The place and practices of wellbeing in local governance

Sarah Atkinson[1] and Kerry E. Joyce[2]

1. Centre for Medical Humanities, Durham University.

   Corresponding author at:

   Department of Geography

   Durham University

   South Road,

   Durham,

   DH1 3LE

   United Kingdom

   s.j.atkinson@durham.ac.uk

2. Institute of Health and Society

   Newcastle University

   The Baddiley-Clark Building

   Richardson Road

   Newcastle upon Tyne

   NE2 4AX

   United Kingdom

kerry.joyce@ncl.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The concept of wellbeing has become prominent within national policy goals in the UK since the end of the 'nineties. However, the concept of wellbeing remains ill-defined, an instability that is increasingly understood as problematic to policy-making. The paper engages with this terminological instability through an exploration of how the concept of wellbeing is practised discursively in local governance and critically examines the place of the concept in local policy-making. In contrast to the current enthusiasm to define and measure wellbeing, we argue that the conceptual instability has inherent value for local governance. The concept of wellbeing is practised through a number of potentially conflicting discourses, but it is exactly this conceptual instability that enables a local negotiation and combination of alternative policy frameworks for local place-shaping strategies. As such, wellbeing is not only an overarching goal of governance but also contributes to the dynamics of the policy process.

INTRODUCTION

In the last twenty years, high income countries have witnessed an important movement in the aspirations of public policy beyond meeting merely material goals towards a range of outcomes captured through the use of the term wellbeing. In the United Kingdom, the concept of wellbeing is prominent as a goal of contemporary policy making: 'In order to get a better understanding and focus on wellbeing.... the government will sponsor cross-disciplinary work....to explore how policies might change with an explicit wellbeing focus' (HM Government, 2005: 23). The 2000 Local Government Act obliges local government 'to set the overall strategic direction and long-term vision for the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of a local area' (DCLG, 2008a: 26). But the concept of wellbeing is itself ill-defined, a term used in multiple different contexts with different meanings and policy implications. This instability of meaning and the associated lack of shared understanding have been positioned as risks or barriers to communication and partnership in policy and governance (Ereaut and Whiting, 2008). There are currently major moves to define and measure wellbeing. The recent high profile Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress was set up to explore relevant indicators of social progress beyond GDP and includes wellbeing as a key outcome (Stiglitz et al., 2009). Developing societal measures of wellbeing is an analytical priority for the UK Office of National Statistics (Allin, 2007). This paper challenges this presumed need for precision in definition and measurement of wellbeing. First, we introduce the dominant use of the concept of wellbeing as evident in academic studies and position this into Rose's theory of contemporary governance (1996). We then explore how the concept of wellbeing is practised discursively in local governance to critically examine the presumed place of wellbeing an overarching goal in local policy-making.

Academic knowledge and expertise contribute to framing and legitimating the practices of central concepts of governance such as wellbeing and there is a substantial and growing body of work

exploring the nature and definition of wellbeing. Within this, a mainstream approach has emerged to operationalise wellbeing. First, research mostly takes a normative approach to definition and deals with the abstract nature of the concept by breaking it down into constitutive components (see for example Stiglitz et al., 2009). Debates concern the identification of independent dimensions and the relative value of objective and subjective elements (Deneulin and McGregor, 2009; Diener et al., 2009; Fleuret and Atkinson, 2007; Nussbaum, 2000). Secondly, these philosophical elaborations of the dimensions to wellbeing underpin applied, quantitative research on assessment and measurement and on the identification of associated variables (Clarke et al., 2006; Huppert et al., 2005; McGillivray and Clarke, 2006; Searle, 2008; Steuer and Marks, 2008). These endeavours share a common understanding of wellbeing as a quality that inheres to the individual. Wellbeing may be influenced by factors and processes from the individual to the global in scale and reach; it may be an objective characteristic or a subjective assessment; it may refer to a current state or a projection into the future, but the concept of wellbeing itself is individual in scale.

This treatment of wellbeing as an individual attribute has not always been the case. Sointu (2005) documents the changing dominance of different competing definitions of wellbeing since 1985 in the UK press. She identifies a clear shift in the term from a collective attribute, mostly associated with economic wellbeing, through to an individual attribute, largely related to a positive mental state. Sointu (2005) interprets this shift in the dominant use of the term wellbeing as concurrent with changes to the modes of governance and welfare provision grouped under the label of neoliberalism. There is almost no analysis to-date that explores how wellbeing is conceptualised in relation to different governance regimes. Dean builds a conceptual analysis of 'moral and political accounts – through which people in different social and cultural contexts might understand and contend with ... threats to well-being' (Dean, 2003: 2). He maps such potential discursive repertoires of wellbeing along two dimensions: first, a universal-local dimension

which differentiates the systems and structures through which social, economic and political resources are coordinated from a local agency through which meanings, behaviour and feelings are constructed; secondly, a contractarian-solidaristic dimension of traditions of citizenship and policy which differentiates subjects as bargaining and competitive from subjects as attached or cooperative. Contemporary neoliberal governance maps high on the universal and contractarian dimensional poles.

