A case for change
For thriving individuals, families, workplaces and communities
This publication draws on material written for the NSW Wellbeing Collaborative by Dr Richard Tooth of Sapere Research Group. It was developed by the Mental Health Commission of NSW in consultation with the NSW Wellbeing Collaborative.

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Strategic context

The development of this case for change and companion resources arose from the publication of Living Well: A Strategic Plan for Mental Health in NSW 2014-2024. A number of actions and themes from Living Well are relevant.

Living Well calls for the establishment of a NSW Wellbeing Collaborative to support wellbeing initiatives among organisations, share knowledge and promote innovative and successful activities.

The NSW Wellbeing Collaborative was formally launched on June 2015\(^1\). The Collaborative seeks to build the capacity of government agencies, non-government organisations and private enterprise to implement the actions within Living Well that relate directly to wellbeing, and broader initiatives that promote the wellbeing of the people of NSW.

Living Well calls for a whole of government and community response to address those things that enable people living with mental illness to enjoy full and satisfying lives. It also has a focus on universal measures to build the wellbeing of the entire NSW community and calls for action for early intervention and prevention for vulnerable groups. Education, workplaces, and local communities all have a critical role in bringing the vision of Living Well to life. Wellbeing is everybody’s business.
Wellbeing clearly starts with the individual. Everyone has enormous scope

- to take action to improve their own wellbeing, to be active,
- to connect with those around them, to keep learning throughout life,
- to take notice and be aware of themselves and their surroundings, and to give back and participate in society.²

It is also essential for government — Commonwealth, state and local — to embed the concept of wellbeing in policies, programs and services. Non-government organisations are important partners in this endeavour and employers across sectors must look to address the wellbeing of their workforces. Any concerted effort to protect, improve and enhance wellbeing needs to involve every level of society and:

- **Individuals need to be empowered to take action**

- **Communities need to be engaged to understand their aspirations, and**

- **Organisations need to be mobilised to strategically assess and plan.**
Purpose of this document

This case for change is one of a series of resources that the NSW Wellbeing Collaborative has developed to build the foundations and capacity of government agencies, non-government organisations and private enterprise in NSW to develop and implement policies, programs and services that promote wellbeing. It lays out the case for a stronger focus on wellbeing outcomes and drivers.
What is wellbeing?

While there is no single, universally agreed definition of wellbeing there is considerable research and practice in this area and looking across a range of attempts to define wellbeing common elements emerge. At an individual level, wellbeing is made up of how a person feels, how satisfied they are with their lives, and their sense of meaning and purpose.³

Aboriginal understandings of social and emotional wellbeing remind people to think holistically and collectively when thinking about what makes life good. Social and emotional wellbeing is often described as the harmony of elements such as mental, physical, cultural, spiritual, environmental, social, economic, and political and ideological health.⁴

Western literature now offers similar wisdom and credible analyses of the drivers or determinants of wellbeing often provide a list of parts of life that are important to our wellbeing including things like income, education, work, family and community life, values, environment and physical and mental health.⁵

The NSW Wellbeing Collaborative has developed a Wellbeing language and definitions guide as part of this series to provide further guidance on the range of definitions that could be used to describe wellbeing.
The case for change

There are four main arguments for reorienting policy and organisational goals to include a focus on improving wellbeing.
Wellbeing is everybody’s business. Government, workplaces, non-government organisations, communities and individuals all have an interest in wellbeing. Most government agencies (Commonwealth, state and local) and non-government organisations have a core objective or role that relates to the wellbeing of people. This can be framed in terms of quality of life, standard of living, welfare or some other similar term.

A search of the strategic documents of most government departments and non-government organisations will reveal a vision, goal or objective related to improving the wellbeing of people. For example:

In 2015-2016, the Department of Premier and Cabinet described its mission as:

“We enhance the lives of the people of NSW by driving priorities, brokering outcomes and delivering programs and services.”

The 2017 vision for NSW Treasury is:

“NSW Treasury’s vision is to enable the Government to deliver on its promises to the people of NSW that the State will always be a great place to live and work.”

The Local Government Act 1993 states that the object of the principles for councils set out in the Act

“is to provide guidance to enable councils to carry out their functions in a way that facilitates local communities that are strong, healthy and prosperous.”

