loving relationships, accomplishments through tasks).<sup>8</sup>

A number of different approaches have been set out to conceptualise well-being. Some approaches to well-being focus on the “subjective”, such as internal affective states (the balance of pleasure over pain), while other approaches focus on the “objective”, such as the external realisation of internal desires (the experience of fulfilling desires or preferences) or a series of states or experiences that are seen as “good” ends in themselves.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of some of the main approaches to conceptualising the intangible notion of well-being. However, as this working paper is concerned with locating well-being in a public policy context, it is worth noting a number of general points that help focus this discussion. First, irrespective of the approach taken to setting out what is meant by well-being, it seems reasonable to suggest that at the very least well-being is:

- An individual-level state – Well-being is ultimately experienced and valued by individual people though this is not to deny that individuals are nested in families, communities and other groupings, and are dependent on those groups for their individual well-being;
- Dynamic – Well-being may be measured at a point in time, but it may also change over time (i.e., a person may not experience “good” across all aspects of their life or for the whole of their life; they are likely to encounter change over time); and
- Covers how a person as a whole is faring – Well-being is multi-dimensional and includes a balance of what is positive and negative in a person’s life (i.e., more than one aspect of what constitutes a meaningful and fulfilling life needs to be considered).<sup>10</sup>

Second, the focus of this working paper is very much on an empirical approach to well-being rather than a normative approach. This working paper is concerned with setting out an approach to understanding well-being in a public policy context by describing people’s experiences and challenges, considering what it is government policy intended to achieve and examining evidence to describe progress toward those policy goals.<sup>11</sup> While this working paper does not consider setting out a normative approach of what ought to constitute well-being (either for particular groups of people, specific policy areas or specific policy areas

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<sup>8</sup> Forgeard et al., 2011; Thomas, 2009. A person being in “good health” is a common example of an experience or state that is central to a person leading a meaningful and fulfilling life. However, it is not the only experience or state. Clearly, an individual is unlikely to be in “good health” over the whole course of their life and when a person experiences “poor health” it does not mean that they are unable to lead a meaningful and fulfilling life.

<sup>9</sup> Crisp, 2017; Hughes, 2020; Cronin de Chavez et al., 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Hughes, 2020; Smith, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> As Upton (2021: 13) notes, “declaring wellbeing to be multidimensional does not constitute agreement on what wellbeing is. At best, it provides a framework for defining wellbeing and places some limitations on what that definition should look like.”

focussed on particular groups of people), this is not to suggest that such work cannot be undertaken or would not be useful to undertake.<sup>12</sup>

The empirical focus of this working paper is in keeping with the efforts by other governments and international institutions to consider the notion of well-being in public policy. These initiatives have sought to conceptualise well-being by means of holistic multi-dimensional frameworks that combine subjective and objective notions of well-being and recognise the potential tension between supporting well-being today and how doing so might impact on well-being in the future.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, in this context, it is important to note that these well-being initiatives are not associated with the emergence of a new policy concern, but the result of increasing salience within policy communities.<sup>14</sup> The increased salience of well-being is in part a recognition that economic growth, as a policy goal, while important in terms of generating resources, should be considered in the context of supporting sustainable human well-being. In particular, attention has focussed on the weight given to economic growth as a measure of societal progress and the persistence of social, distributional and environmental challenges despite periods of economic expansion.<sup>15</sup> While economic growth may never have been the all-consuming goal of policy and budgetary decisions, the development of well-being frameworks provides policy communities with a structure to make explicit those other policy goals that (can) also inform such decisions.<sup>16</sup>

### 3.1 Subjective Well-being

The OECD (2013a) offers an inclusive definition of subjective well-being as “good mental states, including all of the various evaluations, positive and negative, that people make of their lives and the affective reactions of people to their experiences.”<sup>17</sup> Rather than something that is associated with “happiness”, this definition seeks to encompass the full range of aspects to subjective well-being, in particular how people experience and evaluate their life as a whole. It encompasses three elements:

- Life evaluation or satisfaction – a reflective assessment on a person’s “life as a whole” or some specific aspect of it. Such assessments are a judgement by the individual

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, in addition to the familiar *How’s Life?* framework, the OECD has also developed an “aspirational” child well-being measurement framework. The framework has its roots in the idea that children should be able to both enjoy a “good” positive childhood in the here-and-now, and have the opportunity to develop skills and abilities that set them up well for the future. The framework presents a multi-dimensional and forward-looking conception of child well-being. At its centre are four core thematic children’s well-being outcomes each of which is framed by a question reflecting the key policy and well-being concern: Do children have the things they need?; Are children healthy and developing well physically?; Are children learning and thriving in education?; and Are children doing well emotionally and socially? The Framework also considers children’s attitudes, aspirations and behaviours; children’s home, school, neighbourhood and community environments; and public policies. [https://www.oecd.org/wise/measuring-what-matters-for-child-well-being-and-policies-e82fded1-en.htm?\\_ga=2.102762117.420820218.1625131844-1057264132.1625131844](https://www.oecd.org/wise/measuring-what-matters-for-child-well-being-and-policies-e82fded1-en.htm?_ga=2.102762117.420820218.1625131844-1057264132.1625131844)

<sup>13</sup> What the OECD has characterised as “current well-being” and “future capitals”.

<sup>14</sup> Over the millennia, governments have sought to implement public policies to advance the well-being (welfare) of their *citizens*. For instance, Julius Caesar had plans for the Pontine Marshes that were intended to reduce the incidence of malaria and a new harbour in Ostia to improve access to grain and promote economic activity.

<sup>15</sup> Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009. As Upton (2021) observes, a peculiar feature of the history of GDP is that its limits were recognised, and then quickly forgotten.

<sup>16</sup> Upton, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> See also Diener et al., 2006.

relative to a “standard” that they perceive as appropriate for themselves (not a description of an emotional state);

- Affect – a person’s feelings or emotional states, typically measured with reference to a particular moment in time (or shortly after the experiences have occurred). Affect has at least two hedonic dimensions:
  - Positive affect – the presence of the flow of positive emotions - positive feelings or affect such as feeling happiness and joy, or a sense of vitality and energy; and
  - Negative affect – the presence of the flow of negative emotions - negative feelings or affect such as feeling angry, sad or depressed.<sup>18</sup>
- Eudaimonia (or flourishing) – a sense of meaning and purpose in life, or good psychological functioning, and can inform thinking about how the individual is linked to the social through the bonds that give meaning to people’s lives. Haroon, Hey and Brunetti (2020) summarise a variety of conditions that are important if people are to thrive:
  - A sense of feeling in control of their own lives (self-direction and autonomy);
  - A sense of being engaged in things that interest them, and have the ability to choose or change their lives and how they live (sense of achievement);
  - A realistic and healthy attitude about themselves, their lives and their abilities (esteem);
  - A feeling of belonging and acceptance, and of trust in other people and institutions (connection);
  - A sense that what they do is worthwhile and has meaning (purpose); and
  - A healthy balance of happiness and anxiety to function well (emotions).

While subjective well-being is an important element of a broader consideration of well-being, it is not sufficient. In particular, it does not consider the conditions under which “well-being” was achieved. The availability of resources does not ensure that people are able to convert them into well-being (e.g., two people with similar means may achieve or reveal very different levels of life satisfaction).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, while there are numerous instruments or scales available to measure subjective well-being, the way in which these have been defined and constructed may, in part, be shaped by the assumptions of researchers. There is a risk that they may not always take account of how subjective well-being has been influenced by social and environmental factors, or the views of individuals as to which of the various domains of subjective well-being are most important to their lives.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Sen, 2005; Robeyns and Byskov, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Cronin de Chavez et al., 2005; Amendola, Gabbuti and Vecchi, 2021.

## 3.2 Welfare Economics and Theory of Fair Allocations

An alternative perspective on examining well-being is evident in welfare economics and the theory of fair allocations.<sup>21</sup> In this context, the notion of well-being is associated with the economic notion of utility. A utility function may offer a means of describing people's well-being (internal desires) through their choices with regard to the consumption of goods or services (i.e., choices are seen as the external realisation of those internal desires).

Welfare economics utilises the notion of "willingness-to-pay" to extend the scope of monetary measures to non-market aspects of life. From a well-being perspective, people make trade-offs between the different dimensions (i.e., people's willingness-to-pay to achieve a given level of health, education or quality of environment).<sup>22</sup> Willingness-to-pay is useful in terms of understanding the relative importance of changes in non-monetary dimensions of well-being compared to income. However, in the aggregate, such evaluations may disproportionately reflect the preferences of those who are better-off in society and may be of limited use when it comes to informing policy decisions that are concerned with addressing questions of inequality.<sup>23</sup>

The theory of fair allocations seeks to overcome such weaknesses by examining the allocation of resources among people with different tastes and abilities by explicitly referring to equity or fairness criteria.<sup>24</sup> This approach involves the construction of a hypothetical set of feasible allocations across the dimensions of well-being and these can then be ranked. This current situation of an individual person is assessed in terms of hypothetical reference situations. When two individuals are indifferent with respect to their current situations and reference set situation, then they are considered to be equally well-off. However, this approach requires people to have well-defined preferences about the various aspects of life; something that may not be feasible or observable. Furthermore, accessing relevant data tends to rely on observed choices (and as such is limited to what can be traded) or surveys that examine preferences (e.g., contingent valuation surveys or discrete choice experiments) or satisfaction and, as such, an equivalence approach may be of limited use in terms of informing policy decisions.<sup>25</sup>

## 3.3 Capability Approach

The central focus of Sen's capability approach is its concern with the "capabilities of persons to lead the kind of lives they value – and have reason to value".<sup>26</sup> While Sen's (1970, 1976 and 1979) capability approach is a normative approach with foundations in notions of social justice (and more specifically, an analysis of social choice and welfare theory<sup>27</sup>), it has also been important in terms of developing an empirical approach to understanding well-being.

First, the capability approach focusses on people's abilities to achieve human "ends" (i.e., what a person is able to be and what they can achieve) with the "means" they can access (i.e.,

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<sup>21</sup> Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009. Both of these approaches differ from typical analysis of people's preferences by supporting the inclusion of non-monetary dimensions in indifference sets (i.e., in addition to goods and services that are traded in markets).

<sup>22</sup> Crisp, 2017; Boadway and Bruce, 1984.

<sup>23</sup> Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> That is, no one should (a) prefer another's bundle, (b) be hurt by an increase in available resources and (c) prefer an equal-split solution.

<sup>25</sup> Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009; Moulin and Thomson 1997.

<sup>26</sup> Sen, 1999: 18

<sup>27</sup> Anand et al., 2009.

it shifts the focus away from what resources and goods a person has). The capability approach considers the broad range of human functionings<sup>28</sup> in terms of:

- “beings”, that is the kind of person someone is able to be (e.g., being well-nourished; being educated); and
- “doings”, that is, the activities that a person is able to undertake (e.g., working, caring for someone, voting).<sup>29</sup>

From a public policy perspective, the capability approach focuses attention on describing people’s lives and the challenges they face. In particular, it can contribute to the policy-making process in terms of defining the policy challenge and setting clear policy goals to be achieved.

Second, the capability approach emphasises how the individual is dependent on (or constrained by) other people and the environment in which they live. From a public policy perspective, the capability approach highlights how the context within which the policy intervention is to be implemented is complex (i.e., society is complex). This understanding focuses attention on the broad range of interacting factors that ought to be taken into account when designing and implementing public policy to address policy challenges.

The capability approach identifies a number of conversion factors that can constrain the extent to which goods and services can be turned into functionings:

- *Personal conversion factors* – factors internal to the person (e.g., metabolism, physical condition, reading skills);
- *Social conversion factors* – factors from the society in which a person lives (e.g., public policies, social norms, practices that unfairly discriminate, societal hierarchies, power relations related to socio-economic group, gender, race); and
- *Environmental conversion factors* – factors that emerge from the physical or built environment in which a person lives (e.g., air and water quality, quality of housing or work place).<sup>30</sup>

However, these factors should not simply be seen as constraints as people may be able to enhance their lives through interacting with others and drawing benefits from the environment.<sup>31</sup>

Third, by focusing on what people are able to be and do (the “ends”), the capability approach is concerned with “real freedom” (i.e., the extent to which a person has all the required means necessary to achieve their potential “beings and doings”) rather than the formal freedom “to be” or “to do”.<sup>32</sup> The capability approach seeks to identify which types of means are important

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<sup>28</sup> Functionings or “beings and doings” are the various observable activities and states that constitute a human life, that is, they make the lives of human beings both “human” (i.e., in contrast to other forms of life) and “lives” (i.e., in contrast to inanimate objects). (Sen, 1992)

<sup>29</sup> Sen, 1992; Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009; Robeyns and Byskov, 2020. That said, such distinctions are not always clear-cut as some functionings may be described as a “being” (e.g., a person *is* housed in a warm house) or a “doing” (e.g., a person *consumes* energy to keep their house warm). In other cases, functionings are more clearly a “being” (e.g., being healthy) or a “doing” (e.g., driving a car).

<sup>30</sup> Sen, 1992 and 2005; Robeyns and Byskov, 2020; Weijers and Mukherjee, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Dean, 2009; Taylor, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> By way of illustration, a person may have the formal freedom to vote in an election but if they are not able to get to the polling station to cast their ballot then they do not have the real freedom to vote. (Robeyns and Byskov, 2020)

to achieving a particular capability (i.e., does not assume that financial resources are the most important means to achieve all ends).<sup>33</sup> In some cases, the most important means may be financial. However, in other cases non-financial means may be important, such as, a person's health status, role of political institutions, social norms or cultural practices.<sup>34</sup>

As such then, public policy is about creating opportunities for people to change or progress their lives. For instance, the provision of education and training provides people with the opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills that, over the course of their lives, can shape their employment prospects, potential earnings and health. When educational opportunity may be at risk of being denied by poverty or deprivation, public policy can intervene in a more targeted manner as part of an effort to alleviate the impact of educational disadvantage.

Fourth, the capability approach is concerned with the breadth of information that should be considered in order to inform social choices. It seeks to conceptualise well-being by identifying a range of objective dimensions that ought to be considered simultaneously when considering what benefits people. This multi-dimensional approach recognises and takes account of how people pursue a diversity of "beings and doings" (i.e., a plurality of functionings and capabilities). As such, it seeks to broaden the range of information used to inform social choices beyond internal affective states and the available resources and goods. That said, the capability approach advises against the idea of a pre-determined canonical list of capabilities selected by reference to theory only. Instead, it proposes an open or public deliberative process in identifying those aspects of well-being that bear most directly on people's living conditions.<sup>35</sup>

From a public policy perspective, the capability approach offers a multi-dimensional approach to understanding people's experiences. While various sets of dimensions have been set out, empirical work in this area centres around: material living standards (income, consumption and wealth); health; education; personal activities including work; political voice and governance; social connections and relationships; environment (present and future conditions); insecurity, of an economic as well as a physical nature.

