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Dear Measuring What Matters team

### **Australian Psychological Society Submission to the Measuring What Matters Second Phase Consultation**

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to Treasury's second phase consultation on Measuring What Matters. As suggested by Treasury, the APS convened a consultation session to discuss the themes and issues in the Second Phase Consultation Pack. The online session was held on 25 May 2023 and was attended by 10 participants. Participants included Chairs or representatives of the following APS member groups:

- APS College of Clinical Psychologists
- APS College of Community Psychologists
- APS College of Organisational Psychologists
- APS College of Sport and Exercise Psychologists
- APS Division of General Psychological Practice

The session was hosted by the APS Policy Team and was also attended by APS National Office staff who are registered psychologists or have advanced qualifications in psychological science. The key themes from the consultation session are set out below according to the questions in the Consultation Feedback Form.

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

- Participants indicated that the five emerging policy themes had face validity. That is, the themes made sense and were all seen to have a connection to wellbeing. Some participants commented that the themes resembled a simplified version of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, which is used widely (including by the Australian Psychological Society) as a framework for wellbeing and progress.
- However, there was insufficient detail about the underlying conceptual structure of the emerging policy themes and how they relate to each other, and to wellbeing more generally. Significant concerns were raised about the presentation of the themes in an absolute and decontextualised way.
- Without further detail, it would be easy to assume that the five themes are rigidly and equally weighted. This led to a further concern that this approach implicitly allows for trade-offs between themes or domains of wellbeing: for example, that sustained inequalities in health

indicators for some Australians could be ignored or justified if there are sufficient increases in the domain of prosperity for others.

- Related to this, participants sought greater clarity about the fundamental question: *for whom* do the themes apply? It should be made clear that the themes apply at different levels (e.g., individual, communities, particular groups, society, and government). There should be some acknowledgement of the tension that can exist between these levels, and the importance of working through these tensions in an open and equitable way as a part of enhancing wellbeing and social progress.
- The above concerns were compounded by the limited detail about how these emerging themes were identified. The themes have significant normative weight, setting out what *should be* considered important for wellbeing. As such, there needs to be an evidence-based, impartial and transparent basis for their selection. This process of identifying *what matters* for wellbeing was seen as being just as important as the themes themselves. Without this information presented in a credible way, there is a risk that this framework could be misapplied in support of policies or programs which may undermine wellbeing.
- As we pointed out in our first submission, an opaque and closed process of conceptualising wellbeing increases the risk of epistemic injustice when the model is applied to policies and programs. Participants noted that the Government's determination of 'what matters' for wellbeing could be used to erase the experience of inequity, injustice or impaired wellbeing, causing further psychological and social harm particularly to Australians who are already vulnerable or disenfranchised. Participants therefore hoped that this consultation process has actively extended to these groups.

## **2. Which of the following themes are most important to you?**

- Participants found that this question was difficult to answer without clear definitions of the themes (see Question 4 below) and a better sense of how the themes relate to each other, as noted above.
- Participants also believed that the task of prioritising the themes was inconsistent with the Consultation Pack, which notes that "themes need to be viewed as interconnected as opposed to discrete or ranked in priority". Domains of wellbeing should not be constructed as being rivalrous or zero-sum. Further work should be done to communicate that the themes are related, cross-cutting and operate within a dynamic system.
- Moreover, the relative importance of these themes is contextually-dependent. Participants also recognised the culturally-linked values associated with some of the themes and were therefore cautious about imposing their own viewpoint about their importance in the abstract.
- Participants pointed to the World Health Organization's conceptual framework for the Social Determinants of Health as an example of a model which expressly considers the social context and sets out theory-informed mechanisms for how the various determinants relate to each other.

## **3. Which themes or descriptions were most frequently discussed?**

- 'Prosperous' was discussed by participants as a theme that was not well-defined. Whose prosperity – and what kind of prosperity – matters, or matters more? Participants were concerned that the concept of prosperity – which was seen to be primarily tied to traditional economic measures – could be given disproportionate weight or be used to justify the status quo in policy decision-making. Participants also discussed the importance of promoting or maintaining wellbeing even when we are not prosperous, as well as recognising non-economic forms of prosperity (e.g., mental wealth). Finally, there was discussion about the importance of recognising unpaid and care work as a contributor to shared prosperity, not just paid employment.

