



AASW

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Australian Association
of Social Workers

Measuring What Matters

Submission to the Federal Treasury

January 2023

About the Australian Association of Social Workers

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

Acknowledgements

This submission has been developed in consultation with our members who are working across Australia in various social work areas of practice and, by consultation with our National Advisory Panels which are made up of experts in their field of practice.

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

Cindy Smith
CEO

Cindy.smith@asw.asn.au

Angela Scarfe

Senior Policy Advisor

Angela.scarfe@asw.asn.au

Executive Summary

The AASW welcomes this initiative. We endorse the government's aim to identify and articulate wellbeing for all members of the community as the basis for a larger project towards an overall improvement in the quality of life for everyone in Australia.

We believe that any project to advance wellbeing must commence with a renewed commitment to our human rights obligations under the IBR¹ and the Sustainable Development Goals. It must be accompanied by a systematic and considered effort to embed all Australia's human rights obligations into our economic, political and social policies.

Social workers believe that a focus on the wellbeing outcomes of people who are vulnerable is the key to ensuring the wellbeing of the whole community and we encourage the government to add appropriate mechanisms to the resulting wellbeing framework. The AASW would welcome the opportunity to work with the government to implement this initiative.

Recommendations

The AASW recommends that:

- Our national wellbeing goals be identified and articulated with reference to our human rights obligations;
- The indicators identified under this initiative focus onto the actual outcomes of vulnerable people;
- The work resulting from the Measuring What Matters initiative build on and contribute to work already underway to improve wellbeing and reduce harm;
- The data collection instruments be sufficiently fine to capture the situation of groups with complex needs.

¹ By this term we include: The International Bill of Rights (encompassing: Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNHDR); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); First Optional Protocol to ICCPR; Second Optional Protocol to ICCPR); Convention on Status Relating to Refugees; Convention on the Rights of the Child; Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; Convention on the Rights of Peoples with a Disability; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination; Convention on the Rights of Older Peoples; and, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Particularly Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime

Our Vision: Wellbeing and Social Justice for All

The social work profession in Australia is based on an abiding respect for all persons and the principles of social justice and professional integrity. The AASW's vision is one of "Wellbeing and Social Justice for All". To fulfill this vision, the AASW works toward a society in which all people can thrive, develop their potential, contribute to their community, and pursue lives of meaning and purpose.

We agree with the proposition that Australia needs a renewed national conversation about the nature of wellbeing, the most effective means of improving wellbeing, and mechanisms for ensuring that we make progress towards this goal. Having made several submissions to the budgetary process, the AASW also endorses the proposed role for the federal budget as the appropriate instrument for this.² We therefore welcome this initiative by the Federal Treasurer, the Hon Jim Chalmers, MP to expand the budget process to identify the impact of budget measures on wellbeing. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to Treasury's deliberations on this important project.

Our submission

To the AASW it is axiomatic that our suite of national policies should aim for more than economic growth; and that improvement in people's quality of life is the ultimate goal of all national policy, including economic policy. Nevertheless, that goal is not always at the front of public discussion about the purpose of public policy, nor even as the goal of economic policy. In the absence of overall vision of well-being, the concept of economic growth has stood in for progress, with the inevitable consequence that the situations of particular groups of people have been subsumed into an overall summary of the national position. As well as diverting attention from the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized members of our community, this has meant that measures to promote improvements in people's wellbeing have been described only in terms of their costs to the economy. A clear example was the recent public reporting of the impact of the NDIS on the Federal budget which referred to it only as a cost rather than as a means of furthering people's economic and social participation.³

Although the AASW welcomes this initiative, we believe that the process for *measuring* wellbeing, as described in the discussion paper should be extended and strengthened, to ensure that wellbeing *guides* government policy. The AASW believes that the following refinements are needed.

The Objectives should refer to Australia's international obligations.

The AASW endorses the use of the OECD's work identifying the domains of wellbeing and indicators for each.⁴ Indeed, Australia has already made commitments to enhancing many of these elements that contribute to wellbeing. These are the undertakings that Australia has given to promoting and defending human rights; particularly those specified in the ICCPR and the ICESCR. Similarly, Australia has given an undertaking to meet all the indicators of the Sustainable

² (Treasury of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2022)

³ (Brown, 2022) (Gauntlett, 2022)

⁴ (Stiglitz, 2018)

Development Goals by 2030. The AASW believes that the process of embedding wellbeing into our policy and budgetary processes must commence with references to each of the human rights that attach to everyone in Australia because of our ratification of the international human rights instruments.

