

The five ways to wellbeing

Background briefings and engagement from the Making Wellbeing Count for Policy project

This document contains background materials related to the Making Wellbeing Count for Policy project funded by the ESRC, conducted by Cambridge University, City University London, and the New Economics Foundation.

As part of that project, three roundtables were held, each with a mix of policy makers, practitioners and academics to share emerging findings, discuss their implications for policy and practice and identify areas for further research. The three roundtables covered:

- Inequalities in wellbeing
- Wellbeing, governance and the perceived quality of society
- The five ways to wellbeing

This paper brings together the background materials on inequalities in wellbeing. Below can be found the following:

Briefing paper:

- Roundtable briefing: Five ways to wellbeing roundtable briefing - Who does the five ways and who doesn't? (New Economics Foundation)
- Summary of roundtable discussion

The briefing paper was shared with participants ahead of the roundtable.

Roundtables followed Chatham House rules, and comments are therefore not attributed to participants.

The project culminated in the final report *Looking through the wellbeing kaleidoscope*. The report, and background documents on the other two roundtables are available at the project website www.wellbeingcounts.org.

Five ways to wellbeing roundtable briefing

Who does the five ways and who doesn't?

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Making Wellbeing Count for Policy

An ESRC-funded collaboration between City University, Cambridge University and the New Economics Foundation, using the European Social Survey

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Summary

Our research has found that:

- Five ways participation in the UK is lower than in comparable countries such as Germany and France, particularly with regards to Take Notice. Having children seems to limit people's opportunities to take notice in the UK in ways that do not apply in the rest of Europe.
- People of working age in the UK connect less than their peers in the rest of Europe, though this deficit also applies to those not in employment, suggesting that it cannot be explained purely in terms of working patterns.

The European Social Survey

The European Social Survey (ESS) is an academically driven cross-national survey that has been conducted every two years across Europe since 2002. The survey measures the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour of diverse populations in more than thirty nations.

Who does the five ways and who doesn't?

Introduction

The five ways to wellbeing are a set of actions that a range of evidence sources suggest promote wellbeing. They are: Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Give.

The five ways to wellbeing were developed by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) from evidence gathered in the UK government's 2008 Foresight Project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing. The aim was to identify actions which were simple, universal, and which anyone can do on an individual level.¹ There is no suggestion that these are the five *strongest* determinants of wellbeing. Since their publication, the five ways have had an enormous reach, being used as evaluation frameworks, in school curriculums and by local authorities.² Their use has far outstripped expectations, and there have been a number of calls to further explore the evidence base further.³

In 2012, the European Social Survey was the first major survey to include questions directly on the five ways to wellbeing, allowing us to explore patterns of five ways behaviours across Europe for the first time.

This study, conducted by NEF, sought to better understand who does, and doesn't practice the five ways, in order to allow policy makers and practitioners to better target support and interventions.

We explored how five ways participation varies:

- Between countries
- Between age groups across Europe and within the UK
- Between genders across Europe and within the UK
- By education level, and how the education effect on five ways participation differs between countries

Questions on the five ways to wellbeing

The following questions from the European Social Survey were used:

C2 How often do you meet socially with friends, relatives or work colleagues? (Response options are 'never', 'less than once a month', 'once a month', 'several times a month', 'once a week', 'several times a week', and 'every day') - **Connect**

D20 Please tell me to what extent you learn new things in your life? (Scale from 0 to 7, with 0 being 'not at all', and 7 being 'a great deal') – **Keep Learning**

D34 On a typical day, how often do you take notice of and appreciate your surroundings? (Scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being 'never', and 10 being 'always') – **Take Notice**

D37 And to what extent do you provide help and support to people you are close to when they need it? (Scale from 0 to 6, with 0 being 'not at all', and 6 being 'completely') - **Give**

D39 Please tell me on how many of the last 7 days you were physically active continuously for 20 minutes or longer? (Options from 'no days' to 'seven days') – **Be Active**

It is important to note that the questions used for each of the five ways in the survey are all framed differently, and so one must be careful about making direct comparisons between each five way. In particular, some questions have a more objectively true or false answer (e.g. how many days were you physically active, or how often do you meet friends), whilst others are more open to subjective interpretation (e.g. how often do you take notice, learn new things or help people).

Whilst all the questions are valid and useful, we do know that there are biases in how people respond to questions, for example some people may have more trouble recalling behaviours, others might tend to respond more positively to all questions. The more subjective questions (i.e. on take notice, keep learning and give) are more likely to share bias type with the subjective questions used to assess overall wellbeing, which means they are more likely to correlate strongly with wellbeing than the more objective questions will. For that reason we caution against making direct comparisons between the effects of the different five ways on wellbeing. However,

we *can* make comparisons between the effects for different population groups – e.g. taking notice may be more or less important to wellbeing for a particular population group.

