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Talking wellbeing:
A public dialogue approach to effective policy-making

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The New Economics Foundation (NEF) is an independent think-and-do tank that inspires and demonstrates real economic wellbeing. We aim to improve quality of life by promoting innovative solutions that challenge mainstream thinking on economic, environmental and social issues. We work in partnership and put people and the planet first.

The Sciencewise programme is funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). Sciencewise aims to improve policy-making involving science and technology across government by increasing the effectiveness with which public dialogue is used, and encouraging its wider use where appropriate to ensure public views are considered as part of the evidence base.

Cabinet Office

The Cabinet Office supports the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, and ensures the effective running of government. It is also the corporate headquarters for government, in partnership with HM Treasury, and takes the lead in certain critical policy areas such as national security and government efficiency, transparency and accountability.

Hopkins Van Mil: Creating Connections
is about engagement to gain insight. As expert dialogue facilitators the team creates safe, neutral and productive spaces in which to access people's views. HVM bridges the gap between policy- and decision-making and the views of communities and members of the public for whom policies and decisions are made.

Contents

Summary

By running three public dialogues on wellbeing in policy, this project found that the public were interested and engaged with wellbeing, and that the wellbeing lens enabled them to really consider what matters to them. This has the potential, not only to deliver better policy, but also to reconnect people to the policy-making process in a meaningful way.

Since 2010 the government has made great strides in measuring population wellbeing. The question now is how to use that data, and other evidence on wellbeing, to create better policies.

This project aimed to involve members of the public in doing just that. In order to achieve these aims, we ran three public dialogues in each of which members of the public were presented with a policy challenge, and asked to consider high wellbeing solutions. We recruited a range of people of different ages and backgrounds who would be affected by each policy area. For each policy area we held two, three-hour workshops in two areas of the country. The project was lead by NEF with Hopkins van Mil, and funded by the Cabinet Office and Sciencewise.

By bringing together the wellbeing and open policy-making agendas we hoped to strengthen both. We found that introducing a wellbeing lens helped participants engage with the policy issues in a meaningful way, enabling clearer and deeper focus on what really matters to them.

In particular, participants were able to use the wellbeing lens to challenge the assumptions underpinning the policy design and in some cases the objectives. This allowed them to make quite broad suggestions for changes to policy priorities.

We therefore recommend that where possible, wellbeing is introduced in public dialogue at an early stage of the policy cycle, when challenging objectives and assumptions is most useful, though it can also have value with other engagement techniques at later stages of the cycle.

Based on consideration of the wellbeing evidence, dialogue participants came up with suggestions on the three policy questions posed to them.

Increasing the incomes of low earners

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) were interested in how a better understanding of wellbeing may help them design policy to encourage and support low earners to increase their incomes.

Key findings and policy implications
- Many participants working part time were not interested in working longer hours due to the negative perceived effect on their wellbeing. We therefore suggests that policies to help low earners increase their hours should avoid targeting those working part time voluntarily.

- For parents who were interested in working longer hours, the provision of affordable, flexible childcare was key.

- Participants felt that improving the quality of work would motivate them to increase their earnings, and felt that government could play a pro-active role in supporting this.

- Participants wanted flexible, personal, supportive and high quality services to help them pursue higher incomes, ideally being assigned to one contact person. However, many felt Jobcentre Plus would not be able to provide this support because of perceptions that it had a stigmatising and punitive culture, suggesting other alternatives should be considered.

Reducing loneliness

The Cabinet Office's Social Action Team were interested in how to reduce loneliness in communities.

Key findings and policy implications
- While many participants were very keen to be involved in building stronger communities and overcoming loneliness, some felt they could not do this alone. They suggested that investment by government was needed to help them take the first step in creating stronger communities, for example in the form of community workers or community centres.

- Participants explained that a lack of money was both a cause of loneliness, and a barrier to undertaking activities that would help to reduce their loneliness. We therefore suggest that interventions to reduce loneliness explicitly aim to overcome inequalities in loneliness according to income.

- Participants felt that GPs have an important role to play in reducing loneliness and felt strongly that GPs needed to be more aware of loneliness as an issue. In particular, they were worried about the use of medication to treat loneliness, and many preferred approaches which addressed the underlying causes.

Increasing the uptake of community rights

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) were interested in what would encourage more people to consider exercising their community rights, or take control of decision-making in their communities in other ways.

Key findings and policy implications

- Some participants were interested in being involved in the community rights (though not in a leadership role), due to the wellbeing benefits of the process and the benefits to their quality of life that could be secured through the outcomes.

- However, there were also participants who were less enthusiastic about taking a pro-active role in exercising the community rights in their current form. This was due to a number of perceived difficulties with exercising the rights, including the long time frame; the lack of local leadership and cohesion needed to get an initiative off the ground (particularly in deprived areas); the excessive levels of time commitment and skill often required; and the risk of failure and conflict. Participants felt that these could have negative effects on their wellbeing. Nevertheless, many participants did express a strong desire to engage more with their communities and help shape the place they lived, due to the wellbeing benefits they perceived would come about from doing so.

- Some participants in one of the more deprived areas were particularly negative about the 'right to challenge', as this was perceived negatively by many as a back door to privatisation.

- We suggest that creating further community rights, or developing existing ones, could be more popular to a wider range of people if the emphasis is more on helping people participate in the decisions that affect them, rather than taking over assets and services. In addition, opportunities should be promoted to lower the barriers of participation by allowing for some quick wins.

1. Introduction

Since 2010 the government has made great strides in measuring population wellbeing. The question now is how to use that data and other evidence on wellbeing to create better policies. This project brought together members of the public to help do just that.

Aims of the project

Since 2010, the UK's Office of National Statistics (ONS) has introduced one of the world's most comprehensive systems for measuring population wellbeing. This evidence allows the relative influence of different circumstances on wellbeing, and thus policy priorities, to be assessed. In 2011, Prime Minister David Cameron expressed his intention to use this data to inform policy:

> "*Right across Whitehall we are today applying to the design of policy the best that science teaches us about how people behave – and what drives their wellbeing.[1]*"

It is not yet clear how this will affect the day-to-day practice of policy development. One measure of success would be that wellbeing evidence is fed into existing Whitehall processes, and considered alongside other evidence presented in analyses and evaluations. This has received welcome attention, including from Lord Gus O'Donnell's report on wellbeing earlier this year which proposed the use of wellbeing cost-benefit analysis[2] and from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics report *Wellbeing in Four Policy Areas*, published in September.[3] However, while embedding wellbeing into civil service processes is an important ingredient, if wellbeing is to achieve its full potential, it cannot be relegated to the technical appendices or impact assessments of Whitehall. It will need to become a public agenda.

At the same time, government is increasingly committed to policy-making that is more engaged and open. Indeed, it is hoped that open policy-making can become the default across government.[4] The public are arguably the most important stakeholder in this process. The call for more engagement with the public is not just based on a belief that it is the right thing to do. It is also based on the recognition that open policy-making is better policy-making. A more curious and collaborative approach can create services which are better able to meet people's actual needs, and policies which reflect their aspirations and priorities and benefit from their ideas and insight.

This project aimed to bring together the wellbeing and open policy-making agendas in order to strengthen both. Our hypothesis was that a consideration of wellbeing would encourage and enable participants to focus more clearly on what really matters to them when considering a policy.

The project aimed to:

- inform policy in the three areas identified, based on participants' interpretation of the wellbeing evidence and their own personal experiences

- learn from the process about how, where and when to engage with the public on wellbeing, and understand the specific benefits of adding consideration of wellbeing into public dialogues on different policies

- produce guidance and support for policy-makers on enhancing public engagement by using wellbeing, on the basis of this learning (to be developed in 2014/15).

In order to achieve these aims, we ran a public dialogue in which members of the public were presented with three policy challenges, and asked to consider high wellbeing solutions. The project was delivered by NEF, and funded by the Cabinet Office and Sciencewise. Dialogue experts Hopkins van Mil were contracted to deliver the dialogues, and 3KQ undertook an independent evaluation.

Methodology[5]

What is public dialogue?

For Sciencewise, public dialogue is:
- opening up discussion with public and different perspectives to help explore issues, aspirations and concerns when shaping policy

- talking with the public about ethical and societal issues related to public policy

- equiring the instigators of the dialogue to be potentially willing and able to change their minds

- ensuring that public insights can inform policy.

Public dialogue is not:
- solely one-way communication 'to' the public

- representative – participants do not formally represent their geographic area or discipline

- a talking shop with no policy purpose

- about the public actually making decisions – these are ultimately the responsibility of elected government, ministers and others

- about simply gaining public support or acceptance for preconceived policies.

Good public dialogue can help policy-makers and government to:
- make better, more robust decisions that reflect public values and societal implications

- increase legitimacy for tough decisions

- demonstrate accountability in public investment

- overcome entrenched positions to enable policy to move forward

- gain a rich understanding of public aspirations and concerns that goes beyond media headlines or focus groups.

Developing policy questions
Departments put forward three policy challenges to be explored:

• increasing the incomes of low earners (working with DWP)

• reducing loneliness (working with the Cabinet Office Social Action Team)

• encouraging the take-up of community rights (a specific set of rights introduced in the 2011 Localism Act) and considering other ways of communities taking more control of local decision-making (working with DCLG).

The exact policy questions for each area were very important. We returned to them regularly to inform the detailed workshop designs. As a result, the questions were often adapted over the course of the project, as the process of developing the detailed dialogue methodology, and the research undertaken alongside it, sharpened our thinking. More detailed descriptions of the questions can be found in each policy chapter.

Overarching methodology
For each policy question five workshops were delivered in two rounds.

The first round brought together 25 participants in each of two areas of the country (50 in total). Through a series of small group exercises and plenary discussions, participants were introduced to the topic and came up with some initial thoughts and suggestions.

After the first round, participants' thoughts were collated. Input was sought both from the relevant policy-makers and from external topic specialists, to consider which areas would be most interesting to follow-up on in Round 2. We considered:

• which discussions could add value to policy-making (for example if there is already extensive research on the public's views, revisiting it would not be useful)

• which areas participants felt were most important

• which ideas were most likely to be actively considered by policy-makers.

In Round 2, the same participants were re-convened in both locations. They were presented with the research on the outcomes of Round 1, after which they interrogated and challenged the ideas further.

Round 2 also included a workshop with frontline workers – relevant stakeholders such as Jobcentre Plus staff, local businesses or community organisers. They were also presented with the ideas and suggestions participants came up with in Round 1, and asked to consider their feasibility and the possible impacts on their work.

Participants were identified through an external recruitment agency according to a recruitment specification that aimed to include a diverse range of participants who would be affected by the policy area. They were given a fee for attending in line with good practice for delivering public dialogue.

Introducing the wellbeing lens
During the dialogues, we introduced the wellbeing lens in a number of ways:

• asking questions that encouraged consideration of wellbeing. For example, 'What effect would this idea have on your personal wellbeing?'

• actively reflecting back points in a way to encourage connection with the wellbeing and what drives and influences it

• presenting participants with evidence on what influences wellbeing.

The relevant wellbeing evidence differed considerably between the different policy areas. In the case of the dialogue on low pay, we introduced participants to some general findings in relation to work, for example the high wellbeing benefits of being in work compared to being unemployed, and the importance to wellbeing of issues such as pay, autonomy and job security. We also presented them with more specific wellbeing evidence in relation to a range of active labour market programmes which had already been undertaken and might be relevant to the policy question.

However, there was no specific wellbeing evidence on the effects of exercising the Localism Act community rights. Instead we presented evidence on drivers of wellbeing which might be affected by exercising community rights, such as volunteering, knowing your neighbours or feeling that you can make a difference. We also drew from qualitative studies of the experiences of people who had exercised influence in their communities in other ways. As well as supporting the positive effects of exercising local control, this research also identified some wellbeing disadvantages, such as feelings of stress or the effects of group conflict.

The topic of loneliness is so intrinsic to wellbeing itself that limited additional evidence was necessary. The causes of loneliness were explained, and participants were also presented with the 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' – five evidence-based steps to improve personal wellbeing.[6]

The dialogues were run according to Sciencewise's guiding principles.[7] The design, materials and facilitation were delivered with a view to avoiding leading participants to certain conclusions. Staff from the relevant government departments were engaged throughout the process. Their input was invaluable to ensure the dialogue remained grounded in the realities of policy-making – an essential ingredient if participants' views are to have real influence. For example, between the first and second workshops, policy-makers helped to identify ideas that would be of most interest to government and would be worth further discussion. However, NEF retained full responsibility for the final dialogue process.

The methodology is described in more detail in the appendix (www.neweconomics.org/talkingwellbeingappendix), and detailed workshop plans and materials can be found in the online technical annexes: www.neweconomics.org/talkingwellbeingtechnicalannexes

Learning on methodology

As the three policy areas were undertaken one after another, we were able to learn and adjust our approach as we went along. This allowed us to identify some key lessons for future dialogues. As we outline in the next chapter, a full public dialogue process may not always be appropriate. However, these suggestions may also be applicable to other more light-touch engagement methods.

- In order to develop clarity on the policy question, the project team found it helpful to develop a shared understanding early on between project partners on the following questions.

