



Listening to what matters

Feedback on the 2023 Measuring What Matters Statement

31 January 2023

The Victorian Council of Social Service is the peak body for the community services sector in Victoria.

VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy.

VCOSS advocates for a fair and equitable society by supporting the social service industry and representing the interests of Victorians facing disadvantage.

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VCOSS acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and pays respect to their Elders past and present.

This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.

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Executive summary

VCOSS has long advocated for a wellbeing economy to offer meaningful solutions to address disadvantage and put people's needs at the heart of economic decisions.¹ We welcome the Federal Government's interest in adopting a wellbeing approach. The Measuring What Matters Statements are an important step in embedding wellbeing into policymaking.

The case for wellbeing budgeting and a wellbeing economy is clear. Our health and social services systems have been severely stretched by the COVID pandemic, we are facing unprecedented natural disasters and emergencies driven by climate change, and inequality is growing.

And while traditional economic indicators may present a positive story, many people do not feel like they share in this success and do not feel optimistic for the future. People experiencing poverty and disadvantage are doing it tough, and their experiences do not reflect the wealth of a supposedly prosperous society.

But before we can *measure* what matters, we need to *find out* what matters. Frameworks and indicators are important elements of a wellbeing economy but they need to be informed by meaningful community consultation.

VCOSS recommends a broad and deep community engagement process, to ask communities what is important to their wellbeing and to adapt the OECD Framework for Measuring Well-being and Progress. Listening to Aboriginal Australians about Indigenous perspectives of wellbeing is particularly important and should be central to Australia's approach from the start.

VCOSS's *Voices of Victoria* Listening Tour is a suitable model for capturing a wide array of community voices and for facilitating participation by people who are often excluded from traditional forms of consultation.² During the Listening Tour we heard about wellbeing priorities that are neglected by the business-as-usual approach of government, including social isolation and loneliness, digital inclusion, and access to essential services.

VCOSS also advocates for big-picture changes in how economic decisions are made. We strongly support a holistic approach to wellbeing budgeting that puts inclusion, equity, and fairness at the centre of government processes.

A broad set of recommendations for establishing a wellbeing economy can be found in VCOSS's 2022 State Election Platform, including five steps that can be readily applied to the Federal Government.³

Recommendations

- Consult communities about what matters to them by:
 - Holding in-person sessions at trusted community settings.
 - Ensuring everyone can participate including people experiencing disadvantage.
- Consult Aboriginal communities and peak bodies about their wellbeing.
- Embed Indigenous perspectives of wellbeing at the heart of an Australian framework.
- Prioritise indicators for reducing social isolation and loneliness in an Australian wellbeing framework.
- Add indicators for improving digital inclusion and access to essential services.
- Fully commit to becoming a wellbeing economy.
- Task every government department with improving every indicator.

Ask communities what matters to them

Recommendations

- Consult communities about what matters to them by:
 - Holding in-person sessions at trusted community settings.
 - Ensuring everyone can participate including people experiencing disadvantage.

Communities should be meaningfully consulted before an Australian Wellbeing Framework is developed; we need to *find out* what matters before we can start *measuring* what matters. A considered and substantive community consultation process can identify what changes are needed to the OECD Framework, imbue the next Measuring What Matters Statement with rich qualitative data, and increase community buy-in for a wellbeing approach.

“It mustn’t be easy running a government ... but they need to listen to common people too.”²

By way of public consultation processes, governments in Australia commonly gather feedback online, ask for written submissions, and hold formal hearings in government venues. These methods are convenient and can be useful, but they exclude people who have limited free time, have no digital access, have low English language skills, have been mistreated by government agencies in the past, or are facing a variety of other barriers.

This prevents governments from hearing the voices of ordinary community members. People might have fresh ideas for solving entrenched problems but be completely unaware that a consultation is even occurring. It limits the richness of the feedback, restricting participation to frequently-heard stakeholders who have most capacity to participate – such as think tanks, universities and industry groups.