- As psychologists, 'Healthy' was also recognised as an important theme with clear linkages to wellbeing, particularly in terms of mental and physical health. Participants also pointed to the multiple bidirectional casual relationships between health and other wellbeing themes (e.g., the connection between mental health and employment and social participation). However, the description of 'healthy' was seen as unrealistic, noting that there is a sizeable proportion of the Australian population for whom good physical and mental health is unlikely to be realised. The wellbeing of these Australians still matters and should be promoted in other more meaningful ways. Finally, the description/proposed indicators should refer to the reduction of health inequities across Australia, both as something that can be readily measured and addressed.

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

- Participants felt that the theme of *equity* is important for future wellbeing. While equity was an underlying concept in the themes and descriptions, participants believed that it should be given greater prominence. This includes geographical equity (i.e., identifying and narrowing the wellbeing gaps for Australians in rural and remote communities), as well as ensuring that there are diverse voices participating and being heard in respectful public discourse, including in this consultation process.
- The themes need to recognise the role of preventative actions to mitigate against future events which have a negative impact on wellbeing (e.g., climate change, disasters or pandemics at a societal level, or effective prevention initiatives to promote good physical and mental health at the individual or community level). This also requires measuring our capacity to learn from recent or past events (e.g., COVID-19) as a society, including learning from failures or the unintended wellbeing effects of policies, programs or interventions.
- It is important to measure endemic adverse social experiences (e.g., racism, discrimination and prejudice embedded within the fabric of society), given the under-recognised damage to wellbeing and progress that these can have on individuals, communities and society.
- There should be greater emphasis given to positive and trustworthy leadership – a sense of being well-led – from both governments and organisations. There is currently limited recognition of the role of organisations (particularly corporations and employers) and their role in promoting or hindering the wellbeing of their employees, customers, clients, or others whose lives are affected by their actions.

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

Participants believed that each of the descriptions need to be better operationalised in two directions:

- Aligning the descriptions with the theme: The themes are currently not well-operationalised and seem to be nebulous umbrella terms. The descriptions do not provide a sufficient explanation about what they mean.
- Aligning the descriptions with the proposed indicators: There is some disconnect between the themes/descriptions and the list of proposed indicators against that theme. This suggests that there is a lack of conceptual clarity or specificity in the theme which is yet to be resolved.

In addition, the descriptions should aim for achievable, incremental and meaningful change, rather than setting aspirational targets which are unlikely to ever be achieved. In other words, the themes and descriptions should drive towards success, not be set up for failure.

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

Participants believed that the themes should be developed based on the available data and research, rather than to have aspirational themes in search of data.

We refer to the indicators and data sources identified in our first submission. The APS would welcome the opportunity to engage with Treasury further to showcase other measures and data sources which are informed by extensive psychological research and practice.

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

- As noted in the response to Question 1 above, participants wanted greater detail and transparency about the process of determining the themes. Who made these decisions? What evidence was used to select the themes? What steps were taken to protect against bias, and to ensure that the themes, descriptions, and proposed indicators are culturally appropriate? We reiterate the need for a measurement framework, as set out in our original submission, to ensure that these matters are addressed in a credible, transparent, and evidence-based way.
- A clear definition of wellbeing is necessary. As noted in our initial submission, a robust and operationalisable definition of wellbeing is essential for both effective measurement and the practical application of the model to public policy.
- Given that the Consultation Pack notes that the themes are inter-connected, participants wanted to see some examples of what these relationships might look like. What are the mechanics by which the themes affect each other, and how does this play out across different actors and groups within society (e.g., individuals, communities, and government)?
- The Statement should illustrate how the themes will be used in the policy and budget process, and what success looks like. How will we know that the themes and indicators have validity; that is, that they are indeed measuring what matters, and that these indicators are used effectively in policy decision-making to have a positive impact on wellbeing? To this end, it would be useful to have an end-to-end worked example of how the themes are applied to a complex social problem, such as homelessness. One suggestion was that the next round of consultation should invite relevant stakeholders to workshop such an example, with the results to be included as part of the Statement.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Measuring What Matters consultation. If any further information is required from the APS, I would be happy to be contacted through our National Office on (03) 8662 3300 or by email at: [z.burgess@psychology.org.au](mailto:z.burgess@psychology.org.au)

Yours sincerely



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*The APS would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank the members who so kindly contributed their time, knowledge, experience, and evidence-based research to this submission.*