  1. What is the relevant policy context?

  2. What is the primary policy question? Are there other issues which would be interesting to explore as well?

  3. What current or future policy decisions or processes may be influenced by the public's views on this topic?

  4. What can the public add? (That is, what can they tell us that we don't know already from other research?)

  5. What can the wellbeing lens add? (That is, what is its relevance to the topic?)

- If re-convened discussions are possible, incorporating time to undertake research and consider suggestions from a policy perspective can be valuable to guide further participant discussion. Input from policy-makers ensured the dialogue remained grounded in the realities of policy-making and ensured that the workshops were not merely talking shops, but could have real influence.

- For similar reasons, providing time for policy-makers to feed back their reactions to participants during, or at the end of workshops was useful. This direct connection between policy-makers and participants had dual value. Firstly, it demonstrated to participants that policy-makers really had listened. Secondly, it allowed policy-makers to constructively challenge certain suggestions from a policy perspective, which could then be fed into later discussions, leading to more grounded and nuanced suggestions.

- Given that wellbeing data is not always available, it was useful in some cases to look beyond specific wellbeing measures and reference mental or physical health measures, which are more often available. This should of course be made clear to participants in materials and presentations.

These lessons should be considered alongside the extensive literature on how to run engagement and dialogue sessions, some of which can be found on the Sciencewise website.[8]

Reading this report

This report should be helpful to anyone who is interested in better, more open policy-making. It is for those who are keen to expose their policy questions and proposals to the public with the aim of testing and improving ideas so that they can be implemented with minimum risk, thereby saving time and money downstream in the policy process. The first chapter of the report describes what we have learned about when and how to introduce wellbeing into public engagement, and how this can improve policy-making. The following three chapters consider the three policy areas in turn.

In each section, we pull out those **findings** which are relevant to policy and government generally. Not all of these findings directly answered the specific policy questions which were used to guide the sessions. As we suggest below, we see this as a strength of the dialogue process. Participants' lives do not fit into Whitehall silos and building policy based on people's real experiences may produce cross-departmental solutions and more holistic policy, which starts with the individual.

Based on these findings, NEF have suggested some **policy priorities** which do attempt to help answer the policy question (whether or not the action which needs to be taken is in the gift of the departments we were working with, or another part of government). For the most part these are not detailed solutions: rather they suggest a broad direction, and so set an agenda for further research and policy development.

The policy pointers are made by NEF and are fully grounded in participants' views. They do not necessarily reflect the policy of any government department.

Full dialogue reports, written by dialogue specialists Hopkins van Mil can be found in the appendix: www.neweconomics.org/talkingwellbeingappendix

Public dialogue is not the same as research or opinion polls. The views presented here do not claim to be representative of the UK population. However, the loss in breadth is traded off for gains in depth. Participants' opinions are the result of careful consideration and deliberation between a diverse range of people for whom the policy question is particularly relevant.

2. When and how should the public be engaged in the use of wellbeing in policy-making?

Introducing a wellbeing lens helped participants engage with policy issues in a meaningful way. We recommend its use in public dialogue at an early stage of the policy cycle, when challenging objectives and assumptions is most useful. We also recommend its use with other engagement techniques at later stages of the cycle.

Summary of findings and recommendations

This project was experimental. We knew that public dialogue is most useful when the aim is to open up issues, explore possibilities and examine strong ethical or policy dilemmas and how they can be resolved. We also knew that wellbeing is a highly engaging topic that resonates well with the public. Our hypothesis was that introducing this perspective into public dialogues about policy would strengthen participants' engagement with the issues, lead to richer conversations and thus produce a more useful output. Nonetheless, this was only a hypothesis, and we were not sure before we began how the public would react to the wellbeing evidence, or whether the dialogues would differ significantly from dialogues on these issues which did not consider wellbeing.

In the event we found that **introducing a wellbeing lens *did* help participants engage with the policy issues in a meaningful way.** It helped them relate the policies to things that really mattered to them, to their quality of life, and to engage more deeply with the process, sometimes in quite an emotional way. Our sense was that engaging with participants in this deeper way reduced the tendency to offer received or acceptable opinions. In addition, the wellbeing lens legitimated participants' reactions – because everyone is an expert in his or her own wellbeing.[9]

Partly as a result of this legitimation, we found that **participants were able to use the wellbeing lens to challenge** the assumptions underpinning the policy design and in some cases the objectives, and on this basis to make quite broad suggestions for changes to policy priorities. Naturally this depended on their assessment of wellbeing impacts, which was of interest in itself – for example many participants were risk averse when it came to their wellbeing, a finding that may usefully inform Whitehall sponsors of new initiatives. **However, the wellbeing evidence was less useful when the discussion turned to the details of policy implementation**, although our assessment was that this partly reflected the public dialogue technique, and that it could have been more useful during such discussions if other

techniques had been used (such as approaches based on co-production, or engagement in service design such as customer journey mapping etc.) Finally, the dialogues were a potentially useful stimulus for new ideas and perspectives amongst policy-makers but participants themselves **did not produce particularly innovative solutions** to problems. There had been some hope that wellbeing evidence might stimulate a range of innovative, new ideas amongst participants, but we found no evidence for this. Nevertheless, the views of participants were still extremely valuable, not only in themselves, but also as a foundation for others e.g. policy-makers and frontline workers, to consider new solutions and approaches to communicating policies.

On this basis we recommend two ways of involving the public in policy-making using a wellbeing lens.

First, **at an early stage of the policy cycle**, when the objectives are being formulated, or the broad design of the policy is being shaped, **it will often be worth using public dialogue based on wellbeing evidence**. This is most likely when the impact of the policy on wellbeing is uncertain but critical to success, either because wellbeing is the ultimate objective of the policy or because the impacts will affect how people behave in response, and this behaviour is in turn critical to success. There are policies that satisfy these criteria in just about every area of government.

Public dialogue is designed to open up discussions and help examine real dilemmas and how they might be resolved. We found that the wellbeing lens reinforces this, drawing attention as it does to the ultimate objectives of policy as perceived by citizens, rather than purely as framed by particular departmental priorities. This means that the more that is still open, the earlier in the cycle and the more active the decisions, the greater the value of this approach. Some kind of defined policy questions and parameters will always be needed – participants have to have something to get their teeth into – but much of the value will lie in the creative thinking amongst policy-makers that challenges to these parameters provoke.

Second, **during later stages of the policy cycle**, when detailed design and implementation are being considered, **it may be useful to use wellbeing evidence as a stimulus in other engagement processes** (i.e. not public dialogue as used in this project). This will often be the case when public services or government communications are being designed or, again, where the success of a policy is dependent on how people behave. Bringing wellbeing into the conversation may help both to elicit more authentic responses, as noted above, and potentially make the discussion more open.

Findings in more detail

Finding: Introducing a wellbeing lens helped participants engage with the policy issues in a meaningful way and led to richer conversations.

On the whole, participants reacted positively to being provided with evidence on wellbeing during the dialogues. In the anonymous evaluation

questionnaires, 91% said that thinking about wellbeing had helped them come up with better views and ideas on the topic.[10] This was not unanimous – a small number of participants were unclear about the relevance of wellbeing during the community rights dialogue and one participant felt overwhelmed by repeated use of this 'new phrase of wellbeing'. However, this was the exception to the rule.

Many participants drew on wellbeing issues throughout the dialogue. For example, when discussing the importance of getting feedback from the policy-makers on how their views had been considered as a result of this dialogue, one participant said:

> "*Even if it's a no, give us a reason why, make it public. […] Don't cover it up, […] that's not good for our wellbeing.*"
> Public participant, Birmingham

The focus on wellbeing seemed to give permission to participants to move beyond the intellectual level of processing that is often associated with policy development towards emotional and visceral engagement with the real issues at hand. For example, during the community rights dialogue one participant made a case for financial constraint, a topic which might usually be associated with dry financial reasoning, with a somewhat emotional plea.

> "*One thing that would tie in with wellbeing in this context is knowing that they're not spending a fortune getting it going. The government's so good at spending a fortune. That worries me senseless.*"
> Public participant, London

Similarly, one of the ways in which the wellbeing agenda seemed to influence discussions about community rights was in its ability to encourage conversations that were grounded in real life experiences. For example, in London, many participants were keen in principle to do things for the community, but when thinking about their own priorities and the effect on their wellbeing, some explained that they personally wouldn't get involved because of the time and effort required. Some saw the trade-off as risking their present wellbeing against future gains which they may or may not see. However, given that they did see that there were wellbeing benefits to engaging in their communities more generally, this allowed the conversation to explore what would actually motivate them to get engaged.

We also began to see this play out during the dialogue on increasing the income of low earners. One of the ideas we presented to participants was government providing incentives to attend training or enter full-time work – two policies which have already been trialled in the UK. If we assume people are self-interested, we might have expected them to react favourably to this suggestion; why wouldn't they want to get paid to do something that many people were interested in doing anyway? However, while some participants liked these ideas, they were much less popular than many others. For example, participants were much more interested in getting a sense of satisfaction from work. Instead, participants suggested, government could consider how to encourage employers to value their employees more.

This overall finding is hard to substantiate without further dialogues on a larger range of issues, as well as comparisons with dialogues that did not use wellbeing evidence. However, because of its potential to dig below the surface and encourage people to think concretely about how things would affect them, wellbeing may offer a way to engage people in policy topics that they would not otherwise be interested in. Indeed, given that we are facing what some argue is an historical low in democratic trust and engagement, wellbeing may offer a long sought after way to reconnect people to the political process.

Finding: Participants were able to use the wellbeing lens to challenge policy objectives and design, and to suggest new priorities.

The three policy objectives we considered differed along two dimensions: the extent to which participants challenged the assumptions behind the objectives, and how developed the policies themselves were.

The DWP policy objective (increasing the incomes of low earners) sounds uncontroversial, but given that in practice it may mean encouraging people to switch jobs or work longer hours, it was in fact highly controversial amongst participants. The policy itself however, was at a relatively early stage. Participants challenged the objectives, but were also able to suggest priorities for implementing a modified version of these objectives.

For example, many participants were interested in the evidence that there can be wellbeing benefits to working part time for those who choose to do so. For participants who had chosen to work part time, this resonated strongly with their own experience. As one woman explained:

> *"I wish I'd [started working part time] years ago, because I was too busy working and looking after my daughter to realise the importance of wellbeing. Now, later on in life, I do understand it. I'm calmer, I'm enjoying myself more."*
> Public participant, Pontypool

Some participants therefore questioned whether encouraging low earners to work full time in order to increase their incomes should in fact be a policy objective. This did not imply the policy objective should be abandoned altogether (particularly as DWP would not advocate longer hours in every case) but rather refined so that it targets the right people.

The question then became what kind of support is needed for those people who do want to work longer hours or change jobs. The dialogues produced three key priorities:

• affordable child care

• addressing the increased insecurity associated with moving to a new job

• and support that is more personalised and professional than what they had received from Jobcentre Plus (see chapter below for details).

The DCLG policy objective (encouraging the take-up of community rights and other ways of communities taking more control of local decision-making) was less controversial. While not everyone wanted to take up community rights as currently defined by the legislation, there was support for the broader objective of helping communities take more control of local decision-making. In this case, though, the policy was very far advanced, including a specific set of rights which had been in place since 2011 and even a support package designed to encourage take-up.

Participants did not challenge the objective, but their comments challenged the specific design of the policy, in this case one which involved a significant input of time.

"Two years is too long. It is two years of grief, emails, phone calls, anxiety, and also the pressure of dealing with it, and also holding your group together."
Public participant, London

The dialogue was thus most useful as an input into any potential redesign of the policy.

The Cabinet Office objective of reducing loneliness was completely uncontroversial. In fact there was some pleasant surprise that government might have such an objective. One participant remarked, appreciatively:

"I wasn't aware that the government was bothered whether anyone was lonely or not."
Public participant, Leicester

Furthermore while there are a large number of initiatives, the policy is still quite open. There is scope for new types of initiative and there was no pre-set policy framework to challenge.

This meant the wellbeing evidence – in this case mainly NEF's 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' – played a different role. Rather than stimulate a challenge, it provoked conversation amongst participants (all self-identified as currently or recently lonely) about what can be done to address loneliness. The importance of 'giving' struck a chord for many in the room. This lead to conversations about policy responses to loneliness which on the face of it had little to do with social relationships, but rather were about helping people contribute more generally to their communities. This is not a new idea, but it was the dialogue process and the wellbeing evidence that opened up the discussion and allowed us to see just how positive the self-identified lonely were about this, suggesting they would respond well to such initiatives.

Considering the use of public dialogue in science and technology, Professor Andy Stirling argues that public dialogue can add most value by disruptively 'opening up' the policy discourse as long as dialogue is designed to allow this.[11] The wellbeing evidence seemed to support this process, particularly in the dialogues on low pay and community rights. The Cabinet Office dialogue felt less disruptive – there was less to disrupt – and it is arguable that the same results could have been achieved with a lighter technique than full-scale public dialogue.

Finding: This approach – the use of wellbeing within public dialogue – was less useful when the discussion turned to the details of policy implementation.

In contrast to these quite fruitful uses of the wellbeing lens, once participants were discussing the detail of policy implementation – how to advertise local volunteering opportunities to help overcome loneliness, for example, or the guidance needed to support people to use the community rights – participants drew less on the wellbeing evidence. Indeed some of these conversations were less productive in general.

For some of these issues, such as how best to advertise the support available for community rights, wellbeing evidence simply had less bearing, or to the extent that it did it was far less important than other issues. In addition, some of these issues were not well suited to public dialogue, which, as we suggest above, is particularly good at opening up processes rather than dealing with detailed policy design.