Unfortunately many aspects of our current public and social policy fail to fulfill these obligations and meet these standards. For example, our income support payments to people looking for work are inadequate to meet the minimum standards required for nutrition, housing and health.⁵ Despite protracted and concerted efforts from civil society, government policy making has so far failed these people.

Recommendation:

- Our national wellbeing goals should be identified and articulated with reference to our human rights obligations.

The Indicators should measure outcomes not outputs.

Although Australia already collects data on multiple aspects of health and wellbeing, our current data collection methods give priority to service outputs, rather than wellbeing outcomes.⁶ For example, the AIHW's data framework for the outcomes of mental health services describes only aggregated re-admission measures rather than whether people who weren't re-admitted experienced better mental health.⁷

A further problem is that data is collected according to our current program definitions, rather than categories of need, nor the lived experience of someone with multiple needs. It cannot show the connections between the needs that are unmet by one program and their consequences for other programs. For example, many of the young people using homelessness services have already been through the child protection or youth justice system. Improvements in the effectiveness and targeting of these services may be the most effective way to improve a young person's housing needs, but that can't be identified by measuring spending on homelessness services.⁸

Recommendation:

- The indicators identified under this initiative should focus onto the actual outcomes of vulnerable people.

The Policy Application stage should build on work already underway.

Australia has already articulated several national frameworks and strategies which aim to improve wellbeing through health and mental health measures and decrease the harm of violence and suicide.⁹ Some, such as the framework to prevent violence against women¹⁰ and to prevent child sexual abuse¹¹ are supported with action plans, monitoring arrangements, and accountability mechanisms. Many AASW members are employed in programs that fall within the scope of these

⁵ (Saunders P & Bedford M, 2019)

⁶ (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 2013)

⁷ ibid

⁸ (Productivity Commission, 2023)

⁹ See, for example: National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy

¹⁰ National Action Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children

¹¹ ibid

over-arching strategies and using their provisions to drive progress on these important aspects of well-being. To ensure progress it will be important that any further work towards national wellbeing benefits from and contributes to the work that is already underway with these initiatives.

Recommendation:

- The work resulting from the Measuring What Matters initiative should build on and contribute to work already underway to improve wellbeing and reduce harm.

Measurement should be disaggregated to show outcomes for the most vulnerable.

The AASW believes that improved well being for the whole community can only be achieved by paying attention to the situation of particularly vulnerable or marginalized people within the population. The discussion paper released as part of this consultation proposes several measures to track progress, many of which are described in overall or average terms. Social workers work with people who are experiencing multiple barriers to their wellbeing, and these are frequently compound each other. AASW members observe that overall and averaged measures do not capture the extent or the nature of hardship experienced by the most vulnerable people. If progress towards wellbeing is to be made, the policy process needs to capture the groups who are consistently overlooked so that programs can be designed to ensure that their needs are met. For example, the housing crisis has different consequences for men and women, because the lack of adequate income and safe housing is a powerful force preventing women from leaving violent households, particularly if they have children. Therefore, to capture progress on housing and its role in mental health and physical safety, our data about housing needs to be disaggregated by gender and family type.

Recommendation

- The data collection instruments should be sufficiently fine to capture the situation of groups with complex needs.

Conclusion

The AASW endorses the philosophy underpinning this initiative. We believe that it should be extended in such a way that it drives progress towards improved outcomes for everyone in Australia, in ways that have already been identified under our human rights obligations. We look forward to playing an active role in the implementation of any work that arises from this consultation.

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Melbourne office

Level 7, 14-20 Blackwood St
NORTH MELBOURNE 3051
PO Box 2008
Royal Melbourne Hospital VIC 3050

ACN 008 576 010
ABN 93 008 576 010

T: 03 9320 1000
W: www.aasw.asn.au
For general enquiries please contact:
social.policy@aasw.asn.au

For enquiries relating to the Submission, please contact:
Angela Scarfe | Senior Policy Advisor
angela.scarfe@aasw.asn.au



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