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National Wellbeing Framework White Paper

A review of the National Wellbeing Framework from the perspective of the built environment.

blix | atelier ten

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Executive Summary

In July 2023 the Federal government released 'Measuring What Matters', "Australia's first national wellbeing framework." The statement released by Treasury is the government's first iteration of a framework intended to 'understand, measure and improve on the things that matter to Australians." This white paper will examine how this new policy will impact the work we do as designers and creators of the built environment. It will examine how the government measures wellbeing and consider what insights this has for how we design great places.

It is a positive, early, step forward, one we at Blix Architecture and Atelier Ten are excited to explore. With this framework likely to change over time, now is the opportunity for architects, urban designers, and built form creators to step up to the table and contribute their knowledge to how wellbeing can be improved and measured in the built environment. We hope this white paper inspires some new conversations, research and great projects.

Georgina Blix
Blix Architecture

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"(The Framework) has been specifically designed to be drawn upon by business, academia, and the community to support their efforts to create better lives for all Australians."

(Measuring what matters, Treasury, Australian Government).

First Steps...

The government's 'Measuring What Matters' statement, framework and live dashboard is an important first step forward for Australia. The policy is intended to inform government decision making including policy development and evaluation. As creators of the built environment, we expect to start to see this framework influence the types of projects government invests in, and the evaluation of their value and success. This first attempt to define a flourishing community can also provide built environment creators with insights to what makes a better place.

Wellbeing, whether explicitly stated in project outcomes, or altruistically embedded in our optimistic core as creators, will play a role in our future projects. This paper will provide a summary of the wellbeing framework, with a particular focus on the indicators and measures that could affect architects, urban designers, sustainability experts and in general creators of our cities and places.

Who are we?

Georgina Blix is the Director of Blix Architecture, a studio dedicated to design for wellbeing. This architectural practice focuses on the design for wellbeing across urban design, affordable housing, education and mixed use developments. In 2023 Georgina was awarded the Byera Hadley Travelling Scholarship to explore the role of design for wellbeing, in particular how we measure wellbeing in mixed use communities. This research to be completed in 2024 will take her to leading designers, social value researchers and psychologists in the US, Canada, UK and Europe.

Stewart Monti is trained as an architect and researcher, and is an environmental designer focused on strategic sustainability, master planning, and multidisciplinary projects which combine local aspirations with global responsibility. As an Associate at Atelier Ten, Stewart also won the Byera Hadley exploring Renaturing for Resilience in our cities.

Georgina Blix,
Director of Blix Architecture

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What is Wellbeing?

If you are struggling to come up with a definition for wellbeing, a word commonly used for so many projects these days, you are not alone. The National Wellbeing Framework glossary, with over 42 key terms also forgot to define this key word. In general we understand that wellbeing is more than the GDP of a country, and more than just the avoidance of ill health[1].

Following the Seligman model[2] wellbeing can be considered a construct made up of elements that contribute towards flourishing individuals and communities. One of the few available definitions in the building industry can be found in the Property Council of Australia "A Common Language for social sustainability"[3]. They define wellbeing as "A measure of a person's quality of life, that is connected to their sense of happiness, relationships, emotional resilience, life satisfaction and realisation of their personal potential. Health, employment, financial resources, standard of living and sense of community are all contributing factors to wellbeing."[4] It's a great starting point to define wellbeing. When we consider community wellbeing we may start to broaden that definition to include the wellbeing of a group of people, their collective wellbeing, as well as some of the other key wellbeing elements identified in the Seligman PERMA(H) model such as a meaning, achievement, relationships and engagement.

But beyond that, a universally agreed definition of what creates a 'quality of life' or sense of wellbeing may not exist. The New Zealand framework acknowledges "there is no single conceptualisation of wellbeing that is universally agreed..."[5] The subjective nature of wellbeing means that most international frameworks have been based on extensive community consultation. The resulting frameworks attempt to create a rich collective of values and measures that represent 'a good life', health and happiness.

The following white paper helps to outline which elements of wellbeing were selected for the Australian framework, and which ones may be considered for future iterations of the framework.

What is the National Wellbeing Framework?

The Australian National Wellbeing Framework includes a statement, framework and live online dashboard. This seems to be a similar structure to the Canadian, New Zealand and Scottish frameworks, all released by the treasury departments of their respective Governments.

Overall the framework has 5 key themes:

- Healthy
- Secure
- Sustainable
- Cohesive
- Prosperous

These 5 overall key themes are supported by 12 dimensions and 50 indicators which are focused on utilising existing measures where possible. These indicators or measures are then broken down by age, gender and ethnicity to focus on 'inclusion, equity and fairness' across all themes. These indicators are then measured and published on the dashboard.

The overall statement is easy to read and well structured, explaining clearly the overall topic, measure and why it is important for wellbeing.

Inclusion, fairness and equity

Overall life satisfaction

Healthy	Secure	Sustainable	Cohesive	Prosperous
Healthy throughout life • Life expectancy • Mental health • Prevalence of chronic conditions	**Living peacefully and feeling safe** • Feeling of safety • Experience of violence • Childhood experience of abuse • Online safety • National safety • Access to justice	**Protect, repair and manage the environment** • Emissions reduction • Air quality • Protected areas • Biological diversity • Resource use and waste generation	**Having time for family and community** • Time for recreation and social interaction • Social connections • Creative and cultural engagement	**Dynamic economy that shares prosperity** • National income per capita • Productivity • Household income and wealth • Income and wealth inequality • Innovation
Equitable access to quality health and care services • Access to health services • Access to care and support services	**Having financial security and access to housing** • Making ends meet • Homelessness • Housing serviceability	**Resilient and sustainable nation** • Fiscal sustainability • Economic resilience • Climate resilience	**Valuing diversity, belonging and culture** • Experience of discrimination • Acceptance of diversity • First Nations languages spoken • Sense of belonging **Trust in institutions** • Trust in others • Trust in key institutions • Trust in Australian public services • Trust in national government • Representation in parliament	**Access to education, skills development and learning throughout life** • Childhood development • Literacy and numeracy skills at school • Education attainment • Skills development • Digital preparedness **Broad opportunities for employment and well-paid, secure jobs** • Wages • Job opportunities • Broadening access to work • Job satisfaction • Secure jobs