Best practice community consultation is accessible to all, encourages genuine participation by lesser-heard voices, and takes place in trusted settings where communities already gather. One model for such a process is VCOSS’s *Voices of Victoria* Listening Tour.²

Listening Tour

VCOSS conducted a Listening Tour from February to May 2022 in partnership with Neighbourhood Houses Victoria. We visited 12 communities across the state via in-person events at trusted community centres, and ran deep dive sessions with Aboriginal Victorians, people with disability and carers. To test key findings against a broader sample of participants, follow-up phone polling was conducted by Essential Media.

The purpose of the Listening Tour was to hear from Victorians about their experiences of the pandemic and their hopes for the future. The discussions were open-ended and free-flowing, framed around asking people three key questions:

1. How are you feeling right now?
2. What challenges are you facing?
3. What are your hopes for the future?

Listening to people face-to-face in familiar community spaces gave them the opportunity to tell their stories in their own words, in places they felt safe. To make sure everyone felt empowered to contribute, deliberate consideration was given to partnership, method, location, space, food, privacy, compensation, timing, feedback, language, and safety.

Consistent feedback from the Listening Tour was that people appreciated being listened to about what matters to them. Over 98 per cent of participants were satisfied with the sessions overall, and over 95 per cent of participants felt comfortable, safe and supported to share their stories.²

“I think the Listening Tour should be done quarterly at all Neighbourhood Houses as it was a counselling service in itself.”²

Many people said that it was the first time their ideas and perspectives had been actively sought by decision-makers. There was excitement about influencing the direction of Victoria’s recovery from the COVID pandemic. This type of enthusiasm would enrich Australia’s wellbeing approach, as it has in other jurisdictions.

Lessons from other wellbeing economies

New Zealand, Wales and Scotland have all introduced indicators for societal success that go beyond economic headlines such as GDP, inflation, and unemployment.⁴ Closer to home, the ACT forged ahead with the ACT Wellbeing Framework to measure Canberrans’ quality of life.⁵

These jurisdictions conducted genuine and in-depth community consultations before developing their wellbeing frameworks.

For example, Wales based its wellbeing economy on a two-year conversation that included 20 events and a network of 150 Future Champions.⁶ The Wales We Want discussion resulted in almost 1,000 responses via reports, videos, postcards, drawings, and surveys.

And the ACT Wellbeing Framework was developed after an eight-month consultation that reached around 3,000 people.⁵ This included a wellbeing forum, community roundtables, and online and in-person surveys.

Embed Indigenous perspectives

Recommendations

- Consult Aboriginal communities and peak bodies about their wellbeing.
- Embed Indigenous perspectives of wellbeing at the heart of an Australian framework.

One of VCOSS's Listening Tour events was hosted at Willum Warrain – a Gathering Place for Aboriginal Victorians located on Boonwurrung/Bunurong Country in Hastings. The site has strong connotations of positive community involvement: it was once used as an industrial dumpsite but the community restored the original wetlands and planted thousands of native plants.

“I received a phone call from a community org saying they were calling disadvantaged groups and I said, ‘hang on, we’re not disadvantaged, we’ve got mob’. Our Gathering Place is everything to us.”²

Many of the challenges raised by the participants at this session were similar to the concerns raised across the rest of the state, but other important issues were unique. It exemplified the tenet that different communities experience things differently, and perspectives of wellbeing vary between cultures.

For example, VCOSS heard about the importance of place for supporting Indigenous people's wellbeing and their connection to community, culture and Country. At this event the health of the environment was frequently mentioned as a key indicator of wellbeing.

We encourage the Government to meaningfully engage with Indigenous communities and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. This will help imbue an Australian Framework with Indigenous perspectives of wellbeing, which are missing from the OECD Framework.⁷

“Mob looking after each other. It’s just the way we do things.”²

New Zealand could be a partial model for this. The He Ara Waiora framework helps the New Zealand Treasury understand Māori perspectives of wellbeing.⁸ And since 2021, the framework has been gradually introduced into wellbeing assessments alongside Treasury's Living Framework Statement.⁹

Australia has an opportunity to embed Indigenous values at the heart of an Australian Framework, from the start of the process. This can lead to more meaningful outcomes than incorporating Aboriginal perspectives after a general framework is created.