Dean's conceptual framework centres on discourses. This reflects arguments that much of governing is about defining the situation through the discursive construction of frameworks within which problems and policy responses are defined and negotiated (Hajer and Laws, 2006). Within a neoliberal discursive repertoire, the individual is reassigned as the primary unit of action and analysis, as the arbiter of policy options through consumer choice and the site for self-management and self-actualisation (Barnett, 2003; Harvey, 2005). Herein lies the connection that Sointu (2005) asserts between neoliberalism and wellbeing. Wellbeing, treated as an individual quality, is ultimately the outcome of individual choices and actions for both self and closely connected others. Writers drawing on Foucault's notion of governmentality (1991) examine how this apparent space for self-actualisation is one in which choice is shaped and directed through a complex interplay of multiple rationalities and technologies (Binkley, 2007; MacKinnon, 2000; Miller and Rose, 2008; Prince et al., 2006; Rose et al., 2006). Local government is thus tasked to enable social inclusion through an active, responsibilised engagement in their own wellbeing (Barnett, 2003). Systems of audit and accounting, monitoring and surveillance are central to a neoliberal governance regime, in which standardised indicators and performance targets for local government may effectively shape both goals and visions of local government (Miller and Rose, 2008; Rydin, 2007). Through a governmentality lens, wellbeing holds promise as both discursive rationality and calculative technology by which to promote and valorise self-actualisation and self-responsibilisation as part of a competent citizenry. The concept can enable everyday

individual behaviours to be connected into wider rationalities of government through, on the one hand, a moral imperative for self-management and, on the other, the external definition of responsible choices. However, realising this promise is still an emergent process. The imperative for better measurement of wellbeing and the dominant uses of the term in both academia and the mass press can be seen as reflecting this process. To what extent, then, is this process evident in the mobilisation of the concept of wellbeing in local governance in the UK?

NATIONAL STRUCTURING OF WELLBEING

Central government in the UK positions wellbeing prominently in policy goals across various sectors, including children, health and sustainable development. The Local Government Act, 2000, makes wellbeing key to the obligation of local government to elaborate a local Sustainable Community Strategy (DCLG, 2008b). Local government is situated as a place-shaping agency informed and guided by the Local Strategic Partnership, a non-statutory forum for voluntary involvement of local communities in local governance (DCLG, 2006). The sustainable community strategy is operationalised and monitored through the local area agreement which comprises a series of targets and monitoring tools to evaluate and assess progress (DCLG, 2008b). Local authority targets are developed within The National Performance Framework designed to assess performance and legislated through the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act, 2007. This provides a national set of 198 standardised indicators from which each local authority selects 35 in agreement with central government plus 17 statutory targets on early years and educational progress (DCLG, 2007).

A governmentality approach expects the requirement for conceptual goals to be translatable into defined and measurable objects to in turn structure vision so as to constrain local priority definition by specifying a set of standardised, universal measures (Enticott and Entwistle, 2007; Rydin, 2007). However, empirical studies of local governance demonstrate resistance to, or at

least reconstruction of, the influence of both the discursive rationalities and such calculative technologies. Some local government officers will have trained within or have political sympathies with alternative discursive repertoire of governance, particularly those that map onto Dean's poles of local and solidaristic (2003). Moreover, various policy issues and concepts are characterised by overt contestation which make resistance and reconstruction more likely (Rydin, 2007). Operationalising wellbeing constitutes such a policy issue, recognised as a challenge to define and measure (Allin, 2007; HM Government, 2005; ONS web-site).

The influence of an imperative for measurement on conceptual definition is evident in examining how wellbeing is structured at national level. The 2006 Government White Paper, '*Strong and prosperous communities*' outlines national government's priority challenges (see Table 1). Despite the broad usage of the concept of wellbeing in central government directives for Sustainable Community Strategies (DCLG, 2008a), sustainable development goals (HM Government, 2005) and national priorities for measurement and monitoring (Allin, 2007), here the term wellbeing is practised only within two of the national challenges: '*Health and Well-being*' where it is frequently used throughout the section [p13]; *'Children, Young People and Families'*, where it reiterates one of the goals of the government's Every Child Matters policy - 'achieving economic well being' [p31]. The National Performance Framework (DCLG, 2007) presents the national indicator set by themes (see Table 1), and similarly places wellbeing in relation to health, this time adult health, and the Every Child Matters goal of economic wellbeing. The national strategy and the related set of performance indicators thus resolve tensions between concept and indicator by structuring the concept of wellbeing into two distinct and contained fields.

ANALYSING LOCAL SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGIES

The paper takes as its case material the Sustainable Community Strategies. Given local government is tasked with enabling self-responsibilisation and self-actualisation, the term wellbeing may be mobilised to this end. But given the contestation around the definition of wellbeing, the term may also afford a conceptual tool for resistance at local level to neoliberal discursive regimes. We explore how wellbeing is practiced at two levels within the strategy documents: first, the way local authorities frame their vision and priority themes, which we have called the structuring of wellbeing; secondly, the discursive practices of the term wellbeing and the implicit constellations of themes and meanings.

