



Beyond Blue submission to the Commonwealth Treasury: Measuring What Matters

31 January 2023

Introduction

Beyond Blue welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the design of the *Measuring What Matters Statement* and Australian Wellbeing Framework (Framework).

Wellbeing frameworks are being developed around the world, encouraging governments to address significant health, social, environmental, and economic issues, such as the climate crisis, childhood adversity and inequality. The measurement of wellbeing cannot simply be a 'spray on' collection of data on existing activity, but rather a carefully considered strategy that measures what is etiologically important to wellbeing – the underlying drivers, not individual action and behaviours. Good wellbeing frameworks explore questions not usually asked by governments, and listen to and centre diverse community voices, values and knowledge.

A Framework has the potential to lead to more informed and transparent policy-making that drives intergenerational change and delivers more equitable outcomes, including the promotion of good overall wellbeing, mental wellbeing and mental health for everyone (note: these terms are defined in **Appendix 1**).

Recommendations

Beyond Blue recommends that the *Measuring What Matters Statement* and Framework should:

1. include goals that connect the proposed indicators with the impact that people living in Australia want public spending to achieve. While the current consultation question focuses on **what we should measure and how** the Framework should also be clear on **why** we are measuring these indicators and what intergenerational change we hope to see.
2. reflect the **strong relationship between mental health and wellbeing and overall wellbeing** by:
 - (a) including a **life satisfaction and social connection indicators**
 - (b) including **both mental health and mental wellbeing indicators** (e.g. Kessler Psychological Distress Scale and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing scale or ONS4 measure)
 - (c) incorporating mechanisms to better understand the **strength of relationships** between mental health and wellbeing and other wellbeing domains and causes of poor wellbeing (such as employment, housing, racism, discrimination, bullying, money worries, etc) and better **understand inequalities** across domains. This will improve the evidence-base for policy responses to address the social determinants of health and help target investment to promote health equity.
3. be based on thorough, community-focused and inclusive consultation about what matters to people living in Australia, including people with intersecting **lived experiences** of mental ill-health, suicidality, and the social determinants of health (such as homelessness, unemployment, racism and poverty).
4. be informed by and complement **First Nations frameworks** for understanding and measuring wellbeing (such as social and emotional wellbeing and Closing the Gap), in partnership with First Nations Peoples.
5. **incorporate bold ways to embed the Framework into the fabric of how policy is made, and decisions on how public money is spent** to deliver greater impact (including in the promotion of mental wellbeing, the prevention of mental ill-health, and the improvement of mental health service experiences and outcomes) and promote transparency and accountability.
6. learn from and **connect with existing Frameworks** for measuring wellbeing across Australia.

Framework architecture

- The OECD Framework for Measuring Well-being and Progress (OECD Framework) provides a strong starting point for the Framework and offers important opportunities for international comparison.
- Government should seize the opportunity to connect indicators of wellbeing to broader goals designed to drive intergenerational change on complex health and societal issues. It is important to define not just **what** we should measure and how (indicators and measures), but **why** we are measuring these indicators (**vision, goals and objectives**).
- The Victorian Government's Outcomes Framework Architecture¹ illustrates this in visual form (see **Figure 1**). New Zealand publishes Wellbeing Objectives in its annual Wellbeing Budget that describe aspirations across environment, economy, mental and physical health and child adversity.
- The OECD Framework has a strong focus on understanding the drivers and impacts of inequalities across wellbeing domains, which is a critical component to achieving more equitable outcomes. In addition to a focus on understanding current levels of wellbeing, the Framework should **explicitly measure and report on inequalities in wellbeing outcomes** to help drive intergenerational change.