Source: Measure What Matters Statement (July 2023)

International Wellbeing Framework History

Australia is not the first country to create a Wellbeing Framework. “In 2011, the OECD released its first well-being report on its member countries, and in 2012, the UN began releasing its annual world happiness report. And individual countries began to collect data on well-being in more sophisticated ways.” [6] “In 2019, New Zealand became the first country to make well-being the organizing principle of its national budget.”[7] Since then countries such as Scotland, Wales, Finland and Iceland have already begun to move well-being to the centre of their policymaking[8]. These policies have in part come from an international effort by the UN to make wellbeing a focus. The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reaffirmed “We are committed to developing broader measures of progress to complement gross domestic product (GDP)”[9]. “Quality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data will be needed to help with the measurement of progress and to ensure that no one is left behind.”[10]

Australia has had the benefit of these other frameworks, and there are a number of key similarities between them. In particular the focus on consultation, the value for incorporating subjective wellbeing indicators along side existing data and the challenge of accurately reflecting equity and inclusion. But there are some differences. Some frameworks (e.g. Wales) are embedded in legislation, giving them more weight and permanence in guiding policy and decision-making. Australia could consider a legislative approach to strengthen the impact and longevity of its framework. However as it currently sits as a statement within Treasury, it does has the ability to influence all portfolios.

If you are interested in any of the other international wellbeing frameworks you may like to explore these links:

1. OECD – Better Life Index - https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/#/11111111111

2. Wellbeing of Wales - https://www.gov.wales/wellbeing-wales

3. Scotland’s National Performance Framework: https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/

4. World Happiness Report - https://worldhappiness.report/

5. The New Zealand Higher Living Standard - https://www.treasury.govt.nz/information-and-services/nz-economy/higher-living-standards

6. Great summary on the history of subjective measures in government policy here: https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/23862090/subjective-wellbeing-wealth-philanthropy-gdp-happiness-givewell

"The way we measure wellbeing drives public discussions and influences how we drive progress. The Framework can help inform discussions of the type of society we want to live in and how that may be achieved. "

(Measuring What Matters, July 2023)

Measuring GDP or Wellbeing?

Traditionally Treasury has considered GDP as a measure of a country's success, but not necessarily it's wellbeing. The UN points out "GDP does not account for human well-being, environmental sustainability, unpaid household services, such as care work, and the biased distributional dimensions of economic activity. Moreover, it fails to capture the human and environmental destruction of some economic activities."[11] In simple terms as Seligman describes "Every time there a divorce, GDP goes up. Every time two automobiles collide, the GDP goes up.... GDP is blind when it comes to whether it is human suffering or human thriving that increases the volume of goods a services."[12] Whilst there is often "a very high correlation between a nation's GDP per capita and its self-reported life satisfaction"[13], it is clear that as GDP has increased in some wealthy nations their wellbeing has not measurably increased with it[14]. The UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals makes it clear that more is needed to accurately capture the wellbeing of a country, and in particular find common ways of measuring it across UN signatory countries. The Australian wellbeing framework will use these wellbeing measures 'in addition to, not instead of, all the other traditional ways we measure our economy, like GDP and employment."[15]

Who is measuring wellbeing?

It is interesting to consider why Treasury is the holder of these measures, particularly ones regarding wellbeing. Are they able to objectively hold this data, have the nuanced knowledge to interrogate their data sources, and consider the science behind wellbeing? There is also an inherent conflict of interest between government being the holder of data that measures the impact of their own work. Some groups are working to improve this situation. Groups like the 'Wellbeing Intelligence Network'[16] are a not-for-profit evidence institute interested in independent data collection and holding. Rather than a top down government approach they advocate for community owned data, helping communities impacted by decisions to own and understand their own data. Similarly Seer Data and Analytics

is interested in democratising wellbeing data. “When this happens, we experience a multiplier effect. Grassroots leaders gain agency and power in decisions, data skills are developed across society, governments are transparent and work in partnership with communities, and most importantly community outcomes are achieved.”[17]

Treasury however is a powerful holder for decision making, particularly for architectural and urban projects. Money is still a primary factor in decision making for any project. Including wellbeing measures in decision making could help to balance the vast number of economic measures that usually form part of the feasibility and assessment stages of a project. As projects with a high social value (e.g. a new school) are considered for development, their wellbeing outcomes could help to throw more weight behind their importance. Conversely some projects (thinking new roads here) may struggle to demonstrate positive wellbeing impacts, or may need to work harder to include social impact initiatives like active transport or nature based water management.

As the framework improves over time, we should also challenge Treasury to interrogate their wellbeing data sources. In some of the following chapters we will take a look at the data sources and their implications.

‘Thrive’ verse ‘Flourish’

An individual, group or community that is considered to have high levels of wellbeing, is described as ‘thriving’ or ‘flourishing’. In wellbeing theory the goals are to both measure and “promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive”[18]. If you are doing a deep dive into wellbeing theory you may want to argue to differences between these terms.[19] However in the built environment and government policy the term ‘thriving’ seems to be use more commonly in Australia. The repealed Design and Place SEPP discussed how ‘well designed built environments support successful, **thriving** places where people want to live.” The Measuring What Matters Statement uses the term ‘thrive’, although only once.

This idea that the built environment contributes to thriving accords with research from the UNESCO Futures of Education initiative which states “Flourishing is conditional on the contribution of individuals and requires an enabling environment.”[20] As designers of these ‘enabling environments’, either term can be used in this industry to use when describing wellbeing in our communities and projects. However, from real world experience, ‘thriving’ tends to be less ‘cringy’ and more aligned currently to government policies.

Measures – Why we need them

"To be sure of our progress towards a more healthy, secure, sustainable, cohesive and prosperous Australia, we need to measure it."

(Measuring What Matters Statement).

