

# Community wellbeing indicators: measures for local government

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**Abstract.** This paper presents key findings from a research project undertaken for the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) and the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG). The research project builds on national work undertaken in developing community wellbeing indicators and contributes to enhancing the capacity of councils to plan for, measure and report on the wellbeing of their communities. Whilst the concept has been the focus of research for many years, it has been revitalised by a renewed interest in how community wellbeing might be measured. A key objective of the project was to develop a tool which allows councils to: measure community wellbeing using a number of standard indicators; track changes over time in community wellbeing; benchmark performance against results from comparative surveys in councils across Queensland and elsewhere; and identify policy measures that can improve community outcomes. This paper profiles the process used to develop the survey template, and the results obtained from the state-wide survey using the questionnaire. The utilisation of scores obtained from the survey to develop a valid set of indicators capable of measuring overall community wellbeing is also discussed. The use of a standard questionnaire, as developed by this project, is seen as providing an opportunity to develop benchmarks by council category, and to track performance in enhancing community wellbeing. The paper argues that the use of this survey template enables replication of the research method allowing a valid assessment of community wellbeing. Such performance measures are critical to enhancing governance and general service delivery.

## Background

This paper presents key findings from a research project undertaken for LGAQ and ACELG. The research project built on national work undertaken in developing community wellbeing indicators and contributes to the enhanced capacity of councils to plan for, measure and report on the wellbeing of their communities (Morton & Edwards 2013).

The aim of the project was to support councils in developing ways to:

- better understand and measure local community wellbeing
- build a consistent statistics base
- improve community planning
- strengthen citizen involvement.

This research aimed at establishing a valid, but limited set of survey questions, able to be easily replicated, that would provide an indication of relative community wellbeing. The concept was to provide councils, especially smaller ones, with a tool which allows them to:

- measure community wellbeing using a number of standard indicators
- track changes over time in community wellbeing
- benchmark performance against results from comparative surveys in councils across the State (and elsewhere in Australia)
- identify policy measures that can improve community outcomes.

The project did not seek to identify every possible measure of community wellbeing. Instead, the project aimed at developing a practical community survey tool that can be used to assess and monitor community wellbeing within the framework of local community objectives and the context of local government roles and responsibilities.

## **Framework**

The project focused on five themes developed by Community Indicators Queensland (CIQ)<sup>1</sup>:

1. Healthy, safe and inclusive communities
2. Culturally rich and vibrant communities
3. Dynamic resilient local economies
4. Sustainable built and natural environments
5. Democratic and engaged communities.

The LGAQ/ACELG wellbeing indicators project rolled out simultaneously with the Community Resilience project conducted jointly by the Queensland Council of Social Service and Griffith University using the same five domain CIQ framework informed by Community Indicators Victoria. The resilience measures project further confirmed the need for establishing baseline community wellbeing measures at the local government level.

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<sup>1</sup> See <<http://www.communityindicatorsqld.org.au/>>.

The National Accounts of Wellbeing project<sup>2</sup> reports two headline figures for personal and social well-being. **Personal wellbeing** measures people's experiences of their positive and negative emotions, satisfaction, vitality, resilience, self-esteem, and sense of positive functioning in the world. **Social wellbeing** measures people's experiences of supportive relationships and sense of trust and belonging with others.

The National Accounts of Wellbeing model relies on subjective ratings which capture personal wellbeing and social wellbeing assessments, noting that "... presenting separate data on 40 or so different questions would make it hard to see the patterns for the numbers and has the lack of reliability associated with using a single measure to capture any particular aspect of well-being".

A key issue for this project was the development of a valid set of questions. Another integral element was how to minimise the number of questions required while still being able to provide an indication of relative community wellbeing. Particularly, the research tool was intended to be relevant for the majority of local governments which typically do not have the research resources of larger councils.

This ACELG/LGAQ project resulted in some 34 indicators with scores on a five point scale. The indicators covered the five domains noted above, allowing them to provide an aggregated measure of relative community wellbeing. Full details of the survey instrument developed by the research are included in the project report published by ACELG (Morton & Edwards 2013).