For example, the Lowitja Institute has identified six cultural domains for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing:

- Family, kinship and community;
- Indigenous beliefs and knowledge;
- Cultural expression and continuity;
- Indigenous language;
- Self-determination and leadership; and
- Connection to Country.¹⁰

Act on Victorian consultations

Recommendation

- Prioritise indicators for reducing social isolation and loneliness in an Australian wellbeing framework.
- Add indicators for improving digital inclusion and access to essential services.

Wellbeing indicators are a useful tool. They can identify gaps in government funding and services, direct resourcing where it can make the most difference to the people most in need, and expose inequities within different communities and cohorts to help address poverty and disadvantage.

The indicators in the OECD Framework are a good starting point for measuring what matters in Australia. But, as discussed, they must be adapted to our local context following deep engagement with communities about what matters, which will provide insight into what indicators should stay, change, be added, or be removed.

VCOSS's *Voices of Victoria* Listening Tour is an example of how community insights can be used to enrich a wellbeing framework.

The tour identified several complex challenges exacerbated by the siloed structures of government, which cannot respond adequately to problems that do not fit neatly within any one department. These are cross-departmental issues that currently fall between the cracks, but could be addressed in a wellbeing economy via whole-of-government solutions.

Social isolation and loneliness

'Loneliness, isolation and reconnection' was the second most common challenge cited during the Listening Tour.² More than half of the young people who responded to VCOSS's Essential Media poll in June 2022 reported loneliness and isolation as a key challenge.²

"It's lonely transitioning from school to uni. I don't know many people at uni and socially, I feel like I'm stuck in Year 10."²

The OECD Framework has two headline indicators regarding loneliness: 'social support' (the share of persons that indicate they have friends or relatives that can assist them when needed), and 'social interactions' (the average amount of time spent on social interactions).¹¹

Our consultations indicate that these two measures, which are not captured by any traditional economic frameworks, are poor and declining due to the COVID pandemic.

“I’ve seen two people this last two weeks ... there should be more people in a life than that.”²

People's stories from the Listening Tour also indicate that social connections will take a long time to rebuild, even as life continues to return to ‘normal’. For example, people might feel daunted by and out of practice with socialising, might be immunocompromised and unable to socialise, or might have lost social opportunities that were cancelled and have not returned.

These are timely issues for government programs and supports to focus on, and for an Australian wellbeing framework to prioritise.

Digital inclusion

The Listening Tour showed that people’s wellbeing is impacted by their access to the internet. This includes access to data, access to a digital device, and the knowledge and confidence to effectively navigate the internet.

Digital access is an important gateway to work, healthcare, education and training, social interaction, and more. During the COVID pandemic, government services pivoted online, school lessons went digital, and virtual catch-ups were sometimes the only way to socialise with friends and family.

“You call mygov and they just direct you to the website, but the reason you called is because you don’t have the skills to navigate the website!”²

Community sector workers spoke with VCOSS about the difficulties facing community members who did not have access to the internet or the capabilities to use a device. One participant said that the digital divide had prevented older clients from accessing housing because they were unable to navigate the online forms.

Access to essential services

Participants of the Listening Tour frequently spoke about being unable to access health and social services. This incorporates services provided by government and not-for-profits, and includes health care, mental health support, income payments, disability advocacy, financial counselling, legal aid, and more.

We heard of many different barriers that people faced, and the frustration and hopelessness that can result.

For government services, common barriers included:

- departments bouncing people between agencies
- low English language skills
- services only being available online
- long waitlists
- outright discrimination.