Also, we noted that the question on physical activity suffered from what is known as ‘skew’ – i.e. that most respondents gave responses at one end of the scale. In this case, 44% of respondents said they were physically active seven days a week. We can assume that there was a lot of variation in the levels of physical activity within these 44% that was not being measured by the survey, and therefore that this question may not have been the best question to understand variations in physical activity across Europe. As such, one should be cautious interpreting the results related to Be Active – with null results potentially resulting from the poor question rather than demonstrating that it is not relevant for wellbeing.

What does the existing research say?

A brief review of the literature showed that, generally, in the UK:

- Males are more likely to be active, whereas females are more likely to give and connect.^{4 - 10}
- People from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to be active, give and keep learning.^{11 - 16}
- The older people are, the less likely they are to keep learning and be active. However, for both Connect and Give, the trend follows a U curve, with people aged 16-25 and 65-74 most likely to engage in these activities.^{17 - 25}
- People with qualifications are more likely to keep learning and give.^{26 - 29}

Method

Most of our analysis involved simple ‘descriptive statistics’ comparing proportions of people carrying out each five way activity. Where we found differences, we carried out statistical tests to determine whether they were significant.³⁰ We also explored ‘interaction effects’ between factors, for example does the effect of age differ in the UK compared to in Europe in general? ³¹

The questions for each of the five ways in the survey were on a range of scales from 7 to 11 points, each one different to the others. As such we had to develop a methodology to determine, for each five way, how to convert the scale into a binary ‘yes this person participated in that five way activity’ vs. ‘no, this person did not participate in that five way activity’. We attempted to assign roughly equal proportions to all five questions, as there was no a priori way of being confident that our data could be used to argue that, across Europe, one five way was participated in more than another.

Thresholds were defined such that approximately one fifth of respondents were categorised as not participating in each five way activity.³²

Findings

Country comparisons

The figures below show the UK's levels of five ways participation compared to other countries. Countries with a GDP per capita of below \$30,000 are shaded in lighter blue. Given that the UK has a GDP per capita of almost \$40,000 one would expect it to achieve higher participation in five ways than those countries.³³

The UK appears to have middling levels of participation on most of the five ways. In most cases it has lower levels of participation than peer countries such as Germany and France. Particularly low levels of participation are seen in relation to Take Notice – 63% taking notice in the UK, compared to, for example, 75% in Germany. The UK does have higher levels of Be Active than many other wealthy countries, but, as we have noted, we suspect this question may be somewhat flawed.