There are of course many areas of service design, or detailed policy development, where wellbeing can add value. In these areas, other engagement techniques better suited to later stages of the policy cycle may be more appropriate (for example, customer journey mapping in service design).

Finding: Participants' views have the real potential to stimulate new policy ideas and perspectives, but the participants themselves did not produce particularly innovative ideas.

During all three policy areas, participants brought up a range of new perspectives that may stimulate new ideas from policy-makers. In particular (and as other Sciencewise evaluations have suggested[12]) the value of actually being in the room was paramount. It was often the process of listening to how policies affected the realities of people's lives which stimulated new thoughts and ideas.

However, despite the hopes of policy-makers and the dialogue team, very few ideas emerged from the participants themselves which were genuinely innovative while also considered feasible by policy-makers. In retrospect, this was rather a tall order. How were participants, in a relatively small amount of time, expected to come up with new ideas to problems that policy-makers and experts had been thinking about for a long time already?

This was not a reflection of the use of wellbeing evidence, but on this form of public dialogue in itself. It may be that there are other public engagement mechanisms that may be more successful at fostering innovation, for example approaches such as 'sandpits'[13] or co-production with service users.

3. Increasing the incomes of low earners

DWP were interested in how a better understanding of wellbeing may help them design policy to encourage and support low earners to increase their incomes. Participants suggested that ensuring any support and advice was respectful and personalised, offering affordable childcare, and improving the quality of work, would all motivate them to pursue longer hours or increased pay in a way that was good for their wellbeing.

Introduction

The government's approach to supporting those on low incomes is changing. Under the previous system of tax credits, many low earners had their incomes topped up by working tax credits. Government is currently in the process of developing a new system called Universal Credit, which will eventually replace most existing benefits with one single payment.

Ensuring that work pays is a fundamental objective of Universal Credit and support will be offered, for the first time, to people who are in low-paid work and who are able to increase their earnings. DWP explained that it is possible that in the future, people who can reasonably be expected to increase their earnings could face benefit sanctions if they fail to do all that is reasonable to do so, without good reason.

The evidence about what works to support those on low pay to increase their earnings is very limited. Most efforts by the UK government, and across the developed world, have been targeted at those out of work. DWP are keen to understand more about what levers may be effective to support people into longer hours or better-paid work, in order to inform their new approach. This dialogue considered the question:

- **What policy levers can stimulate claimants to try to increase their income, and to do this voluntarily, without the threat of sanctions?**

It was hoped that a consideration of wellbeing might help shed light on what these might be, in particular by making the options for increasing income more attractive in wellbeing terms.

The dialogue included part-time and full-time workers. For those working full time, policy levers would need to encourage them to increase their pay, which may involve moving to a better-paid job. Those working part time could either increase their income by moving to better-paid part-time work, or by increasing their hours.

Workshops were held in Birmingham and Pontypool, a town in the Welsh Valleys. Many participants (particularly in Pontypool) said that a key barrier to increasing their income was the range of available jobs. While this may be the case, this is a question of macro-economic policy and was outside the scope of this dialogue. Rather, we were concerned with how government can influence the choices that people make – encouraging them to choose a higher income if jobs are available.

Summary of findings

- The motivations and barriers to increasing income differ significantly between participants, depending on their circumstances.

- For parents who worked part time, but wanted to work full time, childcare was one of the biggest barriers to increasing their hours.

- However, other participants working part time were not interested in increasing their hours, even if this meant having low pay. Their decision to work part time was either based on necessity (for example in order to undertake housework or caring responsibilities), or on the wellbeing benefits of working part time.

- Furthermore, some participants working full time were interested in working part time. In particular, those with excessively long working hours reported the negative impacts on their and their families' wellbeing.

- Participants suggested that if work was more rewarding or enjoyable, they may feel more motivated to increase their hours, and felt that government should take an active role in promoting wellbeing at work.

- One of the loudest messages from participants was the importance of job security. In particular, they felt strongly that zero-hours contracts should be abolished. As well as security of income being important to their wellbeing, they also explained how job insecurity could act as a barrier to movement in the labour market, and discourage them from changing jobs.

- Participants explained that they wanted flexible, personal, supportive and high-quality support services to help them move to pursue higher incomes. Any training provided would need to be of a similarly high quality. They expressed the view that Jobcentre Plus would not be able to provide this support because they perceived it as having a stigmatising and punitive culture, and suggested that other alternatives should be considered.

Policy priorities

1. Policies should be designed to reflect the different needs of different segments of low earners, and to provide appropriate responses to each.

2. An affordable solution to childcare should be a top priority for any government.

3. Policies to help low earners increase their hours should avoid targeting those working part time voluntarily.

4. Government may need to be vigilant that any changes in benefits under Universal Credit, or policies associated with it, do not inadvertently lead to participants working excessive hours.

5. Government should play a pro-active role in promoting wellbeing at work.

6. Government should pursue higher income security for low earners, particularly for those who move jobs in order to increase their income.

7. Support to encourage low earners to increase their incomes could be usefully targeted at those whose employment is currently insecure.

8. Policies to support low earners to increase their income should not involve zero-hours contracts.

9. Advice and support to help low earners increase their incomes needs to be flexible, personal, supportive and high quality in order for participants to use it voluntarily.

10. Government should communicate with low earners about how much extra time they will be expected to invest in training and advice sessions in order to allay fears about additional commitments.

11. Support services will need to distance themselves from the stigma of services provided by Jobcentre Plus.

Findings and policy priorities in more detail

Finding: The motivations and barriers to increasing income differ significantly depending on circumstances.

The participants fell into the following groups.

• Those who worked part time and wanted to work full time but could not because of childcare responsibilities.

• Those who wanted to work part time, who either already did so or would have liked to.

• Those who wanted an increased income but were put off by the perceived increase in insecurity associated with moving to a new job (for example the reduction in redundancy pay).

• Those who wanted an increased income and were not put off by this perceived increase in insecurity, including those with jobs that they already experienced as insecure.

According to these different circumstances, participants described very different policy levers that would be effective to support them to increase their income. More detail is given below.

Policy priority 1

Policies should be designed to reflect the different needs of different segments of low earners, and to provide appropriate responses to each.

This is particularly important as the wellbeing effects of different policies may differ according to the circumstances and interests of each group.

Finding: For parents who worked part time, but wanted to work full time, childcare was a major barrier to increasing their hours.

For some participants the cost of childcare meant that working was not financially beneficial. Some had decided to work anyway, and for others, it prevented them from working longer hours.

> *"I get so much towards childcare with my working tax, but it still doesn't justify if you're only minimum wage, how much that childcare is."*
> Public participant, Birmingham

> *"I'm toying with the idea of cutting my hours back so I'm not paying as much for petrol or after school clubs."*
> Public participant, Birmingham

In addition to supporting them to work longer hours, participants felt that a reliable solution to childcare would be good for their wellbeing.

> *"All the worrying and rushing. I feel like I'm putting it on my parents. They're in their 70s… I rush to get home so they can go home. That stresses me out, the fact that I'm putting it on my family."*
> Public participant, Birmingham

> *"You could be in control of your life knowing that [childcare is] in place, you can then structure your working pattern more knowing that you've got reassurance with that."*
> Public participant, Pontypool

A similar point was made by some about public transport costs, although it is not clear how much impact these would have on decisions to work longer hours or move jobs.

Policy priority 2

An affordable solution to childcare should be a top priority for any government.

Finding: Some of those working part time would not be interested in increasing their hours. Some of those working full time would also be interested in working part time.

Some participants had consciously chosen to work part time. These participants were unable to suggest ways they could be encouraged to work longer hours.

> "If it was more hours, I wouldn't be able to. It's not going to benefit me. My house has got to run."
> Public participant, Birmingham

Some participants who did work full time explained that they did so in order to pay the bills, but would prefer to work part time. One explained why she would like to work four days a week.

> "I want my weekends to be weekends to spend with the children. I feel my whole weekend I'm washing, ironing, doing stuff for school. I feel like I don't stop and don't get a day with them. I'm constantly saying, 'Go and get me this.' I feel like I'm constantly demanding things from them rather than spending quality time with them."
> Public participant, Birmingham

Some participants also reflected on how much work they did outside paid employment.

> "Life is full of get up, dishes, ironing, washing, cleaning, looking after kids, tidying up, that's going to happen until my kids have left home."
> Public participants, Pontypool

Participants were also unsure whether working full time should in fact be a policy objective, given the potential benefits both to them, and to society, of working part time.

> "[Government should] allow people to decide if they want to increase their hours without the threats of being sanctioned and all of that."
> Public participant, Birmingham

> "Do you think it's morally right though that they're making single parents go to work? Children have all these behavioural and social problems. We were brought up and our mums stayed at home to look after us, it's so different now for youngsters."
> Public participant, Pontypool

A number of participants felt that their families benefitted from their decisions to work part time, and wider society may also benefit if low earners contribute more to their communities. For example, one participant mentioned their involvement in an allotment scheme, and a local choir.

Participants' personal experiences of working part time are reflected in population-level wellbeing studies. The UK's Annual Population Survey found that four out of five part-time workers choose to work part time (though this was not segmented for low earners, where more people may be working part time involuntarily).[14] Studies of wellbeing data in the UK find that, although those working part time overall have lower wellbeing than those working full time, those who work part time voluntarily have higher wellbeing than those who work full time.[15]

Policy priority 3

Policies to help low earners increase their hours should avoid targeting those working part time voluntarily.

Not only are policies targeted at this group likely to be less effective, but a move into full-time work may also be damaging to their, and their families' wellbeing.

Finding: Those working excessive hours reported very negative impacts on their wellbeing.

Some participants working full time reported working excessively long hours, either because their wages were too low to be able to afford a decent standard of living without doing so, or because it was expected of them by their employer. Some participants worked two part-time jobs.

"Doing 15-hour days just to earn a normal wage, because you're on such bad money."
Public participant, Birmingham

"I only have two days off a month because I work every day. I'll often go for up to 19 days without a day off."
Public participant, Pontypool

The effect on their, and their families' wellbeing was highly detrimental.

"You'd be shattered from the week, so there's no social life. You get a wage and you're too tired to spend it, so there's no enjoyment."
Public participant, Birmingham

"Your home life suffers for it."
Public participant, Pontypool

"I never saw my kids growing up. I used to work 70 hours a week, away from home at weekends."
Public participant, Pontypool

Participants' experiences are confirmed by the wellbeing literature. Analysis of data from across Europe shows that poor work-life balance is the strongest predictor of stress, and one of the strongest predictors of a range of other wellbeing outcomes.[16] There is no clear agreement yet in the wellbeing literature on how many hours of work a week delivers optimum wellbeing, with

results ranging from between 27 to 55 hours per week.[17] Nevertheless, studies from the developed world do consistently show declining wellbeing from excessive working hours.

Policy priority 4

Government may need to be vigilant that any changes in benefits under Universal Credit, or policies associated with it, do not inadvertently lead to participants working excessive hours.

Clearly, no policy would aim to encourage excessive working hours, and DWP are clear that they would not expect low earners to work any more than 35 hours per week. However, in order to ensure that excessive working hours are not an unintended consequence, government may wish to consider evaluations to monitor working hours amongst those affected by relevant policies.

Finding: Participants suggested that if their job was more rewarding or enjoyable, they may feel more motivated to increase their hours.

While some participants felt they simply did not want to work longer hours, or could not do because of childcare or other responsibilities, there were others who felt that the quality of the jobs available could affect their decision. This went beyond pay (though this was important too). Participants described a number of ways work could be more enjoyable and rewarding. Some of these involved 'extras' such as time off for good performance, or being given shares in a company in return for loyalty. However, many were intrinsic to the job itself – how it was managed and the environment in which it was carried out.

Key themes included the importance of good relations and communication, the value of positive feedback, and using a variety of skills.

> *"I was there for about six years. It's repetitive. You're just putting things on one end of a production line and taking them off the other."*
> Public participant, Pontypool

> *"If you don't feel appreciated at work, your morale starts to go down and then you don't want to work hard because you don't think your employer really cares about you. It's just a downward spiral."*
> Public participant, Pontypool

We also heard about the disadvantages to wellbeing of work intensification…

> *"I don't enjoy the job as much as it's getting busier and there aren't enough staff to do it all, and I've asked for help so many times, you get it then it's taken away."*
> Public participant, Birmingham

…and feeling micro-managed and out of control.

"You're given two minutes, and if you take two toilet breaks in a day, you get marked when you do that. If I have more than 12 marks in six months then I get put up for the selection to be knocked off."
Public participants, Birmingham

There is a rich body of research exploring how the quality of jobs affects workers' wellbeing. Evidence suggests that many of the points raised by participants above are indeed associated with health or wellbeing.[18] These issues are particularly important given that low earners are at the most risk of working in environments which are damaging to wellbeing. For example studies by Michael Marmot found that workers in lower-paid jobs are given less autonomy and enjoy less reward in exchange for the effort they put in.[19]

Participants expected government to take a pro-active approach to improving the quality of work.

"Obviously there needs to be some sort of study in comparative businesses.… Say, these two companies are identical, this company undertakes all these employee rewards, and six months down the line they've seen 10% [more] turnover."
Public participant, Pontypool

"The government would have to get the employers on board for all those points. The workforce is already on board so the government has got to be able to negotiate that with the employers. "
Public participant, Pontypool

In Pontypool participants felt that the government should even make it a legal requirement for employers to sign up to Investors in People (an accreditation process which promotes high standards of employee wellbeing in the workplace). However, local employers who we spoke to during the frontline worker dialogues made it clear that top-down legislation would not be welcomed by local businesses.