Finally, the notion of human diversity is central to the capability approach. People differ in terms of their needs and priorities (human agency and goals), the relative importance of different dimensions of well-being and personal and socio-environmental conversion factors. More generally, people are concerned with questions around how goods and resources are distributed in society (i.e., suggesting that they are not solely concerned with the maximising their own utility or welfare).<sup>36</sup>

From a public policy perspective, this recognition of human diversity highlights the need when examining well-being to look beyond average conditions (societal wide estimates) to inequalities in people's experiences. There may be asymmetries in the distribution of resources and opportunities between individuals and/or between different groups of people as well as persisting advantage and disadvantage across generations.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Means have an instrumental valuation (i.e., help achieve a particular end) rather than an intrinsic valuation (i.e., desirable in and of themselves). For example, how policy impacts on people's capabilities as well as their functionings: are people able to be healthy *and* do they have the means or resources for this capability (e.g., access to medical services, clean water and adequate sanitation). Money or economic growth are not valued for their own sake but for the contribution they make to resourcing services that are important to people being healthy. (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009; Robeyns and Byskov, 2020)

<sup>34</sup> Sen, 2005; Robeyns and Byskov, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Sen, 1987, 1993 and 2005; Nussbaum, 1999 and 2000; Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009; Robeyns and Byskov, 2020; White, 2005; Qizilbash, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009; Alkire 2002; Robeyns, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009.



## 4. International Experience of Adopting a Well-being Approach to Public Policy

The purpose of this section is to provide a brief overview of some of the key initiatives in other countries that have sought to link public policy and well-being. One initiative that has informed work in individual countries is the well-being framework developed by the OECD.

The OECD's well-being framework is based on the capability approach<sup>38</sup> and emphasises people (either as individuals or households) rather than the aggregate economic conditions (may not reflect the diversity of well-being experienced by different groups of people). The OECD approach concentrates on well-being outcomes (rather than the drivers of well-being as measured by input or output indicators), the distribution of well-being across individuals<sup>39</sup> (national averages often mask inequalities between different groups in the population) and considers objective and subjective aspects of well-being. Another important aspect of the OECD's approach is how it differentiates between current well-being<sup>40</sup> and resources for future well-being<sup>41</sup>. Finally, when designing the framework, the OECD engaged in a process of consultation with member countries.

### 4.1 Institutional Factors and a Well-being Approach to Public Policy

The OECD (2021) has identified five institutional building blocks that underpin a well-being approach:

- Multi-dimensional well-being monitoring – A multi-dimensional perspective should be used to monitor societal progress and measure policy outcomes. This is part of an approach that seeks to broaden the information used in the policy process to take account of what matters for people's well-being today (current and distributional well-being outcomes) and in the future (resources for future well-being).
- Evidence-based priorities – Policy objectives should be prioritised based on multi-dimensional well-being evidence. In recent years, governments in New Zealand and Canada have sought to link well-being evidence to government agenda setting and

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<sup>38</sup> It also drew upon the recommendations of the *Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*. (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009)

<sup>39</sup> That is, horizontal inequalities (gaps between population groups, e.g. old and young people), vertical inequalities (between top and bottom of an achievement scale, e.g. difference between most and least affluent) and deprivations (share of the population falling below a given threshold of achievement).

<sup>40</sup> Current well-being refers to material living conditions (i.e., income and wealth, work and job quality and housing) and quality of life (i.e., health, knowledge and skills, environmental quality, subjective well-being, safety, work-life balance, social connections, civil engagement).

<sup>41</sup> The OECD sets out four stocks of resources ("capitals") that persist over time, store value, can be monitored and can generate a stream of benefits to society over time. The capitals identified by the OECD are: *Economic capital* - (a) Produced capital ("man-made capital") consists of tangible assets and knowledge assets; and (b) Financial capital includes assets such as currency and deposits, stocks and bonds; (2) *Natural capital* - consists of a wide range of naturally occurring assets (from minerals and timber to oceans and the atmosphere) with a distinction between "environmental assets" (the individual components of the environment such e.g., fish) and "ecosystems" (the joint functioning of environmental e.g., aquatic environments); (3) *Human capital* - the knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being; and (4) *Social capital* - the social norms, trust and values that foster co-operation. The inclusion of current well-being and the sustainability of well-being focuses attention on intertemporal trade-offs (i.e., how enhancing well-being today impacts on well-being in the future).

policy prioritisation within their budgetary processes. (The issue of well-being and the budget process is the focus of a separate working paper.)

There may be an unwritten assumption that all expenditure intended to enhance well-being achieves such an outcome. However, an evidence informed well-being approach is not simply about increasing spending that has positive impacts, but includes reforming policies and programmes that are not having the intended impact and curbing expenditure on services that are having negative impacts.

- Long-term focus – A well-being perspective facilitates the introduction of a long-term focus in policy-making. The reason for doing so is to support a more future-focussed and anticipatory approach to public policy. A practical consequence of this is that it may encourage the consideration and development of prevention and early intervention approaches to addressing policy challenges.

For instance, in Wales public bodies are encouraged to think long-term (meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs) and consider prevention (acting to prevent problems occurring or getting worse).<sup>42</sup>

- Integration and collaboration – A well-being perspective brings a holistic multi-dimensional approach to considerations of policy challenges. This highlights the need to enable an integrated and collaborative approach to the design and implementation of public policy.

Based on the experience in New Zealand, the OECD notes that a well-being approach can ensure a more systematic evaluation of policy decisions by defining a core set of well-being priorities and ensuring that there is consistency in the domains and dimensions considered, the indicators used for each of these and that all government agencies are engaged in the process.

In order to support an integrated and collaborative approach there is a need to address a number of barriers that can hinder policy coherence:

- The long-term focus of any well-being initiative may make it difficult to achieve sustained leadership and commitment;
- There may be tensions between the different tiers of government (a top-down approach may be seen as disempowering local government or communities; a bottom-up approach may be seen as disconnect from higher level policy goals); and
- There may be tensions across tiers of government (e.g., requires alignment of policy goals across departments; proposals to pool public finances can encounter formal financial accountability difficulties).

As the OECD notes, very few countries have put a joint well-being framework at the heart of their multi-level governance approach. The Welsh Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 offers an example of an approach that sets out five “ways of working” as part of requiring public bodies at all levels to work together towards the achievement of the seven identified well-being priorities.

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<sup>42</sup> [www.futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/](http://www.futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/)

- Actively connecting – The development of a well-being perspective is in part about developing a shared vision of what matters most to societal well-being. If a nascent well-being framework is to achieve legitimacy and public support it is important that its development is supported by inclusive and transparent engagement with private and civil society stakeholders.

## 4.2 Subjective Well-being and Public Policy

The OECD (2013a) has set out four ways in which measures of subjective well-being are used as part of the policy process.

- Complement other outcome measures – Measures of subjective well-being focus on people’s experiences and judgements across multiple aspects of their lives. This suggests that they may provide additional information to what has already been captured by more conventional indicators. Subjective measures have the potential to provide information on the net impact of changes in social and economic conditions on people’s perceptions of their lives. Furthermore, they have the potential to provide information on those groups in society who are more (or less) likely to feel satisfaction with their life, report positive feelings or report a sense of flourishing.<sup>43</sup>
- Help better understand the drivers of subjective well-being – Measures of subjective well-being provide an empirical way of testing and identifying what factors are critical aspects of people’s well-being. In particular, they can be used to examine the relationship between outcomes that measure progress and people’s perceptions of their well-being.
- Support policy evaluation and cost-benefit analysis (especially where non-market outcomes are involved) – Measures of subjective well-being can assist the evaluation of public policies as part of:
  - Formal policy evaluations – Clearly, subjective well-being indicators are central to evaluations of policies or programmes that are intended to have an impact on the subjective experience of people. In other cases, measures of subjective well-being can bring additional information to the policy evaluation. The use of measures of subjective well-being may broaden consideration beyond the direct impacts of a policy or programme (e.g., having a job, gaining additional income) to less obvious or indirect impacts on people’s well-being (e.g., time use).
  - Cost-benefit analysis – It can be difficult to identify meaningful values of costs and benefits when a policy proposal is focused on achieving policy goals that do not have obvious market prices. In recent years, subjective well-being valuation has been proposed as a way of valuing non-market goods. While requiring further research and applications, it essentially compares the impact of a particular outcome on subjective well-being (i.e., on people’s experience

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<sup>43</sup> For instance, a WELLBY is a subjective well-being measures which equate to a one-point change in life satisfaction on a 0-10 scale, per person per year. (HM Treasury, 2021; DeNeve et al., 2020) In the UK, since 2011, the Office of National Statistics has systematically collect data on subjective well-being. These items have been evaluative (“overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?” and “overall, to what extent do you feel that the things that you do in your life are worthwhile?”) and affective (“overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?” and “on a scale where 0 is ‘not at all anxious’ and 10 is ‘completely anxious’, overall how anxious did you feel yesterday?”).

of an outcome) and seeks to estimate the change in income that would produce an impact of equivalent size.<sup>44</sup>

- Help identifying potential policy problems – Measures of subjective well-being can also support a better understanding of human behaviour and decision-making. This provides an opportunity to consider how to address those behaviours and decision-making that lead to poor outcomes.<sup>45</sup> Dolan and White (2007) note that information on subjective well-being can be used to help set policy default options by indicating which default options contribute most to subjective well-being (e.g., focus on achieving better outcomes by setting policy defaults to influence people’s behaviour in positive directions based on how people respond differently to “default” options such as “opt in” or “opt out” clauses).

### 4.3 Well-being and Public Policy: Integrating Evidence into Decision-Making

Durand and Exton (2019) have compared the experience of various national governments in putting well-being at the heart of public policy by integrating evidence on well-being into decision-making. They note that, in these countries, well-being initiatives are at a relatively early stage of development. Furthermore, even where there is routine collection and publication of national dashboards of well-being indicators, these efforts remain largely disconnected from policy practice.

While the need for better data is a key element of putting well-being at the heart of public policy, Durand and Exton have identified a number of broad mechanisms that have been used to integrate well-being indicators and frameworks into government processes and procedures in a systematic way. Table 1 sets out a summary of these mechanisms and experiences in other countries.

- Integrating dashboards of well-being indicators into budget decision-making and national development strategies. (The issue of well-being and the budget process is the focus of a separate working paper.)

The inclusion of reporting on a dashboard to the budget process can add contextual richness by providing an indication of whether public policy is moving national well-being in a positive direction. That said, a dashboard does not in itself produce a shift in how policy makers arrive at their decisions (i.e., can be ignored).

A more fundamental change would involve the assessment of individual spending proposals *ex ante* for their anticipated well-being impacts. However, achieving this change requires the development of both an evidence base and tools for assessing well-being impacts of proposals (i.e., methods of cost-benefit analysis). Given the burden involved in conducting such an assessment (e.g., development of appropriate methodologies, investment in skills and training, data collection), it would be important to demonstrate the benefits of doing so (e.g., improved quality of advice, development and articulation of clear intervention logic, coordination of policies focused on same well-being outcomes).

- Using legislation to lock an outcomes-based approach into government processes.

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<sup>44</sup> Clarke and Oswald, 2002; New Zealand Government, 2021a; HM Treasury, 2021; OECD, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Kahneman and Krueger, 2006; Frey and Stutzer, 2008.

Some countries have followed a legislative approach to securing long-term change in government processes and procedures. By “locking in” certain aspects of the well-being approaches, the intention has been to encourage policy makers to consider a broader set of outcomes rather than to require them to use a particular set (i.e., allow for priorities to shift as circumstances demand it).

A challenge that this approach presents is to ensure that the legislation is purposeful enough to lead to an improvement in the quality of policy-making, but is flexible enough to accommodate new priorities.

- Integrating dashboards of well-being indicators into national development strategies.

Strategic development planning is a way of setting out specific priorities for national progress in the medium- and long-term. A key part of formulating national development strategies is extensive engagement with stakeholders on priorities and goals. Furthermore, development strategies are often associated with a wide range of dashboard goals and indicators. Given that well-being dashboards are used to illustrate what is meant by progress and what it means to have a “good life”, the integration of both approaches may support efforts to focus on a small number of strategic priorities and communicate a clear vision for the future.

- Creating new institutions or government posts with responsibility for well-being.

One way of demonstrating how well-being is to be a key consideration in policy-making is to create new institutional positions or structures to promote the use of well-being evidence in government.

The creation of an independent institution, resourced to conduct research and regular reporting, can support governments in meeting their well-being commitments and provide an effective champion for well-being in public policy. For instance, such an institution may be able to support capacity-building by accessing academic expertise as part of efforts to build the evidence base on well-being, provide guidance and training courses for analysts within government and shape how public policy can impact well-being into the decision-making processes.

Furthermore, as the multi-dimensional nature of well-being tends toward a whole-of-government perspective, it can be challenging to identify a single department to lead the initiative. Cabinet Offices or Prime Ministerial Offices often have a coordinating role, but may lack the sustained analytical capability. Treasury or Ministry of Finance Offices may have the analytical capability and a whole-of-government perspective when it comes to budgetary considerations, but may lack consideration of the wider impacts of public policy (i.e., beyond economic and fiscal impacts).

- Building civil service capacity and shifting culture of practice within institutions.

The development and introduction of a well-being initiative within the policy process has implications for how policy is developed, appraised, implemented and evaluated. There is a significant difference between monitoring a set of well-being indicators to report progress and identifying policy instruments that will improve performance on those indicators.

In order to make the concept of well-being operational for public policy, there is a need to be able to articulate an intervention logic and set out the evidence that shows how policy outputs will contribute to improving well-being outcomes.

Furthermore, there may be a need for a change in how the civil service goes about its work, and recognition that this may take many years to embed. In particular, civil service managers may need to be convinced that well-being will result in better policy decisions, help them solve policy problems and produce better quality advice. There is likely to be a need to co-design well-being tools with civil service analysts and develop training programmes that focus on utilising a well-being lens in public policy.