In selecting a small number of case study documents, we set two criteria: we excluded large local authorities likely to be more powerful in their dealings with central government; we wanted the local authorities to share regional concerns and regionally defined priorities to better compare locally determined practices. Thus, the study selected the Sustainable Community Strategies from three relatively small urban boroughs within the Tees Valley region in the Northeast of England: Darlington, Hartlepool and Stockton which are adjacent along the north shore of the River Tees. The three sustainable community strategies were all published towards the end of 2008, together with the Local Area Agreements (Darlington Partnership, 2008; Hartlepool Partnership, 2008; Stockton Renaissance, 2008). The documents are complemented by interviews with two key local government officers in each borough, purposively selected as key in the production and subsequent management of the documents. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken between June 2008 and March 2009 on a one-to-one basis and lasted around an hour. All interviews were recorded and transcribed before analysis. In line with assurances of confidentiality, informants are not identified by local authority when quoted.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, the local structures of wellbeing, that is how wellbeing is placed within the overall visions and priority themes of the local strategies, are

described and compared with the national structures. Secondly, the discursive practices of wellbeing are mapped by the themes associated with the practice of the term and against a set of dimensions adapted from Ereaut and Whiting (2008), listed in Table 2. Thirdly, local agency is explored through the meanings given to wellbeing by the key local government officers interviewed. The final section draws on this three-step analysis to reflect on the place of wellbeing in local government policy-making.

1. LOCAL STRUCTURES OF WELLBEING

The Darlington and Hartlepool strategies are structured round a vision to improve lives and places and whilst wellbeing is not explicitly used, both emphasise opportunities for everyone to realise their potential. In Darlington the key concepts are inclusion, a Darlington whose benefits are for all people, and place, which has various aspects including environmental concerns. The economy is not positioned as an aim in itself, but as a means to the people and place related goals:

'...we want to make the most of our potential for greater prosperity, and open up aspiration and opportunity for everybody.' [Darlington, SCS: 7]

Hartlepool's vision is expressed through a list of desirable qualities for Hartlepool, itself defined as community and physical environment. These community and environmental qualities will enable social inclusion and benefits for all.

'Hartlepool will be an ambitious, healthy, respectful, inclusive, thriving and outward-looking community, in an attractive and safe environment, where everyone is able to realise their potential.' [Hartlepool, SCS: 5]

By contrast, the Stockton vision echoes the wellbeing domains in the Local Government Act, 2000, being structured by economic, environmental and social goals:

'Stockton-on-Tees driving Economic Renaissance.....

An enhanced quality of place....

10

Enhanced well-being and achievement for local people' [Stockton SCS: 9]

The economy is placed at the forefront of the vision as an end in itself, with environmental and social ends taking an equal, parallel and intersecting role. Only Stockton uses the word wellbeing in the vision statement and by placing it into the social strand, explicitly relates the concept to people and individuals.

The visions are developed through sets of themes which reflect closely, but not exactly, the indicative themes of national government (see Table 1). All documents identify a theme related to the economy, although this varies as to what is included beyond commerce and jobs. They all also contain themes related to the safety of communities, health and the environment. Hartlepool and Stockton echo the national theme of stronger communities. Children and young people are high profile in all documents but there is variation in how this category is placed. Stockton alone specifically identifies demographic groups, children and young people, older adults, echoing the national performance framework. The other documents use categories of aspiration and lifelong learning for the whole population, but within which children and young people are given a particular focus. Hartlepool and Stockton expressly diverge from the national themes by placing leisure and the arts amongst their themes; these are embedded within other themes in the Darlington document. The national government's theme of tackling exclusion and promoting equality has been incorporated into both vision and themes in all local authority strategies but not positioned as a separate category.

Thus, whilst the national themes are mostly echoed through all the local sustainable community strategies, there are important variations both from the national structure and between the adjacent local authorities in the framing and language of challenges.

2. MAPPING THE DISCURSIVE PRACTICES OF WELLBEING

11

2.1 Themes of wellbeing

The term wellbeing is used with least in Stockton where practice almost exclusively relates to individual health:

> 'Our vision is for a healthier Stockton where all residents are able to take control of their own physical and mental health and well-being..' [Stockton, SCS: 35].

The few occurrences in which wellbeing does not refer to health, relate to children together with a connection between wellbeing and achievement, which can be traced through different demographic groups: 'wellbeing and achievement for adults and communities' and 'wellbeing and achievement for children'.

Similarly, in Hartlepool, the term wellbeing most often relates to mental and physical wellbeing and, again, the exceptions relate to children. However, since Hartlepool's agenda for children and young people cuts across its eight themes, wellbeing is placed and practised not only under the theme, 'health and wellbeing', but also under the themes of 'jobs and the economy' in relation to the Every Child Matters goal of promoting economic wellbeing (p.31) and of community safety:

> '...where ...all adults take responsibility for their [children's] safety and wellbeing' [Hartlepool, SCS: 46]

Adult wellbeing also features under the jobs and the economy theme in an argument that:

> '...residents enjoying better physical and mental wellbeing as a result of being in employment' [Hartlepool, SCS: 33]

The Darlington document expresses the most varied practice of the term wellbeing. Moreover, the expression beyond health does not exclusively relate to children. The term wellbeing is placed under three of the five themes, healthier, aspiring and greener Darlington. The practice of the term wellbeing under the healthier theme contrasts the other documents in talking of fulfillment, as opposed to achievement:

'…happiness, fulfillment and well-being are central to the vision' [Darlington, SCS: 30]

The concept of emotional wellbeing is firmly embedded within a wide range of processes:

'…enable people to be in control of their lives, have equality of opportunity and aspiration, have access to the information and support they need to pursue their aspirations, to value their place in the community, and to treat one another with respect and dignity – these objectives underpin emotional health and well-being' [Darlington, SCS: 30]

Darlington is also distinctive in an explicit reference to spiritual aspects of wellbeing,:

'…broader view of prosperity and aspiration as embracing spiritual and mental well-being and the 'social capital' of community involvement, as well as material wealth' [Darlington, SCS: 17]

Wellbeing is linked to community concerns of social relations, pleasant spaces and equity:

Supporting informal leisure and health and well-being by reclaiming open space for community use..' [Darlington, SCS: 35]

'A philosophical forum for debate on issues of inclusion, equality and community well-being' [Darlington, SCS: 41]

2.2 Conceptual dimensions of wellbeing

The detailed meanings implicit in the discursive practices of the term are mapped onto a number of conceptual dimensions, listed in Table 2.

