

Public Policy Briefing

March 2009



Happiness Counts

Why investing in the well-being of children brings benefits to all

Happiness Counts is a new partnership project between Action for Children, one of the UK's leading charities and provider of services to vulnerable children, young people and families, and the centre for well-being at nef (the new economics foundation), the UK's leading independent think-and-do-tank.

Happiness Counts will challenge the limitations of a system that focuses on short-term economic indicators of success in relation to children's lives. We aim to reshape the way we invest in the future of our society through our children.

There have been many attempts to shift the balance of services for children and young people towards a greater emphasis on prevention but they have not gone far enough. As well as counting the costs of failing our children, this project will demonstrate the social and economic benefits of investing in a more transformative approach. The project will culminate in a manifesto for change, to be published autumn 2009.

Building on Action for Children's Growing Strong campaign, which highlights the huge impact emotional well-being has on young people's futures, Happiness Counts will provide the evidence to show how investing early in the happiness and well-being of children can help achieve a myriad of policy objectives. Our ultimate aim is to bring benefits

to all – children, young people, their families and society at large.

Why Happiness Counts now

A number of organisations have conducted research, held inquiries and launched campaigns with regard to children and young people in recent months. All of these activities have raised the debate about children and young people's well-being and highlighted the need for change. Happiness Counts will build substantially on this activity offering new insights, grounded in practice.

Drawing on the latest analytical techniques to calculate the economic and social return of a range of children's services, the project will demonstrate that redesigning policy and practice towards a more preventative system is both desirable and possible. Uniquely, our project will:

- ▶ capture the benefits of universal and targeted services that promote positive feelings and capabilities for children and young people
- ▶ calculate the longer term cost savings of more preventative and early intervention approaches
- ▶ provide national and local governments with recommendations to take substantive action in this area

as long as it takes

The need for transformative action

Recent policy agendas in the UK have acknowledged the importance of enhancing children's well-being and supporting child-centred models of care. Yet evidence of the need for a more radical approach is compelling.

The latest quantitative and qualitative research suggests that the UK is failing to deliver higher well-being and improved outcomes for all, despite a steady increase in recent years in wealth (as measured by GDP). As the impact of the recession bites, delivering better models of care will become more important, with even more children and families requiring help. While government has acknowledged a problem exists, as evidenced by over 400 new initiatives targeted at services for children and young people in the last 21 years, the UK ranked bottom in Unicef's 2007 report on child well-being.

What we need now is transformative action to tackle inequalities in both the material well-being of families in the UK and strengthen the wider support all children and young people depend on in order to thrive. For this we need a system and services that support the 'core economy' of family, community and wider social networks.

The next steps

Over the next few months, we will be holding citizens' juries that bring together children, young people and their families with researchers, policy makers and practitioners to identify what needs to change and how to achieve it.

Happiness Counts will result in a manifesto, published this autumn, with clear policy recommendations aimed at achieving better outcomes for all.

Upcoming events

31 March

Expert learning panel

31 March–1 April

Young people's reference group meeting

23–25 April

Young people's citizens' jury – London

7–9 May

Parents' citizens' jury – Edinburgh

May

Expert learning panel

19–21 May

Young people's reference group meeting

June

Expert learning panel

September

Report and manifesto launch

19 September–8 October

Party conference fringe events

Talk to us

If you would like to be kept up to date with the project, or participate in one of the citizens' juries, please contact:

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You can also fill out and return the postcard in this pack.

Action for Children works with the children and young people who most need support to achieve their full potential. As an independent charity, we campaign for changes that will end injustice, deprivation and inequality. Our campaigns, such as Happiness Counts, aim to make a difference to all children, young people and families across the UK as well as those that we work with directly.