Policy priority 5

Government should play a pro-active role in promoting wellbeing at work.

Participants raised wellbeing at work as an important factor when considering the overall question of how to increase income. During the workshops, we did not dig down to explore the extent to which improved wellbeing at work would in fact drive their decisions in practice. However, participants definitely felt this would be valuable in its own right – and could have an impact on such decisions. Although wellbeing at work initiatives are often associated with physical exercise and healthy eating, participants' comments suggests that it is other aspects of wellbeing at work that are most important to the overall experience of work.

Government have already made important progress in this area, for example by measuring employee wellbeing,introducing wellbeing at work strategies across many government departments and introducing the right

to ask for flexible hours. There are a range of approaches that could be considered to take this agenda further, for example:

- continuing to demonstrate best practice by constantly looking to improve employee wellbeing in the public sector

- taking an active interest in the employment practices of government contractors, or including considerations of employee wellbeing in tendering processes

- taking a leading role in making the business case to employers (as suggested in the 2005 work and wellbeing strategy)[20]

- building relationships with key employers to encourage and support them to invest in employee wellbeing

- developing kitemarks (or combining existing ones) in order to celebrate achievement and inform company decision-making.

Finding: Participants reported that security of income was crucial for their wellbeing. They also explained how job insecurity could act as a barrier to movement in the labour market, and discourage them from changing jobs.

It is hard to overestimate the strength of participants' feelings about the value of job security. A large number of participants were in, or had experienced, jobs with temporary contracts, low redundancy pay, or low minimum hours. The quotations below are just a few, chosen from many conversations which described the profoundly negative effects insecurity had on their wellbeing.

"[I want] peace of mind. I had to reapply for my second job three times. It's just stressful and unnecessary. The job was only for four hours a week."
Public participant, Pontypool

"I'm anxious all the time. Am I going to get enough hours this week?"
Public participant, Pontypool

"It's very short-term, I live month to month now. Basically, whatever I earn this month is next month's bills, I'm quite lucky that I've got that month. It's not knowing what's around the corner with the jobs, like if it finishes."
Public participant, Pontypool

One participant summarised the groups' conversation.

"The biggest thing that came out was lack of security. Take all the other things away and give me security."
Public participant, Pontypool

Furthermore, in discussions with participants about the barriers to increasing their hours, a counter-intuitive asymmetry emerged in the effects of a flexible labour market. In economic theory, the benefit of light employment

regulation is flexibility. Flexibility makes it easier for businesses to hire and fire staff, thereby stimulating growth and creating new jobs. However, while for employers, insecurity and flexibility may go hand in hand, participants described how an insecure labour market can in fact work against their flexibility, as they cling to the income that they can rely on and are less likely to take risks in the labour market or move to a better-paid job.

For example, one participant in Birmingham had left a secure job to improve his financial position and was made redundant within two weeks. Another participant had had a similar experience.

> *"It happened to me. I was guaranteed a job at the war memorial. I was in a stable job. After a week, he let me go. I wasn't too happy."*
> Public participant, Birmingham

One frontline worker who helps people find work explained that this was not uncommon, as new employees have fewer rights than longer-serving ones, such as lower redundancy pay:

> *"You want to make the new job more secure for the person going into it. You get clients coming in who've been in a job and just dismissed for whatever reason… What puts people off looking for a new job is redundancy pay. 'I'm not really looking at moving because I haven't got the same level of security'."*
> Frontline worker, Birmingham

Over the course of the dialogue, participants demonstrated a good understanding of the complexities of the economy and sensitivity to the needs of employers. However, when it came to job security, many were uncompromising in the need to transfer more risk from employee to employer.

> *"Government ministers would argue it makes us competitive."*
> *"Well, do you know what? Come and live in my shoes."*
> Public participants, Birmingham

> *"Can I just say it's one sided. To the employer and that's it."*
> *"Everything's on their terms."*
> Public participants, Pontypool

There is strong evidence that insecurity at work is damaging to wellbeing, even beyond the loss in income associated with it. Temporary contracts are worse for wellbeing than permanent ones, and employees who think that they are likely to lose their jobs have lower wellbeing than those who think it is less likely (even if their actual employment is not yet effected).[21]

Policy priority 6

Government should pursue higher income security for low earners, particularly for those who move jobs to increase their income.

There are a number of ways government could pursue this aim.

Increased income security could be achieved through a re-ordering of macro-economic priorities to give job security a higher priority than it currently has. This point was made by the recent All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics in their report Wellbeing in Four Policy Areas published in September.[22] It also echoes the emphasis on economic stability that Gus O'Donnell et al make in their report on Wellbeing and Policy published in March.[23] While this recommendation follows from what was said in this dialogue, clearly such a big shift in priorities would not be undertaken just to encourage some people to look for better-paid jobs (though our evidence suggests it would have that effect).

Alternatively (or in addition), income security could be achieved through a re-design of the benefits system: additional benefits could be provided to soften the dip in income if an employee was unexpectedly made redundant after moving to a new role. Making such transitions easier is one of the aims of Universal Credit. This could be part of a broader 'flexicurity' approach to labour markets and social security, that is, one that recognises the synergies between labour market flexibility and personal financial security, and the potential wellbeing benefits of both.

Policy priority 7

Support to encourage low earners to increase their incomes could be usefully targeted at those whose employment is currently insecure.

Those who are currently in insecure work may be the most receptive to any policies to support them to move jobs, and may receive the highest wellbeing benefit from such mechanisms. This would include those on zero-hours contracts (see the finding below). However, this will clearly only be the case if new roles are more secure than their current ones.

Support mechanisms could be designed to increase job security as much as possible. For example, targets could include not only the number of low earners moving into better-paid jobs, but also the security of those new positions.

Finding: Participants recommended that zero-hours contracts were abolished due to their negative effect on wellbeing.

Zero-hours contracts were seen as the worst of insecure jobs. There was a very strong consensus amongst public participants that zero-hours contracts should be abolished.

> "It's just not fair. You can't expect people to live and work on short or zero-hours contracts"
> Public participant, Pontypool

> "It can be working one day and nothing the next. That's no good to anybody. This is something that should have never been allowed to have happened."
> Public participant, Pontypool

Government has recently explored the challenges of zero-hours contracts, and has this June banned exclusivity clauses.[24] Although exclusivity clauses were mentioned as a specific problem, the vast majority of participants wanted a straight forward ban on all zero-hours contracts.

Policy priority 8

Policies to support low earners to increase their income should not involve zero-hours contracts.

As already noted, DWP could target those on zero-hours contracts to support them to find more secure employment. In addition, it could ensure that services do not encourage participants to move into zero-hours contracts, even if they appear to pay a higher wage. DWP could refuse to act as an employment exchange for these jobs.

Finding: Participants want flexible, personal, supportive and high-quality support services to help them increase their earnings, or those with longer hours. Any training provided would need to be of a similarly high quality.

While some participants either could not or did not want to work full time, others were keen to move to full-time work, either because they enjoyed it, or because of the additional financial security it would offer.

> "My job at check-in I loved. If they could offer me full time, I would have definitely stayed there. After I paid out for expenses, I wasn't earning money [part time]."
> Public participant, Birmingham

"I'd rather just work full time, pay the rent. It's hard work having to constantly calculate how many hours I've worked each week and whether or not I'm eligible for benefits… I've got no money to live on."
Public participant, Pontypool

For these participants, once barriers such as childcare costs were removed, providing suitable support is likely to be important, and this possibility was presented to participants. In response, they suggested that if support was to be effective, it would need to be flexible, of high quality, personalised, and ideally with the same advisor.

Although some participants did want practical support in CV writing and interview skills, they were particularly keen on personal guidance on developing their own goals.

"It's getting in tune with people and what they want to do, so treating people as humans with ambitions and ideas."
Public participant, Birmingham

Frontline workers agreed.

"It's about aspiration. They need to have a dialogue."
Frontline worker, Birmingham

Services would need to be provided outside working hours in locations that are easily accessible. As one participant put it:

"I haven't got the time in the week, I'm working, but if there's something there out of hours, and if the government is going that extra mile for me, I'd feel appreciated, I'd want it."
Public participants, Birmingham

Ideally, participants wanted one advisor that they could build up a relationship with.

"If I went in I would want to see the same person every week so you build up a relationship, they know you. They know that I don't want to go for a job in roofing, they need to know what I want to do and how many hours a week I want to work."
Public participant, Birmingham

The development of personal trust may be particularly important for wellbeing when applying for new jobs. Research suggests that repeated experiences of failure may have negative effects on mental health, if those people are not supported through the process.[25]

In particular, participants did not want to be told to apply for jobs that were inappropriate, or where they were unlikely to get the job. Both job seekers and managers described times when people had applied to inappropriate positions because Jobcentre Plus had told them to, which was perceived as extremely unhelpful. In a review of similar support mechanisms for people in work, Pamela Meadows found the same, arguing that "resources are wasted and opportunities to provide genuine help are lost if an intervention is not appropriate to the needs of an individual."[26]

The support service could also advise on training, though this would also need to be relevant and of high quality. Some participants had experience of training which had not been useful to them, but was largely useful to the employer, or to meet someone else's targets.

"The company just gains by saying that you've got it."
Public participant, Birmingham

"They have statistics to cover. They have to get so many people in and on training courses. That's how it felt to me."
Public participant, Birmingham

Participants also suggested that training would not necessarily improve their job prospects, which would be a waste of tax payers' money.

"I've done training. I've got loads of certificates and every imaginable qualification, and it's made no difference to my employment prospects."
Public participant, Pontypool

However, the right training could improve confidence, employment prospects and wellbeing.

"If you can go to work and know you can handle anything that's put in front of you, it will make you feel better about going. You don't have to rely on other people to help you succeed. You have that independence."
Public participant, Birmingham

In order to undertake training, most participants suggested that it would need to be free. One participant had paid for her own training and described how hard it had been.

"I've had to pay for all my courses. This one, the Level 6, is just over £2,000, which is a hell of a lot of my money, with no help as a single mum on a low wage. So I'm really struggling to better myself. It's not easy at all."
Public participant, Birmingham

Participants also suggested that they would be interested in 'bridge courses', which some had experience of.[27] This is a scheme which facilitates employees to spend a short period of time in another job in order to test it out. This was seen as particularly relevant by those who felt stuck in the same kind of job and might feel more motivated to progress to another area, but did not feel able to take the leap without being sure it would suit them.

Participants were particularly concerned about the time they would be able to invest in training and support given their existing work commitments.

> "*If you're working 40 hours a week and then they say to you, 'We want you to do this course which will be another eight/ten hours on top of your weekly hours,' then you might not have the time.*"
> Public participant, Birmingham

> "*My mum's doing her NVQ3, and she does two jobs. She tries to do assignments when she comes home from work, and sometimes she's knackered. You're just adding more work for yourself.*"
> Public participant, Pontypool

> "*I'm on targets. If I had a couple of days off to do training, that means a couple of days off not to earn money.*"
> Public participant, Birmingham

The evidence available from other existing trials of interventions to support those already in work also suggests that there is limited time to undertake further training.[28]

Policy priority 9

Advice and support to help low earners increase their incomes needs to be flexible, personal, and of high quality in order for participants to use it voluntarily.

If possible, government may want to consider assigning claimants to one contact advisor who is able to support them throughout the process of searching for and securing a new position.

Policy priority 10

Government should communicate with low earners about how much extra time they will be expected to invest in training and advice sessions in order to allay fears about additional commitments.

DWP do not plan to encourage employees to work any more than 35 hours a week, combining training and employment. This is a useful and important commitment which may need to be communicated clearly alongside the support package in order to reassure those who are concerned about additional commitments on top of a busy existing schedule.

Finding: Participants viewed the culture of Jobcentre Plus as punitive and stigmatising, and suggested that if support was delivered through Jobcentre plus, they would be unlikely to use it.

Many participants reacted with scepticism to the idea of government providing help and advice. Their opinions were based on their experiences of the support they had received from Jobcentre Plus when looking for work, which they felt was inappropriate and sometimes degrading. Many participants made it clear that, if the support was similar to what they had received when out of work, they would not be interested in using it.

Due to its current image, a frontline worker said:

"There does need to be a tailored support, I just don't know whether there'd be a take up if Jobcentre Plus delivered it".
Frontline worker, Birmingham

Many participants associated Jobcentre Plus with being patronised or punished.

"You sit there, you get spoken to like an idiot, treated like an idiot."
Public participant, Birmingham

"It's all about the stick. It's not about the carrot."
Public participant, Birmingham

When asked what would stop them taking up personal advice and training one person said:

"Embarrassed to think that I've got to ask for that sort of help."
Public Participant, Pontypool

Participants felt that the quality of advice they had received at Jobcentre Plus was not adequate.

"I think I could do a better job myself."
Public participant, Birmingham

"Part of the job centre helped [my husband] put a CV together and it was awful. I mean I see 20, 30, 40 CVs a day from 16-year-old lads and it was as if a 15/16-year-old lad had written it."
Public participant, Birmingham

Participants felt that the use of targets had not improved the quality of service.

"*The people who claim they're helping you just ask you how many jobs you applied for that week and then they want to see proof of it, and even that isn't always substantial. That's all they do.*"
Public participant, Pontypool

"*They're box tickers, really.*"
Public participant Birmingham

Participants suggested a change.