If we want a less 'fluffy' use of the word wellbeing, we need data. This framework is an exciting step forward to utilising data and measures to assess progress in wellbeing over time. Whilst governments are usually strong at measuring GDP, the Canadian Wellbeing Framework outlines that the frequency and availability of non-economic indicators have historically been weaker, less transparent and inclusive, and collected too infrequently to accurately assist in spotting trends, or informing government policy. Their framework along with those of NZ, Wales, Scotland and now Australia aims to help address that lack of data and measures.[21]

However whenever we collect data, there are key issues to consider such as the data sources, depth of research, and data sovereignty (who owns the data). We also need to consider if the data is giving us a clear and accurate picture. Here are some of the considerations we have identified, as non-data experts but passionate wellbeing and sustainability experts.

Sources of Data

The framework prudently capitalises on existing data sources, harnessing information from a combination of government entities, such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), and non-governmental institutions. For environmental indicators, it relies on jurisdictional monitoring that aligns with national standards, ensuring consistency and comparability. However, there's an inherent challenge with the timeliness and frequency of data collection, notably for indicators related to First Nations people, which may not fully capture rapid societal changes or the immediacy of certain issues.

A pertinent example of non-governmental data sources is the Economic Complexity Index (ECI), developed by Harvard University's Growth Lab. While the ECI provides a detailed look into economic diversification and complexity, its external, potentially US-centric nature raises questions about its full applicability to the Australian context. The Australian Government's lack of control over these 'black box' methodologies, which may not

be completely transparent or adaptable to local needs warrants attention.

Moreover, the robustness of external sources, like the Social Cohesion Index derived from the Scanlon Foundation's surveys, is subject to scrutiny. These surveys, with a potentially small national sample size of only 7,500 respondents (2023), may not provide a comprehensive representation of national cohesion. This raises questions about the sufficiency and representativeness of their sample sizes in reflecting the diverse perspectives of Australia's population.

There is also the matter of independence and endorsement, as these external sources, despite originating from reputable research bodies, operate without direct Australian Governmental backing or funding. This independent operation can offer a degree of objectivity, but also introduces a layer of complexity when integrating their findings with government-led initiatives.

Aligning these varied data sources and ensuring synchronisation across different collection intervals present additional hurdles. The discrepancies in data collection timing can lead to challenges in creating a cohesive, timely picture of the nation's progress and in formulating responsive policies.

In refining the data sources for future iterations of the framework, a balance must be struck between leveraging the breadth of available data and ensuring that these sources are timely, representative, and aligned with the Australian socio-economic landscape.

Data vs. Insights

The framework is designed to provide insights that can inform government and societal actions. The indicators chosen aim to reflect consistent, comparable, and reliable data. However, the framework acknowledges the limitations of data availability and the challenges in measuring some aspects of wellbeing outcomes. Proxy indicators and factors influencing outcomes are used when direct measurement is challenging. This approach provides early warnings and assists in timely intervention but also highlights the complexity of translating data into actionable insights.

Aggregated Indicators - A Macroscopic View

The aggregated indicators in the framework, such as the Economic Complexity Index (ECI) and the Australian Disaster Resilience Index (ADRI), offer a holistic perspective on economic and climate resilience, respectively. They aggregate multiple data points, providing a panoramic view that is instrumental in policy formation and strategic planning. The ECI, for instance, is a novel index that gauges economic diversity and innovation capacity. Both the ECI and ADRI are holistic, robust, and underpinned by substantial evidence, indicating their reliability. However, these metrics often represent a static point in time, which raises questions about their adaptability to future conditions. For instance, as we contemplate the landscape in 2030 and beyond, it is uncertain whether these indexes will reflect the evolving realities of climate scenarios, potentially requiring them to be dynamic and responsive to ensure they remain relevant and actionable.

Single Data Line Indicators - Zooming In

On the micro level, single data line indicators like 'waste generation per person' offer specificity, allowing us to zoom in on distinct areas such as job security and employment benefits. These indicators can be pivotal for targeted interventions, identifying precise issues that may be obscured by broader metrics. However, the current use of 'waste generation per person' conflates various waste streams, which could oversimplify complex sectors and diminish the precision required for effective policy response. This calls attention to the potential inclusion of circular economy metrics in future iterations of the framework. As these metrics are refined, they could provide a more granular understanding of resource use and waste management, ensuring that sustainability efforts are accurately measured and effectively implemented.

Moving Forward with Data Diversity

In summary, while aggregated measures offer a wide lens, single data line indicators provide the close-up detail necessary for a nuanced understanding. Both have their place in the 'Measuring What Matters' framework, and the interplay between them will be crucial for capturing the full spectrum of Australia's progress towards a resilient and sustainable future. As we advance, it will be essential to revisit these indicators, ensuring they are aligned with the dynamic nature of our economy and environment, and reflective of the diverse experiences of all Australians.

Equity and Inclusion

The "Measuring What Matters" framework notably prioritizes equity, fairness, and inclusion within its array of indicators. Recognising this, experts John Hawkins and Jacki Schirmer highlight a crucial aspect of the framework's approach: "For these measures to be meaningful and useful to the budget process, they need to be both timely and capture differences in experiences between different groups—not just the 'average'." This insight is essential, as relying solely on average values can obscure the significant inequalities present within society.

The framework indeed has a focus on these values, indicating a progressive step by the government towards a more inclusive approach to policy evaluation and development. However, it also suggests a need for a more detailed investigation into the specific circumstances of diverse groups. By ensuring that future iterations of the framework go beyond surface-level data and provide a more segmented analysis, policymakers can better understand and address the unique challenges faced by different segments of the population, ultimately leading to more equitable outcomes.

Data and its next steps

While the "Measuring What Matters" framework attempts to provide a comprehensive picture of wellbeing through a mix of aggregate and single data line indicators, each with its strengths and weaknesses, it also confronts the

challenges inherent in data collection, such as timeliness, frequency, and the ability to turn data into actionable insights. The framework is positioned as an evolving tool, with the potential for refinement and enhancement through continuous feedback and data development.

It is particularly important that moving forward subjective measures continue to form part of the framework. As explained earlier, different people subject to the same initiative can have very different experiences, which means that wellbeing cannot be inferred from design features or activities, but must be measured directly with those impacted. Therefore, as well as including subjective measures in each theme, it should be considered important to always include Satisfaction with Life (subjective wellbeing) to ensure that overall, the change is occurring as expected, for the people experiencing it.