Figure 1 Country comparison: Connect

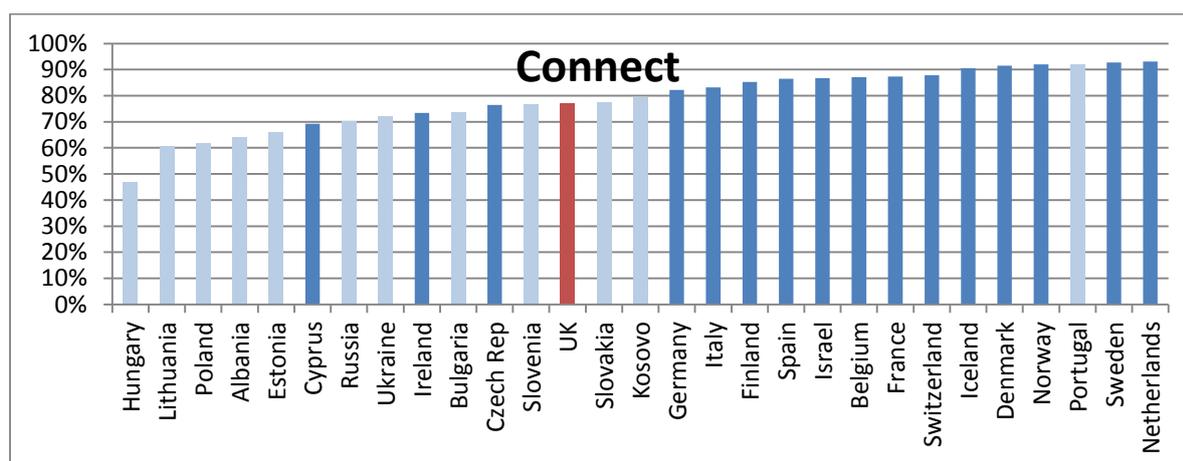


Figure 2 Country comparison: Be active

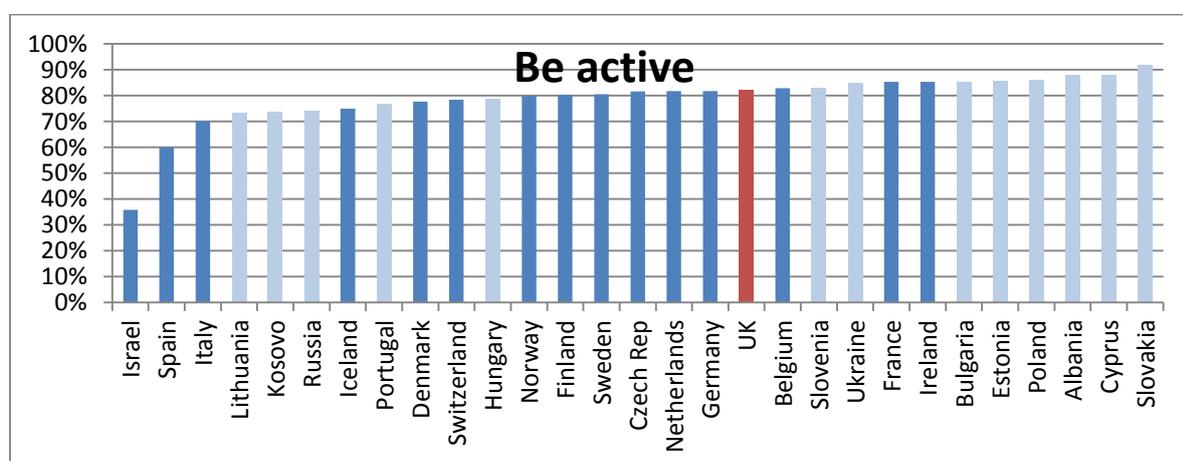


Figure 3 Country comparison: Take notice

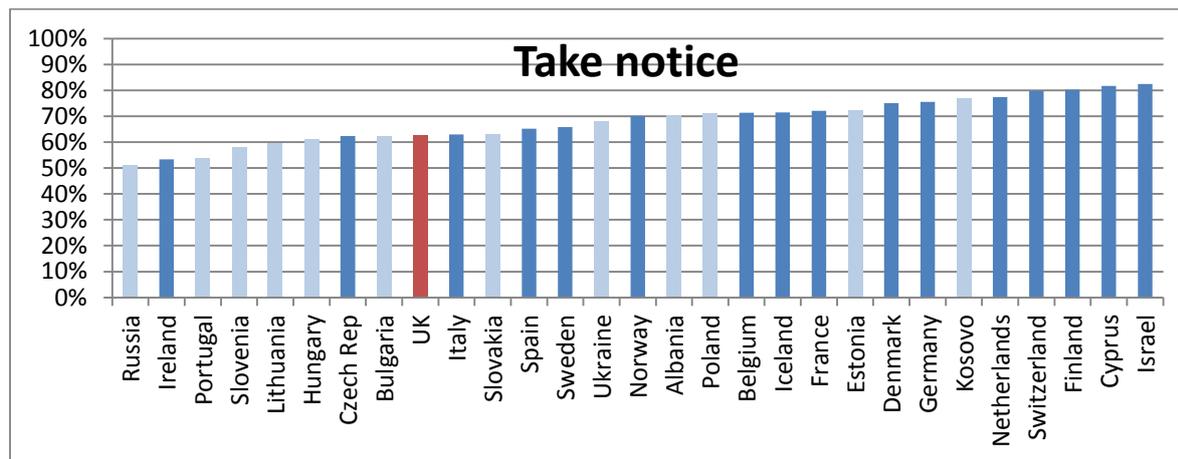


Figure 4 Country comparison: Keep learning

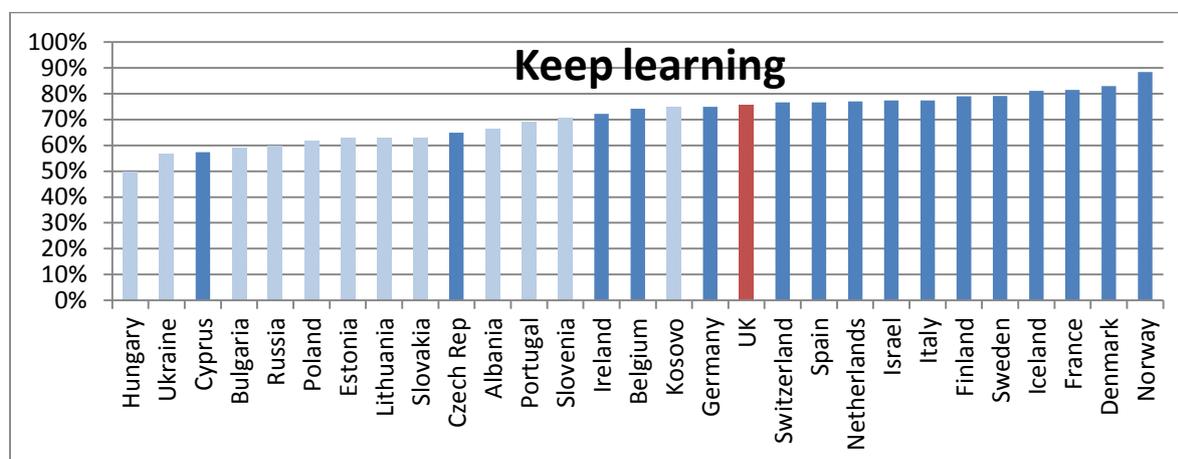
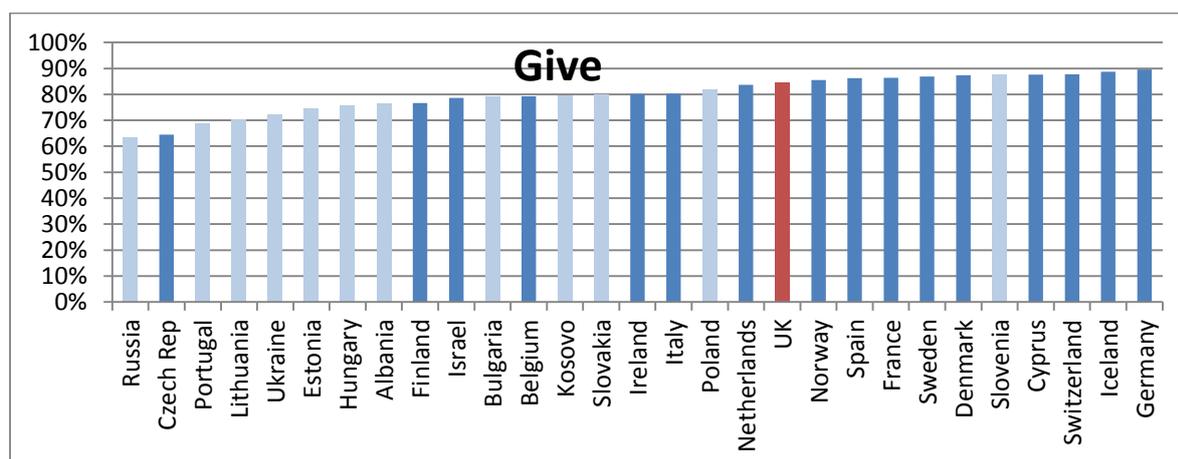


Figure 5 Country comparison: Give

