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**Henry Halloran  
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Research Initiative**



# Implementing wellbeing outcomes into NSW Planning System

A new pro-social narrative for planning

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*For the*

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## DISCLAIMERS

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# Glossary

ABS - Australian Bureau of Statistics

ACT - Australian Capital Territory

DPHI - Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure

EP&A Act - NSW Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979

MWM Framework - Measuring What Matters Framework

NSW - New South Wales

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

SDGs - UN Sustainable Development Goals

UK - United Kingdom

WBFGA - Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

## Executive Summary

From ancient roots, wellbeing has evolved to become a policy priority around the world, as governments seek new ways to measure progress beyond economic growth. In July 2023 the Australian Treasury released 'Measuring What Matters, Australia's First Wellbeing Framework' (MWM Framework). The MWM Framework is part of a growing international movement to better align the economic, environmental, and social outcomes in government decision making. While the MWM Framework is not currently enacted through legislation, the Australian government is looking for ways to implement it into all areas of government decision making, including urban planning.

### Report purpose

This purpose of this report is to identify the barriers and enablers to implementation of the MWM Framework into planning policy in New South Wales (NSW) and to make recommendations that provide a step forward from policy aspiration to implementation. In establishing the barriers and enablers to a wellbeing approach, this research then considered if implementation of the MWM Framework could elevate social outcomes in planning.

### Methodology

This research study has incorporated a variety of qualitative methods to explore the research questions including a literature review, policy review, semi-structured interviews and a case study based on the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (WBFGA) (National Assembly for Wales 2015) which has been widely celebrated as groundbreaking legislation.

### Literature review

Interest in wellbeing is not new and there is a deep body of philosophical enquiry into what constitutes the good life (Diener 2000). While there is no universal definition, there is consensus that wellbeing is a multi-dimensional construct that can broadly be conceptualised as an 'ideal state of being' (McNaught 2011). There is also academic consensus that place, scale, and context impacts on the multiple dimensions of wellbeing (Kent & Thompson 2014) and this implies a critical role for planners who are central agents in shaping the built environment. Despite an extensive body of literature, it has been raised that planners often lack the systematic knowledge to improve wellbeing (Mouratidis 2021), in part because of the broad nature of wellbeing research, a reliance on process more than expert knowledge (Tennøy et al. 2016) and the complexities of measuring planning outcomes (Gurran & Phibbs 2014).

Contemporary research focuses on wellbeing as a measure of societal progress beyond economic growth, with GDP rendered an inadequate measure (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi 2009). Wellbeing, like sustainable development is positioned as a post-growth philosophy but by comparison, wellbeing offers a greater emphasis on pro-social thinking that considers questions of human meaning, happiness, personal experience and social recognition (Taylor 2011).

## Policy review

Internationally there has been a proliferation of wellbeing frameworks, particularly in high income nations. Wellbeing frameworks are generally suites of statistical indicators designed to measure societal progress at a national or state level. While there are many commonalities between wellbeing frameworks, a key differentiator is the strength of implementation within government. Internationally the WBFGA is held up as the most ambitious policy.

In Australia, there is long history of wellbeing thinking and the MWM Framework builds on this legacy. The MWM Framework includes a relatively weak consideration of the spatial and temporal dimensions of wellbeing, but it does recognise the need to improve future disaggregation of data to understand place-based differences. By comparison, the WBFGA takes a greater interest in the dimensions of place.

Wellbeing is not explicitly stated as an object of the NSW Environmental Planning and Assessment 1979 (EP&A Act) (NSW Government 1979) but many planning policies in NSW share similar thematic aspirations to the MWM Framework, for example healthy, sustainable and safe are common goals of many planning instruments.

## Case study

The WBFGA was established in April 2015 and introduced a duty on public bodies to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing of Wales. As a direct result of the WBFGA, the Welsh planning system has undergone comprehensive reform. The WBFGA case study highlights the central role that planning played in the early years of implementation of the WBFGA, including a recast of Planning Policy Wales shaped around the national wellbeing goals. After 10 years the WBFGA has increased in prominence and it is making an impact on decision-making but not the system-wide change that was intended (Audit Wales 2025). Interviews highlighted a sense of optimism for longer term impact despite a recent resurgence in the neoliberal rhetoric in Welsh planning.

## Industry insights

Interviews highlighted that there is little awareness of the MWM Framework and the broader wellbeing movement amongst planning professionals in NSW. However a set of nationally agreed outcomes for planning was seen as beneficial to provide a clear purpose and line of sight from Federal priorities to local implementation.

Interviewees reflected that planning plays a role, directly and indirectly, in achieving the MWM Framework wellbeing themes. However, it is unclear what contribution planning is making as there isn't a system in place to measure these outcomes, and planning does not have a strong culture of evaluation.

It was also reflected that there is strong alignment between the MWM Framework and ambitions of planning policy and planning professionals but in practice the purpose of planning is muddy. It was also reflected that planners do not have the tools to effectively balance social, environmental and economic considerations in decision making.

## Key findings

This research set out to understand the barriers and enablers to implementing a wellbeing approach within planning and if this could achieve a better balance between social, economic and environmental considerations. While there is a growing community in Australia pursuing a wellbeing agenda, the barriers to implementation remain significant.

The key barriers and enablers are summarised below:

**Professional relevance** – There is a large body of academic research that evidences the impact of the built environment on wellbeing and identifies a role for planners in improving human and ecological wellbeing. There is also strong alignment between the aspirations of NSW planning policy and planning professionals with the goals of the MWM Framework.

**Policy versus practice** – Despite the aspiration to improve wellbeing, interviews revealed that in practice the purpose of planning feels unclear and there is an unresolved tension in planning between its role as a force for social progress and a tool of economic growth.

**Industry engagement** – There is little knowledge of the MWM Framework amongst planners in NSW and the MWM Framework has been criticised for a limited public consultation process. A lack of engagement with the planning industry has potentially influenced the weak spatial and temporal dimensions of the MWM Framework.

**Entrenched beliefs** – The wellbeing agenda challenges the dominance of pro-growth planning by requiring equal consideration of social and economic outcomes as the measure of success. The Welsh experience also highlighted resistance to shifting their policy focus from sustainable development to wellbeing and similar opposition is likely in Australia. However, this research revealed there is support for a new more holistic discourse.

**Momentum for change** – The Welsh devolution from the United Kingdom provided a catalyst for new ways of working within government. Combined with a national conversation, this generated broad community support and provided the conditions for the WBFGA to be legislated. International experience suggests we need to identify our own fertile ground that provides the conditions for change.

**Planning governance** – The planning system in NSW is complex and any additional requirements that go against the tide of neoliberal efficiency are likely to meet resistance. Planning policy also interacts with the regulatory requirements of other policy areas and the MWM Framework requires a whole of government commitment.

**Enforcement** – The implementation of the MWM Framework is relatively weak with limited evidence to suggest it is influencing the way government decisions are being made. Interviews highlighted that without a legislative requirement to achieve wellbeing outcomes it is unlikely to change the way planners are working.

**Evidence system** – The MWM Framework is asking planning to consider how it contributes to wellbeing outcomes. Success of the planning system is currently measured through performance outputs – such as the speed and value of development and measuring planning outcomes continues to challenge planning systems around the world.

**Collaboration** – The high-level nature of the wellbeing themes, for example healthy, sustainable and secure, are beyond the control of planners and requires collaborative solutions. Interviewees described siloed ways of working and systematic barriers to working together. The inclusion of ‘ways of working’ within the WBFGA was highlighted as a key enabler for behaviour change.

**State of the profession** – Australia is facing a critical shortage of planners. Welsh interviewees reflected a similar shortage driven by austerity measures. This shortage has been a barrier to implementation of the WBFGA, as overstretched planners do not have the capacity to learn new skills or adapt to new ways of working.

In establishing the barriers and enablers to a wellbeing approach, this research then considered if implementation of the MWM Framework could elevate the consideration of social outcomes in planning. It found that the sustainable development paradigm, which sits at the heart of planning, is deeply rooted in environmentalism and has marginalised social issues. By contrast, the pursuit of wellbeing has a stronger focus on pro-social thinking that considers tangible as well as intangible social impacts such as sense of place, trust and connection. It also found that planners do not have effective tools to balance social, environmental and economic outcomes in decision making.

## Closing Discussion

This research has highlighted that there is an unresolved conflict at the heart of planning. While the ambition of planning in NSW is to deliver wellbeing through the balance of social, environmental and economic objectives, in practice pro-growth objectives are prioritised. The implementation of the MWM Framework offers an opportunity to resolve this tension. It provides a framework for a national conversation about the purpose of planning policy and the values that we want to uphold through the built environment. If we agree, as this research suggests, that planning should play a role in a more healthy, safe, sustainable, cohesive and prosperous Australia, then as an industry we should want the evidence to demonstrate this and inform our decision making.

History shows us that planning reform in NSW is challenging and requires agents of change in the right place at the right time. With a second term for the Albanese government, expiry of the 2030 SDGS, the absence of a state-wide strategic plan in NSW and calls for reform to address the housing crisis, there is perhaps a window of opportunity to support change. There is also a growing community in Australia and overseas interested in progressing the wellbeing agenda and evidence that wellbeing thinking is starting to influence strategic planning within the NSW Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (DPHI).

The MWM Framework is not perfect, and this research paper has identified areas for improvement. But more importantly it needs commitment, which I argue needs to take the form of law. Without a legislative requirement, the messy work of systems change is unlikely to occur. Hoekstra (2019) argues we don’t need more models, but a strong process towards harmonisation if wellbeing is to compete with the ubiquity of GDP. In 2020, Treasurer Jim Chalmers expressed a similar sentiment that neoliberalism is broken and we need to “*find coherence and conviction in what replaces it*” (Chalmers 2020). The MWM Framework offers a strong starting point, with 5 national wellbeing themes and a system for measuring progress.



## Recommendations

Based on the findings in this research report the following recommendations are made to provide the foundation for change, shape policy and further research.

**Clarify the purpose of planning** – Amongst the urgency of the housing crisis and other critical challenges we need to create space for a meaningful dialogue about the purpose of planning, which I argue should be to maximise collective wellbeing. Without clarity of purpose, the credibility of planning will continue to erode. A clear statutory purpose will also help shape the tools that planners need to make purpose aligned decisions. Previous reviews of the planning system have advocated for the elevation of ‘ecologically sustainable development’ as the central guiding principle of the EP&A Act. However sustainable development in planning has become understood to mean environmentally preferable outcomes. Wellbeing offers a more optimistic, holistic and relatable discourse that is supported by national wellbeing priorities and a measurement approach.