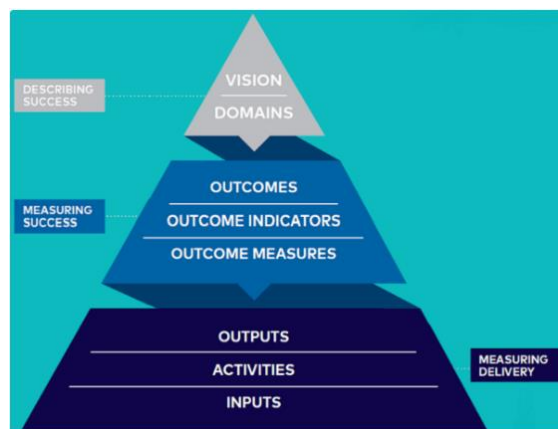


Figure 1: Victoria's Outcomes Framework Architecture

Indicators

- This is an important opportunity to rethink what we measure and why, alongside the communities that are impacted by government policy-making. Government should consider engaging with global experts (such as the [Behavioural Insights Team](#)) to discuss how we might do this differently, and better, than we have before so that the Framework truly resonates with Australian people and communities.
- In terms of adapting the OECD Framework, Beyond Blue supports the **life satisfaction indicator**, as it provides a high-level, subjective measure of how people are faring, noting that life satisfaction alone is not sufficient to measure mental health and wellbeing.
- We also support the **social interactions and social support indicators**, as social isolation and loneliness are significant risk factors for mental health, and tracking progress over time with provide useful insights.
- Given the fundamental links between our mental health and other aspects of our wellbeing (explained in the next section), Beyond Blue recommends the inclusion of a **mental health indicator** such as the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale and a **validated mental wellbeing indicator** such as the long-form Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales or Office for National Statistics ONS4 Personal Wellbeing measure (noting that the ONS4 includes life satisfaction). Further information about the merits of wellbeing measures can be provided on request.
- In adapting the OECD Framework for the Australian context, the Framework **should be informed by and connected with other Australian frameworks** that monitor overall wellbeing, mental health and mental wellbeing outcomes, including the NSW Mental Health Commission Measuring Change, the Victorian Mental Health and Wellbeing Outcomes and Performance Framework (in development) and Tasmania's Wellbeing Framework (in development).

- The Framework will be developed on the unceded lands of its First Peoples, who hold unique and holistic understandings of wellbeing (see **Figure 2** – Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework). In developing the Framework, determining indicators and conceptualising how they fit together to create a picture of human wellbeing, government should partner with First Nations Peoples and communities to explore how it can be shaped by their perspectives, promote their wellbeing and connect with other frameworks that impact them (e.g. Closing the Gap and the National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing).



Figure 2: First Nations Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework

The relationship between overall wellbeing and mental health and wellbeing

- **Mental health is central to our overall wellbeing**, with longitudinal studies revealing it is the strongest predictor of happiness and one of the biggest factors in self-reported wellbeingⁱⁱ.
- In 2021-22, people living in Australia grappled with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate disasters and economic challenges. During this people reported consistently low mental wellbeing, which continued to trend down in the first quarter of 2022ⁱⁱⁱ.
- Mental ill-health and suicide are major contributors to the national burden of disease^{iv} and causes of death^v. One in five people (4.2 million people living in Australia) experienced mental ill-health in 2021-22, with young people, women, First Nations peoples and those facing social disadvantage, homelessness or unemployment experiencing disproportionately high rates of prevalence^{vi}. The Productivity Commission estimated that the cost to the Australian economy of mental ill-health and suicide is projected to be up to \$70 billion per year^{vii}.
- **Improving mental health and wellbeing has become one of the greatest health, societal and economic issues of our time, and wellbeing frameworks need to address this.**
- Prevalence rates have remained stubbornly high despite steady increases in per capita mental health spending over the past twenty years^{viii}. We need to invest differently if we want to see rates of mental ill-health fall, which requires an innovative, whole-of-government, whole-of-person approach.
- The insights offered by the Framework can help guide efforts to prevent poor wellbeing and distress from becoming mental ill-health and increase targeted investment in cost-effective initiatives to promote wellbeing and deliver greater health equity, particularly for people who face the greatest adversities and who are at the highest risk of poor mental health and wellbeing as a result.

The relationship between mental health and wellbeing and other wellbeing domains

- Developing a wellbeing framework requires **holistic thinking** about what contributes to, and creates barriers to, overall wellbeing. Mental health and wellbeing are closely interconnected with other domains of wellbeing. People’s experiences of mental ill-health are influenced by biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors. These are commonly referred to as the social determinants of health, or risk and protective factors.
- People who engage with Beyond Blue’s services and supports tell us that cost-of-living pressures, loneliness and work problems (such as workplace stress and interpersonal issues) are currently driving distress. These insights are supported by:
 - research commissioned by Beyond Blue and the Australian Securities and Investments Commission that found that people experiencing financial challenges are twice as likely to experience mental health challenges, and the same is true in reverse^{ix}.
 - a representative survey commissioned by Beyond Blue in 2022 of 5000 people living in Australia that shows strong links between those concurrently experiencing mental ill-health, financial distress, loneliness and delayed help-seeking^x.

