



AASW

.....
Australian Association
of Social Workers

Measuring What Matters

Submission to the second phase of
consultation

May 2023

About the Australian Association of Social Workers

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the national professional body representing more than 16,000 social workers throughout Australia. The AASW works to promote the profession of social work including setting the benchmarks for professional education and practice in social work; while also advocating on matters of human rights to advance social justice.

Acknowledgements

This submission has been developed in consultation with our members who are working across Australia in various social work areas of practice. It draws on the results of our most recent biennial membership survey which was conducted in July 2022, and collected information from more than 2,000 members about the issues they consider to be most important in terms of community wellbeing, and their priorities for social policy reforms to advance that vision of wellbeing.

For further information or questions relating to this submission, please contact:

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Executive Summary

The AASW welcomes this initiative. We endorse the government's aim to define and drive progress towards wellbeing for all members of the community as part of a commitment to an overall improvement in the quality of life for everyone in Australia.

Social workers operate at the interface between people and their environment, maintaining a dual focus on assisting people to improve their wellbeing, and on identifying and addressing underlying factors that limit or inhibit wellbeing. The AASW's answers to these consultation questions are informed by the experiences of our members across all services systems and sectors related to wellbeing. We believe that the framework that results from this process should:

- refer to Australia's existing human rights obligations;
- reflect the principle that every resident of Australia has equal right to the foundations of wellbeing;
- measure the distribution of these foundations, with an emphasis on the people who are most marginalized and most at-risk.
- monitor the outcomes for the people who are most marginable and most at-risk.

Our Vision: Wellbeing and Social Justice for All

The social work profession in Australia is guided by respect for the dignity of all persons and the principles of social justice and professional integrity. Ensuring that the human rights of individuals and communities are fully realized and protected is at the core of all our work toward our vision of 'Wellbeing and Social Justice for All'. To fulfill this vision, the AASW works toward a society in which all people can thrive, develop their potential, contribute to their community, and pursue lives of meaning and purpose.

Our submission

What are the top 5 issues important for your wellbeing and your community's wellbeing?

The AASW concurs with the results of the first round of consultations; and supports the proposal to limit the number of themes in the framework. We believe that this is the best way to advance the creation of a wellbeing framework which has broad community support, is achievable and will guide decision making.

How do our priorities align with the themes? Which are most important?

The AASW's priorities derive from our foundational principle that every person has a unique, inherent and equal worth; and that each person has a right to wellbeing, opportunities to contribute to their community and society, self-fulfillment, and self-determination to the extent that is consistent with the rights of others. Therefore, the social work profession maintains an unwavering dedication to the promotion and protection of human rights.

Social workers also address the underlying, systemic causes of injustice such as discrimination and structural disadvantage. The AASW upholds the principle of social justice, and we advocate for economic and social policies and conditions which promote equitable access to social, political, economic and environmental resources. Eliminating discrimination depends on

balancing autonomy against shared social responsibility; and ensuring that everyone can participate in the decisions which affect them.

In other words, the AASW's priorities are reflected in some aspects of each of the 5 themes identified in the consultation so far. Rather than being concentrated in only one theme, our priorities are expressed in some of the descriptions, (i.e. the dot points) throughout all themes. These dot points describe the aspects of the theme that relate to human rights and social justice, or which contribute to important descriptors within other themes. For example, within the theme of prosperity, the AASW gives priority to financial security, access to necessary services and access to education. These aspects of prosperity operate as gateways to health, inclusion and cohesion.

Which of the above policy themes are most important to you? Which are less important?

We believe that a national conversation about wellbeing must start with the recognition that health is a human right and that everyone in Australia has a positive right to the services necessary for health. Ensuring equal access to health services must include adopting policies which respond to the social and environmental determinants of health. These are the non-medical factors which influence health outcomes, such as income support and social protection, housing, safety in one's home and community, and affordable, high quality mental health services. Therefore, 'Health' is a priority for the AASW.

Everyday social workers work with people who are not receiving the services they need; and they observe the profound consequences of inadequate income, housing, education, disability supports, and health services. They observe how people's unmet needs compound each other and how people who are already marginalized and vulnerable feel these impacts most acutely. Participation in education, employment, recreation and community life becomes difficult for people, and the exclusion and isolation they experience constitutes an added threat to their wellbeing. Therefore, 'Inclusion', is a priority for the AASW.