First, despite the dominance in current research of wellbeing as an individual attribute, several uses of the term reflect either collective or non-human scales, particularly in the Darlington strategy:

> '…our focus on improvement, and particularly on tackling deprivation, should be
> matched by care for the wellbeing of the whole community and the environment'
> [Darlington SCS: 11]
>
> '…building the social inclusion and environmental well-being that are the desired
> characteristics of a sustainable community' [Darlington SCS: 5]

However, the meaning of this collective use is uncertain. A connection to a notion of sustainability is implicit, as are attributes of inclusion, respect and care.

Secondly, the majority of uses of the term wellbeing were in contexts where some form of objective assessment of that wellbeing could be made by someone else,

> 'We will give priority to: improving sexual health, including a reduction in teenage
> conception rates; reducing levels of substance misuse; improving emotional and mental
> well-being including tackling bullying; halting the rise in obesity; and maintaining low
> rates of infant mortality' [Stockton SCS: 33]

Only a few cases indicated that people themselves might constitute the primary source of assessment: an unusual combination with spiritual wellbeing in Darlington; references to happiness or fulfilment, also mostly in Darlington. By contrast, Hartlepool and Stockton eschew a subjective fulfilment in favour of 'achievement' as amenable to objective measurement given its common association with children, education and skills. However, the Stockton document does position perceptions of the local environment as a key influence on wellbeing – possibly a dimension to wellbeing, possibly a factor affecting wellbeing, but certainly something to be assessed subjectively.

Thirdly, wellbeing was most often placed as an end in itself and never only as a means to another end,

'Residents enjoying better physical and mental wellbeing as a result of being in employment…' [Hartlepool SCS: 33]

'Recognising and accommodating the broader view of prosperity and aspiration as embracing spiritual and mental well-being and the 'social capital' of community involvement, as well as material wealth…' [Darlington SCS: 17]

Thus community wellbeing is valued for its own sake as well as for the wellbeing of the individuals comprising it. Economic wellbeing is positioned as the means for better future wellbeing, in other senses, for children and adults; environmental wellbeing is positioned both as an important end in itself and as part of sustainable living.

Fourthly, despite claims that wellbeing captures a holistic experience of living, the multiple dimensions comprising wellbeing are treated as different spheres of action, spheres which are both distinguishable components of wellbeing and distinguishable influences on wellbeing. This blurring enables a reduction of wellbeing to these components for monitoring and policy evaluation:

"Individuals need to be able to develop their own integrated package to improve their well-being, including for example: employment opportunities; health improvement; social care; education and lifelong learning; leisure and cultural activities" [Stockton SCS: 44]

Fifthly, this components approach and the need to measure wellbeing results in the concept largely treated as a static state,

'improving emotional and mental well-being including tackling bullying; halting the rise in obesity; and maintaining low rates of infant mortality.... looked after children will have the similar levels of physical and mental health....' [Stockton, SCS: 33]

although implicit reference to the life-course emerges occasionally,

'good health and well-being for older people, rooted in healthy lifestyle choices earlier in life' [Darlington, SCS: 30]

'Enhancing well-being and achievement of children and adults will ensure...life opportunities for all our residents...' [Stockton, SCS: 9]

Sixthly, there is confusion whether wellbeing is more than a neutral state. Wellbeing is often used rather rhetorically as a positive emotional state, but reverts in the detail to a biomedical absence of mental ill-health,

"...to promote mental wellbeing, to reduce suicide rates and support people with mental health problems". [Hartlepool, SCS: 42]

This reduction to an absence of ill-health in part reflects the imperative to describe and monitor the pursuit of wellbeing through measurable indicators. However, positive meanings to the term are evident in other contexts,

'...to support individuals to enjoy their lives and achieve wholeness and mental well-being' [Darlington, SCS: 12]

'To improve the health, emotional development and wellbeing of all children, young people and their families... ' [Hartlepool, SCS: 65]

Lastly, the documents combine different levels of responsibility. The local authority reasserts its traditional responsibilities for the provision of services but expands this with a brief for improving the context in which others can make responsible choices. Nonetheless, children are brought almost entirely under the ambit of national and local government,

'We will promote the health, wellbeing and achievement of children and young people' [Stockton SCS: 12]

The emphasis on individual responsibilities, especially for health and healthy lifestyles, is evident throughout:

> '…where all residents are able to take control of their own physical and mental health and wellbeing, through living healthy and active lifestyles..' [Stockton SCS: 36]

More interesting is the positioning of the community as taking responsibility for subjective aspects of wellbeing,

> 'Regarding the happiness, fulfillment and well-being of individuals as a legitimate concern for the community as a whole..' [Darlington SCS: 12]