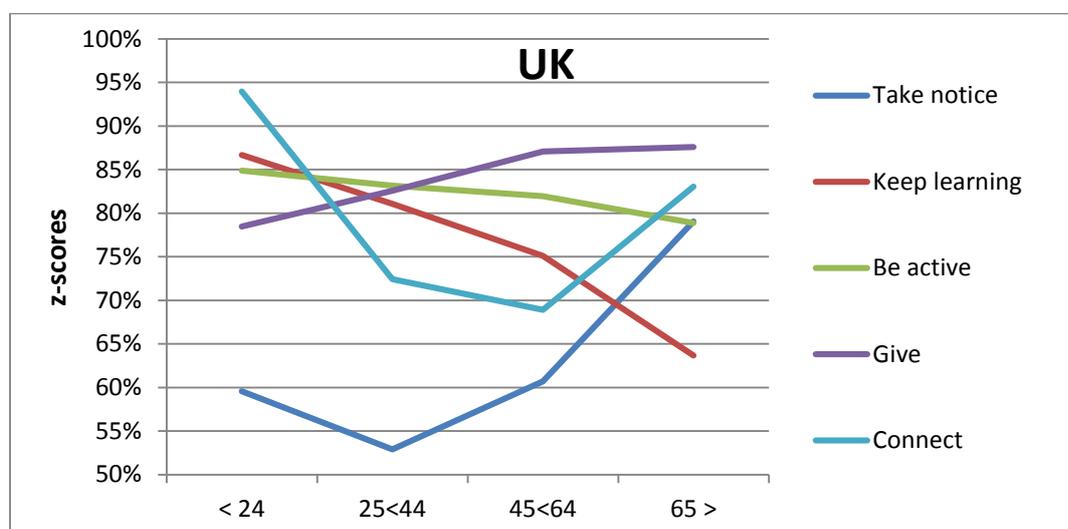


Age comparisons

Five ways participation varies considerably with age. In the UK, Keep Learning declines with age, as does Be Active to some extent, whilst Give increases with age. Take Notice is lowest in the age group 25-44 and much higher in the oldest age

group. Connect follows a U-shaped curve, declining to its lowest point for those aged 45-64.