The AASW believes that the description of the 'Sustainable' theme fails to communicate the urgency of the situation facing Australia and its population. Ending the harm that is being caused by the destruction of our natural environment is a necessary precondition for all aspects of our wellbeing. Further, AASW members report that the burden of the climate emergency is not being distributed equally. Although the climate affects everyone, the harm caused by the climate emergency is experienced more forcefully by people who are already marginalized and vulnerable. For social workers the climate emergency is a cause of profound social injustice. Therefore, 'Sustainability' is a priority for the AASW.

When it comes to wellbeing, what do you care about that isn't captured above?

As already stated, social work depends on the conviction of the equal value of every person and their equal right to the conditions to fulfill their wellbeing. Therefore, we believe that the Wellbeing Framework should articulate the principle that everyone in Australia has an equal entitlement to the components of wellbeing. Many of the draft descriptors in the consultation document only contribute to wellbeing if they are enjoyed by everyone equally. For example, it is not enough for men to feel safe at home if the women and girls in the same home continue to feel unsafe because of the violence from the men in that home. The AASW believes that the most effective way for the Wellbeing Framework to capture the principle of equality will be for it to be built on a foundation of human rights.

Do these themes cover the key principles we want to be considered when policies are developed?

The AASW has three concerns relating to the process of translating the themes and their descriptors into policies. The first builds on our point above, about the relative distribution of the elements of wellbeing between people. The AASW has a concern that many of the descriptions under the themes are phrased in terms of a generalized allocation across undifferentiated individuals, as though people are merely units of consumption. The descriptors do not address inequality of access, nor do they acknowledge that people differ in their ability to benefit from social goods. For example: it is not enough to specify that “People have access” to education and opportunities for employment. Instead, the wellbeing framework should specify that people with disadvantages such as a language barrier, remote location or disability, have the same ease of access to them as do people without those disadvantages.

One way to address this when policies are developed is to ensure that policies pay attention to the policy outcomes in terms of people’s wellbeing, rather than service outputs. Although this sounds obvious, social workers have seen too many policies constructed in terms of service outputs, such as a number of service hours, which do not necessarily translate directly into equal outcomes for service users.

A second principle for policy development is to pay attention to the close relationship between equality and the theme of cohesion. Although the descriptors in the prosperity theme are obvious examples, this applies to all themes. Many of the items in the other themes operate as drivers of overall wellbeing, only to the extent that they are perceived to be equally available to everyone. If some people believe that they are systematically excluded from elements such as intergenerational mobility, support for diversity, engagement in the community and participation in the democratic process; the level of cohesion within the whole society and community will decrease, to the detriment of everyone in that society.

Related to this is the problem of unequal participation in decisions about how resources are allocated. The AASW believes that excluding some groups of people in the process of policy development has serious consequences, not only for their inclusion into community life but also for the long-term cohesion of the society as a whole.

The response to these concerns is to ensure that policies developed to enhance wellbeing:

- specifically refer to our existing human rights obligations;
- focus attention on the needs of the people who are already most marginalized and vulnerable;
- are directed towards outcomes;
- are informed by consultation with the people who will be affected by them;
- are continuously monitored and improved.

Conclusion

The AASW congratulates the Australian Government on this initiative. We believe it will make a valuable contribution to a society which fosters wellbeing, recognises our shared social responsibility and enables everyone to participate in the decisions that affect them. We believe that this work will require systemic, long-term strategies and policies from all levels of government, and collaboration between all sectors of society, including civil society and the community sector. We look forward to continuing to participate in this process.

Attachment A: Measuring What Matters: Consultation Feedback

Consultation details

Organisation: Australian Association of Social Workers

Host contact details : Angela Scarfe: angela.scarfe@aasw.asn.au

Host Organisation

- ☐ Member of Parliament
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ Non-government organisation
- ☐ Business
- ☐ Academic
- ☐ Community group
- ☐ Individual
- ☒ Other Professional Association

Meeting date: 1/07/2022

Event: Annual membership survey of priority social policy issues.