"*Make it more into a place of growing and learning, and a place of giving.*"
Public participant, Birmingham

The limited existing evidence on providing support for those in work mirrors participants' views. Meadows reported that "one challenge facing programmes is overcoming the reluctance on the part of people who have moved into work to engage with the help that is available to them. They do not see it as relevant to their needs in their new situation, and may regard it as a threat to their new-found sense of independence, even when they are struggling."

She went on to stress that "this reinforces the need for staff to be well trained, both in understanding labour market needs and in providing personal support."[29]

Policy priority 11

Support services will need to distance themselves from the stigma of services provided by Jobcentre Plus.

If DWP do intend to deliver services from Jobcentre Plus, not only would the quality of service need to be improved (as described above), but the perception of Jobcentre Plus would also need to change.

This dialogue suggests however, that services are likely to be much more successful if delivered outside Jobcentre Plus. For example, delivering services through further education colleges, or setting up mentoring schemes within, or across different work places.

4. Reducing loneliness

Government is interested in how to reduce loneliness. While many participants felt that individuals themselves had to take ultimate responsibility for preventing and overcoming loneliness, they also felt that government had a role in creating conditions which encourage people to take the first steps. Participants also thought that GPs had an important role to play in supporting patients to overcome loneliness once it had set in.

Introduction

It is increasingly recognised that loneliness is a major issue in the UK. For example, in recent surveys 18% of adults in England say they felt lonely always, often or some of the time[30] and 9% of UK adults reported having no close friends.[31] However, despite extensive evidence of the widespread and damaging effect of loneliness on individuals and communities, both the range of interventions that have been developed to reduce loneliness, and evidence of their effectiveness, remains fairly limited. This public dialogue worked with the Cabinet Office's Social Action Team to explore peoples' personal experiences of loneliness and their suggestions on how to reduce it. The question the dialogue aimed to answer was:

- **What interventions, and by whom, could best alleviate high levels of loneliness, particularly those which can occur on a neighbourhood level?**

Dialogues took place in Leicester and Bedford. All public participants had self-identified as currently experiencing loneliness, or having been lonely recently in a pre-recruitment questionnaire. However, we did not aim to recruit chronically lonely people, who might have found the format of the workshops (which were social in nature and held in the evenings) challenging to attend. It may be that the recommendations made by participants are therefore less well suited for chronically lonely people who might require more intensive, one-to-one interventions.

Summary of findings

• Participants felt that one of the main reasons for increased loneliness was the erosion of communities. While many were very keen to be involved in building stronger communities and overcoming loneliness, some did not feel that they could do this alone. They suggested that investment would be needed by government to help them take the first step in creating stronger communities.

• Participants suggested a number of approaches to reducing loneliness, many focusing on improving other aspects of wellbeing. In particular, participants were keen to help others who were experiencing loneliness and suggested that coming together around a common goal such as contributing to their communities could be an effective approach.

• Participants suggested that a lack of money was both a cause of loneliness, and a barrier to undertaking activities that would help to reduce their loneliness.

• Participants suggested a number of ways the physical environment, and in particular more vibrant high streets, could encourage social interactions.

• Participants felt that GPs have an important role to play in reducing loneliness. However, many of them had experienced inadequate support and care, and felt strongly that GPs needed to be more aware of loneliness as an issue.

• Participants were worried about the use of medication to treat loneliness, and many preferred approaches which addressed the underlying causes.

Policy priorities

1. Invest in helping people build stronger communities in order to overcome loneliness.

2. Substantially increase the evidence for what works to prevent and reduce loneliness.

3. Interventions to reduce loneliness should aim to overcome inequalities in loneliness according to income.

4. Use planning guidelines to promote social connectedness.

5. Urgently increase efforts to raise awareness about loneliness amongst GPs and ensure that they have a clear approach to addressing it.

6. Scale up the use of social prescribing to treat loneliness, as an alternative to anti-depressants.

Findings and policy priorities in more detail

Finding: Participants felt that one of the main reasons for increased loneliness was the erosion of communities. They suggested that investment would be needed by government to help them take the first step in creating stronger communities.

Participants felt that people were lonelier now than they were in the past, and that this was due to the loss of community spirit.

"People don't seem to get to know their neighbours anymore. You can live in the street and never speak to your neighbour for ten years, really, or just say, 'Hello,' and never get to know them. Everyone keeps themselves to themselves a lot more than they used to."
Public participant, Bedford

"When we've been out with my daughter, you get the elderly who still say, 'Hello.' She'd look at me, like, 'Do you know them?' They're not used to it."
Public participant, Leicester

One participant in Leicester suggested that, if you spoke to a stranger…

'…they'd think you were weird, or you were going to mug them, or wanting something."

Participants identified a number of interconnected causes of this decline. These included a lack of information about what was going on locally.

"I can remember when I was younger, you'd go to community fairs. There'd be one every other week. You'd get a pamphlet through your door to say where it's going to be… You don't seem to get anything like that. If it is going on, you don't know it's going on. You pass it on the bus or in the car, and think, 'I could have gone to that.'"
Public participant, Leicester

…as well as the loss of shared focal points…

"Dare I say, years and years ago, the church would be a focal point of a lot of communities. They would know about elderly people in their area that were infirm, needing food, companionship."
Public participant, Leicester

…changes in social values…

"In today's society, culture has changed where people are more out for themselves."
Public participant, Leicester

"I think humans by their nature are compassionate. I think it's when we put competition in that people tend to ignore other people… We're encouraged now to tread on our neighbours to get ahead all the time."
Public participant, Bedford

…and the rise in inequality…

"Do you not think that it's gone into the Victorian age? The rich get richer and the poor get a damn lot poorer. It's like there's a big gap now."
Public participant, Leicester

They also suggested that they did not have the time to invest in building social relationships.

"I'm a full-time working mum. I don't see any of my neighbours. I'm divided by a main road, get home at the weekend, I'm totally exhausted. I don't see anybody… You need time to engage and we don't when we're working full time."
Frontline worker, Bedford

"Busy lifestyles, I don't think people give themselves enough time. You get muddled priorities."
"That can end up with feelings of loneliness."
"You throw yourself into your work and actually have no friends."
Public participants, Bedford

Participants' perception of a decline in neighbourliness and levels of trust are backed up by longitudinal data in the UK and other parts of the developed world.[32] Although overcoming loneliness is likely to require building close relationships, emerging research suggests that 'weaker' social ties may also be important for wellbeing,[33] and may lead the way towards developing stronger bonds.

Participants came up with a number of ideas to increase community spirit that they could undertake themselves. Many of these already exist in various forms, such as skills-sharing activities, good neighbours initiatives, or national 'meet your neighbour' days.[34] However, many participants did not know where these activities took place or how they could get involved. Though the ideas were there, the problem remained of how to get them off the ground, particularly for people who lacked confidence and time, and in communities where the countervailing forces seemed to be moving against them. This was particularly the case for those experiencing loneliness already who might be reluctant to get involved even if activities were taking place. As one participant put it when discussing a neighbours' day:

"Some people would absolutely dread it. I know I would. I'd be hibernating."
Public participant, Bedford

Participants felt that funding and support were needed to help them take the first steps in rebuilding their communities. For example, one group in Leicester suggested the need for a 'super community centre' which would facilitate chance meetings and group activities.

There was support for the idea of a paid community officer for each community, who might facilitate local activities that help address loneliness.

"What's needed is a focal person within the community and a budget attached to them."
Public participant, Bedford

"Bringing back that sense of community but giving somebody responsibility for it. It's very hard in a large community."
Public participant, Leicester

Some groups expressed concern about the lack of affordable community spaces for hire. They felt that the availability of free or affordable activities and community spaces would make a positive difference to their wellbeing.

"20 years ago we didn't have the problems we have now. Now it's a nightmare, it costs a fortune to do even the simplest thing."
Public participant, Bedford

Although most participants felt that it was ultimately the responsibility of the individual to form relationships, both to help themselves and to help others, many found it hard to take the first steps alone. They felt that there was an important role for government in creating, and funding, the circumstances to do so.

This finding was also reflected in a participatory research project recently undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that worked with residents to develop neighbourhood responses to loneliness. During the evaluation, stakeholders suggested that it was crucial for one person or organisation to take responsibility for drawing people together.[35] Programme Manager, Tracey Robbins, who was acting as an advisor on the project, suggested the same was true for participants.

"If you are looking at loneliness from a place perspective, then there does need to be someone to facilitate action, or to 'enable or give people permission' to get involved."

Policy priority 1

Invest in helping people build stronger communities in order to overcome loneliness.

A community-based approach could not only help prevent loneliness, but also relieve loneliness where it already exists. Efforts may differ depending on the local area in question, for example:

• where community activity is already strong, encouragement and support may be required from government, or via the voluntary sector to encourage groups to identify and engage those who may be feeling lonely

• where funded community initiatives exist, such as community workers or community centres, they could incorporate aims around reducing loneliness, explicitly reaching out to those who are lonely

- in communities which are not well-connected, and without funded initiatives such as community workers or community centres, government may need to consider investing resources (people and facilities) in such initiatives, with the aim of building the confidence and connections for communities to take a more active role in preventing and reducing loneliness.

See also the recommendation on community development in the section on community rights below.

Finding: Participants suggested a number of approaches to reducing loneliness, many focusing on improving other aspects of wellbeing. In particular, participants were keen to help others who were experiencing loneliness and suggested that coming together around a common goal such as contributing to their communities could be an effective approach.

Participants suggested a number of ideas to reduce loneliness, which are detailed in the appendix: www.neweconomics.org/talkingwellbeingappendix. Clearly, approaches will need to be many and varied. As one participant put it:

"There are so many different variations of people, and so many different types of loneliness."
Public participant, Leicester

Here, we draw out a few of the key themes from participants' suggestions and conversations.

Many participants were very interested in the 'Five Ways to Wellbeing: Give, Keep Learning, Take Notice, Connect and Be Active'. Participants suggested that, rather than specifically focusing on building social relationships, interventions could promote other aspects of wellbeing.

"I know there's no easy short-term cure to loneliness, but by promoting a happier, richer in spirit, more fulfilling life, then we think we're on the road."
Public participant, Leicester

Frontline workers agreed.

"I think if you try and address the wellbeing thing overall, it's like a light switch going on for some people. They've concentrated on one area of perceived need, but actually the answers lie, sometimes, in different things… [for example], in addressing doing something physical, they will also make some new friends, which will address the area of social wellbeing as well. These kind of areas are so interlinked."
Frontline worker, Bedford

Participants suggested they would be more likely to engage in an activity that didn't have the reduction of loneliness as the main, or only, goal (a finding which has also emerged from other research).[36] As one participant put it:

"Loneliness in itself is not incentive enough for people to change that situation, you have to have an incentive. A common interest attracts them with the by-product being integration with a group. It has to be something that will capture their interest, that they will benefit from."
Public participant, Bedford

"A place where there is a common goal, driven by co-operation – where enjoyment is achieved by the process as much as the result."
Public participant, Leicester

Participants were particularly interested in 'giving' as one of the Ways to Wellbeing, and explained how making a contribution to their communities would increase their confidence.

"When you help somebody, it increases your own self-worth. People who are lonely have low self-worth."
Public participant, Bedford

"It gives a meaning to what you're doing but also gives you that company and connection, so you're helping each other rather than just helping yourself."
Public participant, Leicester

Participants were also interested in reciprocity, suggesting ideas similar to time banking (although this term was not used directly), for example a bartering scheme in which people would offer a skill, a belonging or their time, and receive an equivalent offer from someone else in the community.

"Starting small and then maybe moving on to bartering… maybe just getting shopping for someone; clubbing together to get buy one get one free things; trying to always think of other people and what you can do."
Public participant, Bedford

"I was talking to someone today. They went to the gym but then the person training said, 'I'll be your personal trainer, could you teach me guitar?', because this guy could play the guitar. Exchange, so it's healthier."
Public participant, Leicester

Participants felt that interventions would need to be free, or affordable.

"Free clubs for all ages. Quite often I don't think people have the money to go and pay for extra things other than living. Entertainment for all ages, and then easy access."
Public participant, Bedford

"Free. Otherwise then you get into means testing."
Public participant, Bedford

Participants were very keen that interventions should not just be designed for older people, but consider people at other life stages as well.

"The perception is that it only applies to old-aged pensioners, for want of a better word, which isn't the case."
Public participant, Bedford

"I know a lot of my daughter's friends, when she went to university, they were very lonely. It can affect you at any stage of your life."
Public participant

Participants identified a strong stigma surrounding loneliness, a finding that has been backed up elsewhere.[37] A number of participants were surprised to find so many other people experiencing loneliness during the workshops, a realisation some found helpful and, at times, moving. Perhaps as a result of this, many suggested a campaign to raise awareness about loneliness.

"[A national campaign] takes the stigma away. It's a national problem, not just you. You don't feel so isolated."
Public participant, Leicester

"Normalise loneliness, get it talked about."
Public participant, Bedford

Policy priority 2

Substantially increase the evidence for what works to prevent and reduce loneliness.

Surprisingly little is known about how to reduce loneliness. The first quantitative systematic review of interventions to reduce loneliness found that, overall they did seem to make a difference (though a small one), but stressed that evidence was limited and often of poor quality.[38]

In contrast, the evidence base for the health and wellbeing effects of loneliness is substantial. Some estimate the effect to be equivalent to that of smoking and larger than obesity.[39] The cost to the NHS is significant. Lonely people make more use of health services, visit their GP more, use A&E more and have more days in hospital and outpatient appointments.[40]

There is, then, a dramatic imbalance between the national scale and impact of loneliness, and the fragmented, largely unevaluated responses to it. Given that there is both a business case and a clear public appetite for the reduction of loneliness, there is a strong case for more systematic and co-ordinated action. This could take the following forms.