**Planning industry engagement** – Without an engaged planning industry, the wellbeing agenda cannot be realised. Cities are the centres of social and economic activity and any effort to move beyond growth as the primary goal of the economy will require the support of planning. Engagement with the planning industry could also improve the spatial and temporal dimensions of the MWM Framework, including indicator selection and disaggregation of data at different spatial scales. Identification of additional indicators to support planning policy in NSW could be an area for future research. Outside of the planning industry broad community engagement is required to ensure the framework has political legitimacy, reflects community values and has public support (Sollis, Campbell & Drake 2025).

**Address the state of the profession** – The Welsh experience highlighted that to enable major planning reform, we need a high-functioning planning industry. Collective action by government and industry is needed to resolve the shortage of planners in NSW and to provide the capacity for change. A planning system aligned with a clear vision to deliver wellbeing is likely to be a more attractive proposition for young people looking for purpose driven work. Cardiff University has embedded the WBFGA within their planning syllabus to train a new cohort of planners to advance this policy agenda. We also need planners with the right skills for contemporary challenges which includes post-growth planning, evidence-based planning and outcomes evaluation.

**Improve the use of evidence in planning** – We should be able to measure the extent to which planning is achieving its stated objectives, but this remains an unresolved challenge. The complexities of evaluating planning outcomes are well established in literature (Gurran & Phibbs 2014) but there are examples we can draw on to build an approach in NSW, including the ACT Planning System Evaluation Framework and the Scottish National Planning Improvement Framework, which both align with their respective wellbeing frameworks. We also need to foster a culture of evidence and evaluation in planning and take a level of responsibility for the place outcomes achieved or not achieved. Peak bodies can play a role by tying evaluation skills to CPD or industry awards. State led developments could require post development evaluation or embed evaluation requirements into contractual agreements. A closer link between planners and researchers is also encouraged, like the Practitioner in Residence program and systems to disseminate expert knowledge to planners. A culture of evaluation should move away from the name and shame culture of ‘council league tables’ to one of collaboration and continuous improvement.

**Conceptualise new planning tools to support wellbeing** – It's widely researched and accepted that urban planning influences on the dimensions of wellbeing. Planners now need ways to translate this knowledge into planning instruments. Drawing on the Welsh experience, at a policy level the WBFGA provided the compass for a recast of the Planning Policy Wales and the introduction of a National Development Framework and Place Making Charter. The documents contain practical decision-making tools for planners, for example the sustainable transport, waste and energy hierarchies and the five legislated 'ways of working.' Regarding the broader wellbeing economy agenda, new tools are needed to decouple urban planning from the reliance on economic growth to achieve other policy goals. Some of these tools are emergent, such as circular economy practices, meanwhile use initiatives and windfall taxation but they need greater commitment. Others will be more radical for example planning for reduction in existing infrastructure and others are yet to be conceived within the constraints of the current purpose of planning.

# 1 Introduction

In July 2023 the Australian Commonwealth Treasury released ‘Measuring What Matters, Australia’s First Wellbeing Framework’ (MWM Framework). The MWM Framework is part of a growing international movement to better align economic, environmental, and social outcomes in government decision making.

The MWM Framework builds on a long history of wellbeing thinking in Australia and we have been regarded as an early pioneer in the space. While the MWM Framework is not currently enacted through legislation, the Australian government is looking for ways to link policy decisions with wellbeing metrics. The impact of the MWM Framework is intended to extend beyond the public sector and ‘underpin the broader efforts of business, community groups and others, to deliver better outcomes and opportunities for Australians’ (Australian Government 2023).

Development of the MWM Framework has drawn on international experience including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Framework for Measuring Well-being and Progress (OECD 2011), as well as the work of individual countries including New Zealand, Canada, India and Wales. Internationally the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (WBFGA) has been widely celebrated as groundbreaking, placing a duty on public bodies to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. As a direct result of the WBFGA, the Welsh planning system has undergone comprehensive reform.

A decade later, the Welsh experience provides a unique case study to understand the impact of the legislation on the planning system, the challenges of implementation and the difference a wellbeing approach has made in balancing the social, economic and environmental outcomes.

## 1.1 Report purpose

The purpose of this report is to identify the barriers and enablers to implementation of the MWM Framework into planning policy in New South Wales (NSW) and to make recommendations that provide a step forward from policy aspiration to implementation. In establishing the barriers and enablers to a wellbeing approach, this research then considered if implementation of the MWM Framework could elevate social outcomes in planning.

The motivation for this research is personal, as well as academic. Over the last decade I have worked in the built environment industry in a range of roles related to sustainability. In my experience social sustainability, for example equity, health, culture and gender have been poorly considered by the planning system, compared to environmental and economic considerations. While marginalisation of social considerations is not unique to planning, increasing urbanisation and persistent social challenges faced by even the most prosperous economies, warrants serious attention.

Implementation is a broad term, and this report draws on the work of Jackson (2020) which identifies three steps to implement a wellbeing agenda within government. Building on this Hayden and Dasilva (2022) identify that ‘strong implementation’ of a wellbeing approach requires a whole-of-government commitment to a new economic narrative, one that decouples wellbeing from economic growth, while a ‘weaker’ wellbeing approach focuses more narrowly

on wellbeing measurement. Based on this scale The MWM Framework adopts a 'weaker' form of implementation that complements instead of replacing economic indicators or growth objectives.

## 1.2 Research aims

This research aims to identify the barriers and enablers to implementing a wellbeing approach into NSW planning and how this could support better social outcomes. This study will do this by:

1. Reviewing Australian and international literature on wellbeing theory
2. Identifying the key policy instruments for implementing wellbeing outcomes into planning in NSW
3. Investigating what key local stakeholders (government and industry) identify as the main barriers and enablers to implementation
4. Investigating what key international stakeholders (government, academia and industry) identify as the main barriers and enablers to implementation and how these have been overcome.

## 2 Methodology

This research study has incorporated a variety of qualitative methods to explore the research questions, outlined in detail below. The following section provides an overview of the research methods and my experience as emergent researcher. While these reflections might not normally be included in an academic paper, I hope that they are useful for other practitioners who may consider a similar process.

### 2.1 Insider research

The 'Practitioner in Residence Program' allows experienced practitioners to undertake a period of supported research to work on a project that is of interest to the Initiative. An important aspect of work-based research is that it is within the researcher's own work practice (Costley, Elliott & Gibbs 2010). In the context of this research project, I can be classified as an 'insider' researcher. As an 'insider' researcher, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue that there is a level of safety and comfort for research participants, who are more likely to trust, and give in depth answers to 'insider' researchers. However, sharing experiences and perspectives with research participants can also cloud a researcher's perspective when analysing data. By taking a self-reflexive approach, I hope to occupy 'the space between' insider and outsider research (Dwyer & Buckle 2009).

### 2.2 Research methods

This research study has incorporated a variety of qualitative methods to explore the research questions, as outlined below:

#### Literature review

The theoretical underpinnings of wellbeing and how this informs contemporary policy are explored through a review of Australian and international literature. The literature review considers how wellbeing is defined, the spatial dimensions of wellbeing and wellbeing as post-growth philosophy.

The literature review was challenging due to the depth and breadth of literature available on wellbeing and finding my unique contribution to this body of work. It was also challenging to constrain my research to what was relevant and feasible to consider within the limits of this research project. The literature review was the most challenging component of this research but also the most transformational for me in terms of new knowledge gained.

#### Policy review

The wellbeing policy landscape is rapidly evolving with the proliferation of wellbeing frameworks around the world, particularly in high income nations. The policy review has been conducted to chart the emergence of wellbeing policy internationally and in Australia as well as how planning policy in NSW currently considers the concept of wellbeing.

## Case study

A case study approach is an established research method within social sciences and can be defined as an empirical inquiry which investigates a phenomenon in its real-life context (Yin 2009). The purpose of the case study is to describe the forces that enabled or opposed the implementation of the WBFGA into planning policy in Wales and generate findings that are potentially transferable to the Australian context. Drawing on a decade of experience since its implementation in 2015, the Welsh experience provides a unique case study to understand the impact of the legislation.

The WBFGA was chosen as a case study for three reasons. Firstly, it is recognised as international best practice. In 2015 Nikhil Seth, the Head of Sustainable Development for the United Nations, in a speech about the WFG Act, proclaimed *“what Wales is doing today, we hope the world will do tomorrow, action more than words is the hope for our future generations.”* Secondly, the WBFGA has been in place for 10 years and there is a reasonable body of evidence to develop a detailed case study. Thirdly, Wales and Australia are both democratic nations and the land use planning systems in Australia and the United Kingdom (UK) share a common history (Gurran & Whitehead 2011).

However, it is also acknowledged that the Welsh social and political context is different to that of Australia and NSW. Wales is a small country of fewer than 4 million people, the poorest country in the UK and the Labour Party has been the dominant political force for more than a century. Devolution from the UK government in 1998 also provided a unique environment for change.

My original research plan had included three case studies, however given the time constraints and the in-depth research required to prepare a case study this report is limited to the Welsh experience. However, I see great value in studying the ACT Wellbeing Framework and New Zealand Living Standards Frameworks and the influence on their planning systems.

## Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 15 stakeholders (1 hour each) representing the private sector (planning consultants), public sector (state and local government) and academia (University academics). Interviewees were selected based on their knowledge of the planning system and wellbeing frameworks in NSW or Wales. Two of the interviewees had professional experience in both NSW and Wales and they reflected their dual perspectives in the interviews. A breakdown of the interview participants is provided below in Table 1.

I identified interviewees based on my own experience, as well as recommendations made through my professional network. International participants were identified through a mix of research and recommendations. The assistance of my network in connecting me with potential interview candidates was extremely valuable. The recruitment process has also extended my professional network which has been a positive outcome of selecting interviews as part of methodology.

Generally people were receptive to being interviewed, particularly in the private sector. Public sector participants also showed great interest, but the consent process was more

challenging. Protecting anonymity of interviewees also required careful consideration in the selection of supporting quotes.

Recruitment was initially planned for November and December 2024, however due to a protracted ethics approval process this was delayed until January and February 2025 once people had returned to work after the holiday period. Interviews were conducted using a thematic interview guide approach. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in accordance with Ethics Application 2024/HE001510.

Table 1 Interview Participants

Category	No of participants
<b>NSW</b>	
Private sector	6
Public sector	4
<b>Wales</b>	
Public sector	2
Academic	3
Total	<b>15</b>

### 2.3 Limitations

While not a focus of this research report, it is acknowledged that wellbeing is a topic of long-standing interest in many philosophies and there is great value in Indigenous perspectives on wellbeing. Due to research limitations, the discussion in this report is primarily focused on western theories of wellbeing and there is a need for greater consideration of Australia’s First Nations people and their knowledge systems within discussions on wellbeing.