Figure 6 Age comparison: Five ways



We also compared the patterns in the UK with those in the data set as a whole. Whilst it might be desirable to increase five ways participation to high levels for each activity for each age group, it may be unrealistic to expect some age groups to carry out certain five ways at high rates. For example, whilst those aged 65+ in the UK had lower rates on Keep Learning than younger age groups in the UK, they had *higher* rates than those aged 65+ in other countries in Europe (64% vs. 57%). Generally speaking, the UK seems to have higher levels of five ways participation than expected for those aged 65+, but lower levels for those under 45, particularly those aged 25-44. The following differences between UK respondents and other respondents were strongly significant³⁴ and merit further consideration:

- Those in the UK aged 25-64 were much less likely to connect than their peers in other countries (for example 72% of those aged 25-44 did Connect vs. 82% in the survey as a whole)
- The low levels of Take Notice in the UK were reflected in all age groups up to 65 years old. In particular, only 53% of those aged 25-44 in the UK did Take Notice, compared to 66% in the survey as a whole.
- People in the UK aged 65+ had significantly higher levels of five ways participation for all five ways. For example, 79% did Take Notice, compared to only 70% in the survey as a whole.

Gender comparisons

Broadly speaking, participation in the five ways was roughly equivalent for males and females in the UK. Females reported Give significantly more than males,³⁵ whilst

males reported Take Notice and Keep Learning marginally significantly more than females.³⁶

More interesting is the comparison between UK males and females and their peers in other countries. In particular we see that the UK's low levels of participation in Take Notice relative to the rest of the survey are predominantly due to lower levels of participation of females. Whilst 69% of females in the survey as a whole reported Take Notice, only 61% of females in the UK did.

We also explored the intersectionality of the age and gender patterns. There were a few findings of interest:

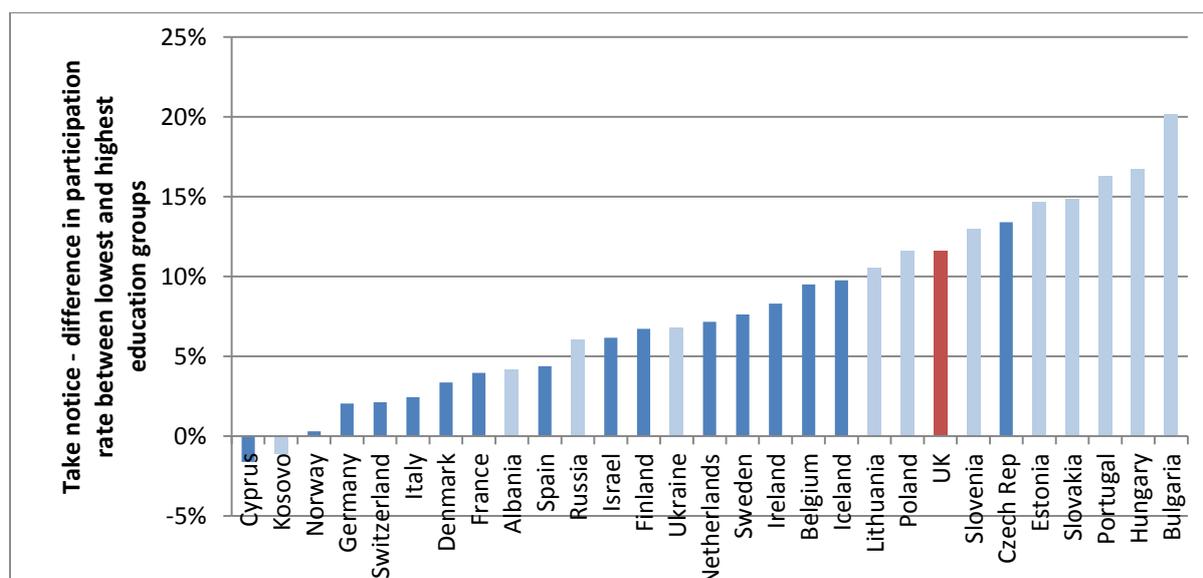
- It is the youngest females (aged 18-24) in the UK that have the lowest levels of participation in Take Notice vis a vis their peers in the rest of the survey – only 53% compared to 68%.
- Females aged 45-64 in the UK had particularly high levels of Give (91% vs. 84% for their peers in the rest of the survey)
- Females aged 25-44 in the UK had particularly low levels of Connect (69% vs. 82% for their peers in the rest of the survey).

