

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Federal Government's *Measuring What Matters* statement.

We are writing this submission on behalf of Australia reMADE (www.australiaremade.org), an independent, not-for-profit community and leadership network bringing people closer to democracy; and supporting collaborative, transformative and ambitious change. We have expertise in qualitative research, community engagement, political strategy and effective messaging and communications.

Of particular note for this submission, we have experience in community research that is directly relevant to your development of a Wellbeing Framework.

Firstly, we are absolutely thrilled to see the Government commit to a Wellbeing Framework and to be considering so carefully what the best model is for Australia. Australia reMADE has long been interested in how we shift our decision making focus away from GDP and mere economic growth and towards more holistic, purposeful and values-aligned measures of success^{1 2}. A key part of this shift is the creation of a shared and articulated sense of national purpose.

Our Research

Prompted by the 2019/20 fires on the East Coast and the arrival of the pandemic, both of which were major disruptors for most Australians and prompted significant public conversation about private and public priorities, we explored what it is that people want – not just for themselves, but for their communities and country as a whole.

In 2020/21 Australia reMADE conducted a qualitative research project asking people what matters with the question, “What do you want for you and your communities and who should provide it?”.

This research was led by qualitative researcher Dr Millie Rooney, who worked in conjunction with a team of community facilitators to discover what it is that really matters to Australians from diverse backgrounds, locations, professions, political orientations and walks of life. As a qualitative research project, it was made up of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion, and drew on adaptive theory methodology. While we went into the work with a clear question and a sense of what might be significant to Australians, the methodological approach we took meant that we were open to finding the unexpected.


Results

While we heard the consistent need for tangible goods like housing, healthcare, education, jobs, access to the internet and access to nature — we also heard some deeper needs. We were surprised by how quickly the conversation shifted from the material and tangible things that people want, to something deeper; pointing towards wellbeing and quality of life itself.

Analysis of our data showed that across the board, this longing for ‘something more’ was expressed across three key areas: the drive for **connection** with people and place, the drive to **care and be cared for**, and the drive to **contribute** both locally and nationally (we now call these the ‘3Cs’).

¹ <https://www.australiaremade.org/blog/budget-public-good>

² <https://www.australiaremade.org/blog/budget-purpose-spencer>



The 3Cs are what we've come to understand as universal human motivations, and thus we argue, key cornerstones of wellbeing itself. We also believe they offer policy makers a bridge between the high-level goals of a wellbeing framework and the nitty gritty details of what we measure. Finally, they are unapologetically values-based, though not ideologically left-vs-right.

With that in mind, we offer the following insights from this research towards the development of a Wellbeing Framework for Australia.

Find out 'what matters?' before asking 'what measures?'

A Wellbeing Framework should provide a cohesive and coherent way of bringing together the things that matter to us as a country, that goes beyond simplistic measurements such as GDP.

As the *Measuring What Matters* statement explains, often the objects of such frameworks are intuitive but hard to pin down. We strongly recommend that time and effort are put into articulating and socialising a shared sense of what matters among Australians, rather than merely borrowing and adapting pre-existing indicators from the OECD or elsewhere. This can also, of course, be supplemented with expert practice and guidance – ideally based on quality public research and engagement – but let's not just assume we already know what matters and move too hastily to measurement.

If we leap straight to determining the measurements we use, we run the risk of choosing what matters by proxy, simply because it is easy to measure.

Exploration and socialisation of what actually matters as a public conversation also encourages us to think collectively about the conditions we need for 'what matters' to thrive, building that scaffolding for good future decisions and making it harder to undo good work by reverting to old, outdated paradigms.

Trust that asking people what matters is powerful, rather than divisive

Our research found that despite the pressures of modern life and falling rates of civic participation across many fronts, people are still hungry for opportunities to contribute both locally and nationally to our country, in meaningful and enjoyable ways. At a time when trust in government and institutions is still very low (despite an increase during the first years of the pandemic)³, an easy and accessible process that enables the public to help shape the consensus on what matters is going to be essential in ensuring the success and longevity of such an approach.

The opportunity to comment in a submission such as this is welcome, and we also need simpler and easier mechanisms for community engagement.

Our best suggestion for this is a broad-ranging community engagement process involving community facilitators and public conversations. Or at the very least a simple and accessible survey process such as the one rolled out in Germany (and referenced in the statement). We encourage any such process to ask not only what people think matters to individuals, but what wellbeing looks like for the collective.

³ https://scanloninstitute.org.au/sites/default/files/2022-11/MSC%202022_Report.pdf

Be brave (walk softly, but don't be timid)

From our work, we believe that across the political spectrum, Australians want a government willing to prioritise wellbeing and the public goods of connection, care and contribution. We applaud the Treasurer's call to seize our 'big chance'⁴ to rethink business as usual, and not only because the climate crisis, pandemic, growing inequality, financial crises and other challenges will continue to confound and fracture us if we do not.