- The Framework should incorporate mechanisms that measure the drivers and causes of poor wellbeing and ask new and different questions, rather than shoehorn in existing data simply because it is already collected. A strong emphasis on subjective wellbeing measures – derived from an extensive consultation process that asks Australians what matters to their wellbeing – will help to **better understand the strength of relationships** between mental health and wellbeing and other wellbeing domains (such as employment, housing and childhood adversity) across different cohorts. This will improve the evidence-base for policy responses to the social determinants of health by deepening our understanding of how investment in non-health domains impacts mental health and wellbeing, and target investment to promote health equity. Doing so would create flow-on economic savings by improving mental wellbeing, reducing demand for mental health services, and increasing productivity and participation.
- For example, New Zealand’s Living Standards Framework Dashboard provides interactive tools allowing users to explore multidimensional wellbeing and interrogate the relationships between different domains and areas of low wellbeing.

Driving change and committing long-term

- While measuring and reporting on the wellbeing of people living in Australia is important, if we are to make inroads at tackling significant issues and reducing inequity across wellbeing domains, the Framework must be utilised to drive policy-making over the long-term.
- Cross-jurisdictional analysis of how this has been done in Ecuador, France, Italy, New Zealand, Scotland, Sweden and the United Kingdom shows that wellbeing evidence is being applied at different stages of the policy-making cycle, from strategic policy analysis to allocation of resources and evaluation of interventions^{xi}. Examples include legislative requirements that budget bids demonstrate how new funding will contribute to improving wellbeing (NZ) and legislated public reporting of progress against indicators and assessment of impact (France)^{xii}.
- Beyond Blue recommends that the Government **formally embed the Framework into budgetary and policy-making processes** to effectively apply what we learn from this new national dataset.
- Developing a robust plan and resilient mechanisms to use the Framework’s evidence-base to **guide investment in the health, social, economic and environmental factors that shape our mental health and wellbeing** is what will deliver progress in the areas that matter most to the people of Australia.

Appendix A – Definitions

The terms used in this submission do not have universally agreed definitions and mean different things to different people and communities. For the purposes of this submission:

Overall wellbeing is a holistic term used in wellbeing frameworks to represent how people are going across all domains of wellbeing, including health, environment, social, economic, civic, housing etc.

Mental health refers to a state of wellbeing in which an individual realises their own abilities, can cope with the normal stressors of life, can work productively, and is able to contribute to their community (World Health Organisation, 2001). Many factors from other wellbeing domains contribute to mental health, and mental health is critical to overall wellbeing.

To effectively measure mental health, we need to understand two key components: (a) **mental wellbeing** which refers to subjective feelings about how people experience their lives including emotions, functioning, life satisfaction and purpose; and (b) **mental ill-health** which is a clinical term relating to diagnosed or diagnosable conditions and is most often measured by prevalence rates, or rates of psychological distress. While prevention efforts can take time, national data on increases or decreases in people’s mental wellbeing and rates of mental ill-health and distress provide insights into the effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving mental wellbeing in Australia.

The Framework should include definitions of key concepts so that people understand what is being measured and what progress means.

ⁱ Victorian Government (2022) [Outcomes Reform in Victoria](#), accessed 6 December 2023

ⁱⁱ What Works Wellbeing (2018) [Origins of Happiness: Policy Brief](#), What Works Wellbeing website, accessed 6 December 2022

ⁱⁱⁱ Smiling Mind and KPMG (2022) [Australian Mental Wellbeing Index Report 1: January to March 2022](#), accessed 6 December 2022

^{iv} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022) [Australian Burden of Disease Study](#), AIHW website, accessed 13 December 2022

^v Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) [Causes of Death, Australia](#), ABS website, accessed 13 December 2022

^{vi} Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020-21) [National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing](#), ABS Website, accessed 13 December 2022

^{vii} Productivity Commission (2020) [Mental Health Inquiry Report](#), Productivity Commission website, accessed 13 December 2020

^{viii} Meadows G, Enticott J, Rosenberg S (2018) [Three charts on: why rates of mental illness aren't going down despite higher spending, The Conversation](#), accessed 6 December 2022

^{ix} Heartward Strategic on behalf of ASIC and Beyond Blue (2022) [Money and Mental Health Social Research Report](#), Beyond Blue website, accessed 13 December 2020

^x The Social Research Centre, (2023) *Beyond Blue Population Level Survey Report*. Unpublished

^{xi} Exton C, and Shinwell M (2018) [Policy use of well-being metrics: Describing countries' experiences](#), OECD Statistics Working Papers, No. 2018/07, OECD Publishing, Paris, pg 4

^{xii} *Ibid*, pg 20