First Impressions for the built environment

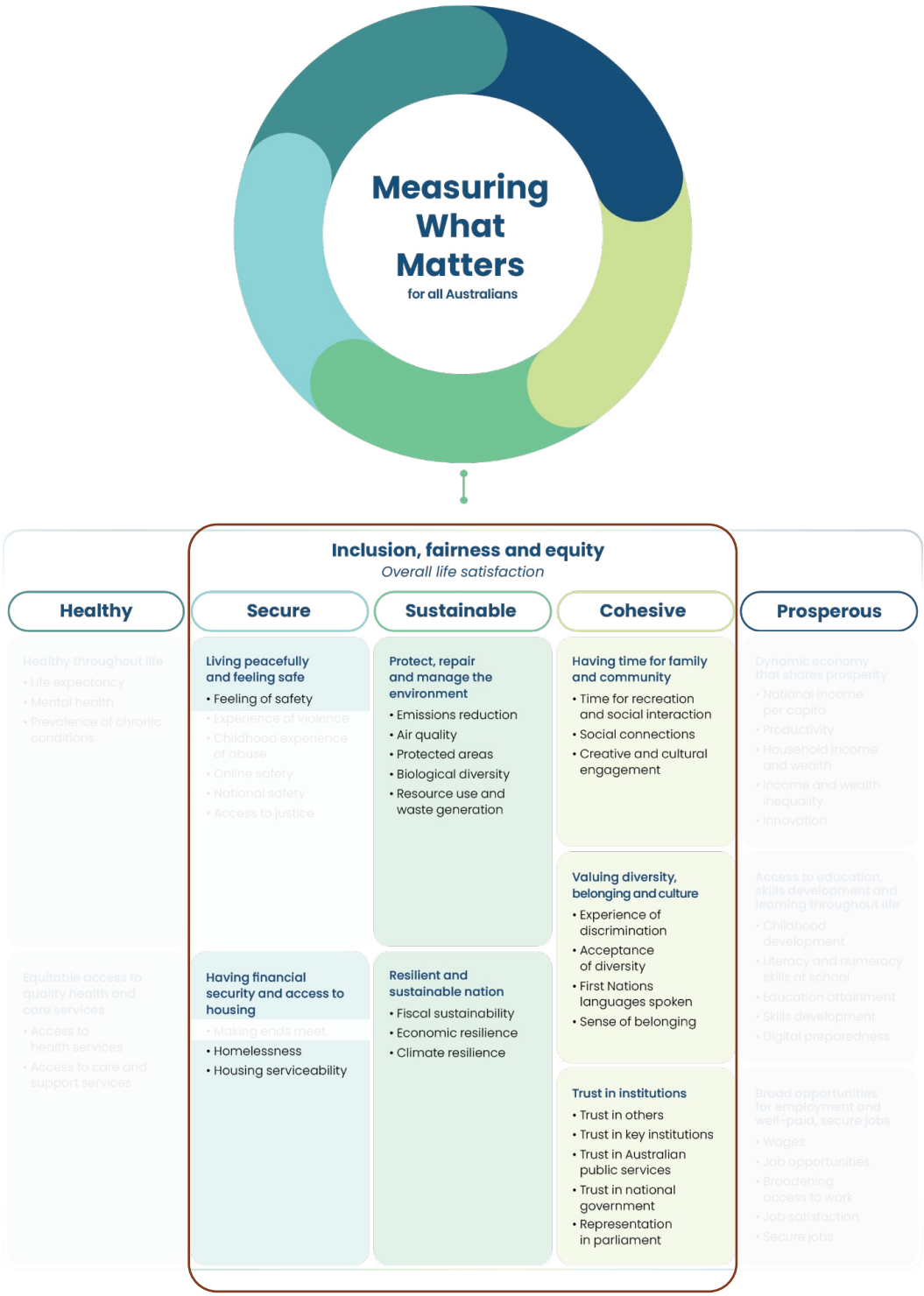
This section will look at the specific measures that have the greatest relevance to our work as creators of the built environment and great places.

The framework has both some obvious and some obscure indicators that could relate to our work in the built environment. Of the 5 overall key themes, “sustainable” and “cohesive” have the strongest transferable links between the built environment and wellbeing. Other key indicators that relate to the built environment are included in the overall themes of ‘healthy’ and ‘secure’. In particular measures that relate to healthy living, a feeling of safety, homelessness and housing serviceability and affordability. The themes and their indicators relevant for this discussion are included on the next page.

Interesting from a wellbeing perspective, there are still a large number of indicators heavily focused on ‘ill health’ as a measure of wellbeing, particularly under the theme of ‘Healthy’. That seems paradoxical, but fairly common internationally. For example the progress in Australian Regions and Cities Dashboard[22] measures wellbeing against factors such as smoking, suicide rate and psychological distress. Whilst all important measures, wellbeing is “more than the absence of ill health”[23]. A community that is flourishing may demonstrate positive health measures such as reduced cardiac disease (directly related to optimism and wellbeing[24]), high levels of physical activity or access to good nutrition. Focusing and articulating on what we should look for and measure in a flourishing community has the benefit of turning our attention to where we want to head. It helps us understand what factors leading to life satisfaction and wellbeing, not just how we avoid ill health.

The following section delves deeper into the two key themes of Cohesive and Sustainable. We also explore some of the key factors under Secure.

Key indicators for built form designers



Cohesive

“A society that supports connections with family, friends and the community, values diversity and promotes belonging and culture.” (Measuring What Matters Statement)

It is clear through the framework that having the time and access to spaces for social interaction, creative and cultural engagement and recreation are key measures for wellbeing and reduced loneliness. As architects and urban designers, we have the ability to influence the quantity, location and quality of places that support these elements.