This exercise in mapping the place and practice of the term wellbeing within the Sustainable Community Strategies indicates three concurrent discourses. The most frequent use of the term through all three documents relates to health and wellbeing, constructed as: individual in scale; defined objectively by others; a state with component elements, although reference to the life-course is noted; expressing ambivalence as to whether wellbeing is a neutral state characterised by the absence of definable features of ill-health or a positive state characterised by what remain ill-defined criteria; strongly defined as ultimately the responsibility of the self. This practice is so ubiquitous it clearly constitutes the contemporary dominant discourse for wellbeing. In Hartlepool and Stockton, any other conceptual associations beyond the dominant discourse of health and wellbeing mostly relate to children, and largely reflect achieving economic wellbeing, one of the goals of central government's Every Child Matters policy. This then constitutes a secondary discourse of wellbeing specifically in relation to children, also individual in scale, defined objectively by others, a state with component elements although the dynamism of development is noted, positive rather than neutral and with responsibility lying largely with the state and local government. These two primary discourses echo the national government mobilisations of wellbeing.

However, two other wellbeing discourses emerge associated with concepts of community and environment. The meanings in relation to community involve desirable attributes such as

inclusion, respect and care whilst those in relation to environment include future prospects and sustainability. Similarly to the two more dominant discourses, these characteristics of wellbeing are mostly defined objectively by others. The term wellbeing is used with positive rather than neutral connotations, as in the children and wellbeing discourse. The two discourses differ from the other two in the focus on collective and non-human specific scales. They differ from each other in that the community discourse treats wellbeing as a state with component elements such as inclusion, respect and care, whilst the environment discourse treats wellbeing as dynamic through the concerns with sustainability and future prospects.

Community and inclusion and environment and sustainability are in themselves leading concepts and issues for contemporary governance and are prominent both in the name and throughout the Sustainable Community Strategies. Despite this, in relation to wellbeing, they only emerge as minor discourses, and only significantly in one of the three strategies.

3. LOCAL AGENCY AND THE PLACE OF WELLBEING

This section examines the discursive practices of key local government officers in relation to the four discourses of wellbeing identified from the Sustainable Community Strategies.

In line with the dominant discourse evident in both national and local government documents, the local government officers most often explicitly connected wellbeing to health:

> '...it's interesting that you've picked it up and said wellbeing, rather than health and wellbeing, because I think it's difficult to separate the two'.

But the connection reflects a social model of health in which multiple factors are influential,

> 'It's more than the absence of ill-health, it's about access to wide variety of services, not only just to satisfy needs but those which make better a life'.

'Take the child protection agenda, child abuse, then that's actually about health and wellbeing... about making sure that children and young people are safe... if they're not safe... they're not going to grow up, they'll have mental health problems and... not get into work ... and the generations will carry on...'

Thinking about wellbeing through a social model of health requires consideration of the consequences of the actions of other sectors on health which thus broadens the scope of responsibility across government sectors,

'...colleagues in the Jobcentre Plus who look at wellbeing in terms of... financial and economic wellbeing, but then actually acknowledging the knock-on effects that has in terms of health'.

'It's the benefit of having a health and wellbeing group because ... it's that different combination, so having someone from regeneration involved in that means that when we're looking at our new developments... you think of the environment, what will it do .... [In terms of] quality of life'

Moreover, this is an inter-sectoral responsibility that local government officers see taken up,

'Yes, it's in health and wellbeing but we've all got to contribute to this.... there's real understanding that it involves all of us'

The reduction of wellbeing to mental or emotional health found in the documents is echoed, but again draws on a broad social model of health,

'I think prosperity is quite an important area that we need to push but not obviously to the detriment of wellbeing, prosperity at what cost, the pressure that prosperity can bring on people and is the balance right, stresses and strains and balancing that against wellbeing.....'

The reduction to absence of ill-health is largely avoided by the local officers,

'Wellbeing is, I would say is, a very generic title, you know. It is about what people

actually think about their lives. So at the end of the day are they happy with their lives?'

In contrast to the extensive practice of a health and wellbeing discourse, interviewees draw little

on the secondary discourse in which wellbeing is linked to economic wellbeing of children. The

presence in the documents reflects central government imperatives to include the Every Child

Matters goals, but finds little engagement from local government officers beyond repetition of

this agenda,

'For children and young people, it isn't about wellbeing overall but it's about are they a

productive member of society'

'There's looking at economic wellbeing, that stems from the ECM framework'

The lack of attention to the children and wellbeing discourse indicates that although national

government rationalities may be operationalised in order to meet national government

requirements, they are not necessarily internalised. Moreover, there is no evidence of a conscious

resistance or conflict in the discursive practices around children and economic wellbeing.

The relationship with central government in setting indicators and targets shows more explicit

conflict,

'There is always a worry that the central government drive is not always quite the same as

the local one.'

'It's been quite testing particularly when we get down to targets. This is all about

delivering the community strategy but of course government have their priorities as well.

So there was reconciliation to go on there'

These comments belie any notion that the imposition of calculative regimes structures local

subjectivities into framing the practices of abstract concepts like wellbeing. Moreover, more

detailed commentaries of how indicators relate to wellbeing show resistance to measurement as the final arbiter,

'You can measure facets of it [wellbeing]. ..but we have to be clear why we're measuring it and how we interpret it'

'I don't think you can measure wellbeing as such'.