## Research method

The Project involved:

- a literature review of community indicator research undertaken internationally and elsewhere in Australia (CIQ 2011; CIV 2013; Cummins et al. 2011; Malcom 2012; Michaelson et al. 2009)
- development and testing of an initial pilot survey with representatives of five local governments
- review and feedback on the draft questionnaire from a further six councils across Queensland
- a State-wide survey in March 2013 to develop the benchmark scores for each question with a sample of 500, subdivided into South East Queensland, Regional Cities and the Rural Balance.

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<sup>2</sup> See <<http://www.nationalaccountsofwellbeing.org/>>.

The results obtained from the March 2013 benchmarking survey using the final questionnaire indicated that there is very little difference for the ratings given by each geographic sector, or those ratings given in the initial pilot. For most questions there was also little significant difference in the responses by gender or by age group.

At the aggregate level, the total score in the 2013 survey was **3.43 (68.6%)**. Table 1 shows the scores aggregated by theme for the initial pilot and for the benchmarking survey. Table 2 shows the score out of 5 obtained for each of the 34 indicator questions. Data from the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index survey in April 2011 (Cummins et al. 2011) provides an indication of how well this survey corresponds with other surveys aimed at measuring wellbeing.

In this Australian Unity survey, two indexes generally cover the themes used for this study. For personal wellbeing, the score was 75.9% while for National Wellbeing the score was 62.7%. Combining these two indexes gives a score of **69.3%**, very similar to the aggregate score above from the 2013 ACELG/LGAQ project survey of **68.6%**.

**Tab. 1.** Theme Scores 2013 Survey and 2011 Pilot

Theme	Score 2013	Pilot 2011
1. Healthy, safe and inclusive communities	3.69	3.8
2. Culturally rich and vibrant communities	3.74	3.8
3. Dynamic resilient local economies	2.98	3.2
4. Sustainable built and natural environments	3.46	3.6
5. Democratic and engaged communities	3.10	3.0

## Conclusions and recommendations

The intent of this project was to provide a survey template and benchmarks that could be used by councils, in Queensland and elsewhere.

The use of these standard questions and the rating scale provided is important in gaining a comparative measure of community wellbeing. While other questions can be added to suit unique local government contexts, the use of the core set of questions is recommended.

Key outcomes sought from the project were to:

- encourage councils to use the survey template provided as a key tool to source data for their long term community planning
- provide the ability to benchmark performance against results from comparative surveys in other councils
- assist councils to identify policy measures that can improve community outcomes.

**Tab. 2.** 2013 Community Wellbeing Survey Scores

Item	2011 Pilot Survey	2013 Survey	SEQ 2013	Provincial Cities 2013	Rural 2013
1. Public transport adequacy	3.9	<b>2.75</b>	3.00	2.66	2.23
2. Health service adequacy	3.2	<b>3.48</b>	3.58	3.44	3.28
3. Education service adequacy	3.9	<b>3.71</b>	3.79	3.61	3.65
4. Sport, recreation	3.8	<b>3.74</b>	3.73	3.73	3.78
5. Arts and culture	3.4	<b>3.35</b>	3.34	3.26	3.53
6. Social interaction in public spaces	Not piloted	<b>3.58</b>	3.48	3.78	3.51
7. Park/reserves upkeep	3.6	<b>3.77</b>	3.97	3.47	3.71
8. Park/reserves accessibility	3.6	<b>3.84</b>	4.00	3.58	3.84
9. Park/reserves facilities	Not piloted	<b>3.58</b>	3.68	3.47	3.48
10. Bikeways	3.2	<b>2.96</b>	3.06	2.81	2.94
11. Walking paths	3.3	<b>3.16</b>	3.34	2.92	3.09
12. Protection of natural environment	3.5	<b>3.49</b>	3.58	3.38	3.46
13. Socially inclusive environment	Not piloted	<b>3.40</b>	3.45	3.39	3.30
14. Liveable built environment	Not piloted	<b>3.50</b>	3.56	3.34	3.54
15. Suitability for young children	3.8	<b>3.52</b>	3.49	3.49	3.63
16. Suitability for teenagers	3.4	<b>2.97</b>	2.90	3.13	2.90
17. Suitability for seniors	3.7	<b>3.58</b>	3.58	3.61	3.52
18. Level of support from friends	4.1	<b>4.30</b>	4.21	4.44	4.30
19. Level of support from family	4.1	<b>4.32</b>	4.32	4.37	4.23
20. Level of support from neighbours	3.9	<b>3.93</b>	3.91	3.89	4.05
21. Access for disabled	3.4	<b>3.37</b>	3.31	3.44	3.39
22. Welcoming of people from different cultures	Not piloted	<b>3.57</b>	3.42	3.74	3.65
23. Volunteer/organisation involvement	Not piloted	<b>2.26</b>	2.40	1.93	2.41
24. Safety when alone	4.0	<b>3.72</b>	3.83	3.48	3.82
25. Life satisfaction	4.2	<b>4.30</b>	4.27	4.42	4.18
26. Work not demanding or stressful	3.2	<b>3.01</b>	3.13	2.79	3.07
27. Work not interfering with family life	3.3	<b>3.16</b>	3.24	2.79	3.49
28. Job security	3.8	<b>3.08</b>	3.18	2.63	3.51
29. Impact of cost of living	2.6	<b>2.37</b>	2.38	2.25	2.51
30. Impact of housing cost	Not piloted	<b>3.29</b>	3.48	2.77	3.60
31. Opportunities for engagement	3.0	<b>3.02</b>	3.02	3.07	2.96
32. Range and quality of council services	Not piloted	<b>3.18</b>	3.25	3.05	3.18
33. Ability to access internet	Not piloted	<b>3.96</b>	3.98	4.01	3.82
34. Ability to access private or public transport	Not piloted	<b>3.55</b>	3.66	3.16	3.85
<b>Average of above</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>3.43</b>	<b>3.48</b>	<b>3.32</b>	<b>3.43</b>