Social connections and relationships of all types support wellbeing, “... relationships are integral to the human experience and therefore understanding the health of these relationships is part of a holistic view of wellbeing.”[25] In the framework, social cohesion has been measured through the following indicators:

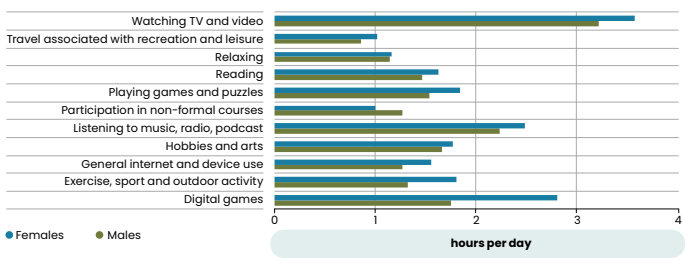
1. Time for recreation and social interactions,
2. 'Social connections’ measured through loneliness surveys levels of volunteer participation, and;
3. Creative and cultural engagement including activities and events.

All of these indicators represent likely factors that contribute to overall personal wellbeing and boost social cohesion. Base on these indicators, urban creators will hopefully have more evidence and weight for providing urban masterplans, mixed use developments and community infrastructure plans with social, recreational, volunteer and cultural spaces.

Time for Recreation = social connection

This first indicator under cohesion measures the amount of time for recreation. There is an interesting snap shot from the ABS (collected every two years) on how people spend their time, with the clear winner being watching TV and videos.

Chart 11: Average time per day of people who participated in the activity, 2020–21



Source: ABS Time Use Survey 2020–21

However there could be more information or research needed on which type of recreational activity create the highest levels of wellbeing and social cohesion. For example, e-gaming has strengths in creating a sense of achievement, social connections and inclusion of all abilities. But physical sports may contribute to achievement, social connections and physical health. Future research may then help us to decide on the types of recreation facilities required in an urban environment. A new gaming arena, or new sports oval? Which option can be used to specifically target certain generations and their wellbeing needs? Do we have enough diversity and inclusion in the types of social spaces we are providing?

Future iterations of the wellbeing framework may also benefit from other indicators that have strong links between social connection, urban design and architecture. The Heart Foundation's "Healthy Active by Design"[26] for example is helping to link the design of our communities to wellbeing. In particular in this case, linking healthier hearts to accessible open space, walkable communities, healthy food and a sense of place or community. Future iterations of the framework may want to consider measures like these including access to recreation spaces, walkability of neighbourhoods and schools, and the amount and distribution of open space. It is great to see a note in the statement that "future iterations of the healthy indicators could benefit from improved coverage of access to green and blue spaces for promoting health and recreation activities"[27]. This is missing data that is needed.

Using the umbrella of wellbeing at a federal level will ideally help support policies and initiatives for designed spaces that support social connection. The framework specifically calls out place based and co-design initiatives[28] the government are working on with 'Stronger Places, Stronger People'[29], specifically tackling disadvantaged communities and youth participation. With good data, we would hope to see more investment in social cohesion projects at all levels of government.

Creative and Cultural Engagement

The framework interestingly measures participation in, and attendance to cultural activities and events. It breaks down the level of participation in creative and cultural engagement into all sectors including (visual arts, music, dance and craft). There are some useful insights in the commentary such as that regional areas are less likely to attend a cultural venue or event, and a trend that younger audiences (under 35) since 2022 and covid have reduced their attendance to these events. When we as creators of communities consider creating social spaces, these types of measures can help us to consider social spaces that are age appropriate for specific groups like teenagers, children and over 55 years, and the distribution of social spaces. We might also start to more carefully consider spaces for not-for-profits, noting that rates of volunteering are now measured and are correlated with wellbeing.

Safety in the public realm

The theme of 'Secure' also includes an indicator on "Feelings of Safety", something strongly related to the design of the urban environment. Shockingly 53.8% of people report feeling unsafe when walking locally in their community at night[30]. This correlates with recent data by Transport for NSW that found "after dark, women were twice as likely to feel unsafe in public spaces compared to men'[31] and that people feel safest in activated public spaces with plenty of people around. This is an important urban design challenge for us to face, particularly as we discuss urban density and growth. It helps us to place a greater focus on night time economies, activation for all ages at night, a local sense of place and belonging and even basic ideas like good lighting around public spaces and transport. Can we balance the need for privacy for residents with the now measurable social benefits of active and lively spaces that feel safe?

Valuing diversity, belonging and culture

Designing for a sense of belonging and representation of diversity and culture are challenging current issues that designers are facing. Again some of the measures in this indicator are focused on negative factors like experiences of discrimination. But others focus on diversity of languages and acceptance of immigrants. A sense of belonging has been outlined by two measures, one directly related to the proportion of First Nations people who recognise an area as their homelands or traditional country.

And one overall aggregate measure called The Social Cohesion Index: Sense of Belonging measure created by the Scanlon Foundation[32]. This aggregate score is published every two years from their own survey data and objective indicators. Their 2022 report comments "The degree to which we feel a sense of belonging and connectedness in our neighbourhoods has been high and growing since the start of the pandemic. However, our sense of pride, belonging, and social justice In Australia are declining and are now at their lowest levels since 2007."[33]

How does this affect what we do as designers? A sense of belonging in part comes from a sense of relatedness. That the built environment around us feels accessible, inclusive and representative of our diversity. As Hugh Mackay writes 'finding ways of bridging the cultural gap between 'us' and 'them' as quickly and respectfully as possible"[34]. Spaces and design ideas that connect people through shared spaces, arts, culture, sports, food or nature can contribute to a sense of belonging.

Belonging and trust is also fostered by institutions of power feel accessible and welcoming. If you are designing for example a new Olympic village in Brisbane (just an idea), how do you make areas of power, arbitration and control feel accessible, transparent, welcoming and diverse. How do we make it feel safe for all, avoid homogeneity and instead celebrate the 'other'? Alternatively, at the community scale, how does the local police station connect with community and express community trust?

The scale we might want to focus on as designers is also interesting to consider in designing for wellbeing. Hugh Mackay advocates strongly for the role neighbourhoods and relationships with our neighbours play in supporting wellbeing claiming ‘state of our nation starts in our own street’[35]. As an Architect that research is useful. It provocates that the neighbourhood scale (or the ‘15 minute city’) is important as designers for social connection. How does my corridor of blank doors encourage people to express themselves and meet their neighbours in a multi-residential building? Why are roof top shared spaces so successful?