*Table 2 – Summary of International Experiences of Integrating Well-being into Public Policy (Durand and Exton, 2019)*

Shaping budget decisions	Monitor a dashboard of well-being indicators to frame (ex ante) the budget discussion, complementing standard economic and fiscal reporting	<i>France</i> (since 2015) – New Wealth Indicators – 10 indicators selected following wide ranging public consultation
	(The number of indicators used is often quite small and represents a subset of the extensive well-being indicator set produced by National Statistics Offices.)	<i>Italy</i> (since 2017) – Economic and Financial Document – 12 indicators selected by an expert committee
	Assess budget proposals for their expected impact on well-being	<i>Sweden</i> (since 2017) – New Measures for Well-being – 15 indicators  <i>Italy</i> (since 2017) – in addition to GDP, four indicators <sup>46</sup> were selected for a deeper analysis that involved an experimental forecasting exercise (aggregate impact of new policy measures) for the next 3 years compared against a “no new policy” baseline
Ensuring continuity and accountability through legislation	Identify and quantify how proposed policy initiatives are expected to impact on people’s well-being across various well-being domains	<i>New Zealand</i> (since 2019) – developed their cost-benefit analysis template for departmental submissions of spending proposals to include well-being considerations
	Place a duty on government to report regularly on a set of well-being indicators	<i>New Zealand</i> – Public Finance Act 1989 as amended by the Public Finance (Wellbeing) Amendment Act 2020  <i>France</i> (2015) – “Sas” law  <i>Italy</i> (2016) – Italian Budget Law  <i>Scotland</i> (2015) – Community Empowerment Act
	Require government to set out well-being objectives and indicators alongside the fiscal objectives and indicators that guide budget decisions	<i>New Zealand</i> – Public Finance Act 1989 as amended by the Public Finance (Wellbeing) Amendment Act 2020

<sup>46</sup> Household disposable income; the inter-quintile income share; labour underutilisation; and emissions of greenhouse gases.

Strategic planning and performance frameworks	Introduce well-being frameworks and indicators into strategic development planning	<p><i>Slovenia</i> – Slovenian National Development Strategy 2030</p> <p><i>Colombia</i> – Ministry for National Planning’s “Presidential Dashboards”</p> <p><i>Ecuador</i> – policy goals included in the Ministry of Planning National Plans for Buen Vivir</p> <p><i>Paraguay</i> – Social Progress Index in its National Development Plan 2030</p>
	Create specific high-level roles	<i>United Arab Emirates</i> – designated a Minister for Happiness
	Put in place new accountability mechanisms	<i>Wales</i> – appointed a Future Generations Commissioner
	Create a new government department	<i>Ecuador</i> – created the Buen Vivir Secretariat
Creating new institutional structures	Establish a separate agency	<i>United Kingdom</i> – established the What Works Centre for Well-being
	Give a central government office or department cross-cutting responsibility for well-being	<i>New Zealand</i> – happened to some extent in 2017 following the appointment of the new Minister for Finance
	Explaining how well-being affects policy appraisal and evaluation	<i>United Kingdom</i> – Green Book has been updated
Capacity building and guidance for public servants	Acknowledge it may take time to embed a well-being approach within policy processes	<i>New Zealand</i> – Living Standards Framework has been developed since 2011 and become a core feature of their budget. The Treasury is in the early stages of developing support for more widespread use of the framework in policy advice.



*Box 1 – NESC Secretariat (2022) Towards Transformative Outcomes and Reflections for Ireland*

The Secretariat of the National Economic & Social Council (2022) has undertaken research into the experience of embedding well-being frameworks into policymaking in New Zealand, Scotland and Wales. Central to the experiences of these countries is that there is no ‘one size fits all’ and the process of embedding a well-being approach takes time and involves carefully reflecting on each step. What has been developed in each of those countries has been suited to a particular context, has been monitored and reviewed over time including taking account of specific sectors, with the learnings used to re-shape and develop the well-being framework over time. While NESC outlined four steps, they also noted that at each step, leadership, dialogue with stakeholders including the public, availability of resources to support adoption of the well-being framework, and process of review and reflection were evident.

The four steps to embedding a well-being approach include:

- *Build Shared Consensus and Understanding* – The creation of a shared consensus and understanding. The foundation of this can vary, and includes international commitments (e.g. on sustainability and child development), domestic willingness to consider new approaches to policy-making, well-being leaders and champions within political and civil service spheres and a strong commitment to dialogue and consultation to build awareness and wider support among stakeholders, experts and citizens.
- *Design a Workable Framework* – While frameworks may vary in terms of specifics, they tend to include agreed national outcomes or objectives and a suite of indicators to measure progress. Frameworks may also prompt the development of new evidence and data sources to provide more information relevant to policy decisions on the range of national objectives. Finally, development of supports and guidance for policy makers and other stakeholders to adopt a well-being approach.
- *Implant, Monitor and Review* – There are various processes for implanting a well-being approach within day-to-day policymaking (e.g., legislation, specific links to the budgetary processes and structures which increase awareness, provide guidance, and monitor progress on implementing the well-being approach). In some cases, parliamentary monitoring has been developed. The countries studied review their national well-being frameworks after a number of years and these are used to identify strengths and barriers in current approaches.
- *Integrate and Deepen* – Involves work to integrate and deepen the use of the well-being framework (e.g., requiring local and national bodies to work towards meeting national well-being objectives, new legislation to enable organisations to work together towards shared well-being objectives, targeted approaches were used to address the well-being of particular groups).

Based on their analysis of the experience of these three countries, NESC Secretariat (2022) has set out a number of reflections for the Irish case:

- *Work to develop the approach which suits the Irish context.* In particular, ongoing commitment and resources to support consultation and dialogue with stakeholders, ensuring there are staff with the skills in this type of work, further development and communication of evidence and its value, and further development of methods to assess how policies have contributed to outcomes.
- *While there is ‘no-one-size-fits all’ is critical, there are aspects of international experience that merit further consideration in an Irish context* including the role of a structure to provide a range of supports (e.g. communication, guidance and monitoring, in the longer-term), the potential role IGEES in providing analytical capacity, exploring the potential for further incorporation of well-being requirements into budgetary processes over time, reflecting on the most appropriate mechanism for review; exploring the role of the Oireachtas in



monitoring and accountability; and investigating role of the Comptroller & Auditor General in monitoring implementation of well-being approaches; and assessing the contribution of possible legislative support.

- *Working to co-ordinate national work with local* (e.g., small range of key national goals which all agencies work towards, investigation mechanisms to support joint accountability for the use of funding in the Irish context, investigating possible alignment of geographical boundaries of statutory organisations).
- *Equity and sustainability* (i.e., potential of well-being framework to address these).

## 5. Ireland's Well-being Framework and Dashboard

### 5.1 Well-being Framework for Ireland

In June 2022, the Government published *Understanding Life in Ireland: The Well-being Framework*. This report captures the outcomes of a second phase of research and consultation that sought to build on an initial report, *First Report on a Well-being Framework for Ireland* (July 2021), by updating the 11 dimensions of the *Well-being Framework for Ireland* taking greater account of issues such as sustainability and equality as cross-cutting themes.<sup>47</sup> This second report also sets out initial approaches for embedding the well-being initiative over time into policy making, including annual published high-level analysis of the well-being dashboard and incorporation into the Budget process; continued embedding into expenditure and evaluation policy; promotion of relevant research and policy developments; and supporting structures.

The *Well-being Framework for Ireland* sets out an overarching vision of “enabling all our people to live fulfilled lives now and into the future” and, in particular:

- Enable people to have purposeful lives that support good physical and mental health, enabling development of skills across the life cycle and providing a good standard of living;
- Ensure a sustainable sense of place, including through an appropriate and safe place to live and protection of Ireland's environment, climate and biodiversity;
- Preserve balance, inclusivity and equality of opportunities across society with open and effective government, empowering families, friends and communities to grow, connect and meaningfully engage.<sup>48</sup>

In terms of working towards achieving better policy decisions for better outcomes, the *Well-being Framework* will seek to develop a shared understanding within policy communities and society more generally of what makes for a better life. It will also provide an overarching structure that will ensure that all Government Departments and public bodies are strategically aligned in the identification of policy priorities, opportunities, and challenges. The purpose of this is to promote more effective coordination and co-operation between departments and agencies in the development of public policy and ensure a focus on various elements of people's experiences.

The *Well-being Framework* seeks to measure the progress of Irish society in a way that is holistic, multidimensional, interconnected and intergenerational with a clear focus on addressing policy questions relating to sustainability and equality of opportunity. Where the OECD has distinguished between “current well-being” and “future capitals”, the *Second*

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<sup>47</sup> In this context it is worth noting earlier work in this area, in particular, NESC's (2009) “well-being test” and its underpinning principles: capability (a focus on what an individual can do with a view to developing capabilities; their developmental potential); agency (respect for the capacity of individuals to make decisions about their lives); purpose (recognising the importance of having a sense of purpose by encouraging and supporting people to engage in meaningful activity); social interaction (the recognition that we operate in the context of a set of relationships – family, community, wider society); common good (as individuals and as societies we do better in more equal and fairer societies); and sustainability (we live in a finite world and have to use our resources wisely now and for future generations).

<sup>48</sup> Government of Ireland, 2022: 4

*Report* sets out a hybrid approach. While this approach presents sustainable well-being (economic, social and environmental) as integrated with current well-being, it also allows for a separate consideration of sustainability through “tagging” those dimensions, aspects or indicators that are relevant for sustainable well-being. The intention is to maintain a focus on longer-term impacts of policy so as to ensure that they are not overshadowed by the present.<sup>49</sup>

Figure 3 illustrates the 11 well-being dimensions included in the Well-being Framework. (Appendix 1 provides a summary of the concepts involved.) At this stage, it is important to note that this is an initial presentation of a *Well-being Framework for Ireland*. Over time, the Framework will be refined as understanding of well-being as an issue in an Irish policy context deepens and experience of utilising it broadens.

Figure 3 – Initial Well-being Framework for Ireland



However, that this working paper is concerned with locating the *Well-being Framework for Ireland* within an Irish public policy context does not mean that public policy has been unconcerned with well-being or the use of holistic approaches to addressing policy challenges. Indeed, the opposite is the case. The *First Report on a Well-being Framework for Ireland* (2021: 43-49) noted that a core principle for the development of this *Framework* is to build on work already undertaken in the well-being space in Ireland. In particular, it notes that right across the public service there is a wide range of well-being related initiatives. (Box 2 lists the various well-being related initiatives described in more detail in the *First Report*.)

Box 2 – Well-being Related Initiatives in Ireland

- Health System Performance Assessment Framework
- Healthy Ireland Framework
- Sláintecare Strategy and Action Plan
- Sharing the Vision
- Connecting for Life
- Growing Up in Ireland
- Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing
- Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures
- EPA Coordination of Climate and Environmental Research
- Our Rural Future – Rural Development Policy 2021-2025
- National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019-2022

<sup>49</sup> Government of Ireland, 2022: 11

National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education  
National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework  
National Remote Work Strategy  
Pathways to Work 2021-2025  
Adult Literacy for Life – a 10-year adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy  
Roadmap for Social Inclusion  
Housing for All Strategy  
Creative Ireland Programme  
Sustainable, Inclusive, and Empowered Communities 2019-2024  
National Volunteering Strategy 2021-2025  
National Dialogue on Climate Action  
National Economic Dialogue  
Creating Our Future – A National Conversation on Research in Ireland  
Sustainable Development Goals  
Public Participation Networks  
A Shared Island Approach

Source: *First Report on a Well-being Framework for Ireland* (2021: 43-49)

## 5.2 Well-being Framework for Ireland Dashboard

The *First Report* (2021) sets out an initial dashboard of indicators for the *Well-being Framework*. The creation of such a dashboard is in keeping with the practice of the OECD and other countries that have sought to develop and integrate a well-being perspective into public policy.

Since autumn 2021, the CSO has hosted an interactive version of the dashboard.<sup>50</sup> The dashboard complements the conceptual framework and measures life and progress in Ireland using a cohesive set of indicators. The dashboard is located at a cross-governmental level (meta level) and provides a high-level holistic indication of Ireland's progress towards well-being.

The design of the dashboard has sought to leverage work by both OECD and CSO as well as tailoring it to specific Irish areas of interest and priorities. This will support meaningful international comparisons while also facilitating a focus on issues of particular concern for policy in Ireland. The selection of indicators was informed by a variety of criteria, most notably the need to provide: a balanced and holistic view; added value and policy relevance; aggregation and disaggregation (inequalities); availability and quality; and international comparability. Another important consideration was that the dashboard would be user-friendly and, as part of this, the number of indicators for each dimension has been limited to three or four. The dashboard will update automatically as data corresponding to individual indicators becomes available. That said, work will continue on how to improve relevant data as part of the next phase of the IDG's work and this will inform a formal review in four to five years.

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<sup>50</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-wbhub/well-beinginformationhub/>

## 6. *Well-being Framework* and Public Policy Analysis

The development of a *Well-being Framework for Ireland* and dashboard of well-being indicators are key parts of this important cross-government initiative. However, by themselves they will not fulfil the Programme for Government's ambition of improving policy and decision-making. In order to meet this challenge it is necessary to develop ways of utilising the *Well-being Framework* within the policy process, whether examining existing policies and programmes (the focus of this chapter) or designing and implementing new policies and programmes (the focus of the next chapter).

The Well-being Public Policy Unit (WPPU) in the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform has undertaken work that has piloted the use of the *Well-being Framework* in order to develop an understanding of how a well-being perspective might be applied in an Irish public policy context. In particular, this work has sought to apply the *Well-being Framework* to:

- Describe the lives of a cohort within the Irish population (i.e., older people in the context of the broad policy challenge of ageing); and
- Examine the relationship between well-being and public policy by focusing on policies and programmes that are concerned with particular policy challenges (i.e., early learning and childcare, child and family welfare and protection).

What is included in this working paper outlines the various approaches that have been used to date. As a consequence, this working paper is not intended to be a comprehensive presentation of all the ways in which a well-being perspective could be applied to public policy. This working paper will be updated as further work applying a well-being perspective is carried out and different methodologies and approaches are utilised.

The purpose of this chapter is to set out key lessons from these exercises by addressing three questions:

- How can existing public policy be linked to the *Well-being Framework*?
- How does the quality of evidence inform an understanding of the relationship between well-being and public policy?
- How does the approach to examining data inform an understanding of the relationship between well-being and public policy?