## 3 What is wellbeing?

Before discussing the implementation of a wellbeing framework into planning, it is important to establish what is meant by the term wellbeing. The following section provides an overview of the main academic perspectives on wellbeing, the definitional challenges and the renewed interest in wellbeing as post-growth philosophy and measure of societal progress beyond economic growth.

### 3.1 Defining wellbeing

Academic interest in wellbeing is not new, from the beginnings of intellectual history, there has been considerable debate about what constitutes 'the good life.' Modern wellbeing theory has evolved from two different but intersecting ancient philosophies – the idea of a happy life (hedonic wellbeing) and a meaningful life (eudaimonic wellbeing) (Ryan & Deci 2001a). Building on ancient roots, contemporary literature focuses on two conceptual approaches – subjective and objective wellbeing. Subjective wellbeing is concerned with an individual's own appraisal of their existence (Diener 2000) and the ideas of happiness, life satisfaction and more recently human 'flourishing' from the positive psychology movement. Objective wellbeing investigates the objectively measurable dimensions of a good life such as material resources (e.g. income, food, housing) and social attributes (education, health, political voice, social networks and connections) (Western & Tomaszewski 2016).

While wellbeing is commonly coupled with health, the literature is much broader and dispersed across many of the social sciences, including psychology, sociology, and economics. The centrality of the environment to human well-being has gained increased attention in recent years, in response to the human vulnerabilities to climate change and resulting natural disasters (Schleicher et al. 2018). Broad interest in wellbeing can partly be attributed to its unspecified nature (Fleuret & Atkinson 2007) and the ability to 'encode universal values' and 'good things' that no-one could possibly disagree with (Cornwall 2007). The language of wellbeing captures positive issues of 'rounded humanity, including questions of human meaning, happiness, personal experience and social recognition as well as access to material goods and resources (Taylor 2011).

Despite the large body of research there is no universal definition of wellbeing. The absence of a definition does present challenges, as how we define wellbeing in policy influences our practices of government and we require some vision of what "the better" is (Ryan & Deci 2001b). As stated in the MWM Framework 'the way we measure wellbeing drives public discussions and brings attention to how we are progressing in areas valued by the community that are important for longer-term prosperity' (Australian Government 2023). The complexity of wellbeing has led researchers and policy makers to focus on dimensions of wellbeing rather than on definitions (Dodge et al. 2012). This approach is evident in the MWM Framework, which avoids a definition of wellbeing and instead identifies five wellbeing themes, as well as a measure of self-reported life satisfaction. While the debate over the meaning of wellbeing continues, it is generally agreed that wellbeing is a multi-dimensional construct, and it can be broadly conceptualised as an 'ideal state of being' (McNaught 2011).



## 3.2 Wellbeing measurement and post-growth

While wellbeing is an ancient pursuit, a resurgence in wellbeing research has been driven by the pursuit of a broader measure of societal progress, with GDP rendered inadequate (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi 2009). The limitations of GDP have been widely researched, and it is well established that GDP 'not only falls short in evaluating critical aspects of quality of life, but it also triggers and fosters activities that are contrary to long-term societal well-being' (Giannetti et al. 2015). The key arguments against GDP as a measure of wellbeing are summarised by Giannetti, Agostinho et al (2015) including - its neglect of income distribution amongst individuals, failure to capture informal transactions that occur outside markets and the unpriced deterioration of the natural environment. It has been argued by Easterlin (1995) that a reliance on GDP as measure of wellbeing is flawed because very little correlation exists between growth and wellbeing after a certain threshold of basic needs are met and it is the relative income differences within a country that matter most. The impact of conflating growth with wellbeing is significant because it can lead to the wrong policy decisions – i.e. policies that result in economic growth are inherently seen to be beneficial for society (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi 2009).

As discussed above wellbeing is multidimensional and no single measure can capture the complexity of the wellbeing of a country. This has led to the proliferation of wellbeing frameworks which include suites of statistical indicators, including social, environmental, cultural and economic measures. Beyond introducing a broader set of metrics for measuring societal progress, wellbeing is positioned in the literature as post-growth philosophy and new economic logic. The central idea of the post-growth perspective is to unsettle the 'hegemony of growth' and replace the goal of increasing GDP with the goal of improving human wellbeing within planetary boundaries (Kallis et al. 2025). The latest evolution of wellbeing theory is captured by the term a 'wellbeing economy,' which is an economic system that places human and ecological wellbeing – instead of economic growth at the centre of policy making (Fioramonti et al. 2022).

Post growth ideas are not new and arguably the most prominent post-growth philosophy is the concept of sustainable development, which has been widely adopted as a guiding principle of policy around the world since the 1980's. Australia is no exception and has made several international commitments to sustainable development, including being a signatory to the United Nations SDGs. Despite the ubiquity of the term, there is evidence that sustainable development has failed to deliver the systematic changes required to address urgent and persistent global challenges. According to the 2024 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Report (United Nations 2024), with just six years remaining, current progress falls far short of what is required to meet the SDGs. Within planning, sustainable development has become understood to mean outcomes that are 'environmentally desirable' (Pezzey 2002). Sustainable development is deeply rooted in environmentalism and the focus on 'green' issues of ecosystem conservation rather than 'brown' issues of urban inequality (Agyeman, Bullard & Evans 2002) has marginalised social issues. For example, the renewable energy transition which has been primarily focused on meeting emissions reduction targets, has led to broad socio-political resistance and local community impacts (Segreto et al. 2020). Wellbeing by contrast has emerged from the social sciences and has a greater focus on human needs.

## 4 Wellbeing and planning

The following section considers the relationship between urban planning and the multiple dimensions of wellbeing as well as the role of planning in a well-being economy.

### 4.1 Planning and the dimensions of wellbeing

Wellbeing theory has traditionally focused on the impact of socio-economic factors such as income, age, class and marital status. However, with more people living in cities today than ever before, the impact of urban environments on human wellbeing has become an area of intense academic interest. A proliferation of studies has investigated the impact of the built and natural environment on the dimensions of wellbeing. Mouratidis (2021) in their work on subjective wellbeing, synthesises recent empirical findings into seven pathways that urban planning influences wellbeing - travel, leisure, work, social relationships, residential well-being, emotional responses, and health. In particular, the built environment as a determinant of mental and physical health have been extensively researched. In a review of academic literature Kent and Thompson (2014) conceptualised the primary links between health and the built environment under three domains – supporting physical activity, connecting and strengthening communities and equitable access to healthy eating. While there is still debate regarding the optimal urban form, in particular the findings on density are inconclusive (Ala-Mantila et al. 2018) there is widespread appreciation that place, scale, and context impacts on the multiple dimensions of wellbeing (Kent & Thompson 2014).

The relationship between the dimensions of wellbeing and the built environment implies a critical role for planners. But despite an extensive body of literature, it has been raised that planners often lack the systematic knowledge to improve wellbeing (Mouratidis 2021). Several authors have raised challenges in relation to the use of evidence and expert knowledge in planning which are relevant to the pursuit of wellbeing. Firstly the interdisciplinary nature of urban planning and wellbeing has resulted in a large body of research spanning a range of disciplines and planning does not have well-established systems and methodologies for aggregating, updating and disseminating research findings (Berghauser Pont 2024). Secondly Tennøy et al. (2016) highlight that planning has a greater focus on process, deliberation and embedded professional knowledge and references for important knowledge claims are rarely presented or required in plans or policy. Kent and Thompson (2014) highlight the weaker use of evidence as a core division between the health and urban planning traditions. Thirdly the absence of an evaluation culture within planning has also been identified by scholars. The performance of planning systems is traditionally measured by planning outputs - the speed, number and value of approvals. But planning outputs tell us little about the reasons for different development outcomes (Gurran et al. 2012) or the experience of people living in these places, the quality of the decision making or who was involved. Talen (1996) asserts that the planning community has shown a curious lack of interest in developing methods to evaluate how successfully plans are implemented and as a result, the success or failure of plans relies on assumptions rather than empirical assessments. There is a large body of literature that highlights the complexity of measuring planning outcomes, Wong and Watkins (2009 p. 481) summarise this as *'the breadth of the desired planning objectives, the lack of precision surrounding their definition and the complex institutional environment make it a rather difficult task to ascertain the outcomes of spatial planning.'*

## 4.2 Planning and the wellbeing economy

There is limited literature on urban planning and the wellbeing economy, but the broader concept of post-growth planning has received attention by planning scholars. While planning emerged from concerns for human health, it is argued that the contemporary planning has bound itself into a pro-growth agenda and is reliant on growth to meet broader policy goals through direct benefits from developments (Durrant, Lamker & Rydin 2023). For example, the provision of affordable housing through bonuses tied to the development of new market housing. From a degrowth perspective, housing is not a commodity but an essential social good (Savini 2022). Pro-growth planning has also been criticised for promoting 'green growth' designed to simultaneously tackle climate change and drive economic growth. Critics argue that by pursuing environmentally sensitive forms of development through technological and design solutions, it is almost always possible to label the pursuit of more development as sustainable (Durrant, Lamker & Rydin 2023).

De-growth literature also discusses an equitable downscaling of consumption (Xue 2022) and criticises the predominant planning instrument of land-value capture for its unfair accrual of value with property owners without circulating benefit back into the society that creates it (Vejchodská et al. 2022). Any planning mechanism that increases income inequality is problematic, because as discussed earlier it has been shown that relative income differences within a country matter most for wellbeing (Easterlin 1995). As summarised by Oishi and Kesebir (2015) – 'even growth is happy growth, and uneven growth is unhappy growth.' Other social criticisms of growth dependent planning include the vulnerability of existing lower value land uses and even communities, to higher value residential and commercial development (Rydin 2013).

## 5 Policy review

The ‘wellbeing’ policy landscape is rapidly evolving with a proliferation of wellbeing frameworks around the world. The following section provides an overview of the emergence of wellbeing frameworks in Australia and overseas, and a detailed look at the Australian MWM Framework. It also analyses the treatment of wellbeing within the EP&A Act, the lead planning legislation in NSW.

### 5.1 International wellbeing frameworks

Modern wellbeing frameworks seek to measure societal wellbeing and have gained increasing popularity as an alternative measure of progress that moves beyond GDP. In February 2008 the President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy convened the ‘Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress’ and asked economists Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi to consider the limitations of GDP and how national progress might otherwise be measured. In the resulting report, Stiglitz famously declared ‘the time is ripe for our measurement system to shift emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people’s well-being’ (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi 2009 p.12). This statement captured a growing discontent with the way most governments define and measure progress (Forgeard et al. 2011).