Participants attending:

- ☐ Member of a community organisation
- ☐ Businesses
- ☐ Academics
- ☐ Union members
- ☐ Individuals
- ☒ Other Members of the AASW

Number of participants: 2,132

What matters to Australians?

1. Did the five emerging policy themes Prosperous, Inclusive, Sustainable, Cohesive and Healthy resonate with meeting participants?

☒ Yes ☐ No if not, why not [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

2. Which of the following themes are most important to you? (Select three)

☐ **Prosperous:**
A growing, productive and resilient economy

☒ **Inclusive:**

A society that shares opportunities and enables people to fully participate

☒ **Sustainable:**

A natural environment that is valued and sustainably managed in the face of a changing climate for current and future generations

☐ **Cohesive:**

A safe and cohesive society that celebrates culture and encourages participation

☒ **Healthy:**

A society in which people feel well and are in good physical and mental health now and into the future

3. Which themes or descriptions were most frequently discussed? (Select three)

☐ **Prosperous:**

A growing, productive and resilient economy

☒ **Inclusive:**

A society that shares opportunities and enables people to fully participate

☒ **Sustainable:**

A natural environment that is valued and sustainably managed in the face of a changing climate for current and future generations

☐ **Cohesive:**

A safe and cohesive society that celebrates culture and encourages participation

☒ **Healthy:**

A society in which people feel well and are in good physical and mental health now and into the future

4. What do you see as the most important issues for future wellbeing? Are these captured by the emerging policy themes?

Social workers believe that the most important foundations for the future well being are: Climate action, equality and the social determinants of health.

The AASW believes that the description of the ‘Sustainable’ theme does not capture the urgency of the climate crisis nor the existential threat that failure to address it would pose to everyone’s wellbeing.

The AASW believes that the overall statement or framework that results from this consultation should refer to the principle that the wellbeing of every member of society matters to the same extent; and everyone has an equal right to the benefits that flow from community wellbeing. The success of the ‘Inclusive’ and ‘Cohesive’ themes depend on paying attention to the people who currently have the least access to the dot points described in all the themes. For example, people will be included in leadership, and will trust government if they perceive that government ensures their equal access to necessary services, amenities, education and provides for the health and development of their children.

The AASW believes that the “Healthy” theme should refer to the social determinants of health. We agree with the consultation paper’s points that wellbeing is holistic and that the themes are connected. We agree that “Good physical and mental health” depends on prosperity, inclusion and cohesion. Social workers observe daily how poverty, poor nutrition, insecure housing and loneliness pose severe risks to physical and mental health. The AASW believes that the ‘Healthy’

theme should acknowledge the importance of equal access to the ingredients necessary for physical and mental health.

5. How might the descriptions be amended to best reflect our priorities?

The AASW believes that the descriptions should pay more attention to the way that the foundations for social, economic and health wellbeing are distributed between members of society. For example, many of the current descriptors of the “Prosperous” theme are phrased in terms of individual experiences and ignore the worsening inequality in their distribution. For many people, it seems that budget sustainability has been achieved at the expense of their own income support payments, which in turn has destroyed their financial security and curtailed their opportunities for employment. Further, many of the descriptors in the other themes will only contribute to wellbeing, to the extent that everyone experiences them equally. For example: a society in which only some women experience gender equality creates a division between groups of women and is therefore less cohesive as well as being less inclusive. Similarly lack of intergenerational mobility detracts from the life satisfaction of all the generations involved.

6. Are there any indicators and existing data sources that will be critical to inform the emerging policy themes?

Further to the comment above, the AASW believes that data on the indicators should enable the disaggregation in terms of groups of people who we know to be currently marginalised. Social workers are working with the people who are most vulnerable and whose needs are most complex. Data that describes averages and overall progress is inadequate in capturing the severe consequences for these people when progress is slow. Therefore to know whether we are improving the wellbeing of everyone, we need to be able to break down data by gender, age group, ability status, Indigenous status and geographic location.

7. Is there any additional information you would like to see in the Measuring What Matters Statement? If so, please outline.

Please see our attached submission.

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