Education comparisons

We looked at the participation gap for each five way between people who had not completed secondary education vs. those with a degree or higher qualification. Unsurprisingly, the biggest gaps for most countries in Europe were for Keep Learning, whilst overall there was no gap for Be Active. For the UK the biggest gap was also Keep Learning (88% of those with higher education did Keep Learning, compared to 67% of those without). There was also a large difference for Take Notice (71% vs. 60%).

Comparing countries, it was lower income countries which tended to have larger gaps between high and low education groups. The UK had some of the largest gaps for Keep Learning and Take Notice, in both cases being much larger than the gaps in countries like France and Germany. Indeed for Take Notice, the gap in the UK was the largest of any country with a GDP per capita over \$30,000, with the exception of the Czech Republic (see figure 7).

Figure 7 Education comparison: difference in Take Notice participation rate between lowest and highest education groups



Exploring the UK's five ways deficits

We carried out additional analysis to understand two findings for the UK:

Low levels of Take Notice for females aged under 45

We looked at the impact of having children and doing housework on Take Notice. Whilst participation in Take Notice is roughly equal in Europe for those who have children and those who don't, within the UK there is a large penalty associated with having children – 53% of those who have children in the UK take notice, compared to 68% of those who don't. But this effect brings down participation for both genders. One factor which explains why females in particular have lower levels of Take Notice is that, in the UK, people whose main activity is housework participate in Take Notice much less. Given that females are more likely to be in this category, this may explain some of the difference.

These findings are more relevant for those aged 25 and over (which are more likely to have children). They do little to explain why females aged under 25 take notice so little in the UK. Unusually, here we found a potential trade-off between Take Notice and another one of the five ways – Connect. Females under 25 that reported meeting their friends every day were particularly unlikely to take notice – only 37% did, compared to 74% of males in the same category. This gender difference was statistically significant.³⁷ Is there something about the lifestyles of more sociable young females that means they are less likely to take notice? It should be noted, however, that their wellbeing, measured with life satisfaction, is not lower than those who meet friends less frequently.

Low levels of Connect for people aged 25-44

We also looked to try and understand why people aged 25-64 (particularly females) in the UK participated in Connect less than their peers in other countries. Given that 25-64 year olds are typically thought to be of working age, one could hypothesise that being in employment reduced levels of connecting. This was not confirmed in our analysis. People who described their 'main activity' as including paid work, housework, education and being unemployed saw similar deficits. The only exceptions being for those who are retired, or permanently sick or disabled, where levels of Connect were similar in the UK to those in Europe. Similarly, marital status, and whether the respondent has children living with them did not appear to explain the effect. In other words, it seems that low levels of Connect in the UK for those aged 25-64 are widespread and cannot be associated with any particular demographic group.

Conclusions

- Five ways participation in the UK is lower than in comparable countries such as Germany and France.
- The UK has particularly low participation with regards to Take Notice. Our deficit is particularly acute for those aged under 45, for females, and those with lower levels of education. Having children also seems to limit people's opportunities to take notice in the UK in ways that do not apply in the rest of Europe.
- People of working age in the UK connect much less than their peers in the rest of Europe, though this does not only apply to those in employment.

Endnotes

¹ Thompson, S., Aked, J., Marks, N. & Cordon, C. (2008). *Five Ways to Wellbeing: The Evidence*. London: New Economics Foundation

² Thompson, S. & Aked, J. (2011). *Five Ways to Wellbeing: New applications, new ways of thinking*. London: New Economics Foundation.

³ Davies, S. (2013). "Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 2013, Public Mental Health Priorities: Investigating in the Evidence" London: Department of Health (2014).

⁴ Scholes, S., & Mindell, J. (2013). Physical Activity in adults. *Health Survey for England–2012. The Health and Social Care information Centre, 27*.

⁵ Sport England. (2015). Active People Survey 9Q2, Once a week overall participation fact sheet. Retrieved from <http://www.sportengland.org/research/who-plays-sport/national-picture/>

⁶ Drever, E. (2008). *09 Citizenship Survey: Volunteering and charitable giving topic report*. London: CLG.

⁷ NCVO. (2015). UK Civil Society Almanac 2015, Volunteering overview. Retrieved from <http://data.ncvo.org.uk/a/almanac15/>

⁸ CLG. (2011). 2009-10 Citizenship Survey: Community Action Topic Report. Retrieved from <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120919132719/http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/statistics/pdf/2056233.pdf>

⁹ Office for National Statistics. (2015). Measuring National Well-being, Inequalities in Social Capital by Age and Sex, July 2015. London: ONS <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/wellbeing/measuring-national-well-being/inequalities-in-social-capital-by-age-and-sex/index.html>

¹⁰ Sherwood, C., Kneale, D., and Bloomfield, B. (2014). *The Way We Are Now*. London: Relate.