However, before considering these questions it is useful to bring to the fore how the well-being initiative is located within the performance framework and is in keeping with the other reform initiatives that are supporting an evidence-for-policy perspective. (See Chapter 2.)

### 6.1 Placing a Well-being Perspective within Public Policy Analysis

A key benefit of a well-being perspective is the focus it brings to considering the impact of public policy on people's lives. This focus encompasses not only efforts to describe people's lives and the challenges they face, but also how public policy can enhance their ability to progress their lives and/or overcome those challenges. The utilisation of a well-being perspective in a public policy context will support efforts to:

- Describe:-
  - The place of well-being within an Irish policy context (i.e., how existing public policy is focused on progressing well-being);
  - How well-being has progressed;
  - The resources and services that have been utilised to progress well-being;
- Inform discussion about the:-
  - Further development of well-being within an Irish policy context;
  - Articulation of policy goals (i.e., have a clear focus on an intended outcome and direction of travel); and
  - Identification of appropriate indicators to measure progress.

In terms of the familiar programme logic model (see Table 1, above), the approach used in the pilot papers to examine the relationship between well-being and public policy can be described as focussing on:

- Strategic objectives; and
- Results and impacts of policies and programmes;

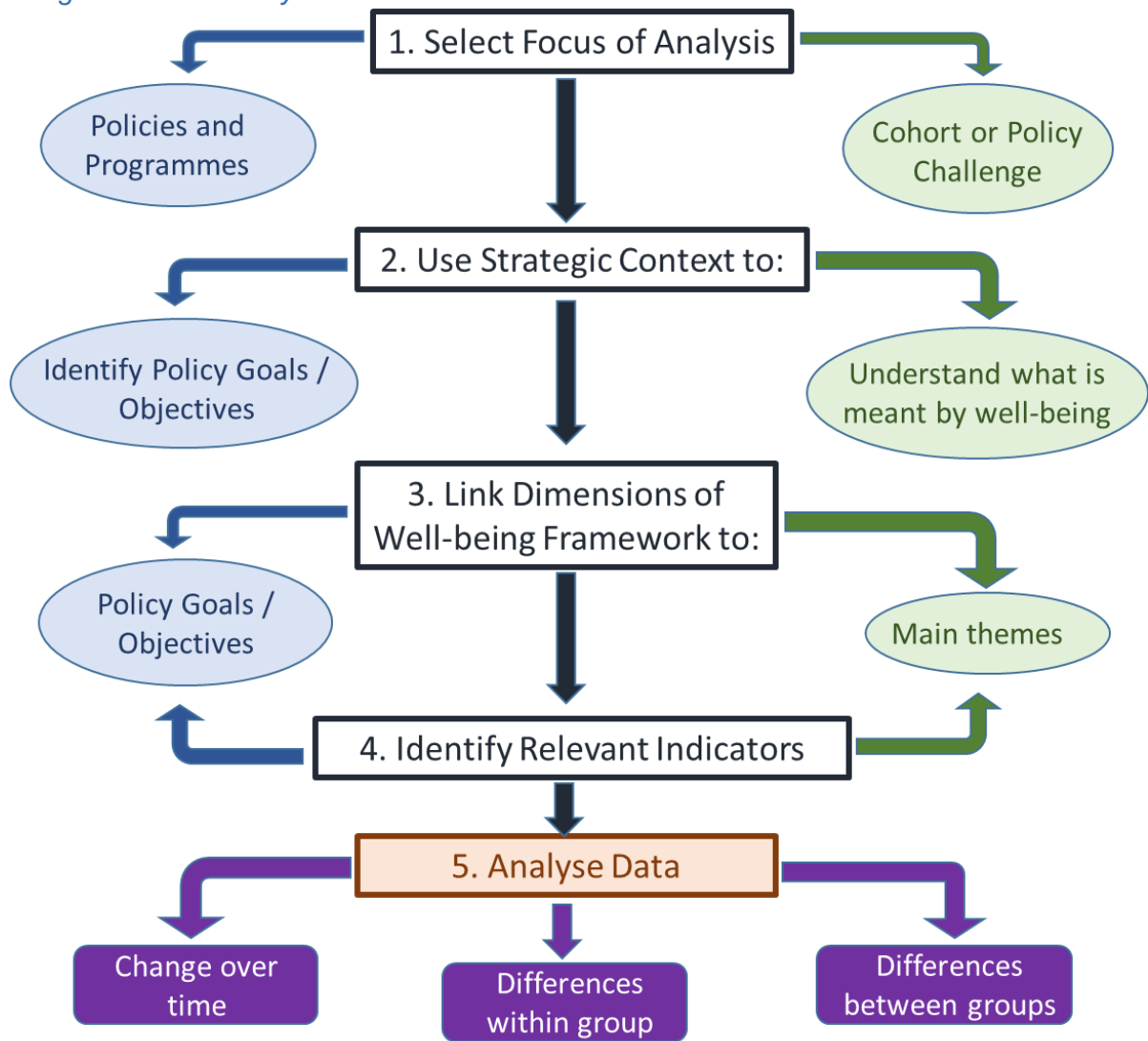
in order to address questions of:

- Effectiveness; and
- Impact.

Figure 4 sets out the key features of the approach used in the pilot work to examine the relationship between well-being and public policy:

- The “strategic context”, that is, the strategic policy documents that:
  - Contribute to an understanding of what is meant by well-being for a particular cohort or within a particular policy area by identifying the main aspects or themes; and
  - Set out relevant policy goals and objectives associated with a set of policies and programmes.
- A set of indicators that are relevant to both the well-being dimensions and:
  - The main aspects or themes of what is meant by well-being for a particular cohort or policy area; and / or
  - The policy goals associated with a set of policies and programmes.

Figure 4 – Key Features of the Approach used to examine the Relationship between Well-being and Public Policy





In the pilot work, the steps used to examine the relationship between well-being and policy were to:

- Link the dimensions of the *Well-being Framework* with:
  - The main aspects or themes of what is meant by well-being for a particular cohort or policy area; and / or
  - The policy goals associated with a set of policies and programmes<sup>51</sup>; and
- Examine indicators to address key questions, such as:
  - How has well-being changed over time?
  - How does the well-being of a particular group of people compare to that of people in general?
  - How does well-being differ within the group of people that is the primary focus of a public policy?

However, there are a number of limitations to what is set out in this working paper, including:

- The authors of these pilot papers do not work in the Departments that have responsibility for the policies and programmes under consideration. While the development of the pilot papers benefitted from comments provided by colleagues, and have drawn on previous work undertaken by the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform<sup>52</sup>, the further development of this approach will require its utilisation by those with greater expertise and deeper knowledge of policy areas being examined from a well-being perspective;
- The approach to examining the relationship between well-being and public policy in the pilot papers is at a simple or naïve level. Those with greater expertise and knowledge, and potentially access to individual level data, may be in a position to explore the full complexity of the relationship between well-being and public policy. There are likely to be important links between the various dimensions of the *Well-being Framework* that are not reflected in the simple model used in the pilot papers. A more sophisticated approach may be able to articulate and examine the relationships between the various dimensions of the *Well-being Framework*.
- The pilot papers have examined publicly available data. While this is a useful place to start examining the relationship between well-being and public policy, a deeper understanding of how policy impacts on well-being will require the use of more detailed data on the services provided and the impact of those services, ideally at the level of the individual;
- The pilot papers are focused on utilising the *Well-being Framework* to provide an empirical, retrospective examination of the relationship between well-being and public policy. In addition to being able to undertake more expert and knowledgeable empirical work, policy experts in Departments may also look to develop a normative

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<sup>51</sup> At this point it is worth noting that it is not necessary to include all of the well-being dimensions in the analysis. The analysis should focus on the main policy goals and objectives and the well-being dimensions that are important or central to the policy area that is the focus of the analysis.

<sup>52</sup> <https://igees.gov.ie/peiu-focussed-policy-assessments/>



consideration of well-being for the cohort(s) who are the intended beneficiaries of the policy;

- The pilot papers have focused on a small number of policies and programmes within individual Departments. However, it is likely that the well-being benefits of these policies and programmes are also associated with other Departments' policies and programmes. As any undertaking that examines the relationship between well-being and public policy is likely to be quite sizeable, it may be more efficient to undertake a series of papers that examine more confined sets of policies and programmes that can subsequently be brought together to present a broader, cross-departmental examination of the relationship;
- The quality of the available indicators, and the scope of the approach adopted, means that at best these pilot papers describe the relationship between well-being and public policy. They are not evaluations of how public policy has enhanced well-being. An evaluation would, at the very least, require a fuller application of a programme logic model (e.g., examine the resources available (both human and financial), how these resources were used to support implementation (e.g., volume and quality of services provided including training, guidance and standards) and focus on questions such as efficiency, effectiveness and on-going rationale).

## 6.2 How can existing public policy be linked to the Well-being Framework?

As with the introduction of any new cross-government initiative, questions are likely to arise as to how a new initiative fits with what is already in place. In this particular case, how does existing public policy fit with the *Well-being Framework's* multi-dimensional structure? While existing public policies may set out their own multi-dimensional approach to addressing a policy challenge, the dimensions are unlikely to be as numerous, or defined in the same way, as those presented by the *Well-being Framework*. Given this context it is probable that any effort to utilise the well-being perspective will require a willingness to bridge the differences in how public policies and the *Well-being Framework* are articulated.<sup>53</sup>

### 6.2.1 Strategic Context

In this working paper, the strategic context refers to those strategic policy documents that inform efforts to link policy and well-being by setting out relevant policy goals and objectives and / or an understanding of what is meant by well-being for a particular group of people or a particular policy issue.

The documents included as part of the strategic context might include departmental or public service corporate documents such as Statements of Strategy, Annual Reports and Business Plans, cross-governmental strategies, policy documents that relate to the provision of a particular service and policy documents that relate to a particular type of policy challenge.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> The overarching *Well-being Framework* provides a focus on high-level well-being outcomes and a broad range of well-being dimensions. The sectoral frameworks tend to focus on either a particular cohort in society (e.g., children, older people) or one of the dimensions set out in the overarching *Framework* (e.g., work and job quality, mental and physical health). These more specific frameworks help identify the intermediate components and drivers of the outcomes that are relevant to the cohort or well-being dimension. Furthermore, by being more specific they can draw clear links between policy actions and well-being outcomes, and support greater cooperation and co-ordination between departments, agencies and other stakeholders.

<sup>54</sup> Some may consider this a narrow approach to describing the strategic context and suggest that it should also include information from other non-governmental sources such as international organisations, academic research, charities and so on. The approach set out here has been adopted

In addition to setting out policy goals and objectives, and an understanding of well-being in a particular policy context, these documents may contain additional information that enhances an understanding of the relationship between well-being and public policy such as a description of the policy challenge as well as relevant public services and other policy interventions. By way of illustration, Box 2 sets out the strategic policy documents included in one of the pilot papers developed by the WPPU.

### *Box 3 – Examples of Documents included in Strategic Context*

#### *Statements of Strategy*

The Public Service Management Act 1997 requires each Government Department and Office to publish at regular intervals a Statement of Strategy comprising the key objectives, outputs and related strategies (including use of resources). (Department of Children & Youth Affairs *Statement of Strategy 2016-2019*; Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth *Statement of Strategy 2021-2023*)

#### *Business Plans*

Tusla Child and Family Agency's *Business Plan 2021* was produced under Section 46 of the *Child and Family Agency Act 2013*. *Business Plan 2021* sets out the actions that Tusla would undertake in 2021 to drive the implementation of, and work toward achieving the goals set out in Tusla's *Corporate Plan 2021-2023*. It reflects the *Performance Statement* issued by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth.

#### *Cross-government Strategies*

The purpose of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020* was to coordinate policy across Government to achieve better outcomes for children and young people.

*First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, 2019-2028* is a cross-departmental strategy to support babies, young children and their families.

*National Youth Strategy 2015-2020* is a universal strategy for young people aged 10-24 years that is concerned with ensuring that they are active and healthy; achieving their full potential in learning and development; safe and protected from harm; have economic security and opportunity; and are connected and contributing to their world.

#### *Policy documents relating to the provision of a particular service*

*National Aftercare Policy for Alternative Care* sets out policy statements with regard to the provision of aftercare services. Young people who have had a care history with Tusla are entitled to an aftercare service based on their assessed needs. Aftercare services are support services that build on the work that has already been undertaken in preparing young people for adulthood and build on the skills and capacity that young people have learned and developed during their time in care.

#### *Policy documents relating to a particular policy challenge*

In 2019, Tusla and the Health Service Executive published *Hidden Harm Strategic Statement - Seeing Through Hidden Harm to Brighter Futures* setting out their commitment and role in addressing the sensitive and emotive issue of parental problem alcohol and other drug use in order to improve outcomes for children and families. It also set out how it is intended to bridge the gap between adult and children's services in favour of a more family-focused approach that considers the needs of dependent children and other family members.

The overall aims of *Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence, 2016-2021* are to change societal attitudes to support a reduction in domestic and sexual violence; improve supports available to victims and survivors; and hold perpetrators to account in order to create a safer Ireland.

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because the focus is on developing links between government policy and the *Well-being Framework*. However, this is not to suggest that the overall approach to examining the relationship should not include information from other sources.

## 6.2.2 Policy Goals and Objectives

Policy goals or objectives can be useful in terms of establishing a link between public policy and the *Well-being Framework*. As policy goals and objectives are explicit statements of the intended results of the policy or programme,<sup>55</sup> they are concerned with achieving progress. The *Well-being Framework* conceptualises public policy as providing opportunities for people to change or progress their lives, that is, “to be” (e.g., being well-nourished, being educated) and “to do” (e.g., working, caring for someone, voting). The process of setting out a policy goal or objective provides an opportunity to state the benefits of a policy, programme or programmatic intervention to the individuals who access a service, and to society more generally. As such, it is the stated “benefits” that identify the particular aspect(s) of a well-being dimension(s) that ought to be associated with the policy goal or objective.

When these links are being identified, there should be some discussion as to why the policy goal is relevant to the dimension under consideration (i.e., highlight the aspect of well-being that would be improved or enhanced by progression toward a policy goal). In cases where policy goals and objectives are clearly stated, it should be reasonably straightforward to associate them with a well-being dimension.<sup>56</sup> However, policy goals and objectives may not always be clearly stated. Strategic policy documents sometimes articulate policy goals and objectives in quite general terms encompassing several aspects of a policy challenge.<sup>57</sup> When this is the case, an individual policy goal or objective may be associated with more than one well-being dimension. A wider understanding of the policy may be required in order to establish a rationale for linking a policy goal or objective to a well-being dimension. (See Figure 5 and Box 4.)