Assessment not only elicited evidence of resistance conceptually to national government approaches, but also local conflicts. A number of local government officers stressed the importance of local negotiation in assessment,

'...a mix between the sort of lets count it, can we measure it, that performance management... it's just as really important that we care...there was the two camps and somewhere in the middle we managed to come together and say well actually as long as we can count some bits of it and have some subjective bits then that really for us is wellbeing.'

'...but you can't escape politics, or can't come up with the perfect answer [re what wellbeing is] so it's about discussion, negotiation, and reconciliation'

Most do propose that wellbeing needs breaking down into component elements for assessment. Nonetheless, several question whether this is enough to capture fully what wellbeing is,

'Whether in the end we measure wellbeing or measure strands within that holistic view. ...whether you can then bunch them all together and say, well, that's a picture of wellbeing, I don't even begin to know to be honest. I think the best measure is going out and talking to people and, you know, trying to synthesise the views as to the state of play.'

'You can also think of the well-being of the community which has more factual components like a strong economy and low unemployment, transport that works so you can get to where you want to, low crime. So you've got all of these factual bases but sitting on top of that or generated by it is well-being'

There was also resistance to a solely objective assessment of wellbeing, equated with indicators, viewed as missing important subjective accounts of wellbeing,

'We need to measure a bit but also accept that a lot of it is subjective and somewhere together that will give us a wellbeing type approach'

Nonetheless, whilst local accounts of measurement show a nuanced understanding of wellbeing, the concept is firmly treated as an attribute of individuals and an attribute that is shaped by individual choice and self-government,

'It's more than the absence of ill-health, it's about access to wide variety of services, not only just to satisfy needs but those which make better a life. In one word it's about choice and creating opportunities for people to have choice and control over their own lives'

The dominant discourse of health and wellbeing as individual health, as mental health or emotional health or as a subjective state was at times explicitly challenged,

'It's about how we live our daily lives, how we get on with our neighbours, how we mix in our communities, what events are going on in communities, how and where we go shopping, how well we interact all of that stuff is much more important than the NHS and police are to the wellbeing agenda'

Further challenges to the dominant discourse position wellbeing as dynamic within a time frame or a life-course approach, rather than as a static state,

'It's very easy to say wellbeing is about mental health but actually aspirations are wellbeing, or peace of mind is actually what it's about. Aspirations have got to be about people tracking a course for themselves and saying they've achieved it and not just accepting what they've got'

Although these framings of wellbeing largely operate at the individual scale, occasionally wellbeing is attributed to other scales of analysis. Whilst central government charges local

government with responsibility for telling the story of place and for a place-shaping agenda, a few local actors explicitly link this to the concept of wellbeing,

> 'So the sense of wellbeing through being [....] as a community, we as a public have a sense of wellbeing and confidence. The wellbeing of the borough is about the confidence ... that doesn't mean over-confidence or misplaced confidence'

> 'Something else that came through strongly.... the need to build a much stronger, more caring, cohesive community, recognition that we're getting to be a more diverse community, so we get back to sort of core community values. They [the faith and voluntary sectors] would ask really searching questions – why is prosperity so important, what do you mean by prosperity, what about spiritual prosperity? And then stuff about health, what's wrong with dying?'

This resonates with the alternative discourse of community and wellbeing identified from the Sustainable Community Strategies. The engagement of local government officers with an alternative discourse of community and wellbeing, related to issues of care and inclusion, was provoked by central government's requirement that local authorities work in partnership with other local agencies, particularly the voluntary and faith agencies,

> 'Quite often when you produce these types of documents, the public sector dominates the culture, but in ours the prevalent and dominant group is the voluntary and community sectors and we sat in the LSP [Local Strategic Partnership] with the voluntary sector saying, 'this is our document, the voluntary sector wrote this you know'.

The wider prominence of environment and sustainability in UK governance is little reflected in relation to wellbeing. Moreover, the distinction between current and future wellbeing, as expressed by the notion of sustainability, is explicitly understood as more than environmental,

> 'Wellbeing is about sustainability not only in environmental but economic and social terms. It's about creating economic, environmental and social circumstances which can be

sustained into the future in ways that don't disadvantage particular groups or particular areas'.

These explorations of the engagement of key local government officers with wellbeing in the production of the Sustainable Community Strategies show local agency capacity to adopt central government framings without necessarily internalising these uncritically, to resist and adapt such framings for local purposes and to go beyond such framings to reconcile them with alternative practices of the concept of wellbeing. Ironically perhaps, the mobilisation of alternative discourses in local governance is facilitated exactly by some of the requirements placed upon local government by national guidelines. The adherence to government directives to work in partnership with other local actors generated a source of variation in conceptualising wellbeing. The imperative to negotiate indicators and targets brought to the fore debates about what wellbeing really is, how it might be captured and assessed and the role of measurement therein.

These negotiations around the meanings and practices of wellbeing do suggest that the conceptual instability of wellbeing is problematic for the policy process (Ereaut and Whiting, 2008). But whilst local government officers recognise the challenges of a broad, abstract concept such as wellbeing in policy, they also stress its importance,

'The sense of wellbeing is about having a vision for our communities, for our places. Place-shaping is effectively about the same, so sustainability, wellbeing, place-shaping - they're all terms that don't easily define themselves and are open, of course, to being defined differently and exploited because of that. But I think when you're talking about what we're doing here, which is about defining a vision for the future, then they are essential concepts'.