¹¹ Sport England. (2015). Active People Survey 9Q2, Once a week overall participation fact sheet. Retrieved from <http://www.sportengland.org/research/who-plays-sport/national-picture/>

¹² Scholes, S., & Mindell, J. (2013). Physical Activity in adults. *Health Survey for England–2012. The Health and Social Care information Centre, 27*.

¹³ Townsend, N., Wickramasinghe, K., Williams, J., Bhatnagar, P., Rayner, M. (2015). *Physical Activity Statistics 2015*. British Heart Foundation: London.

¹⁴ Drever, E. (2008). *09 Citizenship Survey: Volunteering and charitable giving topic report*. London: CLG.

¹⁵ NIACE. (2015). *NIACE adult participation in learning survey*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

¹⁶ NIACE. (2014). *NIACE adult participation in learning survey*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

¹⁷ NIACE. (2015). *NIACE adult participation in learning survey*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

¹⁸ NIACE (2014). *NIACE adult participation in learning survey*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

¹⁹ Snape, D., Tanner, E., & Sinclair, R. (2006). *National adult learning survey (NALS) 2005*. London: National Centre for Social Research.

²⁰ McNair, S. (2009). *Demography and lifelong learning*. National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (England and Wales).

²¹ Sproston, K., & Mindell, J. E. (2006). *Health Survey for England 2004. The health of minority ethnic groups*. London: The Information Centre.

²² Scholes, S., & Mindell, J. (2013). Physical Activity in adults. *Health Survey for England–2012. The Health and Social Care information Centre, 27*.

²³ Townsend, N., Wickramasinghe, K., Williams, J., Bhatnagar, P., Rayner, M. (2015). *Physical Activity Statistics 2015*. British Heart Foundation: London.

²⁴ Drever, E. (2008). *09 Citizenship Survey: Volunteering and charitable giving topic report*. London: CLG.

²⁵ CLG. (2011). 2009-10 Citizenship Survey: Community Action Topic Report. Retrieved from <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120919132719/http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/statistics/pdf/2056233.pdf>

²⁶ McNair, S. (2009). *Demography and lifelong learning*. National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (England and Wales).

²⁷ NIACE. (2015). *NIACE adult participation in learning survey*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

²⁸ Snape, D., Tanner, E., & Sinclair, R. (2006). *National adult learning survey (NALS) 2005*. London: National Centre for Social Research.

²⁹ Drever, E. (2008). *09 Citizenship Survey: Volunteering and charitable giving topic report*. London: CLG.

³⁰ Using chi-square tests

³¹ Statistical significance was tested using univariate analysis of variance with interaction terms.

³² These thresholds were then checked against a table showing what percentage of people who gave each response on the five way question scale also reported having high wellbeing, based on the CPWB scale. In one case (Take Notice) that led us to increasing the threshold at which a person is defined as participating in that five way activity from 6+ to 7+ on the scale (from 0 to 11) as only a small proportion of people who responded 6 on that scale had a high CPWB score.

³³ GDP per capita, PPP, current international \$ in 2014, World Bank. Downloaded from http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?order=wbapi_data_value_2014+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=desc on 26/11/15

³⁴ $p < 0.001$

³⁵ $P < 0.01$

³⁶ $P < 0.05$

³⁷ Based on a Univariate ANOVA with Take Notice as the dependent variable, and gender, Connect and an interaction term between gender and Connect as the independent variables. $P < 0.01$.

Five Ways to Wellbeing roundtable: Summary of discussion

Making Wellbeing Count for Policy

NEF, 18 January 2016

Summary of priorities/ next steps:

- More work is needed on how to communicate the Five Ways. We do not currently know how they are interpreted, and how this interpretation differs across different population groups.
- Policy makers and funders rebalance resources and consideration towards supporting those in middle-age, in proportion to the low levels of Five Ways activity in this age group. One immediate step could be to change funding requirements to no longer assume that projects should be targeting the young and the old.
- Key areas were suggested for further research:
 - The effect of social media on Five Ways participation
 - Qualitative research on barriers and enablers to Five Ways participation in groups with low participation
 - Further analysis of the drivers of low wellbeing for young women, and those with children, particularly regarding working culture, and child-care policies

Discussion in more detail

The roundtable discussion raised various broad questions about how to communicate the Five Ways and their application to all population groups.

