Measuring National Well-being: Where We Live

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Summary

Measuring National Well-being - Where We Live explores the way in which our homes and the areas in which we live influence our well-being. This briefing provides a summary.

- The report forms part of the Measuring National Well-being programme which aims to measure the nation’s well-being and promote its importance to policy and decision makers at all levels.
- It draws on a wide range of subjective and objective evidence to consider headline measures including housing tenure, provision and quality, the housing market, the local area and access to services and amenities.
- The report has particular relevance for officers involved in housing, community and neighbourhood planning, as well as local members.

Overview

Measuring National Well-being - Where We Live is one of a series of thematic reports published as part of the Office for National Statistics’ Measuring National Well-being programme. The programme aims to produce a set of credible measures by which to assess the nation’s well-being.

This report draws on a range of research and data, from objective and subjective sources, to consider the evidence of each of the headline measures within its scope: satisfaction with living accommodation; importance of services and amenities; tenure and housing stock; housing conditions; housing market; satisfaction with the local area; access to the local environment; access to local services.

Clearly, homes that meet our individual needs and provide us with shelter and security are made all the better by having easy access to local shops and services, and green spaces to walk or play in – and have the potential to exercise a powerful influence over our sense of well-being.

The value of this report lies in the methodical approach it takes to attempting to define, and assess, the influence exercised by our homes and neighbourhoods on our general sense of well-being. It has particular relevance to officers involved in housing, planning and neighbourhoods, as well as local ward members.
Briefing in full

Measuring National Well-being Programme

The Measuring National Well-being Programme is run by the ONS and aims to produce accepted and trusted measures of the nation’s well-being – a measure of how the UK as a whole is doing.

An early priority for the programme has been the development of a framework of key quality of life indicators and headline measures through a process of national debate and consultation. The broad subject domains are: individual well-being; our relationships; health; what we do; where we live; personal finance; education and skills; the economy; governance; the natural environment, and; sustainable development.

The ONS has started to explore the different domains in a series of reports. Each considers a range of specific headline measures by drawing on a wide range of statistics, research and newly commissioned data, across economic, social and environmental headings. An outstanding feature of the approach is the capture and use of subjective as well as objective measures of well-being.

Measuring National Well-being: Where We Live

When the ONS asked people what mattered in their measurement of National Well-being, ‘where we live’ was found to be one of the most important aspects. The consultation process clarified this to extend from people’s homes to include the wider area in which they live and their access to local services, facilities, amenities and the local environment. All have a bearing on our well-being. The report discusses each one of the headline measures in turn.

Satisfaction with living accommodation

The report starts by probing the extent to which we are satisfied with our living accommodation. It cross-refers to the ONS’ subjective data to find a relationship between satisfaction with living accommodation and life satisfaction:

- 84 per cent of people report a medium/high satisfaction with their living accommodation.
- Nearly half of adults reporting low satisfaction with their accommodation also report a low satisfaction with their life.

Importance of services and amenities

The area in which we live and the availability of local services and amenities can all contribute to a sense of satisfaction and well-being. The Place Survey 2008 asked people to prioritise the features of a good place to live:
Tenure and housing stock

The most common forms of tenure in the UK are:
- home ownership – over two-thirds of households own their own homes, just under half of whom own them outright (without a mortgage);
- social renting - 10 per cent of people rent their homes from a local authority and 8 per cent from a housing association;
- private renting - 13 per cent of households rent from a private landlord.

There is a relationship between housing tenure and overall satisfaction with life:
- A higher proportion (80 per cent) of home owners report a medium/high level of life satisfaction compared to 67 per cent of tenants.
- Nearly a third of tenants report a low satisfaction with life compared with around a fifth of home owners.

The report suggests that the availability of different types of tenure and accommodation in a neighbourhood may also contribute to a sense of satisfaction with a local area. There appears to be a contradiction between people’s priorities for new local housing and the reality of new build:
- 37 per cent of people identified 3 to 4 bedroom houses as the priority, 35 per cent 1 to 2 bedroom houses and 14 per cent thought more flats or maisonettes.
- 35 per cent of all permanent dwellings built last year were flats, 30 per cent were 3 bedroom houses, 22 per cent were 4 or more bedroom houses and 13 per cent were 1 to 2 bedroom houses.

Access to affordable housing is important to life satisfaction and well-being. The report looks at the gross supply of affordable housing in England last year, showing:
- 60,640 additional affordable homes were supplied for rent or low-cost ownership, the highest number since 1995/96.
- Just under 9 in 10 of these homes (53,340) were newly built and only 12 per cent were through acquisition from the private sector.

**Housing conditions**

Living in poor quality or badly maintained accommodation risks people’s well-being. The Decent Homes Standard defines minimum standards of housing quality in England. A European standard of housing deprivation makes international comparison possible. In 2010:
- 26.5 per cent (5.9 million) homes in England failed the to meet the Standard; failure rates were highest in the private rented sector where over a third were non-decent compared to 20 per cent in the social rented sector.
- 2.8 per cent of the UK population experienced severe housing deprivation compared to 5.7 per cent of the EU-27 population (around 30 million people).

**Housing market**

Closely linked to conditions in the wider economy, the state of the housing market affects housing mobility, negative equity and indebtedness. All of these have an effect on people’s sense of well-being. The most commonly cited advantages of home ownership are: the investment value, long term security and freedom to do what they want with a property. However, nine out of ten adults identify at least one practical advantage of renting: flexibility over moving, choice of where to live and fewer financial risks and responsibilities were those most commonly identified.