Enhancing wellbeing is the purpose of government and the activity it funds. If government and the community is able to have a more explicit conversation about what wellbeing means, what drives it and how it is measured, both are more likely to achieve their shared goals and aspirations for good lives.
Economic indicators don’t tell the whole story

Countries and communities use a range of measures to mark their progress. The dominant measures used today are economic, such as per capita Gross Domestic Product. However, there is a growing global movement to shift this concentration from traditional economic measures of community progress to a more direct focus on human flourishing.

This is not to say that economic indicators are not important. They are, but increasingly policy-makers are adding to these a range of social indicators and measures of how people rate their own wellbeing (subjective wellbeing) to provide a more detailed picture. For example, the OECD Framework for measuring wellbeing and progress takes into account material conditions like income, but adds to this measures of quality of life related to health, work-life balance, education, social connection, governance, the environment, personal security and subjective wellbeing. It also states countries should look at the sustainability of drivers of wellbeing over time.⁹
The OECD examined trends in a number of wellbeing dimensions and found that some, like health and education, correlated well with GDP, and have improved as GDP has increased. Dimensions like the quality of political institutions and personal security do not correlate well with GDP. And there is a negative correlation between GDP and the quality of the environment. Broadening the scope of measures of progress beyond GDP allow for this more nuanced picture of how a society is faring.
Wellbeing information makes for better policy

In 2015, about half a trillion dollars (or about one-third of Australia’s Gross Domestic Product) was spent on services, including education, health, social security and welfare, housing and community services, with the primary purpose of improving the wellbeing of individuals and the community. It is critical that this spending and effort be well directed. Investment decisions can be based on data and research on what works to improve wellbeing.

There are many points in the policy cycle where wellbeing information can inform better decisions. Data and information about wellbeing are useful to:

**Identify** risks and issues. For example by identifying population groups who have very low wellbeing or identify factors that are likely to impact on wellbeing.

**Analyse** options. Tools and approaches are being developed to help organisations assess options in terms of their impact on wellbeing.

**Monitor** progress and performance. Indicators and evaluation can provide an overall picture of wellbeing, how populations and settings are faring, and the impact of particular programs.
Analysis needs to be relevant to the context to which it is being applied. However, as an example, a group of researchers based in the UK, US and from the OECD asked “If wellbeing was the goal of policy makers, what difference would it make to their priorities?” They concluded:

“we should treat mental ill health as professionally as physical ill health, support parents, and build character and resilience in schools. At the community level, we should promote volunteering and giving, address loneliness, and create a built environment that is sociable and green. As well as promoting economic growth, we should aim to reduce unemployment through active welfare policies and encourage businesses to promote wellbeing at work. We should treat citizens with respect and empower them more.”

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A wellbeing focus pays off

Improvements in individual wellbeing have benefits to others in society including communities, workplaces and government. For example, there is evidence that individual wellbeing is a contributor to improved academic performance, workplace performance, mental health outcomes and social cohesion.

Many of these benefits result in lower costs for government in providing services. Over the course of someone's life and across the range of government services, the costs of an individual can amount to several million dollars. When the long-term benefits are considered, along with the immediate benefits, the return on investment to society can be overwhelmingly positive. Studies have shown that early interventions focused on wellbeing can be very cost-effective and in particular, interventions to improve the wellbeing of young people can have long-term benefits.
The Act Belong Commit campaign is a population based campaign to promote mental health. Individuals are encouraged to participate in mentally healthy activities and organisations that offer these activities are encouraged to increase participation. The campaign is being rolled out in a number of places in NSW and Australia. In a recent study, Irish data was analysed to look at the link between Act Belong Commit activities and depression, anxiety and cognitive impairment. The ‘Act’ call to action was measured by the number of social or recreational activities a person engaged in. ‘Belong’ was assessed by looking at how well someone is integrated into social networks. Frequency of participation in these social/recreational activities was the indicator of ‘Commit’. These indicators were shown to be protective against mental disorders and cognitive impairment among older Irish adults.21
Wellbeing in context
Wellbeing may be conceptualised at multiple levels, at the individual, community and organisational levels, all of which intersect and have an effect on each other. This understanding of an ecological and life course approach to wellbeing acknowledges that different domains of wellbeing are influenced by multiple factors across the stages of human development.