- Some people find the Five Ways too vague and open to interpretation. Take Notice can mean different things to different people, for instance, during the roundtable, one participant understood Take Notice as appreciation of surroundings, but another participant felt that it should be understood as taking notice of good and bad feelings. Should the behaviours be more specific and include examples to better communicate them?
- There was some discussion about whether the framing of the Five Ways – focussed on individuals aiming at improving their own wellbeing – is culturally exclusive. There can be a perception that wellbeing is a ‘middle-class’ concern. One participant described conversations with mothers living in deprivation who did not think about their own wellbeing, but focussed instead on the wellbeing of their children, seeing wellbeing as a luxury out of their reach. This discussion raised some more general questions; are the Five Ways too focused on the self? And is happiness a universal aspiration?

Further research

Information on the drivers of the Five Ways to Wellbeing is useful to policy makers and practitioners. More work could usefully be done unpicking certain aspects.

- Participants wondered whether the changes in the use of digital connection over the past ten years have changed peoples’ behaviour. Longitudinal data could be helpful in exploring how social networking has changed the landscape of connection.

- The relationship between work and wellbeing was discussed, for example, are people less able, or willing, to participate in Five Ways behaviours if they work long hours, or if their work is inflexible? How does dominant working culture influence this, even for people who are not working? Can flexible work explain the high levels of wellbeing in Scandinavian countries?
- More analysis is needed on how particular policies affect participation in the Five Ways to Wellbeing.
- The analysis of Five Ways activity by education suggests there may be a social gradient in the Five Ways activity. Participants suggested that this could be expanded by exploring whether Five Ways activity is related to deprivation and/or lower income or wealth. Given that in theory at least, people should be able to practice the Five Ways for free, it would be interesting to further explore the basis of this relationship.
- The analysis presented in the roundtable found that young women have particularly low levels of participation in Take Notice. Participants discussed various potential reasons for this that could merit further research, for example, the pressures of multi-tasking for working mothers. There was a lot of appetite for further analysis on working status and working hours in relation to the Five Ways behaviours, as well as analysis of child-care policy and whether this could explain the variation.
- Responding to the UK's relatively low levels of participation in the Five Ways behaviours, participants wondered if the UK's average was brought down by low levels in particular areas of the UK. There was an appetite for regional analysis of Five Ways behaviours.
- Participants wanted to understand in more depth what drives Five Ways activity at the lower end of the distribution. Qualitative research could be undertaken with people doing low levels of Five Ways activity, to find out more about the barriers and policy options.

Some further research that could be undertaken to test the Five Ways questions was identified.

- Some people were concerned that the ESS question for Connect, which asks about connections with 'friends, relatives or work colleagues', does not sufficiently capture the types of connections that contribute to wellbeing, for example with partners or communities. To ensure the findings of this question are not misleading, the Connect responses could be compared to people's scores on questions relating to experience of relatedness and relationships.
- The results for the Be Active question suggest that many people may over-estimate the results when they self-report. Could we triangulate with results from the Sports England survey, or European equivalents, to see how they relate?

Implications for policy

A number of policy relevant findings were drawn out regarding the Five Ways to Wellbeing

- The analysis presented suggests that policy and practice need to focus more on the middle age groups. This might involve working out ways to normalise and facilitate the integration of community-related activities within the lifestyles of people in the middle age group. For example, policies could focus on how to make it easier for people in middle age groups to volunteer (although there was discussion about whether 'volunteering' is a useful framing).

- One thing that could directly support this would be to get rid of the age tick boxes for funding, which often assume resources should be directed at the young and old, and don't take into account needs in middle age groups.
- Another suggestion that could support middle age groups to engage in more Five Ways behaviours is improvements in the labour market. For example, reduced working hours, flexible working time, and improved access to training and development.
- Some participants felt that the Five Ways behaviours should be introduced to children in schools to ensure that they become habitual and filter through to families. Real change isn't achieved through post-hoc interventions but through a change in culture.
- Some suggested that the Five Ways as a set might seem unachievable to people with low levels of activity. Rather than presenting them all at once, they could be introduced, step-by-step, identifying achievable aims.
- Similarly, it might be that for some groups who wouldn't ordinarily engage with Five Ways, the best approach is through "wellbeing by stealth". For example, men's sheds – a hugely successful project that isn't promoted on the basis of its improvement to wellbeing, but has wellbeing outcomes.
- There was some discussion about the framing of who is and isn't doing the Five Ways, with participants suggesting that this can lead to a deficit approach, creating policies or interventions that target particular groups as failing to do the Five Ways. There was broad agreement that policy needs to be about enabling conditions to engage with wellbeing promoting behaviours.

There were also some policy implications that relate to wellbeing more generally.

- Some people suggested that wellbeing should be integrated into all policies, for example using a 'wellbeing impact assessment' tool similar to an environmental impact assessment.
- Wellbeing should be promoted within councils for staff – this can both support the wellbeing of staff, and also help them to 'walk the talk' and improve their ability to support others – e.g. Kent council uses the Five Ways in HR and recruitment.