House prices may have an effect on people’s financial confidence which in turn affects overall well-being. Large decreases in house prices were seen in 2009 when values dropped by 7.6 per cent, the largest annual decline in 40 years. Residential property transactions reflect the buoyancy of the private housing market. They have fallen dramatically in the past 5 years. In 2008, they were almost half that of 2006, spiking briefly at the end of the Stamp Duty ‘holiday’, before reaching an all time monthly low of 51,000 in January 2010.
In the rented sector, a regional list of average weekly rents for 2011/12 shows:

- There is a slight difference in the weekly average rent paid to social landlords (£72.30) and private landlords (£78.28).
- In both social and private rented sectors, rents are lowest in the North East (£59.38 and £65.78 respectively) and highest in London (£89.17 and £97.46).
- Since the 1990’s, social rents have changed least in the North West (rising by 59 per cent) and most in Yorkshire and the Humber (80 per cent); private rents have changed least in the East Midlands, and Yorkshire and the Humber (59 per cent) and most in London (83.5 per cent) and the North West (79 per cent).

**Satisfaction with the local area**

Research suggests that those who are satisfied with life are more likely to feel satisfied with the local area and to feel strongly about it.

- Nearly 4 in 5 of adults reported a medium/high satisfaction with their local area, only 1 in 5 of whom reported a low satisfaction with their life.
- Of those reporting a low satisfaction with their local area, 42 per cent reported a low satisfaction with their life.
- However, the reverse is not necessarily true: 58 per cent of those reporting a low satisfaction with their local area also reported a medium/high satisfaction with life.

Both people’s relationship to and confidence in their local area and local people may impact on their satisfaction with the area and, by extension, their sense of well-being.

- Just over three-quarters of adults reported a low involvement in the local area and just under three-quarters reported a low sense of belonging.
- Around half of adults reported that many of the people in their neighbourhood could be trusted and around a third that some could be trusted.
Noise, crime and anti-social behaviour have been identified as features associated with a wide range of adverse impacts on health, quality of life and well-being. They can also, by their very nature, undermine relationships and communities.

- 84 per cent of adults were satisfied that the place where they lived was a quiet environment – however, 40 per cent reported being bothered, annoyed or disturbed by road traffic noise and 37 per cent by noisy neighbours.
- 70 per cent agreed that ‘It is important to live in secure and safe surroundings’
- Last year, of the 4.04 million police recorded crimes in England and Wales, the most common were theft (27 per cent), violence against the person (19 per cent), criminal damage (16 per cent) and burglary (13 per cent).

Perceptions of crime rates are subject to influence by an individual’s experience and exposure to crime or anti-social behaviour, whether directly (as a victim) or indirectly (knowing a victim or through such things as the media). This can also impact negatively on an individual’s well-being and their quality of life. Last year:

- 6 in 10 adults said that there was more crime, as a whole in England and Wales, than two years ago; 3 in 10 felt this was the case for their local area.
- 14 per cent perceived there to be a high level of anti-social behaviour locally.
- 15 per cent of sample sites failed an acceptable standard for litter.
- Councils in England dealt with 820,000 incidents of fly-tipping, nearly two thirds of which involved household waste.

When asked, people identify the ‘very or fairly big’ local problems as:

![Bar chart showing the most common local problems]

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Access to the local environment
Access to green space - local public gardens, parks, commons or other green spaces in the area - was identified in both the national debate and response to the proposed domains and measures as having a significant bearing on well-being.

- Over 9 in 10 adults regard it as important to have local green spaces nearby.
- A third of adults reported that they visited the outdoors, away from home, several times a week or more often, in the past year.
- The most important reasons for visiting green space are: fresh air (74 per cent), open space (46 per cent), scenery (36 per cent) and tranquillity (27 per cent).
- Just under 7 in 10 adults reported a medium/high satisfaction with their local green space, ranging from almost 8 in 10 people in the South East and South West compared with under a half in the North East.

Access to local services
The extent to which an area is adequately provided for by services and amenities greatly assists local satisfaction. The proximity of housing to employment, services and facilities, and the public transport infrastructure, both have an impact on access and are equally important contributors to satisfaction with an area and well-being.

There is a high degree of variation between satisfaction ratings and access to local services. There is also a significant but declining sense of confidence in people’s belief that they can influence local decisions and shape local services.

- For most local environment services, satisfaction levels are above 70 per cent compared to less than 50 per cent for sports, leisure and cultural services (excepting libraries).
- A higher proportion of people in urban areas had reasonable access to key services and amenities by public transport/ walking than those in a rural areas.
- 22 per cent of people reported that they knew someone who felt a sense of isolation due to difficulty accessing local shops and services.
- Nearly three-quarters of people say that it is important to feel that they can influence decisions in their local area – in the past decade, the proportion saying that they feel this is the case has fallen from 43 per cent to 37 per cent.

Comment
The ONS has made a robust start to its National Well-being project, setting about defining a secure, comprehensive means of measuring well-being. A series of core publications is well underway and Where We Live is a good example of both the programme’s strengths and weaknesses.

At worst, the report attempts to define and clarify to such an extent that it risks oversimplification and a pre-dominance of assorted mainstream facts and figures. Where, for example, amongst the preoccupations with house prices and housing market stagnation, is any mention of repossessions, homelessness or affordable rural housing shortages?
At best, it offers a simple and intelligible framework in which to add local detail and against which to assess the contribution made to individual and community well-being by our homes and neighbourhoods. It captures the key components, offering a checklist of headline indicators and the potential outline of a new policy approach that can accommodate well-being as a central objective.

Where We Live suggests a way forward for some further thinking on how best local councils might provide housing and shape communities in order to support residents’ and communities’ well-being. It will be of particular relevance to ward members, community leaders and council officers responsible for housing, planning and neighbourhoods.

For more information about this, or any other LGiU member briefing, please contact Janet Sillett, Briefings Manager, on janet.sillett@lgiu.org.uk