The Social Cohesion Index takes that idea further asking “How do we draw on the strengths of our neighbourhoods to improve national cohesion?“[36] Can we find ways to celebrate the neighbourhood as a way to express a national sense of belonging and cohesion. Are there key projects, towns or neighbourhoods we can use to demonstrate measurable data on social cohesion and celebrate their strengths?

Sustainable

"An environment with rich biodiversity, clean air and water, and sustainable natural capital stocks supports healthy, enriched lives."

(Climateworks Centre Submission, Measuring What Matters Statement)

Embracing Sustainability in Australia's Wellbeing Journey

The 'Sustainable' theme within the "Measuring What Matters" framework represents an optimistic step forward in Australia's commitment to a future where economic, social, and environmental prosperity are in harmony. The Treasurer's Forward articulates an ambition to track and align our nation's goals, acknowledging the interconnectedness of community wellbeing with our natural surroundings. It signals an emerging paradigm where the vitality of our economy and the integrity of our society are seen as intertwined with the stewardship of our environment

Expanding the Sustainability Narrative

The important precedent set by introducing indicators like emissions reductions and renewable energy generation, acknowledges the importance of an environmentally resilient economy. Yet, this recognition is only the starting point in a broadening conversation about sustainability globally. As we mark progress in renewable energy, which now accounts for 30% of our electricity generation, we must also consider the continued reliance on fossil fuels and the complex, systems-based nature of contemporary sustainability practice.

Beyond Traditional Metrics: A Systems-Based Approach

The initial sustainability metrics within the framework reflect a traditional view that focuses primarily on emissions, air quality, waste, and very basic environmental indicators. However, contemporary sustainability practice views these elements as part of complex systems with extensive direct and indirect effects. Using less energy, for instance, isn't solely about conservation or cost reduction. It encompasses a reduction in mining, ecological destruction, transport of materials, infrastructure requirements, packaging, waste, and embodied carbon emissions. The interconnectedness of these systems necessitates a broader set of metrics that capture their wide-reaching impacts. Future iterations of the framework could benefit from aggregated metrics similar to the Economic Complexity Index (ECI) and the Australian Disaster Resilience Index (ADRI), which synthesise multiple interrelated

data points into a single, comprehensible metric. This is where the potential lies for the development of indicators that more accurately reflect the interconnected systems we navigate. Collaboration with built environment professionals is crucial in this endeavour, as they play a pivotal role in shaping the spaces where these sustainability practices are enacted.

Visioning a Regenerative Future: A Catalyst for Transformation

The current state of the framework presents a traditional snapshot of sustainability, one deeply rooted in the immediate concerns of emissions and energy use. However, it holds within it the seeds of a transformative vision—one that could guide us from a focus on mitigation to a future of ecological regeneration. This framework, while nascent in its journey, should aspire to be a catalyst that prompts us to define and strive for a regenerative future.

The opportunity before us is to expand the framework to embody a forward-thinking ethos that embraces ecological restoration as a fundamental aspect of our collective wellbeing. By establishing ambitious goals that champion a regenerative approach, the framework can evolve to measure not only our current impact but also our progress toward a thriving, sustainable society. In this vision, built environment professionals emerge as vital partners, their innovative designs and strategies becoming instrumental in realising this future.

The aspiration is clear: to nurture a framework that serves as a living document, one that progressively redefines sustainability to reflect the dynamic interplay between human prosperity and environmental stewardship. It is about creating a future that celebrates ecological abundance and human flourishing in equal measure—a future that we not only envision but actively shape with every policy, project, and initiative.

Water: The Overlooked Essential

In the Australian narrative, water is not just a resource; it is a central character in the story of our continent and way of life. The framework's current iteration does not adequately reflect our intrinsic connection to water and the role it plays in our culture and daily existence. Recognising water's importance goes beyond conservation tactics to embody a philosophy of stewardship that honours and preserves our critical water resources. This stewardship is essential for maintaining the Australian way of life, whether it be in our homes, vibrant cities, or the natural environment where water is a source of recreation and spiritual connection. As we seek to enshrine water in our national consciousness, the framework must expand to embrace this deep-seated relationship, ensuring that water remains at the heart of our communities and environmental strategies.

A Forward-Looking Approach to Resilience

The framework's inclusion of the Economic Complexity Index (ECI) and the Australian Disaster Resilience Index (ADRI) is a positive step forward, positioning these metrics as pivotal for gauging our economic adaptability and readiness for natural calamities.

These benchmarks reflect a commitment to sustainability and an understanding of its broad implications. However, the static nature of such indices necessitates a re-evaluation in the context of an evolving climate landscape.

As we face the ever-accelerating pace of climate change, the question arises: can these metrics evolve to not only reveal our current state of preparedness but also guide us toward enhanced resilience? The capacity of these indicators to adapt and provide a roadmap for improvement becomes crucial. They should offer insights into local-level preparedness, highlighting specific vulnerabilities and opportunities for fortification against future disruptions or disasters.

This perspective raises important questions: Do our communities have robust emergency plans that reflect their unique needs and vulnerabilities? Are we cultivating social ties that contribute not only to disaster preparedness but also to everyday wellbeing? The peace of mind that comes from being prepared for disasters, coupled with the benefits of stronger community connections, directly enhances the overall wellbeing of individuals and communities.

By expanding the scope of these indices to offer actionable guidance, we can help communities proactively enhance their resilience in a manner that's deeply integrated with their wellbeing. This approach involves investing in emergency response assets and formulating comprehensive management strategies. More crucially, it includes nurturing community cohesion, essential for both immediate disaster response and long-term social resilience.

The framework, while including economic and climate resilience, currently overlooks an explicit focus on social resilience. This oversight presents an opportunity to incorporate elements of optimism and social connectedness, which are vital for a resilient and thriving society. The wellbeing of a community is not just defined by its capacity to withstand disasters but also by the strength of its social bonds and the collective optimism in its ability to face and overcome challenges.

Our role as environmental stewards

In embracing the 'Sustainable' theme, we acknowledge that our relationship with the environment extends beyond mere metrics. It's deeply rooted in stewardship—a commitment to the cultural fabric of our nation and the well-being of our communities. For architects, landscape architects, urban designers, and master planners, this stewardship is a call to action. It is about designing spaces that respect and preserve our natural environment, enrich our cultural heritage, and strengthen community bonds.