Recommendation 11 of the report indicated the need for a dashboard of indicators ‘that inform us about the change in the quantities of the different factors that matter for future well-being’ (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi 2009 p.17). Responding to the report’s recommendations, in 2011 the OECD developed their Framework for Measuring Well-being, as part of the broader Better Life Initiative. Since then, numerous countries have drawn on the OECD Framework to develop their own suites of indicators for monitoring national wellbeing, commonly referred to as wellbeing frameworks – See Table 2 below for a timeline of key national frameworks.

Building on the concept of a wellbeing framework, several national governments have adopted the idea of wellbeing economy. In 2018 the Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo) was formed with the founding members of Scotland, Wales, Iceland, and New Zealand.

*Table 2 Wellbeing Frameworks, adapted from Auditor-General Report No.34 2024–25, Department of the Treasury*

Country	Framework name	Year introduced
Scotland	National Performance Framework	2007
Italy	Measures of Equitable and Sustainable Wellbeing	2010
United Kingdom	Measures of National Wellbeing	2010
New Zealand	Living Standards Framework	2011
OECD	Measuring Wellbeing and Progress	2011
Wales	Wellbeing of Wales	2015
Germany	Wellbeing in Germany	2017
Canada	Quality of Life Framework	2019
Iceland	Wellbeing in Iceland	2019
Australia <sup>1</sup>	Measuring What Matters	2023

<sup>1</sup> Before *Measuring What Matters*, there were two wellbeing initiatives in Australia: *Measures of Australia’s Progress* and the Department of the Treasury’s *Wellbeing Framework*, as discussed below.

## 5.2 Australian wellbeing frameworks

While MWM Framework is pitched as our first national wellbeing framework, there is a long history of ‘wellbeing’ thinking in Australia and we have been regarded as a pioneer in this space. In 2002 the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released Measuring Australia’s Progress (MAP), a national report focusing on a series of key economic, social, and environmental indicators that represented whether life in Australia was getting better. MAP was widely acknowledged internationally, in particular for its inclusion of environmental and sustainability dimensions (Gaukroger 2023). In 2014, budget cuts led to the closure of the ABS initiative but there was a strong interest in MAP and Treasury was increasingly engaged in international discussions on wellbeing and the need to move beyond GDP as a measure of progress. In 2004 the Australian Treasury established a Wellbeing Framework under the Howard Government, but it was quietly withdrawn by the Abbott Government in 2016 (Jones 2021). The MWM Framework is a product of this intellectual history, and an evolution of ideas that have been in development by multiple governments.

### 5.2.1 NSW Performance and Wellbeing Framework

In 2024 the NSW Government released a draft Performance and Wellbeing – Consultation Paper with a final Framework to be included in the 2025/26 budget. The NSW Framework is informed by the MWM Framework however focuses on key NSW Government service delivery functions including planning.

### 5.2.2 ACT Wellbeing Framework

In 2020 the ACT Government released their Wellbeing Framework, which like the national and NSW frameworks, does not define wellbeing but states that it can be conceived as *‘generally, having the opportunity and ability to lead lives of personal and community value – with qualities such as good health, time to enjoy the things in life that matter, in an environment that promotes personal growth – are at the heart of wellbeing.’* In addition to the Framework the ACT Government has developed Wellbeing Impact Assessments (WIAs) for use by government at the early stages of policy, programme, and project development to assess potential impacts on various dimensions of wellbeing.

In 2023 the ACT Planning System Evaluation Framework (Evaluation Framework) was introduced. The Evaluation Framework outlines how the ACT Government will approach monitoring and evaluation of the ACT planning system over the next 5 years and is aligned to the ACT Wellbeing Framework to gain a better understanding of how well the ACT planning system supports progress towards other government priorities.

### 5.2.3 Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill

A Wellbeing of Future Generations Bill was tabled in Australian parliament in February 2025, by Dr Sophie Scamps MP. The bill was based directly on the WBFGA, including establishing legislation and an independent commissioner. However, this bill failed to gain support and did not proceed.

## 5.2.4 Measuring What Matters

In July 2023 the Australian Federal government released the MWM Framework, a whole-of government approach to collecting information to guide national public policy to promote wellbeing. It elevates non-economic indicators in government decision making but does not replace traditional economic indicators of progress, like GDP, employment, inflation and wages. It is also intended to form part of policy guidance and be given consideration in budgeting processes (Australian Government 2023).

Prior to release, the Australian government undertook a consultation process from October 2022 to May 2023, including 71 stakeholder meetings and two public consultation rounds, which received 283 responses (Australian National Audit Office 2025). There is no public record of engagement with the peak body for planning in NSW, the Planning Institute of Australia. The consultation process has been criticised with calls for a more comprehensive, and genuine consultation process to ensure the framework has political legitimacy, reflects community values and has public support (Sollis, Campbell & Drake 2025).

### Framework Architecture

The MWM Framework is not legislated and there no is act of law that requires government agencies to consider the MWM Framework in its current form. By comparison with the WBFGA the architecture is relatively simple.

The MWM Framework does not define wellbeing, rather it describes 5 wellbeing themes - healthy, secure, sustainable, cohesive and prosperous. The labelling of the 5 dimensions as themes rather than outcomes appears non-committal as compared to the WBFGA. Underneath the 5 headline themes the MWM Framework is supported by 12 dimensions that describe aspects of the wellbeing themes and 50 indicators. Inclusion, equity and fairness are cross-cutting dimensions across all five themes. Unlike the WBFGA the MWM Framework does not have an explicit intergenerational focus, rather it relies on a companion Intergenerational Report.



Figure 1 Measuring What Matters Framework, Australian Government, <https://treasury.gov.au/policy-topics/measuring-what-matters/framework>

Supporting the MWM Framework are two key components, a statement and dashboard. The dashboard is used to track and monitor progress against the 50 key indicators. The online dashboard is intended to be updated annually, with the first update occurring in 2024. Unlike the WBFGA, the Australian Framework does not include goals or targets. Responsibility for the dashboard is managed by the ABS.

The statement is a report of the outcomes and government progress toward embedding the framework in decision-making. Every three years, the Government will release a comprehensive MWM statement examining progress made against the indicators. The second MWM statement is intended to be released in 2026. The first statement reported that 20 of the wellbeing indicators have improved, 7 have been stable or had little change, 12 have deteriorated and eight indicators have mixed trends, and three others do not have data for comparison over time.

It is of note that of the areas that deteriorated there is a link to the built environment and the role of planning, including the prevalence of chronic conditions, homelessness, biological diversity, social connections and cohesion.

## Framework Implementation

The statement is not an implementation plan and does not provide details on timeframe, resourcing or other guidance for agencies to inform policy making. Like international versions, it is intended to be iterative and will evolve as further consultation is undertaken, and new data becomes available. Steps towards implementation have been made since the release, including funding the delivery of an updated Annual General Social Survey by the ABS to provide a more detailed picture of Australians' wellbeing (Australian National Audit Office 2025).

The National Audit Office undertook a review of the design and implementation of the MWM Framework, released in May 2025. Overall, the audit found that Treasury was largely effective in designing and implementing the MWM Framework, but it did not have arrangements in place to monitor, report or evaluate whether MWM is achieving its intended policy objective or have arrangements in place to facilitate the next MWM statement (Australian National Audit Office 2025). These are not insignificant findings, and while this report does identify a momentum for change there is significant work to be done to embed the Framework into government.

## Relevance to Planning

While not specifically a spatial policy, the MWM Framework does recognise there is a spatial dimension to wellbeing, as well as a need to improve this dimension in future iterations. Urban planning is not explicitly referenced but in *Appendix A: Strengthening The Indicators* (p95) the statement acknowledges that improved demographic and spatial/geographic analysis could assist in variances from region to region. It also acknowledges that aggregate measures, at a national or state level, can obscure spatial differences and result in policy decisions that do not target those most in need.

The current MWM Framework considers 'access to health' where access is defined through the dimensions of cost, wait times, quality and unmet needs, not spatial access. For comparison the WBFGA includes an indicator "percentage of people satisfied with their ability access the

facilities and services they need within a 15-20 walk from their home.’ This research has not undertaken a detailed study of indicators across MWM Frameworks and the additional indicators that could support planning policy and this could be an area for future research. However it appears evident from a review of the indicator list that the WBFGA takes a greater interest in the dimensions of place and built form, for example the inclusion of ‘percentage who feel able to influence decisions affecting their local area’, ‘percentage of people satisfied with local area as a place to live’, ‘percentage of dwellings which are free from hazards’ and ‘percentage of dwellings with adequate energy performance.’

The MWM statement references the future inclusion of additional indicators including ‘access to blue and green spaces (p 96)’ under the healthy theme and ‘access to public transport’ in the context of employment, the economy, health, equity and inclusiveness (p 97). Access to services, spaces and infrastructure is within the remit of planning to influence and increased inclusion of access indicators should be considered, for example access to social infrastructure, fresh food, social and affordable housing.

To enable the MWM Framework to better inform planning policy and deliver places that are healthy, secure, sustainable, cohesive and prosperous, greater consideration of place throughout the MWM Framework is required. A greater connection to the National Urban Policy goals and data points would also help create a coherent approach to urban governance and measurement of outcomes.

## 5.3 Planning policy

In Australia urban planning is the responsibility of state governments, which then determine local government's role in implementing urban planning policy and plans. The federal government has minimal involvement in urban planning unless any plan requires financial assistance (Farid Uddin & Piracha 2023). Recent activity by the federal government has shown a greater interest in urban systems and urban planning to address critical challenges – including the National Urban Policy, National Planning Blueprint and Housing Accord. However, none of these documents address the MWM Framework in any meaningful way. While there is cross-over between the goals of these documents there is no golden thread linking them together.

### 5.3.1 NSW Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979

In NSW, the primary planning legislation is the EP&A Act which passed through both Houses of Parliament in 1979. The EP&A Act is the enabling legislation from which all other planning instruments are made. It is also the main tool available to guide planners and planning authorities in their decision making.

Since it was first enacted, the EP&A Act has been amended on numerous occasions, generally aimed at simplifying the planning system to speed up development assessment and centralise decision making. These amendments are mirrored overseas and can be seen as part of broader neoliberal trend in government around the world (Piracha 2010). Whilst writing this research report amendments were made to reduce the minimum public exhibition time for State Significant housing developments in NSW from 28 days to 14 days.