- Invest in evaluation of existing approaches to reduce loneliness. Many of the suggestions made by participants may not have loneliness as an intended aim, and therefore even if they are evaluated may not assess loneliness as an outcome. One way to increase the evidence base would be to encourage such initiatives to begin doing so. Although assessing prevention can be challenging to demonstrate, efforts should be made to do so given that this is where such community-based interventions may be the most effective.

- Pilot and evaluate new approaches to reducing loneliness. Most existing interventions to reduce loneliness focus on improving life for those who are already very lonely, and often focus on the elderly.[41] Therefore, even if all these were fully evaluated, questions would remain on how to tackle other groups, for example single parents experiencing

loneliness. If these gaps begin to emerge during the research process, new approaches should be tested. These would not necessarily need to require costly new projects. For example, based on participants' enthusiasm for contributing to their communities, it could involve simply providing extra support to local voluntary centres to encourage them to identify and support lonely people. Clearly, building the evidence base alone is not enough – findings on 'what works' then need to be shared with local commissioners.

The growing network of What Works Centres, particularly the Aging and Wellbeing centres, could take leading roles in co-ordinating efforts in both these areas, perhaps in association with NICE.

Finding: Participants suggested that lack of money was a barrier to undertaking activities that would help to reduce their loneliness.

A lack of money was repeatedly brought up as a barrier to participating in activities that might reduce loneliness.

"Nowadays, because money tends to be such an issue, people are expected to provide and have money to do things. Work colleagues could say, 'Come out,' but you might not have the means to do it. You feel you should do, but you end up in debt."
Public participant, Bedford

"Poverty and loneliness have got a lot of things in common."
Public Participant, Bedford

This is supported in research that finds poverty is a strong predictor of loneliness.[42] Indeed, relative poverty is often defined as not having enough material resources to participate fully in society.[43]

Policy priority 3

Interventions to reduce loneliness should aim to overcome inequalities in loneliness according to income.

Given that poverty is both a cause of loneliness and a barrier to overcoming it, any approaches to reducing loneliness should aim explicitly to reduce inequalities in loneliness along income lines. Given the wide-ranging effects of loneliness on health and wellbeing more generally, this will not only reduce inequalities in loneliness, but also inequalities in health more generally. This suggests that initiatives to support stronger communities should be targeted at low-income areas, and thought given to what different approaches may be needed to support those of a lower socio-economic status.

Finding: Participants suggested a number of ways the physical environment, and in particular more vibrant high streets, could encourage social interactions and thereby reduce loneliness.

Participants felt the physical environment where they live is very important to their ability to build social connections. When asked to describe a place where people felt connected to each other, many described houses surrounding public spaces, pubs, and places for chance meetings with neighbours. Nevertheless, many participants felt that the reality was moving in the other direction.

> "Personal geography, it's changed a lot. We don't walk and talk with people that we live near anymore."
> Public participant, Leicester

> "Close your pubs and local shops and you've got a smaller community. Especially in rural communities, although it could happen in a housing estate. You haven't got anywhere to really pass people."
> Public participant, Bedford

> "My gran and granddad used to have a farm years ago, so when I was younger I spent all my summers there. It was a proper community. There was a village hall there. They had concerts, a village shop."
> Public participant, Leicester

However, participants were optimistic that much could be done to reverse this trend.

> "The design of public spaces, there is a lot that can be done to make it more conducive to people meeting, talking and being together."
> Public participant, Leicester

For example, they suggested that if you are feeling lonely, you might find it less intimidating to sit with one or two others and proposed the installation of more seating areas in twos or threes. Another idea was to equip more parks with permanent barbeques.

Policy priority 4

Use planning guidelines to promote social connectedness.

While the latest planning guidelines do aim to facilitate social connections, participants' views appear to support more pro-active application of this aspect of the guidelines. In particular, the dramatic decline in village shops and pubs is well documented, and may be particularly important for the elderly who are likely to spend a higher proportion of time in their neighbourhood, and are most likely to feel lonely.

In aiming to make public spaces conducive to building social connections, government could consider:

• reviewing the extent to which social connectedness is in fact considered in planning decisions

• promoting examples of best practice where planning decisions have in fact increased social connections.

Finding: Participants felt that GPs have an important role to play in reducing loneliness. However, many of them had experienced inadequate support and care.

While participants were keen to focus on preventing loneliness in communities, many were familiar with feelings of extreme loneliness, either currently or in the past, and some had visited their GPs for help. Participants reported that the GPs they spoke to responded inadequately. A number of participants shared distressing personal stories.

"I have the fear of walking in [to public spaces]. Sometimes I feel too proud to admit that I'm lonely. For a long time I didn't admit to it. I went to the doctor and told them, they said I'd have to wait for six weeks, so I ran out of there and thought, 'Forget it,' which shut me back into my box again."
Public participant, Leicester

"When my wife died I went to the GP in January with chronic depression. The GP told me to go home and make models. I tried to commit suicide on 6th January of this year."
Public participant, Bedford

Despite these negative experiences, participants nevertheless felt that GPs had the potential to play an important role in the reduction of loneliness.

"We think people are more confident in front of the GP than an awful lot of other people in society, including their own family."
Public participant, Leicester

"I think GPs need to be educated and funded and have a push from government."
Public participant, Leicester

"We need to educate the GPs to understand loneliness, because we don't think they do, and to tell the difference between loneliness and depression."
Public participant, Leicester

The research suggests that participants' experiences may not be atypical. In a survey prepared by the Campaign to End Loneliness, 92% of GPs said they had at least one patient a day who visited them largely because of being lonely. However, most of them did not feel that they had the tools to do much about it.[44]

The medicalisation of common social challenges is widely considered problematic,[45] and participants were divided on whether loneliness should or should not be seen as an illness. However, loneliness does not need to be categorised as an illness in order to be treated as a medical issue. If we are to take the social determinants of health seriously, as it is increasingly recognised we must,[46] then our health service should be as concerned about loneliness as it is about obesity. The findings from this public dialogue suggest that the public expect GPs to do just this, and to support them to overcome loneliness. We also heard that their failure to do so can have damaging, and even life threatening, consequences.

> **Policy priority 5**
>
> **Urgently increase efforts to raise awareness about loneliness amongst GPs and ensure that they have a clear approach to addressing it.**
>
> This might include developing clear guidance for GPs on spotting the signs of loneliness, including loneliness in GP training, or requiring each surgery to publish their approach to reducing loneliness.

Finding: Participants were worried about the use of medication to treat loneliness, and many preferred approaches which addressed the underlying causes.

Although participants were divided about whether loneliness constituted a mental health problem or not, they were united in their distrust of medicine as a solution. Instead, public participants and frontline workers suggested tackling the underlying causes of loneliness.

"GPs should work closely with community officers, referring them to local activities."
Public participant, Leicester

"Less medicine, more guidance… It isn't a simple prescription for diazepam, it's a route into some form of group or therapy, counselling, guidance."
Public participant, Leicester

However, they also suggested that they may need some practical or financial support to ensure that people undertook these activities.

"A bit like the GP referral schemes for gyms. They're very good. It makes you go. If the GP just said, 'Go and sign on at the gym,' I probably wouldn't bother."
Frontline worker, Bedford

"If anybody's got any problems with paying for these activities, if [they have] a voucher from a GP, they'll no longer have that issue. It would benefit all five ways of wellbeing."
Public participant, Bedford

This approach is often called social prescribing (although that word was not used directly by participants).

Policy priority 6

Scale up the use of social prescribing to treat loneliness, as an alternative to anti-depressants.

There is a growing body of evidence of the positive effects of social prescribing, not only on social interactions, but also on other important outcomes that may help to reduce loneliness indirectly, such as self-confidence.[47] Social prescribing also sits firmly within the government's stated approach to public health, which focusses on tackling social determinants, prioritises mental wellbeing, capitalises on local provision of preventative services and involves wider stakeholders (including the voluntary sector) in the promotion of health.[48]

However, a survey by the Mental Health Foundation found that 78% of GPs reported prescribing an anti-depressant in the previous three years, despite believing that an alternative treatment might have been more appropriate, often because this treatment was unavailable or had long waiting lists.[49]

This suggests that more can be done to promote the use of social prescribing more widely. For example, government might consider:

- Ensuring that every prescription for an anti-depressant is accompanied by a social prescription. This should be possible to implement immediately if the activities prescribed were free, such as sign-posting to a volunteering opportunity (an approach which has been used effectively in a time bank in Catford).[50]

- Developing NICE recommendations for the use of social prescribing for the alleviation of loneliness. Although NICE currently recommends a range of social prescriptions for treatment of anxiety or depression, including exercise, cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and befriending,[51] there is limited consideration of more community-based social prescriptions, such as group activities, volunteering or initiatives like time-banking, or their use to alleviate loneliness.

- Evaluating the cost-effectiveness of funded social prescriptions. In particular, further research could consider the cost effectiveness of social prescribing where patients are provided with a paid voucher to undertake an activity which costs money. This will clearly be important to ensure that social prescriptions reduce, rather than exacerbate existing inequalities in the prevalence of loneliness along income lines.

- Provide leadership and support to clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) in commissioning social prescribing across their areas. Although a number of GPs have run successful pilots, there have been fewer examples of CCGs rolling out these approaches more widely.

5. Increasing community control through community rights

DCLG were interested in the wellbeing outcomes associated with community involvement in local decision-making, and how this learning could inform approaches to encourage more people to exercise their community rights (introduced in the 2011 Localism Act) or take control of decision-making in their communities in other ways. Some participants could clearly see the connections between exercising their community rights and enhanced wellbeing. Others felt that the time commitment and uncertainty of using the community rights might be bad for their wellbeing, and were therefore unlikely to exercise them in their current form. However, even amongst these, many were interested in helping shape their communities, particularly if opportunities were available for lower-risk and shorter-term involvement.

Introduction

In 2011, the Localism Act introduced a new set of legislative powers, which aimed to give people more control over their communities.

The community right to challenge gives communities the right to submit an 'expression of interest' in taking over and running a local authority service. If a local authority accepts the challenge they must then run a procurement exercise in which organisations – including those that challenged the delivery of the service but also other voluntary, social enterprise or private sector organisations – can bid to take over the running of the service.

The community right to bid is intended to help local communities protect local assets, such as pubs, football pitches, village shops or libraries. Communities can nominate an asset to be included in a 'list of assets of community value'. If the owner of the asset then wants to sell, they may have to wait six months before doing so to allow community groups time to develop a proposal and raise the required capital to bid for the property.

Neighbourhood planning gives communities direct power to develop a vision for their neighbourhood and shape the development and growth of their local area. They are able to choose where they want new homes, shops and offices

to be built, have their say on what those new buildings should look like and what infrastructure should be provided, and grant planning permission for the new buildings they want to see go ahead.

The community right to build allows local communities to undertake small-scale, site-specific, community-led developments. The right allows communities to build new homes, shops, businesses or facilities where they want them, without going through the normal planning application process. Members of the community set themselves up as a corporate body with the purpose of furthering the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of the local community. The developments would then be managed by this corporate body. Any benefits from any development which come to the body are retained or used for the benefit of the community.

In order for either a neighbourhood plan or a right to build to be passed, the proposals must:

• meet some minimum requirements (for example, they should be in line with national planning policies and strategic elements of the local plan)

• have the agreement of more than 50% of local people that vote through a community referendum.

For DCLG, the community rights are one part of a wider effort to empower and encourage both communities and public sector bodies to work together in a way that moves decision-making as far as possible into communities and to local people, and gives communities the assets to make the most of this new power.

The legislation has been backed by efforts to raise awareness about community rights, including:

• the provision of information, guides and toolkits online about community rights, provided by Locality, a national charity and membership body of community-led organisations

• spreading information and awareness of the rights through events, workshops, social media and case studies

• policy-makers visiting local areas to talk about community rights to interested audiences.

For those who then seek out more information about the community rights, a range of support and information is available, including detailed step-by-step guides and case studies on a dedicated website (mycommunityrights.co.uk); a telephone helpline; and pre-feasibility and feasibility grants available via Social Investment Business to support communities through the process.

The rights have already been taken up by thousands of communities across the country. However, they have not yet been taken up by tens of thousands. DCLG were interested in whether the barriers to people using the rights might be influenced by the perceived impact on wellbeing (positive and negative) of taking up these rights. If so, this could usefully influence the design of messaging and support around community rights. They were also interested in

any additional ways of giving individuals and communities more powers and so advance the overall objective of the policy, whether or not they resulted in the use of the specific Localism Act community rights. Therefore, this dialogue aimed to answer the following questions.

- **How can the rights, or the support packages associated with them, increase wellbeing?**

- **Are there ways to refine the rights that would further enhance wellbeing and therefore encourage more people to exercise them?**

- **How can giving people more opportunities to take control of their communities in other ways help to increase wellbeing?**

Workshops were held in London and Birkenhead. We included Birkenhead because we were particularly interested in how giving more powers to those living in deprived areas might affect wellbeing. We aimed to recruit participants who may be interested in getting involved in their communities. To do this, we recruited a majority of participants who answered favourably to a question about whether they think it's important for communities to have greater control over delivering and budgeting for local services.