This focus on stewardship and community cohesion does more than create visually appealing and functional spaces; it cultivates a sense of belonging and engagement among residents. By fostering community involvement and nurturing spaces that people care about, we inherently promote more sustainable, resource-efficient towns and cities. Engaged communities are more likely to adopt sustainable lifestyles, think critically about resource use, and advocate for environmentally friendly practices. The creation of such places is a testament to the

power of built environment professionals in shaping not only the physical landscape but also the social and environmental ethos of a community.

Conclusion: A Progressive Path Forward

The first iteration of the "Measuring What Matters" framework marks an important step for Australia in joining the global wellbeing movement, showcasing a willingness to innovate and progress. While this initial effort is commendable, it also opens up avenues for critical enhancements, especially in the realms of environmental stewardship and community resilience.

Acknowledging the framework's current scope, we see it as a starting point in a journey marked by continuous conversation and development—one that has the potential to embrace the full spectrum of sustainability and wellbeing. Our observations have identified crucial gaps in the framework, including the need for a more detailed and nuanced systems-based approach to sustainability, the integration of comprehensive water metrics, and the establishment of a regenerative vision. These gaps present essential opportunities for growth, calling for an expanded focus on the interplay between resilience, community wellbeing, and sustainable development.

As the framework evolves, it's crucial that it incorporates a more comprehensive approach to resilience. This includes not just economic and climate resilience but also social resilience, recognising its profound impact on community wellbeing. The enhancement of these aspects within the framework will be instrumental in ensuring that all Australians can thrive in a society that's as robust as it is resilient.

In this context, built environment professionals have a pivotal role to play. Their expertise and creative vision are vital in shaping not only the physical spaces we inhabit but also in contributing to the broader discourse on how resilience and sustainability can be integrated to enhance community wellbeing. Their involvement will be crucial in transforming the identified opportunities within the framework into tangible, sustainable, and resilient outcomes.

In embracing this evolving framework, we see a clear path forward for built environment professionals to create communities that resonate with people's lives and aspirations. It is a cycle of positive reinforcement, where each aspect of well-being and sustainability reinforces the other. As this framework continues to develop, it will serve not just as a measure of our current state, but as a beacon guiding us toward a future where ecological abundance, human flourishing, and cultural richness are celebrated in equal measure.

Next steps for indicators

The framework is an important step forward for Australia. The framework is clear that as data improves, so too will the indicators for wellbeing. Here are some of the ways we would like to see improvements in the next iterations with a focus on our work as Architects and urban designers.

What is next for social cohesion indicators?

For all the social cohesion measures, a focus on equitable access will be critical. If future data sources are geographically mapped, we could have powerful tool for both understand what is contributing towards wellbeing, and identifying areas for key design projects as wellbeing interventions. We may be able to consider the direct correlation between the quantity of recreational, cultural and socials spaces with improved community wellbeing. If we could spatially map wellbeing results, we could cross correlate data, for example the amount of open spaces with levels of loneliness. This is an example of where data turns into insights.

Perhaps we could also see patterns of volunteering rates with the amount of accessible volunteer buildings. Or work out what types of spaces in a community are creating the best social connections for the largest group of people? Future iterations of the framework could ideally help advocate for investment in projects that promote social cohesion where it is most needed.

New measures for cohesion and belonging could also be considered, such as inclusive expressions of history and culture which help to create a shared sense of history and meaning for a community. We could also measure personal time spent in flow or engagement, or the spaces that support flow, a key element of wellbeing under the Seligman model[37]. Flow can be enhanced through the design of spaces and community places by providing areas for quiet reflection, low sensory or natural environments that allow for retreat and concentration on a specific task (such as a library, passive garden space, or even a public chess board).

Next steps for healthy indicators:

As mentioned earlier the ‘Healthy’ value includes a number of factors for overall life expectancy and ill health. New positively focused measures such as access to healthy food and water, time spent in nature, or time spent doing physical activity may also be helpful in future versions.

For future iterations it could also be positive to see ‘healthy’ include some specific mental health measures like optimism and hope. These two buffering factors can improve wellbeing at both the individual and community level[38]. These factors can be improved by access to inspiring places and buildings that open your horizon through education, play or by providing a broader world perspective. Feeling hope may also relate to an expanded sense of ‘feeling safe’

that incorporates a future based thinking. In a context of extreme, climate change driven weather, does the nation feel 'safe' for the long term? How does our feeling of hope for neighbouring countries that may be affected by climate change impact our wellbeing? These additional measures could help expand our understanding of wellbeing and the benefits of sustainable design for the community in any project.

Housing Security and affordability:

Homelessness and housing serviceability (the ratio of housing costs to household gross income, by tenure) are two key areas of interest for architects and urban designers that falls under the theme of 'secure'. "Financial security and access to housing are important determinants of personal wellbeing. They reduce people's vulnerability to income fluctuations and enable their full participation in social and economic activities."[39] Increased cost of living, combined with increases in rental costs have an impact on wellbeing, particularly in recent post covid years. The framework whilst acknowledging the problem, also says the available data does mask disparity between groups and regions who feel this issue more acutely. It is an understandable focus for government policies that needs attention. Social housing, affordable housing, housing quality and density are all policies that can be aligned with this indicator.

Indigenous and First Nation Measures

Many of the indicators discuss the disproportionate negative results for indigenous and First Nation cultures in areas of health, employment and education. The framework states that these wellbeing measures supplement and does not replace more detailed First Nation measures such as the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. "...the whole of population indicators outlined in this Framework are not an accurate measure of First Nations wellbeing as they are limited in their ability to represent these intrinsic cultural differences or acknowledge the past practices that have had detrimental impacts."[40] More could be done in this area. For example the NZ 'Higher Living Standards' is supported by the He Ara Waiora, a framework that gives an indigenous and uniquely Aotearoa perspective on wellbeing and living standards[41]; and the Fonofale a Pacific perspective on wellbeing. "This approach has been taken to avoid overloading the Framework with too much complexity and to help maintain the integrity of complementary perspectives."[42]

More representative measures and indepth analysis of the data for First Nations Australians is needed.