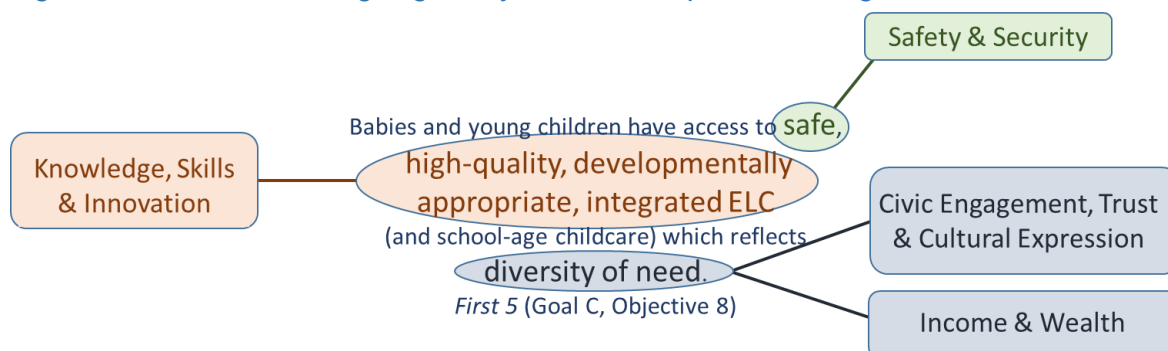
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<sup>55</sup> Guidelines for Evaluating, Planning and Managing Current Expenditure, Section 3.1; Value for Money Review and Focused Policy Assessment Guidelines, Section 4.1.3 – 4.1.9 and 5.1.10 (<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/public-spending-code/>)

<sup>56</sup> Ideally, policy goals and objectives should be: *Specific* (a clear statement of the intended results or outcomes of the intervention including direction of change (i.e., define what success looks like); *Measurable* (define results or outcomes in ways that can be quantified, that is, develop and / or identify a coherent set of quantitative metrics to measure the impacts, results and benefits of the intervention); *Achievable / Attainable* (the intended results or outcomes should be within the control of those tasked with implementing the intervention though there should also be an awareness of the limitations and constraints involved in doing so (e.g., resources and time). Given that time is often a key factor in achieving policy objectives, policy makers may consider identifying intermediary outcomes that will provide evidence of whether or not the policy, programme or programmatic intervention is progressing toward the intended outcome); *Relevant / Realistic* (while focused on the specific policy challenge, it should also be part of the overall work of the department and government); and *Time-bound* (provide clarity on how long it is likely to take before the intervention will have its intended impact, in particular, noting whether or not the impact is likely to be discernible within the lifetime of a government).

<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, how policy goals and objectives are articulated may vary in terms of how clearly they focus on intended outcomes and results. Some goals and objectives will set out a clear statement of the intended outcome and may also include a direction of travel or target that is to be achieved. Other goals and objectives may reference the provision of a service that is intended to contribute to achieving an outcome but may not necessarily make explicit what that outcome is and others may be high-level aspirational statements about the future of society. (Kennedy, 2020.)

Figure 5 – Illustration of Aligning Policy Goal to Multiple Well-being Dimensions



#### Box 4 – Clarity of Policy Goals and Complexity of Policy Challenges and Policy Interventions

The clarity of policy goals and objectives may be associated with the complexity of the policy challenge and/or policy intervention. The complexity of a challenge can be understood in terms of what might happen (i.e., number of possible outcomes) and how likely it is that something will happen (i.e., probability of observing a specific outcome). Complexity may mean that it is difficult to define and measure an outcome. It may not be obvious what “success” looks like (e.g., the non-emergence of a problem, multiple related outcomes<sup>58</sup>). The benefit may be expressed in terms of the individual who accessed the service, but may also be described in terms of their family, community and society more generally. Furthermore, the intended benefit may only emerge in the longer term or in combination with other policies interventions across the lifecycle (i.e., the intervention promotes factors that support an individual’s development over a prolonged period).

The complexity of a policy intervention can be understood in terms of:

- Simple interventions - rely upon a single (a coherent set of) known mechanism with a single (a coherent set of) output whose benefits are understood to lead to measurable and widely anticipated outcomes;
- Complicated interventions - involve a number of interrelated parts with processes that are broadly predictable and outputs that arrive at outcomes in well-understood ways; and
- Complex interventions – involve multiple components that may act independently and interdependently (characterised by feedback loops, adaptation and learning by both those delivering and those receiving the intervention), a portfolio of activities (a large number of different actors are delivering a range of different interventions at more than one level) and multiple desired outcomes (involves more than one policy domain, no one organisation has overall control over an intervention and its outcomes, and outcomes may change over time as the context in which the policy or programme is being implemented changes).<sup>59</sup>

It is also worth noting that policy goals and objectives may lack clarity because they have been developed in a context involving consultation and negotiation between various stakeholders. Any one goal or objective may encompass a range of issues (i.e., they are not scientific hypotheses).

<sup>58</sup> Cairney and St Denny, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> HM Treasury, 2020; Ling, 2012; Stirling, 2010.

To date the WPPU has used information derived from the strategic contexts to:

- Describe what is meant by well-being for a specific cohort in the population (i.e., older people); and
- Examine the relationship between well-being and a set of policies and programmes (i.e., early learning and childcare, child and family welfare and protection).

The strategic context has helped shape an understanding of what is meant by well-being for a specific cohort in the population. When thinking about older age, there may be a tendency to focus on issues around people's health. However, as the *National Positive Ageing Strategy* and various conceptualisations of ageing make clear, a consideration of well-being in older age is about more than people's health. Well-being in older age is also about how people meet their basic needs, that they have a sense of purpose and efficacy, participate in society, and find value in the lives that they live. The goals and objectives of the *National Positive Ageing Strategy* helped inform how three themes of well-being in older age (being healthy; participating in all aspects of life; and being confident and secure) can be linked to the *Well-being Framework*. (See Box 5.)

At this stage in the development of the well-being initiative, Subjective Well-being highlights an additional way of thinking about the relationship between the various dimensions. Subjective Well-being is a separate dimension of the *Framework* and may also be a consequence or product of other dimensions of the *Framework*. (See Section 4.2.) A full understanding of Subjective Well-being and public policy would require the use of individual level data to examine how a person's overall measure of Subjective Well-being (e.g., quality of life) is associated with other dimensions of well-being, including subjective assessments on those dimensions (e.g., health status, quality of time use). This may also apply to other dimensions of the *Framework* and empirical analysis will support the development of a fuller understanding of these interactions.

#### *Box 5 – Summary of National Positive Ageing Strategy and Conceptualisations of Ageing*

In Ireland, the *National Positive Ageing Strategy* sets out a vision that:

...celebrates and prepares properly for individual and population ageing. It will enable and support all ages and older people to enjoy physical and mental health and wellbeing to their full potential. It will promote and respect older people's engagement in economic, social, cultural, community and family life, and foster better solidarity between generations. It will be a society in which the equality, independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity of older people are pursued at all times.

The *National Positive Ageing Strategy* sets out a range of national goals that are concerned with:

- Removing barriers and providing opportunities for people to be involved in all aspects of life. In particular, this goal references employment and education, active citizenship and volunteering, engagement and participation in their local communities and enabling people to "get out and about".
- Supporting people's physical and mental health and well-being. In particular, this goal references preventing and reducing disability and chronic illness and promoting the development and delivery of high quality care services and supports.
- Enabling people to age with confidence, security and dignity in their own homes and communities. In particular, this goal references people's income and standard of living, the quality of their homes, the accessibility of public spaces, transport and buildings and their feelings of safety and security both within and outside their homes and families.

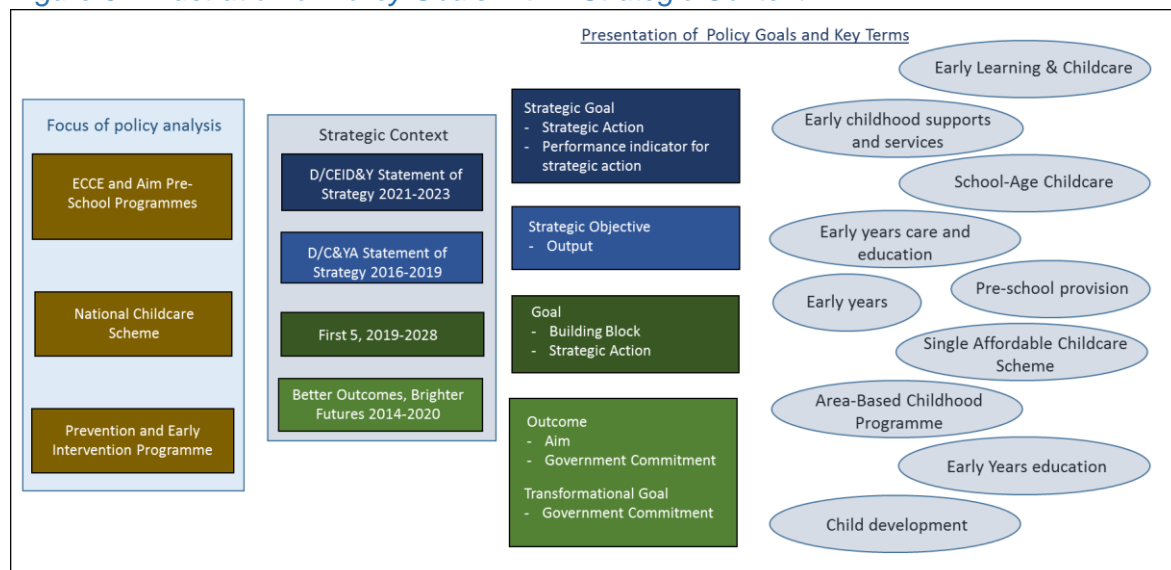


The development of an understanding of well-being in older age was also supported by different approaches to conceptualising ageing:

- *Healthy ageing* focuses on optimising opportunities for physical, social and mental health in order to enable older people to take an active part in society without discrimination and to enjoy an independent and good quality of life;
- *Active ageing* emphasises people’s continued participation in all aspects of their communities (e.g. social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs) and not just the ability to be physically active or to participate in the labour force;
- *Positive ageing* moves beyond a concern with a person’s physical, emotional and mental well-being to include social attitudes and perceptions of ageing that can influence the well-being of older people, whether through direct discrimination or through negative attitudes and images; and
- *Successful ageing* accounts for the dynamic or life-cycle element of ageing as it is concerned with the ability of people to adapt to the transitions experienced by the ageing person; preventing or reducing the negative impacts on their quality of life.

Finally, it is worth noting that there was a certain amount of variation in the nomenclature associated with policy goals and objectives. In corporate documents, the more general (or higher) statement of policy goals were referred to as either “strategic” goals or objectives. In policy or service specific documents, policy goals tended to omit reference to “strategic” and instead referred to “goal”, “transformational goal”, “outcome” or “statement of purpose”. There was also a hierarchical approach to presenting policy objectives and goals. As policy goals become more specific, they were associated with a variety of different labels: “strategic action” and “performance indicator for strategic action”; “building block” and “strategic action”; “aim” and “government commitment”; “objective”; and “output” / “priority activity and output”. (See Figure 7, also includes examples of key words used to identify relevant policy goals and objectives.)

Figure 6 – Illustration of Policy Goals within Strategic Context



### 6.2.3 Relevant Indicators

What is set out in this working paper is concerned with developing the well-being initiative within the wider context of the performance framework and other reform initiatives that are supporting an evidence-for-policy perspective. As such then, it seeks to provide an empirical description of the relationship between well-being and public policy.

In undertaking this type of analysis, there is a need to identify and select indicators that are relevant to both the well-being dimensions and the policies that are the focus of the analysis. The purpose of these indicators is to provide the evidential base for an understanding of the relationship between well-being and public policy.

In some cases, a Department may have published a set of indicators. With regard to the work undertaken by the WPPU to date, such publications have been useful in terms of identifying relevant indicators. The Department of Health has developed a *Health System Performance Assessment (HPSA) Framework* and this has identified a set of indicators relevant for key outcome domains.<sup>60</sup> (See Table 3.) In the area of children and young people, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (2017) published a set of over 100 indicators across 70 indicator areas that were intended to allow for the measurement of progress in some key areas across the five national outcomes; this was updated in 2022. Relevant indicators are also included in *State of the Nation's Children*.