This is about building the scaffolding for good future policies and decisions – and we agree that there is potential in offering 'reform, not revolution' that doesn't negate and dismiss our current strengths, but redirects them towards better and brighter possibilities.

We don't just want to survive the next century, we want to thrive.

Build the scaffolding now for good future decisions

It is heartening to see our government asking what we need to pay attention to in order to foster a country whose environment and people are truly well. No one hopes this work amounts to a future box-ticking exercise, instead of a paradigm shift.

From our public good research, we suggest you pay attention to the kind of *infrastructure* (both obvious and enabling) we need to invest in as a society to give people the time, space and capacity to connect, care and contribute well; and to achieve the things that we decide as a country actually matter to our wellbeing.

What we pay attention to today, we can change tomorrow. Here are just a few examples of what we might consider 'enabling infrastructures' to invest in wellbeing over the long-term:

Staffing ratios that enable a nurse to be rested, alert and able to take the time to engage with individual patients and their specific needs.

Universal carers' leave that provides support for care work to be done in community, by family and neighbours. At the moment in Australia personal/carers' leave only covers immediate relations or members of a household. We could even consider carers' leave to include environmental care and care for Country.

Local festivals that provide opportunities for residents to connect with each other and with place via formal and informal gatherings. Even better might be the proposed Universal Basic Income for artists (the Republic of Ireland is currently trialling this) – supporting artists to create atmosphere and community.

A four-day work week coupled with affordable housing policy or other measures to ease cost of living pressures – so that all of us, regardless of what we do for paid employment, have the time to participate in and strengthen cultures of connection, care and contribution however we choose.

Attractive public spaces — public beaches, walking trails, playgrounds, community centres, parks — that beckon us out of our homes and into each other's company, without demanding we open our wallets. (Because these physical spaces are more tangible we're already pretty good at valuing them,

⁴ <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2023/february/jim-chalmers/capitalism-after-crises>

especially in wealthy areas, but imagine if these kinds of ‘public luxuries’ were seen as essential to wellbeing for everyone!)

And while we can and should try to measure a wider range of things, we also need to get comfortable with the knowledge that not all infrastructure for wellbeing is tangible or measurable, and that doesn’t make it less worthy of investment or priority.

Friendship might not be the easiest thing for government to measure (much less provide), but experts have known for some time that loneliness poses a bigger health risk than smoking⁵, and the world’s longest study into health and happiness by Harvard University has recently found maintaining quality relationships to be the most important single factor⁶.

Knowing this, if we decided to try to value/measure friendship, by deciding to measure the infrastructure that supports (or undermines) meaningful connection, we would notice a lot. We might notice that fair employment laws, housing policy that positions homes as more important than profit, encouraging active civic engagement, investing in excellent public schools, a healthy environment and great local facilities like parks etc... are not only as good to do in their own right, but they increase conditions for relationships and thus wellbeing to thrive. Or we might notice where our current social media platforms and the profit-motive of surveillance capitalism serve profits over people, and decide to change the rules back in our favour.

Additionally, if we decided to measure ‘care’, and ‘contribution’ more broadly as central to wellbeing, we might ask Australians if they would actually prefer to work *less*, in order to have more time for raising children and other pursuits (rest, travel, sports, creativity, friendship, participating in civic life or contributing to their communities in other ways). To our authors’ existing knowledge, we currently only ask Australians whether they are in paid employment, and if they would like more hours than they currently have.

By measuring something new, we would gain the insight to better understand what people are actually grappling with, and thus consider a wider range of policies and solutions that might promote wellbeing more effectively.

Conclusion


This is an exciting opportunity and moment to seize. The great disruptions of recent times have challenged the idea that there is no alternative. We are already thinking more about our wellbeing and priorities, and there is appetite for our bigger systems and measures of progress to catch up.

We can have an economy that serves our values. We can become as confident in noticing and valuing the less-visible *enabling infrastructure* of wellbeing (or the enabling infrastructure of care, connection and contribution) as we are in our calls for better public transport and more hospital beds.

We can talk publicly about wellbeing and what matters (or what we’ve called ‘the public good’) and connect it to the many policies and solutions we care about – generating a galvanising sense of purpose and positive vision for the future.

⁵ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/loneliness-has-same-risk-as-smoking-for-heart-disease>

⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/happiness-meaning-harvard-study-b2272203.html>



We commend you for progressing a Wellbeing Framework in Australia, and we would be pleased to offer any further assistance we can to this endeavour.

Living, loving and working across this country, we respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay respect to elders both past and present.

AUTHORS

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Millie is a social scientist, researcher and champion of participatory democracy and politics, based in nipaluna/Hobart, Tasmania. She co-directs the strategic and daily operations work of Australia reMADE, writes regularly and is sought after on panels, podcasts and forums for her work on the public good and more. Her social science expertise centres around community building and social capital.

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For more detail on our work please find the following attachments:

- [Reclaiming our Purpose: It's time to talk about the public good](#)
- [Pieces of the Same Solution: Reimagining the Public Good](#)