Next Steps for Sustainable Indicators

In advancing the National Wellbeing Framework, enhancing our sustainability indicators is a crucial next step. The framework's current emphasis on

emissions, air quality, and waste marks an important starting point, yet it is imperative to broaden our scope. Water, as a fundamental resource, must gain more prominence in our metrics. Future iterations should encompass comprehensive indicators that capture water usage, efficiency in industry and agriculture, quality, and the health of our river ecosystems. Such metrics are essential not only for a holistic environmental assessment but also for directly influencing community wellbeing. Additionally, a shift toward systems-based metrics is necessary to acknowledge the multifaceted impacts of resource use. These metrics should consider the wider implications of activities like energy consumption, including its effects on mining, ecological health, and infrastructure. Collaborating with built environment professionals in developing these metrics is vital, as their insights from creating sustainable living spaces can offer practical perspectives and ensure the metrics are actionable and relevant to urban and environmental design.

Setting a Vision for a Regenerative, Wellbeing Future

Central to the evolution of the National Wellbeing Framework is the imperative to set a unified vision for a regenerative, wellbeing-focused future. This vision is more than a mere blueprint; it's a collective aspiration that defines what we, as a society, aim to achieve in our pursuit of environmental rejuvenation and societal wellbeing. The importance of this vision lies in its ability to provide a clear direction and a shared goal for our communities, policymakers, and built environment professionals.

A regenerative, wellbeing-centred future envisions an environment where sustainability goes hand in hand with community prosperity. It's a future where our natural environments are not just preserved but actively nurtured, where our cities and communities are not only resource-efficient but also spaces of social and ecological abundance. Setting this vision involves a collaborative effort, engaging diverse stakeholders to define what such a future looks like, and identifying the steps necessary to achieve it.

The role of the Wellbeing Framework in this context is to act as a compass, guiding our efforts and measuring our progress towards this shared vision. It's not just about assessing where we are now but critically evaluating how far we have yet to go. This ongoing measurement serves as a continual reminder of our commitment to this future, keeping us aligned and motivated. By having a clear vision, we can more effectively direct our policies, urban designs, and community initiatives towards outcomes that are not only sustainable but also enrich the collective wellbeing of our society.

In this journey towards a regenerative, wellbeing future, the insights and expertise of built environment professionals are invaluable. Their role in designing and shaping our physical spaces will be instrumental in bringing this vision to life, ensuring that our built environments reflect and contribute to the goals of ecological restoration and community wellbeing. The framework, with a clear vision at its heart, thus becomes a tool for inspiring and actualising the sustainable future we collectively aspire to create.

So what now?

"It (the framework) has been specifically designed to be drawn upon by business, academia, and the community to support their efforts to create better lives for all Australians." (Measuring What Matters Statement)

This wellbeing statement is not clear exactly on how government will use this data. It states 'As we refine our approach in future statements, the Government will also consider ways to better link policy decisions with consideration of wellbeing metrics."[43] In contrast to this vague statement it describes how the "NZ framework is applied to inform budget priorities and analyse budget bids for funding." Wales has a Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) and a Future Generations Commissioner to 'guide and shape how we collectively advance sustainable development"[44].

In time, we hope to see that the data will directly influence government policy, spending and ideally tracking progress. We hope to see these measures incorporated into government project feasibilities and business case studies. For example, we would expect to see alignment with the national framework to state policies like the NSW "Framework for Valuing Green Infrastructure and Public Spaces"[45] and "NSW Government's Guide to Cost-Benefit Analysis"[46].

The Framework also intends to provide data for communities and businesses to contribute to the solutions. But what are those solutions? This first statement doesn't yet make that leap between identifying the measures and then making recommendations on ways to improve wellbeing. It does highlight some government current policies for each theme. But more broadly, it would be positive to see national recommendations on targeted areas of cross department policies to improve national wellbeing. Like a specific focus on loneliness interventions.

For individual companies, adopting the Framework may assist to align an organisation's efforts to government priorities. However in order to ensure design truly supports wellbeing, it is important to adopt an approach that actually measures what matters, particularly for the people being impacted. We cannot just accept that the Australia Wellbeing Framework (or other predetermined outcomes frameworks) account for this. For example when a new school is built, we cannot assume wellbeing benefits using the general framework data, rather we need to effectively measure wellbeing impacts for the school and local community. Effective co-design will be a powerful tool to identify and measure wellbeing priorities. This process will require practicing cultural safety - recognising we all

come with our own biases and experiences and we need to account for this, and working hard to actively make a safe space for everyone's points of views to be heard. Post occupancy wellbeing evaluations will be a new tool needed to measure the short and long term benefits of any project.

Time to step up!

As mentioned earlier, whilst there has been some community consultation for the framework, it was limited in time and depth (in comparison to the Wales framework for example that was developed over years). There has also been a serious lack of contribution from the build form community. Whilst is great to see the Australian Dental Association has contributed to the framework, where are the national representative bodies for planners, Architects or development community? It is great to see the following university groups step up to the table (Centre for Urban Transition- Swinburne University of Technology, Institute for Sustainable Futures - University of Technology Sydney, Centre for Urban Research- RMIT University) but for the next round we look forward to more robust contributions from our industry.

Conclusion

Well designed places can contribute to healthy, secure, socially cohesive communities. It is a positive step forward that we now have national leadership and the first[47] tangible framework that articulates “what is wellbeing”. The scientific approach, utilising measures is an important step forward in outlining what we think a thriving community looks like. As creators of the built environment that gives us the beginning of a road map to understand how architecture, urban design and good places can contribute towards these measures. As a National statement, there is the opportunity to inform other levels of government hopefully use the statement to aid in greater alignment between funding, policy and measures.

We hope this white paper inspires more conversation about how we create, measure and impact wellbeing as an industry. This statement is just the beginning of an iterative process and we are excited to see where this goes.

Contact:
If you are passionate about wellbeing in architecture and urban design and want to continue the conversation, please reach out to Blix Architecture or Atelier Ten.

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