*Table 3 – Outcome Indicators included in the Health System Performance Assessment Framework*

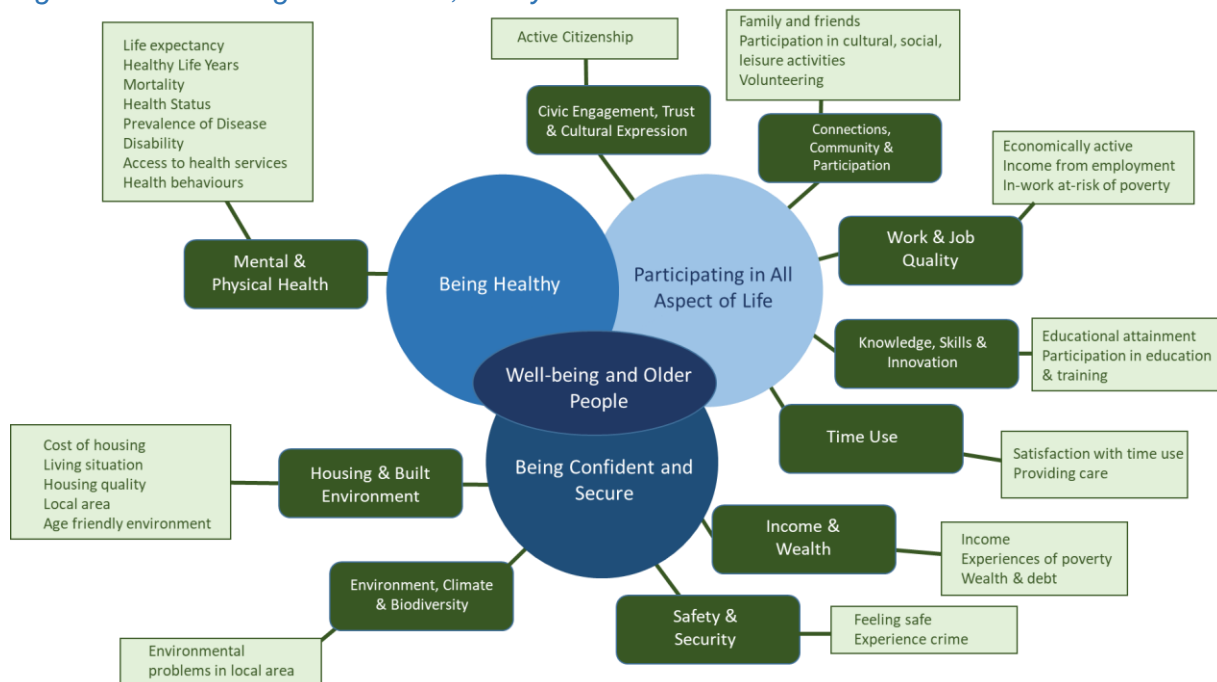
Self-reported health	Self-reported health status
Disability	Self-reported disability Types of disability
Morbidity	Burden of disease Select types of morbidity Multi-morbidity
Mortality	Life expectancy Avoidable mortality Causes of mortality Healthy life expectancy
Risk factors	Overweight / obesity Lifestyle / environment Health literacy

However, it may happen that these publications may not include indicators that address some aspect of the policies or programmes under consideration, or one or more of the well-being dimensions. As such, it may also be fruitful to examine other sources of information in order to identify potentially relevant indicators. Such sources might include official reports produced by a Department or Agency under its aegis that focus on a relevant policy challenge (e.g., publications by Pobal, Tusla, National Review Panel), longitudinal studies of a particular cohort (e.g., *Growing Up in Ireland*, *The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing*) or official statistics (e.g.,

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/6660a-health-system-performance-assessment-hspa-framework/>  
The HPSA Framework is ordered into five clusters: outcomes (health status); outputs (costs, access, quality and person-centred); processes (continuity of care, coordination of care, integration of services); structures (finances, health workforce, health services structures, health technologies, health information); and cross-cutting cluster (equity, efficiency, resilience).

Central Statistics Office, Eurostat). Figure 8 presents various relevant indicators used in the pilot exercise undertaken by the WPPU in the context of well-being dimensions and associated policy goals / well-being themes.

Figure 7 – Well-being Dimensions, Policy Goals and Indicators



### 6.3 How does the quality of evidence inform an understanding of the relationship between well-being and public policy?

When examining the relationship between well-being and public policy, it is important to acknowledge how differences in the quality of evidence inform understanding of the nature of that relationship (i.e., how direct the relationship is between the policy intervention and the policy outcome). While discussions of public policy may reflect a notion of “evidence” as some homogenous bearer of truth, the reality is much more complex: there are various types or levels of evidence and each of these is based on differing methodological approaches.

Hierarchies of evidence provide a way of comparing quality of evidence. These hierarchies are structured in terms of how well or otherwise the methodology addresses the issue of causality (i.e., is it possible to attribute the programmatic intervention as the cause of the outcome). (See Appendix 2.)

From this perspective, the highest quality of evidence are the *results* (or dependent variables) from rigorously conducted evaluations such as Randomised Controlled Trials (RCT) or Quasi-experiments. Randomised Controlled Trials are designed to minimise the risk of variables other than the intervention influencing the results and demonstrate the effectiveness of the policies or programmes in achieving the well-being outcome.<sup>61</sup> When indicators of this quality

<sup>61</sup> This “classic” RCT model in which one group is randomly allocated to participate in the programmatic intervention and another is allocated to act as a control is not always applied as the approach to testing some interventions. When testing interventions in social or human services, it may not have been possible or appropriate because of ethical issues to identify a control group. As such then, the control group may receive a lower level of treatment than the treatment group.



are used, it is possible to state that the policy or programme *has (or has not) enhanced a particular dimension of well-being (or a particular aspect of a dimension of well-being)*<sup>62</sup>.

However, such rigorously conducted evaluations are expensive and are relatively uncommon in an Irish context. While evidence of this type may inform some aspects of an analysis of existing public policy, it may make a stronger contribution informing the design and implementation of policies that seek to enhance well-being (i.e., help identify effective programmatic interventions).

Furthermore, policies seeking to enhance well-being may not involve fixed, linear sequences of activities capable of duplication and replication. The evaluation of such policies may require approaches that, on the one hand, result in more contingent findings, but on the other hand, improve understanding of the policy challenge (i.e., reduce uncertainties) and the services and practices, and support more informed adaptation of policy or programmatic interventions to better achieve policy objectives.<sup>63</sup>

To date, the work undertaken by the WPPU has relied on impact indicators and context indicators:

- *Impact indicators* are indicators that are relevant measures of the intended well-being outcome (as set out in a Programme Logic Model).<sup>64</sup> The focus of the analysis is on the overall trend or direction of travel, that is, is the indicator demonstrating progress toward an intended goal.
- *Context indicators* are relevant measures of the intended well-being outcome (i.e., encompassed in the stated policy goal) but there is an indirect link between the policy outcome and the public service (i.e., through a complex series of intervening variables and / or feedback loops). Such indicators may also help understand demand or need for a particular public service.

Both of these types of indicators are further down the quality of the evidence hierarchy than results from RCTs and this limits what can be concluded about the relationship between well-being and public policy. When these types of indicators are used, any conclusions are within the scope of “contingent findings” and are about informing understanding of the relationship (i.e., not about determining “causality” and setting out an explanation of the relationship).<sup>65</sup> If the relationship between well-being and policy is examined using:

- An *impact indicator*, the policy or programme might be described as being *associated with the increase (or decrease)* in a particular dimension of well-being (or a particular aspect of a dimension of well-being); or

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<sup>62</sup> See: New Zealand Government, 2021a.

<sup>63</sup> Petticrew and Roberts, 2003; Bagshaw and Bellomo, 2008; Muir Grey, 1996; Stern, 2015; Breckon, 2016; Supplee and Duggan, 2019; Ling, 2012. Also see Better Evaluation: [https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/developmental\\_evaluation](https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/developmental_evaluation)

<sup>64</sup> The policy or programme has not been the subject of a rigorously conducted evaluation (i.e., the direct causal relationship has not been demonstrated).

<sup>65</sup> Given the type of data that tends to be available, “understand” is used in terms of descriptive inference rather than causal inference (“explain”). Descriptive inference is the process of understanding an unobserved phenomenon (i.e., the relationship between public policy and well-being) on the basis of a set of observations (i.e., indicators that are associated with both a policy goal (set out in a key strategic document) and a well-being dimension (as defined in a framework)). (See: King, Keohane and Verba, 1994)

- A *context indicator*, the policy or programme might be described as being *implemented in the context of improvement (or deterioration)* on a particular dimension of well-being (or a particular aspect of a dimension of well-being).

At this stage, it is worth noting how the use of impact indicators and context indicators impose an even more fundamental limitation on understanding the relationship between well-being and public policy. These types of indicators are measured at an aggregate level (i.e., they are the sum of the experiences of many individual people). However, well-being is conceptualised at the level of the individual. Aggregate approaches do not provide an opportunity for the individual to articulate what is important for their “well-being”.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, the well-being of an individual is not simply about their current circumstances and behaviours, but includes the accumulation of positive and negative effects of social, economic and environmental conditions that they have experienced over the course of their life (i.e., the circumstances in which people are born, grow up, live, work and age).

This means that there is a tension between how well-being is understood (at the level of the individual) and the data available to understand it (at the level of the group). While it is reasonable to use aggregate level data to discuss the well-being of people in general or well-being of a specific group of people, it is important not to use such data to make inferences about individuals (i.e., ecological fallacy). This will be important in terms of efforts to design and implement policy that seek to enhance well-being. Aggregate level data can contribute to a description of the policy challenge that people encounter, but if the focus is on how policy can enhance the well-being of the individual then it is more appropriate to use individual level data.<sup>67</sup>

#### 6.4 How does the approach to examining data inform an understanding of the relationship between well-being and public policy?

The *Well-being Framework* provides a multi-dimensional structure for considering the relationship between well-being and public policy. While it is by no means the definitive word on what is meant by well-being in a public policy context, it provides a starting point for thinking about what ought to be considered when examining that relationship. This section of the working paper is concerned with the challenge of how to utilise multiple indicators across numerous dimensions to examine the relationship between well-being and public policy.

To date, the work of the WPPU has tended to consider three basic questions:

- How has well-being changed over a period of time?
- How does the well-being of a particular group of people compare to that of people in general?
- How does well-being differ within the group that is the primary focus of a public policy?

These questions are important because they shape the perspective from which the relationship between well-being and policy is examined, and a given perspective can shape conclusions about the relationship. For instance, an analysis of the first question may show that well-being for a particular group of people has improved. However, an analysis of the second question may show that their well-being is less than that of people in general. Finally, an analysis of the third question may show that within a particular section of society, the well-

<sup>66</sup> Amendola, Gabbuti and Vecchi, 2021.

<sup>67</sup> King, Keohane and Verba, 1994: 30-31.

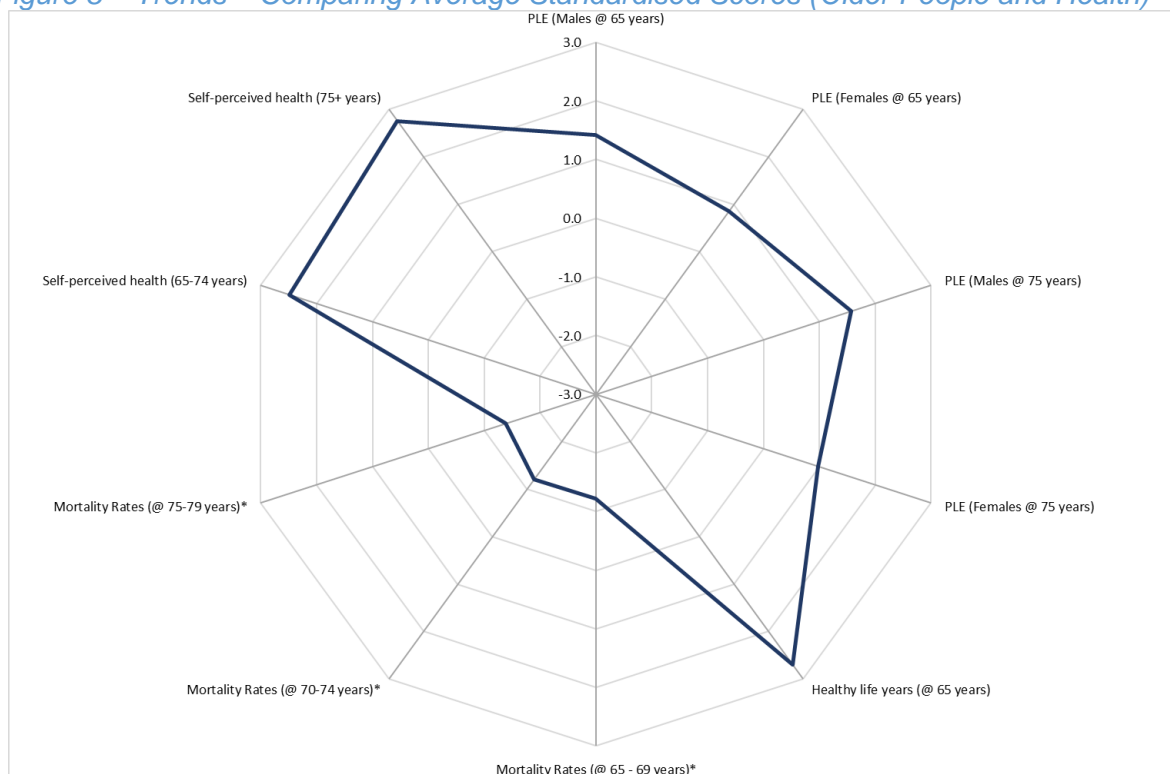
being of some may be better than others, or that over time the well-being of some has improved more than others. The equality focus of well-being brings a more rounded approach to policy analysis. The combination of a multi-dimensional approach with differences between and within groups can contribute to a more developed consideration of public policy: what might be presented as an important improvement over time is tempered by an understanding of issues of (in)equality in society.

### 6.4.1 Change over time

The first question is concerned with change in well-being over time. It is addressed by comparing the well-being of people today with the well-being of people at an earlier point in time. This question focuses on whether people today are more likely than people some time ago “to be” or “to do” something. In addressing this question it might be useful to compare an average across a number of years rather than single years (e.g., the three most recent years compared against three years closest to the turn of the millennium).

As the various indicators are likely to have different units (e.g., nominal numbers, rates per 100,000 population, percentages) and differing levels of variation (i.e., the extent of change around the mean may differ between indicators making it difficult to distinguish notable change from less notable change), it may be useful to compare standardised scores.<sup>68</sup> Such a comparison makes it easier to present indicators of differing units in a single illustration and to draw attention to notable instances of change. Figure 9 presents change in average standardised scores for two periods across a range of different indicators. The discussion of this presentation can focus on those indicators where the difference is greater than or less than a particular threshold. In the work undertaken by the WPPU, this threshold has been change of two or more standard deviations.

Figure 8 – Trends – Comparing Average Standardised Scores (Older People and Health)



\* Expected negative trend

<sup>68</sup> Transform the indicators to a common scale with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one (z-scores).

In addition to comparing start- and end-points, it may also be useful to consider the trend as a whole in order to bring to the fore variation across the whole of the period; drawing attention to any highs or lows. This approach may allow the analysis to distinguish between:

- Strong positive or negative trends - a clear direction of travel with variation of at least two standard deviations;
- Modest positive or negative trends - a clear direction of travel with variation between one and two standard deviations; and
- No substantive change - variation of less than one standard deviation; as well as
- Mixed trends - a combination of positive and negative trends with variation of at least one standard deviation.

The WPPU has referenced change of two standard deviations or more.<sup>69</sup>

Others may wish to utilise more or less onerous levels of variation in determining the extent of change.<sup>70</sup> For instance, the *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures Indicator Set* presents change in terms of the most recent data relative to a baseline year. Change is associated with the data increasing (or decreasing) by at least 1%.

#### 6.4.2 Comparing groups of people

In addition to examining overall trends, the analysis may also compare different groups of people with each other. The notion of human diversity is central to the capability approach and highlights the need to look beyond average conditions (societal wide estimates) to include differences in people's experiences. In terms of examining the relationship between well-being and public policy this may bring to the fore asymmetries in the distribution of opportunities between different groups of people as well as persisting advantage and disadvantage across generations. Table 4 provides examples of the different categories that were used to differentiate between people in the WPPU pilot papers.