However, as the intention was to explore how getting involved in community rights could appeal to a broader range of people, we did not recruit for very active community members or those who had already used the community rights. In fact only one participant had been actively involved in community rights, and very few other participants had heard of them.

Summary of findings

- Only a small number of those taking part in the dialogue were aware of the rights or had used them.

- Once they had learned more about the rights, some participants could clearly see the connections between exercising their community rights and enhanced wellbeing. They felt that both the processes and outcomes associated with coming together with neighbours to make a difference could enhance community cohesion, lead to a sense of pride and achievement, and ultimately result in a better quality of life. As a result, these participants expressed a strong interest in taking up the community rights.

- Those participants who were interested in the rights were not able to come up with new ideas for support that would help them to exercise the rights. Almost all the suggestions participants made either involved support that already existed or was outside this framework, for example redesigning the rights themselves, or investing significantly in capacity building and leadership development.

- Other participants expressed a strong latent desire to engage more with their communities and help shape their local area, while being much less enthusiastic about taking a pro-active role in exercising the community rights in their current form. For them, the wellbeing benefits of community involvement would be maximised if someone else (quite possibly someone from the local authority) was taking a leadership position.

- Many comments suggested that the rights as currently formed would be difficult to exercise. The barriers included the long time frame; the lack of local leadership and cohesion needed to get an initiative off the ground (particularly in deprived areas); the excessive levels of time commitment and skill often required; and the risk of failure and conflict. Participants felt that these could have negative effects on their wellbeing.

- Many comments, particularly but not exclusively from those in more deprived areas, suggested that the rights in their current form were not relevant and there were other issues that were more pressing for improving their wellbeing. These included the failure of local authorities to engage effectively with the local population, or the need for active community involvement in the regeneration of deprived areas.

- In Birkenhead, some participants were not interested in the 'right to challenge', as this right was perceived negatively by many as a back door to privatisation.

- Finally, several participants had no interest in exercising the community rights or anything similar.

Overall, this suggested that the broader objective of the policy – to help people shape their communities – would resonate well with the public and had potential to enhance wellbeing, but that new rights, or promotion of alternative existing avenues for influence, and new forms of support would be needed to make the most of this.

Two important caveats need to be made. Firstly, community rights have so far often been exercised not by individuals coming together for the first time, but by existing community groups. It may well be that there is significant further appetite for exercising the community rights within the voluntary and community sector, which this dialogue would not have uncovered, targeted as it was at individuals who were not necessarily active in that sector.

Secondly, these findings (and all those in the report) only reflect the views of those who took part in the dialogue, and should not be taken as representative of the public's views on community rights more generally.

Policy priorities

Given that there were limited new ideas for changes to the support packages provided, we have identified policy priorities which focus (a) on messaging which would attract those participants who were potentially interested in exercising the community rights and (b) on broader policy changes which would tap into the aspirations of a wider range of participants.

1. Messaging should highlight the outcomes that exercising community rights could produce, such as saving a pub or a post office, or reviving a neighbourhood, and the wellbeing benefits of exercising the rights, rather than the rights themselves.

2. The existing package of support should continue to be developed in line with current plans. It should be promoted alongside the outcomes that can be achieved by exercising the rights.

3. Creating further community rights, or promoting alternative mechanisms for community influence, could be popular with a wider range of people and could significantly enhance wellbeing if the emphasis is more on helping people participate in the decisions that affect them, and less on taking over assets and services.

4. Additional opportunities for influence should be created (or promoted if they already exist) which are less complex, with lower barriers to participation and with the possibility of quick wins.

5. Promotion of simpler opportunities for influence could be linked to support for community organisers who can provide the catalyst needed for leaders to emerge and communities to develop self-confidence.

6. The scope for structures which make participation in shaping the local community less daunting should be investigated.

7. Where appropriate, government should consider how to give the local population significant influence over the spending of regeneration and other place-making budgets, and over the exercise of related powers.

8. Government should ensure that any materials targeted at the public do not focus on the 'right to challenge'.

9. Government should engage further with those who have exercised the rights, to explore which key partners need to come to the table during community rights processes (particularly neighbourhood planning) and then consider ways to ensure this happens.

Findings and policy priorities in more detail

Finding: Some participants were interested in the community rights in their current form, both because of the benefits on their wellbeing from exercising the rights, and because of the positive outcomes and impact on quality of life that exercising those rights could produce.

A number of participants could clearly see the benefits of using the rights, and felt that it would be good for their wellbeing. They felt that the rights had the potential to increase a sense of belonging through bringing the community together around a common cause.

> "If there was a project where everyone had a shared idea, if we all had the same shared idea, we'd all want to be involved."
> Public participant, Birkenhead

"Wellbeing around communities is largely to do with the common purpose – everyone supporting the same football team – when they get together there's a sense of wellbeing."
Public participant, Birkenhead

It could also lead to a sense of achievement…

"If you get involved with anything and you're part of a group, no matter how big or small, and you achieve something, you know you're going to get a great sense of satisfaction out of that, irrespective of what it is."
Public participant, Birkenhead

"In the long run [the community rights] will give you three things, wellbeing, happiness and peace… when you've achieved something you feel at peace."
Public participant, London

…a sense of pride…

"A sense of achievement when something, like in a community project, follows through. People can have a playgroup or an amenity that people can use. Their wellbeing will increase because they will feel they had something to do with creating that space."
Public participant, Birkenhead.

…and ultimately quality of life.

"I think they seem to be very tied in with quality of life. I think they are very important."
Public participant, London

One frontline worker suggested that the actual process was as important as the outcomes, in building the confidence of communities.

"The whole process is about teaching communities the art of bringing about change. That's a huge outcome from this… Even if they don't change anything, they learn about how to change things. It therefore makes them more confident."
Frontline worker, London

Some participants who were not very interested in the idea of using their community rights in the abstract felt they might be more likely to get engaged if they realised that they could be used to achieve a goal that they felt strongly about.

"I suppose from a selfish perspective, unless it directly impacts on my life and my way of living, do I really care?"
Public participant, London

Asked what would encourage people to take up the community rights, one participant replied:

"A need. If there was something I felt really passionately about, if I thought, 'I really want to start a gardening club and I want that land to do it on,' that would be one thing. If you see things that you don't like happening."
Public participant, Birkenhead

For some, the real value of community rights were the outcomes they could produce.

"[The rights are] the promise that I won't see another eye-sore, huge multi-national chain like Starbucks or something. The assurance and the promise of a slightly better quality of life."
Public participant, London

In fact, the community rights (in this case neighbourhood planning) would not be able to directly prevent a Starbucks from opening, though it could prevent the change of use of a building, if it was justified locally.

Some of the issues people brought up during the discussions, which might lead to them using the community rights, were:

• heritage and the protection or revival of certain areas (for example in Birkenhead, where one group's conversation consolidated around a discussion on how to revive Birkenhead Market)

• preventing planning permission for betting shops and chicken shops in the town centre

• affordable homes

• overcoming poverty.

Policy priority 1

Messaging should highlight the outcomes the community rights could produce, such as saving a pub or a post office, or reviving a neighbourhood, and the wellbeing benefits of exercising the rights, rather than the rights themselves.

Naturally any communications plan should be tested and will only work for those already pre-disposed to act.

Finding: Most suggestions for support made by participants were in line with what is now available or already planned.

When we asked participants what they would need to help them exercise the community rights and maximise the potential wellbeing benefits associated with the rights, many of the ideas they had for specific support was already provided, such as case studies, engagement from local authorities, simple step-by-step guides and access to an advisor.[52]

> *"We need to see how it works for us, how other people's processes have happened, how their concepts started and how they've been fulfilled… We need to be told how to get the support and to be able to ask for it if it doesn't happen."*
> Public participant, London

Participants also had a few additional suggestions. For example, participants suggested providing templates for key forms and documents that would need to be created, so that each group was not re-inventing the wheel.

> *"I think templates are a great idea. There should be a folder of documents that are already there."*
> Public participant, London

Policy priority 2

The existing package of support should continue to be developed in line with current plans. It should be promoted alongside the outcomes that can be achieved by exercising the rights.

Clearly, given that very few participants had actually used the support available, this dialogue cannot provide insight into whether the quality of the services provided were adequate, or whether, in practice when using the community rights there are other support services that participants would need. What we can conclude from the dialogue is that for those who are interested in exercising the rights in their current form, the existing communications about the rights should reassure them that they will have the help they anticipate needing.

Finding: Many participants did have a strong latent desire to engage more in their communities and help shape the places they lived in.

A number of participants expressed strong opinions about specific issues in their neighbourhoods, and said that they wanted more opportunities to discuss and influence what went on.

For example, one group in Birkenhead discussing neighbourhood planning was initially unsure whether it would be feasible for them to use the community rights. However, during the conversation the group identified the regeneration of Birkenhead Market as a local issue that was important to them. The conversation changed tone, and participants became animated and

engaged. They described the market as part of their heritage and reflected on the various developments – such as tunnel tolls, and new parking restrictions, which had contributed to the decline of the market. They felt as though these decisions had been made in policy silos, none of which had considered one aspect of the community that meant a lot to them – the regeneration of the market.

Other participants explained that although they wanted a say in decisions such as these, they did not necessarily want too much control over the process.

> *"We don't particularly want to be decision-makers, but we like to have our voice heard."*
> Public participant, Birkenhead

> *"You need an opportunity for people to say, 'Why? How is this going to affect me?'… The biggest mistake made is there's an assumption of apathy in certain communities, like no one's going to care, 'We can do what we want and no one's going to raise an eyelid,' and nobody's going to care."*
> Public participant, Birkenhead

The desire was partly about being able to hold the local authority to account better, or at a minimum about better communications. Many participants reported that they found communication with the local authority laborious, and bad for wellbeing. They said that they weren't aware of decision-making processes about things that affected them.

> *"We had a children's little play area and then the next thing I knew there was housing there and it was like, 'Well how did that happen? I didn't know that was going to happen.'"*
> Public participant, Birkenhead

> *"No one really said to them that they were going to build all that stuff down there. It just happened."*
> Public participant, Birkenhead

People wanted a clearer, faster and more direct way to communicate with their local authority.

> *"I'm not sure people would listen and I'm not sure who to tell my complaint or concern to."*
> Public participant, London

Where local authorities had been responsive, or made the effort to engage residents, participants were very appreciative.

> *"They do take feedback from us very, very seriously, but I have also found that with them, collectively, we have gone to the council and we have had a lot of success. They do listen to us, and so we managed to get the support then."*
> Public participant, London

Participants felt that they could not effect change on their own, and therefore needed to engage with other people, but did not know how to go about this. Talking about having influence, one participant said:

"I feel like I've got none because I'm not involved in anything that's big enough to have an influence as a group of people. One person doesn't seem to make much difference. If you get a lot of people together you've got more influence."
Public participant, Birkenhead

There was thus a latent desire to participate in this way, with people agreeing that they might take part in an initiative affecting their area – if someone else was leading it.

As we have already seen, this latent desire did not extend to running local services. But it wasn't just the 'right to challenge' that was criticised in this way. After hearing about a neighbourhood plan in Wolverhampton, one participant responded:

"They've allocated 585 new homes. That's great, but why do they need to put all this time and effort as citizens to get enough homes? People pay taxes to governments. Why do we need to pick up the slack for things they're not doing in terms of providing homes for people?"
Public participant, Birkenhead

Qualitative research by Ed Poulter on the views of community activists in Yorkshire and Humber found a similar story, with respondents suggesting that the local authority should be delivering local services and looking after local assets rather than deferring responsibility onto local people.[53]

Policy priority 3

Creating further community rights, or promoting alternative mechanisms for community influence, could be popular with a wider range of people and could enhance wellbeing if the emphasis is more on helping people participate in the decisions that affect them, and less on taking over assets and services.

In addition the barriers to exercising these rights will need to be tackled, as discussed below.

Finding: Some participants found the idea of exercising the rights daunting and unattractive because of the length of time it can take, and felt that it could harm their wellbeing.

One of the barriers identified by participants was:

"Opening the door to a process with no end date."
Public participant, London

"You don't know how long it's going to take. Then you look at reward versus time."
Public participant, London

> *"Two years is too long. It is two years of grief, emails, phone calls, anxiety, and also the pressure of dealing with it, and also holding your group together."*
> Public participant, London

> *"The further you go, the more impossible it is to stop it all. To stop later means you have wasted everything. The only way to guarantee an outcome is to keep pushing. That will make your stress and anxiety go higher and higher."*
> Public participant, London

People wanted to see results from more manageable activities.

> *"Satisfaction about being involved in the community does lead to wellbeing. I come back to my guerrilla gardening. I think that is a really good example of making people feel better because there's something growing where something wasn't growing."*
> Public participant, London

Frontline workers agreed.

> *"There's a paradox. You're trying to engage people who haven't done this kind of thing before. People who are frustrated, apathetic. These powers are there to say you've got rights, we will give them to you. They haven't done this stuff before… If they try and do this, they're six months in, two years in, three years in. They haven't seen anything and they're struggling and back to the frustration and apathy. It's about how they can have power over smaller, more achievable things."*
> Frontline worker, London

> *"What seems fundamental to me is there's a really careful thought about making sure first victories are winnable."*
> Frontline worker, London

Although some groups may be able to identify some quick wins for community rights, by their nature they are largely long-term commitments.

Policy priority 4

Additional opportunities for influence should be created (or promoted if they already exist) which are less complex, with lower barriers to participation and with the possibility of quick wins.