The current version of the EP&A Act (as at May 2025) includes 10 objects (see Table 3) which outline the purpose of legislation. All objects are weighted equally, and it has been argued



that this creates a situation where objects are potentially in conflict and leaves decision makers without a means of resolving potential conflicts (Dwyer & Taylor 2013). By comparison the Planning (Wales) Act provides a simple statutory purpose of planning – ‘*carrying out sustainable development in accordance with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 for the purpose of ensuring that the development and use of land contribute to improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales* (National Assembly for Wales 2015).

The term wellbeing is not used in the current EP&A Act objects instead the related concept of ecologically sustainable development is expressed. Previous reforms have argued for ecologically sustainable development to be elevated as the central guiding principle of the EP&A Act – ‘*not a factor to be balanced against other factors*’ (Dwyer & Taylor 2013).

Interviews undertaken for this research report highlighted that the EP&A Act wording was seen as outdated or ambiguous. For example, the first object contains the words – ‘better’ environment’ but we have no baseline from which better can be measured, and the word ‘social welfare’ felt out of place and is considered a pejorative term.

Table 3 NSW Environmental Planning and Assessment Act

NSW Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 No 203
(accessed 21 May 2025 at 15:00)
<p>The objects of this Act are as follows —</p> <p>(a) to promote the social and economic welfare of the community and a better environment by the proper management, development and conservation of the State’s natural and other resources,</p> <p>(b) to facilitate ecologically sustainable development by integrating relevant economic, environmental and social considerations in decision-making about environmental planning and assessment,</p> <p>(c) to promote the orderly and economic use and development of land,</p> <p>(d) to promote the delivery and maintenance of affordable housing,</p> <p>(e) to protect the environment, including the conservation of threatened and other species of native animals and plants, ecological communities and their habitats,</p> <p>(f) to promote the sustainable management of built and cultural heritage (including Aboriginal cultural heritage),</p> <p>(g) to promote good design and amenity of the built environment,</p> <p>(h) to promote the proper construction and maintenance of buildings, including the protection of the health and safety of their occupants,</p> <p>(i) to promote the sharing of the responsibility for environmental planning and assessment between the different levels of government in the State,</p> <p>(j) to provide increased opportunity for community participation in environmental planning and assessment.</p>

## 6 Case study: Well-being of Future Generations

Arguably the most progressive wellbeing policy in the world today is the WBFGA, hailed by the UN as a model for other countries, with the hope that ‘what Wales is doing today the world will do tomorrow’ (Nikhil Seth 2015).

The following section provides a case study of the WBFGA and its transformation of the Welsh planning system. The case study was developed through a literature and policy review and interviews with 2 Welsh planning academics, 2 policy professionals and 1 public servant.

### The Well-being of Future Generations Act

The WBFGA received Royal Assent in April 2015 and established a duty on public bodies to carry out actions in accord with sustainable development (Stokes & Smyth 2024). Sustainable development is defined by the WBFGA as “the process of improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing of Wales by taking action, in accordance with the sustainable development principle, aimed at achieving the well-being goals.” (Welsh Government, 2015).

Drawing on the 1987 Brundtland Report, the WBFGA defines the sustainable development principle as ‘*that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*’ (National Assembly for Wales 2015). In doing so the WBFGA enshrines in law a duty for public bodies, to safeguard the well-being of future generations.

In summary public bodies in Wales are required to carry out the process of sustainable development, to achieve the outcome of improved wellbeing – as defined via the seven national well-being goals.

### Architecture of the Well-being of Future Generations Act

The WBFGA sets out an architecture to sustainable development to be enacted, as shown in Figure 2. The WBFGA provides a legally-binding common purpose to public bodies via seven equal well-being goals (Welsh Government 2025). The equality of the goals was emphasised by interviewees in relation to the planning which is often seen as making trade offs in decision making.

*“You need to move away from that and to get into the multiple benefits space. You have to look for quadruple wins ... a win for the economy, a win for the environment, a win for people, a win for a culture.” - Welsh Public Servant (Interview)*

The WBFGA also defines five ways of working that public bodies must follow to achieve the well-being goals and create behaviour change. The ways of working were raised by interviewees as a key enabler of change, potentially more so than the wellbeing goals.

*“But I think sometimes gets missed from the broader conversation around the well-being goals is that they also have what they call the ways of working. They are, if anything, more important I think in some cases than the goals themselves.” Welsh Planning Academic (Interview)*

To measure progress against the WBFGA, there are 50 national indicators as well as milestones to track progress towards the achievement of the well-being goals.

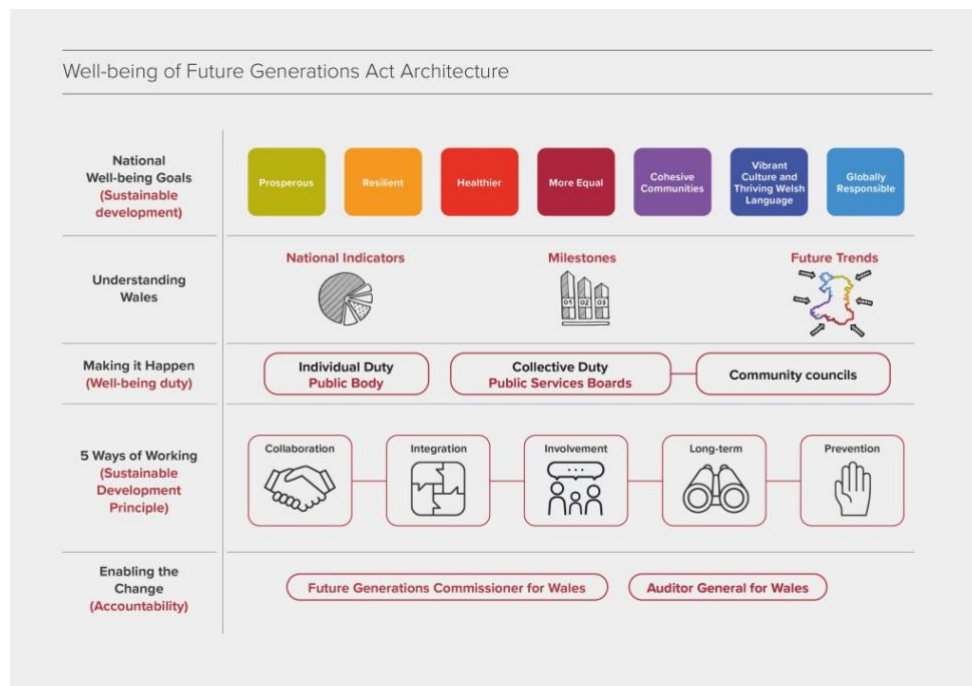


Figure 2 Well-being of Future Generations Act Architecture  
<https://shapingwalesfuture.blog.gov.wales/2021/06/08/introducing-the-shaping-wales-future-blog/>

The WBFGA also establishes two bodies - the Public Services Boards (PSBs) and the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. The PSBs are designed to improve joint working across all public services in each local authority area in Wales and include mandatory membership from the Local Authority, Local Health Board, Fire and Rescue and Natural Resources Body. It is through PSBs and public bodies in Wales that the Act is operationalised. Each PSB must establish a local Well-being Plan, informed by local consultations, including objectives and how it will meet them, which in turn contribute to progress towards the seven national goals (Carter & MacKillop 2023). The Commissioner's role is to champion the interests of future generations in Wales and to support the public bodies to achieve the wellbeing goals.

Despite establishing governance structures specific to the WBFGA, governance has proved to be challenging. While a focus on local governance through the PSBs reflects that wellbeing is place dependant, many issues do not adhere to local boundaries for example climate change and migration (Carter & MacKillop 2023) and new national governance has been established though the National Development Framework for Wales - *Future Wales: the national plan 2040*.

## Ambition of the legislation

The WBFGA has been described as 'groundbreaking,' 'world leading,' 'inspirational' and 'hope bearing' (Stokes & Smyth 2024). As well as providing the legal obligation for change it is intended to provide 'a new mindset, the ambition and permission to improve social, cultural, environmental and economic well-being' (Welsh Government 2025). This landmark piece of

legislation marked a significant development in the identity of Wales on the international stage. Wales has exported this knowledge and influenced other countries around the world to pursue similar legislation.

*“ Our knowledge in this area is a great global export. The Act provides a framework for us to share our experience and tell Wales’ story to the world.”*

*Jane Hutt, Minister for Social Justice and Chief Whip, November 2023*

However, as with other sustainable development policies it has been criticised for being ‘vague, open-ended and aspirational’ and ‘over-leavened with expectation rather than assurance’ (Davies 2016).

## Welsh socio-political context

In 1998 the Welsh Assembly was created after Wales received devolved powers from the United Kingdom. The newly created National Assembly for Wales (Senedd Cymru) was given a statutory duty to promote sustainable development via the Government of Wales Act 1998 (Stevenson & Richardson 2003).

Following a referendum in 2011, the Assembly received primary law-making powers for specific purposes. These new powers were a watershed moment for Wales which represented a shift from the policies and direction of the UK parliament (Messham & Sheard 2020). In the same year a review of sustainable development strategy in Wales found that although annual reports were being published, ‘there is not a real sense as to whether Wales is moving in the right direction at the right pace’ (PWC 2011). The report also identified insufficient monitoring systems and a concern that Welsh Government was still highly focused on measuring GDP, rather than wider outcomes.

In 2012 the Welsh Government commenced a consultation process on a Sustainable Development Bill, to ‘bring forward legislation to make sustainable development the central organising principle of the Welsh Government’ (Welsh Government 2012). This bill later became the Well-being of Future Generations bill, on this basis of it having a broader appeal, including environmental and social justice issues. This change was challenged by the environmental sector who saw it as a dilution of environmental policy but eventually gained support through negotiations on a separate Environmental Bill (Messham & Sheard 2020).

In February 2014 a national conversation entitled ‘The Wales We Want’ was launched, with nearly 7,000 people contributing to the discussions across Wales, including the Royal Town Planning Institute and local authorities.

## Planning reform in Wales

Following devolution, the Planning (Wales) Act 2015 was the first significant piece of primary planning legislation to be made on a Wales-only basis and formed part of three seminal pieces of interlinking legislation: the *Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*, the *Planning (Wales) Act 2015* and the *Environment (Wales) Act 2016* (National Assembly for Wales 2016 ). The Planning (Wales) Act introduced statutory purpose aligned to the WBFGA and

Following the devolution of further planning powers, Edition 10 of Planning Policy Wales (PPW) was completely reworked to take account of the WBFGA and introduced placemaking into the heart of national planning policy to deliver on the wellbeing goals. It emphasised that placemaking is the output of land use planning system in Wales – *‘sustainable places are the output of the planning system rather than the process of achieving them.’* Alongside this aim, the national sustainable placemaking outcomes were created to guide preparation of plan making and development assessment.