Indeed, it may be that it is this very instability of the term wellbeing that infuses it with the potential to serve a creative function in locally negotiated priorities. This proposition is supported

by local actors both in the quotations above relating to the measurement of wellbeing, and here, explicitly positioning instability in the term wellbeing as a provocation to creative discussion and thinking and the forging of partnerships:

> "I think that in a way because they [the terms wellbeing, sustainability and place shaping] are not easily defined it is quite useful because it gives people a chance to sit down and thrash out what they, as a community, mean by that and that's more important than one person like me writing clever words in a document. It's actually getting people together and agreeing what they are about"

REFLECTIONS ON THE PLACE AND PRACTICES OF WELLBEING IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

The co-presence in the same documents of a mix of dominant and other more minor discourses of wellbeing supports the characterisation of the concept of wellbeing as confused and contradictory. However, we argue against those who position this instability as problematic and of necessity indicating the need for more precise definition and measurement. Instead, we see the conceptual instability of wellbeing as enabling the local expression of voices contesting dominant ideologies of the self, responsibility and governance.

The mobilisation of wellbeing common in academia and in the mass press indicates how the concept might encapsulate the rationale for self-responsibilisation and self-actualisation within a neoliberal governance regime. However, for this to be realised, the holistic resonance of wellbeing requires work on boundary setting to translate the concept into a measurable entity. The responsibilisation of the individual within neoliberalism makes it logical that wellbeing will be conceived of as an attribute of the individual. The need to translate any notion of wellbeing into performance indicators favours an approach that breaks the concept down into component

parts. This is broadly consistent with much of the academic literature in which dimensions cover a wide range of facets of human life (Nussbaum, 2000; Stiglitz et al., 2009). However, the national and local policy vision documents, and often the key local actors, narrow the concept far more tightly through a dominant discourse of wellbeing as inseparably connected to health. This tightly bounded definition brings important losses in the potential value of the term. The cooption of wellbeing as an adjunct to health risks reducing the term to a mere synonym and the discursive practice of wellbeing in the national White Paper does just this. In the local Sustainable Community Strategies, further reductions are seen when the phrase indicates mental wellbeing, or even the absence of mental ill-health and concentrates on demographically defined and static categories such as children or the elderly rather than the continuous production of health throughout the life-course. Even when wellbeing is framed into a social model of health, the dominance of health and wellbeing as a discourse undermines the potential for wellbeing to function as an inter-sectoral unifying concept.

The empirical mapping to identify different discourses of wellbeing by themes and dimensions complements Dean's (2003) conceptual matrix of potential negotiations of wellbeing by dimensions of welfare regime. The dominant discourses, and their associated reductions, of health and wellbeing and of children and wellbeing resonate with Dean's pole of contractarian welfare regimes. The alternative discourses of community and wellbeing and of environment and wellbeing which involve collective and non-human scales, sustainability in relation to wellbeing, respect and care, resonate with the opposite pole of solidaristic traditions. However, although Dean's dimensions were elaborated for 'different social and political contexts' (2003: 2), the confusion and contradiction within discursive practices across and within three similar local authorities demonstrates the co-existence of different 'moral and political accounts' of wellbeing in the same social and political context. The local non-governmental and faith organisations had a key role in effecting the inclusion of elements of an alternative welfare regime into neoliberal

framings. The particular significance here is that, first, the expression of this alternative framing is effected through the mobilisation of distinct discourses of wellbeing and, secondly, that it is exactly the conceptual vagueness of the concept of wellbeing that enables potentially oppositional framings to co-exist creatively within a single local authority strategy.

An open category of wellbeing provides an ideal conceptual tool through which to negotiate tensions between alternative political and moral accounts in relation to performance and responsibility. We propose that conceptual complexity and instability has inherent value for local governance; the danger lies in narrowing the scope of the concept. Much research within the governmentality tradition has focussed on local resistance to monitoring, the calculative regimes of governance. But the key task for releasing the potential of wellbeing as an emergent tool of neoliberal governance is boundary work to narrow the scope of how the concept is practised and this should be the key arena for resistance. Already the mobilisation of wellbeing other than as an outcome of self-management is practised only as minor discourses. Wellbeing needs to be seen not only as the final goal and outcome of government policy, requiring closed definition and monitoring, but more importantly as part of the dynamics of the policy process, a stimulus to critical debate about the nature of overarching policy goals. The emergent and potential power of the term wellbeing is not as a calculative but a conceptual technology in which wellbeing is best comprehended as constellations of discursive practices through which place-shaping strategies may be negotiated and reconciled locally.

REFERENCES

Barnett N, 2003, "Local government, New Labour and 'Active Welfare': a case of 'self responsibilisation?" *Public policy and administration* **18** 25-38

Binkley S, 2007, "Governmentality and lifestyle studies" *Sociology Compass* **1** 111–126

Clarke J, 2004, "Dissolving the Public Realm? The Logics and Limits of Neo-liberalism" *Journal of Social Policy* **33** 27–48

Clarke M., Islam S M N, Paech S, 2006, "Measuring Australia's well-being using hierachical needs" *The Journal of Socio-Economics* **35** 933-945

Darlington Partnership, 2008, One Darlington: Perfectly Placed: a vision for Darlington, 2008-2021. Darlington Borough Council.