“It’s so hard across all services, Centrelink, housing ... you just get bounced from place to place.”²

For community services, common barriers were strict eligibility requirements and long waitlists due to limited resources.

Our consultations showed that there is a gulf between a service technically being available for people to access, and community members actually being able to use it. Every service should be made accessible for the people who need it, whether that requires adequate resourcing for the community sector, or government services having a non-digital access point.

“There is a push for services to be accessed online but some people can’t access it. It shouldn’t be like that. Some services must remain face to face.”²

Fully transition to a wellbeing economy

Recommendations

- Fully commit to becoming a wellbeing economy.
- Task every government department with improving every indicator.

The Measuring What Matters Statements are an important step towards embedding a wellbeing approach in the Federal Government's decision-making. But in order to *do* what matters rather than just *measuring* what matters, we need a holistic shift that is broader than a new set of indicators. Otherwise, the indicators will reveal inequalities but there will be limited mechanisms for addressing them.

VCOSS's 2022 State Election Platform contains concrete recommendations for how we can transform into a wellbeing economy. The 'Become the wellbeing state' chapter suggests five steps that can be readily applied to the Federal Government:

1. Consult with communities about what matters to them, as discussed above.
2. Introduce a Wellbeing Framework with priorities that all government spending must progress.
3. Appoint a Minister for Wellbeing to champion the reforms.
4. Establish a new branch of government to drive the process.
5. Introduce legislation to enshrine the approach.

The founder of the Wellbeing Economy Alliance, Katherine Trebeck, has developed a high-level conceptualisation of the broad changes needed to truly embed a wellbeing approach, articulating four cornerstones of economic reform.¹² These 'four Ps' are:

- Purpose – realigning the goals of the economy with people's needs.
- Prevention – tackling problems at their root cause rather than applying band-aid solutions at crisis point.
- Pre-distribution – ensuring fair economic outcomes so that less government intervention is needed to moderate inequality.
- People-powered – putting a diversity of people at the forefront of shaping economic systems.

The holistic mechanism of this approach requires a shift in the processes of governance so that every government department is tasked with improving every wellbeing indicator. Rather than assigning each priority to a single agency, all departments are required to consider how their resources can be utilised across the entire wellbeing framework.

For example, the business-as-usual approach would assign a complex issue like loneliness to a single department, ignoring the role that every agency can play in reducing social isolation. A wellbeing economy, on the other hand, would encourage a whole-of-government approach and properly fund responses such as:

- supporting volunteer sustainability groups (environment);
- better connecting people to friends and family (transport);
- teaching people how to use digital communication tools (education);
- improving the comfort and safety of people's homes for visitors (housing).

That way, we can properly use Measuring What Matters Statements to *do* what matters. We can put Australians' wellbeing at the centre of governance and invest in the programs that will make the biggest difference to the things people care about.

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- ⁴ George Institute for Global Health, *Integrating wellbeing into the business of government: The feasibility of innovative legal and policy measures to achieve sustainable development in Australia*, VicHealth, 2021.
- ⁵ Australian Capital Territory Government, *ACT Wellbeing Framework*, 2020.
- ⁶ George Institute for Global Health, *A toolkit to progress wellbeing economy approaches in Australia*, VicHealth 2022.
- ⁷ Treasury, *Statement 4: Measuring What Matters – Appendix A.1: OECD framework indicators*, Australian Government, 2022.
- ⁸ Treasury, *He Ara Waiora*, New Zealand Government, 2021: www.treasury.govt.nz/information-and-services/nz-economy/higher-living-standards/he-ara-waiora
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- ¹⁰ Lowitja Institute, *Culture is Key: Towards cultural determinants-driven health policy*, 2021.
- ¹¹ Treasury, *Statement 4: Measuring What Matters – Appendix A.1: OECD framework indicators*, Australian Government, 2022.
- ¹² K Trebeck, *The four P's of economic system change*, Dumbo Feather, 23 April 2022: www.dumbofeather.com/articles/the-four-ps-of-economic-system-change