Government agencies, non-government organisations and private enterprise need to use the growing research evidence base about wellbeing to renew their efforts to understand the impact of their policies, programs and services on the wellbeing of the people of NSW and take action to improve wellbeing for all people in NSW.

All settings are important, but, as illustration, this document singles out schools, workplaces and the community as places where promoting, implementing and measuring wellbeing actions and programs will have a major impact. These are integral to people’s lives and have a profound influence on wellbeing across the lifespan. The benefits of wellbeing and resilience are experienced not only by individuals but flow across the whole community and to government and employers.
A literature review prepared for the NSW Department of Education identified that:

In education, wellbeing is important for two reasons. The first is the recognition that schooling should not just be about academic outcomes but that it is about wellbeing of the ‘whole child’; the second is that students who have higher levels of wellbeing tend to have better cognitive outcomes at school.\textsuperscript{22}

Children’s early years are crucial in shaping the adults they will become. The NSW Department of Education’s Wellbeing Framework for Schools recognises that wellbeing applies to individual students, to school settings and to local school communities. The Framework acknowledges that schools play a pivotal role in “connecting character development in children and young people to individual and collective wellbeing, which in the longer term will shape the values and attitudes of the society in which they live.”\textsuperscript{23}

According to the Framework, wellbeing can be shaped by how much people experience choice, achievement of meaningful goals, positive relationships, enjoyment, personal growth and development, health, and safety. The Framework puts these principles into action.
Focusing on wellbeing is also valuable for other areas of education. TAFE institutes and universities are places where the concept of what constitutes a good life can not only be discussed but also practised.

Developed in 2015, the Okanagan Charter for health promoting universities and colleges sets a transformative vision for the change that can be achieved when health promotion principles are embedded in post-secondary education institutions:

“Health promoting universities and colleges transform the health and sustainability of our current and future societies, strengthen communities and contribute to the well-being of people, places and the planet.”

The Wellbeing Framework for schools*

**Connect**

Our students will be actively connected to their learning, have positive and respectful relationships and experience a sense of belonging to their school and community.

**Succeed**

Our students will be respected, valued, encouraged, supported and empowered to succeed.

**Thrive**

Our students will grow and flourish, do well and prosper.

*Adapted from original.

The school environment is pivotal to the growth and development of our most important assets – our children and young people. Our schools strive for excellence in teaching and learning, connect on many levels and build trusting and respectful relationships for students to succeed.
The workplace

Workplaces are ideal settings for the promotion of wellbeing because they are where a large proportion of the population spends a significant part of their time. Activities to improve wellbeing here can benefit many. In addition, the workplace setting itself creates the conditions that contribute to or take away from wellbeing. Good work is good for us, but poor workplace practices can lead to reduced wellbeing for employees. Workplaces need to understand their influence and responsibility and target wellbeing strategies at both the individual employee and day to day work practices.

Safework NSW’s *Work, Health and Safety Roadmap for NSW 2022* has the vision of “healthy, safe and productive working lives”. Mental illness has been identified as a priority for the Roadmap, which is aimed not only at the regulator, but also at peak bodies, associations, community leaders, and each employer and worker. The total cost of mental illness in Australian workplaces is estimated to be $11 billion every year. According to *Creating a mentally health workplace – return on investment analysis*, published in 2014 by beyondblue and PricewaterhouseCoopers, this comprises $4.7 billion in absenteeism, $6.1 billion in presenteeism and $146 million in compensation claims annually.

Workplace wellbeing is not just about preventing and responding to mental illness in the workplace. It is also about promoting mental health by developing the positive aspects of work as well as worker strengths and positive capacities. People’s experience of happiness contributes to their success in the workplace. This is because it promotes workplace productivity, creativity, and co-operation.
Positive feelings motivate people to succeed at work and to persist with efforts to attain their goals. People who are happier are more likely to be healthy and will, in turn, tend to be more productive (in part, simply because happier and healthier individuals will take fewer sick days). In addition, people who are happier better integrate information leading to new ideas, which leads to creativity and innovation. Finally, people who are happier tend to have better social relations. In the context of work this leads to greater co-operation among co-workers and with customers.\textsuperscript{28}

The Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance is a national approach by business, community and government to encourage Australian workplaces to become mentally healthy for the benefit of the whole community and businesses, big and small. Established by the Australian Government’s National Mental Health Commission on 1 July 2013, the Alliance aims to make sure all people in the workplace, including those who experience mental health difficulties, their families and those who support them, are supported. This includes minimising harm, promoting protective factors and having positive cultures that are conducive to mental wellbeing. It also recognises that a mentally healthy workplace is not just good for people. It is also very good for business.\textsuperscript{28}

Wellbeing does not only mean psychological health and wellbeing. It’s also about, for example, physical wellbeing and this can also be influenced by the workplace. Get Healthy at Work is a NSW Government initiative that aims to improve the health of working adults by giving businesses the tools, resources and support to address six priority health focus areas. The program works by addressing individual behavioural and workplace factors contributing to poor health, and supporting people to achieve their personal health goals.\textsuperscript{30}
Local government & community

A key plank of the reforms set out in Living Well: A Strategic Plan for Mental Health in NSW 2014–2024 is the need to ‘make it local’ and strengthen local action.

“There is an emerging understanding of what is required to initiate and sustain effective local action. A review of effective community action in Australia showed action was needed on three fronts simultaneously: building more supportive communities; creating a better co-ordinated and more effective service system; and improving communication about policy between communities and services.

To harness the potential of local action to support better mental health and wellbeing, we will need support from government and agencies at all levels. For local collaborations to be sustainable, there need to be reliable benefits to all contributors. In the longer term, this will be seen through improved outcomes for individuals and reduced costs to the community and government. In the short term, a critical issue will be better access to information across agencies and levels of government.

For the biggest impact we need to target regions and communities with the greatest and most entrenched mental health and social disadvantage. We need to understand how inequalities cluster in geographic areas, and how these relate to poorer mental health. Support will be needed to ensure these areas get priority.”

Living Well: A Strategic Plan for Mental Health in NSW 2014–2024
A lot of what determines wellbeing is not material but centres on relationships, connection and participation, and local government has a major part to play in setting the conditions for these elements to flourish in their community. With the basic building blocks of wellbeing including housing, health and other human services provided by different levels of government, the assets provided at the community level can help people build the social and relational supports they need.

To make community services and strategies more relevant, accessible and appropriate for the people targeted, service users and community members must be closely and actively involved with the improvement of those services and strategies, and with the design and delivery of future initiatives. At the local government level, the Community Strategic Plan, specified by the Local Government Act, represents the highest level of strategic planning undertaken by a council and should identify the main priorities and aspirations of the community, providing a clear set of strategies to achieve a vision for the future. Building the plan takes time and must involve whole-of-community engagement. It must be based on the social justice principles of access, equity, participation and rights and should also address the quadruple bottom line: social, environmental, economic and civic leadership issues.\[32\]

The City of Sydney proudly states on its website that “there’s more to being successful than just boosting economic output”. Its 2015 Wellbeing Survey measured the range of indicators that the city believes marks a happy, healthy and thriving community. The Wellbeing Survey is an important input for the City’s Community Wellbeing Indicators Framework. The Indicators Framework covers five domains – Healthy, Safe and Inclusive Communities; Culturally Rich and Vibrant Communities; Democratic and Engaged Communities; Dynamic, Resilient Local Economies; and Sustainable Environments. This data informs the City in its social planning processes and enables it to track progress towards its strategic directions.
Endnotes

1. For a list of members of the NSW Wellbeing Collaborative please see wbcnsw.net


   [website link]

   [website link], accessed 8 May 2017.


   [website link], accessed 8 May 2017.

    [website link]

11. PwC (2016). *Australia’s social purpose market Understanding funding flows and exploring implications*. The Centre for Social Impact. The Australian Government is a key contributor, but a significant proportion of spending is also by state and local government, and community organisations.


14. For recent evidence, see Lyons et al (2013). The Dual-Factor Model of Mental Health: A Short-Term Longitudinal Study of School-Related Outcomes. *Social indicators research, 114*(2), 549-565. The authors’ conclusions included that SWB was important in explaining the variance in student engagement and that “school mental health professionals should consider SWB a construct relevant to academic outcomes and strive to monitor student SWB when necessary.”


17. As reported in De Neve et al (2013) there is empirical evidence that people with greater wellbeing is associated with less bias against other ethnic groups, giving to communities, more volunteering and better social relationships.


28. See De Neve et al. (2013).