*“If you actually look at the two versions of the Planning Policy Wales, it’s quite stark. You can see where well-being has been introduced. The entire document was sort of flipped around and the starting point was how we can implement well-being through planning policy.”* Welsh Planning Academic (Interview)

Then in 2021, Welsh Government published the *Wales Transport Strategy 2021, Net Zero Wales Carbon Budget 2 (2021-2025), Future Wales: the national plan 2040* and Edition 11 of *Planning Policy Wales (PPW 11)*, creating a coherent approach to transport, net zero and planning priorities. A key feature of PPW 11 was the introduction of hierarchies for transport, energy and waste as tools to be implemented in the making of strategic and local development plans and when dealing with planning applications.

## State of the profession

In 2020 the former Future Generations Commissioner Sophie Hower released her statutory Future Generations Report, documenting progress made in implementing the WBFGA within the first reporting period. The Commissioner found that while PPW had been rewritten, only a small proportion of subordinate planning documents had been updated, creating a complex working environment for planners. Additionally, the statutory review cycle of strategic planning documents, e.g. Local Development Plans, created a protracted implementation process. Conflicts between other intersecting legislation also added to complex and confusing implementation environment. A lack of progress to develop new ways of monitoring the outcomes of the planning system was also raised as a barrier to implementation of the WBFGA.

*“I remember trying to look at the timelines and thinking, we will see the effects of all these changes in 10 to 15...I think it’s not really a blocker, but it’s something which really needs to be managed and spoken about to politicians, to planners, to people. Yes. We are really working for the future. It will take a while for all of us to change all of our plans”* Welsh Public Servant (Interview)

A period of prolonged austerity in the UK and Wales, has also led to a resource constrained planning system and significantly reduced investment (expenditure, training and influence) has made it difficult for planners to meet their statutory responsibilities and support the transformational change required by the WBFGA (Audit Wales 2025). Limited resources of the Future Generations Commissioner and the ability to closely support implementation of the WBFGA within planning was also raised as a barrier. In particular insufficient resources to work with 22 local authorities to revise Local Development Plans and support for planners to take bold action, for example refusing an application on the basis of the WBFGA goals, requires support.

*“that’s what makes a change. It’s by doing it with people, they have this live moment, to explain, if you stay far away, you send them documents, it doesn’t really translate into what you want”*

*Welsh Public Servant (Interview)*

Entrenched systems and beliefs about the role of planning have also slowed adoption of the WBFGA. The WBFGA challenged the idea that planning was already delivering sustainable outcomes.

*“They thought they were already doing sustainability. They had been doing it for so long...but our definition of well-being is different, wider” - Welsh Public Servant (Interview)*

## Impact of the Act

In April 2025, Audit Wales undertook a review of the WBFGA, it found that after 10 years the WBFGA has increased in prominence and was impacting day-to-day decision-making and working practices but was not driving the system-wide change that was intended (Audit Wales 2025).

In relation to planning, the impact of the WBFGA is evident through the program of reforms that have taken place in Wales. There are also key planning decisions that can be pointed to demonstrate application of the WBFGA as a guiding compass. The following section highlights two examples.

### **M4 Corridor**

In June 2019 the First Minister refused the M4 corridor extension on the grounds of cost and environmental impact. The proposed scheme while intended to address traffic congestion on the M4 motorway near Newport went through an environmentally sensitive area and presented a classic conflict between economic development and environmental protection (Smyth 2021). This refusal went against the recommendation of the Planning Inspector and the decision has been held up as an early test and example of success for the WBFGA (Welsh Parliament 2019).

During the M4 Corridor public enquiry the WBFGA became a focus of attention and was described as a valuable tool by environmental objectors (Smyth 2021). The Future Generations Commissioner at the time, Sophie Howes, submitted evidence to the inquiry questioning how building a new road to ease congestion would meet the needs of future generations (Future Generations Commissioner for Wales 2017). While the First Minister focused on environment impacts and financial cost, her evidence also introduced a greater focus on social impacts, suggesting that the M4 is likely to contribute to inequality as it will not benefit poorer households who do not have access to a car. She also emphasised that decisions must seek to achieve all the wellbeing objectives, and in particular, balance must be achieved between the economic pillar and the environmental, cultural and social pillars. (Jones 2021). Since that landmark decision the WBFGA has continued to influence strategy in relation to net zero carbon, land-use planning and transport.

## **Wylfa Newydd**

In 2008, the UK Government announced its backing for a new generation of nuclear power plants alongside other low-carbon sources. Eight sites in England and Wales were identified as suitable for development, including at Wylfa Newydd on the island of Anglesey in Wales. Wylfa Newydd was proposed as the successor to Wylfa, a nuclear reactor which operated in the same location between 1971 and 2015 (House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee 2023). Despite receiving approval by the Isle of Anglesey's County Council to commence site clearing in 2018, the proposed national significant infrastructure project was recommended for refusal by the Planning Inspectorate in 2019. The refusal was based on negative impacts to biodiversity, local economy, health and wellbeing, housing and controversially the island's Welsh language and culture. It was stated in the Examining Authority's report that while many benefits of the proposal aligned to the WBFGA well-being goals, including transition to a low-carbon economy and employment, on balance the proposal 'would undermine the delivery of the wellbeing goals of the WBFGA' (Fernandes et al. 2019). While responsibility for the final approval was to be made by the UK government, the application was withdrawn after developer Hitachi failed to reach an acceptable funding deal with the UK Government. While little has been written on the application of the WBFGA to nuclear power, as the UK government pursues a more aggressive nuclear energy policy and planning reform, future decisions on the Wylfa Nuclear plant will offer an evolved test of the WBFGA.

## **Discussion**

The WBFGA did not respond to a specific problem, rather a web of circumstances, including international calls to address climate change, a failure to make significant progress under previous sustainable development legislation and the state of public services in Wales. A summary of the barriers and enablers that have been gained from this case study include:

### **Implementation enablers**

- Wales has a national identity formed around sustainable development leadership
- Devolution from the UK provided unique circumstances and political momentum for change to the public service
- Devolved planning powers provided the basis for new planning legislation and a recast of the planning system in line with the WBFGA
- Planning was seen as critical to the implementation of the WBFGA due to its cross-cutting impact on the Wellbeing Goals and was a focus area of the former Future Generations Commissioner
- There was a coherent policy approach to WBFGA, whereby planning reform was coordinated with other related areas of policy, including transport and net zero approaches
- The Ways of Working assisted to operationalise the WBFGA and move beyond measurement to having an active influence on behaviour.

### **Implementation barriers**

- The WBFGA has been criticised for being vague and aspirational legislation with little legal weight to enforce it

- Environmental voices spoke out against the evolution of the WBFGA from a sustainable development policy to wellbeing policy
- State of the planning profession, including reduced capacity in the planning system to address transformational change required and limited resources of the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner to work closely with local authorities
- Complexity of the planning system and protracted process to update plans and policies within statutory review cycles and other intersecting legislation
- Entrenched behaviours and beliefs that the planning was already delivering on the concept of sustainable development
- A focus on output not outcomes measurement within the planning system and failure to evolve data collection and reporting systems



## 7 Industry insights

This chapter provides an overview of the key findings from the semi-structured interviews. Interviews were undertaken with 15 professionals from the public, private and academic sectors with working knowledge of the planning system within NSW and/or knowledge about the implementation of the MWM Framework into policy in Australia or Wales. Interview findings were analysed using a thematic approach and have been presented under three themes below:

1. The purpose of planning and wellbeing outcomes
2. Balancing economic, environmental and social objectives of planning
3. Measuring the outcomes of planning

### 7.1 The purpose of planning and wellbeing outcomes

Questions under this theme were intended to explore the purpose of contemporary planning and its role in achieving national wellbeing outcomes, as well as the balance of social, environmental and economic considerations.

#### Purpose of planning

Interviewees were asked to share their understanding about the purpose of contemporary planning. In answering this question, a number of interviewees clarified whether the question referred to the intended purpose of planning or their experience of planning, reflecting a gap between policy and practice. It was generally understood that planning is a form of public policy and is intended to deliver 'public benefit.' It was also reflected that planning has evolved from a system of land use management to adopting higher order economic, environmental and social goals, with a particular focus on creating better places.

*"Fundamentally, to me it still comes back to that principle of, you know planning for cities, towns, whatever places, spaces in a way that maximises broader benefits for society." – NSW Strategic Planner (Interview)*

However in practice, interviewees reflected that the purpose of planning in NSW is muddy and places a greater focus on the legal and technical process rather than achieving good outcomes and lacks a higher vision.

*"Even without the wellbeing part of it thrown in, it's actually more just about like, what is the planning system for? ...I don't feel like there's a like consensus about that as a community." – NSW Public Servant (Interview)*

*"It's easier to say no or it doesn't fit the envelope or the FSR...That's not about the vision. There's no vision in urban planning." – NSW Private Sector Planner (Interview)*

#### Planning and the MWM Framework

Interviewees were asked to reflect on the usefulness of a set of national wellbeing outcomes to guide government decision making and how it may change the way they work.

Private sector interviewees had limited knowledge of the MWM Framework, and it was generally agreed that it wasn't influencing the way they work. Low levels of awareness generally extended to the NSW Performance and Wellbeing Framework. The exception to this were two state government executives who were able to demonstrate that the NSW Performance and Wellbeing Framework was being considered in internal strategic planning. A criticism of the MWM Framework in academic literature has been the limited consultation and this was reinforced during the interview process.

Interviewees were asked for their opinion on planning's contribution to the MWM Framework wellbeing themes (healthy, secure, sustainable, prosperous and cohesive). There was consensus that there is a spatial dimension to each theme and planning can contribute positively and negatively to all five wellbeing themes. It was also raised that planning cannot be solely responsible for these outcomes, and a cross-sector approach is required. It was also reflected that planners are trying to achieve these outcomes in their work and that many planners enter the profession because they aspire to deliver these outcomes.

*"I would like to think that many, if not all, planners, would like to think that they can help to achieve these things and that their work is a really important part of helping us to achieve these outcomes with or without a wellbeing framework to enable it. You know, I'd like to think that most planners are trying to achieve better." NSW Private Sector Strategic Planner (Interview)*

A number of interviewees reflected on the need for legislation in order for the MWM Framework to influence their work, and that 'great policy' and 'doing the right thing' are not sufficient to drive action. While legislation was seen as desirable by interviewees it was also reflected that it is important to strike a balance between enforcement, burdening the planning system with further regulation, and encouraging innovation.