DCLG, 2006, *Strong and prosperous communities*. The Local Government White Paper, October

DCLG, 2007, *The new performance framework for local authorities and local authority partnerships: single set of national indicators*. Department for Communities and local government, HM Government, London

DCLG, 2008a, *National indicators for local authorities and local authority partnerships: handbook of definitions*. Department for Communities and local government, HM Government, London

DCLG, 2008b, Creating strong, safe and prosperous communities. Statutory guidance. Department for Communities and local government, HM Government, London

Dean H, 2003, "Discursive repertoires and the negotiation of well-being: reflections on the WeD frameworks" WeD Working Paper 04, University of Bath

Deneulin S, McGregor A, 2009, "The capability approach and the politics of a social conception of wellbeing" WeD Working Paper 09/43, University of Bath

Diener E, Lucas R, Schimmack U, Helliwell J. (2009) *Well-being for public policy*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Enticott G, Entwistle T, 2007, "The spaces of modernisation: outcomes, indicators and the local government modernisation agenda" *Geoforum* **38** 999-1011

Ereaut G, Whiting R, 2008, *What do we mean by 'wellbeing'? And why might it matter?* Linguistic Landscapes Research Report no. DCSF-RW073 for the Department for Children, Schools and Families

Fleuret S, Atkinson S, 2007, "Wellbeing, health and geography: a critical review and research agenda" *NZ Geographer*, **63** 106-118

Foucault M, 1991, "Governmentality" in *The Foucault Effect: studies in governmentality* Eds G Burchell, C Gordon, P Miller (Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hertfordshire) pp 87-104

Hajer M, Laws D, 2006, "Ordering through discourse" In *Oxford Handbook of Public Policy* Eds M Moran, M Rein, R E Goodin (Oxford University Press, Oxford) pp251-268

Hartlepool Partnership, 2008. *Hartlepool's Ambition: community strategy and neighbourhood renewal strategy, 2008-2020*.

Harvey D, 2005, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. (Oxford University Press, Oxford)

HM Government (2005) Securing the future: delivering UK sustainable development strategy. HMSO, London.

Huppert F A, Baylis N, Keverne B Eds, 2005, *The Science of Well-being* (Oxford University Press, Oxford)

MacKinnon D, 2000, "Managerialism, governmentality and the state: a neo-Foucauldian approach to local economic governance" *Political Geography*, **19** 293-314

McGillivray M, Clarke M Eds, 2006, *Understanding human well-being* (United Nations University Press, Tokyo)

Miller P, Rose N, 2008, *Governing the Present* (Polity Press, London)

Nussbaum M C, 2000, *Women and human development – the capabilities approach* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge)

ONS web-site http://www.statistics.gov.uk/hub/people-places/communities/societal-wellbeing

(last consulted 24:06:2010)

Prince R, Kearns R, Craig D, 2006, "Governmentality, discourse and space in the New Zealand health care system, 1991–2003" *Health & Place* **12** 253–266

Rose N, O'Malley P, Valverde M, 2006, "Governmentality". *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* **2** 83–104

Rydin Y, 2007, "Indicators as a governmental technology ? The lessons of community-based sustainability indicator projects" *Environment and Planning D*, **25** 610-624

Searle B A, 2008, *Well-being: in search of a good life?* (Policy Press, Bristol)

Sointu E, 2005, "The rise of an ideal: tracing changing discourses of wellbeing" *Sociological Review* **53** 255-274

Steuer N, Marks N, 2008, *Local wellbeing: can we measure it?* (The Young Foundation and NEF, London)

Stiglitz J, Sen A, Fitoussi J, 2009, *Report by the commission on the measurement of economic performance and social progress*. www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr, accessed 29th September, 2009

Stockton Renaissance, 2008, *Shaping our Future: a sustainable community strategy for the borough of Stockton-on-Tees*

Table 1. Themes in National Guidelines and the three Local Authority Sustainable Community Strategies (2008)

National *From White Paper*	*National* *From Indicator Guidelines*	*Darlington* *One Darlington: Perfectly Placed*	*Hartlepool* *Hartlepool's Ambition*	*Stockton* *Shaping Our Future*
Economic development, housing and planning	Local economy	Prosperous Darlington	Jobs and the economy	Economic regeneration and transport
Community safety	Safer communities	Safer Darlington	Community safety	Safer communities
Health and well-being	Adult health and wellbeing	Healthy Darlington	Health and wellbeing	Health and wellbeing
Children, young people and families	Children and young people	Aspiring Darlington	Lifelong learning and skills	Children and young people
Climate change	Environmental sustainability	Greener Darlington	Environment	Environment and housing
			Housing	
Third Sector	Stronger communities		Strengthening communities	Stronger communities

Vulnerable people	Tackling exclusion and promoting equality			Older adults
			Culture and leisure	Arts and culture

Table 2. Dimensions to Wellbeing

Dimension	*Description*
Scale	Individual or collective; human or other entities
Authority to define	Subjective, self-defined or objective, expert defined
Value	An end in itself or a necessary to other ends
Unified concept	Reducible to elements or a holistic totality
Permanent or transitory	A stable state or a dynamic process
Criteria	Neutral, absence of something wrong or better than neutral
Responsibility	Located within social and institutional structures or individual agency
[adapted from Ereaut and Whiting, 2008]	