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**Henry Halloran
Urban & Regional
Research Initiative**



Implementing wellbeing outcomes into the NSW planning system

A new pro-social narrative

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Title

Implementing wellbeing outcomes into the NSW planning system: **A new pro-social narrative**

Key Points

- From ancient roots, wellbeing has become a policy priority around the world, as governments seek new ways to measure progress beyond economic growth.
- While there is no universal definition of wellbeing it can broadly be conceptualised as a multidimensional construct and an 'ideal state of being' (McNaught 2011).
- It is widely accepted that place, scale, and context impact on the dimensions of wellbeing (Kent and Thompson 2014) and this implies a critical role for planners who are central agents in shaping the built environment.
- Despite extensive research linking the built environment to wellbeing and alignment between the aspirations of planning and wellbeing policy, there are number of barriers to advancing this agenda.
- Distinct from sustainable development the wellbeing movement offers a greater emphasis on pro-social thinking and a more optimistic, holistic and relatable discourse.

Context

- In July 2023 the Australian Treasury released 'Measuring What Matters - Australia's First Wellbeing Framework' (MWM Framework). The Australian government is now looking for ways to implement it into all areas of government decision making.
- The MWM Framework includes 5 national wellbeing themes (healthy, secure, sustainable, cohesive and prosperous) and a dashboard of indicators for measuring and tracking progress.
- Internationally there has been a proliferation of wellbeing frameworks. Arguably the most progressive wellbeing policy is the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (WBFGA).
- Drawing on a decade of experience since implementation, the Welsh experience provides a unique case study to understand the impact of the WBFGA on planning policy.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

This paper is based on the Henry Halloran Urban and Regional Research Initiative - Martin Payne Practitioner in Residence Project 'Implementing wellbeing outcomes into NSW planning.'

The full paper from this project can be found on the Henry Halloran Urban and Regional Research Initiative website:

<https://www.sydney.edu.au/halloran-urban-initiative/about/publications.html>

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Key Findings

Drawing on the Welsh experience, this research set out to understand the barriers and enablers to implementing a wellbeing approach within planning in NSW. While there is a growing community in Australia pursuing a wellbeing agenda, the barriers to implementation remain significant. The key barriers are summarised below:

- **Policy versus practice** – The purpose of planning is unclear and there is an unresolved tension between planning 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, reinforcing criticisms of limited public consultation.
- **Entrenched beliefs** – The wellbeing agenda challenges the dominance of pro-growth planning and sustainable development as central pillars of planning policy.
- **Momentum for change** – The Welsh devolution from the UK provided a catalyst for new ways of working and we need to identify our own opportunity for change.
- **Planning governance** – The planning system in NSW is complex and any additional requirements are likely to meet resistance.
- **Enforcement and commitment** – Without a legislative requirement to achieve wellbeing outcomes it is unlikely to change the way planners are working.
- **Evidence system** – Success of the planning system is measured through performance outputs and measuring planning outcomes continues to challenge planning systems around the world.
- **Collaboration** – The wellbeing themes require cross-sector solutions and dissolving silos between government agencies.
- **State of the profession** – Australia is facing a critical shortage of planners and there is limited capacity to support major change.

In establishing the barriers and enablers to a wellbeing approach, this research then considered if the MWM Framework could elevate the consideration of social outcomes in planning. It found social impacts have been marginalised by the sustainable development movement, which has become understood as primarily about environmentally preferable outcomes. It also found that planners do not have effective tools to balance social, environmental and economic outcomes.

Sources

- Diener, E 2000, 'Subjective Well-Being: The Science of Happiness and a Proposal for a National Index', *The American psychologist*, vol. 55, pp. 34-43.
- Mcnaught, A 2011, 'Defining wellbeing', *Understanding wellbeing: An introduction for students and practitioners of health and social care* (pp.7-23), Lantern Publishing, Banbury.
- Gurrán, N & Phibbs, P 2014, 'Evidence-free zone? Examining claims about planning performance and reform in New South Wales', *Australian Planner*, vol. 51, no. 3, pp. 232-242.

Implications for Practice

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.

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 requires the support of planning. Engagement with the planning industry is needed to improve the spatial and temporal dimensions of the MWM Framework.

Address the state of the profession

– To enable transformational change, we need a functioning planning industry. Collective action by government and industry is needed to resolve the shortage of planners in NSW. A planning system with a clear vision to deliver wellbeing is likely to be a more attractive proposition for young people looking for purpose driven work. We also need planners with the right skills for contemporary challenges, including 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. We also need to foster a culture of evidence-based decisions and outcomes evaluation in planning to understand the place outcomes achieved or not achieved.

Conceptualise new planning tools

– It's widely accepted that urban planning influences the dimensions of wellbeing. Planners now need to translate this knowledge into planning instruments. Drawing on the Welsh experience the WBFGA led to practical decision-making tools for planners, for example the sustainable transport, waste and energy hierarchies and the five legislated 'ways of working.' New tools are also needed to

- Kent, JL & Thompson, S 2014, 'The Three Domains of Urban Planning for Health and Well-being', *Journal of Planning Literature*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 239-256.
- Messham, E & Sheard, S 2020, 'Taking the long view: the development of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act', *Health Research Policy and Systems*, vol. 18.

decouple urban planning from a reliance on economic growth to achieve other policy goals.