*"The stick of legislation as well as the carrot of it being good policy are desirable things, and otherwise there'd be an ethical dimension to it, but there'd also be the force of law, so to speak, of it being in legislation." – NSW Strategic Planner (Interview)*

It was reflected that the Federal Government does not have a strong influence on planning policy, but it would be useful to have a degree of national consensus on what's important to Australia and to be able to point to an agreed framework. It was also reflected that the MWM Framework could provide a clearer line of sight in strategic planning and reduce the vulnerability of planning policy to the political cycle.

*"You would hope this would be driving the budget and the programmes and the actions at the federal level, so if that's the case and it makes what's happening at the local level more powerful"*  
– NSW Local Government Planner (Interview)

## 7.2 Balancing economic, environmental and social objectives of planning

Interviewees were asked to reflect on the balance of social, environmental and economic outcomes in planning. Questions under this theme were used to test my personal experience and the existing body of research that highlights how social outcomes are poorly considered in planning and the built environment.

Overall, there was strong agreement that there are professional aspirations and legislative intent to balance social, environmental economic outcomes but a failure to achieve this during implementation. The majority of interviewees emphasised that economic considerations were given the most weight and that social outcomes were given the least consideration.

*"I think a lot of it's probably driven by the economic first and then the social and environmental, probably joint seconds from that and I think that's done because planning has positioned itself to be something that's helping cities grow, helping regions grow, helping them develop and make things better." NSW Planner and Local Government Executive (Interview)*

The focus on environmental outcomes was seen in part as legislatively driven with more requirements to address environmental impacts as well as other frameworks for example Green Star and BASIX rating systems. Planners assess proposals based on what is in the EP&A Act, plan or instrument and it was reflected that these primarily deal with built form and the natural environment and therefore they are given consideration. It was also reflected that there is lineage between the environmental movement and planning, as reflected in the name of the EP&A Act and other equivalent legislation around the world.

*"It's the Environment Planning and Assessment Act, you know? And so it was always written to protect the environment." NSW Planner and Local Government Executive (Interview)*

It was reflected that planners do not have effective decision-making tools to balance social, environmental, and economic outcomes. For example, interviewees expressed that Social Impact Assessment was a 'bolt on' to the development assessment process. It was also highlighted that no weighting is applied to the different considerations within the EP&A Act. An example provided was a proposal for an RSL club which is compliant from a built form perspective, is well designed, has no traffic impacts, will generate jobs and fund local community services but includes gaming machines which are demonstrated to be socially harmful.

*"Nothing's weighted. What's more important than others, is it more important the public interest, more important than the impact on the environment? – NSW Local Government Planner (Interview)*

Interviewees expressed that social impacts were complex and subjective and as a result they can be reduced to the provision of physical space, like a park or playground, within the development context. It was also reflected that social impacts are hard to measure and culturally we're less comfortable with qualitative data used by the social sciences and tend to preference impacts expressed in quantitative data. A Welsh Planning Academic also reflected that social impacts are more likely to involve vulnerable groups that may not be able to have their voice heard. These communities can also be framed as needy and their objection to something gets overridden by the economic benefit that will be delivered. The current housing crisis in NSW was raised by a number of interviewees when exploring the tension between economic and social impacts. It was raised that although housing is a human right, the discourse tends to be expressed in economic terms of supply and demand.

*"I think it's definitely about who gets their voice heard and who's got who's got the ability to get their voice heard. – Welsh Planning Academic (Interview)*

*"Is it the physical manifestation of a hospital or is it the feeling of the development and the feeling that there's enough space in light and air like is it a feeling, the vibe, or is it, you know, or is it a*

*physical? Yeah, too often, we're like, oh, here's a park or a playground.” – NSW Private Sector Planner (Interview)*

## 7.3 Measuring the outcomes of planning

The MWM Framework and wellbeing policy approaches in general place an emphasis on the measurement of outcomes. Interviewees were asked to reflect on how the outcomes of planning decisions are currently monitored and evaluated.

Responses generally expressed uncertainty as to how planning outcomes are measured, with some interviewees reflecting a degree of uncertainty about the question being asked and lack of familiarity with the terminology. A number of interviewees raised that planning success is measured via outputs, such as the number of approvals and that we don't measure outcomes. However, one public servant made the point that planning in NSW has never been asked to demonstrate anything but the performance of the system to deliver approvals efficiently. A few interviewees reflected on their own observations of poor development outcomes in NSW as evidence and how planning has responded overtime to improve outcomes, such as the design of streets to improve walkability, but there is no systematic way of measuring outcomes.

*“The way we are measured in success in planning is basically on widgets...Planning has not been asked to show benefit, it has only been asked to measure performance of the system...” – NSW State Government Planner and Executive (Interview)*

*“I think we the only thing we measure in terms of an output is the approvals ... So we've approved this many applications or something by Council or by department or the types of things that's the outputs that are being done. But I still stand by what I said in terms of outcomes. We don't actually measure that properly.” – Western Sydney Planner (Interview)*

It was generally agreed that culturally planning is focused on delivering approvals and we quickly move onto the next priority and do not invest time and resources into monitoring and evaluation. Potential reasons for this included a long lag time between approval and the impact and that ongoing monitoring would be an enormous task and cost to the taxpayer and this would be unfeasible.

*“There's a sense that a lot of projects are approved and then that's the last that anybody hears of it, because there isn't any resourcing put into post approval monitoring and management and that it's large largely left to the developer to self-monitor.” – Social Planner (Interview)*

*“Culturally, we move on like we don't really evaluate or measure the outcomes because we've already moved on to the next thing.” – Western Sydney Planner (Interview)*

It was also raised that the legal and technical responsibility for the Department of Planning and Housing and Infrastructure (DPHI) largely ends at approval and there is no requirement to monitor outcomes. It was suggested that local governments are better placed to monitor outcomes as they have an ongoing presence in communities.

A peak body representative raised that there have been discussions to advocate for improving monitoring of outcomes in relation to recent DPHI housing policy. For example, understanding the impact on existing communities that have been upzoned through the TOD process, such as the number of households displaced by this process.

## 8 Barriers and enablers

This section discusses the primary barriers and enablers to implementing the MWM Framework into the NSW planning system and draws together the findings from the semi-structured interviews as well the literature review, policy review and case study. The following analysis avoids a binary structure and considers how factors may simultaneously act as supportive or obstructive forces.

While there are a range of barriers and enablers that relate to general implementation within government, for example adequate funding and resources, the following section focuses more narrowly on the planning system.

### Professional relevance

There is a large body of academic research that evidences the impact of the built environment on wellbeing and identifies a role for planners in improving human and ecological wellbeing. There is also alignment between the themes of MWM Framework and the legislative intent of planning in NSW, which both seek to balance social, economic and environmental outcomes in decision-making. In fact, many of the wellbeing themes can already be found in NSW planning instruments and policies. This alignment extends to the professional ambition of planners, with consensus amongst interviewees that planning is a contributor to all five wellbeing themes and that many planners are trying to achieve these outcomes in their work.

*“Is this getting the world to a better place which you know, I think it was probably a lot of people’s motivation in getting into the that this field in the 1st place, right? But like there’s that disconnect that we’ve been talking about the whole way through, right? Like you know, do people, do they ever look up from the DA that they’re assessing and go \*\*\*\*, how did I end up here? – NSW Private Sector Strategic Planner (Interview)*

### Policy versus practice

Despite clear alignment between the aspirations of planning and the MWM Framework, the interviews revealed a disconnect between policy and practice in NSW. In practice there is an unresolved tension in planning between its role as force for broad societal progress and a tool of economic growth. Interviewees consistently identified that planning prioritises economic considerations and this position continues to be evident in policy, for example the National Urban Policy released in November 2024 establishes a vision for ‘sustainable urban growth.’ This conflict presents a challenging environment for planners – with the practice facing intense criticism for being an ‘enemy of enterprise’ (Sturzaker & Hickman 2024), while at the same facing backlash from the community for being pro-development.

*“Planning system does give equal weight but in its operation the economic imperatives are given more weight than environment and community is prioritised less.” – NSW Private Sector Strategic Planner (Interview)*

### Industry engagement

The MWM Framework has been criticised for a limited public consultation process (Sollis, Campbell & Drake 2025) and there has been advocacy for a national conversation to build political legitimacy and public support. Interviews undertaken for this report indicated that

there is little knowledge of the MWW Framework or wellbeing theory amongst planners in NSW. A lack of engagement with the planning industry has potentially influenced the weak spatial and temporal dimensions of the MWM Framework. International experience highlighted the need for industry specific education for planners at all levels (planning leadership, established and emerging professionals) to raise awareness and develop new skills and to have courage to make bold decisions in the face of potential criticism or legal challenge.

*“that’s what makes a change. It’s by doing it with people, they have this live moment, to explain, if you stay far away, you send them documents, it doesn’t really translate into what you want”*  
Welsh Public Servant (Interview)

## Entrenched beliefs

The wellbeing agenda challenges the dominance of pro-growth planning by requiring equal consideration of social and economic outcomes as the measure of success. The Welsh experience also highlighted resistance to shifting their policy focus from sustainable development to wellbeing and similar opposition is likely in Australia. However, this research report has highlighted that the sustainable development discourse is dysfunctional and there is support for a new more holistic discourse.

*“By providing a more holistic lens to the way we think about development, by obliging us to think about all the spheres and all the dimensions, including fairness and equity and I suppose providing a stronger focus on the need to improve the conditions for vulnerable groups. I think the term well-being just helps us there. Unfortunately, some people don’t like the term wellbeing and it does put a lot of people off.” – NSW Social Impact Specialist*

## Momentum for change

The Welsh devolution from the UK provided a catalyst for new ways of working within government. Combined with a yearlong national conversation, this generated broad community support and provided the fertile ground for the WBFGA to be legislated. Implementation of the MWM Framework into NSW planning will likewise require significant political momentum and community support “to offset the inevitable resistance from those who most benefit from the prevailing state of affairs” (Crawford & Trebeck 2025). International experience suggests we need to identify our own fertile ground that provides the conditions for change.

*“We have our own unique set of circumstances which I think are really fertile...if the Welsh model has anything to share, that is, how did it plug into its fertile ground? What’s is our fertile ground. And how do we plug into that? It’s different fertile ground, but it exists.” – Welsh/Australian Public Servant (Interview)*

## Planning governance

The planning system in NSW is famously complex and any additional layers of assessment that go against the tide of neoliberal reforms are likely to meet opposition. New planning and reporting requirements can also take considerable time and resources to implement and to see their impact is even more delayed. As an example, the Local Strategic Planning Statements in NSW are part of 7-year review. Planning also forms part of a broader urban governance system with responsibilities shared across all levels of government and it interacts with the

regulatory requirements of other legislation. Change in planning policy without change in interacting legislation would be counterproductive and ineffective. In Wales three flagship pieces of Welsh legislation, the Future Generations Act, the Planning Act and the Environment Bill, were introduced together recognising this critical interplay.