To achieve these outcomes requires ongoing initiatives. LGAQ has indicated that it will:

- place the results of this project, including the questionnaire and benchmarks, on-line
- promote the use of the questionnaire by Queensland councils
- use this survey tool to supplement its Queensland-wide biennial Community Attitudes Survey.

ACELG intends to:

- distribute the report widely through its national local government networks
- support LGAQ in promoting the use of the survey in other jurisdictions.

Where a council uses the specific questions and survey framework, it would be valuable if individual council results were collated and also made available through the LGAQ website. This would provide more specific benchmarks for different types of councils. This needs some organisation to collate data and disseminate the results.

Consideration could also be given to developing a web-based questionnaire. While such surveys do not have the rigour of a random sample, they do provide an opportunity to collect and analyse a large volume of data.

## References

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## Attachment A. Summary of standard questions

*(5 point scale with 5 = very good to 1 = very poor)*

1. How would you rate the adequacy of the following services in your local community in terms of your needs and wellbeing?
  - a. Public transport
  - b. Health services
  - c. Education
2. How adequate are the opportunities in your local community for you to effectively engage in:
  - a. Sport and recreation
  - b. Art & and cultural activities
3. How would you rate the opportunity for social interaction within your local community's public spaces?
4. How do you rate the parks, reserves and open spaces in your local community for:
  - a. Upkeep
  - b. Accessibility
  - c. Facilities
5. How do you rate the availability in your local community of:
  - a. Bikeways
  - b. Walking paths
6. How satisfied are you with efforts being made in your local community:
  - a. To protect and conserve the natural environment
  - b. To provide a socially inclusive environment
  - c. To provide a liveable built environment
7. How would you rate the suitability of your local community for:
  - a. Young children
  - b. Teenagers
  - c. Seniors
8. How would you rate the level of support available to you from:
  - a. Friends
  - b. Family
  - c. Neighbours
9. How would you rate access to buildings and services in your local community for people with a physical disability?
10. How strongly do you agree or disagree that your local community is welcoming of people from different cultures?

11. How would you rate your level of involvement in your local community as a volunteer or member of a community organisation?
12. How safe do you feel when you are outside and alone in a public place in your local community?
13. Thinking about your life and personal circumstances, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole?
14. What is your current work status? If 'working' then: do you agree or disagree with the following statements:
  - a. My work is not too demanding nor stressful
  - b. My work and family life do not interfere with each other
  - c. I have good job security
15. How would you rate the impact on your household from the increasing costs of living?
16. How would you rate the impact on your household's finances of your current rental or mortgage payments?
17. How satisfactory is the way your local council provides opportunities for your voice to be heard on issues that are important to you?
18. How would you rate the overall performance of your local council in delivering an appropriate range and quality of services relevant to your households needs?
19. How satisfactory is your ability to access the internet whenever you need to?
20. How satisfactory is your ability to access private or public transport to meet your daily mobility requirements?