The second question focuses on comparing the well-being of a specific group of people with that of people in general. The analysis presents a ratio describing whether the group of concern is more or less likely than people in general "to be" or "to do" something. In terms of setting out the analysis, the approach might focus on all of the group of concern or a subgroup within it (especially if the analysis is also examining variation within the group of concern i.e., question 3). For instance, the WPPU compared the "youngest" cohort of older people with "people in general". (See Figure 10.)

However, given the range of indicators that are likely to be included in any analysis, the definitions of what constitutes a group of people is likely to vary by indicator meaning that

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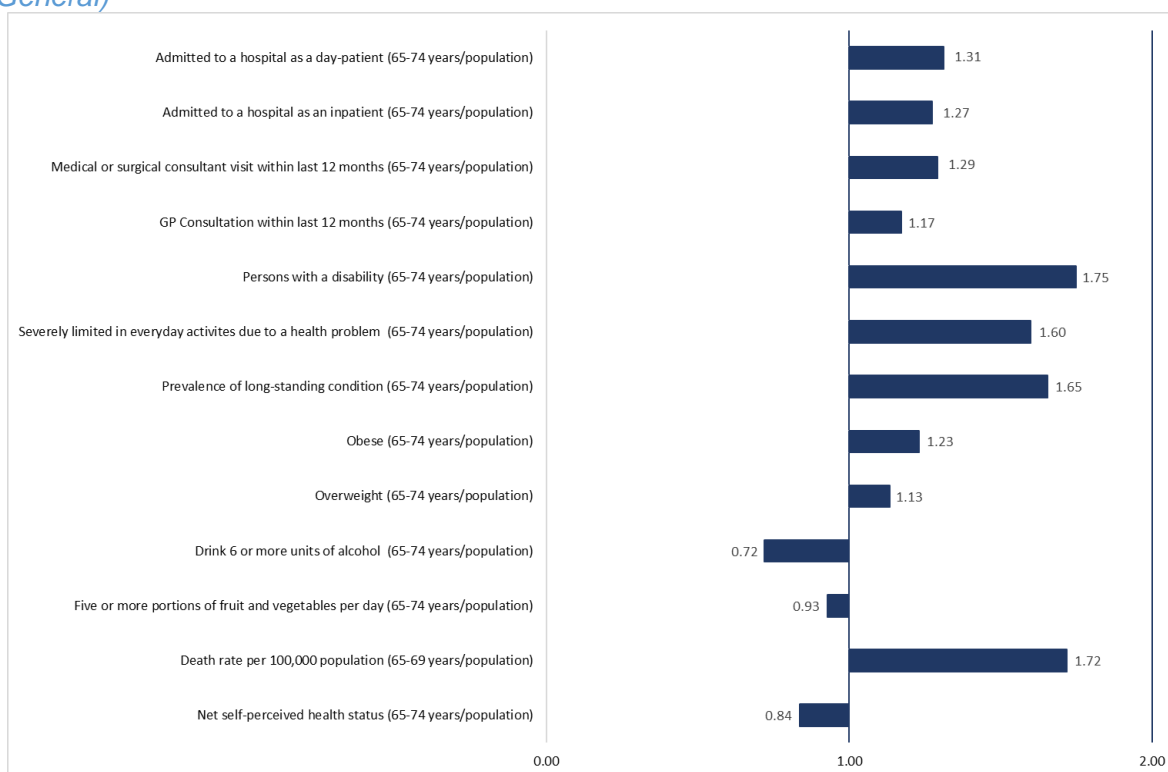
<sup>69</sup> A change of two or more standard deviations suggests that, in the context of the overall distribution of observed values there has been a notable change in the values observed at one period as compared with those observed at another period. For instance, a positive trend suggests that the initial values were less than the mean with later values greater than the mean. With a normal distribution, change of two standard distributions suggests that the initial values were in that tail of the distribution with the lowest values (theoretically, the 15.8% of values that are in the lowest end of the distribution) while the later observed values were in that other tail of the distribution with the highest values (theoretically, the 15.8% of values that are in the highest end of the distribution).

<sup>70</sup> Alternative approaches might calculate the Spearman (rank) correlation coefficient between observed values of each indicator and time (expressed in years), or may set out *a priori* thresholds of change for each indicator that would need to be observed to determine notable change.

comparisons may not be as clear as intended. For instance, depending on the indicator, the “youngest” cohort of older people refers to people aged 65-69 years or people aged 65-74 years. The definition of “people in general” also depended on definitions of the wider population associated with particular indicators.

The third question addresses differences within the group of concern. It should not be assumed that a group of people is homogenous. There may be important differences within it. By comparing the well-being of sub-groups, a ratio can be used to describe whether or not one sub-group of people is more or less likely than their counterparts “to be” or “to do” something. For instance, the WPPU compared “younger” older people (e.g., those aged 65-69 years) with “older” older people (e.g., those aged 75 years or older).

*Figure 9 – Ratios - Compare Groups of People (Health of Older People and People in General)*



*Table 4 – Socio-demographic Variables*

<b>Sex</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Female</li> <li>- Male</li> </ul>	
<b>Educational Attainment</b>	Highest level of educational attainment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Level 0-2 (Less than primary, primary and lower secondary education);</li> <li>- Level 3-4 (Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education)</li> <li>- Level 5-8 (Tertiary education)</li> </ul>	
<b>Age</b>	Children <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Up to 1 year</li> <li>- 1-3 years</li> <li>- 3-5 years</li> <li>- Over 5 years</li> </ul>	Older People <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 65 years or older</li> <li>- 65-69 years</li> <li>- 65-74 years</li> <li>- 70-74 years</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 75 years or older</li> <li>- 60 years or older</li> </ul> <p>Population reference cohorts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 15 years or older</li> <li>- 15-64 years</li> <li>- 16 years or older</li> <li>- 18 years or older</li> </ul>	
Affluence	Haase-Pratschke Index to compare between: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Very disadvantage area</li> <li>- Very affluent area</li> </ul>	Above / below 60% of median equivalised income	
Poverty	At-risk of poverty – The share of persons with an equivalised income below 60% of the national median income.	Deprivation - the share of persons who are excluded and marginalised from consuming goods and services (11 list items) which are considered the norm for other people in society due to an inability to afford them.	Consistent poverty - the share of persons identified as being at risk of poverty and who are living in households deprived of two or more of the eleven basic deprivation items.
Family composition	Couple / lone person by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Number of children</li> <li>- Age of youngest child</li> </ul>	Older households <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1 adult aged 65 years and over</li> <li>- 2 adults, at least one aged 65 years and over</li> </ul> <p>All household compositions</p>	
Family background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Single parent</li> <li>- Traveller</li> <li>- Roma</li> <li>- Neither English nor Irish as first language</li> </ul>		
Disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sensory</li> <li>- Learning</li> <li>- Other</li> </ul>	<p>Activities of daily living (e.g. washing, eating and toileting that are essential to daily life)</p> <p>Instrumental activities of daily living (e.g. preparing meals, managing money and household chores that are important in maintaining independence)</p>	
Economic Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Retired from employment</li> <li>At work (full-time / part-time; employed / self-employed)</li> </ul>		



### 6.4.3 Composite Indices<sup>71</sup>

Any examination of the relationship between well-being and public policy is likely to involve a large number of indicators. A large number of indicators may make it difficult to present the analysis in an accessible manner; making it difficult to follow or assimilate all of the information presented.

One option is to combine indicators to form a single composite index representing a specific dimension, or indices representing different aspects of a dimension. Over the last few decades, there has been an increase in the use of composite indices to describe the complex, multi-dimensional context within which public policy is implemented. While the use of a composite index can facilitate efforts to communicate information, it does not take away from the importance of focusing on the individual indicators as part of the process of describing trends and different experiences.

There is a need to exercise caution when using composite indices as they may contribute to an overly simplistic or misleading presentation of the data, or reflect bias (e.g., the selection of indicators or the presentation of the data may exclude or hide indicators that might otherwise bring to the fore serious failings).<sup>72</sup> There are a number of ways to support the open and transparent development of a composite index:

- For each well-being dimension, give a clear sense of what is being measured. In addition to stating what is encompassed by a dimension in the *Well-being Framework*, it is important to establish the way(s) in which this dimension is evident in the public policies that are under consideration. This discussion may also set out how the public policy encompasses the different aspects (or sub-dimensions) of the well-being dimension.
- As the utility of a composite index is dependent on the quality of the underlying indicators, it is important to be clear about the relevance of the indicators to public policy and the well-being dimension.
- In some cases, missing data may raise a question as to whether or not a relevant indicator can be included in the composite index (e.g., data is collected every few years rather than every year). In these cases, rather than excluding an indicator, it may be possible to impute missing data (e.g., calculating the mean if one data point is missing or a linear projection between two data points if more than one data point is missing). It is important to note how missing data was imputed.
- The relevant indicators may differ from one another in terms of their units of measurement. This challenge can be addressed by normalising the data. One way of doing so is to transform the indicators to a common scale with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one (z-scores).<sup>73</sup> The indicators may then be compiled into a single index by aggregating the standardised scores or calculating a mean score.<sup>74</sup>
- One common source of criticism of composite indices focuses on the weightings given to each indicator. Essentially, weightings reflect the relative “worth” of the various indicators. If specific weightings are given to each indicator, then those given higher

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<sup>71</sup> OECD, 2008.

<sup>72</sup> See: Amendola, Gabbuti and Vecchi, 2021.

<sup>73</sup> Other ways of doing so include adjusting the data so that the minimum is equal to zero and the maximum is equal to one or using a categorical scale (e.g., “fully achieved”, “partially achieved” and so on, or close to the mean (0), above (1) or below (-1) the mean).

<sup>74</sup> Geometric aggregation is an alternative approach that involves multiplying the scores together and then getting the root of the product based on the number of indicators.

weightings are seen as being “worth” more than those with lower weightings. Various statistical models can be used to inform the weighting process. However, many composite indices do not allocate different weightings to the various indicators. This may be because there is no empirical or theoretical basis for regarding one indicator as more important than another. However, this does not mean that the indicators have not been weighted. Instead, all indicators were given an equal weighting, and is something that, in itself, may prove contentious.

- The composite index provides a useful summary overview. However, the discussion should also disaggregate it into its underlying indicators. This discussion should focus attention on differences in the direction and extent of trends, highlighting instances of notable under or over performance. A top-down approach would use the composite index to provide a summary description of the relationship and then discuss the individual indicators. A bottom-up approach would discuss the individual indicators and then seek to summarise the overall trend using the composite index.

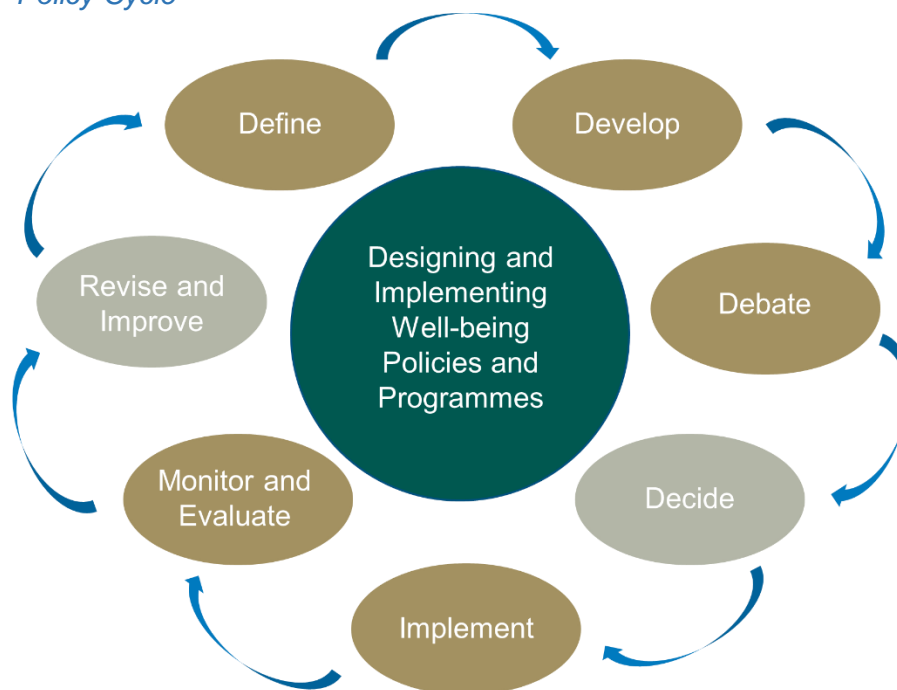


## 7. Well-being Framework and Informing the Design and Implementation of Effective Public Policy

In addition to supporting efforts to examine existing public policy, it is anticipated that the *Well-being Framework for Ireland* will support the ongoing development of the Public Spending Code and the increased use of evidence in the policy making process. In advance of undertaking a programme of work in this area, the purpose of this section is to highlight some of the issues that will be considered.

It is envisioned that the development of a deeper understanding of well-being in a policy context will help inform the design and implementation of public policies. By locating well-being within the various stages of a policy making cycle, an evidence-for-policy approach can bring to the fore key issues, and provide insights into methods and approaches that inform the design and implementation of effective policies and programmes.<sup>75</sup> (See Figure 11 and Box 5.) This work may also provide an opportunity to develop ways in which each stage of the policy cycle would consider questions relating to distribution, resilience, risk, sustainability and productivity.<sup>76</sup>

Figure 10 – Policy Cycle



<sup>75</sup> In this context, it is worth noting that the OECD has proposed a “well-being lens” approach to redesigning an existing system (as such, has a more limited in focus than that being set out in this section). The “lens” approach defines outcomes in terms of well-being and makes these outcomes central criteria in policy design and implementation. The intention is to mainstream well-being considerations in the decision-making process from the start of the policy-making process. The key elements of the OECD’s processes are: envision the outcomes that a functional and sustainable system would achieve; understand the key dynamic underlying undesirable results, and identify key stakeholders and barriers to systemic change; and redesign systems via policy packages focused on reversing unsustainable dynamics. This may include modifying governance, budget allocation and monitoring frameworks so that they enable and are conducive to systemic change.

<https://www.oecd.org/climate-change/systems-innovation/well-being-lens-brochure.pdf>

<sup>76</sup> See: New Zealand Government, 2021b.