These can tap into the interest in participation in decision-making, and if they do indeed lead to quick wins, could encourage take-up of further rights.

Finding: Participants suggested it would be difficult to get even smaller initiatives off the ground in some areas, at least without more pro-active support.

Even smaller initiatives have to be got off the ground. It was widely felt that this required that there be some sense of community to start with, which participants tended to say was lacking.

> *"For 19 years I was in service at schools and I saw the area lose all its sense of community. It is very deprived and it is getting worse not better."*
> Public participant, Birkenhead

> *"Where I used to live everybody spoke about things. If we had a problem we would all speak about it, but I literally don't know what my nextdoor neighbour's name is or anyone round there."*
> Public participant, Birkenhead

This made the idea of organising something collective intimidating for many.

> *"Just arranging a meeting with 21 people is going to be horrendous."*
> Public participant, Birkenhead

> *"I don't feel confident enough to knock on someone's door and say, 'Do you think we should do this?' I don't feel confident enough to do that with those types of people."*
> Public participant, Birkenhead

Similarly, no one in either location said that they would be interested in taking a leadership role in exercising the community rights. Although many people were very enthusiastic about getting involved if it was being led by someone else, most people did not know where to start.

Even if leadership does emerge, frontline workers felt this may be difficult to sustain in more deprived areas. As one of them who worked directly with deprived communities put it:

> *"There's churn in those communities when the leadership leaves because the place is so awful. The people who leave quickest are the ones with the initiative to become leaders. You have a real problem with churn in leadership."*
> Frontline worker, London

Thus it is not surprising that while participants did not use the language of community organising, their conversations did identify a need for such a role, possibly undertaken by the local authority.

> *"I think a paid lead-officer whose professional task is to represent people and be more than just a champion of people's needs, someone who can do work with the community at heart from inside the council."*
> Public participant, London

"I think the danger is you've got a lot of individuals who have got thoughts, but nobody's pulling it together. If the local authority is serious about it, then help us set those groups up."
Public participant, Birkenhead

One participant recommended knocking on doors to find out who is interested, saying:

"You have to go back to basics with these things."
Public participant, London

Other participants felt it would also be useful to have support to broker local connections to make sure the initiatives could have the right level of community support behind them. As one participant put it:

"More networking. If I have an idea, put me in touch with other people that have that idea. I know you can do it on Facebook, but more of a register, yes, buddy systems."
Public participant, London

The UK has a rich tradition of community approaches to social change, designed specifically to overcome some of the barriers that participants identified. Approaches such as community organising and community development aim to:

• talk to local people to identify the issues that matter to them, and build up from there

• build connections between people with common aims

• foster leadership from within communities

• overcome inequalities in power by focusing specifically on areas or individuals who may be particularly disenfranchised.

The frontline worker dialogue included some community organisers who explained why they felt an approach such as this was needed.

"If all you're doing is bringing together people who are already having their views heard then you reinforce the existing power which holds things in place. We need new blood, a new sense of engagement, participation from the full range of people. To do that, you've got to go outside the organisations, structures and meetings and go to where people are already. Go to pubs, cafes, libraries."
Frontline worker, London

"Somebody that is not a local authority or government official that is helping to facilitate this work. It's the most crucial thing and it's left out because it ends up being the most expensive thing. Communities are being left. They're apathetic and frustrated and suddenly given all these powers. It's very hard for them to move from that position to organised and have an energy."
Frontline worker, London

They described how in many communities capacity for this kind of initiative needed building up from the very basics.

"I did some work on the Aylesbury estate. It's a very deprived area with a very diverse community… There we brought people together in each other's homes and set them to talk to each other about the issues they wanted to talk about. Most of the people in the room had never sat in a meeting with other people and had to stop and listen to somebody else and then wait until they had finished and say their bit, or continue from what someone else had said to link it. Those skills were not present in the room."
Frontline worker, London

Policy priority 5

Promotion of simpler opportunities for influence could be linked to support for community workers who can provide the catalyst needed for leaders to emerge and communities to develop self-confidence.

This could involve a variety of approaches such as community organising or community development.

Finding: Some participants were interested in much lower levels of involvement than what would be necessary for the community rights.

There was strong consensus from participants that one of the main wellbeing benefits of using the community rights could be a sense of achievement.

"The impact it would have on wellbeing, it would bring back the community spirit again and community morale. You're working together and you've achieved something at the end of it."
Public participant, Birkenhead

However, conversely, failing to achieve their goals was considered one of the primary risks to their wellbeing.

"I think mine was to do with the fact of wellbeing, because I think you get a little bit scared if it doesn't work out and you feel more of a failure and more of a letdown… I think if we had the evidence to prove it, I think I would be more confident, but I don't like disappointment."
Public participant, Birkenhead

"There's culpability as well. You're putting yourself at the forefront of what could essentially be a complete disaster. There's that responsibility."
Public Participant, London

In addition, some questioned whether they would prioritise the time investment needed.

"I think, automatically, because it's a discussion about how much influence we want and we haven't had any, we feel like we should but when you sit back and think about, how much would you really want? How much can you actually afford the time?"
Public participant, Birkenhead

Frontline workers who had either exercised community rights themselves or supported those who had, agreed that the amount of effort involved in community rights was extensive.

"We were designated by both our councils back in 2012 and we have yet to finish our neighbourhood plan. It's a huge undertaking for a community."
Frontline worker, London

Others did not feel that they had the skills to be able to carry out the task.

"I think logistically it's just too much to ask the communities."
Public participant, Birkenhead

"We were saying outside that realistically in our minds to be able to do this, you have to be of a certain level of education and hold a certain bag of skills. It's not true to say that anybody can do this."
Public participant, London

In a research project into people's motivations and barriers to participation, Brodie et al stressed the importance of this point.

"Expecting people to take on roles and levels of responsibility that they aren't comfortable or familiar with can be counter-productive. A range of opportunities for involvement, from envelope stuffing to public speaking, need to be provided."[54]

As a result, participants were also unclear whether exercising community rights would be good for their wellbeing:

"It would be completely stressful if I was to take this in the capacity of a leader, or even of a team member, because it would detract from my home life. It wouldn't assist or aid my wellbeing."
Public participant, London

These various barriers were felt to be particularly high in deprived areas.

"They could probably work in affluent areas, but what about areas where there's poverty and people are just disinterested, and that?"
Public participants, Birkenhead

"I feel like everybody's given up. It makes you feel like there's no point, because nobody's got respect for the streets, let alone the community. Nobody even looks after, like, the front of their own house. It just makes you think, 'If everybody else is like that, why bother?'"
Public participant, London

"If you're going outside and there's a gang of lads or a gang of girls… you feel intimidated about going out, so you don't want to go and mix because you don't know what you're going to be confronted with."
Public participant, Birkenhead

And yet some of these people at least did express a strong desire to participate in decision-making, and not exclusively about projects where quick wins are available.

Policy priority 6

The scope for structures which make participation in shaping the local community less daunting should be investigated.

Supporting citizens to influence their communities in a way that was relatively straight forward, and with a shorter time-frame, could allow them to experience the wellbeing benefits of feeling that they are able to have a say, and improving their quality of life in the longer term, without taking the risks of short-term harm to their wellbeing.

These structures could be seen as part of a broader process of reviving democratic engagement. They need to enable citizens to participate in even relatively complex initiatives where quick wins are not available.

There are a number of ways in which government may want to consider doing this. One option is to base this on the role of councillors and wards. Another
is to consider whether structures could be created or adapted to reduce the time commitments and skill levels required and the stress levels likely. This might involve:

- opportunities for more low-level participation in addition to the leadership and pro-active roles required

- clearer obligations on local and other authorities to provide expertise and support to local initiatives as and when they emerge

- stronger powers to reduce the enervating bureaucratic wrangles that participants experienced.

Finding: For some participants, particularly (but not exclusively) those who were affected by severe deprivation, the rights as currently framed appeared not relevant, as other things were more pressing for their wellbeing.

Issues of deprivation and poverty were seen as key barriers to interest in community rights as currently framed. These issues were particularly important for participants in Birkenhead, an area with pockets of severe deprivation, though they were also discussed in London.

"Poverty. You know, people have got a lot of issues going on in their lives that are more pressing than what's going on in their local area. How to get money and survive, I think that tends to be more important."
Public participant, Birkenhead

When asked about the impact of the process on wellbeing, one participant answered:

"The problem is the poverty in areas. Not wellbeing being involved in this process. It's getting people into full-time work."
Public participant, London

It was not just that poverty was a more pressing issue than community rights, but that in deprived areas doing anything meaningful was likely to require some injection of money.

At the time of writing, the outline for the new support contract (which is subject to revision) for community rights includes a welcome focus on overcoming deprivation, both by working in-depth with 100 deprived communities, and by working with a further 30 to 50 communities to develop local economic plans, which focus on local economic growth. Further initiatives to link up place-shaping initiatives to regeneration may be likely to engage a much wider variety of people and areas, particularly if initiatives are able to give local residents significantly influence over the spending of local investment. As one participant put it:

"The government are giving these local councils money to improve areas. I think the community should have the say of what that money gets spent on to be honest."
Public participant, Birkenhead

Policy priority 7

Where appropriate, government should consider how to give the local population significant influence over the spending of regeneration and other place-making budgets and over the exercise of related powers.

For example, the public could be given influence over related powers such as Section 106.

Finding: In Birkenhead, the 'right to challenge' was very negatively perceived by some.

Although some participants were interested in having more of an influence over their area, no participants showed any interest in running a local service. The prevalent view was that quality public services were what mattered and that local authorities were responsible for providing them. This view created a negative feeling even about other community rights.

"We didn't want to oversell the impact of community rights on wellbeing, because if the council could provide very good services but in a very autocratic way, people might be just as happy as if they were getting involved."
Public participant, Birkenhead

Other research has found similar views. In 101 in-depth interviews with a wide range of people, Brodie et al found "minimal evidence amongst the people we spoke to of a desire to take over local services and run community assets".[55]

Participants also felt that communities would be unlikely to be able to compete with a large business, and that the process would result in privatisation.

"It's privatisation under another name."
Public participant, Birkenhead

"With all its taxes and hidden agendas, local government, at least we have a governing body that's accountable to the public."
Public participant, Birkenhead

"A lot might rather it stay with the local authority."
Public participant, Birkenhead

Although all four community rights were given roughly equal time in presentations, it was the community 'right to challenge' that many participants in Birkenhead picked up on, including their concern about privatisation (though participants in London did not pick it up in the same way). This probably reflects, to some degree, the different audience for the 'right to challenge', which is focused at established voluntary sector groups and parish councils rather than members of the public. It was harder for communities to identify wider social benefits from the 'right to challenge', suggesting that promoting it alongside the other rights was not productive.

Policy priority 8

Ensure that any materials targeted at the public do not focus on the 'right to challenge'.

It is important to remember that the recruitment of participants was for members of the public, and that voluntary and community groups may be more interested in the 'right to challenge'.

This policy priority is based on participants' perception that the 'right to challenge' would lead to privatisation. Clearly, if there is good evidence that it can prevent local authorities from privatising services, or give the wider community more control over services and outcomes, then this could be a desirable outcome to be promoted in line with Priority 1.

Finding: A minority of participants were actively hostile to community rights as currently conceived and presented. This was partly because they were seen as too difficult to exercise and thus not for people like them.

A small number of participants reacted to hearing about the community rights not only with ambivalence, but sometimes with resentment as well – feeling more disengaged than they did before.

"It's like a dangling carrot. You can do it. You've got the option, but you're not going to get it."
Public participant, London

"We are told we have opportunities and we're given choice, but the fact is that we don't. We couldn't possibly do what is outlined for us to do. It's a charade, a talking shop for the sake of it to give you the impression that you're involved. You're not and you never will be. You will never play a full role in making decisions, regardless of how much you're made to feel you will."
Public participant, London

One participant responded to a presentation about community rights with a broader reflection.

"There's a massive disconnect between the world you guys live in and the reality of people choosing to deal with things."
Public participant, London

Worse, some participants suggested that this process was not for people like them.

"There's a sort of elitism within this whole process. You need to be of a certain calibre or background."
Public participant, London

The language used by some of these participants suggests that the promotion of activities and rights which are more manageable will help avoid alienating people who do not feel able to take up more ambitious suggestions. This adds weight to our priorities numbers 4 and 5.

Finding: In one case, it had not been easy to engage with all the relevant bodies when developing a neighbourhood plan.

During the workshop with frontline workers, one participant working on a neighbourhood plan in London had struggled to engage with Transport for London (TfL).

"I think traffic and transport is such an important point. TfL are just beholden to themselves. There are so many issues in communities. It's not joined-up thinking. You're getting the two councils together but you need TfL, they need to be at the table."
Frontline worker, London

Another participant discussed their challenges developing a neighbourhood plan in an area which straddled two different local authorities, making it very difficult to secure involvement from the right group of people.

Policy priority 9

Government should engage further with those who have exercised the rights, to explore which key partners need to come to the table during community rights processes (particularly neighbourhood planning) and then consider ways to ensure this happens.

The sample of participants who were actually engaged in the dialogue was extremely small, so this finding may be atypical. It would therefore be interesting to explore further whether this experience is shared more widely.

End Notes

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9. Of course to robustly answer the question 'Were the outcomes significantly different to a similar dialogue without use of the wellbeing lens?' we would have needed to run several dialogues, some with and some without wellbeing evidence, and we did not do this. This conclusion is therefore a judgment.

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