*“I remember trying to look at the timelines and thinking, we will see the effects of all these changes in 10 to 15 [years]...I think it's not really a blocker, but it's something which really needs to be managed and then spoken about to politicians, to planners, to people. Yes. We are really working for the future. It will take a while for all of us to change all of our plans” Welsh Public Servant (Interview)*

## Enforcement

The MWM Framework is not enacted through legislation which interviews highlighted is a barrier to successful implementation. Without changes to the EP&A Act and the subsequent filtering down into subordinate instruments, it seems unlikely to influence planning outcomes. Legislation was also raised as providing more long-term certainty for the MWM Framework outside of the political cycle which is essential to achieving the wellbeing goals.

*“It's easier to have conversations with recalcitrant proponents or clients because you can point to something that is, is a legislative obligation as well as being just ethically desirable.” – Social Impact Specialist (Interview)*

## Evidence system

Success of the planning system is measured through outputs – such as the speed and value of development. This measurement system tells us little about the extent to which we are achieving the broader goals of planning – such as the quality of the decision making or quality of the development outcomes delivered. The MWM Framework is asking something new of planning, which is to demonstrate how it contributes to the five wellbeing themes and to measure progress towards this. Measuring planning outcomes continues to challenge planning systems around the world. In addition to new metrics, it requires a shift in culture where planners extend their gaze beyond approval to the place outcomes achieved.

*“The way we are measured in success in planning is basically on widgets...Planning has not been asked to show benefit, it has only been asked to measure performance of the system...” – NSW State Government Planner and Executive (Interview)*

## Collaboration

The broad framing of the wellbeing themes, for example healthy, sustainable and secure, requires collaborative solutions. Interviewees described siloed ways of working between agencies as the business-as-usual approach, barriers to working together such as confidentiality as well as a combative relationship between state and local planning. A lack of collaboration between planning and other areas of practice has been highlighted in the literature (Kent & Thompson 2014). The Welsh inclusion of ‘ways of working’ was raised as a key enabler for greater collaboration and a potential mechanism to help overcome siloed thinking. Planning’s role as a coordinator of diverse expertise, also aligns with collaborative approach that is encouraged by the MWM Framework.

*“Because I guess the problem that we face particularly here is that we have so many agencies that act in silos and don’t actually work together. So for example, like the housing and the issues that we’re facing with that, if there was a way to kind of streamline things, it would actually help a lot.” – NSW Private Sector Planner” (Interview)*

## State of the profession

Australia is facing a critical shortage of planners, with Urban and Regional Planners listed on the national ‘Occupation Shortage List by Jobs and Skills Australia.’ Welsh interviewees reflected a similar shortage of planners, driven by austerity measures. This shortage has been a barrier to implementation, as overstretched planners do not have the capacity to adapt to new ways of working. Sufficient resourcing to implement the MWM Framework would be required particularly at the local government level to support successful implementation and data collection.

*“The purpose of planning and I know a lot of planners feel this way and why we’re losing so many young planners is about assisting housing development to be approved with no consideration of the fact that people, humans need lots of things to live healthy and happy lives...” – NSW Social Planner (Interview)*



## 9 Closing discussion and recommendations

This research has highlighted that there is an unresolved conflict at the heart of planning. While the ambition of planning in NSW is to deliver wellbeing through the balance of social, environmental and economic objectives, in practice economic objectives are prioritised. This conflict has created a challenging environment for planners – with the practice facing intense criticism for its role in the housing crisis and being an ‘enemy of enterprise’ (Sturzaker & Hickman 2024), while at the same time facing negative reviews for an increasingly neoliberal and pro-growth practice. The implementation of the MWM Framework offers an opportunity to resolve this tension. It provides a framework for a national conversation about the purpose of planning policy and the values that we want to uphold through the built environment. If we agree, as this research suggests, that planning should play a role in a more healthy, safe, sustainable, cohesive and prosperous Australia, then as an industry we should want the evidence to demonstrate this and inform our decision making.

However, history shows us that planning reform in NSW is challenging and requires agents of change in the right place at the right time. With a second term for the Albanese government, expiry of the 2030 SDGs, the absence of a state-wide strategic plan in NSW and calls for further reforms to address the housing crisis, there is perhaps a window of opportunity to support change. We also need to build support for this change within the planning industry and currently there is very little awareness of the MWM Framework or broader wellbeing agenda.

The MWM Framework is not perfect, and this research paper has identified areas for improvement. But more importantly it needs commitment, which I argue needs to take the form of law. Without a legislative requirement, the messy work of systems change is unlikely to occur. Hoekstra (2019) argues we don’t need more models, but a strong process towards harmonisation if wellbeing is to compete with the ubiquity of GDP. In 2020, Treasurer Jim Chalmers expressed a similar sentiment that neoliberalism is broken and that we need to ‘find coherence and conviction in what replaces it’ (Chalmers 2020). The MWM Framework offers a strong starting point, with 5 national wellbeing themes and a system for measuring progress.

In establishing the barriers and enablers to a wellbeing approach, this research then considered if implementation of the MWM Framework could elevate the consideration of social outcomes in planning. It found that social impacts are poorly considered in planning and struggle against an ‘a-societal mentality’ that is antithetical to social processes and social science theories (Vanclay 1996). The key challenges identified in this research can be summarised into three key areas. Firstly, the social dimension of sustainability is not well understood in planning and often reduced to physical impacts (e.g. exposure to noise) and physical spaces (e.g. a playground or community centre) while more complex impacts such as social inclusion and belonging are harder to quantify and are easily discounted (Vanclay 1996).

Secondly planning does not have effective tools to consider social impacts. Social impact assessment at the project level is perceived as ineffective and highly constrained by time, budget and other project dynamics. Most social impact assessments are bolted on to an EIA, and no attempt is made to integrate and interpret the collective findings (Vanclay 1996). Impact assessment is also a predictive tool and without monitoring and evaluation, the

outcomes of planning decisions are unknown. Understanding social impacts also requires consideration of qualitative data which we are less culturally comfortable with.

Thirdly social impacts have been marginalised by the sustainable development movement, which sits at the heart of contemporary planning. Sustainable development in planning has become largely understood as meaning environmentally preferable outcomes enabled by technological innovations, while less attention has been paid to the worsening dimensions of inequality in Australian cities (Allen 2025).

The MWM Framework goes some way in addressing these challenges. It seeks to elevate social indicators in decision making through 5 dimensions of wellbeing, moving away from the polarising environmental, social and economic pillars to a more nuanced model. It also highlights inclusion, equity and fairness as cross-cutting dimensions. Distinct from sustainable development, wellbeing offers a more relatable term and discourse that focuses on positive issues of 'rounded humanity, including questions of human meaning, happiness, personal experience and social recognition as well as access to material goods and resources (Taylor 2011).

## 9.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings in this research report the following recommendations are made to provide the foundation for change, shape policy and further research.

**Clarify the purpose of planning** – Amongst the urgency of the housing crisis and other critical challenges we need to create space for a meaningful dialogue about the purpose of planning, which I argue should be to maximise collective wellbeing. Without clarity of purpose, the credibility of planning will continue to erode. A clear statutory purpose will also help shape the tools that planners need to make purpose aligned decisions. Previous reviews of the planning system have advocated for the elevation of 'ecologically sustainable development' as the central guiding principle of the EP&A Act. However sustainable development in planning has become understood to mean environmentally preferable outcomes. Wellbeing offers a more optimistic, holistic and relatable discourse that is supported by national wellbeing priorities and a measurement approach.

**Planning industry engagement** – Without an engaged planning industry, the wellbeing agenda cannot be realised. Cities are the centres of social and economic activity and any effort to move beyond growth as the primary goal of the economy will require the support of planning. Engagement with the planning industry could also improve the spatial and temporal dimensions of the MWM Framework, including indicator selection and disaggregation of data at different spatial scales. Identification of additional indicators to support planning policy in NSW could be an area for future research. Outside of the planning industry broad community engagement is required to ensure the framework has political legitimacy, reflects community values and has public support (Sollis, Campbell & Drake 2025).

**Address the state of the profession** – The Welsh experience highlighted that to enable major planning reform, we need a high-functioning planning industry. Collective action by government and industry is needed to resolve the shortage of planners in NSW and to provide the capacity for change. A planning system aligned with a clear vision to deliver wellbeing is likely to be a more attractive proposition for young people looking for purpose driven work. Cardiff University has embedded the WBFGA within their planning syllabus to train a new

cohort of planners to advance this policy agenda. We also need planners with the right skills for contemporary challenges which includes post-growth planning, evidence-based planning and outcomes evaluation.

**Improve the use of evidence in planning** – We should be able to measure the extent to which planning is achieving its stated objectives, but this remains an unresolved challenge. The complexities of evaluating planning outcomes are well established in literature (Gurran & Phibbs 2014) but there are examples we can draw on to build an approach in NSW, including the ACT Planning System Evaluation Framework and the Scottish National Planning Improvement Framework, which both align with their respective wellbeing frameworks. We also need to foster a culture of evidence and evaluation in planning and take a level of responsibility for the place outcomes achieved or not achieved. Peak bodies can play a role by tying evaluation skills to CPD or industry awards. State led developments could require post development evaluation or embed evaluation requirements into contractual agreements. A closer link between planners and researchers is also encouraged, like the Practitioner in Residence program and systems to disseminate expert knowledge to planners. A culture of evaluation should move away from the name and shame culture of ‘council league tables’ to one of collaboration and continuous improvement.

**Conceptualise new planning tools to support wellbeing** – It’s widely researched and accepted that urban planning influences the dimensions of wellbeing. Planners now need ways to translate this knowledge into planning instruments. Drawing on the Welsh experience, at a policy level the WBFGA provided the compass for a recast of the Planning Policy Wales and the introduction of a National Development Framework and Place Making Charter. The documents contain practical decision-making tools for planners, for example the sustainable transport, waste and energy hierarchies and the five legislated ‘ways of working.’ Regarding the broader wellbeing economy agenda, new tools are needed to decouple urban planning from the reliance on economic growth to achieve other policy goals. Some of these tools are emergent, for example circular economy practices, meanwhile use initiatives and windfall taxation exist but they need greater commitment. Others will be more radical for example planning for reduction in existing infrastructure or development limits and others are yet to be conceived within the constraints of the current purpose of planning.

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