### Box 6 – Evidence-for-Policy Approach to the Policy Cycle<sup>77</sup>

“Define” the challenge that is to be addressed by the public policy - Quantitative evidence can be used to:

- Describe the challenge (i.e., what is known about the challenge, identify gaps in the evidence);
- Provide a clear statement as to why government action is necessary (rationale);
- Set out clearly what it is the policy or programme is seeking to achieve (policy objective); and
- Set out how the (proposed) policy or programme fits within the broader context of a government’s policy agenda (strategic alignment);

“Develop” a range of alternative approaches to addressing the policy challenge and achieving the policy objective. In setting out the alternative approaches, there is an opportunity to begin thinking about the key questions of:

- Who should benefit from the services provided under the policy; and
- The resources likely to be required to ensure the provision of an effective service.

Furthermore, there is an opportunity to consider innovative ways of designing and implementing policy;

“Debate” or appraise the alternative approaches using a consistent evidence informed framework and consider the acceptability and risks associated with each alternative approach. In this context, if policy making decisions are to be informed by evidence there is a need for a leadership culture that values and invests in the capacity of staff to gather and use policy relevant knowledge;

“Implementation” is a challenging process that translates ideas and evidence into the provision of services and often involves a broad range of stakeholders. There is a need for an implementation plan detailing the key activities, responsibilities and timelines.

“Monitor and evaluate” is concerned with ensuring that processes are in place to provide evidence that the policy, programme or programmatic intervention is:

- Being implemented as intended; and
- Achieving the intended outcome(s).

The evidence used to inform the various stages of the policy cycle, and the evidence base established at each stage, inform the discrete decision-making stages of the policy cycle:-

“Decision” to implement a particular policy or programme taking into account all of the information that has been presented; and

“Revise and improve” stage when there is an opportunity to consider whether or not to:

- Continue with an intervention in its current form;
- Modify how it is being implemented in order to improve its effectiveness; or
- End its implementation.

The location of the *Well-being Framework for Ireland* within the policy making cycle may make a singular contribution to addressing a challenge around the setting of policy objectives. The policy objectives for policy challenges and policy interventions that are complex (Box 3) tend to focus on the provision of services, or general references to enhancing well-being; and may

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<sup>77</sup> For example, this approach has been considered in the context of prevention and early intervention policies and programmes, see: Kennedy, Gibney and Doggett (2020).

or may not refer to an intended outcome.<sup>78</sup> For example, in the area of children, young people and their families:

- The *policy challenges are complex* because of a concern with multiple outcomes (e.g., relating to the child, their family, their community) in a number of different policy domains (e.g., education, labour market participation, further skills training, activation measures, family income, childcare).
- The *policy interventions to address these challenges are complex* in that they typically involve a range of actors providing services encompassing different interventions concerned with one or more outcomes at different stages in the life of the child and their family members as well as with ongoing changes in the community in which they live.

For complex policy challenges and complex policy interventions, the *Well-being Framework for Ireland* may be able to achieve greater clarity by providing a structured disaggregation of policy goals. Rather than setting out a policy objective “to enhance the well-being of children and their families”, the multi-dimensional nature of the *Framework* may focus attention on what this means in terms of each of the dimensions of well-being (i.e., in terms of family income, educational opportunities, health behaviours, conditions in which children and their families live (both housing and local environment), and ability to engage with community and express their voice and identity in safety).

By disaggregating policy goals in this way, it may be easier to:

- Determine the progress that has been achieved;
- Examine how best to develop effective policy interventions; and
- Identify opportunities for cooperation and coordination amongst organisations that are concerned with similar policy goals.

Durand and Exton (2019) suggest that focusing on public policies that address these types of policy challenges is likely to support the ongoing development of the well-being approach, in particular, as they are likely to involve the management of many well-being trade-offs.

However, if there is to be an informed, long-term commitment to how public policy can promote well-being, there needs to be an openness about the limits of what is known, what can be done and what can be achieved by public policy; and this is particularly acute in the case of complex policy challenges and complex policy interventions. There is much that needs to be done to:

- Understand the nature of these policy challenges (e.g., what is meant by well-being in a specific policy area and how it might be measured);
- Identify the factors that impact the desired policy outcome (e.g., what factors support or undermine well-being); and
- Articulate what public policy can realistically be expected to achieve (as well as having clarity of purpose and appropriate measurement and assessment tools).

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<sup>78</sup> Kennedy, 2020.

## 8. Conclusion

The public resources available to the Irish government may be substantial, but they are not unlimited. It is important that these limited resources are used efficiently to deliver effective public services. The development of a well-being perspective in an Irish public policy context is part of an ongoing process to increase the focus on the impact of public policy on people's lives. The publication of an initial *Well-being Framework for Ireland* is an important first step in the development of this important cross-government initiative.

Over the last couple of decades, in different countries and international organisations, policy makers have given increased attention to the notion of well-being. However, this increasing interest is not about “the latest way” to do policy. A well-being perspective that is multi-dimensional in structure and takes account of both objective and subjective indicators has significant potential to ensure that public policy has a positive impact on people's lives. This potential can be achieved when high-level well-being frameworks are developed in ways to ensure that they are used to improve policy and decision-making.

Sen's capability approach provides a way of thinking about how public policies are designed and implemented such that they create opportunities for people to change or progress their lives. As an approach to public policy, a multi-dimensional well-framework can assist the policy making process in understanding people's experiences by focusing on:

- Describing people's lives and the challenges they face when defining the policy challenge (to be addressed) and setting clear policy goals (to be achieved);
- Taking account of differences between people (their needs and priorities, individual abilities and contexts, what matters to them in terms of living lives that are meaningful and fulfilled); and
- Considering the broad range of interacting factors that shape the world in which people live.

While high-level well-being frameworks are important in terms of developing a shared understanding of what makes for better lives and influencing public debate on strategic priorities, such frameworks do not in-and-of-themselves fulfil the ambition set out in the *Programme for Government – Our Shared Future* of utilising a well-being perspective to improve policy and decision-making. This working paper has sought to examine how the *Well-being Framework* might be utilised in a systematic way to inform public policy in Ireland, in particular to:

- Articulate an overarching structure to public policy that can contribute to the development of a shared understanding within policy communities and society more generally of what makes for better lives and describe how the well-being of people living in Ireland has progressed;
- Locate well-being within existing public policy in order to inform efforts to improve the impact of public policy on people's lives; and
- Inform the design and implementation of more effective public policies.

The integration of the *Framework* into the policy process can support efforts to deliver greater economic prosperity and social cohesion. In tandem with other reform initiatives, the utilisation of this *Framework* within the policy making process can focus attention on:

- Opportunities to examine and reflect on the progress of Irish society;
- Differences in people's experiences and policy outcomes;
- Identify key challenges and trade-offs to better inform decision making;
- Identify effective policy actions; and
- Enhance strategic alignment across departments promoting effective coordination and cooperation between departments and agencies in implementing policy.

The focus of this working paper has been very much on the experience of applying a perspective shaped by the *Well-being Framework* in an Irish public policy context. What has been described in this working paper are approaches that have been applied as part of a pilot exercise to using a well-being perspective, and the main lessons that have been drawn from that experience. As a consequence, this working paper has not set out a comprehensive presentation of all the ways in which such a well-being perspective could be applied to public policy. This approach has been adopted because the intention is to develop the use of a well-being perspective in a progressive and proportionate way that allows for a deepening of people's understanding of well-being in an Irish public policy context and the development of an approach to public policy that is accessible and useful. Over the next few years, as further work is undertaken and different methodologies and approaches are utilised, this working paper will be updated.

## Appendix 1 – Summary of Well-being Dimensions in Ireland’s Well-being Framework

Dimensions	Well-being as Public Policy
Subjective Well-being	The cognitive and affective responses of individuals to their immediate circumstances as well as to retrospective and prospective reflections of how their life is progressing.
Mental & Physical Health	The physical and mental factors that shape the ability of the individual to engage in economic, social, cultural, community and family life.
Income & Wealth	The financial resources that shape the range of feasible choices available to an individual to meet their day-to-day needs and wants and the opportunity to mitigate personal, economic and societal risks and vulnerabilities.
Knowledge, Skills & Innovation	The cognitive and motor skills acquired and developed over the course of a person’s life that shape their ability to achieve material or economic progress and meet needs relating to esteem (e.g. feeling of accomplishment) and self-actualisation (e.g., achieving full potential) as well as cope with and address change in their lived experience and in society more generally.
Housing & the Built Environment	<p>The physical infrastructure that shapes the ability of an individual to meet physiological needs (e.g., shelter), safety needs (e.g. personal security) and social belonging needs (e.g., a space for family, intimacy and a sense of connection).</p> <p>The built environment refers to the infrastructure and services (e.g., street furniture, accessible transport) that provide people with the opportunity to move freely and easily within their own local area and beyond.</p>
Environment, Climate & Biodiversity	<p>The nature of the place in which an individual lives and works shapes their ability to meet physiological needs (e.g., clean water and air) as well as more transcendental needs (e.g., relating to and interacting with nature).</p> <p>Humans can also hold considerable influence over the environment and can impact it positively (e.g., sustainable living, low carbon lifestyles in food, transport, energy use, etc; conscious consumer, limits waste etc.) or negatively (e.g., pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss).</p>
Safety & Security	The social, cultural, natural and institutional factors that shape the ability of an individual to live life and engage in activities without fear of harm from other people and to mitigate risks and impacts associated with infrastructural, mechanical and natural hazards.
Work & Job Quality	The productive activities (both paid and unpaid) that shape how an individual progresses (i.e., develop their skills and abilities, fulfil their personal ambitions) as well as building and supporting their self-esteem and informing their sense of contributing to society more generally.
Time Use	The efforts of an individual to both meet and combine the demands that others place on their time (e.g., work, family and other caring commitments), and meet their own needs (e.g., personal care and development), subject to the constraint of a fixed quantity of time available in any single day.

Connections,  
Community &  
Participation

The opportunities that an individual has for engaging with other people and sharing activities in order to meet their basic needs and their psychological and self-fulfilment needs.

Civic Engagement,  
Trust & Cultural  
Expression

The rights and opportunities that an individual has to express their voice, and participate and contribute to the functioning of their society. This dimension also includes incidences or feelings of discrimination alongside the freedom to express cultural, personal or political views. The opportunities that people have to express their voice will in part be shaped by trust in public governance (e.g., its institutions, rules and norms) and how this fosters cooperation between people.



## Appendix 2 – Summary of Levels of Evidence-for-Policy

The types or levels of evidence can range from:

- Potential or Descriptive Stage - descriptive studies that set out the core elements of an intervention such as objectives, target groups and activities;
- Plausible or Theoretical Stage - engage with experts or conduct meta-reviews of evidence to outline a programme logic model or theory of change explaining why the intervention should work and for whom;
- Functional or Indicative Stage - present preliminary evidence that the intervention works in practice, that is, can lead to the intended outcome; and
- Efficacious or Causal Stage – Randomised Controlled Trials (RCT) or other methodologies demonstrate clear evidence that the intervention is responsible for the observed effect;<sup>79</sup>

as well as

- Practice wisdom – whereby practitioners draw on their own clinical or practice knowledge and expertise to make professional decisions; knowledge and expertise that has been developed through on-the-job training and experiences as well as from theory, research and life experience.

There is a wide range of methodologies available including:

- Randomised Controlled Trials minimise the risk of variables other than the intervention influencing the results as one group is randomly allocated to participate in the programmatic intervention and another is allocated to act as a control;
- Quasi-experiments resemble experimental research but participants are not randomly assigned as the research is being undertaken in settings in which random assignment is difficult or impossible;
- Natural experiments are often used in situations where controlled experimentation is not possible but people are sorted by the context in which they live into something like a control group and a treatment group;
- Observational studies are used when the investigator does not intervene directly (i.e., does not assign participant to treatment or control groups) but instead observes those who have and who haven't received the exposure of interest and the outcomes for both groups. Cohort studies and case-control studies are examples of this methodology;
- Ethnography is a qualitative method where researchers observe and / or interact with a study's participants in their real life environment;
- Theory based - an approach to evaluation that focuses not only on what works but why and how it worked as the theory of change that underlies the intervention sets out the transformational relations between the services or treatments provided and the intended outcomes as well as the contextual factors;
- Realist evaluation - seeks to understand why policy or programmatic interventions do or do not work in different contexts;

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<sup>79</sup> Veerman and van Yperen, 2007; Connolly et al., 2017. An alternative description of levels of evidence is available at: <https://libguides.winona.edu/c.php?g=11614&p=61584>

- Contribution analysis - explores the contribution a policy has made to an observed outcome given that there are other paths to the intended outcome which may or may not include the intervention;
- Qualitative comparative analysis - establishes what factors, common across cases, can explain similar or different observed outcomes (identifying the preconditions and making sense of the diversity of observed results) across a small number of cases when there are several but not many causal factors;
- Meta-analysis is a systematic review of evidence that uses quantitative methods to summarise results;
- Systematic review systematically search for, appraise and summarise all of the literature for a specific topic;
- Scoping reviews is a type of research synthesis that aims to map the literature on a particular topic providing an opportunity to identify key concepts, gaps in the literature and types and sources of evidence to inform practice, policy-making and research;
- Rapid reviews process have been developed to support policy-makers who require valid evidence in a timely and cost-effective manner to support time-sensitive decisions.

The role of 'evidence-for-policy' in programmes, services, and interventions includes:

- Identifying people's needs (e.g., consulting with stakeholders, conducting community needs analyses);
- Identifying gaps in service provision (e.g., combining a community needs analysis with a scoping out of the range of relevant services provided in an area);
- Developing strategies to enhance people's engagement with the service (e.g., comparing those who do and do not access the service and developing ways of engaging hard to reach cohorts);
- Ensuring ongoing needs continue to be met (e.g., as people transition between services, put in place appropriate systems for the transfer of relevant information);
- Ensuring quality of service delivery (e.g., formal inspection reports, engagement with staff and service users);
- Understanding what the policy is seeking to achieve (e.g., demonstrate impact of the intervention).<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Breckon, 2016; Hickey et al., 2018; Centre for Effective Services, 2019.

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To ensure accuracy and methodological rigour, the author engaged in a quality assurance process that involved engaging with external experts in the policy area, members of the Interdepartmental Working Group and Department of Public Expenditure & Reform line management. As ever, all errors and omissions are the responsibility of the author.







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